ISLAND STYLE
Changes in style-shifting modes in Japanese first-person pronouns of the former island colonies

KEISUKE IMAMURA

Abstract

This paper will discuss how a language in small isolated islands differs from that spoken on the mainland by using Japanese in the former island colonies as an example. Due to decades of Japanese rule before World War II, many people on certain Pacific islands speak fluent Japanese. Their Japanese is slightly different from that of native Japanese speakers. These distinctions are manifested on many linguistic levels (phonological, lexical, syntactical, etc.). In this paper, I will focus on their 'style-shifting', especially in the use of first-person pronouns. Male speakers of standard Japanese mainly use three first-person pronouns according to their relationship to the listener, and they normally use one of these consistently throughout a single discourse. However, islanders use different first-person pronouns within the same discourse. Analysis of the use of first-person pronouns from recorded interviews showed a tendency on their part to style-shift between different pronouns according to the topic.

Trans-border Japanese

Before World War II, Japan had colonies and mandates outside the country. Since the education of Indigenous people in each colony was in Japanese, it produced many non-native Japanese language speakers. Even now, the Japanese language remains as a lasting legacy of colonial times. However, it has been more than 65 years since the end of World War II and the people who lived through Japanese colonisation are quite advanced in age. Consequently, there has been an urgent effort on the part of sociolinguists to record their language and researchers have found remarkable differences in the Japanese of the former colonies (Arai, 2008; Sanada, 2009). In spite of the work that has been done so far, the picture of the Japanese they speak has remained incomplete in the area of discourse features. This paper attempts to clarify one such aspect of the Japanese language spoken in the former island colonies, especially in the South Sea Islands[1]. In this paper, the 'South Sea Islands' refers to areas currently in the Republic of Palau, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (Figure 1). Sanada (2009) points out that the Japanese in former colonies is a more simplified version of Japanese (and more 'logical' in the sense that it has lost some of the 'exceptions to rules' which Japanese has). Some of these changes seem to foreshadow changes in the standard Japanese of mainland. In that sense, it is worth analysing the Japanese of the former colonies in order to understand the Japanese language as a whole. Additionally, such research inevitably provides insights applicable to the teaching of Japanese as a second language.
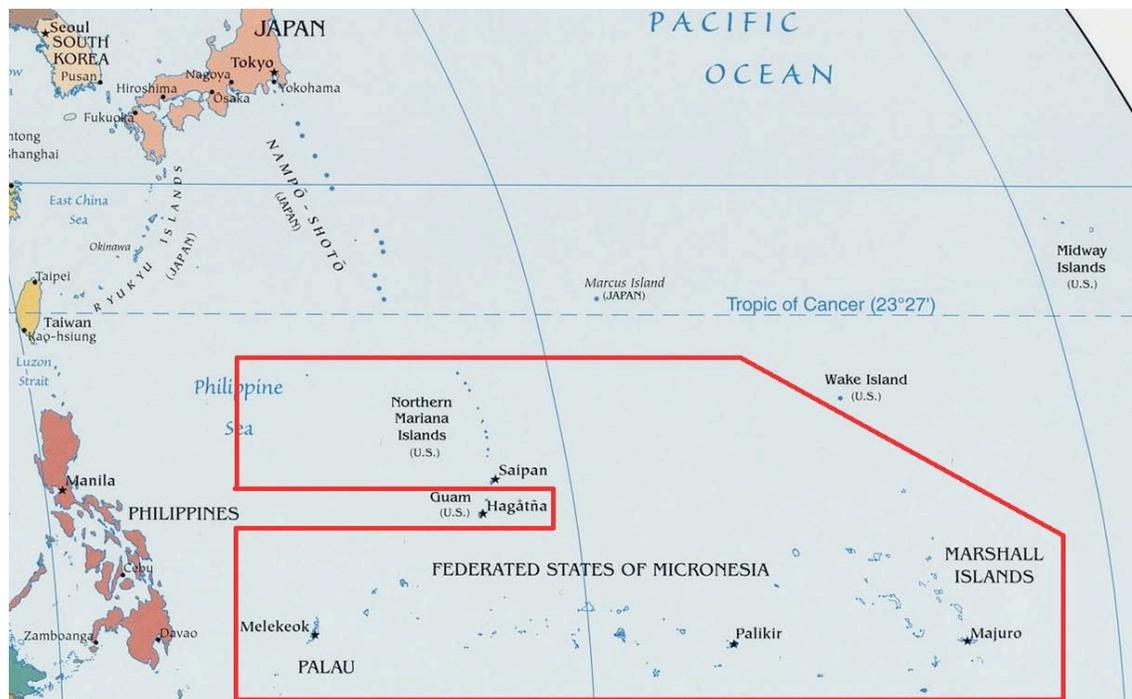
Figure 1. Map of the South Sea Islands (http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/world.html)

Japan seized control of the South Sea Islands from Germany in 1914 during World War I and received an official mandate from the League of Nations in 1919 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1990). Japan opened bureaus on six different islands, Palau, Saipan, Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei, and Jaluit (in the Marshalls) and educated the islanders (something that their former rulers, Germany and Spain, had never done). Education was in Japanese and islanders were prohibited from speaking their native languages.

The acquisition of the Japanese language by islanders

As stated in Long (2004) and Arai (2008), islanders were in a situation where they had to learn Japanese. Due to an intensive education in Japanese, islanders acquired high competency in the language. All the islanders in school started learning Japanese before the so-called 'critical period', after which it becomes difficult to acquire a language with native fluency[2]. Also people had to speak Japanese in order to get by in society because there were a large number of Japanese people living on the islands. About 80 percent of the population of the main Palauan island of Koror and of Saipan in 1934 was Japanese (Nan'yocho, 1934). Islanders needed to speak Japanese in school, at work and in many other social situations. After World War II, Japanese was used as a *lingua franca* (a language that makes communication possible between people not sharing a mother tongue). For example, if people from Palau travelled to Saipan, the language they spoke to each other was Japanese. Additionally, some people spoke Japanese with their spouses whenever they wanted to keep secrets from their children. Though some of those alive today maintain a high level of competency in Japanese, others do not. Even though some speakers are so natural sounding that native speakers cannot tell they are non-native solely by listening to recordings, recent studies (Long, 2004; Arai, 2008; Sanada, 2009) have found that their Japanese is indeed its own interlanguage with its own subtle but rule-governed peculiarities.

Style-shifting of first-person pronouns among standard Japanese speakers

The focus of this paper is on style-shifting, the phenomenon that speakers talk in different ways in different contexts (Cheshire and Bell, 2003). To illustrate, speakers style-shift formal and informal forms of the second-person pronoun in European languages (*du* and *Sie* in German, *tu* and vous in French). Japanese has several significant grammatical features that indicate formality. However, in this paper I will focus solely on the first-person pronoun, especially as it occurs in men's speech. (There are different first-person pronouns that men and women use). Three main first-person pronouns are used among adult male speakers of standard Japanese. These are *ore*, *boku*, and *watashi* (see Table 1).

First-person Pronoun	Formality	Example of the type of speaker-listener relationship
watashi	Formal	Graduate student talking to a colleague met for the first time at an academic conference
boku	Semi-formal	Graduate student talking to a professor s/he knows well
ore	Informal	Graduate student talking to a good friend

Table 1. Men's first-person pronouns in Japanese

The acquisition of *boku* and *ore* occurs first among boys. The acquisition of *watashi* comes much later than the other two, even though it is prescribed as 'standard' by prescriptive language entities. Male speakers begin to use *watashi* as they encounter formal, adult-society situations[3].

Data analysis

Unlike speakers of standard Japanese who choose first-person pronouns depending on their relationship to the listener, non-native Japanese speakers in the South Sea Islands style-shift first-person pronouns in a single discourse. I will analyse interviews of four different male speakers in order to understand the rule of how they style-shift[4]. As the experiences people have had plays an influential role in their usage of first-person pronouns, I have shown in Table 2 some potentially relevant factors to first-person pronoun choices such as the number of years of education in Japanese and experience using Japanese in the workplace.

Name	Native Island	Length of Education in Japanese	Work Experience in a Japanese Environment	Use of pronouns[5]		
				watashi	*boku*	*ore*
J B	Saipan	8 years	South Sea Development Company	73	13	7

B P	Truk	3 years	Commercial fishing vessel, Japanese Travel Bureau	12	0	3
S B	Saipan	3 years	Japanese army	10	0	6
R S	Palau	3 years	House servant	1	10	0

Table 2. General information and number of first-person pronouns used by South Sea Islanders

Before conducting my research, I expected to find that the longer the speaker had been educated in school, the more likely he would be to use *boku* because the norm of first person pronoun in school (at least in schools for Japanese natives) is *boku*. Similarly I hypothesised that the longer a speakers had worked in a Japanese business environment, the more likely he would be to use *watashi*. I thought I might find that the usage of *ore* depended upon experience in 'rougher' jobs such as commercial fishing or the army. As seen below, the speakers' usage shows clear trends (and thus is not random) but does not confirm these initial hypotheses.

Speaker 1 RS[6]

The first interviewee is RS who lives in Palau. He went to school for three years, which was the norm at the time. In the afternoon, after school, he worked as a servant in a Japanese home, which was a very common practice at the time. He did not have many opportunities to speak Japanese after World War II, so his Japanese competency is not as high as the other interviewees. He mostly uses *boku*, the norm for school boys.

(1)R: Can we record this conversation?
RS: Yes, but I (boku) have forgotten a lot.
(2)R: Could you tell me you name?
RS: Me (Watashi)?
(3)RS: I (boku) really want to learn how to refer to years according to Japanese Imperial eras but…

His style-shifting is not dramatically different from speakers of standard Japanese. He used *watashi* once at the beginning of the interview and then used *boku* for the rest. This could be considered an example of the islanders' kind of style-shifting. At the least we see that he uses more than one type of first person pronoun.

Speaker 2 BP

The second interviewee is BP who lived in Truk and moved to Saipan after World War II. He went to school for three years. He uses *watashi* and *ore*, the most formal and the most informal forms. I believe the reasons for this are to be found in his work background. He worked for the Japanese Travel Bureau for 20 years, a context in which the formal form *watashi* would be required. He also worked on a Japanese commercial fishing vessel for many years where rough, masculine language like *ore* would have been the norm.

(4)R: Could you introduce yourself?
BP: I'm (watashi) … My (watashi) name is BP.
(5)BP: Yeah, I (watashi) really got to like [using bombs when I fished].
(6)BP: When I (watashi) heard from the Japanese here that Japan had lost, I (Ø)[7] couldn't stand it. I (Ø) didn't want to hear it. What I (ore) think is, I (ore), I'm (ore) sorry for using [a rough word like] "ore", what I (watashi) think is that if Japan still had more stuff, the war would still be going on now.

As examples 4 and 5 show, he uses *watashi* with most of the topics but he style-shifts to *ore* when he gets emotional as in example 6 when he was expressing his grief over Japan's defeat. It is interesting that he uses *ore* even though he knows it is not appropriate in the discourse, a fact clearly shown by his apologising for using the word "*ore*" (all the time continuing to use it).

Speaker 3 SB

The next interviewee is SB who lives in Saipan. He went to school for three years and later joined the Japanese army. He used *watashi* and *ore* in the interview. This can be attributed to his experience in the army where formal speech is required when addressing higher ranking soldiers, but where soldiers also speak quite informally among those of the same rank.

(7)SB: I (watashi) quit school when I (Ø) was in my third year because of the war.
(8)SB: My (watashi) brother is still alive. He is 84.
W: Oh really?
SB: I'm (watashi) 81.
(9)SB: When I (Ø) joined the army, I (ore) did sumo-wrestling with Americans.
(10)SB: Japan surrendered. I (ore) was ready to go to war, but I (Ø) didn't end up going.
(11)SB: Everyone went camping, but I (watashi) didn't. I (ore) went to join the army. I (watashi) was in the army for three years. I (Ø) did sumo-wrestling every day.

He generally used *watashi* (examples 7, 8) which is suitable for an interview, but as he talks about his masculinity (examples 10, 11), he style-shifts to *ore*. In example 10, he was showing that he was ready to go to war at any time and in example 11, he seems to be boasting about joining the army. However, I should note that he still used *watashi* when on the topic of the army (example 11).

Speaker 4 JB

The last interviewee is JB. He went to school for eight years because he performed well and was allowed to study for a longer period than the average. Later he started working at a Japanese company which was unusual for most islanders. Unlike the other interviewees, he attended school and was with a company for a long time, and as a result of this he was capable of competently using all three first-person pronouns in the discourse.

(12)JB: My (watashi) friends all got married and I (watashi) was the only one left alone.
(13)JB: After me (watashi), three people started attending but didn't graduate because of the war. I (watashi)... It was just me (watashi) and one other guy who graduated.

(14)JB: I (watashi) heard later on that [I couldn't get a prize because I was an islander, even though I was smart], and I (boku) cried. But I (boku) knew I couldn't do anything about it. I (Ø) had to let it go.
(15)JB: I (boku) studied hard. I (watashi) … this isn't boasting, but I (boku) never fail. I (boku) was always the best student.
(16)JB: They come, start a war, destroy our houses, and leave. What are we … what am I (ore) supposed to do? Hey! What about my (watashi) house?
(17)JB: I'm (ore) not Japanese, but my parents are there. I (ore) wanna go back. They never trusted me.

He generally uses *watashi* as in examples 12 and 13. He style-shifts to *boku* when he talks about his time at school as in examples 14 and 15. He style-shifts to *ore* when he gets emotional as in examples 16 and 17 when he expressed his anger toward the American army.

Style-shifting of four speakers

The style-shifting of these four speakers can be summarised in the following way. They tend to style-shift the first-person pronoun based on the topic of conversation even though the interviewees use different first-person pronouns, a result of their affiliation with different work environments. They seem to use the three first-person pronouns in the following way: *watashi* (non-specific), *boku* (school related topics), *ore* (topics that emphasise their masculinity or make them emotional).

Island style: Changes in the style-shifting modes

I would now like to address the question of why the style-shifting of these South Sea Islanders is different from the style-shifting of speakers of standard Japanese. Can this simply be considered mistakes that they make as non-native speakers? I do not think this is the case because the Japanese they speak is fluent in most other ways. Instead, it seems more likely that this is because they have a weaker sense of the linguistic norm which is shared among standard Japanese speakers. These linguistic norms do not necessarily imply grammatical correctness, but rather, as the term indicates, what is 'normal' in a broader sense. It is grammatically correct but not the norm for standard Japanese speaker to use the three first-person pronouns within a single discourse. It is then important to ask why they have a weaker sense of linguistic norms.

The reason for this is almost certainly that in spite of having lived among Japanese people, the most of the native speakers of Japanese in the South Sea Islands were non-standard dialect speakers. The majority of the immigrants from Japan were from Okinawa (Nanyocho, 1934). Long (2010) points out that standard Japanese, as spoken by people from Okinawa, differs in significant ways from what is considered to be standard Japanese elsewhere in Japan. The fact that there was so much linguistic variation among the Japanese residents themselves would have resulted in a weakened sense of linguistic norms which is shared among native speakers.

The absence of the linguistic norms, which they use the same first-person pronoun in a single discourse, allows them to speak in a freer, more unrestricted way. Without being constrained by this, the islanders seem to have a different shared norm where style-shifting occurs based upon the conversational topic.

Sanada (2009) argues that the language changes that are taking place right now are actually moving language toward a place of greater efficiency, and those changes can be found in the grammar of interlanguage. Therefore, topic based style-shifting of first-person pronouns could become the norm of standard Japanese speakers in the future. I believe that the type of style-shifting seen in this paper demonstrates a move toward greater efficiency in the language, but this is a matter for further research.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the geographical distances from Japan, and the island's relative isolation were key factors in the weakening of the linguistic norms which are shared among standard Japanese speakers. This in turn allowed for the development of a different kind of style-shifting among the non-native speakers of Japanese in the South Sea Islands. Their style-shifting is one where first-person pronoun selection occurs not according to the relationship with the listener but according to the topic of conversation. Non-standard island varieties of other languages throughout the world may be seen as having weaker norms than their standard language variety counterparts, and in this sense the weakened South Sea Island norms seen in this paper may actually be part of a larger trend.

Endnotes

1. There has a great deal of discussion about the English term for this area, which is referred to in Japanese as 'Nan'yo'.
2. It is said that the critical period is between the ages of 9 and 12 (Penfield and Roberts, 1959) but there isn't agreement over the exact ages. Although this idea has been repeatedly attacked (Singleton and Lengyel, 1995), it is still a central concept in language acquisition research (Morgan and Kegl, 2006)
3. This acquisition order of Japanese first-person pronoun can be known by the self-reported usage of different age groups of males as found in Ogino (2008), Kojima (2008). The majority of junior high school aged boys report that they use *ore* to friends and *boku* to teachers but none of them reported that they use *watashi.* University students and adults report that some of them use *watashi.* This shows that the acquisition of *watashi* comes later.
4. Part of this data is from Arai (2008).
5. In Japanese, first-person pronouns are used not only for 'I' (*watashi no* 'my', *watashi ni* 'me', etc.) also for 'we' (*watashi-tachi no* 'our', *boku-tachi no* 'our', etc.). Considering the fact that Japanese natives do not necessarily use the same first-person pronoun for saying 'I' and 'we', I did not include first-person pronouns used for 'we' in this paper.
6. The interview was all conducted in Japanese but I have shown the data in English translation in order to make it understandable. Only the first-person pronouns are shown in Japanese inside brackets.
7. 'I ($\emptyset$)' shows that the sentence does not contain a subject. Japanese is a pro-drop language in which such 'null subjects' are often possible (Tonoike, 1993). (ex.) *kinou gakkou ni itta* I($\emptyset$) yesterday school to went, I went to school yesterday.

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