

# 'Opening' the New Year

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I'm sure by now you have given your New Year greetings to many people. The English New Year's greeting is straightforward: you express your wish that your counterpart have a happy New Year. You might even wonder what else one could possibly say on such an occasion. French people wish others a "bonne année" (good year), and Germans a "glueckliches neues Jahr" (happy new year), both of which are much the same as their English equivalent. Even in Chinese the greeting is similar: "xin nian kuai le" ("[Have a] joyful new year").

As readers of my column and others with exposure to Japan will guess, the Japanese approach is quite different.

Those of you living in Japan must have heard Japanese people saying "*Akemashite omedeto gozaimasu.*" Let's explore what this phrase actually means.

*Akemashite* is the *te*-form (a kind of gerund for Japanese verbs) of the verb *akemasu*. In turn, *akemasu*, is the distal-style (or polite style) of the verb *akeru*, which is an archaic verb meaning "[day/year] opens or breaks." In this case, the New Year part of the phrase is implied, so *akemashite* literally translates as "[The New Year] having opened" or "[The New Year] has opened and..."

What does the rest of the Japanese expression, *omedeto gozaimasu*, remind you of? Probably *ohayo gozaimasu* and *arigato gozaimasu* come to mind as similar-sounding phrases.

Let's look at *ohayo gozaimasu*, which people usually translate as "good morning." As loyal readers may remember, *ohayo gozaimasu* actually includes no reference to any words that mean "morning." It is merely a polite form of *hayai desu*, which means "it is or you are early." In fact, the phrase is used not just for morning greetings but also for greetings later in the day, depending on the custom of the group. Among actors, restaurant staff and the like—people who normally start work late—*ohayo gozaimasu* is commonly heard, even at night. Dry as the English translation may sound, "it is [or you are] early" becomes a warm phrase of greeting because it is packaged in a polite format, just like a nicely packaged gift conveys the emotions in a gift-giver's heart.

Similarly, *arigato gozaimasu* is a polite alternative of *arigatai desu*, meaning "it is difficult-to-be" or "it is rare." Dry as this phrase may seem in its meaning, again because of being specially packaged in a polite format, it conveys the speaker's warmth and gratitude.

With those two phrases better understood, let's return to *omedeto gozaimasu*. The original phrase, before it is given its "polite packaging," is *medetai desu*. *Medetai* literally translates as something like "worthy of admiration or praise" or "congratulatory." In other words, *Akemashite omedeto gozaimasu* literally translates to something like "[The New Year] has opened and it is admiration-worthy." We could say that it implies something close to "An admirable New Year has opened [and I bear good wishes for you]." This is a far cry from "wishing you a happy New Year." Again, it is the polite packaging—conversion of the adjective statement into a polite form—that conveys the warmth one carries in one's heart toward the counterpart observing the occasion.

Japanese language tends to describe feelings more objectively than subjectively, and by way of packaging using a polite form, the objective message functions to convey the emotional contents of people's hearts. English speakers frequently start sentences with things like: "I hope..."; "I wish..."; "I'm afraid..."; etc. In contrast, Japanese speakers tend to say, politely, "It is..." This approach indirectly conveys the speaker's feelings.

This style of communication is not unique to Japanese, of course. Even in English, one hears objective descriptions of emotion like "It is a great pleasure..." or "The pleasure is all mine." These phrases, however, are more formal than more frequently used statements like "I am pleased..." Paralleling English, Japanese of late say "*Yoi toshio*" or "[Have] a good year"—a phrase that sounds less formal than the traditional one and one which I am sure is a relatively recent product of English influence.

*Akemashite omedeto gozaimasu* is often followed by *honnen mo dozo yoroshiku onegaishimasu*. I'm sure you are already familiar with at least parts of this phrase. Even if you have only studied a little bit of Japanese, your teacher surely taught you how to introduce yourself. In that case, didn't you use the last part of this phrase after mentioning your name? For this reason, you may have erroneously equated it to "I'm pleased to meet you."

Let's look more closely. *Honnen* is a formal way of saying *kotoshi* or "this year," so *honnen mo* just means "this year as well." *Dozo*, as many of you know, is close to the English word "please" when the latter is used to offer something. *Yoroshiku* is an adverbial form of the adjective *yoroshii*, which is a polite alternative of *yoi*, meaning "good." So, *yoroshiku* translates to "goodly, well or favorably." *Onegaishimasu* is a very widely used humble-polite verb of request. Together, "*honnen mo dozo yoroshiku onegaishimasu*" means something like "I [humbly] request [you to treat me] favorably this year as well, please."

I will need at least one more column to discuss the mentality behind "*dozo yoroshiku onegaishimasu.*"

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