Male and Female Speech in Japanese and Korean:  
a Comparative study

John Kerby

I. Introduction

Differences in the speech of males and females probably exist in every language. They can occur at any level of language organization: e.g. lexical (as when a Thai man says póm and a Thai woman says dichan for '1st person singular'), grammatical (as when Polish men and women use differing verb suffixes), pragmatic (as when American men at a party use vulgar words with more frequency than women at the same party), etc. They can be of an exclusive nature or be tendencies. An example of the former is the cited Thai case: a Thai man could conceivably refer to himself with the word dichan, and a Thai woman could conceivably refer to herself with the term pom; but this would never happen under "normal" circumstances. An example of the latter (tendency, i.e. non-exclusive) is the example of the American party. Although the scenario outlined above is common, there are certainly parties in which women use vulgarities more frequently than men, and this causes no identity crisis to either party (no pun intended).

Lexical and other speech differences are often cited in the linguistic literature about Japanese and Korean. Japanese is a language in which the differences in male and female speech have long been recognized and to which more attention has been devoted than to male/female speech differences in languages in which they are less obvious. At least part of the difference is consciously learned and practiced by native speakers (native speakers of Japanese are usually quite aware that differences in male/female speech occur—indeed, some speakers quite consciously cultivate them). Korean, a language which is sociolinguistically similar (and, as some would have it, genetically related to) Japanese, also displays some male/female speech differences. These, however, are more subtle than at least the more obvious of the Japanese differences (native speakers of Korean that I've talked to, with the exceptions of students of linguistics, generally claim that there are no differences in male/female Korean.) Those who have studied Japanese often mention the absence of such differences in Korean vis-a-vis Japanese).
The following paper will attempt to examine purported differences in the usage of lexical items by male and female speakers of the Japanese and Korean languages.

II. Hypothesis

Any native speaker of Japanese is well aware that there are differences in the speech of males and females when speaking Japanese. Furthermore, the usage of appropriate forms by each gender is quite strictly adhered to in many cases. There are lexical items in Japanese that are used exclusively by one gender or the other.

Native speakers of Korean that I had spoken to before undertaking the research that lead to this paper claimed that there were no differences between the speech of the two genders in Korean. The linguistic literature on the subject, however, makes the claim that there are such differences.

I would therefore like to test the claim that differences in lexical usage exist between the two genders in both Japanese and Korean, but that some of these differences are obligatory in Japanese but generally only tendencies in Korean. Obligatory does not necessarily mean that one or the other genders cannot use a term, but that one or the other gender cannot use it under "normal" circumstances (i.e. without calling his/her genderal/social role into question in the mind of his/her speech partner or calling attention to his/her usage of the item). Tendency means that one or the other gender uses a form with more frequency than the other, but its usage by the other gender would not necessarily be conspicuous.

III. Methodology

In order to test my hypothesis, I first needed to develop a body of sentences which are identified in the literature as being male or female speech. Then, I needed to randomly test the validity of those presumptions. Afterwards, I needed to see whether the correlations between specific sentences and gender of the speaker were on the one hand high enough (in the case of Japanese) to warrant the claim that they are obligatory, but on the other hand (in Korean) at an appropriate level to confirm the existence (but not obligatory usage) of gender related lexical differences in that language.

There are claims in the linguistic literature concerning differences in male/female speech in both Japanese and Korean. I have chosen two articles, one for Japanese (Reynolds 1985) and one for Korean (Bak
n.d.), which discuss male/female speech differences in the two languages, respectively. Both articles contain sample sentences for which it is claimed that a male or female speaker (one, but not either) would have generated the sentence. While it is not the purpose of this paper to analyze the reasons for the differences, interested readers are encouraged to read the articles for more information on that topic.

After selecting the articles, I chose sentences from each which exemplified general speech differences of various kinds. I did not include differences in sentence intonation (which was claimed as a common difference in both languages), because the test that I was devising was written, and intonation is not discernible in the orthography. Reading the items to the informant in order to ask about the gender of the speaker who generated the sentence would be problematic too, since the informant would undoubtedly be biased towards the gender of the person who read the items.

In addition to using sentences for which linguistic predictions had been made in the two articles, I selected sentences which were "neutral." By neutral I do not mean that they are necessarily neutral in terms of the male/female differences, but that they were not chosen specifically because they exemplify such differences. For both languages, I chose sentences from modern literary works which reflect the spoken language. For Japanese, I took sentences from Onna to Otoko no Komori Uta by Otiai Keiko. For Korean, I took sentences from Kigye Toshi by Cho Se-hui. An English translation of the later work is City of Machines (Pihl 1990). The primary purpose for including these "neutral forms" was not to test the responses of the informants concerning them, but rather to dilute the effect of the other forms and make the real purpose of the test less obvious.

The sentences from both the articles and the literary works were randomly mixed (they appeared in differing order for each informant). Each informant was presented with a list of names as potential speakers of the sentences, and asked to create a situation in which the sentence could have been generated by that person. Creating situations was intended to be a psychological distraction to the real purpose of the interview. Since the names on both lists are quite distinctly male or female, the gender of the person that the informant had in mind as having generated a given sentence could be inferred by the gender of the name chosen, and therefore did not need to be asked directly. After giving the test, the subject was asked to write F or M (for "male" and "female" respectively) next to
each name to indicate the gender of the person whose name was chosen as the speaker of each particular sentence. It is important to note that the informant himself/herself determined the gender of the names. In most cases I could have done this myself, but there are some names in both languages that could be ambiguous in respect to gender. In such cases it would adversely affect the results of the study if I had made the determination; and in some cases I might not even notice the possibility of a given name to represent persons of either gender. In the last analysis, it is the gender conception of the informant that is important, not my own. Since the informants were asked to make the determinations after having completed the writing of the names, they were not influenced by knowing the purpose of the study as they participated in the interview. Since they were asked to note the genders shortly after completing the first phase of the interview, the context in which they wrote the names was fresh in their minds and one would expect them not to be easily confused by gender-ambiguous names, if such should have occurred. In most of the interviews, informants were provided with lists of names in Japanese or Korean which they could use if they could not think of names themselves, but they were allowed to use other names of their own choice or repeat previously used names.

In the results tables below, the total number of informants responding to each sentence is presented together with the number of those informants responding with male and female names and the percentages of the total that those responses represent. The variation in the total number of responses for some sentences is due to the fact that some interviews had to be cut short leaving some items not responded to.

IV. Results

Of the twenty items taken from Reynolds (1985) and purported to have definite gender bias in usage, sixteen were confirmed by 100% of the informants to be used by male or female speakers only, as predicted by Reynolds. Three items showed no significant variation from the predicted correlation with gender. Item (S) was noted in Reynolds as a form being available to speakers of either gender, and this was confirmed by results showing 50% for each gender (See Fig. 1).