

# Japanese (*w*)*atashi/ore/boku* 'I': They're not just pronouns\*

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## *Abstract*

*Japanese first-person “pronouns” in conversation are found not to be good clausal arguments and not to be used just for reference. They do not form a unitary category, but rather exhibit three separate construction-specific uses, each with its own set of grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, and prosodic properties, thus supporting nonmodular representations which can capture the way such form–function amalgams are used by Japanese speakers. These constructions are associated with different degrees of fixedness, supporting panchronic views of grammar, which propose that grammar is in a constant state of “structuration”. Our findings underscore the importance of examining the form–function relationship in everyday conversation.*

*Keywords:* pronoun; first person singular; Japanese; grammar; conversation; grammaticization.

## **1. Introduction**

When compared to pronouns in many other languages, Japanese “pronouns” are unusual, a fact which has been noted in a number of earlier studies (e.g., Hinds 1971, 1975; Kuroda 1965; Miller 1967; Shibatani 1990; Suzuki 1976, 1978; Wetzel 1994). In this article we will focus on the use of first-person forms, showing that “referring to first person” is only a small part of the work that such forms do in everyday conversational standard Japanese.

While there are a range of forms associated with first-person reference (see section 2.1), we will focus on the three which show up with any frequency in our conversational data: (*w*)*atashi*, *ore*, and *boku*. We will use the label *ISG* to cover these three forms. As is well known, these are nearly categorically gender linked: (*w*)*atashi* is primarily used by

females and *ore* and *boku* by males. We will show, however, that they are functionally very similar.

In the typological literature, Japanese 1SG forms have been assumed to belong to a unitary category of first-person pronouns, which are primarily associated with referential functions. Most of the constructed examples with first-person reference in the linguistic literature typically give examples with *watashi* (sometimes *boku*, and rarely *ore*), followed by a particle (typically *wa*). Here is one example:<sup>1</sup>

- (1) *watashi wa honkai no rijidesu*  
 1SG this:group of trustee  
 ‘I am a trustee of this organization.’ (Shibatani 1990: 268)

However, our examination of our conversational database of the actual occurrence and use of 1SG in Japanese conversations yields surprising results, with interesting implications for how the nature of grammar should be understood.

Our central (related) findings are:

- i. 1SG is not a good clausal argument
- ii. 1SG is not used just for reference
- iii. 1SG is not a unitary category, but exhibits multiple separate construction-specific uses, each with its own grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, prosodic, and diachronic properties

This last finding thus nicely supports nonmodular types of representations such as those proposed by Langacker (1987, 1991) and Fillmore, Kay, and O’Connor (1988), which capture the way such form–function amalgams appear to be stored, retrieved, and used by speakers of Japanese. It further supports panchronic views of grammar such as those of Bybee (1998, 2001a, b), Hopper (1987, 1988, 1998), and Langacker (1987, 1991), which propose that grammar is in a constant state of “structuration” (Hopper 1987, Hopper and Traugott 1993), as can be observed in everyday interaction. Our findings thus also strongly underscore the importance of considering the form–function relationship from the point of view of data drawn from actual everyday interactions.

## 2. What has been said about Japanese “pronouns”?

Studies of “pronouns” in Japanese have noted a number of respects in which they are unusual when viewed from a cross-linguistic perspective; some have even argued that it is a mistake to consider Japanese to have a category of “pronoun” at all.

### 2.1. *Many different forms*

It is well known that one respect in which Japanese “pronouns” are unusual, at least from the perspective of Western languages, is that there are a large number of forms for each person, which appear to be correlated with shades of speech level, gender, dialectal differences, and so on (Hirose 2000; Kondo 1990; Kuroda 1965; Martin 1988; Miller 1967; Shibatani 1990; Suzuki 1976, 1978; Wetzel 1994). Martin (1988: 1076–1077), for instance, includes *watakushi*, *watashi*, *atashi*, *atakushi*, *watai*, *wate*, *wai*, *atai*, *ate*, *watchi*, *ashi*, *asshi*, *washi*, *wasshi*, *boku*, *ore*, *ora*, *uchi*, *jibun*, *ono*, and *onore* as first-person forms.

### 2.2. *Sociocultural factors*

As just noted, another respect in which Japanese “pronouns” have been claimed to be unusual cross-linguistically — as discussed at some length in Jones (to appear), Kondo (1990), Martin (1988), Miller (1967), and Suzuki (1976, 1978) — is that reference to persons in Japanese is subject to sociocultural factors to a greater extent than in many other languages. These researchers note that the Japanese “pronouns” are characterized by being both more numerous and more socioculturally specialized than is the case for many other languages that have been described. Morita (2001) addresses this issue by showing how bilingual children deal with some of these sociocultural differences between Japanese and English pronouns and address terms. Previous research in Japanese grammar, then, is consistent in pointing out that forms referring to person have a number of sociocultural properties which might be unexpected from a typological point of view.

### 2.3. *Etymologically and syntactically nouns?*

Suzuki (1978), following Sakuma (1959), notes that the Japanese “pronouns” are relatively recent, which contrasts sharply with the situation in Indo-European. Furthermore, etymologically, most of the forms used to refer to person come from nouns (Shibatani 1990: 372).

Synchronically, Hashimoto (1948), Kuroda (1965), and Wetzel (1994) argue that there are no morphosyntactic features that distinguish personal pronouns from ordinary nouns, and that Japanese therefore has no category of personal pronoun in the sense of Indo-European languages. Hinds (1975) argues against this position, showing that Kuroda’s formal arguments are based on properties of English, and do not hold for Japanese. Hinds concludes (1971: 154) that Japanese “personal pronouns are distinguished from nouns both morphologically and syntactically”,

and that “a class of personal pronouns must be established”. In a later paper, Hinds maintains this position, but acknowledges (1975: 132) that

the overall distribution of Japanese personal pronouns and, say, English personal pronouns is markedly distinct. In short, the occurrence of Japanese personal pronouns is much more restricted than the English case. This is a result of various semantic properties of Japanese personal pronouns, which are absent in the English parallels.

Suzuki (1978) argues that classification of these Japanese forms as personal pronouns is the result of “blindly accepting analyses derived from the studies of other languages”, concluding that “such classification is . . . wrong, since it is incongruent with the linguistic facts in Japanese”. Suzuki, like Hinds, observes (1978: 92) that these forms are not used very much, suggesting that “there is a definite tendency to avoid their use as often as possible and to carry on conversation using some other words to designate speaker and addressee”. Suzuki goes on (1978: 93) to argue that the so-called pronouns should be

classified, together with kinship terms, position terms, etc., into the categories of all words used by the speaker with reference to himself and to the addressee.

Hirose (2000) suggests that the lack of a morpheme for “public self” in Japanese (parallel to the English *I*) accounts for the lack of a “system of personal pronouns corresponding directly to that of English”.

In this article, we do not take a stand on the debate over the categorial status of “pronoun” in Japanese. Rather we will focus on what most of the earlier studies have not done, to give a close analysis of the form and use of 1SG in a substantial corpus of conversational Japanese. We will reveal a number features of 1SG found in everyday conversation that have not been fully explored and that do not seem to have parallels in many other well-studied languages.

### 3. Database

Our database consists of 21 spontaneous informal conversations, involving two, three, or four people, mostly in Standard Japanese (there are a few speakers speaking other dialects), totaling two hours of talk, approximately 175 pages of transcripts (see the Appendix for transcription and glossing symbols), and approximately 3700 clauses and 9500 intonation units (defined roughly as “a stretch of speech uttered under a single coherent intonation contour” [Du Bois et al. 1993: 47]).<sup>2</sup> Examples in this

Table 1. *Numbers of each type of 1SG in the data*

1SG form	N
<i>atashi</i>	84
<i>watashi</i>	18
<i>ore</i>	58
<i>boku</i>	11
Total	171

article are given based on intonation units (with each line representing an intonation unit) only when it is relevant, which will be specified.

Table 1 presents the total numbers for these three 1SG forms from our database, with *atashi* and *watashi* distinguished.

One fact that emerges clearly from these data is that Japanese interactants actually use *atashi* much more than *watashi* (84 times out of 102) and *ore* much more than *boku* (58 times out of 69), though *watashi* and *boku* are the forms given in linguistics literature and language textbooks.<sup>3,4</sup>

#### 4. Findings

Our findings suggest some other respects in which 1SG is unusual from a cross-linguistic perspective.

##### 4.1. Length

To the points already noted, we add that 1SG in Japanese is relatively long. Many languages' frequent first-person pronouns are typically one syllable, whereas (*w*)*atashi* is three, and *ore* and *boku* are each two syllables long.

##### 4.2. Frequency

In addition, confirming Hinds' (1975) and Suzuki's (1978) observations, our contemporary conversational data show that 1SG is highly infrequent: we found fewer than one instance per page of transcript, or approximately one in every 22 clauses (or one in every 56 intonation units).

##### 4.3. Prosodic separation

Our data show that 58 percent of the time (i.e., 100 out of 171 instances), when it does occur, 1SG is found in a separate intonation unit from the predicate (or from the head of the phrase if it is a genitive), as shown in (2). (Here, each line represents an intonation unit.)

(2) W: atashi wa ne<sup>5</sup>  
 1SG WA FP

S: e?  
 ‘Huh?’

W: daidokoro de ne  
 kitchen at FP  
 puroguramu no koto o  
 programming of thing O  
 kangae nagara  
 think while  
 gohan o tsukutteru Shinkun ga ichiban ii na  
 meal O marking Shin GA best good FP

‘(I) like Shin (you) best, (who) is making a meal while thinking about programming.’

In the first line of example (2), 1SG is followed by the postpositional particle *wa* (often characterized as a topic marker [Kuno 1973]) and a “floor-holding” final particle *ne* (Cook 1992);<sup>6</sup> we may translate this phrase as “Listen, as for me”. As can be seen, this 1SG is in a separate intonation unit from its predicate *ii* ‘good’. This is rather unusual compared with other languages which have been studied from the perspective of prosodic units (see, e.g., Helasvuo 2001 for Finnish; Kärkkäinen 1996 and Scheibman 2002 for English; Tao 1996 for Mandarin).

#### 4.4. 1SG does not make a very good “argument”

We would like to argue that a further noteworthy characteristic of Japanese 1SG is that it often does not make a good clausal argument, unlike pronouns in many languages. First, as just noted, it often occurs in a separate intonation unit from any conceivable predicate in our data.

Second, 1SG is hardly ever (only 11 percent of the time) marked with the so-called subject particle *ga*. And it is never marked by the so-called direct object particle *o*.<sup>7</sup> In fact, more than one-third of all occurrences of 1SG are marked with no postpositional particle at all, as shown in Table 2. K. Thompson (1993) reports similar distributions of particles for 1SG.

Finally, there is a third, and very serious, problem with considering 1SG as an “argument” of its predicate: as we will illustrate below with the examples from everyday conversation, it is often very difficult to identify a single predicate that 1SG “goes with”.

#### 4.5. 1SG is often not used just for “reference”

Finally, another striking finding regarding the use of 1SG in conversation is that it is often employed for more than simply first-person reference. The

Table 2. *Postpositional particles accompanying 1SG in our data*

	<i>n</i>	%
Ø	60	35
<i>mo</i> ‘also’	24	14
<i>wa</i> WA	27	16
<i>no</i> ‘of’	20	12
<i>ga</i> GA	19	11
<i>to</i> ‘with/and’	7	4
<i>yori</i> ‘than’	5	3
Other	9	5
Total	171	100

rest of this article will be devoted to a discussion of what this “more” is; for now we note in support of this point that, in more than two-thirds of its uses (approximately 70 percent), 1SG is not semantically needed to clarify the referent.

Example (2) provides a good illustration: W is expressing her feelings, and it is well known that in Japanese only the speaker him/herself can talk about his/her feelings (Kuroda 1973; Iwasaki 1993; and references cited there). What this means is that even without the 1SG form *atashi* the first-person referent would be clear, which strongly suggests that *atashi* may not just be doing referential work.

In the next section we outline the three primary functions we have found for 1SG in the conversational data.

## 5. Three major functions for 1SG

### 5.1. 1SG motivated by referential considerations

In about 50 percent of its uses, 1SG can be seen to be motivated by referential considerations. The following examples illustrate this point:

- (3) *atashi wa Amerika da shi*  
 1SG WA America COP and  
 ‘I am (in) the United States.’

Here 1SG is semantically required to convey who is in America; without it, the utterance would mean only that “some entity has some relation with America”, as that is the extent of the semantic specification which the predicate *Amerika da* evokes.

In (4), K asks A if she found out from Nanno that their common friend has been paralyzed. A’s 1SG supplies the answer to K’s question.

- (4) K: *Nanno kara kiita tte kanji na no ne?*  
 Nanno from heard QT like COP NOM FP  
 ‘Did you, like, hear it from Nanno?’
- A: *watashi wa ne*  
 1SG WA FP  
 ‘(Yes) I (did).’
- (5) H: *dare*  
 who  
 ‘Who?’
- O: *ore da*  
 1SG COP  
 ‘(It) is me.’

In (5), 1SG (this time, *ore*) has to be expressed for two reasons: (i) as in (4), it directly answers the question posed in the preceding turn; (ii) 1SG is the predicate; without it, the utterance *da* would be uninterpretable.

Consider the next two examples:

- (6) *atashi to mizutaki to no dotchi ga suki na no*  
 1SG and MIZUTAKI and of which GA like COP FP  
 ‘Which do (you) like between me and *mizutaki* [name of a dish]?’
- (7) *atashi yori shigoto o totta tte koto da yo ne*  
 1SG than work O took QT NOM COP FP FP  
 ‘(It) is that (he) gave priority to his work rather than to me.’

Examples (6) and (7) both illustrate 1SG being motivated by referential considerations by being in an oblique postpositional phrase (*atashi to* ‘me and’ in [6], and *atashi yori* ‘than me’ in [7]); without it, the utterance would not convey the intended meaning.

Here is a similar example with *ore*:

- (8) U: *yaruki de haitte kiteru yatsu bakkari jan*  
 motivation with enter coming guy only COP  
 ‘(It)’s only guys with motivation (who)’ve joined (the judo club),’
- ore igai wa*  
 1SG except WA  
 ‘except for me.’

The use of *ore* in (8) is similarly motivated by referential considerations: the utterance would not mean the same without *ore igai wa* ‘except for me’.

- (9) *atashi ga tsukutta gohan tabe nai de*  
 1SG GA make meal eat not FP  
 ‘Don’t eat the meal I made.’

In (9), during a meal, the speaker jokingly responds to her husband, who has just been teasing her. The referent is clear; both the wife and the husband obviously know that the speaker made the meal. The use of 1SG here seems to be motivated by fact that the speaker has been the butt of the teasing, and she is now joking that if her husband does not watch what he says, he may not be served by her. Although the referent is perfectly clear, without the *atashi* the utterance would not have the joking punch it has of making it clear that she is the one who is feeding him now. (This meaning may also be contributed partly by the “exhaustive listing” use of *ga* [Kuno 1973; Ono et al. 2000].)

Next, consider (10) and (11):

- (10) *boku no daigaku shusshin no sono shita no kotachi wa*  
 1SG of college graduate of that junior of people WA  
*motto soto ni dete mo ii n janai kana*  
 more outside in go:out also good NOM COP:not Q  
*to omou n da yo na*  
 QT think NOM COP FP FP

‘(I) think wouldn’t (it) be good if those junior people (who are) graduates of my college would go outside (their faction or circle) more.’

Here, without *boku no* the utterance would not refer to “my college”, and the NP in the first line without *boku no* would just refer to “those junior people (who are) graduates of a college (i.e., those junior people with a college degree)”.

- (11) *atashi no hanashi shita yo ne*  
 1SG of story did FP FP  
 ‘I told you (my) story, didn’t I?’

In (11), the referent is clear; without any modifier the NP *hanashi* ‘story’ would be interpreted as just identifiable, something like “the/that story”. As it is a story which the speaker has and tells, by inference it is her story even without having *atashi*. We consider it motivated by referential considerations on the assumption that the speaker probably wants to specify that it was “her story” rather than just “the/that story”.

What examples (3)–(11) show, then, is a range of ways in which 1SG can be motivated by referential considerations. In these examples, 1SG can certainly be seen as referring to first person; at the same time, it is clear that, in some of these instances, it is doing more. For example, as we noted, in (9) and (11), the referential work is in a sense superfluous, since in their contexts, all the participants know who is being referred to.

It should be pointed out that, while the general tendency is for 1SG to be unaccompanied by any postpositional particle (see Table 2), most (90 percent; 71 out of 79 cases) of these referentially motivated uses of 1SG are accompanied by a postpositional particle. Interestingly, fully half of these 1SGs are clear cases of obliques; they are marked with particles with a clear semantic meaning (*ni* ‘to’, *to* ‘with/and’, *yori* ‘than’, and *no* ‘of’). Further, examples marked with *wa* and *mo*, which account for a quarter of the referentially motivated uses, have a clear contrastive or additive (“also”) meaning. The other quarter is marked with *ga*, and, interestingly, they are clear cases of what Kuno (1973) calls “exhaustive listing”, that is, *X (and only X) . . .*, or *It is X that . . .*. In other words, these referentially motivated uses of 1SG are either obliques or have marked pragmatic functions (e.g., contrast, additive, or “exhaustive listing”). We also note that when it is motivated by referential considerations, 1SG tends to occur in a separate intonation unit from the predicate (or from the head of the phrase if it is a genitive). So even though the uses motivated by referential considerations, especially being marked with particles, may first appear rather ordinary, they are in fact quite different from the types of examples which we are accustomed to seeing in the linguistic literature, such as example (1), where 1SG is typically portrayed as a core argument and as not carrying any of these marked pragmatic and semantic functions.<sup>8</sup>

As noted, these instances of 1SG motivated by referential considerations comprise about half of the occurrences of 1SG. We will not discuss these further in this article, however, since our more striking findings concern the occurrences of 1SG that are motivated by two other pragmatic considerations.

## 5.2. 1SG not motivated by referential considerations

In the other half of the occurrences of 1SG in our conversational data, its use seems to be motivated by discourse-pragmatic factors other than referential considerations. These uses fall into two types, which are associated with yet different sets of features.

### 5.2.1. “Emotive”

In about six percent of its uses (10 out of 171 cases), 1SG seems to be serving what we call an “emotive” function.<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, we found no instances of *ore* or *boku* in this function. Leaving aside *ore* and *boku*, and considering just (*w*)*atashi*, the frequency of the emotive function is about ten percent (10 out of 102 cases). Here are three examples:

- (12) *sugoi warukute watashi*  
 terrible bad 1SG  
 ‘I (feel) terrible.’

- (13) *moo*    *sapuraizu*    *no*    *aji*    *o*    *shimeten*    *no*    *atashi*  
 already    surprise    of    taste    O    occupying    FP    1SG  
 ‘I (know how fun) a surprise party is.’  
 [More literally: ‘I have already tasted of surprise (parties).’]
- (14) *atashi*    *suki*  
 1SG    like  
 ‘I like (it).’

The following features characterize this emotive function:

- i. The predicate expresses the emotion/feeling of the speaker.
- ii. None of the 1SG tokens for this function are marked with particles.
- iii. Ninety percent (9 out of 10 cases) of the time, 1SG occurs in the same intonation unit as the predicate. This is unusual for 1SG; for the other two functions, 1SG is separated from the predicate (or from the head of the phrase if it is a genitive) 61 percent of the time (96 out of 157 instances).
- iv. Sixty percent of the time (6 out of 10 cases), 1SG occurs after the predicate. This is also unusual for 1SG; for the other two functions, 1SG appears before the predicate 96 percent of the time (150 out of 157 cases).
- v. These utterances would be perfectly acceptable in their contexts without 1SG.
- vi. This appears to be a grammaticized use, similar to the post-predicate elements in conversational Japanese discussed in Ono and Suzuki (1992).
- vii. As just noted, this usage appears to be confined to (*w*)*atashi*; we have found no occurrences of *ore* and *boku* in this emotive function. We take this to be evidence that the emotive function may be a gender-linked use, since (*w*)*atashi* is strongly correlated with female speakers.
- viii. This usage appears to be more tied to *watashi* (the more conservative form), as opposed to *atashi*, than are the other two usages. Forty percent (4 out of 10 cases) of the emotive use involve *watashi*, which is a much higher frequency than for the other two uses (15 percent; 13 out of 89 instances).
- ix. Finally, what we have observed in this section is not an isolated phenomenon. In his impressive survey of the grammaticization of final particles in various dialects of Japanese, Fujiwara (1982, 1985, 1986) gives a number of examples in which “first- and second-person pronouns” in final position like those in (12) and (13) have become (or are becoming) “sentence final particles”. Consider the following:<sup>10</sup>

- (15) *a gomen watashii*  
 oh sorry 1SG  
 ‘Oh, I (am) sorry.’ (Fukui Station; Fujiwara 1986: 379)
- (16) *hoshii wai*  
 want 1SG  
 ‘I want (it).’ (Kunisaki Peninsula; Fujiwara 1986: 383)

These examples are just like the examples of 1SG which we have identified as having the emotive use. The predicates express the feeling of the speaker, and the 1SG forms appear at the end. It should also be noted that they were produced by female speakers. Yamazaki (2001) also discusses cases in which a second-person form *omae* in a conflict discourse behaves like a final particle. So our emotive use may be part of a phenomenon of “pronouns” becoming final particles in Japanese, itself part of a still larger phenomenon in which final particles are constantly being created from various lexical sources (Fujiwara 1982, 1985, 1986; Suzuki 1999).

### 5.2.2. “Frame setting”

The majority of the occurrences of 1SG (43 percent; 72 out of 167 cases) motivated by non-referential considerations have what we call “frame-setting” uses.<sup>11</sup> In these, 1SG provides a subjective framework for, or stance towards, the rest of the utterance, as suggested by Li and Thompson’s (1976) and Chafe’s (1976) definition of “topic”.<sup>12</sup>

Here we present some examples of the frame-setting use, with descriptive comments. At the end of the discussion of the examples, we will suggest what we think they show about this use of 1SG.

- (17) *atashi dakara kakkoi to omo-*  
 1SG so good:looking QT thoug-  
*otokonoko no supootsu de kakkoi to omotta no wa*  
 boy of sports in good:looking QT thought NOM WA  
*juudoo to kendoo*  
 judo and kendo

‘So I thought- cool, what (I) thought (were) cool in boys’ sports (are) judo and kendo.’

In (17), we see evidence that the speaker is having trouble with this utterance: *omou* ‘think’ is broken off after *omo-* in line 1, and, in line 2, she recycles and repairs the utterance in the first line. We also note that the predicate for 1SG is difficult to identify; should we consider the 1SG + predicate to be as shown in (18) or as in (19)?

- (18) *atashi omotta*  
 ‘I thought.’

- (19) *atashi juudoo to kendoo*  
 ‘(for) me, (it’s) judo and kendo.’

Let us consider another example:

- (20) K: *de atashi mo [dakara kono nyuusu] wa [senshuu]*  
 and 1SG also [so this news] WA [last:week]  
*da yo*  
 COP FP

‘and also (for) me this news is (from) last week.’

- A: [X *bikkuri shichatta*] [un]  
 [surprised did:NONVOL] [mhm]  
 ‘(I) was surprised, mhm’

- K: *kiita no*  
 heard NOM  
 ‘hearing (it).’

In this example, again, the predicate for 1SG is difficult to identify; is the 1SG + predicate that shown in (21) or that in (22)?

- (21) *atashi senshuu da yo*  
 ‘(for) me, (it) is last week.’  
 (22) *atashi kiita no*  
 ‘I heard.’

The next example, presented in intonation units, involves *ore*:

- (23) K: *ore ne mukashi ne*  
 1SG FP long:ago FP  
*ano*  
 uh  
*sugoku yotte ne*  
 awfully drunk FP

‘I long ago, uh, really got awfully drunk and . . .’

- E: *un*  
 ‘mhm’

- K: *Shibuya no Ichimarukyuu no shita de ne*  
 Shibuya of Ichimarukyuu of bottom at FP  
*ano*  
 uh

*sooiu ojisantachi to ne*  
 that:type uncles with FP

‘at (the) bottom of (the) Ichimarukyuu (building) in Shibuya  
 uh, with those (homeless) guys . . .’

- E:  $\left[ \begin{array}{l} un \\ \text{'mhm'} \end{array} \right]$   
 K:  $\left[ \begin{array}{l} zutto \\ \text{long:time} \end{array} \right]$  *ne* FP  
*niji* *Ka*  
 2 A.M. Or  
*sanji* *Gurai* *made* *nondeta* *no* *kana*  
 3 A.M. About until drinking NOM Q

‘(I) was drinking (for a) long time until 2 or 3 A.M.’

Once again, we see evidence of speaker trouble in the form of a hesitation (*ano* ‘uh’) and the “floor-holding” *ne* (see below for further discussion of *ne*) in K’s initial utterance. In addition, K is not sure how late he was drinking, so he ends his turn with a question form. Even more telling, however, is the fact that K produces the whole turn intonation unit by intonation unit, with the other speaker offering “continuer” backchannels (Schegloff 1982). That is, what actually seems to be happening is that K, using hesitation and the “floor-holding” *ne*, formulates his utterances as he speaks, under the frame initiated by 1SG, while E is collaborating with him in the production of his turn. And again, we can ask whether the 1SG + predicate is as in (24) or as in (25):

- (24) *ore yotte ne*  
 ‘I got drunk.’  
 (25) *ore nondeta no kana*  
 ‘was I drinking?’

Here is a similar example involving female speakers. Again it is presented based on intonation units. When this speaker refers to *Aichan*, she is addressing the addressee by name.

- (26) K: *atashi sa nanka*  
 1SG FP something  
*ne*  
 FP  
*kyoo Aichan ni han<sup>-13</sup>*  
 today Ai to spea-  
*kyo- kuru kara*  
 toda- come because  
*doo shiyoo kana*  
 how do:INTENT Q  
*to omotteta n da kedo [ne]*  
 QT was:thinking NOM COP but FP

‘I, um, see, today spea- to Ai (you), since (you) will come toda-, what (I) should do, (I) was wondering but . . .’

A: [un] un  
‘mhm mhm’

K: *ano*

uh

*Yosuke kara kiita no yo*

Yosuke from heard NOM FP

‘Uh, (I) heard (it) from Yosuke.’

A: *un un*  
‘mhm mhm’

[Rough translation: ‘I um was wondering, since (you) were coming today, (if I should) speak to Ai (you) (about it), (I was wondering) what (I) should do. But (I) heard (the news) from Yosuke.’]

In this example, we again see broken-off utterances, suggesting speaker trouble. And, similarly to (23), K, hesitating and using the “floor-holding” *ne*, formulates her utterances as she speaks under the frame initiated by 1SG, while A is collaborating with her in the production of her turn. Thus, in both these examples other interactants appear to be oriented to the frame-setting function of 1SG as well: the speaker produces the whole turn intonation unit by intonation unit, with the other speaker offering “continuer” backchannels. And once again, the predicate is difficult to identify; is it as in (27), or as in (28)?

(27) *atashi omotteta n da kedo ne*  
‘I was wondering but.’

(28) *atashi kiita no yo*  
‘I heard.’

Here is another example with *ore*:

(29) U: *ano . . . ore hora handobu tsuttara yappa*  
uh 1SG see handball:club say:if surely  
*umai daro tte*  
skillful SUPPOSE QT  
*minna ni omowareru daroo* [na tte  
everyone by be:thought SUPPOSE FP QT  
M: [un]  
‘mhm’

U: *u:iu jishin* ga  
say confidence GA



- iii. After some struggle the speaker often ends up producing an utterance which could be called “well formed” but just as often, she/he does not. We have seen in (26) an example in which the first candidate predicate is replaced with another one. We have also observed in our database that 1SG is sometimes abandoned directly after it has been uttered; sometimes it is followed by a predicate of which it is not an argument, as further illustrated in (31):

- (31) [Discussing a celebrity person floating in water in a spectacular manner in a TV show]

O: *atashi nanka to- besutoten* [*ka nanka no nan-*]  
 1SG something best:10 or something of  
 ‘I um BEST 10 or something’

T: [*besutoten*]  
 best:10

[*nan da un*]  
 what COP mhm

‘BEST 10 what, mhm.’

O: [*ko yatteta ne*] *mizu n naka de ne*  
 this was:doing FP water of inside in FP  
 ‘(She) was doing this, in the water.’

This example illustrates 1SG being uttered and then abandoned for a different formulation; the speaker seems to find that the 1SG frame is not appropriate and starts over again.

- iv. Though the speaker does not know exactly how his/her utterance will come out, she or he very frequently uses 1SG together with forms like the following to get the utterance started:<sup>15</sup>

- *wa* ‘topic’
- *mo* ‘also’
- *ne* FP
- *de* ‘and’
- *dakara* ‘so’
- *nanka* ‘something’

Such devices are often associated with “frame-setting” and “floor-holding” functions in Japanese conversation (see, e.g., Cook 1992; Mori 1999; Tanaka 2000), and, interestingly, we have found that 1SGs in conjunction with these particles and conjunctions as well as adverbials are associated with various degrees of fixedness. That is, we find that many 1SGs co-occur with a limited set of adverbials, conjunctions, and particles. Further, combinations of 1SG and these

forms typically occur in the same intonation unit, suggesting that they may be stored, retrieved, and used as units (see Erman and Warren 2000 for a persuasive discussion of the pervasiveness of [semi-] fixed phrases in [English] conversation). We thus hypothesize that, due to their frequent co-occurrence in actual talk, these phrases containing 1SG have become (semi-)fixed.<sup>16</sup> The following are from our database; we have found multiple instances of many of these phrases. (Parentheses indicate that we found utterances both with and without the parenthesized elements. For ease of presentation, here we use *atashi*, the much more common form, to represent both *atashi* and *watashi*. So *atashi* in [32] may be either *atashi* or *watashi* in its actual instantiation.):

- (32) *atashi (sa) nanka ne* 'I um, see'  
*atashi nanka* 'I um'  
*atashi (mo) dakara* 'I (also) so'  
*dakara atashi* 'so I'  
*de atashi walmo dakara* 'and I (also) so'  
*de atashi (walmo)* 'and I (also)'  
*honde atashi mo* 'and I also'  
*atashi walmo ne* 'I (also), see'  
*atashi nanka ne chotto* 'I um, see, a little'  
*demo n chotto atashi mo* 'but um a little I also'  
*atashi sa chotto* 'I a little'  
*atashi wa jitsuwa* 'I actually'  
*atashi yappari* 'I after all'  
*yappari atashi* 'after all I'  
*atashi tashika hora* 'I surely, see'  
*datte atashi (mo)* 'but I (also)'  
*iya atashi* 'but I'  
*sorede sa atashi sa* 'and I'  
*moo atashi wa moo* 'really I really'  
*atashi mo hontoni sa dakara sa nanka sa moo*  
 'I also really so um really'  
*ore (wa) nanka* 'I um'  
*nanka ore wa* 'um I'  
*ore wa salne* 'I, see'  
*de ore wa* 'and I'  
*sorede ore* 'and I'  
*ja ore wa ja* 'then I then'  
*demo ore wa* 'but I'  
*ore wa datte* 'I, but'  
*datte ore betsuni* 'but I (not) particularly'  
*jissai ore mo* 'actually I also'

*ore mo tashika* ‘I also surely’  
*mata ore mo* ‘again I also’  
*ano ore hora* ‘uh I, see’  
*yappari ne ore wa* ‘after all, see, I’  
*de ne boku wa* ‘and, see, I’  
*iya honto boku mo* ‘but really I also’

- v. In this respect, we suggest that in the frame-setting function of 1SG the speaker’s *stance* or *viewpoint* initiates the utterance; the production of the utterance thus crucially involves *subjectivity* (see also Benveniste 1971; Iwasaki 1993; Scheibman 2001, 2002).
- vi. Another indication of the frame-setting function is that 1SG is often found with expressions which set up frames such as time, place, domain phrases (e.g., *in boys’ sports* [17], *long ago* [23], and *in Japanese* [30]).
- vii. As shown in examples in this section, this frame-setting function is well adapted to the clause-chaining property of Japanese grammar (e.g., Hasegawa 1996; Iwasaki 1993; Ohori 1992; Ono 1990). That is, the speaker uses 1SG in a frame-setting function at the outset, and then adds several clauses, each one chained to the next.

Other interactants appear to be oriented to the frame-setting function of 1SG: they collaborate with the speaker by offering “continuer” backchannels (Schegloff 1982) during the production of the speaker’s turn in the frame set up by 1SG.

We submit that this set of properties would not be predicted from a predicate-centered view of clausal organization, where the predicates are assumed to take the primary role in the formation of an utterance, and where pronouns prototypically function as arguments. The conversational data show that these frame-setting uses of 1SG may be grammaticized expressions of subjectivity not directly connected with a single predicate.

## 6. Implications and conclusions

### 6.1. *1SG is not a unitary category*

We have seen that uses of 1SG exhibit three distinct functions: they may be motivated by referential considerations, they may serve an “emotive” function, and they may serve a “frame-setting” function. These functions are associated with different sets of disparate features (intonation, use/non-use of particle, word order, predicate type, semantics/pragmatics, discourse function, and grammaticization).

We suggest that these loose amalgams (or networks) of structural and functional features, which are used for different purposes in human interaction, can be thought of as distinct “constructions” (Bybee 1998,

2000b; Croft 2001; Ellis 2002; Fillmore 1989; Langacker 1987). So the tokens of what we called the “referentially motivated” function of 1SG strongly tend to be accompanied by a nominal particle, and are either obliques or have marked pragmatic functions (contrast, additive, or “exhaustive listing”). They strongly tend to occur before the predicate, and, in fact, as we noted, are often intonationally separate from the predicate or head of the phrase.

In the “emotive” function, with the predicate expressing the emotion/feeling of the speaker, tokens of 1SG tend to occur after the predicate and to be grammaticized uses, as with many post-predicate elements in conversational Japanese. They are not marked with any particles, and serve almost no referential function, as the utterance would be quite appropriate without them. They strongly tend to be expressed in the same intonation unit as the predicate. Finally, “emotive” tokens are found only with (*w*)*atashi*, suggesting that this may be a gender-linked function. In fact, compared with the other two functions, emotive uses are more likely to involve the more conservative form *watashi*.

In the “frame-setting” function, we suggest that 1SG, strongly tending to occur before the predicate, provides a subjective framework for, or stance towards, the rest of the utterance. Many of these 1SGs co-occur with a limited set of “frame-setting” and/or “floor-holding” conjunctions, particles, and adverbials in the same intonation unit, which in turn tend to become (semi-)fixed phrases. Tokens of 1SG in the “frame-setting” function strongly tend to be intonationally separate from the predicate or head of the phrase and in fact to be associated with multiple predicates. After 1SG, speakers are often found having trouble formulating the rest of what they want to say. 1SG seems to be used for expressing subjectivity, not just specifying the referents of clausal arguments; in most cases 1SG is not needed to clarify the referent.

## 6.2. *1SG as a discourse-pragmatic marker*

We have shown that 1SG has prominent discourse-pragmatic functions, as pronouns in other languages have been claimed to have as well. However, most of the discussion in the literature to date has centered around the referent-tracking function of pronouns (see, e.g., Clancy 1980; Fox 1987, 1996; Givón 1983, 1984, 1990); what we aim to call attention to here is 1SG performing specific emotive and frame-setting functions which, to our knowledge, have not been discussed in the literature.<sup>17, 18</sup>

## 6.3. *The constructed data fail to reflect the realities of the use of 1SG*

Almost without exception, illustrative constructed examples with a first-person referent in both the linguistics and pedagogical literature

include *watashi* or *boku* together with a postpositional particle as an argument of a predicate. But in actual conversation, we find:

- i. 1SG is rare to begin with
- ii. *atashi* is much more frequent than *watashi*
- iii. *ore* is much more frequent than *boku*
- iv. 1SG most often occurs without any particle
  - when there is one, it is very rarely a “case” particle
- v. 1SG often occurs with no identifiable single predicate
- vi. 1SG is often found in a fixed phrase, as shown in (32), expressing subjectivity, but not a clausal argument.

The pragmatic uses of 1SG that we are discussing here have essentially not previously been recognized,<sup>19</sup> but these pragmatic uses constitute half of the occurrences in actual everyday language use. This means that the assumptions made for 1SG based on constructed examples will be vulnerable.

We suggest that only a close examination of naturally occurring talk provides us with the kinds of facts necessary to construct a realistic account of the form, function, and mental representation of 1SG for Japanese speakers.

Our conclusion is that data from everyday interaction among Japanese speakers shows that 1SG is not a unitary category, as implied by the label, imported from studies of Indo-European languages, of *first-person pronoun*. Rather, 1SG is best viewed as a set of three distinct constructions, each with its own grammatical, semantic, pragmatic, prosodic, and diachronic properties. These properties, which characterize the three uses of 1SG, belong to what are often considered as distinct components in grammar. Obviously, in order to properly model our findings we need non-modular types of representations such as those proposed by Langacker (1987, 1991) and Fillmore Kay, and O'Connor (1988), which capture the way such form-function amalgams appear to be stored, retrieved, and used by speakers of Japanese. Our findings further support panchronic views of grammar such as those of Bybee (1998, 2001a, 2001b), Hopper (1987, 1988, 1998), and Langacker (1987, 1991), which propose that grammar is in a constant state of “structuration” (Hopper 1987; Hopper and Traugott 1993), as can be observed in everyday interaction. Our findings also strongly underscore the importance of considering the form–function relationship from the point of view of data drawn from actual everyday interactions.

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**Appendix: Transcription and glossing symbols**

-	broken-off utterance
[]	overlapped utterance
X	uncertain hearing
<Q Q>	quoted utterance
COP	copula
FP	final particle
INTENT	intention marker
NOM	nominalizer
NONVOL	nonvolitional marker
Q	question marker
QT	quotative marker
SUPPOSE	supposition marker

**Notes**

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1. The transcription and morpheme divisions for this example have been modified slightly to make them consistent with our conventions. The glosses are ours.
  2. For more discussion of intonation units, see Chafe (1987, 1993, 1994), Du Bois et al. (1993), and Schuetze-Coburn et al. (1992).
  3. (*W*)*atashi*, the female forms, are more frequent than *ore* and *boku*, the male forms, as seen in Table 1. This may be due to several factors. One obvious factor is that there is more female-only conversation than male-only conversation in our database. Other possible factors include different distributions of turns and different uses of ISG between the two genders.
  4. It should be noted that some figures given in the rest of the article do not add up to the figures given here. This is because some examples in our data cannot be included in the counts. For example, instances of ISG which are used predicatively are exempt from the counts for the use or the non-use of postpositional particles for ISGs since they cannot occur with postpositions.
  5. The postpositional particles *wa*, *ga*, and *o* are often glossed in the literature as “topic”, “subject/nominative”, and “(direct) object/accusative” respectively. We are glossing them as simply WA, GA, and O to avoid the functional implications of these glosses, which may not be justified for the actual use of Japanese. (See also note 7.)
  6. See below for more discussion of the co-occurrence of these particles with ISG.
  7. But see Ono et al. (2000) and Fujii and Ono (2000) for evidence that *ga* and *o* actually function more like pragmatic particles than “case” particles in spoken Japanese.
  8. It is intriguing to note in this connection that Jones (to appear), based on naturally occurring conversations (which include some of the same data as used in the present study), shows that the overt use of so-called first-person pronouns in referring to first person is much more frequent in interactions involving conflict than in interactions not involving conflict. We can hypothesize that conflict interactions may evoke more “pronouns” because there is more need to implement some of the marked pragmatic functions noted above (e.g., contrast and “exhaustive listing”).
  9. Similar examples are discussed in Shibatani (1990: 368) and Ono and Suzuki (1992).

10. The transliterations, the glosses, and the translations of these examples are ours.
11. In her pioneering research on “first-person subject” in Japanese conversation, K. Thompson (1993: 84–88, 124–125) describes similar uses of 1SG with such functions as “attention-seeker”, “segment marker”, and “delay marker”.
12. For further discussion of stance and subjectivity, see Benveniste (1971), Biber and Finegan (1989), Field (1997), Goodwin and Goodwin (1987), Iwasaki (1993), Kärkkäinen (to appear), Ochs (1996), and Scheibman (2001, 2002).
13. We assume that K is about to say a form of the verb *hanasu* ‘speak’ when she cuts off. Our glossing and translation reflect this assumption.
14. We are taking this broken-off utterance to be the beginning of *minna* ‘all’.
15. K. Thompson (1993: 77, 118–119, 129–131) also finds some of these forms co-occurring with 1SG in her data.
16. See, e.g., Bybee and Hopper (2001) on the effect of frequency in language use on the storage and access of linguistic forms.
17. An interesting question is whether forms used for other persons besides 1SG can be used in the emotive or frame-setting functions in Japanese. This would be a worthy topic for future study; indeed, Fujiwara (1982, 1985, 1986), Mayes and Ono (1991), Ono and Suzuki (1992), K. Thompson (1993), and Yamazaki (2001) discuss other forms whose uses are similar to and/or related to those discussed in this article.
18. See also Tao (1996: chapter 8) for a discussion of the very different considerations that motivate the use of 1SG in Mandarin conversation.
19. There are some exceptions; see Shibatani (1990: 368) and Ono and Suzuki (1992), where at least the emotive use is recognized, and K. Thompson (1993), whose examples show that she recognizes the frame-setting use. In addition, as we noted above, some of the examples given in Fujiwara (1986) of “first- and second-person pronouns” becoming “sentence final particles” are also entirely compatible with our emotive use.

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