

Reverse Discourse in the Separate Surname Issue in Japan: A Discourse Analysis of Chinjo Action

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ABSTRACT

The current research aims at exploring reverse discourse as an advocacy strategy in the narrative discourse created by the Chinjo Action grassroots movement through qualitative discourse analysis framework. In light of Foucault's notion of reverse discourse, it seeks to reveal how the language used by institutions is strategically borrowed and applied by advocacy actors in grassroots advocacy. For the purposes of the research, two data sets were used. First, there are letters directed at the Sodegaura City Council, which contain the narratives. Second, supporting messages posted in 「267 人が投稿『法改正に賛成』の理由」 section of the Chinjo Action website were taken as the second data source. The results show that, apart from advocating gender equality, the narratives under discussion are developed using reverse discourse, which involves the application of the language borrowed from official discourse. This language includes both rationalities, such as the administrative one and economic one, demographics, and even some aspects of the legal one. The use of reverse discourse in advocacy makes the statements of the movement consistent with the institutional logic, thus increasing their validity in the eyes of those making decisions about what should be done regarding gender inequalities. Overall, the results prove that reverse discourse is an effective advocacy tool that allows advocating groups to engage more efficiently with the institutional context and extend their advocacy statements.

Keywords: *Sentakuteki Fufubessei, Chinjo Action, Social Movements, Reverse discourse, Michael Foucault*

INTRODUCTION

The topic of inequality between genders in Japan arises during talks about Article 750 of the Civil Code that stipulates that married couples have to take the same name (Kato & Toyoda, 2022; Piegzik, 2023; Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2020, 2023; Toyoda, 2020; Toyoda & Chapman, 2017). While it may look like an attempt to create consistency in the legal sphere, this problem is placed into a much broader social history context (Miyamoto et al., 2011). According to Tanaka (2012), such an approach may be considered part of the nineteenth-century tradition of wives joining husbands' families and taking their surnames after marriage. In this regard, power was concentrated in hands of males and women had to play subservient roles with lineage also traced through male lines only. While the principle of *ie* was abandoned after the 1947 revision of Japan's Civil Code, the same logic underpins some real-life decisions today, particularly when it comes to naming practices (Chapman, 2011; Tanaka, 2012). A number of factors predict marital surname change and/or related attitudes, including professional, economic, and educational status; religious attendance; age; cultural or ethnic background; the mother's marital surname choice; and premarital cohabitation (Blakemore et al., 2005; Goldin & Shim, 2004; Hoffnung, 2006; Intons-Peterson & Crawford, 1985; Johnson & Scheuble, 1995; Kline et al., 1996; Noack & Wiik, 2008; Scheuble & Johnson, 1993; Twenge, 1997). Taniguchi & Kaufman (2020) point out that individuals who embrace traditional gender roles are inclined to support adopting the joint surname. The same applies to Chayinska et al. (2021) and Palmwood (2024), who highlight that the acceptance of this tradition usually rests on the narrative of maintaining tradition. In turn, the findings of Stoiko & Strough (2017) show that men and non-feminist women are concerned about the popularity of this practice in society, whereas the opposite is true for women and feminists. Hence, it is reasonable to suggest that this custom is not a legal obligation per se but a symbolic representation of the social structure where men play a dominant role and women adjust to it. In other words, names are not only a form of identification but also can be used as a means of communication (Pilcher, 2016, 2017).

With growing conflicts, one possible approach to fighting the continuing discrimination against women is the encouragement of grassroots collective movements that aim to promote the rights of women (Bhattacharjya et al., 2013; Radke et al., 2018). The theory of *sentakuteki fufubessei* emerged in Japan, based on the belief that wives and husbands should be given the freedom to use different surnames (Toyoda et al., 2024). Scholars note that the phenomenon in question can be viewed as Pareto improvement; that is, it benefits many parties but apparently does not harm anyone (Omura, 2019). Advocates of this social trend argue that selection of a surname is an entirely private matter. While united by common goal, the movement comprises diverse individuals, which suggests that the public dissatisfaction runs much deeper than it may seem at first glance (Toyoda & Chapman, 2019). Among active organizations advocating for change is the *Sentakuteki Fufubessei Zenkoku Chinjo Action*, an informal association that submits petitions to municipal councils. Far from being a direct confrontation, this group works within the legal framework of the country. Applying the perspective of social-change theory (Ostrader, 2010, cited in Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2023), one may conclude that the organization actively cooperates with various governmental bodies to affect legislation. During a discussion on the topic, one of the directors Naho Ida argued that politicians should always bear in mind that voters have family values. Therefore, discussing changes, one needs evidence such as petitions and declarations from city authorities or local governments. Moreover, she mentioned that it becomes more challenging to ignore the problem when the same petitions emerge in various parts of Japan (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2023). The study analyzes two types of primary sources. The first includes texts of petitions submitted to the Sodegaura City Council (Sodegaura City, 2024). The second type consists of declarations available on the Chinjo Action website under the heading 「267 人が投稿『法改正に賛成』の理由」 (Chinjo Action, n.d.). The example of the Sodegaura city is relevant since it illustrates the process of petitions operation on the local level which makes easier to trace the construction of demands in an administrative context. The statements of supporters indicate another feature: they present individuals' opinions and views expressed in the language of advocates. Thus, reading of both sources allows tracing how advocacy emerges as a product of official language and reasoning. The phenomenon reflects Foucault's (1978) theory of reverse discourse when marginalized groups use language of power.

Several studies have analyzed the system of family names in Japan from different perspectives. The longevity of the practice has been linked to traditional gender relations (Taniguchi & Kaufman, 2020). Researchers have also focused on public discussions, with a particular emphasis on the conflict between free will and family traditions (Toyoda & Chapman, 2017). The influence of civil society's actions against patriarchy is another topic studied (Toyoda, 2020). Nonetheless, a lot of research presents advocacy against the family name system as resistance to state policies or as a defense of individual freedom. Little attention has been paid to the way in which the discourses used in advocacy are formed, legal terms used, data represented, and policy frameworks employed. Simply put, little attention has been given to institutional discourse as an instrument for advocacy. To shed light on this issue, the current study makes use of Foucault's concept of reverse discourse (1978). Analyzing the texts used by activists to support their stance proves that reforms are not only required because of existing problems; they also are argued using administrative language and formulated according to established procedures.

In this study, attention is paid to the use of the official institutional language as a source of Chinjo Action's legitimation through advocacy. Using a qualitative approach, discourse analysis is conducted based on two kinds of documents: petitions addressed to the council of Sodegaura city and statements published on the website of Chinjo Action in the article entitled 「267 人が投稿『法改正に賛成』の理由」. The selection of research methodology is determined by the role of language in the analyzed texts. Particularly, the study examines the utilization of legal terms, statistical data, and administrative style in constructing an argumentation strategy according to institutional standards. From this perspective, institutional language is not only an obstacle for making a certain statement but also a tool that can be used to legitimize one's position.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A range of research approaches have been used to examine the issue of marriage surnames in Japan. There is an abundance of research examining the relationship between legal requirements, social pressures, and individual decisions associated with surname choice. In the context of the debate around *fufubessei*, the analysis is not only concerned with the issue of legislation; it involves a confrontation of different values. One group of individuals emphasizes the importance of individual freedoms, whereas the other side highlights the need to protect the traditional family structure. The contrast between the two positions is highlighted by Toyoda & Chapman (2017), who discuss how the debate concerning personal liberty can be at odds with the idea of preserving the family structure connected with the *koseki* system. From the sociological perspective, White (2021) studies practical responses to this issue, with some people choosing to adopt unconventional solutions such as *jijitsukon* in order to bypass family traditions while risking to face legal consequences (especially with regard to children). Taniguchi & Kaufman (2020) approach the problem in another way, using survey data to show that the support for a one-surname system goes hand-in-hand with more traditional views on gender and family roles.

There are also studies that focus more on advocacy and social movements. Consider the case of Toyoda (2020), for instance, who explores the *fufubessei* movement as collective action, with the discourse based on issues of identity and rights, as well as a counter to the existing norms. Such **studies** are helpful in giving a sense of the actors involved, as well as their objectives. However, they do little to provide insight into the construction of arguments in the texts. Rather than focusing on the use of language, such studies concentrate on the legal structure, social factors, and ideology. In essence, they highlight legal discourse, presentation of data, and creation of policy discourse. Such an analysis does little to uncover the way the arguments are constructed in advocacy discourses. This research focuses on this problem, specifically analyzing the texts of advocacy discourse written by Chinjo Action using the idea of reverse discourse as formulated by Michel Foucault. The focus will be on how institutional discursive elements are reused to construct arguments that appear plausible within the institutional context.

METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this research, the qualitative approach will be employed to investigate how the advocacy actors talk about reforms concerning the Japanese family name system. Language is at the center of the investigation in this case, not only the content of the message, but also the language through which it is conveyed. For this reason, discourse will serve as the main analytical framework for this study since it will provide insight into the process of constructing the argument in a given text and how some linguistic practices can provide it with legitimacy, especially institutional legitimacy. Additionally, this research will rely upon Foucault's theory of reverse discourse (1978). According to this theory, the language generated by the powerful can be used for different purposes. This theoretical concept is further developed in contemporary research (Haugaard, 2022; Lilja, 2022; Towns, 2022).

The data consists of online textual material, which includes two major sources. First, the texts of the petitions regarding fufubessei submitted to the City Council of Sodegaura City. They are bureaucratic and have an official tone and address other governmental organizations. Second, written statements found in the section 「267 人が投稿『法改正に賛成』の理由」 (Statements for the law reform from 267 people) published on the website of the Chinjo Action. They are more informal, and their tone is personal. The two sources were selected in order to represent two possible approaches to the presentation of ideas and opinions on behalf of supporters of the reform. Both types of sources were considered to be data in accordance with Bowen (2009; Morgan, 2022).

The research was conducted in a step-by-step manner. Firstly, the texts were analyzed several times to observe how arguments are presented in different instances. The focus was on linguistic features, such as the use of legal terminology, mention of data and policies on certain topics. Afterward, findings were classified in several thematic categories to identify the structure of arguments presented by the texts. Lastly, analysis of themes was conducted from the perspective of reverse discourse in order to analyze how linguistic tools that are common in certain settings are used by advocacy actors to make an impact.

DISCUSSION

1.1 Economic and Demographic Rationalization

Petition No. 1 submitted to the Sodegaura City Council in 2024 takes up the problem of surnames not merely as an assertion of rights. The tone immediately becomes different. The petition quickly moves to matters of administration, beginning with:

“政府は旧姓の通称使用の拡大に向けた取組みを進めていますが、通称使用では、自己同一性を喪失する苦痛は解消されず、根本的な解決策にはならないほか、ダブルネームを使い分ける負担、本人や企業等の経済的なコスト、個人識別の誤りのリスクを増大させる等の問題が指摘されています。” (Sodegaura City, 2024)

Translation:

“There are attempts being made by the government to encourage schemes that broaden the scope of usage of old surnames as aliases. But using an alias does not alleviate the problem of loss of identity in any way; it is not a solution at all. There is also added stress of maintaining two names, and there are associated expenses involved, too.”

It is important not only in what sense but also in what language the petition operates. Its authors use such terms as “経済的なコスト” and “自己同一性を喪失する苦痛” which cannot be considered ordinary conversational expressions. On the contrary, they seem to have been taken from certain policy papers or administrative documents. Therefore, the issue itself gets transformed by such wording, losing its character of something subjective and emotional in favor of objective managerial and administrative problem. It becomes easy for an institutionally oriented researcher to trace the development of an argument using such approach. Moreover, the framing of the issue changes due to the fact that it acquires institutional nature. From Foucault's point of view (1978), it means that the issues of identity become related to broader problems such as population. This trend is observed in the examined petition as well, which introduces into the discussion such concepts as efficiency and risk and other categories of

systemic nature, common for policy debates. However, they are introduced to subvert the existing order (Foucault, 1978; Siisiäinen, 2018).

A similar shift can be seen in the way the petition talks about demographic issues. It states:

“さらに、一人っ子同士の結婚や子連れ再婚などにおいて、改姓への抵抗感が強く、中には結婚を諦めちゃう人もいるため、ますます非婚や少子化につながる要因とも指摘されています。” (Sodegaura City, 2024)

Translation:

“However, where marriage is associated either with the presence of children or with remarrying with children, there is great hesitation about surname change. There are individuals who refuse to get married at all; something which has been observed as one reason for increased non-marriage and decreased fertility.”

Shoushika, meaning "declining birth rates," is another important concept in the petition. It is a widely used term in the Japanese policy discussion. It means a case when the number of newborns constantly drops. The reasons for that do not have a single source. Several factors can be involved: later marriages, tough economic conditions, or lack thereof. Besides, there may be value transformations, and other aspects regarding the labor and family spheres (Glonti et al., 2015; Pourtaheri et al., 2024; Tsuya, 2024). The results of such trends are obvious - a reduced working-age population, pressure on the welfare system, and changes in family patterns (Takao, 2024). The introduction of the *shoushika* concept in a petition turns the discussion in a new direction. Now, the problem of surnames has wider implications.

It is not accidental either. This type of discourse relies on the logic that already exists in policymaking, where the state collaborates with concepts such as populations, statistics, and time periods (Foucault et al., 2008). It is precisely because of this logic that the petition suggests itself. It implies the idea that surname regulations may affect marriage, which, in turn, would impact birth rates. In this way, a question of law can be tied into other policy concerns. At the same time, there is another layer to this discourse. The language of the petition is borrowed from the same paradigm. This is when the phenomenon of *reverse discourse* emerges. The same categories previously employed by the paradigm are reused for a new purpose.

1.2 The Use of Institutional Gaps as a *Reverse discourse* Strategy

Reverse discourse emerges from the strategic use of the spaces between the judiciary and legislation. While activists do not necessarily refute decisions made by the Supreme Court, they select specific aspects of the decision to support their arguments. As presented in the petition:

“最高裁判所は...夫婦同姓規定が合憲とされる一方、...夫婦の氏に関する制度の在り方については「国会で論ぜられ、判断されるべき事柄にほかならない」としています。” (Sodegaura City, 2024)

Translation:

“Although the Supreme Court... ruled that the single-surname provision is constitutional, it also stated that the appropriate form of the family name system ‘is nothing other than a matter that should be debated and decided in the National Diet.’”

This discussion seems rather clear-cut. While the Supreme Court states that the system is constitutional, such position does not mean the end of debate on the matter. In contrast, the petition makes use of the ambiguity present and treats it as an unresolved matter rather than an established position. What follows is an emphasis on the role of the law-makers in addressing the issue in question rather than activists. Indeed, the activists are not attempting to get into a conflict with the Supreme Court in this case but merely repeating its own wording in order to put pressure on the law-makers to act. That is, they argue that "the legislature must do something about it." Rather than opposing the courts, their intention is to compel lawmakers to address this issue. The petition is formulated in a manner which leaves no room for doubt but is nonetheless couched in the terms of the contemporary institution. One might say that this petition constitutes a discourse reversal whereby actors resort to authoritative terminology from a court ruling in order to challenge the given structure without opposing it (Foucault, 1978; Lilja, 2022).

1.3 Professional Narrative: Names as Assets of Global Knowledge

Here, profession identity serves as a means by which surname conventions may be critically assessed, especially among those researchers who regard such name restrictions as barriers to idea exchange in an international context. The sources used here include the Chinjo Action website, specifically the page titled "将来の研究者のたまごである『リケジョ』達のためにも" ("For the Future Generation of Researchers, Including Rikejo"), which provides 267 reasons to amend name laws in Japan (Chinjo Action, n.d.). Activists employ the framework of professionalism to justify how altering one's surname impacts indexing, citation, and the research possibilities open to an individual, thus presenting the problem of surname in an international perspective of knowledge development. Here is what the Chinjo Action website says about it:

"研究者は、世界中の不特定多数の人々から、姓名によってその業績・論文を評価・参照されます。インターネットによる論文検索が主流である現在において、姓名が変わることで検索結果から漏れることは、結果として業績・論文が評価・参照対象から外れる要因となります。" (Chinjo Action, n.d.)

Translation:

"The works of an individual researcher are indexed and referenced by many individuals all over the world through his or her name. Given that searching for articles on the Internet has become the most common method of accessing research, altering one's last name may result in a paper ceasing to show up in search results."

Thus, one could argue that there is a sense of importance attached to names within academia by activists since the change in surname may lead to the disruption of records or disassociation from an individual researcher's work. This issue is now brought to a level of practicality in which the petition involves terms such as research evaluation, citations, and searching through journals that are common in academic fields. As a consequence, the discussion has moved beyond personal identity and towards the way knowledge is classified and credited. In effect, there seems to arise elements of efficiency and justice as well. With regards to Foucault's approach, this argument could be viewed as conforming to set patterns of thought that place particular weight on linguistic expressions (Foucault & Gordon, 1984; Haugaard, 2022). By doing so, the activists use familiar conventions to demonstrate weaknesses within the policy system.

1.4 Deconstructing Conservative Logic

The Chinjo Action employs a *reverse discourse* strategy, which does not attack the claim from an external standpoint but dissects the reasoning from within and exposes inconsistencies in order to present evidence. It can be observed in materials published in the Chinjo Action website, specifically in its webpage of 267 reasons for marriage name change legislation entitled "研究者にとって、婚姻時改姓とはキャリア断絶の危機" (Chinjo Action, n.d.). In this website, one can find this statement:

"男性側だけが姓を維持することが重要であり、女性側のそれを軽視しても良いという考えは...婚姻時に改姓を強要されれば、その家系の姓は途絶えてしまいます。この事態を放置することは、先祖を大切に、という保守的家族観に、真っ向から反するものであり..." (Chinjo Action, n.d.)

Translation:

"The idea that only the male side needs to preserve the family name, while the female side can be disregarded... if women are forced to change their surnames upon marriage, that lineage's family name will disappear. Allowing this situation to continue directly contradicts the conservative view of family that values and respects ancestors."

According to government rhetoric, the necessity for the single-surname system lies in the fact that it preserves the tradition of families in Japan; nevertheless, reformers argue in the opposite direction, suggesting that this policy might lead to the destruction of family heritage, thereby positioning the regulation of surnames as means of governmental management rather than cultural conservation. In such a way, supporters demonstrate that surname changing becomes the means to destroy family names, revealing the contradictions of conservatives and establishing themselves as more loyal to tradition in comparison to their opponents. It should be regarded as a kind of *reverse discourse*, meaning that supporters utilize dominant values in order to challenge the current power structure.

Furthermore, it becomes possible to explain the nature of the argument from the perspective of the support for the statement; namely, as the positionality of the activist is represented by a conservative scientist who is a male, it becomes evident that this is a statement made by a specific intellectual, as it is referred to by Foucault & Gordon (1984). Moreover, mentioning shoushika, which refers to the low number of births, allows supporters to link the issue of surname regulation to that of national survival and development of society, which indicates another form of *reverse discourse*.

1.5 Unmasking the Illusion of Formal Equality

The state frequently claims that Article 750 of the Japanese Civil Code is impartial, asserting that “either spouse may choose the surname of the other.” Nonetheless, defenders of the law examine this assertion by applying rational arguments that demonstrate its inequality in practice. This is proven by the Chinjo Action movement, in particular the website titled “夫婦別姓が認められないことと、女性差別は地続き,” where the organization lists 267 justifications for change (Chinjo Action, n.d.). Here is an example statement from Chinjo Action:

“現段階でもどちらの名字を選んでも良いのだから平等だと思う人は、96%以上の女性が改姓している現状に対して...試しに「区役所で婚姻届を出す際にじゃんけんで買った方の名字にする」としてみればよいでしょう。多くの男性が悲鳴をあげ、一週間で夫婦別姓が認められるでしょう。” (Chinjo Action, n.d.)

Translation:

“For those who believe the current system is already fair because couples are free to choose either surname, do they really think that the reality in which more than 96 percent of women change their names reflects women’s own choices? If that is the case, try establishing a rule: ‘When submitting the marriage registration at the municipal office, the surname will be the one belonging to whoever wins at rock-paper-scissors.’ Many men would cry out in protest, and within a week the option of separate surnames (*fufubessei*) would likely be accepted.”

In fact, this type of reasoning reflects an approach known as *reverse discourse* when a person is not directly challenging the idea that the surname law is neutral but tries to examine it through a very simple comparison related to the use of a game called janken. The idea is that if one is convinced that surname choice was indeed neutral, he should agree with a random decision in order for it to be legitimate. Still, the expected reaction in form of objections made by men proves that the situation reflects an existing social imbalance hidden by the idea of equality. This comparison is also helpful to shift readers’ focus on the practical application of the Article 750 instead of considering its meaning at face value. It states that married couples may choose any surname but the statistics show that more than 96 percent of women choose to accept their husbands’ names after getting married, proving that their decisions are not based on equal conditions. The concept of a regime of truth helps explain why certain rules may be perceived as being objectively true although producing social inequality (Foucault & Gordon, 1984; Haugaard, 2022; Towns, 2022). Thus, the author’s suggestion to reverse the scenario in such a way to make men suffer as a result of surname change is aimed at challenging people’s understanding of their right to free choice.

1.6 Unpacking Double Standards and the Normalization of Alternatives

Also, the advocates highlight inconsistencies in the koseki system and legitimize the notion of *fufubessei* based on factual information that is gleaned from state-centric activities. The information is sourced from the Chinjo Action website, specifically the webpage “改姓すれば私の名字は私の代で途切れてしまう.” The webpage features 267 reasons that justify legal reforms (Chinjo Action, n.d.). One of the statements on the Chinjo Action website is provided below:

“もう既に、国際結婚家庭では名字が別で、再婚などをされている方々の家庭でも名字が別でも、皆それぞれ家族円満に幸せに生きているじゃないですか！望んだ人には、夫婦別姓を選べる選択肢を与える。これだけのことです。” (Chinjo Action, n.d.)

Translation

"Even today, we have families of international marriages with different surnames, families of remarriages with different surnames, but they all live happily and in harmony as families. We are just saying that those who wish should be given an opportunity to have different surnames."

It is an example of *reverse discourse* through highlighting contradictions within the practices of state law. In official discourses, for example, the practice of a single surname is linked to family continuity. However, through citing instances of foreign marriages and cases of remarriage, it becomes clear that couples sharing different surnames have been common and officially registered in state agencies. By doing so, it highlights how these family structures have not been novel but part of reality and practice. Instead of criticizing the laws, they cite existing examples within state law to highlight inconsistencies in state claims and policies. By presenting it as a case of "望んだ人には、夫婦別姓を選べる選択肢を与える" *fufubessei* emerges as a logical extension rather than something that challenges the status quo completely. Thus, in this case, *reverse discourse* refers to drawing from the realities already acknowledged by the administration itself in order to challenge state policies (Haugaard, 2022; Lilja, 2022; Towns, 2022).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Thus, the presented study has shown that the struggle for reform of the Japanese family name system does not occur only via discursive confrontation with the state and its authorities; it may also use discursive practices operating within the state institutional environment itself. The content of the petition submitted to the Sodegaura City Council together with the accompanying statements available on the website "Chinjo Action" ("267 People Submit Their Reasons for Supporting Legal Reform") reveals that the advocates of reform adopt a *reverse discourse* approach based on an employment of administrative terms, empirical evidence, and the procedures inherent to the operation of the Japanese state institutions in order to create legitimacy for a reform of the *fufubessei* system. *Reverse discourse*, according to Michel Foucault, refers to an engagement with categories, logic, and procedural mechanisms developed in state institutions and applying them against current policies and regulations. It was discovered that, within the discussed documents, *reverse discourse* was expressed in several ways, such as: administrative and economic rationalities employed in discussions about surname change; connection of the issue to demographic discourses about falling marriage and childbirth rates; employment of differences between positions of judicial and legislative bodies through language of the Supreme Court rulings; stress on professionals affected by changes in surnames and thus impacted negatively in their academic careers outside the Japanese borders; reversal of conservative discourse on preserving family lineages; criticism of equality discourse with simultaneous application of double standards within the *koseki* system. Therefore, the use of categories, language, and other elements of *reverse discourse* by social activists can be considered a method of exposing inconsistencies of the policies and regulations within a certain state. In conclusion, this paper calls for extending the analysis of *reverse discourse* employed by other social groups in communication with governmental authorities in order to better understand the functioning of this mechanism in modern administration.

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