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L2 Japanese: Swedish students' usage of first-person pronouns

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Abstract

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Aim: The aim of this thesis is to look at L2 (learning as a second language) students' usage of first-person singular pronouns, and to discern in what situations (if any) they are changed.

Theory: The Japanese language has a great variety of first-person pronouns, one of the few languages to possess this feature. Due partly to this, learning Japanese as a second language can be difficult and mistakes are easily made. In order to give an overview of politeness in language, both in general and in Japanese specifically, the works of Brown & Levinson (1987) and Tsujimura (2014) have been used. I have also given a brief diachronic overview of some of the most commonly used first-person pronouns, as well as looking at research previously conducted on the subject of pronoun usage in L2 Japanese.

Method: In order to achieve the result, a questionnaire was conducted with the participants all being of an upper- intermediate level of Japanese, studying their fifth term at a university in western Sweden. The subjects were tasked with translating simple sentences from English to Japanese, the resulting sentences then studied to see pronoun usage.

Result: The questionnaire showed that *watashi* was the most used first-person pronoun, followed by *boku*, being the most chosen among women and men respectively. There was a clear distinction in which situations the participants switched pronouns, namely if they were close to their speaking partner or not. The subjects used the more formal *watashi* when speaking to strangers and teachers and the more informal *boku* or *ore* when speaking to close friends. Followed by these pronouns, there were many cases where a first-person pronoun was not used at all, as is common with native speakers of Japanese. This occurs because of *lexicalisation*, further explained in this thesis. As the questionnaire was presented as a translation exercise and not revealing its true purpose, I could not collect any data regarding to *why* the participants chose their preferred pronouns. Various factors can affect the choice, such as level of Japanese education, age and relationship with one's speaking partner and whether the speaker has any close Japanese acquaintances.

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1. Description of subject and research questions

The Japanese language has numerous first-person pronouns to choose from, which comes with different lexical meanings depending on which one is chosen. For L2 (second language) learners of Japanese, the choice of pronoun can be difficult, as their choice of pronoun may affect how people perceive them (Warnick, 1991). To learn more about how the choice is made, I will be looking at L2 learners of Japanese in Sweden at an upper-intermediate level, to see which pronouns were used in different situations.

The questions that I will be attempting to answer are as following:

- What are the factors that can affect the choice? (Situation, gender, age etc.)
- Does having spent an extended period of time in Japan affect the choice?

Examples of things that can affect the choice are age, gender, relationship with the interlocutor and social status (Kinsui, 2003). The Japanese language places a high importance on respect and being polite, especially with people who are older or have a higher rank than the speaker. This type of language is referred to as *keigo*, 'honorific speech'. It is deeply encoded in the Japanese language, to the degree that there are several levels of politeness one must be wary of. This of course poses a challenge in and of itself to L2 learners whose mother tongue does not display such distinction of politeness, but the fact that levels of politeness also are imbedded in first-person pronouns requires the speaker to consider their choice with even more care.

The aim of this study is to see how L2 learners of Japanese in their 5^{th} term at a Swedish university make their choices, and what differences there are (if any) concerning age, gender and experience in Japan. This may prove valuable to further developing the structure of teaching Japanese as a foreign language, in particular how this type of word usage is taught (if taught at all) and used. This may also be useful in explaining a particular aspect of Japanese that might previously be unknown to new students and contextualise one's own pronoun usage.

2. Theory and previous research

2.1 Theory/background

One of the fundamentals of any language is the ability to be able to express a self. This is important when explaining many things, such as opinions, actions and experiences. In order to express such things, rather than using the name of the person every time, pronouns are used instead. According to the Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar, there are eight types of pronouns, but I will be focusing specifically on first-person pronouns in the category of personal pronouns. The English language has two first-person singular pronouns: *I* to express the nominative (subject) and *me* to express the accusative (object) (Aart, 2014). In the case of Japanese however, there are multiple ways to express the self and to refer to oneself. Japanese is far from the only language with several ways to express the self, with Korean, Javanese and Thai (Huang & Jaszczolt, 2018) being examples of other languages where this occurs. It is, however, unique in that there over the years have been 51 recorded ways of referring to oneself (Tsujimura, 2014), each with different connotations. As mentioned before, depending on the word used, the speaker can express age, gender, social status, relationship with the interlocutor and politeness level all at once (Huang & Jaszczolt, 2018). This can be challenging for L2 (second language) learners of Japanese, as their choice of first-person pronoun might affect how people view them. This way of encoding meaning into a specific word is called *lexicalisation* (Matthews, 2014). For example, taking a word in English like *bachelor*. Not only do we know that the person in question is unmarried, we also know that it is a man who is most likely young. This is because the word has been *lexicalised* to include those meanings. Therefore, we do not have to state that, "*that person is an unmarried young man"*, we simply say *"that person is a bachelor"*.

2.2 Politeness theory – Brown & Levinson

One of the most fundamental parts of any language is the existence of *face* or façade. As the term suggests, this indicates that the speaker is putting on a kind of face in order to seem presentable and socially accepted (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In order to achieve this, politeness is vital. To respect the faces of others and in turn have one's own respected, different levels of politeness must be utilised. Broadly speaking there are two types: *positive* and *negative* politeness. There is also *off record*, in which neither of these are acknowledged.

Positive politeness is about establishing common ground with the interlocutor and seeking agreement. Here it is also key to keep a positive face and not upset/anger/be impolite to one's speaking partner. There are altogether 15 different methods to uphold positive politeness; some strategies include indicating that one wants something that the speaking partner has, seeking agreement, offering or promising something and joking around. These all help keep up a friendly and cooperative face for oneself and does not undermine the speaking partner.

Used parallel to positive politeness is negative politeness. These strategies are slightly different and, as the name states, negative. There are a total of ten different ways to express negative politeness, including being overly direct with requests, being defensive, apologizing, forcing somebody to do something and using implication to get one's meaning across (for full examples of both positive and negative politeness, see Brown & Levinson (1987), pages 102 and 131).

When a speaker directly ignores the speaking partner's face and says something to break or contradict it, it is called a *face threatening act* (FTA). Such actions can be threatening or criticizing, blatantly not cooperating, using incorrect address forms (in the case of Japanese, this could be not addressing someone with the correct word or not adding the honorific -s*an* after a person's name, as is customary when being polite or speaking to someone you don't know very well, equivalent to the English Mr./Mrs. (Banno et al., 2011a, page 47)), giving unsolicited advice or bringing up topics known to be sensitive to the partner. This tends to be avoided if possible, as cooperation and respect is key in any language and culture.

All these utterances are considered to be *on record*, that is to say there is only one way to take the statements and they mean one thing only. In the cases where there can be multiple meanings it is called *off record*. These can be used and expressed in several ways, namely letting the speakers have an 'out'. If their statement was interpreted in a way different to what they intended, they cannot get any blame because that is not exactly what they said. Whether a statement is considered on or off record is also determined by intonation and body language, as one can easily say one thing but mean the other. Sarcasm and irony are such statements that are in fact categorized as *on* record, since the majority of people will understand that the speaker meant something else. Various strategies of off record statements include over-and understating something, giving hints, being vague, using metaphors and rhetorical questions and to use ellipsis (explained later in this thesis) (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

2.3 Formality in Japanese

The different levels of formality within first-person pronouns correspond to different levels of formality when it comes to the conjugation of the verbs and sentence-final particles (Tsujimura, 2014). Japanese is one of several languages where politeness is part of grammar and conjugations rather than just different words, like it is in for example English. Japanese has two basic forms for verb conjugation: long form (polite/formal) and short form (informal). In the short form the verb is kept in its original dictionary form, while as the name suggests, the long form removes the final syllable and adds the suffix -*masu* for affirmative or -*masen* for the negative, as well as requiring the verb stem to do so (Banno et al., 2011a), as seen in this example taken from a textbook for Japanese L2 learners:

Table 1

	Ru-verb	u-verb
Verb bases	*tabe*	*ik*
Dictionary forms	食べる(to eat) *taberu*	行く(to go) *iku*
Present, affirmative	食べます *tabemasu*	行きます *ikimasu*
Present, negative	食べません *tabemasen*	行きません *ikimasen*
Stems	食べ *tabe*	行き *iki*

Banno et al. (2011a), p.88

To create a complete, formally and grammatically correct sentence, one needs to match the first-person pronoun (if used), adjectival conjugations, verbal conjugations and any eventual copula to the same level of politeness. For example, in the sentence *"Ore wa yomimasu"* (I read /will read), levels of politeness are mixed, known as *style shifting* or *code switching* (Smith, 2013). The pronoun (*ore*) is impolite/casual, while the conjugation of the verb (-*masu*) is polite. The natural sentences should be *"Watashi wa yomimasu"* (formal) and *"Ore wa yomu"* (informal) respectively. Additionally, the same textbook does not introduce any other first-person pronouns apart from *watashi*. The next book in the series introduces both *watakushi* and *boku*, explaining that they are "*formal"* and "*used by men"* respectively (Banno et al., 2011b). Although this is only taking example from one series of textbooks, it is clear to see that teaching students linguistic nuances such as this is something that comes slightly later in their education, as they must learn more vital grammar first. It is nevertheless an important part in sounding natural and fluent.

2.4 Style shifting

As you can see, formality in Japanese is literally imbedded in the grammar rather than just being a different word order or a different set of words, as it is in English. Even though Japanese people use and see this every day, a study made by Smith (2013) showed that people learning Japanese as a second language are MORE conscious of their formality than native Japanese speakers. A possible reason for this is that L2 learners have to pay more attention to what they are saying and have to take extra time to think about their sentence structure, as opposed to L1 speakers who do this 'automatically'.

Smith further writes, that in a typical Japanese conversation there can be a mix of formal and informal, but the speakers will stick to their respective formalities. For example, in a situation where a teacher is addressing her students she will use the short form since the students are all younger than her and there is no need to be very polite, while the students will use long form to address her since she is an authority figure. This also occurs in situations such as a senior talking to a junior within a school or a company. This is very much connected to the politeness theory presented by Brown & Levinson (1987). However, the desire to protect one's personal space and freedom, as mentioned in the theory, is less pronounced in Japanese culture. Given the history of lords and servants and rank being of utmost importance, individuality in that sense is not deemed as important as in other languages (Smith, 2013).

There has been much research done on style switching, and according to Isaka (2010, see Smith, 2013), there are five possible reasons/categories for it when it comes to native

speakers. The first reason is *"assimilating new information",* in which the speaker hears something for the first time or that they were not expecting and repeats the previous sentence in the short form to confirm with the interlocutor what they have heard. In order to do this, the speaker switches to short form to express surprise while also repeating the word in order to get clarity. The second category Isaka calls "*style shifting as realisation*", in which the speaker in the moment remembers or realises something and expresses this using the short form. With a speaker who would usually use long form in such a situation, switching in this way shows the interlocutor that they have understood what is being said to them, and acts as a sort of confirmation for the speaker. The third category that Isaka presents is "*emotive expression*", in which the speaker purposely uses the short form in order to express a strong emotion connected to the topic. If for example one is talking to an acquaintance who went on a trip somewhere, they might describe the weather as being incredibly hot/cold using short form, to emphasise how awful it was. Doing this is merely to imbue the utterance with more emotional weight, rather than to break face and the degree of politeness already set up. The fourth category is "*candidate wording*". This is the use of short form when suggesting a completion for someone else's sentence or when thinking out loud as the interlocutor. The speaker puts themselves in their speaking partner's shoes, and therefore uses the short form. Since one doesn't need to be polite to oneself, it is natural that the speaker too would use the short form. This also holds true when someone is talking to themselves or voicing their thoughts out loud, referred to by Isaka as "*self-talk*", the fifth and final category. When thinking about something that refers to oneself or one's experiences in a conversation in the long form, switching to the short form in this case indicates that you are not speaking to your interlocutor but thinking aloud to yourself. As stated previously, when talking to oneself or thinking aloud there is no need to use the long form and be so polite (Smith, 2010). Style switching such as these are prevalent among L2 speakers, but not to the same degree. There are many things that could affect the choice of long form vs. short form, such as which textbook was used to learn Japanese, experience in studying abroad, having close L1 speakers of Japanese and which your L1 language is.

A study by Brown (2010) showed that one's native language can have a greater influence over one's second language than previously thought. In an experiment interviews were held with native speakers of Korean and L2 learners. The L2 learner's usage of polite forms were monitored during the conversations, and they sometimes did not use polite form at all even though a native speaker would have. According to Brown, one's mother tongue has a very big influence. In the early stages of one conversation, it was revealed that the native Korean speaker was two years older than the L2 speaker. In a native setting, this would warrant the use of polite language from the younger interlocutor, as respect and politeness are very important in Korean, much like it is in Japanese. In this experiment however, the younger speaker continued using more informal language even after finding out the age of his speaking partner. When asked after the interview why he didn't choose to use more formal language, he said that a two-year difference in age was not enough for him to use such formal language, as he would not make such a change when speaking his native language (in this case English).

2.5 Ellipsis

As seen previously, Japanese speakers tend to drop the first-person pronoun or regular noun, in a phenomenon called *noun ellipsis* (Tsujimura, 2014). Other languages with known noun ellipsis are Italian, Portuguese, Korean and Chinese. This even exists to some degree in English, with sentences such as *"Do you drink?"* and *"Have you eaten yet?"*. Both of these verbs are transitive and therefore require an object to be considered correct. In these cases, they have been omitted, yet are perfectly acceptable sentences to say. Depending on what material one looks at, the drop rate of first-person pronouns is between 0 and 25% in English, while being between 50 and 80% in Japanese. This is a significant difference and is one of the reasons why Japanese has been classed as 'extremely difficult' and even 'an illogical language' by some (McCraw, 2010). Furthermore, (at least in Japanese) text type and genre affect the amount of omitted words in a sentence. A study (McCraw, 2010) showed that in spoken discourse, 73.7% of sentences are subject less, compared to 37.1% in news texts. Another study also showed that subject dropping was prevalent in over 70% of conversation, 42-56% in narrative texts, 27-37% for expository texts and 20% for novels. This would indicate that genre also has an effect on ellipsis.

Examples of ellipted Japanese sentences:

Friend 1: "本を買ったの?"

hon wo katta no? (Did you buy the/a book?)

Book ACC buy- short past PARTICLE

Friend 2: "うん、買った"

un, katta. (Yeah, I bought it/did.)

Yes, buy- short past

Even though neither of the speakers use a first-person pronoun and the second speaker does not even include an object even though the verb is transitive, both these sentences are grammatically correct. The speaker instead relies on the context of the situation and of the listener's previous knowledge. If the friends had previously talked about possibly buying a book, it would not have to be mentioned again since they both are aware of it. Similarly, since the second friend is saying that they did indeed buy the book, they do not need to include an "I" as it is already implied that they were the one that bought it. This is known as *zero pronoun* in Japanese (Tsujimura, 2014).

This is prevalent for L2 learners of Japanese from an early stage, even though it is not referred to as such. If we take a look at chapter 1 of the textbook *Genki* (Banno et al., 2011a):

> *"…Note that none of these sentences has a 'subject', like the 'it', 'I', and 'my major' found in their English counterparts. Sentences without subjects are very common in Japanese; Japanese speakers actually tend to omit subjects whenever they think it is clear to the listener what or who they are referring to."*
>
> *Banno et al. (2011a), p.42*

If we look further in the same book, in chapter 3 we can see that many of the sentences don't have a first-person pronoun in Japanese but do in the English translation.

コーヒーを飲みます

koohi wo nominasu

Coffee ACC drink-NONPAST

"(I) drink coffee"

図書館で本を読みます

toshoukan de hon wo yomimasu

Library-in book-ACC read-NONPAST

"(I) will read a book in the library"

日曜日に京都に行きます

nichiyoobi ni kyooto ni ikimasu

Sunday-on Kyoto-to go-NONPAST

"(I) will go to Kyoto on Sunday"

Banno et al. (2011a) p.90-91

It would of course be perfectly acceptable to add a first-person pronoun, but as seen here, the sentences are complete without them. The short form is not introduced until chapter 8, indicating that at a beginner level, there are more important things to be learned first, and being less formal comes later.

2.6 History

2.6.1. Watakushi/ watashi (私)

According to Ishiyama (2008), Japanese pronouns have two main origins: the more common lexical noun (such as *watashi* and *boku*), and the more unique spatial expression (for example demonstrative pronouns such as *kocchi* and *kochira*, meaning 'this way'). Lexical nouns are nouns that have been imbued with specific meaning and connotations, but as is the case with most languages, in Japanese these meanings have changed over time. One such example is the formal first-person pronoun *watakushi* (私). In the 14th century, it simply meant 'private

matters' or 'own affairs' and was commonly used to juxtapose/contrast/differentiate ones work life and private life or oneself and others. Over the next few hundred years, the word began to be more associated with the person uttering it, rather than solely that person's private affairs. By the 1800s, it had become a fully functioning first-person pronoun and had dropped the syllable *ku* to become *watashi*, a phenomenon known as *phonological reduction*. In modern Japanese the word has been further reduced, with the transition being *watakushi-watashi-atashi-atai*, the leftmost being the most formal and the rightmost being the least formal, and the one most commonly used by women. In modern Japanese both meanings remain and coexist, which is a rare occurrence in language.

2.6.2 Boku (僕)

Another first-person pronoun that has gone through lexical change is *boku* (僕) (Ishiyama, 2008), nowadays mostly used by young men. The word originally meant servant and has its roots in feudal Japan (1185-1868). Japan was ruled by different lords known as *shōgun* controlling different parts of the country (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). These *shōgun* were very wealthy and had many men under their command. These were mostly different types of soldiers and guards, but they also had many servants attending to them and their subordinates. these were known as *shimobe* (下部, literally 'sub part' or 'substructure' (Ahlström, Ahlström & Plummer, 2009)). It eventually became common to replace this original character for the word with the character for *boku*, but to keep the reading. This way, the character 僕 (*boku)* could be read two ways, both meaning servant. When the feudal era ended in 1868, there was no need to use a word like 'servant', because that occupation was now mostly obsolete. Instead, *boku* was taken up as a first-person pronoun by male students and used when talking to someone of their rank/class or lower. This practice remains today as *boku* is an informal, typically male, pronoun used with peers or underclassmen.

2.6.3 Ore (俺)

The final first-person pronoun that I will be giving a diachronic overview of is the pronoun *ore* (俺), an informal pronoun typically used by macho/manly men (Ishiyama, 2008). The history of *ore* is not as straightforward as with *watakushi* and *boku*, as there are several theories concerning its origin. First of all, historically it has been used as both a first-and second-person pronoun, but was considered very derogatory when used in the second person (Ishiyama, 2014). In modern Japanese it is used solely as a first-person pronoun. One theory is that it stems from the reflexive pronoun *onore* (己), while another states that the two words are completely unrelated (Ishiyama, 2014). Yet another theory is that the two words are etymologically unrelated, and that the second-person usage of the words comes from the Ryūkyuan (a language spoken mainly in the Okinawa and Kagoshima prefectures) demonstrative pronoun *uli*, or the Korean first-person pronoun *uli*. The first-person usage of *ore* is attributed to a phonological variation of the first-person pronoun *are*. There are cases of dictionaries holding this theory as the correct one and have therefore listed the different meanings under two different characters: 俺 or 己 for first-person usage, and 爾 for second-

person usage, all with the reading of *ore*. It seems to be generally agreed however, that when used as a first-person pronoun it is informal but perfectly acceptable, and when used as a second-person pronoun is very rude and derogatory.

2.7 Previous Research

2.7.1 McCraw & Warnick

In contrast with having many options when it comes to first-person pronouns, such words are often dropped in Japanese, and speakers frequently rely on the context and lexicalisation of other words in the sentence to express self (McCraw, 2010). For example, relying on the context of the sentence, using second-or third-person pronouns instead or simply just giving a one-word answer.

In cases such as this, purposely using a pronoun can add extra emphasis and personal involvement in the statement. McCraw writes,

> *"That is, subject pronouns are expressed "to increase the speaker's stake in what is being said, and as such will be interpreted as either signalling an increased speaker commitment to the information in the utterance, or as adding semantic 'weight' to the verb to which they may be associated""*
>
> *McCraw (2010), p.2*

Therefore, if an L2 learner of Japanese were to use a first-person pronoun in every utterance, it would sound unnatural and even arrogant or conceited. This phenomenon is, according to Warnick (1991), caused by the mother tongue of the speaker. If one's mother tongue (English in the case of Warnick's study) frequently uses the first-person pronoun, the speaker is used to constructing sentences with one. Therefore, when constructing sentences in a new language, the speaker goes by what they are used to and adds the first-person pronoun, even though that might not be strictly necessary. In the case of L2 Japanese learners with English as their first language, a common mistake is to overuse pronouns. This is because English requires the speaker to use pronouns more often than in Japanese, and that habit transfers to the new language. In his study, he looked at the frequency of pronouns used by male speakers of Japanese, both L1 (first language) and L2. The test subjects were all males in their early to mid- 20's, two groups being in different stages of L2 learning and a control group of men with Japanese as their mother tongue. This study showed that although the L2 learners used first-, second- and third- person pronouns more often than the L1 speakers, there was a gradual decrease in usage as the level of Japanese education increased. It was also shown that in cases where a pronoun was not strictly necessary, seventeen out of eighteen times the test subjects opted to refer to the person in the task with words/expressions other than a pronoun. (Warnick, 1991)

2.7.2 Kinsui

There are several ways to sound more masculine/feminine in Japanese apart from pronoun usage, one of which is sentence-final particles. In the case of particles, ending a sentence with *ze* or *zo* is considered more masculine, as seen in the following examples:

"Konna chōshi dewa shiken ni ochiru zo."

You will lose the examination at this pace

"Ore wa matteru ze"

I will be waiting."

Kinsui (2017), p.82, table 5-1

Ending a sentence with the particles *wa* or *no* however, makes the speaker sound more feminine.

"*Kore, dare ga kaita no?"*

Who wrote this?

"Komatta wa. Henna hito ga iru wa."

I'm in trouble. There is a strange person"

Kinsui (2017), p.82, table 5-1

This also ties into the projected image of oneself that is possible to express in Japanese.

This usage of sentence-final particles, together with the different first-person pronouns is a typical aspect of what Kinsui (2017) calls *Role Language*, also known as *Virtual Japanese*. Kinsui explains it thus: *"…role language is defined as a language that "enables the visualization of a particular character image" of the speaker*...", Kinsui (2017) p.41. Meaning that it is a made up or exaggerated way of speaking that goes hand in hand with what type of character that speaks it. In other words, it is not 'natural' Japanese in the sense that is it commonly spoken by a certain group of people, for example, a dialect. There are several character types that usually use role language (or *yakuwarigo*, as it is called in Japanese), for example old men, princesses and foreigners (most commonly Chinese, their speech referred to as *aruyo* language). These characters are usually associated with a typical set of physical features as well as personality traits common for characters who use that type of language. For example, characters using *aruyo* language are always foreigners (because of the incorrect grammar common in this speech pattern) and usually have a moustache, wear traditional Chinese clothing, are somewhat stupid and have an untrustworthy air about them.

The existence of this type of specified language also gives the speaker the power to project themselves as they see fit. For example, if there is a young woman wanting to sound a bit 'tougher' or 'stronger', she could incorporate typically male styles of speech in order to do that. Similarly, if there is a young boy who doesn't really feel like the typically male style is for him and he wants to portray a 'softer' and more 'polite' image, he can use typically female speech.

2.7.3 Finck

A similar study was conducted very recently by Madeleine Finck at Gothenburg University (2018), in which she studied the gender identities of Swedish students of Japanese who have experience living in Japan. She wanted to know the students' views on the different first-person pronouns and if these corresponded to their gender identities. Similarly, the subjects were given a questionnaire, but in this case it was primarily to gather the subject's opinions rather than just finding out which pronoun they themselves use. That was also asked, but less focus was placed on the answers. Subjects were asked which first-person pronoun they would use in the given situation and why. The given answers were not as straightforward as was first assumed, as in later interviews with some of the subjects it emerged that there was more to choosing first-person pronouns than just wanting to sound natural. The issue that many of the subjects faced was choosing a first-person pronoun that suited them and that felt right to use. The male subjects mostly gravitated towards *ore* to more assert their masculinity, as the majority of them found *boku* to be too 'boyish' and 'immature', contrary to Tsujimura (2014), who writes that it is a more neutral word. However, there were a few male subjects who felt that they were not an *ore* person physically, saying that a person who uses *ore* is generally more muscular and tall. Out of the men in this survey only a few used *watashi*, the most neutral first-person pronoun, the others claiming that it was too stiff and unnatural. As with typically male pronouns, the word *atashi* and *atakushi* are considered typically female (Tsujimura 2014), but there were very few female subjects who actually used these words in the questionnaire and subsequent interviews. The most commonly preferred pronoun was *watashi*, and none of the more male pronouns were used. The reason for this, according to Finck, is the underlying issue of equality in Japan and Sweden, where the questionnaire was conducted. The subjects claimed that they did not want to be viewed as 'too boyish' or 'too girly', so then w*atashi* was the only option available. One of the subjects stated that although *atashi* is considered feminine and not negative per sé, the image of femininity in Japan is of frailness and softness. She did not wish to be viewed as weaker or unable to do things for herself, something that became apparent to her after a male friend in Japan took her bag to carry it for her, even though it was not heavy at all. This, coupled with not particularly wanting to sound 'boyish' or 'manly' either, caused most of the women to use the first-person pronoun *watashi* (Finck, 2018). A final reason for their choice, was that it was the word most similar to the Swedish equivalent *jag*. Since Swedish only has one first-person pronoun in the subjective form (Nationalencyklopedin, 2019) as opposed to Japanese, some found this more cumbersome than helpful and therefore used what was the closest equivalent to the Swedish word. Finck's research highlights the issue of image when choosing a preferred personal pronoun, as well as the importance of feeling like the pronoun fits you.

3. Material

In order to answer my questions, I created a questionnaire which asked the participants how they would refer to themselves in different situations. As there are many things that can affect one's choice of pronoun as an L2 learner (age, gender, level of Japanese knowledge, experience in Japan etc.), I focused on students with an upper intermediate knowledge of Japanese. The group of student participants were all in their early 20's and mid-30's, which

also helped minimise the age variable's effect on the results. The subjects participating in the survey were all studying their fifth and final term of undergraduate Japanese at the Gothenburg University Faculty of Arts at the time of the survey.

I based the questions and relationships with the interlocutors in said questions on the table shown in Wang's (2010) report on Chinese speaker's selection of personal terms. As I am merely looking into the words in relation to people, I only used the human relations part of the table.

In addition to the survey I used previous research on the subject of pronoun usage in general and in Japanese specifically as well as previously done studies on the topic.

4. Methodology

In order to see how Swedish L2 learners of Japanese use pronouns, I constructed a translation type questionnaire using Google Survey (see appendix I). The participants were given different conversations set in different circumstances with different people and were asked to translate a given sentence from English to Japanese. Such conversations include;

- When speaking to a teacher
- When speaking to a friend during a lesson
- When speaking to a friend outside of lessons
- When speaking to an employee in a shop
- When speaking to someone older than themselves
- When speaking to someone younger than themselves

In order not to cause a priming effect, there were no multiple-choice questions, the students were asked to fill in their answers themselves as to get the most natural responses. The exercises were constructed in such a way as to warrant the use of a first-person pronoun in the translated sentence in order to produce results for study. Additionally, the English counterparts all contain first-person pronouns in some form or other.

As some of the students will have had experience visiting Japan for longer periods of time and/or living there, there was also a question asking how much time they had spent in Japan. The reasoning for this was to be able to see if there was a difference between students who had been in Japan previously compared to those who had not.

The gender and age of the speaker could also affect the answers given, as there are typically male and female age specific pronouns (for example *atashi* for young females and *boku* or *ore* for young males). As the participants were of a similar age (early 20's to early 30's), my prediction was that the results would be reasonably consistent in that regard.

In their paper concerning native Chinese speaker's choice of personal terms in Japanese, Wang (2010) includes a table with different speakers that the participants could encounter. The interlocutors were first grouped by societal vs. psychological factor, followed by the type of issue that was being discussed. Finally, they were grouped according to where and with whom the conversations took place and the kind of relationship they had with the speaker. In order to clearly see the types of relationships in the questionnaire, I constructed a similar table

to Wang's, seen below, but focusing solely on the human relations. It included types of conversational partners that one is likely to have while speaking Japanese and the types of conversations that the subjects would be answering questions about (see appendix II). Assuming that the subjects are all in their early 20's to mid-30's, the 'similar/same' age ranking of the interlocutors will correspond to that age range. The relationship with the interlocutors was also included, as this can affect the speaker's choice of words.

Table 2, relation to the interlocutor

Speaking partner	Age	Relationship
Shop employee	Similar	Distant
Classmate/friend (during lesson)	Similar/same	Close
Classmate/friend (after lesson)	Similar/same	Close
Teacher	Older	Distant
Stranger	50+ years	Distant
Stranger	10- years	Distant

5. Results

Out of the 12 respondents, eight were men, two were women, one identified as non-binary and one preferred not to say. Although gender groups with only a single member cannot be considered representative, their results have been included in order to give an example of how such L2 learners can use their pronouns. Furthermore, the subjects were all in their early 20's to mid-30's, which made for very consistent results.

Below I have constructed a table to show how many of each gender used each first-person pronoun. See appendix for questionnaire questions.

Pronoun usage per question

F: Female

M: Male

NB: Non-binary

X: Preferred not to say gender

Table 3, pronoun usage per question, separated by gender

Question	**Gender**	*watashi*	*boku*	*ore*	*atashi*	other	none
1	F M NB X	2 5 1	 3 1				
2	F M NB X	1 1	 1				1 7 1
3	F M NB X	1	 3 1				1 4 1
4	F M NB X	1	 3			 1	1 4 1 1
5	F M NB X	2 6 1	 1 1				1
6	F M NB X	1 1 1	 2 1	3	1	2	
7	F M NB X	1 4 1	 2 1				1 2
8	F M NB X	1 1	 1				1 6 1 1

9	F M NB X	2 6 1	2			1	
10	F M NB X	2 6 1	2 1				
11	F M NB X	1 1 1	3 1	4	1		
12	F M NB X	2 2 1	4 1	2			
13	F M NB X	2 5 1	2 1				1
14	F M NB X	2 5 1	2 1				1
15	F M NB X	1 1	1				1 7 1
16	F M NB X	1 4					1 4 1 1
17	F M NB X			1	1		1 7 1 1
18	F M NB X	1 1	2	2			2 3 1
19	F M NB X	1 1 1	5 1	2	1		
20	F M NB X	1 1 1	2 1	3	1		2

21	F M NB X	2 1 1	3 1	1			3
22	F M NB X		1				2 7 1 1
23	F M NB X	2 5 1	1			1	2
24	F M NB X						2 8 1 1

Most used first-person pronouns were:

Watashi: 101 times

Boku: 59 times

Ore: 18 times

Atashi: 5 times

Other: 5 times

None: 99 times

Of the participants, 10 of them had studied in Japan at some point, living there for 6-12 months.

The most commonly used pronoun was *watashi*, being used 101 times out of 188 cases in total where a pronoun was used. The tactic with the second most uses was a lack of first-person pronoun. As explained earlier, there are many cases in Japanese where a pronoun is not necessary or used at all, which was apparent in this questionnaire. There were 99 cases of responses without any first-person pronoun, making it more common/popular than all the other pronouns combined, the latter collectively amounting to 87.

In one of the cases, the subject had used *boku* in every formal situation and *ore* in every informal, only using w*atashi* once, in the question with a waiter in a restaurant (question 9). Although *boku* is also a polite first-person pronoun, he switches to the more gender-neutral word *watashi* when addressing a stranger in a service setting, even though he did not use *watashi* in a setting with an elderly person or a teacher, who usually warrants more respect.

One of the male participants used *watashi* as his chosen pronoun (when a pronoun was used at all) apart from the question concerning the teacher who gives too much homework (question 4). There, he added the suffix *-tachi*, creating *watashitachi*, the plural form of *watashi*. This is most likely because the English translation was *"… she always gives us so much homework!"*, leading him to instead use the plural form to get 'us' in the Japanese translation.

Furthermore, there were only two subjects who used reflexive pronouns, both of them male. For question 6 (about the cake), both subjects chose to use the pronoun *jibun* (自分) which means 'myself, oneself'. It can be used as a first-person pronoun as 'I, me', and even as a second-person pronoun (you) in some dialects (Jisho, 23/12-19). This was probably chosen to give more context to the situation. The original English sentence was "It's a cake that I made", but the participants most likely chose to change it in the Japanese translation to something that would be closer to 'It's a cake that I made *myself*!" in English. Although it was not explicitly stated that the translation had to show who had made the cake, the explanation of the situation clearly stated that the participants were the creators of the cake.

Interestingly, the non-binary participant used *boku* consistently as their preferred pronoun (when used at all) and was the only participant to use a demonstrative pronoun as a first-person pronoun. For questions 9 (the waiter and the curry) and 23 (the queue number) they use the word *kochi* and *kochira* respectively, which both mean 'over here' or 'this way'. These types of words can also be used to refer to oneself or other people and is a very polite way of doing so.

6. Discussion/conclusion

Watashi was the most used pronoun (when one was used), followed by *boku* and *ore*. This could be because most of the participants to the survey were men, and so two typically male pronouns were heavily used. Most of the participants kept to *watashi* in formal situations, as it is the most polite, and used a different first-person pronoun when speaking to friends. Here we see the awareness of the L2 learners and their concept of politeness, as they appropriately use more polite pronouns in fitting situations and use more informal ones with close friends. There was no significant difference between those who had spent and longer period in Japan and those who had not, as both groups used formal/informal pronouns similarly. Time in Japan may not directly affect how one uses the first-person pronoun, but it may affect which one is used. There was no question in the current questionnaire concerning this, but having personally heard from two of the male participants about how their usage changed, I know it to be true. One of the participants, upon learning about the difference in first-person pronouns, switched from *watashi,* it being the first word these particular students learned, to *boku*, thinking that it suited him as a young man better. Later, he changed it back to *watashi*, motivating his choice with 'it is more gender neutral', and that feeling more natural to him. After making more Japanese friends, he was then told by them that *watashi* sounded too formal and that *boku* would suit his personality better. Following this, the participant has been using *watashi* in formal situations and *boku* in more casual conversation, which is consistent with the data collected from all male participants of the survey. One of the women used *watashi* in formal situations and *atashi* in informal, being the only participant to use *atashi*. *Atashi* is less formal than *watashi* but still polite, much like the typically male pronoun *boku*. Despite that, only one of the participants used it. Which begs the question, why are there so few L2 learners who use *atashi*? Because of the nature of the questionnaire being only single sentence answers, it was not possible to discern whether the participants would be prone to style switching. For that, the conversations would have to be longer, but since that was not the focus of this paper the length of sentences was kept to a minimum. Considering the

participants' knowledge of correct use of formality in different situations, it is not unlikely that they would be switching speech styles in conversation.

There were no face threatening acts as such, but there was a case where one of the male participants used *ore* almost exclusively, except in one case. Using such an informal and casual first-person pronoun in a situation that is more polite can be seen as an FTA against the interlocutor and in a way challenging their status, but this was not the case with this subject. He coupled the use of *ore* with short form in casual situations, and long form in more formal ones, therefore mixing the two and even switching styles is fully plausible.

As this survey was focused more on which pronouns that were used rather than why, I cannot speculate a specific reason. However, if we were to look at Finck's (2018) report researching just this, her report claims that this is because female Swedish L2 learners don't want the weak connotation that comes with *atashi*. Femininity is considered 'soft' and 'weak' in Japan, therefore the more feminine *atashi* also comes with those characteristics. This could be a reason why is it not so commonly used, and most female L2 learners tend to only use *watashi*. This brings us to our next point, the use of *boku* by a non-binary person. Being non-binary (for those of you who do not know) means being neither man nor woman, but something in between or neither. When it comes to choosing a first-person pronoun, the only word that is truly neutral is *watashi*. In this case however, they chose to use *boku*. This is more neutral and polite than *ore* but still has mostly male users. In Japan, *boku* specifically has mostly young male users, but young girls can use it too, as for example seen in the popular school idol group Love Live's lyrics (2010, 2013, 2015, 2019 etc.). One possible reason for their choice might then have been that considering their age (early 20's) they chose a word that both young men and women could use and would sound natural. Similarly, throughout his song アイネクライネ (*ainekuraine*, 2014) popular Japanese singer Kenshi Yonezu uses *atashi* to refer to himself. The singer has stated that he is *"…captivated by people who use atashi and pronounce it beautifully"* (@hachi_enbot, 2017). Kenshi is well-known for his sometimes-androgynous style and has previously worn high heels in his music video for his song *Lemon* (2018). Needless to say, he is not the 'typical' Japanese man in that regard and is an excellent example of the variations possible with one's choice of first-person pronoun.

There are many variations to be made concerning first-person pronouns in Japanese, which can be extra tricky for L2 learners to grasp fully. Politeness levels as well as closeness to the interlocutor are key, and gender can also affect the choice. The participants of this study consistently used more formal pronouns in formal situations, and less formal ones in informal situations, which is also seen in native speakers of Japanese. Having spent and extended period of time in Japan or not does not seem to affect the choice, but rather what the students has learned in the classroom and whether the speaker has close Japanese friends who can assess their choice or not. As to the motivation behind the choice I cannot say for sure, as I did not want to include such a question to alert the participants of the questionnaire's true intention. Further research would be required in order to attain such information, which is beyond the scope of this study.

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Appendix I

Questionnaire questions

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSetube0_vhPJkWuYZWqiqmSWHiTy9-Rt0ZB6dPv7ogMlDWHOg/viewform?usp=sf_link

Questionnaire - translation

This questionnaire is focused on how students of Japanese as a second language translate certain sentences from English to Japanese. You will be given 24 situations in which you will respond in Japanese. This is not about answering 'correctly', just answer like you normally would if you found yourself in these situations. The questionnaire will take around 15 minutes.

Gender

- Woman
- Man
- Non-binary
- Genderfluid
- None of the above
- Prefer not to say

Age

Have you lived/spent an extended period of time in Japan?

- Yes, 0-6 months
- Yes, 6-12 months
- Yes, 1-2 years
- Yes, more than two years
- No

Please answer the following questions in Japanese. If there is anything concerning the question you wish to comment or add on, please do so in the 'comment' following said question. Your answers to the questions need to be in Japanese, but the comments can be either Swedish or English.

1. Your teacher has found your textbook that you left behind last lesson and she asks the class whose it is. The response would be "Ah that's mine", how would you say that in Japanese?

2. You think you have forgotten your phone in a changing room while trying clothes so you go back to the shop to ask if they've found it. How would you say "Excuse me, I think I forgot my phone here"?

3. You see a little boy walking home from school, but is struggling to reach up to a wall where an older student has put their gloves. How would you say "I will get them down for you"?

4. You and a friend are doing homework at a café and your friend asks you how it's going. How would you say "My teacher is the worst, she always gives us so much homework"?

5. You bump in to an elderly lady in the street and she drops her shopping bag. How would you say "I am sorry, that was my fault"?

6. A friend is over at your house and he sees your attempt at a cake sitting on the table. They then ask you what it is. How would you say "It's a cake that I made!"?

7. The teacher asks the class who would like to present next. How would you say "I want to present next"?

8. You are sitting in class checking each other's tests. When you get it back you see that you got 98/100. How would you say "This is the best result I have ever gotten!"?

9. You are at a restaurant. The waiter brings out the food and is asking who's the curry is. How would you say "The curry is mine"`?

10. The teacher has brought your corrected essays but he asks about one without a name. You don't remember writing your name on the test, so it might be yours. How would you say "That might be my test, I think I forgot to write my name"?

11. A friend challenges you to a race to the convenience store. You take on the challenge. How would you say, "The winner is going to be me!"?

12. You are walking in the park when a child comes up to you and asks if you have dropped an acorn. How would you say " No that's not mine"?

13. During the lesson, you are trying to explain to another exchange student the concept of Midsummer. How would you say "In my country we have a holiday called Midsummer where we dance around a pole"?

14. The teacher is deciding when to set the final test. They are asking everyone if it should be next week or the week after. How would you say "For me, next week would be best"?

15. You are out shopping and your little sister has gotten lost. You go to the information desk to ask for help. How would you say "Excuse me, I've lost my little sister. Could you call her here for me?"?

16. You need a letter of recommendation and are asking the teacher to write one for you. How would you say "Could you write a letter of recommendation for me, please?"? (letter of recommendation: 推薦状、すいせんじょう)

17. You and a friend are buying ice-cream. She asks you what flavour you're getting. How would you say "I'm getting the strawberry flavour"?

18. You are chatting to some people during the class when someone mentions a previous exchange student, who is a friend of yours. How would you say "I know them, they're my friend!" ?

19. You are playing board games with the children you are babysitting and the older sister is blaming you for their loss. How would you say "It's not my fault"?

20. You are out with a couple of friend and are about to leave the café when one of your friends points out a contact lens case on the table next to you. They ask if it belongs to any of you and you check your bag to see that it is in fact your case. How would you say "Oh it's mine, thanks for noticing"?

21. You have been given time in class to discuss club activities. Your classmate has said she is going to join the football club. How would you say"That sounds fun! I'm going to join the volleyball club"?

22. You are babysitting a small child when they suddenly start to cry. How would you say "I will go and get your teddybear okay?"?

23. You are in a shop waiting for your number to be called. It's eventually your turn and the employee calls out for number 95. How would you say "Number 95 is me"?

24. You see an old man get on the bus. You offer him your seat. How would you say "Please, have my seat"?

Appendix II

Questionnaire situations sheet

Question	Interlocutor	Gender	Age	Relationship	Location	Situation	Speech act
1	Teacher	Female	Older	Distant	School	Forgotten book	Representative
7	Teacher	Not specified	Older	Distant	School	Presentation	Representative
10	Teacher	Male	Older	Distant	School	Name on test	Representative
14	Teacher	Not specified	Older	Distant	School	Test date	Representative
16	Teacher	Not specified	Older	Distant	School	Letter or recommendation	Directive
2	Employee	Not specified	Similar	Distant	Shop	Forgotten phone	Representative/expressive
15	Employee	Not specified	Older	Distant	Shopping centre	Lost sister	Directive
23	Employee	Not specified	Older	Distant	Shop	Number in queue	Representative
9	Waiter	Male	Similar/older	Distant	Restaurant	Curry	Representative
5	Old lady	Female	Older	Distant	Street	Bumped into her	Expressive
24	Old man	Male	Older	Distant	Bus	Bus seat	Directive
3	Child	Male	Younger	Distant	Street	Help with gloves	Representative
12	Small child	Not specified	Younger	Distant	Park	Acorn	Representative
19	Child	Female	Younger	Distant	Home	Cheating	Representative
22	Small child	Not specified	Younger	Distant	Home	Teddy bear	Representative/commissive
8	Classmate	Not specified	Similar/same	Close/distant	School	Test result	Representative
18	Classmate	Not specified/male	Similar/same	Close/distant	School	Midsummer	Representative

		&female					
21	Classmate	Female	Similar/ same	Close/distant	School	Club	Representative
4	Friend	Not specified	Similar/ same	Close	Café	Complaining about teacher	Verdictive
6	Friend	Male	Similar/ same	Close	Home	Cake	Representative
11	Friend	Not specified	Similar/ same	Close	Street	Race	Commissive
17	Friend	Female	Similar/ same	Close	Shopping centre/ café	Ice cream	Representative
20	Friend	Not specified	Similar/ same	Close	Café	Forgotten case	Representative/commissive