Proper names in Japanese: What the learner needs to know

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to draw attention, predominantly from the perspective of the foreign language learner, to the important linguistic and cultural position of proper names in the vocabulary, and to suggest that they deserve more systematic treatment in linguistic descriptions, dictionaries and language courses than they commonly receive. The focus of illustration is on Japanese, and our main concern is with proper names referring to specific entities rather than with name inventories (cf. Lehrer 1992: 125), although we also comment on some aspects of these.¹

Proper names are at base a semantic category: they are lexical items, in the simplest cases single proper nouns, institutionalized as names for individual persons, places, organizations and things (cf. Allerton 1987; Huddleston 1988: 98). Their grammatical status varies across languages, where they may also exhibit special phonological and orthographical features. In this paper we are concerned to point out the significance of proper names from four main standpoints. Firstly, in terms of weight: proper names occur in larger numbers, and across a wider range of semantic types, than is suggested by their typical representation in descriptive and pedagogical materials. Secondly, in terms of linguistic structure: languages have particular formal patterns for constructing proper names, and these deserve to be treated in linguistic descriptions. Thirdly, in terms of meaning and cultural content:

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while proper names may have an atypical semantic status, they do possess general semantic properties, and their referents are associated with culturally shared knowledge and beliefs which are important in everyday communication. Finally, proper names pose interesting questions of use from the standpoint, for example, of stylistic and discourse restrictions among alternative terms. In all these respects, proper names stand out as an area of vocabulary where the competence of foreign learners typically lags significantly behind that of native speakers.

Below we develop these points with illustrations from Japanese. Our primary concern throughout is with proper names which are generally known across the Japanese speech-community. We also focus mainly on names with Japanese referents (i.e. on names like tokyo\textsuperscript{2} 'Tokyo' rather than rondon 'London'); this is purely for convenience of treatment, and 'foreign' proper names form an equally integral part of the topic.

**Range**

While language descriptions and course materials typically include some common examples of personal and place names, reflection tells us that proper names occur in large numbers and across a wide range of referent types and sub-types. Here we adopt a general classification into five major types: people, places, organizations, things, times. These are each illustrated below with representative Japanese examples.

\textsuperscript{2}Japanese forms are rendered in a modified Hepburn romanization, with long vowels written double and the mora nasal represented everywhere as n; Japanese proper names are capitalized only at the beginning of a sentence. Hyphens are employed in the interests of clarity, generally between components of a compound or between base and affix.
People

Shootoku taishi, kooboo daishi; momotaroo, urashima taroo, kaguya hime, issun booshi; ono no komachi, matsuo bashoo, rafukajio haan, natsume sooseki, kawabata yasunari, yoshimoto banana; tokugawa ieyasu, shoowa tennoo, tanaka kakuei; misora hibari, misune toshiroo, yokoyama nokku; tora san, gojira; nagashima kantoku, takanohana are examples of universally-known names of individuals in Japan. As with proper names of all types, they include historical and contemporary, and mythical and real cases. Names of animals and of vehicles, such as trains or ships, may be considered as extensions of this basic category; hachi-ko and hikawa-maru are familiar Japanese examples.

Places

Names of major cities and island regions appear in most Japanese language courses, but Japanese place names occur in a wide range of sub-types. Proceeding from larger entities to smaller, they include a variety of regional names (nishi-nihon; kyuushuu, shikoku, kansai, hokuriku, toohoku, hokkaidoo), prefectural and old provincial names (tookyoo-to, kyoto-fu, shiga-ken; satsuma, shinshuu), area names (bandai, nikkoo, kita-arupusu), and names of districts of cities (roppongi, ginza, umeda; shinjuku-sanchoome); names of islands and archipelagoes (oni-gashima, sado-ga-shima, awaji-shima; ogasawara-shotoo) and of peninsulas and coasts (izu-hantoo; shoonan-kaigan, nichinan-kaigan); names of oceans, seas, channels, bays, lakes and rivers (taiheiyoo; nihon-kai, seto-naikai; tsugaru-kaikyoo; tookyoo-wan, suruga-wan; biwa-ko; kamo-gawa); and names of mountains (fuji-san, aso-zan). They include names of bridges and tunnels (sanjoo-oohashi; seikan-tonneru) and of rail lines and roads (yamanote-sen; toomei-koosoku), as well as of buildings and venues of all kinds (kookyo, kokkai, tookyoo-eki, haneda-kuukoo,

Organizations
Names of public and private organizations are a further major type of proper names. Commonplace examples include the names of government ministries and agencies (monbu-shoo, tsuusan-shoo; booei-choo), of political structures, parties and groups (tokugawa-bakufu, satoo-naikaku; shakai-too, jimin-too; shijuushichi-shi), of military, professional and occupational organizations (jiei-tai; keidanren, nikkyooso), of public and private universities (toodai, keioo, waseda), of corporations and companies (enuetchikee, fuji-terebi, nikkoo, jeeaaru, dentsuu, kootsuu-koosha, sanseido, kenkyuusha, sonii, toyota, takashimaya, daimaru), of banks (fuji-ginkoo, sumitomo-ginkoo), of artistic groups (enu-kyoo), and of sports teams and organizations (kyojo, chuunichi; se-riigu). Particular names may refer to more than one type of organization: seibu is the name of a railway company, a department store, and a baseball team. Some organizations are embodied in particular buildings or other locations, and such names may double as place names.

Things
Proper names for things primarily refer to works or products. Familiar examples include names of written works of various kinds (genji-monogatari, manyooshuu, hoojooki, chuushingura, botchan; koojien), of films (rashoomon, shichinin no samurai), of songs (kimigayo, sakura), of magazines and newspapers (fujin-kooron, bungei-shunjuu, josei-jishin, shuukan-asahi, mainichi-shinbun), and of television programs (nodo-jiman, nyuusu-suteeshon). Brand names of various kinds of manufactured products are class rather than individual labels, but they are