

日本語流 30

The Nihongo Way 30

< Today's dialogue >

At a cafe, you (U) are chatting with a Japanese friend (J) of yours.



U: ゆうべうちの近くの商店街に行ったら、とても賑やかだったよ。①
Yûbe uchi no chikaku no shôtengai ni ittara, totemo niyayaka datta yo.

J: ああ、いま夏祭りの季節だからね。お祭りは好き？
Â, ima natsumatsuri no kisetsu da kara, ne. Omatsuri wa suki?

U: うん、大好き。
Un, daisuki.

J: じゃ、来週末、上野公園に行ったら？②
Ja, raishûmatsu Ueno Kôen ni ittara?

U: 何があるの？
Nani ga aru no?

J: 行ったらわかるけど、大道芸やコンサートなど、いろんなことやるよ。③
 それに盆栽や骨董品なんかも売ってる。
Ittara wakaru kedo, daidôgei ya konsâto nado, ironna koto yatteru yo.

Soreni, bonsai ya kottôhin nanka mo utteru.

U: 盆栽は知ってるけど、「コッターヒン」って？
Bonsai wa shitteru kedo, "kottôhin" tte?

J: あ、antiqueのこと。
A, "antique" no koto.

As we covered some of how cause-and-effect is expressed in Japanese last month, I'd like to discuss conditions precedent in this column. Please do not jump to the conclusion that this column alone describes "if" in Japanese. Things are not quite so simple.

DIALOGUE OVERVIEW

U: When I went to the shopping arcade near my house last night, I found it very lively there.

J: Oh, because it's the summer festival season now.

Do you like festivals?

U: Yeah, I love them.

J: Then, why don't you go to Ueno Park next weekend?

U: What'll be there?

J: You'll know when you get there; they'll be doing all sorts of things, like street performances and concerts. Also, they'll be selling things like bonsai and kottôhin.

U: I know bonsai, but what are "kottôhin"?

J: Oh, it means "antiques."

VOCABULARY FOCUS

Nouns

daidôgei street performance

kisetsu season

konsâto concert

matsuri festival

natsu summer

nigiyaka lively

raishûmatsu next weekend

shôtengai shopping arcade

Verbs

uru sell

yaru do [colloquial]

Prenominals

ironna-X various X [contraction of *iroirona*]

Others

nado etc., and the like

nanka etc. , and the like [casual]

GRAMMAR FOCUS

(1) Condition Precedent: *V-tara*

As you know, the perfective form of the verb *iku* (go) is *itta*. Here it is followed by *ra* to make *ittara*. This *ra* functions as something like “then” in English; when added here, it means something like “one has gone and then (here is what happened/will happen).” So:

① *Shôtengai ni ittara, totemo nigiyaka datta.*

{I went to the shopping arcade, and then it was very lively.}

(When I went to the shopping arcade, I found it very lively there.)*

* You may wonder what would be the difference if you said:

Shôtengai ni itta toki,...

This means “(At the time) when I went to the shopping arcade...” So, it indicates a time, not a condition precedent. Note that English does not clearly distinguish these two, with “when...” performing both functions.

② *Ueno Kôen ni ittara?**

{You have gone to the Ueno Park; then, (how would that be)?}

{If you have gone to the Ueno Park, (how would that be)?}

(Why don't you go to Ueno Park?)

* This is an abbreviation of “Ueno Kôen ni ittara, dô?” Even though incomplete, this casual form is common for making suggestions. Examples include:

Sensei ni kiitemitara?

(Why don't you ask your teacher and see?)

Tomodachi ni hanashitara?

(Why don't you talk to your friend?)

③ *Ittara wakaru.*

{You have gone; then, you'll understand.}

(You will know if you get there.)

Now you know that this form connects to the subsequent main clause as a condition precedent. It is easy to see how it sometimes translates into an if-clause. However, examples ① and ② show that this is not always the case. Rather than equate “-tara” with “if” in English, you must grasp its essential meaning: *X-tara Y* (supposing/given X, then Y).

(2) Giving examples: *A ya B ya C nado/nanka*

“A to B to C” means “A, B and C” – and nothing else. In our communications, however, we often want to include things of similar type. In these cases, *ya* is very handy for connecting the selected items. If you wish to add “etc,” then you can just put *nado* after the last item.

In casual speech these days *nanka* is increasingly used instead of *nado*.

CULTURE FOCUS

“like” (English) vs. “nanka” (Japanese)

You may have noticed frequent use of “like” in casual English speech these days, like:

“I, like, hate, like, to go to a party and, like, you know, not know anyone there.”

Quite interestingly, in today’s casual Japanese speech, especially among young people, *nanka* is doing similar work:

“Watashi nanka pati nanka itte, tomodachi nanka inakute, nanka suki janakute...”

The psychology behind these usages seems to be avoidance of precise statements, keeping things unclear and open-ended. Are young people today moving towards imprecision on both sides of the Pacific?