

Stylistic variation of gender and age in blog posts in Japanese: From a perspective of the third wave of variation research

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While much attention has been given to youth linguistic behaviours, few studies have discussed the elderly (e.g. Coupland et al 1991). Due to rapid demographic changes, especially in Japan, ageing is definitely “a future priority for sociolinguistics” (Coupland 2004: 83). This study investigates blog posts, written interactively and consciously crafted via the computer by older Japanese men and women, and compares these posts with those by younger counterparts to reveal linguistic and stylistic differences. More specifically, the study analyzes stylistic variation (Schillings-Estes 2004) from the perspective of the “third wave” as articulated by Eckert (2012), with a central focus on agency.

The dataset is comprised of posts by the top 50 most popular male and female bloggers over 60 years of age and “miscellaneous everyday blogs” by the top 50 most popular male and female bloggers in their twenties and thirties on a huge blog aggregation site called Japan Blog Village (<http://www.blogmura.com/>). The study quantitatively examines personal pronouns, auxiliary verbs and sentence final particles, as well as emoticons, which are specific to online interactions.

The study reveals generational and gender differences and considerable variations within age and gender groups. More specifically, the study identifies linguistic and stylistic differences in the degree of formality based on the generation and gender. Older men tend to employ a more conventional written prose style, while older women and younger men and women employ a more casual spoken style with a variety of sentence endings. Specific attention is paid to the use of discourse markers embodied by typographic emoticons (e.g., \(\star\circ\star\)/) and graphic *emoji*, or inline gif images, which could not be used in conventional print media. Bloggers in all the groups employ emoticons and *emoji* to differing degrees. The distribution of the usage indicates that gender is the more salient factor in explaining this difference, with younger women using emoticons far more frequently than any other group, and old men far less frequently. In between, older women employ more emoticons and *emoji* than younger men. The distribution of emoticon usage indicates that seniors are also making use of these features, which are new to them, and this in turn suggests the effects of internet penetration in Japan. This might suggest that seniors are in the process of learning to use medium-specific features to suit their writing styles. Emoticons encode each blogger’s interactional stance (though they may not affect denotational meaning). This study argues that Japanese bloggers take advantage of resources in order to create the kind of persona that bloggers expect readers to recognize in the blogosphere, and hence they can perform complex multiple identities with resources shared among blog audiences and authors.

References

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