

## Masculinity, race and national identity: representations of non-Japanese men's speech in contemporary Japanese novels

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### Abstract

*Language ideologies have been of central concern to the study of Japanese language, gender and society. Many scholars have researched ideologies surrounding representations of Japanese women's speech; however, investigations of representations of men's speech have been limited. This study contributes to filling this gap through the analysis of non-Japanese male characters found in contemporary Japanese novels. The article reveals that authors assign strongly masculine expressions to their East Asian characters much more frequently than to their white characters and argues that these differentiated representations of non-Japanese male characters' speech reproduce and are influenced by ideologies concerning cultural nationalism, racial determinism, class and sexuality. Linguistic data are presented that both unsettle the constructed image of Asian males as asexual beings and question the historically assumed relationship between gendered language and authenticity.*

KEYWORDS: LANGUAGE IDEOLOGIES, CULTURAL NATIONALISM, MASCULINITY, RACE,  
MEDIA REPRESENTATION

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## Introduction

Men express masculinity in diverse ways, one of which includes language. Scholars have differed on how they describe the specific linguistic forms in Japanese that have associations with masculinity, so-called *otoko kotoba* or *dansei-go* ‘men’s language’. For example, Jorden (1983:124) remarks, ‘Masculine language is a variety that communicates assertiveness, strength, toughness and vigor’ Shibamoto Smith (2004:119) observes stereotypically masculine (as well as feminine) forms of language may imply ‘a prospectively successful heterosexual attractiveness/attraction’. Nakamura (2010:126) notes that masculine forms signal a specific kind of masculinity characterised by ‘physicality, simplicity, violence and aggressiveness’. Scholarship on masculine language observes that Japanese men do not make use of this linguistic resource frequently in their interactions and that when they do, they do so strategically in specific contexts (SturtzSreetharan 2004a, 2004b; Itakura 2015). In contrast, producers of Japanese visual or print media often assign Japanese male characters stereotypical masculine language (Kinsui 2003, 2010; Shibamoto Smith 2004; SturtzSreetharan 2017a, 2017b; Saito this issue).

Research on non-Japanese<sup>1</sup> individuals’ use of Japanese men’s language in the media is scarce. A study by Suzuki (2018) is an exception which observes that novelists rarely assign hypermasculine expressions to non-Japanese characters. This study is a follow-up to Suzuki (2018) and takes a closer look at the relationship between masculine language and race in representations of non-Japanese characters in Japanese novels.

Ideologies regarding various identity factors such as nationality, race, class and sexuality contribute to the representations of non-Japanese characters. At the same time, these representations reproduce and reinforce such ideologies. I argue that certain conventional concepts with regard to language, gender, race and sexuality need to be questioned. For example, people in Japan often associate women and their language with tradition and continuity (Morris-Suzuki 1998; Inoue 2006; Nakamura 2007a). In the sphere of sexuality, Asian males have been described and represented as asexual or feminised in the West (Fung 2005; Louie 2015). This study problematises both the association between women and tradition and the dominant images of Asian men. Data reveal that language associated with masculinity is tied to authenticity and that some Japanese novelists depict East Asian male characters as manly and sexy.

Compared to the abundant literature on how women in Japan speak and are expected to speak (e.g. Miller 2004; Inoue 2006; Nakamura 2007a; Okamoto and Shibamoto Smith 2008), research on (heterosexual) men’s speech has been limited.<sup>2</sup> However, more recent scholars have started

paying attention to men and their speech in Japan. Kinsui (2003, 2010) describes how *otoko kotoba* ‘men’s language’ evolved from *shosei kotoba* ‘students’ language’. Focusing on specific contexts, Saito (2013) looks at how male superiors use linguistic strategies with their male subordinates in the workplace, while Itakura (2015) examines how a college-age man uses masculine expressions in a conversation with a younger woman. Portrayals of men’s speech have also been a topic of inquiry: Nakamura (2007b) distinguishes the old-style, stereotypical masculine language from the new-style (lighter and softer) men’s language, and Occhi, SturtzSreetharan and Shibamoto-Smith (2010) explore the relationship between Japanese men and regional dialect as depicted on television. Dahlberg-Dodd (2018) examines diachronic changes across forty years of anime in the use of first-person pronouns as markers of protagonist masculinity.

The seminal work of Cindi SturtzSreetharan (2004a, 2004b), one of the most prolific scholars on Japanese men’s speech, establishes that, like *onna kotoba* ‘women’s language’, *otoko kotoba* ‘men’s language’ is a construct.<sup>3</sup> Men do not necessarily use it very often in their interactions, and when they do, they use it for specific purposes in certain contexts. More recently, SturtzSreetharan (2017a) reports that the usage of rough and vulgar masculine expressions on a reality television show helped provide a counter-narrative to the national movement towards a softer masculinity. In other recent work, SturtzSreetharan (2017b) looks at how the use of masculine linguistic features in tandem with the regional Osaka dialect signals intimacy and informality, helping a filmmaker to create an audible masculinity and fatherhood.

Other literature has focused on how non-Japanese individuals (both female and male) speak Japanese. Ohta (1993) and Fukuda (2014) investigate conversational interactions and metapragmatic comments. Miller (1995), Hiramoto (2010), Yano (2010), Suzuki (2015), Fukuda (2017) and Nakamura (this issue) look into how visual media such as anime, television shows and commercials depict non-Japanese individuals. Yet, only a handful of studies have examined representations of non-Japanese individuals in Japanese print media (Yoda 2011; Kinsui 2014; Suzuki 2015, 2018). The majority of these studies overlook the issue of gender, although studies examining non-Japanese characters’ speech in translation do often investigate how Japanese translations of media originally published in other languages handle gender (Inoue 2003; Shibamoto Smith 2005; Hiramoto 2009; Nakamura 2013, this issue). In drawing from novels for adult consumption and exploring the relationship between gender and non-Japanese individuals’ fictional speech in Japanese, this study aims to fill these gaps. In addition, the study provides a new perspective to this body of scholarship by analysing the data in terms of the fictional characters’ race, comparing the

language used by white characters with the language used by East Asian characters.

## Data and terminology

The data are drawn from the language used by 46 non-Japanese characters in 23 Japanese novels published between 1993 and 2018 (see Suzuki 2019 for a complete list of titles). Although my original intention was to examine gendered language of characters from diverse backgrounds, I eventually confined my investigation to whites and East Asians (characters from Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, North Korea and South Korea), because characters from other backgrounds who speak Japanese appear infrequently in Japanese novels. Since I am interested in how novelists depict the Japanese language spoken by non-Japanese characters, I excluded characters who speak other languages. I also excluded resident Chinese or Korean characters – that is, those whom novelists describe as having lived in Japan for generations – as my focus is the representation of foreignness in Japanese media.

Certain features of masculine language are closely associated with a kind of vulgar, coarse and (hetero-)sexual masculinity while others suggest a ‘soft’ masculinity. For example, between the first-person personal pronouns *boku* and *ore*, *ore* signifies toughness, vulgarity and heterosexual desirability (Kinsui 2003; Shibamoto Smith 2004; Nakamura 2007b, 2010), while *boku* connotes youth, dependence and sentimentality (Saito 2002:225). Miyazaki (2004:265) reports that in her ethnographic interviews, many seventh-grade students regarded boys who used *ore* as stronger and more powerful than those who used other forms. At the same time, students associated the use of *boku* with weaker boys or ‘mama’s boys’.

My analysis focuses on those expressions that suggest a stronger, coarser and more sexual masculinity in order to explore which ideologies influence novelists to allocate these markedly hypermasculine expressions to certain characters and not others. Drawing from Okamoto and Sato (1992) and Itakura (2015), I examine the linguistic features specified below. If a character in a novel uses one or more of these features, I regard that as an *otoko kotoba* usage.

- (1) Strongly masculine expressions
  - a. Pronouns *ore* and *omae*
  - b. Final particles *zo*, *ze*, *ka yo*, *na* (for eliciting agreement) and *ka* (in plain interrogatives)
  - c. Copula *da* in declaratives and interrogatives
  - d. Plain imperative forms of a verb (e.g. *koi* ‘come’ and *ike* ‘go’)
  - e. Phonological form *ee* (e.g. *takee* instead of *takai* and *samee* instead of *samui*)
  - f. Lexical forms associated with vulgarity (e.g. *kuu* ‘eat’ instead of the conventional *taberu*, and *ketsu* ‘ass’)

Finally, in my analysis, I use the term ‘race’ in the sense described by Tamanoi (2000:250): ‘(1) “race” and “culture/history” cannot be separated; (2) hence, the rigid distinction between “(biological) race” and “(cultural) ethnicity” could be misleading; and (3) there is no objective reality behind any of these concepts, as they are all imagined.’

### Masculine language and non-Japanese characters

Studies of the language used by non-Japanese characters in fiction have focused on linguistic features that deviate from standard Japanese and suggest nonfluency. Kinsui (2014) examines *aru yo kotoba* ‘*aru yo* language’, the Japanese expressions assigned to Chinese characters in Japanese fiction dating from 1921 till 2008. *Aru yo kotoba* includes the use of the verb *aru* ‘exist’ following a verb or adjective (e.g. *yasui aru* ‘cheap’) and the use of *yoroshi(i)* ‘good’ after a verb (e.g. *kau yoroshi* ‘you should buy’) (Kinsui 2014:3). Yoda (2011) characterises the Japanese speech of non-Japanese characters as *katakoto nihongo* ‘broken Japanese’. *Katakoto nihongo* includes the non-conventional use of the particle *ne*, the non-conventional pronunciation of vowels and the incorporation of the character’s native language. Both *aru yo kotoba* and *katakoto nihongo* are commonly considered incorrect and imperfect Japanese. As the purpose of Kinsui and Yoda’s work is to find linguistic stereotypes they call *yakuwari-go* ‘role language’ in fiction, much of their data come from comic books and animated films. As Kinsui (2003) observes, linguistic stereotypes figure most prominently in comic books and children’s literature. Creators of these genres often construct simplistic (and not nuanced) characters by utilising exaggerations and stereotypes. Kinsui (2014:180) notes that creators of comic books published since 2000 tend not to use *aru yo kotoba*.

While *aru yo kotoba* and *katakoto nihongo* occur in my data, they do not figure prominently. Many of the characters speak fluently, with rich vocabulary and without any non-standard grammatical or pronunciation usages. This may be because my data consist of contemporary novels; since novels are designed for adult consumption, most novelists do not rely on simplistic and predictable stereotypes. However, novelists do exhibit prejudices about non-Japanese individuals when it comes to masculine language, as I will demonstrate.

In the novels I examined, there are 15 white and 31 East Asian characters. Tables 1–3 show the use and non-use of masculine Japanese per character; the frequency of use varied widely within each character. Table 1 shows that novelists allocate masculine language to East Asian characters much more frequently than to white characters (51.6% and 13.3% respectively). However, as mentioned, a few characters do speak *katakoto nihongo*, or

**Table 1:** Comparison of white and East Asian characters – all characters

	Masculine language used	Masculine language not used	Total
White characters	2 (13.3%)	13 (86.7%)	15
East Asian characters	16 (51.6%)	15 (48.4%)	31

**Table 2:** Comparison of white and East Asian characters – fluent characters

	Masculine language used	Masculine language not used	Total
White characters	2 (18.2%)	9 (81.8%)	11
East Asian characters	16 (72.7%)	6 (27.3%)	22

**Table 3:** Comparison of white and East Asian characters – central characters

	Masculine language used	Masculine language not used	Total
White characters	0 (0%)	5 (100%)	5
East Asian characters	10 (100%)	0 (0%)	10

'broken' Japanese as per linguistic stereotypes. If we remove these non-fluent speakers and focus solely on characters with fluent Japanese, as shown in Table 2, the percentage of masculine language users is still quite low for white characters (18.2%), but it sharply increases for East Asian characters (72.7%). Further limiting the data to those characters who are more central in the story (i.e. those who speak more than a few lines), the contrast is even more pronounced (Table 3). Novelists allocate none of the white characters any masculine Japanese, whereas all East Asian characters use at least some form of masculine language.

Examples 2 and 3 below are representative of East Asian characters' speech. The novelists have assigned a number of strongly masculine forms to their East Asian characters, such as the self-reference form *ore*, the utterance-final expressions *da* and *ka* and direct imperative forms like *nigero* 'run away' and *kaere* 'go home'.

- (2) *Ore wa koo mietemo, ... nihongo de nan to yuu? Imooto o daiji ni suru koto da. ... Omae ga nani o takuranderu ka ore ga shiranai to demo omotteru no ka?*

'Despite my appearance, I am ... what do you say in Japanese? Taking good care of one's sister? ... Do you really think I don't know what you are conspiring?'  
(Hase 1998:433)

- (3) *Anta wa nigerō. Renchuu ga yoo ga aru no wa ore dake da.*  
*... Nando mo iwaseruna. ... Hahaoya wa ie ni kaere.*  
 'You, run away. All they want is me. ... Don't make me repeat myself. ... A mother should go home.' (Fukui 2007:222)

On the other hand, examples 4 and 5 show that white characters do not use masculine forms except for the self-reference form *boku*, which appears to connote 'soft' masculinity. Example 4, which involves a British speaker, is articulated in polite Japanese and lacks masculine forms, even though the speaker is making a marriage proposal. Example 5, which involves a Hungarian speaker, also lacks *okoto kotoba*, even though the speaker is depicted as angry.

- (4) *Mochiron, aiko-san no, e dake demo ii n desu kedo,*  
*oopuningu-paatii toka, yahari honnin ga inai to*  
*hajimarimasen shi, soreni, ano, issroni boku no kuni ni*  
*kitemoraeru to ureshii desu.*  
 'Of course, it would be okay to just have your (Aiko-san's) paintings, but the opening party requires the presence of the painter, and uh, I would be very happy if you could come to my country.' (Shoji 2008:204)
- (5) *Hee, jaa, boku wa korosaresoo ni nattemo, jitto nagura-*  
*reteru no? Hee, boku wa nagurarenagara, mushi mitai ni*  
*chisaku natteru no? Hee, gaikokujin dakara?*  
 'Huh, then, even when I am in danger of getting killed, I should just sit there and get beaten? Huh, am I supposed to shrink myself small like an insect while getting beaten? Huh, is this because I'm a foreigner?' (Miyamoto 1998:186)

In sum, contemporary novelists overwhelmingly assign masculine language to East Asian characters, especially when the focus is on fluent and central characters, while they hardly ever allocate linguistic masculinity to white characters. Several ideologies influence this stark difference in representation – ideologies that are simultaneously reproduced and reinforced by these representations.

## Representations of non-Japanese characters and ideologies

### *Cultural nationalism and racial determinism*

The representations of white vs East Asian characters reflect the real-life situations many learners of Japanese encounter. Interviews with white learners of Japanese reveal reports of men dissuaded from or outright criticised for using masculine language (Ohta 1993; Iwasaki 2011). On the other hand, Itakura (2008) observes that her interviewees – Cantonese speakers working for Japanese companies in Hong Kong – were able to use masculine forms to build solidarity with their male Japanese peers. This leads to

several important questions: what is behind such contrasting approaches to non-Japanese male speakers' use of masculine language? How do these attitudes continue to exist?

I argue that several ideologies play crucial roles in shaping attitudes towards non-Japanese use of masculine Japanese, which is reflected in real life and in the representations in novels, and that, at the same time, the representations in novels reproduce and reinforce these ideologies. Of these ideologies I will first discuss cultural (linguistic) nationalism and racial determinism.

Fukuda (2014) observes that many Japanese do not consider vernacular varieties – such as regional dialects, slang and masculine language – to be part of the linguistic repertoire of non-Japanese but rather solely of those who are ethnically Japanese. That is, as suggested by Ohta (1993), attempts to prevent white male speakers from using masculine Japanese might be a strategy for maintaining Japanese men's linguistic distinctiveness. This language ideology belongs to a broader notion of cultural nationalism, which includes a belief in the exclusive ownership of Japanese culture (Yoshino 1992, 1997; McVeigh 2006). More specifically, Niyekawa (1991:24) observes that 'many Japanese have a mystical belief in "blood," and feel that anybody who has Japanese blood flowing in his body should think, speak, and behave the Japanese way.' The ideology about Japanese language is at the core of cultural nationalism, as the language is 'frequently regarded as the essential element in making the Japanese "Japanese"' (McVeigh 2006:197).

A native Cantonese speaker interviewed in a study by Itakura (2008:475) states: 'By using the masculine form, I can demonstrate my proficiency in Japanese and knowledge of Japanese culture. If they [Japanese male speakers] also speak to me using the masculine form, I take it that they recognize my competence in Japanese.' This speaker thus equates the ability to use masculine Japanese with advanced proficiency in Japanese. Another of Itakura's interviewees indicated that Japanese businessmen shared this view, as they started using masculine language when they found that he spoke Japanese well. Suzuki (2018) observes that when a character in a novel utters masculine expressions, the narrator of the novel often comments on how proficient the character is in speaking Japanese. This suggests that the use of masculine language is often equated with Japanese language competence.

If that is the case, it makes sense that whites are excluded from the use of masculine language. Whites have been considered 'the ultimate Other' for many Japanese: '[s]ince the emergence of Japan as a modern nation-state in the late nineteenth century, the West has been a significant discursive Other for Japan's identity construction' (Kawai 2016:99). That is, Japanese cultural identity defines itself against 'the archetypical *gaijin* [foreigner]',

who is ‘tall, white and blue-eyed’ (McVeigh 2014:39). As per cultural nationalism, Japanese culture and language belong only to the Japanese. Since masculine expressions are linked to competence in Japanese language, whites, whom many Japanese consider as the ultimate Other, would be kept away from using them.

How about East Asians? Hagiwara (1990:162) observes, ‘Japanese are often surprised to hear well-spoken Japanese pour out of the mouth of someone who does not have a Japanese-looking face, especially if that person is a Caucasian.’ On the other hand, he notes that Japanese ‘seem to expect Asians to have good command of the language because of their “Oriental features”’ (Hagiwara 1990:162). McVeigh (2006:191) similarly observes that many Japanese link Japanese speaking ability to Asians’ physical appearances (i.e. they ‘look more Japanese’) and calls the ideology behind such linkage ‘racial determinism’. This situation invites comparison with Rosa’s (2019) ethnography on perceptions of Latinx populations in the United States as ‘looking like a language, sounding like a race’, a core text in the emergent field of raciolinguistics. In the Japanese novels under review, race is likewise connected with the perception of language competence. Masculine language, since it is equated with competence in Japanese, is accepted and even encouraged among East Asian individuals in real life and is often allocated to East Asian characters in novels because they physically resemble Japanese individuals. In other words, cultural nationalism (i.e. the idea that only ethnic Japanese own Japanese culture, including the language) is extended to East Asians because of racial determinism.

At the same time, how novelists represent non-Japanese characters reproduces and reinforces these ideologies. As novelists give genderless and somewhat awkward language to white characters (cf. Nakamura this issue), they give even more prominence to whites’ status as ‘the ultimate Other’. Additionally, by having East Asian characters speak similarly to Japanese (i.e. by having them use gendered language, which is perceived to be a marker of competence), novelists bolster and propagate the idea that only ethnic Japanese or those who look similar to Japanese would use gendered and ‘natural’ Japanese.

### *Class and sexuality*

In addition to cultural nationalism and racial determinism, ideologies regarding class and sexuality also play a role in representations of non-Japanese voices. The hypermasculine expressions which Okamoto and Sato (1992) call ‘strongly masculine forms’ and which Nakamura (2007b) calls ‘old-style men’s language’ are typically viewed as vulgar, aggressive and coarse. Perhaps because of these images, *otoko kotoba* is often linked to working-class identity (Shibamoto Smith 2004:128).

As scholars have pointed out (e.g. Yoda 2011; Sugimoto 2014), many Japanese treat Western countries and whites who hail from such countries as ‘above’ them and Asian countries and their people as ‘below’ them. For example, Sugimoto (2014:196) observes, ‘The leadership of modern Japan envisaged a “ladder of civilizations” in which Euro-American societies occupied the highest rungs, Japan was somewhere in the middle, and other Asian countries were at the bottom.’ If the Japanese transfer this hierarchical view of countries to the socioeconomic class structure in Japan, they may equate whites with the upper and middle classes while linking Asians with the working class. This, in turn, may transfer to the differing print media representations of whites and East Asians.

Closely related to the imagined connections between class and masculine language are ideologies of sexuality. As Fung (2005) and Louie (2015) have noted, the Western media have typically represented Asian men as feminised and/or desexualised. In Japan, however, many Asian men are depicted as manly and sexual, at least in the world of print media. In the novels I examined, the majority of Asian characters are heterosexual. As observed by Nakamura (2007b), the Japanese language provides a powerful tool to maintain heteronormativity because it has feminine and masculine forms that explicitly distinguish women and men. It makes sense, then, that novelists make use of masculine language when they want to portray the heterosexuality of their Asian male characters. Masculine language is therefore used in the data in scenes involving violence and arguments, which are conventionally linked to masculinity, as well as in scenes involving romantic or sexual tension. In her analysis of Japanese romance novels, Shibamoto Smith (2004) observes that masculine (as well as feminine) language communicates heterosexual attractiveness/attraction. Nakamura (2007b:77) also states that hypermasculine forms express, among other meanings, sexual desirability. Of the pronouns, she notes that the coarse-sounding *ore*, which is further away from femininity than the soft-sounding *boku*, strongly signals heterosexuality (Nakamura 2007b:98). Shibamoto Smith (2004:123) also remarks,

[Compared to *boku*,] the more masculine *ore* appears to be used more often in scenes of heightened emotion or after a sexual relationship has been established. [...] Successful male lovers, apparently, say it with *ore*.

In real life, too, *ore*-using men seem to be popular among some women. Kinsui (2003:128) reports that in his informal survey of college-age women, the majority of the subjects preferred *ore*-using men to *boku*-using men.

Novelists can draw from these images of *ore* and *boku*. In the novel *Taiyō wa ugokanai* (*The Sun Does Not Move*) a Korean character named David Kim uses *okoto kotoba* in sexual/romantic scenes, as seen in examples 6 and 7. Specifically, he says *ore* and uses other masculinity-tinged

expressions, such as the copula *da* and the plain imperative form of an auxiliary verb *kure*, when wooing a woman or making love to her.

- (6) *Ore*, *Nana no tame nara nandemo suru yo*. [...] *Kono ase namete kure yo*.  
 'I'll do anything for you, Nana. [...] Will you lick this sweat?' (Yoshida 2014:212)

- (7) *Fushigi da na*. *Konna saigo no saigo ni natte, ore*, *Nana no koto ga suki da*. *Kore made de ichiban suki da*.  
 'It is curious. At this very last moment, I am in love with you. I love you now more than ever.' (Yoshida 2014:485)

In contrast, in the novel *Mahiru nanoni kurai heyā* (*Dark Room in the Midday*), white American teacher Kenny Jones falls in love and develops a sexual relationship with Japanese housewife Miyako Sawai, but he never uses strongly masculine expressions with her, as seen in examples 8 and 9. Most notably, he never uses *ore*; the novelist instead assigns to him the 'soft' pronoun *boku*. Further, this character also consistently speaks with the polite style predicate endings *-desu* and *-masu* even after he and Sawai become lovers. His speech style does not reveal their intimate relationship at all.

- (8) *Boku wa gogo kara jugyoo na no de, sentoo ni ikimasu keredo, ikaga desu ka, isshon'i*.  
 'I am going to the public bath as I have a class to teach in the afternoon. Would you go with me?' (Ekuni 2013:216)

- (9) *Boku wa itsu demo matteimasu kara*.  
 'I will be waiting for you any time (you wish to come).' (Ekuni 2013:217)

In fact, Jones does not come across as sexual at all. Jones exemplifies other white characters I have found in my data: he might woo a woman but appears somewhat asexual compared to the linguistic (hyper)masculinity given to Asian characters. This seems to run counter to the observations made by scholars such as Kelsky (2001) that many Japanese women find white men sexually attractive. In addition, such representations appear to reverse the way Asian male characters have traditionally been depicted in Western media as effeminate and asexual in comparison to white male characters (Fung 2005; Louie 2015; Oh 2017).

I suggest two possible interpretations. The first relates to the class ideologies described earlier. Many Japanese associate Westerners with a class 'above' them. Kelsky (2001:421) writes,

Whiteness functions in Japan as the transparent and free-floating signifier of upward mobility and assimilation in 'world culture'; it is the primary sign

of the modern, the universal subject, the ‘citizen of the world.’ [...] White men appear in women’s media as sensitive, refined, and without sexism.

Because of this polite ‘gentlemanly’ image, white characters in the novels may appear romantic but not sexual. Sexuality, at least as expressed by linguistic masculinity, is linked with ferocity and coarseness, both of which are incompatible with a ‘gentlemanly’ image. Nakamura (2007b) characterises the kind of linguistic masculinity exemplified by the pronoun *ore* and other expressions examined throughout this study as ‘old-style men’s language’. She describes ‘new-style men’s language’ as expressing ‘cool distance from the addressee or the subject of discussion, friendliness, and casualness’ (Nakamura 2007b:76) and lists the soft-sounding pronoun *boku* as one of the representative linguistic features. If whiteness indexes upward mobility and modernity, it makes sense that novelists would assign *boku* to white characters and not connect them to the old-style men’s language. On the other hand, novelists much more frequently give ‘old-style men’s language’ to Asian men. The association of Asian men and the working class certainly allows them to be depicted as expressing coarseness and raw energy.

The second interpretation has to do with ideologies of sexuality. As Oh (2017:138) observes, the construction of masculinity is ‘inseparable from how it is viewed – spectatorship’. It is instructive, then, to examine how East Asian men in the media are perceived. Of course, East Asian male celebrities are a diverse group and views towards them are not monolithic. As Jung (2010) and Louie (2015) point out, some of these stars embody a ‘soft masculinity’ associated with beauty, gentleness and politeness and do not directly represent raw sexuality. However, there also exists a female gaze in Asia that eroticises East Asian masculinity. Oh (2017:215) observes that international female fans of K-pop entertainers enjoy their videos ‘because of an intimate and erotic sensation while watching the bodily labor of the men’. She argues that fans move beyond objectification of the male body ‘by de-stigmatizing and rather eroticizing Korean/Asian/Asian American masculinity’ (Oh 2017:127). Kitahara (2013) remarks that male stars of the Korean Wave such as Toohooshinki (TVXQ!) exude eroticism and have captivated Japanese female fans’ heterosexual yearnings. These observations support that East Asian males can definitely be considered as sexual and sexually desirable beings.

This does not necessarily mean that novelists who assign masculine language to their East Asian characters are consciously thinking about their sexuality. However, unlike white characters, who are closely associated with ‘gentlemanly-ness’ and thus hardly ever linked with coarseness and vigour, East Asian characters are free from such associations and can therefore be depicted as possessing crudeness, ferocity and, sometimes, sensuality.

Similarly to cultural nationalism and racial determinism, ideologies regarding class and sexuality are both 'cause' and 'effect' at the same time. While the imagined connections among class, sexuality, race and gendered language might motivate the linguistic depictions of non-Japanese characters, such representations reproduce and reinforce these connections. By having white characters speak politely and non-sexually, novelists propagate the gentlemanly and somewhat docile image of white masculinity. On the other hand, assigning East Asian characters crude language gives them raw energy, which evokes an image of working-class sexuality.

### **Concluding remarks**

As Doerr (2015:398) observes, a non-Japanese individual 'who spoke a dialect of Japanese was considered more competent in Japanese, implying that dialect was advanced-level [...], more difficult, and more authentic Japanese.' These descriptions apply to masculine language as well. Linguistic masculinity is often equated with proficiency, and is thus a marker of Japanese authenticity.

This is particularly intriguing in the context of how women have been historically considered agents of continuity and tradition (Morris-Suzuki 1998). Women's language has been assumed to be 'uniquely Japanese, with unbroken historical roots in an archetypical, imaginary Japanese past' (Inoue 2006:2). However, this article questions the presumed exclusive link between women's language and authentic Japanese-ness and shows that masculine language also functions as an insider code perceived to be only available to ethnic Japanese or those who are considered racially close to the Japanese.

Finally, this study also unsettles the prevalent image of asexual or feminised Asian men. As pointed out by numerous scholars, this stereotype has been predominantly constructed and maintained in the Western media. The analysis reviews concrete linguistic data from Japanese sources that disrupt and challenge the Eurocentric gaze on Asian male sexuality.

### **About the author**

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## Notes

- 1 I use the adjective ‘non-Japanese’ for a lack of better alternatives, with the awareness that Japanese-ness and non-Japanese-ness represent fluid categories (Sugimoto 2014). For the purpose of this article, I define non-Japanese characters as those described as born and raised in countries other than Japan and who do not speak Japanese natively.
- 2 Research on the speech of LGBTQ+ individuals in Japan has also been limited; exceptions include Abe (2010) and Maree (2008, 2013).
- 3 Also similar to *onna kotoba*, *otoko kotoba* is a linguistic resource used by diverse speakers, not just men. For example, Miyazaki (2004) reports some junior high school girls use stereotypically masculine pronouns to express their (desire for) power and rebellion against conventions of society.

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