

JAPANESE IN DEPTH

Making sense of 'san'

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Suzuki-san, Michiko-san, Jon-san and so on—I'm sure you are long familiar with the Japanese usage of *san*, generally translated into English as "Mr." or "Ms."

San is derived from *sama*, which you have also surely heard. *Suzuki-sama*, *Michiko-sama* and *Jon-sama* all sound quite formal. *Sama* is actually closer to "Mr." or "Ms." in formality.

Compared to formal *sama*, *san* sounds friendly with a modest degree of respect. It goes with family and first names and it is gender-neutral. Children are addressed with *san*'s diminutive alternative, *chan*, which is sometimes used among adults, too, typically with younger women, to show intimacy or endearment.

Many of my readers may be familiar with expressions that contain *sama*, such as: *go-chiso-sama* ("Thank you for the feast"—in thanks for a meal), *o-tsukare-sama* ("You must be tired; thank you for your hard work") and *go-kuro-sama* ("Thank you for your hardship"—to thank a junior for doing a job for you). Each of these expressions can be made less formal but more friendly by the use of *san*: *go-chiso-san*, *o-tsukare-san* and *go-kuro-san*.

Let's think about how to translate these expressions: *o-* and *go-* are polite prefixes, the use of which indicates politeness and care toward your counterpart. The words following the prefix (*chiso*, *tsukare* and *kuro*) simply mean "feast," "fatigue" and "hardship," respectively. By adding *sama* or *san* to such abstract and impersonal notions, however, these terms suddenly become personal, implying the speaker's feelings to the counterpart, usually gratitude or sympathy. Another example is *o-kage-sama de*. *Kage*, which means "shadow," prefixed by *o-*, implies "your kind shadow," meaning shelter or protection. The expression is equivalent to "thanks to you" or "thanks to your considerateness."

Converting abstract nouns into terms for certain people is seen in constructions like *o-mawari-san* and *o-tetsudai-san*. *Mawari* means "circulating/patrolling," and *tetsudai* means "helping." Can you guess these two professions? The first one may be rather obvious: "police officer." The latter is "maid." Both terms carry a cordial image.

Similarly, all professions can be described in a familiar and friendly manner that shows some modest respect by adding *san*; examples include: *o-isha-san* (doctors), *o-hanaya-san* (florists) and *untenshu-san* (drivers).

Note that for teachers, *sensei-san* and *sensei-sama*

are not possible because the word *sensei* does not directly refer to a profession but is itself an honorific title. Indeed it is used for other professionals, too, such as doctors, lawyers, politicians and writers.

Those of you who have studied Japanese have no doubt encountered *oku-sama* or *oku-san* when referring to someone else's wife. If your Japanese teacher was kind enough, she might have added that *oku* actually means "inside the house," so that the title is literally "Ms. Inside the House"!

In several ways this term reflects a typical Japanese mind-set. First off, know that political correctness has not caught up with this phrase and it is in no way popularly considered to be rude or denigrating. Secondly, recall that in Japanese there is a general avoidance of direct personal references, which are considered rude. A good substitute is to use relevant "location" words to indicate people. *San* works beautifully for this—but recall that one never uses *san* in reference to one's in-group. For instance, husbands can be heard referring to their wives as "*kanai*"—here it also means "inside the house."

Other examples of these types of usages abound. You might think that *kami* simply means God in Japanese. You would be almost right. The essential meaning of *kami* is "top" or "the uppermost." So, *kami-sama* does indicate God or gods with due respect, but when it becomes more familiar like *kami-san*, it is used to refer to one's wife or Ms. Uppermost! This usage reflects a husband's unspoken mind-set that she is above him. The more careful and respectful version, *o-kami-san*, means the mistress of a traditional Japanese inn or a seasoned restaurant.

Other place-word-based usages of *san* include: *o-tonari-san* and *o-mukai-san*. *Tonari* means next-door, and *mukai* refers to the place across the road. As you can now imagine, these words refer to the people in your neighborhood.

In the Osaka area, people often say *ohayo-san* in the morning, which sounds quite nice and personal. Even the morning greeting, *ohayo*, can be the target of *san* usage. Moving a little farther afield, so to speak, even the sun and the moon can be personified and personalized through use of *san*: They are often called *o-hi-san* and *o-tsuki-san*, respectively.

But the most intriguing use of *san* I know of is one that can be heard at a conveyor-belt sushi bar in my neighborhood. Here *san* is used to convey to the cashier how many plates of sushi a guest has eaten. They say *jumai-san* (Mr. 10 Plates!) for instance, showing friendly respect, when I eat 10 plates' worth of *kaitenzushi*. If I have a bowl of soup, they say *ippai-san* (Mr. One Bowl). If I have two bottles of beer, too, they add *nihon-san* (Mr. Two Bottles)! In this usage, *mai*, *pai* and *hon* do not mean "plates," "bowl" and "bottles," but are counters that describe the respective shapes of the items being counted.

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