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Boy or Girl? The Rise of Non-Gender-Specific Names in Japan

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ABSTRACT
One current issue concerning Japanese given names is the increasing number of names lacking gender-distinctive features in their graphic and/or phonological form. Unlike in the past, recently even some of the most popular names are given to both boys and girls. This paper explores this phenomenon in the context of the changes in name selection in the last several decades, analyzing names given to 4,567 boys and 4,806 girls born 2008–2016. Comparing these two name sets from the point of view of their orthography, length, structure, and kanji selection brought forth the main distinctive features between current male and female names. A further analysis revealed some features common to the gender-neutral names, and various aspects related to losing gender distinction. The explanations of the parents’ reasons for selecting the particular name, included in the corpus, provided some insight into why some parents select names that do not indicate the gender of their child.

KEYWORDS: name selection, Japanese given names, non-gender-specific names, gender-neutral names

1. Introduction
In contemporary Japan, traditional gender differences have been fading from various areas, including language, fashion, self-image, careers and life goals, and this convergence of the male and female worlds can be seen in given names as well. Current name selection has been greatly influenced by the accelerating changes of the second half of the twentieth century, especially its last two decades. These include changes in external influences (sources of inspiration, the people with whom parents consult their ideas, etc.), changes in the method of and the criteria for name selection (now with an emphasis on the sound and the overall image of the name rather than primarily on the meaning of the kanji used), and also changes in the way parents perceive their children (now with an emphasis on the individual qualities and uniqueness of their child). Last but not least is the increasing tendency to select a name based on the child’s place in the family rather than in respect to the child’s future social roles (e.g., Kobayashi 2009, Nakaya 2012, Barešová 2016).
In the quest for expressing their child’s special individuality, recent generations of parents have been investing a great deal of time and effort into name selection, the process of which is often quite elaborate, an interplay involving phonological, semantic and visual dimensions. The resultant name is often a unique choice, which would only fit that particular child, reflecting the time of birth or expressing the parents’ aspirations for their child, and in numerology calculated in combination with the surname to bring fortune and happiness.

The above-mentioned priorities increasingly eclipse the traditional methods of expressing gender and gender roles. As a result, a growing number of currently bestowed names have no gender-distinctive features, and sometimes even utilize kanji whose meanings are usually associated with the opposite sex. While in the past most names could be clearly identified as male or female, an increasing number of currently bestowed names are ambiguous or even counterintuitive, as in the following example:

“Ever since junior high my husband had wanted to name his child, whether a boy or a girl, Runa (‘luna’), and our son became Runa the very moment we found out I was pregnant. […] The kanji we chose, 月華 (‘moon’ + ‘flower’), are pretty, and although there is nothing like a moon flower, we included through this image a wish for our son to grow up to be a boy who has dreams as big as flowers blooming on the Moon.”

Runa’s mother (2009)

The name Luna (Runa in Japanese) is of Latin origin; according to Roman mythology Luna was the goddess of the Moon. This name has been growing in popularity not only in Japan, but also in the US and Europe, probably influenced by the Harry Potter character Luna Lovegood, and by the Sailor Moon franchise character Runa. Consequently, the name the parents chose for their son is generally perceived as a female name, and the chosen kanji even strengthen this perception.

Such names are becoming something of a cultural phenomenon, which is attracting increasing curiosity. What is the nature and origins of such names? Do they share any common features or distinctive characteristics? What motivates parents to give such names to their children? Answers to such questions were sought by examining a corpus of recently bestowed

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1 The example comes from the corpus described in Section 4: Gender-specific features of currently bestowed names.
names from the point of view of gender distinction. This paper presents the findings of the analysis of these names (and the reasons for their selection), providing some insight into this emerging trend.

2. Formal Limitations to Japanese Given Names
In many countries, most names clearly indicate gender, and gender-neutral names (also called androgy nous or unisex names) are an exception (e.g., the Czech Republic and many other European countries), where giving a boy a girl’s name or vice versa is sometimes even prevented by law (e.g., Willson 2009, Knappová 2017). On the other hand, there are countries in which gender-neutral names are quite common and are recently enjoying growing popularity (e.g., Britain and the USA).

In Japan, there are no limitations to name selection in terms of gender indication. The only limitations concern the orthography. A Japanese given name can be written in *kanji*, *kana*, or some combination of the two, but cannot include letters from the Roman alphabet or Arabic numerals. The Chinese characters permitted for use in names are regulated, and it is not possible to register a name written in other than permitted characters. Currently, names can include the 2,136 *Jōyō kanji* (lit. Chinese characters for common use) and the additional 863 *Jinmeiyō kanji*, a specific list of additional characters which can also be used in names.

Although Japanese given names are not required to indicate gender, in the past it was usually possible to distinguish males and females by their name (Jugaku 1979: 123), although this does not mean that there were no names given to both boys and girls. There are names bestowed upon both men and women, but usually not within the same period. In other words, in each previous period there was usually a distinction between male and female names (ibid.).

3. Gender-Specific Features of Names in the 20th Century
This section briefly summarizes the most typical features of male and female names prevalent for most of the 20th century, until in the 1970s various new types of names started to emerge, causing the current blurring of gender in names, among other phenomena.

Starting with the orthography, names written in *kana* or combining *kana* and *kanji* were typically feminine (e.g., ハナ Hana, はな Hana, はな子 Hanako). On the other hand, single-kanji names were typically masculine (e.g., 昇 Noboru, 茂 Shigeru, 清 Kiyoshi).

Male and female names were somewhat distinctive also in their phonological length and structure. Male names usually varied between
three to six morae\(^2\), but female names were two or three-mora long. Thus, four, five, and six-mora names (e.g., *Hideyoshi, Taketarō, Seiichirō*) were male names, while two-mora names (e.g., *Hide, Take, Sei*) were more often female names.

But even with the same phonological length and number of *kanji*, male and female names could be distinguished from each other, usually by a gender-specific end *kanji*, with the corresponding end syllable(s)\(^3\). For instance, the male name 春雄 *Haruo* and the female name 春子 *Haruko* consist of the same core *kanji*, 春 ‘spring’, but each is complemented with a different end *kanji* to give the name its final form, both graphic and phonological, and also to make it gender specific.

The end *kanji* used in male names include: *kanji* with the meaning ‘man’ (夫, 男, 雄, 郎 /lo\(^4\)/; 彦 /hiko/), *kanji* signifying the order of birth (e.g., 一 /ichi/; 二, 次 /ji/; 三 /zō/), and various other male name end *kanji* (e.g., 平 /hei/; 人 /(hi)to/; 治, 司 /ji/; 樹, 録, 紀, 基, 規 /ki/; 生 /lo/; 志, 司, 史, 士 /shi/; 介, 輔 /suke/; 也, 弓, 弥, 哉 /ya/).

The typical end *kanji* and gender marker of female names was 子 /ko/, which, at the height of its popularity in the 1940s, was used in eight out of ten female names (Sakuma 1969: 98). Another popular end *kanji*, which became widespread in female names in the 1960s, is 美 /mi/. There are a number of other end *kanji* that were used in female names, for example, 恵, 江, 枝, 榮 /e/; 穂, 保 /ho/; 香, 佳 /kal/; 乃 /no/; 利, 里, 理 /ri/ and 代 /yo/.

For most of the twentieth century, the majority of Japanese given names followed structural patterns typical for the male and female names of that particular period. The gradual shift from name selection based on meaning or preference for some particular *kanji* to name selection based on the sound and overall image of the name, combined with the growing emphasis on individuality and uniqueness, caused the formerly popular name patterns to be increasingly replaced as new names emerged, creating great diversity in structure and sound. Due to these changes, some of the name features that were gender-specific ceased to be used in names (e.g., typical end *kanji*, such as the feminine 子) or became no longer gender specific (e.g., single-*kanji* names).

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\(^2\) Two-mora names utilizing the Sino-Japanese reading of one *kanji* were also used, but these only became more frequent after WWII.

\(^3\) Unlike when considering the length of names, here it is more useful to consider syllables than morae.

\(^4\) 郎 is also read as /rō/. 

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29
4. Gender-Specific Features of Currently Bestowed Names

The corpus used for the present study contains data collected over the course of several years from the website Bebī karendā [Baby Calendar]. Each of the 9,373 entries of names of children born 2008–2016 (4,567 male and 4,806 female names) contains the graphic and phonological form of the name, the year of birth and gender of the child, and also includes a short explanation (nazuke episōdo) of the parents’ motivation for selecting the particular name, as well as their interpretation of its meaning, the main criteria for their selection, and so forth.

Orthography

The overwhelming majority of currently bestowed names, both male and female, are written in kanji, as shown in Table 1. Unlike kana, kanji make it possible to convey various meanings, create interesting images, and express desired aspirations and hopes for the child’s future. Hiragana, which has been traditionally considered feminine, still appears mainly in female names, mostly in a limited number of popular names, while male names written in hiragana are very rare. Some of them, such as けんぞう Kenzō, だいご Daigo and うえりゃむ Weryamu (William), sound like male names; however, いと Ito, うた Uta, しん Shin or こはち Kohachi resemble names bestowed on females more than a century ago. But despite its minor occurrence in male names, hiragana can still be considered a feminine feature.

The use of katakana is marginal for either gender, which can be at least partially attributed to the above reasons.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>kanji</th>
<th>hiragana</th>
<th>katakana</th>
<th>hiragana + kanji</th>
<th>katakana + kanji</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>99.63 %</td>
<td>0.22 %</td>
<td>0.09 %</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>0.07 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>93.11 %</td>
<td>6.26 %</td>
<td>0.23 %</td>
<td>0.35 %</td>
<td>0.04 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: The distribution of types of orthography in the corpus

Phonological Length

As Table 2 shows, more than two thirds of the male names are three-mora long. Two and four-mora names are equally frequent, with 14 percent each. A small portion of the names have five or six morae. The majority of

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female names are also three-mora long. Almost all the other female names have two morae, except for an insignificant number of four-mora names.

It can be concluded that a bearer of a five or six-mora name can be quite safely considered male, and the gender of a four-mora name can be usually inferred correctly as well. Female four-mora names are very rare and most of them have some typically feminine features. For example, the corpus names *Sakurako*, *Akariko*, *Yukariko*, *Kaoruko* and *Mashiroko* end in the feminine /ko/, *Marumika* ends in the feminine /ka/, *Himawari* means ‘sunflower’ and is typically used as a female name, and *Aimi* is a foreign female name. *Jūnon* resembles *Kanon*, which is now quite fashionable among female names.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>male</th>
<th>Female</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 morae</td>
<td>14.06 %</td>
<td>38.14 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 morae</td>
<td>67.40 %</td>
<td>61.51 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 morae</td>
<td>14.54 %</td>
<td>0.35 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 morae</td>
<td>3.55 %</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 morae</td>
<td>0.46 %</td>
<td>-</td>
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</table>

Table 2: Phonological length of male and female names in the corpus

*End Syllables and End Kanji*

Parental desire for a unique name has led to the rise of the so-called *ateji* type names (Barešová 2016). The selection process of such a name usually starts with a desired phonological form (often foreign-sounding), to which *kanji* are assigned based either on phonological or semantic relationship. This is one reason why currently bestowed names display such a great variety of end syllables as well as end *kanji*.

The most frequent end syllables in either male or female names are gender-specific, with the exception of /ki/, which very frequently appears in both male and female names. The currently most frequent masculine end syllables are /to/ (e.g., *Haruto*, *Kaito*, *Minato*, *Yamato*, *Yūto*), /ta/ (e.g., *Haruta*, *Kōta*, *Shōta*, *Sōta*, *Yūta*) and /ma/ (e.g., *Haruma*, *Kazuma*, *Ryūma*, *Sōma*, *Yūma*). Other strongly masculine end syllables, some traditional and some recent, and with varying frequency of occurrence, include: /dai/, /gal/, /ei/ /hei/ (/pei/), /kei/, /sei/, /jī/, /shi/, /suke/, /go/ and /rō/. The most frequent feminine end syllables are /na/ (e.g., *Hina*, *Kokona*, *Mana*, *Rina*, *Yuna*) and /ka/ (e.g., *Honoka*, *Ichika*, *Momoka*, *Yuika*, *Yūka*). Other strongly feminine syllables used in currently bestowed names include /el/, /nel/, /ho/, /kō/, /no/ and /yū/.
However, at the same time there is a number of end syllables that occur in both sets of names, although most of these are still significantly more common for one gender than the other (in some cases limited to a few popular names), with the exception of /ki/.

The graphic representations of individual end syllables also display a great variety. For example, the masculine /to/ is represented by over 40 different kanji in the corpus, although the three most frequent ones,斗,人, and 翔, make up over 65% and are gender-specific. Similarly, the feminine /na/ is written with over 30 different kanji, but the two most frequent ones, 菜 and 奈, account for almost 60% of all occurrences and are gender-specific as well.

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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31. 晴</td>
<td>32. 月</td>
<td>33. 葵</td>
<td>34. 登</td>
<td>35. 海</td>
<td>36. 貴</td>
<td>37. 夢</td>
<td>38. 磨</td>
<td>39. 一</td>
<td>40. 星</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>31. 心</td>
<td>32. 歩</td>
<td>33. 依</td>
<td>34. 緒</td>
<td>35. 良</td>
<td>36. 生</td>
<td>37. 一</td>
<td>38. 葵</td>
<td>39. 陽</td>
<td>40. 央</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41. 穂</td>
<td>42. 和</td>
<td>43. 南</td>
<td>44. 紗</td>
<td>45. 来</td>
<td>46. 奏</td>
<td>47. 夢</td>
<td>48. 紗</td>
<td>49. 姫</td>
<td>50. 春</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: The most frequent end *kanji* in the male and female names in the corpus
In the past, there were very few end *kanji* that appeared in names bestowed on both girls and boys. However, the following table now gives us a very different picture. Thirteen out of the fifty most frequent end *kanji* in male and female names in the corpus appear on both lists. Some of these *kanji* represent different readings in names for girls and for boys, and so while the phonological form of the name is still gender-specific, the graphic form no longer has the ability to distinguish between genders.

## 5. Gender-Neutral Names and Their Characteristics

Using the methods already mentioned, it is still possible to clearly mark gender, and most parents still do, but there have been an increasing number of names which lack any gender-specific features in their phonological and/or graphic form, and there also have been an increasing number of names that are used by both sexes. Due to the way Japanese names are formed, there are numerous names with very low occurrence. Therefore, I prefer using the term non-gender-specific names as a more general term covering all names which cannot be clearly determined as male or female, and gender-neutral names when discussing names which have above average occurrence in both sets of names. The 9,373 names in the corpus have 1,897 different phonological forms. 170 (8.96%) of these were found as both male and female names. In many cases the name was significantly more frequent as male or female, with only one or two occurrences of the other. If we select names that have at least five, i.e. above average occurrences in both sets\(^6\), we get the following 31 names:

- Aoi, Asahi, Chiaki, Chihiro, Haru, Haruhi, Hinata, Ibuki, Iori, Kaeede, Kanade, Keito, Makoto, Mitsuki, Mizuki, Nao, Noa, Natsuki, Rei, Rio, Rion, Ruka, Sena, Shion, Sora, Tsubasa, Yura, Yū, Yūki, Yūri, Yuzuki

In the 2016 survey by Meiji Yasuda Insurance Company, three of these, *Aoi*, *Hinata* and *Yū*, ranked among the fifty most popular names given to boys, and also among the top fifty for girls. *Aoi* even ranked 6\(^\text{th}\) among names given to girls and 9/10\(^\text{th}\) among names given to boys. Lieberson, Dumais, and Baumann (2000), who have researched androgynous names in the US\(^7\), point out that it is very rare for androgynous names to be at the same time popular for both boys and girls.

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\(^6\) An average occurrence of one phonological form in the set of names bestowed on boys is 4.26, and 4.84 in the set of names bestowed on girls.

\(^7\) On the data of all white births in Illinois in 1916–1989 and in 1985.
Let us have a closer look at these 31 names. Most of them end in a syllable which is not strongly associated with either gender, the most frequent being /ki/ (Chiaki, Ibuki, Mitsuki, Mizuki, Natsuki, Yūki, Yuzuki). There are some exceptions, such as the name Keito, which is usually perceived as a male name, due to the strongly masculine final /to/. However, when bestowed on a girl, it is meant to imitate the English female name Kate. In other words, the male Keito and the female Keito emerged through separate pathways (cf. Lieberson, Dumais, and Baumann 2000). The name Yūri, on the other hand, is more often perceived as a female name, resembling female names such as Airi, Akari, Ayuri, Juri, etc. Some hints as to why it is also bestowed on boys can be found in the parents’ explanations: it has a soft, gentle sound, more often associated with female names, but resembles the foreign masculine name Yuriy. Similar reasons can be found for the name Iori. It seems to be appealing for both genders as it sounds soft and gentle, but is known as originally being a male name due to Miyamoto Iori, an adopted son of the famous Miyamoto Musashi.

A number of the examined names are of foreign origin or at least foreign sounding, such as the above mentioned Keito (Kate) and Yūri (Yury, Yuri, Yuriy, etc.), also Noa (Noa(h)), Rei (Ray, Rey), Rio (Rion, Lion, Rion), Ruka (Luca, Lucca, Luka, etc.), Sena (Sena), and Shion (Sion), and are usually chosen in the hope that the child would be active globally in the future. Some of these names are used in some countries as male and in others as female or gender-neutral, as a result of which they are used in Japan by both genders. For example, the name Ruka is used in Japan for both boys and girls (with a slight preference for girls, although the Italian name Luca is a male name, probably because of the final /ka/, perceived in Japanese names as strongly feminine). The fact that some of these names are listed in various publications inconsistently as male, female or both, also contributes to their perception as being gender-neutral. For example, the name Sena is listed in Yasuda (1998) as a female name, in Tamiya (2003) as a male name, in Kuniwaki (2005) as both male and female and in Happī Nēmu Fāzāzu (2014) again only as a female name. In the corpus it is similarly frequent as male and female.

Another thing these names have in common is that many of them are known as names of various celebrities and popular fictional characters from manga, anime or TV shows. Kaede is a good example of a name of numerous fictional characters, both male and female. In order to become gender-neutral, it is important for a name which is originally associated only with one gender to receive public attention as a name used by the

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8 This motivation applies to Keito only when chosen for a girl.
other gender, through a popular artist or some other famous personality, or a popular fictional character. Name popularity in general has been strongly influenced by the media, and many parents get inspired by the name of their favorite celebrity or character, who they perceive as a role model for their child.

Names that are gender-neutral from the point of view of their pronunciation often retain gender specificity at least in their graphic form. For example, if the name Keito is written as 慧人 or 啓斗, it looks very masculine, as these two end kanji appear exclusively in male names. On the other hand, if the name is written as 恵都 or in hiragana, けいと, it looks feminine. Conversely, names that are gender-neutral in their graphic form usually have a gender-specific pronunciation. For example, the graphic form 心 represents in the corpus the feminine phonological form Kokoro (utilizing the kun-reading of the kanji), and masculine form Shin (utilizing the on-reading of the same kanji). The name 和 represents the feminine Nodoka and Nagomi, and the masculine Yamato and Nagomu. The name 結音 is found as a male name with the readings Yūto and Yuito, but as a female name with the readings Yuine and Yuno.

The following 41 graphic forms appear at least twice (i.e. above average) in both sets in the corpus:

葵, 優, 和, 碧, 凌, 遥, 心, 凜, 結, 湖, 湊, 湥, 湧, 晴,
優心, 瑠海, 愛琉, 奏音, 真生, 悠月, 柚希, 結音, 陽葵, 結生,
心音, 碧音, 優月, 琉音, 心優, 結心, 琉夏, 陽向, 伊織, 蒼空,
悠希, 光希, 朝陽, 優希

Some of the listed single kanji names (e.g., 優) were previously used as male names, but most of these kanji have become popular only recently, in the last decades of the twentieth century, when single-kanji names started to be increasingly given also to girls. The kanji used in the end position of the listed two-kanji names are also mostly newly popular kanji. Many of them denote natural phenomena/world (e.g., 海 ‘sea’, 空 ‘sky’, 陽 ‘sun’, 月 ‘moon’, 葵 ‘hollyhock’, 琉 ‘precious stone, lapis lazuli’), or have meanings that allude to human relationships or qualities that are now

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9 Actually, there is now a popular Japanese child actor and TV personality Terada Kokoro (born 2008, pseudonym). It is likely that he will inspire some parents to name their son Kokoro.
desired in both boys and girls (e.g., 心 ‘heart, mind, soul’, 優 ‘kind, excellent’, 希 ‘hope, wish, aspiration’).

Some of the names that are used for both boys and girls have the same phonological as well as graphic form. From these names it is truly impossible to recognize the gender of the child. Those that appear repeatedly include:

Aoi 葵/碧/蒼, Asahi 朝陽, Haru 晴, Hinata 陽向, Iori 伊織, Itsuki 樹, Kaede 楓, Kanade 奏, Minato 湊, Ren 蓮, Rion 璃音, Ruka 琉夏/璃海, Rin 凜, Ryō 凌, Sora 蒼空, Tsubasa 翼, Yū 優, Yūki 優希 and Yuzuki 悠月/優月/柚希

The above discussed tendencies are demonstrated in the following two diagrams, using examples from the corpus. Diagram 1 presents one gender-neutral phonological form (Aoi) represented by numerous graphic forms, some of which were found only among male or female names, and some in both parts of the corpus. Diagram 2 shows the opposite situation: one graphic form (璃音) with several phonological forms, one of which, Rion, is used for both genders.

6. From Masculine to Gender-neutral to Feminine or the Other Way Around?

In Western countries, it is generally acknowledged that a gender-neutral name is more advantageous for girls than boys (e.g., Lieberson, Dumais, and Baumann, 2000). According to Barry and Harper (1982), who examined the psychology of name selection in the US, names tend to
evolve from masculine to gender-neutral and from gender-neutral to feminine.
Also in Japan, there are cases when an originally male name became popular as a female name and now is more frequently chosen for girls. For example, the Shōwa male name 優, usually pronounced as Masaru, became popular as a female name under the influence of the Japanese singer and TV actress with the stage name Hayami Yū 早見優 (Makino 2017). In the present corpus the name 優 Yū appears for both boys and girls, but more frequently for girls (優 pronounced as Masaru was not found in the corpus). Similarly, the name Yūki (with various graphic forms) was first used as a name for boys, but later became to be used also for girls. However, some currently gender-neutral names, such as Aoi, Haru, Hinata, Mahiro10, Mizuki, Rei and Shion were originally used only for girls (ibid.). Of these, Haru, Hinata and Mahiro are now even more frequent in the corpus as names for boys. In fact, according to Makino, nowadays it is mostly boys who get a name originally given to the opposite sex; the majority of names that end up gender-neutral were originally female names which became popular and are increasingly used for both girls and boys (ibid.).
There has also been a tendency to create male names inspired by recently popular female names by attaching to them an end syllable typical for male names, as in the following examples: Ai → Aito, Hina → Hinato, Mana → Manato, Saki → Sakito, Yui → Yuito. Such names sound masculine, but they have a soft, feminine touch. The tendency to use in names for boys features that are more frequently associated with women is even more apparent at the graphic level. Names such as 愛音 Akito (‘love’ + ‘sound’), 優心 Yūshin/Yūshī/Yūgo (‘kind’ + ‘heart’), or 結心 Yūshin/Yushin (‘to tie, bind, join’ + ‘heart’) sound masculine but evoke images associated with females rather than males.

7. Reasons for Bestowing Non-Gender-Specific Names
There seem to be various reasons why contemporary parents choose non-gender-specific names. For some of them the gender indication simply is not one of the key criteria they consider in the process of name selection. As the example of naming a boy Runa showed, for some parents the fact that a name even strongly indicates the opposite gender is no obstacle to bestowing upon their newborn their favorite name.

10 Mahiro is not so frequent in our corpus for both genders.
On the other hand, there are parents who intentionally aim for a gender-neutral name. In some cases, the reason is purely practical. They want to decide the name before birth, but often prefer to wait until birth to find out their child’s gender.

Another explanation can be found in the parents’ aspirations for their children, which are now more similar for boys and girls than they were in the past. Whether they have a boy or a girl, many parents wish for their child to become strong and ambitious, but also to be sensitive, empathetic and caring, and they want the name to reflect this accordingly. And here again a possible source of influence can be seen in the already mentioned manga and anime characters. Many of these popular fictional characters possess both masculine and feminine traits, which makes them appealing to the audience.

Makino (2017) suggests that the tendency to give boys female-looking names or names with feminine features might be influenced by the fact that unlike in the past, when it was usually the father who decided the children’s names, nowadays women are more engaged in name selection and more of them want to treat their sons the same way they would treat a daughter. The data examined in this study support this opinion, indicating that women seem to be the more active ones in the name selection process.

8. Conclusion

Japanese names need not indicate gender, and it is even possible to give a girl’s name to a boy or vice versa. Despite this, the majority of currently bestowed names are somehow gender-specific, especially due to their use of gender-specific end syllables and end kanji, both traditional and new, and some also due to their orthography or phonological length. Many, however, lack gender-distinctive features in either their phonological or graphic form, and some have none at all. Such names are often foreign-sounding and utilize currently popular kanji, such as those denoting the natural world, which are used with multiple readings (even in the end position), to evoke images expressing similar aspirations for boys and girls. Often names have jumped the gender gap led by the popularity of a famous personality, either real or fictional.

Japanese methods of name formation have encouraged a great variety of names in some way lacking gender clarity. Not only is it clear that parental tolerance of such names is rising, but there is also mounting evidence that some parents actually seek a more gender-neutral identity for their child. Whether the bearers of such names are as enthusiastic remains to be seen.
In either case, the result has been a serious drop in our confidence that we can predict someone’s gender from seeing or hearing their name.

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