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〈研究論文〉

The Metamorphosis of the “Mask Beauty”: A Sociolinguistic Approach

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1. *Masuku-bijin* at the center of attention

Among the various terms used to refer to attractiveness in Japanese, *bijin* (‘beautiful woman’) is a strong candidate for the title of most well-known or most commonly used. This paper focuses on a type of *bijin*, namely the *masuku-bijin*. It would be fitting to first establish a working definition for this particular type but, as will become clear throughout this paper, that is no easy task. In the title of the paper, the literal translation “mask beauty” was used out of practical considerations, as a shorter version of the more accurate “woman who looks beautiful with a mask on”.

At first glance, it may seem that *masuku-bijin* does not require or even allow in-depth analysis – it is just another term used to talk about beauty in Japanese. However, this paper will shed light on the complex social dynamics reflected in and through the use of this particular term. In her study on the beauty industry and the Japanese body aesthetics, Miller (2006) stresses that “beauty as an object of research is sneered at because it is primarily a concern of women […], yet it has enormous economic and cultural weight” (12). The economic and cultural dimensions will prove essential for understanding the impact of *masuku-bijin*, which captured public attention during a time of profound uncertainty at the level of society: the COVID-19 pandemic. At the end of each year, several rankings of popular or representative words are published in Japan, one of them being Shogakukan’s *Daijisen* New Words Award ranking. In 2021, *masuku-bijin* featured

in *Daijisen's* top 10 words of the year. While it was not the only pandemic-related term included in the top, the others arguably reference more practical aspects of the new way of life brought about by the virus, like in the case of *fukuhannō* (‘adverse reaction’) or *masuku-kaishoku* (‘mask dining’). In 2022, *Daijisen's* website specifies that *masuku-bijin* was among the words with the most votes from the public but did not appear in the top 10 because it had already been featured in the previous year[1].

Why did a beauty-related term spark the public's interest to such a degree, especially during a period marked by health-related anxiety and restrictions on social interaction? Several studies analyzing the psychological impact of habitual mask use mention either the birth of *masuku-bijin* (Sugai and Ariga 2023, Yamamoto 2023) or its rise in popularity (Kawahara et. al 2023, Hayashi 2025), but only tangentially. Prior to the pandemic, Miyazaki and Kawahara (2016) mention that the term started to spread rapidly through mass and social media since 2012 and that it “implies a (false) belief that wearing a sanitary mask may increase female facial attractiveness by concealing spots or birthmarks”.

The present paper will provide data to confirm that *masuku-bijin* does, in fact, predate the pandemic, but its main objective lies in establishing that the mask-related restrictions imposed during that time had a far greater impact than just an increase in usage, from a linguistic point of view. In reality, the term underwent a significant change in meaning which, in turn, had notable societal effects. To prove this, the paper will first examine its structural and semantic properties and will then proceed to explore its evolution within discourse, by analyzing data available online. Finally, its impact will be accounted for through a sociolinguistic approach, illustrating how a term originally used to talk about beauty in Japanese has developed into something that can exert significant pressure or cause emotional distress.

2. Defining the *bijin*

2.1. *Bijin* and its subtypes

What would be an appropriate definition for *masuku-bijin*? Structurally, it can be

categorized as a compound headed by *bijin*, which is generally understood to reference women with beautiful physical features[2]. Semantically, at least upon first inspection, the element on the left, *masuku* (‘mask’), identifies a subtype of the head’s referent, namely women who look beautiful when wearing a mask. From this perspective, there is nothing unusual about *masuku-bijin* – Japanese compounds are typically right-headed and allow a wide range of internal semantic relationships (Kageyama 1982, 1993, 2009). In fact, there is a large variety of compounds with a similar structure in Japanese, and the ways they have been used in discourse can help contextualize the linguistic and social phenomena at the center of this paper. Below, a selection of data collected from The Balanced Corpus of Contemporary Written Japanese (BCCWJ) will be analyzed, aiming to provide background information on the functions of compound terms headed by *bijin*.

A highly productive pattern observable in the data consists in combining specific body parts with *bijin*. The corpus suggests a tendency to focus on the face within this pattern, obtaining compounds such as *kogao-bijin* (‘small face beauty’), *suhada-bijin* (‘bare skin beauty’), and even *memoto-bijin* (‘eye area beauty’) or *hitomi-bijin* (‘pupil beauty’). For example, as illustrated in (1) below, an article in *COSMOPOLITAN* associates *memoto-bijin* with mastering professional eye makeup techniques. In (2), another magazine – this time specializing in health advice – uses *irojiro-bijin* (‘white skin beauty’) to represent someone who has succeeded in fading out pronounced skin pigmentation.

（1）コスモコスメ相談室
今が旬のメイクアイテムといえばアイライナー！上手に使っている人の目はパッチリと印象的。プロのアイラインテクニックをマスターして目もと美人を目ざしましょう！

COSMO Cosmetics Consultation Room
The must-have makeup item right now is eyeliner! Used well, it opens up the eyes and makes them unforgettable. Let’s master pro eyeliner techniques and strive to become eye area beauties!

(BCCWJ: *COSMOPOLITAN Japan*, 2004)

（2）水キムチを百人にプレゼント！
パッと作れる《水キムチ》で十五キロ　十キロやせた！
高血圧に著効
濃いシミが消えた！色白美人に大変身

Free water kimchi for 100 people!
I lost 15 kilos, 10 kilos with **water kimchi**, and it’s so easy to make!
Works wonders for high blood pressure
My dark spots have disappeared! I’ve transformed into a white skin beauty!

(BCCWJ: *Sōkai*, 2005)

Despite the above-mentioned tendency, it would be difficult to identify the limits of acceptability when it comes to this particular compounding pattern. The corpus includes instances of use of *bikyaku-bijin* (‘beautiful legs beauty’), *kyakuchō-bijin* (‘long legs beauty’), *heso-bijin* (‘belly button beauty’), and even *ushiro-sugata-bijin* (‘backside beauty’). As shown in (3), the women’s fashion magazine *JJ* mentions *ushiro-sugata-bijin* in a section dedicated to shoe recommendations.

（3）とっておきのお食事会
ここぞで力を発揮する後ろ姿美人のパンプスも必要
イベントシーズン、後ろ姿美人の靴で接近戦を強化すれば小上がりや階段でもひるまない。

A special dining occasion
Backside beauty pumps are a must, too – they will show their strength when it matters
During the event season, use backside beauty shoes to make sure you look flawless

from close up, and you won't hesitate even on raised platforms or stairs.

(BCCWJ: *JJ*, 2005)

Example (3), situated within the context of fashion, can also be linked to a different compounding pattern revealed by the data, which involves combining *bijin* with clothing items or accessories. The corpus includes examples of *yukata-bijin* ('yukata beauty'), *wafuku-bijin* ('traditional Japanese clothing beauty'), or *kimono-bijin* ('kimono beauty'). Another compound that can be categorized under this pattern is *sutairu-bijin* ('style beauty'), since it evokes the outward appearance reliant on clothing or accessories. This is illustrated in (4), in which the fashion and beauty magazine *CLASSY* recommends an outfit that can transform one into a *sutairu-bijin*.

(4) ほっそりシルエットにこだわったセットアップでスタイル美人に
ほっそりとしたきれいなシルエットとほどよいフィット感が心地良いセットアップ。

Become a style beauty with this coordinated set designed for a slim silhouette
A coordinated set that feels comfortable thanks to a slim, clean silhouette and a just-right fit.

(BCCWJ: *CLASSY*, 2005)

Regardless of the pattern they follow, the terms listed above mirror certain beliefs about what is considered attractive or desirable. When *bijin* is combined with a body part – like in the case of *memoto-bijin* and *irojiro-bijin* – the most readily available interpretation is that the referent is a woman who is perceived as beautiful as a result of that specific body part – eye area or white skin – aligning with attractiveness or desirability standards. This interpretation also applies to compounds that involve clothes or accessories – like *sutairu-bijin* – with the implication that the items in question suit the referent very well, resulting in her being perceived as beautiful. What is of particular

relevance here is that these terms can be seen as the linguistic realization of certain beauty standards. For instance, the preference for pale, evenly pigmented skin in the Japanese society is well known and well documented. Ashikari (2003) explains that in the premodern period painting one's face with white powder was a status symbol for both men and women and that during the Meiji Period (1868-1912) the white face came to symbolize ideal womanhood, representing tradition and native culture. This is consistent with the creation of a compound term like *irojiro-bijin* and with its use in discourse, as illustrated in example (2) above. Miller (2006) also stresses that beauty standards emphasizing pale, translucent skin have existed for centuries in Japan, discussing what she calls "the *bihaku būmu* (beautiful white boom)" in the context of the beauty industry developing an impressive range of skin whitening products and treatments. The reference to the beauty industry is significant in the context of the present paper as well, as the next section will show that compounds headed by *bijin* do not merely mirror beauty standards – they serve more practical purposes, as well.

2.2. Practical uses of *bijin*

What do the four compounds analyzed in the previous section – *memoto-bijin* ('eye area beauty'), *irojiro-bijin* ('white skin beauty'), *ushiro-sugata-bijin* ('backside beauty') and *sutairu-bijin* ('style beauty') – have in common from a practical point of view? They are all used in magazines in the context of promoting or selling certain products – eyeliner, water kimchi, a pair of pumps, and a coordinated outfit. The connection between eyeliner and an attractive gaze, for example, seems reasonable. However, there is room for debate as to whether eating water kimchi can "completely transform" one's complexion, as it is claimed in example (2).

In analyzing the discourse of the Japanese beauty industry, Miller (2006) brings up the word *nayami* ('worry') and demonstrates its use in advertisements or headlines such as "A small bust is a big worry!", emphasizing how new body worries are created in order to promote products or services that address them. Playing on anxiety about beauty standards may apply to compounds headed by *bijin*, as well. For instance, in

example (3), *ushiro-sugata-bijin* is described as someone who does not hesitate even on raised platforms or stairs, because she is wearing a specific pair of pumps. However, these compounds appear to be better suited for capitalizing on an idealized aesthetic image – represented by *bijin* – to promote a particular product or service. Miller (2006) also mentions that the industrialization of beauty and body aesthetics relies heavily on the creation of new concepts and words, which are used to sell "not only cosmetics or body improvement products but also hope and fantasy" (194). Hope and fantasy are two things *bijin* evokes, so mentioning it becomes an effective promotion strategy. A similar phenomenon is discussed in Tanaka (1991, 1994), who demonstrates how words with positive connotations, such as *chisei* ('intelligence') or *chiteki* ('intelligent'), are deliberately used in advertising to the point of over-extending their standard meaning in order to imply desirable qualities that the advertisers see as selling points. For example, she mentions a campaign by the cosmetics company Kanebo in which it is claimed that *chisei* resides in the clothes and even in the lipstick a woman wears (1994, 113)[3].

Mentioning *bijin* as a promotion strategy can also be observed in the context of a third compounding pattern, which involves elements not directly related to the referent's physical features. Okamoto (2004) discusses the term *kotoba-bijin*, translated as "language beauty", pointing out that it is common for self-help books to teach women how to use language, especially honorific expressions, to become more attractive. Expanding on this, Okamoto and Shibamoto Smith (2016) and Okamoto (2018) point out the existence of numerous compounds that use *bijin*, listing *hanashi-kata bijin* ('speaking beauty'), *kaiwa-bijin* ('conversation beauty'), *koe-bijin* ('voice beauty'), *denwa-bijin* ('telephone beauty') and *keego-bijin* ('honorifics beauty')[4] as examples relevant for the concept of linguistic femininity. The emphasis self-help books place on beautiful ways of speaking is taken as an indication that language – like makeup – is an equipment that makes women more attractive (Okamoto 2018).

This perspective aligns with the findings in this paper, in the sense that compounds headed by *bijin* reflect certain attractiveness or desirability standards, as discussed in the previous section. In Okamoto (2004), it is argued that self-help books "promote

the notion that women’s attractiveness depends on their appearance (beauty), which is in part determined by their good upbringing and education, including the knowledge of honorifics” (42). However, whether such compounds refer to appearance per se may depend on the context. Consider examples (5) and (6) below, collected from The Balanced Corpus of Contemporary Written Japanese (BCCWJ). In (5), the term *o-shokuji-bijin* (‘meal beauty’) is mentioned in a book on good manners, where it used to refer to someone who can move her non-dominant hand skillfully when eating with a fork. To some degree, this can be interpreted as part of one’s general look. In contrast, the link between appearance and being mindful of how one’s voice is conveyed over the phone – definitory for a *denwa-bijin* (‘phone beauty’), a term also mentioned in Okamoto and Shibamoto Smith (2016) and Okamoto (2018) – is less clear.

（5）上手に美しく食べるコツ 2
フォークは、「刺す」「すくう」役目があるので、その都度左手でクルクルともちかえながら食べます。「左手（利き手ではない手）がよく動くこと」がお食事美人のコツなので、たまには、お箸を左手に持ち変えて、お弁当を食べてみましょう。

Tips for enjoying food with skill 2
The fork is used to “spear” and “scoop” the food, so rotate it in your left hand as you eat. To become a meal beauty, you have to “move your left hand (non-dominant hand) well”, so try to switch your chopsticks to your left hand when eating your bentō from time to time.

(BCCWJ: *Reigi to Sahō*, 2003)

（6）電話美人になるために
電話は声の表情が大切。だからわたしは、いつも以上に〈声〉に気を配ります。・いつもより半音くらい高い音で話すと、明るい声になる。・ふだんよりゆっくり話す。・一音めは聞きとりにくいので、特にはっきりと言う。

To become a phone beauty

On the phone, vocal expression is important. That is why I am mindful of my **voice** more than usual. Use a pitch half a tone higher than usual, and my voice will sound cheerful. Speak at a slower pace than usual. The first sound is hard to hear, so I pronounce it clearly.

(BCCWJ: *Hito ni Sukareru Kotoba Ressun*, 2004)

In the context of the present paper, compounds like *o-shokuji-bijin* (‘meal beauty’) and *denwa-bijin* (‘phone beauty’) are especially significant from an alternative perspective, that of *bijin* being used to promote or sell. Regardless of the specific standard they reflect, both *o-shokuji* (‘meal’) and *denwa* (‘phone’) can be regarded as an integral part of what each book promises advice on, namely table manners and conversational skills. This reveals that compounds headed by *bijin* can be deliberately used for lucrative purposes, echoing Tanaka’s (1991, 1994) findings about words with positive connotations being manipulated in advertising in order to appeal to target groups. The fact that the terms identified by Okamoto and Shibamoto Smith (2016) and Okamoto (2018) were collected from self-help books can be interpreted as further confirmation. In fact, Okamoto (2018) concludes that such books exploit the creative use of language in order to attract buyers. The findings in the present paper align with this conclusion, though from a more focused perspective. Specifically, compounds headed by *bijin* are seen as having promotional appeal in and of themselves. In other words, simply combining *bijin* with an element associated with a specific product is seen as way to promote that product, be it eyeliner, kimchi, table manners, or sanitary face masks.

3. Defining the *masuku-bijin*

3.1. The mask and the emphasis on beauty

How does *masuku-bijin* fit into the broader category of compounds discussed above? From a subtype perspective, it best aligns with the second compounding pattern, since

a face mask can be viewed as part of someone’s overall attire, functioning like an accessory. With respect to meaning, then, it would be reasonable to expect the term to refer to someone who looks beautiful when wearing a face mask, with the entailment that the mask suits her very well. The following examples, collected from online sources, confirm the availability of this interpretation.

The passage in (7) is taken from a 2012 *Asahi Shimbun* article about an event aimed at popularizing face masks during the exam period. The event’s host uses *masuku-bijin* to describe the guest, a beautiful (*utsukushii*) female celebrity, who had just demonstrated the proper way to put on a face mask. In (8), expert advice on how to wear masks is presented in a 2015 interview from *TOWNWORK Magazine*. The interviewer is exploring recommendations for masks that can make one look beautiful, creating the impression of a small face (*bijin & kogao ni mieru masuku*), and then concludes that the key to becoming a *masuku-bijin* lies in choosing a mask that fits one’s face well.

（7）健康を保つことが欠かせない受験期、マスクを着用してインフルエンザや花粉症などを予防するよう呼びかける街頭イベントが、12 日に東京・渋谷マークシティで行われた。ゲストで招かれた東京大学大学院生でタレントの八田亜矢子は、報道陣らの前でマスクの正しい着用を実演。司会の「美しい女性はマスクをしてもマスク美人ですね」との言葉に「ありがとうございます」と苦笑していた。

During the exam period, when maintaining one’s health is essential, a street event encouraging mask use to prevent influenza, hay fever, and the like was held at Shibuya Mark City in Tokyo on the 12th. Guest Ayako Hatta, a graduate student at the University of Tokyo and TV personality, demonstrated the correct way to wear a mask in front of the press. When the host commented, “A beautiful woman stays a mask beauty even if she has a mask on,” she smiled wryly and replied, “Thank you.”

(https://www.asahi.com/edu/center-exam/TKY201201120563.html)

(8) ちなみに、最近では美肌とか小顔、メガネが曇らないとか、さまざまなマスクが販売されていますが、専門家から見て美人 & 小顔に見えるマスクってありますか？

「きちんとサイズが合ったものを選ぶことが大前提。（中略）マスクが顔にフィットしていれば、シュッとおさまるので、小顔効果も期待できるのではないでしょうか」

どうやらマスク美人へのカギも、フィットにあるようです。

By the way, various masks are sold nowadays, some for beautiful skin or a small face, others to avoid your eyeglasses getting foggy. From an expert's perspective, are there masks that can make one look beautiful and create the impression of a small face?

"Choosing the appropriate size is crucial. […] If the mask fits your face, it will create a neat look, so you can expect to get a small-face effect."

Apparently, the key to becoming a mask beauty is in the fit, too.

（https://townwork.net/magazine/life/10012/）

As with other compounds headed by *bijin*, the type of semantic interpretation illustrated through examples (7) and (8) frames *masuku-bijin* as the realization of certain beauty standards present in the Japanese society. At first glance, the association between beauty and sanitary face masks, objects primarily mean to protect against health-related risks, may appear counterintuitive. However, in Japan, mask-wearing habits had become established in the community long before they became the focus of global attention during the COVID-19 pandemic, sometimes serving aesthetic purposes, like concealing one's makeup-free face in public spaces (Burgess and Horii 2012, Horii 2014, Miyazaki

and Kawahara 2016). Moreover, it may be argued that the link between beauty and hiding one’s face goes beyond such readily observable practical motivations, reflecting long-standing cultural practices (Masuda 2010, Hiramatsu 2020). In fact, in examining the evolution of facial beauty standards in Japan, Murasawa (2007) describes the Japanese culture as a *kao-kakushi bunka* (‘face-hiding culture’). Yonezawa (2022) views this as a potential explanation for how easily the Japanese adopted the sanitary mask during the pandemic, suggesting that what she calls the “mask face” could be a contemporary manifestation of this type of culture. Viewed through this lens, the emphasis on looking beautiful when wearing a mask and, consequently, the creation of the term *masuku-bijin* appear natural.

In discourse, the term can be associated with various ideas related to attractiveness or desirability, depending on the context. In example (8) above, wearing a mask beautifully is dependent on the fit, which in turn creates the “small-face effect” (*kogao kōka*). In (9) and (10), that power is transferred to makeup. Notably, these examples reveal that *masuku-bijin*, too, can be used to promote certain products or services. The excerpt in (9) is from a press release advertising an event organized by the makeup company Shiseido in 2017. Aimed at nurses, who wear masks routinely by virtue of their occupation, the event features demonstrations of time-saving makeup techniques. In the excerpt, *masuku-bijin* is described as someone who can look both healthy and glamorous. Example (10) is taken from an article published in 2016 on *Joshitsuku!*, an online platform offering advice on aesthetic procedures and wellness, mainly targeted at women. As signalled by the title, the information in the article, namely makeup tips that can transform one into a *masuku-bijin*, is deemed essential during the cold season.

(9) マスク美人になるメイク術を学ぶ 看護師向け美容イベント開催

第二部では資生堂学園の人気講師、森田春香さんをゲストに迎え、健康的で華やかに見える時短マスク美人メイク術や、勤務後ひと手間で女っぷりを上げるメイク直しテクを紹介。

Beauty event for nurses: Learn makeup techniques to become a mask beauty

In the second part, we will welcome popular Shiseido Gakuen instructor Morita Haruka as our guest. She will introduce time-saving makeup techniques for mask beauties who look healthy and glamorous, as well as makeup touch-up methods that will increase your feminine appeal with minimal effort after work.

（https://prtimes.jp/main/html/rd/p/000000148.000010591.html）

（10）この時期必見！「マスク美人」になるメイクテクニック

暖かかった今年の冬も徐々に寒さが本格化し、体調を崩し始めている人も多いようです。この時期、マスクが手放せないという方も多いはず。しかし、マスクをすると顔の大部分が隠れてしまったり、マスクがあたる部分の化粧くずれが気になったり、普段どおりのメイクもなかなか楽しめません。そんな悩みを抱える女性のために、魅力的にみせられるメイクテクや、コツをレクチャーしちゃいます！

A must-see at this time of year! Makeup techniques to become a “mask beauty”

This winter started out warm, but the cold has finally settled in, and it seems that many people have started to fall ill. At this time of year, many may find themselves relying on face masks. However, wearing a mask means hiding a large part of the face. At the same time, some may worry that their makeup will smudge in the areas the mask touches, which makes it difficult to enjoy makeup as usual. For women struggling with these issues, we will provide a lecture on makeup techniques and tips that can make you look attractive!

（https://www.joshitsuku.com/beauty026/）

From the analysis in this section, it may be concluded that *masuku-bijin* does not deviate from the behavior of other compounds with a similar structure – it can be used for lucrative purposes because it reflects certain beauty standards, and these standards are compatible with deeply ingrained cultural and social practices involving hiding one’s face. Yet, as the next section will demonstrate, the fact that wearing a mask inevitably involves partially covering the face complicates the semantics of the term, which in turn translates into a profound, far-reaching impact on social interaction.

3.2. The other side of the mask

Under the subtype lens, the semantic relationship between the two elements in *masuku-bijin* appears fairly simple and logical. However, a closer examination of its use in discourse reveals an inherent ambiguity as to whether it carries positive or negative connotations. Acknowledging this ambiguity, the current section will provide data illustrating the term’s evolution in the negative direction, placing emphasis on its influence at the level of society. The data were collected from *Yahoo! Chiebukuro*, an online Q&A community that allows users to address a wide range of inquiries and concerns while maintaining anonymity.

Example (11) clearly indicates the duality involved in the use of the term. The author of the question, submitted in 2011, is wondering whether her colleague, whom she identifies as an older woman (*obasan*), intended to compliment or insult her through the label *masuku-bijin*. Another user shares that she has had a similar experience, suggesting they could interpret it as a compliment about their eyes.

(11) Q:「マスク美人」って褒め言葉ですか？けなし言葉ですか？
風邪を引いてマスクをして仕事に行ったら、バイト先のおばさんに「マスク美人だね」って言われました。
私は「それ褒め言葉じゃありませんよ（笑）」と返したら、「え～？褒めてるよ」と言われました。
普通に考えて褒め言葉じゃありませんよね？

A: 私も職場でそれに近いことを言われたことあります（笑）
風邪のシーズンに病院に行くと看護師さんたちもみんなマスクしてますよね。
みんなかわいく見えるんだそうです。
とりあえず「眼が魅力的♡」ということで良しとしませんか？？

Q: Is “mask beauty” an expression you use to compliment people? Or to mock them? I caught a cold and went to work with a mask on, and an older woman from my part-time job said, “You’re a mask beauty.”
I replied with “That’s not a compliment (lol)”, but she was surprised and said, “I was complimenting you.”
Normally, that’s not a compliment, right?

A: I was also told something like that at my workplace.
When you go to the hospital during cold season, the nurses all wear masks, right?
Apparently they all look cute.
Why don’t you think of it as “You have attractive eyes (heart)”?
（https://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q11257572426）

As mentioned in the Introduction, the COVID-19 pandemic marked a significant increase in the popularity of *masuku-bijin*. The data analyzed for this paper suggest that uncertainty regarding its meaning persisted during this time. However, a shift toward predominantly negative interpretations seems to have occurred, as shown in the examples below. The question in (12), submitted in February 2022, is nearly identical to the one in the previous example. Out of the 15 answers it received, 9 clearly state that they regard *masuku-bijin* as an insult, as illustrated in (12-A1). The remaining 6 answers suggest more nuanced interpretations, like in (12-A2). However, none of the users indicate a purely positive interpretation. Furthermore, the author of the question in (13), dated

January 2023, associates the emergence of *masuku-bijin* with the coronavirus. While this statement may not be perfectly consistent with linguistic data, it can be viewed as proof of the pandemic’s influence on the use of the term in public discourse. At the same time, example (13) is representative for the semantic shift observable in the data, since it proves that *masuku-bijin* has developed to convey a meaning in contrast to that of its head, *bijin* (‘beautiful woman’). Responding to several comments from other users, the author of the question explains that they have never met a *masuku-bijin*, since everyone still looked beautiful after having removed their mask.

（12）Q: マスク美人は褒め言葉ですか？悪口ですか？

A1: 悪口ですね。
「顔半分隠しときな。マスクに感謝しろよ。」ってことなので、ひどい悪口と思います。マスク美人と言われたらオウム返しして言い返してやりましょう。

A2: 微妙 …
マスク美人＝目元が美しい人
目元は褒めてる、それ以外は普通（褒めてもけなしてもいない）と並以下（端的にいうとブサイク）のどちらの可能性も考えられる。
言った本人に確認しないとどちらかわからない。

Q: Is mask beauty a compliment? Or an insult?

A1: It’s an insult.
It means “Hide half of your face. Be grateful to the mask.” So, I think it’s a big insult. If someone calls you a mask beauty, say it right back at them, just like a parrot.

A2: Hard to say…

Mask beauty = someone with a beautiful eye area

It's a compliment about the eye area, but there are two possibilities about the rest: it's either normal (not complimenting, not insulting) or below average (to put it plainly, ugly).

Unless you check with the one saying it, you won't know which of the two it is.

(https://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q11257572426)

(13) Q: コロナでマスク美人て言葉が出てきましたが、そんな人を見たことありますか？

マスク外したら想像と全然顔が違かった、みたいな（中略）

みんなそうゆう人を見てるらしいのですが、私はまだ出会った事がないんですよ。目元が綺麗だと外しても美人な人しか。

Q: During the pandemic, we got the word mask beauty, but have you ever seen someone like that?

Someone who looks completely different from what you imagined once the mask comes off […]

Everyone seems to have seen people like that, but I haven't met one yet. Everyone I've met with beautiful eyes was still beautiful without a mask.

(https://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q13274631788)

Of course, it would be impossible to draw an exhaustive semantic description of the term, since its interpretation depends on the context, or, to be more precise, on the speaker's intended meaning. Still, its development is of interest because it can be correlated with a remarkable level of impact on behavior. Specifically, the simple mention of *masuku-bijin* seems to have acquired the power to elicit intense reactions, mainly from

those it is used in reference to.

In example (14), submitted in November 2021, the user recounts an episode in which two strangers seemed to make fun of her appearance, in an environment where she had removed her mask. Having stated that she does not want to take off her mask anymore, she brings up *masuku-bijin*[5], expressing that hearing the word per se is a nuisance (*meiwaku*). Example (15), from May of the same year, starts with the user asserting that she hates being called a *masuku-bijin*. She explains that the term has had a profound impact on her emotional stability and wonders whether the only solution is to undergo plastic surgery.

(14) マスクを外したくない。飲みの席でマスクを外して飲食をすると前に座っていた男性 2 人が私の顔を見てコソコソ陰口のような事を言っていました。（中略）マスク詐欺、マスク美人といった言葉を良く聞くようになりましたが、本当に迷惑です。綺麗に忘れようと頑張ったのですが、嫌な記憶ほどずっと心に残ってモヤモヤするのでここで吐かせていただきました。

I don’t want to take off my mask. I took off my mask to eat and drink during a party, and two men who were sitting in front of me were whispering while looking at my face, as if gossiping. […] Recently, I’ve been hearing the words “mask fraud” and “mask beauty” a lot, but it’s really a nuisance. I tried to just forget about it, but unpleasant memories tend to linger in my mind and make me feel uneasy, so I vented here.

(https://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q11253224026)

(15) マスク美人って言われるのが嫌です。しにたくなります（中略）
一度顔のことで悩み始めると情緒不安定になってコントロールできなくなります
マスク美人ってもう整形するしかないですよね？

Q: I hate being called a mask beauty. It makes me want to die […]
Once I start worrying about my face, I become emotionally unstable and can't control myself
There's no other option for mask beauties than plastic surgery, right?
（https://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q11244009396）

A similar level of impact on behavior is revealed in examples (16) and (17) below. The former was submitted in November 2021, and the latter in June 2022. Interestingly, both users state that they used to receive many compliments about their appearance in the pre-mask period and that they were very hurt to be described as a *masuku-bijin* by people who, in all likelihood, had not even seen their bare face. As a result, the first user declares she does not want to go to school anymore, while the second confesses she has lost self-confidence and even feels disillusioned with her life.

(16)マスク美人と言われて辛いです。
コロナでマスクをしていない時期はみんなに可愛いと言われたり、（中略）その時は会った人みんなに顔を褒められていました。でも、コロナの時代になり、第一印象でマスクで会った人にマスク美人と言われました。すごく傷ついています。もう学校に行きたくありません。

I'm struggling because I've been called a mask beauty.
Before COVID, when I wasn't wearing a mask, everyone called me cute, […] and I received compliments about my face from all the people I met. But after the COVID era started, I was called a mask beauty by someone I met for the first time while wearing a mask. I was really hurt. I don't want to go to school anymore.
（https://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q13251904368）

(17)私は小さい頃から周りに美人と言われてチヤホヤされていました。（中略）だけど、マスク姿で高校に上がると、2 人の男子にマスク美人だと言われま

した。今までそのようなことを言われたことがなかったのですごく傷つきました。自分に自信がなくなって、親にまで強く当たってしまいました。小さい頃から言われてた言葉は全部嘘だったのかなって思うと生きているのも嫌です。

Ever since I was little, I was called beautiful and doted on by those around me. […] But when I entered high school wearing a mask, two boys called me a mask beauty. I had never been told something like that before, so I was really hurt. I lost confidence in myself, and I even took it out on my parents. When I think that the words I’ve been told ever since I was little were all lies, I don’t feel like living anymore.

（https://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q13256689213）

To a certain degree, the evolution of *masuku-bijin* may be linked to the social dynamics over the course of the coronavirus pandemic. On the one hand, it has been widely reported in the literature that wearing a sanitary mask can influence the perceived attractiveness of the face (for example, Miyazaki and Kawahara 2016, Bassiri-Tehrani et al. 2022, Hies and Lewis 2022, Kamatani et al. 2022, Pazhoohi and Kingstone 2022, Kawahara et al. 2023). On the other hand, taking into consideration that beauty was already a concern in the context of mask-wearing before the onset of the pandemic, an increase in interest can be seen as a natural consequence of the generalized adoption of masks prompted by the spread of the virus. Moreover, as illustrated in Yonezawa (2022), the sanitary mask itself was redefined as a fashionable item, featuring in various campaigns in the beauty industry[6]. However, this alone does not accurately account for the power *masuku-bijin* acquired in discourse. In other words, the events unfolding during the pandemic cannot be considered the sole cause of the reactions the term per se elicits.

4. *Masuku-bijin* through a sociolinguistic lens

How did *masuku-bijin* come to be perceived as a nuisance or a source of shock and distress? The answer lies in the associations the term projects. In sociolinguistic research,

this is understood by drawing on indexicality – using linguistic forms to perform pragmatic work, such as conveying stances or evoking social constructs like identity and gender (Ochs 1990, 1992). Indexicality is not a fixed process, since social meanings can be added and repositioned based on the context (Silverstein 2003). In this paper, an important concept is Eckert's (2008) indexical field, defined as a "constellation of ideologically related meanings" (454) including stances, permanent qualities, and social categories that speakers can activate in each communicative instance. As illustrated in the previous sections, the patterns of use of *masuku-bijin* in discourse involve two major dimensions: an attempt to clarify its meaning and the impact its use has on social behavior. Below, it will be argued that the former is a matter of stance, while the latter can be related to the qualities included in the term's indexical field.

The analysis in the previous section started with examples in which anonymous users were seeking answers about the meaning of *masuku-bijin*, wondering whether it is a compliment or an insult. Both options were considered valid by some of those who responded, outlining a description of the facial features they associated with the term. This clearly involves a process of evaluation: while it may seem that the users are simply debating the meaning of a linguistic item, their dialogue clearly involves judgements on what counts as a "mask beauty" or, in broader terms, as beautiful. Evaluation is broadly recognized as a means by which speakers take stances or express attitudes toward, viewpoints on, or feelings about the entities they are talking about (Hunston and Thompson 2001: 5). In Du Bois (2007), stance is defined as an act through which a social actor simultaneously evaluates objects, positions themselves or others, and aligns with others through discourse. As the data in this paper show, the use of *masuku-bijin* involves all three dimensions of stance-taking. First, it involves evaluation of both the concept of "mask beauty" and the referent. Second, depending on the context, it allows positioning on a continuum between complimenting and mocking. Finally, the inherent ambiguity of the term can be seen as a catalyst for discussion, thus leading to alignment or disalignment among the speakers. This process is perfectly illustrated by example (11), reproduced here in part, since the main trigger for the user's post on the online

community was disagreement with her colleague, who had intended *masuku-bijin* as a compliment.

（11’）Q:「マスク美人」って褒め言葉ですか？けなし言葉ですか？
風邪を引いてマスクをして仕事に行ったら、バイト先のおばさんに「マスク美人だね」って言われました。
私は「それ褒め言葉じゃありませんよ（笑）」と返したら、「え～？褒めてるよ」と言われました。
普通に考えて褒め言葉じゃありませんよね？

Q: Is “mask beauty” an expression you use to compliment people? Or to mock them? I caught a cold and went to work with a mask on, and an older woman from my part-time job said, “You’re a mask beauty.”
I replied with “That’s not a compliment (lol)”, but she was surprised and said, “I was complimenting you.”
Normally, that’s not a compliment, right?
（https://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q11257572426）

Furthermore, the use of *masuku-bijin* may be linked to stance from an alternative perspective. In their study on discourses on body shape and weight loss, Coupland and Coupland (2009) introduce the concept of stance attribution, which they define as the act of specifying someone else’s stance. Focusing on data from geriatric medicine and magazine features, they illustrate how institutional voices attribute stances to people in relation to their own bodies. As the following example reveals, stance attribution may manifest in the case of *masuku-biji*n as well. The question, submitted in April 2021, focuses on the feelings of those referred to by the term. It is followed by several options, namely discomfort, happiness, a sense of power, and guilt. While it is unclear what these options are based on specifically, they can be interpreted as an illustration of stance attribution, in Coupland and Coupland’s (2009) sense, since they reflect an implicit claim

about others' feelings or reactions.

(18) Q: マスク美人と言われてる人は心の中ではどう思ってるんですか？
嫌ですか？嬉しいですか？
コロナの時期だったら、無双できる ww とか思ってるんですか？
それとも、罪悪感でいっぱいですが？

What do people who are called mask beauties feel deep down?
Do they hate it? Are they happy?
Do they think they are invincible (lol), in the COVID era?
Or are they filled with guilt?
(https://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q10242071050)

Stance is particularly relevant because it can be linked to the second dimension of the term's evolution in discourse. As previously noted, ambiguity inevitably results in the projection of a stance continuum, allowing speakers to access both appreciative and pejorative connotations. This, in turn, can shift the responsibility of discernment toward the referents. Coupland and Coupland (2009) remark that stance attribution can put the addressee in the position of having to struggle against a socially attributed orientation, but this also seems to hold in the opposite direction. Specifically, it may fall on the referent's shoulders to identify what quality *masuku-bijin* evokes – or indexes.

As Eckert (2008) posits, a linguistic item's indexical field is complex and flexible, and the findings in this paper align with this approach. For instance, in example (9), reproduced below, *masuku-bijin* appears to simultaneously index qualities like "healthy", "glamorous", or "feminine", as well as a socio-professional category associated with frequent mask use, namely nurses.

(9') マスク美人になるメイク術を学ぶ 看護師向け美容イベント開催

第二部では資生堂学園の人気講師、森田春香さんをゲストに迎え、健康的で華やかに見える時短マスク美人メイク術や、勤務後ひと手間で女っぷりを上げるメイク直しテクを紹介。

Beauty event for nurses: Learn makeup techniques to become a mask beauty

In the second part, we will welcome popular Shiseido Gakuen instructor Morita Haruka as our guest. She will introduce time-saving makeup techniques for mask beauties who look healthy and glamorous, as well as makeup touch-up methods that will increase your feminine appeal with minimal effort after work.

（https://prtimes.jp/main/html/rd/p/000000148.000010591.html）

One of the key issues explored in this paper is the influence *masuku-bijin* has come to exert on social practice, and one particular quality included in the term’s indexical field seems to hold the answer. The data suggest that the term has developed to now index a type of contradiction of expectations, which translates into qualities like “surprising” or “misleading”. Example (18) provides valuable hints in this respect, since the suggested attitudes include “feeling invincible” during the pandemic and an “overwhelming sense of guilt”. The author’s intended meaning is unclear, especially when it comes to why someone would feel guilty in this context, but one plausible explanation is provided by the indexicality process outlined above.

In other words, it is not the mere mention of *masuku-bijin* that causes feelings of annoyance or distress, but a particular meaning it indexes. The following examples support this approach. In (19), the author starts by bringing up the term, wondering whether taking off one’s mask is typically met with disappointment and expressing feelings of fear. Similarly, in (20) the author recounts being called a *masuku-bijin* in middle school and confesses that she feels she will “lose her human rights” the moment she takes off her mask, fearing the others’ disappointment. Another user answers, noting how words said casually can weigh heavily on someone’s memory.

(19) マスク美人って言葉…。やはりマスク外したらがっかりが多いですか？なんか素っぴん見られる感覚で怖くて外すの勇気いりませんか？笑 逆に外した方がよかったなんて人いました？

The word “mask beauty”… Are people mostly disappointed when the mask comes off, after all? Don’t you think it takes courage to remove it, since it’s like showing your bare face? lol Or was there anyone who felt removing it worked for the better?

(https://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q12253742207)

(20) Q: 私は中学の時から男子たちに「お前ってマスク美人だよな」と言われたり、最近友達に「○○ ちゃんってマスク映えする顔だよね」と言われたりしていて、実際マスク美人です。
いま、コロナの影響で入学からずっとクラスのみんなにマスクをしている姿しか見せておりません。（中略）
私はマスクを外した瞬間に人権を失うと思います。マスクを外してみんなにがっかりした反応をされるのが本当にこわいです。

A: 私も同じ高一です。人に言われた何気ない言葉って意外と心に残るんですよね。

Q: Ever since middle school, boys have told told me “You are a mask beauty”, and lately my friends told me “…*-chan*, you have a face that looks great with a mask on”. And I really am a mask beauty. […]
Now, because of COVID, I have only appeared in front of my classmates with a mask on, ever since I started school. […]
I feel like I will lose my human rights the moment I remove my mask. I’m really scared everyone will react with disappointment when I remove my mask.

A: I am also in my first year of high school. Words people say casually do linger in your mind more than you’d expect, don’t they.

(https://detail.chiebukuro.yahoo.co.jp/qa/question_detail/q14230620004)

Clearly, *masuku-bijin* is brought up because it is associated with fear and pressure regarding others’ expectations. Its power lies in what it indexes, namely contradiction of those expectations. From this perspective as well, the term demonstrates its dual nature, in that it points to both the referent and the speaker. Beaton and Washington (2014) start from Eckert’s (2008) indexical field, which had been formulated to include stances, qualities, and social categories pointing toward the speaker, and propose that, in the case of lexical items with referential functions, only stances are associated with the speaker, while qualities and social categories point to the referent. Indeed, as the data in this paper have shown, the qualities indexed by *masuku-bijin* are indicative of the referent. This clearly applies to “healthy”, “glamorous”, or “feminine”, illustrated by the excerpt in (9). However, when it comes to indexing “surprising” or “misleading”, which have been identified as the source for feelings of annoyance or fear, a more nuanced approach is necessary. Specifically, while on the surface the qualities in question may point to the referent, they cannot be considered truly characteristic, since contradicting expectations is entirely dependent on external and, oftentimes, arbitrary or unfounded judgement.

5. Concluding remarks

This paper has strived to shed light on the evolution of the compound *masuku-bijin* in discourse, emphasizing its influence in society. Though spotlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the term was neither new, nor immediately distingushiable from other compounds headed by *bijin*. The analysis started from a classification of such compounds, providing background on their potential to both reflect Japanese beauty standards and function as a means to promote specific products or services. To some degree, this potential is manifested in the case of *masuku-bijin*, as well. However, the data in this paper have illustrated its development toward a complex semantic relationship,

which enables its use to convey a meaning in contrast to that of its head.

More importantly, the analysis has offered insight into the impact *masuku-bijin* can have on social practice. On the one hand, its inherent semantic ambiguity has been the catalyst for debate. On the other hand, its mention in discourse can elicit intense reactions, with the term itself being perceived as a nuisance or a source of distress. Adopting a sociolinguistic approach that draws on the concepts of indexicality and stance, this paper has argued that *masuku-bijin*'s impact stems from its potential to index a contradiction of external expectations. This type of indexicality might also explain the term's semantic evolution, which would frame it as undergoing a process of "derogation", understood as McConnell-Ginet (1989) defines it. On a more practical note, the analysis has sought to illustrate the real-life influence of *masuku-bijin*. Considering that wearing a facial mask entails partially covering the face, discrepancy with expectations is a natural and inevitable result. Ultimately, this paper does not seek to evaluate the motivations behind or the reactions to the use of the term, but rather to highlight that – as one user in the examples analyzed above remarked – words do have the power to linger in the mind far longer than expected.

Notes

1 The ranking (in Japanese, *Daijisen ga erabu shingo taishō*) is based on submissions from the public, but the final selection is made by specialists affiliated with the dictionary *Daijisen*, published by Shogakukan. The complete lists for 2021 and 2022 are available at the URLs below.
https://daijisen.jp/shingo/archive/archive_2021.html
https://daijisen.jp/shingo/archive/archive_2022.html

2 *Kōjien*, 7th edition (2018) defines *bijin* as "woman with a beautiful face/appearance; sometimes used about beautiful men" (*kao/sugata no utsukushii onna. bijo. kajin. reijin. bidanshi ni iu koto mo aru).* In *Nihon gogen kōjiten* (2010), it is mentioned that in contemporary Japanese, the term generally means "woman with beautiful facial features" (*kao-katachi no utsukushii josei*).

3 The campaign in question is quoted below. The transliteration and the translation are Tanaka's (1994).
Intelligence. (in English) *Sore ga kimi no utsukushisa. Kite-iru fuku ni chisei o kanjiru. Tatta*

ippon no kuchibeni kara mo… Intelligence. (in English) That is (the secret of) your beauty. Your intelligence is seen in your clothes. Even in the lipstick which you wear.

4 The transliteration and the translation are Okamoto’s (2018).

5 The user also brings up the term *masuku-sagi*, literally translated as “mask fraud”. While similar to *masuku-bijin*, it is less gender-specific and its interpretation appears to be predominantly negative.

6 Yonezawa (2022) mentions *masuku-bijin* in reference to beauty and fashion mask campaigns, while discussing the pandemic’s influence on makeup.

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「マスク美人」の変容
―社会言語学的アプローチによる分析―

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本稿は、コロナ禍におけるマスク着用の必須化の影響を受け、一時期流行語となった「マスク美人」という複合語に焦点を当て、言語使用と社会的行動の相互関係について考察するものである。国立国語研究所の『現代日本語書き言葉均衡コーパス』(BCCWJ)およびその他のオンライン資料より収集した実例をもとに、「マスク美人」の意味がどのように変化してきたのか、またその変化が社会においてどのように認識されているのかを検討する。

まず、「美人」を主要部とする複合語を意味的観点から分類し、その使用が日本の美意識、特に女性美に対する期待と関連していること、さらに女性向けの商品やサービスの宣伝活動とも結びつけられることを示す。こうした背景を踏まえ、「マスク美人」も元々、他の「美人」を主要部とする複合語と同様の使用が可能であるものの、特に近年では、その内部に見られる意味的関係が変化し、主要部「美人」の意味とは対立する意味を表すようになったことを明らかにする。また、実例の分析により、「マスク美人」という言葉自体が、迷惑なもの、あるいは恐怖や衝撃を喚起するものとして捉えられる場合があることを指摘する。

そこで、社会言語学研究の基盤となる「指標性」(indexicality)および「スタンス」(stance)という二つの概念を用いて議論を展開する。具体的には、「マスク美人」の意味的曖昧性が、その使用に際して成立しうるスタンスの種類に反映されることを明確にする。また、心理的圧力を喚起するものとして認識されるようになったという変容についても、指標性の過程によって説明できるものであると指摘する。