First Person Pronoun Use in Everyday Talk by Japanese Gay Men
Category: discourse/pragmatics/sociolinguistics

In many dialects of Japanese, there is arguably a clear distinction between male and female speech, especially as reflected in person reference terms. In particular, this includes *boku* or *ore* as singular first person pronouns for males and *atashi* for females. It has been claimed, however, that many speakers do not always use pronouns that are associated with their biological sex, but actually use a range of pronouns in everyday interaction to construct particular identities. A good example of this is gay men who have been claimed to use pronouns not normally associated with stereotypical male speech. In particular, gay men have been found to dislike using the more masculine pronoun *ore*, and while they do use the somewhat less masculine *boku* many prefer to use the more neutral *watashi* (Lunsing & Maree, 2004). There is also the so-called *o-nē-kotoba* (literally '*older sister language*'), a speech style employed by some gay men that is said to parody female speech, including the use of the first person pronoun *atashi* (Abe, 2010; Lunsing & Maree, 2004).

While there are many studies investigating gay men's talk in other languages such as English (e.g. Leap, 1996), previous studies on gay men's talk in Japanese, however, have typically relied on interview data (e.g. Lunsing & Maree, 2004) or the examination of media (e.g. Ogawa and Shibamoto Smith, 1997). The current study builds upon those studies by examining naturally occurring conversation data to understand how gay men in Japan actually use first person pronouns in everyday talk with their peers. Participants include ten gay Japanese men in their 20's studying at universities in Osaka Prefecture. While their ages and dialects differ, the participants are all members of the same social circle and are frequently in contact with each other. Participants were recorded conversing in dyads, leading to a total of five conversations and approximately 2 hours and 30 minutes of transcribed data. After the recordings, interviews were conducted in which the participants were asked about their use and opinions towards first person pronouns.

The findings, as summarized in Table 1, revealed that these gay men used a wide variety of first person pronouns.

Table 1
Frequency of First Person Pronouns Used

Pronoun	Speaker									
	K	C	G	N	S	T	Y	E	M	O
ore		6			3	2		5	14	6
boku	4	1	28	1	1	2				
watashi	1	1					35			
atashi	19						1			
Total	24	8	28	1	4	4	36	5	14	6

As can be seen above, the feminine first person pronoun *atashi* was used by two participants (K and Y), although neither used it exclusively: one primarily switched between *atashi* and *boku* and another used it alongside *watashi*. The participant who used *atashi* and *watashi* (Y) emphasized in an interview that he did not want to use a masculine pronoun, and that he felt more neutral or feminine pronouns fit better with his identity. The other participant (K) conveyed in an interview that he was fine using *boku*, but in the data whenever he was discussing a topic related to the gay community he exclusively used *atashi*, as seen in the following examples. In (1), K is talking to C about an episode that occurred at his part time job, whereas in (2) he is discussing an episode that occurred at a get together with other gay men.

(1) K: *de   sono Xsan ga   sono boku no   adoresu o   mi-tara,*
         and that name NOM that 1PP POSS address ACC see-COND
         "And when (person's name) saw my e-mail address,"

(2) K: *katte   no-nde   tte kanji da-tta   n   da   kedo.* <u>*atashi*</u> *ni yo*.
          freely drink-IMP QT   like   COP-PAST NOMI COP   but   1PP   to FP
          "It was like help yourself to drinks. Towards <u>me</u>."

Looking at the above examples, in (1) K uses *boku* to construct a public or professional identity, and in (2) he uses *atashi* to construct an identity linked to the gay community, suggesting a divide between K's language use in regards to his 'everyday' and 'gay' life.

The use of or desire to use feminine or neutral pronouns, however, was far from the norm for these gay men. Of the remaining participants, two avoided the use of the more masculine *ore* and instead used *boku* (G and N), but for the most part many had no problems using *ore*. It was used by six of the ten participants, three of whom used it exclusively (E, M, and O). Of the remaining three who used *ore*, two alternated between it and *boku* (S and T), but one other used *ore* and *boku* but also *watashi* (C). C's conversation partner was K, and reported in an interview that his use of *watashi* was probably the result of the *o-nē-kotoba* that K used, such as in (2) above. This is interesting to note, and suggests that individuals not only choose which pronouns to use but are also subconsciously influenced by those around them.

In conclusion, while stereotypical *o-nē-kotoba* forms were found in the everyday talk of some gay men, the majority of the participants did, in fact, in this context prefer masculine forms. There was, however, a wide variety of pronouns found and an even wider variety of usages and opinions. This implies that although gay Japanese men have been thought of as a monolithic category, especially as portrayed in the media and through the use of *o-nē-kotoba*, this is not necessarily the case. Furthermore, when it comes to the so-called gender-determined variations in Japanese, it is difficult to divide it neatly into 'men's' and 'women's' language. Despite certain societal and linguistic constraints, the gay men examined in this study negotiate among the various forms to construct their own unique identity.

With the aim of looking at how language is used in context, this study has examined one area of gay Japanese men's language use: singular first person pronouns. The next step will be to examine other such areas that have the similar potential of being linguistic markers of the speaker's identity, both as an individual and as a member of the gay community; in particular, second and third person reference terms and sentence final particles.

References

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Gloss Used

1PP: first person pronoun; ACC: accusative; COND: conditional; COP: copula; FP: final particle; IMP: imperative; NOM: nominative; NOMI: nominalizer; PAST: past; POSS: possessive; QT: quotative marker