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**Plurality and Indefiniteness in Personal Expression:
Focusing on the Overuse and Misuse of *hitobito*
by Learners of Japanese**

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This study focuses on the overuse and misuse of the word *hitobito* ('people', a reduplicated form of *hito* 'person') by learners of Japanese (non-native speakers: NNS). Based on a corpus analysis the study finds that *hitobito* denotes a group of people of indefinite number each possessing individuality, and characterized by otherness, that is, excluding the speaker. In Japanese, there is no grammatical marking for singular or plural, so plural expressions have semantic weight beyond that of typical grammatical plurality, especially in personal expressions, where they reflect the speaker's mental attitude toward the persons referred to, and the speaker's perception of the situation.

The following three NNS utterance examples taken from I-JAS (International Corpus of Japanese as a Second Language) all use *hitobito* to refer to multiple people, and yet the usage in each case seems unnatural.

(1) (When asked if the train was crowded)

Mada ammari, hitobito ga imasen deshita. [HHG37]

There weren't many people yet.

(2) (Explanation of the speaker's method of learning Japanese)

Mō, maishū ni, sankai, nihonjin no tomodachi to atte, hanashitari kissaten e ittari shimasu, issho ni nihongo to doitsugo, mō hitobito mo eigo o benkyō shimasu. [GAT21]

Umm, every week two or three times [I] meet Japanese friends, and [we] talk or go to coffee shops, together [we study] Japanese and German, umm [some] people study English.

(3) (Comparing Moscow with Kemerovo, the speaker's hometown in Siberia)

Kemmero ni mo <warai> hitobito ga zutto, hataraitte imasu demo, aa, atashitachi, a, atashitachi no hitobito wa, aa, okanemochi ja nai, aan, Mosukuwa ni, hitobito wa, aa,

okane ga zutto hoshii, honto ni hoshii desu. [RRS41]

In Kemerovo, people are always working <laughs>, but uh, we, uh, our people, uh, are not rich, uh, in Moscow, people, umm, want money all the time, really want it.

When we analyze examples of misuse by learners, we find that there are many cases where *hitobito* is used when *hito* should be used, as in (1). The cause seems to be that learners may have difficulty understanding that Japanese does not grammatically enforce a clear distinction between singular and plural, and that they can easily come to the mistaken impression that reduplicated noun forms such as *hitobito* merely express plurality.

Secondly, there are many cases where the word *hitobito* is misused to refer to identifiable people; for example, in (2) the speaker uses the word *hitobito* to refer to people with whom they are actually involved, a group of friends studying foreign languages together, which apparently produces the unnaturalness of this usage.

Finally, there were several clear cases of misuse in which the speaker used *hitobito* to refer to a group in which they were included. In (3) the speaker is comparing people in Moscow and Kemerovo, the speaker's hometown. The use of *hitobito* here to refer to people in Moscow is unproblematic, since this group does not include the speaker, but its use to refer to people in Kemerovo, which includes the speaker, is somehow unnatural. This is because *hitobito* ordinarily is used to refer to groups of people other than the speaker.

Using the three examples of misuse noted above as indicators, I would like to discuss the main points below regarding "indefinite number possessing individuality" and "otherness", which are identified as characteristics of *hitobito* in this paper.

Indefinite number possessing individuality

Kunihiro (1980) argues that whereas in English the plural form simply expresses "more than one", in Japanese, which lacks grammatical marking for plural, nouns can generally express not only the singular but also the plural, and thus reduplicated forms such as *hitobito* do not merely indicate plurality, but also an indefinite number of entities that possess individuality. The term "indefinite number" here is in contrast to the plural form in English, which can be used both when a specific number of objects is specified and when the number is unspecified. In Japanese, on the other hand, reduplicated forms cannot be used in phrases such as *?sangen no ieie* 'three houses', in which the number is specified, but instead only occur in phrases such as *tōri ni sotta ieie* 'the houses lining the road' in which a vague notion of plurality is imparted. The reason why example (2) is odd seems to be that the group of students with which the speaker is involved is a concrete plural group of people which conflicts with the indefiniteness implied by *hitobito*.

In this connection the possession of individuality is also important, for, as Kunihiro remarks, the members of the group referred to are implied to all be different from one another. Indeed, one must keep in mind that reduplicated forms cannot be constructed from all nouns, but are limited to a select

group. For example, whereas *hitobito* ‘people’ is possible, *?inuinu* ‘dogs’ is not, and while *hanabana* ‘flowers’ is fine, *?kusagusa* ‘grasses, herbaceous plants’ is not. According to Matsumoto (2009), however, the judgement on which reduplicated forms are possible is a subjective one, so that if the speaker had a particularly strong interest in dogs or herbs, or if the individuality of the dogs or herbs were particularly salient, even such unusual forms as *inuinu* or *kusagusa* could be used. Another factor that comes into play is the perceived naturalness of the expressions in how they are pronounced or written. Nevertheless, the circumstances of the utterance and the strength of the speaker’s interest in the entities referred to may allow a certain degree of freedom in their use.

What these previous studies do make clear is that in Japanese reduplicated noun forms, which are lexically productive to a certain extent, do not constitute merely a plural form, but that their appropriateness is determined by the circumstances and context of the utterance, and by the subjective judgement of the speaker.

Otherness

Ordinarily, *hitobito* cannot be used when referring to a group of which the speaker is a member, as occurs in example (3), being used instead to denote a group external to the speaker. This restriction seems to result from the characteristic of otherness which is part of the meaning of *hitobito*. The noun *hito*, in addition to the basic meaning of *ningen* ‘human being’, also expresses a strong nuance of ‘other person’ as may be seen in proverbs such as *hito no furi mite waga furi naose* ‘observe other people’s behavior and correct your own’. In short, the form *hitobito* inherits the nuance of otherness from *hito*, so that even when it is used to make a statement about people in general, it is used objectively to describe a situation in which there is very little involvement by the speaker.

The form *hitotachi*, another plural expression based on *hito*, also cannot be used to refer to a group including the speaker, and thus includes the nuance of otherness. However, since *hitotachi* is almost always used with a limiting modifier, such as in *Hokkaidō no hitotachi* ‘the people of Hokkaido’, the combined expression denotes a more concrete referent than *hitobito*. Furthermore, the plural suffix *-tachi* appears with high frequency in everyday conversations, and *hitotachi* as well is more widely used in conversational Japanese, while the use of *hitobito* entails a stronger psychological detachment from the situation being described, and has a formal, literary quality.

So in summary, based on considerations of the two qualities of *hitobito* discussed above, the word *hitobito* has the nuances of “indefinite number possessing individuality” and “otherness” in addition to mere plurality. However, situations in which this word can express these nuances, that is, situations in which a vaguely defined group of people is perceived to consist of distinct individuals, are rather limited, so that in most cases the use of alternative expressions is preferred. The words *hito* and *ningen*, which can refer to either single or plural individuals, are equally usable in conversation and written Japanese, and the *hitotachi*, the close synonym of *hitobito*, is also easier to use

appropriately than *hitobito*. This is the reason *hitobito* appears with low frequency in the utterances of native speakers. We may surmise, on the other hand, that the reason NNS overuse and misuse *hitobito* is that the expressions corresponding to *hitobito* in their mother tongues have a broader applicability.

Kudō (2005) compares the concept of number in Japanese with that of Indo-European languages, and comes up with the interesting concept of “subjective plural”. He posits that this does not express an increase of quantity, but rather an amplification of the speaker’s affect, and that the nuance of plural expressions in Japanese tends to be close to this subjective quality. As this study has made clear, the use of *hitobito* has a profound relation to how the speaker perceives the referent or situation, in such terms as “indefinite number possessing individuality” and “otherness”. Based on this, I believe that what is important in Japanese language education is to facilitate an awareness of the peculiarity of the concept of number in Japanese, especially in connection with the grammatical category of person.

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