

Self-Reference in Japanese and Thai

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0. Introduction

The cross-sociolinguistic perspective which this thesis takes is pertinent to study the systems of self-reference terms in Japanese and Thai, since both languages use similar linguistics signs for self-reference. Self-reference terms in these two languages are classified into pronouns, status terms, personal names and other nouns.

1. Parameters that govern self-reference usage

Attributes involved in the usage of self-reference terms used in this study are **Basic parameters**, with Gender, Age, and Kinship, **Dependent parameters**, with Power, Refinement, and Intimacy and **Situational parameters** with Formality, Emotional switch and Overhearer presence. Two more attributes have been found only in Thai: one in Basic parameters (Ethnicity) and the other one in the Situational parameters (Personal engagement)(see Table I).

Table I: Parameters

Basic	Gender	Age	Kinship	Ethnicity
Dependent	Power	Refinement	Intimacy	
Situational	Formality	Emotional switch	Overhearer presence	Personal engagement

2. Findings

Significant among the findings of this research are the following six points:

(i) In general, relationships of intimacy and power in the Japanese/Thai self-reference case are more problematic and complex than was proposed in the two-

dimensional model proposed by Brown and Gilman (1960), involving parametric variation referred to there as *power* and *solidarity*. While these high-level variables can furnish a first approximation to the Japanese and Thai cases and provide relevant insights, more specific factors such as speaker and hearer gender, age, kinship relations, occupation, formality of speech situation, overhearer presence and emotional switch were found to be important in arriving at a fuller picture of how self-reference operates in the two languages. Notions of degree of intimacy and refinement have been developed to account for some of this detail. For example, each language has terms appropriate for both intimate and non-intimate usage. The languages permit use of pronominal forms among intimates that would be coarse (LOW refinement level) to non-intimates, regardless of other general power/solidarity considerations.

The research data further show that there are levels of refinement in the self-reference terms used in different situations in both Japanese and Thai. This accords with the views of Japanese self-reference pronouns adopted by Kurokawa (1972) and Ide (1982) and builds on Diller's (1985) account of the ways in which Thai personal pronouns indicate level-sensitive variation.

(ii) The notion of pronoun scope has been used in this study to account for how certain pronominal forms are selected and also to facilitate intra-language and cross-language comparisons. For example, Japanese men were found to lack what is referred to in this study as a wide-scope pronoun. Thai women similarly lack a single pronoun of such a sort. However, usage patterns are still very different. Japanese men still use their pronouns for self-reference relatively frequently, and much more than they use other forms. This contrasts sharply with the characteristic situation for Thai women, where pronouns are used less frequently. In terms of the present account, this is because the *scope* of each pronoun for Thai women is much narrower than that of the corresponding items used by Japanese men. For a Thai

woman, to use a pronoun is to commit herself to one rather specific role-relationship—a selection that she may feel is not appropriate for a given situation. For Japanese males, on the other hand, there are several pronouns available but they are relatively wide in scope and for most situations an appropriate one would be available.

(iii) Substantial diachronic change has marked both the Japanese and Thai systems. Indications are clear that at present the Japanese self-reference system is more stable and less dynamic and variable than the Thai system. Some developments have been parallel in Japanese and Thai. Both use terms originally meaning 'servant' (originally nouns) as self-reference pronouns. Similarly, both use reflexive-like nouns meaning 'self' (*jibun* and *tua-e:n*) as self-reference. Relating to the question of scope discussed in (ii) above, *jibun* was found more frequently used by Japanese men, who lack a single wide-scope pronoun, than by Japanese women, who have one. Similarly, *tua-e:n* is more commonly used by Thai women, who also lack a wide-scope pronoun.

(iv) Pronouns, however, are not the only type of self-reference terms. Thais use names and status terms for self-reference more than Japanese do. In Thai society older speakers speaking to younger ones were found to use kinship terms to a great extent. Thais seem more apt to think of themselves as older siblings when relating to younger hearers. The present study has further shown that in Japanese, occupational terms tend to be fixed and static and have restricted use. Conversely, Thai terms of this type tend to be dynamic and changing. This again illustrates the experimental potential and flux in the Thai system.

(v) The general picture outlined above is subject to considerable variation, however. Both Japanese and Thai usage of self-reference terms is not always determinate, in that the selectional behaviour of a particular speaker can rarely be predicted absolutely, except in a few well-defined cases. Typically, for a given

situation several forms were found to be used, sometimes, but not always, with slightly different feelings or personality factors associated with specific alternates. There are some situations in which people tend to vary their usage more than in others. For example, speakers were found to vary their usage more when talking to a hearer of the same or lower status.

(vi) Overt prescriptive training was found to have some effect on speaker's choices—more so in Japanese than in Thai. Forms of self-reference are introduced by way of institutional training. Correct language use has been a matter of keen public interest in Japan at least since the second World War. The Ministry of Education issued a decree in 1941 and again in 1952 release an official memorandum to guide how people use language which include the term for self-reference (Coulmas, 1992). After the war through education Japanese self-reference usage was influenced by the Ministry of Education's policy. Thai government and formal education authorities had less specific policy pronouncements concerning self-reference usage, except that LOW words are not acceptable in formal situations. There is some censorship of languages use in the media such as radio and television but this seems not to affect everyday language usage. Children in both Japanese and Thai society are sometimes taught in schools to use appropriate terms for self-reference. For adults, Japanese society tends to teach people directly to use particular terms, for example, in training new employees in a company situation. By contrast, in Thai society social norms of self-referential use were found to be more naturally acquired, rather than explicitly taught. This latter point ties in with finding (iii), that, in general, the Japanese self-reference system is more established than the Thai system. As more differences are located in the different age groups among Thais and there is less prescriptive regulation, the Thai system can be seen more clearly to be in a state of change.