

“ What do you call your colleagues at work? ”

A preliminary study on address forms in cross-cultural communication.

Akiko OKAMURA

The examination of power and solidarity in the use of address forms has drawn attention from researchers since Brown and Gilman's pioneering work (1960). In most of European languages and English, solidarity overrides power in deciding address forms between interlocutors. Expressions of solidarity come from the egalitarian principle rooted in the West and now plays a crucial role in success in global economy. A question arises as to how people use address forms in cross-cultural communication when English is one of the interlocutor's second language. This is one of the first experimental studies to examine the use of power and solidarity in address forms in cross-cultural encounters. I interviewed Japanese and English speaking business people about their use of address forms in English when they work together in an office. The results show that when the speaker has power over other office workers, address forms would be negotiable and sometimes they may mix English norms with Japanese norms to show solidarity. For example, when English speakers feel close to Japanese colleagues, they would use “*last name + san*” or switch to it from “*Mr + last name*” although they may speak in English.

Key words: address forms, power and solidarity, cross-cultural encounters.

1. Introduction

Studies on address forms have shown social structure and group ideology in a society since Brown and Gilman's pioneering paper (1960). “*Address*” here refers to a “*vocative*”, a direct reference to the addressee such as “*Mr.*” or “*Mrs*” distinguishing from “*designatives*”, which are used when a third person's name is mentioned. By analysing the use of personal pronouns in European languages, Brown and Gilman (1960) put forth two dimensions of power and solidarity in choosing T and V forms (their abbreviation for familiar vs. formal second person verbs and pronouns in many European languages). They show that power and solidarity create reciprocal

and non-reciprocal exchanges of address forms; reciprocal exchange means that the relationship is equal while non-reciprocal exchange implies there is power difference between the interlocutors; the intimate form is used downwards, and the distant form is used upwards. Although they acknowledge that address forms in some relationship may remain non-reciprocal for the life of their relationship, they show that in the modern egalitarian society, familiarity overrides power difference. Thus once interlocutors are familiar with each other, they often switch to intimate forms (T forms in their examples) regardless of the status difference.

These two dimensions are also examined in the analysis of address forms in American English by Brown and Ford (1961). This time the study is based on four types of data; American plays, observation and interviews of business people working in the US, and recorded dialogues, they analysed the use of First Name and Last Name as a reflection of power and solidarity in American English. Title plus last name (TLN) shows distance (solidarity) and deference (power) and First name (FN) both intimacy (solidarity) and condescension (power). By using a distinction of reciprocal and non-reciprocal exchanges, they categorise the use of address forms in American English to three patterns: TLN and TLN, TLN and FN, and FN and FN, and suggest that three steps are moving on the continuum from TLT to FN. Their findings also show that familiar relationship may produce a variety of address forms to be employed such as Robert, Dick, Mr Smith etc compared to less familiar relationship as they suggest that frequent interaction should be related to more address variation.

Instead of using a reciprocal and non-reciprocal distinction, Ervin-Tripp (1972) presents regularities of the use of address forms in American English in a flow-chart. Based on her experience as an insider to the society, she adds some insights to the choice of address forms in American society. For example, first she states "*familiarity is not a factor between dyads of the same age and rank, and there are no options.*" (p 220). Second age difference may influence the choice of address forms when it becomes the size of a generation. Third, it is necessary to consider signals such as tone of voice for the interpretation of the use of address forms between subordinates and the boss. We need to consider various elements to understand the employment of power and solidarity in address forms.

Since then wave of researchers have studied the use of address forms in various languages such as English (Hook, 1984; Slobin et al., 1968), Swedish (Mitchell, 1979), Japanese (Ishikawa et al., 1981) and in the comparison of English, Korean and Japanese (Hijirida and Sohn, 1983) to name a few.

Japanese and Korean societies. For example, they present the following table to show a list of “*address forms and suffixes*” from most deferential to least deferential in Japanese.

Japanese address forms suffixes

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Title + last name + <u>sama</u> , | 2. Last name + <u>sama</u> |
| 3. Title + last name + <u>san</u> , | 4. Last name + <u>san</u> |
| 5. First name + <u>san</u> , | 6. last name |
| 7. Last name + <u>kun</u> , | 8. First name + <u>kun</u> |
| 9. First name, | |
| 10. First name + <u>tyan</u> (affectionate), | 11. Nick name + <u>tyan</u> (affectionate) |
- (Hijirida and Sohn, 1983, p.144)

To give an example of a difference in use between “*first name + san*” and “*last name + san*”, they refer to their survey on the Japanese speaking academics in Hawaii university. They show that “*first name + san*” is only used 20 cases out of 319 dyad pairs and only used with female speakers. As this form (FN + san) show more intimacy than “*last name + san*”, the shift from the use of last name to first name may be significant in Japanese working environment and hardly used between male workers.

However, as they did not specify the sources of making the whole list, we do not know the context in which the above suffixes are actually used. By contrast, the analysis of address forms in modern Japanese by Ishikawa et al. (1981) is based on 25 Japanese plays written after 1950s. They show that Japanese address system has “*power dimension as its most fundamental property.*” (1981, 139). Solidarity does not seem to override power in Japanese context. In other words, hierarchical nature of society casts a deep shadow on the use of address forms. As Brown and Gilman’s two dimensions are based on languages developed in individualistic egalitarian societies, it is necessary to examine how the solidarity dimension is realised in a hierarchical cultural context. One approach is to examine the use of politeness strategies in different cultural backgrounds (Brown and Levinson, 1987; Scollon and Scollon, 2001) because people may use different types of politeness strategies regarding the interlocutor’s power and the context.

Scollon and Scollon (2001) propose two types of politeness strategies (involvement and independence) employed between the interlocutors. Involvement and independence present two aspects of human face wants; one is to be involved with other participants and the other is to have

business people may be reluctant to adopt English first name and address English speakers by their first name. By the same token, by working for Japanese companies or working in Japan, English speaking business people may take different approach to addressing Japanese business people from addressing other nationalities. It would be interesting to examine how Japanese business people use address forms in and out Japan and what non-Japanese speakers call Japanese business people. The decision making process of address forms between English speaking and Japanese speaking business people may show complex use of involvement and independent strategies.

2. Framework of this study

2.1. Purpose

This is a preliminary study to find the use of address forms in English in cross-cultural encounters. Cross-cultural encounters here only refers to an interaction between English speaking and non-English speaking colleagues (Japanese business people) at work. My main aim is to examine how they realise solidarity in address forms in English when Japanese business people have some power at work.

Three research questions were formed and translated into three interview questions.

2.2. Research questions

- 1) What address forms do Japanese and English speakers use in their mother tongue in addressing their colleagues at work?
- 2) What address forms do English speakers and Japanese use in English to address each other at work?
- 3) What is the reason for the choice?

To examine the research questions in the interview, the following questions were used as a starting point.

2.3. Interview questions.

- 1) What address forms do people in your office use to call you?
- 2) What do you call your colleagues in your office?
- 3) What is the motivation for the use of the address forms mentioned above?

After these three questions, interviewees were asked about the relationship with other

British (female), Canadian (male), Australian (male) and Dutch (male). Four of them (two male Americans, one male Canadian, one female British) worked for a Japanese manufacturing company, while one American female for an American IT company, and one Australian male and one Dutch male for an Italian architectural product company. Five of them stayed in Japan for a relatively short time (six months to three years) and did not speak Japanese while two of them (one American male and one Canadian male) stayed in Japan for eight years and spoke good Japanese.

Ten Japanese interviewees working in the UK and Sweden all worked for Japanese companies in different positions. Six of them were males at managerial level (transferred from Japan), whereas four of them were locally employed Japanese females as secretaries. Two of them were only contacted by email and telephone. Their job experience outside Japan vary from a year to nearly ten years.

3.2.2.1. The criteria for selecting the second type interviewees.

Because the purpose is not to generalise but to find what these interviewees share in spite of their differences, the second type of interviewees varies in their backgrounds.

The differences can be Japanese employees' English proficiency, company's nationality, insiders' status, Japanese employees' experience in working outside Japan, English speaking employees' experience of working with Japanese, the number of English speaking and Japanese employees, knowledge of language and culture (whether English speakers can speak or understand Japanese).

The conditions for selecting the interviewees of the second type were as follows. First, all the interviewees use English at work for communication. Second, they involve both male and female with diverse work experience and status at work, although it turned out to be mostly male interviewees who have a higher position at work. Third, to avoid a strong influence of one corporate culture, they are from more than one company in each country.

age	20s	30s	40s	50s
No of Japanese (n=10)	1 (female)	4 (2 females+ 2 males)	4 (3 males+1 female)	1 (1 male)
No of English speakers (n=7)	5 (2 females and 3 males)	1 (1 male)	0	1 (1 male)

3.1.3. The third type interviews.

The third type was conducted to avoid one sided perspective of the second type interviews and to substantiate the findings of the second type interviews. Although the results were based on the second type interviews, some comments from this type of interviews were included in the results' section.

will show the address forms employed in cross-cultural encounters. The interviews show the complex motivation behind the choice which may not be shown through filling a questionnaire.

4.1. Interviews about Japanese and English address forms in office

4.1.1. British address forms employed in office.

Although some difference may exist between American English and British English in the use of address forms, over and all the interviews with British office workers confirmed the use of first name as a solidarity marker and overriding influence of solidarity over power in English shown by classical studies on address forms (Brown and Ford, 1961; Ervin-Tripp, 1972). Table 1 shows the use of address forms among British office workers. I only included the address forms mentioned by more than ten of fifteen interviewees. Formal and less familiar mean that speakers are not too close and the situation is in a meeting or involving outsiders to the company. By contrast, informal and familiar means that speakers are not in a meeting and they know each other quite well. According to the interviewees, first name is the most common address form regardless of power and gender of the interlocutors in office in the UK.

Table 1

	Formal and less familiar	Informal and familiar
To a boss	Title + Last name (a few people in the organisation) First name	First name
To equals	First name	First name/nick name
To subordinates	First name	First name/nick name

Three female office workers in their 30s said that everybody was not called by the first name but it is the norm in the office. However, they stated the exception was when they need to address those on the top job in the organisation or people whom everybody uses to call them by their last name or title. As shown by Brown and Ford (1961), two of them stated the initiation of the use of the first name was done by their boss.

It was interesting that the use of first name is not an old tradition in the UK; two British males in their 50s said that the use of first name was a trend which has been happening over the past twenty years. They stated that when they were young, they called their boss by "*title + last name*", but now they use first names among the colleagues.

address forms. For example, in formal situation, Japanese office workers use “*title + last name*” to a boss such as “*Tanaka bucho (Tanaka manager)*” but “*last name + kun*” to a male subordinate. In informal situation, Japanese office workers still need to distinguish the address forms between equals and a boss.

Second, unlike English, Japanese office workers hardly use “*first name*” to call their colleagues at work as the use of first name is limited to close friends or family members (Hijirida and Sohn, 1983) in Japanese. In Japanese the use of first name is not to show an involvement politeness strategy to colleagues but to cause some uneasy feeling among them as in Chinese (Li, 1997; Scollon and Scollon, 2001). Japanese office workers also related the lack of the use of “*first name*” to the way they introduce themselves. They stated that because they used their last name only when they introduced themselves at work, the use of last name becomes the norm for addressing colleagues. Thus switching from last name to first name seems to have a significant meaning in Japanese which will be further discussed later.

Third, the difference was shown in the role of the gender of interlocutors in informal context. Interviews showed that “*last name only*” such as “*Tanaka*” or “*last name + kun*” were only used with male colleagues. When the relationship between a male boss and a male subordinate becomes close, the boss may call his subordinate by “*his last name only*” in an informal context. Female office workers may call her male colleagues they know well in an informal situation by “*last name + kun*” but as it implies a close relationship, “*kun*” may not always be a best choice in an office context. One Japanese female office worker stated that she was told not to use “*kun*” to male colleagues for this reason. In this sense, “*san*” seems to be a safe option.

In fact, as it can be used with everybody, the most common address form employed at work is “*last name + san*” whose equivalent does not exist in Chinese address forms (Li, 1997). Four Japanese business people stated that “*last name + san*” is useful as it avoids any power difference and sexism. They stated that in some Japanese multinational companies, employees are now encouraged to use only “*last name + san*” to everybody instead of using “*title*” to call a boss. There seems to be a new trend to support the egalitarian principle in a Japanese context, which can correspond to the use of English first name among Chinese speakers in Hong Kong (Li, 1997) and in Singapore (Tan, 2001).

One interesting characteristic of Japanese address forms reported was that Japanese formal

stated that Japanese working in the US are more likely to adopt English names than those working in Europe. They also stated that English names are for the communication in English unlike Chinese speakers in Hong Kong (Li, 1997) and Singapore (Tan, 2001) who use English first name among themselves. Over and all Japanese business people were reluctant to follow the adoption of English first name like Chinese speakers partly because of the use of English in the education in Japan; unlike students in Hong Kong (Li, 1997) and Singapore (Tan, 2001), the adoption of English first name is not part of secondary education in Japan.

Mr + Japanese last name:1 case

Comment from the interviewee: this was used by a manager working for a Japanese company in Sweden. His predecessor was called by his last name only and as it implies a power difference downwards in Japanese as shown in the results shown before, he wanted to add "*Mr*". He stated that he was happy to be called by "*last name + san*" but not by first name by his subordinates. He stressed that the company was a Japanese company and Japanese norms can be applied.

4.2.1.2. Address forms to call English speaking colleagues

Two types of address forms were used when Japanese business people called English speakers as colleagues in the same office. Being in the UK or Sweden, they seem to follow the norms other employees use. The second type was only used with English speakers who have some knowledge of Japanese language.

First name:10 cases

Comment from the interviewees: all stated that it is the local norm.

First name + san: 2 cases

Comment from the interviewees: they stated that they used this form only to those with some knowledge of Japanese language when Japanese colleagues would like to be polite or would like to ask something, they may use this form.

4.2.2. Address forms employed in Japan

4.2.2.1. Address forms to call English speaking colleagues

The interviews showed that in offices in Tokyo, there were four patterns employed for Japanese business people to call their English speaking colleagues in English. Most common address form is "*first name + san*" followed by "*last name + san*". Unlike Japanese business people working in the

affected by the contextual constraints of Japanese cultural norms and his power in the organisation as English speaking senior managers working in multi-national company in Japan called their secretaries by their first name.

Last name + san: 6 cases

Comment from the interviewees: because their Japanese colleagues call each other by "*last name + san*", they simply follow the local norm. Also they all stated that as Japanese use only last name to introduce themselves, it was difficult to know their first name at work. Three of them was asked by their Japanese colleagues to use "*san*", while the other three chose "*last name + san*" themselves as it was the most common address form in the office. It is interesting that English speakers use "*san*", not the title of their Japanese colleague.

First name only: 2 cases

Comment from the interviewees: one American female manager in her late 20s in an American IT company told that she used first name only to one Japanese female colleague who was educated in the US and spoke good English. Her choice seems to be an involvement politeness strategy to her Japanese colleague. Another English speaker (a senior manager working for an Italian company) stated that because his secretary's English was so good that he did not think of any Japanese norms when he talked to her. The similar comment was given by one of this English speaker's Japanese colleagues in type 3 interviews. He stated that the choice of address forms may be related to Japanese employees' English fluency. English speakers may feel safe to apply English norms when there are little language barriers. By the same token, one Japanese female office worker in the type three interviews stated that as her American boss spoke perfect Japanese, she switched to the Japanese norms when she spoke to her boss in Japanese i.e. "*last name + san*". As Tan (2001) attributes the increase in the use of English first name to the improvement of English among Singaporeans, language proficiency may be one element in affecting the choice of address forms.

Mr/Ms + last name: 5 cases

Comment from the interviewees: one senior manager stated that he used only "*Mr + last name*" to his Japanese subordinate who is older than him and does the good work. He stated that although he could not communicate well with this Japanese colleague because of a language barrier, he wanted to show his respect to his older Japanese colleague with the use of "*Mr + last name*". It is to realise an independent politeness strategy. However, one American lawyer in his

One is an overt manifestation of power and shown by both Japanese and English speaking managers working in Sweden and Japan when the new norms make him/her feel uncomfortable. For example, having worked in a hierarchical culture, the Japanese manager asked his subordinates to call him “*Mr last name*” while the English speaking manager insisted his staff to use his first name. With power, these people can afford to stick with their norms; being bi-cultural seems to need extra effort on the new comer’s side. People can be bi-lingual but that does not always mean that they can become bi-cultural.

The other is a covert one to ask the local employees to adopt the new comer’s norms. Japanese business people asked the local English speaking staff to use one Japanese address form, “*last name + san*” instead of “*first name*”. The reason for calling this covert is because “*san*” is foreign to English speakers, it does not carry direct connotation of power. Instead it can establish solidarity between the local staff and Japanese business people as it creates an exclusive community of insiders. When Japanese business people have some language difficulties in communication, English speakers’ use of “*san*” seems to ease some tension from Japanese speakers. “*Mr + last name*” to “*last name + san*” is a move for English speakers to show solidarity to Japanese colleagues.

The acceptance of the new comer’s norms is the employment of involvement politeness strategies. The use of involvement politeness strategies among Japanese and English speakers will be discussed next.

5.2. Employment of involvement strategies.

The realisation of involvement politeness strategies seems to be highly related to the power relationship between the interlocutors in cross-cultural communication. Speaking in English, everybody may be expected to follow the English norms. However, because of the difference in power between English speakers and Japanese business people, the realisation involves compromise or negotiation. English speakers may adopt Japanese address form suffix “*san*” to call their Japanese colleagues, while Japanese business people use “*first name*” in English speaking countries or “*first name + san*” in Japan. Their choice seems to be an expression of an involvement strategy to the interlocutor’s cultural norms and their choice does not seem to be at random.

The interviews suggest that English speakers’ adoption of Japanese address form “*san*” is not a

Although this was not the case in this study, the effect of English speakers' use of "*last name + san*" may not always enhance solidarity with Japanese business people. Because adopting "*last name + san*" is deviant from English norms, the use of "*last name + san*" expresses an independent politeness strategy to the users of English norms. Thus if Japanese business people are keen to join the English community, they may not be too happy to be addressed by "*last name + san*". It seems necessary to understand the interlocutor's preference. An independent strategy to one norm can be an involvement strategy to another norm. The choice of address forms represent the speakers' use of politeness strategies to certain norms.

The use of involvement and independent strategies employed by English speakers and Japanese in English can be summarised as follows.

For Japanese to call English speakers

In the UK/Sweden

1. First name — involvement strategy to English
2. First name + san — involvement strategy to English and Japanese (only to those with some knowledge of Japanese).

In Japan

1. First name + san — mixture of involvement politeness strategy to English and Japanese
2. Last name+ san — involvement politeness strategy to Japanese
3. Mr/Miss + last name — independent strategy to English (showing deference)
4. First name (English norms) — involvement strategy English.

For English speakers to call Japanese

In the UK/Sweden

1. Japanese last name + san — involvement strategy to Japanese
2. Japanese first name — involvement strategy to English
3. English name — involvement strategy to English
4. Mr + Japanese last name — independent strategy to English

Third, Japanese business people never used “*last name only*” to call English speakers working as their colleagues in English, in and out of Japan. Obviously “*last name only*” is not a common form among English speakers and it may imply the relationship at school in the UK (Ervin-Tripp, 1972) or in military in the US (Brown and Ford, 1961). By contrast, in Japanese “*last name only*” suggests a close relationship among the male colleagues but it can indicate a power difference suggesting that it can only be used with colleagues with equal or less power in the Japanese office. It is an involvement politeness strategy but it is not an address form to show some respect to an addressee.

Thus, “*first name + san*” was avoided to call Japanese colleagues because it worked against Japanese norms while “*last name only*” was not used to address English speaking colleagues because it is neither a common form in English nor does it achieve what Japanese intended. We need to consider norms of both interlocutors to agree on a most suitable address form to call each other.

6. Conclusion

This is one of the first experimental studies to examine the use of power and solidarity in address forms in cross-cultural encounters. I interviewed Japanese and English speaking business people about their use of address forms in English when they work together at work. This study has shown that power plays a role and the realisation of solidarity is affected by a power difference.

When we speak in English, we would be expected to follow English norms. Indeed many people adopt English norms to be accepted in the English speaking community. However, when there is a communication gap between the interlocutors such as language barrier or cultural differences, the interlocutors may try to accommodate the other speaker’s language use. In particular, when non-English speakers have more power than English speakers, English speakers may integrate non-English norms to show solidarity and deference to outsiders. In cross-cultural communication, the less powerful may adopt the norms of powerful as an involvement politeness strategy to show solidarity which also show an independent politeness strategies as to express deference to the norms of the powerful. The adopting of a new comer’s norm realises two opposite types of politeness strategies. The powerful may also insist on using their norms even though their local staff may use different norms. As the power dominates the decision, the situation looks totally

- Michell, Stephan A. (1979). Address and decision-making in modern Swedish. *Anthropological Linguistics* 21 (2), 61-68.
- Oyetade, Solomon Oluwole (1995). A Sociolinguistic analysis of address forms in Yoruba. *Language in Society* 24: 515-535.
- Scollon, R and S.W.Scollon (2001) *Intercultural communication*, second edition, Backwell.
- Slobin, Dan I, Miller, Stephan H., Porter, Lyman W. (1968). Forms of address and social relations in a business organization. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 8, 289-293.
- Tan, Peter K. W. (2001). Englished names?: An analysis of naming patterns among ethnic-Chinese Singaporeans. *English Today* 68,17 (4), 45-53.
- Ervin-Tripp, S. (1972). On Sociolinguistic rules: Alternation and Co-occurrence. *Directions in Sociolinguistics*. Ed. J.J. Gumperz and D. Hymes. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 213-50.