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Misuse or evolution? No. 33

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Lately I have been wondering how many Japanese these days would feel something was wrong if they heard someone say, "Akiko o suki" ("I like Akiko") or "Kimi o hoshii" ("I want you").

I imagine the majority would probably say: "Those sentences are wrong. They should be 'Akiko ga suki' and 'Kimi ga hoshii,' to be correct." And yet, I'm pretty sure that many of the same people make the very same usage "mistake" themselves. I have seen and heard countless examples of this "misuse" in speeches and writings by respectable people of all ages.

Suki is not a verb, but a noun predicate (some call it a *na*-adjective). *Hoshii* is an adjective. In traditional grammar the particle *o* cannot be used with these because *o* is used to indicate the thing upon which the *action* acts; many boldly call it an object indicator, even.

Suki, however, is certainly not an action. It is a noun form of *suku*, which is a verb. So, technically it is possible to say "Akiko o suku" ("I like Akiko"), but culturally this is not acceptable because, in Japanese, liking is perceived to be something that naturally occurs. It's not a volitional action. In fact, the verb *suku* is rarely used. Similarly, *hoshii* or wanting is not an action, either, but refers to a state of mind.

Whether *suki* or *hoshii*, the context involves two parties if we are talking about people we like or want; meaning the person who likes or wants and the person who is liked or wanted. In English, this is all very straightforwardly expressed by subject and object.

In this particular respect, traditional Japanese is, at heart, quite ambiguous. The two persons are not expressed in a subject-object relationship, but as the subject matter(s) involved in the state. So, strictly speaking, unless we have a clear context, who likes or wants whom cannot be identified.

Given all this, it seems quite reasonable that people would start using *o* with *suki* and *hoshii*. The usage makes the old, original ambiguity disappear. Personally, I believe this evolution has occurred due to the influence of English grammar, which is universally studied in Japanese schools. Even though this usage is regarded as wrong by traditional grammarians, I'm quite sure that it will remain because it has a practical reason for being.

Another controversial usage of verbs is what is called "*ra*-omission." Examples: *mireru* instead of *mirareru* ("can see"), tabereru instead of *taberareru* ("can eat"). Traditional grammarians see the *ra*-omitted forms as incorrect. Let's look at the practical validity of this "grammatical progress."

Japanese has, basically, two types of verbs: "consonant verbs" (such as *nom-u, kak-u* and *hanas-u*) and "vowel verbs" (such as *tabe-ru, mi-ru* and *iki-ru*). The labels come from the root forms of the verbs: The former group end in consonants (m, k, and s in the above examples) while those of the latter end in vowels (e or i, as seen above). To make the following explanation simpler, I'll use *nom-u* (to drink) to represent the former group and *tabe-ru* (to eat) to represent the latter.

Nom-u has a form, *nom-areru*, which can mean: can drink (potential); is drunk (passive); and someone honorably drinks (honorific-polite). Similarly, *tabe-ru* has a form, *tabe-rareru*, which can mean: can eat (potential); is eaten (passive); and someone honorably eats (honorific-polite).

For *nom-u* (consonant verbs), *nom-eru* (omitting "ar") is exclusively used with the potential form ("can drink"); the connotation of "can" is contained in the [e] sound. For *tabe-ru*, therefore, we might expect *tabe-eru* to be the potential form, but to avoid back-to-back vowels [ee], an additional [r] is added, yielding *tabe-reru*.

Given that *nom-u*'s potential form is *nom-eru* (which is not controversial grammar), *tabe-ru*'s potential form could arguably be *tabe-reru* (which is controversial). The argument is strengthened when we consider that the potential form is the most frequently used of the three different connotations.

Although the person who started using the "*ra*-omitted" form did so not for grammatical reasons, but simply for ease-of-use considerations, the usage can be justified. I'm sure it's here to stay.

Here, let me ask if you think the following English sentences are correct:

1) I'll go get him.

2) If I was you, I wouldn't do that.

3) Who would you like to meet?

I imagine most of my readers feel comfortable with all of these, but strict grammarians, as well as Japanese teachers of English, would say they are all wrong:

1) Two main verbs cannot be placed one after another without a conjunction, so it should be "I'll go and get him" or "I'll go to get him."

2) Correct traditional grammar here is "If I were you" using the subjunctive mood.

3) The word "who" has three cases: 'who,' the subjective case; 'whose,' the possessive case; and 'whom,' the objective case. In this sentence the word is the object of "meet." So, it should be "Whom would you like to meet?"

Nevertheless, people use all of these nowadays, and now that the usages have settled in, it is basically impossible to reverse them. At this point it's the grammar that needs to change, not the language, because language is alive and constantly evolving, and grammar should reflect this.

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