

COVERING AND COVERED FORMS OF  
WOMEN'S LANGUAGE IN JAPANESE†  
—With Special Reference to the Ornamental Prefix *o-*

By TAKASHI KAMEI\*

*Preliminary Remarks*

In connection with human behaviour, differences in sex between male and female assume multifarious phases in social and cultural terms; and this applies to the case of language as well. However, this does not imply that differences in the language of men and women are necessarily of direct import or relevance to the society in which the phenomena can be seen. In this sense women's language can be divided into two categories (however the demarcation between the two groups, such as it may be, can be extremely fluid in borderline cases):

- 1) The female style outside the context of the position (status) of women in society, i.e., their style, so to speak, in terms of physiognomy (women's voices being often suited to sing in alto or soprano, imparting to their expressions particular female overtones).
- 2) The special expressions (usages)—whether they belong to phonology, morphology, syntax or vocabulary—which correlate directly, if tacitly, with position of women, relative to men, in the society.

This paper chiefly deals with the latter in terms of lexicography, in reference to Japanese.

I

There may exist no such thing as an objective reality *per se* which can be absolutely independent of human understanding; however, leaving to the domain of epistemology the matter of whether it will be possible for any research worker to educe data (as they presumably exist) in a form completely free from any interpretation, I hope I may be allowed to quote the following research policy from the writing of the distinguished anthropologist, Clyde Kluckhohn:

“In social science it is of crucial importance that fact and inference should always be as clearly distinguished as possible. . . . When data and interpreta-

---

\* Emeritus Professor (Meiyokyōju)

† This paper was originally prepared for and presented at the Twenty-Seventh Annual Meeting of the Western Conference of the American Oriental Society; The University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, April 15–17, 1977.

tion are closely juxtaposed, there is often confusion as to the dividing line between the two." (*Navaho Witchcraft*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1967, p. 6)

In consideration of time restrictions, this paper will concentrate primarily upon raw materials, my role here being that of a somewhat sophisticated informant rather than that of researcher.

From the medieval period onward in Japan, many euphemistic expressions were current among court ladies. Such usages were, however, not only not confined to the privileged classes but, as a matter of fact, were soon in much wider circulation, as might perhaps be expected from the interpenetration of social strata especially encouraged, it seems, by the polygamy of the times. Traditionally these expressions have been known as *nyōbō-kotoba* and *jochū-kotoba*, which can be roughly translated as "usages of the fair sex". Such usages were collected even in early days, and glossaries specifically devoted to the subject appeared from time to time, a circumstance reflecting the necessity of revision, perhaps the inevitable result of the fluctuations and vicissitudes to which *nyōbō-kotoba* were exposed.

If I may be allowed to coin a pair of terms, "covered form" and "covering form", the former referring to a more or less tabooed form (i.e. from the female point of view) and the latter being a substitute for the former, then there appear three types of lexical formation of *nyōbō-kotoba*: replacement, prefixing and suffixing.

In the first type, replacement, an entirely different form (covering form) is substituted for the offending form (covered form) and superficially there is no association between them. Each of them is, as a matter of course, isolated from the other. Their coexistence was sporadic.

One example is the form *kabe* (wall) for *tōfu* (bean curd). Here the connection between the covering and covered words is exclusively semantic, both sharing the quality of whiteness. In other words, the form *kabe* has become, in actual fact, polysemic. Most such examples did not, in themselves, survive long, and are therefore not of major significance here. In the case of *kabe*, for example, although it established itself once as a covering form, it continued to survive only through reinforcement with the second type of lexical formation, that is, adding the prefix *o-*, to produce the form *okabe*. Thanks to the prefix *o-*, the new form *okabe* no longer remains a semantic satellite of *kabe* (wall) but eventually becomes the satellite form of *tōfu*.

My main theme today is the prefixing of *o-*, but prior to that, the best known type of *nyōbō-kotoba*, *moji-kotoba*, should be touched upon. An example of *moji-kotoba* formation is as follows: the initial *hi* is dissected from the word *hidarui* (hungry) and prefixed to the form *moji* (letter, graph), producing the covering word *himoji* (a new three-syllable word suggesting hunger).

A woman could use the form as follows: *himoji no / na toki*, meaning "when hungry". Later, by analogy (i.e. in terms of historical linguistics) *himoji* yielded the adjectival form *himojii*. The derivation of *himoji* from *hi+moji*, and that of *himojii* from *himoji* have long since been forgotten, with the result that the effeminate overtone (if used by men) which originally accompanied the form has faded away. It is now regularly used by men as a somewhat elegant (or affected, but not effeminate) term to express the sensation of hunger. (Cf. *hara ga hetta*—(my) stomach has dwindled, *onaka ga suite*—(my) stomach has become

empty. The former is limited to use by the male sex only. The latter sounds softer because of the form *onaka*.)

Another example of *moji-kotoba* is *shamoji* (a broad wooden spatula or scoop for serving rice). Again in this case the original form *shakushi* is seldom identified as the source. The covered form *shakushi* is still often used synonymously side by side with *shamoji* by both sexes. In terms of synchrony the etymological relationship between *shamoji* and *shakushi* has been severed. However the form *shakushi* is losing ground. Apart from the phrases *shakushi-jōgi na* (hidebound, inelastic, sticking fast to rules) and *shakushi-jōgi ni* (adverbial form), *shamoji* is the member of the pair which retains vitality, a conspicuous exception to the fate of most *moji-kotoba*.

The scope of applicability of *moji-kotoba* is reasonably narrow in view of the misunderstandings likely to be occasioned by homonymic coalescence were this principle freely and arbitrarily applied. This is probably the historic reason why the formation of euphemisms through recourse to *moji-kotoba* was eventual abandoned. A few examples of *moji-kotoba* as feminisms (i.e. in terms of linguistics) survive, again with the prefix *o-* contributing in some measure to the acceptance of the form: *omemoji* (seeing you, him, her, them) and *osumoji* (*sushi*—raw fish slices on vinegared rice). The form *shamoji* cited above also occurs in the prefixed form *oshamoji*, and in homes is often abbreviated to a more familiar form, *oshamo*. This last example alone serves to indicate the vital power of the prefix *o-*.

The procedure of prefixing *o-* can be considered the most important of the types of covering form formation, in which the final syllable or syllables of the form to be covered are lopped off to produce the covering form, as seen in the case of *oshamo*. Here it is absolutely unnecessary to assume the form to be directly derived from *oshamoji*. In this instance the forms *oshamo* and *oshamoji* coexist side by side with *shamoji*. However, strange to say, little attention has been paid to this characteristic and distinctive way of prefixing *o-* as a decoration in order to camouflage the referential meaning.

## II

Focus will now be centred on this "ornamental *o-*". The formation of covering words is not, of course, restricted to three-syllable forms, as is borne out by the term *osumashi*, a derivative of *sumashi-jiru* (clear soup). What may be said about the three-syllable covering word is also applicable, *ceteris paribus*, to covering forms consisting of more than three syllables. In order to pick out every three-syllable form as completely as possible (including those with the prefix *o-*) I resorted to the following simple mechanical procedure. Based upon the *gojūonzu* (the Japanese syllabary or so-called "table of fifty sounds") all possible sequences were scanned, thus in sequence the combinations *o-a-a*, *o-a-i*, *o-a-u*, *o-a-e*, *o-a-o*, *o-a-ka*, *o-a-ki*, *o-a-ku*, etc. were considered until I reached the form *o-a-shi*, and so on. My procedure has been to limit myself to forms which are actually used by myself or have been learned and understood through oral communication and stored in my memory since childhood. In this connection it may be added that I was brought up in a family that was linguistically fairly conservative. Those forms which, as a philologist, I acquired from reading old texts were excluded. Thus, prior to *o-a-shi* (money) there is the combination *o-a-e* (a kind of salad) but it has been ignored as not being current.

List I is thus not a listing of all three-syllable forms commencing with the prefix *o-* extant in materials in or concerning the Japanese language throughout its history. Apart from the above aspect, the fact that many covering forms which belong to women's language possess the prefix *o-* does not imply that every form embellished by *o-* necessarily pertains to women's language. I have tried to omit forms with honorific *o-*, for example, *okami* (honorable authority, *i.e.*, government) and to select examples distinguished by "ornamental *o-*", which designation may be employed for the first time here. The semantic history of how ornamental *o-* deviated from the original honorific *o-* is a separate problem, though an intricate and hence attractive one.

Secondly, forms in which the prefix does not function as ornamental have been excluded, despite their belonging to women's vocabulary. This parallels the above exclusion of *okami* (which is basically not peculiar to women's language). For example, *oiro* can mean your / his / her face but never "my face", *oiro ga sugurenu yō ni omikake itashimasu ga* (I have the impression that you appear somewhat pale). On the other hand, *onaka* (stomach, belly) can be used for one's-self, as in: *Mō onaka ga ippai desu* (I'm already full) or, *Onaka ga itakute kinō wa gakkō o yasumimashita* (I was absent from school yesterday with a stomach ache). Therefore *onaka* is included but not *oiro*. In particular I have taken pains to ignore the diachronic aspect in the matter of how a considerable proportion of original feminisms has been neutralized through loss of the colour of femininity, as such a problem naturally does not belong here.

List I includes forms in which the prefix *o-* is firmly welded to a part of the main body of the original word. In these forms the welding is so firm that there obtains only a faint consciousness of embellishment and, hence, of femininity, the existence of which is attested to by occasional use of some items by males without the *o-*.

In List II, on the other hand, are included those words for which the form without *o-* is neutral, the form with *o-* being restricted to females (or to males whose deliberate use has been dictated by the desire to soften verbal communication with the female sex, with a view to stylistic harmony). This implies that the prefix *o-* is still viable, which is the opposite of the case of the suffix *-moji*. One more point in this connection; it is apparent that the prefix *o-*, whether honorific, humble, or merely ornamental, is *qua factum*, still freely applicable to verbs, *e.g.*,

*Kochira e oide kudasai* (Come this way please)  
*Asu oukagai itashimasu* (Tomorrow I shall visit you)

as well as to adjectives, *e.g.*,

*Kyō wa osamū gozaimasu ne* (It's cold today isn't it)

On the other hand, in terms of both style and lexicology there obtains the principle of complementary distribution between *o-* and *go-*, *e.g.*,

*Kuwashiku oshirabe kudasai.*  
*Kuwashiku gochōsa kudasai.*

Both mean "Please examine (this matter) in detail". The former is gentler than the latter which sounds stiff, deferential (and as if the examination would be a more involved pro-

cedure). Parallel examples abound.

Naturally the use of the prefix *o-* is not always a linguistic monopoly of the female sex, but it can be said to be one linguistic symbol of femininity.

List III is added as a kind of historical appendix. As noted at the outset, I offer only materials that I consider relevant. How you bridge the gap between the linguistic data and the position of women (for example, the problem of whether or not they are virtually—though not nominally—queens in their kitchen-castles) . . . is entirely up to you.

### PREFIX *o-*, LIST I

Current 3-syllable words whose *o-* form seems fairly standard (but whose 2-syllable form, i.e., a form without *o-*, may be heard in male speech in the case of a few examples.)

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| 1. <i>oashi</i> =money  | self  |
| 2. <i>ousu: usucha</i> =weak powdered tea                                   | 26. <i>ojaga: jagaimo</i> =(Irish) potato                                     |
| 3. <i>okaka: katsubushi</i> =dried bonito                                   | 27. <i>ojiya: zosui</i> =rice gruel boiled with miso or soy.                  |
| 4. <i>okaki: kakimochi</i> =sliced and dried rice cake.                     | 28. <i>oshama</i> =precocious girl  |
| 5. <i>okazu: sai</i> =side dish other than rice.                            | 29. <i>oshamo: shamoji</i> =rice scoop  |
| 6. <i>okabu: ohako</i> =one's forte   | 30. <i>oshare</i> =personal adornment; a dressy person                        |
| 7. <i>okane: kane</i> =money  | 31. <i>ojan</i> =failure (to turn out satisfactorily)                         |
| 8. <i>okawa</i> =chamber pot (nowadays obsolescent)                         | 32. <i>oshiri</i> =buttocks   |
| 9. <i>okara: u-no-hana</i> =bean curd lees                                  | 33. <i>osechi</i> =New Year's dishes  |
| 10. <i>okyū: kyū</i> =moxa cautery  | 34. <i>osen: senbei</i> =rice cracker   |
| 11. <i>okyan</i> =tomboy, girl or woman of forward ways                     | 35. <i>ozen</i> =small 4-legged serving table                                 |
| 12. <i>oshaku</i> =the serving of <i>saké</i>                               | 36. <i>odai: daikin</i> =price, charge  |
| 13. <i>okeshi</i> =charcoal cinders   | 37. <i>odashi</i> =broth, soup stock  |
| 14. <i>okoge</i> =scorched rice   | 38. <i>otama</i> =(wooden) tablespoon   |
| 15. <i>okoshi: koshimaki</i> =J-style half-slip.                            | 39. <i>ochoko</i> =sake cup   |
| 16. <i>okota: kotatsu</i> =footwarmer                                       | 40. <i>otsuke: misoshiru</i> =miso soup                                       |
| 17. <i>okomo: komokaburi</i> =beggar  | 41. <i>otsumu</i> =head   |
| 18. <i>okowa: kowameshi, sekihan</i> =glutinous rice boiled with red beans. | 42. <i>otsuyu</i> =clear soup   |
| 19. <i>osai: okazu</i> =side dish other than rice.                          | 43. <i>otsuri</i> =change (money)   |
| 20. <i>osage: sagegami</i> =hair hanging down the back.                     | 44. <i>odeki</i> =boil, skin eruption   |
| 21. <i>osashi: sashimi</i> =slices of raw fish                              | 45. <i>otesho: teshiozara</i> =saucer   |
| 22 <sub>a</sub> . <i>osatsu</i> =bank note                                  | 46. <i>oden: dengaku</i> =bean curd baked and coated with miso                |
| 22 <sub>b</sub> . <i>osatsu: satsumaimo</i> =sweet potato                   | 47. <i>onaka</i> =belly, tummy, stomach                                       |
| 23. <i>osan: san</i> =birth   | 48. <i>onabe</i> =maidservant   |
| 24. <i>oshime: omutsu, shimeshi</i> =diaper                                 | 49. <i>onama: namaiki</i> =pert or saucy child.                               |
| 25. <i>oshimo</i> =private parts; relieving one-                            | 50. <i>oname: namemiso</i> =miso mixed with chopped vegetables, meat or fish. |

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 51. <i>onara</i> =flatus   | 65a. <i>obon</i> =tray   |
| 52. <i>onesho</i> : <i>neshoben</i> =bedwetting                            | 65b. <i>obon</i> : <i>urabon</i> Buddhist festival for the dead.                 |
| 53. <i>oneba</i> : <i>ninuki</i> =rice glue; froth from rapid rice boiling | 66. <i>omake</i> =lagniappe  |
| 54. <i>ohagi</i> : <i>botamochi</i> =rice dumpling covered with bean jam   | 67. <i>omase</i> =precocious child   |
| 55. <i>obake</i> : <i>bakemono</i> =apparition                             | 68. <i>omaru</i> =chamber pot. Cf. <i>okawa</i>                                  |
| 56. <i>ohako</i> =one's forte.   | 69. <i>oman</i> : <i>manjū</i> =bun with bean jam                                |
| 57. <i>ohachi</i> : <i>meshibitsu</i> =rice tub                            | 70. <i>omutsu</i> : <i>oshime</i> ; <i>mutzuki</i> =diaper                       |
| 58. <i>ohari</i> =needlework   | 71. <i>omocha</i> =toy   |
| 59. <i>ohitsu</i> =rice tub  | 72. <i>omori</i> =babysitting, babysitter  |
| 60. <i>ohiya</i> =cold water, cold boiled rice.                            | 73. <i>oyaki</i> : <i>yakimochi</i> =toasted rice cakes and the like.            |
| 61. <i>ohira</i> : <i>hirawan</i> =shallow bowl                            | 74. <i>oyatsu</i> =P.M. snack.   |
| 62. <i>ohiru</i> : <i>hirugohan</i> =lunch                                 | 75. <i>owan</i> =lacquered bowl  |
| 63. <i>ofuru</i> =a hand-me-down.  | 76. <i>onba</i> : <i>uba</i> =wet nurse (only in the phrase <i>onba-higasa</i> ) |
| 64. <i>oheso</i> =navel  |  |

For simplicity, except for a few borderline cases, nursery words (which must, however, have been coined for the child by the mother as nurse) have been excluded, e.g., such reduplicates as *otete*, *omeme*, *obebe*, *ozeze*, *obaba*, and some others, such as *omeza* and *omiya*.

## PREFIX *O-*, LIST II

Current 3-syllable words whose 2-syllable form (i.e., without *o-*) is standard, the prefixed form being restricted to women or to men deliberately softening communication with the female sex through its adoption.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1. <i>okan</i> : <i>kanzake</i> = <i>saké</i> mulling | 9. <i>otoso</i> =New Year's spiced <i>saké</i> |
| 2. <i>okome</i> =uncooked rice                        | 10. <i>onegi</i> =onion                        |
| 3. <i>osara</i> =plate, dish                          | 11. <i>ohashi</i> =chopsticks                  |
| 4. <i>oshake</i> : <i>s(h)ake</i> =salmon             | 12. <i>omame</i> =beans                        |
| 5. <i>osushi</i> =vinegared fish and rice             | 13. <i>ofuro</i> =a bath (tub)                 |
| 6. <i>osumi</i> =charcoal                             | 14. <i>omiso</i> =miso paste                   |
| 7. <i>osoba</i> =buckwheat noodles                    | 15. <i>omugi</i> =wheat flour                  |
| 8. <i>ochichi</i> =(mother's) milk, breasts           | 16. <i>omochi</i> =rice cakes                  |

One may fairly extensively lengthen the above list with such occasional expressions as *oyasai*, *onasu*, *okyūri*, *oringo*, and many more. Even though they are sure to be rejected by purists, it is still noteworthy that this application of ornamental *o-* is especially common in kitchen vocabulary. One can say, e.g.: *Watashi no ohashi doko e itta no kashira* (I wonder where my chopsticks have disappeared.) But one cannot say: *Watashi no okutsu* (shoes) *doko e itta no kashira*. For although this sentence, except for the replacement of *ohashi* with *okutsu*, is identical with the first, *okutsu* is applicable only

in the sense of "your / his / her / their shoes." (The situation is different in the case of child language. That is to say, in the case of child language the form *okutsu*, e.g., can be used especially by a girl in the sense of "my shoes.")

### PREFIX *O-*, LIST III

Ornamental *o-* appearing in historical reference materials. The following words are taken from: VOCABULARIO DA LINGOA DE IAPAM, published 1603-4 in Nagasaki by the Jesuit Mission Press. Only the first example is quoted from the original text in full.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. <i>Voaxi i. Jeni.</i> Caixas. He palavra de molheres ( <i>zeni.</i> coins. feminine speech) | 12. <i>Voita (oita)</i> =salt                                    |
| 2. <i>Vocama:</i> <i>kamaboko</i> =fish sausage  | 13. <i>Voman (oman):</i> <i>manjū</i> =bun with bean jam filling |
| 3. <i>Vocazu (okazu)</i> =side dish other than rice  | 14. <i>Vomana (omana)</i> =seafood, fish as food                 |
| 4. <i>Vofagata:</i> <i>daikon</i> =Japanese radish   | 15. <i>Vomanaca (omanaka)</i> =privy                             |
| 5. <i>Vofaguro (ohaguro)</i> =toothblack (cosmetic)  | 16. <i>Vomauari:</i> <i>okazu</i> =side dish other than rice     |
| 6. <i>Vofin (ohin)</i> =wakening   | 17. <i>Vomuxi (omushi)</i> =miso                                 |
| 7. <i>Vofira (ohira):</i> <i>tai</i> =sea bream  | 18. <i>Vomoxi (omoshi)</i> =miso                                 |
| 8. <i>Vofiru (ohiru)</i> =wakening   | 19. <i>Vonaka (onaka)</i> =belly, tummy                          |
| 9. <i>Vofiyaxi (ohiyashi)</i> =cold water  | 20. <i>Vonama (onama)</i> =salad                                 |
| 10. <i>Vofoso:</i> <i>iwashi</i> =sardines   | 21. <i>Votcuqe (otsuke)</i> = <i>misoshiru</i>                   |
| 11. <i>Vofuru (ofuru)</i> =hand-me-down.   | 22. <i>Voguxi (ogushi)</i> =your / his / her / their hair.       |

This final item should be accorded separate treatment. Not only in terms of phonemic makeup is it irregular because of voicing in the combination *o+kushi* but also, in terms of semantics, the prefix *o*, in this case, is honorific and not ornamental, implying the meaning "your / his / her / their" in contradistinction, e.g., to *onaka*. (Cf. no. 19 in the above). The formation *ogushi*, which is to be analyzed into *o+kushi*, is a separate problem. From a semantic point of view it should be added that items 6 and 8 belong to this class.

Addendum: In the main text the author has mentioned that *omemoji* is one of a very few examples of *moji-kotoba* which can survive with the prefix *-o* contributing to the acceptance of the form. However, this does not imply that the form *memoji* existed anterior to *omemoji* (even if there are textual evidences of the form *memoji*, i.e., the form without the prefix *-o*). The form *omemoji* must have been derived from the usage *omeni kakaru*.