DOI: 10.23817/strans.16-1
Received: 11.07.2025
Accepted: 05.09.2025

STUDIA TRANSLATORICA
2025 • vol. 16 9–32
ISSN 2084–3321 e-ISSN 2657-4802

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Still Women's Language! How foreigners sustain language ideologies in Japanese television

ABSTRACT

Still Women's Language!
How foreigners sustain language ideologies in Japanese television

This study analyzes women's language as represented in the television segment *Shirabete Mitara*, aired by Japanese broadcaster Fuji TV. Drawing on audiovisual translation research and recent developments in Japanese sociolinguistics and media studies, the article examines the interindexical relationships that emerge between the Japanese voice-over and interlingual subtitles used to render the speech of foreign female speakers, together with the ideological portrayals of femininity associated with them. The analysis of the interview segments highlights not only the discrepancy between the speech style of non-native female speakers and that adopted by Japanese voice actresses, but also a process of hyperfeminization aimed at indexing a set of metapragmatic stereotypes around which the so-called Japanese Women's Language (*joseigo*) has crystallized. In particular, the study underscores how the iconic bodies of the speakers are instrumentalized as semiotic resources to convey specific ideologies of femininity in Japan, which converge in an adaptation strategy that reinforces gender-based discrimination – a phenomenon still deeply embedded in contemporary Japanese society.

Keywords: language ideology, voice-over, interlingual subtitling, women's language, audiovisual translation.

Introduction

This study explores the use of Japanese Women's Language (WL) in contemporary audiovisual television, with a particular focus on the *Shirabete Mitara*

segment broadcast by Fuji TV. It analyzes the voice-over and subtitling practices applied to foreign women interviewed in Japan, aiming to investigate the types of femininity constructed through WL in translation. Drawing on ethnographic and anthropolinguistic scholarship (Agha 2007; Duranti 2021; Irvine, Gal 2000, 2019; Miyazaki 2023; Spitzmüller 2022) alongside sociolinguistic studies (Abe 2010; Hirano 2023; Itō/ Muta/ Maruyama 2025; Iwata/ Shigemitsu/ Murata 2022; Mashiko 2017; Nakamura 2024; 2025; Okamoto 2025; Okamoto/ Shibamoto-Smith 2004; Sanada 2020; Yamashita 2022; Yukawa/ Saitō 2004), the analysis foregrounds a complex gendered linguistic landscape shaped by the shifting meanings language acquires across diverse social and media contexts. At the same time, the persistent diageneric bias characterizing Japanese media – particularly within audiovisual translation – tends to obscure the dynamic and transformative nature of language, often disregarding how communities of practice actively reshape linguistic forms. While building upon constructivist approaches to gender in audiovisual translation (De Marco 2006; 2009; 2016; Konstantinovskaia 2020; Ranzato 2012; Vitucci 2020; 2023; 2024a; 2024b; 2025), in gender translation (Abe 2010; Furukawa 2009; 2024; Hiramoto 2009; Kobayashi 2024; Länsisalmi 2019; Nakamura 2020a; 2022; 2023; Nohara 2018; Ohara 2019; Saitō 2018; SturtzSreetharan 2006; 2009; 2017), and in studies on role language (Johnstone 2017; Kinsui 2003; 2007; 2017; Yasui 2024), this study challenges views of audiovisual translation as a merely technical process. Instead, it highlights how translation practices are informed by underlying linguistic ideologies that construct and circulate particular social imaginaries. These imaginaries – often internalized by viewers as naturalized representations – contribute to the reproduction of normative gender roles. In this context, the study demonstrates how the speech styles attributed to foreign women in Japanese audiovisual translations tend to reinforce entrenched gender ideologies by re-naturalizing women's roles within a patriarchal and heteronormative order which is intimately tied to the cultural idealization of femininity (Katō 2017; Konstantinovskaia 2020; Mandujano-Salazar 2016; Starr 2015).[1]

From a linguistic perspective, numerous Japanese scholars – including Jugaku Akiko, Endō Orie, Tanaka Kazuko, and, more recently, Nakamura Momoko and Okamoto Shigeko – have shown how discourse on WL has historically promoted a form of linguistic essentialism. This ideological stance has

1| The ideological framework in question is firmly tied to broader historical and socioeconomic shifts. As Mandujano-Salazar (2024: 61) observes, Japan's economic downturn in the 1990s and early 2000s triggered major changes in the social fabric, including population ageing, declining birth rates, and growing distrust in state institutions. Notably, this period also saw rising social criticism of women, especially regarding their perceived reluctance to marry and have children.

contributed to the reproduction of hegemonic socio-political structures, often to the detriment of gender equality. Nevertheless, gendered stereotypes about women continue to pervade Japanese media. As Furukawa (2024) observes, such biases are evident even in literary translation, including instances where translators themselves are women. Similarly, Mashiko (2017: 137) argues that the normalization of feminine sentence-final particles (SFPs) as markers of "femininity" in fictional characters – whether in television dramas or novels – signals the persistence of gender-based discrimination. These ideological patterns call for empirical investigation into the disjuncture between such representations and women's actual linguistic practices.

In the context of voice-over and dubbing, the transformation of female speech is shaped by two central processes identified in this study: one multisemiotic, the other interlinguistic. The first involves the visual use of foreign actresses' bodies as "bodies of otherness," foregrounding the gap between visual presence and vocal representation (Inoue 2003; Vitucci 2023; 2024a). The second concerns the use of gendered speech registers encoding specific inter-indexical meanings, made possible through a translational process known as "transduction" – that is, the selective assignment of gendered speech styles to foreign characters based on culturally and ideologically prefigured templates. As a result of this process, particular speech styles, such as WL, can be assigned to specific groups of speakers on the basis of, for example, their gender, class, or ethnic affiliation, and to stimulate a process of iconization of the translated language that is referred to as "linguistic essentialism" (Hiramoto 2009; Inoue 2003; Okamoto 2025; Nakamura 2013; 2020b; 2023). The outcome of this process, it hardly needs to be reiterated, is the reinforcement of metapragmatic stereotypes which go beyond purely linguistic discrimination, altering the social and identity-related perceptions of the groups involved. For audiences, the effect is particularly striking: viewers are led to reconcile an artificial yet seemingly naturalized speech – rendered as if native to the foreign characters – with a visual illusion of coherence, thereby implying that gendered language norms extend beyond Japanese. This ultimately reinforces the belief in the universality of a genderlect modeled on Japanese WL.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, Japanese WL is grounded in ideologically constructed assumptions that stem from enduring stereotypes surrounding female speech in Japan. As noted by Okamoto (2016) and Shibamoto, Smith (2004), WL is conventionally associated with: (1) a greater use of honorifics, indirect speech acts, interjections, and exclamatory expressions; (2) a generally higher vocal pitch; (3) the exclusive use of sentence-final particles such as *-wa* with rising intonation; and (4) the avoidance of the copula *-da* and emphatic sentence-final particles like *-zo* and *-ze*. In line with prior research (Abe 2010; Ishiguro 2013; Okamoto 2016; Vitucci 2020; 2024a), additional features

commonly linked to WL include the use of honorific or beautifying prefixes such as *o-* and *go-* (e.g., *obentō*, *ocha*, *okaban*), the avoidance of imperative or negative verb forms (e.g., *tabero!*, *taberu na!*), and a general preference to avoid masculine or profane vocabulary. Instead, WL tends to favor first-person pronouns with feminine or neutral connotations (e.g., *watashi*, *atashi*, *atai*, *uchi*), and second-person pronouns such as *anata*, typically used in intimate or affective contexts. Feminine SFPs like *-kashira*, *-wa*, *-wane*, and *-wayo*, along with stereotypically feminine interjections (e.g., *maa*, *arama*, *araa*, *kyaa*), are also frequently employed. Furthermore, WL speakers often omit the copula *-da* after *-na* adjectives and nominal predicates, opting instead for sentence-final *ne* (e.g., *gomen ne!*), or replacing *-no desu* / *-ndayo* with the more feminized *-noyo* (Abe 2010; Nakamura 2013; Vitucci 2020; 2024a). Importantly, these linguistic choices are not merely stylistic but are embedded within broader ideological formations that associate them with culturally idealized notions of "femininity" (Konstantinovskaia 2020). As Nakamura (2025) observes, *-wa* is frequently interpreted as an index of "softness" (*yawarakasa*), ideologically tethered to the category of "women".

1. Dataset and methodology

The dataset for this study comprises three episodes of the television segment *Shirabete Mitara* (しらべてみたら), a recurring feature within the news program *Live News It!* (Live News イット!), broadcast by Fuji TV between February and June 2025, with a total duration of approximately 74 minutes. Characterized by its investigative approach and accessible style, the segment addresses a wide range of topics, including consumer behavior, cultural trends, inbound tourism, and public safety. Content is rendered broadly comprehensible through the use of on-site interviews and statistical data. In its translated form, interviews with foreign participants are mediated via a combination of voice-over and interlingual subtitles, except in cases where speakers demonstrate fluency in Japanese. The episodes are publicly available on the broadcaster's official website (fujitv.co.jp), as well as through *TVer* (a free streaming service), *FOD* (Fuji TV's official platform), and the network's official *YouTube* channel. For the purposes of this analysis on Japanese Women's Language (WL), only the voice-over and subtitled segments pertaining to female foreign speakers were considered. Excluded from the dataset were male speakers, women who originally spoke in Japanese, and female participants who produced fewer than three utterances.[2]

2| The sample of six speakers covers three different geographical areas (the U.S., Venezuela, Chile and Canada) and was selected based on the presence of more than

The topics addressed in the three episodes, presented in chronological order, are as follows: 1. Shopping by foreign tourists in Japan, broadcast in February 2025; 2. Shopping by foreign tourists in Japan (part 2), broadcast in May 2025; 3. Services most appreciated by foreigners in Japan, broadcast in June 2025. In particular, the speech of the following speakers, as recorded in the interviews conducted within the program, will be analyzed in chronological order:

Table 1: Profile of the examined sample

Speaker's reference	Nationality	Aproximate Age (where not indicated)	Japanese register in translation	Episode
S1	Venezuela	20-30	Informal	February 2025
S2	U.S.A.	20-30	Informal	February 2025
S3	U.S.A	20-30	Informal	May 2025
S4	Chile	40-50	Formal	May 2025
S5	U.S.A.	20-30	Informal	June 2025
S6	Canada	20-30	Formal	June 2025

The study pursues three main objectives: (1) to explore possible correlations between speakers' age, nationality, and their use of WL; (2) to examine the relationship between diaphasic variation (polite vs. informal register) and Japanese Women's Language (WL); and (3) to identify the ideological framework underlying WL usage among the selected speakers. To calculate the proportion of WL employed in the three analyzed videos – that is, the extent to which each speaker activated features from the WL repertoire – Chart 1 presents the resulting percentages. These were obtained by dividing the number of WL tokens actually used by the total number of possible tokens in the full repertoire, which includes: *–no*; the variant *–noyo*; *–wa*; the variant *–wane*; *–kashira*; noun/adverb + *–yo*; adjective + *–yo*; verb + *–yo*; and noun + *–ne*.[3] Once the WL percentages have been established for each speaker, a quantitative and qualitative analysis of their speech will follow, cross-referencing the variables of

three utterances. It is worth noting, however, that each of the three videos also includes additional female speakers of different nationalities whose speech features tokens associated with WL. These latter speakers were not included in the analysis, as they each produced no more than two utterances translated into Japanese. The United States were overrepresented relative to other national backgrounds, due to the high number of American citizens interviewed.

3| Due to constraints inherent to the nature of the contribution, paralinguistic features of language and personal pronouns will not be taken into consideration.

nationality, age, and diaphasic register in order to identify the models of femininity evoked through the use of WL.

2. Quantitative dataset analysis

Chart 1 illustrates the distribution of WL features across the six speakers selected for this study (S1–S6) distinguishing between the two translation modalities: voice-over and subtitles.

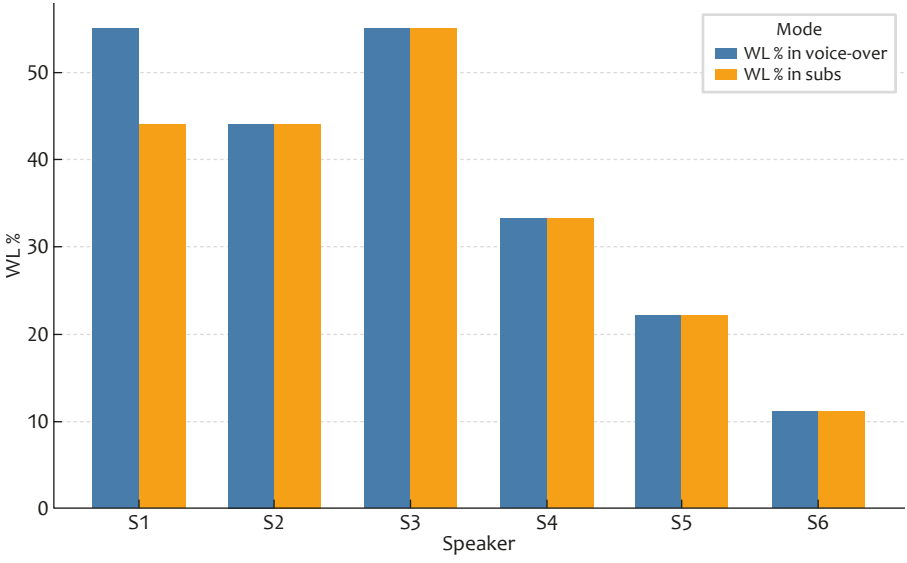

Chart 1: WL Percentage per Speaker in Voice-over and Subtitles

The vertical axis indicates the percentage of WL features relative to the total number of target tokens, while the horizontal axis lists each speaker. Two key trends emerge. First, WL percentages are quite symmetrical across modalities for all six speakers (S1–S6), suggesting a high degree of translational consistency between voice-over and subtitles. This symmetry points to a systematic application of gendered language features irrespective of the mode of translation. Second, a gradual downward trend is observable across speaker profiles: while S1 and S3 register the highest WL percentages (55%), followed by S2 (44.4%) and S4 (33.3%), S5 and S6 exhibit significantly lower values (22% and 11%, respectively). This distribution may reflect either differences in character construction or in the ideological framing of each speaker. Overall, the chart suggests that although modality no longer differentiates the presence of WL, stylistic and ideological distinctions among speaker profiles remain clearly marked.

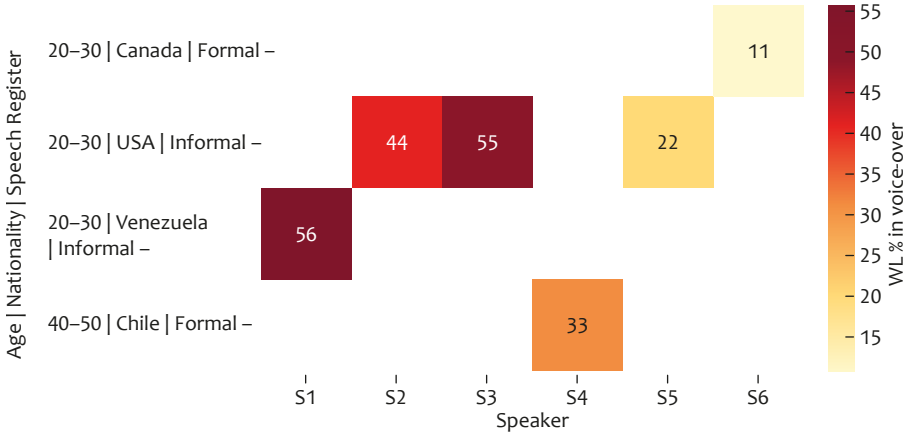

Chart 2: Heatmap of WL % in Voice-over by Age, Nationality and Speech Register

Chart 2 presents a heatmap visualizing the percentage of WL features used in voice-over translations, cross-referenced by speaker metadata including age group, nationality, and speech register. The most salient pattern is the gradual decrease in WL percentages across speaker profiles, largely aligned with speech register and age. The highest values are recorded for speakers in the 20–30 age group using informal Japanese: S1 (Venezuela) and S3 (U.S.A.) register 55%, suggesting that younger speakers portrayed with informal registers are more frequently associated with indexical features of femininity. S2, also in the 20–30 age group and using informal speech, records a slightly lower percentage (44%), while S5 – again from the same demographic – shows a much lower value (22%), indicating that informal register alone does not guarantee high WL presence. This variation suggests that other factors such as speaker personality, cultural framing, and episode context may shape the degree of stylization. The speaker with the lowest WL percentage is S6 (20–30 | Canada | Formal), whose formal speech style yields only 11%, reinforcing the tendency for WL features to be minimized in more formal registers. Meanwhile, S4 (40–50 | Chile | Formal) registers 33%, a value higher than S5 and S6, but still considerably lower than the informal speakers at the top of the scale. Overall, the heatmap suggests that WL representation in translated voice-over is most pronounced among young, informally framed speakers, while formal contexts and older profiles tend to suppress its use.

In contrast, Chart 3 (p. 16) visualizes the distribution of WL features in subtitled Japanese translations, cross-referenced by age group, nationality, and speech register. Unlike the slightly more dynamic pattern observed in voice-over translations (Chart 2), subtitles exhibit a markedly uniform distribution. Most notably, S1 (Venezuela), S2 (U.S.A.), and S3 (U.S.A.), all aged 20–30 and

using informal speech, converge at 44–55%, suggesting limited variation despite differences in nationality. Interestingly, the data point for S5, who shares age and nationality with S2 and S3 but registers the second-lowest WL percentage overall, highlights the tendency of subtitling to flatten indexical contrasts. Taken together, Charts 2 (p. 15) and 3 point to a modality-specific effect: while voice-over translations allow for a slightly higher degree of ideological stylization and responsiveness to sociolinguistic features such as age and speech register, subtitles appear to prioritize standardization, reducing the variability of WL features across speaker profiles.

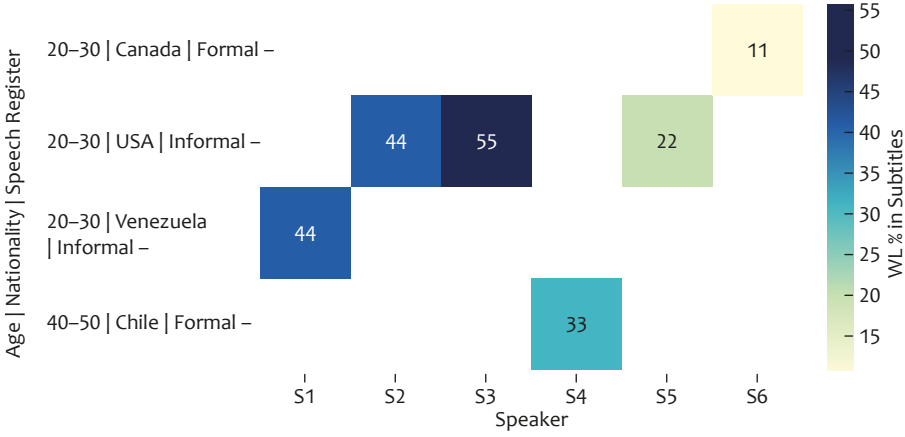

Chart 3: Heatmap of WL % in Subtitles by Age, Nationality and Speech Register

3. Qualitative dataset analysis

This section offers a qualitative discourse analysis of the speech of the six female interviewees, with the aim of identifying potential models of femininity as constructed through the two translation modalities under investigation. Structurally, the *Shirabete Mitara* segment alternates between interviews with foreign female participants and commentary by a Japanese female speaker, in addition to interactions with native Japanese interlocutors such as shopkeepers. Voice-over translation is performed by native-speaking female voice actors who are distinct from the main narrator. Significantly, casting choices for these voice actresses appear to be primarily influenced by the interviewee's age, rather than by visual traits or national origin.

Regarding WL occurrence, all SFPs analyzed were present in the six interviews. Some particles occurred more frequently, as shown in Chart 4 (p. 17), while others appeared only one to three times but still represented the rest of the dataset. We attribute this lower frequency not to intentional omission but

to the program's editing style, which presents short interviews with multiple speakers. To clarify the choices made by dialogue writers and subtitlers, a brief overview of the female interviewees – following their order of appearance across the three episodes – is provided below.

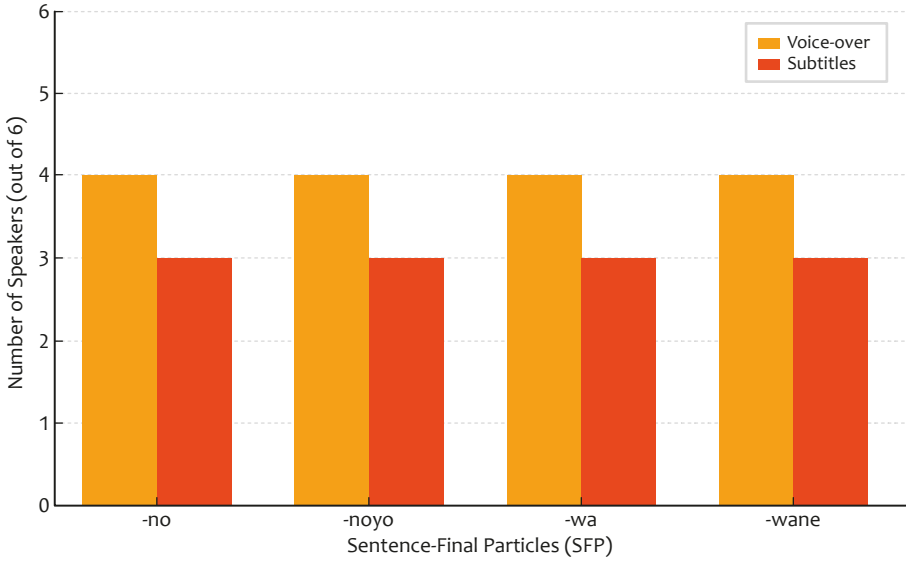

Chart 4: Distribution of WL SFPs in Voice-over and Subtitling

The February episode features two speakers: S1, a fashion-oriented model from Venezuela who moved to Japan for professional reasons and demonstrates a marked interest in purchasing clothing items; and S2, a young American woman with a fuller body type who displays notable enthusiasm for acquiring Japanese kitchen knives. Both speakers are represented as particularly captivated by consumer goods available in Japan. S1, in particular, actively promotes these products on her social media platforms. Introduced as the winner of the "Miss International 2023" pageant, she enthusiastically presents the items she has purchased in Japan and articulates her views as follows[4]:

01 *Nedan mo yasui shi, hinshitsu mo subarashii* ***wa!***
(Eng. Not only are the prices low, but the quality is also excellent!)
02 *Nihon no toppu no mise yo!*
(Eng. This is one of Japan's top stores!)
03 *Sētā o katta ndakedo…*
(Eng. I bought a sweater, but…)

4| In this section, the voice-over and subtitle texts are identical.

04 *A! Watashino baggu mo sō*
(Eng. Oh! My bag is the same)
05 *Kono ryukkusakku mo Yunikuro* ***noyo***
(Eng. This backpack is from Uniqlo as well)

From our perspective, the use of the informal register (*futsūtai*), in conjunction with the presence of the two sentence-final particles *–wa* (line 1) and *–noyo* (line 5) in S1's speech, serves to index a "casual" model of femininity (Nakamura 2020), if not one that verges on the "infantile." This impression is further reinforced by the notably high-pitched delivery of the Japanese voice actress, whose vocal performance draws heavily on the stylized repertoire associated with the so-called "sweet voice" (Starr 2015). Given both the topic of the interview (shopping in Japan) and the speaker's age group, it appears that the stereotype constructed through translation is intended to index a form of *iropposa* (coquettishness), positioning the speaker as a self-proclaimed connoisseur of Japanese shopping culture who addresses the interviewer in a performatively feminine manner. Significantly, this representation is visually reinforced in the subsequent footage, which includes clips from S1's social media accounts where she demonstrates how to wear the items she purchased in Japan.

Similarly, S2 is portrayed as an enthusiast of both shopping and Japanese culture. Encountered on the street in Asakusa and taken to a traditional Japanese knife shop, the young woman expresses herself as follows:

06 *Nihon ni kite kara, hobo mainichi kaimono shiteiru* ***wa***
(Eng. Ever since I arrived in Japan, I've been going shopping nearly every day, you know.)
07 *Konnani nagai hōchō de nani o kiru no* ***kashira****?*
(Eng. I wonder what one would cut with such a long knife?)
08 *Amerika niwa konna takusan no hōchō nai* ***wa***
(Eng. You don't find this many knives in America)
09 *Kore o kau* ***wa***
(Eng. I'll buy this)
10 *Nigitta toki no kanshoku ga yokute, sugoku karukatta* ***no****!*
(Eng. It felt really good when I held it, and it was incredibly light!)
11 *Ha ni tsuiteta moyō mo sugoku suteki datta shi*
(Eng. The pattern on the blade was also really beautiful, and…)
12 *Tottemo kagayaiteiru* ***wa****. Kagayaiteru no ga suki*
(Eng. It's shining so brightly. I really like things that shine)

In this case, S2 – like S1 – makes use of the informal register (*futsūtai*), incorporating not only SFPs such as *–wa* (lines 6, 8, 9, 12) and *–no* (line 10), but also extending her repertoire to include *–kashira* (line 7). Unlike S1, however, the tone of the voice actress voicing S2 is noticeably deeper, likely in order to render the character multisemiotically more credible (especially given that S2

is physically less striking than S1). Still, while S2's WL retains a certain degree of "casualness" in her performance of femininity, it appears to place greater emphasis on the affective dimension of speech. Notably, she seems overly excited not only at the prospect of purchasing such expensive knives (a point also emphasized by the narrator, who comments on their exorbitant price), but also at the idea of possibly living in Japan in the near future – an idea she herself introduces shortly thereafter. Unlike S1, then, S2 employs *-wa* to express *excitement* (*kōfun*) – both for her unique personal experience and, more specifically, for the *distinctiveness* (*omoshirosa*) of her purchasing choices. This contributes to reinforcing the stereotypical portrayal of foreign consumers in Japan as prone to making quirky or unpredictable choices (after all, why would a young American woman travel to Japan to buy vegetable knives?). At the same time, her reaction helps underscore the presumed superiority of Japanese craftsmanship over foreign-made goods. Needless to say, this mode of representing alterity serves the broader agenda of the program itself, which aims to present the Japanese audience with the hidden charms and positive aspects of their own country.

In the May 2025 episode, the featured speakers are S3, a young American woman visiting Japan with her partner, and S4, a Chilean woman in her forties or fifties, also traveling in Japan accompanied by a friend. From a linguistic standpoint, S3 – who adopts an informal register (*futsūtai*) – exhibits a high frequency of WL features across both translation modalities. These are primarily manifested through the use of the SFPs *–no* (lines 13, 16, 17), *–noyo* (line 19), and *–wa* (line 20):

13 *Rosanzersu kara kita* ***no***
(Eng. I came from Los Angeles)
14 *Kekkon shitate de hanemūnchū* ***nano***
(Eng. We just got married and we're on our honeymoon!)
15 *Yūjin ga Kappabashi shōten*
(Eng. My friend told me)
16 *de kicchinyōin o kau koto o susumete kureta* ***no***
(Eng. I should check out Kappabashi for kitchenware)
17 *Kare*[5] *wa ookii kara kyabetsu no tegiri o takusan taberu* ***no***
(Eng. He's a big guy, so he eats a lot of hand-cut cabbage)
18 *Watashi ga kiru supīdo ja oitsukanai kara*
(Eng. I can't cut fast enough to keep up)
19 *Suraisā no hō ga hayaku dekite yoi* ***noyo***
(Eng. Using a slicer is just faster and easier!)
20 *Koko nara kitto mitsukaru to omotteta* ***wa!***
(Eng. I just knew I'd find it here!)

5| In this instance, S5 is referring to her husband.

In the case of S3, the sentence-final particle *–wa* appears to partially fulfill the same pragmatic functions observed in S2's speech, where it was used to convey both "excitement" (*kōfun*) and a sense of "distinctiveness" (*omoshirosa*). Specifically, in line 20, S3 expresses satisfaction at having successfully located a slicer in the neighborhood that had been recommended to her, thus confirming her intuition. Additionally, S3 frequently employs *–no* in an explanatory capacity (lines 22, 25, 26), similarly evoking a sense of enthusiasm. This is once again articulated in a tone that borders on the "childlike," paralleling the pattern identified in S1. A further noteworthy element in S3's case is the presence of her husband, which plays a significant role in shaping how her identity is constructed in translation. For instance, her explicit reference to cooking for him reinforces the interpretation that her use of WL indexes a model of femininity closely aligned with patriarchal norms (Mandujano-Salazar 2016; Vitucci 2024b).

The second speaker in the same video, S4, is the oldest participant and consistently adopts a formal register (*teineigo*) in both voice-over and subtitles, thereby exhibiting a lower frequency of WL features among the interviewees. In contrast, S4 – while initially using a polite register (*teineigo*) – shifts to a plain form (*futsūtai*) when explaining how she manages to save money during her trip to Japan. This register shift coincides with the use of features typically associated with WL, namely *–noyo* (line 24) and *–wane* (line 25), each serving a distinct pragmatic function. As observed in S3's case (line 19), *–noyo* is used in an explanatory, emotionally engaging manner, while *–wane* seems to express an opinion framed as a matter of "common sense" (*jōshiki*). It is also notable that, although S4 does not produce full sentences in Japanese, she sometimes incorporates several Japanese lexical items into her speech – such as *shokupan* (square loaf bread), *hamu* (ham), *gyūniku* (beef), and *kōhī* (coffee). From an ideological standpoint, the use of WL in this context reproduces a conventional image of femininity: a woman who is competent in domestic affairs, attentive to budgeting, and eager to share practical advice. The overall effect is a momentary transformation of S4 from a Chilean tourist into a stereotypical twentieth-century Japanese housewife.

21 *Zenkai no nihonryokō wa zenbu de 70man'en kurai deshita*
(Eng. My last trip to Japan cost me around 700,000 yen in total)
22 *Tokuni furaito ga takai kara*
(Eng. Especially because flights are so expensive)
23 *Sūpā de asagohan o katte*
(Eng. I buy my breakfast at the supermarket)
24 *Yorugohan wa kombini de kau* ***noyo***
(Eng. I get my dinner at the convenience store)
25 *Yasui basho wa ii* ***wane****!*
(Eng. Cheap place is good!)

In the June episode, we encounter S5, a young American woman in her twenties who expresses particular interest in the wrapping services offered in Japanese stores. As with S1, S2, and S3, her voice-over and subtitles are rendered in an informal register (*futsūtai*), and among the SFPs most representative of WL, both *–wa* (line 28) and *–wane* (line 30) reappear. Similar to S2 and S3, S5 employs *–wa* to express excitement (*kōfun*), while her use of *–wane* appears to convey a sense of astonishment (*odoroki*). Ultimately, her remarks emphasize the stark contrast between Japan and the United States, where customers are never offered complimentary transparent plastic bags to cover the items they purchase in stores. In line with the episode's theme, the program's creators once again appear intent on emphasizing the superiority of Japanese services over those offered abroad, promoting a subtly nationalistic representation that becomes inextricably intertwined with the use of WL. Notably, even from a vocal perspective, S5 – like S1 – seems to have a lower-pitched voice than the one employed by the Japanese voice actress. The indirect imagery that emerges is therefore that of a Japanese woman who is enthusiastic about the quality of life offered in Japan and convinced of the overall superiority of its social system.

26 *Nihon no ten'insan wa katta mono o kireini rappingu shite kureru deshō*
(Eng. Japanese shop staff wrap your purchases super nicely, don't they?)
27 *Tokuni ame no hi ni omise de tsukete kureru*
(Eng. I was really impressed by the plastic bag covers they give you at stores)
28 *poribukuro no kabā ni wa kandō shita* ***wa!***
(Eng. especially on rainy days!)
29 *Amerika no mise de kaimono shitemo,*
(Eng. When you shop in the U.S.,)
30 *ameyoke nanka tsukete kurenai* ***wane!***
(Eng. they never bother with rain covers, do they?)

The same episode also features S6, a Canadian woman in her twenties of Asian descent who, unlike S5, primarily speaks in the polite register (*teineigo*). The topic of the interview in this case concerns the way change is handed over in Japanese stores and the use of tablets for ordering in *rāmen* shops. Unlike the other speakers, S6's speech includes two utterances in the plain register (*futsūtai*), as seen in lines 35 and 43, where the only SFP associated with WL, namely *–wa*, also appears. As in the case of S1, S2, S3, and S5, in line 43 S6 appears to use this suffix to express her excitement (*kōfun*), while in line 35 the same suffix seems to mirror S5's usage in line 30 – namely, to convey astonishment (*odoroki*) when comparing the services offered in Japan to those in Canada. From a linguistic perspective, although SFPs associated with WL occur less frequently, the presence of the polite register in this translation may indirectly reinforce the feminine ideal promoted by the program – one of

a woman who is both "well-mannered" and "emotionally impressed" by the superiority of Japanese services. Significantly, this ideological alignment echoes the characterization constructed through the Japanese voice-over for S2. It is also noteworthy that S5 and S6 are dubbed by different voice actresses, further suggesting a deliberate effort to individualize their portrayals while maintaining a shared ideological frame.

31 *Omise de otsuri o watasu toki ni*
(Eng. At stores, they count the change out loud)
32 *kazu o kazoeru desho*
(Eng. when they give it to you, right?)
33 *1000en, 2000en, 3000en, 4000en tte*
(Eng. Like, "1,000 yen, 2,000 yen, 3,000 yen, 4,000 yen")
34 *Kanada dewa ten'insan wa wazawaza me no maede*
(Eng. in Canada, store clerks don't bother to count)
35 *Okane o kazoete misete kurenai* ***wa!***
(Eng. the money out in front of you like that!)
36 *Nihonjin wa hontōni teinei nanda na tte*
(Eng. It really struck me how courteous)
37 *kandō shimashita*
(Eng. Japanese people are)
38 *Kono aida rāmen o tabe ni itta ndakedo*
(Eng. I went out for ramen the other day)
39 *taburetto o tsukatta chūmon shisutemu ga*
(Eng. and I was really impressed by how easy)
40 *tottemo kantan de kandō shimashita*
(Eng. the tablet ordering system was!)
41 *Kanada dewa amari mita koto ga nakute*
(Eng. I hadn't really seen anything like that in Canada)
42 *totemo kōritsuteki de kantan de*
(Eng. so I thought it was super efficient, easy to use)
43 *subarashii sābisu da to omotta* ***wa!***
(Eng. and just a great service!)

4. Discussions and perspectives

The ideological foundations of Japanese WL have been the subject of critical scrutiny in recent years. A growing body of scholarship has highlighted how WL is frequently framed through essentialist lenses, thereby reinforcing rigid conceptions of gender difference that align with broader hegemonic structures (DiBello Takeuchi 2023; Duranti 2021; Nakamura 2023). Despite such critiques, essentialist representations remain pervasive in Japanese media, where linguistic forms associated with conventional femininity are routinely recycled. As Mashiko

(2017) observes, the normalization of feminine SFPs in scripted media can serve to perpetuate discriminatory gender norms, often under the guise of authenticity or character realism. Building upon the corpus presented in this case study, the analysis aims to examine how sociolinguistic variables – namely age, nationality, and speech register – interact with the representation of Japanese WL across two translation modalities (voice-over and subtitles) in the television program *Shirabete Mitara* (Fuji TV). Although the sample examined here is limited to only three episodes of the program, employing a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative data with qualitative discourse analysis, the case study identifies several salient patterns that directly address the three guiding research questions, as described in the following subchapters.

4.1. Correlation between age, nationality, and WL use

The relationship between age, nationality, and speech register significantly influences the distribution of Japanese Women's Language (WL) features in translated media discourse. The analysis of six female speakers reveals that WL markers – particularly SFPs tied to traditional femininity – are more frequently associated with younger women employing informal Japanese. Among speakers aged 20–30 using informal speech, the highest percentages of WL features are found: 55% for a Venezuelan speaker (S1) and an American speaker (S3), and 44% for another American speaker (S2). These values indicate a clear association between youthful informality and a heightened indexical projection of femininity. However, this trend is not uniform. Another speaker from the same age group and nationality (S5) registers only 22% despite also using informal Japanese. This discrepancy suggests that age, nationality and register alone do not fully account for WL variation; instead, other factors – such as speaker persona, framing within the episode, or broader narrative function – may also play a role in shaping stylistic representation. The impact of register becomes even more evident when considering formal speech. A Canadian speaker aged 20–30 (S6) using formal Japanese registers only 11% WL both in voice-over and subtitles. Similarly, a Chilean speaker aged 40–50 (S4), also speaking formally, records 33% in both modalities. These results suggest that WL features tend to be minimized in formal contexts and among older participants, further reinforcing the alignment of WL with youth, emotional responsiveness, and casual interactional settings.

4.2. Relationship between register and WL

A second key finding concerns the role of speech register – specifically the contrast between informal (*futsūtai*) and polite (*teineigo*) forms – in shaping the distribution of Japanese WL. Among the six speakers analyzed, four consistently employ the informal register during their interviews. This prevalence of informal

speech aligns with higher WL percentages: S1 (Venezuela) and S3 (U.S.A.) both record values of 55%, while S2 (U.S.A.) follows with 44% in both translation modalities. These findings suggest that WL, despite its traditional associations with politeness and refinement, now functions predominantly within affective and performative registers, particularly when constructing youthful and emotionally expressive femininity. S6 stands out as the only speaker whose speech is primarily framed through *teineigo*. Her WL percentage drops to 11% in both voice-over and subtitles, supporting the hypothesis that polite speech constrains the use of WL features. This may stem from the ideologically "neutral" orientation of *teineigo*, which tends to resist indexical markers of intimacy, emotion, or subjectivity. Similarly, S4 – the only speaker in the 40–50 age group also employing formal speech – maintains moderate WL usage (33% in both modalities), further reinforcing the tendency for WL to be minimized in more formal and socially regulated communicative contexts.

4.3. Ideological functions of WL in translation

Importantly, WL emerges across these interviews as a pragmatically flexible and ideologically charged resource. While S1, S2, S3, S5 use SFPs such as *–wa*, *–wane*, *–no*, and *–noyo* to express excitement (*kōfun*), cuteness (*iropposa*), or consumer enthusiasm (*omoshirosa*), S4 resort to the same suffixes to articulate opinions framed as expressions of "common sense" (*jōshiki*). In contrast, S6 uses WL features only sparingly and primarily for narrating functional, everyday experiences – such as ordering food or interacting with service technology – rather than for expressing identity. Taken together, these patterns reinforce the view that WL is not a fixed or uniform linguistic variety. Rather, it operates as a multi-indexical and highly adaptable semiotic resource, variably mobilized to construct affect, stance, ideology, or gendered subjectivity depending on the speaker's role, narrative positioning, and communicative goals. By contrast, when considering the intersection of sociolinguistic and ideological variables, it becomes possible to group the six speakers into a structured typology of foreign femininities (Table 2, p. 25).

4.3.1. Group 1 (S1, S2, S5, S6) – enthusiastic and consumer-oriented femininity

This group is characterized by the use of informal register and a consistent deployment of WL features such as *–wa*, *–noyo*, *–wane*, and *–kashira*. Their linguistic choices convey strong emotional engagement, affective enthusiasm, and astonishment, particularly in relation to consumer experiences and Japanese cultural practices. The femininity indexed here is overtly expressive and performance-oriented, aligning with stereotypical roles such as the fashion-conscious consumer (S1), culturally curious shopper (S2), and admiring customer

Table 2: Typology of Foreign Femininities in Shirabete Mitara

Speaker	Age Group	Register	WL Features	Indexed Femininity	Symbolic Role
S1	Young	Informal	-wa, -noyo	Casual, coquettish	Fashion-oriented consumer
S2	Young	Informal	-wa, -no, -kashira	Affective, enthusiastic	Culturally curious knife collector
S3	Young adult	Informal	-wa, -no, -noyo	Childlike, emotionally expressive	Newly domestic figure
S4	Older adult	Formal > Informal	-noyo, -wane	Frugal, practical	Budget-conscious tourist
S5	Young adult	Informal	-wa, -wane	Astonished, enthusiastic	Admiring customer
S6	Young adult	Formal > Informal	-wa	Astonished, excited	Polite and practical observer

(S5). Through these representations, femininity is framed as emotionally vibrant and tightly linked to consumption, admiration, and affective display. Only S6 stands out for her dominant use of formal register, with limited WL usage (*–wa* only), typically expressing polite astonishment or admiration. Her representation is less emotionally charged compared to the other speakers but nonetheless indexes a femininity that values courteousness, efficiency, and observation. This linguistic profile constructs a pragmatic and emotionally impressed female figure, aligned with ideals of politeness and quiet appreciation rather than overt enthusiasm.

4.3.2. Group 2 (S3, S4) – reflective and critically oriented femininity

Speakers in this group employ WL forms such as *–no*, *–noyo*, and *–wane*, but with more introspective or didactic tones. S3's usage emphasizes explanation and domestic responsibility, aligning her with a newlywed domestic figure shaped by patriarchal expectations. In contrast, S4 combines formal and informal registers and repurposes WL to convey pragmatic advice and ironic commentary, particularly about budgeting while traveling. The overall effect is a model of femininity that is less performative and more cognitively engaged, positioning these women as reflective observers or critical insiders to the Japanese cultural context.

4.4. Conclusions

The presented typology demonstrates how *Shirabete Mitara* strategically mobilizes WL to produce stylized and ideologically inflected portrayals of foreign women. Through the interplay of speech register, translation modality, and the speaker's sociolinguistic positioning, the program constructs distinct models of femininity that are at once familiar and exotic. This dual framing not only reinforces Japan's cultural authority (Mandujano-Salazar 2016; 2024) but also renders foreign female subjects intelligible through gender norms that resonate with domestic audiences (Nakamura 2013; 2014; 2023). In our view, despite their distinct features, the two profiles identified in the analysis ultimately reinforce gendered representations grounded in an essentialist and patriarchal framework (Konstantinovskaia 2020), in which women are either positioned within the domestic sphere – as caretakers and managers of household economy (Group 2)[6] – or constructed as knowledgeable and enthusiastic consumers (Group 1).

From a translation studies perspective, it is worth noting how the reproduction of WL through the two channels of subtitling and voice-over has direct repercussions in the field of Japanese audiovisual translation and, more specifically, in the phenomenon of ideological manipulation (Alfano 2018; Díaz-Cintas 2012; Vitucci 2020; Zabalbeascoa 2012). It is no coincidence that the inter-indexical relations analyzed in this case study – linguistically encoded through the use of WL – are further substantiated by the testimony of a professional voice actress, who participated in an email interview with the author of this study in February 2025. When asked about the continued use of WL in dubbing and voice-over, Yūko[7] affirmed that, despite a slight decline in recent years, scriptwriters still tend to include it as a hallmark of female speech. She attributed this tendency, in part, to the Japanese educational system, which subtly informs linguistic imaginaries of femininity across genders, and, in part, to the voice acting industry and training institutions, which continue to promote this mode of linguistic stylization – commonly referred to as *yakuwarigo* (Kinsui 2007; 2017). According to Yūko, such stylization is believed to enhance audience comprehension and emotional investment by making female characters more immediately recognizable. However, from an ideological perspective, this strategy contributes to the perpetuation of an iconization process (Irvine/Gal 2000; 2019), wherein specific speech styles become indexically linked to narrowly defined speaker identities. Although such associations fail to account for the heterogeneity and evolving nature of contemporary female

6| It should not be overlooked that, within the patriarchal model of the heterosexual family prevalent throughout the twentieth century in Japan, it was always women who were responsible for managing the household economy.

7| For privacy reasons, we shall refer to her as Yūko.

linguistic expression, they persist in shaping dominant representations of gendered speech, especially in translated dialogues from foreign languages. What arises as a central question, therefore, is whether those working in audiovisual translation in Japan assume the ethical responsibility of translation and the related social repercussions of their translated texts. As has already been highlighted in several studies within translation studies and sociolinguistics, once shared with its target audiences, translated dialogues permeate the social fabric, altering audience perceptions and influencing both their thinking and their linguistic experience. As Squires (2014) explains, this process – referred to as "indexical bleaching" – is closely connected to the high degree of pervasiveness of audiovisual texts in their target societies, which implies that metapragmatic stereotypes conveyed through WL, for instance, are reinforced through the voice-over and subtitles analyzed in this case study. Not by chance, from a multisemiotic perspective, the so-called "bodies of otherness" continue to function as ideologically charged constructs, reinforcing normative linguistic frameworks (Inoue 2003). This persistence calls for sustained critical engagement with Japanese media production, especially in the light of recent developments in artificial intelligence that may further entrench these representational patterns. At this technological juncture, AI-driven tools – such as automatic subtitling software and the standardized female voices used in car navigation systems – actively reproduce and disseminate these gendered scripts across multiple media platforms (Iwata/ Shigemitsu/ Murata 2022). Ultimately, both WL and men's language contribute to the sedimentation of linguistic hierarchies, shaping public perception by offering recurring patterns that crystallize into models of power. The outcome, it hardly needs to be reiterated, is a stereotypical and discriminatory representation of all the speakers involved, which ultimately brings the audiences of such texts back to a patriarchal and heteronormative view of Japanese society as a whole.

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