

Gendered Metapragmatic Evaluation of Women's Institutional Participation: The Mori Controversy in Japan

Wiwik Retno Handayani,^{1*}

Language and Literature Department, Faculty of Cultural Studies, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia¹

*) Corresponding Author

Email: wiwikretno@ugm.ac.id

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Abstract

Women's institutional participation can become an object of metapragmatic evaluation concerning communicative efficiency, speaking behavior, and appropriateness. This study examines how women's participation was evaluated and contested in the controversy surrounding Yoshiro Mori's 2021 remarks about women and institutional meetings in Japan. It asks how participation was evaluated, what norms and gendered social meanings were indexed through these evaluations, and how the evaluative categories were subsequently contested and redirected toward Mori's own discourse and institutional position. The study employs qualitative sociopragmatic documentary analysis of ten publicly available documents covering 3–24 February 2021, comprising six core and four contextual materials. Metapragmatics provides the primary analytical framework, supported by indexicality and language ideology, while face and repair are used specifically to interpret the apology sequence. The analysis shows how women's participation was associated with meeting duration, competitive speaking, and a reported orientation toward speaking-time regulation. In contrast, particular women were positively evaluated when their speech was represented as concise, focused, and bounded. This evaluative distinction was subsequently contested through #wakimaenaionna #わき

まえない女, after which attention shifted toward Mori's own discourse and institutional position. The study contributes to sociopragmatics by showing how gendered conditions of legitimate institutional participation can be constructed through successive evaluations and contested through recursive shifts in the object of evaluation. The findings are interpreted within the evidentiary limits of the documentary corpus.

Keywords: *Metapragmatics; sociopragmatics; language and gender; institutional discourse*

INTRODUCTION

Institutional participation is shaped not only by formal access to decision-making spaces but also by expectations about how participants should speak, listen, respond, and take turns. These expectations are often treated as practical requirements for efficient interaction, yet they can also become sites of social evaluation. Research on language and gender has shown that gendered meanings are not fixed properties of women's or men's speech. They are produced through social practices, historical ideologies, and contextual interpretation (Inoue, 2002, 2006; Nakamura, 2014; Smith & Okamoto, 2004). In Japanese, research on gendered language has likewise demonstrated that linguistic forms acquire gendered meanings through social processes rather than simply reflecting speakers' identities (Miyazaki, 2016; Okamoto, 1997, 2018; Okamoto & Morimoto, 2023). This perspective makes communicative evaluation itself an important object of analysis.

The present study focuses on metapragmatic evaluation, understood here as discourse in which communicative conduct, participation practices, or norms governing such conduct become objects of comment, assessment, classification, or regulation. Metapragmatic activity is important because it makes otherwise tacit assumptions about appropriate communication more visible (Silverstein, 1993, 2003). Previous studies have shown that people do not merely use language; they also comment on what counts as appropriate, polite, humorous, gendered, or otherwise acceptable language (Davies, 2018; Su, 2019; Sinkeviciute, 2019; Chang & Sinkeviciute, 2022). Research on assessment responses likewise shows that evaluations can become consequential through how subsequent participants take them up, align with them, or resist them (Chang, 2025). Recent work on metapragmatic talk also emphasizes that evaluations are enacted through

situated communicative practices rather than existing only as abstract judgments (Brown et al., 2023). In research on Japanese women's language, Okamoto (2018) demonstrates how metapragmatic discourse can connect particular speech practices with broader ideas about femininity. Miyazaki (2016) similarly shows that young speakers actively evaluate and reinterpret gendered language ideologies. These studies support an analysis that treats evaluation as a social practice rather than as a transparent description of linguistic behavior.

This distinction is especially important when metapragmatic evaluation overlaps with sexism or gender stereotyping. A statement may reproduce a gender stereotype without explicitly evaluating communication. Conversely, a statement can evaluate communicative behavior in ways that make gender socially relevant without reducing the analysis to the speaker's attitude toward women as a category. The present study therefore does not treat every gendered statement as metapragmatic evidence. A segment is analytically relevant when the documentary record shows that communicative conduct, participation, or a norm of participation is itself being evaluated, classified, or regulated. Gender becomes relevant when that evaluation is explicitly attached to women or when gender is used to justify a judgment about participation. In practical terms, the analysis requires evidence of an evaluative link among a participant category, a communicative practice, and a standard of appropriate participation. A statement that merely insults women, for example, would not qualify unless it also evaluates how women speak, participate, or are expected to participate. This criterion allows the analysis to distinguish metapragmatic evaluation from gendered content that is not about communicative conduct.

Institutional participation provides a particularly useful setting for examining this process. Research on deliberative participation has shown that communicative practices can affect whose contributions are heard and how participation is organized (Karpowitz et al., 2012; Afsahi, 2021; Levy & Sakaiya, 2020). Research on political institutions also emphasizes that participation is shaped by informal expectations as well as formal rules

(Shaw, 2020). These studies do not establish a universal rule about how women speak in meetings. Rather, they show why judgments about speaking time, turn-taking, and deliberative conduct matter for participation. The present study builds on this insight by examining what happens when such judgments are explicitly formulated as gendered evaluations of women's participation.

Japanese sociolinguistic research offers a closely related background. Studies of Japanese gendered language have shown that categories such as women's language are historically produced and continually negotiated rather than simply inherited as stable linguistic facts (Inoue, 2002, 2006; Nakamura, 2014). Okamoto (2018) demonstrates that metapragmatic discourse can prescribe broader patterns of idealized feminine conduct, while Okamoto and Morimoto (2023) show that gender norms operate across multiple linguistic and paralinguistic resources in actual interaction. Miyazaki (2016, 2023) further demonstrates that speakers can reproduce, resist, or creatively reinterpret gendered expectations. More recent work continues to show that evaluations of women's speech are shaped by intersecting social and situational factors rather than gender alone (Okamoto, 2025). Research on Japanese media also shows how gendered language ideologies can be sustained through representation and translation (Nakamura, 2023; Vitucci, 2025). Recent Japanese pragmatics research likewise shows that speakers evaluate interactional norms in situated contexts, including in digitally mediated discourse (Fukushima, 2024). Together, these studies support a contextual approach to gendered evaluation.

The expression *wakimaete orarete* in the Mori controversy is useful in this respect. The verb *wakimaeru* can refer to recognizing circumstances, limits, or what is appropriate in a situation. In the documentary context examined here, Mori used the expression when describing women on the Tokyo 2020 organizing committee who, in his account, spoke concisely and stayed on point. The contextual evidence for its evaluative meaning is the co-occurrence of three elements: the expression is applied specifically to women, it follows a contrast in which women's speaking is associated with longer meetings and the need for regulation, and it is immediately followed by positive descriptions of particular women's

concise and focused speech. The later reuse of the category in #wakimaenaionna further shows that participants treated the expression as a socially meaningful category that could be accepted, rejected, or reversed. This evidence supports a contextual account of how the expression acquired its relevant social meaning in the controversy. It does not, however, demonstrate that the meaning was created entirely by the event or that pre-existing Japanese gender ideologies played no role. Rather, the documentary record shows how an existing linguistic resource was made socially consequential through its target, co-text, institutional setting, and subsequent uptake. This distinction avoids treating *wakimaete* as inherently sexist or inherently gendered.

The documentary record also requires a clear distinction between representation and behavior. Mori's remarks are evidence of how he represented women's participation; they are not evidence that women in Japanese institutions actually speak more, interrupt more, or make meetings longer. Likewise, media reports and public responses document particular representations and evaluations rather than the views of Japanese society as a whole. This distinction is central to the present study because claims about women's communication can easily turn mediated descriptions into assumptions about actual behavior (Inoue, 2006; Nakamura, 2014). The analysis therefore remains limited to what can be established from the selected documents.

The Mori controversy is analytically productive because the object of evaluation changes during the public sequence. Mori initially evaluated women's participation by linking women's presence in meetings with meeting duration, competitive speaking, and the need to regulate speaking time. He then contrasted those representations with women in the organizing committee whom he described as knowing how to participate appropriately. Public responses subsequently evaluated Mori's own discourse, while the expression associated with appropriate participation became contestable through the hashtag #wakimaenaionna. The sequence thus permits an examination of metapragmatic evaluation as recursive: one communicative practice becomes the object of evaluation, and

that evaluation can itself become the object of further evaluation (Davies, 2018; Su & Lee, 2022).

This focus distinguishes the present study from earlier analyses of the controversy that primarily examine sexism, gender stereotyping, organizational inequality, or the broader significance of Mori's remarks (Itani et al., 2022; Sulatri, 2021). Related research has also examined gender injustice as a discursive phenomenon and pragmatic features in Japanese political interaction (Amelia et al., 2025; Noorsanti, 2024). These studies are relevant to the background of the controversy, but the present article asks a more specific question: how are women's institutional participation and communicative conduct evaluated metapragmatically, and how does the object of evaluation shift as the controversy develops?

The article also develops the author's earlier analysis of the same controversy. Handayani (2026, pp. 22–35) offers a sociopragmatic interpretation of five Mori statements, with attention to sexism, politeness, power, and the social implications of the utterances. The present study uses a different analytical focus and a different unit of analysis. It examines the documentary sequence surrounding the statements and traces how participation norms are articulated, contested, and redirected toward Mori's own discourse. The distinction is therefore substantive rather than merely a difference in publication format. The earlier chapter provides contextual groundwork, while this article develops a process-oriented account of metapragmatic evaluation.

The study is designed as a bounded documentary case study. The corpus contains ten publicly available documents dated from 3 to 24 February 2021. Six documents provide core evidence and four provide contextual evidence. The materials include the reported statements, media coverage, Mori's public response, and subsequent reporting on the controversy. This design permits close analysis of the evaluative sequence while placing a clear boundary on the claims that can be made. It does not permit conclusions about the prevalence of the identified norms in Japan, about Japanese women's actual communicative behavior, or about public opinion as a whole.

Two research questions guide the analysis: (1) How is women's institutional participation metapragmatically evaluated in the Mori controversy? and (2) How does the object of evaluation shift across the controversy, particularly when the initial evaluation of women's participation becomes itself contested? Metapragmatics provides the primary framework for identifying evaluative discourse, while indexicality and language ideology support interpretation of how participation norms acquire social meaning (Ochs, 1992; Silverstein, 1993, 2003; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). The analysis also draws on work on evaluation and institutional discourse to distinguish explicit assessment from contextual inference (Davies, 2018; Wang, 2025).

This processual perspective also clarifies the article's state of the art and research gap. Existing Japanese language-and-gender research has established that gendered meanings are historically and interactionally produced, while research on participation has shown that speaking practices can affect access to deliberative space. Work on the Mori controversy has documented sexism, gender stereotyping, and institutional inequality. What remains less developed is an account that connects these strands by tracing how an institutional participation norm is explicitly formulated, applied to women, challenged by subsequent discourse, and redirected toward the evaluator. The present study addresses this gap through close analysis of a bounded documentary sequence rather than through a claim about Japanese society as a whole.

The case further illustrates why evaluation should be studied as a sequence rather than as an isolated utterance. Mori's initial comments connect women, speaking behavior, and meeting efficiency. His later description of women who "know their place" introduces a positive counterpart to that evaluation. Public responses then challenge the distinction itself, while the subsequent apology and resignation-related reporting place Mori's conduct under further scrutiny. These stages do not form a simple linear progression from statement to consequence. They show how categories of appropriate participation can be repeated, challenged, and recontextualized. Similar recursive processes have been noted

in studies of metapragmatic evaluation, stance, and contested linguistic authority (Davies, 2018; Su & Lee, 2022; Su, 2026).

Metapragmatic evaluation also raises a question of evaluative authority. Institutional participants do not enter interaction with equal capacity to define what counts as appropriate participation. Formal position, public visibility, and access to institutional discourse can affect whose descriptions become consequential. The present study does not measure authority or assume that Mori's position automatically determines the norm. Instead, it examines how his public formulation of a participation norm was taken up, challenged, and reframed in subsequent discourse. This approach is compatible with research that treats linguistic authority as something that can be enacted and contested rather than simply possessed (Su, 2026). It also helps explain why the controversy is analytically relevant beyond the wording of the initial remarks.

Theoretically, this study contributes to sociopragmatic research by extending metapragmatic analysis from the evaluation of linguistic forms and interactional conduct to the evaluation of institutional participation as a gendered communicative practice. It further develops a processual perspective in which the object of evaluation can shift across successive stages of public discourse: from women's participation, to the participation norm itself, and eventually to the discourse and institutional position of the original evaluator. This perspective brings together metapragmatics, indexicality, and language ideology to explain how conditions of legitimate participation are made socially meaningful and subsequently contested. The contribution is deliberately bounded to the documentary case examined here and does not assume that the evaluative patterns identified represent Japanese institutional culture as a whole.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs qualitative sociopragmatic discourse analysis to examine how women's institutional participation was evaluated and contested in the Mori controversy. Metapragmatics serves as the primary analytical framework because the study focuses on discourse in which communicative conduct, participation practices, and expectations

about appropriate participation become objects of evaluation, classification, or regulation. Indexicality and language ideology support the interpretation of how these evaluations acquire social meaning in particular contexts (Ochs, 1992; Silverstein, 1993, 2003; Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994). Face and repair are used more narrowly to interpret the apology sequence, where Mori's public responses are examined as observable discourse practices rather than as evidence of his private intentions. Document analysis is appropriate for this study because the research traces a public sequence across reported statements, media accounts, responses, and subsequent institutional developments rather than observing the original interactions directly (Bowen, 2009).

The corpus consists of ten publicly available documents concerning the Mori controversy, covering the period from 3 to 24 February 2021. Six documents provide core evidence, and four provide contextual evidence. The core materials document Mori's remarks, immediate responses, and the apology sequence, while the contextual materials help situate subsequent public and institutional developments. The documents were selected purposively because they contain material directly relevant to the research questions and represent different stages of the controversy (Patton, 2015). The sources include Sponichi Annex, Asahi Shimbun, JBpress, HuffPost Japan, Mainichi Shimbun, Tokyo Shimbun, Yomiuri Shimbun, Bloomberg, BBC News Japan, and TIME. The corpus is treated as a record of public and largely mediated discourse, not as a representative sample of Japanese citizens' views. The study therefore does not use these documents to make claims about the prevalence of the identified participation norms in Japan or about Japanese public opinion as a whole.

The analysis followed an explicit criterion for identifying metapragmatic evaluation. A segment was included when the documentary material showed that communicative conduct, a participation practice, or a norm governing such conduct was itself being evaluated, classified, or regulated. A segment was further treated as gendered metapragmatic evaluation when the evaluation explicitly connected the communicative practice to women as a social category, or when gender was made relevant to the judgment

of participation. Gendered or sexist content alone was therefore not sufficient for inclusion. This distinction allowed the analysis to separate evaluations of communicative conduct from statements that expressed negative attitudes toward women without evaluating how women participated or were expected to participate (Davies, 2018; Su, 2019).

The coding process considered six dimensions: the evaluative target, the orientation and content of the evaluation, its pragmatic function, the participation norm it indexed, its position in the metapragmatic trajectory, and the evidentiary status of the document. The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the documents were mapped according to their date, source, and role as core or contextual evidence. Second, relevant segments were identified and coded according to the six dimensions. Third, related evaluations were compared across documentary sources to examine points of continuity, contrast, and contestation. Fourth, the resulting sequence was interpreted in relation to the research questions and the analytical concepts of metapragmatics, indexicality, and language ideology. The apology sequence was examined separately in terms of observable discourse practices of retraction, regret, and apology, using face and repair to interpret this part of the sequence.

Interpretive validity was addressed by examining each evaluative segment in its documentary context rather than treating isolated statements as self-sufficient evidence. Related evidence was compared across source types, and direct statements, journalistic descriptions, public responses, and institutional statements were not treated as equivalent forms of evidence. Where a document supported only a contextual interpretation, the analysis used appropriately limited wording. This approach helped reduce the risk of extending an evaluation documented in one source into a broader claim about Japanese women, Japanese institutions, or public opinion. The distinction between representation and behavior was maintained throughout the analysis. For example, statements describing women as speaking excessively or making meetings longer were analyzed as representations of women's participation, not as evidence that women actually displayed those behaviors.

Trustworthiness was supported through source triangulation, source traceability, and an audit trail. The researcher recorded the reasons for including the documents, the coding decisions applied to relevant segments, and the documentary basis for the main interpretive claims. Comparing different types of documents also allowed the analysis to distinguish between what a source reported and what the source itself evaluated. Digital material, including the use of *#wakimaenaionna*, was treated as contextual evidence of contestation rather than as a representative sample of Japanese social media users. Similarly, the analysis did not infer private intentions from public statements when such intentions were not documented.

The study was conducted by a single analyst, and inter-coder reliability was therefore not calculated. Rather than presenting the analysis as independently verified by multiple coders, the study makes its interpretive procedure transparent through explicit coding criteria, repeated comparison of related segments, source traceability, and attention to the documentary context of each claim. In this qualitative case study, reproducibility is understood primarily in terms of traceability: readers can identify the selected data, the coding categories, and the links between documentary evidence and interpretation. This does not imply that another researcher would necessarily assign identical interpretations to every segment. The aim is instead to make the analytical path sufficiently visible for readers to assess how the interpretations were developed from the documentary evidence.

The shift in the object of evaluation was also examined as part of the analytical procedure. The analysis traced how the initial evaluation of women's participation was followed by evaluations of the participation norm itself and, subsequently, by evaluations of Mori's discourse and institutional position. This sequence was considered in relation to evaluative authority, understood here not as a measurable property of an individual or institution but as something visible in whose evaluations receive uptake, challenge, or reframing in subsequent discourse. Because the corpus consists of mediated public documents, the study does not attempt to measure how authority was distributed across

Japanese society. Instead, it examines how Mori's institutional position initially gave prominence to his evaluation and how subsequent discourse subjected that evaluation to competing interpretations and forms of challenge.

The bounded nature of the corpus places further limits on the scope of the findings. Ten documents allow for close examination of the evaluative sequence surrounding the controversy, but they do not exhaust the range of responses to Mori's remarks. A larger and more diverse corpus could include additional media sources, institutional documents, meeting records, and systematically sampled digital responses. Such a corpus might reveal alternative evaluations or competing trajectories that are not visible in the present selection. It could also provide a stronger basis for examining whether similar evaluative patterns occur across different institutional and social settings. The present study therefore treats the ten-document corpus as sufficient for a focused documentary case analysis, while recognizing that broader research would be needed to examine the wider distribution and recurrence of the patterns identified here.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals a progressive shift in the object of metapragmatic evaluation. At the beginning of the controversy, women's institutional participation is evaluated in relation to meeting efficiency, speaking behavior, and the perceived need to regulate participation. Mori then contrasts this representation with women whom he describes as appropriately bounded participants. The category of appropriate participation subsequently becomes contestable through #wakimaenaionna #わきまえない女, after which attention turns toward Mori's own discourse and institutional position. The sequence is therefore analyzed as a connected process in which an evaluation of participation becomes an evaluation of the norm underlying that judgment and, eventually, an evaluation of the evaluator. Table 1 presents representative segments used to trace this process.

Table 1 presents representative evidence rather than frequency counts. It identifies the evaluative target, the participation norm made relevant, and the

interpretation supported by the documentary context. The table is intended to make the analytical procedure visible rather than to suggest that the selected segments exhaust the controversy.

Table 1. Summary of Representative Data and Sociopragmatic Interpretation

Data segment	Source	Evaluative target	Indexed norm	participation	Analytical interpretation
「会議は時間がかかります」	Asahi Shimbun; Sponichi Annex	Women's participation	Efficiency and duration	meeting	Women's institutional presence is associated with perceived meeting inefficiency.
「競争意識が強い」	Asahi Shimbun; Sponichi Annex	Women's speaking behavior	Controlled participation		Women's speech is characterized as potentially excessive through a gendered description of competitive speaking.
「わきまえておられて」	Sponichi Annex; HuffPost Japan	Particular women	Appropriate and bounded participation		Positive evaluation is attached to women represented as observing an expected participation boundary.
「シュツとして、的を射た」	Sponichi Annex	Women's speech	Concision and focus		Concise and focused speech is constructed as a desirable form of institutional participation.
# わきまえない女	Contextual digital evidence	Evaluative category	Contestation of participation norms	of	The category of appropriate participation becomes an object of counter-evaluation.
Public evaluations of Mori's remarks	Editorial and news materials	Mori's discourse	Institutional appropriateness and accountability	and	The evaluative focus shifts from women's participation to the appropriateness of the evaluator's discourse.
「撤回をしたい」 / 「お詫び申し上げます」	Mainichi Shimbun; Sponichi Annex	Mori's response	Repair and accountability		Retraction and apology constitute observable repair-oriented responses to the controversy.

Note. The table presents representative evidence rather than frequency counts. The interpretations are limited to the documentary context of the selected controversy. Digital material is used as contextual evidence and is not treated as a representative sample of Japanese public opinion.

Gendered Evaluation of Participation as an Efficiency Problem

The first pattern links women's institutional participation to meeting duration. In the February 3 meeting, Mori stated, "*Josei ga takusan haitte iru riji-kai no kaigi wa jikan ga kakarimasu*" (「女性がたくさん入っている理事会は時間がかかります」), representing meetings with many women as taking longer (Asahi Shimbun, 2021; Sponichi Annex, 2021). He then explained the alleged cause by saying that women have strong competitive awareness and that when one woman speaks, others feel they should also speak. The evaluation therefore connects women's presence to a particular participation practice, namely extended or repeated speaking, and to an institutional consequence, namely longer meetings.

The metapragmatic significance of this formulation lies in the explicit relationship among a social category, a communicative practice, and a standard for institutional interaction. When Mori subsequently refers to the need to regulate speaking time if more women are appointed, regulation is presented within his account as a response to the communicative problem he has described. The statement thus formulates an expectation about how participation should be organized and makes that expectation available for further evaluation (Silverstein, 1993, 2003). The analysis consequently does not treat the material simply as evidence of a gender stereotype. The relevant evidence connects gender, communicative conduct, and an institutional norm.

At the same time, the evidence does not establish that Japanese women actually speak more, interrupt more, or cause meetings to run longer. It shows how women's participation was represented within the selected documentary materials. The significance of the finding is therefore located in the construction of an evaluative relationship rather than in an empirical claim about women's behavior.

Wakimaeru and Conditional Positive Evaluation

A different evaluative pattern appears when Mori describes about seven women on the organizing committee: "*Watakushidomo no soshiki iinkai ni mo josei*

wa 7-nin kurai orimasuga, minasan, wakimaete orarete” (「私どもの組織委員会にも女性は 7 人くらいおられますが、みなさん、わきまえておられて」). He follows this with praise for their speech as “*Ohanashi mo shutto shite, teki o ita*” (「お話もシュツとして、的を射た」), describing it as concise and on point (Sponichi Annex, 2021). Women’s participation is therefore evaluated positively when it is represented as controlled, concise, and relevant. The contrast shows that the same broad category, women, is evaluated differently according to how participation is represented. The resulting norm is conditional rather than absolute: participation is treated as appropriate when it conforms to an expected communicative boundary.

The expression *wakimaete* is important here because its relevant social meaning cannot be established from the lexical item alone. Its interpretation in this sequence is supported by its target, co-text, and position in a larger evaluative contrast. It is applied to particular women, follows a discussion in which women’s speaking is associated with longer meetings and the need for regulation, and is followed by positive descriptions of concise and focused speech. These relations make the expression part of a contextual evaluation of appropriate participation. This supports an indexical approach in which social meaning emerges through relationships among linguistic resources, participants, activities, and contexts (Ochs, 1992; Silverstein, 2003).

The finding also connects with Japanese research showing that gendered meanings are historically produced and continually negotiated rather than simply encoded in linguistic forms (Inoue, 2002, 2006; Nakamura, 2014). Okamoto (2018) demonstrates how metapragmatic discourse can connect speech practices with ideas about femininity, while Okamoto and Morimoto (2023) show that gender norms operate across linguistic and paralinguistic resources. In the present case, the relevant point is not that *wakimaete* is inherently gendered. Rather, an existing

linguistic resource becomes socially consequential through its use in a gendered institutional evaluation.

Counter-Metapragmatic Reframing of Women's Participation

The participation norm does not remain uncontested. The hashtag *#wakimaenaionna* #わきまえない女 reuses the category of the woman who supposedly does not know how to behave appropriately and turns it into a counter-evaluative resource. What had been presented as a deficiency in women's participation becomes a category that can itself be questioned and rejected. The analytical significance is that subsequent discourse does not merely offer an opposing view about women. It takes up the evaluative category itself, illustrating the recursive character of metapragmatics (Davies, 2018; Su & Lee, 2022).

The hashtag is not treated as a representative sample of Japanese public opinion. Its value lies in documenting the public availability and uptake of a counter-category within the selected documentary record. Digital circulation can show that an evaluative category became contestable without establishing how widely the category or its rejection was held across the population.

Public responses also redirected attention toward Mori's remarks. News and editorial materials documented judgments concerning the appropriateness of his statements, while public and institutional responses challenged the assumptions connecting women's participation with meeting inefficiency. The analytical point is not to determine which public judgment was correct, but to trace how the original evaluation became an object of further evaluation. The authority to define appropriate participation consequently became discursively contestable.

From Evaluating Women's Participation to Evaluating the Evaluator

Once the participation norm itself becomes contested, the evaluative focus shifts from whether women meet the expected standard to whether Mori's formulation of that standard is appropriate. His discourse, rather than women's participation alone, becomes the object of metapragmatic scrutiny. The initial norm

therefore cannot be treated as settled simply because it was formulated by a person occupying an institutional position.

This sequence illustrates recursive metapragmatics. The initial discourse evaluates women's communicative conduct. Subsequent discourse evaluates the terms and assumptions of that evaluation, including the category of the appropriately bounded woman (Davies, 2018; Su & Lee, 2022). The object of evaluation moves across levels while remaining connected to institutional participation. This shift matters because participation is no longer examined only in terms of whether women conform to a norm. The norm itself becomes available for scrutiny.

The shift also changes how evaluative authority becomes visible. Mori's institutional position initially gives his assessment prominence, but subsequent responses show that institutional position does not by itself settle the meaning of appropriate participation. Media actors, public respondents, and institutional representatives evaluate the evaluator, making his formulation accountable to competing norms. The documentary record therefore suggests a relational and contested form of evaluative authority: authority is visible not only in who can issue an evaluation, but also in whose evaluation is taken up, challenged, or reframed (Davies, 2018; Su, 2026). The corpus does not permit a claim about how authority was distributed across Japanese society more broadly.

Discursive Repair and Institutional Consequence

Following the criticism, Mori issued a public statement expressing regret, retracting the remarks, and apologizing to those who had been offended (Sponichi Annex, 2021; Mainichi Shimbun, 2021). These statements are treated as observable discourse practices rather than evidence of private intention. Face and repair are used here only to interpret this apology sequence. The public record provides evidence of retraction, regret, and apology, but it does not establish Mori's private motives or sincerity. The significance of the sequence lies in the change from

evaluating women's participation to responding publicly to evaluations directed at Mori himself.

The subsequent institutional consequence is considered separately from the linguistic analysis. Mori initially stated that he had no intention of resigning, but later resigned as criticism continued (Mainichi Shimbun, 2021; Tokyo Shimbun, 2021; Yomiuri Shimbun, 2021). The resignation is not treated as a direct linguistic effect. Within the documentary sequence, it marks a further extension of evaluation from communicative conduct to institutional accountability. This distinction prevents the analysis from reducing a complex institutional development to a simple effect of language.

The documentary materials contain different framings, and the analysis does not aggregate them into a single public position. What remains consistent across the selected materials is the observable movement in the object of evaluation: women's participation is initially described and judged, the participation norm becomes contestable, and Mori's own discourse becomes subject to scrutiny. This processual interpretation is narrower than a claim about a unified public reaction, but it captures the sequence traceable in the selected documents.

Recursive Metapragmatic Evaluation

Taken together, the findings show a sequence in which the object of evaluation changes while the question of appropriate institutional participation remains continuous. Mori first evaluates women's participation through efficiency and speaking-time norms. He then positively evaluates women who are represented as concise and focused. Counter-metapragmatic discourse contests the category of the appropriately bounded woman, and subsequent responses evaluate Mori's own discourse. The trajectory can therefore be understood as evaluation of participation, evaluation of the participation norm, and evaluation of the evaluator.

This sequence gives the case its sociopragmatic significance. Metapragmatic evaluation is not limited to explicit comments about linguistic forms. Here, it also

operates through judgments about how institutional participants should speak, how much they should speak, and what counts as appropriate participation. Once those judgments become contested, the evaluative process itself becomes part of the discourse. The case therefore extends metapragmatic analysis from communicative forms to the recursive evaluation of institutional participation norms.

The sequence also clarifies the contextual status of *wakimaete*. Its relevance does not follow from the lexical form alone. It emerges from the contrast between women represented as appropriately bounded and women represented as excessive or difficult to regulate, together with the subsequent reuse of the category in counter-evaluative discourse. The evidence supports a contextual and indexical interpretation of its social meaning in this controversy. It does not establish that the controversy created the meaning from nothing, nor does it exclude the influence of pre-existing Japanese gender ideologies.

The case can consequently be understood as a contestation over the conditions under which institutional participation is treated as legitimate. The evidence does not demonstrate a general Japanese norm that women should speak less. It demonstrates that, within the selected controversy, women's participation was publicly represented through a norm of concision, focus, and boundedness, and that this norm became contested. The significance lies in the process through which the norm was made visible and subsequently challenged.

The shift in evaluative object also provides a more precise way of understanding authority. The controversy does not show that authority simply moved from Mori to another identifiable actor or group. Instead, it shows that the authority to define appropriate participation became discursively contestable. An institutional position could give an evaluation prominence, but subsequent uptake, challenge, and reframing could make that evaluation itself subject to scrutiny. This

supports a relational understanding of evaluative authority while remaining within the limits of the mediated documentary corpus.

Theoretical Contribution

The study makes three connected contributions to sociopragmatic research. First, it shifts attention from gendered linguistic forms to the metapragmatic evaluation of communicative conduct and institutional participation. Second, it identifies a contextual form of conditional legitimacy in which women's participation is positively represented when it is concise, focused, and bounded within the selected documentary sequence. Third, it develops a processual account of recursive evaluation in which a judgment about women's participation becomes contestable, the participation norm itself becomes an object of evaluation, and the original evaluator's discourse and institutional position subsequently come under scrutiny.

These contributions connect the findings to the theoretical framework established in the Introduction. The analysis supports an indexical view of social meaning by showing that the relevant meaning of *wakimaete* emerges through its relation to participants, co-text, institutional setting, and subsequent uptake rather than through the lexical item alone (Ochs, 1992; Silverstein, 2003). It also extends metapragmatic analysis by showing how evaluations can move across levels of discourse, from communicative conduct to the norm used to judge that conduct and then to the authority of the evaluator (Davies, 2018; Su, 2026). The case therefore brings together metapragmatics, language ideology, and institutional participation without treating any one dimension as sufficient on its own.

The notion of conditional legitimacy should be understood as a finding about the documentary case, not as a universal institutional norm. It describes the contrast constructed in the selected materials between participation portrayed as efficient and participation portrayed as excessive. Similarly, the relational account of evaluative authority is bounded by the public documentary record. These

qualifications are important because the study does not establish the prevalence of the identified norms across Japan or the distribution of authority across Japanese institutions.

The recursive pattern also distinguishes the present study from the author's earlier book-chapter analysis (Handayani, 2026). That chapter examines five Mori statements and their sociopragmatic implications, with attention to sexism, politeness, power, and the social implications of the utterances. The present article uses a different unit of analysis by tracing the documentary sequence across multiple sources and examining how the object of evaluation changes over time. Its contribution therefore lies not simply in revisiting the same controversy, but in examining how a participation norm is articulated, contested, and redirected toward the discourse and institutional position of the original evaluator.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the Mori controversy as a sequence of metapragmatic evaluations of women's institutional participation. The analysis shows that participation was first evaluated through meeting efficiency and speaking-time norms, then positively represented when women were portrayed as concise and focused, and later contested as Mori's own discourse became an object of public evaluation. The findings therefore support a processual account of how participation norms can be articulated and renegotiated in public institutional discourse.

The contribution is deliberately bounded. The corpus does not establish how common these participation norms are in Japan, whether women actually display the behaviors attributed to them, or how Japanese public opinion as a whole responded. A larger corpus containing meeting transcripts, institutional documents, and systematically sampled digital responses could test whether similar evaluative patterns recur across settings. Such research could also compare how participation norms intersect with gender, status, age, and institutional role.

The study's main implication is methodological as well as theoretical: examining what communicative conduct is evaluated, who is authorized to evaluate it, and how that evaluation is subsequently contested can reveal gendered assumptions that may remain less visible when analysis focuses only on linguistic forms or on whether a statement is sexist. The Mori case illustrates this process within a clearly bounded documentary record.

AI Declaration

The author declares that Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools were used solely to enhance the linguistic quality of this manuscript. Specifically, ChatGPT and Grammarly were used for language clarity, stylistic improvement, and grammatical correction. The AI tools were not used to generate, analyze, or interpret the research data, and they did not determine the selection or interpretation of the academic references. The author reviewed and verified all AI-assisted outputs and accepts full responsibility for the content of the manuscript. This statement is included in accordance with the publication ethics and malpractice requirements of the Journal of Pragmatics Research.

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