

On Quasi-Proper Names in Japanese A Reply to A. Capone

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Abstract In reply to Alessandro Capone's paper entitled "On quasi-proper names", I provide relevant data in Japanese and discuss the properties and status of quasi-proper names from a cross-linguistic perspective. A close look at the properties of Japanese quasi-proper names indicates that they are a special case of *yobina* (lit. 'call name'), a subcategory of nicknames in Japanese which are used both to refer to and to call someone. Specifically, they are like stage names systematically given to older family members. The *yobina* status of quasi-proper names appear to hold cross-linguistically, while the peculiarity within the *yobina* category has general and language-specific elements.

Keywords Quasi-proper Names. Proper Names. Stage Names. Japanese. Indexicality. Speech Acts. Cross-linguistic Analysis.

Summary Introduction. – Data. – Discussion. – 3.1 On the Directly Referential Property. – 3.2 On Indexicality. – 3.3 On the Involvement of a Speech Act and Lexical Knowledge. – The Status of Quasi-names. – Conclusion.



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1 Introduction¹

In reply to Dr. Alessandro Capone's paper entitled 'On quasi-proper names' (included in this issue), I provide relevant data in Japanese. I aim, on the one hand, to see how the idea of quasi-proper names (henceforth quasi-names) applies to Japanese, and, on the other hand, to offer some implications on the properties and status of quasi-names from a cross-linguistic perspective. After providing the data, I discuss the major properties of quasi-names mentioned by Capone and identify the status of quasi-names in Japanese and in general.

2 Data

I focus on quasi-names in Japanese for family members in a nuclear family. They consist of a kinship term and honorific morphemes attached to it, with the exception of the loan words *papa* 'Dad' and *mama* 'Mom'.² Morphemes used are; a prefix *o-* which expresses politeness, and suffixes which express politeness or intimacy, including *-san* (formal/neutral and polite), *-sama* (more formal and polite/respectful), and *-chan* (casual and intimate).

In a Japanese family, traditionally, older members call or refer to younger members (i.e. their children or younger siblings) by their first names, with an optional intimacy suffix *-chan* or *-kun* (for males). Younger members, on the other hand, call or refer to older members, using the terms listed below, instead of by their first names. This rule applies generally, although the basic terms have some minor variations. The main difference from the Western system is that older siblings occupy a higher status than younger siblings within the family.

Basic quasi-names in Japanese

papa 'Dad' → *o-too*-{*san*/*sama*} 'Father'

mama 'Mom' → *o-kaa*-{*san*/*sama*} 'Mother'

o-nii-chan (lit. 'dear older brother') → *o-nii*-{*san*/*sama*}

o-nee-chan (lit. 'dear older sister') → *o-nee*-{*san*/*sama*}

Note. Arrows '→' indicate an optional change made at a later stage of the child's growth.

¹ This work is supported by KAKENHI (22K18461).

² I use the American English version 'Mom', instead of the British English version 'Mum'.

The loan words *papa* and *mama* are now commonly used among native speakers of Japanese. Young children learn to say *papa/ mama* to call or refer to their parents, and *o-nii-chan/ o-nee-chan* to call or refer to their older siblings. As the child grows, *papa/ mama* optionally, but quite commonly, shift to the respectful version *o-too-{san/ sama}/ o-kaa-{san/ sama}*, given that *papa/ mama* sound friendly but childish.³ As for *o-nii-chan/ o-nee-chan*, the optional shift is not common. Across all four referring terms, the most respectful version with the suffix *-sama* has only limited users.

Accordingly, the terms which are typically used are *papa/ mama* or *o-too-san/ o-kaa-san* for parents, and *o-nii-chan/ o-nee-chan* for older siblings. All the terms listed above appear to be qualified as quasi-names in Capone's sense.

3 Discussion

I discuss how the idea of quasi-names applies to Japanese, and on this basis, offer some implications on the properties and status of quasi-names from a cross-linguistic perspective.

Capone (§1) provides the following list of six major properties of quasi-names:

1. They can be used as directly referential subjects.
2. They can be used to call people.
3. They are not introduced by actions like baptism or other speech acts.
4. They are memorized like ordinary lexical items [...]
5. When used in the third person, they can be replaced with a proper name, *salva veritate*, if the person who bears that name can be assigned the predicate.
6. They are indexical.

This list serves as a working definition of quasi-names, each item of which is either a necessary condition for or a prototypical property of a quasi-name. Items 1 and 2 are shared by proper names, while Items 3 and 4 put together (are meant to) illustrate the contrast with proper names. Item 5 appears to be entailed from (and equivalent to) Item 1. Item 6 is unique to quasi-names. Given this, the following discussion focuses on Items 3, 4, and 6, including also Item 1.

³ There are still quite a few children who (are directed to) start with *o-too-san/ o-kaa-san*, instead of *papa/ mama*, as indicated by the survey result that *o-too-san/ o-kaa-san* were also among top twenty earliest produced words (Mynavi Corporation 2008).

3.1 On the Directly Referential Property

First, I provide additional support for the directly referential property of quasi-names (Item 1) from the perspective of first language acquisition.

Papa and *mama* are among those words that Japanese children learn to say at the earliest stage of their first language acquisition. If we assume that *papa* and *mama* involve a relation between the speaker and the reference, not just the property of a person, why can *papa/mama* be directly referential terms?

Gentner and Boroditsky (2001, 244) argue: “relational nouns like *uncle* or *passenger* are typically interpreted first as object-reference terms, and only later relationally”. This should hold for *papa*, *mama*, and other quasi-names at issue. Also, empirically, parents often talk to the child, “*mama-wa koko-yo*” (Mom-particle, ‘Mom is here’), “*papa-da-yo*” (Dad-copular-particle, ‘This is Dad’), and so on. These speech acts of greeting and presentation combined should have a perlocutionary effect of creating a direct link between the parents (i.e. the references) and the terms *papa/mama*. These suggest that *papa/mama* are acquired as directly referential terms. Even after the child learns the relational concept, there is no good reason for switching to a concept-based indirect access to their parents. Thus, *papa/mama* should remain directly referential terms.⁴

We could consider that the information about the kinship relation (‘conceptual materials’ in Capone’s term) are added to the terms as connotation (vs. denotational meaning; Murphy 2010), Gricean conventional implicature (vs. explicature; Grice [1975] 1989), or Searle’s preparatory condition for speech acts (Huang 2015), none of which has effect on quasi-name’s directly referential property.

The complex forms *o-too-{san/sama}/o-kaa-{san/sama}* are also considered to be directly referential. Quite a few children still start with these terms. Otherwise, these terms seem to replace *papa/mama* as their stylistic variants in favor of politeness.

When a child has two or more older brothers, she calls each of them *o-nii-chan*. The exact reference is determined contextually. This is similar to what happens when there are two or more students named John in the same class. The existence of multiple links between a (quasi-)proper name and the reference does not affect the directly referential property of proper names and quasi-names including *o-nii-chan*. The same applies to *o-nee-chan*.

⁴ Presumably, at a later stage, indexical, directly referential quasi-names are extended to non-indexical relational terms which apply to a specific person’s parents, in the form that is underlyingly accompanied by a possessive (ex. *X-no mama* ‘X’s mom’).

3.2 On Indexicality

Indexicality of quasi-names (Item 6) also applies to the Japanese data, but with some extension. While the reference of English ‘Dad’ and ‘Mom’ and their Italian counterparts is always determined relative to the speaker, in Japanese the reference of *papa/mama* may be determined relative to the speaker’s family. Specifically, it is quite common that the mother calls her husband *papa*, even in the absence of their children. Thus, *papa* (more commonly, *o-too-san*, and less commonly also *mama/o-kaa-san*) is extended to express a position in the family analogous to, say, chief director of a business group. Consequently, for example, if a child’s mother says to her husband, “Ken resembles *papa*”, *papa* is ambiguous between her husband and her father. To accommodate such cases, I propose the following extension (indicated by boldface) to the characterization of the reference of *papa* (and *o-too-san*).

The reference of *papa* (*/o-too-san*)

The reference of *papa* is the individual who is (presupposed to be) the father of the speaker, **or someone else who is in the position of ‘papa’ in a family of the speaker.**

A similar extension applies to *mama* as well, but less commonly.⁵ Such an extension is NOT involved in *o-nii-chan/o-nee-chan*, which are used in calling or referring to older siblings, since it is only younger siblings, not the parents, who say *o-nii-chan* or *o-nee-chan*.

To be noted, the above-proposed extension does not affect the indexical nature of *papa/mama*, that is, the crucial involvement of the speaker in determining the reference.

3.3 On the Involvement of a Speech Act and Lexical Knowledge

The Japanese data indicates that some speech act is required for introducing quasi-names. A close look at the data suggests that this is a language-specific requirement. More essentially, the requirement is attributed to the felicity conditions for the vocative use of quasi-names.

First, Japanese has more than one candidate quasi-names for one target person, although very small in number, as listed above (§ 2). Each family agrees on a particular set of quasi-names for older members, which are chosen from acceptable options available in

⁵ We can accommodate cases of deictic projection (Huang 2015), that is, cases that the speaker uses *papa* from someone else’s perspective, by replacing ‘the speaker’ in the characterization with ‘the deictic center for person’.

the lexicon (ex. *papa* and *o-too*-{*san/ sama*} for father; *mama* and *o-kaa*-{*san/ sama*} for mother).⁶ In the case of proper names, there are a much wider variety of options. For example, a girl's name is chosen from the set of female names and gender-neutral names of the language. In Japanese, they include Mari, Akiko, and Kaoru, while excluding Ken, Jun, and Haruo. A novel name is allowed but should follow the convention on the linguistic form. Despite this difference, quasi-names and proper names share the basic structure of choosing a particular element from the set of acceptable options.

Second, as I mentioned earlier, parents present themselves to the child together with the terms *papa* and *mama*. The speech acts have a perlocutionary effect of creating a link between the term and the reference, as in christening in the case of proper names.

Third, the optional change from *papa/ mama* to *o-too-san/ o-kaa-san*, for example, requires some informal speech act to be acknowledged by relevant family members. For example, the parents may tell the child, "Now that you have started elementary school, call us *o-too-san* and *o-kaa-san* from now on", or the child in high school may tell their mother, "From now on, I will call you *o-kaa-san*, as most of my friends do."⁷ If, for example, the child calls her mother *o-kaa-san* lacking in such a speech act followed by the mother's approval, it sounds odd: the mother's response would be like, "Oh, what happened?" Also, suppose that a lost child crying in a shopping center shouts "Mama!" and his mother hears it without seeing him. If she has been called *o-kaa-san* so far, she would think it's somebody else's son, unless his unique voice insists otherwise. Also, once the change to *o-too-san/ o-kaa-san* has been made, the former version *papa/ mama* is no longer acceptable. So, some speech act is presupposed in order for a particular quasi-name to be effective, although it could be quite informal, and even rather implicit, replying on conversational implicatures and the like.

These illustrate a similarity between quasi-names and proper names in Japanese. Simply put, effective quasi-names in Japanese presuppose an informal process of what we may call 'quasi-naming'. However, in case there is only one option for one person (ex. 'Mom' in English for mother), there is no need to specify one: the speaker simply uses the term 'Mom' in the lexicon. Therefore, 'quasi-naming' is a language-specific requirement.

To be noted, the presupposed speech act of 'quasi-naming' is attributed to the felicity conditions for the vocative use of quasi-names:

⁶ In reality, parents discuss and decide on a particular set of quasi-names and children follow them.

⁷ For practical purposes, these utterances are written in an English translation except for quasi-names.

in order to felicitously use a name to call someone, the speaker should make sure that the addressee knows (and also agrees on) the use of the name (for relevant discussions, see Capone §6 ‘On the speech act of calling someone’).

4 The Status of Quasi-names

The Japanese data provides insight into the status of quasi-names. The Japanese language distinguishes between two kinds of nicknames; *adana* (lit. ‘another name’) and *yobina* (lit. ‘calling name’). An *adana* is a name that is created on a metonymical or metaphorical basis, reflecting the target person’s properties or a particular event. The target person may not know her *adana*. So, *adana* does not guarantee the vocative use. The ‘Nino mutanda’ example mentioned by Capone (§6) is a clear example of an *adana*.

A *yobina*, on the other hand, is a name that is used for pragmatic reasons. They often have a connotation of endearment. Examples of *yobina* in English are; Alex (for Alexander), Bill (for William), and Lilibet (for the late Queen Elizabeth III, used by her family members, especially by her husband the late Prince Philip). Besides these phonological variants of the original names, popular names of various sorts (ex. pen names, stage names) are also *yobina*. In addition, an *adana* can also be used as a *yobina* (not preferably), but not vice versa. In order for a *yobina* to be effective, the target person should approve of it. Therefore, a *yobina* has both vocative and referring uses. English counterparts to *yobina* thus include *popular names*, *pet names*, and *endearing names*.

Given this, Japanese quasi-names appear to be a special case of *yobina*, a subcategory of nicknames. The peculiarity is that they are: 1) shared within each family, 2) licensed relative to the speaker (Cf. indexicality), based on the immediate or complex kinship relation with the target person, 3) chosen from a small set of acceptable options in the lexicon of the language under certain constraints, 4) assigned only to those in a higher position. In a nutshell, Japanese quasi-names are like stage names systematically given to older family members.

The *yobina* status of quasi-names appear to hold cross-linguistically, while the above-mentioned peculiarity has general and language-specific elements. For example, regarding Property 2), if there is only one option for one person available in the lexicon (ex. English ‘Dad’ for the speaker’s father), the speaker should use that unique option.

If we are to accommodate a wider range of quasi-names including ‘Coach’ and ‘Teacher’ (Capone §1), we could do so by making changes/ extensions from ‘family’ to ‘community’, and from ‘kinship relation’ to ‘social relation’.

5 Conclusion

I provided a basic set of quasi-names in Japanese to support and enhance Capone's argument from a cross-linguistic perspective. Directly referential property obtains further support from the perspective of first language acquisition. Indexicality also applies to the Japanese data, but with an extension. The Japanese data indicates that some informal speech act is required for licensing quasi-names. But the requirement has a language-specific element.

In sum, Japanese quasi-names are considered to be a special case of *yobina*, a subcategory of nicknames in Japanese. More specifically, quasi-names are much like stage names systematically given to those members in a higher position. The *yobina* (or stage name variant) status of quasi-names appears to hold cross-linguistically, while the peculiarity within the *yobina* category has general and language-specific elements.

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