

## Amae and Its Hierarchy of Love

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<https://doi.org/10.15017/18436>

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出版情報 : 九州大学心理学研究. 10, pp.225-230, 2009-03-31. Faculty of Human-Environment Studies, Kyushu University

バージョン :

権利関係 :

# Amae and Its Hierarchy of Love

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Takeo Doi discovered that Japanese people can beautifully illustrate the undifferentiated oral state of mind by using the word “Amae.” When one answers to the other’s requesting love of Amae by giving active love, Amae, which is said to be a passive desire, really corresponds to a positive adjustment of the mother, or substitute mother. The author’s interest lies in the hierarchical relationship of the characters involved in the Amae situation. Following the discussions from the viewpoint of language, the author concludes that Japanese words of love or Amae mean to give love from the higher to the lower. Under this hierarchy of love, the lower’s love to the higher turn out to be neglected and it eventually makes Amae, in which children may ask for love from adults, conspicuous. In the author’s opinion, it is very possible the idea of a child’s loving his/her parent had been suppressed linguistically, but Doi didn’t take this hierarchy of love into consideration in his Amae theory.

**Key Words:** Amae, Love, Psychoanalysis

## I. The Position of Amae

### 1. Amae from the lower side

When we translate “Amae” into “dependency” in English, this word implies something negative or pathologic among Westerners while sharing a relatively positive sense among Japanese. This comparison is quite important for both groups because it enables us to exchange our different viewpoints on dependency. For example, if the positive meaning of Amae tends to be repressed in the unconscious of Westerners, to be conscious of it by this exchange would be a psychoanalytic experience. Besides, it is precious, I believe, that Japanese people can be aware of the pathological possibility of dependency by gaining the Western point of view.

In this presentation, I would like to introduce some words concerning Japanese love and attempt to exchange our different viewpoints of love following Doi’s way. The reason I am doing this is that some important aspects of love are easily misunderstood because of the linguistic popularity of Amae in Japan.

In its writing and practice, psychoanalysis tries to link various meanings by making use of the ambiguity of ordinary words. Doi exerts fully this method in his development of Amae theory and connects the literal experience of tasting with the mouth to the metaphorical experience of psychologically depending on others. According to this linguistic hypothesis, the foundation from where Amae arises rests on the mother-infant oral relationship. We think psychological desire for dependency and instinctive, biological desire for seeking the mother’s milk through the mouth may remain

undifferentiated due to our infantile experiences. Japanese people can beautifully illustrate this undifferentiated oral state of mind by using the word “Amae.”

Besides, Doi (1973) associates the pronunciation of the word “Amae” with the Japanese baby talk word “Uma-uma,” which usually means “eating.” I think language is a medium which can easily imply the meaning of Amae because language is the work of the mouth. Furthermore, the sound of “ma” makes us associate the meaning of Amae with the oral experiences of infants. I can give you some word examples which contain “ma” in their sounds. Those are “mother,” “mouth,” “munch” in English, “mamma” (breast) in Latin, “mam-ma” (food), “umai” (tasty), “man-puku” (being full) in Japanese and the name of the Japanese Goddess “Amaterasu.” We can say that the sound of “m” or “ma” retains satisfactory oral experiences.

In Japanese, this sound of “ma” is usually pronounced with the face rather up and the mouth open. I suppose that this posture of the mouth expresses the desire of the person who is asking for something important to be given from somewhere higher up to the open mouth. Here, please pronounce “A-ma-e” with loud voice. The sounds “A,” “Ma,” and “E” are pronounced with our mouths open. Especially the fact that it is difficult to pronounce “A” and “Ma” with our face down is important when we think of the experiential meaning of the pronunciation. This is because I experience that the person showing “Amae” is looking up from a lower level and the person being asked for “Amae” is coming from a higher level just as the Japanese Goddess Amaterasu, which literally means “shining in the heaven,” shines on us from the



Fig.1

heavens.

## 2. The descent of parents and the ascent of children

This is the picture which D. Freeman (1994) selected from a variety of Ukiyo-e as the one showing Amai of a child [Fig.1]. In this picture by Utamaro, the characters appearing are "Kintaro" and "Yamauba." According to the tale, they are not actual mother and child but "Yamauba," which is a substitute mother, and from her behavior it is clear that the painter is illustrating the intimate mother-child relationship. As the picture is a plain, two-dimensional world different from three-dimensional reality, the characters' states of mind are often presented by the characters position in the picture, such as up or down and right or left. My interest lies in this hierarchical relationship of the characters in the pictures.

Like in the picture, when an infant in the lower side is asking a mother in the upper side for something, how will this mother react to the child's request? A typically anticipated interpretation is that the infant is requesting to be held by the mother, and the mother will sit down to hold the infant up in her arms, answering the infant's request. When the parent lets the infant depend on her according to the infant's Amai by showing the response, known as "Amayakasu" in Japanese,

the parent holds the infant up like this and they come closer, at which point the hierarchical relationship will disappear. That is to say, when one answers to the other's requesting love of Amai by giving active love, Amai, which is said to be a passive desire, really corresponds to a positive adjustment of mother, or substitute mother, which allows someone to depend on her. Besides, need of Amai is often abstracted as a need for dependency, but it is more appropriate to call Amai a need to be met rather than a need for dependency as it draws the other's adjustment and request for something to be given.

At the same time, however, as I believe in an infant's inner reality and illusion, it is possible to interpret that the infant in the picture is trying to leap up to his/her mother like Superman, not requesting her to do anything. Or maybe he/she wishes to grow up rapidly just like Japanese old tale "Issun-boushi." In other words, the possibility that a smaller and lower subject reaches up to a bigger and higher object by means of imagination, play or magic undoubtedly exists if we consider the existence of the infant's magical or unrealistic wishes. Compared to this, general interpretation of Amai is realistic and it contains realistic sense or insights of adults that the smaller object needs to request a bigger object to approach him/her.

In Japanese, we sometimes express children as "小人" in Chinese letters, which literally means "a small person." And adult is "大人", whose literal meaning is a big person. Amai is conspicuous when there arises a vertical distance between the parent and the child. When Amai desire is fulfilled by the parent, the distance between the bigger and the smaller disappears. In Japanese daily lives adults often sit on the floor. Thus, an adult is perceived by Japanese children as someone who sits and stands, and when an adult sits down, he/she becomes the same height as children. In this sense, the adaptation and approach from adults to children are quite common as this hierarchical distance between the two easily gets smaller.

## II. Hierarchy of Love

### 1. "Love" from the higher side

As you can see now, children's Amai doesn't stand alone but it makes itself conspicuous when the positionally higher parents are expected to give something which the positionally lower children ask for. Parents' psychology corresponding to the psychology of Amai is usually called "Amayakasu," but it doesn't tell us the parents' state of mind outside of Amai. From now on, in order to grasp parents' psychology from some other angles, I would like to use

another keyword which is different from Amae. What I take on here are the Japanese noun “愛(ai),” verb “愛する(ai-suru),” and adjective “愛しい(ito-shii).” “愛” is translated as “Love” in English and it is extremely important to review the usage of the word in Japanese when we study psychology of Amae, which is defined as “passive object love” in English. This is because in modern Japanese, the word “愛” or “愛する” is considered as a somewhat positive wish or behavior for love just like the usage of “love” in English. And in this sense, it is in contrast to Amae, which is a passive desire for being loved.

When we think of the history of Japanese word “愛,” we must not forget the fact that the word was seldom used in older periods. “愛” was originally a Chinese word and it never appeared in “The Story of Genji,” which is said to be one of the best classic novels of love. Besides, it appears that this word was never used in Japanese old poems. Even when the word “愛” was used, it was used to express a one-sided love from the higher to the lower, men to women, husbands to wives, or parents to children. I suppose it hardly implied equal or mutual love. For example, Nobutsuna Saigo, a scholar of old literature, insists that this word used to indicate mainly the emotion of the higher to the lower, that is to one’s subordinates or mere objects. Thus, they said “men’s love” or “parents’ love” but not “women’s love” or “children’s love.”

This seldom used word “愛” turned to be explosively popular when we started to use it to mean love in translations of European philosophy or philanthropy in Christianity, indirectly relating to the Chinese viewpoint of love and sex. As people concerned already knew, however, there existed a discrepancy in the usage of the word, and this very discrepancy, or misunderstanding, follows to the discussion of love concerning “Amae.”

Here, let me explain the pronunciation of “愛(ai).” The accent is on the first phoneme and when one pronounces this word, the head moves from up to down as if it were nodding. In my opinion, the word “愛,” in the aspect of sound as well, shows the movement from the up to down and conveys the fact that Japanese love contains vertical movement from the upper to the lower person. In Japanese alphabetical order, “a-i” are the first and the second letters. Please note that the word “愛(ai)” is also read from up to down in Japanese vertical writing.

The very reason why Japanese “愛” seldom holds horizontality in its meaning such as equal love or philanthropy in Christianity rests on the hierarchical relationship in meaning and the vertical movement of the sounds of the word “愛.” Recently in Japan, the Japanese “愛” is easily used as

something philanthrophical and mutual without any serious thoughts in TV dramas, popular songs, and advertisements. When the word is used in this way, however, it often accompanies the sense of shallowness and falsehood. Indeed, because of this discrepancy in the meaning of love, “愛,” which used to express equality and philanthropy, has become a serious betrayal to the younger generation in Japan although it also attracts their longing so much. As a result, the word “愛” is seldom used in Japanese psychotherapy, and when used, it is treated as a special word in a particular context with an emphasis on the meaning of horizontal or mutual love.

## 2. 愛しい(ito-shii) : lovely

We have so far examined the hierarchical structure of the noun “愛(ai)” and the verb “愛する(ai-suru).” Here, let us examine another daily adjective, “愛しい(ito-shii).” This word is considered to express affection and an enchanted feeling and is quite close to the verb “愛する(ai-suru)” in its meaning. In Japanese, “愛しい(ito-shii)” has a historical background and we can see the unique psychology beyond the word when we consult the word “いとおい(ito-oshi)” (an archaic word of 愛しい) in a dictionary for Japanese archaic words. For example, a description of the word in one dictionary is as follows:

1. unsightly, shameful
2. pitiful, poor, sorry
3. pathetic, piteous

The love described here is also from the higher to the lower, the stronger to the weaker, and the parent to the child, and I think we can observe hierarchical relationships here again. What is distinctive here is that the feelings of compassion, pitiness, and mercy are moving as a motive for love. It is said that the word “kawaii,” meaning “pretty,” which is frequently used in modern Japanese, has derived from the word “kawaisou,” which means “pitiful.”

Therefore, what is suggested is that in the process of experiencing and trying to evade psychological suffering, such as pitiful, poor, and pathetic feelings, here comes the feeling of love. In other words, when the stronger or the higher cannot look straight at the poorer, the inferior, and the unhappier, the feeling of love occurs to avoid the pain. In this sense, those who have the feeling of “愛しい(ito-shii)” protect and take care of children and the weaker for the purpose of evading the pain they feel toward those with whom they sympathize. Taking these suggestions into consideration, it is understandable that “いとしい(ito-shii)” originated from “いたはし(itawa-shi),” meaning painful. The interpretation of love stated above might sound too egoistic, but we cannot

deny that parents' love to children certainly includes such a selfish aspect to some extent.

Following the discussion above from the viewpoint of language, we conclude that Japanese words of love, “愛(ai),” “愛する(ai-suru),” and “愛しい(ito-shii)” mean to give love from the higher to the lower. As if it precisely corresponds to this, Amae tends to be the request of love from the lower to the higher. Here, let me call this aspect of love a “hierarchy of love.” At the same time, however, I want to stress that even if one doesn't or cannot say something in words, it never means that he/she doesn't have such a state of mind. For example, the fact that people didn't say “the love of children” or “the love of women” doesn't mean that those kinds of love never actually existed. Rather, the fact that “the love of children” and “the love of women” were eliminated from the old Japanese language indicates that it hardly acquired citizenship even when it existed.

### III. The love from the lower

Under this “hierarchy of love,” the lower's, or the weaker's love to the higher, or the stronger turn out to be neglected and it eventually makes “Amae,” in which children may ask for love from adults, conspicuous. If we ignore these relationships of the stronger and the weaker or the superior and the inferior, it is supposed that those who are small, weak, low, dependable, and sick can all love the higher and the stronger. This kind of love, however, cannot be described as “いとしい(ito-shii)” in Japanese. Thus, this makes us notice that Japanese language doesn't have a proper word which expresses the weaker's love to the stronger or children's love to parents. And I think that the idea of the smaller's (strong and passionate) love for the bigger didn't exist at least in certain areas of Japanese language until psychoanalysis was imported. It is very possible that the idea of a child's loving his/her parent had been suppressed linguistically.

In Japanese daily lives, and psychotherapy too, adolescents who are pointed out their Amae by their parents often strongly oppose this indication. If we take the discussion mentioned above into consideration, we can easily understand why. They may not be passively asking for love, which is Amae, but they may be positively loving a person. What troubles them is they often do not have the proper word to describe this impulse of love.

Besides, when we say someone is in the state of Amae, which is a passive request for love, we need to be aware that we might have put the person as our subordinate in doing so. Those who passively depend on others can be those who

positively love others at the same time. When we observe or talk about Amae, aren't we captured by the viewpoint of “hierarchy of love,” which presupposes that love never comes from the lower? Is there any possibility that those who are big and satisfied enough with love tend to feel the pathetic pain when they see a small person, who cannot survive without depending on others, detect his/her Amae, and try to do something for him/her? One of the most significant distances between the parent and the child is the one between “big person” and “small person,” divided into up and down. For infants' universal anxiety, called separation anxiety, which may be derived from this distance, infants all over the world try to get rid of this distance. It is quite an objective and realistic view of Amae that this distance can disappear when adults adapt to infants. On the contrary, there also exists subjective desire, magical hope, and unconscious wishes that the small person can jump up to close the distance without support from adults. That is to say, on one side, Amae accompanies a sense of reality, to tell which is big and which is small, and insight that love and care is given from the higher to the lower. On the other side, the psychoanalytic viewpoint of love in infants pays attention to psychological reality and expressions of love in illusion, and naturally, it can be very subjective and unrealistic. And I think that the interpretation of this positive love as performing Amae is not fair to this infantile sense of aiming at rising from the lower to the higher.

Because of the reasons stated above, I pay my attention to a sense of hierarchy that love comes from the bigger to the smaller and I believe that this sense certainly exists in Japanese language which includes Amae. But I think that Takeo Doi didn't take this hierarchy of love into consideration in his Amae theory. What makes me confused is the misunderstanding that those who talk about love in Japanese produce when they talk about horizontal and equal love with the words of “愛,” which is based on the sense of hierarchy. This discrepancy occurred when Christianity brought the concept of philanthropy into Japan, when our writers used the Japanese “愛” in the sense of European love, and when we discussed the theme of Amae in terms of love. Clinically, I would not only estimate it as just Amae to accept the love from the higher, but also take into consideration the conservative idea that the love only comes from the higher. Some patients in Japan are struggling hard to find ways to express impulses of love rather than Amae-need, so they have to face the hierarchy of love which can be very “Oedipal.”

Lastly, let me discuss Iconography in Christianity in order to contrast it to various characteristics of love in Japanese culture. In these pictures, I, having the scope of

Amae, see this tiny Christ showing Amae to mother Maria and asking to be loved by her. This is because of a vertical, overwhelming hierarchy between too great and generous Maria and too tiny Christ, and I may interpret that Christ as a child is showing Amae to mother Maria. Besides, when we look up at this picture from the bottom, we experience Amae as well that we want to be loved by this great and generous mother. To my surprise, however, it is usually said in Christian explanations of these pictures that the "Son of God" is comforting the sad and depressed "Mother of God" and he appears to caress the mother.

Furthermore, if we take a closer look at the picture, it seems that the mother in the Icon, as a mediator between people and God, is not looking at the child but seems to be pondering the father in the Land of God. As if corresponding to this, it is emphasized in psychoanalysis that the son loves the mother and the mother belongs to the father and that this triangle relationship is the origin of Oedipus complex. And I think that psychoanalysis is interested in the possibility that the child who loves his/her mother wishes to become big like adults although the child may confront the fact that it is taboo. And this very tendency, that psychoanalysis is positive to unrealistic and subjective thoughts, is one of the important roles of psychoanalysis, which attempts to understand delusive thoughts and pathological narcissism.

Let us return here to the mother and child in the Ukiyo-e. This child may be wishing to leap up to his/her mother from the bottom. Looking at this child, it is too realistic and objective to stick on the interpretation of Amae that the child is asking the mother to sit down and hold him/her up. Although I admit the concept of Amae as something valuable which may lead to sensible and insightful knowledge, the idea that a small person is small sometimes crushes a big heart of a small person.

### Postscript

Another characteristic which I would like to point out is a sense of transience or temporality in the Amae experience. Although definitions of the concept of Amae are dissimilar from each other, as has been pointed out, there is some similarity between them. That is, there is an element of temporary denial of something, that is, "the fact of separateness" or "ordinary social restraints," which is accompanied by ego flexibility (Mizuta et al., 1997). As Freeman (1997) also stress, we can explain the appropriate or adaptive Amae behavior in terms of "temporary regression." If one lacks the flexibility, his or her Amae becomes inappropriate,

maladaptive, convoluted (Doi, 1989) and sometimes pathological.

In my opinion too, Amae phenomenon often involve a sense of transience which is shared and highly appreciated in Japanese culture (O. Kitayama, 1998). The state of Amae is transitory and transitional, halfway between oneness and separateness. The sense of transience is just like the experience with transitional objects, between illusion and disillusion, and it sometimes leads even to a sense of beauty. Western people, however, tend to describe illusion and disillusion in terms of a clear dichotomy, for instance, regression and progression, or reality and fantasy.

Finally, let me pose questions here. Where does the love, which generates in the relationship between the parent and the child, come from? Does it come from the side of the child? From the side of the mother? Or from the father? There is no "one" answer to these questions. Rather, through this questioning process, we can gain a variety of viewpoints and perspectives concerning the love between the parent and the child, and we can exchange these viewpoints. And this exchange is full of joy and insights.

(Paper originally presented at "Amae reconsidered", American Psychoanalytic Association's 86<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting, May 1997, San Diego, California.)

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## 付 録

## 和文タイトル

甘えとその愛の上下関係

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## 和文要約

土居健郎は、口にまつわる心の未分化な状態を「甘え」という言葉を用いて日本人が見事に描写出来ることを発見した。甘えという愛を要求する他者に、積極的に人が愛を与えることで応える際、受身的な欲求と言われる甘

えは母親あるいは母親代理の陽性の順応とまさしく対応するのである。著者の興味は甘え状況に関わる人物たちの階級的な関係にある。言語の観点からの議論の後に、著者は愛や甘えという日本語が目上の者から目下の者へ愛を与える事を意味すると結論する。この愛の階級構造の元では目上の者への愛は無視される傾向があり、これが結果的に、子どもが大人からの愛を求めるという甘えを際立たせる。著者の意見では、子どもがその親を愛するという考えは言語的に抑制されているという可能性があり、土居はその甘え理論にこの愛の階級構造を考慮していないのである。

キーワード：甘え，愛，精神分析