

Speaking freely vs ‘the rules’

By Shigekatsu Yamauchi

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Sometimes when people study foreign languages they come to believe there is only one “correct” way of saying things. As students they are constantly learning rules and being corrected, so it is easy to understand why this happens.

In today’s column, I’d like to loosen you up a little, set you free, at least in a manner of speaking.

I recall a chat I had with a young American woman who was sent to a local high school in Japan to be an assistant English teacher. She said she was often shown a number of similar English sentences by Japanese teachers of English and asked which sentence was correct. When she chose several, saying that all were correct but had different nuances, the teachers would push her to choose the “most correct” sentence.

Understandably, she was at a loss for what to say.

As a Japanese, I think we are particularly prone to this tendency. Perhaps it is because we grew up with multiple-choice school tests; tests that always had “one correct answer.” There often seems to be a mind-set, not only among teachers of English, but also among teachers of Japanese, that there is always only one correct answer.

If you have already begun studying Japanese, you surely have been taught some rules, probably including the following:

1) Use *arigatō gozaimasu* when thanking someone for a current deed, and *arigatō gozaimashita* for past deeds.

2) Use the particle *ni* for places where something is located, but *de* for places where some activity occurs.

3) *Arimasu* is used for inanimate objects, while *imasu* is for animate objects.

4) When using time words, you generally use *ni*, like *ichiji ni* (at one o’clock), *kayōbi ni* (on Tuesday), etc.. But some time words do not take the particle *ni*, like *mainichi* (every day) and *asa* (morning).

5) You must use the honorific or polite form when addressing superiors (teachers, presidents, etc).

Rules of this type are unkind to learners, and can even be misleading. Let me give you my ideas regarding the above “rules.”

1) It is safer to say that *arigatō gozaimasu* is used when you give thanks for something that is (being) done, and to use *arigatō gozaimashita* for something that has already been done. Even so, this “rule” is still inadequate: I believe it is up to your subjective judgment whether the “something” is finished or unfinished.

2) This rule is true in principle. Most other languages do not make this kind of distinction in relation to location, so foreign learners of Japanese need to make conscious efforts to correctly distinguish between these particles. However, there are situations where both particles are possible. An example

is “*kono biru no mae ni/de kuruma o tomemashita*” (I stopped the car in front of this building). If you regard “stopping” as an action, *de* is more appropriate. But if your focus is on the place where the car is located after stopping, *ni* is appropriate.

3) This rule is essentially accurate, but misses an important point. If you say “*asoko ni kuruma ga imasu*,” your Japanese teacher would tell you you should say “*asoko ni kuruma ga arimasu*.” But what you have said is fine, so long as you understand that the listener would take it that in your mind cars are “alive,” which is quite nice in fact. Many Japanese children use *imasu* for cars, trains, etc., which charmingly reflects their world view.

4) Your kind Japanese instructor might give you a chart organizing all the time words: those which take *ni*; those which do not; those which can be used with or without. I would simply say that if you envisage time in your mind as having a flow, and want to indicate a certain point in that flow, then use *ni*. In situations where you aren’t thinking of locating a point in the flow of time, don’t use *ni*. Words like the current time, date, month, year, etc., are usually taken to be terms indicating a point in the flow of time, but words like *asa* (morning), *yoru* (evening, night), etc. are not. I hold, however, that this is not a matter of correct or incorrect, but a matter of how you conceptualize the word in an actual context. In my neighborhood, there is a sign which says “*Yoru ni gomi o dasanai de kudasai*” (Don’t put out your garbage at night). In the author’s mind, there was a notion of a flow of time like: morning—daytime—afternoon—evening—night—morning, and he/she used “*yoru ni*” to indicate a specific point in that flow. Keep in mind, many Japanese would not use *ni* here.

5) If you think you MUST use honorific or polite Japanese to your seniors, you are wrong. Of course, you don’t have to. Honorific or polite forms are used to show respect to a person. It is ultimately up to you whether or not to use the respect-displaying forms. However, keep in mind that, like all societies and cultures, there are protocols by which Japanese society operates. You are encouraged to do your best to stick close to these to function and operate optimally in Japanese society.

Let me ask you a question: When you say you write letters using a PC, would you say you write letters *on* or *with* the PC? Both these prepositions are used in this situation by natives English speakers. It seems a conceptual difference: If you think a PC is a substitute for paper, you write “on” the PC; if, in your mind, PCs replace the pen, you use “with.” Once again, usage reflects your subjective mind, and is not a question of “correct” or “incorrect.”

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