

*Eating, Chatting, and Talking Back: Japanese Modern Schoolgirls' Agency
in the Early Twentieth Century*

Yu Umehara, University of Tsukuba, Japan

The IAFOR International Conference on Arts & Humanities in Hawaii 2022
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

The eyes are important interpretive tools when analyzing modern schoolgirls of the early twentieth century. Scholars in the field of girlhood, such as Kan Satoko, have pointed out that modern Japanese girls' culture is characterized by sentimentality. The eye, an organ that exudes tears, has many symbolic meanings in the modern subgenre of girls' novels. Illustrations show luminous brown eyes filled with tears. According to Takeda Shiho, girls' tears often signify nostalgia, sorrow, and lament over the loss of their female friends in novels in girls' magazines. This study focuses on another body part that carries a symbolic valence: schoolgirls' mouths, which are contested terrain. I argue that schoolgirls' mouths, or rather their use of the organ, serve as a potential instrument for social change in girls' culture. This paper offers a reading of the "speaking mouth" and the "eating mouth" of schoolgirls in girls' novels and illustrations in schoolgirls' magazines such as *Shojo Gaho* [Girls' Pictorial] and the satirical magazine *Marumaru Chimbun* [Comic Paper]. Schoolgirls create a unique language that is used only by them. They also eat out and chat while eating—an act contrasted with feeding children and husbands at home. They are audacious enough to talk back to their parents and teachers. By interpreting schoolgirls' eating and talking mouths, this study demonstrates how they function as an emblem of struggle against the traditional (and patriarchal) norm and reclaim control over their own bodies.

Keywords: Gender Studies, Girlhood Studies, Japanese Studies

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Introduction

The eyes are important interpretive tools when analyzing modern schoolgirls in the early twentieth century. Scholars in the field of girlhood have pointed out that the modern Japanese girls' culture is characterized by sentimentality. The eye, an organ that exudes tears, has many symbolic meanings in the modern subgenre of girls' novels.¹ Illustrations show luminous brown eyes filled with tears. In one scholar's account, in novels of nostalgia, sorrow, and lament over the loss of female friends, tears are important factors supporting girls' novels.²

This study focuses on another body part that carries a symbolic valence: schoolgirls' mouths, which are contested terrain. I argue that schoolgirls' mouths, or rather their use of the organ, serve as a potential instrument for social change in girls' culture. This paper discusses the "speaking mouth" and the "eating mouth" of schoolgirls in girls' novels and illustrations in schoolgirls' magazines such as *Shojo Gaho* [Girls' Pictorial] and the satirical magazine *Marumaru Chimbun* [Comic Paper]. Schoolgirls create a unique language that is used only by them. They also eat out and chat while eating—an act contrasted with feeding children and husbands at home. They are audacious enough to talk back to their parents and teachers. By reading the representations of schoolgirls' mouths that eat and talk, this study demonstrates how they function as a site of struggle against the traditional (and patriarchal) norms, allowing girls to reclaim control over their own bodies.

Eating Girls

In her book *Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century* (2012), Kyla Wazana Tompkins insightfully discusses how the act of eating negotiates the dynamics of power, racial privilege, and racial anxiety in nineteenth-century American literature and culture. Eating and digesting simultaneously reinforce and undermine the boundary between the self and others based on differences.³ However, in early twentieth-century Japanese schoolgirl culture, eating and digestion operate differently from nineteenth-century America. I would suggest that they significantly helped reshape and threaten the patriarchal system at the same time.

In Japan, under the patriarchal feudal system, it is important for the family to eat breakfasts and dinners at the same table.⁴ However, in the Meiji era, when the Japanese government aimed to increase national power and modernize the country by following Western countries, educators began to promote the idea of children having snacks between meals as nutritional supplements, cautioning that otherwise children would be in poor shape. They warned teachers in elementary schools that forbidding pupils from having snacks would lead to poor health, so snacking at fixed times and in fixed quantities should be encouraged.⁵ The results were different for female students. They needed more precaution than encouragement because females, irrespective of the difference in social status, tend to eat snacks more than

¹ Watanabe, S. (2008). Saffo no Manazashi—Hanamonogatari to Sashie [The Eyes of Sappho: A Tale of Flowers and Illustrations], K. Satoko (Ed.), *Shōjo shōsetsu wandārando: Meiji kara Heisei made* [Girls' novels wonderland]. Tokyo: Meiji Shoin. 104-113.

² Takeda, S. (2014). Yoshiya Nobuko Kenkyu [The Research of Yoshiya Nobuko] (Doctoral thesis, Gakushuin University, Tokyo, Japan). Retrieved from <http://hdl.handle.net/10959/3449>

³ Tompkins, K. (2012). *Racial indigestion: eating bodies in the 19th century*. New York: New York University Press.

⁴ Sakai, K. (1902). *Katei no Shin-fumi* [New Tastes of Home]. Tokyo: Naigai-shuppan-kyokai, 357-361.

⁵ Shoni no Kanshoku [Snack and Children]. (1893). *Katei Zasshi* [Home Magazine], 28-29.

they need, and their eating habits should be corrected by regular diets that contain protein.⁶ In the Meiji era, snacking was justified only for nutrition in order to maintain and improve health.

Schoolgirls were rebellious in snacking by choosing what and where they liked to eat. Indeed, snacking was something that schoolgirls did together on the street in public, rather than at the table at home or at school. By eating, they deviated from the gender norms prescribed by the patriarchal society. Inevitably, schoolgirls' eating snacks became an object of ridicule in magazines as unfeminine and "un-girlish." *Marumaru Chimbun*, a satirical magazine read by adults, carried a cartoon of schoolgirls eating at a food stall in town.⁷ Street stalls typically sell fast food to working-class people. The signboard of the stall indicates that they sold tempura. Tempura sold at stalls was initially fast food for mainly working-class men from the Edo era, so the schoolgirl of the middle class eating at a food stall was "inappropriate" as a violation of gender and class norms. Schoolgirls were expected to become good wives and wise mothers who teach their children table manners at home. Hence, schoolgirls—most of them from the middle class—should not eat at street stalls. The magazine also carried cartoons in which schoolgirls drink alcohol and smoke cigarettes.^{8,9} In the Meiji era, smoking increasingly became a male activity, so schoolgirls smoking meant disobeying gender norms. Drinking was also a luxury and privilege for men. In July 1912, when feminists drank alcohol at a bar, the public criticized their invasion of the male-gendered sphere. Since both alcohol and cigarettes were primarily men's goods, the schoolgirls depicted in the cartoons violated female gender norms. This way, newspapers created an association between "eating" and "schoolgirls." They ridiculed schoolgirls' uncontrolled eating habits as a crisis of femininity.

On the other hand, girls' magazines tell different stories about their new eating habits. Schoolgirls had breakfasts and dinners at home but enjoyed having snacks away from the family table and without family members. As indicated above, snacks have become an issue in children's education. Educators encouraged children to have the right snack at the right time, but they criticized the female habit of eating snacks as problematic and suggested that it be regulated because snacks interfere with their appetite for meals. They believed that girls tended to snack too much. Girls reportedly secretly steamed sweet potatoes in their dormitory room despite prohibitions.¹⁰ Female magazines—unlike satirical magazines—did not depict schoolgirls eating uncontrollably. Instead, they recommended cooking snacks. On the surface, magazines promoted cooking snacks as a female practice. *Fujin no Tomo* [Female's Friend], for instance, introduced recipes that even young schoolgirls could cook.¹¹ Cooking snacks encouraged schoolgirls to learn about the female role in the patriarchal system. However, it is important to note that they did not cook snacks for men but for their female friends and themselves to eat together, that is, not out of the love of men but for female bonding.

⁶ Wassyama, Y. (1908). Shukan ni Torawaretaru Fuji no Kanshoku [Female's Bad Habit of Having Snack]. *Fujin Kurabu* [Ladies' Club], vol. 1, no. 1, 39-42.

⁷ Jogakusei no Tachigui [Schoolgirl Eating Standing]. (1895). *Marumaru Chimbun* [Comic Paper], no. 1023, 13.

⁸ Jogakusei, Sake o Nomu [Schoolgirl Drinking Alcohol]. (1895). *Marumaru Chimbun* [Comic Paper], no. 1024, 7.

⁹ Jogakusei to Tabako [Schoolgirl Smoking Cigarettes]. (1895) *Marumaru Chimbun* [Comic Paper], no. 1022, 14.

¹⁰ Wassyama, Y. (1908) Shukan ni Torawaretaru Fuji no Kanshoku [Female's Bad Habit of Having Snack]. *Fujin Kurabu* [Ladies' Club], vol. 1, no. 1, 39-42.

¹¹ Kodomo ni Dekiru Oyatsu no Tsukurikata [Recipes of Snacks for Children]. (1914). *Fujin no Tomo* [Female's Friend], vol. 8, no. 8, 138-139.

Novels in girls' magazines describe how romantic friendships between schoolgirls emerge through snacking. In the schoolgirls' imaginary realm in magazines, eating snacks together is a metaphor for schoolgirls' relationships. For instance, a photography novella titled "A liquid snack" in *Girls' Pictorial* highlights a scene in which five schoolgirls chat while having snacks in one girl's house.¹² In another photography novella, "Noji no Hana," two girls from different social statuses deepen their friendships by having the same snack.¹³ In a tale titled *Hamanadeshiko* [*Dianthus japonicus*] in *Hanamonogatari* [Flower Tales], a milestone of girls' novels by Yoshiya Nobuko, ice cream plays an important role in informing readers that two girls are in a special friendship.¹⁴ The two heroines, Masumi and Hosojima-san, dream of having a large and delicious ice cream together in Hawaii. However, they could not go to Hawaii together to settle there, and Hosojima-san had to leave Masumi for family reasons. Before they part, they have ice cream at Hosojima-san's home together instead of having it in Hawaii. This eating scene can be read as a ritual of painful separation. Eating together in a girls' realm is a metaphor for romantic friendships between schoolgirls. It does not reinforce gender norms based on a patriarchal system in which women typically cook for men to eat. Additionally, snacking is different from having a meal with one's family at home. Schoolgirls' culture in magazines and novels thus significantly created the grammar of eating and encoded meanings that only schoolgirl readers could decipher.

Girls' Chatting

Interestingly, schoolgirls in the Meiji era literally created a language used only among themselves, called "teyo-dawa kotoba," or the "teyo-dawa" language, because of their frequent use of characteristic sentence-final particles, including "teyo" and "dawa." Scholars have traditionally identified the "teyo-dawa" language as schoolgirl speech and examined how speech was used and what it expressed. Nakamura Momoko states that "teyo-dawa kotoba" made schoolgirls an object based on the male gaze and was used to separate the people of the nation into binary genders.¹⁵ Honda suggests the importance of the language of female students, saying that by using a special language, they showed that they were not set in tradition.¹⁶ They criticized the use of the speech as something good women should avoid in public but remarked that the speech was performative; that is, even a schoolgirl can make the speech. Male writers, for instance, used speech to create schoolgirl characters, and male students wrote love letters to schoolgirls, pretending to be schoolgirls using the speech.

My interest is not so much in the speech style of sentence-final particles as in the terms coined by schoolgirls. Their terms were codes shared only among schoolgirls, originating from physical and language education at school. The invention of a new language—rather than the traditional Japanese language they were taught to use—made their speaking (mouths) both modern and rebellious. Samples of such terms can be found in magazines for schoolgirls, particularly the readers' columns in the magazine *Jogaku Sekai* [the World of Women's Learning] (1901–1925). According to historian Kawamura Kunimitsu, English was an important source of inspiration to build schoolgirls' language and their "imagined

¹² Ekitai no Okashi [A Liquid Snack]. (1917). *Shojo Gaho* [Girls' Pictorial], vol. 6, no. 1.

¹³ "Noji no Hana [Flowers in the Glass]. (1913). *Shojo Gaho* [Girls' Pictorial], vol. 2, no. 10.

¹⁴ Yoshiya, N. (2009). *Hanamonogatari* [Flower Tales]. Tokyo: Kawade Shobo.

¹⁵ Nakamura, M. (2007) *Onna-kotoba wa Tsukurareru* [The Process of Being Invented Female Gendered Language]. Tokyo: Hitsuji-shobo. 127-128.

¹⁶ Honda, M. (1990). *Jogakusei no Keifu: Saishikisareru Meiji* [Geneology of Schoolgirls: Colored Meiji Era]. Tokyo: Seidosha. 129-130.

community.”¹⁷ In *Makaze Koikaze* (a tragic love story of schoolgirls and male students serialized in the *Yomiuri newspaper* in 1903), the heroine pronounces 愛 [love] as “Rabu” using quasi-English pronunciation instead of Japanese pronunciation, “Ai.” Thus, English served as a code for romantic friendships between schoolgirls who learned English in the school curriculum. From the beginning of the twentieth century, they invented vocabulary used only by themselves. In Ochanomizu Girls’ School, students called being scolded by teachers “Genman” [ten-thousands fists]. In Peeresses’ School, the students called going to the toilet “monosuru” [doing]. Students in Toyo Eiwa Jogakko Girls’ School called eating baked sweet potato snacks “Oinori” [Praying].¹⁸ According to a *Girls’ Pictorial* article in 1926, the unique vocabulary that schoolgirls used in their school lives borrowed words not only from English but also from German and Korean.¹⁹ For instance, girls used “Danke” (“thanks” in German) and called their female teachers “Dante” (“aunt” in German) behind their back. Nappun-Sarami, which means “bad people” and “Yanpan” which means “the rich” in Korean were introduced as schoolgirls’ jargon. Moreover, some terms that schoolgirls invented as codes among themselves were derived from a Western sport, tennis. In this tennis-inflected terminology, “receiver” means being beloved by someone, and “lob,” which in tennis means hitting the ball high into the other’s court, means getting along. By creating a new linguistic culture, they drew a boundary between inside and outside, between being a schoolgirl and a father’s daughter, subverting the patriarchal norm and order of the nation, and refusing to be co-opted into the system in which they were forced to be good wives and wise mothers.

Conclusion

As discussed, eating and speaking mouths are representations of schoolgirls’ actions. They function as apparatus to question patriarchal gender norms and make the category of schoolgirls exclusively their own. Representations of the mouth tell us about schoolgirls who grudgingly agreed to Japan’s patriarchal system and, at the same time, playfully refuse to be a father’s daughter.

¹⁷ Kawamura, K. (1993). *Otome no Inori: Kindai Josei Imēji no Tanjo* [Pray of Maiden: Generation of Image of Modern Women]. Tokyo: Kinokuniya Shoten.

¹⁸ *Kyoiku Gakujutu-kai* [Education and Academy]. (1908). vol. 17, no. 5, 93.

¹⁹ Gendai Jogakusei Kakusi-kotoba Jiten [Modern schoolgirl jargon dictionary]. (1926) *Shojo Gaho* [Girls’ Pictorial], vol. 15, no. 4, 98-113.

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Contact e-mail: umehara.yu.ft@u.tsukuba.ac.jp