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## Gender as a Variable in Grammatical Accuracy

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### Introduction

Despite the trend for more communicative classes, grammar in Japanese English education is given a great deal of attention. EFL publishers and TOEIC and Eiken tests have flourished over the past 10 years, with students (and teachers) being trained to focus on a wide range of errors and tasks, some of which that can be problematic for even native speakers. However, very little attention is given to the kinds of errors students make in spontaneous discourse. Spontaneous speech can be viewed as a mirror of what students actually *know* and how they can *use* it. However, spontaneous speech gives an imperfect reflection of students' true proficiency insofar that it is subject to the limitations of short-term memory in both the speaker and hearer. It has been noted that the short-term memory can hold about seven bits of information, so as a result, spontaneous spoken language typically has far less grammatical subordination than written language. The syntax of spontaneous spoken language is, in general, fragmented and unintegrated; phrases are less complex than phrases of written language (Miller, & Weinert, 1998). The errors which are produced are important to study. As Corder (1967) notes, "learners' errors can also provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language" (p. 167). The issue of acquisition is important for educators because it shows which forms students are effectively able to use in their interactions and which ones they consistently use *incorrectly*. Thus, this study will examine the interactions of groups of male and female participants, with the aim to identify which grammatical errors were the most problematic, and to learn about potential differences in error rates between the genders. The research question is: Does the spontaneous speech of females differ in grammatical accuracy from males?

### Review of the Literature

#### Gender Differences in Discourse

Gender has often been considered as an important variable in investigating spontaneous speech due to the variables related to gender (i.e., the pitch of a person's voice, and the intonation patterns of the

individual). Based on such factors, listeners will often make assumptions, expectations, and stereotypes that can influence how the discussion is framed, and this impacts decision-making. The listener can also be influenced by the speaker's resonance, speaking speed, volume, and nonverbal gestures, among other variables. As West and Zimmerman (1983) point out, gender is a powerful ideological device—one that can affect how a person generates and presents content as well as the degree of making and legitimizing certain discourse choices. Most research concerning gender in the social sciences does not uncritically accept biological determinism as the fundamental pillar for behavior; however, a great deal of analysis retains its framework of sex-linked behavior and traits (see Henley, 1985; Hochschild, 1973; Thorne, 1980; Tresemer, 1975), supporting the idea that *gender* is actually a valid independent variable.

Describing and differentiating the speech of women and men goes back almost seventy years with Jespersen (1949), who first described how women leave sentences unfinished or dangling more often than men. However, both Jespersen, and later, Lakoff (1973, 1975), offer unsubstantiated assertions of the superiority of men as speakers. To follow this up, Maltz and Borker (1982) drew up lists of women's features and men's features, but unlike Lakoff, they did not claim that these features reflect a power imbalance between the sexes. The features, instead, simply reflected a different set of discourse norms. Sadker and Sadker (1985) also compared genders and found from their research that boys spoke on average three times as much as girls, and that boys were eight times more likely than girls to call out answers in the classroom. Regarding speech acts, it was concluded that men's speech reputedly serves to lecture, argue, debate, assert, and command, while women's speech was viewed as nonassertive, tentative, and supportive (Haas, 1979).

Wood (1966) found that males talked more than females when describing photographs of male faces, and similar results arose from discourse concerning paintings. However, women were more talkative on three of nine topics in a study by Gall, Hobby, and Craik (1969). Moreover, in gendered discourse, men have been found to talk more than women (Argle, Lalljee, & Cook, 1968; Sayers, 1984). One of the most controversial statements made about discourse from women, described as women's language (WL), (e.g., Lakoff, 1977; McMillan, Clifton, McGrath, & Gale, 1977) and that it was hesitant and ingratiating and weak (Lakoff, 1973, 1975); furthermore, it had a *female register* (e.g., Crosby & Nyquist, 1977). However, it should be noted that Crawford and Roger (1987) found that the occurrence of WL was unaffected by topic or gender as it was more determined by context.

Such ideas led to the *deficit* and *dominance theories*, which state that any linguistic inadequacies in women's speech are the result of women's political and cultural inequalities and that conversational dominance is based on wider political and social issues (Freeman & McElhinny, 1996). Lakoff (1975), in particular, argues that there are characteristic features in the discourse of WL, that it is marked by powerlessness and tentativeness, expressed through the use of mitigators and inessential qualifiers. Freeman and McElhinny (1996, p. 232) provide a comprehensive list of Lakoff's (1975) claims of WL:

- Men use more expletives while women use weaker ones
- Women's speech is more polite than men's
- Trivial, unimportant topics are considered to be women's domain
- Women use empty adjectives
- Women use tag questions more often than men
- Women express uncertainty through the use of the question intonation pattern
- Women use more intensifiers
- Hedges are used more often by woman
- Hyper-correct grammar is a feature of women's speech
- Women don't tell jokes

Researchers then began to look at more stylistic differences, taking into account politeness, hesitancy, empty adjectives, fillers, qualifiers, nonassertion, and the use of tag questions. As more researchers, educators, and the media became more interested in the topic of women's and men's speech, there were

more claims and counter-claims about the validity and reliability of the results.

In short, investigators—as Crawford and Rogers (1987) noted—had to “account for more and more complex patterns of sex differences with an increasingly fragile theoretical net to cast over them” (p. 30). A further criticism was that because most of the previous research was primarily based in North America (and less so in Europe), it had *limited value* as how genders interact in Asia, Africa, and in Central and South America. Another issue to consider was the degree of collaboration which occurs in gendered discourse, and how this is affected by these psycho-social values. Coates (1996) reveals that a great deal of collaboration is needed in gendered discourse, with each speaker paying close attention to the other at all linguistic levels through joint constructions involving simultaneous speech, sharing in searching for the right words, and overlapping speech. As for gendered L2 speech, expectations and stereotypes can easily be changed by having one of the participants being far more fluent, productive, and competent in his or her L2 use.

## Gender Influences

One issue for researchers to consider is whether or not same-sex interactions differ fundamentally from gendered ones in regard to grammatical accuracy. While it has been shown that males often talk faster and longer than women, it remains to be seen how the data from *gendered* interactions might differ (if at all) from same-sex interactions involving the same participants. A second characteristic concerns the *interactive balance* in discourse. Fishman's (1978) research on casual conversation found an asymmetrical “division of labor” in talk between heterosexual intimates: “Women had to ask more questions, fill more silences, and use more attention-getting beginnings in order to be heard ... Some occasions are organized to routinely display and celebrate behaviors that are conventionally linked to one or the other sex category” (p. 138). Similar data may differ, however, with Japanese participants and L2 speech due to cultural norms. Molm (1992) noted that “gender inequality is conceptualized as multidimensional, and theories span historical eras, societal types and multiple causation” (p. 303), and one aspect of this inequality is that of aggression in discourse. This aggression can be noted in either replies that are too short or in over-talking. Research by Zimmerman and West (1975) showed patterns of silence that occurred because of a delayed minimal response by the male, an overlap by the male, and by an interruption by the male; however, it remains to be seen how minimal responses, silence, or excessive talking, for example, function in Japanese-centered, gendered L2 discourse. The issue of excessive mean length runs from males and patterns of silence from females needs to be further explored.

Some researchers took issue with Lakoff's (1975) deficit and dominance theories, proposing the *difference theory*. This theory was based on the idea that the reason for any difference in language use comes from early socialization, psychological differences, and socialization differences in social power. As for biological differences, these were viewed as leading to different rates of language acquisition causing possible differences in learning. Furthermore, one difference in language use was that women tended to focus on connections and developing involvement, while men value autonomy and independence. A key factor in difference theory is that of social power: Men exercise a greater degree of power, thereby dominating interactions. In short, this greater degree of power brings about more competitiveness. The theory postulated that women had more of a cooperative conversational style (Coates & Cameron, 1988). To distinguish between these two conversational styles, Coates (1986) stated that women relied on gradual topic development, frequent and well-placed minimal responses, and overlapping speech and linguistic forms. These helped reduce any assertiveness that might have been implied. West & Zimmerman (1987) and Deuchar (1988) have emphasized that those who see themselves as powerless tend to be more polite. In short, Coates argues that women tend to focus on maintaining social relationships with the goal of consolidating friendships, which is then reflected in how they interact. Finally, Sunderland (2004) notes that research on gender should come “from an understanding of post-structuralism and discursive psychology, it is important to see gender as a *process*, something that people *orient to* and *do*—including in their spoken and written discourse” (p. 17). Thus, in mixed-sex interactions

it has been found that men's topics are more often pursued, while women play a *supportive* role (Fishman, 1978; see also Hirschman, 1974).

## Research Gap

Various studies have examined grammatical accuracy as related to specific pragmatic acts. Nyoman and Anak (2017) examined whether grammatical accuracy and gender were significant predictors of the use of request strategies (i.e., direct or indirect). Their findings suggested that pragmatic competence may not be determined by either grammatical competence or gender, either in isolation or in combination. In addition, it appears that female learners were not significantly different from their male counterparts in regard to using language appropriately in concrete situations. But this study was limited to the single use of a request strategy, and it is not generalizable. Other studies (Go, 2014; Waskita, 2008) were limited to task-based techniques, specific grammatical issues, and to academic writing. It is important to gather a large amount of data from varied males and females to be able to generalize on the speech of Japanese EFL learners.

## The Study

### Rationale

To better focus material, techniques and tasks in Japanese EFL education, teachers need to become familiar with the most common errors Japanese learners are making in their oral interactions. A second issue concerns gender. While studies have shown that there are differences in fluency between males and females (Long, 2016, 2017), it is necessary to explore any possible differences in grammatical accuracy between the genders. The results of this study can help to orient teachers, letting them to better understand if males and females process and apply grammatical rules and forms differently.

### Research Questions

1. What are the primary errors in the spontaneous speech of Japanese EFL learners?
2. Is gender a factor in the accuracy of the L2 discourse of Japanese EFL learners?

### Corpus Subjects

A national university and a municipal university provided the subjects for this study; all of the participants were between the ages of 18 to 21 and had lived in Japan with limited study abroad experiences. Specific test scores, which reflected a similar level of proficiency, were used to select students (see Table 1 below). As Coates (1996) noted, discourse is more fluent between intimates, thus to eliminate the confounding variable of familiarity, participants had to confirm that they did not know any of the others in their group. Participants signed permission forms allowing for their discussions to be videotaped and transcribed; these transcripts together comprise the corpus that was used for the study, see footnote 1.

TABLE 1  
*Scores for Lower Proficiency Students*

TOEIC	Eiken	IELTS	TOEFL IBT	TOEFL ITP	TOEFL PBT	TOEFL CBT
440 – 550	Level 2	3.0 – 4.0	42 – 55	272 – 450	463 – 480	143 – 157

## Corpus Procedures

Groups of four students (two males and two females) were videotaped during concurrent sessions, with interactions, first taking place between the genders. One male and one female were videotaped in two rooms for ten minutes. The second interaction took place with the males switching places and starting the second set of gendered discussions. The third session took place with the females (and males) interacting with one another.

To prevent topics from becoming too familiar, thus impacting fluency, subjects were asked to use the topics in a list that was provided for them. For each topic, students would first talk about shared interests to find areas of commonality and differences before gathering information related to these shared interests. Finally, to see how fluency might change in which participants had to think through their ideas, the final point of discussion challenged students to answer a loaded question or respond to a complicated scenario. If the participants finished these three issues before the time allotted, they could move on to the next topic on the list.

## Corpus Data

The Japanese University Student Corpus (JUSC 2016)<sup>1</sup> was used for data analysis. It contains 61 transcripts containing 51,061 words, which were manually transcribed from March to July, 2016. The videos, which are located on Youtube<sup>1</sup>, totaled over 9 hours and 8.3 minutes (590 minutes), with videos ranging in length from 6:23 to 14:59 minutes.

## Data Analysis of Errors

From the conversations in this corpus, there were 400 errors that were used for this study. The sentences containing these errors were then put into a *separate inventory* from which teachers could then evaluate. Error categorization included the number of error-free clauses and clauses with errors, errors were categorized in three grammatical classes, type 1 (GM1 – articles, nouns, and verbs), type 2 (GM2 – pronouns, prepositions, and conjunctions), and type 3 (GM3 – adverbs, adjectives, and interjections). After these data were inputted into excel, statistics were performed through XLstat for descriptive statistics, percentages, and t-tests.

## Results

As for the first research question, the primary errors were as follows: incorrect use of articles (381), incorrect verb tense of form (162), incorrect use of prepositions (158), omission of verbs (152), modifier error (111), and incorrect subject-verb agreement (76). Regarding *other errors*, the misuse of plurals, deletion of words, and wording/rephrasing were the most common mistakes.

As for possible gender differences, the data for error free clauses per 100 words and the data for clauses with errors per 100 words showed slight differences between males and females (see Table 2 below), though females had more clauses without errors. In examining the first 1,000 words of the first transcript, females produced almost half of the errors than males did; however, in examining the entire corpus, in which females produced more words than males, the number of errors did increase for errors involving the misuse of articles (F: 259/M:147), for the lack of a verb (F:87/M:65), incorrect use/deletion of prepositions (F:103/M:55), and for incorrect verb tense (F:98/M:64). The error rate percentage, however, showed an important difference with females having a 49.3 percent error rate compared to males with a 60.1 percent error rate (see Table 4 below).

TABLE 2  
*Error-free Clauses per 100 Words and Clauses with Errors per 100 Words*

	<u>Females</u>	<u>Males</u>
Error-free clauses per 100 words	6.55	5.15
Clauses with errors per 100 words	3.96	3.27

TABLE 3  
*Errors in Transcript 1: Gendered Discussion (1,000 Words)*

	<u>Females</u>	<u>Males</u>
GM1		
Incorrect verb tense or form	2	3
No verb	0	1
Errors in subject-verb agreement	3	1
Errors / deletion of articles	2	3
GM2		
Incorrect use / deletion of prepositions	0	0
GM3		
Modifier error / deletion (adjectives/adverbs)	0	1
Other	2	7
Totals	9	16

TABLE 4  
*Percentages for Errors and Error Rates for Males and Females in JUSC Corpus*

	<u>Females</u>	<u>Males</u>
Number of words	514.17	352.44
GM1		
Incorrect verb tense or form	19.0	18.1
No verb	16.9	18.4
Errors in subject-verb agreement	9.7	7.3
Errors / deletion of articles	50.3	41.6
GM2		
Incorrect use / deletion of preposition	20.3	15.5
GM3		
Modifier error / deletion (adjectives/adverbs)	13.6	11.6
Other	6.9	15.1
Error Rate %	49.3%	60.1%

Concerning error rates between the genders, t-tests based on data of errors for 100 words showed a significant difference in error free clauses and clauses with errors, reflecting that female participants spoke longer, having 37.3% more words, whereas the males used many minimal responses in which to assert their views. Two t-tests revealed significance between male and female grammatical accuracy: Results for error free clauses showed  $t(39) = 2.023$ ,  $p < 0.000$ , while clauses with errors had  $t(39) = 2.023$ ,  $p < 0.001$ . In short, females were almost twice as accurate in their speech than males.

## Discussion

Concerning the types of errors that Japanese EFL learners often make, the data confirm the research and experience of many educators that articles, verb tense, prepositions, modifiers, and subject-verb

agreement are the most problematic forms. Also, these data show that female EFL students are more accurate than males with regards to overall error-free clauses, but that females had more problems with articles and prepositions than males. In short, the results point out that gender is an important variable in grammatical accuracy, but more investigation needs to be conducted as to how females might learn differently from males.

Our recommendations focus on more form-focused oral tasks (see Appendix A) that allow students to use particular forms in ever-increasing complexity over time. By having students speak, listen, and have feedback from their peers (in real time), there should be more improvement in grammatical accuracy.

## Conclusion

These findings are a reminder that knowledge does not necessarily reflect awareness and impact usage. First, educators need to focus on getting students to *use* grammatical forms in ever increasing complexity and in various kinds of interactions in order for them to truly master these grammatical forms. Secondly, it is important to better understand and use error analysis that is based on actual Japanese EFL usage so as to address grammatical issues that are problematic. In short, it is time to get students to *use* grammar instead of learning about it.

## Notes

1. The corpus can be found at [www.genderfluency.com](http://www.genderfluency.com).
2. Gender fluency: Youtube Playlist is entitled “Gender Fluency Basic” (Jose Domingo Cruz).

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### Appendix A. Form-focused Gambit

**Directions:** Write your name on the paper, and change paper with your partner. Your partner will write down your responses on your paper as you will write down his or hers. Then take some time after each task is done and circle responses that you think are incorrect.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Student Number \_\_\_\_\_

#### Extended Gambit on Food

<p>Role A. An Australian named Harry You are sitting in a café in Sydney when a Japanese person comes to sit at the same table. You ask him or her about Japanese food</p>	<p>Role B. You You are on holiday in Sydney and drop into a café for a rest. The person at the next table starts talking to you.</p>
<p>Oh, hi there, I like to introduce myself. I am Harry Waldermore. Where are you from?</p>	<p>[1] _____ _____ _____ _____ [Grammar focus: Use present tense]</p>
<p>You know my girlfriend is coming over tonight and I want to cook here something really special? Any ideas.</p>	<p>[1] _____ _____ _____ _____ [Grammar focus: Use modals: should try/ ought to try]</p>
<p>Well, she knows all of those dishes. I need something unique!</p>	<p>[1] _____ _____ _____ _____ [Grammar focus: Use modals: I would recommend]</p>
<p>Hmm...do you know of any local dishes in your area?</p>	<p>[1] _____ _____ _____ _____ [Grammar focus: Use present continuous tense: I am learning how to cook....]</p>
<p>So how do I make this dish?</p>	<p>[1] _____ _____ _____ _____ [Grammar focus: List out ideas, using sequencers: first, second, third, next...]</p>
<p>Well, it's been fun talking to you.</p>	<p>[1] _____ _____ _____ _____ [Grammar focus: Use present perfect continuous tense: it has been fun talking....]</p>