Talking like a Shônen Hero: Reframing masculinity in post-bubble era Japan through the lens of boku and ore

Hannah E. Dodd, Ph.D. Student

BACKGROUND

Japanese hegemonic masculinity in the 20th century underwent a variety changes. During the post-World War Two (hereafter “postwar”) economic boom, the masculine ideal was reinterpreted from the educated, affluent male to that of the more “red-blooded”, economically aggressive “salaryman,” a shift we can observe in the speech of fictional protagonists (Deacon 2013). According to Kinisi (2003), within a given work, a protagonist typically has the least marked speech style unless there exists a narrative reason that justifies otherwise (66-67). Accordingly, when looking at the speech of protagonists over the early- and mid-20th century, we are able to see a shift in the preferred first-person pronoun of male characters from boku, which in male speakers is associated with the aforementioned educated speaker noted above, to ore, which has more aggressive, “hot-blooded” connotations, indicating that the default interpretation of the ideal “hero” evolved (Nakamura 2007: 64-66).

AIM

During the economic downturn of the 1990s, the dominance of salaryman masculinity weakened due to the destabilization of the path from school to full-time white collar employment. In order to assess in what way hegemonic masculinity’s changes in the 90s are reflected in popular media, this project analyzed animated works adapted from comics that have run in the manga magazine Weekly Shônen Jump, which has a reported targeted audience of elementary and junior high school boys (61% of readership as of 2012). Also, it is the highest grossing manga magazine both among those marketed to adolescent boys and in the market overall.

METHODS

Between 1980 – 2015, 77 total different series aired. • Exclusions

- Female protagonist
- Few episodes available
- No calm voice/poor audio quality

Included in data set: 14

There were a total of 7 different total pronouns used by protagonists in the data set, as we can see in Figure 1.

- “Other” - or (1), ola (2), sessha (1), watashi (2), wash (1)
- Boku vs. ore usage
  - Prior to 1996, no protagonists or side characters in this data set used boku.
  - Post-1996, boku users are approx. 30% of protagonists.
  - Even where the protagonist uses ore, there was frequently a boku using character in the ensemble.

In Table 3, we can see the age of the protagonists that used particular pronouns. As illustrated above, the majority of boku users that appeared were teens. This is counter to our expectation, as boku has more of an association with young boys than with teenage ones (Miyazaki 2004).

CONCLUSIONS

Beginning in the mid-90s, boku reemerged as a common pronoun in the mouths of protagonists. Temporally, this is in consistent with the reevaluation of hegemonic masculinity practices that occurred during the 90s as a result of the economic downturn. However, this is not that say that hegemonic masculinity as it existed prior to the downturn went away entirely—rather, it came to coexist more with other varieties of masculinity that gained recognition during this time period (see Smitsmans 2015, Dasgupta 2013). This is reflected in the continued presence (and dominance) of ore-using protagonists.

The reevaluation of masculinity, however, is particularly evident by examining the age group using boku the most—teens. Boku is most commonly associated with the speech of young children, particularly boys, and among teens it can carry a connotation of “weakness” (Miyazaki 2004). However, in this data set, the majority of the protagonists that were portrayed using the pronoun boku were teens, and they were not in any sense disadvantaged for their use of boku, nor was boku a reflection of any character-based shortcoming.

SELECTED REFERENCES