

## Address Terms in Japanese Blogs as a Response to the Author's Self-Presentation

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# Address Terms in Japanese Blogs as a Response to the Author's Self-Presentation

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**Abstract:** In recent years, internet blogs have quickly gained popularity as a medium. The communication that takes place on a blog follows different patterns than face-to-face conversation, but has not been studied as extensively. An author of a blog can selectively disclose personal information and describe events from everyday life, thus creating a self-image for public view. This paper analyzes the manner of self-presentation on four blogs written by Japanese celebrities and the way readers of the blogs respond to this self-presentation by choosing certain terms of address when referring to the celebrity in their comments. Even when relevant parameters such as the gender and the age of the celebrity are similar or identical, some important differences in the patterns of address can be observed. It can be concluded that the addressed person's manner of self-presentation is an additional important factor.

## 1 Introduction

This study is concerned with the self-presentation of four Japanese celebrities on their blogs and the verbal responses of their readers, specifically the address terms that the readers use to refer to the celebrities in their comments. The aim of this study is to investigate how the identities created by speakers affect address terms, in order to show that the manner of self-presentation, just like age or social status, is a factor in the address system.

The word “blog” is a contraction of “weblog”; in other words it is a “log published using the Web”. A blog is a personal webpage on which the author posts entries concerning the topics of his or her choosing, such as: personal life, hobbies and interests, advice for the readers, etc. The distinguishing feature of a blog is its diary-like structure in which new personal entries are expected to appear from time to time, at least until the author decides to stop posting.

## 2 Blogs in Japan

The precursors of modern blogs started appearing on the Japanese internet around late 1990s. Since then the number of registered blog users has been steadily growing, reaching almost 27 million in 2009.<sup>2</sup> Considering that the population of Japan is around 127 million, it would mean that about twenty percent of Japan's population was writing a blog at that time. This is a simplification, as there could be cases where one person has multiple blogs, or conversely multiple persons administrate a single blog, but the figure is

sufficient as a rough estimate that shows the considerable popularity this medium has achieved in Japan. Incidentally, the figure of 20 percent is corroborated on a smaller scale by Sakamoto (2010 : 17). 20 percent of her university student respondents reported writing a weblog.

### **2.1 Japanese research on blogs**

Because they are a fairly recent phenomenon, blogs have not yet been extensively studied in Japan. The studies that have been conducted are focused on technological issues (Taniguchi et al. 2004) or psychological aspects of blog writing such as: the motivations that drive people to it (Yamashita 2005) or the self-disclosure aspect of writing about your personal life in a very public space that is the Internet (Sakamoto 2010). Yamashita proposes several research approaches to the study of blogs and mentions the possibility of a strictly linguistic study, but to the best of our knowledge none has actually been conducted in Japan so far.

The psychological studies mentioned above have some relevance to this paper, but they analyze blogs created for non-commercial reasons, unlike the blogs chosen here. For the celebrity bloggers of this study internal motivations may of course be a factor affecting the decision to write (and continue writing) a blog, but another (possibly more important) factor is the potential publicity generated by the blog and the monetary gain that will follow.

The concept of self-disclosure used by Sakamoto applies more to the student bloggers who she used as informants than the bloggers in this study. The definition she uses describes self-disclosure as an act of self-expression where one openly tells another person true statements about oneself, in contrast to self-presentation, where one either tells true statements but does so selectively, or simply lies to make a certain impression. The latter concept is more useful when describing celebrity blogs. While there is no reason to think the authors of the blogs in this study are lying at any point, selective picking of the information to be divulged is surely taking place.

## **3 Communicating on a blog**

The linguistic exchange that takes place on a blog is different from face-to-face communication in several aspects. The text is written and not spoken. The exchange does not take place in real time, but rather at the convenience of the involved parties. When people take turns in a conversation, the pauses between those turns will be measured in seconds or fractions of seconds. The time that elapses between uploading a blog post and a response can be much more than that. There is no upper limit for it, but a delay of several days is not uncommon.

Furthermore, while in live conversation the participants do not have set roles as far as managing the interaction is concerned, on a blog the owner is the one who has the right to initiate an exchange by proposing a topic. Depending on the features of a particular blog service, the blogger may also have the capability to moderate the communication act by removing inappropriate comments or blocking access for users who make such comments repeatedly. This is true for the blogs chosen for this study – anyone who wishes to make a comment is informed that the comment must be accepted by the administrator of the blog or it may not be published. That is the likely reason why no inflammatory or even simply critical comments were found among the data.

The progression of the exchange can also be very different. On some blogs, each commenter not only

refers to the post of the owner, but also to some comments that came before. This gives the communication act the structure of a long chain, which is similar to the structure of natural conversation. However, most of the comments gathered in this study referred only to the blogger's post and not to preceding comments. This means that the post and the comments formed multiple, independent and very short exchanges, rather than a single connected chain.

#### **4 Self-presentation in a blog**

Internet blogs of the kind chosen here serve as a form of a diary for the celebrity. Of course, this is not a diary of a traditional kind, one that is only intended to be seen by the person writing it, one used strictly for personal purposes. While the authors of the blogs write about a variety of subjects, including personal life, they are projecting an image of themselves as celebrities, through the lens of their careers. Their notes are not private introspections, but a presentation intended for the readers, who for the most part seem to be fans of the celebrities rather than friends or acquaintances. For a fan, the admiration for the idol's work comes first, while the interest in the idol's personal life only follows later.

The very name "official blog" hints that the blog belongs to someone who has achieved at least some fame, as it is used to separate sites administrated by fans of certain figures from sites maintained by those figures themselves or those who represent them. Each of the blogs listed below includes the word "official" in its title. This suggests that the celebrity's name is a household brand in itself and that behind it is a network of managers and sponsors. Consequently, special discretion must be applied when divulging personal information on the blog, because it may affect not only the career of the blogger, but also of the blogger's financial affiliates.

This is also true in the case of ordinary personal blogs, but to a lesser degree. Sakamoto (2010 : 6) reports that after a Japanese student drove a motorcycle under the influence of alcohol and talked about it on his blog, the university disciplined both him and the captain of his sports club (the student was drinking with his club colleagues). This is an example of consequences following from admitting involvement in an illegal and life-endangering act on a blog. A celebrity must take care even when divulging less controversial and non-incriminating information, because even such information may be enough to hurt his or her professional image, future career and income. An ordinary person has a smaller stake in maintaining a certain image, and always has the option to remain anonymous and avoid trouble. This makes an honest self-disclosure more likely, while a celebrity can be presumed to perform consciously selective self-presentation more often.

As Erving Goffman (1959) showed in his seminal work, people engage in all sorts of performances on a daily basis and are not necessarily aware of it all the time. Even if the bloggers share only truthful information, the very act of picking one post topic over another gives them the first measure of control over the projected image. To use Goffman's theatrical metaphor, the blog constitutes a "front region" or a "stage", where the bloggers' reflections on their daily life are only presented to the public after being subjected to a process of selection and refinement. Those parts of the bloggers' lives which do not find their way to the blog remain in the "back region" or "backstage". The difference between a blog and the examples given by Goffman in his book is that the blog is not a stage for a live performance, but a pre-recorded one. What the audience is allowed to see is an edited depiction of events, not the events themselves in real time. It is the

difference between seeing a live theatrical play and a movie.

#### 4.1 Address terms as a response to self-presentation

The object of this study is not just the manner in which the celebrities present themselves in their posts, but also the way in which readers of their blogs respond in comments to said posts. Specifically, we were interested in finding out what kind of terms of address the readers use when referring to the bloggers.

To use a term of address (e.g. “you”, “Sir”, “Jane” in English) is to make a direct reference to a person and such an act is strongly tied to the issue of personal image. Address terms tend to be pragmatically charged, and indeed in Japanese there seems to be no truly “neutral” term that one can use to refer to anyone in any context without ever causing some sort of “trouble” – for example offending or confusing the addressee.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, every time a commenter uses an address term he or she must make a choice which is based on the perception of the addressed celebrity and of the relationship between the two persons. The point we would like to make is that this choice is affected by the content of the blog entries – the commenters react to the blog owner’s self-presentation.

### 5 The data

The data comes from blogs of Japanese celebrities hosted by Ameblo (ameblo.jp). It consists of comments made in response to some of the blog entries posted in March and September 2013. The most current entries at the time of data collection were used, regardless of the topic. A total of 200 comments were analyzed for each blogger. Those 200 comments were collected from several entries. Up to 50 comments from a single entry were analyzed, in order to avoid having too many comments from one source, which could create a bias in the data. This means that for every blogger at least 4 blog entries were analyzed.

**Table 1**

Name	Age	Gender	Profession	Blog address
Momo	28	Female	Fashion and romance guru	<a href="http://ameblo.jp/momo-minbe/">http://ameblo.jp/momo-minbe/</a>
Kintaro	32	Female	Comedian	<a href="http://ameblo.jp/kintalotanaka/">http://ameblo.jp/kintalotanaka/</a>
Kenji Darubishu	33	Male	Musician	<a href="http://ameblo.jp/doramu-kenji/">http://ameblo.jp/doramu-kenji/</a>
Kensuke Sasaki	47	Male	Wrestler	<a href="http://ameblo.jp/sasaki-kensuke/">http://ameblo.jp/sasaki-kensuke/</a>

The celebrities and their basic personal data are listed in the table above. These bloggers were chosen because when the first batch of the data was collected in March 2013, all of them were in the top 10 of the popularity ranking<sup>4</sup>, which means they received plenty of comments and so there was an abundance of linguistic material to work on. Furthermore, those two men and two women present different images of masculinity and femininity, and their popularity proves that each of those ways of being meets with some positive response in Japanese society.

The blog posts analyzed here are typically accompanied with one or more images, often photographs of the author. These are a part of the message and very important for self-presentation. However, since we wish to focus on the linguistic aspects of the message, we will not discuss them in detail.

### 5.1 The bloggers' profiles

Momo's job description in Japanese is *tarento*, or "talent". This is a general term for people who sing, dance, act or do some similar kind of work in the entertainment industry. Her blog entries create an image of a feminine young woman who is knowledgeable in fashion, make-up and other forms of beautification. Momo is treated as a role model and a mentor by her predominantly female fans, who say they wish they could become as pretty as her and ask her for advice about beauty. She also receives many questions concerning romantic relationships with men. Momo seems to have a very loyal fan base – her blog is the only one which was still in the top 10 list of popular blogs in September 2013, ranking second place.

Kintaro is a comedian, which means it is her job to make people laugh. "Cuteness" or "attractiveness" may be important for Momo, but these qualities are not central aspects of Kintaro's persona. In fact, for comedic effect she often aims for "oddness" instead. The oddness begins with the name she chose for herself – Kintaro is a male name and its most famous bearer was a little boy from an old Japanese legend. She explains that she decided on this name after seeing it on a sign in a city she was visiting (possibly it was a name of a store or a restaurant). However, the choice was not completely random. She also stated on her profile that she named herself Kintaro because she wanted to become strong like a man and to succeed in the male dominated world of Japanese comedians. This further distances her from the typical femininity of Momo.

Kenji is a member of a rock band called *Gooruden Bombaa* (Golden Bomber), which belongs to a subculture called "visual kei". A common feature of this subculture is an androgynous image maintained by some of its participants. Kenji's trademark is heavy makeup, mimicking that of actors in Kabuki theatrical plays. Perhaps this is why in his profile<sup>5</sup> he describes his gender as "kabuki". He also seems to be making an effort to control his body weight. He is not just trying to avoid obesity, but keeps his body very lean, if not thin. He is not married and does not have children, or if he does he keeps it a secret. His looks and his family status, combined with the playful tone he affects in many of his posts, create an image of a young boy rather than a mature man.

Kensuke Sasaki is a wrestler. His work belongs to a genre called *puro-resu* (short for "professional wrestling"), which should not be confused with the competitive sport of wrestling which features in the Olympic Games. *Puro-resu* is a scripted performance where the outcomes of the fights can be decided in advance and where entertainment is more important than realism. The matches are performances and the wrestlers are performers, often adopting flamboyant personas which are sometimes based around a certain theme. Even when no particular theme can be found, one common characteristic of most of the wrestlers is a macho hypermasculinity, represented by menacing expressions and poses as well as unusually muscular physique (wrestling performers are commonly more muscle-bound than athletes who participate in real combat sport competitions). This is the case with Kensuke, or at least it used to be. He is now in his late forties, raising his two sons with his wife (a fellow wrestler). He does mention his career from time to time and he maintains his brawn, but now family life seems to be the main topic of his blog posts. The aggressive fighting man gave way to the loving husband and father.

### 5.2 The results: cute Momo and quirky Kintaro

Table 2 below lists all distinct address terms that the two female bloggers received from their fans. Note that with the exception of one special case which will be discussed later, address terms which differed only

in spelling were treated as the same unit. For example, some commenters wrote Momo's name in *hiragana* もも and some used *kanji* 桃, but we concluded from the context that this variation has little to no bearing on the pragmatic aspects of the address term.

**Table2**

Address to Momo	Number	Address to Kintaro	Number
Momo-chan	210	Kintaro。 san	49
Momo-san	14	Kintaro-san	46
Momo-tan	13	Kintaro	18
Moo-san	3	Kintaro。	8
Momo-chan-san	1	Kin-chan	6
Momoko-sama	1	Kintaro-chan	5
		Kintaro。 chan	3
		Kin-san	3
		Kintama	1
		Kintaro-san	1
Total	242	Total	140

Momo received 242 address terms in total, more than one per every comment on average, the highest number among the four celebrities and considerably more than Kintaro, who was addressed 140 times. The meaning of this difference is not clear and it could be caused by chance, but such a high rate of address might be an expression of endearment. Jabłoński (2003) demonstrated that in everyday communication in Japanese it is quite feasible to do without address terms in a large proportion of utterances without negatively impacting the clarity of the message. Similarly, Yui (2007 : 25) notes that address terms appear in some Japanese sentences despite not being required to identify the addressee or get the addressee's attention. In her opinion, this sort of seemingly redundant address serves as a sign of emotional closeness. Incidentally, the address term she uses in an example that illustrates her point is a first name combined with *chan*, just like *Momo-chan*. Perhaps we are dealing with a similar phenomenon in this study.

**Table3**

Address to Momo	%	Address to Kintaro	%
N + chan	87%	N + san	71%
N + san	6%	N	19%
N + tan	5%	N + chan	10%
Other	2%	Other	<1%
Total	100%	Total	100%

Table 3 groups the address terms into more general categories and shows what percentage of all address a category constituted. The vast majority of address towards Momo is *Momo-chan*, a form which uses the name (marked as N in the tables) and denotes "cuteness" of some sort. Because of that it fits well with her manner of self-presentation. By "N" we mean whatever the celebrities chose to call themselves, which is not always their legal name. The suffix *chan* is predominantly used towards children of both sexes and young women, but also towards other people and even animals, provided they are perceived as "cute"

in some way. *Momo-chan* constituted 87% of all address terms Momo received, and if *Momo-tan* (a closely related form) is included, this number rises to 92%. The more formal *Momo-san* was used only 6% of the time. It is clear that the commenters strongly preferred a more endearing term.

Conversely, in Kintaro's case *chan* was only used 10% of the time. The fact that Kintaro receives very few *chan* forms compared to Momo may be partially explained by their age difference, as Kintaro is four years older. But the age gap alone cannot account for the great difference in the way those two women were addressed. The manner in which they present themselves is likely to be a much more important factor. Kintaro does not make an effort to appear cute. In fact sometimes she aims for the opposite effect. One of Kintaro's acts is parodying Atsuko Maeda, a member of the popular band AKB48. Good looks are one of the main requirements that need to be fulfilled if one wants to join a band of this kind. Kintaro's act is a deliberate distortion of Maeda's image, including her attractiveness. This has earned her the ire of Maeda's fans, some of whom felt offended by the caricature. Although none of the comments analyzed here was angry in tone, this kind of self-presentation is less likely to elicit *chan* suffixes.

The preferred form in her case was *Kintaro-san*, used in 71% of all cases. A form like this (N+san) was also the standard for the two male bloggers. This form expresses acceptance of the bloggers image, because N is the name the bloggers chose for themselves. In the case of the four bloggers selected here it is also a sign of familiarity, as in each of the four cases the N is a given name – which as an address term is generally an expression of smaller distance than a family name. On the other hand, the added suffix *san* expresses a relatively greater distance. The fact that for three out of four celebrities N+san was the preferred form might suggest that it is an optimal expression of the distance between a famous figure and a fan, where the fan is not really a friend of the celebrity, but nonetheless is very supportive and welcoming. Kintaro also received a plain N without any suffixes 19% of the time, while Momo did not receive this form even once. This form is more familiar than N+san, so it was the choice of those fans who felt more closeness or were bolder in expressing it.

Kintaro adds to her odd image by adding a full stop (。 ) to her nickname. She does this even outside a sentence, when punctuation is unnecessary. Some commenters omit the full stop when addressing her, but many honor her choice and write her name exactly the same way as she does. Doing this within a sentence disrupts its structure, but this disruption is compatible with Kintaro's image as quirky, odd, and funny (within the dominant gender framework). The readers also pay attention to the signs she uses to write her own nickname. Kintaro uses *katakana* キンタロー。 , as opposed to *kanji* 金太郎 or *hiragana* きんたろう。 The majority of the commenters uses this type of writing when addressing her.

### 5.3 The results: boyish Kenji and Kensuke the father

Similarly to the tables which showed the numbers of address terms given to female bloggers, table 4 shows the detailed distribution of address terms given to males in this study and table 5 generalizes it into categories. It is worth noting that Kenji received a variety of creative nicknames derived from either of the two parts of his stage name, such as *Kenjicchi* or *Nyarubisshu*.

The most common address term used was N+san and the reasons for this were proposed earlier. However, this form was used more often toward Kensuke (81 percent of all of his address terms compared to Kenji's 60 percent). Kenji was addressed with a plain N 17% of the time and with an N+kun 9% of the time. Either form was not used to address Kensuke even once. N+kun is a form used mostly towards



Table 4

Address to Kenji	Number	Address to Kensuke	Number
Kenji-san	141	Kensuke-san	90
Kenji	41	Anata	4
Kenji-kun	21	Papa-san	3
Kenji-chan	8	Papa	3
Kenjicchi	6	Kensuke-papa	3
Daru-sama	6	Kensuke-papa-san	2
Nyarubisshu	5	Kensuke-shan	2
Daru	1	Kensuke-senshu	1
Darubishu Kenji	1	Kensuke-sama	1
Daru-san	1	Kensuke-chan	1
Kenji-nii	1	Danna-san	1
Ken-chan	1	Sasaki Kensuke-san	1
Kenji-shan	1		
Kenji-kyun	1		
Anata	1		
Total	236	Total	112

Table 5

Address to Kenji	%	Address to Kensuke	%
N + san	60%	N + san	81%
N	17%	Kinship term	10%
N + kun	9%	Pronoun	4%
Darubishu (stage name) and derivatives	6%	Other	5%
Other	8%		
Total	100%	Total	100%

males who are junior in some sense, often simply young (or younger than the addresser, at least). Again, the presence of this form and the familiar plain N can be in part explained by age. Kenji is 14 years younger than Kensuke. However, he is still 33 years old, which makes him a mature man if age alone is any indicator. But he is childless and unmarried, makes an effort to keep his appearance youthful and on top of that writes his posts with a puerile sense of humor. He makes himself look boyish and the readers treat him as such.

In contrast, Kensuke is unmistakably a grown-up family man. The portal Ameblo.jp includes Kensuke's blog in the category *papa-buroгаа*, or "daddy blogger". His children feature in most of his blog entries, even if the entries are not specifically about them. This prompts the readers to make positive comments about Kensuke's role as a father and about his sons and his wife. The users respond to his family man image by addressing him with kinship names appropriate for a father, such as *papa* or *Kensuke-papa*. This kind of address is a confirmation of his fatherhood, which is clearly important for Kensuke. A single commenter also referred to his marital status by using the term *danna-san* (husband).

This is different from the "fictive" use of kinship terms, where those terms are used towards an unrelated person and the blood bond to which they refer is not real, unlike Kensuke's fatherhood. An example of a fictive kinship term in Japanese would be *ojisān* (uncle) used to address an unrelated middle-aged man,

especially if the speaker is younger than this man.

## 6 Closing remarks

I have attempted to show that although the sex and age of a person affect the choice of the term used to address that person in Japanese, another important factor is the person's gendered manner of self-presentation. The celebrities in this study received address terms which corresponded to their image on the blogs. The "youthful" and "facetious" Kenji was addressed with adequately familiar and playful terms, while the "serious" and "responsible" Kensuke received more honorific titles and terms that acknowledged his family status (and with it his place in the symbolic gender order). Momo, who bases her career on highly gendered notions of female beauty and romantic love, received endearing terms used towards young women and children, while the only slightly older Kintaro (who parodies attractiveness and uses strangeness to fuel her career) received these terms only rarely.

Almost no second person pronouns were found in the comments. This may be due to the fact that there is really no adequate polite pronoun for the kind of relationship between a famous blogger and a user. It is noted that the Japanese language doesn't really offer a pronoun that would be not only adequate in a relationship with a certain degree of distance, but could also conceivably be preferred to other terms of address. Typically, when personal information about a person is available (e.g. name, profession, rank), this information will be used directly to select a proper address term and pronouns will become obsolete, at least in this kind of relationship. Most of the users choose to call the celebrities by a name or a nickname (whichever the bloggers choose for themselves) since the profession of a popular musician, comedian or model does not come with a special address term like the professions of doctors or CEOs do. One exception is Kensuke, who as a wrestler was addressed *Kensuke-senshu* one time (*senshu* is a general word for an athlete).

The only pronoun which appeared in the data (albeit rarely) is *anata*, which is one of the most formal second-person pronouns in Japanese. The comments in which *anata* appeared tended to be adequately serious in tone. In Harriett Russell's study of address term preferences, *anata* was only rarely mentioned as a term a Japanese person would like to use or receive. One exception was talk between a married couple, where women said they would like to use it towards their husband and men said they would like to receive it from their wives (Russell 1981).

The kind of interaction that takes place on blog sites analyzed here happens in a context which unusually mixes the private and the public. There are no access restrictions concerning viewing the blog and comments can be both read and written by anyone with an Internet connection. The anonymity of the readers allows them to use familiar expressions they might less eagerly use in face-to-face interaction, where their identity would be plain to see. On the blogger's side, the informality of the medium may encourage somewhat more casual talk than a formal event like a press conference might, but on the other hand blogs give a much greater degree of control over the message. Any slip of the tongue made during a live event may go on permanent record, without the possibility of retraction or editing.

### Notes

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- 2 Data gathered by the Institute for Information and Communications Policy, available at: <http://www.soumu.go.jp/iicp/chousakenkyu/data/research/survey/telecom/2009/2009-I-13.pdf>
- 3 Unlike the English “you”, which in modern day is an appropriate term in a great variety of social situations.
- 4 The ranking is displayed at <http://ameblo.jp/> (available as of 22 November 2013)
- 5 <http://profile.ameba.jp/doramu-kenji/>

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