

What Do They Mean? A pilot study investigating address terms for foreign teachers in Japan

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Address terms are the names that one uses when addressing another person. They are based on sociolinguistic systems rooted in language and culture. This complex situation is greatly compounded when different cultures and languages come together and intertwine. This is the case that both students and foreign teachers must cope with on a daily basis here in Japan. Students do not apply the same cultural rules for addressing foreign teachers that they do for Japanese teachers. The purpose of this article is to shed light on students' knowledge and perceptions of the various address terms used in Japan. More specifically, it shows the politeness levels students associate with American address terms, Japanese titles, and the mixture of the two. In addition, it reports on the background knowledge students use to choose an address term. In sum, this article provides useful insights into the student–teacher dynamics which govern EFL university classrooms in Japan.

Understanding address terms are a complicated sociolinguistic endeavor. According to Brown and Gillman (1960) American terms of address are based on two semantics; power and solidarity. Japanese terms of address are founded on a social hierarchy that stems mainly from traditional values (Watts, 1992). Despite the dominant components governing address term use, in both cultures age, gender, social status, employment hierarchy, social setting, and level of familiarity all are important components that one must consider when addressing another person. However, what happens when these two systems are intertwined together? Wardaugh (1992, p.267) points out, “there are some possible dangers in cross-cultural communication when different relationships are expressed through what appears, superficially to be the same address system.” Wardough’s example only focuses on a single dimension. He assumes that both parties are attempting to use the same system of address. This scenario is quite the opposite for foreign teachers in Japan. The difficulties not only arise from both students and teachers attempting to use the same system of address, but also more of which system (if any) are the rules based on. Usually, it seems to be a mixture of both Japanese and western rules of address combined.

Under such a system, without any established social rules governing the use of address terms there can and usually are misunderstandings. These misunderstandings can lead to an awkward situation and even to an outright insult (Thomas, 1999). Over the last ten years of living in Japan, I often wondered “why do students address me differently from my Japanese colleges?” The answer maybe simple if they adhered

to the rules of American address but this is usually not the case. Address terms such as Paul, Mr. Paul, Paul teacher, Dessoir, and Dessoir teacher are common forms for Japanese students. The purpose of this study is to investigate the meaning behind these address terms. More specifically, what do students mean when they refer to a teacher using one of these address terms? Are they being polite or impolite? Do they even know the difference? These ponderings serve as the foundation of this study and have led to the following research questions:

- 1) To what degree do students understand western address terms?
- 2) Do students use the same address term in difference situations and settings?
- 3) What levels of politeness do students associate with the address terms they use?
- 4) What factors do students consider when choosing an address term for foreign teachers?

Participants

The participants for this study were 177 first-year Japanese university students. 112 students were from a national prefectural university and 65 were from a large 'language' university in the Kansai area. All of the participants were enrolled in identical communicative courses taught by the same instructor. There were approximately half male and half female participants. In addition, each participant had been instructed by an average of 4.1 foreign teachers over their entire span of English language study. However, it

becomes more interesting when looking at the minimum (1) and the maximum (20). Despite the initial appearance of possible outliers, there were no participants excluded from the study because 1) there were no statistical univariate or multivariate outliers and 2) an observation by the instructor that everyone adhered to the general norms of address used by other students in class.

Materials

The main form of data collection for this study is a 29-item questionnaire designed to investigate 1) students' perceptions of foreign teachers, 2) levels of politeness for address terms used with foreign teachers, 3) differences in address term usage dependent on the situation, 4) which address terms are actually used by Japanese students, and 5) how do students choose the address term. The questionnaire consisted of five biographical data items, 25 six-point Likert scale items, and three open-ended items. The Likert scale ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). The address term used for reference in the questionnaire was the instructor's name so that the participants would be able to properly contextualize the items rather than attempting to deal in the abstract. Finally, considering the target population, the questionnaire was translated into Japanese and then back-translated to ensure that the Japanese version's content was parallel with the original and that nothing was lost in translation.

Method

One of the main goals of this research was to describe and investigate what term of address students chose and also what factors were important in determining their choice. At the beginning of the semester, the instructor did not explicitly inform or implicitly imply to the participants what name to call him. The only information provided was the instructor's name on the syllabus. During the course of the semester, the instructor equally replied to any and all address terms. In this way, the participants were left to themselves to choose the address term in which they deemed appropriate for the instructor. Finally at the end of the semester, the questionnaire was administered.

Analysis

The analysis of this study mainly focuses on describing the data collected. As such the descriptive statistics of mean (M), standard deviation (SD), skewness (SK), and standard error of skew (SEs) were conducted. In addition, a principal component analysis (PCA) was used to further help clarify the data. The choice of a PCA rather than a factor analysis (FA) was due to the fact that the questionnaire dealt with address terms and was only descriptive in nature. In addition, the questionnaire was not designed to test or solve a theory so according to Pedhazur and Schmelkin (1991), "When you have no theoretical rationale for doing a FA, DON'T" (p. 591). At the same time, it was best to try and extract the maximum amount of variance possible from the data (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001).

Results

A principle component analysis was used to create an empirical summary of the items from the questionnaire. A total of 23 items were entered into the analysis which yielded an eight factor solution with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. This accounted for 60% of the total variance.

The first research question dealt with the degree to which students understand address terms. According to the results in Table 2, students have a basic understanding of ATs but there is still some confusion on their usage. The first item, a self assessment, shows that Ss somewhat think that they understand foreign names, but the when asked if first names are friendlier than last names, again Ss somewhat agreed. In addition Ss slightly disagree that the title 'san' is appropriate for foreign teachers. This title is considered impolite if used for a Japanese teacher, yet Ss seem to have a different conventionalization for foreign teachers. This ambiguity may stem from Ss lack of explicit instruction and also the mixture of Japanese and western address terms. In the end, it is apparent that students do not understand and know as much as they think they do.

The second research question dealt with how students use address terms in different situations and in different contexts. The results indicated in Table 3 show that there is considerable inconsistency in students' replies. When asked if both Japanese and foreign teachers should use the same name (form of address), Ss agreed. However, in contrast, they slightly disagreed that the title of 'sensei' is appropriate for foreign teachers.

Table 1. Principle Component Analysis, Varimax Rotation

Item		Factors								
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	h2
Factor 1: Address Term Usage										
23	You use the same name for a foreign teacher in and outside of the classroom	.82	-.83	-.39	.14	.21	-.04	-.06	.08	.67
24	You use the same name for a foreign teacher in and outside of school	.77	-.06	-.06	.04	.30	-.04	.11	-.05	.60
21	You use the same name the foreign teacher told you to use	.63	.07	.13	-.29	-.11	-.13	.13	.01	.40
2	First names are friendlier than last names	.38	-.16	.30	.01	.16	.26	-.23	.09	.14
Factor 2: Cultural AT Intermixed										
22	You use the same name for both Japanese and foreign teachers	-.09	.73	.02	-.01	-.01	-.01	.15	.07	.52
13	For foreign teachers “sensei” is appropriate	.01	.59	.03	.50	.02	-.08	-.20	.05	.35
12	Foreign teachers should use the same names as Japanese teachers	.12	.56	-.05	.30	-.18	.05	-.16	.24	.32
4	The same name should be used for both Japanese and foreign teachers	-.20	.55	-.11	-.08	.13	.30	-.17	.11	.31
Factor 3: Formality										
5	Japanese teachers are more formal than foreign teachers	.05	.01	.77	.06	.01	.04	.08	.06	.59
3	Foreign teachers are more casual than Japanese teachers	-.10	-.14	.76	-.04	.10	.03	.10	.01	.57
7	You have the same level of respect for both foreign and Japanese teachers	.24	.35	.49	-.02	.21	.08	-.06	-.36	.24
Factor 4: Politeness										
6	You use a different name for your foreign teacher when you want to be polite	-.09	-.05	.06	.76	.09	.17	.06	-.11	.58
10	For foreigner teachers in Japan “san” is appropriate	.04	.32	-.05	.64	-.13	-.12	-.16	.14	.41
17	You use the same address term for all foreign teachers	.39	-.04	.06	.42	-.19	-.01	.33	.05	.18
Factor 5: Discipline										
18	You listen (obey) to foreign teachers	.13	-.20	.04	.02	.72	.14	-.01	-.01	.51
20	You listen (obey) to Japanese teachers	.11	.12	.22	-.05	.68	-.06	.09	.05	.46
19	Foreign teachers directly inform you the name to call them	.21	.14	-.13	-.05	.42	-.15	.33	.01	.18

Factor 6: AT Knowledge										
1	You understand how to use foreign names	-.07	.05	-.03	.09	.16	.82	.08	.14	.67
16	You have been taught how to use foreign names	.23	.08	.19	-.04	-.25	.72	.11	.01	.51
Factor 7: Cultural Input										
14	When choosing a name, you use your knowledge of Japanese names	-.26	.27	-.04	-.02	-.05	.01	-.76	.08	.57
15	When choosing a name, you use your knowledge of foreign names	.05	.11	.15	-.09	.12	.22	.70	-.01	.49
Factor 8: Japanese Language Use										
9	You listen to a teacher better when they speak Japanese	.119	.11	.17	-.07	-.09	-.01	-.02	.85	.72
8	You are a better student in a class that has a Japanese teacher	-.03	.22	.08	.10	.20	.21	-.07	.69	.47

Table 2. Understanding Address Terms

F	Item	N	M	SD	Skew	SE _s
6	You understand how to use foreign names	177	4.08	1.22	-.08	.18
6	You have been taught how to use foreign names	177	3.49	1.38	-.09	.18
5	Foreign teachers directly inform you the name to call them	177	3.91	1.31	-.37	.18
4	For foreign teachers in Japan “san” is appropriate	177	3.03	1.33	.15	.18
1	First names are friendlier than last names	177	4.08	1.22	-.08	.18

Note. F stands for the factor number of the item. Means (M) are based on a six-point scale.

Table 3. Address Term Usage

F	Item	N	M	SD	Skew	SE _s
2	The same name should be used for both Japanese and foreign teachers	177	5.10	1.21	-1.79	.18
4	You use a different name for your foreign teacher when you want to be polite	177	2.79	1.25	.25	.18
2	Foreign teachers should use the same names as Japanese teachers	177	2.64	1.18	.69	.18
4	You use the same address term for all foreign teachers	177	4.00	1.28	-.25	.18
2	For foreign teachers 'sensei' is appropriate	177	3.18	1.36	.21	.18
2	You use the same name the foreign teacher told you to use	177	4.37	1.10	-.34	.18
1	You use the same name for both Japanese and foreign teachers	177	3.25	1.40	.17	.18
1	You use the same name for a foreign teacher in and outside of the classroom	177	4.54	1.30	-.81	.18
1	You use the same name for a foreign teacher in and outside of school	177	4.73	1.19	-.93	.18

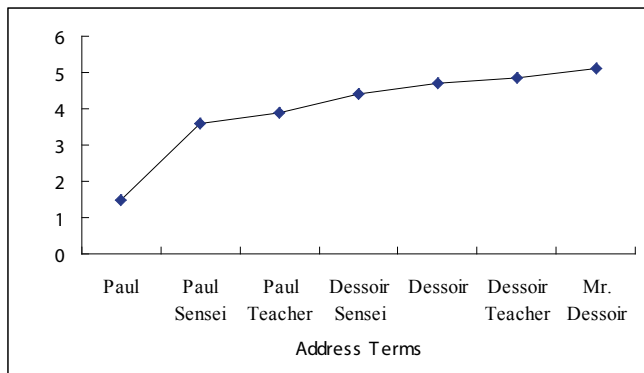
Note. F stands for the factor number of the item. Means (M) are based on a six-point scale.

In addition students slightly agreed that they do not change address terms depending on the situation or the place of encounter. The results to the second research question are not clear. The mean of 5.10 clearly indicates that student's think the same address form should be used but this is later contrasted when it comes to addressing foreign teachers with 'sensei' with a mean of 3.18. One possible explanation for this discrepancy may be that students feel they should use the same title but in actual practice it is not as natural to call foreign teachers by 'sensei'.

Research question three investigated the different politeness levels that Japanese students associate with common address terms used for foreign teachers. Figure 1 illustrates that the participants consider last names to be politer than first names. It also shows that the Japanese title of *sensei* is not considered as polite as the English translation

of *teacher*. Both 'Dessoir teacher' and 'Paul teacher' are considered to be politer than the same address term but with the Japanese title of *sensei*. Figure 1 clearly shows that these Japanese university students view Japanese titles not as polite as their English equivalents (or their translation). It seems that when dealing with foreign teachers these participants assume that western forms of address are politer than Japanese address terms.

Figure 1.



Levels of Politeness

Research question four was about how students choose the address term to address their teacher. It is important to point out that there was no teacher input about what name to use. Students were left entirely by themselves to choose the address term in which they deemed suitable. Table 4 indicates that students almost equally use their knowledge of Japanese and western names to choose the form of address for foreign teachers. Although they draw on their knowledge of western names slightly more. It seems that when dealing with foreign teachers, although in Japan, students rely more

on their knowledge of western address terms. It is as if the English class is transformed and Japanese cultural norms are left at the door; at least when dealing with the teacher.

Discussion/Conclusion

Understanding terms of address is a difficult sociolinguistic endeavor. The complexity expands exponentially when more than one cultural norm or different systems of address are intertwined together. This is the situation in Japan where there are large numbers of foreign instructors teaching in Japanese universities. The purpose of this study was to bring some clarity to an address system that is neither Japanese nor western. The results show that these participants do not have a clear understanding of western address terms. However, is this really important? I do not think so because the participants in this study are not attempting to use this system. Rather a hybrid system of address is adopted. This is evident in their reluctance to use *sensei* with foreign teachers, their use of family names only, and the translation of Japanese titles. All of these examples are not governed by either Japanese or western address systems. It is also important to note that the participants think the title ‘*teacher*’ is politer than their native language title of ‘*sensei*’. They make the marked distinction between foreign teachers and their native Japanese teachers. The participants attempt to

Table 4. Cultural Input for Choosing an Address Term

F	Item	N	M	SD	Skew	SES
7	When choosing a name, you use your knowledge of Japanese names	177	3.50	1.16	-.24	.18
7	When choosing a name, you use your knowledge of foreign names	177	3.73	1.16	.06	.18

combine both Japanese and western systems of address and the end result can be misleading for foreign instructors. In the end, students are not trying to be impolite but rather they are attempting to make the best out of the two address systems that they know.

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