

Uncovering Gender Bias in Japanese Spousal Terms: Insights from an Online Survey of Couples with Adolescent Children

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Abstract

This study is based on an online survey of 447 Japanese married individuals between the ages of 40 and 60 (230 women and 217 men) who reside in the greater Tokyo area and have adolescent children in January 2023. The survey explores the usage of spousal terms in various social settings. The results show that when introducing their spouses to others, men tend to use the neutral term “妻 tsuma” (wife) instead of the traditional term “家内 ka-nai” (one inside the house) while women continue to use the traditional term “主人 shu-jin” (master) which implies the history of male chauvinism. In addition, the higher the education level of the women, the higher the use of “夫 otto” (husband) and the lower the use of “旦那 dan-na” (patron). Both men and women seldom use gender-neutral terms such as “パートナー pātōnā” (partner) or “連れ合い tsure-ai” (companion). In their home environment, couples tend to use family terms such as “お父さん o-tō-san” (father) and “お母さん o-kā-san” (mother) more frequently than nicknames or first names. In private interactions, women tend to use the honorific second-person pronoun “あなた anata” (a polite form of “you”) when addressing their spouses, while men tend to use the derogatory one “おまえ omae” (a pejorative form of “you”). These results suggest that gender discrimination still exists in the Japanese language nowadays.

Keywords

Spousal Terms, Gender Bias, Married Couples, Social Values, Japanese Language

1. Introduction

Language, like a mirror, reflects the cultural environment and social values sur-

rounding the user. Furthermore, changes in the cultural environment and social values also bring about changes in language use. In the 1960s, the movement to eliminate gender discrimination exploded in the U.S., and words with gender-specific images were changed to common expressions for both men and women. For example, “policeman” was changed to “police officer”, “chairman” to “chairperson”, “businessman” to “business person”, “housewife” to “homemaker”, and so on (Tanaka & Tanaka, 1996: p. 79).

In Japan, the Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1970s led to the correction of many biased expressions. For example, words such as “老女 rō-jo” (old woman), “老婆 rō-ba” (old woman), “内妻 nai-sai” (inner wife), “未亡人 mi-bō-jin” (widow) and “若妻 waka-zuma” (young wife), which discriminate against women and have no male counterparts, were rarely used in general newspaper articles in the late 1990s (Satake, 2001: p. 163). In particular, the word “未亡人 mi-bō-jin” (widow), a derogatory and discriminatory expression for women that includes the meaning “one whose husband is dead but not yet dead herself”, was noted as a word of concern (Endo, 1987: pp. 146-151) and has become a dead word in recent times. Another word “女医 jo-i” (woman doctor), which implies the socially accepted notion that being a doctor is a man’s job and that it is special for a woman to be a doctor, has become a dead word nowadays (Ide, 1997: p. 1).

After the Equal Employment Opportunity Law was enforced in 1986 and substantially revised in 1999, occupational terms that predominantly referred to women were rectified to common expressions for both men and women. For example, terms such as “保母 ho-bo” (childcare mother) and “看護婦 kan-go-fu” (women nurse), which were implicitly considered women’s occupations and named with the suffixes “母 bo” (mother) and “婦 fu” (women) indicating mother and women, respectively, were replaced by terms with neutral suffixes “士 shi” (specialist) and “師 shi” (teacher), such as “保育士 ho-iku-shi” (childcare worker) in 1999 and “看護師 kan-go-shi” (nurse) in 2002. Behind these changes was the concept of gender equality in the profession based on the Equal Employment Opportunity Law.

However, despite these activities, as a recent Global Gender Gap Report (Crotti, Geiger, Ratcheva, & Zahidi, 2020) shows, gender equality in Japan has stagnated for years at the lowest rank among the advanced countries (Akita & Mori, 2022; Estévez-Abe, 2013). The Japanese parliament’s men-women ratio is still near the bottom among OECD countries. According to Akita and Mori (2022), in some prefectures like Aomori and Kagoshima, the gender-separated registry is still used in schools, with boys listed before girls. Also, schoolteachers refer to boys and girls differently in the traditional way: for boys, their name with the suffix “君 kun” (a suffix added to men’s names), and for girls with “san” (an honorific suffix).

Gender biases in occupational terms are improving, but sexism in spousal terms still exists in Japan. In particular, the spousal terms “主人 shu-jin” (master) and “家内 ka-nai” (one inside the house) are often regarded as sexist. In Ja-

pan, when introducing and referring to one's spouse, women use the spousal term “主人 shu-jin” while men use the spousal term “家内 ka-nai”. Considering the original meaning of the Japanese words “主人 shu-jin” and “家内 ka-nai”, such usage implies a master-slave relationship in a couple. Furthermore, the term “家内 ka-nai” also comes from the traditional family role of men-centric days, literally meaning “a person staying within the house”.

However, couples customarily use them in modern Japan despite the original implications. For example, in a survey by the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs (1999), 74.6% of women used “主人 shu-jin” to refer to their spouses and 51.1% of men used “家内 ka-nai” to refer to their spouses (Agency for Cultural Affairs, 1999: p. 52, p. 55). In a recent survey by Mizumoto (2017), 33.0% of women still used “主人 shu-jin” and 20.5% of men used “家内 ka-nai” (Mizumoto, 2017: pp. 17-19). Compared with the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs (1999), each term's use has decreased by half, but it cannot be ignored that these terms are still used nowadays.

Globally, Japan still has a significant gender gap between men and women. Although patriarchy was officially abolished in 1947, the patriarchal culture continues to persist due to the transmission of ideas from previous generations to their descendants. As a result, many families maintain a patriarchal structure where the father is the dominant figure. Therefore, it is crucial to address the sociolinguistic issue of spousal terms in Japanese households.

In sum, the use of spousal terms varies across languages, cultures, and social backgrounds and is also subject to the effects of social change. For example, there has recently been a significant shift in the use of spousal terms in Japanese by married couples due to the rapid social transformations in Japan. Therefore, this study aims to examine the current usage of spousal terms and how they have evolved by conducting an online survey on spousal terms in the greater Tokyo area.

As exemplified above, Japanese words are comprised of *hiragana*, *katakana*, and *kanji* (Chinese characters), with individual meanings. Therefore, it is crucial to know the meanings of both the combined terms and the individual characters to understand Japanese words adequately. This paper describes Japanese words with *kanji* in the standard orthography, followed by their phonetic transcriptions, then English translations in brackets. However, as stated above, the meaning of each *kanji* in a Japanese word often matters. Therefore, we list the main Japanese spousal terms in this paper and the meanings of the *kanji* in **Table 1** for unfamiliar readers.

2. Previous Studies

Previous research on Japanese spousal terms includes a public opinion survey by the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs (1999), as well as independent research by individual researchers (Endo, 1985, 1986, 1987, 1998; Hong, 2007; Kanamaru, 1997; Mizumoto, 2017; Sugihara, 2000; Terasawa, 2007, 2009; Yoneda, 1986).

Table 1. Japanese spousal terms appeared in this paper.

Japanese	Phonetic transcription	English translation	Constituent characters and their meanings
主人	shu-jin	master	主 = master; 人 = person
夫	otto	husband	夫 = husband
旦那	dan-na	patron	旦那 = dānapati (Sanskrit)
妻	tsuma	wife	妻 = wife
家内	ka-nai	one inside the house	家 = house; 内 = inside
嫁	yome	bride	嫁 = bride, daughter-in-law
女房	nyō-bo	woman's chamber	女 = woman; 房 = chamber
連れ合い	ture-ai	companion	連れ = companion; 合い = together
パートナー	pātōnā	partner	パートナー = partner
パパ	papa	daddy	パパ = daddy
お父さん	o-tō-san	father	お = prefix (polite); 父 = father; さん = suffix (polite)
ママ	mama	mommy	ママ = mommy
お母さん	o-kā-san	mother	お = prefix (polite); 母 = mother; さん = suffix (polite)
あなた	anata	you	あなた = you (polite form)
おまえ	omae	you	おまえ = you (pejorative form)

Although they are valuable surveys depicting spousal terms usage in various periods, some data needed to be updated. For example, [Terasawa \(2007\)](#) and [Terasawa \(2009\)](#) were based on a survey conducted in 2002. Even the latest one, [Mizumoto \(2017\)](#) was a report of a survey conducted in 2015. Eight years have passed since then, and general language use has changed considerably. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the recent usage of spousal terms.

In addition, previous studies on spousal terms primarily used methods such as interviews and home visits on limited informants or mere introspection by the authors. Moreover, informants may have refrained from honest answers during in-person interviews. Hence, they may not have fully captured the overall trend of language usage among married couples in Japan.

Furthermore, these studies were mainly about cases in which couples refer to their spouse to others. Therefore, they might have used different terms in different social situations. For example, [Nin \(2023\)](#) surveyed how Chinese couples referred to their partners under three different circumstances: introducing them to others in formal and informal settings and addressing each other when alone at home and found the differences.

Accordingly, this study utilizes the online survey method, which has several advantages, including a wider geographic area, anonymity for more honest responses, and ease of collecting a larger sample and analyzing data. Therefore, this study aims to conduct an empirical investigation using online survey data to examine the relationship between spousal terms under various situations. We also aim to examine social changes by comparing the survey results with those of previous studies. It should be informative and beneficial to sociolinguistics researchers in Japan as well as in other countries.

3. Outline of the Online Survey

We conducted a survey using the internet questionnaire tool Google Forms to solicit answers on spousal terms in various social situations in the same way as [Nin \(2023\)](#). To recruit, we asked undergraduates attending Chinese learning classes at a university in the suburbs of Tokyo to invite their parents to take an online survey. We chose this procedure so that the survey informants would be married couples with adolescent children. According to the general demographic data the university registration office disclosed, most students lived with their parents in the greater Tokyo area or lived alone in an apartment near the campus. Even in the latter cases, their parents lived mainly in the greater Tokyo area. About 20% of parents were from outside Tokyo.

It is preferable to use random samples in such a survey, as in a public opinion poll, where people are statistically selected at random. However, we did not use random sampling for this online survey due to time and economic constraints. Furthermore, there was an advantage that targeting parents of students chose couples with children automatically. Despite this sampling procedure, we judged that the representativeness of the data could be ensured by specifying their ages. In effect, we obtained sufficient responses to analyze general trends within each designated spouse group.

How people refer to their spouse can vary depending on the context in which they are introducing them to others or when they are alone. In the present online survey, we selected questions for asking about the terms respondents use when introducing their spouse to others in different situations, such as when speaking with a business client, a boss at work, a colleague, or a friend. Additionally, we set questions that asked respondents to select the terms they would ideally use when referring to their spouse. We also included questions to explore how the level of intimacy or hierarchy may influence the choice of terms in the relationship with the conversation partner.

Following [Nin \(2023\)](#) on spousal term usage in Chinese couples, we prepared the survey questions, including the following three categories:

- 1) Indirect spousal terms: how respondents introduce their spouses to others (such as business clients, bosses, close colleagues, or close friends);
- 2) Direct spousal terms: how spouses address each other when they are alone at home; and

3) Preferred spousal terms: the terms respondents prefer their spouses to use when addressing them.

In addition, we included questions on the educational backgrounds of the respondents. The survey was done anonymously, except for gender, age, and educational background. We did not include questions about the respondents' places of residence.

We collected 447 valid responses from the respondents (230 women and 217 men) from January 17 to January 31, 2023. The age and gender distributions of the respondents were as follows: 40.0% were aged 40 - 49, 58.3% were aged 50 - 59, and 1.7% were aged 60 - 69 among women; and 22.2% were aged 40 - 49, 70.1% were aged 50 - 59, and 7.7% were aged 60 - 69 among men.

Meanwhile, respondents' educational backgrounds were as follows: among women, 20.0% had a high school education, 74.8% had a university education, and 5.2% had a master's or doctoral degree; among men, 17.0% had a high school education, 63.6% had a university education, and 19.4% had a master's or doctoral degree.

This survey was conducted online, and the sample size for each age and education group was not fixed. However, we received enough responses to analyze general trends in each designated spouse group.

4. Results

In the following sub-sections, we report the results under three categories: indirect, direct, and preferred spousal terms. For each category, we provide separate analyses of female and male respondents. Additionally, we examine whether the spousal term's usage patterns vary based on age and educational background.

4.1. Indirect Spousal Terms

First, we report how Japanese women and men introduce their spouses to others, such as business clients, bosses, close colleagues, or close friends.

4.1.1. Results from Female Respondents

As shown in **Figure 1**, “主人 shu-jin” (master) was the most frequently used term by female respondents to refer to their spouses in public situations with a sense of tension or distance, such as in business settings or at the workplace. As many as 64.6% of women used this term when introducing their spouses to business clients, and 64.2% used it when introducing them to their bosses. The second most common term was “夫 otto” (husband), used by the same percentage of women to business clients and bosses. The third most common term was “旦那 dan-na” (patron), used by 9.6% of women to business clients and 10.5% to bosses. Other terms were used by less than 5%.

Meanwhile, when introducing their spouses in intimate settings, such as to close colleagues or close friends, female respondents showed three main variations. As shown in **Figure 2**, the most common term was “主人 shu-jin” again, followed

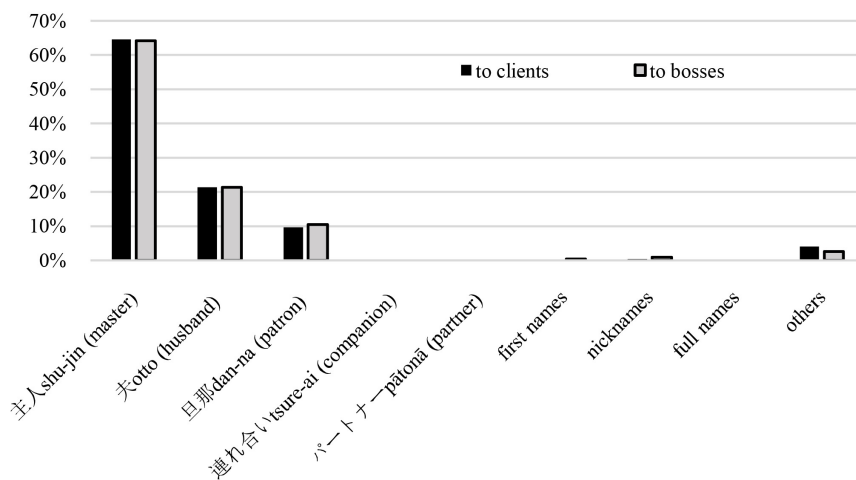


Figure 1. The terms used by women for introducing a spouse to business clients (black) and bosses (gray).

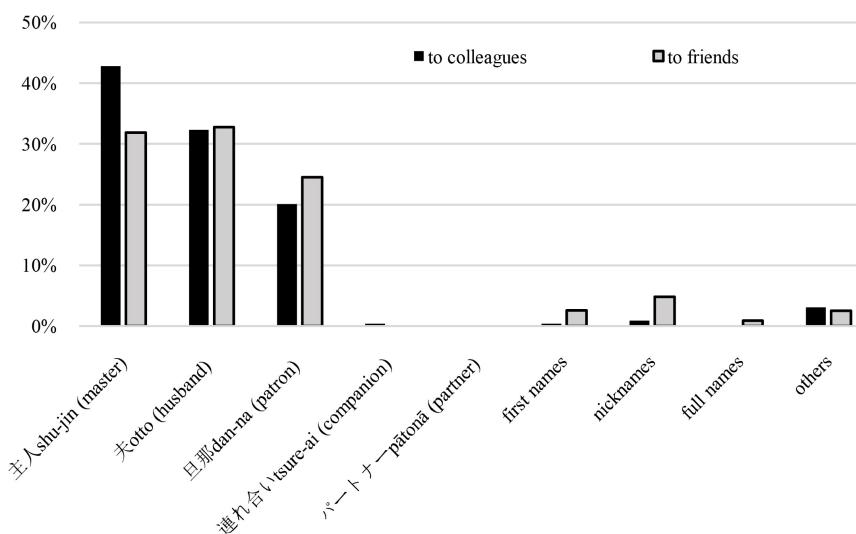


Figure 2. The terms used by women for introducing a spouse to colleagues (black) and friends (gray).

by “夫 otto”, then “旦那 dan-na”. In these situations, 42.8% of women still used “主人 shu-jin” with a colleague, while around 30% used “夫 otto”. Meanwhile, 20% of women used “旦那 dan-na”, depending on the context. Compared to the more formal case, the use of “主人 shu-jin” decreased, and the use of “夫 otto” and “旦那 dan-na” increased. The usage rate also indicated a role division, with “主人 shu-jin” being used more towards a colleague and “旦那 dan-na” being used more towards a friend. It is important to note that the spousal term “旦那 dan-na” (patron), a word from the Sanskrit word “dānapati” meaning “making an offering”, is considered to be equivalent to “主人 shu-jin” (master) as a term that includes a master-servant relationship.

Further age-group-specific data analysis showed that the most significant difference was in the top three terms used to introduce a spouse to others, with

women in their 40s and 50s using these terms while women in their 60s not using any of the top three. Additionally, there was no difference in the usage rate of the term “主人 shu-jin” between women in their 40s and 50s (both 43%). However, it was revealed women in their 40s used “旦那 dan-na” more often than women in their 50s; conversely, women in their 50s used “夫 otto” more often than those in their 40s. There are distinctive differences in the terms used based on the women’s age, as shown in **Figure 3**.

The data analysis based on educational background revealed all educational groups used the term “主人 shu-jin” frequently. However, there were differences in the usage of “夫 otto” and “旦那 dan-na”. Specifically, the higher the level of education, the higher the usage rate of “夫 otto”, while the lower the level of education, the higher the usage rate of “旦那 dan-na”. Women with higher levels of education, such as master’s or doctoral degree holders, were found to use the term “夫 otto” more often than “主人 shu-jin” or “旦那 dan-na”. In sum, there were differences in the choice of spousal terms based on educational background, as shown in **Figure 4**.

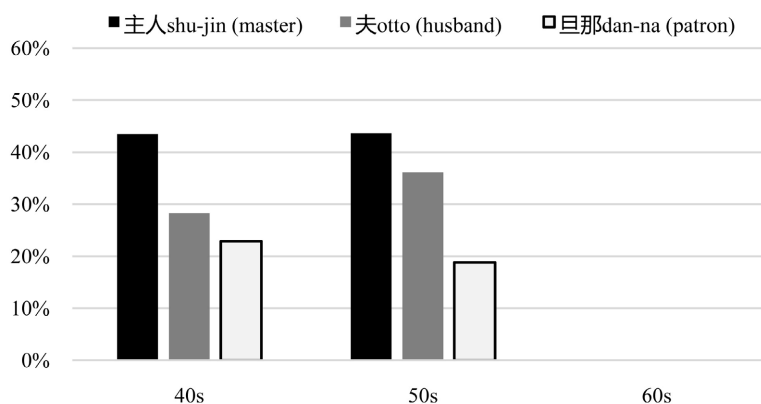


Figure 3. The proportion of terms used by women to introduce a spouse based on each age group.

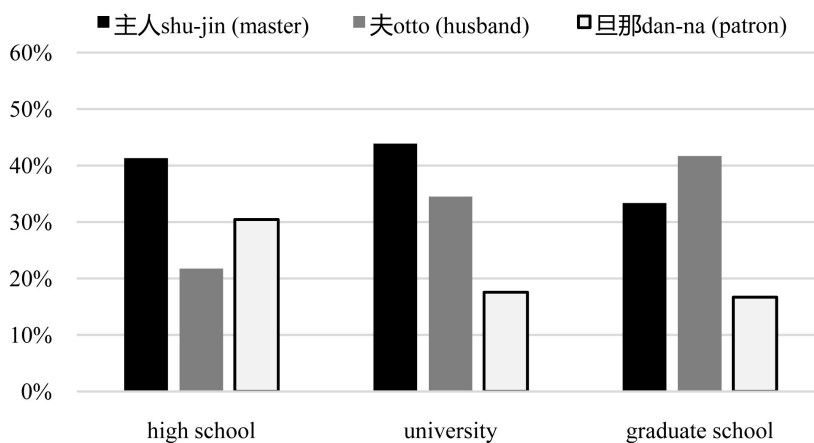


Figure 4. The proportion of terms used by women to introduce a spouse based on educational background.

4.1.2. Results from Male Respondents

Most male respondents introduced their spouses as “妻 tsuma” (wife) to business clients (59.9%) and bosses at work (65.9%), as shown in **Figure 5**. In public situations with a sense of tension or distance, such as in a business setting or at the workplace, it showed that about 60% of men used “妻 tsuma”. The second most common term was “家内 ka-nai” (one inside the house), used by 24.0% of respondents when introducing their spouses to business clients and 19.4% to their boss. Other terms were rarely used.

When introducing their spouses informally, such as to close colleagues or close friends (as shown in **Figure 6**), most men used “妻 tsuma” (59.0% to a colleague, 56.2% to a friend). Around 10% used “家内 ka-nai”, while 10% used “嫁 yome” (bride), “女房 nyō-bo” (woman’s chamber) and their first names at 4% and 5%, respectively.

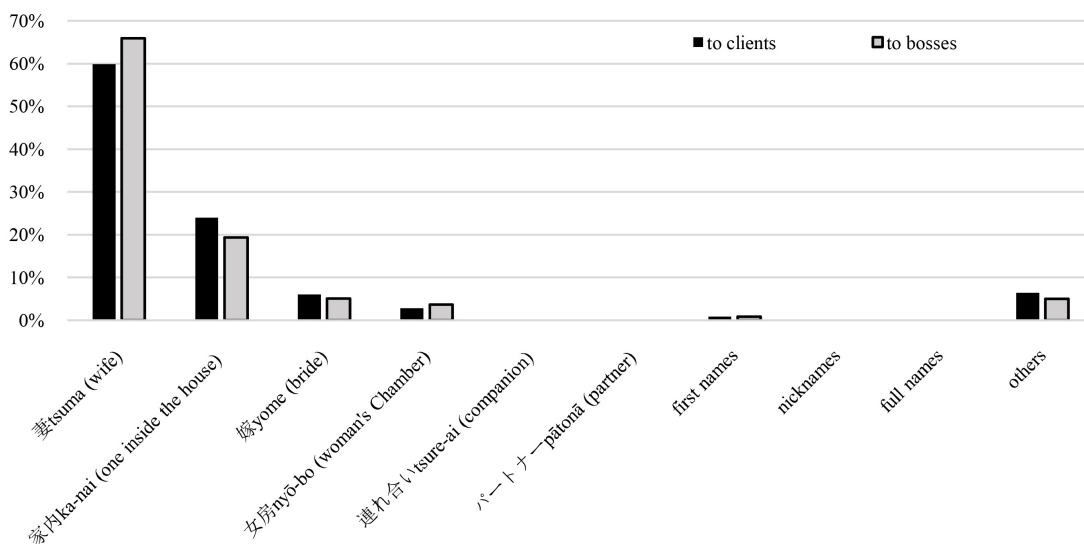


Figure 5. The terms used by men for introducing a spouse to business clients (black) and bosses (gray).

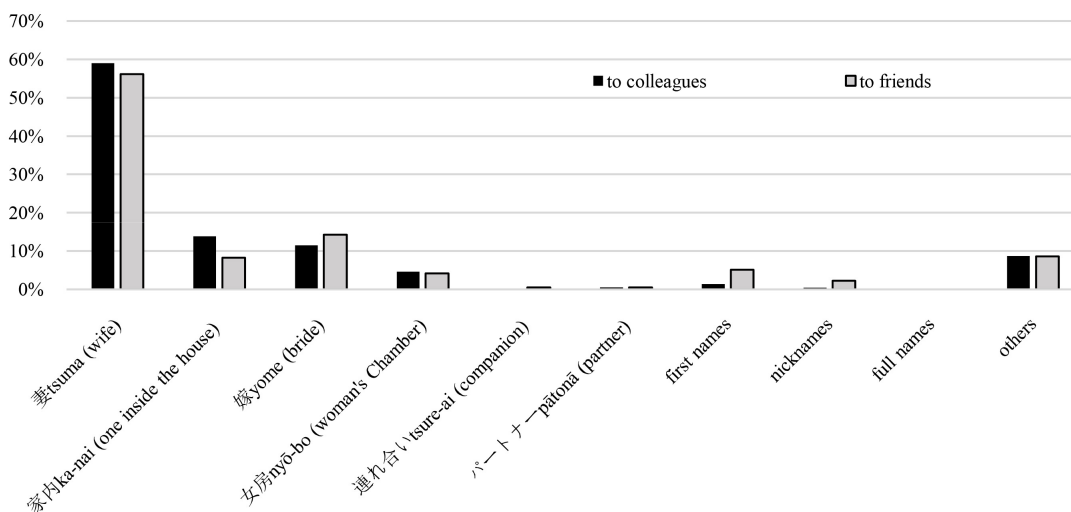


Figure 6. The terms used by men for introducing a spouse to colleagues (black) and friends (gray).

An analysis of term usage among male respondents of different ages showed that the most frequently used term among all age groups was “妻 tsuma” (as shown in **Figure 7**). The highest usage rate was observed among those in their 60s at 66.7%. Despite a low overall usage rate, “家内 ka-nai” was used more frequently with increasing age. Conversely, the usage rate of “嫁 yome” decreased with increasing age. The usage of “女房 nyō-bo” was rare among respondents in their 40s and 60s and was hardly used by those in their 50s. The term “家内 ka-nai”, which men in formal situations previously had used to refer to their spouses, was rarely used by men of all ages, regardless of the person they were talking to. The usage of “家内 ka-nai” will be further discussed in the discussion section. Notably, Japanese men, particularly those in their 40s and 50s, use “嫁 yome” in current communication. It is important to note that the word “嫁 yome” can be translated as “bride” or “daughter-in-law” in English, but the Chinese character “嫁” itself comprises “女” (woman) and “家” (house), implying almost the same meaning as “家内 ka-nai” (one inside the house) or “女房 nyō-bo” (woman’s chamber). These three spousal terms reflect the traditional social role women in Japan, where women should be staying at home and be in the house.

Meanwhile, a closer examination of background-specific data revealed that the most common term in all education groups was “妻 tsuma”, primarily used in each education group (as shown in **Figure 8**). Men with postgraduate degrees had the highest use rate of “妻 tsuma” (69%). For men, the higher the level of education, the higher the usage of “妻 tsuma”. While overall usage was low, “嫁 yome” was mainly used by high school and college graduates, while “家内 ka-nai” was used by postgraduates.

4.2. Direct Spousal Terms

This section reports on the terms used by Japanese couples when addressing each other directly at home. **Figure 9** compares the terms used by women and men. The results show that nicknames were the most common term used by women (30.1%), followed by “パパ papa” (daddy) (28.4%) and “お父さん

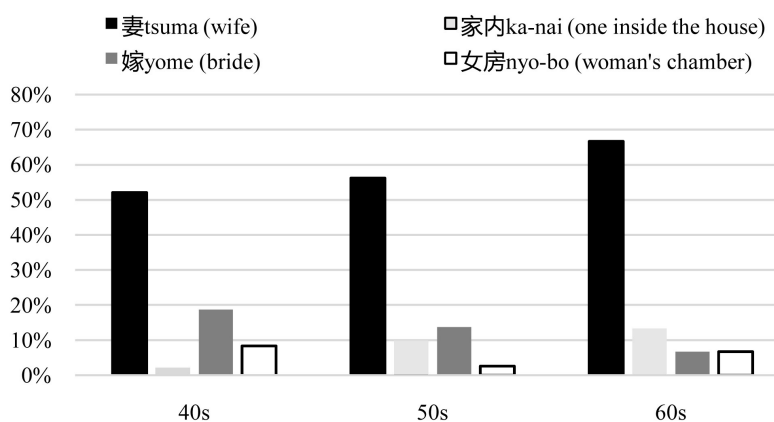


Figure 7. The proportion of terms used by men to introduce a spouse based on each age group.

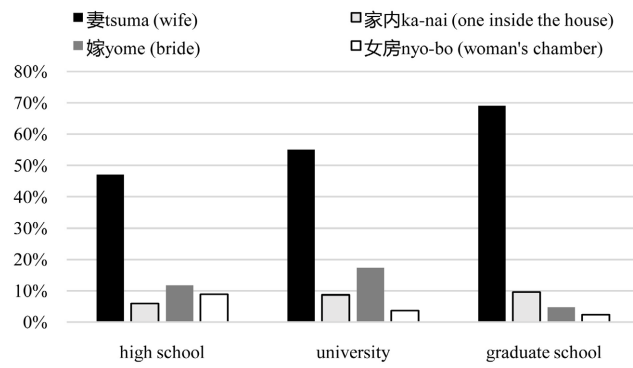


Figure 8. The proportion of terms used by men to introduce a spouse based on educational background.

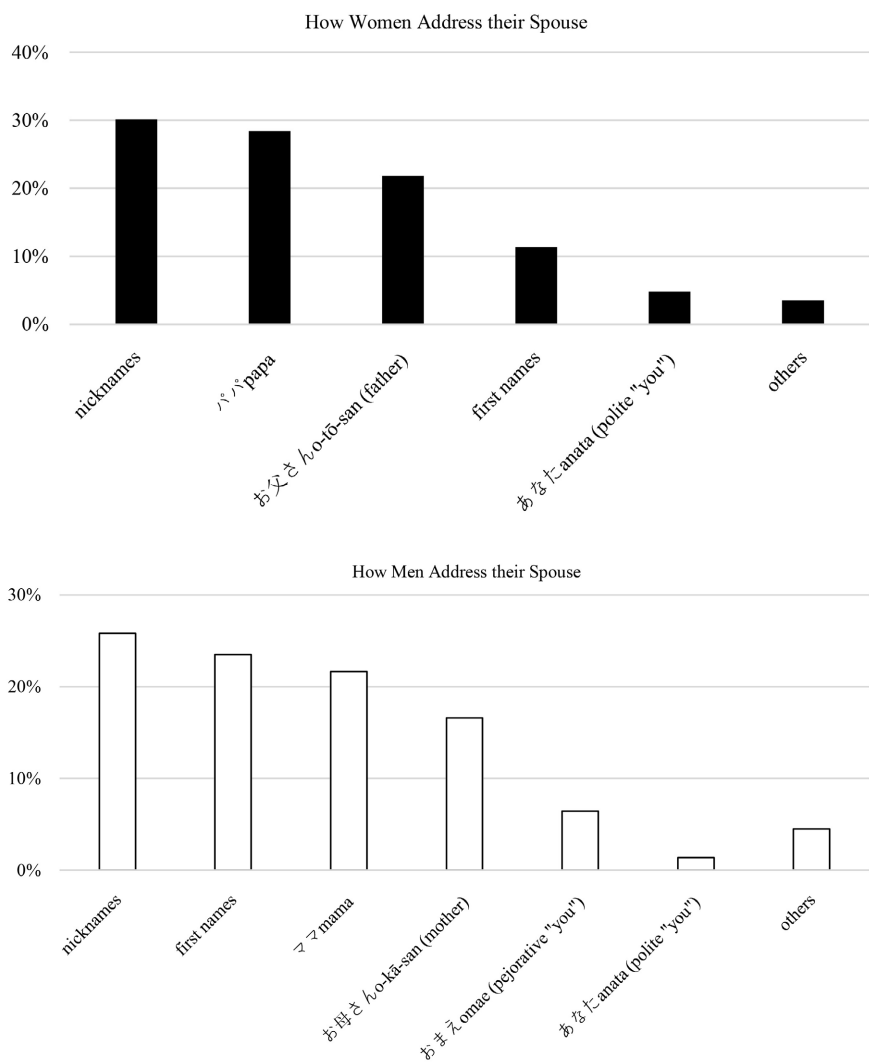


Figure 9. How couples directly address each other at home: women’s terms (top) and men’s (bottom).

o-tō-san” (father) (21.8%). Meanwhile, men mostly used their spouse’s nickname (25.8%) followed by their spouse’s first name (23.5%), then “ママ mama”

(mommy) and “お母さん o-kā-san” (mother). Aside from nicknames and first names, couples used family terms like “お父さん o-tō-san” and “ママ mama” when addressing each other directly at home. It needs to note that the words “パパ papa” and “ママ mama” were imported from European languages after World War II. When combining the usage rates of these family terms, women used them more frequently (50.2%) than men (38.3%). In addition, women also tend to use “あなた anata” (a polite form of “you”), while men use “おまえ omae” (a pejorative form of “you”). This suggests a difference in term usage between women and men when addressing each other directly at home.

4.3. Preferred Spousal Terms

Finally, we present the results of the preferred spousal terms used by Japanese couples in public and private settings. As shown in **Figure 10**, when asked, “If

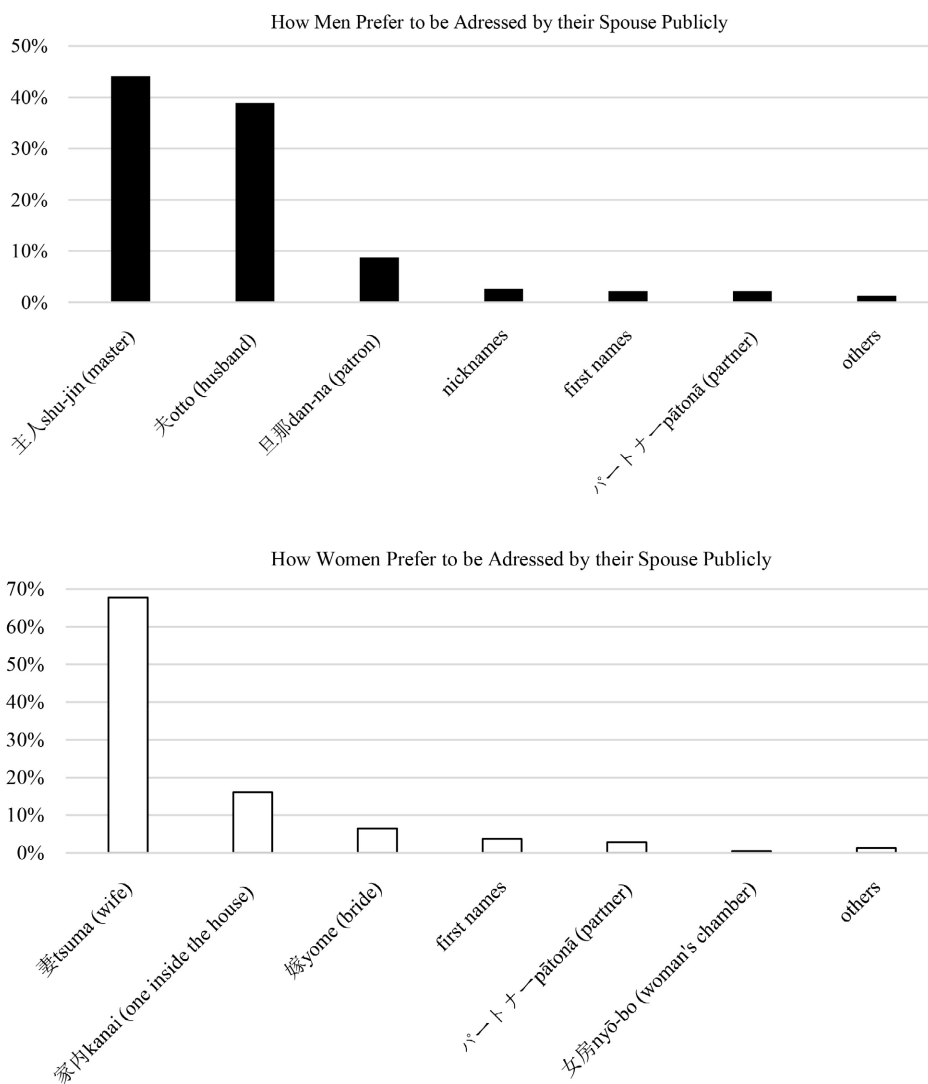


Figure 10. How couples prefer to be addressed publicly: men’s terms (top) and women’s (bottom).

your spouse introduces you to others, what would you most like to be addressed as?”. Most men preferred to be addressed as “主人 shu-jin” at 44.1%, followed by “夫 otto” at 38.9%, and “旦那 dan-na” at 8.7%. In public settings, “主人 shu-jin” remained the top choice as the preferred spousal term, but compared with the actual use by women, the rate of the preferred term “主人 shu-jin” was lower. In addition, the rate of the preferred term “夫 otto” was higher than the actual use, while the rate of the preferred term “旦那 dan-na” was lower than the actual use as shown in **Figure 1** and **Figure 2**.

Among women, the most preferred term was “妻 tsuma” (67.7%), followed by “家内 ka-nai” (16.1%). There is little difference between the preferred and actual usage of these spousal terms, as shown in **Figure 5** and **Figure 6**. In reality, Japanese couples tend to use the terms “主人 shu-jin” and “妻 tsuma” when addressing their spouses in public.

Figure 11 shows the results of the question “What would you most like to be addressed as when you are alone with your spouse at home?”. Among men, the most common response was their first name (35.8%), followed by their nickname (31.9%), “お父さん o-tō-san” (14.9%), and “パパ papa” (9.6%). However,

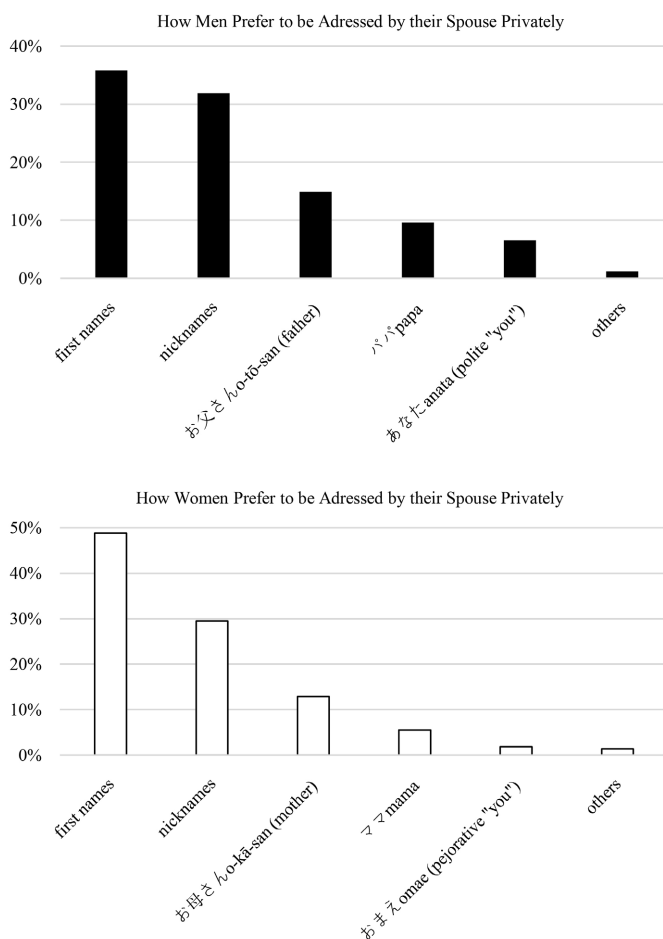


Figure 11. How couples prefer to be addressed privately: men’s terms (top) and women’s (bottom).

the preferred ranking differs from the actual usage. There is a discrepancy between the preferred terms and their actual use, as shown in **Figure 9**.

Meanwhile, the most common response among women was their first name (48.9%), followed by their nickname (29.5%), “お母さん o-kā-san” (12.9%), and “ママ mama” (5.5%). The ranking also does not match the actual usage. This reveals a discrepancy between the preferred and actual usage of these terms between men and women. Ideally, men and women preferred to be addressed by their first names or nicknames, but they were most often addressed by family terms by their spouses in reality.

Overall, the results showed that in public settings, Japanese couples overwhelmingly chose to address their spouses as “主人 shu-jin” for the husband and “妻 tsuma” for the wife, regardless of age, educational background, preference, and reality. In private settings, couples tend to use family terms more frequently. However, there is a noticeable gap between the preferred terms and the terms used in reality.

5. Discussion

Before concluding this study, we discuss four significant findings by comparing them with the literature on spousal terms usage in the Japanese language. First, “主人 shu-jin” is still the most commonly spousal term used by women in public. Second, “妻 tsuma” becomes the most commonly spousal term used by men in public. Third, family terms are more frequently used when couples are alone at home. Lastly, the use of second-person pronouns shows evidence of gender discrimination. In addition, we compared the present findings with those of **Nin (2023)**, which surveyed the spousal terms in Chinese couples.

5.1. The Most Commonly Male Spousal Term “主人 shu-jin” Used by Women in Public

This survey showed that “主人 shu-jin” was the most widely used term when introducing a male spouse to others. This finding is similar to the studies conducted about 40 years ago. Even in the 21st century, “主人 shu-jin” remains women’s most used spousal term.

Multiple surveys have been conducted in Japan to determine the most used term to refer to a spouse. **Endo (1985)** surveyed 123 housewives of salaried households in Tokyo and found that “主人 shu-jin” was the most common term used by wives to refer to their husbands when speaking to others. In formal situations, such as when speaking to their husband’s boss or colleagues, 78.9% of wives used “主人 shu-jin”, and in casual situations, such as speaking to friends, 61.8% of wives used “主人 shu-jin” (**Endo, 1985: p. 25**). **Yoneda (1986)** surveyed 185 married couples in the Tokyo metropolitan area and found that “主人 shu-jin” was used overwhelmingly often, both in formal (71.9%) and informal situations (63.2%) (**Yoneda, 1986: p. 20**).

Ten years later, **Kanamaru (1997)** surveyed 101 married couples in the Sendai area of Miyagi Prefecture and found that “主人 shu-jin” was used most fre-

quently at 39% (Kanamaru, 1997: p. 26). A poll by the Japanese Agency for Cultural Affairs (1999) showed that “主人 shu-jin” was used by 74% of women when talking about their spouses with others (Agency for Cultural Affairs, 1999: p. 55). In the Sugihara (2000) survey, 91% of women used “主人 shu-jin” when introducing their spouses to others, particularly to an older person or a boss (91%), a same-age colleague (67%), or a younger subordinate (65%) (Sugihara, 2000: p. 356).

Terasawa (2007) summarized the results of a survey conducted in Tokyo in 2002 and found that “主人 shu-jin” was the most used term (82.6% to a boss, 76.5% to a person at city hall, 55.1% to a friend, and 51.5% to a neighbor) (Terasawa, 2007: p. 78). Hong (2007) surveyed 226 Japanese (96 women and 130 men) and found that when wives referred to their husbands to others, “主人 shu-jin” was used the most (89.1% to their husband’s boss and 67.7% to their husband’s friends) (Hong, 2007: p. 87). Therefore, it was confirmed that the overwhelmingly high use of “主人 shu-jin” has not changed much from Endo (1985) to the present online survey conducted in 2023, almost 40 years later.

The use of the word “主人 shu-jin” as a spousal term has faced criticism because of its association with the concepts of “master” or “head of a family”. According to Kanamaru (1997), the *Asahi Shimbun* once ran a feature article in its home section titled “Muzukashii ‘Shu-jin’ Tsuihou” (Banishment of the difficult word ‘Shu-jin’) in 1972. Also, NHK, National Broadcasting Japan, once aired a program titled “Ki ni naru Kotoba: Shu-jin” (Concerned Words: Shu-jin) as a part of the TV program “Nihongo Saihakken” (Rediscovering the Japanese Language) in 1982 (Kanamaru, 1997: pp. 29-30).

On the contrary, some people argued that “a word is a kind of sign, so if ‘主人 shu-jin’ (master) is used to refer to a ‘husband’, that is fine”. Endo (1987) responded to this opinion as follows: the term “主人 shu-jin” (master), which is based on the original master-servant relationship, is used in very common publications that we see every day, even if not in particularly old documents. If this is the case, it is no longer possible to treat “主人 shu-jin”, which expresses the meaning of husband, as a mere sign without a master-servant relationship. Even if the person who uses the term “主人 shu-jin” calls it a sign that eschews the master-servant relationship, there is no guarantee that the word will be socially accepted as a mere sign even after it is used (Endo, 1987: p. 43). It suggests that the unconscious use of “主人 shu-jin” (master) may perpetuate the traditional male-centric social consciousness.

Despite these objections, “主人 shu-jin” remains a popular spousal term. Jugaku (1988) explained from a linguistic point of view that the word is more functional than alternatives like “夫 otto” (husband) or “連れ合い tsure-ai” (companion). The term is shorter and more easily used in the spoken and written language and can be modified to show respect by adding the prefix “御 go” (politeness) or the suffix “様 sama” (politeness). In contrast, “夫 otto” cannot be used in this way, and “連れ合い tsure-ai” is too long (Jugaku, 1988: p. 30).

However, this explanation does not work for the use of “家内 ka-nai” and “妻 tsuma” by their husbands because they cannot be used with the prefix “御 go” (politeness) or the suffix “様 sama” (politeness) to show politeness. Therefore, if a more polite form is needed only for referring to a husband, not to a wife, it is another evidence of the gender bias in the spousal terms in the Japanese language. Jugaku (1988) also pointed out that the acceptance of the term “主人 shu-jin” (master) was probably due to a vague or positive sentiment on the part of women that it was acceptable to posit the marital relationship as a hierarchical one (Jugaku, 1988: p. 30). It implies a need for gender consciousness reform on the part of Japanese women.

In this online survey, it is also found that when introducing their spouses to a colleague and a friend, compared to the formal case, the use of “主人 shu-jin” (master) has decreased and the use of “夫 otto” (husband) and “旦那 dan-na” (patron) has increased. It is also found that the higher the education level of the women, the higher the use of “夫 otto” (husband)” and the lower the use of “旦那 dan-na” (patron). Gender-neutral terms such as “パートナー pātōnā” (partner) and “連れ合い ture-ai” (companion) are still seldom used.

Regarding “旦那 dan-na” (patron), Mizumoto (2017) stated that the word was from the Sanskrit word “dānapati”, which seemed to have no gender bias problem just meaning “making an offering”, but it was considered equivalent to “主人 shu-jin” (master) as a word containing a master-servant relationship, given its history of being used by servants to call their masters and by women to call patrons who take care of them in their lives (Mizumoto, 2017: p. 13). It is important to note that the spousal term “旦那 dan-na” (patron) is considered to be equivalent to “主人 shu-jin” (master) as a term that includes a master-servant relationship. The use of “旦那 dan-na” (patron) also implies inequality between Japanese couples.

The present survey also showed women with higher education levels were more likely to use “夫 otto”, indicating a change in gender awareness due to increased educational opportunities for women. This suggests that a shift towards using “夫 otto” instead of “主人 shu-jin” may occur in the future. Although it was not of an actual spousal term usage but of ideal spouse terms, Mizumoto (2017) reported the results of a survey conducted in 2015 and showed that the most common answer was “夫 otto” (38.8%), followed by “主人 shu-jin” (33.0%) (Mizumoto, 2017: p. 17).

5.2. The Most Commonly Female Spousal Term “妻 tsuma” Used by Men in Public

The present online survey found that most men addressed their spouse as “妻 tsuma” which differed from previous studies’ results, showing that the most common term was “家内 ka-nai”. For instance, Yoneda’s (1986) survey found that “家内 ka-nai” was the most frequently used term in formal situations (36.8% to a former teacher), while the first name was used most in informal cases

(29.7% to a friend) (Yoneda, 1986: p. 20). Kanamaru's (1997) survey in Sendai city found that “家内 ka-nai” was the most common term used when referring to a spouse at 32% (Kanamaru, 1997: p. 28). A poll by the Agency for Cultural Affairs (1999) also showed that “家内 ka-nai” was the most used term (51.1%) by men when talking about their spouses with others (Agency for Cultural Affairs, 1999: p. 52). The results of the Sugihara (2000) survey showed that “家内 ka-nai” was the most used term (41%) when men introduced their spouses to older people (or a boss), while “妻 tsuma” was in second place at 33%. When men introduced their spouse to someone of the same age or younger, the most used term was “女房 nyō-bo” (39% used with same-aged colleagues and 42% with younger subordinates) (Sugihara, 2000: p. 357). According to Terasawa (2009), “家内 ka-nai” was the most used term when talking about spouses outside the home, with 43.1% to a boss, 27.6% to a friend, and 24.1% to a neighbor. However, it is important to note that when speaking to a boss, both “家内 ka-nai” and “妻 tsuma” had an equal 43.1% usage. “妻 tsuma” was also used more frequently than “家内 ka-nai” (53.4% vs. 29.3%) when talking to a public office receptionist (Terasawa, 2009: p. 116). Hong (2007) found that most husbands referred to their wives as “家内 ka-nai” (33.1% to the wife's boss, 21.9% to the wife's friends). While “妻 tsuma” was the second most used term at 25.6% when speaking to the wife's boss (Hong, 2007: p. 87).

According to Endo (1987), the term “家内 ka-nai” became prevalent only in the Showa period (1926-1989), whereas “妻 tsuma” was more commonly used previously (Endo, 1987: p. 81). In addition, “主人 shu-jin” (master) became popular only after World War II (1945), while before then, “夫 otto” (husband) was more common (Endo, 1987: p. 41). It suggests that “主人 shu-jin” and “家内 ka-nai” as terms for referring to spouses became established only relatively recently. Historically, the pair of “主人 shu-jin” (master) and “家内 ka-nai” (one inside the house) has not always been leading.

Yoneda (1990) stated that “主人 shu-jin” and “家内 ka-nai” did not easily give up their top positions in any of the previous surveys (Yoneda, 1990: p. 21). In effect, most surveys conducted in the 1980s through the 1990s showed the dominance of “主人 shu-jin” and “家内 ka-nai” as spousal terms, as stated above. However, the results of Terasawa (2009) and this online survey conducted in 2023 suggest that “主人 shu-jin” and “家内 ka-nai” are not the most frequently used terms in the 21st century.

The connotation of “家内 ka-nai” as “one who is inside the house” strongly reflects a gender role consciousness “男は外,女は内 Otoko wa soto, onna wa uchi” (men outside, women inside). Today, with the traditional male-centered patriarchal family system collapsing and women becoming more socially active, women commonly enter the workforce even if they are married. Consequently, the term “家内 ka-nai” is seen as outdated. Accordingly, the present online survey suggests a shift from “家内 ka-nai” to “妻 tsuma” has begun, and low usage rates of “嫁 yome” and “女房 nyō-bo” indicate improved gender awareness.

5.3. The Most Commonly Spousal Terms Used by Couples in Private

A distinct feature of Japanese terms for spouses was that couples used family terms such as “お父さん o-tō-san” and “お母さん o-kā-san” and the European-based words “パパ papa/ママ mama” when alone at home. If combined, using these family terms took first place (women 50.2%, men 38.3%), with women using them more often.

Suzuki (1973) first noted the use of family terms in the Japanese language and explained it as a psychological adjustment by parents, who identify with their children and adopt their child-like position, named it “empathetic identification” (Suzuki, 1973: p. 168). S. Kim (2002) called it “child-centered usage” and highlighted its uniqueness to the Japanese language (S. Kim, 2002: p. 284). The present online survey confirmed this social language phenomenon.

Meanwhile, we look at the results of the question, “What would you most like to be addressed as when you are alone with your spouse at home?”. Among men, the most common response was their first name (35.8%), followed by their nickname (31.9%). Meanwhile, the women’s most common preferences were their first name (48.9%) and nickname (29.5%). Again, these results suggest differences in the preferred and actual usage of these terms between men and women.

Technically, family terms are not spousal terms. However, it should be noted that when a couple is alone at home, they address each other in their family terms. They started by addressing each other with family terms in the presence of children but soon got accustomed to using them, like a common name in the family, even in the absence of children.

In this online survey, it was also observed that 50% of women addressed their husbands by their family terms, such as “お父さん o-tō-san” (father), while men often addressed their wives by their first names. According to Mizutani and Mizutani (1977), to address family members older than oneself, polite terms (e.g., o-tō-san) are used; for family members younger than oneself, their first names are used (Mizutani & Mizutani, 1977: p. 228). In general, husbands are older than wives in Japanese families, which may be one of the reasons for the above social language phenomenon, but it is also probably due to the patriarchal system of male dominance that remains. Further research is needed to determine whether this is a social language phenomenon found only in Japan or can be observed in other countries and regions.

5.4. Gender Discrimination in the Use of Second-Person Pronouns

The present study found that when a Japanese couple was alone at home, they used different second-person pronouns when addressing each other. Women tend to use the respectful pronoun “あなた anata” (4.8%), while men tend to use the pejorative pronoun “おまえ omae” (6.5%) for their wives.

According to Yoneda (1986), when the couples were alone at home, wives

used “あなた anata” (44%) to their husbands, while husbands used “おまえ omae” (32%) to their wives (Yoneda, 1986: p. 20). Kanamaru (1997) also reported that wives only used “あなた anata” to their husbands (6%), while husbands used “おまえ omae” (3%) to their wives when the couple was alone at home. Hong (2007) also reported that when the couples were alone together wives only used “あなた anata” for their husbands (7.6%), while husbands used “あなた anata” (2.4%) and “おまえ omae” (2.4%) for their wives (Hong, 2007: p. 82).

In the Japanese language, “あなた anata” (a polite form of “you”) is a term of respect for a superior or peer, while “おまえ omae” (a pejorative form of “you”) is used to refer to a subordinate. This suggests that there is a difference in term usage between women and men when the couples address each other directly while they are alone at home. In other words, women tend to use the honorific second-person pronoun “あなた anata” to refer to their spouses and men tend to use the derogatory second-person pronoun “おまえ omae”.

According to Jugaku (1988), the second-person pronoun “おまえ omae” was used from the superior to the inferior in a family, specifically from a parent to a child, husband to wife, or an older sibling to a younger sibling. Jugaku (1988) also pointed out that in Japan, the vertical relationship of hierarchy was preferred over the horizontal relationship of equality. The most problematic was that the wife’s side preferred it rather than indulging in it, much less protesting it (Jugaku, 1988: p. 29). It suggested that wives often accepted their husbands’ using the derogatory pronoun “おまえ omae” rather than resisting it.

These results are almost identical to those of this online survey. This finding suggests that the relationship between men and women in the family is not equal and is still patriarchal and male-dominated. It also suggests the need for a change in gender consciousness on the part of women in order to confront traditional values and social norms and correct many discriminatory expressions. Further research is needed to examine this linguistic phenomenon and its effects on gender equality in contemporary Japan.

5.5. Gender Bias in Spousal Terms in Japanese and Chinese Languages

Nin (2023) conducted an online survey on spousal terms usage among contemporary Chinese couples with the same questionnaires as the present one, so we could directly compare the spousal terms in the Chinese and Japanese languages. As well known, China and Japan share various Eastern Asian cultural aspects, including the use of Chinese characters. Many Japanese customs have roots in Chinese ones. Social values such as “男尊女卑 dansonjohi” (male chauvinism), “男は外, 女は内 Otoko wa soto, onna wa uchi” (men outside, women inside), and “夫唱婦隨 fushōfuzui” (Wives should obey their husbands.) are common. So parallel aspects in using spousal terms, including gender bias, would be expected.

Nin (2023) showed that both young and older Chinese couples most com-

monly used “老公 lǎogōng” (old lord) to refer to husbands and “老婆 lǎopo” (old granny) for wives. In Chinese, the masculine counterpart of the character “婆 po” (old granny) is “爷 ye” (grandfather), not “公 gōng” (old honorable gentleman). Therefore, “老公 lǎogōng” and “老婆 lǎopo” are not fully symmetrical in connotation, but they are less biased than the Japanese spousal terms pair “主人 shu-jin” (master) and “家内 ka-nai” (one inside the house). It is clear that with the head of the family on top, the relationship between husband and wife has always been framed in terms of superior and subordinate in Japanese social or traditional values.

Despite sharing an oriental tradition, the Chinese spousal terms are less gender-biased than the Japanese ones. Presumably, this can largely be attributed to the Communist Revolution (1921-1949) and Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) enforcing gender equality in China, whereas no such radical change has occurred in Japanese society. Nin (2023) stated, by quoting Chen (1979), Chen (1994), and H. Kim (2002), that the gender-neutral spousal term “爱人 àiren” (loved one), a symbol of free love and free marriage, began to be used to refer to both husbands and wives in the early 20th century and peaked in use during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), but has completed its historical mission and is no longer commonly used nowadays.

In addition to Japan and China, East Asia includes the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, so it is necessary to investigate how Koreans use spousal terms. Both nations use the Korean language, but their political systems differ significantly, so a further survey will provide much depth to our knowledge of the spousal terms usage in East Asia.

6. Conclusion

This study conducted an online survey of married couples with children to examine the various terms used for spouses in the Japanese language. The results of this survey, compared to previous surveys, revealed a diverse range of spousal terms in Japanese.

When introducing their spouse to others, men tend to use “妻” (wife) instead of the traditional term “家内 ka-nai” (one inside the house), while women still tend to use the traditional spousal term “主人 shu-jin”. Women with higher education levels tend to use “夫 otto” more, “主人 shu-jin” and “旦那 dan-na” less. Gender-neutral terms such as “パートナー pātōnā” (partner) and “連れ合い tsure-ai” (companion) are rarely used nowadays. At home, couples tend to use family terms such as “お父さん o-tō-san”, “お母さん o-kā-san”, “パパ papa” and “ママ mama” more frequently than nicknames and first names. Moreover, women also tend to use the honorific second-person pronoun “あなた anata” to refer to their spouse, while men tend to use the derogatory second-person pronoun “おまえ omae”. Overall, the results indicate that gender discrimination persists in contemporary Japanese.

The limitations of this study must be acknowledged. It provides insights into

the impact of changes in social roles and values in Japan on using spousal terms. However, data gathered from online surveys may not accurately represent the general population as such surveys only include individuals with internet access. Although widespread smartphone use may reduce this limitation, future studies should still track changes in spousal terms through a combination of methods.

Furthermore, the samples in this study were limited, as the survey forms were sent to university students' parents, mostly in their 40s and 50s. Additionally, most of the respondents were highly educated. Therefore, a full-range survey with broader ages and educational backgrounds is necessary to obtain a more comprehensive understanding.

It has been over two decades since the beginning of the 21st century, and gender equality is increasingly becoming the norm worldwide. However, while women can now take on more active societal roles compared to when patriarchal systems were prevalent, Japan still faces a significant gender gap. As shown by the results of this online survey, spousal terms that reflect traditional Japanese notions of male chauvinism and contempt for women, such as “主人 *shu-jin*” (master), “旦那 *dan-na*” (patron), “家内 *ka-nai*” (one inside the house), “嫁 *yome*” (bride), and “女房 *nyō-bo*” (woman's chamber), continue to be in use nowadays.

Language changes gradually, and speakers must often be aware of these changes. Even if language reforms are consciously implemented to promote change, it may take hundreds of years for them to be fully adopted by society. In particular, prejudices deeply ingrained in a culture cannot be easily eliminated (Reynolds, 1998: pp. 226-227). Therefore, it is crucial to systematically study gender bias in Japanese and actively link language use to social practices. To eliminate sexism, we must first pay attention to sexist language. Changing the language can lead to a change in society. The findings of this paper will help transform an increasingly diverse Japanese society. We hope that spousal terms like “主人 *shu-jin*” (master), “旦那 *dan-na*” (patron), “家内 *ka-nai*” (one inside the house), “嫁 *yome*” (bride), and “女房 *nyō-bo*” (woman's chamber), which originated in a patriarchal culture, will soon become taboo.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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