A Study of the Relevance of Linguistic Relativity Theory as an Effective Tool for Engineering Feminist Social Change in Japan. Differences in Oriental / Occidental Attitudes towards Achieving such a Change and Factors that might Influence its Successful Achievement

Jon BLUNDELL

Faculty International Communication, Aichi University
E-mail: blundell@vega.aichi-u.ac.jp

要　旨

　本稿では男女同権論者の視点から社会変化を引き起こす道具として言語がどれだけ用いられているかについて考察する。はじめに，アメリカにおける Robin Lakoff の画期的な業績を取り上げながら，そのような変化に影響を及ぼす道具としてサピア・ウーフの言語相対性理論の妥当性を論じる。また，ジェンダーの不平等を反映する男女のことばの違いを再考し，女性によって，また日本の女性について用いられた言語のさまざまな用例が示される。さまざまな分野（一般，医療，文学）の性差の平等に基づく社会変化に対処する日本における試みが論じられ評価される。そしてそのような試みがどの程度成功するかに影響を及ぼす要因について示唆する。

　次にそのような男女同権論者の社会変化を引き起こす可能性ばかりではなく，好ましさについての問題を取り上げる。このことはさらにそのような変化の好ましさに関する欧米と東洋における見解が両立するかどうかについて浮き彫りにすることになる。社会変化は絶対的であるよりむしろ段階的に認識されるべきであるということがどれだけ受けいれられるのか。

　最後に，日本における新しい言語形式を用いることにより言語社会変化を引き起こす男女同権論者の未来が考察される。そして社会学的な変化を決定する言語と思考の相互関係の主な役割について述べる。

I. Introduction

In 1975, Robin Lakoff's seminal work "Language and Woman's Place" (Lakoff, '75) burst upon the linguistic / feminist scene.

This year saw its republication with annotations by Lakoff in the light of developments over the last

30 years, and an additional 'Commentaries' section, in which 25 socio-linguists (including two from Japan) made additional up-to-date contributions.

'Language and Women's Place' was the first work to highlight differences between men and women's language. Reaction was mixed, but much research was generated over the following 30 years. Debate over the validity of Lakoff's research methods (introspection as opposed to discourse analysis) ensued, as did discussion over whether or not 'women's language' was exclusively used by women, and if so which women:

"So who is this woman who inhabits the pages of 'Language and Woman's Place'. Is she me? Is she women? Clearly not. She is an ideological artefact - a stereotype." (Eckert : 'The Good Woman', contribution to Lakoff ('04, 165).

The question also arose of whether Lakoff's work rendered a service or disservice to the feminst movement - viz. "The charge that I am a 'deficit theorist' " (Lakoff, ('04 .106)). In other words, was Lakoff in some way representing women's language as inferior to the 'standard' (i.e. men's)? Furthermore, the question of whether language should be regarded as a power rather than a gender issue, the importance of varying 'roles' assumed by women in given language contexts, and, with regard to Japan, the whole question of how far women's language might index prestige or even power, rather than subordination, became important issues to be debated.

It is clear, then, that whatever one may feel about Lakoff's use of introspection as a research method, or the accuracy of some of her linguistic observations (e.g. women's use of question tags), or indeed her implicit definition of 'women', Lakoff provided a vital springboard for further linguistic/feminist research, and a great impetus for feminist discussion and action.

Lakoff's main purpose was to outline differences in men and women's language. She originally defined two types of women's language: language used *by* women, and language used *about* women. However, she was also interested in how far linguistic change can engineer social change. This idea has its roots in Sapir-Whorf's theory of linguistic relativity. In her key opening sentence:

'Language uses us as much as we use language' (Lakoff, '75, 1)

Lakoff refers implicitly to this theory. This is explicitly acknowledged some 30 years later in her annotations to the re-publication where she seeks to elucidate the opening statement:

"This statement is an elaboration of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which states that users of language cannot experience 'reality' except through the mediation of language: the forms and structures of the language they are speaking put binders on them, or offer them a distorting lens through which to see their universe." (Lakoff '04,104). Further, she poses the question as to: '... whether anything can be done, from the linguistic end of the problem: *does one correct a social inequity by changing linguistic*

disparities? We will find, I think, that women experience linguistic discrimination in two ways: in the way they are taught to use language, and in the way general language use treats them. Both tend, as we shall see, to relegate women to certain subservient functions:...' (Lakoff, '04, 39), (my italics).

The purpose of this paper, then, is first to examine the concepts and validity of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, as, in its strongest form it may be taken to claim that language actually determines thought (and by extension) societal attitudes. Clearly this is of great relevance to those feminists who seek to change society's outlook towards women.

Having established how far (whether or not) the concept of linguistic relativity (S/W hypothesis) might be regarded as a tool for engineering social change, the following questions will be examined:

1. What are the differences in men and women's language that reflect / promulgate) gender inequality?

2. What linguistic attempts have been made in Japan to engineer gender- equality based social change and with what success?

3. What factors affect the degree of success of the above attempts?

4. Are there occidental and oriental (as well as intra- oriental) differences in perception of the need to engineer social change? Here other relevant questions will be discussed, such as: How far can occidental aims be applied to an oriental society? Is there some some stable, universally acceptable norm of gender equality? Some kind of absolute? Or should one perceive acceptable social change as being on a 'cline' according to societal type rather than in absolute terms?

5. Conclusion:

II. The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis

The Sapir-Whorf linguistic relativity hypothesis claims that the language structure we use influences the way we think and behave. In an analogy with Einstein's Principle of Relativity, Whorf claimed that, just as two observers travelling at different velocities, one close to the speed of light and one not, observe the passage of time very differently, so speakers of different languages perceive and interpret the world in different ways:

"...the 'linguistic relativity principle' means... that users of markedly different grammars are pointed by their grammars toward different types of observations and different evaluations of externally similar acts of observation, and hence are not equivalent as observers but must arrive at somewhat different views of the world." (Whorf, B.L., in Carrol, John, B, (ed.) ('56), 221).

Similarly, Sapir viewed language as 'a constraining channel through which its speakers construe experience' - (a neat paraphrase by Foley, ('97, 199. However, as George Lakov points out, the 'strong' version of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis seems refutable through the existence of translation:

"... there is a devastating critique of Whorf's arguments that there are alternative conceptual systems. Here it is, put in the form of a blunt retort to Whorf: 'Well, Mr. Whorf you have described to us the conceptual system of Hopi (North American Indian language), which you claim is incommensurable with the conceptual system of English. But you have described it to us *in English* in terms that we can understand. Therefore, if you have described it correctly, you are wrong about its incommensurability. You have proven that Hopi and English are commensurable merely by correctly describing Hopi concepts in English." (Lakov, '87, 327).

However, the fact that one can *explain* different concepts, does not mean that these concepts do not exist . A British person might understand that a Japanese perceives a traffic light as 'blue' rather than 'green', but this re-inforces rather than negates the proposition of different conceptualisations. Indeed, later, Lakov rightly states that:

"... conceptual systems affect behaviour in a significant way... To refuse to find out how our behaviour depends on our conceptual systems is to abdicate responsibility for much of what we do. In areas like human relationships where failure rates tend to be higher than we would like them to be, an understanding of differences in conceptual systems, and how behaviour depends on them, might well be helpful." (ibid, 337). Clearly, this view (that language can influence thought) is extendable intra- as well as inter-linguistically, and has relevant implications for how sectors of society view each other through these, in Lakoff's terms 'binds', in Sapir's terms 'constraining channels' and in Whorf's terms 'markedly different grammars' (see above).

Saville-Troike also asserts the existence of a correlation between: "the form and content of a language and the belief values and needs present in the culture of its speakers." (Saville-Troike ('89,32). This process can begin early. Gender identity and roles are shaped in tandem with a child's acquisition of language skills and communicative competence. Williams (while also apparently falling victim to, or unconsciously emphasizing, his own point) would concur:

"Every time the child speaks or listens the social structure is re-inforced in *him* and *his* social identity is shaped. The social structure becomes the child's psychological reality through the shaping of *his* acts of speech..." (my italics). (F.Williams (ed.), '92, 30). Thus we have seen that it is broadly believed that language can affect thought, and thus societal perceptions. The point at issue seems to be not whether or not such a correlation exists, but the degree of strength of that correlation. Most linguists, it seems, would prefer the 'weak' rather then the 'strong' version:

"Linguists feel safer in accepting a 'weak' form of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis ... that our language influences (rather than completely determines) our way of perceiving things." (Mesthrie et alia, 2000).

Slobin (quoted in Steinfatt, '79) also distinguishes between two forms of the linguistic relativity hypothesis: a 'strong' form in which language structure *determines* the logic of thought itself, and a 'weak' form where language structure *influences* cognitive structure.

In the next section we shall examine differences in men and women's language in Japan that reflect (promulgate) gender inequality.

III. Differences in Japanese men and women's language that reflect gender inequality

As mentioned above, Robin Lakoff ('75) distinguished usefully between English language used *by* women, and language used *about* women. Concerning language used *by* women, this distinction is equally, if not more applicable to the Japanese context, since Japanese requires significantly more changes than English to reflect gender / role differences. For example, Ide Sachiko, in 'Women's Language, Men's Language' (quoted in Buckley, '97, 48-64), points to various areas where women's language differs from men's, such as:

"... feminine vocabulary, soft conjunctions, interjections, honorifics, feminine pronouns, the lack of 'kango' (use of words of Chinese origin), the exaggerated politeness of 'asobase' (honoric form of addressing others) and so on..." (ibid, 63).

Interestingly, Ide has shifted her view somewhat over time. Initially she felt that Lakoff's' analysis: "... could be applied in parallel fashion to women's language in Japanese society," (Ide, in Lakoff '04, 185) and pointed out differences of male/female language use (e.g. female usage of 'watakushi' or 'watashi' as opposed to male use of 'boku' and 'watashi'; unacceptability of a woman using the 'you' form 'kimi' in any situation; use of emphatic particles 'zo' and 'ze' restricted to men; feminine restricted use of 'wa' (to attract attention) and 'no' as a softener; 'ro' form of the imperative only available to men (e.g. 食べろう / Eat it!); wider use of honorific forms 'o' and 'go among women', more frequent use of modifiers such as 'totemo', 'sugoku', and adjectives such as 'suteki ' (wonderful) and 'osoroshi' (awful); etc.). Ide comments:

"In 1979, when I wrote my book 'Women's Language, Men's Language' I think there was a purpose to listing in detail the types of sexist language common in Japan." (Ide, in Buckley, '97, 45).

And:

"Once again the norm for women's speech emerges as soft and lacking in self-confidence and assertiveness." (ibid,56.).

The above is certainly a convincing illustration of differences in male / female language use. However, Ide's latest position may be summarised in two ways: Firstly, as a result of her early '80s survey into

honorifics, she concluded that women's greater use of honorifics was due not to gender difference, but to the different roles engaged in by men and women in daily life. Women, she claimed, operate more within a *social context*, and men more within a *work context*. As social interaction (apparently) requires more politeness than workplace interaction, more honorifics were used:

"It became clear that the women's use of more polite language was not due to their subordinate position in society. Instead, it was because most female subjects were housewives whose roles primarily involved social interaction." (Ide, quoted in Lakoff, '04, 181).

The above seems debateable. Firstly, it might be argued that many women are engaged to quite a large extent in a work context (including part-time work). Secondly, companies run training programs to ensure that their employees (in a work context) use appropriate honorifics when dealing with clients and customers. Possibly Ide has moved too far away from her original position.

Now to summarize her second position. Originally, Ide agreed with Lakoff that linguistic imbalances between men and women should be corrected. She now feels, however, that this view springs from: 'the egalitarian idealism of an individualistic society.' (quoted in Lakoff, '04, 185). If one views women's position in Japan as *different*, rather than *subordinate*, (or even more refined / superior), then the need to effect change becomes irrelevant.

So far, then, we have established that in the area of language used *by* women significant differences between men and women's language exist. They may be interpreted as sexist and lacking in assertiveness (see above), although, an alternative view is that such differences are role- rather than gender-based, and may be regarded as different rather than subordinate.

Let us now consider language used *about* women.

Many examples of derogatory or trivialising language vis- a -vis women are evident, although according to Ide (in Buckley, '97, 45) the situation has improved. However, Shibata (U.S. - Japan Women's Journal '99, 49–50) cites some interesting examples of the continuing existence of derogatory language. He deplores, for example, the use of the term 'itazura' (literally a 'prank') by newspapers to describe rape and other forms of sexual abuse, and suggests a change to 'kodomo no seiteki gyakutai' (child sexual abuse). He also stresses that no incest statute exists in Japanese law for so called 'kinshin soukan' (literally 'relative mutual sex'), a term implying:

"that this particular violence is initiated and desired not only by a victimizer, but also by a victim." (ibid, '99).

(This particular example, of course could apply to male or female victims). Further examples of language used *about* women are given in the next section.

To summarise, it is evident from the above that gender based differences in language exist, that certain elements of language used *by* women (e.g. honorifics) may be regarded either positively or negatively according to one's occidental (gender-based) or oriental (role-based) orientation, and that it may be helpful to interpret certain differences within the particular role or context in which they occur. Concerning language used *about* women, the case for the existence of derogatory or trivialising language is much more clear-cut. (See also following section).

Let us now consider further examples of such derogatory language, and describe attempts to engineer change in social attitude through changes in language and language use.

IV. Linguistically oriented attempts to achieve social change in Japan

In 2000, Mesthrie et alia emphasized the importance today of the Sapir -Whorf hypothesis viz-a-vis social change:

"The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis remains of considerable relevance to contemporary socio-linguistic debates, notably those about 'politically correct' language. Those who believe that using new terms will change societal attitudes for the better are subscribing to a Whorfian view of the relation between language and thought." (Mesthrie et alia, 2000, 8–9).

Some interesting attempts to achieve such changes are highlighted by Ogino Miho (in Buckley, '97). When translating the American edition of 'Our Bodies, Ourselves' the translators immediately encountered problems with the negative connotations of the kanji used to describe certain parts of the body. Ogino writes:

"In Japan words that describe the sexual organs frequently incorporate the written characters 恥 (shame, bashfulness, disgrace) and 陰 (negative, shade, secret) with all their negative connotations. We came to resent the fact that these written forms promoted a negative and shameful image of female sexuality and a woman's body and its functions. For example, the word labia has traditionally been written in characters that literally mean dark (shaded) lips (陰唇). We replaced the character for dark or secret with the character for sex and renamed the labia 'sexual lips' (性唇). Similarly, whereas the vulva had been named the 'dark /secret outer organ' (外陰), we renamed it the 'outer sexual organ' (外性器). Pubic hair was converted from 'shameful hair' to 'sexual hair' (性毛), and the pubic bone became the 'sexual bone' (性骨) rather than the 'shameful bone'..." (Contribution to Buckley, '97, 202).

A further example of a perhaps more widely-accepted change is that of: "replacing the word for nurse 看護婦 (*woman* who watches over and cares) with 看護士 (*person* who watches over and cares)". (ibid, 203).

Moving from the realm of medicine to that of literature, and from word-change per se, to discriminatory insistence on word (mis)usage, Ochiai Keiko provides another interesting example. In this case she failed in her attempt to persuade the publishers of her book 'The Rape' to change the title:

"I had initially written it with the title 'Goukan', the Japanese word for rape, but they rejected this. I had deliberately chosen not to use the Japanized version of the English, *repu*... I wanted to use the Japanese word *goukan* because it carries all the weight of the reality of rape. I finally gave in and let them use the softer word *repu*." (Ochiai, Keiko, quoted in Buckley, '97, 232).

A more successful attempt, this time at word *coinage*, is instanced by Ueno Chizuko's now widely-used term *mazakon* (mother complex), although, another coinage of hers to describe those women who *enjoy* the benefits of feminist networking (*joen*) without contributing anything themselves, '*enjo-ists*', does not appear to have caught on.

Thus we have seen that various attempts to effect social change through the manipulation of language have been made, some successful and some less so. Let us now consider those factors that influence the success of such attempts.

V. Factors influencing degree of success of linguistically-induced feminist-oriented social change

There seem to be at least three main factors influencing the uptake of linguistic change and its concomitant re-shaping of attitudes. Each by itself may be a necessary rather than a sufficient condition. They would seem to stand more chance of success if working in unison. The factors are media, legislation and phonetic attractiveness.

Media exposure has popularised such terms as 'OL' (with its connotations of the role of the traditional Japanese housewife), 'yellow cabs' (sexually liberated Japanese women abroad), and more recently 'parasite-singles' (women living at home with their parents, paying no rent, earning a good salary and living a high lifestyle of international travel and owning brand goods). These examples, although hardly pro-feminist, do indicate the power of mass-media. The earlier example of Ueno's *mazakon* is perhaps more feminist-friendly.

Furthermore, regarding pronunciation, *mazakon* with its assonant 'ma' and 'za' that 'trip of the tongue', and the use of 'kon' which fits well into the pattern of abbreviating (foreign) words to first syllable and forming a compound noun (e.g. 'wapuro' (word-processor') is a good example of a word that has come into general use through the combined factors of media and phonetic attractiveness. Similarly, the term 'pawahara' (Yoshika Matsumoto in Lakoff, '04, 245) displays both the qualities of assonance (x4 !) and analogy with an existing word (sekuhara), as well as fitting into the pattern of first syllable assimilation (here the assonance of 'pawa' allowing both syllables of 'power' to be appropriated).

Finally, legislation and/or guidelines on language use in the areas of job advertisements; use of non-descriminatory language in newspapers, books, magazines and official documents, etc. may have some effect, although, the key point is the degree of willingness of members of society to accept linguistic change and its concomitant re-adjustment in social attitudes.

VI. Occidental / oriental differences in perception of need for social (and therefore linguistic) change

Having considered the *feasibility* of engineering social change, it seems appropriate to consider the *desirability*. How far can occidental aims be relevantly applied to an oriental society? Is there some stable universal acceptable norm of gender equality, or should one perceive acceptable social change on a cline, rather than in absolute terms? There are those (for example, Ueno Chizuko (socioligist), Nakanisi Toyoko (owner-manager Women's Bookstore, Osaka), Matsui Yayori, senior staff editor, Asahi Shinbun who, influenced by the women's liberation movement in the '70s and '80s probably felt (feel?) that it could and should be imported virtually directly into Japanese society, where women were perhaps in an even worse situation vis-a-vis gender equality than those in the West. However, others (e.g. Aoki Yayoi) are proponents of 'ecological feminism', others (e.g. Kanazami Fumiko) of 'humanist' feminism, Saiytoo Chiyo arguing (against Ueno) for the positive aspects of a diveristy of 'feminisms'.

Indeed, at the other extreme, Ide (Ide and McGloin, '91), and later in (Lakoff, '04), argues the inappropriacy of applying Western feminist principles to Japan because:

"In Western societies interaction is carried out on the basis of individualism and egalitarianism. Instead of claiming the same status and role as men, Japanese women prefer a complimentary vision of status and role differences, giving them equal dignity, despite differences in form." (Ide & McGloin, '91, 63).

Thus we can appreciate the diversity of opinion in Japan regarding the need for further feminist-based changes in society. Gender equality, in general, is probably best viewed within the varying contexts of societies, on a cline rather than as an ultimate universal goal.

VII. Conclusion

In this essay we have established that linguists widely believe that language has the power to influence, if not determine, the perceptions of society (strong/weak versions of Sapir-Whorf hypothesis).

We have also instanced socio-linguists who believe that gender differences in language exist and that they reflect and, through their continued use, promulgate gender inequality.

Attempts in Japan, both successful and unsuccessful, to change society via linguistic manipulation have been cited, and those factors influencing successful change discussed.

The disparate nature of 'feminisms' in Japan, and the apparent unwillingness of Japanese women to seek equal status with men indicates that a 'lock, stock and barrel' importation of Western feminist concepts has not proved possible / desirable. Nevertheless, 'advances' have been made, although, judging by Western criteria, they may seem disappointing. However, if one accepts that each individual society may have its own intra-socially defined optimum target for successful gender relationships, then the

concept of a universally acceptable feminist goal may no longer be valid. The criteria for 'success' in Japan may not be the same as the criteria for 'success' in the West.

What of the future? The answer seems to depend on the collective will for change framed within the context of Japan's particular perceptions of optimum gender/role, power/role relationships. This, in turn, is both a reflection and a function of the degree of future internationalisation / globalisation.

Although the disparate nature of Japanese feminism(s) will probably continue, this does not preclude independently focussed advances from being achieved through linguistic change.

However, Lakoff's opening words, perhaps even more so, if slightly amended, still ring true:

"Language (ab)uses us as much as we (ab)use language." (Lakoff, '75,1), (adapted).

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