

The Linguistic Representation of Social Hierarchy and Kinship in *Chibi Maruko-chan*

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Abstract

This qualitative descriptive study examines the linguistic representation of social hierarchy and kinship in the Japanese animated series *Chibi Maruko-chan*. Grounded in sociolinguistic theories of politeness and indexicality, the research investigates how language constructs familial and social roles within the show's narrative framework. The primary objectives are to identify and categorize specific linguistic features—including honorifics, address terms, and politeness strategies used to denote social relationships—and to analyze how these discursive practices reinforce traditional Japanese concepts of *uchi* (in-group) and *soto* (out-group). Data were collected through purposive sampling of fifteen episodes, forming a corpus of dialogue that was subsequently analyzed using directed content analysis. The findings reveal a consistent asymmetry in politeness strategies: children, particularly the protagonist Maruko, predominantly use positive politeness and casual language to express closeness, while parents and older siblings employ negative politeness, formal self-reference, and bald-on-record directives to assert authority and maintain hierarchical order. Interactions with grandparents blend affection and respect, softening hierarchical boundaries, whereas peer interactions exhibit egalitarian solidarity through direct, unmitigated speech. The study concludes that the series actively naturalizes social structures through everyday talk, serving as a rich site for the discursive reproduction of cultural norms. It contributes to media linguistics by demonstrating the value of *anime* as a corpus for pragmatic analysis and offers insights into the intersection of language, power, and culture in popular media.

Keywords: *Chibi Maruko-chan*; Kinship; Linguistics; Social Hierarchy

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1. INTRODUCTION

Animated media, particularly Japanese *anime*, has evolved from a niche entertainment form into a significant global cultural and academic phenomenon. As a narrative medium, *anime* does not merely tell stories but also constructs intricate social worlds that reflect, reinforce, and occasionally challenge the cultural norms of its society of origin (Lasseter, 2021; Momchilova, 2019). Within this context, the slice-of-life genre stands out for its dedication to portraying the mundane realities of everyday existence, making it a rich, naturalistic source of data for sociolinguistic inquiry. The series *Chibi Maruko-chan*, created by Momoko Sakura, is a quintessential example. Set in 1970s suburban Japan, it provides a meticulous depiction of *shitamachi* (downtown) culture, offering a vast

corpus of dialogue that captures the linguistic nuances of family, school, and community life. From a sociolinguistic perspective, language is a performative tool that constantly constructs and reinforces social structures, including hierarchy, solidarity, and familial roles (Dujarric, 2024). The interactions in *Chibi Maruko-chan* are therefore not just storytelling devices but authentic representations of the linguistic mechanisms that underpin Japanese social order, making the series an ideal subject for a critical discourse analysis.

Contemporary sociolinguistic research (Muhid, 2024; Muhid & Yassi, 2024; Muhid et al., 2020) has extensively documented the relationship between language and social structure. The study of linguistic politeness, moving beyond Brown and Levinson's (1987) model, now emphasizes its emergent and discursive nature, where politeness is co-constructed in interaction rather than merely deployed by a speaker (Culpeper & Haugh, 2021). This is particularly relevant to the Japanese context, where the honorific system (*keigo*) and the concepts of *uchi* (in-group) and *soto* (out-group) fundamentally shape communication. Recent work by Shen and Yao (2022) on family discourse demonstrates how linguistic shifts occur at the boundary of the household, marking a clear distinction between familial intimacy and external formality.

Concurrently, the academic analysis of *anime* as a valid text for linguistic and cultural study has gained substantial traction. Research has often focused on character archetypes and their stereotypical speech (e.g., the use of rude pronouns by delinquents or hyper-polite forms by nobles). However, a growing subfield focuses on "realistic" *anime* that mirrors everyday communication. Davis (2021) analyzed pragmatic transfer in subtitling, noting that series like *Chibi Maruko-chan* present significant challenges due to their deep cultural embedding. Similarly, a meta-analysis by Lasseter (2021), Taja-On and Vacalares (2021), and Wu and Song (2023) posits that slice-of-life *anime* provides a valuable repository of naturalistic dialogue for research in applied linguistics, as it aims to reflect, rather than distort, societal norms. Previous studies on *Chibi Maruko-chan* itself have primarily explored its thematic elements of nostalgia and family values, but a comprehensive linguistic analysis remains underdeveloped.

Despite the established theoretical frameworks on politeness and the growing recognition of *anime* as a research corpus, a clear gap exists in the literature. There is a lack of systematic studies that apply rigorous sociolinguistic and discourse analysis methods to a long-running, realistic series like *Chibi Maruko-chan* to explicate how social hierarchy and kinship are linguistically constructed episode by episode. While previous research acknowledges the cultural content of the show, it has not explicitly broken down the linguistic micro-mechanisms—such as the choice of address terms, sentence-final particles, and code-switching between polite and plain forms—that actively build its social world. This study identifies this gap and positions itself to address it by treating the series not just as a cultural text but as a recorded instance of sociolinguistic practice.

This study is designed to address the identified gap with the following explicit objective: to identify and categorize the specific linguistic features (including honorifics, pronouns, address terms, and pragmatic particles) used to denote social hierarchy in selected episodes of *Chibi Maruko-chan*.

The contributions of this research are threefold. Firstly, it contributes to sociolinguistic theory by providing a contemporary, applied case study of politeness and indexicality within a nuanced narrative context. Secondly, it offers a significant contribution to Japanese cultural studies by providing a linguistic lens through which to understand the construction of *shitamachi* social values. Finally, it advances the field of media linguistics by presenting a rigorous methodological framework for analyzing animation, demonstrating that popular cultural products are legitimate and valuable sources of data for academic inquiry in the humanities. This research fills a clear empirical and methodological gap by offering the first detailed, linguistically grounded examination of *Chibi Maruko-chan*, thereby contributing new insights into the discursive construction of social hierarchy and kinship in Japanese popular media.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This qualitative descriptive method provides a detailed and systematic analysis of the linguistic phenomena present in the animated series *Chibi Maruko-chan*. This approach is chosen for its capacity to present a compre-

hensive summary of specific events or phenomena in their everyday context, prioritizing a rich, straightforward description of the data without moving beyond the analysis of the language itself into extensive interpretation (Sandelowski, 2015). The objective is to stay close to the data and describe the linguistic features accurately, making this design ideal for mapping the nuanced ways language represents social structures.

The primary data source for this library-based research is the animated series *Chibi Maruko-chan* itself. A purposive sampling strategy was employed to select episodes that best illustrate interactions across varying social contexts. The final corpus for analysis consisted of fifteen (15) episodes from the 1995 series reboot, selected based on two criteria: (1) episodes that prominently feature family interactions within the Sakura household and (2) episodes that feature cross-generational and institutional interactions (e.g., at school, with community members, with teachers). This ensured a sufficient dataset encompassing both *uchi* (in-group) and *soto* (out-group) dynamics. Dialogue from these episodes was transcribed into a textual corpus, forming the primary data for analysis.

Data collection proceeded through a structured process. Selected episodes were viewed multiple times to ensure accurate transcription. All verbal dialogue was transcribed orthographically, with key paralinguistic features (e.g., pauses, laughter, emphatic stress) noted where they were deemed relevant to the pragmatic meaning of an utterance. The transcribed text was then organized into a digital corpus, allowing for systematic coding and retrieval of linguistic units. This method of creating a specialized corpus from media content is established in discourse analysis for enabling detailed qualitative examination (Diegoli, 2024).

The data analysis followed a qualitative content analysis approach, specifically directed content analysis, where initial coding categories were derived from the key theoretical concepts outlined in the literature review (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). The coding framework was developed to identify instances of:

- Honorifics and Politeness Strategies: Use of *sonkeigo* (respectful language), *kenjōgo* (humble language), *teineigo* (polite language), and plain forms.
- Address and Reference Terms: Use of kinship terms (e.g., *ojīchan*, *okāsan*), personal pronouns (e.g., *watashi*, *ore*, *omae*), title-based address (e.g., *sensei*), and names (with and without suffixes like *-chan*, *-kun*).
- Pragmatic Particles: The use of sentence-final particles (e.g., *ne*, *yo*, *wa*, *na*) that modulate interpersonal stance.
- Code-Switching: Instances of shifting between different speech styles (e.g., from *desu/masu* to plain form) within a single interaction.

The analysis was conducted manually. The transcribed corpus was reviewed line by line, and relevant utterances were coded according to the framework. Coded data were then sorted into categories to identify patterns and frequencies of specific linguistic strategies in constructing hierarchy and kinship relations. The qualitative descriptive aim was to organize these patterns into a coherent summary of the linguistic representation of social structure in the series (Kim et al., 2017).

To ensure rigor and trustworthiness, this study adhered to principles of credibility and confirmability. Credibility was addressed through prolonged engagement with the data via multiple viewings and systematic coding. Confirmability was established by maintaining a clear audit trail, including the detailed transcription process, the structured coding framework, and exemplar extracts for each identified pattern, allowing the analytical process to be transparent and traceable (Nowell et al., 2017). This methodological rigor ensures that the findings are grounded firmly in the data collected from the primary source.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the findings from the qualitative descriptive analysis of the selected *Chibi Maruko-chan* episodes, followed by a discussion that interprets these findings within the established theoretical framework of sociolinguistics and politeness theory. The data are organized into thematic subheadings that reflect the core social structures explored.

3.1. Linguistic Construction of Kinship and Authority in the Nuclear Family

The analysis reveals a consistent pattern where language serves as the primary mechanism for constructing and maintaining kinship roles and hierarchical authority within the Sakura household. Interactions between Maruko and her parents are characterized by a clear asymmetry in politeness strategies.

Maruko almost exclusively employs positive politeness strategies (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Saifudin, 2020) and casual, informal language when addressing her parents. This is evident in her use of direct requests (“*Bu, mau uang jajan*”), complaints (“*Tapi panas banget di luar, Bu*”), and emotional outbursts (“*Bu, pelit!*”). This linguistic style, while informal, functions as a strategy to claim common ground and express emotional closeness, reflecting her role as a dependent child. However, it also indexically signifies her lower status within the family hierarchy, as she is permitted to use such directness precisely because of her position.

In stark contrast, the parents, particularly the mother, consistently utilize negative politeness strategies and more formal language. The mother often self-refers using the formal kinship term “*Ibu*” (Mother) rather than a personal pronoun, a move that continuously reinforces her institutional role within the family rather than her personal identity. Her responses are frequently directives or corrections (“*Kalau sudah selesai main langsung pulang ya*”, “*Tulis saja yang kamu rasakan*”), delivered with negative politeness to soften the imposition and maintain harmony while unequivocally asserting her authority. This aligns with the concept of *uchi*, where the home is a structured hierarchy, not an egalitarian space. The father’s language follows a similar pattern, often employing conditional authority (“*Baiklah, tapi setelah itu langsung belajar*”).

Table 1. Politeness Strategies in Parent-Child Dyads

Speaker	Politeness Strategy	Linguistic Features	Social Function
Maruko (Child)	Positive Politeness	Direct requests, casual complaints, emotional language	Claims closeness, expresses dependence
Mother/Father	Negative Politeness	Formal self-reference (<i>Ibu</i>), directives, conditional permissions	Asserts authority, maintains hierarchy and harmony

Table 1 “*Politeness Strategies in Parent–Child Dyads*” summarizes the key linguistic differences between the child protagonist (Maruko) and her parents in *Chibi Maruko-chan*, as analyzed through the framework of Brown & Levinson’s politeness theory.

3.2. Negotiating Hierarchy and Solidarity among Siblings

The relationship between Maruko and her older sister, Sakurako, presents a more dynamic and negotiated hierarchy. Their interactions fluctuate between solidarity and power assertion, reflected in their linguistic choices.

Maruko typically initiates requests with positive politeness, using the honorific kinship term “*Kak*” (Sis) and polite phrasing (“*Kak, aku boleh pinjam penggarismu?*”). This acknowledges Sakurako’s higher status as an older sibling. Sakurako’s responses, however, often lack reciprocal politeness, frequently being bald on record or dismissive (“*Ambil sendiri*”, “*Iya, iya*”). This reflects her perceived right, as the elder sister, to forego elaborate politeness within the *uchi* context (Santos & Humblé, 2023).

Conflict episodes highlight the tension in this hierarchy. When Maruko violates a norm (entering without knocking), Sakurako shifts to direct, bald-on-record reprimands (“*Maruko! Kenapa masuk tanpa mengetuk?!*”), firmly asserting her authority and correcting behavior. Maruko’s defensive responses (“*Aku cuma mau pinjam pensil!*”) and subsequent accusations (“*Kakak pelit!*”) represent a challenge to this asserted authority, though it remains within the bounds of acceptable sibling conflict.

3.3. Affection and Respect in Cross-Generational Interaction

Interactions with grandparents illustrate a unique blend of affection and respect that softens the typical hierarchical structure. Maruko’s language towards her grandfather, Tomozō, is direct and caring but remains deeply respectful, often manifesting as concern for his well-being (“*Kakek, berat ya? Aku bantu!*”, “*Tapi kakek sudah tua,*

nanti jatuh!”). This represents a positive politeness strategy grounded in genuine affection.

Tomozō’s responses are pivotal. He often refuses help with humble pride (“*Tidak, tidak, Kakek masih kuat!*”), using humor to deflect concerns and maintain his dignity and role as a capable elder (“*Kakek ini masih seperti anak muda*”). This use of humorous negative politeness serves to balance the interaction: he acknowledges her care without fully conceding to the dependent role she implies (Kádár & Haugh, 2013). Ultimately, he often accepts her affection on his terms, gratefully reinforcing the reciprocal bond (“*Baiklah, terima kasih, Maruko. Kamu cucu yang baik*”). This dynamic shows that while hierarchy based on age is intact, it is navigated with a layer of mutual emotional support that distinguishes it from parent-child interactions.

3.4. Peer Interactions: Establishing Egalitarian Solidarity

Outside the family, interactions with peers like Tama-chan and Maruo are characterized by a marked shift in Maruko’s linguistic behavior. The strict hierarchies of the home give way to predominantly bald-on-record speech and positive politeness strategies aimed at building solidarity.

Expressions of fear, confusion, and excitement are stated directly without mitigation (“*Ini menyeramkan sekali...*”, “*Tapi kamu tadi bersama kami...*”, “*Ayo kita buat festival di rumah!*”). This directness indicates a relationship where status is relatively equal and the need to manage face threats is minimized (Carroll, 2001, 2005). Support is offered and received using casual, cooperative language (“*Jangan khawatir, kita bersama-sama*”), strengthening group cohesion. This contrast with familial interactions underscores how the *soto* (out-group) context of friendship allows for a more egalitarian linguistic mode, highlighting the contextual nature of politeness.

3.5. Discussion: Language as a Tool for Social World-Building

The findings demonstrate that Chibi Maruko-chan is not merely a reflection of Japanese social norms but a site where these norms are actively constructed and naturalized through everyday dialogue. The consistent patterning of linguistic choices across episodes validates the series as a rich corpus for sociolinguistic study (McEnery & Hardie, 2011; Ramírez-Verdugo, 2021).

The data strongly supports the theoretical framework of discursive politeness (Culpeper & Haugh, 2021; Kádár & Haugh, 2013). Politeness is not a fixed add-on but is emergent and context-dependent. A single act, like a directive, can be a face-threatening act (FTA) when issued by a parent (“*Pulang langsung belajar*”) but a simple instruction or offer of help when issued between siblings or peers. The core concept of *uchisoto* (Arfianty & Mulyadi, 2024) is powerfully illustrated. The high-boundary, hierarchical *uchi* of the family is maintained through differentiated language use, while the lower-boundary, solidarity-based *soto* of friendships permits greater linguistic equality. Maruko’s character is particularly fascinating as she navigates these boundaries, her language shifting fluidly from subordinate child to equal friend, demonstrating early pragmatic competence.

Furthermore, the study reveals that authority is not monolithic. Parental authority is asserted through negative politeness and formality, elder sibling authority through bald-on-record directives, and grandparental authority is softened by humor and affection. This nuanced portrayal suggests that social hierarchy, even within a traditionally structured society, is multifaceted and managed through a complex repertoire of linguistic strategies.

3.6. Implications for Further Research

This study could be extended by a comparative analysis with a contemporary slice-of-life anime to investigate evolving perceptions of family hierarchy and politeness in modern Japan. Additionally, a multimodal analysis incorporating paralinguistic features (e.g., tone, pitch) and non-verbal cues (e.g., body language, animation style) could provide an even deeper understanding of how social relationships are co-constructed in animated media.

The findings of this research both support and extend the trajectory of previous work in media linguistics and Japanese sociolinguistics. This analysis strongly corroborates prior studies by scholars such as Lasseter (2021) and Wu & Song (2023), who posit that slice-of-life anime serves as a valid repository of naturalistic dialogue that reflects and reproduces cultural norms. Specifically, it validates Shen & Yao’s (2022) observations on how linguistic shifts demarcate familial boundaries by providing a detailed, empirical mapping of those shifts within the *uchi* of the Sakura household. However, this article moves beyond previous thematic or character-based studies of Chibi

Maruko-chan by systematically isolating and categorizing the micro-linguistic mechanisms—honorifics, address terms, and politeness strategies—that actively construct its social world. In doing so, it addresses the identified gap in the literature, offering a rigorous, discourse-analytic confirmation that the series does not merely depict Japanese social hierarchy but discursively enacts and naturalizes it through everyday interaction, thereby providing a more granular contribution to the fields of sociolinguistics and media studies than earlier, more generalized cultural analyses.

4. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that *Chibi Maruko-chan* acts as a sophisticated discursive site where the linguistic constructs of social hierarchy and kinship are dynamically enacted and naturalized. The analysis provides clear answers to the research objectives, revealing that social hierarchy is constructed through an asymmetry in politeness strategies, with children using positive politeness to claim closeness and authority figures using negative politeness and direct directives to assert authority, while kinship roles within the *uchi* (in-group) are reinforced through differentiated address terms and linguistic deference. Maruko's occasional subversion of these norms highlights the negotiated nature of these interactions without fundamentally challenging the social order, portraying a nuanced sense of childhood agency.

The implications of this research are twofold: it validates slice-of-life anime as a legitimate source for empirical sociolinguistic analysis, contributing to discussions on language and social power, and it illuminates for a general audience how a beloved cultural artifact educates viewers on complex social codes. For future research, a comparative analysis with contemporary anime, a multimodal examination of paralinguistic cues, and a cross-cultural pragmatic study of translation choices are recommended to further explore the transmission and evolution of these sociolinguistic norms.

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