

Spousal Terminology in Japanese

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Abstract

Japanese married women are still referred to in spousal terminology that has derogatory connotations even though other aspects of the Japanese language have clearly evolved. Many women seem to feel ambivalent about this. The current study builds on the work of Takemaru (2010). In her book she explores how women came to be referred to in such terms from olden times and argues that changes in the Japanese language apparently occur only when the words in context affect men, particularly in the context of occupational terms. This paper surveys the historical context of this terminology through a literature review following prehistory and mythology and the rise of civilization focusing on the Heian and Kamakura periods. Second, this paper critically reviews the opinions of 50 women informants. I will argue that Japanese women are aware of the negative connotations of the terminology evidenced by the survey, however, they are still comfortable with the use of the words. This ambivalence suggests that present day Japanese women are indifferent to the words' original written meanings. Despite being a minority, some women did voice their dissatisfaction to the words, which is reason to raise awareness of the issue.

Key words: terminology, spousal, ambivalence, connotation

1. Introduction

There has been some language reform concerning gender-biased words

in the Japanese language in recent years. As more men having been taking up positions previously held by women, a number of words/expressions in the Japanese language have been changed to new ones to portray the present social norms. Some examples are the replacement of *kangofu*, which used to be used for “female nurse”, with *kangoshi*, which can be used for men and women, and the replacement of *hobo*, which used to be used for “female child-care worker” with *hoikushi* (kindergarten teacher”). However, the words for “wife” and “husband”, which when seen from their literal meanings (writings) are discriminatory and can be seen as even degrading to women continue to be used. There are many Japanese words that discriminate against women in general such as *mibojin* (widow), literally meaning “the one who hasn’t died yet” and *urenokori* (older unmarried woman), literal meaning “unsold merchandise”. However, this study focused only on words that are used to refer to married women. Two groups of words were selected for this study. The first one is comprised of three words used for “husband”: *shujin* (主人, Chinese character meaning: master), *otto* (夫, Chinese character meaning: male laborer) and *danna* (旦那, Chinese character meaning: donor¹). The other group is comprised of four words used for “wife”: *kanai* (家内, Chinese character meaning: inside the house), *okusan* (奥さん), Chinese character meaning: in the back of the house), *tsuma* (妻, Chinese character meaning: woman holding a broom²), *yome* (嫁 Chinese character meaning: woman-house³).

It is understandable that when these words first came into common use they

1 Original meaning “donor” from Middle Chinese *tanna*, transliterated from Sanskrit *dana*, “generosity, giving, donating”). Broadly used as “patron”, “husband”, “master” in modern Japanese. <https://en.wiktionary.org>

2 This character is also popularly interpreted as a woman holding a hairpin.
<http://okijiten.jp>

3 Meanings according to Cherry (2016), New Japanese English Japanese Character Dictionary (1990) and Kurihara (2011)

portrayed the roles of husband and wife at the time, but that does not hold true anymore these days. This study aimed to find out how Japanese married women feel about the use of these words/expressions nowadays.

2. Literature review

In ancient Japan, according to historical records, women in the courts and castles had considerable influence and arguably could exercise their power. In old Japanese legends there were some women depicted as sovereigns, shamans, and chieftains who were believed to be closer to the divine than men. It is believed that these women even performed sacred rituals (Takemaru, 2010).

Amaterasu Omikami (enshrined in Ise Jinja), according to mythology, was the first ancestral goddess, “the foremother of all Japanese people and the supreme deity in Shinto mythology” (Cherry, 2017). According to Silva-Grondin (2010), in the *Nihongi* “Amaterasu is portrayed as the epitome of perfection in the Shinto religion exemplifying intelligence, beauty, fertility, and purity”. The mythology surrounding Amaterasu, the author says, based on femininity brought into existence a “matriarchal antiquity” in Japan. From that came the birth of the Yamato line that subsequently developed an attitude of respect towards women. That status was held by women until the sixth century. (ibid)

According to The Encyclopedia Britannica (2017) Chinese records, “considered more accurate than contemporary Japanese accounts”, reveal that a female ruler Himiko (Pimiko), having both ruler and priestess status, governed Japan in the third century. Silva-Grondin (2010) points out “What Amaterasu represents is personified in Pimiko”. Paulson (1976) argues that the early Japanese chronicles show a mixture of fact and myth and only from circa 600 CE that written documents became more historically reliable.

According to Paulson (1976) in 702, the Taiho Code, which is one of the first legitimate developments to incorporate Confucianism as an important basic

fundamental in the Japanese code of ethics and government, was enacted. The writer argues that the Confucianism based Yoro Code (a revised version of the Taiho Code), enacted in 718, abolished the matriarchal system that existed in the Japanese clan organization and substituted it with a patriarchal system, which following Confucian ideas, discriminated against women in matters of property, marriage, and divorce. The code was “unevenly and incompletely accepted by Japanese society” (ibid) and concerning women the code “remained in many respects little more than a legal fiction or a set of abstract ethical principles” (ibid) at the time and it did not affect women outside the capital, nevertheless, it did set the basis for the beginning of a degraded female autonomy.

Lebra (1976) points out that the status of women changed from an ancient time when the woman was revered as “goddess, sun, or princess” to a time when they came to be subjugated to men. Paulson (1976) and Silva-Grondin (2010) point out that court women lived in basic seclusion until the end of the Heian period. On the other hand, this was a time when aristocratic women produced remarkable literary works, such as the *Genji Monogatari* (The Tale of Genji) by Murasaki Shikibu. Towards the end the Heian period, according to Paulson (2010), following the collapse of the centralized power a less strict society where women’s lives had fewer limitations emerged, and women then came to have some strength. The Kamakura period started with a “high point” in the status of women (Lebra, 1976). Women gained the ability to inherit and own property, which was clearly defined in the Joie Shikimoku clan law, enacted in 1232 by the Minamoto and Hojo families.

With the establishment of the feudal system in the Kamakura period (1191~1333), the samurai took over the aristocrats, the notion of *danson johi* (men superior, women inferior) which held women in subjugation to men evolved, particularly in the samurai class, at the time. (Takemaru, 2010). Paulson (1976) argues that as feudalism took a strong grip on society and women were

continuously held in contempt by the conservative aspects of Buddhism³, “the stage” was set for women to lose their rights and be in complete subjugation to men.

In the Muromachi period (1338~1500), the whole system of inheritance underwent a radical change. Property which previously had been divided up among all the children of a family, was now awarded to one son chosen as the chief heir. Small shares were given to all the other remaining children, which consequently resulted in their being, out of necessity, financially dependent on the chief heir. Paulson (1976) draws attention to the fact that by 1500, with Japan being entirely at war⁴, women in the sixteen century came to be subject to political convenience. Male relatives, at their will, married, divorced and sometimes gave away their mothers, daughters and sisters as hostages when hostilities arose. Life at a time when brutality ruled, consequently brought women to accept themselves as not as worthy as men. (Paulson, 1976).

The notion of *danson johi* was predominant mainly among the upper and ruling samurai classes until the Edo period (1603~1867). The word *okusan* dates back to this period, when wives' primary roles were mostly limited to producing heirs. Then, in the Meiji period (1868~1912) the *danson johi* notion gradually spread, reaching all social classes. That was when the family system was legitimized by the Civil Code of 1898 (Takemaru, 2010). The eldest son came to be legally recognized as the head of the family, and thus came to hold power over other family members and to have the right to inherit the family property in order to maintain lineage. (Takemaru, 2010).

Women's conduct books that emphasized the role of the son's wife

3 The writer, however, points out that the form of Buddhism that came to Japan from China had “antifeminine elements” uncommon to Buddhism in general.

4 A period known as the Sengoku “Country at War” (2009 Asia for Educator, Columbia University)

and taught women to obey their husbands and their husbands' parents were written in the Kamakura and Muromachi periods for the writers' daughters and granddaughters to prepare them for marriage. Used for the education of women in the upper classes, these were printed in enormous quantities when print media came to be used in the Meiji era (1868~1912). Widely used, they spread to all social classes (Nakamura, 2014; Okamoto and Shibamoto-Smith, 2016). There is a Japanese proverb that well illustrates the position of women back then 女は三界に家なし *Onna wa sangai ni ie nashi* (A woman does not have her own fixed home in the three periods of her life [because she obeys her father when she is young, her husband when she is married, and her son after her husband dies]. (Storm, 1992).

While Takemaru's use of the word "invisibility" in the following quote could be seen an overstatement, her point about gender bias in terminology is poignant: "the invisibility of women is not particular to the Japanese language" . To exemplify the invisibility of women in another language, she explains the use of "generic masculine" or "pseudo-generic" in words like *man-made*, *mankind*, and *he* as the generic masculine in the English language Takemaru (2010, p. 148). The author though makes the point that this bias is more predominant in Japanese. The word *kyodai* (兄弟), which means "siblings", is written with the Chinese characters for older brother and younger brother. The same happens with *fukekai* (父兄会), parent-teacher association, which is written with the Chinese characters for "father" and "older brother", which completely excludes women. Takemaru further mentions the following:

"Many feminist scholars point out that such prevalent male dominance in the Japanese language has resulted from the pre-World War II social system based on patriarchy, as well as the notion of *danson joshi* (men superior, women inferior) that supported such social system" (Endo, 1995; Nakamura, 1990, Swanger, 1994") [p. 149]

Yukawa and Saito (2004) also draw attention to how women are portrayed in the Japanese language by pointing out that Endo Oriie and her colleagues (Group for Thinking about Language and Women 1985) analyzing how men and women were represented in dictionaries' definitions found that words presented men as 'strong, reliable, taking initiative, and influencing the course of women's lives'. However, the images of women in the definitions, were "passive".

There has, however, been some language reform in recent years and due to that, some gender-biased words, mentioned earlier in the introduction, have undergone changes. Takemaru (2010) argues that changes in occupational terms only occur when men take up occupations that had been traditionally held by women and not vice-versa. Another word that has undergone change is *fukei* 父兄 (parents), having the characters for father and brother), which has been replaced with *fubo* 父母, written with the characters for "father" and "mother". More recent changes have modified it even further to *hogosha* 保護者 (*guardians*), which is neutral, making it thus a remarkable improvement.

Researchers (e.g., Shibamoto, 2003) examined a wide range of terms for women and found that the terminology carried "connotations of domestic confinement", except for the words *shufu* (female head of the household), *shujin* (master/male head of the household) and *tsuma* (wife). Shibamoto also mentions that many men these days use the word *waiifu*, loaned from the English "wife" to refer to their wives, that way avoiding the use of the discriminatory *kanai*. The writer also points out, however, there is no such a choice when referring to other men's wives, when the only existing word is *okusan*.

Mizumoto (2010) states in her essay "How to refer to another person's spouse in formal situations" that she feels "guilty" when she addresses another person's spouse because there are simply no non-bias alternative terms. She mentions that there are three neutral words for "spouse" in Japanese, *hanryo*, *paatonaa* and *tsureai*, yet these words would sound extremely strange if used to

address someone else's spouse. Thus, people are left with no choice but to use the gender biased *goshujin* (husband) and *okusan* (wife). While she explains that thanks to The Gender Equality in Employment Act, names of occupations have been changed, she questions the fact that there have not been any proposals for changes to words relating to spousal terminology, in particular words to address someone else's spouse.

3. Methodology

This study recorded the opinions of 50 married Japanese women aged 30 to 67. The answers were collected via a Google document questionnaire posted online during a period of one month, between March and April, 2018.

The subjects responded to six questions:

Questions

Age: _____ occupation: _____

1. What word(s) do you use to say "my husband" when talking to friends or people you feel close to? Why do you choose to use that(those) word(s)?
2. What word(s) do you use to say "my husband" in formal situations? Why do you use that(those) word(s)?
3. Do feel comfortable using the words you mentioned in questions (1) and (2)?
Yes () Explain _____ No () Explain _____
4. What word(s) does your husband use to say "my wife" when talking to close friends?
5. What word(s) does your husband use to say "my wife" when talking to people in formal situations?
6. Do you feel comfortable with the words you mentioned in questions 5 and 6?
Yes () Explain _____ No () explain _____

4. Data analysis and discussion

Most of the respondents had jobs, some held full-time positions, some had part-time jobs and very few were homemakers.

The words respondents used to refer to their husbands when talking with acquaintances are as follows: *danna/danna san* (30), *papa* (9), *husband's name* (9), *shujin* (1) and one error answer. Some people said they sometimes change their choice of terminology, e.g. *papa* or *danna/danna san* depending on who they are talking to. The reasons the subjects gave for using these words were “that’s the word/s people around use” and “that feels natural”.

The answers given by the majority of the subjects show that they feel comfortable using the words they use. That could be explained that although the words/expressions are biased in their written form, these people probably do not take these words literally, but rather use them without relating them to their original meanings.

Words used by the respondents to refer to their husbands in formal situations were *shujin* (40), *danna san* (5), *otto* (4) *husband's name* (1).

Overall, most participants, 86%, as shown in figure 1, feel comfortable with the words they usually use to refer to their husbands when talking to acquaintances and or in formal situations.

Do you feel comfortable using the words you mentioned in (1) and (2)?

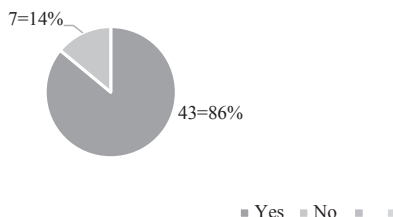


Figure 1. Respondents' contentment with the words they use to refer to their husbands

The answers of the 14% (7 people) of the respondents who said they were not happy with the words they use to refer to their husbands, as well as the reasons given, are listed in table 1. Worth noting is that all the words are words used in formal situations.

Table 1.

Words used in formal situations, by the subjects themselves, that they reported being uncomfortable with.

	Reasons
<i>shujin</i>	<i>I actually feel like using “otto” but don't do so because that word is not widely used yet. I think that “danna” as well as “shujin” are not appropriate words because of their original meanings, so I feel some reluctance to use them.</i>
<i>shujin</i>	<i>the origin of the word bothers me</i>
<i>shujin</i>	<i>because that's the word used in Japan in public and it's a formal word.</i>
<i>otto, shujin</i>	<i>I don' really know the correct word to use. I feel some reluctance to using the words mentioned. I don't know what words to use. As I have few chances to use such words. I'm not used to formal situations.</i>
<i>shujin</i>	<i>although I feel “shujin” is not gender equal, I can't think of any other word to use.</i>
<i>danna san</i>	<i>saying only “danna” would put an air of importance, I haven't got used to that yet.</i>
<i>shujin</i>	<i>using “danna” would be a bit disrespectful, I think. I'm not used to say “shujin”</i>

A matter that deserves attention is that out of the seven positive answers showing discomfort, six were with the word *shujin*. The reasons given were mostly that they “do not have a choice of another word” and “that’s the word used” . The seven opinions, although a minority view, show that there are some people who do not feel at ease with the words, with some of them saying they use it due to the lack of a choice.

Concerning whether or not the respondents feel comfortable with the terms their spouses used to refer to them, the majority, 88% (44 respondents), as shown in figure 2, said they are contented with the words used by their husbands. However, six people, aged between 32 and 45, said they are not happy with the word *yome*, used by their husbands to refer to them, when talking to acquaintances or in formal situations.

Do you feel comfortable with the words you mentioned in (5) and (6)?

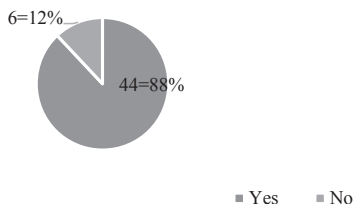


Figure 2. Respondents' contentment with the words used by their husbands

Husbands talking to close friends used: *wife's name* (18) *yome/yomesan* (16), *okusan* (9), *kamisan* (4) *uchi/uchi no yatsu* (2), *tsuma* (1). In formal situations they used: *tsuma* (28), *oyomesan* (11), *okusan* (4), *kanai* (4), followed by *kamisan* (3). Referring to their wives by their names shows that Japanese men seem feel more at ease at least when talking to acquaintances. *Tsuma* being the first choice is not surprising since that is the formal/official word for "wife". *Oyomesan*, on the other hand, being cited 11 times, shows that although women have voiced their dislike for this specific word, it is still widely used. *Kanai*, having only 4 answers, shows that this word is not used much these days, it is now largely considered outdated. *Okusan*, which is still a formal/polite word for "wife" (four respondents) shows that although it is formal, it is being replaced by *tsuma*, which is more used these days. Table 2 shows the words used by

their husbands which the respondents do not feel comfortable with and their respective reasons. The reasons given can be seen as evidence that these women have given thought to the meaning of the words.

Table 2.

Words used in informal situations and formal situations, by the subjects' husbands, that the subjects reported not feeling comfortable with.

Informal situations	Formal situations	Reasons
<i>yome</i>	<i>tsuma</i>	I don't like to be called <i>yome</i> because it shows superiority on the part of the speaker. I feel comfortable with <i>tsuma</i>
<i>yome</i>	<i>okusan</i>	I want to be called by my name
<i>yome</i>	my name+ <i>chan</i>	I don't like to be called <i>yome</i>
my name	<i>yome</i>	I feel that <i>yome</i> implies inferiority of the wife.
<i>yome</i>	<i>tsuma</i>	I've heard that the use of <i>yome</i> is not correct.
<i>yome</i>	<i>yome</i>	I think that <i>okusan</i> is more common.

As mentioned above, all the answers showing discomfort were with the word *yome*. This word has a negative connotation attached to it because of the meaning of the characters “woman” + “house”, which denotes “housework”. Also, this is a word that has been discussed fairly often in the media in recent years, with women voicing their dislike for it. Cherry (2016) claims that *yome* is translated as daughter-in-law, not “bride”, because the *yome*, besides often not being able to focus on her relationship with the groom, is “usually responsible for nursing her in-laws if they become bedridden or senile”, besides taking care of the house, so the character explains itself as it puts together the words “house” and “woman”.

Overall, as it was demonstrated before, most of the respondents, showed no dissatisfaction with the words they use to refer to their husbands as well as with the terminology their husbands use to refer to them. There was however, a

small percentage of responses showing dislike for the words used. Interestingly, the only seven answers showing dislike with the word used for “husband” were all with the word *shujin* and, similarly the only six answers showing dislike with the word used for “wife” were with the word *yome*.

While the majority of respondents did not seem to have given much critical thought to the negative connotations of spousal terminology, what the others reported feeling was revealing. If even a minority of respondents have an opinion about terms of reference, there is reason to consider that the residue meaning of these terms is still in the public’s consciousness and that it is the connotations of this terminology that Japanese women often feel ambivalent about.

5. Conclusion

While a small scale-study, the current research has yielded data that describe how the respondents feel about the current spousal terminology, which historically carried derogatory connotations. While roles have evolved and changed, the terminology has not.

The majority of the respondents were from Sapporo, a modern metropolis in northern Japan. Most subjects said they feel comfortable with the words used. Very few voiced dissatisfaction, suggesting that these women do not take the terminology literally, but rather use them to mean “wife” and “husband”. The few reports of dislike of the terminology show that, albeit small in number, there are women who still seem to see these words in a historical context. That is encouraging and could eventually lead to a reassessment of the issue in the future. People who showed ambivalence may not be looking at the terminology in its historical frame of reference. However, this study, limited in scope to Sapporo, reflects the feelings of these women in this area of Japan and may not be representative of other parts of the Japanese society.

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Appendix

All the answers given by the subjects are listed in the page below:

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1GTRhaps9B48MCci4ptMnAYqfCBWKFNARvYiunWpO3WQ/viewanalytics>