

Changes in Address Terms for Family Members in the Japanese Language

This study analyzes the changes in the terms used for addressing family members in the Japanese language. Traditionally, research has identified that the use of terms to address family members in Japanese is determined by the junior and senior dichotomy. Regarding fictive use, the youngest child's perspective is adopted by other family members. For example, a wife would address her husband, *otoosan*, i.e., 'father' and the eldest son, *oniichan*, or 'older brother,' if there are younger siblings. Also, adopting the perspective of a grandchild, parents would address their own daughter, *okaasan*, i.e., 'mother.' However, in recent years, this system of Japanese familial terms appears to have undergone changes. Instead of using familial terms, a first name basis is becoming more prevalent.

This study employs a survey as well as interviews for the analysis. The survey was conducted in July 2023 on 200 people (men and women in the age range of 10~60 years). The preliminary results show interesting changes. Firstly, fewer elementary school students use the terms *oniichan* or *oneechan* to address their older siblings, compared to junior high or senior high school students. Secondly, distinct from other age groups, a higher ratio of men and women in their forties address their siblings by name.

Regarding the interview, it was conducted with 15 mothers in their forties, fifties, and sixties. The respondents' comments indicate that while it is normal for married women in their fifties and sixties to address their husband's parents, *otoosan* (father) and *okaasan* (mother), it is not unusual for those in their thirties and forties to call their mothers-in-law by their name with the honorific *-san*. Additionally, although almost half of the women in their fifties and sixties address their parents-in-law, *otoosan* and *okaasan*, they strongly prefer for their daughters-in-law (the wives of their sons) to call them by their names.

Similarly, it is no longer common for children to address their parents' siblings as *ojisan* (uncle) and *obasan* (aunt); instead, they use aunts' and uncles' names with the honorific *-san*, in the same way as for their parents.

The reason why the hierarchical system of familial terms in Japanese families is declining is presumably that the vertical social structure (determination of connections based on hierarchy) may no longer be readily applicable within society. Furthermore, according to a few of interviewees, women born from 1950s to 1980s may play an important role for this change. While raising their children they have been wishing for them to be free from social expectation.

This may have resulted in a social transition toward the current first name system. The use of Japanese familial terms once symbolized hierarchies and traditional norms within the family, but in recent years, it appears to undergo a change to less hierarchical practices.

Reference: Friederike Braun (1988) *Terms of Address*, Mouton de Gruyter, New York.