In the framework of sociolinguistics, authentic language “produced in authentic contexts by authentic speakers” (Bucholtz, 2003, p. 398) has been the subject of much investigation. At the same time, the accumulation of research on style has revealed that people construct their identities through language practices. By choosing certain languages, styles, and/or words in particular ways, speakers establish particular identities, while, at the same time, these identities are established through the languages they use. In other words, we choose certain expressions among the many that are available in order to “fashion selves” (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013, p. 47).

However, we are not free agents who can choose any expression whatsoever to convey what we want to say. As Milani and Johnson (2010, p. 4) pointed out, not all choices are ranked equally. Certain languages, dialects, and/or words are given prestigious labels, while others, due to social, cultural, political, and economic factors, are not.

The rich pool of Japanese self-reference expressions (SREs; i.e., the expressions with which a speaker refers to themself), are no exception. Unlike English, which provides a speaker with only one first-person singular pronoun, “I,” Japanese offers a wide variety of first-person singular pronouns and nominal expressions for referring to oneself.¹ A speaker chooses one among the rich pool

¹ In order to refer to a speaker, the Japanese language provides speakers with some nominal expressions, such as one’s own name, kinship terms such as okāsan (mother),
of expressions with consideration of who speaks to whom in what situation, as we will see in the next section. In particular, the gender of a speaker is one of the salient factors in choosing a certain expression. Thus, this paper aims to illuminate the ideology that influences Japanese speakers’ choice of SRE. Using self-report survey data, this study considers why a speaker chooses one expression among multiple choices to “fashion selves.” That is, I explore the meta-linguistic idea behind the choice of SRE to illuminate the relationship between the labels (in other words, ideology) attached to the SRE, the self-representation of speakers, and gender ideology. This, in turn, reveals the relationship between cultural norms concerning choices of SRE and the agency of speakers in projecting a certain stance that the speaker wants to take at the moment of speaking.

**Background**

**Japanese Language and Gender**

The Japanese language has been considered to have gender distinctions; that is, Japanese has linguistic features strongly associated with either male or female speakers. Notable features include sentence-final particles (e.g., *ze/zo* is used by male speakers vs. *wa* by female speakers), vocabulary (e.g., *kuu* [eat] is considered to be a vulgar expression mainly used by male speakers), and personal pronouns (e.g., *ore* is used by male speakers vs. *watashi* by female speakers). Horii (1990) stated that we can correctly guess speakers’ gender by looking at their conversational descriptions.

The declining use of strongly feminine expressions and increasing use of and professional titles like *sensei* (teacher), in addition to various first-person pronouns such as *watashi, atashi, boku, ore*, etc. In order to include these expressions, this paper uses the term “self-reference expression” for speakers’ self-referential expressions, which is equivalent to *jishōshi* (expression referring to a speaker), a term coined by Suzuki (1973, 1982).
neutral or male expressions by female speakers has been reported (Mizumoto, 2010; Okamoto, 1995; Ozaki, 1999). In terms of person reference forms, some blurring between male and female use amongst the young has also been reported (Miyazaki, 2004, 2016). However, the choice of person reference expressions in general still maintains gender-specific differences.

**Characteristics of Japanese Self-Reference Expressions**

The way speakers refer to themselves and others in conversation has been actively investigated. Brown and Gilman (1960/2003) and Sacks and Schegloff (1979) have been particularly influential in subsequent studies on the topic. The former analyzed pronoun choice in conversation in terms of power and solidarity. The latter proposed two preferences in choosing person reference forms in conversation: minimization and recipient design. These two studies focused on different aspects of person reference expressions: the former focused on the interpersonal and the latter on the interpretive aspect. Japanese SREs have also been investigated from these perspectives and are widely researched due to their two notable features: richness of vocabulary and optionality.

**Rich Resources of Vocabulary and Gender Distinction**

As for vocabulary richness, Miwa (2005) detected 81 first-person reference pronominal expressions in written documents dating from ancient times to the present. In standard contemporary Japanese, the following five variants are frequently used: *watakushi, watashi, atashi, boku,* and *ore* (Maynard, 2009). In addition to these expressions, *uchi, jibun,* first names, and nicknames are also

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2 Minimization is a preference for using a single reference form: “on occasions when reference is to be done, it should be preferredly be done with a single reference form,” and recipient design is a preference for easy recognition: “if they are possible, prefer recognition” (Sacks & Schegloff, 1979, p. 24).
observed in daily use.

As for *watakushi* and *watashi*, both women and men use them to refer to themselves in formal contexts (Kanemaru, 1993; Shibamoto-Smith, 1985, 2004). For female speakers, *watashi* is used in both formal and informal contexts. *Atashi* is used in informal situations by female speakers (Shibamoto-Smith, 2004). However, workplace research by Kobayashi (1997) revealed that contextual differences between the use of *watashi* and *atashi* are not clearly defined. Recently, the use of *uchi* as an SRE has been frequently observed in girls and young women (Kojima, 2017; Miyazaki, 2004, 2016)

*Boku, ore,* and *jibun* are expressions mainly used by men to refer to themselves. *Ore* is avoided in formal situations. *Boku* is situated between *watakushi/watashi* and *ore* in terms of formality. The use of *jibun* conjures images of the army, which has strict hierarchical relationships (Kanemaru, 1993; Miwa, 2005). However, these three expressions are not exclusively used by men. For example, Miyazaki (2004, 2016) found that some junior high school girls prefer using these expressions.

In addition to these pronominal expressions, Japanese has many varieties of nominal expressions referring to a speaker. They are open categories: proper names and kinship terms are often observed. Kojima (2017) reported that some female university students (about 11% of the students surveyed) used their first name or nickname as their daily SRE (i.e., they refer to themselves in the third person). A speaker’s age also affects their choice of expressions (Komori, 2008; National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics, 2002, 2003; Nishikawa, 2002, 2003, 2011). Nishikawa’s research revealed that there are gender differences in selection patterns concerning first-person reference expression: boys initially used their name as their SRE and changed to *ore* and *boku* depending on addressees and topics, and girls started and continued to use their first name or nickname for a while and changed to *watashi* at a certain age, although the age of
transition differed between individuals.

In sum, the combination of contextual considerations and the speaker’s gender and age complicatedly interact in the selection of SRE in Japanese.

Optionality and Exploitation of Overt Expressions
In Japanese, grammatical subjects are optional. Those assumed to be active in discourse are usually not referred to directly (Maynard, 2009). As a result, overt expressions are rarely used. Lee and Yonezawa (2008) surveyed 330 minutes of face-to-face conversation between native Japanese speakers and found that about 84.5% and 88.5% of possible first- and second-person subjects were omitted, respectively.

The functions of overt expressions have been investigated from referential, semantic, and pragmatic perspectives (e.g., Kuno, 1978; Mizutani, 1985; Ono & Thompson, 2003). Lee and Yonezawa (2008) analyzed cases in which overt subjects/objects appear despite being clearly recoverable from the context and where they could easily have been omitted. As a result, they found that overt expression “adds a certain ‘influence’ pragmatically or meta-pragmatically to the utterance” (Lee & Yonezawa, 2008, p. 763), whether the purpose of overt expression is contrastiveness, emphasis to signal the change of conversational flow, speaker’s attitude, or something else. Furthermore, they suggest that “the need to express the properties that are inherent in the subjects” (Lee and Yonezawa, 2008, p.764), or add pragmatic weight, is the best way to understand overt expressions.

Word Choice and Stancetaking
As previously mentioned, complex factors are involved in a speaker’s choice of a certain SRE in Japanese. When participants meet for the first time, higher formality is required. In such a situation, a speaker uses *watakushi*, the most
formal SRE, accompanied by honorifics, to signal politeness and distance toward
the interlocutor. In the following conversation between A and B, both A and B
introduce themselves using *watakushi*, the most formal expression:

(1) A: *Watakushi Nezu to mooshimasu.*

わたくし ねず と申します.
I am Nezu.

B: *Watakushi Ogawa to mooshimasu. Yoroshiku onegaishimasu.*

わたくし 小川 と申します。よろしくお願いします.
I am Ogawa. Nice to meet you.

A: *Ogawa san de irasshaimasu ka. Yoroshiku onegaishimasu.*

小川さんでいらっしゃいますか。よろしくお願いします.
(You) are Mr. Ogawa. Nice to meet you.

(Lee & Yonezawa, 2008, p. 757)

However, speaker A also uses *boku*, a less formal expression, in the same
conversational encounter when he speaks to B about his personal enjoyment of
movies:

(2) A: *Boku wa kekko eiga suki na mondesu kara.*

ぼくは 結構映画好きなもんですから.
I also quite like movies, and so…

(Lee & Yonezawa, 2008, pp. 758–9)

Lee and Yonezawa (2008) attributed this shift to the influence of the
conversational topic: “the more personlised the topic is, the less polite the
linguistic forms used tend to be” (p. 759). Komori’s (2008) observation of SRE
usage among family members also revealed that the same person shifts their
expression from kinship terms such as *otōsan* (father) to *boku* or *ore*, depending on addressees and audience, topic, and mood.

As has been shown previously, the Japanese language has multiple forms of “I” in its language system, and there are cultural assumptions about the appropriateness of choosing particular expressions for addressing particular people in particular situations. Furthermore, use of overexpression sends a certain message, which is about the inherent properties of the expression, according to Lee and Yonezawa (2008). Then, what makes one choose a certain expression over another at a certain point of an ongoing interaction; for example, why is *boku* rather than *ore* chosen when a topic is about one’s preferences and enjoyments? In other words, what are the inherent properties of an expression that makes a speaker choose it? Furthermore, what kinds of effect does a speaker expect to have through their choices? In order to answer these questions, we need to think beyond a simply patterned relationship between social groups and linguistic variations.

In this situation, stancetaking is a useful concept. We cannot utter any words without taking stances; or, as Kiesling (2009) put it, “speakers ultimately make linguistic choices in order to take stances” (p. 179). Stance is exercised through evaluating, positioning, and alignment in a single act, dialogically and intersubjectively (Du Bois, 2007). From the first-person perspective, Du Bois (2007) defined the relationship of these three acts as follows: “I evaluate something, and thereby position myself, and thereby align with you” (p. 163). Kiesling (2009, p. 172) also defined stance as holding together two elements: speakers’ epistemic stance (“a person’s expression of their relationship to their talk”) and speakers’ interpersonal stance (“a person’s expression of their relationship to their interlocutors”).

The choice of a certain SRE expresses a speaker’s self-evaluation and their positioning of themself and others at the time of interaction. Simultaneously, this choice explains the alignment, disalignment, and realignment of interlocutors.
investigating the meta-linguistic idea behind the choice of SRE, this study aims to
detect both epistemic and interpersonal stances, which in turn, reveal the agency
of a speaker “who is actively managing his or her variable use in order to achieve
socially meaningful impressions” (Kiesling, 2009, pp. 190–1).

**Survey**

A self-report survey was administered to university students in Kantō
region during a class on gender issues in spring 2015. The respondents were
91 male and 205 female students (most were in their first year).³ I chose these
university students as the target of the investigation since they are attentive to
their way of speaking for the following two reasons: first, they have come from all
over Japan with their own local dialects to a university located in an area where
standard Japanese is predominantly spoken, and need to converse with each other
in the new environment; and second, they are in the social preparation stage for
adulthood and are expected to follow the social norms which society requires
from full-fledged adults.

They were asked to answer the following open-ended questions:

Q1. List all the SREs you use.

Q2. Do you use a particular expression to particular addressees or in
particular situations? If yes, explain how.

Q3. Explain the reasons for your choice.

Q4. Have you received any advice concerning use or nonuse of a
particular expression? If the answer is yes, who advises what?

³ The survey was conducted anonymously on those who attended the first day of the
class. The gender imbalance of respondents reflects the characteristics of the class. I must
admit that these respondents might be more gender conscious than other students who
did not choose to take a class on gender issues, and this might affect their choice of SRE.
This study’s use of self-reporting might be criticized as leading to results that do not reflect actual language use. However, the purpose of this study is not to uncover actual language practices, but to reveal what speakers consider as factors in their choice of SRE. In other words, this study aims to uncover the meta-linguistic concept behind choosing a certain expression. Thus, to meet this purpose, I considered the self-report survey to be an appropriate method.

Results

Results for Qs 1 and 2

Table 1 and Figure 1 summarize male students’ answers to Q1 regarding the SREs they use. Most (90.11%) prefer ore in daily conversation, followed by boku (56.04%), and watashi (39.56%). The majority use two (32 respondents) or three (30 respondents) different expressions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression</th>
<th>No. of respondents (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ore</td>
<td>82 (90.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boku</td>
<td>51 (56.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>watashi</td>
<td>36 (39.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jibun</td>
<td>27 (29.67)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>8 (8.79)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 and Figure 2 show the female students’ responses to Q1. Most (97.07%) use watashi in most conversational situations, followed by their own name (40.98%), and uchi (33.17%). On average, they answered that they use fewer than two expressions. A total of 102 respondents use two expressions and 68

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4 This self-report survey did not distinguish between watashi and atasshi since speakers are quite often unaware of the difference in pronouncing a first-person reference with or without /w/ at the beginning of the word.
Figure 1. The number of different expressions male respondents used

Table 2. Expressions female respondents use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expression</th>
<th>No. of respondents (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>watashi</td>
<td>199 (97.07)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name/Nickname</td>
<td>84 (40.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uchi</td>
<td>68 (33.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jibun</td>
<td>9 (4.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>21 (10.24)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. The number of different expressions female respondents used
Male students’ answers to Q2 (whether they use a particular expression to particular addressees or in particular situations), show that male respondents change from *ore* to *boku* or *watashi* based on contextual considerations, in particular, consideration of addressee and situation, as the following comments show:

**[Addressee consideration]**
- *watashi*: unfamiliar, older person
- *boku*: senior student (*snepai*), superior person (*meue*), teacher
- *jibun*: superior person, person who meets for the first time, parents, family members

**[Situational consideration]**
- *watashi*: official situation
- *boku*: presentation, home
- *name*: home, being humorous

Interestingly, no respondents mentioned their use of *ore* and the considerations leading to its selection.

As for female responses to Q2, their explanations about choosing their own name or *uchi* focus on addressee and situational considerations. They answered that their usage is governed by identification of the proper context, which is outlined as follows:

**[Addressee consideration]**
- *uchi*: friend
- Name/nickname: family member, close friend

**[Situational consideration]**
- *uchi*: friendly conversation
- Name/nickname: at home

They rarely mentioned their selection considerations for *watashi*, just as the male
respondents paid little attention to their choice of *ore*. A very small number of comments mentioned that *watashi* was chosen when one speaks to a superior person or a person who meets for the first time in an official situation.

The self-report survey’s questions were open-ended, and respondents could answer what they considered to be necessary. Thus, the results of Q1 and Q2 reveal that respondents’ use of *ore* for male and *watashi* for female speakers was automatic. Their answers focused on situations where their SRE changed from *ore/watashi* to something else. Thus, choosing *ore* for male speakers and *watashi* for female speakers as their SRE is commonsensical to them. In other words, *ore* and *watashi* are the default SRE for male and female respondents, respectively, in line with the remark of Blommaert and Verschueren (1998, p. 25): “The commonsense nature of beliefs, ideas, and attitudes (i.e., commonsensical for those who hold the beliefs and attitudes) is manifested in the fact that they are rarely questioned.”

**Male Results for Qs 3 and 4**

Most comments from male respondents concerning their reasons for choosing a certain expression in a certain situation or with certain addressees were related to the use or nonuse of *ore* and *boku*.

Most *ore* users commented that they use it as a daily self-reference since people around them use it. Only 2 of the 91 male respondents answered that they always use *boku*. One of them commented: 5

- (I) am not the type of person who uses *ore*.

His reason for the daily use of *boku* was connected with his personality. In this case, the expression chooses the person, rather than the person choosing the expression. This comment shows that the SRE *ore* is not a neutral default

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5 The subject is omitted in their original Japanese responses. For clarity in English translation, (I) is added where the pronoun was omitted in Japanese.
expression but seems to have some other connotations. The other *boku* user’s response gives a clue about what this connotation is:

- *Ore* is haughty (*erasou*), and (I) can use *boku* both to friends and superior people (*meue*).

On the other hand, many *ore* users explained their nonuse of *boku* by saying that it sounds childish. This idea might be derived from their own experience of changing their SRE as they grew up, as the following comment suggests:

- (I) use *ore* now but used *boku* when (I) was a child.

One person who uses *jibun* explained his reasons for doing so as follows:

- *Ore* is arrogant (*gōman*), and *boku* is childish.

In addition to childishness, *boku* seems to connote weakness:

- *Boku* sounds weak (*yowayowashii*).

Interestingly, even *ore* users notice that *ore* entails arrogance; thus, they change SRE depending on the person they are talking to and the situation they are in, to avoid appearing arrogant. They choose *boku* or *watashi* when they speak to a person who is superior to them. They explained their use or nonuse of *ore* with adjectives related to arrogance.

- (I) usually use *ore*, but (I) use *boku* to superior people because *ore* is rude (*shitsurei*).
- *Ore* sounds haughty (*namaiki*), so (I) use *boku* in official situations.
- To show humility, (I) use *boku* at a part-time job.

Furthermore, their comments reveal that their feeling at the moment of speaking is linked to word choice:

- (I) usually use *boku*, and (I) use *ore* in a good mood.
- (I) use *ore* with a rebellious feeling, and *boku* with a gentle feeling.

One interesting comment obtained is the following:

- (I) use *ore* because I have no confidence in my masculinity.
That is, this respondent uses *ore* to wear a masculine mask.

In sum, male speakers’ choices of their SRE are related to maturity and masculinity. Most male respondents prefer *ore*. They consciously choose *ore* to show their maturity: they change their SRE from *boku* to *ore* at a certain age (around junior high school). However, they consider that the use of *ore* is inappropriate when the situation is formal and addressees are higher in rank and/or not close; thus, they switch to *boku* or *watashi* when they speak in formal situations, to people of a higher rank, and to people who are not close. The inappropriateness of *ore* seems to be derived from its connotations such as arrogance, haughtiness, or rudeness. These connotations, however, are compatible with masculinity. They use *ore* to show masculine qualities such as toughness, which also leads to avoidance of *boku* which holds connotations of weakness and childishness. The inverse of the same motivation makes them choose *boku* to show gentleness and diminish the appearance of having an arrogant attitude.

**Female results for Qs 3 and 4**

Although most female respondents answered that they use *watashi* in Q1, they rarely commented on why they do so. A few mentioned that they were told to use *watashi* by their mothers.

Some commented on the linkage of *watashi* to honorifics:

- *Watashi* is a kind of honorific.
- (I) use *watashi* with honorific expressions.
- (I) use *watashi* because it is a polite expression.

Nonuse of *watashi* is explained through formality and femininity:

- (I) do not like *watashi* because it is too formal.
- *Watashi* sounds too adult.
- *Watashi* sounds feminine.

There were many negative comments on the use or nonuse of *uchi* and
their own names:

[Images of uchi]
- The use of uchi is shameful (hazukashii).
- Uchi lacks elegance.
- Uchi sounds childish.
- Uchi sounds frivolous (karui).
- Uchi sounds uncultivated (inakappoi).
- Uchi sounds vulgar (gehin).

[Images of names]
- Use of names sounds childish.
- Use of names is shameful.
- Use of names sounds like phony childishness and cuteness (burikko).

Attaching these negative feelings to uchi and names as SREs, they tried to change the expressions they use during the process of growing up. One student explained how she and her friends changed their SRE:

- In high school days, we played “let’s use watashi game” and succeeded in changing our first SRE from our own names or uchi to watashi.

To sum up, avoidance of sounding too young or too mature are two main reasons for their SRE choice. Both the use and nonuse of watashi are explained through the concept of formality, but watashi is also linked to femininity. Thus, they sometimes use uchi and their own name to avoid sounding too formal and/or too feminine, although they consciously acknowledge that this usage is associated with some negative images.

**Discussion**

We can detect four dimensions concerning choice of SRE for male speakers: formality, addressee, maturity, and masculinity. The less formal the situation is, the more the speaker tends to choose ore and the more formal the
situation is, the more the speaker tends to choose *watashi*. When an addressee is equal or lower rank/closer to the speaker, the speaker tends to choose *ore*, and when an addressee is higher rank/not close to the speaker, the speaker tends to choose *watashi*. *Boku* is situated in the middle.

**[Formality]**

Less formal ◄-----------------------------► More formal

*ore* ◄-----------------------► *boku* ◄-----------------------► *watashi*

**[Addressee]**

Equal or lower rank/closer ◄----------------► Higher rank/not close

*ore* ◄-----► *boku* ◄-----► *watashi*

In addition to situational considerations, maturity and masculinity are related to male speakers’ choices in complicated ways. They use *ore* to show their maturity in informal situations and also use *watashi* in formal situations. By choosing the proper expression depending on the situation, speakers adopt the stance of a responsible member of society. Therefore, *boku*, which is perceived as a childish, tends to be avoided in informal situations.

Masculinity is another factor that respondents consider in the choice of SRE. *Ore* is preferable to show male maturity, but at the same time, *ore* sounds arrogant, which is not compatible with the stance of a full-fledged adult accepted in society. Thus, *ore* is avoided in specific situations. On the other hand, *boku* is avoided because it sounds weak, but at the same time it is utilized to show gentleness or diminish the appearance of being macho:

**[Maturity]**

Childish ◄-----------------------------► Mature

*boku* ◄-----------------------------► *ore/watashi*
We can also detect four dimensions concerning the choice of SRE for female speakers: formality, addressee, maturity, and femininity. As for formality and addressee, when the situation is less formal and/or the addressee is equal or lower rank/closer to a speaker, they tend to choose *uchi* or their own name. When the situation is more formal and/or the addressee is higher rank/not close to the speaker, the speaker tends to choose *watashi*:

**[Formality]**

Less formal ↔ More formal

*uchi/name ↔ watashi*

**[Addressee]**

Equal or lower rank/closer ↔ Higher rank/not close

*uchi/name ↔ watashi*

Maturity and femininity are also at issue when choosing one’s SRE. Respondents are conscious about showing their maturity through their self-reference forms, but at the same time they do not want to present themselves as too feminine. These two factors make them choose *uchi* or their own name in a certain situation and *watashi* in other situations:

**[Maturity]**

Childish ↔ Mature

**[Femininity]**

Less feminine ↔ More feminine

*uchi/name ↔ watashi*
Conclusion

The self-report survey in this study revealed that each SRE has an inherent meaning, which affects whether it will be chosen among the rich available resources. Furthermore, in addition to situation and addressee, two factors have been detected regarding the motivation to choose one expression over another: maturity and masculinity/femininity.

These factors are closely related to the speaker’s stance. For male respondents, two opposing axes of maturity, formal and informal maturity, are at issue. Informal maturity is linked to masculinity: they prefer sounding masculine. At the same time, masculinity connotes arrogance; thus, they change their SRE to avoid being rude depending on addressee and situation. Furthermore, sounding masculine does not connote tenderness; thus, they change their SRE to match their feelings. For female respondents, maturity equals formality, but they tend to avoid sounding too mature because maturity also equals femininity, which is considered as something to be avoided. At the same time, they tend to avoid sounding too childish. The relationship between maturity and femininity and the reasons why respondents want to avoid the appearance of excess femininity have not been clarified by this survey. This will be an interesting topic for future research.

Focusing on the results of this survey of Japanese SREs, this paper shows that each self-reference form contains ideological meaning, ideological meaning is manifested in the choice of particular forms, and choices are made consciously to present oneself as a certain person: masculine and mature for male speakers, and not too feminine but mature for female speakers.

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