Osaka Aunties:
Negotiating honorific language, gender, and regionality[1]

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1. **Introduction**

In 2005, Maegaki published a checklist of characteristics that women could use to measure the degree to which they qualify as an *Osaka obachan* 'Osaka Auntie'. Since the author purchased this book from *Amazon.co.jp* Japan, presumably this checklist could be used by any Japanese speaking individual to assess one's *Osaka Obachan*-ness. In this way, the regional confinement of these characteristics are questionable; nonetheless, the traits which so readily mark one as belonging to the category of *Osaka Obachan* are firmly located (at least in the imagination) in women who are born and reared in Osaka, Japan. Ideas about regional Japanese women are entrenched in (at least) local and national consciousnesses of Japan. The *Osaka Obachan* is a particularly salient category of the Japanese Regional Woman who shows up in various satire and comic sketches on TV, in *manga*, and in region-based folklore in general. One of the ways to recognize her is through her speech – both the style of speaking with regard to specific linguistic forms as well as pragmatic considerations such as nosiness, pitch/tone, and (what can only be described as) shifting linguistic politeness (Maegaki 2005). *Osaka Obachan* are said to speak their minds forcefully and to "hit you (with] *honne* [true feelings]" (Maegaki, 2005: 13). It is worth mentioning that Maegaki's text is just one of many which outlines regional characteristics in general, but regional women's characteristics in particular. As much as these texts (and their content) may resonate with actual Osaka Obachan or merely observers of them, it remains virtually unknown to what extent these traits are realized by real people. That is, do all Osaka women turn into *Osaka Obachan*? If so, what is the

process of becoming one? These questions are beyond the scope of the current endeavor; however, central to this endeavor is shedding light on the linguistic practices of Osaka *women* whether or not they are or become *Osaka Obachan*.

The image of the *Osaka Obachan* does not readily conjure a 'proper' Japanese (feminine) woman – a womanly woman (see Shibamoto, 1987; Inoue, 2006). But, Osaka women are not the repository, at least not in the national imagination, of a womanly woman. And, yet, they have access to, and indeed consume, many of the trappings of "standard" women (located in the Tokyo area) including speech styles and practices. Our understandings of Japanese women's speech practices have flourished over the past thirty-plus years as more and more investigations – of various methods and theories – have added insight into the linguistic practices (both real and imagined) of Japanese women (see Shibamoto, 1985; Ide, 1993; Okamoto and Shibamoto Smith, 2004). However, regional women have not enjoyed the same scrutiny, yet, arguably have a greater repertoire of forms to choose from and play with as they can call upon dialect and standard forms of language. Using empirical data drawn from naturally occurring informal all-female conversations among groups of Kansai women (ranging in age from thirty to seventy), this article aims to shed light on the speech practices of non-standard speakers of Japanese. Particular focus is given to easily recognized dialect forms (detailed below) and their standard variants. While the conclusions note some potential indexical work that particular linguistic forms are performing, the main thrust of this paper is to ascertain what kinds of linguistic practices are used by regional Japanese women and how dialect forms articulate and complement standard forms. Ultimately, I suggest that regional women (Osaka speakers) use standard forms as a means of distancing themselves from the stereotypical Osaka woman – the *Obachan* – but simultaneously use enough regional forms to position themselves clearly as regional women and *not* users of *joseigo* (Japanese women's language).

1.1 *Why Regional Women?*

The Japanese language is said to have a "true women's language" (Kindaichi, 1942). Inoue (2006) has shown clearly how the nation state of Japan carefully constructed this women's language (*joseigo*). Specific structural features, phonological, lexical, and morphological, have been identified as constituting Japanese women's language. For example, Ohara (1992) has found that women use a higher pitch than is explicable on physiological grounds alone concluding that the use of high pitch by Japanese women is part of a display of femininity. Pronouns are another component where distinct gender differences are noted for women and men speakers of Japanese (Ide, 1982; Shibatani, 1990). Morphological differences in the gendering of Japanese are typically demonstrated by investigating the frequency with which men and women are thought to use polite and honorific forms. Women are considered to use verb forms which are more honorific and to use these more frequently than men use them (e.g. Ide et al., 1986). Finally, sentence final particles are another focus of gendered language studies. These forms serve to indicate the speaker's stance toward his/her utterance; there are numerous forms which are typically categorized as exclusively male or female and some which are categorized as neutral (McGloin, 1997; Reynolds, 1985).

The above descriptions of gendered structures are the result of investigations aimed at Standard Japanese, or *kyootsuugo* 'common language,' which is associated with Japanese

spoken in Tokyo and the Kanto area. Inoue has shown clearly (1994, 2006) the regional and class assumptions underpinning the gendered associations. Inoue finds that contemporary language forms which are associated with "women's language" are drawn from the speech patterns of middle to upper middle class women in *Yamanote Tokyo* during the modern state reformation after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. Having access to this form can index education, class, and ideological femininity. Empirical investigations into women's linguistic practices allow a richer understanding of how these forms are viewed and used as a resource for identity construction. Matsumoto (2002) demonstrates, in her work on middle-class mothers located in the Tokyo region, that women do not use just one style of speech; rather, they exhibit heterogeneity of linguistic practices, calling on both stereotypically feminine and masculine language forms to assert and subvert particular positions and identities. While it is true that this national (women's) language ideology reaches throughout the Japanese archipelago, it is unclear to what extent women in non-center regions utilize Japanese women's language (*joseigo*). Sunaoshi (2004) has shown that Japanese women in the Ibaraki region are aware of the ways in which Standard Japanese can index middle-class femininity and that they use standard forms to assert such an identity, but also to make fun of it as well. Likewise, Miyzaki's work on Shizuoka junior high school students underscores that the gender indexicality potential of first- and second-person pronouns is fully realized by both girls and boys (2004). She notes that group-leader girls use stereotypically male forms in specific contexts to achieve particular ends while boys may avoid particular male-forms of these same pronouns due to the ways in which the forms can position the boys in powerful(less) positions vis-à-vis others.

Osaka City and its outlying regions within the Kansai[2] area is an ideal site for investigating the articulation of regionality and gender because the dialect spoken there is considered a prestige dialect compared to Standard Japanese. The dialect spoken in the greater Kansai region was not eradicated to the great extent that other dialects were during the modernization period (e.g. Miyake, 1995; Kunihiro, Inoue, & Long, 1999). In contrast, it occupies a position of prestige within Western Japan; it is seen as an indicator of the relaxed and informal image that is cultivated in the Kansai region (Peng & Long, 1993; Onoe, Kasai, & Wakaichi, 2000). In fact, it is reported that Kansai residents do not hesitate to speak openly in their own language(s) and that young people throughout Japan strive to mimic the dialect of Kansai in lieu of their own Standard Japanese (Onoe et al., 2000). Nevertheless, the language spoken in the Kansai region is not Standard Japanese. As such, women in Kansai are presented with, arguably, several choices when they speak and engage in conversation with their friends. Inoue (1996) presents a vignette in which friends who speak the Kansai dialect, purposefully use particular features associated with *joseigo* to be sarcastic, thereby distinguishing themselves from those women who do use this ideological women's language. Okamoto and Sato (1992) show how female speakers of Standard Japanese creatively switch between stereotypical womanly *joseigo* and forms more traditionally associated with men's speech to index anger, sarcasm, middle-class-ness, etc. Given the various styles they have access to, the informal conversations of Kansai women are an ideal source for an investigation of how women, poised simultaneously at the center of their local region and at an edge of their national region, use language as a means of identity negotiation. Previous work on Kansai men's linguistic practices has shown that men do not use language in ways that is stereotypically imagined

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[2] The Kansai region is the greater 'western region' of Japan. The dialect spoken here is variously referred to as *Osaka ben* 'Osaka dialect' or *Kansai ben* 'Kansai dialect.' Technically they are overlapping but distinct; however, people tend to use the terms interchangeably.

as "men's language style" (see SturtzSreetharan, 2004a, 2004b, 2006a, 2006b, forthcoming). Indeed, men show adept manipulation of dialect and standard linguistic forms to achieve a range of conversational (or interpersonal) goals such as creating distance or building solidarity, creating a position of stereotypical masculinity or denying one. Similar work on Kansai women is needed.

1.2 *Features of the Dialect*

In this article, I am most interested in a portion of the Kansai Dialect referred to as *Hanshinkan* Dialect (HKD) – which spans from Osaka City northeast to Toyonaka City, Osaka Prefecture, then travels west to Kawanishi, Nishinomiya, Ashiya, and the Eastern edge of Kobe City, in Hyogo Prefecture (see Hirayama, 1997). This dialect differs from Standard Japanese at all levels of the language – phonologically, morphologically, lexically, and pragmatically. As with any dialect, there are some features which are recognized as essential components of the dialect while other aspects are only recognized by specialists. Below I give a few of the most 'recognizable regionalisms[3].'

(1) Negation

In Standard Japanese (SJ), an informal negative is created by attaching ~*nai* to the verb stem; in HKD, this is achieved by attaching ~*hen* instead.

   (1) a. *ika<u>nai</u>* (SJ)
         b. *ika**hen*** (HKD)
        "[I'm] not going."

(2) Copula

In SJ, the informal form of the copula is *da* while in HKD it is *ya*. Both of these also have negative forms; the SJ form is irregular (*janai*) while the HKD form is *yani* with modal forms *daro(o)* and *yaro(o)* respectively.

   (2) a. *ringo <u>da</u>*
         b. *ringo **ya***
        "[It] is an apple."

         c. *ringo daro*
         d. *ringo **<u>yaro</u>***
        "[It] is probably an apple."

         e. *ringo <u>janai</u>*
         f. *ringo **yanai***
        "[It] isn't an apple."

(3) Honorific

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[3] The regionalism being discussed is bolded while the Standard Japanese form is underlined for clarification purposes.

There is a dialect specific piece of *sonkeigo* – honorific language used toward others -- in the Osaka region; it is *haru*. One characteristic of the dialect honorific compared to that in SJ is its much wider range of use. It can be used toward an interlocutor who is senior and close to you or equal to you but not very close; it is also used toward family members who are senior to you (e.g., a daughter to her father) (Hirayama, 1997).

> (3) a.   *ikinasaru*
>   b.   *iki**haru***
>   "[You will] go."

These are three examples of ways in which HKD and SJ differ; they were chosen because they are forms that most users of HKD are highly aware of and cite as being different from SJ and of using (see Silverstein, 1981). That is, when people cite examples of HKD these are among the very typical ones to be listed and checked as a measure of one's knowledge of HKD not to mention one's use of it. Additionally, these forms are ones which become important later in this article for they ways in which they are utilized or not and some of the implications of the various usages.

2.   **Methods and Data**

The data presented here are part of a larger corpus collected over a period of 14 months from June 2006 through August 2007. The current data are drawn from four separate conversations among women born, reared, and (at the time of data collection) living in the Kansai area. The women range in age from early thirties to late seventies. Conversation Groups 1 and 2 are comprised of the same three women: Ami (39 yrs.), Hana (32), and Akiko (41); Ami is a self-proclaimed 'office lady,' Hana a law clerk, and Akiko an office assistant. Conversation Group 3 includes Kaori (64), Michiko (61), and Naoko (62); Conversation Group 4 includes Asako (58), Sachi (63), and Reiko (76). The women in Conversation Groups 3 and 4 are all self-identified 'housewives' but all also participate in Japanese traditional flower arranging (*ikebana*); Asako is an *ikebana* teacher. All data were recorded on a digital recorder; the author was not present for any of the recordings. Participants were engaged in data collection through volunteer networks known to the author from previous research in the Kansai region; women known to the author were asked to invite a few friends to gather for informal conversations for research purposes. All recordings took place in casual settings such as someone's home, a restaurant, or a small café. Participants were not given pre-set topics to address, but they were informed that the research being conducted dealt with linguistic practice.

All conversations were transcribed by native speakers of HKD; they were then coded for pronominal forms, honorifics (standard and HKD), distal forms, dialect forms, and sentence final forms. As noted above, I am most interested in the ways in which recognizable regional forms articulate (or co-exist) with standard forms and the ways in which these two styles are utilized by the speakers. Several interesting patterns emerged at the global level of the conversations: exclusive use of HKD honorific *haru* to do actual honorific work; exclusive use of standard distal (polite) modal *deshoo* rather than *yaro(o)* [or *daro(o)*] 'probably'; exclusive use of standard copular negation *janai* rather than regional variant *yanai*; exclusive use of HKD copula *ya* rather than standard *da*; and, high

frequencies of stereotypically feminine sentence final forms[4]. Because these patterns emerge at the macro level of the conversations, rather than providing an analysis which looks at the turn-by-turn level of the conversation, I focus on the interplay of these patterns across various speakers and contexts. As the data show and subsequent discussion will suggest, these Kansai women use just enough dialect to provide membership in the Kansai region but just enough standard forms to show them to be savvy womanly women. Or, to put it another way, these women clearly locate themselves as Kansai women with the use of their HKD but their frequent use of highly indexical SJ forms underscore their rejection of being an *Osaka Obachan*.

2.1. *Data Examples*[5]

(4) *Haru*

(4) a. itsumo <u>joozu</u> ni shi**HARU** yone
    always good PT do-HON SFF
    "[She] always does it well, doesn't she." (Naoko)

   b. tsu**koo**te kure**HATTARA** **ee** **na**
    make give- HON nice SFF
    "If [they'll] make it for you, that's great!" (Sachi)

   c. asoko mago wa ite**HARA** **hen** yone
    there grandkids SUB go- HON not SFF
    "The grandkids haven't gone though, right?" (Kaori)

(5) *Janai*

   a. yappari kininaru kara futto nanige ni ashimoto
    expected notice because quick casually PT feet
    mitara hiiru <u>janai</u> **nen** . . .
    look heel not SFF
    "And, because I had noticed [her height], I casually glanced down at her feet and it wasn't heels [she was wearing] . . ." (Akiko)

(6) Distal Forms

   a. Ak: tomodachi wa itteta
        friend SUB said
        "My friend was telling me . . ."

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[4] A literature review of the scholarship on Japanese sentence final forms (SFF) and their possible sociolinguistic relationship(s) to gender is beyond the scope and length of this current paper; suffice it to note a long history of investigations of SFFs and gender (see McGloin, 1997; Okamoto & Sato, 1992; Shigemitsu, 1993).

[5] Transcriptions conventions: double underline = SJ; bold ALL CAPS = HKD honorific; bold = HKD; wavy underline = SJ stereotypically feminine SFF; SFF = sentence final form; pt = particle; HON = honorific; SUB = subject; TQ = tag question; Q = question; POS = possessive; POL = polite.

H:	on'na	no	hito	soto	derare**hen**	no	*deshoo*	
	girl	POS	person	outside	go out not	SFF -Q	modal	
	"Women aren't allowed outside, you know?"							
A:	kon'nan	koomutte						
	That	suffer						
	"They suffer so . . ."								
H:	kao	dashitara	**akan**	*iimasu*	yone			
	Face	put out	prohibit	say POL	SFF			
	"They say they can't even show their face."							
A:	nan	**ya**ttake?	nanka	kina	**akankatta**	yone		
	What	is it	what	not wear	prohibit	SFF		
	"What's that thing? That thing they have to wear?"							
	(Ak = Akiko; H = Hana; A = Ami)							

(7) Sentence Final Forms

a.
ima	goro	kara	**umaku**	detekitara	de	kyonen	wa
now	about	from	good	come out	uh	last year	SUB
sore	de	kekko	**kirekatta**	*noyo*			
that	PT	quite	pretty	SFF			

"If they bloom nicely from now, uh, last year with that [treatment] they were quite pretty." (Michiko)

b.
genki-na	hito	ikan,	iki**haru**	hito	mo	**oru**	*kashira*
healthy	person	go not	go HON	person	too	exist	SFF

"Healthy people can't go, but I wonder if there will be those that go, too?" (Reiko)

3. Discussion

Throughout each of the conversations investigated, the use of HKD honorific *haru* was virtually exclusive; SJ honorific forms were rarely used. When such forms did appear, it was mainly in formulaic sayings or used with sarcasm.[6] Aside from its almost exclusive use[7], the occurrence of *haru* is rather unremarkable – the women use it in rather prescriptive fashions to give deference to relatives of their close friends/interlocutors; they use it to depict familiarity and respect (see Hirayama, 1997). The examples listed in (4) above show the ways that *haru* is employed; it is perhaps interesting to note that it almost always occurs without verbal final politeness (e.g. *haru* rather than *harimasu* where ~*masu* is the distal form). This seems to underscore or reinforce the familiarity with the interlocutors regarding the person being discussed by the speaker.

The speakers all use other highly salient pieces of dialect including negation *hen* and *akan* – the nationally known variant of SJ's *dame* (prohibit, disallow). The use of copular

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[6] See Inoue (2006) for similar notations of highly salient SJ honorific forms being utilized as sarcasm by Osaka women.

[7] Previous work on HKD male speakers finds zero instances of *haru* (see SturtzSreetharan 2004a); anecdotal evidence suggests that while men are not prohibited from using it (that is, people state that *haru* is not female exclusive) they rarely seem to employ it. Additionally, literature which addresses *haru* does not indicate that it is sex-exclusive (e.g., Horii, 1995; Makimura, 1984; as an exception see Maeda, 1980).

ya (rather than SJ *da*) is highly frequent and favored by all of the speakers. These uses combined with other pieces of dialect (some noted above in bold) clearly mark these women as speakers of HKD; because phonological and pitch differences also occur between HKD and SJ, these women could use *all* standard forms and yet still be *heard* as dialect speakers; however, standard forms are not used exclusively, they use many recognizable regional variants as well.

For instance, as Examples (5) and (6) above show, these women favor the SJ form *janai* over the dialect variant *yanai*; they similarly show exclusive use of SJ *deshoo* over the dialect variant *yaro(o)*.[8] Example (6) is a typical example wherein *deshoo* occurs in spite of dialect variants preceding or following this SJ form; not only does a speaker avoid the use of the dialect variant *yaro(o)* but she avoids the informal SJ form *daro(o)* as well. (Indeed, there is no distal form of the dialect variant). While women did not use distal verb forms exclusively they did use them frequently – more frequently than one might expect for informal, casual conversations.[9] However, as noted previously, the women rarely used the distal form with the HKD honorific. The use or non-use of distal is emerging as an interesting aspect of the dialect – standard relationship and certainly requires further inquiry.

The final example, Example (7), shows the women using sentence final forms that are categorized as stereotypically feminine in SJ (see Okamoto and Sato, 1992). HKD has SF forms which are stereotypically neutral[10] with regard to gender as well as those categorized as masculine (see Kawashima, 1999; Kishie, 2000) but reference dictionaries and grammars do not note any dialect specific forms as stereotypically feminine. Thus, it is necessary to investigate the use of standard sentence final forms by dialect speakers to ascertain to what extent the forms are used and in what ways. A complete analysis of SFFs are beyond the current scope of this paper, but it is noteworthy that the SFF *noyo* – categorized as strongly stereotypically feminine – is used by all of the women. Example (7) gives two different instances of feminine forms which, like the distal forms noted in Example (6), occur surrounded by dialect. Again, by using these sentence final forms which are highly associated with stereotypical (feminine) gender, I suggest that the speakers are distancing themselves from the loud and boisterous idea of the Osaka *Obachan* and instead are calling on stereotypes of properly feminine Japanese women to be heard over the dialect, but not smother it.

4. **Conclusions**

In the Japanese national imagination there are particular ways of rendering regional peoples; in the Osaka region these renderings include caricatures of old merchants, and/or shopkeepers. The images also include some which are specific to women and men:

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[8] Quantitative statistics have not yet been completed, but preliminary analysis suggests that women avoid both *yanai* and *yaro(o)* at statistically significant levels leaving these as two possible forms for being gender markers.

[9] This particular aspect requires further analysis; the women in conversation Groups 1 & 2 are all employed in companies. As such, their use of distal forms even when conversing with one another informally is not unusual. The women in conversation Groups 3 & 4 utilize distal forms in interesting ways. For example, the *ikebana* teacher uses distal form exclusively when *teaching* about *ikebana* but switches to neutral style when engaging her "students" in non-teaching topics (see SturtzSreetharan, 2007, and Cook, 1998 for further discussion of this 'teaching style').

[10] In Example 4b Sachi uses '*na*' a HKD specific SFF which is neutral with regard to gender.

women are imagined or depicted in national imaginaries as *Osaka Obachans* while men are held to images of *Omoroi Yatsu* (the 'interesting guy'). For women, this caricature is replete with specific ways of talking – style and content – which include direct speech, nosiness, and discussions on where to procure the cheapest or most discounted products (Maegaki, 2005). For men, the *omoroi yatsu* is more about shedding a stuffy standard stereotype of the stiff studious guy and gathering an image of the guy who can entertain a crowd with his witty remarks and charming smile (see Satoo, 2000). Osaka or Kansai men may not mind this kind of association; indeed, they may embrace it as an acceptable alternative to the typical Japanese (Tokyo/Kanto) man. But, women in this dialect region may find the Osaka Auntie not to be the desired identity to cultivate. However, as others have noted, many Osaka women do not wish for an unfailingly proper Japanese woman identity either. So how better to achieve this middle ground than through language? My data supports an analysis which suggests that women in the Kansai region, at least the women in my data, are choosing to use language which situates them squarely as regional women yet, crucially, not "aunties." They use dialect, especially highly recognizable pieces, that can only be interpreted as a willingness to be heard as regional women. Simultaneously, they use standard Japanese forms which clearly situates them as understanding the indexical power of using pieces of *joseigo*, Japanese Women's Language.

Language comes forth as an ideal place for the creation of Kansai membership while also asserting a claim to the savvy of ideological "Japanese woman," especially among friends. By using highly salient regionalisms such as the honorific *haru*, *hen*, *akan*, *ya*, and others and avoiding forms such as *yaro(o)* and *yanai* the women can still position themselves as members of the region. Additionally, by using pieces of *joseigo* (Japanese women's language) such as *deshoo*, *janai*, and feminine sentence final forms but avoiding highly marked usages such as standard honorific forms and copula *da*, the women can simultaneously position themselves as knowledgeable of proper ways of being national Japanese women but not fall into the "abyss" of *joseigo*.

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