Manga and Role Language Research

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1. Introduction

While my main area of interest is a history of Japanese grammar, since 2000 I have been studying what is known as role language (役割語). During the last 11 years the research of role language has gained recognition within and without Japan, and foreign students with special interest in it come to Osaka University every year. In this article, I explain how manga has contributed to the development of role language in Japan and argue that the two phenomena are intrinsically bound to each other.

2. What is role language?

The term "role language" indicates patterns of speech (including vocabulary, grammar, phonetic characteristics, set phrases, etc.) that are evocative of attributes (gender, age, generation, occupation, social status, region of residence or birthplace, race, etc.) of a speaker. For instance, in the following example all utterances can be translated as "Yes, I know that."

(1)   a. そうじゃ、わしが知っておるんじゃ。
        b. そうよ、あたしが知ってるわ。
        c. そうだ、おれが知ってるぜ。   （Kinsui 2010: 51）

For a Japanese speaker who grew up in Japan it will be clear that the most likely speaker in each case is (1a) an elderly woman, (1b) a young girl, and a (1c) typical "macho" guy.
There is often a gap between role language and speech patterns used in real life. Nevertheless, native Japanese speakers evidently share the ability to recognize and interpret such utterances. The reason is that most native speakers grow up surrounded by products of popular culture that form role language, transmit and disseminate it. The role of manga (and anime) in this process is particularly big. By way of illus-

tration, let us consider the formation process of elderly male language (老人語 , first described in Kinsui 2003).

3. Case study: Elderly male language

Elderly male language (EML) is distinguished by, for instance, the use of copula *ja* (じゃ) instead of standard *da* (だ); or of negative *-n* (ん) instead of *-nai* (ない). These features coincide with those of the contemporary western Japanese dialects. The reason is the following.

During the Edo period, the military government (*bakufu*) resided in Edo (modern Tokyo) located in eastern Japan, but eminent citizens, starting with the warrior class and including persons of power, financers, and intellectuals, all used western Japanese dialects. This happened because before the Edo period the political, financial, and cultural center of the country was located in western Japan (that is, in Kyoto). However, in the second half of the 18ᵗʰ century, Edo citizens gained economic power, and thus got the opportunity to propagate their own dialect. The younger generation took the initiative and started to use eastern Japanese, but elderly people of authority, high social status, or intellectual influence continued to speak in western Japanese. As this tendency was exaggerated in stage plays and literary works, the basis was laid for what would become elderly male language.

Proto-EML used in the Edo period still reflected actual speech patterns, but, as it became one of the devices in novels and books for children, EML grew increasingly distant from reality and turned into a completely fictional set of expressions and speech patterns. Tezuka Osamu, without a doubt, played a particularly major role in establishing the use of EML in postwar Japan. Many of his works feature elderly professors, starting with Dr. Ochanomizu in *Astroboy* (「鉄腕アトム」), and these characters usually speak in EML. Since Tezuka was such an influential figure, the elderly professor became a recurrent character type in the works of other manga authors. Examples include Dr. Gilmore in Ishinomori Shōtarō's *Cyborg 009* (「サイボーグ 009」), or Dr. Agasa in Aoyama Gōshō's *Detective Conan* (「名探偵コナン」, also known as *Case Closed*). Thanks to these works, even nowadays native Japanese speakers of all ages can recognize the EML.

Figure 1. Dr. Ochanomizu (Tezuka Osamu "*Astroboy*".vol. 1. In: *Tezuka Osamu Manga Complete Works* vol. 22, Kodansha 1979, p. 92).

Figure 2. Dr. Gilmore (Ishinomori Shōtarō. *Cyborg 009*. Vol. 4: 80. Media Factory, 2001).

Figure 3. Dr. Agasa (Aoyama Gōshō. *Detective Conan*. Vol.1: 123. Shogakukan, 1994).

4. Connection between role language and manga in Japan

As is evident from the example above, manga has played a big part in the popularization of certain types of role language. Especially strong has been the influence of popular authors. At the same time, role language has become an important means of expression in manga. It allows to bring up all relevant attributes of the speaking character directly, without protracted descriptions. When role language matches the design of a character, it makes the whole scene more convincing. On the other hand, when there is a mismatch between a visual type and role language attributed to the character, it leaves a particularly strong impression on the reader.

For instance, in *Rurouni Kenshin* (「るろうに剣心－明治剣客浪漫譚－」) by Watsuki Nobuhiro, the protagonist Himura Kenshin has discarded the samurai haircut, *chonmage* (and the Meiji government abolished the warrior class itself). However, by making Kenshin use typical expressions associated with the samurai (武士ことば), such as *gozaru* (「ござる」), Watsuki shows that the protagonist still possesses the heart of a warrior. Another example is General Blue from *Dragon Ball* (「DRAGON BALL」) by Toriyama Akira, who looks like a young army officer, but uses feminine expressions (女ことば). It is thus implied through the character's speech patterns that he could be homosexual.

Figure 4. Himura Kenshin (Watsuki Nobuhiro. *Rurouni Kenshin*. Vol.1: 60. Shueisha, 2006).

Figure 5. General Blue (Toriyama Akira. *Dragon Ball Complete Edition*. Vol.5: 179. Shueisha, 2003).

Out of 273 samples used in *Glossary of Role Language* (『〈役割語〉小辞典』, Kinsui 2014), 93 — that is, about one third — are taken from manga. As a matter of fact, examples from manga demonstrate very vividly the practical application and effects of role language. Thirty nine of these citations include images (direct reprints from manga), which have also proved to be very instrumental in illustrating the use of role language.

An interesting international experiment was conducted in 2007 by Hyeseon Jung, who compared levels of precision in matching role language utterances and images from manga. Jung separated manga visuals from dialogue. Japanese and Korean subjects were then asked to re-insert the lines. Examples included Japanese original manga and Korean original manhwa (both in Japanese and in Korean). 70.2% of the answers by native Japanese speakers were correct, against 42.8% by native Korean speakers. Moreover, with citations limited to Japanese manga only, the proportion of correct matches rose to 89.6% with native Japanese speakers. For Korean speakers, however, the correct answer ration was 44.4% with Japanese manga only, and 41.2% with Korean manhwa only – in other words, there was

Figure 6. Characters and utterances Jung used in her experiment (Jung 2007: 81-82).

Figure 7. Correct answer ration for the Japanese and native Japanese speakers (JJ), and the Koreans and native Korean speakers (KK), respectively (graph made by Kinsui based on the data in Jung 2007).
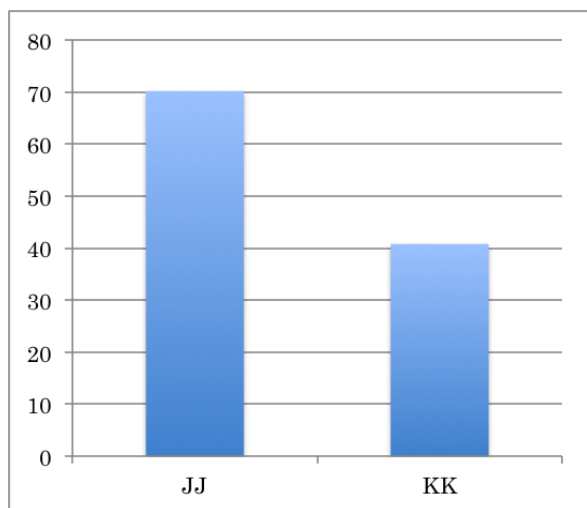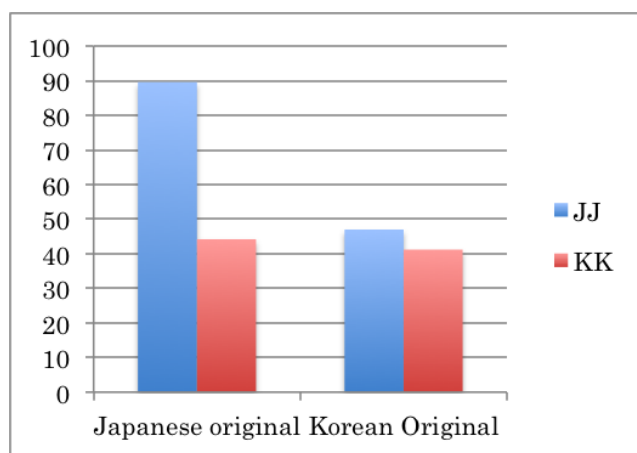

Figure 8. Correct answer rate for the Japanese and native Japanese speakers (JJ), and the Koreans and native Korean speakers (KK) depending on the type of suggested material (Japanese original manga and Korean original manhwa, respectively).

no significant gap. Two things are evident from these results. First, character types and role language correspond to each other more precisely in Japanese manga. Second, native Japanese speakers demonstrate more shared knowledge of role language.

5. The negative role of manga

Role language consists of linguistic stereotypes, so at times it can promote prejudice and discrimination against certain social groups. This is its negative role. In such cases, too, the influence of manga can be crucial. So-called *aruyo* language (アルヨことば), which is ascribed to the Chinese, will be discussed in the following section as an example (based on Kinsui 2014).

When in the second half of the 19th century Japan opened to the world, large numbers of Chinese people came to the country along with foreigners from Western countries. The Chinese entered Japanese society as mediators in the trade between other foreigners and the Japanese, as peddlers or street performers. They used a sort of pidgin to communicate with Japanese people. There are no consistent descriptions of this dialect in available documents, so presumably several varieties of it existed. However, one variety has remained in popular culture as a typical manner of speech for Chinese people. It is characterized by the words *aru* (ある) and *yoroshii* (よろしい) added to the end of sentences – thus the term *aruyo* language. Early examples of this speech pattern are found in a work of Miyazawa Kenji from 1921, but *aruyo* talk became immensely popular after it was used in Tagawa Suihō's *Norakuro* (「のらくろ」) in 1937-38.

1937 saw the beginning of the Second Sino-Japanese War, and *Norakuro*, correspondingly, depicts the war between the army of dogs (who stand for Japanese soldiers) and the army of pigs (who embody Chinese armed forces). The dogs are portrayed as disciplined and dauntless warriors, while the pig army, on the contrary, is described as unorganized troops led by a cruel and incompetent general. The pigs also speak in *aruyo* language throughout the entire story. In other words, the narrative is designed in such a way that the absolute inferiority of the pig army and the *aruyo* language they use are inevitably connected in the mind of the reader. There is no denying that in this case role language is abused with ill intentions. The *Norakuro* series was extremely influential, so many postwar manga artists, starting with Tezuka, began to incorporate *aruyo* language in their works. The speech pattern therefore became inflected with bias: it was used either to ridicule the speaking character, or to suggest that the character had some negative side about them.

Figure 9. The general of the pig army and soldiers (Tagawa Suiho. *Norakuro: All-Out Attack*. 45. Kodansha reprint, 1969. The original published in Dai Nihon Yubenkai Kodansha, 1937).

6. In Conclusion

As is obvious from all these examples, manga provides an invaluable material for the research of role language. At the same time, its influence on the entire Japanese language is clearly enormous. So it seems natural to conclude that the research of role language and manga studies have to proceed hand in hand.

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