



Exploring the Image of Children in Japanese proverbs:

A Semantic Analysis

M.V. Lakshmi

Associate Professor,

Centre for Japanese Studies, School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies, Jawaharlal
Nehru University

mvlakshmi@gmail.com, mvlakshmi@mail.jnu.ac.in

Abstract:

In any language, linguistic expressions not just enrich the language but also act as invaluable resources to understand a country and its culture. Japanese language is rich in proverbs, idioms, and onomatopoeia, and all these give a character to the language unique to it while giving valuable insights into the culture and beliefs of Japan as well. In the case of proverbs which is the focus of the current study, they continue to exist in public memory despite many socio-economic and political changes which may have taken place over time, with some variations. This is evident from their continued usage, and presence in dictionaries and other media such as websites and books as well.

This paper attempts to specifically look at the motif of *ko* or *kodomo* (child or children) as portrayed in *Kotowaza* (proverbs) to understand how Japanese society views them or what qualities it associates with them. It also attempts to see how the society and parental roles are defined vis-à-vis children, attempting to understand Japanese society's understanding of children through this rich resource of linguistic expressions. The proverbs chosen are largely from dictionaries and websites which have enlisted proverbs which are relatively popular in recent times.

A detailed study of the proverbs under the two categories act as sources of age-old wisdom and in this case of the many ideas associated with children-an integral part of the society. The paper attempts to explore the idea of children vis-a vis the adult in Japanese society through these timeless linguistic expressions by carrying out a semantic analysis using Wolfgang Mieder's theory of paremiology, and studying prominent proverbs as they continue to exist in public memory through a sample of representative expressions.

Keywords: Children, *Kodomo*, Japanese linguistic expressions, Proverbs, *Kotowaza*

Introduction:

Language and Linguistic expressions have been known as important means to gain insight into a culture and its people. Words, expressions, idioms, and proverbs are rich sources that act like windows that help peek into the conventions, traditions, thinking and psyche of a culture and country. Japan and Japanese language too have a rich repertoire of Japanese proverbs on a variety of subjects. When one opens a dictionary of *Kotowaza* (Proverbs) in Japanese, many of the dictionaries are alphabetically arranged while others may be arranged thematically. The online resources that can be accessed also abound since the usage of internet has spread.



A knowledge of proverbs in any language is a possible indicator of proficiency in the language and knowledge of a country thereby, since it alludes to the culture of a people. The study of proverbs is known as *paremiology*, referring to a subset of expressions which are prevalent across time; and are powerful tools to convey meaning about a people and society. Proverbs mirror society's multiple facets, strengths, peculiarities and unique characteristics while at the same time giving valuable vision into the thinking and psyche of a country's people -in this case Japan.

Hypothesis:

The current paper hypothesises that proverbs are rich sources from which one can understand a culture and its people and are invaluable resources to understand a country and its culture from the perspective of traditional wisdom. In the case of Japanese proverbs, the paper surmises that an analytical study of selected proverbs would illustrate the perception of children in Japan, thereby providing an idea of how children were perceived across time.

Before the onset of the Modern Period (1868 onwards), the concept of *Jido* (child) was still not fully formed in Japan, and children were largely seen as small adults whether in society or literature. It is only after the Meiji period and the onset of the idea of child as *doushin* (innocent at heart) in the modern period. (Shin, 2009), that the concept of child or children as an independent being, emerged in Japan. As a result of this, children were recognised as an entity separate from an adult. This can be understood from the fact that literature was in the form of moralistic folktales of Japan promoting the concept of *Kanzenchoaku* (Good wins over evil) till then in the Tokugawa period. The paper would examine the conventional tropes associated with the images of child or children in Japan through a study of proverbs.

Objective:

The objective of this paper is to explore how Japanese proverbs construe the idea of 'Child' or 'Children' and what qualities are associated with children. The paper aims to explore how Japanese society perceives Children and what image of children it conventionally holds which is propagated through them. What does the child symbolise in these proverbs, is the question that the paper explores. In the process, it aims to throw light on characteristics that are identified with children, and secondly of the parental and societal role in the lives of children.

Scope of Study:

The present paper restricts itself to analysing Japanese proverbs which have a reference to *ko/kodomo* (child or children) and understanding their meaning with the intent to understand the *Kodomo-Zo* (Image or perception of children) as traditionally propagated in Japan. The sources of these proverbs are largely paper dictionaries and online dictionaries which have listed proverbs alphabetically from where the author has selected proverbs that fall under the purview of study.

The paper classifies proverbs with child or children (*Ko* or *kodomo*) mentioned in them, into two main categories for the purpose of analysis namely,

- i) Proverbs that describe children's character
- ii) Proverbs that allude to parents or others in society vis-à-vis children.

This classification has been made with the intent of understanding values that are associated with children in the first category and in the second category of attempting to understanding society's expectations and ideas associated with children, by their primary caregivers i.e. their parents.

The limitation of the paper is to restrict itself to *Kotowaza* (proverbs) and exclude other linguistic expressions such as *Kanyoku* (Idioms) and *Hyogen* (expressions) to highlight the conventional views on children that have been passed on over generations through proverbs. Furthermore, the author is cognisant of the fact that since all proverbs mentioned in dictionaries may not necessarily be used in everyday parlance with similar incidence, the paper does not claim to be an exhaustive study in giving a realistic reflection of what current society may think of children through proverbial expressions.

In Japanese language the reference to the word child can be made through many words such as *ko*, *kodomo*, *jido*, *shoni*, *yoji*. However, the word *ko* or *kodomo* appear in a good number of proverbs and such proverbs have been selected for the purpose of analysis. Since the term *ko* or *kodomo* is gender neutral and there are many proverbs that include these words, an analysis of these, would provide a comprehensive image of child or children that conventionally existed in Japan. *Musume* (daughter), *musuko* (son) are words using which some proverbs exist, however the paper is not particularly looking at the gendered perspectives on children and has excluded them from the scope of study. The proverbs for analysis are chosen from a paper dictionary which enlists proverbs that are still actively used, or which are still known as old and significant. (Shin, 2009).

Theoretical underpinnings:

It would not be possible to analyse all existing proverbs which have mentioned the word *Kodomo* or *Ko* alluding to children. The paper aims to analyse proverbs for the image of child construed through them. The approach for analysing the various proverbs selected is analytical and qualitative in nature wherein the ideas associated with a child are analysed. The paper takes a qualitative semantic approach for the purpose of study. Usually, information that is contained in proverb collections include the literal translation, the implied meaning, enlisting of similar proverbs and provide etymological and historical data about a proverb of which the semantic meaning is analysed in this paper. (Kispal, 2014)

The process of analysis involves identifying themes associated with the child, and/or analysing what the child in a proverb may symbolise. In the process it attempts to answer the following research questions.

- a. Are there any characteristics which are typical or recurring, when referring to children in proverbs?
- b. What is the role of the caretaker (parent) or society when it comes to perception of children?

When approaching the study of proverbs, it is important to note that perhaps the most comprehensive framework that is available in the field of paremiology is the one propounded by Mieder. Mieder approaches the subject of proverbs, by dividing them into collection and study. (Mieder). The emphasis laid in his theory is in the significance of proverbs in a context which may typically be defined as “proverbs in usage”, within a specific culture, historical period, customs or society. Since the study of Japanese proverbs in this paper is rooted in the culture of the country and focusses on the conventional wisdom of Japanese people as conveyed through linguistic expressions, it is appropriate to apply Mieder’s theory for the current study by first collecting proverbs about a theme -Child or children in this case and then studying them in the context of Japanese society. What remains unaddressed and a limitation in this study is the study of proverbs in use outside the dictionary such as literature, media, etc.

The selected *Paremiās* (in this case proverbs) are analysed typologically studying them as linguacultural units to comprehend the meaning of what the motif of child or children connote and then delineate these, based on dictionary definitions of the expressions. This is followed by analysing the context of usage with respect to Japanese culture and society, as expressions of age-old wisdom.

The interdisciplinarity of the approach is valuable to the study of proverbs as expressions of not just language alone but also as a commentary on culture, custom, beliefs and society of Japan as encompassed in them. What follows is an analysis of proverbs about Children in Japanese language and what they signify or connote for the Japanese people, in other words a semantic analysis of Japanese proverbs in the context of Japanese society. The work aims to understand how these linguistic expressions are invaluable tools to gain an understanding of Japan's society and psyche especially about children. The significance of this perspective and theory cannot be overemphasised since it provides a window into the culture and society of Japan.

What follows in an analysis of proverbs as classified into two groups as stated above with their literal meaning in the dictionary while shedding light on similar or contradictory proverbs at times which highlight the significance of context in the study of proverbs.

Children or *Kodomo/Ko* as seen in Japanese Proverbs:

This section of the paper discusses Japanese proverbs which highlight characteristics associated with children in Japan. While children in any society are very highly valued, the proverbs below attempt to shed light on the idea of what a child is conventionally thought of in Japanese society, by emphasising on various facets associated with them and examining what they symbolise or signify for the Japanese people.

“Meaning is the most important information on understanding proverbs.” (Kispal 233). Proverbs can usually be classified into idiomatic and non-idiomatic proverbs. Even though proverbs which are classified as idiomatic are not easy to decipher it is the abstract meaning of proverbs which is important semantic information to be codified. (p 233)

Even though there is criticism about the relevance of proverbs with the passage of time, the paper underlines the significance of conventional tropes and possible ideas of a child as they exist in Japanese society through a study of proverbs about children.

As the proverb below illustrates, children are one of the most precious treasures that a person can have.

Kodomo ni masaru Takara nashi (Tokita, 2000 p 251)

This proverb means that there is no treasure more valuable than having a child, thereby explaining how children are the most valuable treasure anyone can possess, indicating the value that a child has in a person's life. In a similar vein the following proverb reaffirms their value in a person's life.

Motsubeki monowa ko, Motsubeki monowa kane to ko (p 593)

like the previous proverb means, if there is any treasure worth possessing then it is children, or as the second proverb states, if there is anything that is worth having then it is money and children. In other words, the proverb reaffirms the value that children bring to a person's life.



To further build on the perception of a society that compares children to treasures is another proverb as follows. *Nai kodewa Nakarenu* which amounts to saying that one cannot cry for a child one does not have. The proverb means that while having children has its own sets of troubles associated with them, it is still better to have children and undergo those trials, underlining the significance of children and their presence in the lives of parents.

Moto mo ko mo ushinau (p 596)

Here the proverb indicates how to lose everything without any sign. Here *ko* is a reference to profit and indicates how not just the initial investment but everything else is completely lost.

Nanasai made wa Kami no Uchi (p 433)

The proverb means that children are part of God till they turn seven. It explains how children are innocent till they turn seven years of age. *Kami* is God or a reference to the divine, and young children are manifestations of God himself.

In today's Japanese society when a declining population of the country is a cause for economic problems and of a changing demographic of the country, the abovementioned proverbs underline the significance of children in society.

When talking about children, the one proverb which is popular and has a universal appeal is as follows.

Nikumarekko Yoni Habakaru (p 442)

The literal meaning of the proverb is a child who is hated by others goes on to do well later in the world. The proverb illustrates how a child who is disliked when young, grows up to succeed in the world. It shows how a person who undergoes hardships early on in life, builds character to face the world and its challenges later and is likely to succeed later in life.

Naku ko to jito niwa katenu (p 427)

In this proverb the one weapon that children use, i.e. tears are described and compared to *Jito* a land steward who is in a position of power, to explain one cannot win against a crying child, comparing him to a person in a position of strength or power. Thereby for children it is this weapon that characterises their responses which when used can manipulate an adult as well. The slight exaggeration in comparing the crying of a child to a weapon is symbolic of how the wordplay has been used to convey the intended meaning.

A similar proverb which describes a crying child is given below.

Naku ko mo damaru (p 429)

meaning even a crying child would become quiet (when intimidated). This is an example of a crying child who is crying to have their way but will calm down or quieten when they sense someone more powerful than themselves. Since crying is an act often associated with young children there are many proverbs which highlight the act of crying in various situations with respect to them.

There are proverbs such as the one below which reaffirm the thinking about a child and a person's character.



Mitsugo no Tamashii hyakumade (p 570)

is a proverb that suggests that whatever character a person possesses as a child, is the one that stays unchanged for life, to put it literally till he turns hundred years of age. The proverb in other words hints at the essential nature of children. The expressions emphasises the significance of nurturing a child in the early years since these formative years define their future as well.

Naku komo Me wo miru (p 429)

The above proverb suggests how even a crying child looks at a person's eyes. This is to imply that even a person at a relatively disadvantageous position is aware of his circumstances and the surroundings he or she may be in. The child has been used to symbolise a person at large. The in a sense seems to portray child not as just naïve creatures but one who are discerning of their environment and surroundings, indicating the presence of an innate intelligence in them as well.

Besides proverbs that describe children and their characteristic behaviour, there are proverbs that can be read as commentary on parents and their roles in the lives of children.

Given below are proverbs which emphasise this bond of parents with their children and its many nuances and aspects therein.

Kodomo sukiwa Kodomo ga shiru (p250)

The abovesaid proverb highlights another aspect of what characterises children i.e. their intuitive sense of knowing who is affectionate towards them and get drawn to them instinctively. It is difficult to fool a child's instinct since they are very intuitive, and their gut feel is not influenced by societal expectations.

Kodomowa Otona no Kagami (p252)

Children are a mirror (reflection) of their parents. The proverb is self-explanatory wherein it states how a child takes after his or her parents and resembles them. So how a child behaves as he grows up is very much a reflection of his or her parents' behaviour. The proverb puts on the onus of nurturing and influencing the child on the parent.

A similar proverb would be *Kodomowa Oya no senaka wo mite sodatsu* (p252) which means that children see their parents and grow up imitating them. This is similar in meaning laying the onus of behaviour first on the parents so that the children have a good role model to follow. It is considered to have evolved under the influence of many social and political changes and also the proliferation of media in our lives. There are some variations to the proverb which exist.

Kodomowa Kaze no ko (p 252)

This proverb indicates that children are built to face all weather conditions whether cold or hot. In fact, this is what helps them to be resilient and face all odds once they grow up as well. It describes the intrinsic character of all children at large, also indirectly telling parents to not pamper them too much.

While many proverbs about children, value the significance of children and characteristics associated with them, the following proverb connects children to trouble.

Neta ko wo Okosu (p 461)

This is a proverb that means waking up a sleeping child where a sleeping child is symbolic of trouble that is lying dormant. So, waking a sleeping child would amount to raking up old issues which may have resolved themselves. In this proverb a child is synonymous with trouble.

The above discussion highlights how adults think of children and about their character whether it be associated with one who braves difficulties or is disliked. At the same time there is a sense that children are pure at heart which is revealed through some proverbs above, which highlight how the gut feel of a child is true. Most characteristics give an understanding of how children are or should be, with a few indicating that they may not be always innocent or naïve but can be discerning or even sources of trouble as well.

Having discussed proverbs that delineate the character of children in proverbs, what follows are proverbs where the role of the parent or caretaker is defined.

Proverbs about Parent- child relationship:

One of the most significant adults who exists in a child's world is one who is closest to him and helps to rear and nurture him- a parent. This role of the parent is defined in the proverbs analysed below thereby underlining the significance of the parent child relationship and what it entails for the parent in a relationship with a child.

Ko no Kokoro oya shirazu (p 253)

The proverb describes how even though a parent is closest to his child, he or she is unable to comprehend the child's heart. It implies that the child's heart is not as simple to understand as it may seem even to the closest people in his life i.e. his or her own parents.

Interestingly there is a slightly contradictory proverb i.e.

Ko wo miru koto oyani shikazu (<https://proverb-encyclopedia.com/kowomirukotooyanishikazu/>)

This proverb means that it's a parent who understands a child emphasising the very close bond that the two share.

These proverbs illustrate that the proverbs that use the word *Ko* or *kodomo* in Japanese are a commentary on society or the parent and not just the child alone.

Kowa sangai no kubikaze (p253)

This proverb talks about how children limit a parent's freedom and bring with them many restrictions on the lives of the parent. This means that once a child is born, he takes over the life of a parent which completely revolves around them from thereon influencing all choices that a parent makes prioritising the child. It is a realistic description of the life of a parent.

Ko yue no yami ni mayou (p256)

The proverb means one loses one's way due to a child. The proverb illustrates how a parent loses rationality and power of thinking in his overwhelming love and affection for his child. While recognising the strong bond between a parent and a child, it also highlights how children are a parents' weakness.

The next proverb gives parenting advice as to how children should be reared, and nurtured.

Mitsu shikatte itutsu home, nanatsu oshiete ko wa sodatsu (p570)

If taken literally the proverb means, scold a child 3 times, praise him 5 times, and teach 7 times to bring him up. This proverb explains how a parent should bring up a child by reprimanding or scolding him a little, praising him more and teaching him. It acknowledges the fact that children often cause parents to lose their patience but that it is not right to always scold or criticize them but to nurture them for them to grow well. The proverb offers parental advice which may well be true in the current times as well.

Kodomo Shikaruna Kita Michija, Rojin warauna iku michija (p250)

In a similar vein, the above proverb mentions how one should not take the mischief of a child too seriously and reprimand them too much, similar to how one must not laugh at an old person. The proverb implies that since people behave as per their age, it is not appropriate to reprimand them for behaviour that is natural to them, whether it is a young child or an old person.

Kawaii ko ni tabiwo saseyo (p183)

If you have a child, make him travel. This proverb implies that if one really loves a child, one should not pamper them much and should make them experience troubles and travails to strengthen their character and build resilience. The traditional idea of not pampering children but making them leave the house and exploring and discovering the world by themselves is emphasised here.

Kodomo no kenka Oya Kamawazu (p251)

Further talking about a parent's role in their child's life, this proverb talks about appropriate behaviour of adults (parents in this case) when dealing with conflict amongst children. It says that it is not desirable for adults (parents) to intervene in a fight amongst children. This is because resolving such fights amongst themselves is how they learn the ways of the world and a parental intervention takes away this opportunity from them, which is an essential part of growing up. In a way it adds onto the meaning of the previous proverb discussed where letting the child discover and deal with problems in the world is considered better than the over indulgence of the parent in their lives.

Nusubito wo toraete mireba wagako nari (p453)

This proverb illustrates how upon catching the thief it turned out to be one's child, thereby cautioning that one should be careful and vigilant of even close people around oneself, since even they may turn out to be the culprit or troublemakers. The child is again a symbol of someone close who can pose potential danger or trouble in other words. The proverb highlights that the parent should possibly be aware of the possibility of that one's own child may not always be innocent as they may tend to believe.

The above-mentioned proverbs are largely those which are found in dictionaries and have lived on in the memories of people over ages and continued to be listed in dictionaries of proverbs or websites as discussed earlier. Even though children universally are valued and nurtured for their innocence, and bond with parents, the proverbs discussed in this paper, illustrate as to how analysing a selection of proverbs about children, provide invaluable insights into the way of thinking of a society – in this case Japan, with respect to children. What follows are the main findings of this study and its conclusions.



Conclusion:

The paper analysed representative proverbs about Children or child through proverbs found in prominent dictionaries and websites of Japanese language by delineating their meaning and implication. Having analysed the proverbs under two major categories, where the first category discusses the character of children or facets of their character while the second category alludes more to the parent-child relationship or to societal expectations or wisdom for adults using children as symbols of various things.

In the first category of proverbs discussed, Children are synonymous with being a treasure to be valued and are even compared to the divine when they are young. A semantic analysis of the proverbs chosen for the purpose of study have shown what children symbolise. Thereafter, some of their characteristics are revealed such as their intuitive nature, while at the same time being compared to a force to reckon with. It is interesting how the proverbs associate children not only with innocence or naivete, as one would have expected but also with strength or trouble at times. Moreover, they are compared to the parent figures whom they idolise and mimic as well.

The role of adults who closely associate with children in caregiving and nurturing roles, and exert a considerable influence on the former is acknowledged in the second set of proverbs analysed. The proverbs classified under the second category reveal as much about the adults as about children, such as how sometimes even a parent cannot understand their child. There are proverbs that indicate how children restrict the freedom of a parent even though they are irrefutably invaluable. There is parenting advice which is given through some proverbs such as not to interfere when two children are fighting or letting a young child travel to gain experiences and grow.

An important finding of this research is how an analysis of prominent proverbs associated with children provides interesting and at times unexpected aspects of how Japanese people conventionally perceive children and society with which the child interacts. Such traditional wisdom of which proverbs are a rich source are helpful to gain insights into the psyche of a country and its people as revealed through this paper.

The analysis of proverbs while shedding light on traditional roles and ideas about children, have a timelessness about them, making them relatable even in contemporary times. The timelessness of the wisdom they impart is the reason they continue to be used even today. The notable change in perception of children, and their upbringing, with the onset of modernisation in Japan 1868 onwards, have coexisted with conventional and long held perceptions about children as revealed through the Japanese proverbs discussed in this paper. This study of proverbs is relevant in understanding the ever-evolving psyche of a people - the Japanese with respect to their understanding of children and parents in Japanese society which have withstood the vagaries of time and socio cultural-change.

In the current context of declining birth rate of children, the importance of revisiting the idea of child or children as it existed in Japanese society conventionally, cannot be reiterated enough. The study underlines how proverbs act as rich cultural sources, and semantic analyses of proverbs is a step towards highlighting the child as an important component of society, and to the many things he/she signifies whether it be value in terms of being equated with something profitable, or acknowledging the troubles associated with child rearing or children at large.



At the same time a parent's integral role in child rearing as the second category of proverbs illustrate, are a commentary on what roles and attitudes are desirable in a parent or society when rearing or dealing with children.

The current research has potential to be explored from a comparative perspective in the future, by comparing Japanese proverbs about children with those in other countries such as India; and exploring how the motif of child or *kodomo* may be reflected from a comparative perspective. The interdisciplinarity as propounded by Mieder of exploring the theme of proverbs from varied perspectives such as those in language and in literature would provide a better understanding of the theme. What one would have to guard against however is using proverbs to stereotype a people or culture and rather utilise them as resources to understand the psyche behind their formulation and usage. With the widespread use of multimedia, it would be interesting to study proverbs in the current world of social media, and advertisements as well, which would help throw light on the fact as to which proverbs continue to live on in public memory even today while exploring any possible change in the semantics of these expressions over time.

References:

- Kispal, Tamas. Paremiology Proverb collections in Hrisztalina Hrisztova-Gotthardt. & Melita Aleksa Varga (eds.) (2014) in Introduction to *paremiology: a comprehensive guide to proverb studies*, p 229-241, De Gruyter Open, Berlin.
- Masamizu Tokita (2000). Iwanami Kotowaza Jiten, Iwanami Shoten, Japan.
- Mieder, Wolfgang (2004). Proverbs: A Handbook, Greenwood Press, London.
- Mieder Wolfgang, Modern Paremiology in Retrospect and Prospect, <http://cvc.cervantes.es>
- Shin, Torikoe. (Editor) (2009). *Hajimete Manabu Nihon Jidobungakushi*, Minerva Shobo, Japan
- Yoshiyasu Daigo, (1965). *Shinsetsu Kotowaza Jiten*, Tokyo Do Shuppan, Tokyo