

# Personal References in Japanese Young Children's Ordinary Conversation<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

This paper is concerned about Japanese personal references in children's (aged 3 to 6) ordinary conversation. Anna Wierzbicka (1992) writes about personal names and expressive derivation. She 'proposes a set of explications to show how pragmatic meanings encoded in different forms of personal names can be modeled in the natural semantic metalanguage(p.229).' With some examples of English names, she commented 'personal conventions can be superimposed on the social ones, but they don't cancel them out. Set of explications that she proposed are formulated as the following expressions (p. 229).

I want to speak to you the way people speak to (boys)...

I want to speak of X the way people speak of (boys)...

She continues that even though first names can be said to form a system,...they belong to a larger system of forms of address and forms of reference, which includes combinations of first names with surnames, surnames with titles, titles alone, and so on. Interactional meanings of the variety of choice can account for stable personal conventions as well as for variable usage of names. Jim, James, or Jimmy are up to the speakers' mood. The choices can clearly be accounted for in terms of the semantic formulae (pp.231-232).

However, it can be said that these Western cultural conventions cannot fit with the way the Japanese use personal references. First, her proposing formulae which starts with 'I want to speak to you...' or 'I don't want to speak to you' puts responsibility of the choice on speakers' will. The speaker chooses one form according to his/her own mood and will. Although Japanese could choose one form according to his/her own mood and will to some extent, they choose one form depending on the situations. In English, when introducing each other, one might say, 'Call me John.' Japanese do not usually absolve the speaker from the obligation of using the most appropriate form for that situation and do not permit them to use a different one. However, Japanese people do not ask other people to designate one form. The addresser usually selects one form of personal references according to a given situation. It is not the addressee's nor the addresser's intention. I also find the example of my Canadian friend Barb interesting in that she is always Barb, not Barbara. She introduces herself as Barb in any situation even on her CV. She explains her feeling that Barb is 'her,' and Barbara does not sound like her. It never happens in Japan. In Japan, how one takes his or her own role in each situation defines a personal reference which suits in each situation. It can be said that each situation determines how a person is referred to.

Second, although first names can be said to form a system, using one's first name is not so important among Japanese adults especially outside of family relationships. We usually refer to one another by family name+*san*<sup>2</sup>. We

rarely care what their first names are. For example, as in a PTA meeting, parents usually call each other "family name+*san*," or sometimes say "children's name+mother/father," that is, "*Yoko-chan no otosan* (Yoko-chan's father)." Sometimes, we do not care what their family names are.

## 2. Objectives

This paper tries to clarify how young Japanese children use different personal references in different situations. It can be said that to study on children's usage is to observe pre-programmed Japanese culture. As Scollon (1982) has argued, children's acquisition of culture-specific patterns of communication is an extremely important part of their socialization since such patterns serve as one of the primary sources of information on cultural values concerning social relationships and interaction (cited in Clancy 1986: 213). First, children do not have a good command of various types of personal references which are commonly known by adults. Second, they do not master the usage to suit the situation and often make mistakes which are not acceptable for adults. Therefore, it is assumed that the core of the function for the usage of personal references could be abstracted from the observations. Moreover, the steps in how children perceive the culture may be observed.

The main subjects for this research are children at a day care center (age 3-6), at a kindergarten (age 3-6), at a primary school (age 6- ), at an private English school (age 3-6) and at a private music school (age 3-6). All children are college-educated, middle-class parents living in a suburb of Tokyo. The fathers and the mothers hold white-collar positions. I recorded 2 hours of conversations at a house of two sisters (5 year old and 3 year old). During the recording, they played a make-believe role-playing routines and some adventurous role-playing game with dolls. Their mother was at home, doing her own house task. However, children's concentration did not remain focused compared to ordinary adult conversations. Consequently the other my main resource is based on my notes written down by my participant observation at the facilities mentioned above.

## 3. Analysis<sup>3</sup>

### 3.1. First Person References

Small children (around under 4 years old) refer to themselves by their own name+*chan/kun* form<sup>4</sup>. The way they call themselves is reflected by the habit how they are called at home. The followings are utterances by a girl (4;4 year old).

- (1) *Kore Hoshii, Moe-chan.*  
       this want (name+dim.)  
       I want this
- (2) *Kawaiso, Moe-chan.*  
       poor/miserable (name+dim.)  
       I feel I am miserable.
- (3) *Itai, Moe-chan.*  
       hurt/aches (name+dim.)  
       It hurts me.

For their age, name+*chan/kun* seems to denote a constant self-image of themselves. They refer to themselves as they are referred to. This usage is acceptable and it is the most natural form that they can use. It was observed that when a girl (3;5 year old) referred to herself by “*Watashi* (I-form)<sup>5</sup>”, it caused the other participants, especially adults, to laugh. To such a younger girl, “*watashi*” is a marked form, even when she wanted to try to sound more mature.

A boy (4.5 year old) referred to himself as “*boku*” but a girl (4.5 year old) corrected the form. She said to him that he must call himself “*Tomo-chan* (short-form first name+*chan*, as he is called at home).” He used to call himself “*Tomo-chan*.” But now he calls himself “*boku*” which has a masculine connotation. He may abandon his childishness with the reference “*Tomo-chan*.” It might be said that boys are conscious about masculinity compared to girls who can continue to be called by name+*chan*. It can also be said that masculinity is a marked form for younger children. A 3 year old girl corrected her father who said ‘*watashi*’ in a very formal setting. To her, *watashi* belongs only to female vocabulary.

Older children manipulate their identification in a given situation with first person references. A 5 year old girl referred to herself as “*oneechan* (big sister)<sup>6</sup>” when she and her younger sister are alone.

- (4) *Oonechan*                      *no, kaeshite.*  
 (hon.)-older sister-(dim.)’s    give back  
 Give it back to me. That’s mine.
- (5) *Oonechan*                      *ga yatte ageru.*  
 (hon.)-older sister-(dim.) (subj.) do for you.  
 I will do it for you.

At her home, habitually, she is called by her first name+*chan* even by her younger sister. The girl may have acquired this usage outside of her home and may insist on her authority over her younger sister with the usage. Her younger sister usually calls her sister by her name. But when she needs her help, she calls her “*oneechan*,” indicating her respect to her older sister.

The 5 year old girl usually refers to herself as “*watashi*.” Her friends also call themselves *watashi* (girls)/*boku* (boys). Now at their age 5, they sounds natural and are age adequate forms. As they are growing, they are corrected to use age adequate forms by their parents and teachers or some adults around them.

The girl used to call herself “*Chi-chan* (short form first name + *chan*, as she is called at home when she was younger) before. But she sometimes refers to herself as *Chi-chan* only in the following situation.

- (6) (On the telephone)
- |              |   |
|--------------|---|
| Grandmother: | <i>Moshi, moshi.</i><br>hello<br>Hello.   |
| Chisa:       | <i>Hai</i><br>yes<br>Yes.   |
| Grandmother: | <i>Moshi, moshi, dare?</i><br>Hello                      who<br>Hello, who is it? |
| Chisa:       | <i>Chi-chan</i><br>first name short form + (dim.)<br><i>Chi-chan.</i>             |

(7) (On her schedule sheet)

(written) 10 ji. *Chi-chan* ga oyatsu wo youi suru.  
 10 o'clock first name short form + (dim.) (subj.) snack (obj.) prepare will do.  
 At 10 A. M., I am going to prepare a snack.

In (6), the girl recognized that the phone call was from her grandmother. So when she identified herself, she selected the form *Chi-chan* as she is called at home<sup>7</sup>. In (7), in her own schedule book, she refers to herself *Chi-chan*. To her, *Chi-chan* might express her own self.

### 3.2. Second person references

During this research, I never found children using *anata* (you-form). The adults around young children usually call them by using the children's names. When there are many, the teachers call them '*Minasan* (all or everybody), *O-hana gakari-san* (a task group name), *1 kumi san* (a work group). So it is rare that children are referred to '*anata* (you-form)'. The following example illustrates the natural usage of the first and second personal reference. Subject equivalent in each utterance are substituted for by the person's name. Takashi, a 5 year old boy, uses his own name as a subject in his utterance. B, a 5 year old girl, his classmate at the kindergarten, uses Takashi's name as a subject.

(8) Takashi (5 year old boy): *Takashi-ne, Tokyo deznii rand e ittayo.*  
 (first name)(colloq.) Tokyo Disney Land went (emph.)  
 Takashi has been to Tokyo Disney Land.

Yuka (5 year old girl): *Takashi-kun, hontou-ni ittakoto aruno?*  
 (first name)(dim.), really went thing exists (explan.)  
 Have you really been there?

### 3.3 Third person references

(9) Mother: *Kore, sensei-ni watashitene.*  
 this teacher (obj.) give (colloq.)  
 Give this to your teacher.  
 Son (4;4): *Wakatta. Sensei ni watashite oku.*  
 understood teacher (obj.) give leave  
 I see. I'll give it to (my) teacher.

The above example shows that we rarely substitute person reference using pronoun in Japanese. The mother tells her son to give something to his teacher. The third person '*sensei* (teacher)' is repeated in B's utterance. As for the topic, children seldom talk about other people. So I could not collect usage as I expected. But even when a child was bullied and reported it to his parents, he used the reference as he usually uses. He didn't change it according to his feelings.

#### 4. Factors for choices of Personal References

##### 4.1 Appearance

As we see, the children's personal reference is mainly reflected by their habit. But they become aware of physical appearance rather than other criteria in a given situation. A 5 year old girl consciously called a 5 year old boy 'first name+kun'. The 5 year old boy is physically big and tall and strong. She is afraid that she will be bullied by him if she calls him using the *yobisute*-form (name by itself). Another 5 year old girl was kicked by a different boy because she called the boy with *yobisute*-form. But a bigger girl helped her. She was bigger than the boy. After that the girls always call him with the *Yobisute*-form. This exemplifies how the form indicates a power difference.

As for the second person, if they choose the wrong one or choose the one which the addressee does not like, there arises a conflict between them. When they still do not know polite/impolite differences, they want to know whether they will be bullied or not, or scolded or not, corrected or not. The physical characteristics are easy to gauge.

A 3 year old girl calls a tall 6 year old girl with long-hair "*oneesan* (a big sister)" and a short 6 year old girl with short-hair "*oneechan* (a big sister)." These two girls are not her siblings. From her point of view, the former girl does not have a childish sense and the latter girl has more childish image.

##### 4.2 Male/Female Difference

As for the male/female difference, children start to distinguish *kun/chan* differences when they notice the boy/girl difference. Some children start to use *kun* to boys even when their parents call them using *chan*. A 3 year old girl cannot use *kun/chan* flexibly. As for a kinship term "*ojisan* (Uncle)", she is confused that address form with males requiring the "*kun*-form" and called him \**Ojikun*.

Reflected from the physical appearance, girls are more concerned about using first-name only form (*yobisute* form) compared to the boys. A 5 year old boy and a 5 year old girl called each other using the *yobisute*-form, reciprocally. But the girl sometimes referred to him 'first name+kun' form.

##### 4.3 Intimacy/anti-respect in *Yobisute*-form

Habitually, at the day care center, young teachers call pupils with first-name (+intimacy) only, that is *yobisute* form. So children call each other with *yobisute* form. However, as they get older (around 4 years old), they begin to realize slightly that there could be an anti-respect connotation with the first-name only. Although they are accustomed to use the first name only usage with the intimacy marker, they draw attention to its bad images. They do not care when they refer to somebody but they are very conscious when they are called with *yobisute*-form. A 4 year old girl got angry when her mother called her by her first name as she usually did. She said "You should call me *Shiori-chan*, not *Shiori*. That is a *Yobisute* form."

These kinds of claims were heard several times from some children. An Episode at the English school illustrates the solution of this conflict. Usually, when we address a teacher, we add the word *sensei* (teacher) after the last name (sometimes after the first name at young children's school). It is a kind of obligation. Even when an English speaking teacher told them to call him Douglas, children could not call him by his first name only because they would feel bad and strange. The 3 year old pupils started to call him *Doug-chan*. *Doug-chan* sounds intimate as he required and does not sound anti-respect as the children wanted to refer to him.

#### 4.4 Formal/Informal

Young children do not care formal/informal setting when they speak. At the age of 5, children call girls with “first name+*chan*” and boys with “first name+*kun*.” Interestingly, even both boys and girls are called “full name+*san*” at the roll call attendance in the kindergarten by their teacher. They never use this form for each other. They know it is a formal setting and these expressions belong to teachers’ and still the usage lies outside of their command. A primary school teacher calls role using a “last name+*san*” too in a 6 year-old’ class. She also selects a pupil using “last name+*san*”. For example, “Can you answer, *Ogawa-san*. (last name+*san*).” However, outside of the classroom, in the hall for example, the teacher sometimes calls her pupil “first name+*chan*.” This shows she differentiate the form according to the formal (in the classroom setting) and informal (outside of the classroom). Young children rarely use this form for each other and still the usage lies outside of their command. 6 year old at primary school girls gradually start to refer to their friend last name+*san*. It becomes their mature habit to call each other last name+*san*.

#### 4.5. Age difference

Small children are not sensitive to the age difference which adults are concerned for. They call each other by their habitual address form. As for the age difference, young children differentiate the reference from the outlook of the addressee. Age is still a difficult concept for small children. They confuse the height and age, if the younger person is taller.

#### 4.6 *Uchi/Soto* (in-group/out-group distinction)

Let me refer to the *uchi/soto* distinction (in-group/out-group distinction) which is said to be a key concept to understand Japanese culture. Children do not seem to make the *uchi/soto* distinction yet. Young children will refer to each family members individually not as a group.

- (10) Reina (5 year old girl): *Reina to otosan to okasan to Kazuma, kino tsuri ni ittandayo.*  
 (name) and father and mother and (name) yesterday fishing went (conj.).  
 I, father, mother and Kazuma went fishing yesterday.

An adult might say “*Uchi de kino tsuri ni itta* (We went fishing yesterday).”

Children do not seem to have strong solidarity among their friends and they do not recognize their family as a distinctive group yet. The same can be seen in a classroom setting. In the class, the teacher made groups for them in order to make new friends. But young children do not show strong group-oriented concepts. Younger children do not care who is in the group or why group member must be sit together in the classroom.

It does not mean that they do not care about the group identity. They start to be aware vaguely who belongs to which group when the group is a family. A 3 year old boy called his friend’s father ‘*Mi-chan no otosan* (*Mi-chan*’s father).’ It reflect how he recognize him. His friend’s father is not Mr. XX. The father belongs to the category of his friend who is called *Mi-chan*. Some children say *Kawamura* mama (last name+mama), *Ma-kun* mama (First name short form+mama) as though they are proper nouns.

## 5. Socialization

Children acquire usage which are very distinctive and concrete, such as physically big and small, or males and females. They start to change usage when they are corrected and told that the usage is not adequate for the situation.

When children use more mature expressions compared to their age---a 3 year old should use a 3 year old register, the Japanese tend to think it will sound inadequate and strange because he/she uses 5 year old register. For example, if a small girl refers to herself as "*watashi*," Japanese feel that she is acting too grown up for her age instead of her encouraging to use it. As a result, children correct their expression to the age adequate register which is required. This might be the first step to let them become conscious of how situational factors are working in addition to their own will. They find that the form of personal references change their relative status in each situations. At the same time, they have a command of a variety of personal references to adjust their position in a given situation. For example, when they play house, young children sometimes use *watashi* to take on the role of a mother or a big girl characteristics during their play. This is a way how they are becoming socially mature.

When they start their school (kindergarten) life, they learn formal/informal markings although it is difficult for them to know the formal/informal distinction. One girl (a 5 year old girl) corrected her friend because the friend called her mother 'Mama' when the parents were visiting their class. She said "Mama" should be limited to use at home and for younger children. A 6 year old girl is aware of selecting a word differently in formal/informal situations. In her writing exercise (formal), she began to refer to her mother as "*haha*". *Haha* is the formal word to refer to his or her own mother, but not an address form. She also began to call her friend's mother '*okaasama*', a very formal form with very formal honorifics. In writing, she refers to herself as '*watashi*' in a paper written at school, but at home, she wrote "*Chi-chan* (short form first name+chan)" in the schedule book to refer to herself.

For small children, it can be said that their self is indicated by their name as usually used at home. It also might be said it is the inner end of the continuum of their organization of their self image. They use their own name to refer themselves before they start to use *watashi/boku*, so called the I-form.

## 6. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, how children use personal references in ordinary conversations was observed. To children, the usages of personal references seem to be a difficult concept. It was observed that Japanese children has an age adequate register. The age adequate register may be related to the process of their development. But it is said that age becomes a factor which determines a particular form the child should use in a given situation. Bullying is also one of the factors how they choose one particular form. To such young children, bullying rather than politeness influences more. Learning how to avoid bullying will lead to learn the politeness system in a culture. Personal references can be a major sources to know a culture. So further research is required to get to know the function of personal reference.

## Notes

1 This paper is based on my presentation "Self-address Term and Address Term ---How Japanese Children Relate Themselves to Situation in a Conversation---" at 5th International Pragmatics Conference at UNAM, Mexico city, on July 6th, 1996

2 *San* is the most common title that can be added to the last name, first name, or full name.

3. As for the analysis, I analyzed children's usage of personal reference in the Western-Indo European grammatical categories of first, second and third person, since the Japanese personal reference system is very complicated with various criteria. There may be several ways of looking at it.

4 Besides *san*, the following are other typical common use Japanese titles.

Name+*chan*: *Chan* is a diminutive equivalent of *-san*. They are most typically used with the names of children, but also among close adult friends and family. *Chan* can be added to the first name, or full name but not to the last name only.

Name+*kun*: *Kun* is added to the first name, last name, or full name.

Although it is very rare, some older males add *kun* when speaking to a younger women, indicating he is older and/or has more power.

*Yobisute*-form (Name by itself): There are two connotations. The one is plus affectionate and plus intimacy. The other connotation is the opposite; anti-respect. This is called *Yobisute*-form which means "throwing one's name away."

5. Some of you may have heard that there are several words each which are equivalent to the word you and I. Among them, *watashi* is the most common word for "I" and *anata* is the word for 'you.' Females of all generations and adult males use *watashi*. *Boku* is used only by males. Sometimes, especially children refer themselves by their own name. If adults (limited to younger women) refer themselves by their name, it sounds immature.

6. Japanese speakers can use personal names, job titles, kinship terms where nominal and personal pronouns are possible. Within a family, we generally refer to the older siblings by their kinship titles rather than by their names.

7. It is hypothesized that at this stage of her social development, she recognized the difference between in-group/out-group situation. It can also be said that '*Chi-chan*' is her own self-image.

8. Some of you may be aware that it can be said that there may be no personal pronouns in Japanese, especially the third person pronoun. We do have the words equivalent to the English pronoun, 'he' and 'she.' These words were said to be created about 120 years ago because of the necessity of translating European and American readings.

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