

Language Change and the Use of the Particle *Shi*:

Meta Linguistic Comments of Japanese Native Speakers

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1. Introduction

Change in language use and meanings is one of the topics explored in the field of sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropology. The particle *shi* in Japanese seems to be undergoing a change in its functions and meanings. Although the particle *shi* is traditionally categorized as a connective particle, it is used at the end of an utterance without “main” clause in conversation. Previous researchers have argued that this use of the particle *shi* seems to work similarly to sentence final particles marking the speaker’s epistemic and/or affective stances (Sakakibara, 2008; McGloin & Konishi, 2010; Kondo, 2012). Moreover, in conversations among teenagers and early 20s, more extended and innovative uses of particle *shi* are observed: Question Word + *da* + *shi*, (Sakakibara, 2008), Imperative + *shi* and (Yamamoto, 2012), and Plain form + *na* (imperative of negation) + *shi*. Although some studies describe that these innovative uses of the particle *shi* are connected with young Japanese native speakers, these uses have been underrepresented in the research field. When and how these innovative uses of the particle *shi* are used have not been fully explored. Through analyzing the interviews, the present study aims to investigate how Japanese native speakers in their late teens and 20s perceive the innovative uses of the particle *shi*.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Innovative uses of the Particle *Shi*

To the author’s knowledge, there are two studies that discuss the innovative uses of the particle *shi*. Sakakibara (2008) pointed out that the use of *shi* at the end of the utterance involving a question word does not convey the action of adding new information but marks the speaker’s affective stance. According to her, this is one type of “youth language.” Yamamoto (2012) found that the combinations of imperative + *shi* and verb plain form + *na* (imperative of negation) + *shi* are used when the speaker is irritated, and these combinations are suitable for soliloquy-like utterances but not for utterances ordering the interlocutor to do a certain action. These studies are illuminating in the way that they recognize the innovative uses of the particle *shi* as “youth language” and show that these uses are acceptable by high school students and college students.

It seems that the innovative uses of the particle *shi* started to be used by “young” people in the early 2010s. On *Yahoo! Chiebukuro*, there are several threads discussing the innovative uses of the particle *shi* used by “young” people, and the earliest thread the author could find is dated in 2010¹. On these threads, some people pointed out that the particle *shi* used with a verb in imperative form and the particle *shi* used with a verb and the particle of prohibition *na* are from Koshu dialect², which is spoken in Yamanashi prefecture located to the west of Tokyo prefecture. In contrast, the particle *shi* used with a question word and copula is reported to be originated from the internet slang used on *Niconico Douga*³, a video streaming service with which *Otaku* culture is associated.

Although the previous research and these online threads indicated the acceptability of the innovative uses of the particle *shi* among “young” people and informed the origins of the innovative uses, the functions of these innovative uses have not

¹ https://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q1249643317

² https://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q1249643317

³ https://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q1196497876

been fully explored. Moreover, as these uses are associated with “young” people, these uses seem to index social identity which in turn expands the meaning and functions of the particle *shi*. Thus, it would be necessary to investigate the indexical and social meanings of the innovative uses of the particle *shi* to fully understand the meanings of the particle *shi*.

2.2 Indexicality

Indexicality refers to the relationship between a linguistic resource and its representation, being contiguous with each other and being highly context-dependent. Ochs (1992) proposed two types of indexical relationship: direct indexicality and indirect indexicality. According to her, any linguistic feature associated with social identity, such as gender, is most likely to directly index interactional stances, social acts (such as ordering), and/or social activities (such as public speech). This linguistic feature will be associated with social identity through these directly indexed stances, acts, and/or activities. The linguistic feature comes to index indirectly the social group or identity believed to take the stances, do the acts, and engage in the activities indexed directly.

One of important concepts related to indexicality is indexical order proposed by Silverstein (2003). In this concept, new meaning ($n + 1^{\text{st}}$ order indexicality) will emerge through the engagement of ideologies and metapragmatics. That is, people’s beliefs play a crucial role in the emergence of the social meaning of a linguistic resource. Building upon this concept of indexical order, Eckert (2008) proposed the notion of indexical field. She defined indexical field as “a constellation of ideologically related meanings” (p. 454). She argued that any social meaning is not static but has a set of potential meanings, and any one of the related meanings can be activated depending on the situation. The activated meaning can construct new potential meanings built upon ideological connections.

These notions of indexicality may be applied to understand the relationship between the various meanings of the innovative uses of the particle *shi*. Since the meanings of the innovative uses of the particle *shi* have not been fully explored, it is crucial to analyze the interactional contexts in which these uses are used, the character types that are associated with these uses, and metapragmatic comments on these uses.

3. Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this research are: 1) In what context are the innovative uses of the particle *shi* used?; 2) What are the functions of the particle *shi* when it is used with question words + *da*, verb imperative form, and verb plain form + *na*?; and 3) What are the social meanings of the particle *shi* with question words, verb imperative form, and verb plain form + *na*?

4. Data and Methodology

To answer the research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 participants from November 2020 to September 2021. The interviews were conducted in pairs; thus, there were in total six interviews. The participants in each pair were close friends; this allowed participants to feel relaxed and discuss their opinions more freely. The ages of the participants ranged from 19 years old to 29 years old. All participants were from Kanto area. The interviews were conducted online using a video conferencing service and a video chat application. All interviews were video-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The data were analyzed using theme analysis (Ritchie, et al., 2003). The interview transcripts were manually coded for each of the six interviews separately, allowing recurring themes to emerge to identify the key themes. In Vivo and Focus coding were performed to categorize the codes (Saldaña, 2016). The coding software NVivo was used for analyzing and organizing the coded data.

5. Findings and Discussion

From the analysis, five themes were identified as recurring themes: 1) joking, 2) soft, weak, 3) soliloquy, 4) not proper Japanese, and 5) sounding young. Because there is a limited space in this paper, I will present only a few selected examples.

The theme “joking” was found in all the three innovative uses of the particle *shi*. The representative comment related to

this theme was found in the response of Chika⁴, who is a 25-years-old female, when she was asked when these innovative uses of the particle *shi* are used:

Chika: まっでもやっぱ冗談を言う時? ちょっと含んだ感じ. ちょっと笑いー, ユーモアを加えたい時とか (well actually, when saying jokes? It (the utterance) has a hint (of joking tone). When you want to add a bit of laughter or humor.)

This response indicates that the utterances with the innovative uses of the particle *shi* have a joking tone. One of the reasons why the speaker of the innovative uses would like to add a joking tone could be that the grammatical structures of QW + *da*, imperative form, and plain form + *na* sound blunt by themselves. Moreover, it seems that the innovative uses are used to counter the interlocutor's utterances when the interlocutor teased or made fun of the speaker. Kiko, a 28-year-old female, said the following when asked in what situations the particle *shi* would be used with imperative form of a verb:

Kiko: 高校生でー, なんかからかわれてる時. なんか, 「お前あの子のこと好きなんだろう」, みたいな. 「やめろし」っていう, 言いそう.

(When a high school student is being teased (by their friend). Like, “You like that girl, don’t you?”. And, (they) most likely say, “*Yamero shi* (Stop it *shi*).”

The theme “soft, weak” seems to be connected to the first theme. As mentioned above, the grammatical structures used in the innovative uses of the particle *shi* sound blunt. Many participants stated that the utterance sounds softer with the particle *shi*. Kiko stated in her interview:

Kiko: なんかちょっと, 「言うな」とか「やめろ」とか命令口調じゃないですかー. だから強い感じがする? なんてんだろ, 響きが. でも「し」つけて柔らかくはなる

(Well, “Don’t say” and “Stop it” and the like have imperative tone, don’t they? So it feels like (they sound) strong? How should I say, the sound. But by adding *shi*, they become soft.)

As this excerpt shows, the participants in this study perceive one of the functions of the innovative uses of the particle *shi* as mitigation of the bluntness of the utterance.

There was another context that the participants acknowledged in which these innovative uses would be used. “Soliloquy” was a recurring theme for the particle *shi* with QW + *da* and plain form + *na*. When she was explaining the situation in which she used the particle *shi* with QW + *da*, Yasuko, a 21-year-old female, responded that she used it when she was talking to herself. She also mentioned that she would not use the expression directly toward her interlocutor; that is, the speaker does not have the intention to actively communicate with the interlocutor when using this expression. When asked how she would respond to the utterance with the plain form + *na* + *shi*, Chika stated that she would not take the utterance seriously and not respond to it. That is, the use of the innovative uses and the receiver of the utterances seem to have the shared understanding of the meaning.

The fourth theme identified from the analysis was “not proper Japanese.” Although participants admitted that they regularly see and hear the innovative uses of the particle *shi*, they still think that these uses are not proper Japanese. Taro, a 20-year-old male, told the author that it is not grammatically correct to use the particle *shi* with a question word. He further stated that those who do use these innovative uses (which he thinks are grammatically incorrect) are “クセ, 強い (have a strong character).” His comments seem to indicate that the people who are out of norm would use the innovative uses of the particle *shi*.

The last recurring theme is “sounding young.” All participants revealed that these innovative uses of the particle *shi* sound young. They also claimed that these are used by male middle school and high school students. Hiroto, a 22-year-old male, stated that these expressions were popular when he was a middle school student. When people older than high school students use these expressions, he thinks that they are trying to sound young (若作り). Riko, a 25-year-old female, claimed that she does not use the innovative uses of the particle *shi* now because these uses do not fit her age anymore (年相応の言葉遣い). These comments indicate that people in a certain age group (middle school and high school students) are associated with the innovative uses of the particle *shi*.

The above five recurring themes appear to be interconnected with each other. A joking tone could be considered as one of the ways to mitigate bluntness of the utterance. Moreover, the act of countering, which seem to be achieved by the

⁴ All names are pseudonyms.

innovative uses, could be considered rude. The joking tone may also help mitigate the rudeness of the act. Furthermore, because the act of countering could be considered as rude, the speakers may not want to communicate the message to their interlocutor; thus, these expressions would be used when they are talking to themselves. The participants of this study still considered these expressions as not proper Japanese although they have encountered these uses in the real life. These innovative uses do not fit them anymore because they were considered as adults, and adults should use the proper Japanese. It could also be said that the male middle school and high school student persona was associated with these uses of the particle *shi* because these male students are perceived to joke around a lot.

This interconnectedness illustrates the indexicality of the innovative uses of the particle *shi*. Following Ochs (1992), the innovative uses could be said to index directly the act of joking, which could be considered as the act that male middle school and high school students often engage in. Using the notions of indexicality by Silverstein (2003) and Eckert (2008), the context of countering and the metapragmatic comment of “not being proper Japanese” could have given rise to the persona of male middle school and high school students.

6. Conclusion

The present study revealed the various meanings and functions of the innovative uses of the particle *shi* by analyzing the interview data conducted with the native Japanese speakers in their late teens and the 20s. The contexts in which these uses would be used are when countering the interlocutor’s previous utterances and when talking to oneself. One of the functions of these uses seem to be mitigation of the bluntness of the utterance. These uses appear to be associated with the persona of teens, especially male middle school and high school student. The future research is expected to explore how, if at all, the marked uses of the particle *shi* are related to the traditional uses of the particle *shi*.

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