

## Notes on the Differences between English Personal Pronouns and Their Apparent Japanese Counterparts\*

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### 1. Introduction

In this article, I make a short investigation into the difference between English personal pronouns and Japanese person reference terms. Our main concern is with the fact that Japanese can characteristically omit self-reference terms and other person reference terms where English cannot omit them. This is most clearly illustrated by the difference between English *I* and Japanese self-reference terms. For example, the natural translation of (1a) is (1b), where *watasi* 'I' does not appear at all:

- (1) a. When I saw the fire, I got scared and (I) ran away.  
 b. Hi-o mi-ta-ra, kowaku-natte, hasitte-nigemasi-ta.  
 'Fire-ACC see-PAST-then scared-become, run-away-PAST'  
 c. ??*Watasi-wa* hi-o mitara, *watasi-wa* kowaku-natte,  
*watasi-wa* hasitte-nigemasita. (same as (1b) except for  
 the three additions of *watasi-wa* 'I-TOP')

Suppose that we are faithful translators so that every instance of *I* has to be rendered into *watasi*, then the translation results in an unnatural sentence like (1c). In English, at least two instances of the first person singular pronoun are required to make the sentence in (1a), but the most natural expression in Japanese requires no *watasi*: the more instances of *watasi* the expression has, the more unnatural it will be. In particular, in the context in which the speaker describes the fire break situation as being continued from his or her previous utterance, the no *watasi* version is the obvious choice, and sentences like (1c) are unacceptable. This article is intended to give an answer to the question of where such a difference between English personal pronouns and their apparent Japanese counterparts comes from.

This article is organized as follows. Section 2 will see that Japanese self-reference terms denote specific roles played by the speaker in the utterance situation. Section 3 will argue that English *I* is a word that replaces the speaker's name, but Japanese self-reference terms are words that replace the speakers' roles rather than their name. Section 4 will extend the difference between the name-replacement and the role-replacement to the cases of third person reference. Section 5 concludes this article.

## 2. On the Speaker's Role Denoted by *Watasi*

As we have seen, most instances of English *I* can appropriately be made silent in Japanese translations. However, there is a context in which the sentence full of *watasi* is acceptably used. Suppose that there is another speaker who talks first, and then selects the next speaker by saying (2A):

(2) A: Doozo hanasite kudasai.

Please speak give

'Please talk,' said by someone superior to the speaker of (2B)

B: *Watasi-wa hi-o mitara, watasi-wa kowaku-natte, watasi-wa hasitte-nigemasita.* (= (1c))

In this way, Japanese self-reference terms most naturally occur when the speaker takes his or her turn. Otherwise, they basically do not occur. This means that English has to make explicit what can be dispensed with in Japanese, and if Japanese is to make explicit what English *I* means, the Japanese expressions involve something else which is absent from English *I*.

Such differences between English *I* and Japanese self-reference terms are well known, and have attracted the attention of linguists (see Hasegawa and Hirose (2005) and references therein). For example, Suzuki (1973) notes that Japanese does not have a word equivalent to English *I*; instead, it has an addressee-oriented strategy with which speakers produce their self-reference terms from the descriptions of their roles. Suppose that you are male and have a son: when you talk to your son, your role to the addressee is father, and so you refer to yourself as *otoosan* 'father,' as in (3):

(3) {*Otoosan-no/Sensei-no*} iu koto-o kiki nasai.

Father-GEN Teacher-GEN say thing-ACC listen-to must

'Listen to what I say.'

Similarly, an elementary school teacher refers to herself as *sensei* 'teacher' when she talks to her pupil. The strategy in question goes as follows: refer to yourself with the description of the role that you play for your addressee.

This strategy invites us to think that self-reference terms like *watasi* and *boku*, too, are descriptions of the roles that the speaker plays in the context in which he or she interacts with their addressee(s). Clearly, *boku* has a more specific lexical meaning than *watasi*; it means a male speaker, and etymologically, it means 'servant,' which is still present in words like *kou-boku* 'public servant.' To reflect the etymological sense, *boku* is used by male speakers who consider themselves to be subordinate to their addressees, especially by boys. A number of lexical variants have been

produced from *boku* to emphasize the sense, *boku-tyan*, *boku-tan*, or *boku-tin*. Thus, an adult male who prides himself to be a bad guy will not use *boku*, for he will not play the role of the speaker who is subordinate to the addressee.

In contrast to *boku*, *watasi* has a much more generalized meaning. It etymologically means ‘private,’ which is still present in words like *watakusi-goto* ‘(my) personal matter,’ but it does not impose constraints on who can use it for self-reference. Anyone can use it for self-reference either in polite speech or in casual speech, and this is in a sense similar to the fact that any English speaker uses *I* for self-reference. Thus seen, *watasi* might appear to be more like English *I* than *boku* and *otoosan*. However, there is evidence that even *watasi* is a description of the role that the speaker assumes when he or she takes turn to speak in face of others.

The role that the speaker plays with *watasi* can be illustrated by the first line of an e-mail message. When you write an e-mail message to a person to whom you send e-mail for the first time, your first line goes like the one in (4), which happens to have my name, but holds of anybody:

- (4) *Watasi-wa Nishida-to moosimasu.*  
 I-TOP Nishida-COMP say (polite form)  
 ‘I am Nishida (in a polite style)’

In this situation, you have to use *watasi* for the self-reference. On the other hand, when you write an e-mail message to a person whom you know well, and to whom you usually send e-mail, your first line goes as follows:

- (5) (??*Watasi-wa*) *Nishida desu.*  
 I-TOP Nishida COP  
 ‘(I) am Nishida.’

Here the *watasi*-version is unacceptable. Besides the difference of polite form verbs, the *watasi* in (4) does something other than the self-reference function that can be done without explicit self-reference terms, as in (5).

For the purposes of exposition, I refer back to the speaker with *she* and the addressee with *he* when their sexes are irrelevant in the rest of this article. The contrast between (4) and (5) makes it clear that the function given to *watasi* utterances is the conversational strategy by which the speaker takes first turn to speak. The strategy is not exhibited when she talks with someone she knows well, but it has to be exhibited when she talks with someone unfamiliar to whom she cannot talk unless she first sends an explicit message to him in order to take turn to talk with him.

This means that an explicit *watasi* is a mark that shows that the

speaker talks with someone with whom she is unfamiliar, and so she has to make explicit her right to speak with the addressee. This conversational strategy accounts for the unnaturalness of (1c) and the naturalness of (2B): in the former, the speaker is able to talk without paying attention to the fulfillment of the strategy, but in the latter, she has to fulfill it on every time she may make self-reference. Even when she talks with someone familiar, she has to exhibit the strategy when it is necessary for her to explicitly take turn to speak; for example, when she wants to stop the addressee speaking by starting to speak, when she wants to distinguish herself from him by saying something different from him, or when there is some unfamiliar third party present in the situation in which she talks with him.

To summarize, *watasi* is not just a speaker's self-reference term, but is a common noun that describes the role of the speaker who has the obligation towards her addressee to make explicit her status as a speaker.

### 3. Differences between Names and Roles

A natural question to ask now is why there are such differences between English *I* and Japanese self-reference terms like *watasi*, as illustrated above. I argue that the differences come from the fact that English personal pronouns are replacements of the name of the person referred to by the antecedent a pronoun, but Japanese person reference terms are replacements of the role of the person referred to by such an expression.

In making self-reference, the English speaker can, and indeed has to, use *I* instead of her name. Legal complexities aside, a speaker's name is invariant across times, places and situations. Because she always and invariably has her own name, the word that replaces it has to be the same in every occasion. That is, the speaker's name has virtually the same value as her self-identity. This means that if self-reference can be made by a word that replaces one's name, then that one word is sufficient to perform this function. The reason is clear; every speaker has only one name in principle, and everyone is equal in this respect. Moreover, the presence of such a name-replacement word precludes the occurrence of other words that serve the same purpose. The same applies to other European languages which have only one first person singular pronoun for self-reference.

On the other hand, in making self-reference, the Japanese speaker can, but need not, use terms like *watasi* or *boku* for the purpose of saying the role that she plays for the addressee. Unlike her name, her role changes from

situation to situation, and so the word that replaces it has to be changed accordingly. While no speaker can avoid having a name, one can qualify as a speaker without having a specific role. Thus, the English speaker cannot avoid using *I* for self-reference, but Japanese allows speakers to dispense with *watasi* or *boku* when they have no specific roles for their addressees.

Moreover, the roles that a speaker plays can be multiple, and so the self-reference terms that replace these roles are naturally multiple: for example, various self-reference terms like *watasi*, *boku*, *ore*, *assi*, *soregasi*, *sessya* in Japanese each describe a distinct role that a single speaker can play depending on the situation. For example, *syoosei*, literary 'small life,' can be specifically used as a self-reference term when the male speaker is writing a letter, and in that letter he refers to himself as *syoosei*. Like other self-reference terms, it is a situation-specific word.

To give another example, it is natural for a junior high school boy who calls himself *ore* when he talks with his male friends to switch to *watasi* when he talks with his elders and betters; *ore* is a self-reference term used by a male speaker when he plays the role of a close friend of the addressee. To adopt technical terms from Brown and Levinson (1987:107-112), he uses *ore* as an in-group identity marker which shows positive politeness: because of its mannerlessness connotation, *ore* makes a common ground for a group of men who feel free to use it as a self-reference term in informal contexts.

This shows another difference between the name-replacement pronoun and the role-replacement words. A speaker has one and the same name, but she may have numbers of different roles; she needs to determine the priority of her roles, in light of who the addressee is. This is clear when the speaker uses her occupational title for the self-reference term, as in (3). She uses *sensei* to refer to herself, because the term denotes the highest priority role of hers in the context in which she uses that term in front of the pupils in her charge. The same woman will use *okaasan* 'mother' to refer to herself when she is back home and talks with her children, because in this context, mother is the role having the highest priority among the various roles that she plays. Unlike names, roles are characterized by the degrees of priority.

#### 4. Differences in Third Person Reference

Arguments to the same effect come from the differences between English *she* and Japanese *kanojo*, a third-person reference term for a woman who is absent from the utterance situation. This is shown by the contrast

between the *kanojo* intended to refer back to Mrs. Kim and the *kanojo* intended to refer back to my mother and to a total stranger written in a book. The Japanese examples in (6b) are the same in meaning as those in (6a):

- (6) a. {Mrs. Kim/My mother/The main character of this book}  
works for a hospital. She is a nurse.
- b. {Kim-san-wa/ Watasi-no haha-wa/ Kono hon-no  
Mrs.Kim-TOP I-GEN mother-TOP This book-GEN  
syujinko-wa} byoin-de hatara-i-te-imasu.  
main character-TOP hospital-in work-STATE (polite form)
- (\* ) Kanojo-wa kangohu desu.  
She-TOP nurse COP

In (6a), *she* can be used to refer back to *my mother* and to *the main character of this book* as well as to *Mrs. Kim*, but in (6b), *kanojo* can refer back only to *Kim-san*, and it is highly unnatural to use it as an anaphoric expression to *watasi-no haha*, or to *kono hon-no syujinko*, who is a total stranger to the speaker. This contrast, too, follows from the fact that personal pronouns in English are replacements of the name of the person referred to in the preceding context, but person-reference terms in Japanese are replacements of the role of the person referred to in the preceding context. In other words, *kanojo* can be used anaphorically only if the speaker considers that the woman referred to by its intended antecedent appropriately plays the role described by *kanojo*. Just because she is the main character of a book does not mean that she has a role that deserves to be called *kanojo* by the speaker.

In consideration of the fact that Japanese children learn to use *kanojo* as an anaphoric expression when they are educated to use it as an equivalent to English *she*, we are justified to suppose that when it is used without implying the girl-friend sense, it belongs to an educated register. In light of the differences shown in (6), the speaker may use *kanojo* for a woman whom she knows, but with whom she does not have a fixed close role relation. Thus, the antecedent woman who can be referred back to by *kanojo*, is limited to a woman who satisfies at least the following three conditions:

- (7) a. The speaker and the woman know each other,  
b. The woman can act independently of her, and  
c. The two stand in a relation of communicating in an intelligent language style.

The unacceptability of *kanojo* in (6b) is due to the fact that for the speaker, the person referred to in this context has no greater role than to be a mother.

and so she has no choice but to refer to her as *okaasan* or *haha* 'mother.' Any other way of referring to her would damage the important role-relation between the speaker and her mother. Thus, *kanojo* is an inappropriate anaphoric expression when the intended antecedent is the speaker's mother.

Japanese *kanojo* can be used as an anaphoric expression only when the intended referent is a woman who is independent of, but not totally unrelated to, the speaker. Consider a young male who talks about his girlfriend, with whom he is to get married. Before their marriage, he can easily refer back to her with *kanojo*, but after the two get married, and have their children, getting elder and elder, he finds difficulty in referring back to his wife with *kanojo*. This is precisely because the woman no longer plays the role of *kanojo* for him; she now cannot act independently of him, and she now has more important roles to play, wife, mother, or life insurance beneficiary.

No such conditions are imposed on English *she*, because it is a replacement of the name of the person referred to by its antecedent.

Japanese has a special type of context in which the writer can, and in fact, must, refer back to his or her mother with a personal-pronoun equivalent. This is the case with police documents, especially crime reports on a woman who was arrested, an example of which is shown in (8). In this case, the writer has to refer back to the woman in question with *do-jo* 'the same woman' even when she happens to be his or her own mother.

- (8) Fukuoka kenkei-wa settou-de Tanaka Sakiko (61)-o  
 Fukuoka Police-TOP theft-for Tanaka Sakiko age 61-ACC  
 taihosi-ta. Sirabe ni yoruto, do-jo-wa jimotono  
 arrest-PAST According-to-investigation she-TOP local  
 syooten-de settou-o kurikaesitei-ta.  
 store-in theft-ACC repeat-PAST  
 'The Fukuoka Police arrested Tanaka Sakiko, 61, for theft.  
 According to the police investigation, she repeatedly committed  
 theft in the local stores.'

The same applies to *do-dan* 'the same man' in crime reports: the writer has to refer back to the arrested man mentioned in the preceding context as *do-dan* even if he happens to be his or her father, because, in crime reports, the writer has to put priority on the criminal role of the topic person over the blood relation with that person. In other words, police officers who write crime reports have to be free from all the personal relations they have with others, and focus only on the viewpoint from which to see the suspect.

Partially like English, Japanese has third person pronouns in the form of *do-jo* and *do-dan*, but not of *kanojo* and *kare*. They are replacements of the name of the people referred to in the preceding context, but used only if the speaker is a member of the police who deals with them as criminals. Thus, Japanese speakers who have nothing to do with criminals can dispense with the name-replacement pronouns without losing means of reference to third parties. Their priority is much lower than role-replacement terms.

## 5. Conclusion

This article attempted to answer such a question of why there are a multiple number of self-reference terms in Japanese, while there is virtually only one such term in English, by arguing that personal pronouns in English are replacements of the name of the person referred to, but person reference terms in Japanese are replacements of the role of the person referred to. This accounts for the impartial, and virtually obligatory, distribution of personal pronouns in English, and the occurrence and non-occurrence of self-reference terms in Japanese. This account is highly tentative as it is, but I hope it will be the first step towards an integrated account of syntactic and pragmatic properties of the person reference in the two languages.

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