

An Analysis of the Outcome of a Questionnaire: Gender Differences in Consciousness of Compliment Usage among Japanese People¹

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1. Introduction

In a context related to language history, Peter Burke (2004) says as follows.

Politeness is one speech domain which has attracted cultural historians, while insult has attracted still more.

(Burke 2004:58)

Politeness is a field in which not only cultural historians but also sociolinguists are very interested. Particularly, in studies of gender differences in language, politeness is often used as one of the variables to measure actual gender differences in language usage. Insult, on the other hand, is a face-threatening act and is used as a variable to measure politeness in studies of gender differences in language.

However, it is no easy task for us to explain accurately what politeness is. On writing my master's thesis, I attempted to define accurately the term 'politeness' that is used in studies of gender differences in language, distinguishing it from our everyday language notion of politeness. Afterwards, I considered the notion of 'com-

pliments' because they are often used as one of the important variables in this kind of study.

In my master's thesis, I discussed whether gender differences in politeness strategies and compliment usage can be found or not. From this viewpoint, I also referred to cultural differences between Japan and the West, particularly New Zealand, by comparing my findings with Holmes' (1995). In order to do so, I collected two types of data. First, I questioned 112 Japanese people (who consist of 49 men and 63 women). In terms of consciousness or views of compliment usage and politeness strategies, this questionnaire was helpful. Second, I recorded several conversations. They consisted mainly of recorded conversations occurring spontaneously between Japanese people and some conversations taken from television programmes such as *Tetsuko no Heya* or *Waratte Iitomo*.

In this article, I will attempt to discuss the results of the questionnaire about the usage of compliments and focus exclusively on whether and how we can find the gender differences in consciousness of paying and receiving compliments².

2. The Consciousness of Compliments

2.0. What do Japanese People Think about Compliments?

In order to do preliminary research for my master's thesis, I sent out a questionnaire concerning language usage or consciousness of gender differences in speech acts and gender roles. This questionnaire was carried out between February and April in 2006 and 112 people (49 men and 63 women) in Japan participated in

this. The analysis and consideration of a variety of questions will lead effectively to the discussion in the following sections.

In the following sections, I will look at and identify the consciousness of compliments in Japanese society by comparing some previous research findings, mainly Holmes', with results obtained from my questionnaire. How Japanese people view compliments may differ between men and women, as well as actual conversational style and linguistic behavior tend to be different between them.

2.1. Questionnaire

This questionnaire has 23 questions and, as I explained above, it was answered by 112 people (49 men and 63 women) in Japan. Most of them are my friends, acquaintances and former colleagues with whom I once worked together as a station attendant. Some of the respondents are their family members or their current colleagues. The group of 112 people is composed as table 1 illustrates.

In table 1, this questionnaire needs to be analyzed on the basis of the total number of men and women because the number of people over 30 years old is much less than that of people younger than 30.

Though this is my personal feeling and I do not remember

Table 1. Respondents by Age and Sex

Sex \ Age	16 to 29	30 to 49	over 50	total
Male	38	6	5	49
Female	48	7	8	63

how many people I asked to answer, it is interesting to note that women were relatively cooperative with my request. Some men rejected it by saying that answering a questionnaire can be embarrassing and troublesome. However, none of the women said this.

In the following sections, I will consider the outcome of this questionnaire in more detail.

2.2. Who Tends to Use Compliments Most?

Then, in general, who pays compliments and who receives them? Kitao and Kitao (1989) point out that compliments tend to be paid to people who have equal or lower social status. They also suggest that compliments tend to be less used upward (see Kitao and Kitao 1989:40–41). In other words, we can say that compliments are generally used levelly, laterally or downward and therefore less paid to people who are socially distant. Though Kitao and Kitao (1989) point out that American people sometimes pay compliments to strangers, this pattern seems not to apply to Japanese society. This is because Japanese people tend to be sensitive to social distance. Itakura (2001) makes a similar remark as follows.

Japanese has been characterised as a language that especially reflects speakers' sensitivity to social distance and the relative status of (a) speakers and addressees and (b) speakers and third person referents. (Itakura 2001:5)

From this point of view, Fun Volga, who had originally come from Argentina and lived in Japan, reveals his experience in a

magazine *English Zone* published in Japan.

When he visited Italy, his host, a 65-year-old man, not only said to a strange woman that “God bless your mother! You’re gorgeous!” but also began to walk backwards in an effort to further admire her curves. He was very scared and felt uneasy because he knew that women in Japan are not used to being praised.

After he came back to Japan, when he was getting on a crowded subway one day, a beautiful young woman was standing close to him. He carelessly said to her, as if his host had said in Italy, “You’re gorgeous. Would you care for a coffee?” Then, the woman began to shout “*Chikan! Chikan!*” In fact, everybody there regarded him as a sex maniac, molester (see *English Zone* 22:58–59).

As this demonstrates, in Japanese society, compliments are highly likely not to be used to strangers. Especially, compliments from men to strange women in Japanese society can be regarded as sexual harassment.

Holmes (1995) collected quantitative data on compliments in New Zealand. According to her data, women both gave and received definitely more compliments than men do as figure 1 illustrates.

She reveals that women gave 68 per cent of all the compliments recorded and received 74 per cent of them. By contrast, compliments between males were only 9 per cent (Holmes 1995: 112–113). The outcome of my questionnaire illustrates a pattern similar to hers as figure 2 reveals.

In my questionnaire, I asked “Do you compliment other people in everyday life?” As a result, 78 per cent of females answered

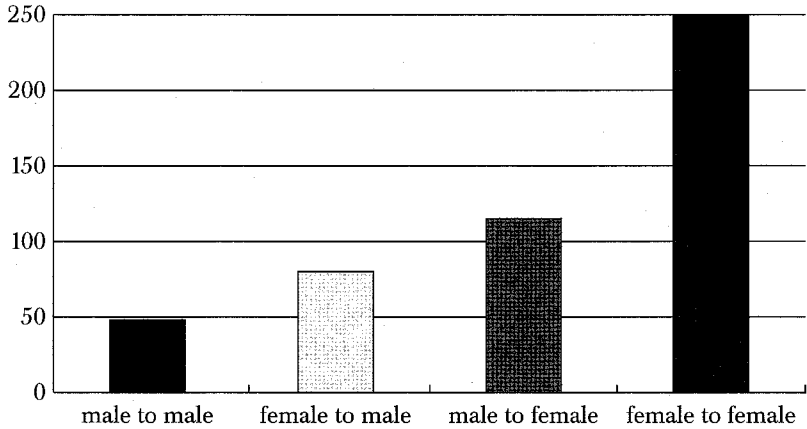


Figure 1. Gender of Participants and the Number of Compliments (Quoted from Holmes (1995:123, Figure 4.1))

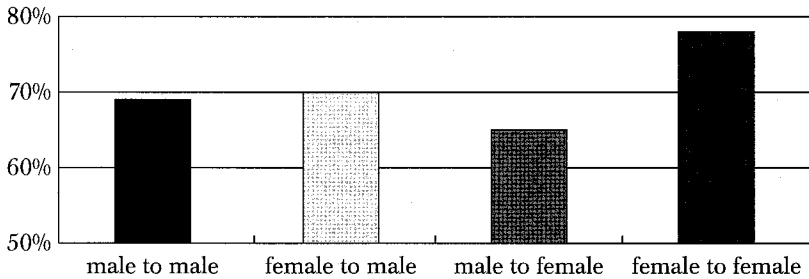


Figure 2. Proportion of Positive Answers for Using Compliments

that they sometimes or often pay compliments to other females. In Holmes' data, compliments from male to male are the least distributed, while in my data, compliments from male to female are the least. As I illustrated above, if men in Japan pay a compliment to other women, it can be regarded as a sexual harassment.

Therefore, Japanese men may attempt to avoid paying compliments to them or to say nothing. To put it another way, Japanese men may sometimes attempt to be 'a man of few words' in order to prevent themselves from being criticized for misunderstanding or miscommunication. From this point of view, Holmes (1995) shows an intriguing example as follows.

Example

Middle-aged man commenting on his wife's complaints that he never expresses appreciation.

I don't see why she needs to be told that she looks good or that **the meal was OK**. If I don't complain, that implies things are fine. (quoted from Holmes 1995:195)

This example reveals that men tend to regard 'not to praise' as a kind of compliment. This can be evidence that men in Japan also are conscious that they pay less compliments to women because Japanese men traditionally tend to highly value being taciturn and being able to agree tacitly. Talkativeness is not important for them. Holmes (1995) also refers to a male view as follows.

Redundant verbal frippery seems to be how linguistic politeness is regarded by many men. It is icing on the cake, unnecessary in contexts where 'real' interaction takes place. (Holmes 1995:195)

Men can pay compliments according to contexts, but they praise less often in context where women hope to be compliment-

ed. This can account for misunderstandings between men and women.

By contrast, in terms of consciousness of paying compliments, it seems that women attempt to be more positively polite. Moreover, women may exactly know the feelings of other women. In other words, women can pay compliments to other women in an appropriate moment to do so. 'When they are complimented' and 'what they are complimented on' seem to be very important for women and they exactly know these key points. Consequently, this may be evidence that compliments from women to other women are the most distributed in my questionnaire as figure 2 illustrates. In addition, we can say that women are conscious that they are more positively polite³ than men. This pattern is similar to findings of Holmes (1995).

After that question, more specifically, I asked a question: "Who do you compliment?" Respondents could make three choices. figure 3 illustrates the outcome.

Both men and women chose 'same-sex friends' the most (men 23 per cent and women 29 per cent). In this figure, it is interesting to note that 14 per cent of women chose 'same-sex superiors', while only 5 per cent of men answered so. This can be evidence that women regard compliments as a social lubricant or a way to build solidarity, although compliments are less likely to be used upwards. In other words, women are not afraid to pay compliments regardless of social status of recipients. This means that most women are not status-orientated but rapport-orientated⁴. On the other hand, men seem to pay more compliments to subordinates regardless of sex than women do (to opposite sex: men 13

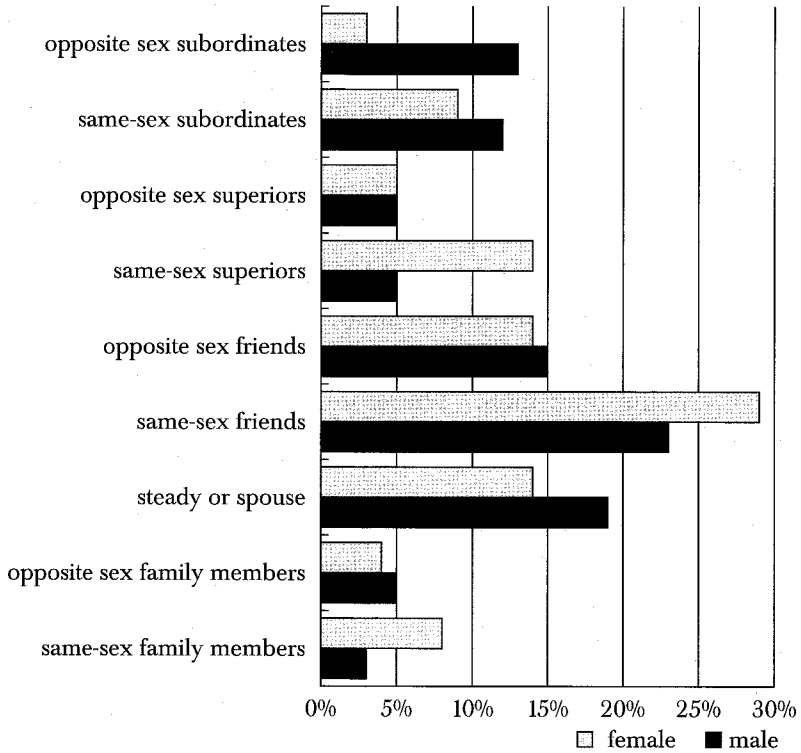


Figure 3. Proportion of Chosen Recipients of Compliments

per cent, women 3 per cent; to same sex: men 12 per cent, women 4 per cent). This is also evidence that men regard compliments as what needs to be paid downwards rather than as a social lubricant or being upwards. To put it another way, when a man has higher social status than that of the addressee, he is more likely to pay compliments. This may be associated with male emphasis on the referential function³ of speech acts. That is, compliments from men can convey not solidarity or rapport but true admiration or

flattery. Therefore, they have less opportunity to pay compliments upwards and they tend to be status-orientated.

More interestingly, 8 per cent women think that they pay compliments to 'same-sex family members', while only 3 per cent of men think so. This is a token that women recognize their strong association with their family members, while men pay less attention to them. This can be also evidence that women pay compliments to maintain relationship or solidarity while men pay compliments referentially. In consciousness, women tend to be more positively polite than men. Therefore, we can say that this outcome of the questionnaire reinforces the findings of Holmes (1995).

Though this finding is based not on real conversations but on a questionnaire, we can see some gender differences in compliment usage. The fact that the proportion of women who recognize that they pay a compliment sometimes or often is larger than that of men is similar to some previous research findings such as Holmes'. In terms of consciousness, women seem to be more positively polite than men. The fact that women tend to pay more compliments to same-sex superiors and family members than men do reveals that women recognize paying a compliment as a social lubricant; i.e. positive politeness device. On the other hand, it seems that men tend to pay compliments to people who have lower status or equals such as spouse, steady and friends.

In order to discuss this in more detail, I made another question: "Are you complimented in your daily life?" The outcome is illustrated in figure 4. As I mentioned above, in Japanese society, women are conscious that they pay more compliments than men

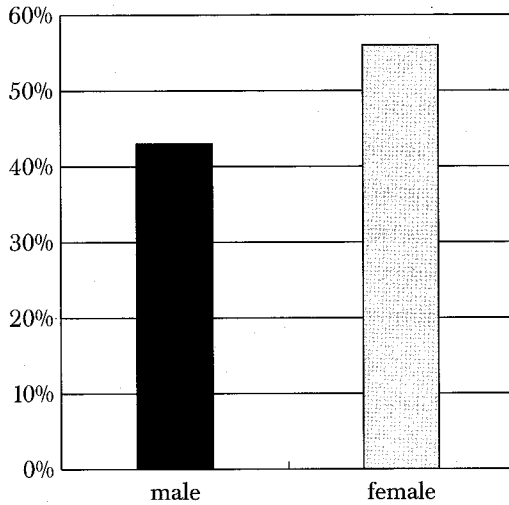


Figure 4. Proportion of People Who Think that They are Complimented

do. The proportion of compliments both from women to women and from women to men is higher than that from men, as figure 2 illustrates. Then, I made two questions from another angle. That is, I asked “Are you complimented in your daily life?” and “Who pays compliments to you?” In the first question, women have a consistently higher proportion of choosing ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’ than men as figure 4 reveals (women 56 per cent and men 43 per cent). In other words, this pattern accords with the outcome of figure 2, and women in Japan are more aware than men that they are complimented. As Holmes (1995) points out, women seem both to pay more compliments and have more opportunities to be complimented (see Holmes 1995:214). Women’s linguistic behavior in Western societies such as Australian society may be consis-

tent with that in Japanese society. Moreover, focusing on compliments, we can say that the pattern that women tend to be more positively polite than men can apply not only to Western societies but also to Japanese society.

In the second question, the respondents could make three choices as in the previous question. The outcome is also interesting as figure 5 illustrates.

Women chose 'same-sex friends' the most (30 per cent). They

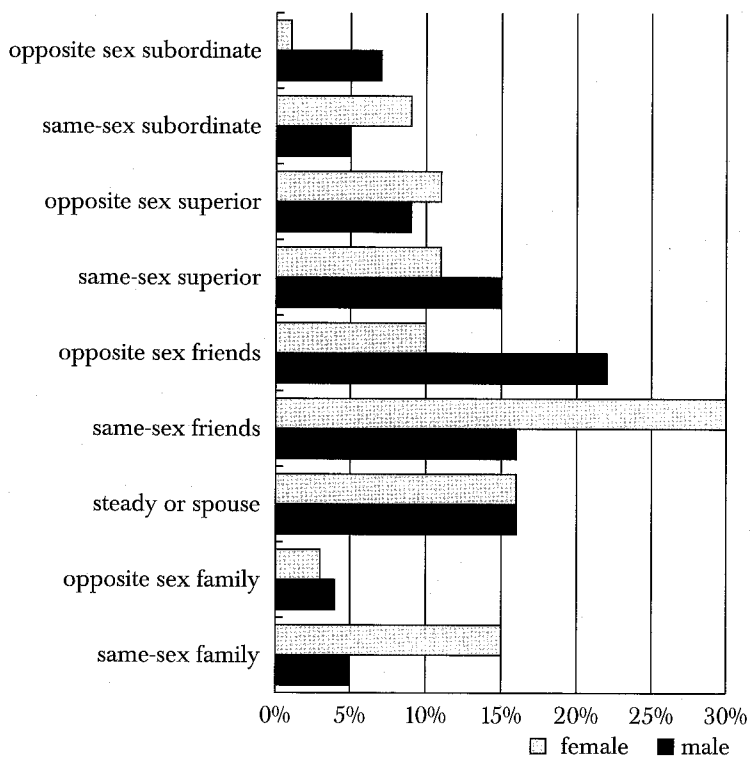


Figure 5. Proportion of Chosen Complimenters

also chose 'same-sex family members much more than men did (women 15 per cent and men 5 per cent). As far as 'same-sex subordinates' is concerned, we can say that the tendency was similar (women 9 per cent and men 5 per cent). Women appear to think that compliments between women occur very frequently. All these patterns are consistent with the outcome of figure 2. These also constitute evidence that women receive compliments as a kind of social lubricant or in order to build solidarity. That is, we can speculate that exchanges of compliments between women are typical of phatic or socio-emotional communication.

By contrast, it is very interesting to focus on men's choice pattern. In fact, men chose 'opposite sex friends' the most (22 per cent). To put it another way, men recognize that female friends pay most compliments to them. Also, the proportion of choosing 'opposite sex subordinates' is quite different between men and women (men 7 per cent and women only 1 per cent). This means that men also recognize that they have more opportunities to be complimented by women rather than by men.

We can speculate that the reason why men chose more 'same-sex superiors' than women did is a kind of indication that the sensitivity to status relationships in Japanese society is reflected as Itakura (2001:5) points out. In addition, this is also evidence that men recognize that compliments should be paid downwards and are not regarded as a positive politeness device.

3. Conclusion

The outcome of these questionnaires which I have discussed in

this chapter is intriguing because not only women but also men are aware that they tend to be given more compliments by women than by men. As discussed in figure 5, men think that female friends pay most compliments to them and that female subordinates often give them compliments. In other words, women pay compliments regardless of the age of recipients. In this way, Japanese people recognize that women play roles of both 'complimenter' and 'recipient' of compliments.

9 per cent of women are aware that they receive compliments from female subordinates as figure 5 demonstrates, and women have a predominantly higher proportion of the choice of 'same-sex superiors', that is female superiors, than men do (women 14 per cent and men 5 per cent). Compliments are inherently paid downwards or laterally. In spite of this, women recognize that they often use compliments both upwards and downwards. This can be evidence that the norm of paying compliments is different between men and women.

As I repeatedly suggest, it is obvious that women regard paying compliments as a speech act to function as a social or interactive lubricant and to build and maintain solidarity or harmonious relationship even if they do not clearly identify this. If this were not true, paying compliments upwards might function as a serious threat against women's social position or be labeled as 'socially inappropriate behavior' in certain circumstances because Japanese society strikingly reflects the social status relationship between the speaker and the addressee as Itakura (2001:5) points out. However, women have increasingly more opportunities to participate actively in Japanese society and we can not imagine that none

of the women are active in the society⁵.

On the other hand, women also maintain their strong association with their family members, particularly female family members. Women have much higher proportion than men do in terms of both paying compliments to 'same-sex family members' and receiving compliments from them. Women may treasure people and the environment surrounding them. As Tannen (1995) and Talbot (1998) suggest, men tend to be independence-orientated, while women tend to be rapport-orientated, and therefore we can say that female emphasis on social harmonious relationship leads to women playing roles of both complimenter and recipient of compliments². Thus, we can say that women in Japan as well as the Australian women whom Holmes (1995) investigated are more positively polite than men. Men in Japan, on the other hand, are still relatively status-orientated even if they do not notice this.

In figure 5, we have seen that men have a higher proportion of choice of 'same-sex superiors' than women do (men 9 per cent and women 5 per cent). In figure 3, men are aware that they pay more compliments to not only male superiors (men 12 per cent and women 9 per cent) but also female superiors (men 13 per cent and women 3 per cent). These outcomes can be evidence that men think that compliments should be paid downwards or laterally.

When men pay a compliment, the status relationship between the complimenter and the recipient is a crucial factor. They recognize that they refrain from paying compliments upwards. We can speculate that this means that men are reluctant to select speech acts which deviate from traditional norms in Japanese society. From this point of view, Holmes (1995) suggests that men may

regard acceptance of compliments as socially owing a debt (see Holmes 1995:193). Men may neatly obey this traditional norm. Therefore we can label men in Japan as conservative. Or alternatively, though women appear to be more positively polite than men, male emphasis on status relationship can lead to the avoidance of offences; i.e. the adherence to negatively polite behavior. Also, they may not be used to manipulating a positive politeness device. Consequently, we can say that differences in norms of compliment usage between men and women correspond to differences in priority between the positive politeness device and the negative politeness device.

In this article, my questionnaire is a resource to consider what Japanese people think about paying compliments. Therefore, discussion in this article is based not on data from actual conversation but on the consciousness of compliment usage among Japanese people. Consciousness may not always be accurately transferred to real conversation. Whether it is different from actual compliment usage or not, it is interesting to investigate how or how frequently people in Japan pay compliments. Consequently, we can say that, in Japanese society, there are some gender differences in consciousness of compliment usage and this might be a source of mental and verbal misunderstandings between men and women.

Notes

- 1 This is the revised version of chapter 2 of my master's thesis *An Analysis of Gender Differences in Politeness Strategies and Compliment Usage*. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Professor Yoshida for reading my first draft and giving valuable comments

on it.

2 For the definition of politeness and the detailed discussion of findings obtained from previous studies, see chapter 1 of my master's thesis.

3 Most sociolinguists such as Holmes (1995) and Coates (1993) assume that politeness can be divided into 'negative politeness' and 'positive politeness'.

'Negative politeness' is strongly associated with our daily language usage and regarded as a linguistic behavior which we try to avoid insulting or swearing someone, requesting something of someone and offending someone. Therefore, for example, a linguistic behavior which we do not ask other people "Please buy some milk." but "Do you mind buying some milk?" is recognized as a kind of negatively polite behavior towards the addressee.

By contrast, 'positive politeness' is related to other people's feelings and the affective function of language, which is contrasted to the referential function of language that focuses on informative interaction. In other words, it is a linguistic behavior which a speaker tries to satisfy the feelings, needs or faces of the addressee and paying compliments to the addressee is a typical example of positively polite linguistic behavior. Though this might differ from our daily language notion of politeness, satisfying other people mentally and verbally is regarded as one of the politeness in a wide range of meanings.

4 Talbot (1998) summarizes Tannen's (1995) classification of the gender-based conversational characteristics as follows. However, Talbot does not fully agree with this dichotomy (see Talbot 1998: 97-101).

Female	Male
sympathy	problem-solving
rapport	report
listening	lecturing

private connection supportive intimacy public status oppositional independence (Talbot 1998:98)

5 I also asked a question related to women's current activity in Japanese society and gave respondents mainly five choices. The outcome is also interesting as figure 6 demonstrates.

Question: It is pointed out that there has been an increasing tendency for women to participate in public affairs. You are requested to evaluate each of the following; please encircle an item which you think is most appropriate.

A: Judging from the present situation, we can not say that women are allowed to have sufficient opportunity to participate in public domains.

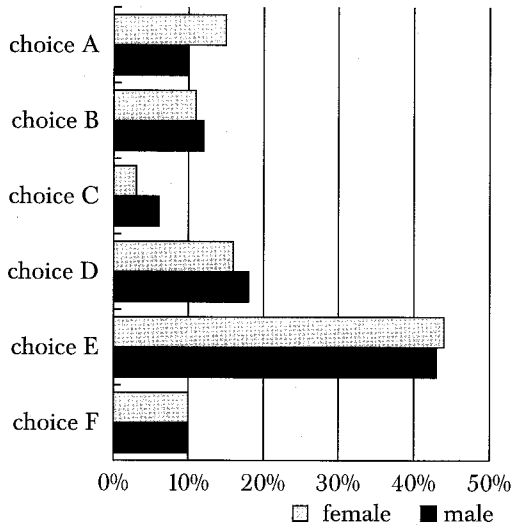


Figure 6. Outcome of Question Relating to Women's Current Activity

- B: Surely women now have sufficient opportunity to participate in every domain of social activities, but I am against this tendency; I believe that women's place should be in the home.
- C: Surely women now have sufficient opportunity to participate in every domain of social activities, but they should not think that they can participate in it because they are limited in working ability.
- D: Since it is quite desirable for women to contribute to society by working outside home and this tendency is socially supported, they should be more encouraged to do so.
- E: Women are beginning to have access to every kind of public sphere, and I think this is very desirable, but the whole society does not fully approve of it.
- F: I have no ideas about this tendency or I have other ideas. Please write down your own opinions if any.

As figure 6 demonstrates, both men and women tend to perceive that women increasingly have more opportunities to participate in society. B, C, D and E mean that such opportunities are remarkably increasing. 79 per cent of men and 74 per cent of women chose one of them. Therefore, we can say that many people believe that women have enough opportunities to be active in Japanese society.

However, approximately half of the respondents think simultaneously that the social perception or approval of female participation in public domain is not enough (choice E: men 43 per cent and women 44 per cent). This may mean that the existent social system can not catch up with a rapid social change in Japanese society. More specifically, most women tend to have a lot of trouble in making working outside home and child rearing compatible because it is difficult for people in Japan to bring up their children

without economic power to some extent. The drop in the birth rate may symbolize this (In 2006, the birth rate in Japan is 1.26, which is the lowest in Japanese history.). Consequently, this may be a reason why a higher proportion of women than men consider that women do not yet have sufficient opportunity to participate in society (choice A: men 10 per cent and women 15 per cent). Women seem overtly to hope that they will get more opportunities to contribute to society.

Then, if the number of nursery schools increases, will women be satisfied with society? What society do women obtain a high degree of satisfaction in? Or alternatively, if women obtain a higher degree of satisfaction in Japanese society, will men be disadvantaged? In a context related to conversation in workplaces, Holmes (1995) points out the possibility of equity of contributions to discussion as follows.

One might argue, using a more democratic ideal, that men should be treated with less deference, rather than women with more. But accepting current norms, it is clear that women in professional jobs which attract respect when men occupy them, are not being treated in ways appropriate to their status.

(Holmes 1995:210)

However, I personally think that, though the degree of satisfaction should be higher as soon as possible, this should not be accompanied with the decline in the degree of male satisfaction. This is because social insecurity can be caused. The equity issue of gender-differentiated status should be improved in a 'bottom-up' way (if women are really disadvantaged in society). In other words, if men continue to maintain their social status, women should be given and gain a position equivalent to male social status.

On the other hand, though the number is small, men have a higher proportion than women do of negative cognition of women's activity in modern society (choice B: men 12 per cent and women 11 per

cent; choice C: men 6 per cent and women 3 per cent). This does not mean sympathy or consideration for female physical disadvantage but reflects views on the basis of patriarchy or androcentrism. Former Japanese society was typically based on such values, although the number of nuclear families is rapidly increasing with a result that women participate more frequently in public sphere. However, this outcome is evidence that some Japanese people including women still hold patriarchal or androcentric views.

A few days ago, when my mother and I got on a train together and the conductor was a young woman, my mother said that female conductors make her feel uneasy (though this comment must offend many feminists and many people regard it as a kind of bias). Needless to say, my mother is a middle-aged woman but she was socialized in a culture based on 'division of labor' (see Talbot 1998: 131). Therefore, she holds such a view or she may envy modern young women who can work in society.

Japanese society is changing rapidly, while patriarchy still remains to some extent. Possibly, we may be given a choice between harmony between 'conservatism' and 'innovation' and rejection of old-fashioned views of society.

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