

日本語流 5

The Nihongo Way 5

< Today's dialogue 1 >

You (U) are on the street, lost. As your Japanese language skills are still limited, you want to ask a passer-by for help in English. J1 is the first passer-by, and J2 the second.



<p>U: すみません。英語わかりますか。 <i>Sumimasen. Eigo wakarimasu ka?</i></p>	<p>U: あのう、すみません。 英語できませんか。 <i>Anô, sumimasen. Eigo dekimasen ka?</i></p>
<p>J1: ちょっと・・・。 <i>Chotto...</i> (He looks awfully awkward and sucks air through his teeth.)</p>	<p>J2: ええ、ちょっとできますけど・・・。 <i>Ee, chotto dekimasu kedo...</i></p>
	<p>U: Oh, great. I'd like to know if...</p>

< Today's dialogue 2 >

You (U) are planning a trip to northern Japan. Train tickets can be reserved starting today, which is one month beforehand. You mistakenly thought yesterday was the first day for purchases and went to buy the tickets. A Japanese colleague (J) asks you about your adventure.



<p>J: 昨日、チケット予約できました？ <i>Kinô chiketto yoyaku dekimashita?</i></p>
<p>U: いや、できませんでした。今日します。 <i>Iya, dekimasen deshita. Kyô shimasu.</i></p>

In the last column I introduced the core of Japanese sentences, showing you verb, adjective and noun sentences. Of the three types, today's column is dedicated to verb sentences. You will see that verbs behave very regularly in Japanese.

DIALOGUE OVERVIEW

Here is an English translation of the dialogues:

<Dialogue 1>

U: Excuse me. Do you understand English?

J1: Well, uh... [lit. A little (awkward I am).]

U: Um, excuse me. Can't you (speak) English?

J2: Yeah, I can a little, but...(would that be OK?)

<Dialogue 2>

J: You were able to book the tickets yesterday?

U: No, I wasn't. I'll do it today.

VOCABULARY FOCUS

Verbs

The verbs that appear here are:

wakarimasu: understand, is comprehensible

dekimasu: can do, is able

shimasu: do, play, perform

Nouns (languages)

eigo: English [All languages are expressed as <country name + *go*>, i.e., *doitsugo* (German), *supeingo* (Spanish), *chûgokugo* (Chinese), etc. England is usually called "*Igirisu*" but is also known as "*Eikoku*," hence *eigo*.]

chotto: a little [While it means "a little," this word is commonly used as a filler when the speaker hesitates to say something. In dialogue 1, J1 uses it as a filler, while J2 uses it for its original meaning.]

kinô: yesterday

kyô: today [In addition, tomorrow is *ashita*; the day after tomorrow, *asatte*; the day before yesterday, *ototoi*.]

chiketto: ticket [English loanwords are numerous in Japanese. A more "genuine" Japanese word for ticket is *kippu*.]

yoyaku: reservation, booking [A loanword, "*bukkingu*," is also used. To use either as a verb (i.e., "to reserve"), add the versatile verb *shimasu*: *yoyaku-shimasu* / *bukkingu-shimasu*.]

GRAMMAR FOCUS

1. Japanese verbs are not mere words.

Although I am using the word “verb” here, Japanese and English verbs are not the same thing. Most importantly, a Japanese verb constitutes a valid sentence on its own, while an English verb is just a word. Unlike English, no subject (or object) is required to form a Japanese sentence.

Thus, a common short exchange:

A: *Wakarimasu ka?*

B: *Hai, wakarimasu.*

can only be translated as:

A: Understanding occurs?

B: Yes, understanding occurs.

Of course, a more agreeable English translation is:

A: Do you understand (it)?

B: Yes, I do.

And when called for, related words (often nouns) are mentioned BEFORE the verb.

In dialogue 1, therefore, *eigo* was mentioned because this word was needed, given the situation.

2. Form conformity

All Japanese verbs, with no exceptions, end in *-masu*, with the negative form *-masen*. In fact, this is part of the definition of “verb” in Japanese. To finish the definition, a verb’s “past tense” ends in *-mashita*, and its negative with *-masen deshita*. More precisely, we should call it the “perfective” tense, but for convenience’s sake, we’ll use “past” for a while. I will discuss the distinction more in a future column.

Using the three verbs introduced today, let’s see how they behave. The translations provided are some of the possibilities:

Dekimasu: I can do it. It’s possible.

Dekimashita: I could do it. It’s been completed/done.

Dekimasen: I cannot do it. It’s not possible.

Dekimasen deshita: I could not do it. It was not possible.

Wakarimasu: I understand. It’s comprehensible.

Wakarimashita: I (have) understood it.

Wakarimasen: I don’t understand.

Wakarimasen deshita: I didn’t understand.

Shimasu: I do it. I’ll do it.

Shimashita: I did it. I have done it.

Shimasen: I don’t do it. I won’t do it.

Shimasen deshita: I didn’t do it.

I’m sure you now have the pattern: All verbs behave exactly the same way, i.e., *V-masu*, *V-mashita*, *V-masen*, and *V-masen deshita*, without exception.

3. Questions without *ka*

The sentence-particle *ka* functions as a question marker. You can also make a question without *ka*, by using rising intonation to end your sentences, as seen in dialogue 2. This sounds slightly more careful and polite.

CULTURE FOCUS

As “*iie*” is a sign of disagreement, Japanese people find it difficult to say it – to avoid confrontation. The word *chotto* (“a little”), is often used instead. This use is as a filler. The actual negative signal is the speaker’s gesture or facial expression, instead of spoken words.

Japanese men sometimes suck air through their teeth, tilting their heads, when they are placed in an awkward position, and do not know the answer to a question or request.