

# Some Recent Phenomena in the Usage of Spoken Japanese——What Mental Habits Do They Reflect?\*

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## Introduction

There has been in recent years a tremendous change in the usage of Japanese as spoken by native Japanese of all ages, ranging from the very young to the more advanced in years. This change can be evidenced by the increase in number of those who apparently take delight in the use, or rather, abuse, of linguistic deviations from those norms which have taken root in the consciousness of the cultured elite during the course of their schooling from elementary up toward higher levels. By “linguistic deviations” I do not mean regional divergences in the spoken language. Regional differences in speech have always existed and still persist strongly in some localities.

What I do mean is an assortment of phenomena which arose initially from among the young, but which have rapidly spread through the whole spectrum of age groups of both genders—except the elderly few who were linguistically trained through schooling before World War II. If there is any cohort in the society of present-day Japan who holds on

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to a traditional system of values and guards it jealously against all dangers of corruption, it is these elderly few who care seriously about the current trend that is with ever-increasing velocity pulling down, as they put it, “the standard of *authentic* Japanese.”

What I propose to do in this paper is (1) to instance some of the most conspicuous of deviations from the linguistic norms, 2) to examine some of the comments made on those deviations by professional linguists, and (3) to consider what habits of the mind the new phenomena may be assumed to reflect.

## 1 “Half-/Quasi- Questioning ”

The first of the deviations that I would like to take up is a phenomenon called variously by the researchers— “half-/quasi- questioning ” by some, and “posing of semi-questions ” by others. What these names refer to is the recurrence of a rising intonation in the midst of a spoken sentence. Here are two sample sentences, in which a rising intonation that occurs is shown by an upward-pointing arrow.

①英語の↑ 早期教育を↑ めぐる↑ 論議が↑ 活発に↑ なっている↓。<sup>1</sup>

*Eigo no ↑ sooki kyooiku o ↑ meguru ↑ rongi ga ↑ kappatsu ni ↑ natte iru ↓.*

Discussions on the teaching of English at an early stage in life are going on lively.

②なぜ↑ 早くから↑ 英語を↑ 学ぶことが↑ 良いのか↓。

*Naze↑ hayaku kara↑ eigo o↑ manabu koto ga↑ yoi noka↓.*

Why is it good to learn English at an early stage in life?

You may feel that each of these sentences contains too many breaks for a rising intonation. Yes, it certainly is unusual to intone at all of these breaks, and most native speakers of Japanese do not actually change their tones so often within such a short sentence. But in theory, if not in practice, it is not impossible to put in a rising intonation at any one of those breaks. And that, in fact, is what an increasing number of talkers— especially middle-aged women — are observed to be doing in their daily verbal interactions. What is interesting to note is that in more recent years it is not women talkers alone who are displaying this tendency; even men—and an increasing number of them at that—are beginning to speak in this strange manner of “half-/quasi- questioning.”

## 2 Anomalous Adjuncts

### 2-1 “... or something” / “something like ...”

The second of the linguistic phenomena that arrest the attention of observers is the proliferation of semantically empty or near empty words or phrases in the verbal interactions of Japanese men and women—especially the younger of them. This is illustrated by the following

sentences:

- ③日本人が漢文で書いたりとか、そんな感じだ。だから、文法的におかしかったりとか、ヘンなところが結構あったりする。

*Nihonjin ga kanbun de kaitari toka, sonna kanji da. Dakara, bunpo-teki ni okashikattari toka, henna tokoro ga kekko attari suru.*

It's like a Japanese writing **or something** in the style of a Chinese classic. That's how I feel about it. You can easily commit **something like** a grammatical error, or use somewhat unnatural wording.

- ④免許証とかを持たないでクルマを運転するのは違法じゃないの？

*Menkyoshoo toka o motanaide kuruma o untensuru nowa ihoo janai-no?*

Isn't it illegal to drive a car without a license **or something**?

In these sentences – at least in their English versions – there may be some plausible excuse for the use of such words or phrases as **something of**, or **something like**. It may be said, indeed, that so long as you used them sparingly, you could expect to achieve something of a rhetorical effect. However, if you used them too much within such a short piece of discourse, the result would surely be disastrous. Whatever effects you might have expected to achieve could easily be ruined. What is

amazing is that not only the younger, but even the more elderly generations of Japanese men and women are going in for such anomalies in their daily conversations.

## 2-2 “sort of ...”/“rather like ...”/“actually ...”

The third of the remarkable phenomena in the verbal behavior of the Japanese—observed especially among young men and women—is the scattering of meaningless modifiers in their talk. For example, they often begin or end a phrase or sentence with such a modifier as “**ichioo**,” “**kekoo**,” or “**igaito**” almost (as it appears) unconsciously, with little regard for what it should mean in its proper context. Look at the following dialogs:

⑤ A : 「ご職業は？」

B : 「一応、銀行員です」<sup>2</sup>

A : “*Go-shokugyo wa?*”

B : “*Ichioo, ginkooin desu.*”

A : “What’s your occupation?”

B : “**Sort of** a bank clerk.”

⑥ A : 「きみて、結構、シャイなんだね」

B : 「ええ、わたしって、意外とシャイなんです」<sup>3</sup>

A : “*Kimitte, kekko, shai nanda-ne.*”

B : *"Ee, watashitte igaito shai nandesu."*

A : "Sure enough, you're shy."

B : "Well, I'm ... **actually** shy."

When someone asked you what your occupation is, as in the first dialog above, you would normally reply in English, "Bank clerk," if you are a bank clerk. You would hardly ever say "**Sort of** a bank clerk," unless you are being deliberately vague or evasive. What is characteristic of the Japanese is that they tend to use such vague and evasive wording, even when they have no reason for doing so.

The second dialog above is one between a young man and his girl friend. The young man is voicing his mild surprise at the shyness of the girl. The phrase "**sure enough**" in the English version sounds slightly more emphatic than does its Japanese equivalent "**kekko**," which normally means "**rather**" or "**somewhat**." The fact is that neither interlocutor in the dialog has in mind any of these meanings when they utter them. They use them as a lubricant, so to speak, merely to make their conversation run smooth. The girl's response to her boy friend's remark may puzzle you, for she says, "I'm **actually** shy" (more literally, "I'm shy **though you may not believe it**") in a setting where no one has any disbelief in what she is saying. But the fact is that many Japanese young men and women find it amusing to conduct a conversation in just that way.

## 2 - 3 “ ..., you know”/ “ ..., don't you agree?”

I will show you another verbal mannerism indulged in by a rapidly increasing number of young people—males, as well as females. It is a tag-assertion in the form of a question, “-janaidesuka.”

⑦わたしって、お肉が食べれないじゃないですか。だから、だいたい魚と野菜です。<sup>4</sup>

*Watashitte, o-nikuga taberenai-janaidesuka. Dakara, daitai wa sakana to yasai desu.*

I cannot eat meat, **you know**. So I eat mostly fish and vegetables.

The tag “**you know**” in the English version may sound normal enough, though here again I must warn you that if you used it too often, you might offend the ears of native speakers. By contrast, the Japanese tag “-janaidesuka” has an imposing (and therefore, offensive) overtone, audible from such a pushy demand as “Of course you must accept my statement.” The truth is that the Japanese speaker actually means no more than to say: “You and I are, as it were, one and the same identity, and so you would naturally agree to what I am saying, wouldn't you?” However, such an assumption on the part of the speaker is likely to produce, and does in fact often produce, an unpleasant resonance in the ear of the listener. It is understandable that elderly persons generally should frown at such an “odious”

expression, as they put it.

### **3 Responsive Interjections**

The responsive interjection “**un**” or “**uu-n**” (a prolonged form of “**un**”) is also gaining currency among Japanese interlocutors — no less among men than among women. This same interjection is used on such a variety of occasions as: (1) when one speaker responds affirmatively to a question posed by the other, (2) when one speaker assents to an opinion expressed by the other, (3) when one speaker affirms his/her own statement, (4) when one speaker responds in sympathy to the other, and (5) when one speaker is at a loss (“**uu-n**” ) for a quick response to something said by the other.

#### **3 - 1 Simple Affirmative: “yes / yeah”**

This use of the interjection “**un**” is supposed to have originated in the cradle. It persists through the successive stages of growth—from infancy to childhood and from these, through adolescence, to adulthood. At some point along the path, you get the notion that this form of response is acceptable only in an informal setting. You come to learn, sooner or later, that in a more formal setting a different rule obtains. In a society like Japan, well-educated women were from an early age so conditioned as to avoid all coarse language, including interjections. That is why the greater part of the mature womanhood in that country—at least on formal occasions—shy away from uttering a blunt “**un**”



and respond, as if by instinct, with a more polite, more soft-sounding “**hai**” (more formal) or “**ee**” (less formal).

The following dialog is between a pair of male speakers. (They are assumed to be in a fairly close personal relationship to each other.)

⑧A : 「きみ、週末はひまかい？」

B : 「**うん**、ひまだよ」

A : “*Kimi, shuumatsu wa hima kai?*”

B : “*Un, hima dayo.*”

A : “Are you free this weekend?”

B : “ [Yeah] [I] Guess so.”

If the same dialog took place between females, it would probably go (in their feminine language) like this:

⑨A : 「あなた、週末は おひま？」

B : 「**ええ**、 ひまよ」

A : “*Anata, shuumatsu wa o-hima?*”

B : “*Ee, hima yo.*”

The recent trend in Japanese society, however, is that more and more women are abandoning such feminine language and adopting blunt masculine language instead, as in the following version of the same

dialog:

⑩ A : 「マリコ、週末は ひま？」

B : 「**うん**、ひまだよ」

A : “*Mariko, shuumatsu wa hima?*”

B : “***Un**, hima dayo*”

A : “*Mariko, are you free this weekend?*”

B : “***Yes**, I’m free.*”

You will notice that the first speaker addresses the second by the latter’s personal name “マリコ” (Mariko), in preference to the more formal personal pronoun “あなた” (anata), which sounds in fact rather impersonal. This use of personal names in friendly conversations is now becoming “trendy” among young women. Some critics regards this as an evidence of Americanization in the society of Japan after World War II. That may indeed be the case. But I would like to draw your attention to masculinization of young women’s speaking style in more recent times. The evidence is in the same dialog above, where you will notice that the respondent speaker is using the same male idiom “**Un**, hima dayo” as in dialog ⑧.

### 3 - 2 Assentive: “I think so, too.”

The function of the interjection “**un**,” as illustrated above, may be called “affirmative” because you use that interjection when you reply to a

question affirmatively. There are other functions, each of which I will illustrate in the succeeding dialogs.

⑪ A : 「彼女、ボーイフレンドができたのかもね」

B : 「うん、その可能性、おありね」

A : "*Kanojo, boi-furendo ga dekita-no-kamo-ne*"

B : "*Un, sono kanoosei, oo-ari-ne*"

A : "Maybe she's got a boy friend."

B : "**Yes**, that's very likely."

The first speaker in this dialog is either a male or a female. You cannot tell which, in print. The second speaker, despite her employment of the masculine interjection "**un**" is assumed to be a female because she is using a feminine phrase-ender "**ne**" at the end of her phrase "oo-ari." (The phrase-ender "**ne**" in the first speaker's remark could be either masculine or feminine.) The function of the interjection as it is used here may be named "assentive," because it expresses the assent of the second speaker to the first speaker's opinion.

### 3 - 3 Self-assuring: "yes " / "indeed" / "it must be so"

The third of the functions to be illustrated here may be called "self-assuring." This function is illustrated by the interjection "**un**," as it occurs in the following dialog:

⑫A : 「じゃ、なんであんな声をだすの？」

B : 「とオ、なんでってことはないけどオ、ひとりでにでちゃうんだよ  
なあ、**うん**」<sup>5</sup>

A : “*Jaa, nande anna koe o dasu no?*”

B : “*To’ho, nandette koto wa nai kedo-o, hitorideni  
dechaundayo-naa, **un.***”

A : “Why, then, do you raise your voice like that?”

B : “Ugh! I don’t know why, but it comes out that way,  
without my knowing it— **yes** [unconsciously].”

The first speaker here is supposed to be a male friend of the respondent speaker, apparently a young female. Immediately after she has replied to her friend, she pauses a moment to ask herself whether her reply is true or not, and then, rather abruptly, she answers this latter question with a “self-assuring” interjection, “**un.**”

### 3 - 4 Sympathetic: “I think I know...”/ “I could well imagine ...”

The fourth function of “**un**” as a responsive interjection is to express sympathy. It may be named “sympathetic” because one of the interlocutors, by that interjection, conveys his/her sympathy with the other, as in the following dialog:

⑬A : 「それで、わたし、彼と離婚する決心をしたの」

B : 「**うん**、その気持ち、わかるなあ」

A : *"Sorede, watashi, kare to rikon suru kesshin o shita-no"*

B : *"Un, sono kimochi, waku-naa"*

A : "And so, I decided to divorce him."

B : "I think I know how you came to that decision."

This is presumably a dialog between a woman telling about her divorce to a man listening to her sympathetically. But the same dialog could have taken place between two female friends. Even so, it may be noticed, the listening friend is using a male manner of speech, in accordance to the now current usage, without giving a hint of unnaturalness. In any case, the listening speaker is responding sympathetically to the other speaker. If the first speaker was a man confiding a similar experience of his own to his woman friend (supposing that both speakers were mature enough), the conversation would go (in a different wording in Japanese) like this:

⑭ A : 「それで、ぼくは、彼女と離婚しようと思ったというわけさ」

B : 「(まあ、そうでしたの。でも) あなたのお気持ち、わかるような  
気がしますわ」

A : *"Sorede, boku wa kanojo to rikon shiyo to kesshin shita to  
yuuwake-sa"*

B : *"(Maa, soodeshita-no. Demo) anata no o-kimochi, waku  
yoona kigashimasu-wa"*

A : "And so, I decided to get divorced from her."

B : “Is that so? [ But ] I could well imagine how you came to that decision.”

Notice that the woman is not responding to the man with a blunt “un”, but is taking a roundabout way of expressing a mild surprise in the form of a responsive question, thereby implying her sympathy. This is what a cultured Japanese woman was once supposed to do in such a situation. But the trend among the majority of young women today is to do away with all such euphemism and take an easy option to have this same interjection “un” serve their present need on all occasions.

### 3 - 5 Emphatic: “w...ell” / “sure (enough)” / “absolutely” / “of course”

If one speaker wants to convey his/her response emphatically to what the other speaker has said or is saying, they usually prolong the vowel in an interjection more or less, according to the degree of emphasis. Thus, “un” often turns into “uu-n.” For example:

⑮ 「うーん、それはむずかしい質問だなあ」

*“Uu-n, sore wa muzukashii shitsumon da-naa”*

“W...ell, that’s a difficult question to answer.”

⑯ 「うーん、そりゃ困ったろうなあ」

*“Uu-n, sorya komatta-roo-naa”*

"That must **sure** have got you in a fix."

⑰ 「うーん、そりゃきみの言うとおりだ」

*"U-uu-n, sorya kimi no yuu toori da"*

"You're **absolutely** right, **of course**."

All these responsive interjections sound natural enough, when they are uttered by Japanese males of a relatively easy personal relationship to each other. The "Uu-n" in sentence ⑮ concurs with a groan when the speaker fails to come up with a ready answer to a question posed by the other speaker. The "Uu-n" in sentence ⑯ is uttered when the speaker expresses his sympathy with the other speaker. The "U-uu-n" in sentence ⑰, if uttered emphatically in the "low-high-low" pitch pattern suggests that the speaker is in complete agreement, or in deep sympathy, with the other speaker.

How would these responses go between two female speakers (who are on reasonably good terms with each other)? The normal responses would be like the following:

⑱ 「うーん、それはむずかしい質問（だわ）ねえ」

*"Uu-n, sore wa muzukashii shitsumon (-dawa)-nee"*

⑲ 「うーん、そりゃ困ったでしょうねえ」

*"Uu-n, sorya komatta-deshoo-nee"*

- ⑳ 「うーん、 そりゃあなたの言うとおりよ」

*"U-uu-n, sorya anata no yuu toori yo"*

Notice that, despite some minor differences in the wording, the responsive interjection that occurs in the female talk is identical to that which occurs in the male talk.

Now, what would happen if the respondent speaker was a man? Well, the man would probably use the same interjection *"uu-n"*. What, then, if the respondent was a woman speaking to a man? She would probably avoid the interjection *"uu-n"* and have recourse to some other devices, as in the following sentences:

- ㉑ 「そうねえ、 それはむずかしい質問（だわ）ねえ」

*"Soo nee, sore wa muzukashii shitsumon (-dawa)-nee"*

- ㉒ 「まあー、 そりゃお困りでしたでしょうねえ」

*"Maa ... sorya o-komari deshita-desho-nee"*

- ㉓ 「ええ、ええ、 そりゃあなたのおっしゃるとおりですわ」

*"Ee, ee, sorya anata no ossharu toori-desu-wa"*



All these are quite normal female responses. The trend of the times, however, is that more and more women abandon these well-established forms of female speech and take to all-purpose masculine forms, such as “un” or “uu-n.” It does not seem to make any difference to them whether those they talk to are friends of their own gender, or of the other. It does not seem to make any difference to them, either, whether those they talk to are their elders, or superiors.

## 4 Commentary

Having given some of the most conspicuous deviations in the usage of present-day Japanese, I now go on to consider possible reasons for their emergence.

### 4 - 1 On “half-/quasi- questioning”

The phenomenon of “half-/quasi- questioning” in the form of a “semi-question” has caught the attention of a number of watchers of the speech behavior of the Japanese – especially the young. A couple of years ago, Fumio Inoue the sociolinguist-*cum*-dialectologist, was asked to give his opinion about the cause of this fad, when he was participating as a panelist in a symposium on “21st-century Japanese.” Since the discussions were conducted in Japanese, I may be allowed to quote his words not in his original language, but in my English translation here:

Inoue: I don't think we had anything of the sort [in days gone by], though I must say I haven't lived that long. But I think it's an effective way of speaking. Within the duration of a moment or so, you could keep your listener's attention to what you're saying, while making sure at the same time how the listener got it. Suppose you were using a certain word in your talk and you wanted to make sure if your listener knows the word. If you were to ask your listener "By the way, do you know this word?" you would have to [hold back the flow of your talk and thereby] lose your precious time; of course it would be impolite if you did that sort of thing merely to check about the knowledge of the listener. You might well raise your pitch a bit at the end of the word, with a quick glance at your listener. If you saw your listener nod at that moment, you could continue your talk. If not, then you could put in some other word there by way of explanation. You could expect some gain, either way.<sup>6</sup>

On this same phenomenon there is a specialist observation from another linguist. The following extract (again in my English translation) is from an article by Hideo Satake:

Generally speaking, semi-questions occur on two occasions. One is when the speaker wants to have the truth of his/her statement ascertained by the listener. The other is when the speaker wants to ascertain that the message has been correctly understood by the listener. On either occasion, the speaker has recourse to this particular form [of a semi-question] to

ascertain the response of the listener.<sup>7</sup>

He continues:

Most of the semi-questions used by the young occur on the first of these occasions. On closer observation, it becomes evident that they put in this particular question right after some unfamiliar word or expression, of whose appropriateness they are not feeling sure at the moment.<sup>8</sup>

These two observations by two distinguished linguists do not agree in every detail. It looks as if Inoue by choice is seeing the positive side of the phenomenon. The speaker's aim, he says, is "effectively" achieved by the raising of a pitch of voice at the end of each key word, and the simultaneous throwing of a glance at the listener (to see the latter's reaction). On the other hand, Satake appears to be more inclined to see the speaker's diffidence in his/her own communicative competence. In one respect, however, the two experts stand on the same ground: they are both seeing in the speaker's act a need to ascertain the response of the listener. If I may be allowed to venture a remark of my own, I must say that I find it difficult to accept *in toto* either of their specialist views.

My objection to Inoue's thesis is that the speaker who poses a semi-question in the midst of a statement is seldom (if ever) in need of having the appropriateness of his/her chosen word confirmed or denied by the listener. Why, then, does the speaker pose a semi-question at

all? My answer is that, more often than not, the speaker merely assumes a pose to impress on the listener that he/she is being ready or fair or open-minded enough to accept, if necessary, any comment whatsoever—favorable or otherwise. The speaker is actually in no mind to accept, nor indeed to expect, any such comment coming from the listener. I am skeptic in no small degree about whether the speaker ever throws a glance at the listener each time he/she puts in a semi-question.

Well aware of the possibility of such a doubt being raised, Satake follows his observation with a word of warning:

Does the speaker, then, seriously seek to have the appropriateness of his/her verbal choice confirmed by the listener? It does not appear to be always the case. If the speaker is in fact seriously seeking such confirmation, he/she ought to wait till the listener gives some response; only then would the speaker be in a position to continue the talk. As a matter of fact, the speaker just goes on talking, without allowing the listener any duration of time for response.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, Satake offers his own interpretation of the phenomenon in terms of a strategy the speaker adopts for removing, beforehand, any possible objection from the listener. I think this line of argument holds good—in so far as it goes to explain the peculiarly Japanese fear for confrontation, and it is a well-known fact that many Japanese hate to be involved in any conflict of opinion. Nonetheless, the fact remains

that the speaker posing a semi-question does not normally allow the listener sufficient time for response. And I do not think that this fact has ever been satisfactorily explained by any of the professional linguists that I know of.

What looks like a more convincing theory is that in these times of democracy and egalitarianism men and women alike are becoming less and less dogmatic and authoritarian, and more and more tentative and accommodative in their assertions. In other words, they are caring more and more to be considerate toward the positions of others. This theory explains in part, if not in whole, why most women talkers tend to show a predilection for semi-questions. By nature, they are a sociable lot, or supposed so at any rate. If this idea of womanhood has any grounds in reality, it will go toward explaining the peace-loving nature of a female talk. It may be accepted as a truth, then, that women in general love a friendly talk. It may well be this aspect of female talk which makes a "hen" party look pleasant and agreeable. By contrast, a "bull" session, though it may start as an occasion for idle talk, often turns into something like a political debate, and the participants all too easily get into a heated argument. This may well be due to men's natural tendency toward aggressiveness. They are generally less accommodative than women. Of course, I know well enough that all this is a crude generalization about a gender difference. All the same time, while admitting that limitation, I prefer to stick to my own supposition, and from that very supposition I want to proceed to posit a thesis that may startle you—that, contrary to general beliefs, Japanese males are rapidly becoming more effeminate in their speech

behavior than they used to be. From my point of view, it is this characteristic in Japanese manhood that distinguishes them sharply from their counterparts in many Western, and some Asian, countries.

There can be various kinds and degrees of difference not only between individuals, but also between nations, no less in their mental habits than in their outward behavior. Mental habits of an individual are formed at an early stage in his/her life history, whereas a nation takes hundreds of years or more, for their collective thinking patterns to be formed. The Japanese as a nation had long been exposed, from ancient times on (at least to the end of World War II), under the potent influence of Buddhist, as well as Confucian, moral philosophy. Due to this dual influence, which persists even to this day, generation after generation of Japanese have been so conditioned, in their thinking and behavioral patterns, as to maintain a peaceful relation with others and avoid confrontation on all occasions and in all settings for interaction. The posing of semi-questions, then, must be considered a manifestation of this particular mode of thinking, which normally lies dormant but starts its operations almost automatically, whenever an occasion arises for an interaction—verbal or otherwise.

What counts in the field of a conversational interaction is not so much for one speaker to have the appropriateness of this or that word confirmed or denied by the other, as for one speaker to signal to the other that he/she is willing, if necessary, to retract or modify his/her word. There is a tacit understanding between the interlocutors that such retraction or modification is not actually needed. Half-/quasi-

questioning, then, is a sort of *pro forma* questioning, in which one interlocutor behaves as if he/she is ready to start or continue a friendly conversation with the other interlocutor. It is a mere gesture of politeness in the conversational act as a ritual.

#### 4 - 2 On "... or something"/"something like ..."

The first of what I call "anomalous adjuncts" ("とか", "**toka**") is easily recognizable, for it is attached to the first (and each succeeding one) of more than two words or phrases aligned in parallel with one another, as shown in the following schema:

Word 1, Word 2, Word 3, ... or Phrase 1, Phrase 2, Phrase 3, ...

You use this adjunct properly only when you illustrate more than two items, and when you do this by attaching the adjunct *at the end of* the first (and each succeeding one) of them, as in the following dialog:

A : 「犬**とか**猫のことですか?」

B : 「そうです」

A : "*Inu **toka** neko no koto desu-ka?*"

B : "*Soo-desu*"

A : "You mean a dog, **or** a cat?"

B : "That's right."

The conjunctive “**or**” in the English version of the question asked by A is ambiguous, for it could mean either (1) “You mean either a dog, or else a cat?” or (2) “You mean animals, such as a dog, or a cat? The latter is what the question means in Japanese, and in that case the Japanese equivalent (動物 “doobutsu”) to “animals” in the English version is often omitted. This practice is perfectly acceptable. But the novelty of the now fashionable practice, which is becoming more and more popular among the young and other generations in Japan, lies in the use of that same adjunct when there are no other words to which it ought also to apply in correct usage. Thus, the Japanese question in the dialog above turns too easily into a problematic version, like the following:

「犬**とか**のことですか？」

*“Inu toka no koto desu-ka?”*

“You mean a dog, **or something?**”

There are two positions from which to view this malapropism. One is taken by those who, while recognizing a malapropism in the use of this or that neologism, choose to see some value, even a virtue, in that very malapropism. Almost diametrically opposed to it is the other position, taken by those who are quick to denounce everything that deviates from the norm. Interestingly, the former group includes a majority (as it appears) of professional linguists, whereas the latter includes only a handful of non-professionals. The following extract is from an essay



from Shigeru Ekuni, who, unlike his usual practice, is here rather humorously voicing his dislike for this particular malapropism:

「ね、ね、ビール**とか** 飲みに行きませんか？」

若い女性にいつも誘われるのは（嘘つけ！）うれしいが、ビール**とか**、はごめん を こうむりたい。

「ね、ね、不倫**とか** しない？」

これは、許す。<sup>10</sup>

*“Ne, ne, biiru **toka** nomi ni iki-masen?”*

*Wakai josei ni itsumo sasowareru nowa (uso tsuke!) ureshii ga, biiru **toka**, wa gomen o koomuritai.*

*“Ne, ne, furin **toka** shinai?”*

*Kore wa, yurusu.*

“Hey, what about going out for a drink of beer, **or something?**”

I feel good, of course, whenever I’m asked to go out by a young pretty thing (I expect an instant cry from you: “Oh, you’re telling a big lie!”), but I can never, ever, swallow down that way of saying “biiru **toka**”.

Should she say, “Hey, what about having fun, **or something** — with me on the bed?”, why, that’d be a different story, you know. <sup>11</sup>

#### 4 - 3 On “sort of ...”/“rather like ...”/“actually ...”

It is well known among anthropological linguists that one of the characteristics of the Japanese is their tendency to avoid saying things straightforwardly. Even in a debate, where they are supposedly aware that they have to make a definite statement, they somehow tend to leave part of their statement either unsaid or fuzzy. It is as if they would rather leave the meaning of that part guessed at by others. This is what often irritates Westerners, for they have great difficulty in deciding whatever meanings or implications may be intended. It all goes in counter to their tradition in communication.

On the other hand, it is interesting to note that many Japanese—and this is especially the case with the young—are becoming more loquacious in their casual talk than ever before. It is mostly in casual talks that they display their habit of using such apparently meaningless modifiers as “*ichioo*,” “*kekko*,” or “*igaito*.”

How would professional linguists account for this latter phenomenon? Hideo Satake accounts for it in terms of what he calls, “the speaker’s excessive self-consciousness,” with reference to the example already mentioned (in which the modifier “*ichioo*” occurs):

A : 「卒業した後はどうするの？」

B : 「一応、就職します」

A : *"Sotsugyo shita ato wa doo suru no?"*

B : *"Ichioo, shuushoku shimasu"*

A : "What would you like to do after graduation?"

B : "I'd find a job **anyway**."

His comment follows:

[In this dialog] the speaker who asked the question would naturally expect something more to be said by the other, in addition to the word "**ichioo**." The same speaker might well have felt an urge to ask: "and then, what?" But the respondent apparently has no intention to do that. He simply replied that he would "find a job," and that was all about it. By making his reply sound more substantial than it actually was, he may have hinted that he wanted to do something better, but that the harsh realities on the job market which he knew only too well would not allow him to say anything more. <sup>12</sup>

Such an argument in itself does look convincing enough, but I am inclined to believe that the truth of the matter lies somewhere else. To put it straightforwardly, I think we should regard all of these seemingly innocent little modifiers as nothing other than cliches. If someone finds by chance that certain words or phrases are convenient to use, and a sufficient number of others also find them as such, and use them frequently, those words and phrases are bound, sooner or later, to take on the appearance of cliches. This is especially the case with the modifiers now under discussion. What bothers us is that too many kids,

and even adults, are now using them, without (as it appears) realizing that they are, after all, nothing but cliches, and that cliches are what all men and women of fine sensibility should feel ashamed of using, even casually, in their talk. One may be reminded, in passing, of a couple of other cliches. I mean widely-used intensifying modifiers, such as “**sugoku**” (and its variant, “**suggoku**”) and “**cho-**” which roughly correspond to English intensifiers, such as “**terribly**,” “**awfully**” and “**exceedingly**” (and, to take a more recent example, “**absolutely**”). I dare not quote from a popular woman poet who once amazed me with her habitual use (more than twice in her brief talk) of such a hackneyed intensifier as “**sugoku**” when she was speaking as a panelist in the aforementioned symposium, but I certainly want to leave on record how badly I felt when I confirmed this mannerism of hers in the proceedings of that symposium published afterward.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4-4 On “..., you know”/“..., don’t you agree?”

Reactions to this curious use of the tag-assertion (“**-janaidesuka**”) among the young seem to be generally negative. The Agency for Cultural Affairs, one of the governmental organizations in Japan, published on 30 March 1998 the results of a survey on the current usage of Japanese, which was conducted from November to December of the previous year on 3,000 individuals over the age of 16, of whom about 2,200 responded to the questionnaire.<sup>14</sup> One of the questions asked was how they felt when someone said to them:

「私ってコーヒーが好きじゃないですか」

*“Watashi-tte koohii ga suki -janaidesuka”*

“I like coffee, **don’t** I?”

Forty-six percent of the respondents felt that this expression sounded “abrupt” and twenty-six percent felt it sounded “pushy.” In other words, as many as seventy-two percent of them were feeling that it sounds unpleasant, one way or the other.

The question may well be asked why it is that this particular expression, which gave so many people so much embarrassment or offence, should have gained such currency among the young, and spreading with ever-increasing velocity to the rest of the population. To which Hideo Satake suggests his answer, thus:

Those who use this form of speech are thinking it would be impolite if they ended an assertion without it. In other words, they are using it to soften an assertion. <sup>15</sup>

I am not sure whether or not he has hit the mark, but in the absence of a better explanation from other professionals, I may be allowed to put forth my own.

I think that those who responded in negative terms to the questionnaire afore-mentioned retained enough of the good sense for their language, whereas those who take delight in such an extraordinary way of speech as this tag are thereby revealing their lack of linguistic sensibility.

These latter are in fact so obtuse that, when it comes to the matter of verbal implication, they can hardly make any sensible distinctions. They may indeed be intending, as Hideo Satake suggests, to avoid impoliteness or rudeness by attaching this tag to their statement or assertion. The possibility that the same tag might give an impression of "abruptness" or "pushiness" (which are sub-categories of "impoliteness" or "rudeness" ) to some other ears more finely tuned than theirs is, it must be supposed, beyond their lean imagination.

#### **4 - 5    On "Responsive Interjections"**

The responsive interjections, "**un**" and "**uu-n**," have their origin in infant speech. A study by a researcher in the National Institute for Research on the Japanese Language reports that her subject, a male infant, started to utter one or the other of these responsives some 24 months after he was born. According to that report, the infant was observed to utter "**uu-n**" when he showed resistance to a request that he should do this or that little thing for her, and "**un**" when he showed an willingness to do something else. <sup>16</sup>

Putting aside the question about whether or not the infant was consciously differentiating his responses, one may safely assume that these utterances belong to the vocabulary of every normal infant. It is something of a wonder that of all items in the infant vocabulary the above-mentioned alone should enjoy such a longevity of life that many adults, even those who are very old, still use them on various occasions.

Despite all the functional differences that are recognizable in their usage, these responsive interjections do retain their essential nature, that of infantility. If adults use them, two remarks must be made about it. One is that those responsives often strike sensitive ears as being singularly unpleasant. Sometimes they even make hearers suspect that the speaker may actually be an arrogant man— or woman. I remember once watching an interview on TV, in which a politician was replying to each question thrown at him by the interviewer, with exactly those same responsives. The impression I then received was not so much that the politician was being arrogant, as that he was a helplessly insensitive man. He looked quite unaware that he might be impressing on the viewers a fatal image of himself as a politician, namely that of a very arrogant man.

The other is that those responsives can be made to serve a number of different purposes at one and the same time. Simple-minded people (let no professional linguists be among the number!) may regard this as convenient, and therefore, quite acceptable. People of more refined sensibility, however, are likely to see the matter differently. These latter would refuse to use them simply because they are conveniently there for ready use. They would rather examine the matter instantaneously in their minds to see if there are no other options they might take — more fitting to the occasion. If they see that they could avail themselves of no alternatives, then, of course, they would use those responsives. The great majority of talkers, however, do not take so much care about the choice of their words. They just make use of the more readily available of words in their limited vocabulary, no

matter how hackneyed and banal they are.

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing discussions may be summarized under three general heads: (1) prevalence of a female mode of thinking in conversations, (2) ever-growing tendency among female talkers to use masculine language, and (3) general decline of decorum in speech.

### **(1) Prevalence of a female mode of thinking in conversations**

It is difficult to ascertain who invented the strange fashion of "half-/quasi- questioning," or "posing semi-questions," or when. Whoever may have started it, the fashion is likely to have spread among some in-groups in the younger generation. Almost as soon as it got started, that fashion seems to have caught the imagination of a wider range of women, first in their twenties and thirties and then in their elders. Whatever the origin and process of the spreading of this fad may have been, the psychology of those who indulge in the use of this particular form of speech is worth further exploration. In the foregoing commentary, I gave some attention to this aspect of the matter and suggested that the phenomenon may be explained from a deep-seated desire in womanhood to carry on a friendly conversation as smoothly and peacefully as possible. In that connection, I also made my observation that this (originally female) mode of thinking is now being shared by an increasing number of males as well. What this observation implies is that a female thinking is now rapidly gaining ascendance over



the male thinking that once prevailed in Japanese society. I also put forth my thesis that, contrary to some views from professional linguists, the poser of a semi-question does not actually mean to pose the question with any serious intent, but that he/she may simply be enjoying, among themselves, a sort of "ritualized" game of pretending politeness in conversational interactions.

## **(2) Ever-growing tendency among female talkers to use masculine language**

This phenomenon has been noted by many for quite some time—perhaps for a decade or two. As early as 1979, one respondent, in reply to a questionnaire, said "Women [these days] speak a rougher language [than before]." And those who replied similarly went as high as 68 percent of a total of 2,639 respondents.<sup>17</sup> A panel discussion was held in 1980 on "The Japanese and Their Consciousness of Language," in which the panelists talked, among other topics, about this "roughness" of female language.<sup>18</sup> In my commentary above, I gave some attention to this tendency among women, with special reference to the ascendancy of the all-purpose, responsive interjection "un" over all others. I do not deny the possibility of interpreting this phenomenon in terms of women's heightened consciousness of one gender being equal to the other in all things, including speech practice. But I think it is more likely that women love to use this little responsive simply because they find it a more convenient conversational strategy than anything else. They now tend to think that all they need in expressing different responses on different occasions is this little interjection. Of course, most mature women are cautious enough to limit their use of it within a circle of

relatively close friends, either of one gender or the other, or both. Trouble is inevitable, however, when the more reckless of women use this seemingly insignificant interjection on a more formal occasion, say, in a talk with an elderly gentleman or lady. As I suggested earlier on, elderly persons are generally more sensitive to any breach of decorum, including that in speech, than most young people think they are. The breach of decorum is not something to be hilarious over. And so, it naturally leads to my final conclusion.

### **(3) General decline of decorum in speech.**

The most remarkable phenomenon in the linguistic situation in contemporary Japan is an ever-dwindling number of those who observe decorum or defend a traditional system of values which was once accepted nationwide, but which is breaking down with alarming velocity. And if there is any group in that society who voice their protests now and then against the breach of decorum in speech, it is the elderly few who received their education before World War II. As a surviving member of this dwindling group, I can only record my fears that the crumbling of our beloved language may already have reached a point where there is no hope of recovery.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Each of the illustrations here and in the rest of this paper consists of a Japanese sentence in its original written form, its Romanized transcription, and its English version. This last is the present writer's

own translation from the original. He has endeavored to be as faithful to the original, but in cases where he judged too literal a translation would not do, he has made certain alterations in its wording.

<sup>2</sup>佐竹 (1997), 62.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 58.

<sup>5</sup>江国 (1989), 25.

<sup>6</sup>井上 (ひ) ほか (1999), 74-75.

<sup>7</sup>佐竹 (1997), 60.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>10</sup>江国 (1989), 121-122.

<sup>11</sup>The last sentence in my translation may be better translated literally as “I allow her to use this [ obnoxious ] word in that particular situation”.

<sup>12</sup>佐竹 (1997), 62.

<sup>13</sup>井上（ひ）ほか（1999）, *passim*.

<sup>14</sup>Downloaded from the “Opinion Survey on the Japanese Language Conducted in 1997” on-line (<http://www.bunka.go.jp/7/2/2-H-9.html>).

<sup>15</sup>Quoted in an article in the 1 March 1998 issue of the Asahi Shinbun, entitled “「じゃないですか」って不快じゃないですか – 同意をもとめられても困るじゃないですか（‘-janaidesuka’tte fukai-janaidesuka – dooi o motomerare-temo komaru-janaidesuka）.”

<sup>16</sup>国語研（1981） a, *passim*.

<sup>17</sup>NHK（1980）, 22.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 34-48.

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**Abstract:** The Japanese language, as spoken by native Japanese, has undergone a tremendous change in recent years — more noticeably in its spoken than in its written aspect. Some people brought up in the good old days deplore this, attributing it to the ignorance or negligence of decorum in speech among the younger generation. But the fact is that more and more adults are finding themselves unwittingly committing errors in usage, which they were formerly trained at school to avoid by all means. Among these deviations from linguistic norms, there are some which look likely to be established as perfectly acceptable usage, no matter whether one favors or disfavors them. Among them the most easily observable are: (1) recurrence of a rising intonation in mid-sentences, (2) omission of a morpheme, a word, or even a phrase, which was once considered indispensable in correct usage, (3) recurrence of what looks like an “empty” (semantically meaningless) word, (4) recurrence of what amounts almost to a cliché, and (5) prevalence of “feminine” (often infantile) language over strong “masculine” language, particularly in dialogs. What these phenomena reflect is, in the view of this paper-writer a kind of enervation in the verbal culture of the Japanese in general.