

# Dare no Kutsu?: The Challenge of Japanese Pronoun Use for Non-Japanese

Michael Russell

## Abstract

This paper examines an example of pragmalinguistic failure - when an apparently substitutable linguistic structure is taken from one language and used in another unsuccessfully. The particular episode here involves pronoun usage in English and Japanese. The first person singular pronoun choices available in English are few compared to the many of Japanese. This divergence is further complicated by the grammatical requirement of a subject in English declarative sentences and the less common use of subjects in Japanese.

**Keywords:** pragmatics, pragmalinguistic failure, pronoun usage, linguistic context, degree of solidarity, relative power

I live with my family in Nakano-ward, an inner city suburb of Tokyo. Six years ago my eldest son was six years old and attended a local day care center. It was my responsibility to pick him up each evening and bring him home. One evening we were leaving the center at the same time as one of my son's friends, Kotarou, and for some reason, Kotarou pointed to my shoes and said:

Kotarou: *Dare no kutsu?* (Whose shoes are those?)

Me: *Watashi no.* (Mine.)

Pause.

Kotarou: *Doushite anata wa josei no you ni hanashiteimasuka?* ("Why are you talking like a woman?")

Me: *Eh, hontouni?* (Oh, really?)

This is an example of pragmalinguistic failure (Thomas, 1983: 101), the inappropriate use of apparently synonymous structures. I was not aware at that time that the use of *watashi* in casual settings or with people younger than myself would be perceived as feminine and therefore a strange usage. So why then did I use *watashi*? Firstly, I was

simply translating from English, “mine” (*watashi no*). Secondly, Japanese language textbooks (such as the *Japanese for Busy People* series) teach that foreigners, as outsiders, (*gaikokujin* literally means ‘outside country people’), should learn and speak polite Japanese. *Watashi* seemed to me to be polite and appropriate for the situation.

Textbooks such as these often don’t explain the context of the language they teach and the influence context has on language. In this case, and to my chagrin, it resulted in me speaking like a woman.

I was surprised and embarrassed by my mistake and especially so after being corrected by a 6-year-old boy. I have seen it noted elsewhere that children are good language teachers for exactly this reason, they have no hesitation in consistently and explicitly correcting language learners.<sup>1</sup>

Japanese pronouns are far more numerous than their English equivalents, making pronoun choice in Japanese a complex undertaking. Compounding this, English pronouns are high frequency words (OEC, 2015) making translating from English to Japanese difficult. Furthermore, in English many declarative sentences begin with “I” or “my” (the deictic centre), the very first word we use, communicating by translating them to Japanese is fraught with difficulty and can be quite disheartening. It is not only talking about ourselves with *I*, *me* and *my* but of course being able to confidently address and speak about other people and things.

Archer et. al. (2012: 113) raise this issue of pronouns, addressing interlocutors in other languages and the challenge it presents to language learners.

*“Judging how to address a new acquaintance is a fine balancing act and the source of considerable anxiety to learners, since an inappropriate choice can severely disrupt relationships or at least be a source of unwanted amusement.”*

For the Japanese language learner the question soon arises: how can I choose the correct pronoun both to refer to myself and to other people or things? Brown and Gilman (1960) concluded that regarding the *tu/vous* distinction in Western European languages the choice of pronoun is controlled by two parameters: degree of solidarity (the similarities between interlocutors) and relative power (older than, employer of, richer than, stronger than). A later study (Clyne, 2009), claimed that there were more factors involved when deciding forms of address such as the *tu/vous* dichotomy or other pronouns. Do I know this person? Are they older or younger than me? Are they part of

my group? Are they similar to me? Should I copy their chosen form of address? The pronoun or form of address decision is dictated by our answers to these questions and also what language is being used (the address rules of that language), what are our personal or group preferences and what the context is (ibid: 399).

Japanese does not generally inflect by case, so, “I” is equivalent to “me” (Akiyama & Akiyama, 2012). A number of references listing<sup>2</sup> the most commonly used Japanese versions of the English “I” and “me” has sixteen pronouns and concedes that this is not exhaustive as there are regional and dialect variations. As an adult Australian male living in Japan there are a number of pronoun options available for me to refer to myself.

As has already been observed, *watashi* is the first-person pronoun initially taught in Japanese language textbooks. In formal or polite contexts *watashi* is gender neutral, but when used in informal or casual contexts, it is often perceived as feminine (thus Kotarou’s comment to me: “Why are you speaking like a woman?”).

*Ore* is informal and used almost exclusively by men, it can be considered rude depending on the context (thus my ongoing reluctance to use it). The use of *ore* creates a sense of masculinity and emphasizes the speaker’s status when used with peers and with those who are younger or who have less status. Amongst close family and friends, its use is a sign of familiarity rather than of masculinity or of superiority. To add an historical and spatial perspective here, *ore* was used by both genders until the late Edo period (which ended in 1868) and still is in some regional dialects. *Ore* is *oi* in the Kyushu (the south-westernmost of the four main islands of Japan) dialect.

*Boku* is informal, used by males and rarely females, it sounds boyish. *Boku* can be used when casually giving deference and the word *shimobe* (“manservant”) uses the same Chinese character as *boku*.

*Jibun* can be used in formal or informal situations and mainly by males. Literally this word means “oneself”.

*Uchi* is informal and mostly used by women. *Uchi* means “one’s own” and is used in western Japan dialects, especially the Kansai (Osaka) dialect. The plural form *uchi-ra* can be used by both women and men. The singular form is also used by both genders when talking about the household, “*uchi no inu*” (“my/our dog”), “*uchi no haha-oya*” (“my mother”). Furthermore *uchi* is also used in less formal business speech to mean “our company”.

Returning to the Kotarou context, can Brown and Gilman's (1960) analysis assist me with my language choice? In terms of relative power I am a father and adult and Kotarou was a six year old boy and pupil of the day care center. Thinking of degree of solidarity, we are both associated with the day care center and live in the same neighborhood but I am a *gaijin* (outside person) – or more politely *gaikokujin* (outside country person) – which makes me very distant from him.

Turning to Clyne's (2009) research, I do know Kotarou, he is much younger than me, he belongs to some of the same groups as me and not others, he is quite different to me (race and nationality) and I could copy one form of his manner of address of me, *Sammy no papa* (Sammy's father) but not the more polite version of that, *Sammy no ousan* as one cannot apply the honorific *-san* to themselves or their family.

So there are a lot of factors and possible choices and one could quite naturally yearn for the relative simplicity of English in this particular context: "They're mine" or simply "mine". The solution for me comes from where it usually comes from, consultation with my Japanese wife. She maintains that *watashi no* was a good response but can also understand Kotarou's perception. She rejects the use of *ore no* on the basis that I am not a fluent Japanese speaker and so should choose the more polite option – *watashi no*. She expects that Kotarou's father would reply *ore no*, and that is consistent with the explanation of *ore* given earlier. My wife, understanding the failure of *watashi no* in this specific situation, suggests that *Sammy no papa no* would have been a good response. That translates to "Sammy's father's" and in English I cannot think of a situation where I would use the third person to refer to myself, although Japanese do refer to themselves in the third person.

When asked about the possible responses of other fathers of Kotarou's classmates my wife was uncertain. She thought that *boku* or *boku no* might be used but that doesn't match what has been written above (it is boyish). She also suggested that personal preference would be a factor, which is consistent with Clyne's (2009) findings. My wife's reply in this context would be *watashi no* which with its feminine sound in a casual situation would be appropriate.

To recap, English speaking learners of Japanese are taught through their textbooks to substitute *watashi* for the English "I", "me" or "mine" (*watashi no*). A further complication for a native English speaker is the Japanese language tendency to often omit the subject of a sentence (Kanaya, 2002). Pronouns are used less frequently in Japanese when compared to other languages mainly because there is no grammatical require-

ment to use a subject in a sentence. “I” or “you” is often omitted when it is clear who the speaker is talking about (Kanaya, 2002).

Another factor in not requiring sentence subjects or pronouns is that some verbs indicate who the interactants are. An example of this is *kureru* which means for the speaker (or someone very close to them) to receive a thing or action (give it to me/do it for me). *Ooi, sono kagi wo nagete kure*, “Hey, throw those keys to me.” *Ageru* means give or do for someone other than the speaker. *Tokikata o oshieteageru yo*, “I will show you how to solve it” but there is no pronoun in either of the above Japanese sentences. Another common example of particular vocabulary indicating the interactants is the use of a ‘shii’ adjective. *Urayamashii* translates to ‘I envy you’ and yet “I” or “you” are not explicitly mentioned. In Japanese subject pronouns are often omitted.

## CONCLUSION

*“Wierzbicka’s (2003: 106) comments highlight the difficulty of using a language with different pronominal distinctions from one’s own” (Archer et al., 2012: 113).*

It is natural for language learners to use their L1 as they attempt to learn or communicate in an L2. The great majority begin with an L1 thought and then translate that to the L2. At times this will lead to successful communication and at other times young children will laugh at you and say that you are speaking like the opposite gender. At times there will be communicative failure.

The long history of Japan, its people and its culture are reflected in its language. Japanese pronoun use, or more usually non-use, is substantially different to English pronoun usage and English speaking learners of Japanese need to be aware of that and need to be made aware of that.

## NOTES

- 1 I read this book in around 2005 but haven’t been able to remember or find the title.
- 2 The information about Japanese pronouns for I, me and my has been compiled from a number of sources: Breen, J. (2015), Maynard, S. K. (1993) and Takasugi, S. (2004). It was then either verified or rejected by my Japanese wife and myself.

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