

日本語流 4

The Nihongo Way 4

< Today's dialogue >

You (U) are visiting a Japanese friend (J) at her home around 3 o'clock in the afternoon. J offers U something Japanese to eat.



J: 食べませんか。 <i>Tabemasen ka?</i>	J: おまんじゅう? 甘いですか。 <i>Omanjû? Amai desu ka?</i>	J: どうですか。 <i>Dô desu ka?</i>
U: 何ですか。 <i>Nan desu ka?</i>	U: ええ、甘いですよ。どうぞ。 <i>Ee, amai desu yo. Dôzo.</i>	U: とてもおいしいです。 <i>Totemo oishii desu.</i>
J: おまんじゅうです。 <i>Omanjû desu.</i>	J: ありがとうございます。いただきます。 <i>Arigatô gozaimasu. Itadakimasu.</i>	J: そうですか。よかったです。 <i>Sô desu ka. Yokatta desu.</i>

Today's focus is on the core of this language, which is the answer to the question, "what constitutes a valid Japanese sentence in its shortest form?" In English, a valid sentence requires a subject and a verb as its minimum requirements. You might think this a universal rule for all languages; Japanese, however, has no such rule.

DIALOGUE OVERVIEW

Here is an English translation of the dialogue.

J: Would you like to have some? [lit. Won't you eat?]

U: What is it?

J: It's *omanju*.

U: *Omanju*? Is it sweet?

J: Yes, it is. Please (go ahead).

U: Thank you very much. [lit. It is rare.] I'll have some. [lit. I humbly accept.]

J: How do you like it? [lit. How is it?]

U: It tastes very good. [lit. It is very tasty.]

J: Is that so. I'm glad you liked it. [lit. It was good.]

Similarly to English custom, the Japanese have a traditional afternoon tea time called "oyatsu." Tea with *okashi* (cake) or similar snacks are offered for *oyatsu*. As it is traditionally served around 3 o'clock ("san-ji") some call it "*osanji*" also.

VOCABULARY FOCUS

Verbs

The verbs that appear in the dialogue are *tabemasu* and *itadakimasu*.

tabemasu: eat

itadakimasu: (humbly) accept

Adjectives

The adjectives that appear in the dialog are *amai*, *oishii* and *yoi*.

amai: is sweet (in taste)

oishii: is delicious, tasty

yoi: is good [In the dialog, the perfective form, *yokatta* (was good), is used.]

Nouns

omanju: Japanese cake with sweet bean jam inside

sô: so, the way you say/do

Nouns (interrogative)

nan: what [abbreviation of *nani*]

dô: how, what way

GRAMMAR FOCUS

1. Three types of sentence

The dialog contains three types of Japanese sentence: (i) Verb sentence, (ii) Adjective sentence, and (iii) Noun sentence. Keep in mind the three “word classes” and distinguish them whenever you learn a new word. Each word class has distinctive behavioral patterns. Importantly, these patterns are highly consistent in Japanese.

In future Lessons, I’ll show how each type behaves. The beauty is that once you identify the word class, you can then control your language in its use.

2. No subject

Look again at the English equivalents to the dialogue. Every sentence has a subject and a verb because these are the English language’s minimum requirements for forming a sentence. In contrast, a Japanese verb is not just a word itself: it also constitutes a perfectly valid sentence on its own. Not only does using a verb by itself not violate Japanese grammatical rules, such use is not sloppy or choppy in style. Adding in words to mark what English might call “the subject” only happens when the situation calls for such clarification.

This rule also holds true for Japanese adjectives and nouns, in principle. Regarding the word *desu*, you could think of it as functioning like the English “is,” but as we’ll see later, *desu* and “is” are very different from each other. Just keep in mind that in Japanese there is no mentioning of the subject as such unless necessary.

English and other European languages have developed pronouns, such as I, you, she, and they, to form sentences; these are used even when it is obvious who the subject is. In Japanese, because there is no idea of “subject” like in European languages, this is not done. Japanese does not have personal pronouns as found in English and many other languages.

3. A negative question is an invitation.

The negative form of *tabemasu* (eat) is *tabemasen* (do not eat). To make a question, add the question sentence-particle *ka*, i.e., *tabemasen ka?* (do not eat?). Because the situation is obvious, this translates to “Won’t you eat?” As this English translation suggests, it works as an invitation. In fact, negative questions are a typical invitation form in Japanese.

OTHER EXAMPLES

- | | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| - <i>Nomimasen ka?</i> | Would you like to drink? |
| - <i>Ikimasen ka?</i> | Would you like to go? |

A negative question is typically used when the speaker expects a positive response. Think of a question like “Aren’t you going?” for instance. This psychology works in Japanese, too, and therefore extends the meaning so as to create an invitation. (When inviting, the inviter is surely expecting a positive answer; otherwise, s/he would not invite, to start with.)

CULTURE FOCUS

When I say there is no subject in Japanese, people tend to think this is why Japanese is “ambiguous.” I don’t think so. Even if you use “he” in an English sentence, who “he” is could still be ambiguous: For instance saying, “He is waiting” when two men are standing by, provides a subject but no indication of who is referred to.

All languages are ambiguous in nature; each language has ways to clarify ambiguities as needed.