

Playing the Japanese name game



Once, when telephoning the international PR office of a major electronics manufacturer, I got lucky. Without my even asking, the young woman who picked up the phone volunteered her name, saying 私は青木と申します (*Watashi wa Aoki to mōshimasu*, My name is Aoki). Actually it sounded more like ア・オ・キ (*Ah-Oh-Ki*), which she stated as three clearly enunciated syllables, almost musically varying her pitch.

Ms. Aoki knew that via telephone, when a non-native speaker of her language can't make eye contact or exchange business cards, the foreign ear appreciates a little help, and she made an extra effort to pronounce her name clearly from the start without sounding the least bit patronizing. I immediately sensed she was a skilled communicator and our subsequent dealings confirmed that to be the case.

Experience will show that asking people's names — which is done in polite speech by asking お名前はなんとおっしゃいますか (*onamae wa nan to osshaimasu ka*, how do you say your honorable name?) — can generate unpredictable responses, because Japan is estimated to have up to 300,000 surnames. Truly one could say, 日本の名字はバラエティに飛んでる (*Nihon no myōji wa, baraetii ni tonde iru*, Japan has a cornucopia of surnames).

That figure is impressive. China, with more than 10 times Japan's population, makes do with about 5,600 surnames. And 70 percent of that country's population, it has been estimated, use just 45 surnames.

Recently, some interesting articles have appeared in the media on this topic. The weekly magazine *Shukan Post* (Jan. 17) featured a 16-page special report titled 名字の秘密 (*myōji no himitsu*, the secrets of surnames). Very little of the contents could be described as secret, but I found most of it to be fascinating.

As a general rule of thumb, Japanese surnames correspond to eight basic patterns. These are: 1) 地名 (*chimei*, name of a locale) such as 山口 (Yamaguchi) and 宮崎 (Miyazaki); 2) 地形や土地の様子 (*chikei ya tochi no yōsu*, those featuring geographic or topographic descriptions) such as 山本 (Yamamoto, meaning base of the mountain), 寺田 (Terada, meaning temple rice paddy) and 高橋 (Takahashi, high bridge); 3) 方位や方角 (*hōi ya hōgaku*, those describing position or direction) such as 西川 (Nishikawa, west river), 坂下 (Sakashita, beneath the hill) or 辰巳 (Tatsumi, southeast); 4) 職業 (*shokugyō*, indicating an occupation or some other personal attribute), for example 呉服 (Kurehatori, a dealer of kimono fabrics), 服部 (Hattori, weaver), etc.; 5) names that end with 藤 (read Fuji or *tō*, and meaning wisteria), which signify ties to the powerful 藤原 Fujiwara clan, such as 佐藤 (Sato), 伊藤 (Ito), 遠藤 (Endo) and so on; 6) names conferred in feudal times by one's lord such as 松平 (Matsudaira), 浅野 (Asano) and 島津 (Shimazu); 7) surnames related to 僧侶 (*sōryō*, the Buddhist priesthood), which include 釈 (Shaku), 即真 (Tsukuma) and 無着 (Muchaku); and 8) その他 (*sono ta*, everything else), which are difficult to generalize except to say that this is where you will find the so-called 難読名字 (*nandoku myōji*, names with unusual, non-standard or difficult readings).

Shukan Post also touched on something I've wondered about for some time: What moved the Toyoda family, of automobile fame, to change its corporate name to Toyota? According to one account, numerology seems to have been one factor. When the company began exporting its products it redesigned its logo emblem. In English, Toyoda and Toyota are both written with six letters; but in Japanese katakana, dropping the *nigori* (or *dakuten*) marks from トヨダ (Toyoda), thereby giving トヨタ (Toyota), enables it to be written in 八画 (*hakkaku*, eight brush strokes). And eight is regarded as the most auspicious number, indicating prosperity.

While nobody disputes that Japan indeed has lots of people named 佐藤 (Sato), 鈴木 (Suzuki), 高橋 (Takahashi), 田中 (Tanaka) and 渡辺 (Watanabe) — which are generally recognized as the country's five most common surnames — Japan's national census does not compile surnames, and in fact no 公式な名字ランキング (*koshiki-na myōji rankingu*, official ranking of surnames) exists. With the recent growth in use of mobile phones, moreover, individual listings in telephone directories — which were once the most effective means of compiling names — have sharply declined.

To complicate the matter further, when names are extremely similar but not exactly the same, how do you differentiate them?

For instance, all four of the names that follow — 滝沢、滝澤、瀧沢、瀧澤 — can be pronounced either Takizawa or Takisawa. The 滝 and 沢 are reformed characters; the 瀧 and 澤 are traditional. Between the four kanji combinations and two readings, we can get eight variations of what is essentially the same name, meaning “waterfall marsh.” Or, take the surname 小原, written with the characters meaning “small” and “field.” Ask a person so named how it's pronounced, and chances are roughly equal you'll be told Obara, Ohara or Kohara.