

Variationist's Approaches towards Japanese Language

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Introduction

Japanese language is regarded as one of the most geographically and socially diverse languages; a number of dialects, gender differences, honorifics, and so forth. In fact, the differences were emphasized in Japanese history especially in Edo era when social class system, *shinokosho* (士農工商), existed where Japanese language had social class differences. Fortunately enough, even today, Japanese language still retains the regional and social differences. These differences, i.e. language variation, have been studied from various perspectives within the framework of sociolinguistics.

This paper aims to render a historical account to explain the sociolinguistic approaches to Japanese language. In particular, this paper shall focus on more linguistic-oriented approaches, or variationists' approaches to language.

Variationist sociolinguistics

Variationist sociolinguistics is one of the sociolinguistic approaches to language variation, which pays a close attention to explain both linguistic and non-linguistic (or social and stylistic) factors over language variation. Variationist linguistics is also called, 'secular linguistics' which works on the assumption that linguistic hypothesis and theories should be based on observations and analyses of vernacular varieties (or ordinary speech, which are not found in the formal settings) as these are used by ordinary speakers in everyday social contexts (Trudgill 2003).

Language variation is not regarded as any 'mistakes' or 'errors' by variationists, and, instead, they regard the language variation as an indicator of language change in progress. This leads us to assume the interplay between variationist sociolinguistics and historical linguistics where we share the common academic inquiry to understand the mechanism of language change.

Variationists are supposed to work with any kind of language variation at all linguistic levels. As long as variation exists in a target language, they have to tackle with the variation to render their sociolinguistic explanations. In other words, if one wants to become a variationist, one has to learn basics of linguistics: phonetics, phonology, morphology, semantics, syntax, and pragmatics in order to identify the academic orientation of the phenomena. Sociolinguistics is sometimes regarded as

one of the 'hyphenated' linguistics which are not really linguistics especially by theoretical linguists, functional linguists or any other sorts of linguists, but sociolinguistics is a firmly established disciplines in linguistics.

Variationists have a close look at the phenomena, which are more or less overlooked by other linguists. For instance, Japanese first person pronouns has a highly diverse system. This system can be explained by gender differences and formality. For instance, *watakushi* (formal) and *watashi* (casual), and *ore/boku* (male) and *watashi* (male/female) in Tokyo Japanese are distinguished by either/both gender or/and formality.

Another more important example is the distinction of *watashi* and *atashi* (or *watakushi* and *atakushi*). Most linguists do not locate the differences between these two pronouns as they linguistically function as first person pronoun. Variationist looks into the differences through the usage of each form and its linguistic and non-linguistic constraints. In fact, *atashi* and *atakushi* is found both in male and female speech although male do not know notice their use when they are interviewed. These finding can be construed as an indication of language change in-progress or that of free variation. Free variation means that variation exists to a certain degree, but none of the variant (or any specific feature) tends to win out of the variation to demonstrate any language change.

History of Japanese variationistsociolinguistics

Japanese sociolinguistics itself started in 1930s, and a number of studies have conducted so far to render the sociolinguistic description of language variation. However, it was other terminologies than sociolinguistics at that time. It was after 1970s when sociolinguistics became widespread in the Japanese academia.

(a) *Kokugo Iso Ron* (国語位相論)

Kokugo Iso Ron (or simply *Iso Ron*) is the very first terminology in Japanese sociolinguistics. *Iso* (language topology) refers to stratification of language. Kikusawa (1933) suggested this notion based on his findings in psychics. He claims as follows;

'different language forms are used differently if the structure of the society differs from one another. Japanese linguists need to work on this differences...I would like to propose a new discipline, called language topology, which focuses to clarify the regularities that can be observed from the actual language uses in various situations.' (originally in Japanese, translated by the author)

The idea itself is more or less the same as today's sociolinguistics. Therefore, this is the beginning of Japanese variationist sociolinguistics.

According to Kikusawa, *Kokugo Iso Ron* consists of the two major sub-notion: *Yosoron* (Phase-ology) and *Yoshikiron* (Stylistics). *Yosoron* aims to explain the relationship between language use and society whilst *Yoshikiron* aims to explain the stylistic relationship with a close look at both written and spoken language forms (and others). In other words, the former deals with inter-speaker variation and the latter with intra-speaker variation. This distinction should remind the reader of the taxonomy of language variation made by Bell (1984). Figure 1 is his diagram to explain the relationship between inter-speaker and intra-speaker variation.

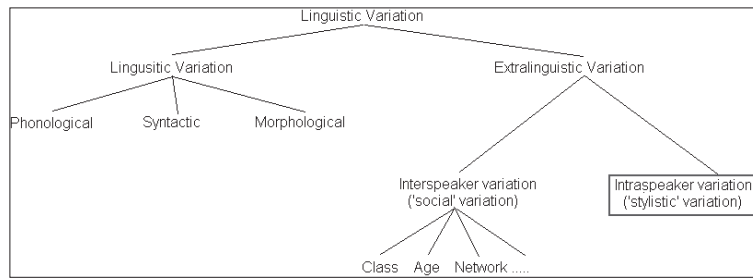


Figure 1 Relationship between inter-speaker and intra-speaker variation

Surprisingly, we can find a correlation between Kikusawa’s category made in 1930 and Bell’s category in 1980s. In this sense, *Kokugo Iso Ron* contributed to establish the foundation of variationist sociolinguistics.

(b) Gengo seikatsu (言語生活)

Gengo Seikatsu (Language Art of Living) is a second notion in a history of Japanese sociolinguistics proposed in 1940s. We can find the definition of the *Gengo Seikatsu* in Tokieda (1941) as below;

‘Apart from a traditional framework in Japanese linguistics, *Gengo Seikatsu* aims to render a description of the language in relation to human life itself...’(originally in Japanese, translated by the author)

Gengo Seikatsu studies have been initiated and conducted by National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics (NINJAL). In *Gengo Seikatsu* studies, quantitative approaches were adopted. This is different from most ethnographic or ethno-methodological studies, most of which adopt qualitative approaches. Most *Gengo Seikatsu* studies include some basic questions as to measure an amount of the

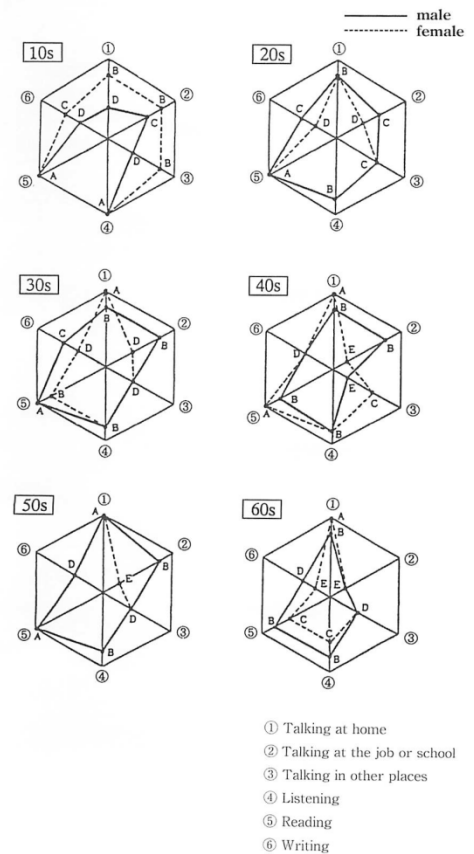


Figure 2 Language activities in Matsue

'language activities' such as amount of talking, listening, writing and reading. Figure 2 is a result from NINJAL study in Matsue in 1960s. From Figure 2, one can find an amount of talking at home/at the job or school, listening, reading, and writing differ amongst six age groups (Hayashi 1966).

Other approaches contrast with the above study. NINJAL worked with some speakers in *Gengo Seikatsu* context. 24-hour survey documents individual-level behaviors of a whole day in Shirakawa (NINJAL 1951). 19-hour recordings by a portable reel-to-reel player were made on three speakers. Transcriptions were made to conduct the sociolinguistic analyses. Figure 3 shows the number of sentence per hour (from 4am to 11pm) of the three speakers (farmer, hairdresser, and housewife). This figure shows an amount of utterance and its relationship with hours of the day.

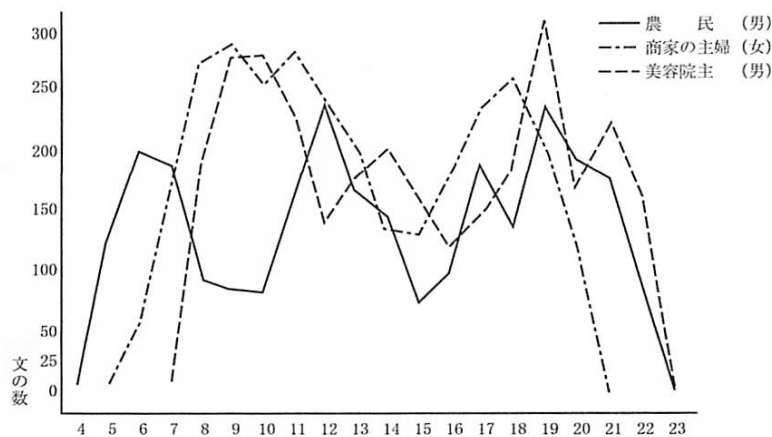


Figure 3 24-hour survey towards three speakers

Along with these unique approaches, *Gengo Seikatsu* studies were conducted in collaboration with other countries. At the end of 1970s (1977-1980), NINJAL conducted a contrastive linguistic study of linguistic behavior in Germany and Japan in a collaboration with German language institute. Table 1 is a result of the greeting expressions in 13 settings. This table 1 shows the routineness of the greeting expression is stronger in Japanese than in German in such situations as 'greeting at the end of dinner,' 'when you get home,' and 'greeting with your neighbors.'

	あいさつをする割合		異なり語形数		上位2形式の カバー率(日本)
	日本	ドイツ	日本	ドイツ	
①朝起きて家族に	64.7%	92.9%	8種類	55種類	95.4%
②よる寝る時家族に	70.9	96.1	12	81	97.2
③夕食の始め	68.6	65.2	4	54	98.1
④夕食の終り	71.9	25.6	11	46	91.8
⑤外出する時	85.6	94.9	35	99	72.9
⑥外出する家族を見送る	78.8	90.5	28	99	71.4
⑦帰宅した時	87.6	93.2	12	102	91.0
⑧帰宅した家族を迎える	80.7	88.1	20	106	78.5
⑨朝, 近所の人に	97.4	97.6	6	67	96.4
⑩昼, 近所の人に	97.4	98.8	11	74	89.2
⑪夕方, 近所の人に	97.4	98.8	14	61	88.6
⑫誕生日の知人に	55.9	98.5	39	129	52.1
⑬不幸のあった知人に	87.9	95.5	120	127	20.5

Table 1 Comparison of greeting behavior in Germany and Japan

(c) Sociolinguistic Variation

A third notion in a history of Japanese sociolinguistics is sociolinguistics, which has been used up to today. It was around 1980s when this notion was adopted in a literature in Japanese sociolinguistics instead of *Gengo Seikatsu*. *Gengo Seikatsu* studies were too descriptive to claim any theoretical significance to understand language use in daily life. Since mid-1960s, sociolinguistic studies began primarily in the US and later in the UK, and their publications (such as Labov 1966, 1972; Trudgill 1972, and others) made such a tremendous impact onto language variation studies on other languages including Japanese.

Affected from the trends in sociolinguistics and also from sociolinguistic studies on Japanese by Japanese graduate students who had their trainings at universities in the US, UK, or Canada, Japanese sociolinguistics had developed into its own way. As most Japanese variation studies were made traditionally in the area of Japanese dialectology, many Japanese dialectologists claimed to be a ‘sociolinguist’ who integrate their expertise with their sense of sociolinguistics.

Let us raise a couple of the Japanese sociolinguistic studies. Sanada (1993) studied honorifics (when you ask other residents in the same hamlet of Gokayama) by employing a so-called ‘league-style’ survey technique. In this technique, all the residents were targets of the survey, and this kind of study is first possible in such a small community. Each resident was asked to answer what to say ‘where are you going?’ to each of other members. Figure 4 shows that Family N and A are ranked higher in the community so that other members use the most polite expressions to the member of the two families.

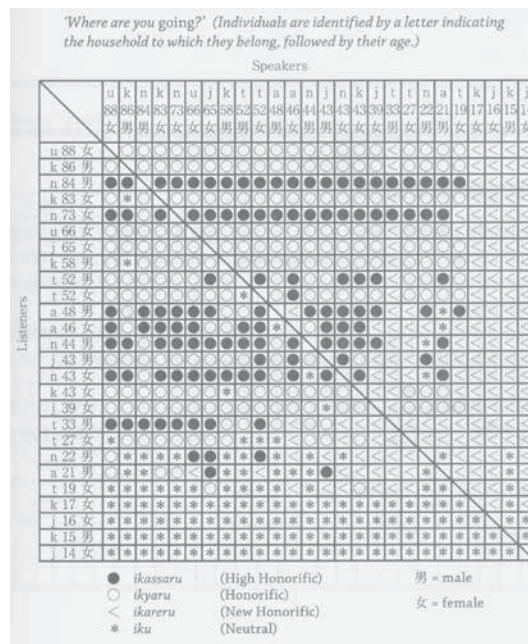


Figure 4 League-style survey on honorifics

Second sociolinguistic study initiated by NINJAL since 1950 is the real-time language change studies. NINJAL selected a couple of cities such as Tsuruoka, Okazaki, and Furano, to investigate the degree of standardization and also change in Japanese honorifics and attitude towards the honorifics. Real-time studies are nowadays quite popular, and this topic becomes a session topic at the international conferences in dialectology, sociolinguistics, and language variation. In this sense, NINJAL initiated this area of study in sociolinguistics, and it is widely known amount sociolinguists through citation in the introductory sociolinguistic textbook such as Chambers (2002) and so others.

Rest of this section shall look into two case studies in this research framework: Tsuruoka and Okazaki studies. Tsuruoka study was conducted four times: 1950, 1971, 1991, and 2011. In each survey, random sampling was made to choose respondents of the survey. A group of 10-20 researchers (mostly NINJAL staff and some faculty at university and graduate students) made their fieldwork at Tsuruoka to conduct doorstep surveys. Their survey questions have been repeated in the second, third, and fourth survey.

Figure 5 is a graph of the standardization process of the phonetic features of the Tsuruoka dialects (inter-vocalic voicing, nasalization, palatalization, and others). The score shows the degree of standardization; in other words, the higher the score becomes, the stronger the standardization proceeds. In the Figure 5, three survey results were included.

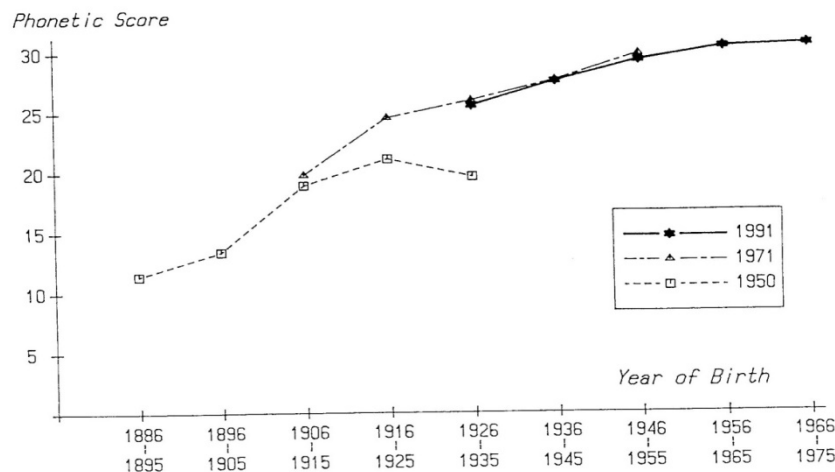


Figure 18 : Phonetic score by year of birth (Full scale = 31)

Figure 5 Real-time change in phonetic features (Yoneda 1997)

Figure 5 shows a gradual but steady real-time progress in the standardization. In addition, the so-call S-shape curve can be detected in this figure; it indicates that during the period of 1880s through 1960, language change in this particular level was taken place. This finding can be first made through conducting real-time studies.

Okazaki study is another real-time study on honorifics. Having three surveys in 1953, 1972, and 2008 towards about 400 residents. With the same research framework with Tsuruoka, Okazaki study aimed to examine the degree of real-time changes in honorifics as well as the attitudes towards the honorifics. During the interview, we asked whether or not you use honorifics to your parents, grandparents, and any elder siblings. Figure 6 shows the decrease of the use of honorifics in three surveys. This kind of change is also examined in this framework.

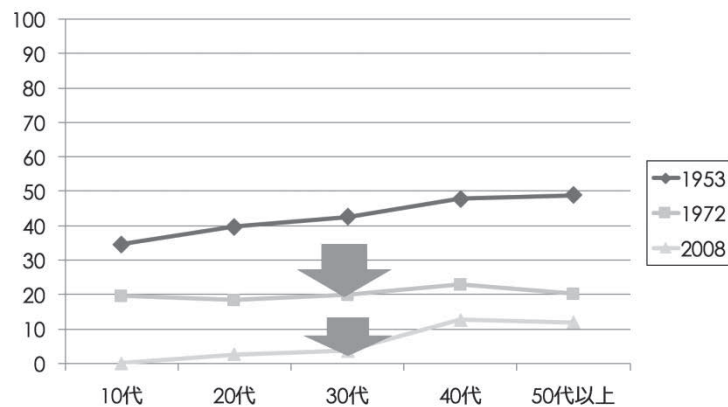


Figure 6 Real-time change in attitudes towards honorifics (Asahi 2009)

Conclusions

This paper focuses on the variationist sociolinguistic studies on Japanese language from a historical point of view to illustrate the following:

- (1) definition of Japanese sociolinguistics
- (2) history of Japanese sociolinguistics: *Kokugo Iso Ron* and *Gengo Seikatsu*

Relevant studies in the history of Japanese sociolinguistics are raised to explain their academic significance. Recently trend in linguistics especially in Japan centers on the documentation as well as theoretical examinations. Their contribution is highly evaluated and more studies should be carried out in future. At the same time, from variationist's point of view, Japanese language hold a large degree of variation. The studies on this facet of language should be continued as long as we, any language speakers, are living with our speech community and our language is bound to the social context. We should keep our eye on the Japanese language variation, and try to explain the mechanism of the variation with more challenging and innovating framework.

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