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

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Abstract
Comics (*manga*) and their animated counterparts (*anime*) are ubiquitous in Japanese popular culture, but rarely is the language used within them the subject of linguistic inquiry. This study aims to address part of this gap by analyzing nearly 40 years’ worth of *shônen* anime, which is targeted predominately at adolescent boys.

In the early- and mid-20th century, male protagonists saw a shift in first-person pronoun usage. Pre-war, protagonists used *boku*, but beginning with the post-war Economic Miracle, *shônen* protagonists used *ore*, a change that reflected a shift in hegemonic masculinity to the salaryman model. This study illustrates that a similar change can be seen in the late-20th century. With the economic downturn, salaryman masculinity began to be questioned, though did not completely lose its hegemonic status. This is reflected in *shônen* works as a reintroduction of *boku* as a first-person pronoun option for protagonists beginning in the late 90s.

Key words  
sociolinguistics, media studies, masculinity, *yakuwarigo*
1. Introduction

Comics (manga) and their animated counterparts (anime) have had an immense impact on Japanese popular culture. As it appears on television, anime, in addition to frequently airing television shows, can also be utilized to sell anything as mundane as convenient store goods to electronics, and characters rendered in an anime-inspired style have been used to sell school uniforms (Toku 2007:19). The largest and most lucrative genre of anime is shōnen. Though the name of the top-selling shōnen magazine Weekly Shōnen Jump suggests a target audience that is predominately young and male, works within the shōnen genre are in actuality consumed across variety of age groups and genders (Japan Magazine Publishers Association 2012).

According to Kinsui (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), and shōnen works are no exception. Using this logic, shōnen protagonists utilize a speech pattern that is most expected relative to not only their age, education-level, social class, and so forth, but also to the target audience at the time that that work was released. What constitutes as the least marked style for male speakers in Japanese fictional media, however, has shifted considerably in the last hundred years. In the early- to mid-20th century, this change is realized in an image shift in hegemonic masculinity, or the form of masculinity that is positioned as most ideal, though not necessarily most widespread, within a given culture or cultural context (Connell 2005:79). Following World War 2 (hereafter ‘post-war’), the hegemonic form of masculinity shifted such that the prototypical male protagonist changed from that of the educated, upwardly mobile man to that of the more aggressive, economically powerful one as the Japanese economy quickly expanded during the post-war period. In fiction, this change is realized as a shift in preference from the first-person pronoun boku, which in male speakers is associated with the educated speaker noted above, to ore, which has more aggressive, “hot-blooded” connotations (Nakamura 2007:64-66).

In the early 1990s, the Japanese economy declined, causing the previously hegemonic sarariiman (lit. “salaryman”) model of masculinity brought on by the last several decades of success in the financial quarter to fall in popularity as job security and hiring rates also fell (Dasgupta 2000:199). In analyzing nearly 40 years of shōnen protagonists, we can see a similar change in first-person pronoun usage that corresponds with this late 20th century shift in masculinity, resulting in a greater characterological and linguistic range for the portrayal of teen and young adult male characters in media. To put it more generally, language use in Japanese popular media reacted to, rather than directly affected, the societal construction of masculinities, a phenomenon that is similarly reflected in the language use of female characters in manga in Unser-Schutz (2015).

Through a text-based analysis of one of the most salient markers of one’s gendered persona in Japanese, the first-person pronoun, this study aims to illustrate not only the ways in which main character figures are designed for their audiences, but also bring to the light the nature of the ideological conversation between a work’s authors and its audience.

2. Fiction and Masculinity in Early- and Mid-20th Century Japan

2.1. “Salaryman Masculinity” in the Post-War Period

With the rapid increase in Western influence during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, combined with swift economic changes under the influence of World War Two, Japanese masculine ideologies were re-evaluated and resituated multiple times in reaction to shifting domestic and global climates during this period. A particular point of focus for scholars has been...
“salaryman” (sarariiman) masculinity, a cultural, characterological figure defined as a “white-collar, male employee of a private sector organization” who benefits from “lifetime employment, seniority-based salaries and promotions, and a paternalistic concern for the employee on the part of the company in return for steady and diligent loyalty” (Deacon 2013:145). As noted by a number of scholars (e.g., Dasgupta 2000, 2005, 2013, Deacon 2013, Smitsmans 2015), the salaryman model of masculinity was “hegemonic,” which in terms of masculinities, means that among a given hierarchy, that particular form is the most ideal, though not necessarily most widespread (Connell 2005:79).

2.2. The Shift from Boku to Ore

Momoko Nakamura in her (2007) work Sei to Nihongo [“Gender” and Japanese] draws attention to a shift in hegemonic masculine ideology that is observable in the literary realm. Drawing on the original novel Japanese translation of the Gone with the Wind (1957) and the Japanese translation of the English movie script (1994), Nakamura illustrates how the linguistic ideologies as related to hegemonic masculinity have changed during the 20th century. In Japanese translations of the same sentence in the English version, Rhett Butler is translated as using boku and speaking in a socially distal style in the (1957) version, while in the (1994) version, he speaks ore and a much more familiar speaking style.

Of particular note to this study, however, are the first-person pronouns boku and ore in (1) and (2), respectively. According to Kinsui (2003), in a given fictional setting, the protagonist typically has the least marked speech style (i.e., most faithful to “Standard”) unless there exists a narrative reason dictating otherwise (92). In the first half of the 20th century, male protagonists typically used the first-person pronoun boku, which according to Kinsui, gives the impression of an educated, upwardly mobile student (Ibid.:124). This usage was particularly common in shōnen works, where it remained until the 50s, suggesting that the expected protagonist of a shōnen work has an interest in education and social mobility. In the mid-20th century, likely beginning with the shōnen manga Kyojin no hoshi (1966) and Asita no Joe (1968), it became increasingly common for protagonists to use ore as not only audience expectations for the preferred, idealized “hero” changed, but more importantly, the hegemonic masculine ideal had begun to shift (Ibid.:124). During this period, there was an increase in desire for the “hot-blooded hero,” an aggressive, no-nonsense character (Nakamura 2007: 64-65). To put it differently, simply being educated and upwardly-mobile was not sufficient to embody the kind of idealized masculinity that had captured the cultural imagination of male viewers and fiction-oriented content producers during the 50s and 60s.

While salaryman masculinity is by no means the only masculinity that could conceivably utilize the first-person pronoun ore, this connection can still be seen in media aimed at salarymen. For example, though the average salaryman at work utilizes either watashi (a first-person pronoun that can be utilized by either gender in formal situations) or boku (Kinsui 2003:127-128, see also Miyazaki 2004), the inner-thoughts of salaryman can often be seen portrayed using ore. One example is from the yearly Sarariiman Senryuu competition hosted by life insurance company Dai-Ichi Life. The competition, which has run every year since 1987, is a way for salarymen to submit comical haiku-style poems (known as senryuu) about their daily lives. Not only do the submissions available on the website use exclusively ore, but the advertisements on the website

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1 Although Rhett Butler was not the protagonist of Gone with the Wind, as pointed out by Nakamura (2013), dominant gender ideologies are actually more salient in translated works than works originally created in Japanese.
portray caricatured salarymen also using ore.² This is due to the fact that while salarymen are beholden to speaking according to certain politeness registers that may demand either watashi or boku, ideologically there is a connection between the personality traits associated with ore and the societal image of the ore. In other words, ore is in an “indirect indexical” (see Ochs 1992) relationship with the salaryman image, but invoking it in an advertisement (such as for the Sarariiman Senryuu) is enough to call upon this image if used in conjunction with any other features of what could be called the “salaryman indexical field.”

3. Shōnen Protagonists and Their Speech

3.1. Why Shōnen Anime?

For this study, the data under discussion are all anime adaptations of manga that have run in the manga magazine, Weekly Shōnen Jump. Frequently abbreviated to just Shōnen Jump (or Jump), it first began publishing in 1968 as a bimonthly magazine, moving to a weekly format nearly immediately in 1969. In 2012, then-editor Ibaraki Masahiko was quoted as saying that despite the number of female readers, Shōnen Jump is designed and written with elementary- and junior high school aged-boys in mind (Yomiuri Shimbun Morning Edition June 16th 2003). This is a trend that is reflected in Shōnen Jump’s readership data as of 2012 in demographic information obtained from the Japan Magazine Publishers Association. The company reported a readership that was 79.8% male and 20.2% female, with 63% of readers falling between the ages of 10 and 15. Those below 9 and those older than 16 made up 5.1% and 39.1% of the readership, respectively (Japan Magazine Publishers Association 2012). Additionally, in the third quarter of 2016 (July through September), Shōnen Jump printed more copies than any other comic magazine, regardless of demographic (Japan Magazine Publishers Association 2016). This magazine’s readership data, combined with its popularity, target audience, as well as its longevity in popular culture, make it a prime candidate for analyzing diachronic representation trends of masculinity in fictional media.

Anime began to be adapted from Shōnen Jump shortly after the magazine’s inception, with the first anime (Otoko ippiki gaki taishoo) airing in 1969. Shueisha, the publishing company that owns Shōnen Jump, has little to do with its animated adaptations at a production level, however. Works that are adapted from manga that run Shōnen Jump are managed by numerous different companies, but because these works are likely to retain the same target audience due to their roots in Shōnen Jump and the fact that few major changes are made in their animated adaptations, it is most appropriate to think of these as Shōnen Jump anime rather than necessarily as distinct products of their various animation companies.

3.2. Variables

In the full version of this study, the variables under consideration are 1) first-person pronouns, 2) average f0, and 3) average range of f0, but the only one that is under discussion for the purposes of this paper is first-person pronouns. In Japanese, first-person pronouns, along with sentence-final particles, are typically cited as particularly salient with regard to gender indexing in a given utterance (SturtzSreetharan 2004, Unser-Schutz 2015). Sentence-final particles, however, regularly change from utterance to utterance (especially in non-fictional discourse), depending on the speaker, as well as context, thus an investigation of their role in masculinity would be better suited by either a corpus-based study, discourse analysis study, or some combination of the two, putting this particular facet of identity construction outside the scope of this study (see Unser-

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First-person pronouns, however, are much slower to change diachronically, particularly among female speakers due to the high amount of scrutiny placed on female voices in Japanese. Additionally, even more so than sentence-final particles, first-person pronouns carry salient gender indexing information, due in large part to the traditional prescriptive approach to pronoun usage. According to Ide (1997) Standard Japanese pronouns vary primarily among two axes: gender and formality register. Pronoun usage, however, can differ significantly. Miyazaki (2004) conducted ethnographic work on first-person pronouns in a Tokyo-area junior high school in the late 1990s, and she found that rather than the conceptions in Ide (1997), usage patterns in casual situations where more fluid. The difference between Ide (1997) and Miyazaki (2004) can be seen below in Table 2.

Table 1. A representation of self-referential pronoun usage according to dominant gender ideologies versus the usages of junior high school students in Tokyo (Miyazaki 2004:261).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gendered ideologies</th>
<th>ore/boku</th>
<th>masculine</th>
<th>feminine</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students' patterns</td>
<td>ore</td>
<td></td>
<td>uchi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>boku</td>
<td></td>
<td>atashi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rather than necessarily limited based on gender, in casual situations students conceptualized pronoun usage based on a scale of masculine to feminine. Focusing only on male speakers for the purpose of this study, the overwhelming majority of male speakers surveyed in Miyazaki (2004) used ore as their pronoun of choice rather than boku, which is contrary to Ide (1997)’s information in Table 1. Despite the fact that ore is labeled as “other-deprecatory,” when asked about this, boys who used ore just considered ore to be the pronoun that boys use (Miyazaki 2004:264). In general, male students considered other male students who used ore to be “cool” or “strong,” but some female students felt that ore-using boys were “arrogant” (Miyazaki 2004:264-265). Boku, however, was considered to be “weak,” and the boy who used boku nearly exclusively in this study was regularly bullied by his male peers (Ibid.:265). Because of these discrepancies between prescriptive usage and descriptive usage, it seems only logical to choose boku and ore as the focus of first-person pronoun analysis through which to analyze diachronic trends in masculine ideologies.

In light of the observations by Nakamura (2007) and Kinsui (2003) regarding the boku to ore shift across the early- and mid-20th century period with the shift in hegemonic masculinity, this study aims to explore whether or not a similar shift in first-person pronoun usage can be seen in the late 90s with the economic downturn.

3.3. Methods

A total of 78 different anime series have been adapted from Shōnen Jump manga between 1968, the year of Shōnen Jump’s first issue, to 2015, when this data was collected. The protagonist of each work was determined based on the work’s reported protagonist (designated by the word ‘shujinkoo’). However, because the complete version of this study combines an analysis of first-person pronouns as well as acoustic data, the works analyzed had to be limited based on a number of factors. The principles for exclusion are listed below with the number of works that were excluded for that reason.

1) Works produced before 1980 were excluded due to poor audio quality (n = 5)
2) Works that were difficult to find were excluded due to lack of data (n = 13)
3) Works with female protagonists were excluded due to the focus on male speakers (n = 4)
4) Because acoustic measurements are more consistent when taken from a speaker using a calm voice rather than a speaker displaying an extra emotion (e.g. screaming, crying, voice breaking, etc.) (Hirose et al. 2005), works with protagonists that did not utilize a calm voice were excluded (n = 1)
5) Works without a singular, designated protagonist (n = 1)

In addition to the above exclusions, only a single season of continuous works were considered such that a protagonist from a show with multiple seasons does not way more heavily in the data than a protagonist from a show with fewer seasons. In the case of works that had been remade, the original version was the one considered for data purposes. This results in a total of 54 different works under consideration with no repeated protagonists. The number of works surveyed by decade can be seen in Table 3 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Number of Works</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1980s</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990s</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000s</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010s</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In each work, the pronoun used by the protagonist was recorded. Any deviation was noted, though within this data set, characters used only a single pronoun and did not deviate. This is contrary to data taken from speakers outside of fiction, where a Standard Japanese speaker may change five times during a conversation (Miyazaki 2004), but more likely changes pronoun usage according to context of formality.

3.4. Results

Across the thirty-five total years of analysis, ore was by far the most prevalent first-person pronoun used by protagonists, and it was used across age groups. The 2nd most common, boku, was used almost predominately by teens, which is in opposition to the ideological association of boku in casual speech with children (Nakamura 2007). Other pronouns that appeared were ora (n = 1) and oira (n = 1), both of which are associated with a “country” archetype, sessha (n = 1), which is an out-of-use pronoun used by warrior characters, watashi (n = 2), and washi (n = 1), which is associated with old men.

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3 One exception was made to this in the case of a show which had a poorly reviewed original run, and it was remade within two years with a different voice actor with a several hundred episode run. In this case, the remake was considered.
Table 3. Number of first-person pronouns used by protagonists by age group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>child (&lt; 12 yo)</th>
<th>teen (13-19 yo)</th>
<th>adult (&gt; 20 yo)</th>
<th>total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>boku</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ore</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Diachronically, *boku* was not used by any protagonists prior to 1996, which can be seen in Figure 1. below. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the overwhelming majority of first-person pronouns used were *ore*, regardless of age of the protagonist. Thereafter, *boku* reappears, and protagonists using *boku* steadily remain approximately 30% of the represented protagonists through present day.

Figure 1. Percentage of 1PP usage by five-year period.

4. Discussion

As we can see by Figure 1., *ore* was overwhelmingly the most frequently used pronoun for *shōnen* protagonists in the 1980s and first half of the 1990s. To reiterate the earlier quote from Kinsui (2003), the protagonist of a given work uses the least-marked speech style in its fictional environment unless a narrative reason justifies otherwise (66-67), but what constitutes as “least-marked” varies with not only the demographic of the portrayed protagonist, but also the the writers of that work as well as the intended audience. For the writers and audience of the 1980s, the “hot-blooded hero,” in whatever manifestation it appeared, was the least-marked protagonist in works created by a nearly exclusively male staff for a young male audience. With the reintroduction of *boku* in the 1990s, we can see that expectations for protagonists in *shōnen* works changed as the power of masculinity structures that were dominant during the 1980s began to weaken. This suggests that not all of the qualities that were desired in protagonists as of the mid-1990s were able
to be portrayed with only ore as an available first-person pronoun. Boku, however, which was still in regular use in natural speech but not used in Weekly Shōnen Jump for either protagonists or side characters in this data set, seemed to serve as a viable masculine alternative. This usage is particularly evident in that the characters using boku are nearly entirely teenage boys, as seen in Table 3. Boku also has an association with young male children (see Miyazaki 2004), but because it is being used by male speakers who would have theoretically outgrown a usage of boku, the shift in masculine ideology is particularly evident.

First-person pronouns, as mentioned earlier, are particularly salient with regard to gender indexing, and for male speakers of Standard Japanese, boku and ore present a contention that does not exist in the same way for non-male speakers. They were not, however, the only pronouns used by protagonists in this analysis. Others that appeared, such as ora and washi, are actually part of a system of fictionalized voices known as yakuwarigo, or ‘role language’ (Teshigawara and Kinsui 2011). In other words, yakuwarigo varieties can be understood as enregistered voices, or characterological figures ideologically associated to a particular register of speech (Agha 2005:45). In the case of Japanese, these figures are called forth through the situated use of particular pronouns and sentence-final particles. Ora, for example, is associated with a variety known as nise hoogen, a kind of fake dialect ascribed to a character to suggest that they are of rural origin (Kinsui 2012:59-62). Washi, on the other hand, has long fallen out of use in natural speech, and is associated with an elderly male style known as hakase kotoba (Kinsui 2012:202-204). Because of their limited usage in reality, as well as their specific role in fiction, the characterological figure associated with ora or washi is suggested by even a single use of the pronoun, even without accompanying sentence-final particles.

This degree of ideological association does not exist for boku and ore, however. Because of their regular use in natural speech by speakers navigating an ever shifting field of gender ideologies, observing boku and ore as they are used in fictional spaces allows us insight into the meta-linguistic conversation that occurs between the writers and consumers of fictional media, a conversation that is also known as “macrocosmic communication” (Yamaguchi 2007). Because, as pointed out by Unser-Schutz (2010:406), language as it appears in fictional media is a constant tug-of-war between changing ideologies and believability on the part of the audience, by examining the aural and linguistic semiotics that go into character construction, we gain a greater understanding of speakers’ metalinguistic awareness in their social and media-oriented landscapes.

5. Conclusion

Through this diachronic analysis of first-person pronoun usage in Weekly Shōnen Jump, we are able to see a relationship between between mainstream masculine ideologies and the linguistic construction of male protagonists in a male-targeted media genre. During the 1980s, ore was the first-person pronoun of choice for protagonists in the shōnen genre, but in the 1990s the previously hegemonic variety of masculinity began to weaken. This resulted in a loss of dominance for the ore-using “hot-blooded hero,” a shift that is evidenced by the reintroduction of the first-person pronoun boku, which had fallen out of use in shōnen works in the 1960s and denotes an upwardly mobile, educated protagonist (Kinsui 2003:124).

As it stands, research on language use in media is underrepresented in the area of sociocultural linguistics. Further study of linguistic and metalinguistic practices with regard to the construction of characterological figures can only enrich our understanding of the way that speakers interact with variously meaningful ideologies, as well as the way we choose to construct and consume our linguistic landscapes.
References


Saito, J. (2012). Construction of institutional identities by male individuals in subordinate


**Appendix**

Complete List of Works Analyzed in Order of Release Sorted by Decade

### 1980


*Hokuto no Ken* [*Fist of the North Star*] (1984). Produced by Toei Animation

*Dragon Ball* (1986). Produced by Toei Animation.


### 1990


*Janguru no ooja Taa-chan* [*Jungle King Tar-chan*] (1993). Produced by Group TAC

*D · N · A²* (1994). Produced by Madhouse and Studio Deen.


HUNTERxHUNTER (1999). Produced by Nippon Animation.

2000

Shaman King (2001). Produced by Xebec.
Bobobo-bo Bo-bobo (2002). Produced by Toei Animation.
Ring ni Kakero (2004). Produced by Toei Animation.
Ichigo 100% [Strawberry 100%] (2005). Produced by Madhouse.

2010

Bakuman. (2010). Produced by J.C.Staff
Beelzebub (2011). Produced by Pierrot+
Kuroko no Baske [Kuroko's Basketball] (2012). Produced by Production I.G.
Haikyuu!! [Haikyu!!] (2014). Produced by Production I.G.