

# A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Addressee–Reference Usage of the First-Person Pronouns *watasi(tati)* in Japanese\*

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## 1 Introduction

Terms of address, defined as linguistic expressions used to refer to an addressee, ‘play a fundamental role in facilitating social interaction within all linguistic communities due to their frequent use in everyday communication’ (Son 2010: 96, translated by the authors). Analyzing the social functions of terms of address is thus expected to contribute to our understanding of how interpersonal relationships are established and maintained through language use within a linguistic community.

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Terms of address in Japanese have been studied abundantly, with particular attention paid to their referential use in daily life, for instance, kinship terms<sup>1</sup> (Suzuki 1973, Miwa 2005) and personal pronouns (Kobayashi 2016, Yonezawa 2016). In this paper, we take note of some apparently ‘marked’ terms of address in Japanese in which first-person pronouns are used to refer to the second person (addressee). A well-known example of such marked usage is the use of a first-person masculine pronoun *boku* (僕), as illustrated in a conversation between a mother and her son (1). We will refer to such usage of first-person pronouns as ‘addressee–reference usage’ henceforth.

(1) (A mother to her child)

*Boku*      *haya-ku*      *irassyai.*  
 1SG      fast-ADV      come.HON  
 ‘You (lit. ‘I’), come quickly.’

(Suzuki 1973: 172, glosses added)

Previous studies (Suzuki 1973, Takubo 1997) have argued that such ‘addressee–reference’ usage is motivated by the following assumption held by adult speakers: A child addressee may have difficulty comprehending the referent of a second-person pronoun such as *kimi* ‘you’ as it involves shifting viewpoints from the first person (*boku*) to the second person (*kimi*). However, such an explanation does not extend to the case where first-person pronouns are used to refer to second-person ‘adults’, which is the very target of this paper.

By analyzing tokens extracted from Japanese natural conversation data in You Tube videos, the present study will explore sociolinguistic and communicative motivations for the addressee–reference usage of first-person pronouns *watasi* ‘I’ and *watasitati* ‘we’.

The organization of this paper is as follows. Section 2 outlines the system of personal pronouns in Japanese and critically reviews the findings on the addressee–reference usage of the first-person pronouns presented in previous studies. Section 3 provides our analysis of sociolinguistic and/or communicative motivations for the use of *watasi* and *watasitati*. Section 4 summarizes the findings and implications of the current study.

## 2 First-Person Pronouns in Japanese and the Addressee–Reference Usage

Japanese is known to possess personal pronouns that belong to an open class.<sup>2</sup> Tsujimura (1968) proposes that while the precise number of pronouns may vary among researchers, at least 51 first-person pronouns (and 81 second-person pronouns) have existed throughout the history of Japanese, including *a*, *mi*, *wa*, *are*, and so forth. First-person pronouns commonly used in Modern Japanese include *ore*, *boku*, and *watasi* (and *atasi*, *watakusi* as its variations). Sociolinguistic features of these three pronouns are summarized in Table 1 (see Jung (2020) for details).

<sup>1</sup> One of the reasons that kinship terms are frequently used in Japanese is that they are not only used as vocatives, but also as arguments of a predicate (e.g. (a boy to her sister) *onētyan* (vocative); *onētyan* (argument)-*ga kinō kasi-te kureta hon, zenbu yo-nda-yo*. ‘Sister, I read the book that *you* (lit. sister) lent me yesterday from cover to cover’.)

<sup>2</sup> An open class is one whose membership is in principle unlimited because new items are continually being added (Whaley 1997: 56).

|                      | <i>ore</i> (俺)  | <i>boku</i> (僕) | <i>watasi</i> (私) |
|----------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| Gender (of referent) | Male            | Male            | Neutral           |
| Formality            | Informal/Vulgar | Informal        | Formal            |

Table 1: Sociolinguistic Characteristics of *ore*, *boku*, *watasi*

Among these three pronouns, *boku*, in particular, has attracted scholarly attention due to its addressee–reference usage (1). Suzuki (1973: 168) and Takubo (1997: 32–4) propose that the addressee–reference usage of *boku* tends to be employed by a caregiver (mother) when she is talking to her child (son) arguably because he may have difficulty understanding the shifting viewpoint associated with the use of second-person pronouns. For example, a male child addressee may not be able to understand that a second-person pronoun like *omae* ‘you’ employed by his mother indeed refers to him as he employs *boku* ‘I’ to refer to himself, as illustrated in Figure 1.

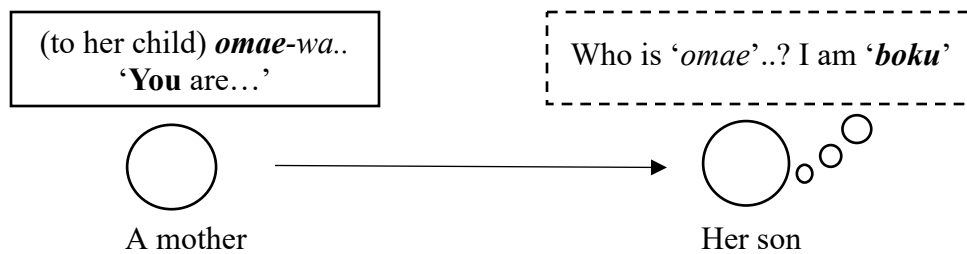


Figure 1: Employing a Second-Person Pronoun *omae* ‘you’ Necessitates a Child’s Viewpoint Shift

In order to solve this potential problem, a caregiver (mother) may change the addressee–reference term to the one that the child is familiar with and uses to refer to himself. Copying of the addressee (her son’s) self-reference term *boku* (‘I’) obviates the need to shift the viewpoint on the part of her son, as shown in Figure 2:

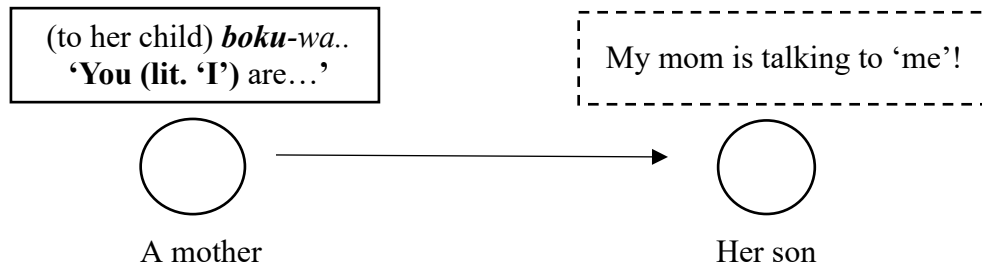


Figure 2: ‘Copying’ of a First-Person pronoun *boku* ‘I’ Obviates a Child’s Viewpoint Shift

As illustrated in Figure 2, the addressee–reference usage of a first-person pronoun *boku* is enabled by the ‘copying’ of the addressee’s self-reference term. This explains why *boku* is used by a caregiver to refer to a male child but not to a female child. Only a male speaker can felicitously use *boku* as his self-reference term (Table 1).



B2: *A, daizyôbu-nan-da.*  
EXCLAM be.okay-NMLZ-COP  
'Oh, so it is okay (with him).'

E2: *Watasi-wa daizyôbu-desu.*  
1SG-TOP be.okay-ADR.HON  
'I am fine.'

B3: *Aa.* (Shifting his gaze from E to F) *Watasi-wa?*  
EXCLAM 1SG-TOP  
'I see. (Shifting his gaze from E to F) What about *you* (lit. 'I')?'

F1: *E, watasi-wa, koros-are-masu.*  
EXCLAM 1SG-TOP kill-PASS-ADR.HON  
'Well, (he) will kill me.' (and everyone burst out laughing)

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1F14QIgeio>, accessed September 6, 2023)

Here, *watasi* in B3's utterance, concomitant with the gaze-shifting gesture directed to F, was being used to switch the target of address from E (the previous speaker) to F (the new speaker). Our interpretation of the addressee–reference usage of *watasi* in E3 is corroborated by the judgements of two Japanese native speakers (a male in his 30s and a female in her 30s, both from Nagoya city) who stated that *watasi* in E3 is interchangeable with a genuine second-person pronoun *anata* 'you'.

Example (4) is another illustration of the addressee–reference usage of *watasi*. Here, two adult male speakers were interviewing female high school students on the street about their recent romantic relationships. As in (3), the use of *watasi* in A3's utterance, accompanying the gaze-shifting gesture directed to D, served to shift the target of address from C (the previous speaker) to D (the new speaker).

(4) (Male speakers A, B are interviewing teenage girls C, D)

A1: *Sô-nan-da.*  
that-NMLZ-COP  
'I see.'  
(after a few seconds of silence, looking at C)  
*E, sorede-sa, tuki-at-te-sa, zyâ mô*  
EXCLAM and-SFP go on a date-GER-SFP then already  
*dêto-toka-mo si-te-ru-n-da?*  
date-or-as well do-PROG- PRS-NMLZ-COP  
'Well, so, (you) decided to date him. Then have you been anywhere on a date?'

C1: *Si-te-masu.*  
do-PROG-ADR.HON  
'(I) have.'

A2: *Hanabitaikai-toka-mo it-ta?*  
fireworks-or-as well go-PST  
'Have you been to the fireworks festival as well?'

C2: *Mada it-te-nai-desu. Korekara...*  
not yet go-PROG-NEG-ADR.HON from now on  
'Not yet. I am planning to...'

- A3: *Tanosi-sô.* *E*, (pointing his microphone to another girl D) ***watasi-wa***, *ima*  
 be.fun-look like EXCLAM 1SG -TOP now  
*ik-ko-ue-no karesi? Ima iru-no?*  
 one-thing-older-GEN boyfriend now have-NMLZ  
 ‘That sounds fun. So, (pointing his microphone at another girl D) ***you*** (lit. ‘I’) have, a one-year-older boyfriend? Now?’
- D1: (Nodding) *Ima iru.*  
 now have  
 ‘Now (I) do.’

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AbAy5t5SzhY&t=263s>, accessed October 12, 2023.)

Example (5) illustrates the addressee–reference usage of *watasitati* (‘we’). This conversation clip was taken from a comedy video where an adult male speaker A, along with his friend B, was looking for his younger sister C. When they met C at a so-called ‘maid café’, C invited A and B to work there. While the female employees D and E were briefing A and B about the rules of the café, A asked the following question:

- (5) (After listening to the rules of the so-called maid café from the female employees D and E, the male speaker A asks them a question)

- A1: *Tyotto mat-te.* *Animarumeidotyan-tati-tte* *iu-no -wa,*  
 a little wait-GER -PL-QUOT say-NMLZ-TOP  
*uti-ra-ga?*  
 1SG-PL-NOM  
 ‘Wait a minute. Is it we who will be (dressed as) animal maids?’
- D1: *A, hai.* (pointing to D and E) ***Watasitati.***  
 EXCLAM yes 1SG-PL  
 ‘Oh, yes. (Pointing to D and E) ***We*** are (animal maids).’
- A2: *A*, (pointing to D and E) ***watasitati-ga*** *animarumeidotyan.* *De,*  
 EXCLAM 1SG-PL-NOM so  
*uti-ra-wa nani?*  
 1SG-PL-TOP what  
 ‘Oh, ***you*** (lit. ‘we’) are animal maids. Then, what are ***we***?’
- D2: *E, ningen...?*  
 EXCLAM human  
 ‘Um, human...?’ (and everyone burst out laughing)

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YUoNxEH8n4o>, accessed October 12, 2023)

In A1’s utterance, a male speaker first used a first-person pronoun *uti*<sup>3</sup>-*ra* ‘we’ to refer to himself and his friend (B), asking whether they would need to dress as animal maids. Then, in D1, a female employee replied that she and her colleague (E), not A and B, were indeed animal maids, using

<sup>3</sup> The literal meaning of *uti* (うち) is ‘inside’ or ‘house’. However, *uti* is currently used as a first-person singular pronoun.

another first-person plural pronoun *watasitati*. In A2, A wanted to confirm that the female employees (D and E) were indeed the animal maids, not he and his colleague (A and B). This situation, aided by pointing gestures (see (2)), enables a male speaker to use first-person pronoun *watasitati* even though a second-person plural pronoun such as *kimitati* ‘you-PL’ is possible. Our interpretation of the addressee–reference usage of *watasitati* is also corroborated by the judgements of the two Japanese native speakers, who stated that *watasitati* in (5) is interchangeable with a genuine second-person plural pronoun *kimitati*.

Through the illustration of the three case studies (3)–(5), it was shown that the addressee–reference usage of first-person pronouns is not only used by an adult female caregiver to a male child, but also by an adult male speaker to a female adult speaker. Given that adults are capable of understanding the shift of viewpoints associated with the use of terms of address, we need to find another motivating factor than that advocated for the use of *boku* to address a male child (Suzuki 1973, Takubo 1997). Why then do adult male speakers use *watasi* and *watasitati* to address adult female speakers? We can approach this question by asking why supposedly more natural, alternative expressions (e.g. genuine second-person pronouns) are disfavored.

The male speakers in situations (3)–(5) were engaged in making YouTube videos and, out of necessity, interviewed younger female speakers whom they met for the first time. They need to strike a delicate interpersonal balance when talking to younger female strangers in order for the interview to be successful. On the one hand, the interviewers need to make addressees/interviewees feel sufficiently at ease for the conversation to proceed smoothly. In other words, the speakers are constrained by an interpersonal maxim: **(I) Do not be too formal**. This maxim helps explain why a formal and gender-neutral second-person pronoun *anata* ‘you’ is avoided. *Anata* ‘you’ is basically a formal expression (Shibatani 1990), which can possibly convey unnecessary and undesirable connotations such as ‘business-like’, ‘too formal’, or ‘pushing the addressee away’ (Yonezawa 2016: 70). In an interview situation which prioritizes the cooperation of interviewees/addressees, *anata* would thus be infelicitous.

Conversely, terms of address that sound ‘too close/over-friendly’ would also be avoided. In other words, the speakers are also constrained by another interpersonal maxim: **(II) Do not be too close**. This maxim explains why less formal-sounding second-person pronouns *kimi* and *omae* ‘you’ are also avoided. Specifically, *kimi* and *omae* ‘you’ are stereotypically used by male speakers towards their close subordinates (e.g. a husband to his wife, a boss to his younger female employee, etc.; Kobayashi 2016: 22–5). Even though these second-person pronouns can convey interpersonal closeness, it may be strategically safe for the speakers to avoid them lest their addressees should be offended.

In contrast, *watasi* would be an optimal term of address as it is the repetition (or copying) of the addressee’s own term of address and does not violate either of the two interpersonal maxims. The first maxim (**(I) Do not be too formal**) is circumvented because *watasi* can serve as a less formal alternative to *anata* ‘formal you’. Copying/imitating other’s use of words is known to facilitate informal behavior such as joking. For instance, example (6) illustrates a situation where the teacher humorously echoed his student’s excessive use of honorifics, mildly encouraging the student to speak less formally:

## (6) (A conversation with a teacher and his student at school)

Student: *Sensei, watasi-no repôto, mi-te-kudasai-masi-ta-ka?*  
 teacher 1SG-GEN report see-GER-give.HON-ADR.HON-PST-Q

‘Teacher, have (you) checked my report?’ (excessive level of honorifics)

Teacher: (laughing) *Un, mi-te-kudasai-masi-ta-yo.*

Yes see-GER-give.HON-ADR.HON-PST-SFP

‘Yes, (I) have checked (your) report.’

(A constructed example)

Copying/echoing the addressee’s own use of *watasi* is beneficial in view of the second maxim ((II) **Do not be too close**). From an anthropological perspective, directly addressing a person (e.g. using second-person pronoun) can be construed as intrusive or face-threatening (Takiura 2007). However, copying/echoing the addressee’s own use of *watasi* can help create proper interpersonal distance between the speaker and the addressee. See example (7) where *watasi* serves a rather different function from (3)–(5):

## (7) (Female speakers A and B, out of the blue, recognize and approach male speakers C, D, E, F (well-known YouTubers) from behind)

A1: (Pointing her finger at E) *Kore zyanai? Zenzen osi-toka-zyanai-n-da-kedo.*  
 this is not not at all favorite-or-is not-NMLZ-COP-but

‘It isn’t this (person)? (He is) not (my) favorite at all.’

B1: (Hiding her face with hands) *Watasi-wa...*  
 1SG-TOP

‘As for me, ...’

C1: (Seeing A and B approaching from behind) *E, sugoi-zyan.*  
 EXCLAM be.great-NEG

‘Oh, that is daring!’

D1: *I, ikinari?*

all of a sudden

‘What, all of a sudden?’

(A few seconds of silence)

D2: *E, dare, dare? Konomi dare?*  
 EXCLAM who who favorite who

‘Oh, who, who? Who is (her) favorite?’

B2: *Kono ko.*

this kid

‘This kid.’

D3: *Ā... De? (Shifting his gaze to A) Watasi-wa?*  
 EXCLAM so 1SG-TOP

‘Okay... so? What about you (lit. ‘I’)?’

([https://youtube.com/watch?v=d4J\\_sM1Mzoo&si=1cwI8-UAXVTVEGYs](https://youtube.com/watch?v=d4J_sM1Mzoo&si=1cwI8-UAXVTVEGYs), accessed October 17, 2023)

The male speakers in (7) are well-known YouTubers. The female speakers, who supposedly had discussed who their favorite was, spotted them interviewing others on the street and approached

them, saying, ‘Isn’t this the guy who one of us said was her favorite? He is not my favorite type at all.’ It should be noted that the female speakers addressed the male YouTuber as *kore* ‘this’ and *kono ko* ‘this kid’, which are not proper terms of address for a person whom they have never met before. *Watasi* in D3’s utterance was arguably chosen to counter such rude behavior. Given that *watasi* in (7) is interchangeable with another distance-taking referring expression *sotira* ‘you’ (lit. ‘that way’)<sup>4</sup> (Kanai 2003), it is safe to conclude that copying/echoing of *watasi* in D3’s utterance is motivated by the desire to create some psychological distance between the speaker and the addressee.

To summarize our findings, *watasi* is chosen as a term of address because it is not incompatible with the two sociolinguistic/communicative maxims: (I) Do not be too formal; and (II) Do not be too close.

## 4 Conclusion

This study paid particular attention to the addressee–reference usage of first-person pronouns *watasi* and *watasitati*. Specifically, these pronouns can be employed typically by male adult speakers to address younger adult female addressee(s). These pronouns are strategically chosen to satisfy conflicting sociolinguistic/communicative needs that cannot be satisfied by genuine second-person pronouns. These pronouns, which copy the forms originally used by addressees to refer to themselves, neither sound too close nor too formal, striking a delicate balance in terms of interpersonal distance.

Further research is essential to determine whether the addressee usage of *watasi* is affected by factors such as the speaker’s age, gender, occupation, or regional background. Additionally, it would be critical to conduct an awareness survey to investigate how addressees perceive being referred to as *watasi*. Such investigations would further illuminate the social and pragmatic dimensions of terms of address in Japanese, providing a more comprehensive picture of their role in discourse.

## Abbreviations

1 = first person; ADR = addressee; ADV = adverbial; COP = copula; EXCLAM = exclamative; GER = gerund; HON = honorifics; LOC = locative; NEG = negative; NMLZ = nominalizer; NOM = nominative; PASS = passive; PL = plural; PROG = progressive; PRS = present; PST = past; Q = question marker; QUOT = quotative; SFP = sentence final particle; SG = singular; TOP = topic.

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<sup>4</sup> *Sotira* ‘that way’ is a demonstrative that marks the direction close to the addressee (e.g. *sotira-ni byooiin-ga ari-masu* ‘there is a hospital in your direction’). Kanai (2003: 60) states that it is used as a term of address when the speaker has an adversarial relationship with the addressee, as in B’s utterance below.

A: [Well, Kabuki actors have big heads anyway.]

B: *Nani itte-ru-no-yo.*                      *Sotira-da-tte*                      *dónaga-no*                      *ganimata-no-kuseni.*  
 what say-PST-NMLZ-SFP              that way-COP-QUOT              long torso-GEN              crab legs-GEN-ADV  
 ‘What are you talking about. You (lit. that way) have a long torso and crab legs.’

(Kanai 2003: 60, glosses added)

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