

Sentiment wrapped in grammar

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Sophisticated packaging is one of the things foreigners living in Japan find amazing, extravagant even. For environmental reasons “overpackaging” is decreasing, but there is still clearly a strong cultural desire to wrap things in a sophisticated way.

Why do we wrap things? To protect the contents? To carry them more easily? To some extent, of course, both must be true. These are physical and practical reasons for wrapping and packaging.

Perhaps you have begun preparing Christmas presents already. Thinking about why we wrap Christmas presents, we find wrapping done for reasons beyond physical and practical ones. Clearly gift wrapping has psychological or spiritual implications. Gifts are wrapped nicely to show abstract qualities, such as goodwill, love and care, that accompany the physical gifts. Think of a time you gave a beautifully wrapped gift; now, compare that with a situation where you gave something without wrapping it. You’ll likely agree that wrapping makes the gift come more from the heart.

The same effect applies in the use of the Japanese language.

In a previous article, I covered how *arigatō gozaimasu* (generally translated as “thank you”), for instance, does not include any words of gratitude, but translates literally as “it is difficult-to-exist” or “it is rare.” Similarly, *ohayō gozaimasu* merely means “it is early.” Nevertheless, the phrases convey the speaker’s gratitude or goodwill, respectively.

The secret here is found in the same effect we get from wrapping. The fundamental meanings of “it is rare” and “it is early” are *wrapped* in a “grammatical package.” When so wrapped, they deliver the speaker’s gratitude and goodwill, beyond the literal meanings of the words.

If you use this form with other adjectives, they become nice ways of showing concern or thoughtfulness toward your counterpart. These patterns demonstrate that you are showing more feeling toward the other. For example, *oatsū gozaimasu* (“it is hot”). By virtue of using this polite packaging, you are actually expressing your consideration.

Another grammatical package is seen in phrases such as *go-chisō-sama* and *o-tsukare-sama*. *Go* and *o* are polite prefixes; *sama* is the original word for *san*, used after a person’s name to show respect. The words sandwiched between the prefix and the title are “feast” (*chisō*) and “fatigue” (*tsukare*), respectively. Although literal translations are next to impossible, these phrases represent a way to offer thanks for food and to acknowledge or commiserate with another person for their hard work. Again, rather than being verbalized in words of gratitude or commiseration, feelings are conveyed by being

“wrapped.” Other examples of this type of package include: *osewa-sama* (“sorry for your trouble”), *go-kurō-sama* (“thank you for your hard work”), *go-shūshō-sama* (“my condolences”) and *o-kage-sama* (“thank you for your concern”).

Another grammatical package is the honorific form, such as *o-hanashi ni naru* (“honorably speak”) or *o-kiki ni naru* (“honorably ask”). Looking at the verbs’ humble forms *o-hanashi suru* (“humbly speak”) and *o-kiki suru*, (“humbly ask”) we can really only translate them as “speak” or “ask.” Unless we tack on the cumbersome “honorably” or “humbly,” the honorific and humble verb forms would translate the same way! But in Japanese, simply putting the verb into the different forms creates the connotation of respect or humility. The packaging of the words shows your emotional stance.

How might this work in a specific scenario? Imagine the following: A mother is waiting to take her little son out, and he is in his room playing Nintendo. If she says “*sorosoro dekakeru kara...*” (“we’ll get going, so...”), he knows that he still has some time to play. If she says, in the same calm voice, “*sorosoro dekakeru n da kara...*” (“we’ll get going, so...”), he knows that he had better finish up right away! How does he know this?

The second declaration translates literally as “It’s that we’ll get going, so...,” but could more correctly be translated as “Come on! Hurry up! We’re going!” More realistically, if it were English, she could well be shouting at him. This is, again, packaging.

First a brief grammatical review: The particle *kara* combines the first clause (the reason) with the next clause (its outcome). The *n da* (when not followed by *kara*) changes the preceding clause into a noun clause; this subtly offers an explanation or reason for something. The two forms combined express a reason along with, typically, frustration or joy. Again, the form contains emotion.

Unlike the English subjunctive mood, where the politeness comes from an assumed, yet unspoken phrase (generally “if you don’t mind,” as in “I would like to go, if you don’t mind”), Japanese doesn’t use any particular words, but form, to hint at hidden meanings.

In any package culture there is the risk of packaging as facade. Perhaps you once received an extravagant gift but did not feel it reflected the feelings of the giver. Combined with Japanese *giri* (obligations requiring social demonstration) packaging sometimes becomes formality without substance.

This also happens in the language, with many formal phrases used to mean virtually nothing. Take, for example the recitations heard at McDonald’s. Formal, politely packaged phrases, they are said without feeling.

That reminds me: A long time ago, on a business trip to New York, I made an operator-assisted call to London. At the end of our short conversation, the operator said something too quickly for me to catch. I said “Pardon?” Then, she was so kind as to stress every single word most distinctly, saying, “I said, ‘THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR USING AT&T.’”

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