Paper Title: Japanese sentence-final particles and the expression of identity

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Abstract

This paper explores the interrelationship between language and the biographical characteristics of the speaker including gender, age and social status by examining the functions of two Japanese sentence-final particles ne and na. How can these misleadingly simple particles create such a distinctive impression about the speaker’s gender, age and social status?

It is difficult and unnatural to have a Japanese conversation without using sentence-final particles which are one of the most frequently used linguistic items in spoken conversation, as pointed out by many studies (McGloin, 1990; Ide and Sakurai, 1997; Hayashi, 2000; Katagiri, 2007). The target particles ne and na are not exception to this, and many studies have explored their significance (e.g. Saji, 1957; Watanabe, 1968; Uyeno, 1971; Suzuki, 1976; Cheng, 1987; McGloin, 1990; Washi, 1995; Izuhara, 1996; Takubo and Kinsui, 1996; Miyazaki et al., 2002; Asano, 2003). As acknowledged in these studies, although these two particles share some similar functions, they differ markedly in terms of gender, age and social status of the speaker: na is used by male speakers only while ne is used by both male and female speakers; na with the polite form desu/masu denotes that the speaker is aged while ne does not; and na is used only when the speaker is socially higher than or equal to the hearer while ne does not have such a restriction. To date, little research has systematically examined these differences.

This paper will provide a comprehensive analysis of the functions of ne and na by exploring not only their similarities, but also their differences. In doing so, it sheds light on some aspects of the interrelation between language and the speaker’s biographical characteristics, as to how these characteristics are presented through the use of language. This paper firstly discusses the common functions of the particles, for example, how they are used to indicate the speaker’s attitude towards inviting the hearer’s involvement in an ‘incorporative’ manner, and how the incorporative attitude of the speaker expressed by the particles affects the tone of the utterance. Secondly, this paper will examine the difference between ne and na, focusing on their use in relation to the speaker’s particular gender, age and social status. It will be shown that the
biographical characteristics of the speaker are not the primary factor that motivates the different use of *ne* and *na*. Rather, their different use is due to the fact that, unlike *ne*, *na* has a special property which indicates the ‘camaraderie’ tone of the speaker, and this causes a restriction of the use of *na* in terms of gender, age and social status of the speaker.