What's in a Name? Gender, Diversity, and Change in Japanese Naming Practices

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Are these names: Boy, Girl, or Both?

蓮	*ren* ‘lotus’
悠希	*yūki* ‘calm hope’
空	*sora* ‘sky’
葵	*aoi* ‘hollyhock’

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Answer

All four are used for both boys and girls — though with very different frequencies. This talk explains why.

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So What Is Going On?

- Some names are no longer clearly for boys or girls
- This seems to be happening more often

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Are Japanese names becoming less gendered?

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What This Talk Is About

- **Puzzle:** Are Japanese names becoming less gendered?
- **Data:** Three large-scale datasets, 1989–2024
- **Answer:** Yes — slowly, measurably, and not uniquely Japanese

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Today's Journey

1. Where does the data come from?
2. Are names becoming more **diverse**?
3. Are names becoming less **gendered**?
4. What role do **kanji** play?
5. How does Japan compare **globally**?

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Three Big Trends

- Names are becoming more **diverse**
- Gender boundaries are becoming **less strict**
- But boys' names are becoming more **predictable from kanji**

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But first a note on Japanese names

- Japanese names can be written in Kanji or Hiragana. Only the written (orthographic) form is officially recorded.
- Only kanji from an official list can be used (and this changes over time)
- Kanji can have multiple official readings **but the names do not have to follow them**
- So you get names like 月 (official readings *getsu, gatsu; tsuki; ato, ga', su, zuki, mori*

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- So you get names like 月 (official readings *getsu, gatsu; tsuki; ato, ga', su, zuki, mori*
  - Pronounced *runa* "Luna"!
- The law was changed to officially record pronunciation just last year, …

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Where Does the Data Come From?

Why not official government data?

Japan's family register (戸籍, *koseki*) records every birth, but is not released in aggregate form — there is no official name-frequency database. Koseki only record characters, not pronunciations.

Baby Calendar (BC) Real naming choices + parental explanations + pronunciation, 2008–2022.

Heisei Namae Jiten (HS) Large historical dataset, 1989–2009.

Meiji Yasuda (MY) Most popular names each year, 2004–2024.

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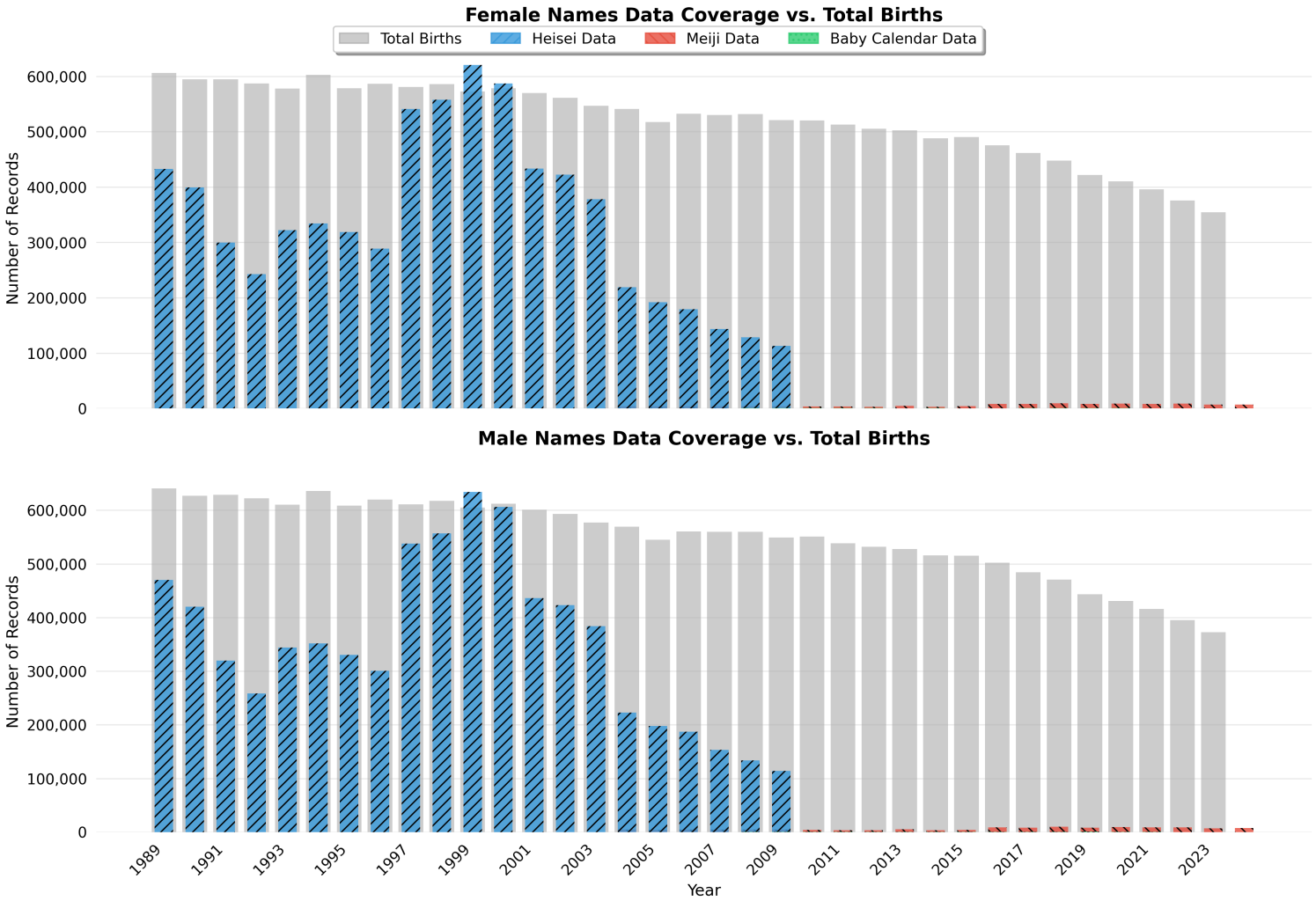
Dataset Coverage vs. Total Births



- HS dominates 1989–2009; BC fills 2008–2022
- MY covers only the very top names

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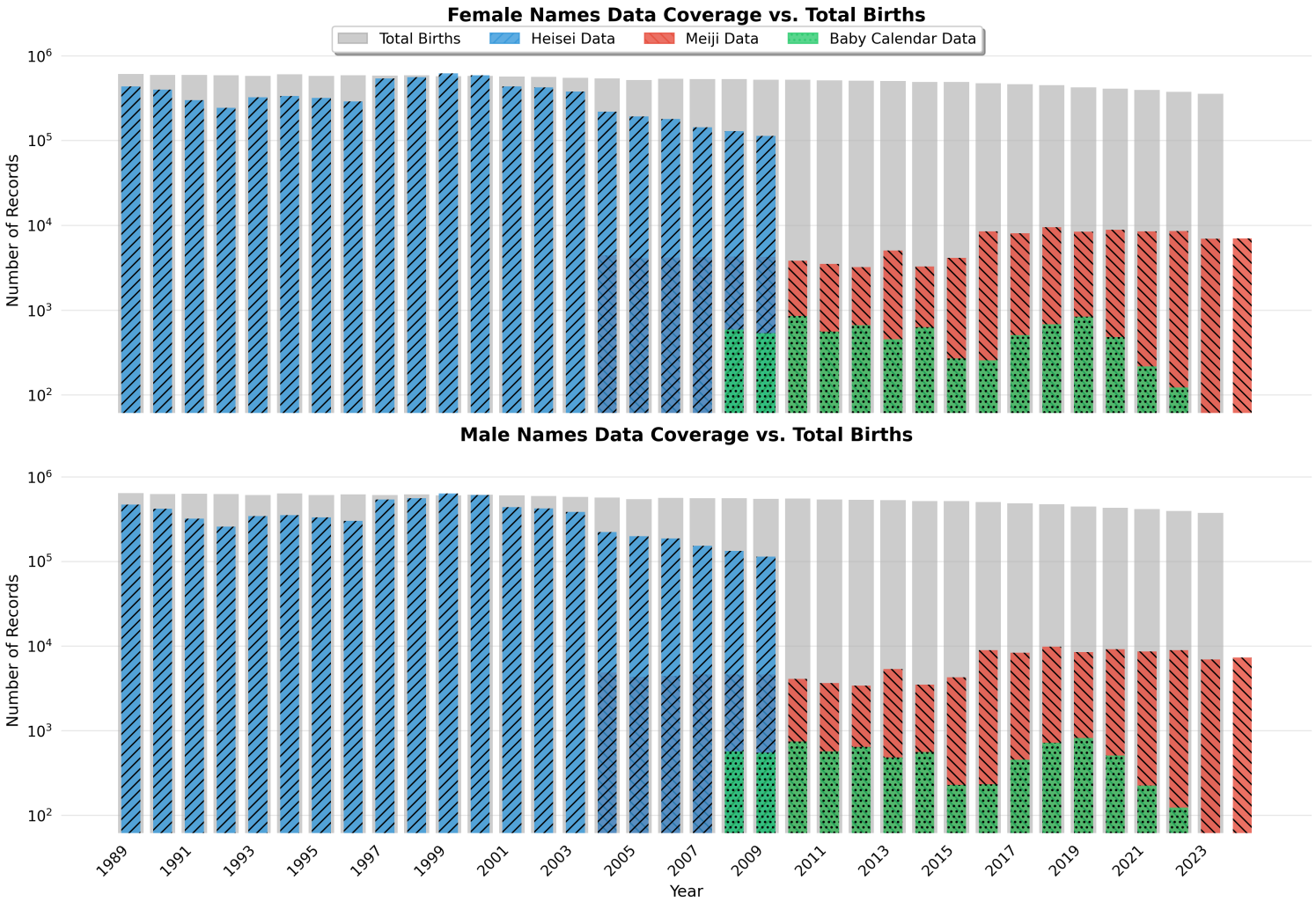
Dataset Coverage (log scale)



- Log scale shows just how narrow MY's coverage is
- BC and HS overlap during 2008–2009 — allowing cross-validation

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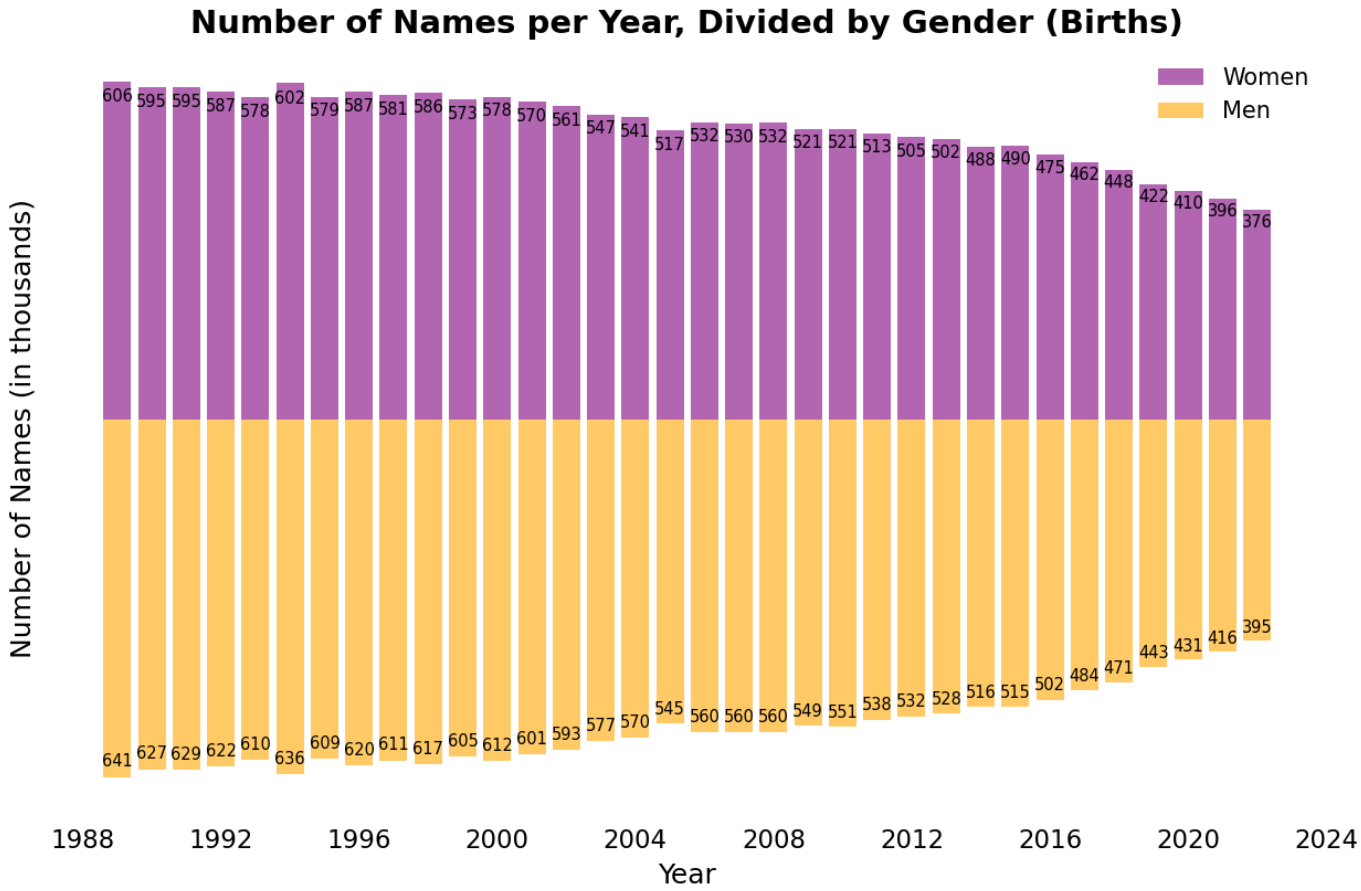
Annual Births



- Steady decline from ∼1.2M (1989) to ∼0.8M (2024) — a smaller pool, but *more* diverse naming choices

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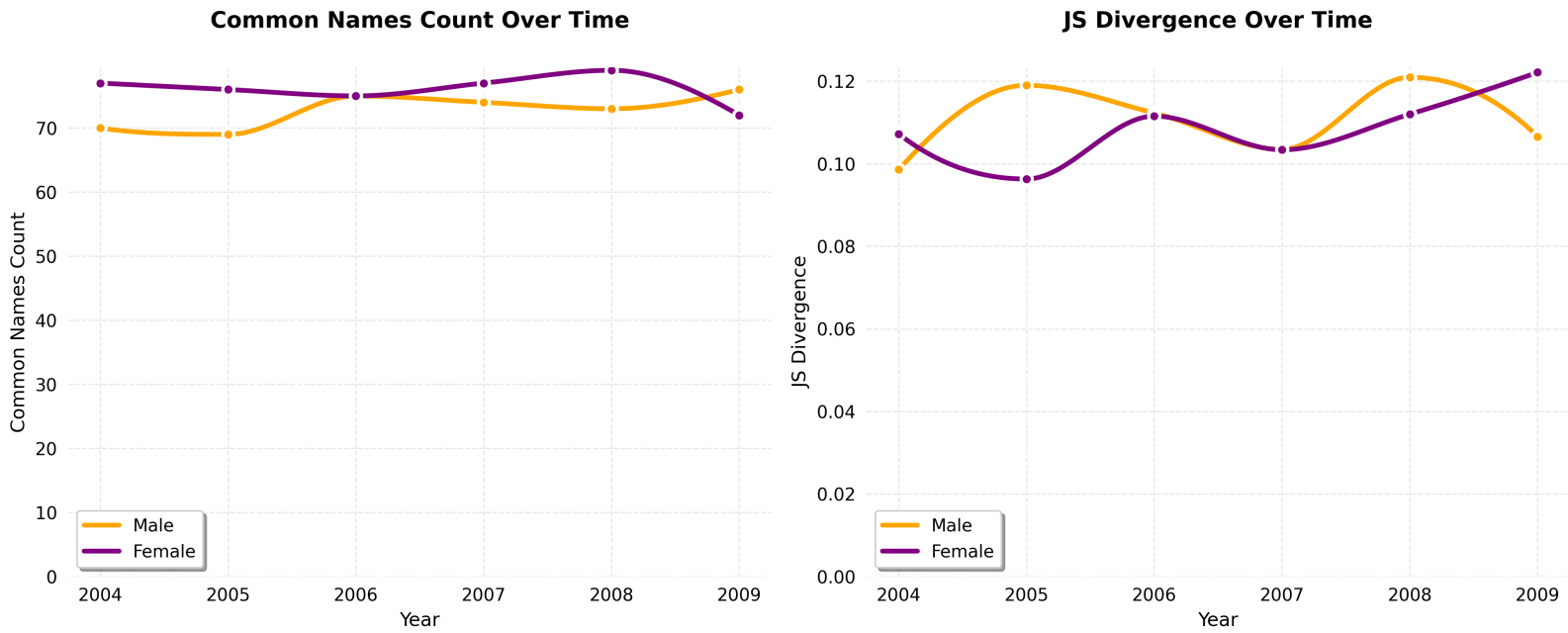
How Well Do the Datasets Agree?

Meiji Yasuda (top-100) vs. Heisei Namae Jiten:



- ∼75 names in common each year (out of top 100) — the datasets are telling the same story

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Are Name Choices Becoming More Diverse?

Berger-Parker index: share of names *not* held by the top-*n* names.

Plain English

How much of naming is concentrated in the top few?
Higher value = more diverse (less dominated by popular names).

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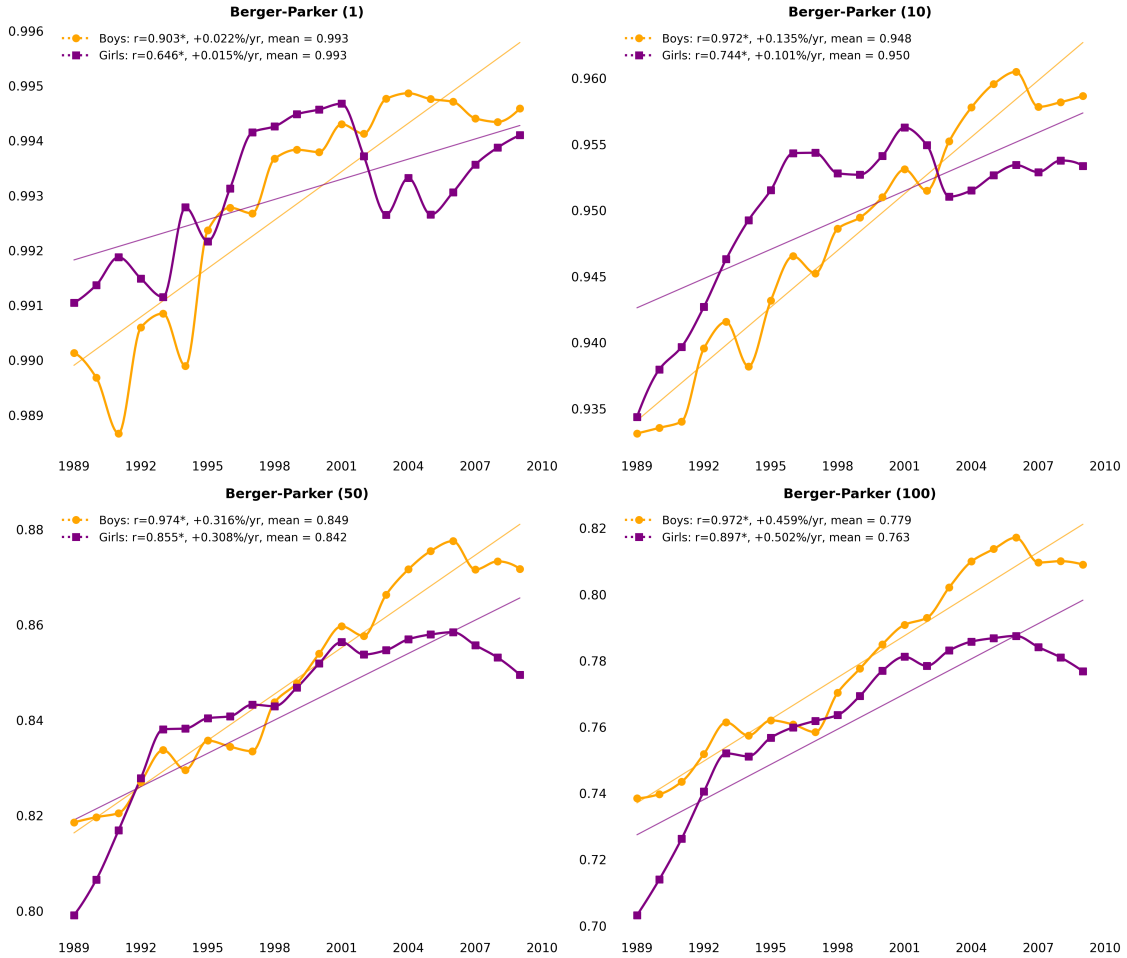
Berger-Parker: Heisei (orthography)



- Names are becoming more diverse over time — for both boys and girls
- The same upward trend holds in Meiji Yasuda data (2004–2024)

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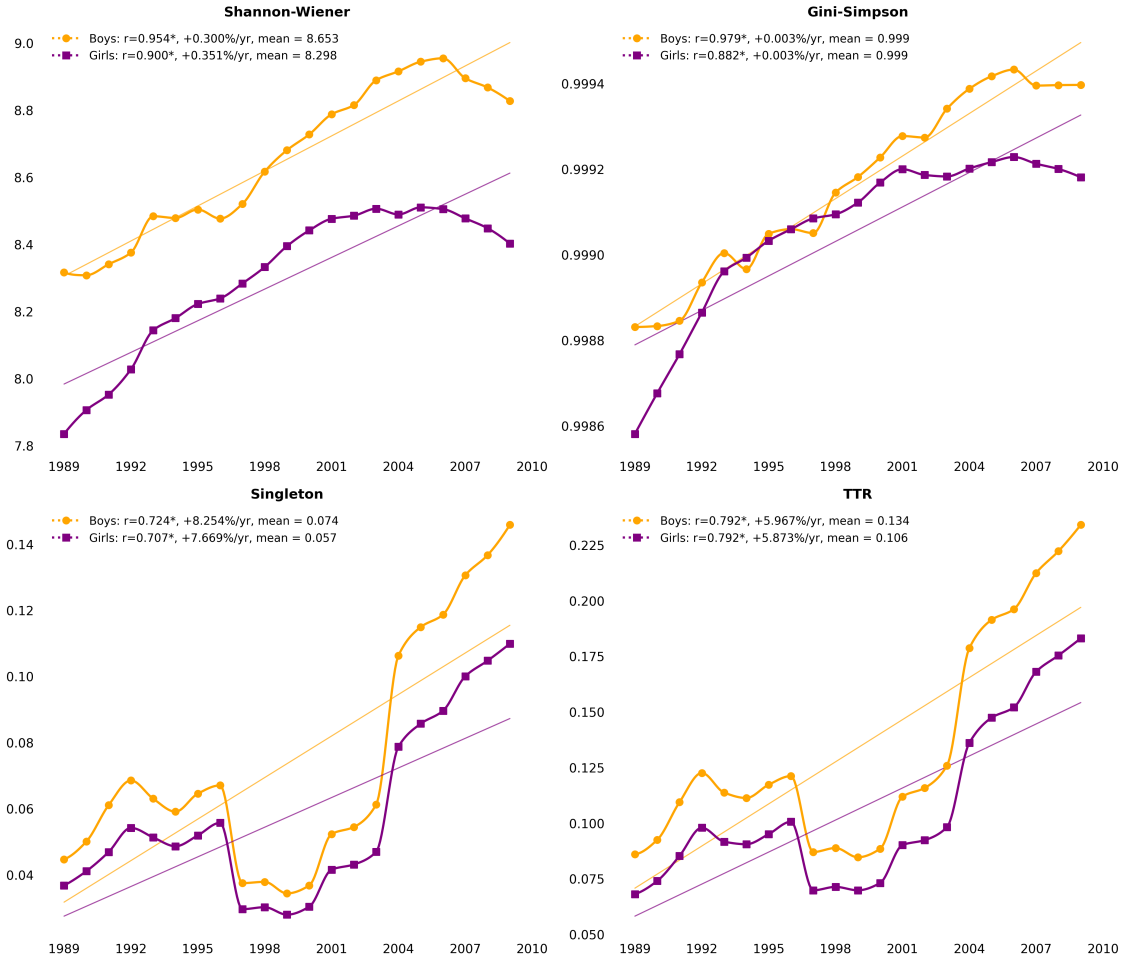
Diversity: Four Measures Tell the Same Story

Four ways of measuring "how many different names, how evenly used"



- Four different methods, same result: diversity is rising
- Boys consistently slightly more diverse than girls

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What Is an Irregular Reading?

- Japanese names can be read in ways not predicted by standard phonological rules (*nanori*)
- 心 *kokoro* ‘heart’ → read as *noa* in a name
- Irregular readings signal creativity — and sometimes controversy
- *Kira-kira* ‘sparkle’ names

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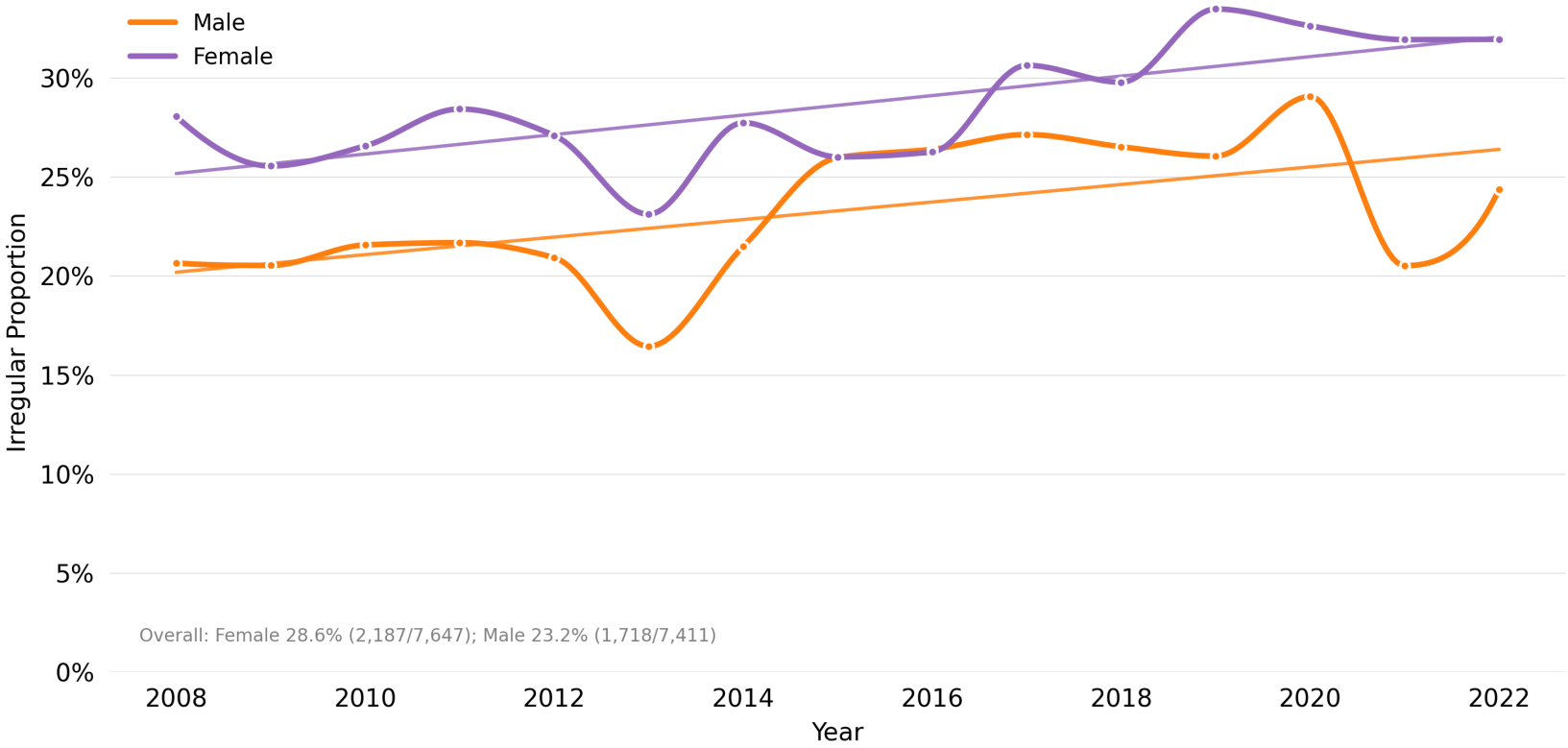
Proportion of Irregular Readings Over Time (BC)



- Parents are getting more creative — irregular readings are becoming more common
- Girls' names lead ($\approx 29\%$); boys' follow ($\approx 23\%$)

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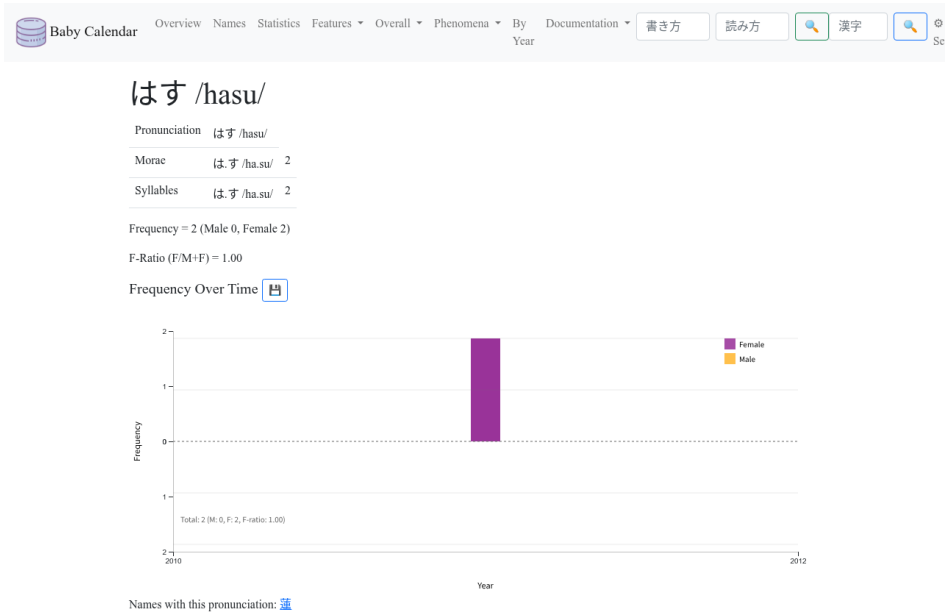
Example: 蓮 ‘Lotus’

蓮 read as *ren* — predominantly for boys



蓮 read as *hasu* — for girls only

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-ko Endings: A Gender Marker in Decline

- Traditionally, 子 (*-ko*) marked girls' names: *Hanako*, *Michiko*, *Keiko*
- At its peak ($\sim$1950s): $> 80\%$ of girls had a *-ko* name
- Today: well under 10% — replaced by *Hana*, *Michi*, *Kei*
- The suffix disappears but the kanji often remain — meaning shifts with pronunciation

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Gender Coding of Names

- We define an **F-ratio** = girl count / (boy + girl)
- F-ratio = 0 → only boys; F-ratio = 1 → only girls
- Gender-neutral names: F-ratio $\in [0.2, 0.8]$

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What Would You Expect?

- If names are becoming less gendered…

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What Would You Expect?

- If names are becoming less gendered…

What should the data look like?

What Would You Expect?

- If names are becoming less gendered…

What should the data look like?

- More names shared by boys and girls?
- Less clear separation between the two?

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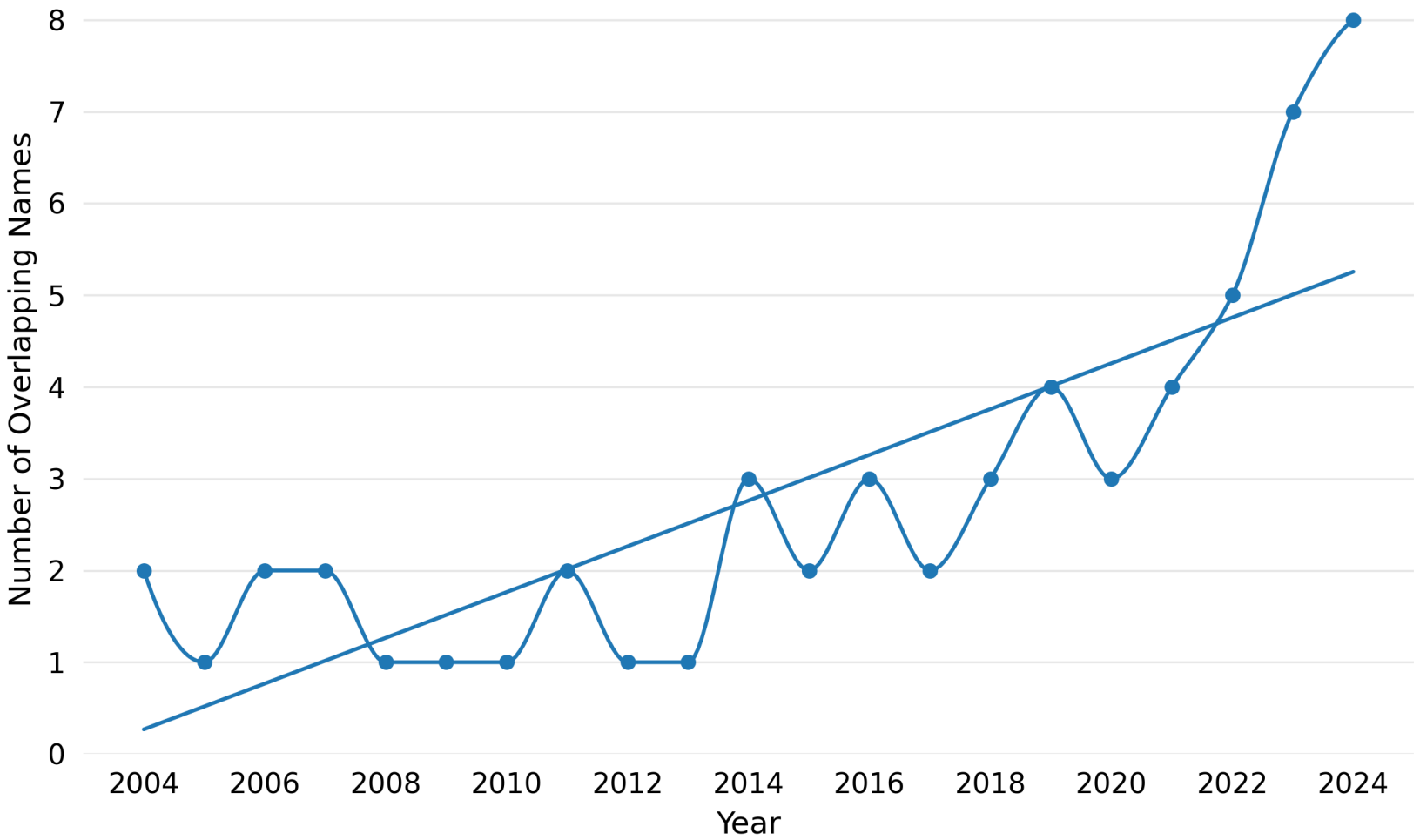
Names Shared Across Genders (Meiji Yasuda, pronunciation)



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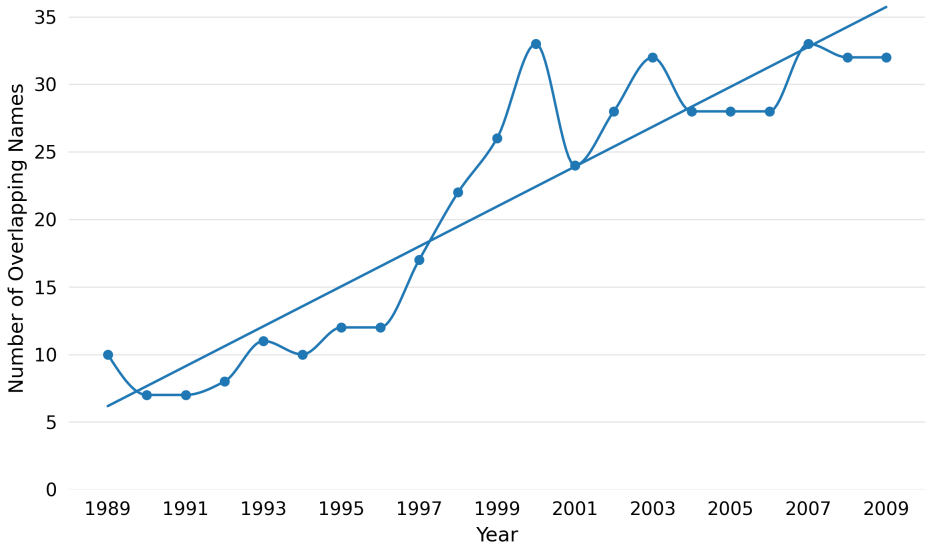
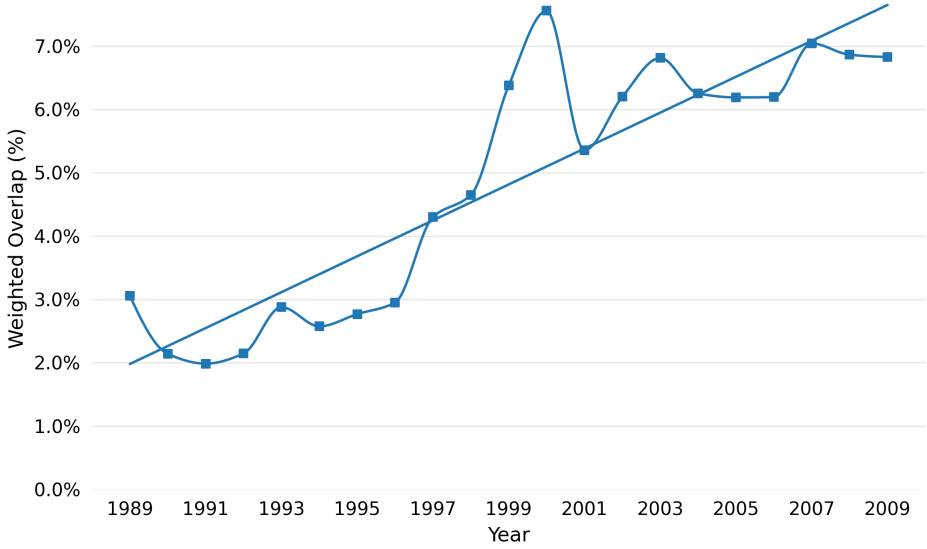
- Sharp rise post-2020: the top-50 overlap is growing fast

Shared Names: Heisei (orthography)





Count

Weighted

- 1989–2009: steady rise from ∼10 to ∼32 shared names in top 500 — the trend is long-running

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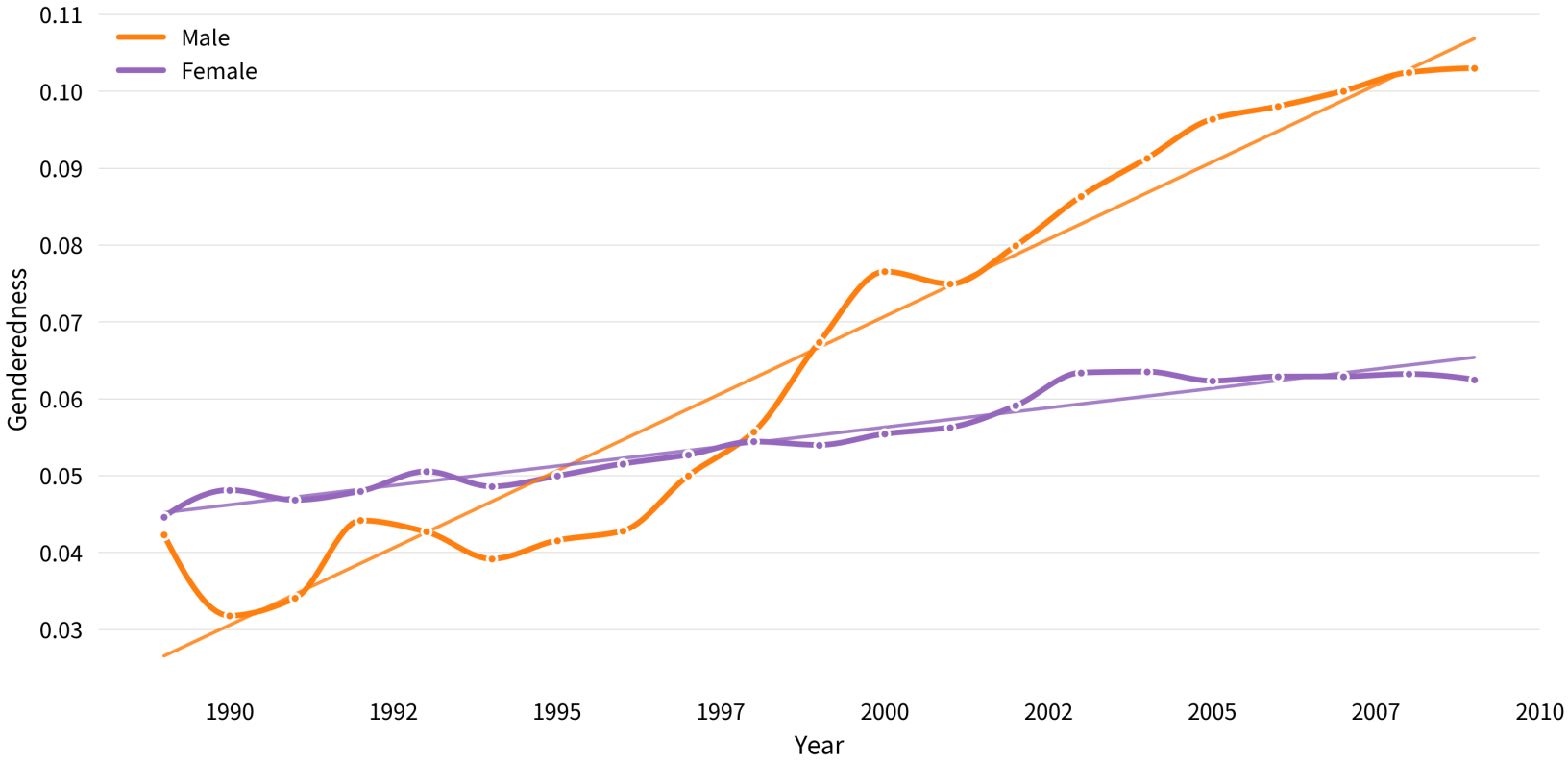
Genderedness Over Time (Heisei)



- **Genderedness**: how easily a classifier guesses gender from the name alone — higher = more gender-predictable
- Boys' names are becoming *more* gender-predictable from kanji, even as overall boundaries soften; the same pattern holds in MY data

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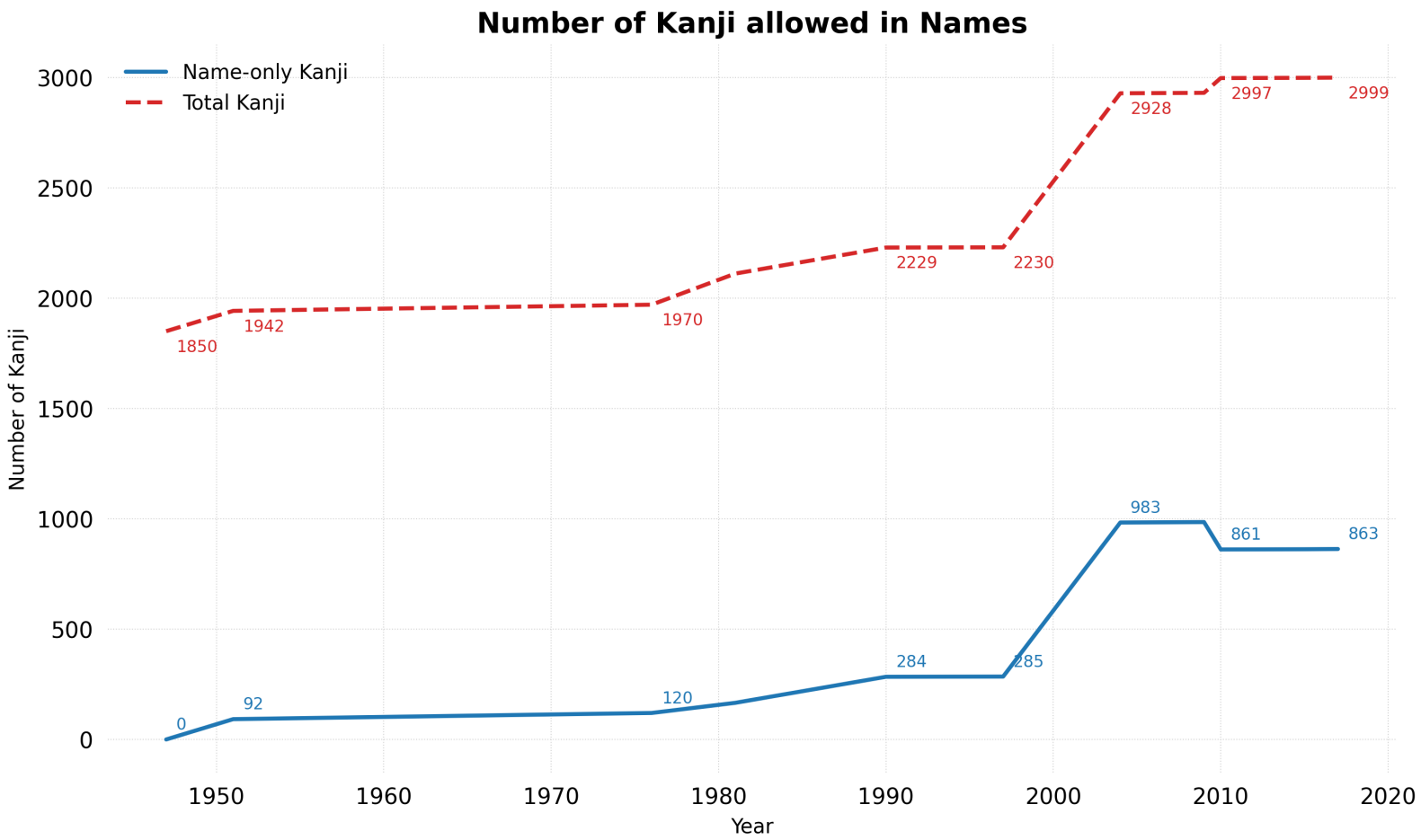
Kanji Allowed in Names



- 2010 reform added 983 name-only kanji in one step
- Now ≈3,000 kanji permitted; name-only kanji = 863

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Where Does a Kanji Appear in a Name?

- **Solo**: single-kanji name (翔)
- **Initial**: first kanji in a compound (翔太)
- **Middle**: middle position (大翔太?)
- **End**: final kanji (大翔)

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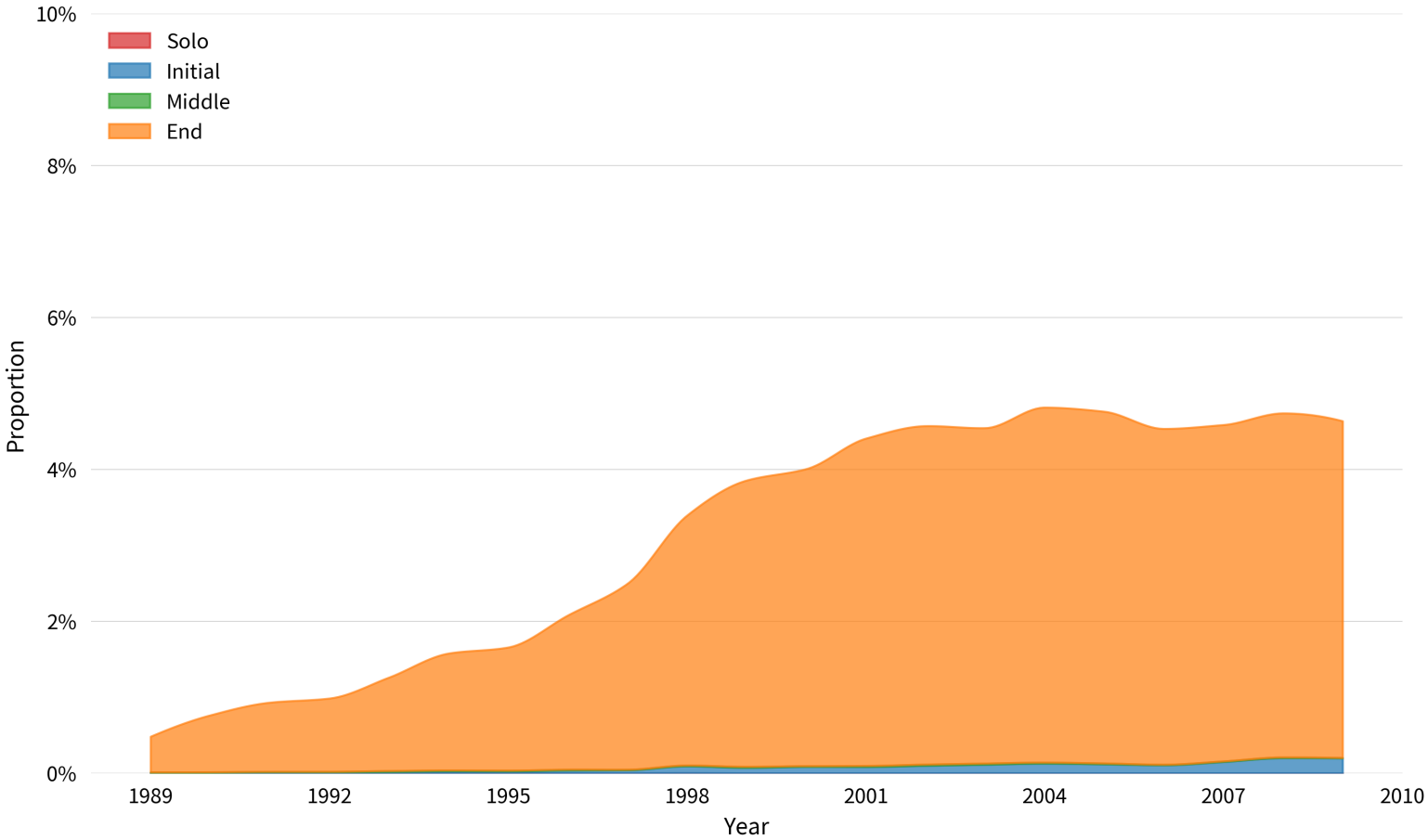
斗 (dipper, *to*) — Heisei, boys



- Rises in end-position through 2009 — 大斗, 颯斗, 斗真 etc.

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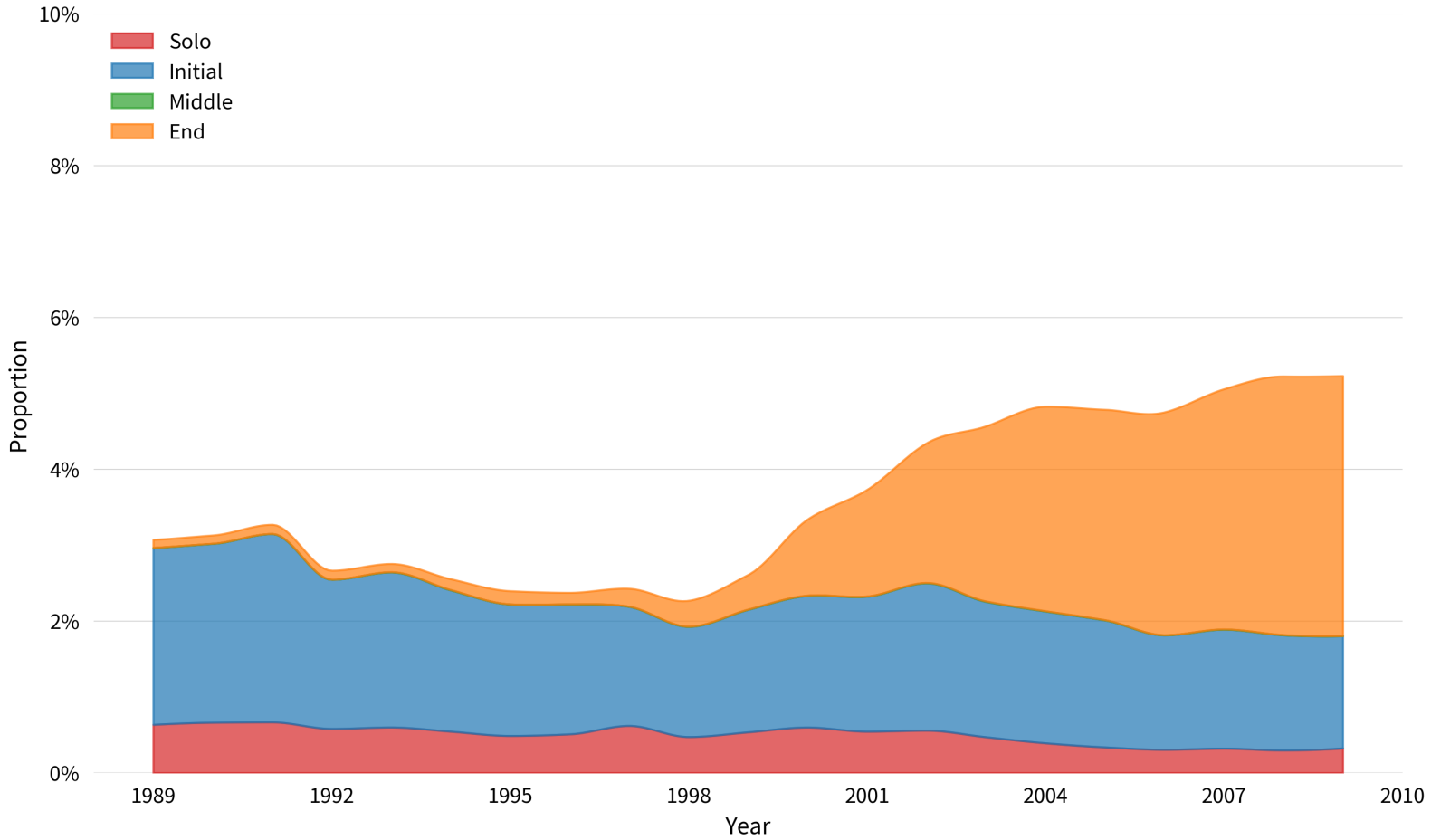
翔 (soar, *shō*) — Heisei, boys



- Fashion cycles are visible in kanji position: 翔太 (initial) gave way to 大翔 (end) over a decade

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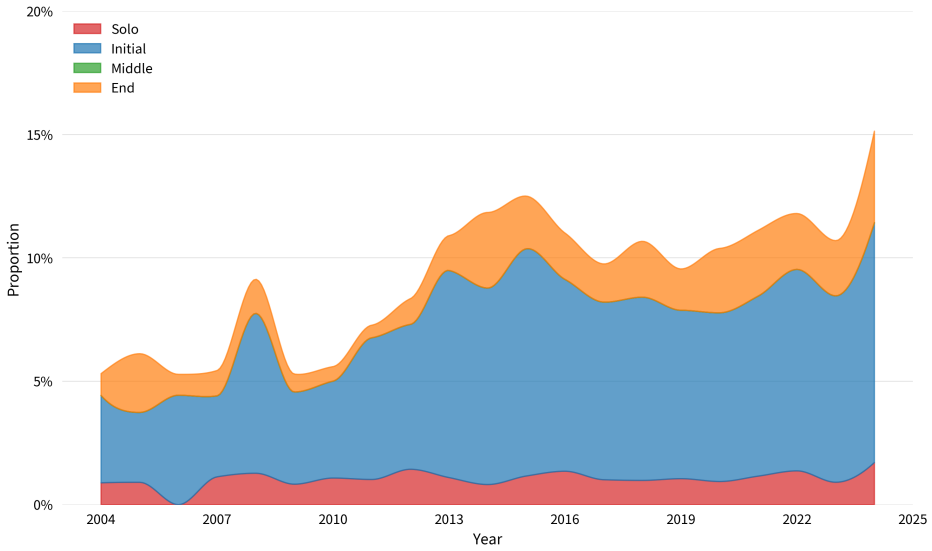
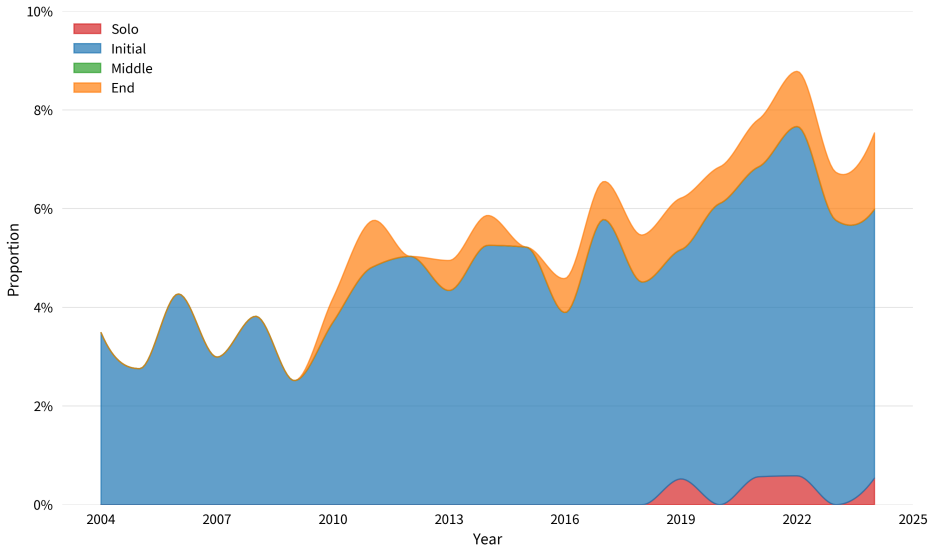
陽 (sun/positive, *yō*) — Heisei vs. Meiji Yasuda



Heisei (boys)



Meiji Yasuda (boys)

- Initial position dominant throughout; small end-position growth in recent years

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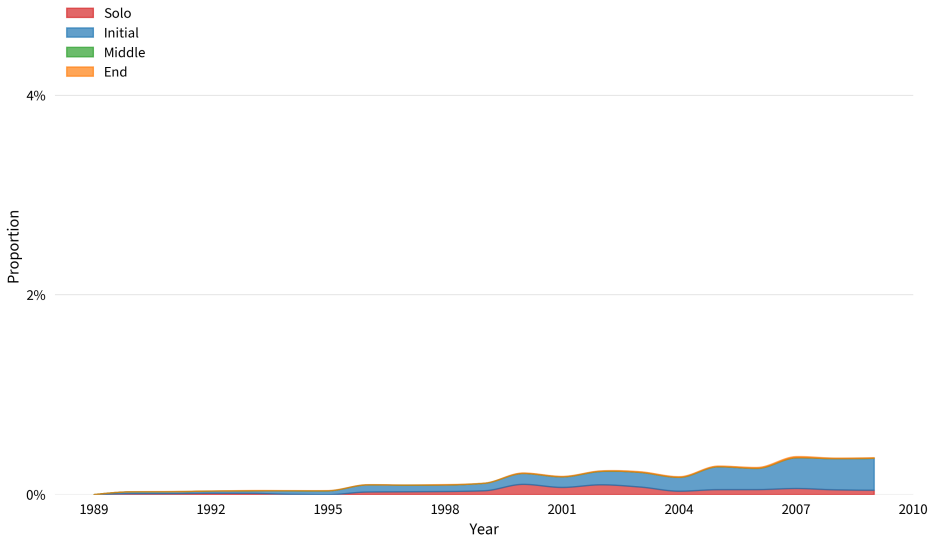
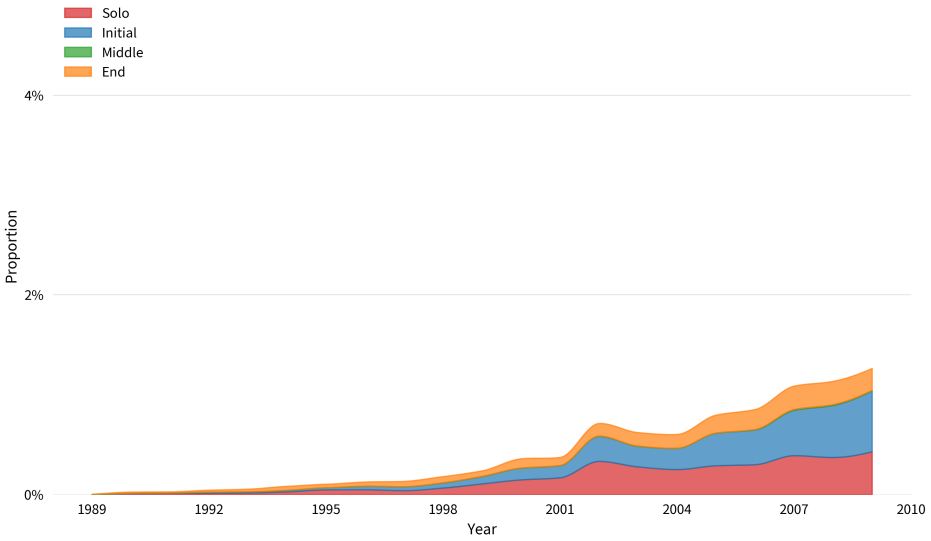
凛 (dignified, *rin*) — mainly girls



Heisei (girls) — small uptake at first



Meiji Yasuda (girls) — solo dominant

- Only allowed in names from 1990.
- Adding a kanji to the approved list unlocks a wave of new names

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A Global Trend

- Gender-neutral naming is rising across many societies
  - English: *Taylor*, *Jordan*, *Riley* — all now commonly used for girls
  - Korean: *Yuri*, *Eugene* — common for both boys and girls
  - Scandinavia: explicit de-gendering in law and culture
  - China: parallel trend, constrained by character conventions
- Drivers: changing gender norms, social media visibility, desire for individuality
- Japan: slower but measurable shift — constrained by kanji gender-marking conventions and registry rules

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What Constrains Change in Japan?

- Kanji carry gender associations (美/子/花 = feminine; 郎/夫/男 = masculine)
- Registry law restricts name characters to approved list
- Cultural pressure: names must be readable, not embarrassing
- But: *pronunciation* is more flexible than orthography — gender-neutral sounds spread faster than gender-neutral kanji

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Parental Voice: Baby Calendar Naming Stories

- “We wanted a name that works for any gender”
- “The sound should be cute but not too girly”
- “We chose 蓮 because it sounds natural in both Japanese and internationally”
- Themes: nature, universality, softness — regardless of child’s gender

Observation

Parental narratives show conscious gender-neutralising intent, even when the name itself remains statistically gendered.

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Summary

1. **Diversity** is increasing: more names, fewer shared top-names, rising irregular readings — all trends point toward greater individuality
2. **Gender coding** remains strong but is softening: gender-shared names rising
3. **Kanji position** reveals cultural fashion cycles: specific characters rise and fall in specific positions over decades
4. **Global context**: Japan's trajectory parallels international trends toward more fluid gender expression through naming, moderated by linguistic and legal constraints

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Future Work

- Cross-linguistic comparison with Korean and Chinese data
- Modelling the spread of new name fashions as diffusion processes
- Impact of the 2024 Family Register Law revision on name choice

Takeaway

- Japanese names are still gendered
- But the boundaries are shifting
- And parents are actively reshaping them

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- Japanese names are still gendered
- But the boundaries are shifting
- And parents are actively reshaping them

This is not just about names —
it reflects changing ideas about identity

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Thank You

ありがとうございました

- This research will be published as an open access e-book
  Ivona Barešová and Francis Bond (2026) Gender in Japanese Names Today, University of Palacky Press (in press)
- All the data and software is available here:
  https://github.com/bond-lab/namae-bc or from Zenodo
  Francis Bond, and Ivona Barešová. (2025). Japanese Given Names: Data, Analysis, and Interactive Resources. Zenodo. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18591986

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