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Sugoi! – Indexicality and stancetaking in Japanese compliments

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I explore the notions of indexicality and stancetaking practice through the analysis of a single lexical item embedded in the speech act of complimenting among young Japanese speakers. After revisiting prominent frameworks of indexicality and stance, I illustrate the ways in which the lexical item *sugoi* 'amazing' performs multiple pragmatic functions: as a marker of praise, surprise, or mock impoliteness; an intensifier; or silence-filler in the act of complimenting. On the basis of extensive sociolinguistic interviews and ethnographic metadata, I discuss how and why Japanese speakers use the variants *sugoi* and *sugee* to build intricately on their indexical field in the context of complimenting. I argue that *sugoi* and *sugee*, canonically assumed to index speaker gender, are used as a linguistic resource to perform larger interactional functions and stancetaking practice among young Japanese speakers. (Compliments, indexicality, stance, interactional analysis, Japanese, pragmatic function)*

INTRODUCTION

In thinking about meaning, language, and identity construction (cf. Ochs 1992; Bucholtz 1999; Holmes & Meyerhoff 1999; McConnell-Ginet 2011), the notion of indexicality has been central to both the analysis of macro-level interaction and micro-level interaction in the form of stance (Silverstein 1976, 2003; Ochs 1992; Kiesling 2004, 2009, 2011; Eckert 2008; Johnstone & Kiesling 2008; Jaffe 2009). In this article, I revisit some of the revolutionary theories of indexicality and stance, building on the increasingly large volume of sociolinguistic work in these areas. I then attempt to answer some critical questions through the interactional analysis of Japanese compliments that are central to the ongoing discussion on indexicality in sociolinguistic theory:

- How is indexical meaning structured? How and why does it vary and change?
- How are linguistic forms used interactionally to contribute to building complex meanings such as stance? How and why does this process occur?

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In order to tackle these questions, I examine interactional data relating to Japanese compliments with a particular focus on the variation between *sugoi* and *sugee*.

The lexical items *sugoi* and *sugee* (literally meaning 'amazing, incredible') have been around for some time in Japanese. Traditionally, the variation between the two forms has been recognised as gender-preferential—the phonologically reduced variant *sugee* is a male-preferred form and was 'not allowed' in women's repertoire (Ide 1992). During at least the past two decades, however, as female speakers have started to use the *sugee* variant increasingly in interaction, the use and associated (social) meanings of these two words have been renegotiated and reconstructed, especially among young speakers of Japanese, expanding and changing the indexical landscape of the forms *sugoi* and *sugee*. I have therefore set out to investigate this mystery—that Japanese women as well as men are increasingly employing the traditionally male-preferred variant *sugee* and that the meanings of *sugoi/sugee* variation are changing through the interactional analysis of Japanese compliments.

Goodwin & Goodwin (1996) analyse assessments and alignment in interactions and claim that 'assessments provide an arena within which language structure, cognition, and social coordination can be investigated in fine detail as integrated components of a single process' (1996:184). Complimenting is a type of speech act that inherently involves social assessments (as in Goodwin & Goodwin's term above) and speakers' alignment towards the referents—in other words, the topic of the compliment (cf. Brown & Levinson 1987; Ochs 1992; Holmes 1995; Du Bois 2007), which holds up 'a mirror of cultural values' (Manes 1983:96). Compliments, therefore, are useful linguistic resources for investigating indexicality and stancetaking practices, because they are necessarily socially and culturally loaded and closely intertwined with social indexes and meanings.

I first outline some prominent theoretical frameworks of indexicality with particular attention to defining stance. I then turn to the lexical item *sugoi* in the context of Japanese complimenting and illustrate how variation in the realisation of this single form performs multiple pragmatic functions in moment-to-moment interaction. Next, I move on to investigate stancetaking practice and indexicality through an analysis of metapragmatic data as the speakers discuss and evaluate their own language use in playback interviews (Gumperz 1982). This section forms the core part of the discussion in this article. As the existing literature demonstrates, it is often difficult to pinpoint what exactly indexical meanings are and to recognise how they are related to each other, if we merely analyse speakers' sociolinguistic utterances. In this article, I offer a different approach by allowing speakers themselves to unpack and analyse their own sociolinguistic behaviour. This part of the discussion thus provides rich insights and brings us a step closer towards understanding the interactional purposes that young Japanese speakers use this lexical item for when (re)producing indexical relations and stance. Finally, I conclude with the claim that the polyvalency of the lexical forms *sugoi* and *sugee* in fact allows young Japanese speakers to weave complex stances into particular moments of interaction, which ultimately help construct an indexical field that is specific to their

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community of practice (Meyerhoff & Strycharz 2013). It is through the interactional data and analysis of the variation between *sugoi* and *sugee* observed in Japanese compliments that the article contributes to the sociolinguistic theory of indexicality.

INDEXICALITY, STANCE, STYLE, AND COMPLIMENTING

Some of the most influential work in our endeavour to understand indexicality—that is, the relationship between language use and social meanings in interaction—is, perhaps, that of Ochs (1992, 1996). Although her model is primarily concerned with the indexing of gender in language socialisation, the proposed framework is particularly useful in theorising how the indexing of certain meanings operates through social activities, stances, and acts. More specifically, Ochs argues that there are two types of indexes: direct and indirect. While there are only a few direct indexes to gender in English (e.g. terms of address, such as *Mr.* indexing a male referent, or the pronouns *he* and *she*, which directly index the gender of the referent), indirect indexes are widely used and drawn on by language users to construct meanings and make sense of the world, as a single linguistic form can index a number of related meanings (both referential and social).

Silverstein's (1976, 2003) approach is also important. Silverstein claims that there is an order of indexes and argues that meanings evolve in such a way that a newly created index latches on to a previously created one over time through repeated use. His model is particularly useful when looking at changes in language variation and their meanings from an historical point of view. Kiesling (2011) builds on this view further, proposing the notion of an indexical cycle where (re)cycling of creative indexical meanings is possible.

Some indexes are rather fluid and subject to moment-specific changes, whereas others are more transportable beyond various speech events and depict social ideology and categories more deeply. Kiesling (2009) defines these as having interior and exterior indexicality. Using the example of the address term *dude*, he argues that the interior index of *dude* is particular to specific speech events and can manifest momentarily created stances (e.g. cool solidarity), while the exterior index of *dude* can point to a larger level of social category, such as identity or persona—in this case, masculinity (cf. Bucholtz 2009 on *güey*).

In the more recent history of sociolinguistics, efforts to grasp the mechanisms of indexicality have emphasised the importance of understanding stance (cf. Englebretson 2007; Bucholtz 2009; Jaffe 2009; Kiesling 2009, 2011). Stance, as Kiesling states (2009:172), is 'a person's expression of their relationship to their talk (their epistemic stance—e.g. how certain they are about their assertions), and a person's expression of their relationship to their interlocutors (their interpersonal stance—e.g. friendly or dominating)'. In Kiesling's view, stance is at the heart of ANY interaction. Speakers cannot avoid taking a stance when they interact with others through language; to put it differently, speakers are inevitably involved with

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displaying alignments towards either the propositions that they are making or the individual(s) with whom they are interacting (Eckert 2008; Kiesling 2011). Through an analysis of the use of the (ING) variable amongst fraternity members, and the lowering and backing of the variable (-er) among migrants in Sydney, Kiesling (1998, 2011) argues that stancetaking is the primary concern in speakers' interaction and that analysing stance can help sociolinguists better understand the patterns and motivations of linguistic variation and change.

When some stances are repeatedly used and recognised at certain levels, these repeated repertoires may contribute to establishing style (Johnstone 2009). The process of how stancetaking comes to embody style is illustrated in many recent sociolinguistic studies (e.g. Eckert 2000, 2008; Mendoza-Denton 2008; Zhang 2008; Johnstone 2009; Moore & Podesva 2009; Snell 2010). One of the best known and pioneering of these is perhaps Eckert's (1989, 2000) work on Detroit high-school girls. Her research shows that speakers actively draw not only on linguistic resources (e.g. vowel variants), but also on social resources/activities (e.g. clothing) to create and index their social categories or particular persona or personal style, such as 'burnout' and 'jock' girls.

In her argument about indexicality, Eckert (2008) also highlights the importance of stances: the fact that speakers are more concerned with the most immediate interactions in which they are involved (i.e. stancetaking, alignments, and other social and linguistic factors that are meaningful in that particular moment and context), though these meanings are connected to larger concepts such as identity and ideology at a higher level. For example, when girls use a female-led variant, they do not simply mean to index their femininity; rather, there must be other micro-level meanings, such as stances (e.g. friendly), that they intend to express through that variant.

Building on Silverstein's work on indexical order, the framework on which the current study draws most deeply is Eckert's (2008) notion of indexical field. She formulates the concept in the following way: 'the meanings of variables are not precise or fixed but rather constitute a field of potential meanings—an indexical field, or constellation of ideologically related meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable' (2008:454).

The idea that all of the potential meanings, indexes, stances, and identity work co-exist and are all at work in a field (rather than identifying some as more direct/indirect or interior/exterior) is a useful and powerful one, especially when one analyses the interactional data collected at a particular point in time. As my data reveal, however, it is also instructive to illuminate the ways in which all of the potential indexes co-exist and co-occur in ways that are meaningfully related. It is therefore relevant to talk first about stance at the interactional micro-level in order to discuss style or the overall picture of indexicality that might emerge at the macro-level. The current study demonstrates this approach by examining the stancetaking practice that speakers adopt with a particular lexical item, *sugoi*, in a particular social context—complimenting.

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The reason why the current study has taken the speech act of complimenting as a resource for analysing indexicality and stance is that complimenting is a speech act that is inherently social (Manes 1983). It involves assessment of the referents and the negotiation of interactants' mutual alignments. Compliments are highly complex and performative, covering and offering many 'social moves' (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003). They not only facilitate and establish solidarity, acting as 'social lubricants' (Manes 1983:89), but also (mostly) address interactants' positive face needs (Brown & Levinson 1987). While there have been many attempts to define what a compliment is, the present study follows Holmes's definition (1988:446; 1995:117): 'A compliment is a speech act which explicitly or implicitly attributes credit to someone other than the speaker, usually the person addressed, for some "good" (possession, characteristic, skill etc.) which is positively valued by the speaker and the hearer'.

Throughout the whole complimenting sequence, the speakers directly and/or indirectly align themselves with the referents while showing their approval of whatever is being assessed. To give a compliment (and to accept or reject it) is inherently to adopt a stance. Kiesling's definition of stance was mentioned earlier; Du Bois's definition has a slightly different focus, one that is particularly relevant to complimenting: 'a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field' (Du Bois 2007:163).

Through an analysis of this social act, in particular through the act that is embedded in a single linguistic form, I discuss stancetaking practice and explore the associated system of indexicality—that is, how linguistic resources are used interactionally in the context of complimenting, and what indexicals there are and how they are interconnected.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA SET

The data analysed here are based on a corpus of more than forty hours of recordings of sixty-seven Japanese university students. The recordings of naturally occurring conversations were conducted on a university campus in the southern part of Japan in 2007–2008 drawing on the techniques of ethnography (Besnier & Phillips 2014) and sociolinguistic interviews (Meyerhoff, Schleef, & MacKenzie 2015). Group recordings were selected as one of the mitigation methods to counter-balance the Observer's Paradox (Labov 1972). The fact that participants were interviewed with a group of friends whom they knew relaxed the tension in the interviews and facilitated the production of as much natural and spontaneous conversation as possible. The corpus consists of two sets of data from two settings: sociolinguistic interviews and lunchtime recordings. In the sociolinguistic interviews, the researcher was present to monitor the conversations loosely, although the flow and direction of conversation were largely determined by the participants themselves.

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The lunchtime recordings, by contrast, allowed even more dynamic and fluid participation for the interactants; participants were free to join the conversation over lunch whenever it suited them and the recordings were sometimes made without the presence of the researcher (for details see Adachi 2012). As co-members of the same university degree programme and regular lunch and study partners, these students formed a distinct community of practice (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992; Meyerhoff & Strycharz 2013).

Through extensive fieldwork over three stages, a total of 369 compliments were identified in the corpus and their surrounding discourses were transcribed using ELAN[1] and the Basic Transcription System for Japanese (Usami 2003). The transcription conventions used for all of the subsequent data described in this article can be found in the appendix.

THE LEXICAL ITEM *SUGOI*

The lexical item under investigation is a Japanese adjective, *sugoi* (lit. 'something beyond the ordinary', 'amazing', 'incredible'), whose use, along with its variant *sugee*, is often informally claimed to be on the increase, particularly among young Japanese speakers. *Sugee* is a phonologically reduced variant of *sugoi* (the final diphthong [oi] becomes reduced to a lower front prolonged vowel [e:]). While *sugoi* is a standard form in the lexicon, the *sugee* variant is traditionally considered a male-preferred form (Ide 1992). Both variants share the same grammatical roles (they both occur as adjectives and, less frequently, as intensifiers) and referential meanings, although they seem to index socially distinctive meanings and stances, as the data below reveal.

The use of these variants in Japanese compliments is highly frequent and salient in the data set. Out of 369 compliment utterances and subsequent discourses collected for the corpus, seventy-nine compliments were marked with the variants *sugoi* and *sugee* (sixty-six and thirteen, respectively). This accounts for more than twenty percent of the entire data set of compliments, indicating the nontrivial use of both forms. As found in previous research (e.g. Holmes 1988), women gave more compliments than men (238 of the 369 compliments—sixty-four percent—were given by women).

Sugoi, both in and out of the context of complimenting, is an adjective when it appears in predicate positions. In other cases, it precedes and modifies noun/adjective/adverbial phrases, functioning as an intensifier, similarly to English *very*. An example of each case is illustrated in (1) and (2).[2]

(1) *Sugoi* as an adjective

Heta	ja	nai	shi	**sugoi**	yo:.
bad	COP	NEG	and	amazing	SFP

'[Your Japanese or English] is not bad, it's amazing.'

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(2) *Sugoi* as an intensifier

Ano	toki	no	karami	ga	**sugoi**	omosirokatta	yo.
that	time	GEN	interaction	NOM	very	funny.PAST	SFP

'That interaction was very funny.'

MULTIPLE PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF *SUGOI*

When examining how the lexical item is used and what it is used for in the moment-to-moment interaction of Japanese compliments, it becomes clear that it serves multiple pragmatic functions beyond the prescribed meanings. In the corpus there were at least five pragmatic functions of *sugoi* in interaction—it was used to indicate (i) praise, (ii) surprise, (iii) emphasis, (iv) a silence-filler, and (v) mock impoliteness. For convenience and clarity, only examples using *sugoi* are outlined here, although the *sugee* variant can potentially also perform the same pragmatic functions (but not the same stances, as we see later). Though the functions of emphasis, silence-filler, and mock impoliteness are relatively minor and less frequently observed, they are also illustrated, as one of the fundamental goals of this article is to illustrate how a single linguistic form fulfils multiple (pragmatic) functions and performs diverse stances, building on the wider indexical field. Below, I explore each pragmatic function in interaction.

SUGOI AS A LINGUISTIC INDICATOR OF PRAISE

First of all, the main and most frequently observed function of *sugoi* is to indicate speakers' praise for hearers in the context of complimenting. This could easily be predicted, drawing on the general positive meanings of *sugoi*: 'something amazing, something beyond the ordinary'. Because it carries a positive semantic evaluative load, this meaning can go hand in hand with the main function of complimenting: to make the addressee feel good. Extract (3) below illustrates a case in point. Compliments are highlighted in bold in all of the extracts. Each extract gives the name (pseudonym) of the speaker, the transcribed speech, and an English translation.

(3) *Sugoi* as praise

All four of the speakers are fourth-year students. Takeshi is a male student, and Mie, Yoriko, and Rie are female students. Mie is a student who belongs to Professor Shibamoto's seminar group. They are talking about this professor's seminar students, who are practising their presentation.

1	Takeshi:	Kyou, teka, kyou, renshuu suru no?.	'Will you practise [the presentation] today?'
2	Mie:	Kyo:, u:n, go-jikanme owatte kara:, ano go-maru-nana de renshuu.	'Yeah, we will practise in 570 after fifth period today.'

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3	Yoriko:	He:.	'Heh.'
4	Rie:	**/3sec/ O: sugoi ne:, Shibamoto-zemi.**	**'Shibamoto seminar students 'are amazing.'**
5	Takeshi:	**E, ii na: sore.**	**'That's good.'**
6	Mie:	Kuru? <laughing>.	'Do you want to come?'
7	Takeshi:	E, kite ii no?.	'May I?'
8	Mie:	A kurunda, hahaha <laugh>.	'You really want to come, haha.'

In response to the question asked by Takeshi in line 1, Mie responds and gives the required information for Takeshi in turn 2: in fact, they are practising after the fifth period in room 570. This triggers an 'appreciation sound' (cf. Golato 2005:29), *he:*, in turn 3 by Yoriko. In turn 4, the use of *sugoi* and Rie's general tone indicate that the speaker is sincerely praising Mie and Shibamoto's seminar students. Just before *sugoi* occurs in turn 4, there is an admiration sound, *o:*, reinforcing the function of praise in this context. This generates one more compliment from the third person, Takeshi, in turn 5. This type of compliment using *sugoi* illustrates nicely the purposes that complimenting can serve: to fulfil the addressees' positive face needs, conveying the positive attributes of the addressees.

SUGOI AS A LINGUISTIC INDICATOR OF SURPRISE

The second main function of *sugoi* is to imply surprise at an event previously mentioned or an utterance previously made in conversation. This meaning might be easily predicted from the general referential meaning, since one could be readily surprised at other people's attributes that are 'something beyond the ordinary'.

(4) *Sugoi* as surprise
Both Akiko and Arata are female fourth-year students. They are talking about their career plans after graduation.

1	Akiko:	Atashi, koko de hataraku yotei desu.	'I intend to work here.'
2	Arata:	Doko doko?	'Where where?'
3	Akiko:	Koko de.	'Here [at this university].'
4	Arata:	Koko? [↑] (Akiko: hahaha), **sugo:i**.	'Here? **Amazing.**'
5	Akiko:	Atashi koko ga daiichi shibou nande.	'My first choice is [to work] here.'

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In turn 1, Akiko sets out the direction of the conversational topic: future career after graduation. Arata is clearly intrigued by the utterance Akiko made and so asks a question to clarify the content of the proposition in turn 2. When Arata finds out that Akiko wants to work at the administrative office of the university, a post that is considered challenging to obtain, Arata puts rising intonation on the final segment *koko* 'here', implying surprise, and *sugoi* right after confirms its function as a further indicator of surprise with the prolonged and emphasised vowel /o:/. This type of rising intonation followed by *sugoi* soon after is frequently observed in the data set. Also, there is a slight pause between *koko* with rising intonation and *sugoi*. Both factors signal that Arata might have needed a moment to understand the utterance, possibly because of the surprise or shock.

SUGOI AS AN INTENSIFIER

Though relatively infrequently found, *sugoi* can be used for emphasis and as an intensifier. Since *sugoi* is not simply an adjective but also an adverb, it can also be used to reinforce and emphasise the force of the predicate. Consider the example in (5).

(5) *Sugoi* as an intensifier
Interaction between two fourth-year females. Yoshiko is thanking Rie for the postcard she received from her.

1	Yoshiko:	Ne sugoi sa:, ano sa:, hagaki kimashita.	'Hey, the postcard came.'
2	Rie:	N?.	'What?'
3	Yoshiko:	Hagaki ga ne: kita no:.	'The postcard came.'
4	Rie:	A, a: <laughing>.	'Ah haha.'
5	Yoshiko:	Arigato:u.	'Thank you.'
6	Yoshiko:	**Sugoi, nanka, go, go-teineini doumo: to omotte.**	**'I thought it was like very polite.'**
7	Rie:	Haha, ieie.	'No, not at all.'

Here, as we have seen in extract (2) earlier, *sugoi* modifies the adverbial phrase immediately following, *go-teineini* 'HON.prefix-polite'. *Sugoi* in turn 6 emphasises the degree of *teineini* 'polite' and Yoshiko takes it to a further degree of politeness by using the honorific prefix *go*. These types of appreciation compliments are commonly found. In turn 5, Yoshiko thanks Rie for sending the postcard to her. Then in turn 6, she states how she felt about Rie—Rie was very polite for sending the postcard. It seems clear from this example that the relationship between the speech acts of complimenting and thanking is closely intertwined. Doing something admirable or doing someone a favour can cause benefit for the addressee. In these cases, thanking, possibly as part of complimenting, tends to co-occur with it (cf. Holmes 1995).

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SUGOI AS A SILENCE-FILLER

There are some cases where *sugoi* potentially functions as a silence-filler. The idea that frequent use of *sugoi* signals the 'meaningless' and acts as a filler in conversations is something that was frequently raised in the playback interviews[3] by the participants, as we will see later on. Extract (6) is an example of this use.

(6) *Sugoi* as a silence-filler
Both Maho (female) and Takeshi (male) are fourth-year students. Rie (female) is in a relationship with an older man, who does not do much housework. Prior to this extract, Rie has been expressing her anger in describing an event where she had to clean up his apartment after a party at which she was not present. Takeshi thinks it is admirable of her to do so and therefore that she has a good character as a woman.

1	Maho:	**Era:i.**	**'Admirable.'**
2	Takeshi:	**Sugoi yo ne: erai.**	**'Amazing, admirable.'**
3	Rie:	Mou maji mukatuite ne: kyou ira ira shinagara kita <laughing>.	'I was really irritated and I came to university irritated.'
4	Takeshi:	**A: erai.**	**'Admirable.'**
5	Takeshi:	Ahahaha <laugh>.	'Hahaha <laugh>.'
6	Rie:	Arien.	'This has to stop.'
7	Takeshi:	**Iya, ne, sugoi, souiu buki tte iu ka ne:, hai…**	**'But, see, that's like a weapon [which you can use to attract men].'**

Throughout this interaction, a number of compliments were generated: in turn 1 *erai* 'admirable', in turn 2 *sugoi* and *erai*, and in turn 4 *erai*. These compliments are all addressed to Rie and comment on her performance: how she completed the housework for her boyfriend. Rie does not acknowledge these compliments anywhere in this interaction. In turn 3, she simply explains how irritated she felt about having to do her boyfriend's housework. Even after the third compliment in turn 4, she does not directly accept the compliment but instead states 'This has to stop' in an ominous tone in turn 6. Takeshi attempts to respond to this comment in turn 7 with yet another compliment.

There are some keys to interpreting this use of *sugoi* as a silence-filler by Takeshi in line 7. First, there are a lot of pauses in this utterance. In fact, there is a pause after every word, indicating that he might be looking for something he can say to this poor girl. Second, this *sugoi* is interlocated between other silence-fillers such as *iya, ne*, and *souiu*. Even if we get rid of *iya, ne, sugoi*, and *souiu* in line 7, the literal meaning of the entire sentence remains the same. Therefore, it seems that the referential meaning of *sugoi* is bleached out and almost empty amongst all of the other silence-fillers. It might be said that this use of *sugoi* adds to the stance

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of hesitation. The close relationship of discourse features such as silence-fillers to stancetaking has been reported in some sociolinguistic studies (Moore & Podesva 2009; Pichler 2013).

It seems reasonable to state that we are observing a shift from the canonical use of *sugoi*. The participants were also aware of the fact that they use this lexical item to this effect every so often, as reported in the playback interviews. My participants frequently raised the point that the word 'does not mean too much these days', one informant actually articulating the opinion that *sugoi* is meaningless in some contexts. These comments seem to suggest a change in progress or a phase of grammaticalisation, and that these young speakers might be aware of this potential change. This data set, however, does not provide the real time data—or at least the apparent time data—to compare and confirm this trend. This, then, may be a suggestion for future research.

SUGOI AS MOCK IMPOLITENESS

This final example of *sugoi* functioning in an atypical way shows that the classically positive evaluative word *sugoi* can be used as a conversation strategy to mock the addressee for interactional purposes: in this case, fostering solidarity between the speakers. At first glance, the utterance seems to be a typical compliment, that is, fulfilling the addressee's face needs by giving positive evaluations. A closer reading of the contextual keys, however, can give rise to a different interpretation of its illocutionary force. Golato also discusses these nonprototype compliments, stating that 'it is the placement of a potential compliment turn that is the crucial feature determining whether or not an utterance comes across as a compliment, or as some other (face-threatening) action' (2005:127).

Mock impoliteness (Culpeper 1996; Haugh & Bousfield 2012) and the banter principle (Leech 1983) help us understand this type of compliment better. Culpeper suggests that 'mock impoliteness, or banter, is impoliteness that remains on the surface, since it is understood that it is not intended to cause offence' (1996:352). Hence, it is important to note that a face threat is not intended in mock impoliteness. Leech's (1983) banter principle suggests a similar point: 'in order to show solidarity with *h* [the hearer], say something which is (i) obviously untrue and (ii) obviously impolite to *h*' (1983:144). Because what the speaker says is clearly untrue and impolite, this generates a conversational implicature that the opposite is the intended effect. Furthermore, Culpeper (1996) and Leech (1983) both agree that banter and mock impoliteness most frequently occur between speakers of the same status and indicate that 'the more intimate a relationship, the less necessary and important politeness is' (Culpeper 1996:352; cf. Wolfson 1988).

In the case of *sugoi*, too, we see that the contexts in which this variant is used are essential for accurate retrieval of the illocutionary force of the utterance as a compliment. The next example (7) is a case in point.

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(7) *Sugoi* as mock impoliteness

Both Takeshi and Gengoro are male fourth-year students. This interaction takes place as soon as Gengoro comes into the common room. Gengoro handed in his assignment late this morning and Takeshi was informed of this by another mutual friend before this interaction.

1	Takeshi:	**Sugoi ne:, nanka shachou-shukkin rashii ne, Gengoro-kun.**	**'Amazing, I heard that you came in late like a boss, Gengoro.'**
2	Gengoro:	Nante, nante, nante?.	'What what what?'
3	Takeshi:	Touzen no youni motte itta rashii ne:.	'You handed [the assignment] in late as if it's normal.'
4	Gengoro:	Chigau…chigau.	'No no it's not like that.'

Shachou-shukkin (lit. 'boss-commute') in turn 1 is a phrase in Japanese that denotes the high status of powerful bosses in the workplace. It indicates that these bosses are so powerful that they can come into work much later than the rest of their subordinates or even choose not to come in at all. This phrase is often used sarcastically against people who are actually not the ones with the power, and yet seem to be acting like them. In this case, Gengoro is, in fact, merely a student and also a close friend of Takeshi. Takeshi is teasing Gengoro that he handed in his assignment late—taking the kind of liberties with deadlines and schedules that a boss would. This interpretation fits well with the banter principle (Leech 1983) since the statement is both obviously untrue and is interpreted as ostensibly impolite among these students.

This type of compliment, exploiting a mock impoliteness strategy, may not be canonical. It looks like a compliment at the surface level; however, taken in the context of the larger discourse, it reveals a deeper level of face work—teasing the addressee's face, thereby fostering solidarity between the participants.

THE VARIANTS *SUGOI* AND *SUGEE* IN JAPANESE COMPLIMENTS

As previously discussed, *sugee* is a phonologically reduced variant of the standard lexical form *sugoi*. While they carry the same referential meanings and grammatical functions, at least in the context of Japanese compliments, the social meanings assigned to each variant seem to be quite distinctive. According to Ide (1992), these phonologically reduced variants[4] have derogatory connotations; they are typical of men's repertoires and are generally considered vulgar. Ide goes further to state that these vulgar expressions are 'not allowed' in women's repertoire of morphemes and lexical items (1992:125). Much of the previous literature on Japanese language and gender has noted that there are gender-preferential forms that index either male or female language use. The best-known examples are sentence-final particles and address terms and pronouns: for instance, *-ze* indexes male speakers' use

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TABLE 1. *Number (percentage) tokens of* sugoi/sugee *by speaker gender (chi-square = 0.8724,* p = *0.350303, not significant).*

Tokens	Gender of speaker		Total
	Female	Male	
Sugoi	49 (13.2%)	17 (4.6%)	66
Sugee	8 (2.1%)	5 (1.3%)	13
Total tokens of compliments	238	131	369 (100%)

whereas *-wa* points to female speakers. This dichotomy of male and female preferred linguistic forms has been reinforced over time and it has been considered important to encourage its 'appropriate' use for both genders, though the pressure has been greater for females to select female-preferred forms (Jugaku 1979; Okamoto & Sato 1992; Nakamura 2001).

This is what Ochs (1992) calls an indirect index of gender as opposed to a direct index. Under indirect indexing, linguistic forms ultimately point towards the gender of speakers but they are not exclusive and prescribed. For instance, female speakers may choose to use (even against societal norms and pressure) male-preferred forms like *-ze* to express or achieve particular stances and interactional and social goals, and these consequently contribute to indexing various social meanings beyond the prescribed ones.

Certainly, the current data set shows that women do not necessarily follow the traditional view of the use of gender-preferential forms with *sugoi* and *sugee*. Table 1 presents results showing that although both men and women use *sugee* less often than *sugoi*, women use *sugee* more frequently than men, though the difference does not prove to be significant.

In order to investigate further why young Japanese female speakers utilise the 'vulgar' variant traditionally used by male speakers and to explore the ultimate social meanings and stances these variants carry, the data from the playback interviews were analysed. These metadata are extremely useful for unpacking speakers' evaluations of the particular variants under question as they assess their own linguistic practice. The analysis of their metalanguage undoubtedly adds to a better understanding of how forms vary and why they vary the way they do.

THE PLAYBACK INTERVIEWS

The playback interviews were conducted in the last stage of my fieldwork with forty-one university students in total, some of whom were interviewed for a second time after the first recording made six months previously (either sociolinguistic interviews or lunchtime recordings, or both). The aim of the playback interviews was to access native speakers' judgements of certain complimenting-like behaviours. Ten instances of complimenting behaviour were extracted from the

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first stage of data collection. These were then transcribed and provided for participants in the playback interviews to follow as they listened to the sound files. Participants were then asked to provide comments about the underlined segments—namely, complimenting-like behaviours that contained somewhat unclear or unusual aspects that made it difficult to code them as prototypical compliments. One of the ten extracts included an interaction in which girls used the positive evaluative form *sugee*, but for rather unclear reasons. The extract that participants were invited to analyse is shown in (8) below.

(8) Excerpt of *sugoi/sugee* use in the interaction used in the playback interview

Except for the female researcher (R), all three speakers (Saki, Motoko, and Takeo) are second-year students. Saki and Motoko are female students while Takeo is a male student. They are talking about what first person pronoun forms they use towards people of higher status.

1	R:	Tatoeba jaa, sore wa tomodachi no aida to shite, meue no hito toka niwa, nante iimasu?.	'Okay, then, that's between your friends, how about when talking to someone higher in status?'
2	R:	Jibun no koto iu toki wa, meue no hito ni hanashite iru toki.	'When you refer to yourself, talking to someone higher.'
3	Saki:	"Watashi wa".	'"Watashi [female-preferred first person pronoun] wa"'
4	Motoko:	U:n, "watashi wa".	'Right, "watashi wa".'
5	R:	"Wa" "watashi wa" desho? "wa".	'Wa, isn't it? As in "watashi".'
6	Motoko:	"Wa".	'"Wa".'
7	Saki:	/3sec/ "Boku wa" tte iun ja nai?.	'Don't you say "boku [male-preferred first person pronoun]"?'
8	Takeo:	A, souiu toki ni, <"jibun wa" ga>{<} detari suru kamo shiremasen.	'Ah, I think I use "zibun [male-preferred first person pronoun]" in these cases.'
9	Motoko:	<"boku wa" tte iu?>{>}.	'Do you use "boku"?'
10	Motoko:	**A: sugee.**	**'Ah, amazing.'**
11	Saki:	**Sugee.**	**'Amazing.'**
12	Takeo:	"Boku wa" wa tabun tukai masu.	'I use "boku" sometimes.'
13	Motoko:	"Boku wa" wo tsukau to?.	'Do you use "boku"?'
14	Takeo:	Ue dattara… (R:a:).	'If I'm talking to someone higher.'
15	Motoko:	**Sugee.**	**'Amazing.'**
16	Takeo:	"Watashi"…"watashi" mo tsukau kana.	'I might use "watashi" … "watashi".'

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The forty-one students came up with a wide range of comments about and possible interpretations of the use of *sugee* by the two young females (i.e. Motoko and Saki) in this particular interaction. They often made effective comments on the difference in usage between *sugoi* and *sugee*. It was important that the sound file was also listened to, as this gave participants more contextual cues (e.g. intonation and tone). In analysing their metalanguage and observations, it became clear that there were a few recurring themes—stances and indexical meanings, in effect—to which the speakers were referring. The use of *sugee* seems to index a wide range of stances, which then contribute to building an indexical field for *sugee*. I consider these in more detail below.

STANCETAKING AND INDEXICAL MEANINGS OF *SUGOI* AND *SUGEE*

In the playback interviews, when speakers were asked to interpret the meaning of and reasons why these girls used the *sugee* variant, instead of *sugoi*, in the interaction shown in (8), they pointed to a diverse range of meanings; some of these are more stance-related, while others have more to do with persona and social category. In this section, I touch on the five most frequently repeated meanings that emerged in the playback interview: maleness, power, informality/solidarity, supportive listening, and meaninglessness.

First, as has been widely discussed in the past (cf. Ide 1992), there seems to be a relatively strong association between users of *sugee* and a social category of masculine speech. Male participants especially showed more obvious and stronger attitudes concerning this association than the females in the interviews. The following comments were all extracted from male participants in the interviews.

(9) Nori, male, 20
Otoko rashii onna dakara.
man like woman because
'Because she is a man-like girl.'

(10) Katsu, male, 19
Onna rashiku wa nai yo ne.
woman like TOP NEG SPF SFP
'She is not feminine like.'

(11) Ichiro, male, 20
Kankyou da to omoimasu. Mawarini otoko ga ooin ja nai desu ka.
environment COP Q think.POL surrounding man TOP many COP NEG POL QM
'I think it's the environment. I bet she is surrounded by a lot of boys.'

(12) Ryoya, male, 19
Sugee wa sugoi yori otokoppoi.
Sugee TOP sugoi than manly
'*Sugee* is more manly than *sugoi*.'

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As seen in (9), there is a direct comment on a clear evaluation of *sugee* as more typical of projecting a masculine persona compared to *sugoi*. Although the data set demonstrates females often using the variant *sugee*, as shown in Table 1, the overt comments of these male participants show they consider that the use of *sugee* still points towards the social category or persona of maleness, especially when used by female speakers. Put differently, the girls' atypical use of the male-preferred form *sugee* might even suggest that the girls are orienting to unconventional personae, and distancing themselves from the conventional feminine personae attached to *sugoi.* It is worth noting that speakers most strongly associate the *sugee* variant with masculinity, a social category and/or persona.

Second, this variant seems to presuppose some power relation between speakers in the interaction. The comments in (13) and (14) support this claim.

(13) Eiji, male, 21
Joge kankei desu. Takeo no hou ga kono
high-low relation COP Takeo GEN comparison NOM this
hutari yori
two than
shitani imasu yo.
Down exist SFP
'It's the status high and low relationship thing. The boy has a lower status than these girls.'

(14) Hanako, female, 20
Sensei ni wa sugee to wa ie nai desu kedo.
Teacher to TOP sugee Q TOP say NEG COP but
'I wouldn't be able to use *sugee* to *sensei*.'

Extract (13) explains clearly who is assumed to hold higher status or more power —the two girls who used *sugee*—and who has the lower status in the relationship— the boy being addressed with *sugee*. Extract (14) orients to another important power relationship in Japanese society. In other words, social norms discourage students from using the variant *sugee* to higher-status speakers such as *sensei* 'teachers/professors'. Therefore, it appears that the second stance the *sugee* variant indexes is the powerful and authoritative stance of the user in relation to the addressee.

Third, and closely related to the stance of powerfulness discussed above, this variant indexes some form of informal and/or solidarity stance (i.e. equality of power or status) in the interaction. Consider the comments in (15) and (16).

(15) Kyoichi, male, 19
Dou gakunen de kudaketa kanji.
same year and relax feeling
'Between the same grade, they feel relaxed.'

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(16) Mako, female, 21
Shitashikute ki wo tsukawa nai aite, kotoba tsukai ni
Intimate care OM use NEG partner language use OM
ki wo tsukawa
care OM use
nakute ii aite ni tsukau.
NEG good partner OM use
'I would use it to someone intimate with whom I don't have to think too much about which [linguistic] form to use.'

The second comment, shown in (16), demonstrates in particular just how much the Japanese are aware of different forms of language to be exploited in order to reflect their social relations to the addressee both linguistically and interactionally. Mako frames an interesting relationship between language use, linguistic form, and social relations. Depending on their social relationships with whomever they are talking to, Japanese speakers are aware that they modify their utterances and choose specific linguistic forms. Social relations and distance (sometimes this also includes physical distance) are key constraints for speakers, who must determine which linguistic form to use (cf. Bell 1984; Rickford & McNair-Knox 1994). As discussed in Adachi (2012), the salience and relevance of social status were found to be significant within this particular community of university students. The senior-junior relationship (*senpai-kouhai*) proved to be of high importance, especially in this speech community. Evidently, as indicated by these comments from the Japanese speakers, the variant *sugee* seems to index a stance of informality and solidarity.

Finally, and perhaps even most interestingly, interviewees often stated that the variant *sugee* actually does not have any (social) meaning. Consider the comments in (17) through (19) from the interviews.

(17) Shotaro, male, 21
Sugoi to omotte nai to omou.
sugoi Q think NEG Q think
'I don't think [she] really thinks it's amazing.'

(18) Ayumi, female, 21
Demo zettai kore hukai imi ga atte no sugee
but definitely this profound meaning NOM have GEN sugee
ja nai yo ne.
COP NEG SFP SFP
'This is definitely not THE *sugee* that has profound meanings'

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(19) Noriko, female, 21
Sugoi tte itte mo ironna imi de tsukawareru kara.
sugoi Q say even various meanings by use.PASS because
Aiduti no isshu mitaina.
nodding GEN kind like
'Because s*ugoi* has a range of meanings. It's like a type of nodding.'

It is apparent from the comments above that the interviewees are aware of the literal meaning of *sugee* 'amazing' (as seen in (17)). They further explain, however, that *sugee* has 'a range of meanings' and also functions as 'a type of nodding' (see (19)). Bearing in mind that this data set demonstrates the pragmatic function of *sugoi/sugee* as a silence-filler, it might be plausible to think that the variant *sugee* indexes the stance of supportive listening in interaction. It does not mean much in a literal sense, working instead as a discourse marker and/or interactional marker to indicate that the speaker is actively listening and contributing to the conversation. From these comments, it seems that young Japanese are aware of this newly created discourse function as they seem to orient to the fact that the original semantics of *sugoi/sugee* are virtually bleached in some interactions. It is interesting that speakers themselves are aware of a change in the meaning of *sugoi/sugee*, shifting from the literal senses to practically bleached, empty ones.

Overall, these comments are interesting because they indicate that these variants might be going through, or have already gone through, some stage of change in meaning-making and functions, given that participants can talk about the shift/change from the literal meaning at a recognisable level. As mentioned earlier, one might even consider the possibility that this form is going through a phase of grammaticalisation.

Analysis of the playback interviews led to the observation that speakers can point to a diverse range of social meanings attached to *sugoi/sugee*—stances (e.g. informal, powerful), pragmatic functions (affirmation, supportive listening), and social categories such as gender (e.g. masculinity). In the next section, in consolidating and making sense of all the data I have presented so far, both interactional data looking at pragmatic functions and metadata exploring speakers' perceptions, I summarise the indexicality of *sugoi/sugee* in Japanese compliments, drawing on Eckert's (2008) model of the indexical field.

INDEXICALITY OF *SUGOI* AND *SUGEE* IN THE COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE

As my data have revealed, through an analysis of interactional language and metalanguage, the indexicality of *sugoi* and *sugee* retains a great deal of complexity and diversity, involving multiple levels of meaning. The first and most foregrounded indexicality of this form is that it is embedded within the speech act of complimenting. As Ochs (1992) argued, social acts such as complimenting can be closely

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related to other social acts (such as thanking and encouraging) and may express stances (e.g. informal, vulgar, powerful), pragmatic/illocutionary events (e.g. praising, showing surprise, mock impoliteness), and social activities (e.g. solidarity-building, attention to positive face). While some meanings may in fact be more direct than indirect (Ochs 1992), or even more interior than exterior (Kiesling 2009), or related to each other in a more hierarchical manner (Silverstein 2003), given that speakers in the playback interviews pointed to a wide range of complex meanings (e.g. from stance to social category) at the same time, it is safe to assume that meanings and indexicalities co-exist in a field that can push some meanings out to be significant and more foregrounded in specific contexts. Eckert articulates this idea clearly:

> the very fact that the same variables may stratify regularly with multiple categories—e.g. gender, ethnicity and class—indicates that their meanings are not directly related to these categories but to something that is related to all of them. In other words, variables index demographic categories not directly but indirectly (Silverstein 1985) through their association with qualities and stances that enter into the construction of categories. (2008:455)

Speakers, in other words, are ultimately associating with social categories like maleness through the stances and pragmatic functions of *sugee* that are embedded in the act of complimenting. Drawing on Eckert's model of the indexical field, Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between *sugee*'s meanings and indexicality.

As we have seen in the metadata from the playback interviews, on the one hand, speakers are aware that *sugee* indexes stances that are specific to this variant—for example, informal, vulgar, powerful, friendly, and supportive (listening). On the other hand, because we are looking at the variant *sugee* only in the context of complimenting, this can point to some indexes and/or meaning that pertain to this speech act as part of pragmatic functions (the micro-level of functions in interaction—that is, what they 'do' in interaction as opposed to what they 'mean'). These functions are, for instance, solidarity-building, attention to positive face, intensification, indication of surprise, mock impoliteness, and silence-filler. These indexes are simultaneously, interactionally, and temporarily drawn and created in on-going moment-to-moment interaction. And, obviously, these indexicalities are always under pressure to change whilst speakers produce and reproduce new meanings associated with particular linguistic forms such as *sugee* through repeated use. With *sugee* and *sugoi* in particular, the trace of this process or change has come to be apparent; as speakers articulately and repeatedly noted, their meanings have become obsolete and bleached. But when they use the term 'meaningless', they do not mean that there is absolutely no meaning attached anymore to *sugoi*/*sugee*; instead, they indicate that the original literal meanings have become diffuse and have expanded to index something else—such as more unconventional stances (e.g. supportive listening) and interactional functions (e.g. mock impoliteness). To put it differently, the speakers are overtly expressing observations of language change.

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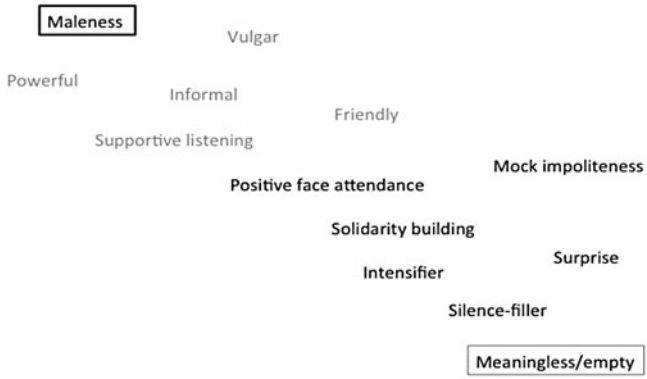


FIGURE 1. Indexicality of *sugee*. The black box indicates social category. Grey type indicates stance. Black type indicates pragmatic functions pertaining to the speech act of complimenting (i.e. shared with *sugoi*).

Recall Ide's claim that the vulgar variant *sugee* was not prototypically allowed in women's repertoire. My data, however, reveal that masculinity associated with the *sugee* variant is just one index in *sugee*'s vast field of indexicality. It might be worth noting that these Japanese women may not be aiming to do gender work through the *sugee* variant, but rather other kinds of social and interactional work, which are indexed through these variants as they establish more immediate and meaningful senses in interaction. Female and male speakers strategically exploit these two variants in different contexts to suit their intricate interactional goals and purposes. The distributional result and variability of the variants *sugoi* and *sugee* point to how the systems of indexicality attached to these variants co-exist for individuals as options for intraspeaker variation. As Eckert puts it: 'variables have indexical fields rather than fixed meanings because speakers use variables not simply to reflect or reassert their particular pre-ordinated place on the social map but to make ideological moves' (2008:464).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I examined and contested the notion of indexicality through the analysis of both interactional and metalanguage data as speakers themselves evaluate their sociolinguistic behaviour. In particular, I focused on the lexical items *sugoi* and *sugee* in the context of complimenting among young Japanese speakers. I first showed how the forms are interactionally used and embedded in the context of complimenting. Further analysis then revealed that these two variants index a number of social meanings, stances, and indexicalities through the act of complimenting and in fact allow the young Japanese speakers to carry out a variety of kinds of interactional work. I addressed how and why these variants bring certain

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meanings forward and inaugurate stancetaking practice in the context of complimenting. Analysis of the playback interview data made it clear that speakers are aware of, and capable of talking about, a number of potential stances and indexicalities attached to *sugoi/sugee* variants at the same time.

Through an examination of the use and distribution of *sugoi/sugee* variants in interaction, this article provides a richer picture of how and why lexical items may perform as a marker of social functions and stances among young Japanese speakers. Largely, the study supports Kiesling's argument that 'stance is the speaker's primary concern, and that linguistic features index social meanings in the service of the speaker creating or performing a certain stance' (2005:102). The analysis illustrates that young Japanese speakers simultaneously, interactionally, and even temporarily index their choice of stance through the use of the linguistic forms *sugoi* and *sugee* in performing the social act of complimenting. Further, we have seen change in the meaning attached to these variants as the speakers oriented to this change at a recognisable level—the 'bleached' meaning of *sugoi* and *sugee*. Finally, as studies of indexicality in sociolinguistics continue to advance, I hope that this article contributes to our understanding by highlighting the importance of combining interactional data with metalinguistic data that are directly attuned to speakers' own voices and their evaluation of indexical meanings.

NOTES

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[1]Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, The Language Archive, Nijmegen, The Netherlands, http://tla.mpi.nl/tools/tla-tools/elan/

[2]The following glosses are used in this article: COP: copula; GEN: genitive; NEG: negative; NOM: nominative; OM: object marker; PASS: passive; PAST: past tense; POL: politeness marker; Q: quote marker; QM: question marker; SFP: sentence final particle; TOP: topic marker.

[3]The playback interview is one of the data collection techniques originally developed by Gumperz (1982). This method is particularly useful in eliciting speakers' perceptions and interpretations of certain interactions, as it provides speakers with an opportunity to observe and evaluate directly their own sociolinguistic behaviour.

[4]These variations are found in most Japanese adjectives ending in *-i*. For example, *kawaii* 'cute' becomes *kawaee, kirei* 'beautiful' becomes *kiree, kakkoii* 'cool' becomes *kakkoee,* though some regional differences and variations of these variants exist.

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APPENDIX: TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

.	end of utterance
,	short pause
?	question utterance
:	prolonged vowel
[↑][→][↓]	rising, parallel, falling intonation
/number sec/	seconds of silence
…	reluctance to continue/finish the utterance
< >{<}	where overlapping starts
< >{>}	where overlapping ends
()	short back-channelling
< >	laughter; <laugh>
” ”	quoted speech

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