The change from the feudal period to the modern via the Meiji Restoration was certainly one of the most turbulent and complex in the history of Japan and many details of the change remain unexplained. In the process of such a fundamental social change, language inevitably plays a crucial role in forming and accommodating new meanings and new ideologies. This essay is about *boku*, a first person pronoun or self-reference form for males. It appeared rather abruptly in Japanese around the time of the Meiji Restoration and it has quickly become one of the major male first person pronouns. Although it is apparently of a Chinese origin, its history as a Japanese word is not necessarily clear. How and why did it come into being in Japanese at the time when it did? I have examined some texts from the Edo period in an attempt to bring to light the early history of *boku* in Japanese. Bringing various linguistic, sociological and historical facts together, it becomes possible to see the way *boku* entered Japanese. Spread of the use of *boku* began in personal letters exchanged among a close circle of samurai scholars— forerunners of modern intellectuals.

**Self in Feudal Society**

That Japanese has several variants of self-reference is well known. Where an English speaker uses 'I' regardless of his/her social status, class, age, gender, etc., for example, a Japanese speaker would have to choose an appropriate form from a set of first person pronouns including *watakushi*, *watashi*, *boku*, and *ore*. (Addressing is even more complicated than self-reference, but we consider only the latter in this essay). There is no doubt that the multiplicity of self-reference has to do with the fact that Japan had such a strong form of feudalism in its relatively recent history. Brown and Gilman (1960), having examined European languages with more than one second person pronoun (e.g., French *vous* and *tu*), offered a sociolinguistic theory in which the use of pronouns is explained as reflecting the values of the society where the
language is spoken: the reciprocal use of pronouns corresponds with the egalitarian ideology of democratic societies and the non-reciprocal use with feudal and manorial societies. The theory does not mention self-reference terms—probably because no European language has more than one form for 'self'—but self-referencing is an inherent part of addressing. Addressing cannot be adequately theorized without looking at self-reference behavior.

What is observed in the history of Japan is then a case *par excellence* of multiple pronominalization concomitant with a feudal society. It was after the emergence of a militaristic feudalism in the 14th century that many forms of self-reference and addressing were borrowed from Chinese or innovated based on native Japanese morphology in order to mark different social standings of people. By the 17th century Japan was firmly established as a hereditary, centralized feudal society with the Shogun and the samurai at the top of the entire society, and the principle of verticality became of primary importance in almost all the communicative situations. Proper use of self-reference and address forms was an integral part of the decorum of the samurai warriors who were tightly placed in the network of the multi-layered hierarchy within their class. Self-reference and address forms reflecting the social positions played a crucial role in reinforcing the hierarchical interpersonal relationships. It is mostly through the use of language that we internalize the structure of the society. Members of Edo society, at least in the earlier times, unquestioningly accepted their given social positions. The self in such a society has no substance; it is an "assemblage of threads pulled together from different directions" or "a totality of diverse relationships."¹

In my text count study of Kabuki scripts, which can be viewed as partially representative of the Japanese language as used in the feudal time, I found some 30 forms for self-reference, 12 forms of Chinese origin (e.g., 余 yo and 拥者 sessha) and 18 based on Japanese word formation (e.g., soregashi, temae, ware, and watakushi). Expectedly, those forms associated with the samurai status quickly fell into disuse after the Meiji Restoration, when the social stratification giving privilege to the samurai class was denounced and equality of all people was proclaimed.

The historical explanations of *boku* in dictionaries, however, are vague to say the least. It is usually mentioned that the character 僕 appeared in ancient texts written in *kanbun* (Chinese texts produced by Japanese) and that 僕 was generally read or pronounced as [yatsugare] in the texts after the Heian period. This doesn't prove the existence of *boku* (the word written as 僕 and
read as [boku]) as a Japanese self-reference form in the mentioned periods.

It is noteworthy in this light that Furukawa Kaoru (1990), a biographer of Yoshida Shōin (1830-1859), made a bold speculation in his essay entitled "Boku to yuu kenshō-go" (Boku, the Humble Self Form) that boku was first used as a Japanese self-reference form by Yoshida Shōin, who is generally remembered as an ardent ideological leader of the sonnō-jōi (revere the Emperor and expel the barbarians) movement, and was spread by his students and followers. The biographer's speculation is not supported by my text analysis although it may have some truth in it. I would like to make two specific points concerning the history of boku: 1) it entered Japanese in the middle of the Edo period by way of epistolary texts; and 2) it came to be associated with the I-You relationship of "solidarity" about the time of Yoshida Shōin.

**Kanbun and Diglossia**

As Florian Coulmas (1987) has convincingly argued, writers, as well as speakers, play significant roles in creating and shaping language. Criticizing the view that speech is more primary than writing as being based on the alphabetic bias in Western scholarship, he discusses as an example the function of Japanese kanbun, the earliest form of written Japanese. In order to understand exactly how boku could enter Japanese through writing, we need to recognize a couple of facts concerning the Japanese tradition of writing: the existence of diglossia and the epistolary style.

Conceptually there were two distinct writing styles, kanbun (Chinese writing) and wabun (Japanese writing). Kanbun was the prestigious code representing the masculine intellectuals, and thus well suited for official and public writings. Wabun (basically Japanese writing), on the other hand, was for the convenience of the less educated and women. In reality, however, letters were written in so-called wakan-konkōbun (the mix of Japanese and Chinese), wherein kanbun and wabun were mixed in various modes. These styles coexisted for more than a thousand years in Japanese.

In personal letters written during the late Tokugawa period (i.e., the time of Shōin) mixture of kanbun and wabun elements within a paragraph, within a sentence or even within a clause can be commonly observed. In the process of rapid code switching from kanbun to wabun, from wabun to kanbun, many formerly kanbun elements slipped into the wabun code. A number of Chinese self-reference forms were used in the wabun context of Japanese letters.
It was probably this style mixing that accommodated the displacement of *boku* from Chinese to Japanese.

A special register for writing letters had long been existent in Japanese before the appearance of *boku*. It is called "sōrobon" because of the extensive use of sōro, the verbal suffix for humbleness (e.g., *katari-sōro tokoro* [talk-HUMBLE-when] ‘when (I) talked about...’; and *...mono ni goza-sōro* [person be-HUMBLE] ‘is someone who...’). Another feature of the sōrobon style is the use of certain self-reference forms. According to Nanette Twine (1991), there were at least eight words for ‘I’ characteristic of sōrobon letters, such as, *shōsei* and *fushō*. It is hardly surprising therefore if one more form, i.e., *boku*, was added to the list.

The appearance of *boku* in the *wabun* context was not therefore a particularly unusual historical incidence. Of great significance from the socio-historical point of view was that *boku* gained an increasingly greater popularity among samurai-scholars during a half century prior to the Meiji Restoration and has survived till today while all other Chinese forms have completely disappeared from the scene.

**Letter-Writing Era**

Letter writing was an especially pronounced phenomenon of the late Tokugawa Japan. Miyachi Masato (1994) describes this period as "shokan jidai" (letter-writing era). Numerous letters were written vividly describing personal feelings and emotions, such as sadness, loneliness, disappointment, astonishment and joy, minutely describing current social events, and providing various kinds of information, about people, publications, places, etc. The term "letter-writing era" is not an exaggeration at all. There were in fact social conditions that had brought about the letter-writing era in the late Edo period.

First of all, the literacy of the Japanese sharply went up by the middle of the Tokugawa period. Each *han* (fiefdom) established a school to educate samurai children, and private classes to teach reading and writing to commoners’ children mushroomed all over. Japan was shifting from a society where the majority of the people were almost totally illiterate to one of high literacy.

Second, there was the need for writing letters on the part of people: many were obliged to live away from their homes for a long period of time to carry out various duties (e.g., *sankin kōtai*). Traveling across *han* boundaries without official approval of the authorities was still a punishable offense. As a matter of fact, Yoshida Shōin lost his legal status as a samurai and became a *rōnin* ‘unemployed samurai’ as a result of his exploratory trips to Northern Japan. The trend of the time was toward greater
mobility: young samurai left their han, officially or unofficially, to travel throughout the country, making new friends, visiting scholars and observing the political and economic conditions of Japan. They often stayed in contact with their new friends and teachers by exchanging letters with them.

Third, hikyaku, the postal delivery service, was established in this period, enabling correspondence across long distances. The hikyaku service first opened in the Kantō area in 1729 and it grew by the end of the 18th century to cover almost the entire land. The "archaeological" study by Miyachi Masato is extremely valuable to understand the changing conditions of letter writing during the later Edo period. The function of letter writing in this period may best be compared to that of e-mailing today. Just as e-mail writers have invented many symbols and styles for the purpose of conveying their thoughts and emotions through the new medium, the letter writers in the Edo period must have invented many new strategies in order to make letters as effective as possible within limitations.

**Boku in Personal Letters**

Historians are amazed at how quickly information was propagated from Edo, from Kyushu, from Osaka to all distant places, especially among young samurai. Earl (1964) comments, "One of the peculiar characteristics of the late Tokugawa period was the swift spread of the new-old theory throughout the country." He quotes from Kimura Toshio (1942):

> From one man to two, from two to four or ten, from ten to a hundred or a thousand, and from a thousand to ten thousand, this conceptual impulse [the nationalistic awareness] completely permeated the hearts or the Japanese people. (109) [addition in brackets is by Reynolds]

With the characterization of the time as the letter-writing era, we can easily see how it was done. A particularly great number of personal letters were written by the new breed of samurai, who might be called "samurai intellectuals," to vent their aggressions or by disclosing their inner selves, by lamenting over unfortunate happenings of their own or of their friends, by gossiping about common friends, and by giving advice. Letters written by samurai, whose common image is that of a tough, macho character, are often charged with sentimental and maudlin emotions. It is not rare for the author to use a confessional tone showing affection towards the addressee or to make pleas of brotherly love. It was in these personal letters written by those samurai-scholars that I
have found many instances of boku. Since such a great number of letters from the period have been preserved, deciphered, annotated and published, it is possible to use the published texts as the data for sociolinguistic analyses. The experience of reading these epistolary texts is analogous to the excitement derived from fieldwork. Paul Friedrich (1969) demonstrated the value of published works including novels as data for sociolinguistic studies.

As the starting point I have studied boku in the letters written by Yoshida Shōin (1830-1859) for two reasons. First, Shōin has been considered by many historians to be the most typical of the samurai-scholar of the time. David Magarey Earl (1964), for example, chose Shōin as "the best single representation of Tokugawa thought" (110) for his book entitled Emperor and Nation in Japan. Second, he was one of the most prolific letter writers of the time.

Shōin was adopted by his uncle, whose hereditary responsibility was teaching military science to the han (fief) ministers, so that Shōin could eventually succeed the family responsibilities. He was given the privilege of devoting himself to learning and broadening his knowledge, and he learned everything from Chinese classics to Dutch science. He was the star teacher at Shōkason juku, a private school in Hagi within the han of Chōshū. His liberal attitude towards students attracted samurai youth, many of whom remained loyal to his teaching and later became active in the sonnō jōi movement and contributed to the overthrow of the shogunal government. Shōin was probably a great thinker of the time, but he was certainly not a "spectator" of the Meiji Restoration as much as an "actor" of the spectacle, to borrow metaphorical terms from Hannah Arendt (1978). That is one of the reasons why he did not leave many philosophically significant writings behind. The many long letters to his families, to his former students and to the activists and philosophers of the sonnō jōi movement may be, as Fujita Shōzō (1978) says, the most important legacy of Shōin’s life. His letters constitutes the most invaluable documentary record of his inner self, his interactions with his friends, and the language in which he conveyed his inner self.

There are several publications of Shōin’s letters, from which I have chosen the "letters" of Yoshida Shōin edited by Fujita Shōzō (1978) for its detailed and precise annotations. The collection consisting of 245 letters contains a great number of instances of boku, allowing for some quantitative generalizations at a certain level of representativeness, and yet it is within a feasible size.

Although the majority of the letters in this collection are of a personal nature, I have further distinguished two types: 1) letters addressed to his family members (father, uncle, elder brother, and
sisters), letters to his superiors within his han or to government officials, 2) letters to those who were Shōin's teachers, and 3) those to his "friends" or "comrades." In the letters to his family members, his teachers, and his samurai superiors, Shōin identified himself in the traditional vertical framework, as a son, as a younger brother, as an elder brother, and as a subordinate or a student. Boku was not used in these letters with some exceptions in letters to his brother, who was three years older than Shōin. Excluding these letters in 1) and 2), I analyzed 136 letters, paying careful attention to the relationship between Shōin and the addressee and to some extent to the content. The 136 letters were addressed to 44 individuals with whom he had a relationship of camaraderie with varying degrees of intimacy. Most of them were either young men Shōin taught at Shōkason juku or samurai-scholars whom Shōin met during his travels—he made many close friends while he was traveling throughout the country, joining political and philosophical discussions and attending classes at various schools. And he used boku only in these letters to his intimate friends.

The table below is a summary of the self-reference forms that occur in the 136 letters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>boku</th>
<th>ware</th>
<th>shōsei</th>
<th>yo</th>
<th>wagahai</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instances</td>
<td>381</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>%</td>
<td>59.44</td>
<td>15.44</td>
<td>9.67</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>3.28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some comments on forms other than boku may be in order. Ware is a native form that had existed from ancient times; shōsei had been used in personal letters for a long time before the appearance of boku and survived as such until recently; yo was used by samurai of considerable distinction and it was often used by samurai scholars in monographs at the time of Shōin; wagahai is a humble variant of ware; sessei and shōshi were humble forms borrowed from Chinese and perhaps used mainly in epistolary texts; sessha, also a Chinese borrowing, was a form stereotypically used by samurai in Kabuki scripts; watakushi literally meant 'private' or 'personal' as opposed to 'public' and was used as a formal self-reference in writing as well as in speaking. The use of first names
“Norikata 矩方” “Torajirō 實次郎” or “Tora 實” was the most common method of referring to Shōin himself in the letters to his elder family members, but it is occasionally observed in letters to his old friends.

What is seen from the table is that Shōin not only greatly preferred the new self-reference form boku over other forms in writing to his students and friends, but also that he did not care for sessha and soregashi, the words most typically representing samurai identity. In monographs for publication, however, he used yo and he did not use boku at all. Some Chinese scholars describe 余/余 as a neutral self-referencing word.

Boku was originally a lexical noun meaning ‘private servant’ in Chinese and it was used by pragmatic extension as a humble self-reference form in certain types of texts. When it began to spread as a self-reference form in letters written by Japanese samurai scholars, it took on a special significance associated with solidarity between intimate friends or samurai scholars. As a result, boku was used to create a sense of camaraderie, strong enough to override the age and status gaps. For example, Takasugi Shinsaku (1839-1867) sometimes wrote to Shōin, his former teacher, using boku although he wrote perhaps more letters with watakushi.

The letters that Shōin exchanged with Mokurin (1824-1898) are interesting in this regard. Mokurin was a Buddhist scholar who firmly believed that the current power of the shogun was philosophically wrong and that the shogun’s government should be overthrown. Mokurin visited Hagi, where Shōin was confined, so as to correspond with him without waiting days for a reply. A letter was first sent to Shōin, who still thought that the loyalty to the emperor was compatible with the shogunal government, from Mokurin. Shōin added his responses in the margin or the space between lines and sent the letter back to Mokurin. This method of quick correspondence, which was rather commonly practiced at the time, resembles what is done today in the e-mail correspondence, inserting responses at relevant points of the original message text and sending it back to the original author. Although Mokurin was a considerably high-ranking priest older than Shōin, they discussed their serious philosophical and political differences openly, sincerely and emotionally, reciprocating boku. The address terms, however, indicate the vertical relationship, Shōin addressing Mokurin with “上人 Shōnin (Reverend)” and the latter addressing the former with 足下 sokka, a more common respectful address form. It is ironic that Mokurin was exempted from the death penalty on account of his Buddhist status at the time when Shōin was executed. It was Mokurin who changed Shōin’s position towards a clearly anti-shogun one.
Despite the difference in their social background and their age, they were bonded in terms of their intellectual interests and maintained a relationship of camaraderie through letter writing. They never met in person.

*Boku* was not of course a monopoly of the political radicals. It was widely used by samurai intellectuals regardless of their ideology. In addition to the type of samurai-scholars represented by Sho'in, there were other types: nonpolitical samurai-scholars, who were interested in learning in its own right, and those who found their values in artistically creative fields, such as poetry and painting, in the social space between the samurai and the commoners. They were all in need of mutual stimulation and networking, and they depended on letters.

I have found *boku* in the letters written between Ōhashi Totsuan (1816-1862) and Kusumoto Tanzan (1816-1883), who were both interested in the Neo-Confucian philosophy of Chu Hsi. To Yoshimura Shūyō (1797-1866) and Ikeda Sōan (1813-1878), scholars of the Yang Ming Confucian philosophy, however, Totsuan wrote somewhat distantly with a more traditional self-reference form *shōsei*. Ikeda Sōan developed closer relationships with Hayashi Ryōsai (1806-1849), a scholar of an applied philosophy of Yang Ming. They exchanged letters frequently using *boku*.

The examples above bring us back to Brown and Gilman (1960): the sense of camaraderie does not necessarily develop by frequent contact but it depends on “whether contact results in the discovery or creation of the like-mindedness” (258). *Boku* did not certainly denote ‘solidarity’ but it had performative force of creating a sense of camaraderie, which accommodated the need of the samurai scholars, the forerunners of modern intellectuals.

**Postscript**

It is now clear why *boku* had such an appeal to young intellectuals of the post-Restoration period. Samurai words had to go together with the feudalism, and *boku* a self-reference form associated with the meaning of solidarity has become a symbol of modern intellectuals. As it has spread to the entire nation, however, the ambiguous nature of *boku* has become apparent. The use of *boku* inspires, on one hand, a sense of status as an intellectual male. On the other hand, it has taken on a sense of immaturity or dependence.

Ueno Chizuko (1986), a feminist sociologist, has challenged male intellectuals who use *boku* in their writings; young girls have attempted to “highjack” *boku*, the symbol of continuing male
supremacy; *Bokutte nani* (What Am I?), a novel depicting a young man entirely dependent on the assistance and guidance of his mother and his girlfriend, was awarded the Akutagawa Prize for successfully portraying an average young man in postmodern Japan.³ The future of *boku* is unpredictable.

**Notes**

2. Karatani Kojin (1993, 1999) has expressed a similar view, criticizing the "phonocentric ideology of language" in particular reference to the importance of *kanbun* for Japanese modern novelists.
3. This novel by Mita Masahiro was first published in *Bungei* in 1977 and was awarded the Akutagawa Prize.

**Works Cited**


Data:

