
Problems with the Description of Words Relating to Gender and Sexuality in English-Japanese Learner's Dictionaries

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Abstract

While English-Japanese learner's dictionaries have developed relatively sophisticated ways of describing sexist terms, they are not fully successful in the treatment of words related to gender and sexuality as a whole. Our survey reveals that (1) some English-Japanese learner's dictionaries translate non-discriminatory English words into derogatory Japanese words; (2) there seems to be no clear policy about providing translation equivalents with discriminatory English words; and that (3) non-derogatory words are given carelessly as synonyms of derogatory headwords. This paper will report mismatches and inconsistency in the selections and arrangements of translation equivalents for words related to gender and sexuality in current English-Japanese learner's dictionaries, and argue that low awareness of the issues relating to sexuality in Japanese society underlies such deficiencies. It will also propose how those lexical items should be treated, suggesting immediate improvements be made in order not to reproduce discrimination against sexual and gender minorities.

Keywords: gender and sexuality; English-Japanese learner's dictionaries; translation equivalents

1 Introduction

The addition of the word *cisgender* to the *Oxford English Dictionary* in its June 2015 update¹ was celebrated with hopes of “the increased awareness of its meaning which this inclusion will bring”.² This fact shows that dictionaries carry ‘authority’, however descriptive they are designed to be (Svensén 2009: 67). Considering their social influences, the treatment and description of sensitive lexical items needs greater care, especially in learner's dictionaries. In more recent English-Japanese learner's dictionaries for Japanese learners of English (hereafter EJLDs) relatively sophisticated ways of describing sexist terms are observed; however, in terms of the treatment of words related to gender and sexuality as a whole, they are not fully successful. After reviewing the improvements made in the treatment of sexist language, this paper will report mismatches and inconsistency in the selections and arrangements of translation equivalents for words related to gender and sexuality in EJLDs, discuss underlying causes for such deficiencies, and finally propose how those lexical items should be treated.

¹ Oxford English Dictionary. New words list in June 2015.

<http://public.oed.com/the-oed-today/recent-updates-to-the-oed/june-2015-update/new-words-list-june-2015/> (6 October 2015)

² Chris Green. ‘Cisgender’ has been added to the Oxford English Dictionary. *Independent*. 25 June 2015 <http://www.independent.co.uk/incoming/cisgender-has-been-added-to-the-oxford-english-dictionary-10343354.html/> (6 October 2015)

2 Sexism and Sexual Stereotyping in EJLDs

Sexism and sexual stereotyping in EJLDs has attracted due attention, and the lexicographic treatment of sexist terms has been elaborated since the late 1980s. *Genius English-Japanese Dictionary* (1988) is a pioneer in dealing with the sexism issue. The second edition (1994) introduced a register label “NS” (=non-sexism) to navigate its users from gender-specific headwords to gender-neutral ones. For example, the entry for *anchorman, -woman* has a cross-reference to a gender-neutral word with a ((NS)) label:

anchorman, -woman

((放送)) ニュースキャスター, 総合司会者 ((英)) newsreader, ((NS)) ((主に米)) anchor).

Minamide (1998: 171-182), editor in chief, details the dictionary's structured approach to sexism in language. Not only are sexist-term headwords explained with notes and referred to sex-neutral expressions, but also examples are carefully selected to avoid stereotyping of gender roles, being modelled on policies adopted in *American Heritage School Dictionary* (1972). From the third edition (2001) onwards, *Genius* changed the label “NS” into “PC” (=politically correct), which directs users' attention not only to sexism, but also to racism and disability discrimination.

However, English-Japanese lexicography still needed further improvements. Ishikawa (1999) conducted a survey on how sexist job titles (ending *-man*) were treated in fourteen EJLDs published in the 1990s and evaluated the dictionaries according to how fully they guided their users from sexist terms to politically correct expressions. The results reveal that only two out of the fourteen dictionaries – including the second edition of *Genius*—show conscious awareness of the issue of politically correct language, and that even a highly evaluated dictionary lacks a systematic approach to dealing with sexist language in the dictionary. Also, Kurose and Nakaoka (2000) made an analysis of all the example phrases and sentences containing words that identify a specific gender in an EJLD published in the 1990s. They report that two-thirds of the examples collected are about men, and that traditional gender roles or gender stereotypes are embedded in many of the examples. Responding to criticisms of these kinds, more EJLDs have started to pay greater attention to the descriptions of sexist terms, and developed their systematic treatment. For example, now gender-specific terms such as *chairman*, *policeman* and *stewardess* are usually cross-referred to politically correct gender-neutral expressions such as *police officer* and *flight [cabin] attendant*, sometimes followed by usage notes to explain the socio-linguistic movement toward such gender-neutral language.³ Following the example of *Genius*, more EJLDs have adopted new labels to indicate their awareness of gender equality. The *Wisdom English-Japanese Dictionary* introduced a label ((男女共用)) (unisex) in the second edition (2007). The entry for *anchorman*, for instance, begins with a cross-reference to *anchor* and *anchorperson*:

anchorman

((男女共用)) anchor, anchorperson) [C] 1 ((米)) 報道番組の男性司会者, ニュースキャスター...

Similarly, *Shogakukan Progressive English-Japanese Dictionary* started in its 5th edition using

³ The usage note provided at the entry for *chairman* in *Genius English-Japanese Dictionary*, 5th edition (2014) reads: “The word *chairperson* was coined in order to remove linguistic sexism; however, *chairman* is still more frequently used than *chairperson*, and the frequency of *chairwoman* has been increasing. The most frequently used word is *chair*” (Translated by the authors).

((PC)), as in:

policeman

(男性の) 警官, 巡査 ((PC) police officer).

stewardess

(旅客機の) スチュワーデス ((PC) flight attendant) ...

In addition to words ending *-man* or other gender-specific terms, gender-marked forms indicating professions and occupations such as *woman doctor* and *woman writer* have become a concern for lexicographers. EJLDs, in general, contain cultural and encyclopedic entries including historic figures and famous writers. A common entry for a famous writer, for example, provides their dates of birth and death, nationality, occupation, and most important work. However, while male writers are described simply as “writer”, female writers are described as “woman writer” in many dictionaries of the earlier years. It still is the case in some dictionaries today, but some other dictionaries removed this marked explanation and describe both male and female writers as “writer”. This is a positive change in terms of gender equality; however, in effect, the amount of (encyclopedic) information has decreased. Besides, the gender of a writer may be a useful piece of information for Japanese learners who are not familiar with overseas literature. *Genius*, the 5th edition (2014), solved the problem by introducing male/female icons to indicate the gender of a person being described, so that men and women are both treated equally with no loss of encyclopedic information.

3 Problems with the Description of Words Relating to Gender and Sexuality

As we have seen, a great degree of improvement has been made in the treatment of sexist terms in more recent EJLDs; however, it seems to have been done within a rigid gender binarism. Its focus is almost exclusively to get rid of gender stereotyping and discriminatory descriptions against women, whereas the treatment of more nuanced language in relation to gender and sexuality still requires improvement. Checking some words relating to gender and sexuality in five EJLDs published between 2011 and 2014 from different publishers reveals that (1) some EJLDs translate non-discriminatory English words into derogatory Japanese words; (2) there seems to be no clear policy about providing translation equivalents for discriminatory English words; and that (3) non-derogatory words are carelessly given as synonyms of derogatory headwords. Each of the three problems will be discussed in detail in the following sections.

3.1 Derogatory Japanese equivalents for non-derogatory English words

The first problem is that derogatory Japanese words are provided as translation equivalents for non-discriminatory English words in some entries. For example, some dictionaries give *rezu* (a shortened form of *rezubian*, which is a loan translation of *lesbian*) as a translation equivalent of *lesbian*, but this shortened form is often regarded as offensive like *lesbo* and is, therefore, inappropriate as an equivalent of a non-discriminatory word *lesbian* (noun) (English translation is given below the original Japanese; emphasis added) .

Dictionary C (2012)

lesbian

同性愛の女性, レスピアン, レズ.

(homosexual woman, lesbian, lesbo)

Dictionary D (2013)

lesbian

レズ (の女性), レズビアン.

(lesbo, lesbian)

Another similar example is the use of *homo* (a loan translation). It is generally considered derogatory just like the English shortened form of *homosexual*. However, Dictionary A gives *homo* as an equivalent for the headwords *gay* and *homosexual* (English translation is given below the original Japanese; emphasis added.)

gay

(特に男性が) 同性愛の, ゲイの, ホモの (homosexual) (◆現在ではこの意味がふつうに 鋸褌稔ル 含みはない)

(especially of men) homosexual, gay, homo (homosexual) (◆This meaning is more common now and has no derogatory connotation.)

homosexual

同性愛の, ホモの.

(homosexual, homo)

As Komuro (2015) reports, it is often the case that the Japanese equivalents of *homosexual*, *homo*, and *gay* are all used in the same way in Japanese general dictionaries, which may explain the above-mentioned inappropriate use of derogatory Japanese words in EJLDs. However, such a misconception should not be reproduced and needs immediate correction.

3.2 No clear policy on translation equivalents for derogatory English words

The second problem is that there seems to be no clear policy on the selection and arrangements of Japanese translation equivalents of derogatory terms. The table below shows how five dictionaries treat four English words relating to gender and sexuality that can have strongly negative connotation: *homo*, *fag/faggot*, *dike/dyke*, and *queer*. In table 1, under 'translation equivalent,' *neutral* means that an equivalent given is non-derogatory, and *discriminatory* means derogatory.

(Partial) Japanese equivalents of the same register are available for *homo*, *fag/faggot*, and *dike/dyke*; however, in some dictionaries they are described only in neutral terms, while in other dictionaries both in neutral and derogatory terms.

	Dictionary A (2011)			Dictionary B (2012)			Dictionary C (2012)		
	label	translation equivalent	synonyms /notes	label	translation equivalent	synonyms /notes	label	translation equivalent	synonyms /notes
<i>homo</i>	no entry			discrim.	neutral discriminatory		derog.	neutral	= homosexual
<i>fag / faggot</i>	derog.	neutral discriminatory		vulgar	discriminatory discriminatory		derog.	neutral	
<i>dike / dyke</i>	derog.	neutral		no entry			derog.	neutral	
<i>queer</i> (adj.)	derog.	neutral	usage note	discrim.	neutral discriminatory		derog.	neutral discriminatory	(gay)
	Dictionary D (2013)			Dictionary E (2014)					
	label	translation equivalent	synonyms /notes	label	translation equivalent	synonyms /notes			
<i>homo</i>	insult	neutral	= homosexual	derog.	discriminatory				
<i>fag / faggot</i>	insult	discriminatory		derog.	discriminatory neutral				
<i>dike / dyke</i>	insult	neutral	(lesbian)	derog.	neutral	(lesbian)			
<i>queer</i> (adj.)	insult	neutral	(homosexual) usage note	derog.	neutral neutral	((PC)) homosexual, gay usage note			

Table 1: Treatment of derogatory English words relating to gender and sexuality in EJLDs.

The current strategy for describing derogatory terms commonly taken by EJLDs can be expressed as: English headword = stylistic label + Japanese equivalent 1, Japanese equivalent 2, ... (+ usage note) First, stylistic labels such as *derogatory* and *insulting* are used to show the markedness of the defined words (Svensén 2009: 315). Then Japanese equivalents, which are either derogatory or non-derogatory, are given, yet there is no way for users to distinguish them. This is usually considered not to pose serious problems in dictionaries from L2 to L1, as “more can be left to the user’s native-language ability, especially as regards mutually synonymous equivalents” (Svensén 2009: 276). However, in terms of language of gender and sexuality, it may be safe to say too much should not be left to users, since their social and linguistic awareness on such issues is unlikely to be higher than that of lexicographers, whose awareness of such issues does not seem to be sufficiently high as shown in 3.1. For example, there is no commonly used direct Japanese translation of the word *queer* (as “an offensive word used to describe someone who is homosexual, especially a man”⁴), and thus it is explained as follows in two EJLDs (English translation is given below the original Japanese; (emphasis added)).

Dictionary C:

((俗 侮蔑的))<男性が>同性愛の, ホモの (gay).

((*slang, derogatory*)) <a man> homosexual, homo (gay)

Dictionary E:

((侮蔑))<主に男性が>同性愛の, ゲイの ((PC)) homosexual, gay)

⁴ Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 6th edition (2014)

((derogatory)) <a man> homosexual, gay ((PC)) homosexual, gay

Both dictionaries take the same approach: giving synonymous equivalents together with a stylistic label to show offensiveness of the headword. However, while two alternative equivalents in Dictionary E are both non-derogatory, the second equivalent given in Dictionary C (*homo*) is derogatory. (It should be noted at the same time that both dictionaries provide detailed usage notes to prevent unintended insults.)

Another problem is that there seems to be no consistency within one dictionary in terms of register of translation equivalents. For example, in Dictionary E, while *homo* and *fag/faggot* are given derogatory translations, *dike/dyke* and *queer* are given only non-derogatory translations.

3.3 Carelessly given non-derogatory synonyms

The third problem can be seen in the above-cited example of how *queer* is defined in two EJLDs. While Dictionary E is not misleading, as it has a label, ((PC)) before *homosexual* and *gay*, contrasting the offensiveness of the headword with political correctness, Dictionary C can be misleading as the relation between the headword and the non-derogatory word *gay* given at the end in round brackets is not transparent to users, and they might see the two words as simply interchangeable. The practice of providing unmarked synonyms can also be observed in the entry for *dike/dyke*. The column 'synonyms/notes' in table 1 above shows Dictionaries D and E give *lesbian* as a synonym for *dike/dyke* without any labels.

3.4 Causes of failed descriptions

The main reason behind the careless – or less careful – choices and arrangements of Japanese translation equivalents found in EJLDs that we have illustrated may be low awareness of the issues relating to sexuality in Japanese society. While obvious sexism and gender stereotyping in language has been taken seriously as we have observed in the previous sections, terms related to sexuality or sexual orientations have been left unaddressed. We could say that in heteronormative Japanese society, descriptions of non-normative sexuality are often hidden and not discussed or understood, and EJLDs simply reflect this situation. Yet, as pointed out earlier in the introduction, dictionaries carry authority, and have responsibility for guiding their users to socio-linguistic awareness. Heteronormativity is also observed in translation equivalents or lexical descriptions of words and expressions that relate to a romantic/sexual relationship. It is often someone of the opposite sex that one *goes out with*, *flirts with* or *makes advances to*, and a *couple* is typically translated in EJLDs first as a pair of a man and a woman. On the other hand, it is not defined as an exclusively heterosexual relationship in monolingual learner's dictionaries: for example, "two people who are married or who have a romantic or sexual relationship", in *Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary*.⁵ This can be seen as another sign of the lack of sensitivity regarding non-normative sexualities in EJLDs.

4 Suggestions for Improvement

In terms of dealing with insulting or offensive language in a monolingual dictionary, Atkins and Rundell (2008: 425) state that:

A dictionary owes it to its users to give a clear account of the sensitivities that attach to a given word or expression, and the need is especially acute in the case of dictionaries for learners. Users may have different

⁵ <http://www.learnersdictionary.com>

socio-cultural norms from those of the speech community they aspire to communicate with, and a good definition is one that will help them avoid embarrassment.

In the previous sections we have pointed out careless descriptions in some EJLDs that may possibly cause “embarrassment” (or tense situations), and this section will discuss how to minimize dictionary-oriented miscommunication. A good “definition” in the above quote can be replaced by (a set of) equivalent(s) or explanation in the case of a bilingual dictionary.

First of all, considering the low awareness and resulting linguistic insensitivity observed in current EJLDs, the most important step is to design a clear, coherent policy about how to describe words related to gender and sexuality, especially derogatory words which often do not have exact counterparts in Japanese. Svensén (2009: 273) argues that when there are no exact translation equivalents available and approximate expressions are used instead, “[i]t is then necessary to give some kind of supplementary explanation, or at least indicate that the counterpart proposed is an approximate one.” One such supplementary device is usage notes to warn users against (casually) using headwords. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 6th edition (2014) gives a warning “Don’t use this word.” at the end of definition of a headword labelled *taboo*. As well as labels such as *derogatory* and *insulting*, notes or symbols to draw serious attention from users might be necessary in EJLDs. Another useful means is cross-reference to non-derogatory or politically correct terms, as it clearly shows that users are advised not to use headwords, but the words they are directed to. However, non-derogatory words should not be carelessly placed together with a derogatory headword as synonyms in order to avoid misapprehension. Some scheme to distinguish derogatory translation equivalents from non-derogatory ones would be beneficial. An interesting approach found in *Progressive English-Japanese Dictionary*, 5th edition (2012) is to place single quotations alongside stylistically marked expressions (see examples below). The words shown in quotations are highly offensive (English translation is given below the original Japanese).

nigger

((侮蔑的)) 黒人, 「黒んぼ」 ...

((*derogatory*)) black person, ‘nigger’ ...

whitey

((米略式・軽蔑的)) 白人, 「白んぼ」 ...

((*American informal, derogatory*)) white person, ‘whitey’ ...

As EJLDs are replete with detailed explanations about usage and helpful hints about appropriate word choice in terms of the description of sexist/racist terms, the language of gender and sexuality should receive similar attention so that it will be represented much better than is currently the case.

5 Conclusion

Since the late 1980s, a great deal of effort has been made to eliminate sexism and gender stereotyping found in EJLDs, and sexist terms are systematically treated with labels and usage notes provided when necessary. On the other hand, terms related to sexuality or sexual orientations have received little attention from lexicographers and are described often in inappropriate or possibly misleading ways. This may be considered as a reflection of dominant heteronormativity in Japanese society. In order not to reproduce discrimination against sexual and gender minorities, immediate improvements should be made by introducing more careful and systematic ways of treating such words with clear

policies. It is the responsibility of lexicographers of learner's dictionaries to raise socio-linguistic awareness of Japanese learners of English.

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