

Where All Women Shine? A Multimodal Feminist Critical Discourse Study of Japanese EFL Textbooks

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This study is a multimodal feminist critical discourse analysis of the *Sunshine English Course* series of EFL textbooks used in Japanese junior high schools. Textbooks—which convey not just curriculum but are also active in the reproduction of ideology—are a powerful tool in influencing how students think about their world. Gender inequality remains a problem in Japan, and this analysis seeks to critique how these textbooks are engaged in the reproduction of potentially harmful gender discourse. Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) is used to expose the connections between language use, ideology and social power. A hybrid of multimodal, feminist, and Fairclough’s foundational Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approaches was applied. It was found that despite overall increased representation of women and girls compared to older textbooks, some aspects of the textbooks were consistent with traditional and stereotypical gender discourses which marginalize women. Textbooks should offer more progressive alternative discourses if gender equality in Japan is to be achieved.

Keywords: CDS; EFL; Feminism; Gender; Textbooks

概要

本研究は日本の中学校で使用されている英語の教科書シリーズ『Sunshine English Course』に関するマルチモーダルフェミニスト批判的言説分析(CDA)である。教科書は単にカリキュラムを伝えるだけでなく、イデオロギーの再生産にも関与し、生徒が自分たちの世界をどのように考えるかに影響を与える強力なツールである。日本ではジェンダー不平等が依然として問題であり、それを解決するために、本教科書におけるステレオタイプ的なディスコースの有無を調査し、批判的に分析する。本研究は、言語使用とイデオロギー、そして社会的権力の間の結びつきを明らかにするために批判的談話研究(CDS)を用い、マルチモーダル CDA、フェミニスト CDA、および Fairclough の基礎的 CDA という三つのアプローチを統合的に採用する。本教科書では女性や女の子の登場数などは過去の教科書より多かったが、女性を周縁化する伝統的でステレオタイプ的なジェンダーディスコースが認められた。日本においてジェンダー平等を達成するために、教科書は積極的に進歩的で代替的なディスコースを提示する必要があると考えられる。

キーワード: 英語教育、フェミニズム、ジェンダー、教科書

This study offers a multimodal gender-focused critical discourse analysis of a series of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) textbooks used in junior high schools in Japan, the *Sunshine English Course* from Kairyudo (hereafter *Sunshine*; 2021a, 2021b, 2021c). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), more broadly referred to as the field of Critical Discourse Studies (CDS), is a collection of approaches and tools aimed at analyzing how social power, ideology and inequality are constructed and reinforced within discourse (Fairclough, 2010; Flowerdew & Richardson, 2018). In CDS, discourse is not just language, but language as part of the materialization of social life in relation to identity, relationships, social hierarchies, and social systems. Thus, CDS can show us how ideology and the unequal distribution of social power and resources are reinforced through language use (Fairclough, 2015). Textbooks are one possible site of this phenomenon. Not only are they specifically designed to convey knowledge and skills, but they also contain a hidden curriculum in which cultural values and norms are asserted in subtle and indirect ways (Mustapha & Mills, 2015). Furthermore, textbooks in Japan must be approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, also known as MEXT (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, n.d.-a), and are thus directly connected to the Japanese state and, it can be surmised, its dominant ideology.

CDS helps reveal not just how certain groups or individuals are represented in discourse, but enables researchers to critically analyze and push to change the discourse itself. By focusing this analysis on gender, the manner in which EFL textbooks are connected to Japan's gender inequality can be critiqued, keeping in mind that young students internalize ideology through the hidden curriculum. The goal of this study is ultimately to help close the gender gap and contribute to the creation of a society in which one's gender does not reflect social outcomes. CDS research is described as a first step of political action towards emancipation (Fairclough, 2010; Gee, 2011; Lazar, 2018). Thus, the present study aims to answer the following questions: what discourses of gender are active in the Japanese EFL *Sunshine* (Kairyudo, 2021a-c) textbooks, and what can CDS tell us about how and if these textbooks play a part in the reinforcement of harmful gender ideology in Japanese society?

Background and Literature Review

Gender remains a significant vector for social inequality around the world, including in Japan, which ranks 118th of 148 economies on the Global Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2025). Japan's ranking has improved compared to recent years but remains the lowest of the G7 countries (So, 2024). However, it must not be forgotten that Japanese feminism has a long and rich history of debate around gender inequality (Kano, 2016, 2020), and even the Japanese government itself has

been vocal about their commitment to promoting a “society in which all women shine” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, n.d.-c). Former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s economic policies of *Abenomics* also featured *Womenomics* (Gender Equality Bureau, 2017), showing that the Japanese government is at least aware of the issue, despite a lack of progress in closing the gap (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Social and cultural issues around gender and feminism have been part of active discussion in Japan. Coates et al. (2020) detail the rise of the #MeToo movement in Japan, and examine high-profile legal cases like that of Itō Shiori, which the authors argue were ahead of Western discourse around gender-related abuse. Further, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), one of which targets gender equality, are actively promoted by the Japanese government (MEXT, n.d.-b), and 39.7% of local governments were working towards SDGs as of 2021 (Government of Japan SDGs Promotion Headquarters, 2021). Despite increased awareness and efforts, however, gender inequality in Japan persists. CDS, thus, can help us understand how inequality is both created and reinforced through everyday discourse and discourse practices.

Informed by scholars like Butler (2014, 2024) and Connell (2020), the present study is influenced by understandings of gender as a socially constructed and ongoing process, which is separate from that of biological sex. The work of Lazar (2005, 2018) was also instrumental in understanding the relationship between gender and discourse with their Feminist CDA (FCDA) approach. As a preliminary exercise before this paper, the author conducted a multifaceted literature review in which one of the goals was to familiarize oneself with gender issues specific to Japan so as to avoid applying a Western-only perspective (Haddow, 2022). While the literature collected was written in English, the author was careful to pull from a variety of Japanese and international writers in an attempt to ensure diverse perspectives. The following analysis begins from the understandings that gender inequality remains prominent in Japanese social life, and that analyzing discourse practices, in this case the use of textbooks as an extension of dominant ideology, can illuminate how this inequality is reproduced through language use.

Gender Bias in Textbooks

In reviewing the relevant literature for this study, several trends were identified regarding gender bias in learning materials. Disparities in gender representation in textbooks have been observed worldwide, and by the transmission of ideological norms through the hidden curriculum, textbooks can negatively impact students’ understanding of gender (Mustapha & Mills, 2015; Winter, 2010).

This bias can take several forms, from outwardly sexist or offensive language, to stereotypical depictions of gendered labor such as women performing domestic work at home with men working in positions of power in society, to an imbalance in negatively coded depictions compared to positive ones, and so on. Early scholars who offered influential studies of gender in EFL materials include Hartman and Judd (1978) and Porreca (1984), who pointed out how issues like omission, male firstness, and male generics contribute to gender bias, as well as documented how demeaning these early textbooks were to women and girls. Regarding English textbooks used in Japan over time, authors such as Harashima (2005) provide an analysis of an EFL textbook which still contained offensive portrayals of women, while Mineshima (2008) found that a then contemporaneous English oral communication textbook showed an overall balanced and depiction of men and women, suggesting progress.

This overall progression toward more gender equitable English learning materials in Japan was explained in detail by Hamamoto (2012) who offers an expansive study of 39 EFL textbooks used in Japanese junior high schools. They compare gender issues using books from 1999, the year the Basic Law for a Gender-Equal Society was established by the Japanese government, with those published later in 2008. The author found that there was an overall trend towards an effective balance between depictions of men and women in the newer books, and posited that textbook producers appeared to be actively avoiding gender stereotypes. This was compared favorably to the older textbooks which were emblematic of male-dominant gender ideology. However, Hamamoto notes that outside of the content of the textbooks themselves, the women co-authors who produced the texts represented only 12% for the 1999 textbooks and 15% for the 2008 textbooks, indicating little improvement in this area. More recent still, authors like Levine and O'Sullivan (2010), Cook (2015), Lee (2018), and Svien (2018) have shown us how EFL materials continued to contain gender bias despite the apparent efforts of publishers to move away from stereotypical representations. It is also worth briefly mentioning that gender bias has been identified in Japanese as a Foreign/Second Language (JFL/JSL) textbooks as well (Thomson & Otsuji, 2003; Winter, 2010), highlighting the pervasiveness of the issue.

Understanding the above global and Japanese trends of gender bias in textbooks provides us with an understanding of the types of representations and historic problems to look for in our present analysis, as well as an understanding of positive developments away from stereotypical and unequal

depictions of gender. Before beginning the analysis of the *Sunshine* (Kairyudo, 2021a-c) textbooks, the basis of this paper's CDS approach methodology will be explained below.

CDS Approach and Methodology

CDS is a collection of approaches with a shared goal of exposing social inequalities and ideological domination in language use, rather than a single method of analysis. The specific set of approaches that influence this study and concepts and terms that appear within thus require explanation. First, Fairclough's (2015) concept of *orders of discourse* refers to the norms and practices associated within a social organization like a school, for example. In that order of discourse, teachers and students are expected to understand, embody, and project their roles through styles of speaking and acting. Thinking of schools in this way will frame not only a wider understanding of overarching discourses like Japanese students, EFL students, junior high school students, etcetera, but also how said students will likely respond to the content of the *Sunshine* books (Kairyudo, 2021a-c). Next, Gee (2011) offers what they call *tools of inquiry* to aid researchers in critically analyzing discourse. Their *Big C Conversation tool*, for example, prompts researchers to ask what widely understood social debates or issues can be uncovered within a text and its discourse. This tool will help to illuminate how issues specific to Japanese social life, such as Japanese gender-issues, are connected to the textbooks and their content. Lazar's (2005, 2018) FCDA characterizes gender as ideological in nature, an ongoing social process in which individuals are placed on a hierarchy based on assumed sexual differences, and urges CDS scholars to unpack how power and discourse are connected in relation to gender. Finally, Ledin & Machin (2018) and Machin & Mayr (2023) provide an understanding of modern discourse as fundamentally multimodal, in which other elements such as audio and visuals combine with text to produce discourse and ideology. Elements such as the size of illustrations and the gaze of the characters contained in textbooks will undoubtedly shape the meaning perceived by students and teachers, and thus the approach of Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA), is crucial to the present study. Gender discourses specific to Japan that may prove useful to keep in mind include discourses of traditional gender norms such as the expectation of eventual motherhood framing much of social life for women in Japan (Kano, 2016), and of the hegemonically masculine ideal of the *salaryman* breadwinner (Cook, 2020; see also Haddow, 2022).

Progress towards social equality in dominant discourse is possible, and thus the Positive Discourse Analysis (PDA) approach was developed (Bartlett, 2018). Before beginning the data collection and analysis stage of this study, the researcher was careful, to the best of their ability, not to assume the

textbooks in question would be full of stereotypical and harmful gender discourse. The most recent editions of the *Sunshine* books (Kairyudo, 2021a-c) used for this analysis were revised in 2021, and according to the publisher, topics reflecting SDGs are integrated, including the 5th goal of gender equality (Kairyudo, 2020). Although this analysis is not explicitly PDA, it is worth noting the progress that has been made.

It must be said that subjects with less discursive power and resources do not necessarily respond passively to discourse. When a student encounters dominant ideology in their textbook, they can have the capacity and agency to disagree, push back, or even opt out of the learning entirely. Macgilchrist (2018) labels these opportunities as ideological fragility, wherein teachers or students can criticize a lesson, or discuss or offer alternative discourses. An arguable criticism of the current study is that the *Sunshine* textbooks (Kairyudo 2021a-c) are analyzed without access to the teachers and students who engage with the material, but this would require an entirely different scope and analytical approach. Finally, as CDS is qualitative in nature, the following analysis also relies on the interpretations of the present author, although extensive literature has previously been reviewed to ensure a familiarity with Japanese gender issues (Haddow, 2022). Now, before analyzing what gender discourses are present within *Sunshine* (Kairyudo, 2021a-c), the textbooks themselves must be briefly introduced.

Materials: The Sunshine English Course

The three textbooks in the *Sunshine* series chosen for this analysis correspond to an academic year of study in Japanese junior high schools: *Sunshine 1* for first year students, *Sunshine 2* for second year, and *Sunshine 3* for third year (Kairyudo, 2021a-c). The textbooks feature colorful designs, cheerful illustrations, and photographs. Students get to know a consistent set of recurring characters who interact socially using English and participate in real school events like the school trip and workplace experience program.

Broadly divided into numbered Programs, *Sunshine* (Kairyudo, 2021a-c) are then subdivided into sections referred to as Scenes, Think, Retell, and Interact. Scenes introduce a grammar point with two-panel comics featuring a set of characters separate from those featured in the main Think sections. The Think sections serve as the center of each Program and are accompanied by what the Teacher's Book refers to as Oral Introductions. These are printed in pink text in the Teacher's Book, but students will most likely encounter them as audio played via supplementary DVD software.

After a brief section analyzing the opening pages of *Sunshine 1* (Kairyudo, 2021a), this analysis will be organized by exploring the Oral Introductions, Think and Scenes parts of the Programs, using samples pulled from the three *Sunshine* books as necessary (Kairyudo, 2021a-c). This deviates slightly from the order in which the elements appear in the textbooks, but was considered a necessary shuffle based on the results of the analysis. A final section commenting on the content of the publisher's self-proclaimed focus on the 5th SDG of gender equality (Kairyudo, 2020) is offered last. In all cases, the Teacher's Books were used as the basis of the study, as they include transcripts of audio segments otherwise only available through the DVD software, which was not available for analysis. Finally, descriptive language of the visual elements was chosen over reproducing the visuals due to potential issues of copyright and ownership.

The main Think characters are, as listed in order of appearance on the Main Characters page, Furuse Mao (F), Wada Ken (M), Daniel Smith (M), Ono Miki (F), Emily Jones (F), and their Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) Chloe Miller (F), totaling three girls, a grown woman, and two boys (Kairyudo, 2021a, p. 3, preliminary section). The Scenes characters are Ami (F), Ben (M), Shou (M), Sue (F) and Joe (M), totaling three boys and two girls. To preface the main qualitative analysis with some quantitative data, the number of illustrations and number of spoken turns for each character were manually counted and tallied over the three books. In total, the girl characters were featured more heavily than the boys, with 299 total illustrated appearances and 407 dialog turns compared with 274 illustrations and 341 dialog turns. Examining only the Think characters, the four female characters outweighed the males totaling 179 illustrations and 292 spoken turns compared to 129 illustrations and 213 turns. Conversely, the Scenes favor male representation with 145 illustrations and 128 turns compared with 120 illustrations and 115 turns for the girl characters. The male-leaning Scenes data is explained by the fact that characters are occasionally paired with a supplementary character of another gender. If these extra characters were counted, the gender distribution would likely be more equal, but these characters are often unnamed and are not listed on the Main Characters page, such as boy characters paired with a sister or mother, for example. This ultimately has the effect of backgrounding the main female Scenes characters. Finally, it should be noted that although total appearances and spoken turns are distributed relatively evenly, in the cases of both the Think and Scenes characters, individual boys appeared and spoke most frequently. See Tables 1-5 below for a breakdown of this data.

Table 1*Think Character Rankings*

| Rank | Character (Think) | Illustrations | Rank | Character (Think) | Turns |
|------|----------------------|---------------|------|----------------------|-------|
| 1 | Daniel | 68 | 1 | Daniel | 148 |
| 2 | Ken | 61 | 2 | Mao | 129 |
| 3 | Mao | 57 | 3 | Emily | 76 |
| 4 | Emily | 38 | 4 | Ken | 65 |
| 5 | Miki | 31 | 5 | Miki | 46 |
| 6 | Miller | 15 | 6 | Miller | 41 |

Table 2*Scenes Character Rankings*

| Rank | Character (Scenes) | Illustrations | Rank | Characters (Scenes) | Turns |
|------|-----------------------|---------------|------|------------------------|-------|
| 1 | Ben | 90 | 1 | Ben | 82 |
| 2 | Sue | 71 | 2 | Sue | 66 |
| 3 | Ami | 55 | 3 | Ami | 49 |
| 4 | Shou | 47 | 4 | Shou | 44 |
| 5 | Joe | 8 | 5 | Joe | 2 |

Table 3*Sunshine 1-3 Think Totals*

| | | | |
|----------------------------|-----|--------------------|-----|
| Total Female Illustrations | 179 | Total Female Turns | 292 |
| Total Male Illustrations | 129 | Total Male Turns | 213 |

Table 4*Sunshine 1-3 Scenes Totals*

| | | | |
|----------------------------|-----|--------------------|-----|
| Total Female Illustrations | 120 | Total Female Turns | 115 |
| Total Male Illustrations | 145 | Total Male Turns | 128 |

Table 5*Sunshine 1-3 Grand Totals*

| | | | |
|----------------------------|-----|--------------------|-----|
| Total Female Illustrations | 299 | Total Female Turns | 407 |
| Total Male Illustrations | 274 | Total Male Turns | 341 |

Regarding the above data, it must be noted that in some cases, Think pages deviated from the usual A/B dialog formula. Single characters sometimes give a presentation about the Program topic or are depicted as having looked up an article online. In these instances, they were counted as one turn for the featured character, even if verbal speech was not implied. If one assumes the Think characters carry more significance than the Scenes characters, then this appears to suggest that female representation in the books has become more balanced, but these representations must be analyzed within their broader context.

Finally, regarding the perceived gender of the characters, the researcher assumes the characters are cisgender, and their genders were determined through their depicted physical characteristics and gendered school-uniforms. The researcher wants to recognize the fluidity of gender and the undoubted diversity that exists in Japan, despite its perceived homogeneity (Narzary, 2004). Additionally, although there has been news of schools across Japan beginning to offer non-gender-based uniform selection for students, such headlines generally started appearing in national outlets from 2020 onward (Goto, 2023; Kyodo News, 2020; Nippon.com, 2021; Tanaka, 2022) around the same time as the publication of the current editions of the *Sunshine* textbooks (Kairyudo, 2021a-c). While last minute changes in production are possible, nothing in the textbooks suggests an acknowledgement or promotion of this trend or of the existence of transgender, non-binary, intersex, or x-gender people in Japan (See S. Dale, 2020). Having introduced the *Sunshine* (Kairyudo, 2021a-c) textbooks, CDS analysis follows.

Analysis & Discussion

When first opening the pages of *Sunshine 1* (Kairyudo, 2021a), students are greeted by the characters that will be the center of the textbook's stories across their next three years of study. Four smiling characters, at this point unnamed, direct their gaze at the reader, encouraging students to form a connection. On the leftmost page are the two international students, both white and blond/blonde, while the Japanese students, presented in larger illustrations, are on the right. The biggest of the illustrations is an apparently Japanese girl wearing a skirt and pink ribbon, the skirt flaring to the side slightly as she waves to the reader with a hand on one hip. The non-Japanese girl poses with one loosely clenched hand close to her face, and the other draped to the side, bringing to mind idols in Japan or a cute anime character. The female characters embody traits traditionally associated with girls, specifically *kawaii* cuteness and friendliness (J. Dale, 2020). Such comforting and inviting depictions may be read as consistent with the discourse of women as future mothers (Kano, 2016).

The male international student's gaze is confidently pointed at the reader, his arms crossed, and the male Japanese student is wearing glasses and scratching the back of his head as if slightly shy. The visual depictions of the two male characters may bring to mind stereotypical masculine elements such as confidence and strength on the part of the non-Japanese boy, and academics and professionalism with the Japanese boy. The Japanese boy's professionalism can be understood within the context of Japanese masculinity discourse and the salaryman, which Cook (2020) explains is tied with gendered expectations of the male breadwinner, economic productivity, and familial loyalty. Students may imagine this boy being successful in school and going on to a prestigious university to ultimately get a job at a large company or another position of high social status.

The large size of the illustration of the Japanese girl, who students will soon learn is Mao, suggests this is the main character. On the one hand, a female main character represents progress. However, when considering the context critically in terms of Fairclough's (2015) orders of discourse, it can be said that the discourse relationship between student Mao and the school system is an unequal one. If Mao is the ideal student, as suggested by her placement as the apparent main character, she will likely comply with the authority of the education system and the state, a discourse relationship which Fairclough (2010) has described as one of unequal institutional power. Mao being a girl also puts her in the context of gender inequality in Japan, another unequal relationship (World Economic Forum, 2025). Furthermore, because the textbooks are certified by the Japanese government (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, n.d.-a), any progressive material contained within can be said to exist because it does not pose a threat to the dominant ideology and will not disrupt the order of discourse. Although a female main character seems to be a reasonable and even positive choice on the part of the textbook producers, CDS helps us understand how such choices are done so within the context of discourse, ideology, and social power. Finally, referring back to the data in Table 1, it can be seen that Mao ranks third in the number of total illustrations, and second in terms of spoken turns, bringing her status as the main character of the textbooks into question.

Oral Introductions and Synthetic Personalization

Throughout the *Sunshine* books (Kairyudo, 2021a-c), the Oral Introductions are often a site of synthetic personalization (Fairclough, 2015), described as a tactic when a vast number of people are addressed as one to build intimacy and rapport (Machin & Mayr, 2023). The reproduction of ideology is often achieved through persuasion and the convincing of citizens to accept the hegemonic narrative as the norm, and synthetic personalization is one subtle way of both achieving

this and obscuring the process (Fairclough, 2015). The Oral Introductions in *Sunshine 1* feature rhetorical questions such as “What do you like? What do you usually do? What do you like to do?” (Kairyudo, 2021a, p. 32). The language is lexically simple, by way of academic necessity, and seeks to establish a friendly rapport with individual students. This masks the authoritative power of the textbook and the power relationship between school and students. The narrator appears benevolent, so that when imperatives and hortative modalities such as “Look at the students in the picture,” and “let’s listen,” (Kairyudo, 2021a, p. 32) are used, they are likely to be followed without question as the friendly rapport is continuously reinforced elsewhere throughout the textbooks. As synthetic personalization masks the commonsense nature of the textbook’s discursive authority, any gender discourse is also likely to be absorbed as factual and natural, which we will examine below.

The use of synthetic personalization (Fairclough, 2015) through rhetorical questions in the Oral Introductions continues into *Sunshine 2* (Kairyudo, 2021b). In Program 2 the narrator poses questions about Canada, where Miki, one of the Think characters, has gone to study abroad. The narrator asks, “If you go to Canada ... Do you want to see Niagara Falls? A-kun, what about you? B-san, what do you want to do in Canada?” (Kairyudo, 2021b, p. 20). These Japanese honorific suffixes can mark one’s place in the social hierarchy (Inoue, 2020), and as Mogi (2002) explains are also implicated with marking gender. The honorific suffix of *kun* is generally (though not exclusively) used for addressing men or boys of lower hierarchical status than the speaker, and although *san* is considered gender neutral, it has been found to be commonly used when addressing female students (Mogi, 2002). Thus, by choosing to use *kun* and *san* together rather than a neutral *san* exclusively, the textbook’s narrator implies referents of different genders. Within the context of Japanese gender discourse and the broader social context of gender inequality, these utterances can be said to contribute to the continuation of the gendered status quo. The order of discourse of the Japanese school as a gendered and unequal one is maintained, and the masking of the commonsense authority of the school and state make alternative discourses difficult to imagine and realize.

Finally, *Sunshine 3*’s first Program and its Oral Introductions center around the idea of Japanese *bentos*, or boxed lunches (Kairyudo, 2021c, pp. 10-12). The Oral Introduction for Program 1 introduces the concept of the *kyara-ben*, in which the included dishes and garnishes are arranged in a way meant to resemble a cute character (Kairyudo, 2021c, p. 10). This preparation is a very laborious process, and surveys say that most of the housework in Japan is still likely to be done by women (Fukutomi, 2024). The second Oral Introduction for the following page asks the rhetorical questions

“Who made your bento? Did anybody make it by yourself?” (Kairyudo, 2021c, p. 11) which continues the friendly rapport with students to mask the perpetuation of the unequal relationship of discursive and social power. This Program’s third Oral Introduction suggests to students “If [they] like chicken, [they] can ask [their] mother[s] to put some chicken in [their] *bento*” (Kairyudo, 2021c, p. 12). On the one hand, this could be interpreted as recognition for the many mothers in Japan who are in fact performing the labor of *bento* preparation, but we may also view it critically as a failure to offer ideological alternatives to dominant gender discourse. If the textbook producers had deliberately chosen to use father or parent instead, for example, this could help normalize the increased participation of men in the domestic sphere, easing the inequality reported above. Cook (2020) tells us of the discourse of the *ikumens*, for example, which refers to men who take on an active role in childcare. The fact that the textbook creators, through the voice of the narrator, make the discursive choice to say that mothers are the ones who make *bentos*, normalizes and perpetuates the unequal power relationship between women and men in Japanese society.

Think: Main Lessons

The Oral Introductions ease students into the Think portions of the Programs, which feature the main cast of recurring characters mentioned earlier. The Think section of Program 8 in *Sunshine 1* centers on the international students Emily and Daniel doing various tasks associated with Japanese New Year (Kairyudo, 2021a, pp. 98-99). On the left page, Emily and her brother Mark are doing the “year-end general house-cleaning” together with their father, Jack. In Emily’s case, she is shown diligently cleaning a bathtub while Mark is shown wiping down the TV (Kairyudo, 2021a, p. 98). Although both a girl and boy are depicted helping with the housework, the punchline is that Mark is in fact shirking his duties and watching the TV instead of cleaning it. Visually, Emily has her hair uncharacteristically tied back and is wearing an apron, her jeans rolled up, all indicating she is actively engaged in housework. Mark’s illustration does not indicate any exertion or involvement with the housework other than a white cloth clutched in one hand. Textually, the Think piece ends with Mark shouting “Oh, no!” when his father instructs him to switch the TV off, which when coupled with his surprised expression further suggests this is a punchline the reader should find humorous (Kairyudo, 2021a, p. 98). Remembering the social reality of gender inequality in the domestic sphere (Fukutomi, 2024), and the Big C Conversations (Gee, 2021) of men taking more of an active role in domestic labor and parenting (Cook, 2020), it can be said that the textbook here

fails to offer an alternative to stereotypical gender discourse, and that the use of humor normalizes and reinforces the discourse of men not contributing properly to family chores.

In Japan, second year junior high school students undergo an on-site job experience program (MEXT, n.d.), and the characters in *Sunshine 2* are no exception (Kairyudo, 2021b, pp. 62-64). Daniel, Mao and Ken visit a supermarket, hospital, and post office, respectively. We can immediately observe some implications for gender discourse as Mao, the only girl character shown participating in the job experience program, is shown working in a caregiving role. This comes at a time when Japan's rapidly aging population means elderly care work specifically is extremely important, and this subfield of medicine is made up primarily of women for reasons intertwined with gender expectations and ideology (Fujita, 2016). Further, nursing has been shown to be perceived by the Japanese public as more suitable for women, while the image of the masculine doctor or medical scientist remains difficult to overcome, despite a proportional rise in women doctors over the last few decades (Ikkatai et al., 2020). By having Mao carry out this work experience, the textbook also misses an opportunity for a positive representation of boys working as nurses or professional caregivers. Mao embodies stereotypical gender discourse further as the main point of her page is focused on emotional labor as she "just tried to be a good listener" while comforting a lonely old man during her work experience (Kairyudo, 2021b, p. 63). This is in line with the gendered expectation that nurturing is a duty that women are naturally suited for (Fujita, 2016). Emotional labor is of course a crucial part of working as a nurse or caregiver and should be portrayed as such in a textbook. Yet working in a hospital would also require physical stamina, dexterity with tools, and medical knowledge, but Mao is neither visually nor textually depicted as engaged in any of these skills. She is praised for her actions, and the Oral Introduction asks students to answer the question "What was her magic?" before engaging with the main text. The magic is unfortunately tied up with gender stereotypes, which aligns with a recent survey on unconscious bias in which 43.4% of students, 58.1% of parents/guardians, and 41% of teachers answered that they believe gender influences what careers one is or is not suitable for (Tokyo Metropolitan Government, 2023). This shows a need for learning materials like textbooks to directly address this issue, which *Sunshine* (Kairyudo, 2021a-c) does not.

Moving on to the boys' work experiences, Daniel is shown at a supermarket, where his main duties involve placing "many goods on the shelves," emphasizing the physical nature of the job and playing into stereotypes of strong men doing physical labor in society (Kairyudo, 2021b, p. 62). In the

illustration, he has dropped and broken some eggs and is surrounded by two laughing coworkers, both women. While their age is not entirely clear, these women are visually depicted as having grayed hair and rounder physiques, which brings to mind the gendered discourse of adult women workers who, despite overall increased participation in the workforce in recent years, tend to remain in part-time or temporary work rather than in a developed career, as Ikeda (2019) explains. Ikeda continues that although many women quit their jobs to raise children, as the young children require less care and their school expenses begin to rise, many mothers return to non-regular employment. What is crucial to remember, however, is that that pregnant women in Japan have faced workplace *maternity harassment* and often quit their jobs and careers as a result, despite the fact that such harassment has long been prohibited with the Equal Employment Opportunity Law (Assmann, 2020; Enomoto & Bublitz, 2016; Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, 2017). Further, Japanese companies have also been shown to restrict career-track *regular* positions to unmarried women, while married women are often placed in *non-regular* support positions (Macnaughtan, 2020). This contextualizes the visual depiction of Daniel's supermarket coworkers, showing how their depictions are in line with established gender discourse rather than a more progressive alternative, such as presenting one of the women as the store owner or manager.

Finally, Ken's experience represents somewhat of a hybrid of the two prior characters, exhibiting both physical and emotional work. Working at the post office, he is shown performing the physical labor of carrying a heavy package together with a professional mail carrier (referred to in the book with the gendered term mailman) to an elderly woman's house. The elderly woman shows a positive reaction to Ken's effort, and he learns "the importance of working for others" (Kairyudo, 2021b, p. 64). Although the emotional aspect of Ken's labor experience could be read as a positive alternative discourse, this feedback was a byproduct of Ken's physical labor, in line with stereotypical gender norms similar to the experiences of the other characters detailed earlier.

Scenes: Supplemental Comics

This analysis will now turn to the Scenes comics of the *Sunshine* series (Kairyudo, 2021a-c), in which the characters are always depicted in female and male pairs. This distribution, while perhaps done in the spirit of fairness, establishes the Scenes comics as a site of navigating the social differences of gender, as there are no comics in which two girls or two boys speak together. Students may be reminded of the way they themselves would interact with students of the opposite gender, and this could impact how they interpret the comics. Lexically, the comics are generally quite simple with

phrases such as “This is my friend Paul,” “Oh, I know him,” (Kairyudo, 2021a, p. 70), but like the Oral Introductions and Think sections, a multimodal feminist critical discourse analysis of the Scenes can also show us how dominant gender ideology is reproduced.

One set of comics in *Sunshine 1* (Kairyudo, 2021a, p. 62) presents the characters Shou and Sue eating *bentos* made by Sue’s grandmother for lunch. The following panels tell us that Sue’s grandfather makes breakfast, and he is shown to be making an *onigiri* rice ball, a comparatively less labor-intensive dish than a *bento*. The textbook producers seem aware of the need to show both women and men sharing the labor of family food preparation, but the disparity in effort between a *bento* and *onigiri* shows a gendered imbalance consistent with gender-role discourse and domestic labor. In the context of normalized gender inequality, students may find the grandfather’s efforts noteworthy or praiseworthy, as the grandfather is illustrated in a thought bubble but the grandmother is only referred to in text. In the punchline of this set of comics, Shou asks Sue “What do you do for your family?” while moving closer to her on the bench with an unimpressed facial expression, and Sue is shown sweating and silently scratching the side of her head (Kairyudo, 2021a, p. 62). Both visually and textually, it is implied that Sue is in the wrong. The lexical decision to use “do” rather than “cook” or something similar flattens and devalues other forms of labor. Sue may do other household chores, be focused on her studies, or otherwise contribute to her household, for example. Further, the textbook’s use of the failure to fulfill gender norms as the punchline of a joke is poignant and normalizes traditional gender discourse. Earlier in *Sunshine 1* (Kairyudo, 2021a, p. 40), Shou tells Sue that he can make sushi (can/cannot being the grammar point for the lesson), while Sue boasts that she can make ramen, accompanied by an illustration of instant ramen. Again, both textually and visually, Sue is used as the punchline of the joke, made clear by the illustration in which Shou stares at her, mouth open, while Sue gestures proudly about her cooking skills, suggesting she is oblivious to Shou’s incredulosity. Furthermore, although Shou can make sushi, it isn’t implied that he is required to prepare food for his family, while this exact expectation is applied to Sue in the comic on page 62 (Kairyudo, 2021a).

In *Sunshine 3*, one Scenes comic of interest to this study comes in Program 5 in a series of exchanges between Ben and Sue, with the goal stated at the top of the page to “learn to describe people in detail” (Kairyudo, 2021c, p. 64). In the first set of panels, Ben points to one of two women across the street, saying “Look. I think I’ve met that woman before,” (Kairyudo, 2021c, p. 64). When Sue asks which one he means, Ben states “*the woman who* has long hair” (emphasis in original), rather

than the other individual with short hair (Kairyudo, 2021c, p. 64). In the following set of panels below, the two read a plaque at the zoo which states “Lions are *large animals* **which** belong to the cat family. Only the male has long hair around its neck,” (emphasis in original) as the characters utter “I see” in unison with interested expressions (Kairyudo, 2021c, p. 64). In terms of Fairclough’s (2015) orders of discourse, the zoo can be said to hold discursive power over the visitors who come to learn and assume the information offered within is correct. The zoo plaque, itself a genre of discourse, uses straightforward authoritative language with little room for interpretation, and the characters passively accept the information. Sue could have responded with an article she found online about rare cases of female lions growing manes (Gilfillan et al., 2016), for example, but such alternative discourses are absent. Although diversity in appearance among women causes confusion in the human world, in the animal world where sex markers are supposedly natural and absolute, the characters are shown happily trusting in the assumed discursive authority of the zoo via the plaque. It should be remembered that actual students are encountering this comic in a government approved textbook, compounding the power imbalance further. By placing these two sets of panels so closely together on the page, a comparison or connection is implied between human gender expression and biological sex. This comes at a time when the struggle for transgender rights is a Big C Conversation (Gee, 2011) in Japan (Chapman, 2020). Although a critical student or teacher can push back against or discuss this disappointing connection, the present analysis of the textbook suggests a potentially harmful commitment and reinforcement of traditional and dominant gender ideology.

SDGs

Finally, what of the stated commitment to the 5th SDG from Kairyudo’s (2020) own website? The lesson centered on the 5th goal of gender equality comes near the end of *Sunshine 3*, in the form of a reading with no involvement of the characters, and is centered on the story of Malala Yousufzai (Kairyudo, 2021c, pp. 100-105). Not only does this frame gender inequality as something foreign which happens elsewhere, but the content of the story itself, as relayed in the textbook, is more focused on the importance of education rather than the struggle for gender equality. Each page of the reading has a simple Oral Introduction for students, but the rhetorical questions asked within are arguably unrelated to the SDG of gender equality: “What kind of girl was she when she was little?”, “Later, she was given a great prize. What kind of prize was it?”, for example. The lesson can be said to thus be focused purely on reading comprehension, rather than encouraging students to think about gender issues. The main characters are absent to comment on the story or provide examples

of gender inequality in their lives as well. Although a very important and touching story, the textbooks miss an opportunity to address Japan's internal and long standing gender inequality.

Conclusion

Within the *Sunshine* (Kairyudo, 2021a-c) textbooks, traditional gender discourses were observed and critiqued. Research revealed that female coded characters were presented as cute and friendly and were engaged in forms of labor stereotypically associated with women such as housework and temporary employment. They were also made the punchline of jokes for not living up to dominant gender norms. When male characters were made the punchline of jokes, it did not appear measured against their integrity as boys. These characters were also engaged in physical labor and embodied characteristics which aligned with Japanese hegemonic masculinity. Finally, issues of sex and gender were conflated in troubling ways at a time when transgender people in Japan struggle for legal rights. This was all done while the establishment and maintenance of the textbook's discursive authority and ideological common sense were masked through synthetic personalization. Ultimately, although the total numbers in Table 5 indicate more appearances and spoken turns for female characters than male, suggesting progress, a multimodal feminist critical discourse analysis shows how these representations contribute to the maintenance of gender inequality in Japan.

Within CDS, it is beneficial to ponder who benefits from a given discourse or discourse event. At a time when public opinion and government initiatives appear to be promoting a more equal society, textbook producers will benefit monetarily from having their book align with this sentiment, gain approval from MEXT, and be sold to Japanese schools. The Japanese government themselves can also be said to benefit through increased satisfaction polls before elections. Yet Multimodal FCDA shows that whether the gender discourse contained within is traditional or progressive, these government certified textbooks do not threaten the status quo and can be considered both ideologically permissible and materialistically advantageous to those with social power. The order of discourse of the school setting is one of unequal social power, and though beyond the scope of this analysis, the discourse of learning EFL as a means of participating in the global economy vis-à-vis American and Western hegemony is itself a ripe subject for a separate study. *Sunshine's* (Kairyudo, 2021a-c) relationship with gender discourse is a complex one, offering both more female appearances than male and relatively even distribution of spoken turns throughout the books, yet it does not offer criticism or an alternative to Japan's dominant gender ideology. As textbooks are extremely influential to young learners, this is a missed opportunity in pushing for gender equality in

Japan. It is the hope of the researcher that this analysis will help spread awareness of how gender inequality is maintained through discourse practices and ideology, and in turn offer a humble step towards a more balanced society.

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