Changes in speech of women from western Japan: from adolescence to adulthood

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This paper presents some of the findings from a group research project on changes in women’s language in ethnographic interviews. The interviews were conducted by one of the authors with the same group of women every couple of years over two decades. The project investigates diachronic changes in interview discourse of a group of working class women from Hyogo prefecture in the western region of Japan, collected between 1989 and 2012 by an anthropologist-interviewer. This presentation focuses on two of the participants and presents a comparative analysis of their 1989 and 2000 interviews. The women were in their final year of high school in 1989, and in 2000 they were 30. The comparison of the participants’ use of discourse markers, clause final forms and interactional particles is indicative of the participants’ transformation from adolescence to adulthood, while at the same time changes in language also suggests evolving relationships between the participants and the anthropologist interviewer. The women’s use of Hyogo dialect and standard Japanese in 2000 was also compared to that in the 1989 interview. This is explored in conjunction with the women’s life trajectories which entailed increasing engagement with the world beyond school and home. At the same time, the data analysis is located in the larger context of research concerning diachronic changes in the use of regional variation in Japan. The paper discusses inter-speaker variation as well as intra-speaker variation and attempts to draw conclusions in terms of language and its relationship with time and space in modern Japan.

Keywords: Japanese language and gender, Diachronic changes in speech, Regional variation of Japanese.