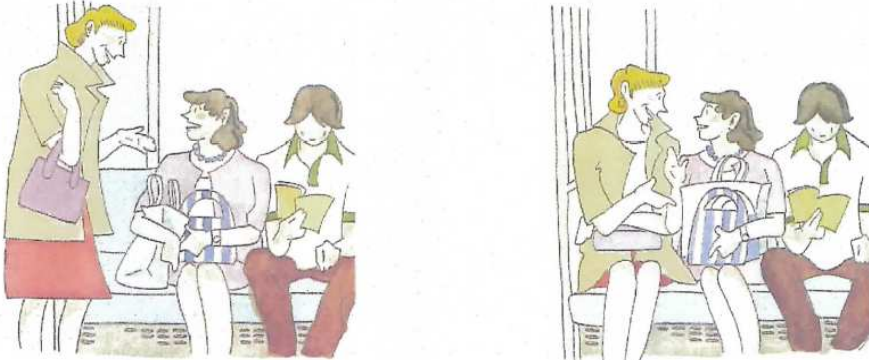


日本語流 3

The Nihongo Way 3

< Today's dialogue >

You (U) get on a train to find most seats occupied. There is an empty seat, but a Japanese woman (J) sitting next to it has left a bag partly on it.



U: あのう、すみません。 <i>Anô, Sumimasen</i>	U: どうもありがとうございます。 <i>Dômo arigatô gozaimasu.</i>
J: はい? <i>Hai?</i>	J: いいえ、どういたしまして。 どうもすみませんでした。 <i>Iie, dô itashimashite. Dômo sumimasen deshita.</i>
U: ここ、いいでしょうか。 <i>Koko ii deshô ka?</i>	U: いいえ。 <i>Iie.</i>
J: あ、ごめんなさい。 ええ、いいですよ。 どうぞ、どうぞ。 <i>A, gomennasai. Ee, ii desu yo. Dôzo, dôzo.</i>	

After greetings and before moving on to more substantive Japanese lessons, I need to introduce a few more everyday phrases. This lesson will conclude the very earliest steps of this long Nihongo journey.

From now on, in all dialogues, I will assume situations where you, a foreigner in Japan, need to speak in Japanese to a Japanese person. In fact, when you practice these dialogues, it's best to practice with a native, to ensure that pronunciation, gestures and timing are "Japanese" in nature.

DIALOGUE OVERVIEW

The dialogues on the top may be translated as:

U: Um, excuse me.

J: Yes?

U: May I sit here? [lit. Would this place be good (for me to occupy)?]

J: Oh, pardon me. Sure, you may. [lit. It is good]. Please go ahead.

U: Thank you very much. [lit. It is rare in every way]

J: Oh, no. You're welcome. [lit. What have I done (to deserve such words)?]

I'm very sorry. [lit. It did not end. I.e., I was indebted]

U: Don't mention it.

When talking to strangers in Japan, it is best to start with “*Sumimasen*” before asking your question. Especially when you obviously look like a foreign person, many Japanese automatically assume that you will be speaking English. You will find that some people will not hear you even if you are speaking beautiful Japanese – their ears are not expecting Japanese, and they don't “hear” it. Saying “*Sumimasen*” will allow the listener to tune in, informing that you are in fact speaking Japanese.

VOCABULARY FOCUS

Sumimasen

Excuse me, I'm sorry, Pardon me, etc.

This is a negative form of the verb “*sumimasu*” which means “it ends.” So, “*sumimasen*” literally means “it does not end,” and by extension “I'm indebted.” “*Sumimasen deshita*” is the past, or perfective, form of “*sumimasen*.” It literally translates as “it did not end” or “I was indebted,” which actually means “I'm sorry for what happened.”

Koko

Here, this place

Koko, *soko*, *asoko* and *doko* is one of the so-called *ko-so-a-do* series of words. *Koko* refers to the place where the speaker is; *soko*, the place where the counterpart is; *asoko*, the place where a third person is; and *doko*, an interrogative meaning “which place” or “where.”

Ii

Good, fine, OK

No doubt this is the adjective that is most frequently used in Japanese. “*Ii desu*” means “It is good” or “You may do so.” It does not mean “It tastes good,” for which you need another adjective “*oishii desu*.”

Sentence-particles

Sentence-final particles are instrumental words that are added at the ends of sentences. They change or modify the mode of the entire sentence.

ka - a question marker

To make a question in Japanese is easy: Just add *ka* to the end of the sentence.

yo – a new information marker

When Japanese think they are giving new information to the counterpart, they often add *yo* to the end of the sentence, sometimes as a warning or reiteration.

Yo often gives a similar effect to “you see,” “you know” or “I tell you” as used at the end of sentences in English.

CULTURE FOCUS

When writing personal notes, Japanese almost always begin with an apology, most likely to apologize for not writing sooner. Likewise, when talking, Japanese tend to start with an apology, too, probably to account for the idea that they are interrupting or inconveniencing the counterpart.

Thus, Japanese has many words of apology; to name a few: *sumimasen*; *gomennasai*, *mooshiwake-arimasen*, *shitsurei-shimashita*, *oyurushi-kudasai*.

English also has quite a few words of apology, such as: “Excuse me,” “I’m sorry,” “Pardon me,” “I apologize,” and “Please forgive me.”

As reflected in the abundance of such words, on a personal level I know that English speakers do apologize a fair amount. In business contexts, however, English speakers apologize less than the Japanese. In business situations, the Japanese are more prone to giving apologies, both in good and bad senses.

OTHER EXAMPLES

ごめんなさい。 *Gomennasai*.

Pardon me, please.

This is an abbreviation of *Gomennasaimase*, which is a polite imperative, therefore a request, for asking for pardon.

申し訳ありません。 *Mooshiwake-arimasen*.

I have no excuse.

The Japanese word for “excuse” is *iiwake*, literally “reason to say” (*ii* is a stem of the verb *iu*, and *wake* means “reason.”) The humble-polite alternative verb for “*iu*” is “*moosu*” whose stem is *mooshi*. This addition of humility is what makes it a polite apology.

失礼しました。 *Shitsurei-shimashita*.

I was/acted rude.

Shitsurei is a word borrowed from Chinese that literally means “lose courtesy.”