

# Omitting the decision-maker

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**T**he New Year having just opened, I'm sure many of you have made New Year's resolutions—that is, you made a decision. Today, I'd like to discuss comparative views on decision-making.

There are a good number of Japanese words that just cannot be translated into English accurately. Most of such words include a certain mind-set that does not exist, or scarcely exists, in English, and therefore, they are likely to lead us into an arena where interesting cultural insights may be found.

The word I would like to discuss today is the Japanese verb *kimaru*.

Before getting too far into the meaning of *kimaru*, let's note its twin, the verb *kimeru*, which means "to decide something." *Kimaru* is an intransitive partner to the transitive verb *kimeru*.

But first let's take a moment to clarify the meanings of "transitive" and "intransitive."

A transitive verb describes a situation as "someone or something does something affecting an object." Intransitive verbs, on the other hand, treat the subject as though it took the action voluntarily.

When you say "I stopped" (intransitive), you voluntarily describe yourself as having made the stopping action yourself. When you say "the car stopped" (also intransitive), you are speaking as though the car had its own will to stop.

However, when you say "the car stopped," the fact is that it was the driver of the car who made it stop. Likewise, strictly speaking, if you say "the door opens," it does not open by itself. There must be a cause for the phenomenon—i.e. it is opened by someone or something, even if only the wind.

Most English verbs can be used both intransitively and transitively. When the verb has an object, it is transitive; when there is no object, the verb is intransitive—it's as simple as that. So, even if the object is obvious, you'd still use a pronoun, such as "it" or "them," to ensure you are using the verb transitively: "I stopped it," for instance, or "I opened them."

In contrast with English, Japanese does not require any object if it is obvious. So, to distinguish between transitive and intransitive, the language has pairs of verbs that sound similar; hence, *tomaru* for "the car stops" and *tomeru* for "I stop it (e.g. a car)."

Another example is *aku* for "the door opens" and *akeru* for "I open it (e.g. the door)." This is comparable to a limited number of English verb pairs, such as lie/lay, sit/seat and rise/raise. Such look-

alike pairs exist in Japanese for most verbs.

Now, let me come back to our original word, *kimeru*. While *kimeru* means "I decide something (such as a rule, assignment or marriage)," *kimaru* refers to a decision (?) that "makes itself," so to speak. When a Japanese person says "*X ga kimatta*," he is saying that X has been decided without making any comment whatsoever about people who may have been involved in the decision-making process.

You might argue that in English you would say "X has been decided." I, however, maintain that even in this passive voice statement, English does still imply a decision-maker; you can in fact mention the decision-maker by saying "X has been decided *by* the committee." As compared with this, the Japanese statement, *X ga kimatta*, completely ignores any decision-maker. Things are presented as if the "decision" was a natural, involuntary occurrence, like fruit ripening.

In the English-language mind-set or worldview, for anything to be decided, it is only natural that someone must have decided it. There must always be a decision-maker and that is why there is no intransitive twin for "decide" to complete a word pair in the manner of rise/raise. Additionally, that is why "decide" cannot be used intransitively, as in "this rule decides."

But, let us think for a moment. Does "deciding" really flow exclusively from the sole authority of a "decision-maker"?

When you think about it, for anything to be decided, the circumstances must be right and ripe. The situation must have matured so that a "decision" can occur. It is not just a "decision-maker" alone that "decides" things. The Japanese language incorporates these other aspects of "decision-making," and is equipped to express them.

Like anything else, however, this Japanese view has negative as well as positive aspects. For one, the Japanese view can overlook the responsibility of the decision-maker, who frequently cannot be identified. In many social, economic, political and business contexts, that means it is often difficult to identify the responsible people; things are left ambiguous. A situation that U.S. society, for instance, would never allow is often tolerated and taken to be a case of *shikataganai* ("it can't be helped").

Aspects of this mind-set are ever-present in Japanese. Recently, for example, it has become more common for salesclerks to say "¥1,000 *ni natte orimasu*" (literally, "It has become, and is, ¥1,000") in response to the question "How much is it?" In this way a price is presented as a natural occurrence rather than as a shop's volitional decision on what to charge. Japanese people take this to be more polite and acceptable, but in fact it stakes out a position that allows no room for negotiation.

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