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Usage of Self-Referential Expressions by LGBT Japanese Speakers

Language is one of the most meaningful and easily identifiable ways to express social identity. It is particularly essential to self-expression and confidence for members of the LGBT community. The process of choosing what words best describe oneself, although difficult, is vital to LGBT individuals because having language to accurately explain one's feelings is validating and places that person within a larger community. This process is especially complex in Japanese-speaking LGBT communities, as Japanese is context-dependent and contains countless loan words from other languages, creating a large repertoire of terminology to choose from. Rather than confining themselves to rigid categories like English speakers often do, LGBT speakers of Japanese interpret self-referential expressions based on their unique experiences with gender and sexuality, constantly re-defining them to fit their desired method of expression. Definitions of terminology therefore cannot be easily created, as there are often endless individual understandings of the same word. For the purposes of this research, self-referential expressions are defined as words or phrases that speakers use to refer to and present their gender and/or sexual orientation in speech. In Japanese, this includes identifying terminology (e.g. terms in the LGBT acronym) and first-person pronouns.

Before discussing self-referential expressions, it is important to understand the culture surrounding sexuality and gender in Japan. Unlike in Western societies where they are viewed as separate aspects of identity, gender and sexuality in Japan are traditionally intertwined, with

gender superseding sexual orientation. Since sexuality is not seen as a key source of identity, beliefs about sexuality are usually connected to Japanese gender norms (Valentine 97). For example, male homosexuals and transgender women used to be confused because gay men are stereotyped as presenting femininely (Lunsing and Maree 95). Language used to describe LGBT identities in Japan has also changed significantly over time. In earlier centuries, native words like *dōseiai* ('same-sex love') existed to describe non-traditional gender and sexual expression such as cross-dressing and same-sex relationships, but only in men (Fotache 28). As Western ideas of gender and sexuality were introduced, more words came into use and the meanings of existing terms expanded to include non-males, though most were still derogatory. With this came an influx of primarily English loan words, some maintaining their original meanings and some shifting in meaning due to adoption by the Japanese LGBT community. Despite this, traditional ideas linger in both how outsiders label members of the LGBT community and how LGBT individuals understand and describe their own identities.

Gay men are the most widely researched subgroup of the LGBT community in Japan, as they are in most male-dominant societies. The terms used to describe male homosexuality have the longest history, with terms like *okama* ('pot') dating back to the Edo period. It is used by heterosexuals as a derogatory term against feminine gay men, but some gay men reclaim this as a positive term to describe their sexual identity (Lunsing and Maree 92). However, this is mostly limited to confidently feminine gay men who also use feminine speech forms, while most masculine gay men are uncomfortable being considered an *okama* (99). *Gei*, a loan word from English, also has varying interpretations. It was used initially to refer to gay male sex workers but is now used as a positive label. Much like *okama*, though, some gay men see this term as hyper-feminine or connected to political and social movements, and therefore choose not to use it

as a self-descriptor (Valentine 101). Other terms exist to describe male homosexuality like *homo* (from English) or *dōseiaisha* (‘same-sex lover’), but they are rarely reclaimed due to their respective derogatory and medical associations and are used instead to describe gay men by heterosexuals.

While masculine gay men make mostly unremarkable pronoun choices compared to their gender, feminine gay men often struggle with first-person pronouns, especially during childhood. Many describe feeling uncomfortable with *boku*, a generally masculine pronoun, but fearing being bullied for using the more feminine *watashi*, making them feel forced into using male pronouns. Among these men, it is not uncommon for them to start using the feminine pronouns *watashi*, *atashi*, and *uchi* in adulthood alongside a cruder version of women’s speech called *onee kotoba* (“older sister speech”) as they gain confidence (Lunsing and Maree 95). The use of *onee kotoba* and the casual pronouns *atashi* and *uchi* specifically conveys a vulgar form of femininity unique to gay men that defies the politeness expected from feminine individuals in Japan. First-person pronouns for gay men therefore appear to relate to expression of masculinity or femininity with masculine gay men using masculine pronouns and feminine gay men using pronouns associated with untraditional femininity. However, further research is necessary to understand how other social factors such as context impact their pronoun usage.

Unlike with gay men, few researchers have delved into lesbian speech, but they have found significant variation in the use of self-referential expressions. Terms that describe lesbian identity are almost entirely foreign, as lesbians were barely discussed in traditional Japanese society. *Rezubian* and its clipped version *rezu* are the most widely known, but they have controversial connotations because *rezubian* is used to describe Japanese lesbian pornography designed for male entertainment. As a result, most lesbians avoid using these terms for

themselves to not hypersexualize their identity to non-lesbians (Chalmers 37). However, *bian*, also taken from ‘lesbian’, does not have these associations and is used by many as a modern alternative to *rezu* (Fotache 32). Others use *daiku*, loaned from ‘dyke’ in English, as a positive self-descriptor. It is a particularly interesting example of how the meanings of borrowed words can drastically change; in the West, ‘lesbian’ has neutral connotations while ‘dyke’ is a slur, but in Japan, those long-standing connotations do not exist, so the unique history of Japan’s lesbian community has influenced the adoption of new meanings (Chalmers 38). There is also a native counterpart to the derogatory term *okama* for lesbians: *onabe* (‘pan’) (Valentine 103). It never found the same widespread use as *okama*, but it is sometimes reclaimed by masculine lesbians.

Lesbians have especially complex experiences with first-person pronouns and have been observed changing them situationally. Femininity and the spectrum of gender is a difficult part of their process choosing pronouns. For example, those who use *watashi* are often feminine but struggle with fitting into a gender binary, while others who identify as *onabes* use *jibun* because they struggle with their masculine lesbian identity and prefer a neutral pronoun (Abe, “Lesbian Bar Talk” 43-44). As with most LGBT individuals, lesbians’ usage of first-person pronouns changes over time. One woman describes using *boku* as a child because of her older brothers and being scolded by adults, so as an act of resistance she avoided pronouns altogether and started self-referencing using her name (Lunsing and Maree 101). Pronoun usage is also situational and depends on factors such as emotion or who the listener is. For example, feminine lesbians might use masculine pronouns like *boku* to convey power when confronting someone. Abe also observed one individual using the strongly masculine *ore* in a heated exchange with a customer (“Lesbian Bar Talk” 45). These examples demonstrate the complexity of first-person pronouns for those who do not align with sexuality and gender norms.

Self-referencing by transgender individuals involves a unique combination of Japanese ideas and Western terminology. *Toransujendā* or just TG is the preferred term for most transgender people in Japan along with its variants *toransu*, *toransu ūman*, and *toransu man*. However, unlike in American culture, these words imply physically transitioning or having gender identity disorder (GID), indicating that being transgender has not been detached from its medical associations in Japan (Fotache 34). As a result, *toransujendā* is almost exclusively used by MtF and FtM individuals, but some of them instead identify as just ‘male’ or ‘female’ and not part of a separate category (Abe, “Performativity of Gender in Speech” 39). The terms *nyū hafū*, *onabe*, and *onī* (derived from *onīsan* ‘older brother’) are derogatory terms reclaimed by some transgender individuals. *Onabe* and *onī* are used towards trans men, but the latter is more frequently reclaimed because *onabe* has a more negative history and implies lesbian sexuality, demonstrating the conflation of gender and sexuality in Japan (Fukuda 67). None of these terms include non-binary identities, displaying the restrictive nature of *toransujendā* in LGBT Japanese communities.

Transgender individuals in Japan tend to use first-person pronouns that align with their gender identity. Abe found that trans women tend to use *watashi* and *watakushi* the most while trans men typically prefer *boku* and *ore* (“Performativity of Gender in Speech” 49). Consciously using these pronouns alongside gendered speech (e.g. polite and indirect forms for women or assertive sentence-final particles for men) can help transgender people supplement their appearance to ‘pass’ to cisgender people. However, not every person feels comfortable with standard first-person pronouns. One FtM content creator expressed giving up on masculine pronouns as a child because he knew he didn’t pass as a male, so he eventually began using *uchi*, a casual feminine pronoun, to reject the traditional feminine identity society forced onto him. He

even created his own pronoun, *ashi* (derived from *watashi*), to represent his unique gender experience (Fukuda 70). Based on this example, it is clear that even if linguistic patterns appear across a community, language use is still highly personalized.

Almost no research has been done on people who do not identify as lesbian, gay, or transgender. Non-binary identities have been essentially invisible in Japan until recently when the term *X-jendā* came into use online by those who are not cisgender but not MtF or FtM either. Instead, they identify with the neutral third gender ‘X’, a concept unique to Japan. These individuals further refer to themselves as MtX/FtX or one of the native terms *ryōsei* (‘both sexes’), *chūsei* (‘androgynous;’ lit. ‘middle sex’), or *muisei* (‘no sex’), indicating that *X-jendā* acts as an umbrella term much like ‘non-binary’ in English (Dale 7). Japanese bisexuals and pansexuals have no in-depth studies covering their self-referencing experiences and were only briefly mentioned in one article used in this research. It is likely that bisexuals use the borrowed terms *baisekushuaru* and *bai* and pansexuals use *pansekushuaru* rather than their formal native counterparts *ryōseiaisha* (‘lover of both sexes’) and *zenseiaisha* (‘lover of all sexes’), but due to lack of research, this is not known definitively (Fotache 33). Additional identities that we now recognize in the West such as queer and intersex are largely left out of research on the LGBT community possibly due to of a lack of visibility or understanding in Japanese culture.

Self-referential expressions are an incredibly complex and constantly evolving part of the Japanese language, especially in the LGBT community. The usage of terminology and first-person pronouns is personal and meaningful, even more so than in heterosexual and cisgender individuals. Choosing how to self-reference and identify is a conscious, life-long process where LGBT individuals consider various expressions and decide what best conveys or categorizes their gender and/or sexual orientation. Other factors such as self-confidence, context, formality

of a situation, familiarity, and the presence of peer pressure can impact a person's use of these expressions. This makes it almost impossible to define words like *okama* or *onabe* in a concise manner, as the vast amount of variation must be accounted for. Despite this, patterns appear across different subgroups of the LGBT community, such as how first-person pronoun usage tends to align with expression of masculinity or femininity and not necessarily gender identity. Additionally, most terms for LGBT identity in Japan are former or current derogatory expressions reclaimed by some (but not all) members of the community, demonstrating how meaning changes over time and is highly individualized and controversial.

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