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**Representations of Japanese Career Women:  
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# Representations of Japanese Career Women: An Analysis of their Social Identities in Japanese Magazine Articles

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## 1. Introduction

This study aims to identify the qualities that Japanese society expects Japanese career women to possess. Inoue (2009) stated that women's images in the media implicitly lay down norms for women in terms of their looks, lifestyles, and "femininity." She added that women's images were not only presented as "the right ones" by the media, but were also made "real" by women themselves, who established their way of life and perspectives based on such images (Inoue 2009: 2).

In this study, I intend to focus on Japanese career women's images in magazine articles and critically analyze them. Talbot (1992) stated, "Looking at language critically is a way of 'denaturalising' it ... questioning and 'making strange' conventions which usually seem perfectly natural to people who use them" (Talbot 1992: 174).

In a similar vein, by denaturalizing the representations of Japanese career women in this study, I will show how the image of the "ideal career woman" is constructed by the media. I will also examine whether it is a completely new image or a prolongation of traditional images of women, or femininity.<sup>1</sup>

Ochiai (1990) analyzed the transition of Japanese women's visual images

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<sup>1</sup> As for the traditional femininity, Yosano (1921) professed opposition to the idea of demanding love, elegance, and modesty only from women, while Arai (2005) urged the importance of women's modesty. Gauntlett (2008) stated, "the characteristics of femininity—passivity, reticence, assuming that men and authority figures are probably right and that you are probably wrong—are therefore redundant" (Gauntlett 2008:11).

in women's magazines. She found that while Japanese women were depicted as independent women in the 1970s, the 1980s witnessed a change in this visual imagery, to that of a girl-like portrayal. She stated that the portrayal of the girl-like image was strengthened in the mid-eighties. She referred to an example of a cover picture in a magazine dated May 20, 1985, which showed "a fragile, delicate and cute 'girl' in fashion, gestures and hairstyles" (Ochiai 1990: 59). She postulated that depicting such girls' image showed women's avoidance of their traditional role (Ochiai 1990: 67). She added that women's visual images in magazines changed in 1988, with a marked decrease in the use of girl-like imagery. In 1990, female models were no longer depicted through such images; rather, they presented themselves in a very natural way, posing with varied facial expressions (Ochiai 1990: 60-62). Besides, in Japanese society, an increasing number of women put off marriage or childbirth, or continued to work after bearing a child (Ochiai 1990: 69).

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Critical Discourse Analysis: Fairclough (1995, 2001)**

This study adopted the methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This approach studies social situations and social institutions, and seeks the context of the targeted discourse or text. It aims to clarify how the writer or speaker constructs realities and represents ideologies in the discourse (Fairclough 2001).

The CDA approach analyzes social contexts since ideologies are "embedded in the forms of language that are used" (Fairclough, 2001: 2) and such embedded ideologies are naturalized when coherence is established in the text (Fairclough 1995).

Moreover, Fairclough discussed how mass media discourse attracts the general public, pointing out "the direct address of audience members with 'you' and imperative sentences" in advertisements (Fairclough 2001: 168). He coined the term "synthetic personalization" which is "a compensatory

tendency to give the impression of treating each of the people ‘handed’ en masse as an individual” (Fairclough 2001:52). I utilized this concept in my analysis of magazine articles that also aim to attract consumers; i.e., readers.

## **2.2. The Concepts of Talbot (1992)**

I also utilized the concepts of Talbot (1992) enumerated in her study based on CDA that classified and examined “synthesized” interactions between writers and readers.

Talbot (1992) studied how language “constructs” women as particular sorts of social subjects. She examined “text population,” or the “population” of real and imaginary characters into which the reader is drawn. In other words, text population comprises the characters that we “associate with” through mass media. She discussed text population in terms of three categories: “Interactants,” “Characters,” and “Subject positions,” and defined them in the following manner.

Interactants: the writer and the reader who simulate direct face-to-face interaction

Characters: people whose words or thoughts are represented in a text

Subject positions: social identities bestowed on writers and readers at a more general level

(Talbot 1992: 177)

The main purposes of examining the text population are to determine the identities assigned to the writer and readers in the articles, and to see who the audience is “associating with” while reading the article. Talbot (1992) found that the writer constructed herself as the editorial-as-friend through various means: A sisterly relationship was established between the writer and her readers, and the writer “sets herself up as a member of the same social group as her teenage readers,” claiming “common ground and the social relation of

closeness” (Talbot, 1992: 189). She found “the evidences of the sisterliness” (Talbot, 1992: 181) in the writer’s “speaking the same language” with the readers and in “presenting agreed knowledge” (Talbot, 1992: 189-190).

I used Talbot’s methodology (1992) to examine the text population, and clarify the interaction in the data.

### **2.3. Literature Review**

Hayashi (1997) found that the writers of Japanese women magazines created relations of “hierarchal interdependence” with their readers. Focusing on the conversational styles in women’s magazine articles, she maintained that their linguistic features and interactional aspects involved the readers in the magazine text with sociocultural knowledge working to construct discourses which regulated the readers (Hayashi 1997: 361). This knowledge functions in creating “hierarchical interdependence,” a kind of solidarity between the superordinate and the subordinate, with the former controlling the latter through the emotion of sympathy and caring. Thus, the readers are given such social identities bordering on the “silly” or “childish” due to the jargon or childish words and to the interactions which show solidarity and intimacy with the writers. Hayashi clarifies a “positioning through discourse” and shows how the image of Japanese women is constructed and stereotyped.

Iyer (2009) demonstrated how the identities of women entrepreneurs were constructed in feature articles of Indian newspapers and popular magazines. She utilized CDA to examine how the media exerted power in shaping the images of women entrepreneurs and how such power was resisted. Fairclough’s (1989, 1992a) notion of discourses and such concepts as intertextuality, presupposition, nominalization, and modality were used as analytical tools. The result showed that women entrepreneurs were represented in “discourses of femininity” and “discourses of patriarchy,” which clarifies the traditional moral in the media towards career women.

Wang (2009) examined representations of female and male artists in the columns of the entertainment section of a Taiwanese tabloid. Based on van Dijk's CDA approach of social cognition, this study analyzed linguistic styles used in the articles. It revealed that female artists were depicted with regard to their physical attractiveness, marital status and their spouses, while male artists were portrayed in terms of their appearance, love affairs, and their manipulation of the media. Thus, Wang (2009) demonstrated how "tabloid discourse" shows implicit shared gender stereotypes in our social cognition.

The studies described above highlighted how women's identities are constructed in media discourse. Iyer (2009.) and Wang (2009) examined the representations of career women, which is thematically similar to my study. Hayashi (1997) and Talbot (1992) analyzed media texts as interaction, whose perspectives I utilized in my study. What distinguishes my study from the above-mentioned is the use of articles of a magazine specifically targeting career women and women who aim to have a career.

The advantages of the using a magazine aimed at career women are two-fold. First, the articles are likely to throw light on the various conventionally accepted identities of career women in society. Second, the analysis of interactions between the writer and the readers, who are mainly career women, may tell us about the expectations of the writer—and by extension—the publishing industry from career women. Examining such data would be appropriate for this study, given its aims to clarify how the social identity of career women in modern Japan is constructed.

### **3. Data**

The data in this study comprised feature articles carried in issues dating January 2010–December 2010 of the women's monthly magazine, *Nikkei Woman*. *Nikkei Woman* was started by Nikkei BP in May, 1988, with the Japanese career women as its targeted reader. The feature articles in the

magazine include varied topics, such as pointers on maintaining neatness and using appointment books effectively.

My study especially focused on the headline and the lead of each article, and examined the types of interactions, while paying attention to linguistic features.

Although all the above mentioned data have been analyzed, the March 2010 issue (Data 1) will be mainly utilized for the examples of the study in this paper. The original Japanese data is listed in italics, followed by the corresponding English translation within the parentheses.

<Data 1>

Headline:

*Hataraku josei no “ouchi jikan” daikaibou.*

(Let's do a large-scale analysis of working women's “hours at home.”)

Lead:

*Ie ni tsuite doa o shimeru “ho” no shunkan kara hajimaru “ouchi jikan.”*

(We know that your “hours at home” begin immediately after you get home and shut the door with a sigh of relief.)

*Tsugi no hi, mata shigoto ni mukau made, chanto genki o juuden dekite imasuka?*

(Are you sure that you recharge your batteries before starting work the next day?)

*Ankeeto kara wakatta Wuuman dokusha no ichi nichi no koudou o himotokinagara, rirakusu dekiru sugoshikata o isshoni mitukemashou.*

(Let's find a way together to relax at home, by following the daily routine of “Nikkei Woman readers” as revealed by their answers to the questionnaire.)

(*Nikkei Woman*, March 2010)



## 4. Analysis

The following four types of interactions were identified in the data; “Suggestion,” “Confirmation,” “Inquiry,” and “Assertion.” We will examine each one at a time.

### 4.1. Suggestion

<Data 2>

*Hataraku josei no “ouchi jikan” daikaibou.*

(Let’s do a large-scale analysis of working women’s “hours at home.”)

(*Nikkei Woman*, March 2010)

The headline from Data 1 is presented as Data 2. Through the headline, the writer suggests to the readers that they thoroughly analyze working women’s “hours at home” together.<sup>2</sup> The headline ends with a noun “daikaibou.” While the word may sound appealing as a headline, it may impart an ambiguous meaning. However, since the writer appeals to the readers to find a way to relax at home at the end of the data 1, we can appreciate that the headline also emphasizes the same meaning, and therefore, functions as a suggestion.

Moreover, there are two presuppositions in the Data 2; i.e., that working women have *ouchi jikan* and that this *ouchi jikan* is special since it is the target of the *daikaibou*. The Japanese word *ouchi* is a polite term for one’s home, and often elicits the image of a child playing at home, or of talking about his/her own home. Hayashi (1997) stated that expressions like ‘o-uchi’ (o-house) and ‘o-dekake’ (o-going out) “implant the idea that the readers are immature or childish” (Hayashi 1997:363). Besides, we find two instances of exaggeration in the word *daikaibou*: “dai” (large-scale) and “kaibou”

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<sup>2</sup> I use the terms working women and career women interchangeably in this paper, because the data includes women who are not only specialists in their field of work, but who are also just attending their work or making the most of their abilities and qualifications.

(autopsy, or more appropriately, analysis), both of which imply humor and a lesser degree of seriousness. Therefore, the writer's suggestion of the analysis of *ouchi jikan* shows the readers' immaturity, and the writer's almost parent-like intimacy with and concern about them.

<Data 3>

*Ankeeto kara wakatta Wuuman dokusha no ichi nichi no koudou o himotokinagara, rirakusu dekiru sugoshikata o isshoni mitukemashou.*

(Let's find a way together to relax at home, by following the daily routine of the readers of "Nikkei Woman" magazine as revealed by their answers to the questionnaire.) (Nikkei Woman, March 2010)

In this data, we have characters of *Wuuman dokusha*. They are the readers who might offer some tips to other readers as role models. The writer suggests to other readers that they should find a way to relax together by following the daily routine of *Wuuman dokusha*. The writer not only communicates with these readers, but also appears to be gently leading them. The expressions of *isshoni* (together), *himotokinagara* (by following), and *mitukemashou* (let's find) show that the writer is establishing common ground with the readers, and calming them almost like a friend or an elderly sister. Here, we find a friendly relationship of "sisterliness" between them, with the readers coming across as passive and dependent younger sisters.

<Data 4>

*Kotsu o osaete, itsumo no houhou o minaosu kikkake ni shitemite.*

(Why not seize this opportunity to review your daily routine by learning the knack of relaxation at home?) (Nikkei Woman, February 2010)

The expressions of *kotsu o osaete* (by learning the knack) and *kikkake ni shitemite* (why not seize this opportunity) show that the writer is gently

nudging the readers to take a particular action rather than demanding that they do so immediately. The word *shitemite* (why not) denotes an informal request, almost like a suggestion among girlfriends. Conventionally, *shitemite* is coupled with an additional expression, such as *kudasai* (please). Therefore, by using an incomplete expression, the writer implicitly suggests an air of casualness, and there is no pressure on the readers to comply. Such casualness is very similar to that of Talbot's expression of "sisterliness". Moreover, through her casual request, the writer speaks directly to the readers through synthetic personalization, which is appealing to them.

#### 4.2. Confirmation

<Data 5>

*Ie ni tsuite doa o shimeru "ho" no shunkan kara hajimaru "ouchi jikan."*

(We know that your "hours at home" begin immediately after you get home and shut the door with a sigh of relief.) (Nikkei Woman 2010, March)

The person who shuts the door is the reader, a working woman. This text conveys that the writer understands the reader's relief after she reaches home, and that the hours at home are precious. The writer could have also described the same situation as "We know that your 'hours at home' begin immediately after you get home and feel relieved." However, portraying the working woman as if the writer were watching every move of hers shows the writer's close relationship with the reader. In this regard, the writer acknowledges that she is exhausted after a hard day's work and consoles her. The consoled working woman is thus represented as helpless. In this way the writer implies his or her understanding of the readers' feelings and in doing so provides the confirmation to the readers of being close to them.

### 4.3. Inquiry

<Data 6>

*Tsugi no hi, mata shigoto ni mukau made, chanto genki o juuden dekite  
imasuka?*

(Are you sure that you recharge your batteries before you start working the  
next day?) (*Nikkei Woman*, March 2010)

Through her use of an interrogative, the writer is speaking directly to the readers. Therefore, we can notice synthetic personalization bringing the writer close to the readers, even though the pronoun “you” is not used in Japanese. Thus, the writer conveys an anxiety about the readers’ physical condition based on the presupposition that they work hard at their jobs and return home exhausted. The term “*chanto* (are you sure)” gives the feeling that an elderly person is asking the question to a dependent or a child. Moreover, the expression “*genki o juuden* (recharge your batteries)” conveys casualness and friendliness, for this is a metaphor which treats the readers as if they were robots or animated characters that could easily regain physical strength by recharging their batteries. Therefore, the writer tenderly asks the readers, who look fragile and too tired to get ready for work, about their physical conditions.

### 4.4. Assertion

<Data 7>

*Kokorogake to puchi koudou de dare demo seirijouzu ni nareru!*

(It is my strong belief that everybody can maintain neatness through  
commitment and simple action!) (*Nikkei Woman*, January 2010)

This is an assertion aimed towards the readers (working women) who fail to keep their rooms/homes neat and tidy. Since it has an exclamation mark, this assertion is a strong and appealing one, and it encourages working

women to put their rooms/homes in order. In other words, there is a presupposition that while some working women have no confidence in maintaining neatness, they must nevertheless be good at it. Therefore, we can see that working women are expected to naturally exhibit this faculty.

It would be fair to suggest that such an expectation may unnerve some readers. However, that is not the intention here; the writer is encouraging the readers by stating that keeping things neat and tidy is easy. *Kokorogake* (attentiveness) requires willingness to conform and does not need any qualification, while the word *puchi* (petty) expresses small or relatively simple efforts on the reader's part. Moreover, the term *dare demo* (everybody) does not refer to anybody in particular, and therefore, reduces the pressure on the readers. Once more, we can say that in spite of it being an assertion, the statement also conveys a sense of "sisterliness", since the writer gets close to the readers, and encourages them gently and with minimal pressure. Thus the readers who are represented as less confident here are dealt with carefully and kindly.

<Data 8>

*Shinrigaku, noukagaku, jikankanrijutsu ni kuwashii shikisha no minasan ni kikimashita.*

(We have asked experts in such fields as psychology, brain science, time management (about making a plan).) (Nikkei Woman, February 2010)

In this data, the writer asserts the readers listen to opinions of some experts, which reveals that career women are intelligent. The term *shikisha no minasan ni kikimashita* (have asked experts) presupposes that the writer expects the readers will understand the answers provided by the specialists from the various above-mentioned fields, and that they will be able to take any decisions pertaining to these answers independently.

Having the characters of experts thus demonstrates that career women are

intelligent and can relate to technical matters.

## 5. Conclusion

In my analysis of the writer-reader interactions, I found evidence suggesting close-knit relationships or “sisterliness” among the writer and readers of articles in a Japanese women’s magazine. The analysis of the linguistic factors and presuppositions showed the writer establishing a close relationship with the readers who appeared immature, passive and dependent, and the fact that the writer gave an appearance of understanding their feelings. I also found representations of career women who work hard at their jobs and have the ability to deal with problems intellectually. Therefore, we have picked out the readers’ eagerness and diligence as well as their helplessness.

These results were rather surprising since the data was sourced from articles written for a career women’s magazine, that may be considered to cater to comparatively independent and aggressive women. However, in reality, together with their career orientation, working women’s dependence, passivity and immaturity were represented and naturalized as social identities.

By denaturalizing the representations of Japanese career women, we saw the image of the “ideal career woman” constructed by the media. In fact, some of their identities may be synonymous with femininity in a traditional sense. We can also say that their dependence, passivity and immaturity might be related to the girl-like imagery in 1980s, or showing their unaffectedness like models in 1990.

In any case, such representations of career women seem to be accepted in society since the magazine attracts a wide readership among working women in Japan.

### Notes

- \* This study is a revised version of the paper presented at the 12<sup>th</sup> International Pragmatic Conference held on July 3—8, 2011.

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Data

*Nikkei Woman* January 2010–December 2010. Tokyo: Nikkei BP.

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