

Japanese kinship terms of address and reference – selected approaches

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1. Introduction

Kinship relations and family roles are believed to be interesting and inspiring issues for both cultural and linguistic investigation.¹ Although terminology referring to related persons exists in every language, various cultures and societies use it and classify it differently.

Asian anthropology is often considered a product of late European colonialism. Although Japan is thought to be the only country to escape colonization from the West, Japanese culture and mentality was influenced by the West. Nonetheless, the different approaches to numerous sociological and ethnological issues signalize that, although inspired by Western theories, Japanese anthropology has developed separately.

One of the most inspiring authors devoted to the matter of cultural anthropology is Nakane Chie, who juxtaposed Japan with Western and Indian cultures and presented it as a vertical society in her *Tateshakai no ningen kankei* (“Personal relations in a vertical society”, 1967) and *Japanese society* (1970). On the grounds of Japanese sociolinguistics, Suzuki Takao’s works are believed to be one of the most dependable sources of information for investigation into Japanese culture and language.

¹ The first academic approach to the problem of kinship terminology is more than a century old and is associated with anthropological research conducted by evolutionists such as Lewis H. Morgan, Edward B. Tylor or followers of the empirical and practical approach initiated by Bronisław Malinowski who applied functionalist models to ethnological analysis.

In modern times, due to the development of socio- and ethnolinguistics, and steadily growing interests in cognitive studies, new approaches to the problem of family relations and kinship terminology research have appeared. The aim of this paper is to present different perspectives of kinship terminology research in order to indicate its multidimensional character as well as reflect individual and universal features of conceptualizing kinship by the Japanese.

2. Japanese kinship terms – the sociolinguistic perspective

Suzuki Takao in his *Kotoba to bunka* (“Language and culture”, translated by Miura Akira into *Words in context*, 1978) emphasized the importance of subtle differences between the use of words in different languages and juxtaposed the interplay between words and context in Japanese with Western languages. Suzuki divided perspectives of designation into *egocentric* (first-person position) and *allocentric* (empathetic identification), which is nowadays considered essential when conducting research. Note that in most cases the process of addressing or referring to a particular member of family is based on placing the speaking person at the focal point (*egocentric* perspective): *Okāsan, otōsan wa osoi yo!* ‘Mum, dad is late!’. However, we might observe several situations when the speaking person attempts to identify with an addressee in order to emphasize intimacy or present his/her social function (*allocentric* perspective): *Mama, koko ni irasshai!* ‘Mama, come here!’ (used to address a female friend who is travelling with a little child) (Suzuki 1978: 142).

Allocentric use might be associated with the youngest-child perspective, which is nowadays regarded as the most favorable method of addressing or referring to a member of a Japanese family. We observe that in the following examples the speaking person transfers her/himself mentally to the position of the youngest child (Suzuki 1978: 142):

- a) mother to her eldest son: *Oniichan, kore o wasurenai yō ni.* ‘Don’t forget it, elder brother.’
- b) grandmother to her husband: *Jitchan, yūhan dekita yo.* ‘Grandpa, the dinner is ready.’
- c) grandmother to her son: *Papa, osoi yo.* ‘Dad, you’re late.’

According to the South Korean researcher Kim Se Rang, age, status and order perspectives were formerly more common than the youngest-child perspective. Kim investigated texts and dialogues taken from three periods: *kinsei* ‘premodern times’ (Edo period), *kindai* ‘modern times’ (early Shōwa period) and *gendai* ‘nowadays’ (Heisei period), and juxtaposed the earlier use of terms of address and reference with actual ones.²

Since the 1960s and 1970s, Japanese society has altered due to the dissolution of the stem-family system and parental support, and socializing terms between parents and children have also been finally proclaimed (Shi 2010: 51). The previously emphasized gap between the eldest son and other siblings has begun to gradually disappear and consequently the youngest child has become the centre of interest.

In the process of addressing a particular person, the Japanese tend to use personal pronouns less than first or last names with or, in cases of more intimate relationships, without the adequate title of respect (*-san*, *-chan*, *-kun*, etc.). The use of first names is also observed in the case of family relations, however it is essential to take into consideration that only members of the family placed in a lower position (wife, younger siblings, siblings’ children, children and grandchildren) are ought to be called by their first name or, alternatively, by the personal pronoun. On the other hand, when addressing the person who is placed in a higher position (grandparents, parents, parents’ siblings, husband, older siblings), the tendency to use the kinship term of address in its pronominal use is

² Among numerous examples of terminology referring to different perspectives of designation, the following three terms of address seem to be especially worth mentioning (Kim 2002: 278–279):

- a) grandfather to his wife: *ba* (abbreviated from *baba*) – an example of *age perspective* taken from the Edo period (the term *baba* is used here in the meaning of elderly woman);
- b) father to his wife: *ka* (abbreviated from *kaka*) – an example of *status perspective* taken from the Shōwa period (before marriage the husband tended to call his wife-to-be by her last name; however, after the marriage he was obliged to address his wife as *kaka*);
- c) whole family to the eldest son: *annya* – an example of *order perspective* taken from the early Shōwa period (although other siblings were called by their first names, the eldest one was supposed to be addressed by the kinship term *annya* to indicate his primacy).

widely observed (Suzuki 1978: 125). Consequently, the use of the kinship term of address in example a) is considered unnatural and incorrect:

- a) father to his son: **Musuko wa doko ni iku no?* ‘Where are you going, son?’ – the use of the kinship term of address *musuko* is incorrect;
- b) father to his son: *Omae wa doko ni iku no?* ‘Where are you going?’ – the use of the pronoun *omae* is correct;
- c) son to his father: *Otōsan nante kirai!* ‘I hate you, father!’ – the use of the kinship term of address *otōsan* is correct.

The pronominal use of terms of address might be regarded as a characteristic of Japanese, Korean and Laotian kinship terminology. However, in Indo-European languages such as Polish, Russian, English, and in Chinese as well, pronouns are thought to be more common than kinship terms of address which seem to have a more subsidiary function. Presumably, the use of personal pronouns indicates a more indirect character of a particular language.

3. Conceptualizing kinship in Japanese

Apparently, the modifications in kinship terminology formation and its functionality is a consequence of the differences in conceptualizing kinship in various societies. On the grounds of the assumption that the users of a particular language conceptualize reality in different ways, we might come to the conclusion that the meaning of a particular word is subjective. Analogically, a particular kin term should be defined individually since it reflects only part of the reality it refers to.

Nonetheless, according to Doug Jones “the conceptual structure of kinship seems to borrow its organization from the conceptual structure of space” (Jones 2010: 367). In every language kinship is conceptualized in spatial terms, since looking into family trees and contrasting kin relations spatial features such as lines, sides, distance, direction are mentioned.

Semantic conceptual structures seem to be one of the most comprehensible methods of linguistic comparison in reference to new approaches to the matter of *meaning*. The pie charts presented below are simplified conceptual structures corresponding to the first cousin in Chinese, Japanese, English and Polish, and their aim is to indicate differences in con-

conceptualizing the kinship term in reference to the selected features that might be distinguished or not:

- a) gender and hierarchy of generation;
- b) relative age (the distinction between older and younger siblings);
- c) paternal (direct) and maternal line;
- d) splitting (using two or more terms to refer to the members who share the same feature, e.g. *mother* and *father*) and lumping (using one general term to refer to the members who share the same feature, e.g. *parents*);
- e) descriptive or classificatory character of the kinship term.

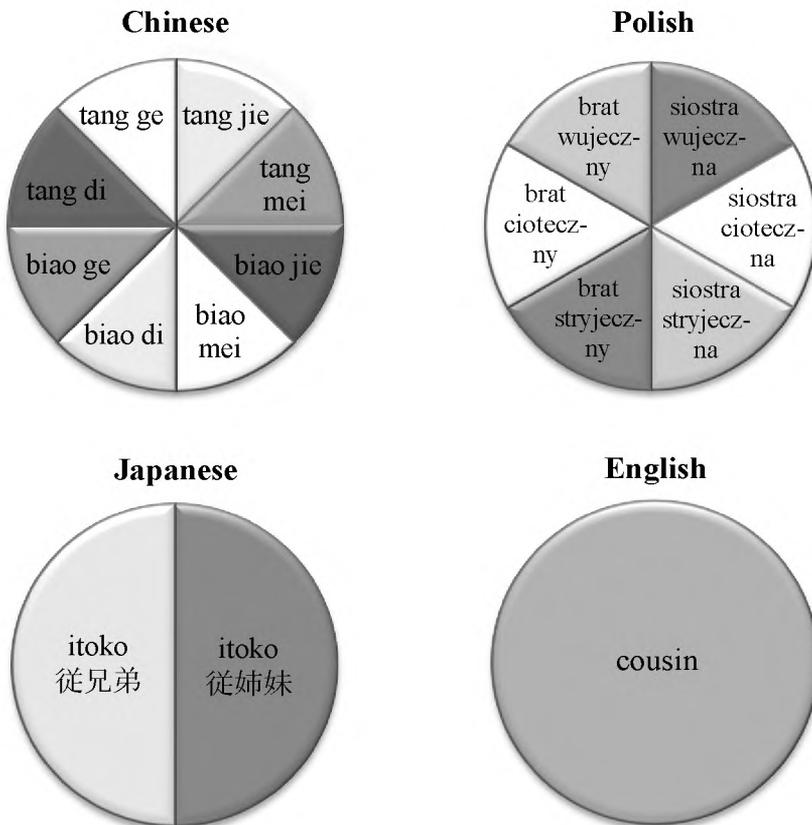


Figure 1. Semantic conceptual structures corresponding to ‘first cousin’

It is noticeable that in the case of English and Japanese terms corresponding to first cousin there is no distinction between gender,³ age or hierarchy and hence we conclude that both the English and the Japanese conceptualize first cousin in the most general and classificatory way. Although not presented in Figure 1, the Polish also conceptualize cousins without concerning age and hierarchy and only the gender is distinguished by the usage of the following terms: *kuzyn* ('male cousin') and *kuzynka* ('female cousin'). However, it is necessary to explain the existence of the above-mentioned division into: *wujeczny*, *cioteczny* and *stryjeczny* categories. In some Polish families the first male cousin is conceptualized as a brother (*brat*) and according to the paternal or maternal line and gender might be classified as: *brat wujeczny* (mother's brother's son), *brat stryjeczny* (father's brother's son) or *brat cioteczny* (mother's or father's sister's son). Unarguably, the Chinese conceptualize first cousins in the most individual way.⁴ Not only do they distinguish the paternal (*tang*) and maternal line (*biao*), but they also emphasize the gender (*ge*, *di* – brothers; *jie*, *mei* – sisters) and relative age (*ge*, *jie* – elder; *di*, *mei* – younger).

According to the short analysis presented above, while kinship terms corresponding to a particular member of family can be classificatory in one language (English, Japanese), they can be also descriptive in another language (Chinese, Polish).⁵

³ Although in Japanese there is only one term corresponding to first cousin: *itoko*, we observe that it can be written in two different ways according to the gender (従兄弟 – male cousin, 従姉妹 – female cousin). Apparently, in this case the gender is iconically reflected in written Japanese.

⁴ The pie chart presenting the Chinese conceptual structure was taken from Qian / Piao 2007: 5.

⁵ Lewis H. Morgan was the first to divide kinship terms into two categories: classificatory terms (more than one type of relative share the same term, e.g. *cousin* in English, *itoko* in Japanese) and descriptive terms (a particular term refers to one individual type of relative, e.g. Chinese terms such as: *tang ge*, *tang di*, etc.).

4. Linguistic corpora as the database for kinship terminology research

Corpus linguistics is recently gaining more and more attention and appreciation on the grounds of new methods of linguistic and contrastive analysis. Analogically, the number of languages possessing their own computerized collection of naturally occurring texts commonly known as corpora is rapidly growing.

The National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics (NINJAL) initiated the *Kotonoha* project, which has made publicly available the compilation of texts taken from both spoken (*Corpus of Spontaneous Japanese*) and written Japanese (*Taiyō Corpus*).

It is thought that the main benefit of a corpora analysis is the possibility to investigate terminology that occurs with its natural contexts. Hence, investigation into Japanese corpora might be a significant database for kinship analysis, as well as a vast platform for linguistic comparison with foreign terminology. For instance, we may find about 778 results corresponding to the kinship term *onēsan* ‘elder sister’ and on this basis describe the scope of functionality and semantics of this term. Note that in the following three examples obtained from the *Kotonoha* corpus analysis the usage of the term of reference *onēsan* is fictive (the speaking person refers to an unrelated person):⁶

- a) *Kinō wa pātī deshita. Dārin mama no tanjōbi. Dārin no onēsan ikka mo kite nigiyaka yo.* ‘Yesterday was a birthday party of my boyfriend’s mom. The family of his *elder sister* came too so it was quite lively.’
- b) *Senmenjo de, sōji no onēsan ga yopparai ni karamarete iru genba ni dekuwasu.* ‘In the washroom you can come across the *girl* responsible for cleaning, who is completely drunk.’
- c) *Kekkon suru kare no onēsan ga watashi yori kyūsai mo toshishita na no desu.* ‘The *elder sister* of my husband-to-be is nine years younger than me.’⁷

⁶ “Fictive use” is a tendency to use a kinship term while addressing or referring to unrelated or affinally related person, e.g. *sōji no obāsan* ‘elderly lady responsible for cleaning’, *uketsuke no onēsan* ‘girl from the reception’.

⁷ [<http://www.kotonoha.gr.jp/shonagon/>].

Although the fictive use of a kinship term is not only characteristic of Japanese (we can find similar examples in English, Polish and Russian, especially in slang), the relative age seems to restrict the use of Japanese kinship terms fictively. In this case terminology referring to elder siblings (*onēsan*, *oniisan*) is willingly used to refer to nonrelatives, while kinship terms referring to younger siblings (*imōto*, *otōto*) are not.

5. Conclusion

The main purpose of this paper was to conduct a basic inquiry into the semantics of Japanese terms of address and reference in regard to selected approaches to the subject of kinship. The author attempted to present kinship terminology as an inspiring subject for various branches of linguistics (sociolinguistic, cognitive semantics, linguistic corpus analysis) and briefly compare the character and functionality of selected Japanese kinship terms with examples taken from Asian and non-Asian terminology. This paper is intended to be a starting point for more elaborate investigation into the subject of kinship relations and family roles in premodern and contemporary Japan.

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