

# Cross-Cultural Analysis of Address Terms: Chinese, Japanese, and English

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# Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework: Sociolinguistic Significance of Address Terms

**Address Terms** are words or phrases used by interactants to refer to each other in verbal communication.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, address terms are more than simple referential symbols; they are complex systems carrying rich socio-cultural information.

Their selection is a social act, constrained by context, social status, age, intimacy, gender, and cultural traditions of the interactants.

Address terms are thus considered "barometers of social change," whose evolution clearly reflects profound transformations in social structure, interpersonal relationship patterns, and values.

## Distinction: "Address System" vs. "Address Usage"

When conducting cross-cultural comparisons, we need to distinguish between "address terms (system)" and "address usage."

**Address Term (System):** A relatively stable, systematic lexical set within a language, possessing social and universal characteristics.

**Address Usage:** The dynamic, personalized, and oral application of that system in specific interactions.

This report will analyze both levels, exploring the interaction between the static system and dynamic usage.

**Politeness Principles** are core pragmatic principles underlying address term usage, with different cultures' understandings and realizations of politeness (e.g., positive vs. negative politeness) directly influencing address term selection strategies.

## Chapter 2: Chinese Address System: Complexity, Relationality, and Dynamic Evolution

The Chinese address system is one of the most complex in the world.

Its core characteristics lie in its profound "relationality" and "dynamism" in response to social development.

## 2.1 Core Features and Classification of Mandarin Address Terms

The Mandarin address system is extensive, generally classified into two main categories: **Kinship Address Terms** and **Social Address Terms**.

### **Kinship Address System:**

Extremely precise, strictly distinguishing paternal/maternal, seniority, generation, and inner/outer family.

Each family member has a unique address term.

Reflects the family-centric patriarchal ethics and hierarchical values of traditional Confucian culture.

## 2.1 Core Features and Classification of Mandarin Address Terms (Cont.)

### **Social Address System:**

Equally rich and diverse, including:

Occupation/position-based terms (e.g., "Teacher Wang," "Manager Li").

Gender-based general terms (e.g., "Mr.," "Ms.").

Terms with specific historical imprints (e.g., "Comrade," "Master/Shifu").

This systematically complex structure dictates that Chinese speakers must first ascertain the relationship between interactants before initiating communication.

## 2.2 Social Functions and Pragmatic Strategies: Generalization of Kinship Terms

One of the most significant social functions of Chinese address terms is to construct and regulate interpersonal relationships.

The "generalization of kinship terms" is a pragmatic strategy highly characteristic of Chinese culture.

Using kinship terms like "uncle," "auntie," "older brother," "older sister" for unrelated strangers or acquaintances primarily serves to:

1. **Bridge Social Distance:** Simulates the intimate relationships among family members, quickly dispelling strangeness and building a "quasi-intimate" social atmosphere (a positive politeness strategy).
2. **Express Respect and Affection:** Using generalized kinship terms for elders conveys respect (aligning with the cultural psychology of seniority) and appears more amiable than using general terms like "Mr./Ms."
3. **Identity and Belonging:** This form of address can strengthen collective identity within a community.

Furthermore, using "surname + position/occupation" (e.g., "Boss Wang," "Engineer Zhang") is also extremely common, reflecting the high importance placed on social roles and status in social interactions.

## 2.3 Historical Evolution and Social Changes

The Chinese address system has undergone dramatic evolution, clearly charting the trajectory of China's social transformation.

### **Changes Under Political Influence:**

From the widespread use of "Mr." during the Republic of China era, to "Comrade" becoming a universal term after the founding of the PRC, and then to the semantic narrowing and new meanings of "Comrade" after reform and opening up—all are closely linked to changes in the political climate and social ideology.



## 2.3 Historical Evolution and Social Changes (Cont.)

### **New Trends Under Market Economy:**

With the development of the market economy, terms like "Boss" ( , lǎo bǎn) and "General Manager" ( , lǎo zǒng) have generalized from specific groups to become common address terms for business people and even ordinary men.

The term "Master/Shifu" ( ) has shifted from a respectful term for manual laborers, gradually being replaced by more modern terms, or confined to specific industries (e.g., drivers).

### **Contemporary Evolutionary Trends:**

Contemporary Chinese address terms show trends of simplification, entertainment-orientation, gender weakening, and the emergence of new words.

For example, the generalization of "Teacher" ( , lǎo shī) is now used not only for educators but also for anyone with expertise in a certain field who deserves respect.

## 2.4 Perspective from Chinese Dialects: Cantonese, Hakka, Minnanese

While direct, detailed comparative studies on Chinese dialectal address terms are limited, we can make reasonable inferences based on lexical and grammatical differences between dialects and Mandarin.

### **Conservatism and Complexity of Systems:**

Southern dialects such as Cantonese, Hakka, and Minnanese are generally believed to retain more ancient Chinese characteristics.

Thus, their kinship address systems may be more complex and detailed than Mandarin, preserving more archaic forms. For example, some unique expressions in Hakka kinship terms reflect its distinctive clan culture and migration history.

## 2.4 Perspective from Chinese Dialects: Cantonese, Hakka, Minnanese (Cont.)

### **Regionality of Social Functions:**

Within dialectal regions, the use of address terms better reflects local cultural identity. For instance, in Guangzhou, "handsome boy" ( , leung jai) and "beautiful girl" ( , leung nei) are not just descriptive words but have become common and cordial forms of address, with a wider scope and higher degree of intimacy than their Mandarin counterparts.

### **Social Function of Code-Switching:**

In diglossic regions where dialects and Mandarin coexist, the choice of address terms itself is a form of code-switching with specific social functions.

Using dialectal address terms for locals can indicate closeness and identity (a marking function), while switching to Mandarin address terms might signify formality, respect, or communication with non-locals.

For example, a Minnanese person might use the Mandarin term "Manager Wang" for a superior in a formal setting, but switch to a more intimate Minnanese term in a private setting, with this switch itself regulating interpersonal relationships.

## Chapter 3: Japanese Address System: Hierarchy, Contextuality, and the Central Role of Honorifics

The Japanese address system differs fundamentally from both English and Chinese. Its core lies not in choosing a nominal address term, but in how its highly developed **honorific (Keigo)** system is used to mark interpersonal relationships.

### 3.1 Overview of the Honorific (Keigo) System

Japanese address behavior is almost entirely integrated into the honorific system.

This system expresses the speaker's respect and attitude towards the listener or topic person through:

- Verb conjugations.

- Noun prefixes (e.g., -/ -).

- Use of specific respectful language (敬語, sonkeigo), humble language (謙語, kenjōgo), and polite language (丁寧語, teineigo).

Directly using second-person pronouns (e.g., あなた, anata) is often considered impolite or overly distant.

Instead, "surname + さん (san/sama)" or "surname + position" (e.g., タナカ buchō, Manager Tanaka) are used.

## 3.2 Social Functions: "Uchi-Soto Distinction" and Building Social Distance

The social functions of Japanese address terms (and honorifics) are deeply influenced by the cultural concept of "uchi" (内, inner circle) and "soto" (外, outer circle).

### **Distinguishing Uchi and Soto:**

Completely different linguistic forms are used for "uchi" (family, colleagues) and "soto" (clients, strangers).

For example, when referring to one's own company superior to outsiders, honorifics are omitted (e.g., 田中課長, buchō no Tanaka, Tanaka the manager), which is a display of humility and reflects clear inner-outer boundaries.

## 3.2 Social Functions: "Uchi-Soto Distinction" and Building Social Distance (Cont.)

### **Precisely Calibrating Social Distance:**

The use of honorifics can extremely precisely express the speaker's perceived social hierarchy, age, obligation relationship, and degree of intimacy.

It is a typical negative politeness strategy, expressing respect by maintaining appropriate social distance.

### **Address Terms for Lovers and Spouses:**

Sino-Japanese comparative studies show that unlike Chinese people who tend to use affectionate terms (e.g., "baby," "husband"), Japanese couples or lovers more often use second-person pronouns or direct names.

The usage scenarios for kinship terms (e.g., "dad," "mom") also differ from China, reflecting cultural differences in expressing internal family relationships between the two countries.

### 3.3 System Evolution: From "Status-based Honorifics" to "Social Honorifics"

Similar to Chinese address terms, the Japanese honorific system is undergoing profound evolution, closely related to Japan's post-war democratization, equalization, and globalization processes.

#### **From "Absolute Honorifics" to "Relative Honorifics":**

Traditional honorifics, based on fixed social status (e.g., aristocracy, samurai), were "absolute honorifics."

In modern society, honorifics have gradually transformed into "relative honorifics" or "conversational honorifics" based on specific interaction scenarios and targets, serving more as social politeness than status confirmation.



### 3.3 System Evolution: From "Status-based Honorifics" to "Social Honorifics" (Cont.)

#### **Simplification and "Equalization" Trends:**

Younger generations tend to use more simplified honorific forms. For instance, overly complex humble language is gradually being replaced by more universal polite language. This "devaluation" or "vulgarization" trend of honorifics reflects society's dissolution of absolute authority and pursuit of equal relationships.

#### **Adjustments in Honorific Policy:**

Official documents such as the Japanese government's "Honorifics Guidelines" also attempt to guide honorifics towards a simpler, more understandable direction that aligns with modern social interpersonal relationships, which itself is a reflection of social change in language policy.

## Chapter 4: English (British & American) Address System: Individuality, Equality, and Informalization

Compared to Chinese and Japanese, the English address system appears remarkably concise. This conciseness itself reflects its cultural core.

It must be noted that empirical research on the specific evolution of English address terms and Anglo-American differences is very limited in the provided search results. The following analysis is based more on general sociolinguistic principles and cross-cultural comparative inferences.

## 4.1 Relative Simplicity of the System

The formal English address system primarily relies on "Title + Last Name" (e.g., Mr. Smith, Dr. Jones).

In most informal and semi-formal settings, it quickly transitions to addressing by first name. This contrasts sharply with the complex network of Chinese kinship/occupational terms and the pervasive honorific system in Japanese.

English has almost no social address terms fully equivalent to Chinese "Big Brother" or Japanese "Senpai," which combine intimacy and hierarchical functions.

## 4.2 Social Functions: Manifestation of Individualism and Egalitarianism

The conciseness of English address terms and the preference for first names deeply reflect two core values in Western culture:

**Individualism:** Addressing by first name emphasizes the individual themselves, rather than their family role, social status, or relationship with others. This contrasts with the relationship-oriented Chinese system.

**Egalitarianism:** Quickly transitioning to first-name basis is a positive politeness strategy to establish equal, friendly relationships. It aims to shorten, rather than maintain, social distance, which is precisely opposite to the function of Japanese honorifics.

## 4.3 Evolutionary Trends and British-American Differences

The most significant long-term trend in English address terms is continuous informalization. Over the past few decades, situations that previously required "Mr./Ms. + Last Name" (e.g., universities, some workplaces) have increasingly shifted to first-name usage.

### **Hypothesized British-American Differences:**

Although direct data is lacking, it is generally believed that British English retains more formality in certain situations than American English. For example, the use of "Sir" or "Madam" in service industries and some traditional institutions may be more common in Britain than in the US.

American English exhibits a higher degree of informalization, with the generalized use of terms like "Dude," "Man," "Bro" among young male peers being a typical characteristic.

## 4.3 Evolutionary Trends and British-American Differences (Cont.)

### **Exploration of Gender-Neutrality:**

In the 2020s, a significant evolution is the rise of gender-neutral address terms.

As societal awareness of gender diversity increases, "Mx." as an alternative to "Mr.," "Ms.," etc., is gradually gaining acceptance in official documents and daily communication.

This clearly indicates that the evolution of address terms directly responds to social equality movements and demands for identity recognition.

## Chapter 5: Cross-Linguistic Comparative Analysis: Structure, Function, and Cultural Connotations

By juxtaposing the address systems of the three languages, we can conduct a deeper comparison across structural, functional, and cultural dimensions.

## 5.1 Structural Dimension: Relationship-Oriented vs. Hierarchy-Oriented vs. Individual-Oriented

### **Chinese (Relationship/Occupation-Oriented):**

The primary consideration for term selection is "relationship"—kinship or social? Within social relationships, is it based on occupation, age, or other social roles? This is a system centered around "roles" and "relationship networks."

### **Japanese (Hierarchy/Context-Oriented):**

Term selection is deeply integrated with honorific grammar. Primary consideration is "hierarchy" and "uchi/soto"—is the other person an elder/superior or a junior/subordinate? Is it an insider or an outsider? This is a system centered around "hierarchy" and "context."

### **English (Individual-Oriented):**

Term selection is relatively simple. Primary consideration is "occasion"—formal or informal? Quickly shifts to using names, centered on the "individual."



## 5.2 Functional Dimension: Similarities and Differences in Politeness Strategies

All three languages use address terms to achieve politeness, but their strategies differ significantly:

**Chinese** employs both positive and negative politeness strategies.

Bridging relationships through generalized kinship terms (positive politeness).

Expressing respect and maintaining hierarchy through occupational titles (negative politeness).

**Japanese** primarily relies on negative politeness strategies.

Maintaining and confirming social distance through the honorific system, avoiding encroachment on the other's "territory" to express extreme respect.

**English** primarily relies on positive politeness strategies.

Establishing a friendly, egalitarian atmosphere by quickly transitioning to names, using nicknames, emphasizing commonalities rather than differences.

## 5.3 Special Comparison of Chinese and Japanese Address Terms

The provided materials contain numerous direct comparative studies on Chinese and Japanese address terms. In summary, differences mainly include:

Chinese names have a wider variety of reciprocal terms, while Japanese has a wider variety of second-person pronoun-based reciprocal terms.

China widely uses generalized kinship terms, while Japan generally does not.

In intimate relationships such as lovers and spouses, Chinese address terms tend to be more emotionally expressive and formally diverse, while Japanese terms are relatively more reserved and patterned.

These differences are rooted in the distinct family concepts, social structures, and emotional expression styles of the two countries.

## Chapter 6: Contemporary Challenges and Future Trends: Impact of the Digital Communication Era (As of Oct 2025)

Although empirical research on the impact of digital communication since 2020 is very limited in the provided materials, based on observed long-term trends and the characteristics of digital media, we can analyze and predict current and future evolutionary directions.

## 6.1 Acceleration of Globalization and Informalization

Digital communication, particularly global social media platforms dominated by English, is a powerful catalyst for the informalization of address terms.

In multinational online collaboration and communication, to enhance efficiency and avoid cultural misunderstandings, using relatively neutral, simple English-style address terms (e.g., first names) has become a common practice.

This habit is subtly influencing languages worldwide, especially among younger generations and in the tech industry, further eroding the authority of traditional address systems.

## 6.2 Emergence of New Address Terms and "Pan-Entertainment" Trends

Cyberspace is a fertile ground for linguistic innovation. Since 2020, we have observed a large number of new address terms originating from online communities, possessing entertainment and meme-like qualities, continuously emerging and entering the mainstream.

### **Chinese:**

Terms like "little older brother" ( 小哥哥, xiǎo gēge), "little older sister" ( 小姐姐, xiǎo jiějie), "sisters" ( 集美, jí měi), and "folks/everyone" ( 家人们, jiā rén men) are widely popular on social media.

These terms blur age and real relationships, quickly establishing a sense of virtual community identity in a relaxed, friendly manner, representing a digital-age variation and upgrade of traditional kinship term generalization.

**English/Japanese:** Similarly, address terms originating from games, anime, or specific online subcultures are popular within communities and spread through social media.

## 6.3 Gender Neutrality and the Politicized Expression of Identity

In recent years, social discussions about gender and identity have deepened, and this trend is most directly reflected in address terms.

### **In the English-speaking world:**

The practice of promoting the use of "they/them" as singular third-person pronouns, and declaring pronouns in signatures and personal introductions, has expanded from academic circles and specific communities to a broader social level.

**Chinese and Japanese**, although being gender-neutral or weakly gendered languages, also face challenges.

How to reflect respect for non-binary and other identities in address terms is an ongoing exploratory issue.

Some newly coined words online, while not yet mainstream, portend the possibility that future address systems may need to accommodate more diverse identity expressions.

## 6.4 Fragmentation of Contexts and Complexification of Address Term Choice

Digital communication creates multiple, overlapping communicative contexts (e.g., WeChat groups, Slack channels, emails, Twitter).

Users need to flexibly switch address term strategies across different platforms and audiences. For example, the same person might use "Dear Dr. Smith" in a formal work email, "John" in a project group chat, and "Dude" in a private chat.

This high degree of contextual differentiation places higher demands on users' pragmatic competence and makes the use of address terms unprecedentedly dynamic and complex.

**Thank You**

**Q&A**