



Prime Minister Suga, Gender Equality and Rapport Speech: A Study of Speech Style

Shoji Azuma¹

¹ Department of World Languages and Cultures, University of Utah, USA

Abstract

Issues related to gender equality have been widely and globally discussed in settings such as politics, education, healthcare and the workplace, among others. In Japan, the Japanese government has been working very hard to increase the number of women involved in Japanese politics, with minimal progress to date. The present prime minister of Japan, Yoshihide Suga, has intentionally sought to bring attention to this issue. He has, for the first time, selected a female cabinet relations chief for his government. His appointment of a female to this post is unprecedented. Unfortunately, due to a recent ethical code violation by the newly appointed female appointee and role model of female leadership in Japan, he felt constrained to accept her resignation from the post. The present study explores Prime Minister Suga's treatment of this gender-related issue by examining his personal interviews with the media and press reporters in his cabinet. The study finds that Suga falls short of adopting an emotive and rapport style of speech which in turn, fails to attract listeners' and voters' support.

Keywords: Emotion, Gender, Rapport, Speech style, Japan

1. Introduction

Since the post-war period, Japan has been trying to address the controversial issue of gender roles in Japanese society. One particular focus has targeted the state of women in politics and government at the national and local levels. However, governmental efforts to boost the number of female politicians has run into long-entrenched attitudes and practices that make the task very difficult to accomplish.

An example of such entrenchment can be observed in a recent incident involving the Tokyo Olympics, set to take place this year. Yoshiro Mori, president of the Tokyo Olympic organizing committee, surprised the Japanese populace when he resigned over sexist comments attributed to him. Mori, age 83, a former prime minister of Japan, openly stated that some women cause meetings to run too long by talking too much (February 3, 2021). Mori's resignation followed unrelenting international as well as domestic criticism of his sexist remarks, further complicating Japan's efforts to carry out the postponed Olympic Games amid a raging pandemic. The International Olympic Committee, which had previously called the incident "closed" after Mori's own apology, called his remarks "absolutely inappropriate." This incident highlights the sensitive and serious implications surrounding the issue of gender equality and how it is viewed currently in Japan as well as in other nations. Mori later suggested that he did not agree with the criticism levied against him. He stated "I didn't mean it in that way, although it was said to be discrimination against women" (New York Times 2021). Nevertheless, a recent poll shows that more than half of the Japanese people believed that Mori is no longer qualified to lead the Olympics.

2. Makiko Yamada

Other politicians in Japan have been more supportive on gender equality issues when compared to Mori. For example, the former prime minister, Shinzo Abe was very enthusiastic about appointing a female officer to his government. In fact, he was the first prime minister to appoint a female senior bureaucrat Makiko Yamada as his official secretary (2013). At the time of the appointment, Yamada, a 53-year-old former vice minister at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, played a major role in promoting the status of women in a very "male-dominated" political arena. Yamada, a graduate of the highly respected Waseda University in Tokyo, started her government career in 1984 at the former Posts and Telecommunications Ministry.

In 2020, Abe's successor, the new prime minister Yoshihide Suga, appointed Yamada to be cabinet public relations chief, the first time this position had ever been occupied by a female. Yamada became quite active in her role moderating all press conferences as the main representative for prime minister Suga's administration.

Yet Yamada's reputation was soon tarnished when it was discovered that she attended a luxury dinner in 2019 with Seigo Suga, the eldest son of prime minister Suga. This action constituted a violation of the national public service ethics code. The code prohibits government employees from receiving gifts or entertainment from companies or individuals. The dinner, valued at 74000 yen (\$700), was paid for by the Toohoku Shinsha film company, and Seigo Suga is a shareholder of the company. Later, in a Diet House of Representatives' Budget Committee meeting, Yamada was asked to respond to the allegations. In the meeting, Yamada expressed regret for her actions saying "I apologize for damaging the public trust in civil servants due to the violation of the ethics code while I was at the communications ministry." She added, "I want to improve myself as much as possible... while I continue to serve in my post." In other words, she made it clear she did not intend to resign despite her violation of the ethics code.

Prime minister Suga as well as his government officials supported her decision. Suga stated, "I have high hopes for her as a female public relations official." Yamada argued that she did not warrant a reprimand since she had already retired from the ministry when the dinner occurred and the code does not apply to individuals who are granted a special status in a government post (which she held as public relations chief for Suga's administration). Although Yamada's explanation may have been accepted by some, the public as well as political opposition leaders increased pressure against Suga's administration amid the growing scandals related to the Tokyo Olympics and the coronavirus pandemic. According to Kyodo News (2021), one former cabinet member commented that "It's a remarkable chain of negative events. If public discontent continues to grow, it will no longer be a laughing matter." Possibly due to these negative attitudes, Yamada finally decided to resign explaining she was unable to carry out her duties, citing her two-week hospitalization for an illness. Details of her sickness were not given. Suga finally accepted Yamada's resignation.

Subsequently, Suga made an official statement stating "I am truly sorry that the cabinet public relations chief has come to resign her post at such an extremely important time in Diet deliberations, inconveniencing the Diet members and the citizens" (Suga 2021). Many officials voiced surprise and regret over the departure of Yamada, who is viewed by many as a leading figure for women's empowerment.

Notably, prior to Yamada's resignation, Suga had been scheduled to speak to the public at a regular press conference (*kisha kaiken*) to discuss the pandemic as well as other political issues. However, after Yamada's resignation occurred, Suga suddenly replaced the press conference with a more informal meeting (*burasagari-kaiken*). This change prompted speculation that the Suga administration was trying to "shield" Yamada from inquiries about her involvement in the scandal (e.g., Jiji News 2021, Nishi Nippon Shinbun 2021, Zenkoku Shinbun Net 2021), and potentially the negative impact on Seigo Suga, the prime minister's son, and his role in the conflict-of-interest story. The informal meeting (*burasagari-kaiken*) surprisingly continued for more than 20 minutes in an exchange between Suga and the media journalists.

In the present study, I will examine this 20-minute exchange and discuss the interactions between Suga and the media. I will limit my focus to the subject matter regarding Yamada, although the meeting addressed other issues. My analysis is primarily based on the information provided by *Suga shushoo no burasagari kaiken shoosai* (Sankei Shinbun 2021a). Did Yamada's resignation take the wind out of Suga's sails? Were Suga's responses persuasive? Did the gender equality related controversy prove to be a stumbling block for Suga's administration? Could the ethics violation blunt any momentum toward a more favorable perception of the administration?

3. Press conference/exchange

3.1. Suga avoids and redirects media questions

Prime minister Suga held an informal exchange called *burasagari kaiken* with the media. This interview style has sometimes occurred in the past in Japan, most notably with the former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi (e.g., Japan National Press Club 2002). The phrase translates to English as a "hanging interview" or doorstep interview in which reporters surround a public figure and prod him for an off-the-cuff response. It is not in any way a formal press conference, but because of the informality, reporters are often able to observe raw, unrehearsed ideas and opinions from public figures and politicians.

Interestingly, the analysis of the exchange seems to suggest that Suga speaks to the media and the public in his own stylized manner. In short, he uses a "speaker-oriented style" rather than "listener- or addressee-oriented style." To put this differently, Suga seems to speak for himself rather than speaking to the addressee. He often avoids answering questions from the media in a clear and convincing manner.

Let us examine the informal exchange or *burasagari kaiken* with the media which happened at the official residence (*kantei*) of the prime minister in Tokyo on the 26th of February, 2021. After briefly discussing the lift of the COVID-19 state of emergency, Suga was directly asked about the issue of Ms. Yamada, who, at the time

of the interview, was still the public relations chief for the government. I will examine the details of the exchange along with its original Japanese with its English translation.

(1)

Reporter: *Kinkyuu jitai sengen no roku fuken kaijyo to iu jyuudai na kettei o shita nimo kakawarazu, naze kyoo kishakaiken o okonawanakatta no deshoo ka. Koogaku settai o uketa Yamada naikaku koohookan no mondai ga eikyoo shitanode shoo ka.*

Even though you declared the lift of the state of emergency over the six prefectures, why didn't you hold the expected (formal) press conference today? Is this related to the problem of secretary Yamada's (unacceptable) expensive dinner meeting?

The lift of the state of emergency is a critical and dramatic event which the entire population of the country awaited. Therefore, it had been expected that the prime minister would speak to the media and the public at a "formal" press conference on this topic. However, unexpectedly, prime minister Suga changed plans and held a very informal exchange (*burasagari kaiken*) with the media instead. Facing this direct question from the media about the change in format, how did Suga respond to them? Observe what Suga said in the exchange in (2).

(2)

Suga: *Mazu Yamada koohookan no koto wa mattaku kankei ga arimasen. Gen ni sakujitsu kokkai de tooben sarete kita koto mo jijitsu jya naide shoo ka.*

First of all, this has completely nothing to do with secretary Yamada. To be clear, it is a fact that Yamada already attended the Diet session and responded to the various questions at the meeting, didn't she?

Although the above reply may appear to be adequate on its face, Suga's response failed to consider his audience in at least two ways. First, the declaration of the state of emergency is a tremendously important issue for the entire nation. When compared with other nations, we can see that a prime minister or president usually speaks directly and clearly to the public on this topic, using his or her own personal expression, carefully selecting words, and doing so enthusiastically and with "passion." This was the case with many countries such as Germany, France, and Great Britain. Yet, prime minister Suga unexpectedly downplayed the huge event as if it were an informal occasion. As shown above, Suga responded to the media's question by saying that the abrupt change from the formal to informal press conference/exchange had no relation to the issue of Yamada. The audience is left wondering why Suga changed from the formal national event style press conference to an informal, almost social "gathering" event instead. Simply put, Suga avoided answering this question. Interestingly, Suga used the clarifying word of *mattaku* (completely) as in *mattaku kankei ga arimasen* (completely has nothing to do). This extremely clear statement vividly indicates Suga's overwhelmingly strong confidence about his statement.

Second, we need to focus on his use of the sentence-final expression of *naide shoo ka* (didn't she?) This takes the form of a negative question. Instead of simply stating his words/phrases in an expected positive style, Suga seems to have a habit of using a negative interrogative style, which indicates the speaker is negatively, yet "positively" expressing his opinion in a culturally appropriate and polite manner. In other words, Suga was indirectly leading the audience to the fact that Yamada indeed appeared in the Diet session. What is the end result? The answer is Suga was successful in "redirecting" the audience to a different topic (the Diet session), and was able to avoid the original question of why he changed the format of the press conference from formal to informal. Short and brief, Suga's answer shows that he did not respond to the original question in an expected straightforward manner, but used his own negative interrogative manner to deflect the question while still maintaining his own style of confidence in using polite Japanese grammar.

3.2. Suga abstains from a formal press conference

In the press conference/exchange, Suga was asked again about the importance of holding the meeting and speaking directly to the general public. Observe how he responded to the media. First, examine the question itself in (3), which is followed by Suga's reply in (4).

(3)

Reporter: *Soori. Kisha kaiken ni tsuite oukagai shimasu. Sakihodo, taisaku honbu demo aratani desu ne, kokumin ni taisuru onegai o shite orimasu. Jitan desu toka, kansen booshi eno onegai o shite orimasu. Souuu koto ni kotaeru tameni wa, kokumi no gimon ni mazu kotaenakya ikenai to omoundesu ga, sore demo kyoo kaiken o yaranakatta koto de, kyoo kaiken o yarazu to mo kokumin no kyooroku o erareru to omoi de shoo ka.*

Prime minister. I have a question about the press conference. You asked the Japanese people to help solve the pandemic. For example, you asked about time saving and infection prevention. In order to deal with these issues, don't you think you need to first speak to the public directly by responding to their various questions? But you did

not hold a regular press conference. Do you think you can receive support from the general public without holding a formal press conference?

The question from the reporter is quite simple. It very clearly asks for a reply from Suga, and asks whether Suga can receive support from the public without holding a formal press conference (which would be broadcast live to the public). Let us see how Suga replies.

(4)

Suga: *Kyoo kooshite burasagari kaiken o yatte irun jya nai deshoo ka. Sakihido wa masani nihon zentai no mitooshi o meikaku ni mooshiageru koto ga dekiru yoona jyootai no naka de koko wa kaiken o okonau beki da to iu fuu ni omotte orimasu.*

Today, as you may know, I have been holding this informal doorstep interview, don't you think so? As I said before, I think I will hold a formal press conference when I have all of the information regarding the entire national situation as a whole.

As initially stated, Suga considers the *burasagari kaiken* or doorstep interview as enough and a more formal press conference as unnecessary (which was originally planned and expected from the media). He assumes the *burasagari kaiken* (doorstep interview) is sufficient to garner support from the general public. Curiously, he ends his statement again with the negative interrogative style.

It's interesting to note that prime minister Suga's approval ratings have not been increasing. His ratings continue to stay very low around 40%, which is not ideal for any prime minister in power. He seems to assume that he will hold a formal press conference when the pandemic is over in Japan, which to date is uncertain. Many Japanese citizens will likely view Suga's informal exchange with the media as insufficient. It appears that Suga may not fully appreciate the significant difference between an informal exchange with the media and a formal press conference. This vague yet crucial question was actually raised by a reporter who asked it in a polite manner. Let us observe his question and Suga's answer in segment (5) and (6) below.

(5)

Reporter: *Seishiki na kisha kaiken to koo itta burasagari no shuzai no chigai to wa dooiu fuu ni okangae, nani ga ichiban ii to omoi masu ka.*

What do you think the major difference between the formal press conference and the present doorstep interview, and furthermore, which style do you think is the best style for the present situation?

Unexpectedly, and in a very straightforward manner, the reporter asked the question directly to Suga. How did Suga respond? The answer was amazingly simple. Observe what Suga said to the reporter in (6).

(6)

Suga: *Sore wa minasan ga kangaeru koto jya nai desu ka.*

Isn't that what you all think about, isn't it?

This is a very simple yet surprisingly terse reply by a prime minister. In short, Suga did not respond to the question at all. In essence, he said "you media people" can think about it (but not me!). And again, as he often does, Suga responded using a negative interrogative (isn't it?) to show his over-exaggerated politeness.

In the Chinese Confucius tradition, there is a well known expression which says *koogen reishoku sukunashi jin*. This means fine words and flattering looks lack sincerity. Suga's reply is far beyond this mark of even fine words. Put simply, Suga's lack of response to the question is quite nonsensical. Suga may occasionally be over confident and may not listen to what others say about him, but even this reply exceeds the usual boundaries of discourtesy and insincerity seen in recent years in Japanese political speech.

Finally, another reporter asked another question regarding Suga's availability for answering more questions in the session. Suga, in the past, has been known for stopping the session due to time constraints. Observe the final question in the meeting in (7).

(7)

Reporter: *Soori. Suimasen. Kondo no kaiken de wa saigo made shitsumon too uchikiri naku, okotae itadakerun de shoo ka.*

Prime minister. I am sorry. In this meeting, are you going to reply to all of our questions without any interruption?

Because of past experience with Suga abruptly closing the interview exchange, the reporter wanted to make sure that Suga would stay in the room and answer all the reporters' questions. Again, Suga's reply was surprising and straightforward. Observe his statement in (8).

(8)

Suga: *Iya, watashi mo jikan ga arimasu kara. Demo daitai minasan detsukushite irun jya nai de shoo ka? Sakihodo kara onaji shitsumon bakkari jya nai de shoo ka. Yoroshii de shoo ka.*

Well, I have my own time schedule. I feel you have asked all the questions you might want to ask. You have asked the same questions over and over again, haven't you? Thank you.

Essentially, Suga rejected the reporter's question and answered "no" to him. Suga thought the same questions were being repeated by various reporters and, therefore, there was no reason to continue the meeting. Suga again ends his reply with the negative interrogative style, and, at that point, he voluntarily stopped the exchange and the entire media meeting ended for the day. Suga appeared exhausted, although it was expected that the meeting could be a successful political event for him as the prime minister. But the media and general public seemed to be disappointed with the final outcome.

4. Discussion

Prime minister Suga was very popular when selected as the prime minister in 2020. Given that he was born and raised in the countryside of the remote Akita prefecture, Suga has done very well as a politician. For example, he was the longest serving chief cabinet secretary and a very trusted government employee under former prime minister Abe. Suga has maintained a rigorous political agenda addressing issues such as de-regulation, social My Number System (a number for all citizens used for taxation, social security and disaster response purposes), digitalization, green energy, climate change, decarbonisation, deoxidation, among a number of others. Many of these have received wide support from the general public. When Suga became the prime minister in 2020, his approval rating was remarkably high, over 66%, and he was indeed a popular prime minister (Japan Times 2020).

However, his approval ratings have dropped to between 30% and 40% over the past several months (Asahi Shinbun 2021). Nevertheless, Suga does not have strong contenders from his political party or the opposition parties, and he appears to be maintaining his prime minister position for now. One of the reasons he is not able to sustain his high approval ratings may be tied to the way he speaks to the public and the media.

There are various methods to improve talking styles so a politician can attract listeners and voters in order to gain their support. Various linguists, cognitive scientists, communication specialists and sociolinguists have studied how "language" is defined and used. For example, Lakoff (2009:15) has stated that "language gets its power because it is defined relative to frames, prototypes, metaphors, narratives, images, and emotions." With regard to Suga's speech style, it seems that the issues of narratives and emotions may be the most relevant. Lakoff has suggested that a speaker should go beyond the simple "facts, truth, and logic." Further, he states that "**emotion** is central to legitimate political persuasion." This line of analysis has also been observed in Lim (2008: 6) who examined "partisan punch lines, and emotional and human interest appeals" in his speech study of past U.S. presidents.

Similarly, expanding her conversational analysis, Tannen (2007, 46) argues that "emotion and cognition are inseparable. Understanding is facilitated, even enabled, by an **emotional experience of interpersonal involvement**." She emphasizes the fundamental importance of "emotion" in our understanding of anybody's speech. In what she calls "involvement strategies," Tannen (2007: 32) points out several well-known strategies such as "repetition, dialogue, and imagery and detail." In other words, all of these strategies help a speaker improve conversational skills in order to actively attract, in the case of politicians, the voters' attention. Given these concrete involvement strategies, if we examine Suga's speech in the exchange/conference of the present study, we can conclude that none of the strategies were actively used in Suga's replies. Nothing was clearly repeated. No dialogue was involved. No details were given -- quite the contrary. Suga ignored the media reporters' **emotion**, and no specific information, facts, and truth were even conveyed to them. In the end, both Suga and the media reporters felt dissatisfied and no "**interpersonal involvement**" was achieved. From a different perspective, we realize that Suga obviously needs a "rapport" (or sympathy) talking style which focuses on emotion, rather than a "report" talking style which focuses on conveying facts and information (Tannen 1991).

For example, in (5), Suga was asked a very fundamental question regarding the difference between the expected formal press conference and the present *burasagari* (doorstep) meeting. Suga's abrupt reply simply rejected the question and inferred that the answer should come from the media people themselves. As we see, no details were given at all. And no explanation, analogy or dialogue were given. In the end, Suga completely ignored the questions from the press, wholly circumventing any possibility for interpersonal involvement or an emotional experience. Suga entirely failed to use any involvement strategies during the conference/exchange.

5. Conclusion

It is encouraging that prime minister Suga has shown signs of supporting gender equality (unlike former president of the Tokyo Olympic organizing committee Yoshiro Mori's scandalous remarks) by appointing Makiko Yamada as his public relations chief. However, in his recent informal *burasagari* meeting, Suga's speech style is too distant from the speech style of what Tannen (2007) described as "involvement strategies," and he consequently falls short of adopting an emotive and rapport style of speech which in turn, fails to attract listeners' and his voters' support. Perhaps this is the most fundamental failure of the informal meeting. Suga may be doing well in "report" talking style by conveying facts and information, given that he was a successful chief cabinet secretary under the former Abe administration. However, Suga is now the prime minister of Japan whose job is far more demanding in

attracting voters in an "emotional" way. A prime minister is expected to go beyond the role of "report" style and move to a "rapport" style (as well as "report" style) if he or she wants to gain the support of his constituents. Sankei Shinbun (2021b), a highly respected daily newspaper in Japan, argues that Suga needs to be more proactive in his speech. The newspaper states "We hope that our prime minister should use easy to understand emotional expressions with respect to what will happen and how we will deal with the issue of COVID-19. It is time for us to see a strong message from the prime minister to indicate what our short-term and mid-term goals are, and to show what we believe will surely assist other people under this pandemic."

In the end, we must wait to see how prime minister Suga proceeds and whether he is able to move from a "report" (information) speech style to a "rapport" (emotion) speech style. Tazaki (2021), one of the highly respected political specialists in Japan makes the following statement: "Humans are the operating force in politics. And it is **emotion** which moves humans. Politicians activate human emotion to gain their support, and this use of emotion is the fundamental principle for any politician." This concept of "emotion" will likely play an important role in the success of Japanese prime minister Suga in the years to come.

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