

Are there double standards in handling foreign names?

2008, 2, 19

By Shigekatsu Yamauchi

Special to The Daily Yomiuri

In my last column, I discussed the use of *-san*, which is normally added to names to show respect. A reader of this column raised two interesting points about how Japanese use or, sometimes, do not use, *-san* with foreign names.

Recall that using first names alone indicates intimacy in English. In Japanese this is called *yobisute* (“throwing the name away”), and is rude. My reader notes, and I expect all foreigners—at least those with non-kanji surnames—have experienced, that *-san* is sometimes dropped from their own names. This, my concerned reader suspects, is a double standard.

As a Japanese teacher, I must agree, unfortunately, that this reflects a double standard, but I don’t believe the purpose is discrimination. I think we are observing here what is an interesting, and in some ways insurmountable, conflict of cultures.

Of course, it would be more equitable, constituting a single standard, if foreign names were all treated just like Japanese names. But, as is typical of Japan, things are not quite so simple and straightforward.

Names perform different functions in different languages. In spoken English, names are an important tool for communication beyond merely labeling individuals; use of first names is considered friendly and often indicates closeness. But this idea of showing closeness through use of first names is not Japanese—indeed it may be uniquely English. Other European languages I am familiar with do not use names as English does. Intimacy in Romance languages, for example, may revolve more around verb conjugations than use of names.

Japanese speakers who do not know English norms, especially when meeting foreign speakers of Japanese that approach spoken fluency, would almost certainly use *-san* with the foreigner’s name. These days, however, most Japanese know enough about English that they grasp, at least at some level, the role of first names in English. I believe this to be an intuitive or unconscious incorporation of the English-speaking mind-set even while using Japanese.

My concerned reader reported a TV reporter saying “Mary,” without *-san*. I strongly suspect that this reporter was pretty familiar with English, even if not fluent. I believe she was in an English-speaking frame of mind, while speaking, at least regard-

ing use of Mary’s name.

In certain areas we expect uniform global standards (science, measurements, etc.). But what about politics? We tolerate the United States having nuclear weapons but not North Korea. Is this not a double standard? Similarly, the application of cultural standards is never uniform. Language, I believe, is a product of culture, reflecting the mindsets and culture of its people. As peoples mix, languages and cultures affect each other. By historical luck, English is globally influential, influencing Japan and the Japanese.

I also note that the “double standard” cuts both ways. Many Americans who do not speak Japanese use *-san* with Japanese names, even when speaking English! The more you think about it, this phenomenon is very mysterious. But it is a beautiful example of languages and cultures mixing. These Americans, knowing that first names are not used in Japanese, hesitate to use Japanese first names like English ones. Influenced by Japanese, they have incorporated Japanese norms into English—even though the English norms that come most naturally to them differ radically.

My concerned reader had another point, paraphrased below:

“Why are Westerners so often referred to by given name rather than family name or title, as would be the case if they were Japanese? ‘When in Rome’ may go to extremes, but linguistically it seems reasonable to treat foreign names like Japanese names, including writing them family name first.”

My American friend recalls a teacher at Waseda University’s School of International Liberal Studies, chastising an international student for reversing his name. The teacher saw doing this as an abandonment of identity. A Japanese friend of mine insisted, in the United States, that she be addressed last name first. This created interesting difficulties for her. It was common for her to remark as to whether or not, when introduced, the other person had gotten her name “right.”

I wonder, for instance, why Chinese names are never reversed in English? It is always Mao Zedong, not Zedong Mao, etc. In Japanese there is now a movement to follow Japanese name order when using English (i.e., Fukuda Yasuo). Even so, Japanese name order is never “preserved” for some reason. I do not think this is nationalism: The norms of how a language uses names are woven so deeply into the fabric of the original language that adoption of that norm by other languages is often very difficult. For instance, I still feel somewhat strange and uncomfortable introducing myself as Shigekatsu Yamauchi in English, which is something I have been doing for almost 50 years now.

Yamauchi is president of the International Communication Institute and a Cornell University-trained Japanese-language teacher.