

Japanese mind-set in greetings

By Shigekatsu Yamauchi

Special to The Daily Yomiuri

You have heard, I am sure, that おはようございます (*ohayo gozaimasu*) means “good morning.” But do these two phrases really mean the same thing? Although they are both said at the same time of day, what each of them is saying is quite different. Today I’d like to analyze what the most common Japanese greetings really mean and focus on the thinking behind them.

While “good morning” is an abbreviation of “have a good morning” or “I wish you a good morning,” its Japanese equivalent has nothing to do with morning. All that おはようございます (*ohayo gozaimasu*) says is “it is early,” using very polite language. Those of you who have worked in Japanese restaurants or theaters (or some other fields) must have heard おはようございます (*ohayo gozaimasu*) commonly used even in the afternoon or evening. It is frequently used when people work late in the day, or meet each other for the first time that day, no matter what the time is.

Another important aspect of this phrase is that it is an impersonal statement. “(I wish you) good morning” is English’s straightforward expression of your wishes for the person you address; it is personal. Compared with this, the Japanese equivalent “it is (politely) early” is, in fact, quite an impersonal, almost objective statement. In English, it sounds awfully cold, too. So how could such a bland statement make for a good greeting? After all, the first greeting of the day is rather important, as greetings go. The reason why this is in fact a greeting, a sign of goodwill, is because the statement is formed in a polite grammatical style. The fact that you are using the polite form implies that you are, in fact, showing care and concern for your counterpart.

The form of おはようございます (*ohayo gozaimasu*) may remind you of ありがとうございます (*arigato gozaimasu*). Indeed, these two are constructed in the same polite style. Let’s take a look at this very common Japanese phrase. People will tell you that “thank you” in Japanese is *arigato gozaimasu*. But again, do these two really mean the same thing?

“Thank you” is an abbreviation of “I thank you,” which is a straightforward expression of gratitude. The phrase *arigato gozaimasu*, however, contains no words of gratitude itself. A literal translation is “it is difficult-to-exist” or “it is rare.” You could also take it to mean “it is precious.” Just like *ohayo gozaimasu*, this statement is again in polite style, and that is why this rather impersonal phrase becomes a nice expression of gratitude. Here again, the expression is more of an objective statement, rather than a straightforward expression of gratitude.

When you know that the actual meaning is “it is rare,” you can readily understand why you say ありがとうございました (*arigato gozaimashita*) using

“past tense” (more precisely, perfective tense), when you give thanks for something which has been done. Literally this means “it was rare” or “it has been rare,” in polite language.

Now that we have seen おはようございます (*ohayo gozaimasu*), it is only natural that we look at こんにちは (*konnichiwa*). *Konnichi* is an old word meaning “this day” or “today,” and the ending *wa* is a phrase-particle, sometimes called the topic marker. (This is why the *wa* in *konnichiwa* is traditionally written with は) Altogether, this phrase literally means only “as for this day.” This is clearly the start of a longer, more complete phrase that goes something like “(as for) today are you fine/how are you?”

The psychology here is that the part left out (“are you fine/how are you?”) is understood via context, and so, is left unsaid. This means that the most important part of the message is not verbalized!

こんばんは (*kombanwa*) works the same way: Its literal meaning is “as for this evening.” The implied important following part, “how are you?” is again left unsaid.

さようなら (*sayonara*) is no exception. The best literal translation of this old-fashioned Japanese expression is “if things are that way.” This is again the start of a longer sentence which goes something like “if things are (or: “it is”) that way, it must be/is time that I went.”

The above examples have ancient pedigrees, but the mind-set from which they came is still alive in modern Japanese. For example, call a company and ask to speak with Suzuki-san, and you will be met with *Ano, shitsurei desu ga* (“well, excuse me, but...”) in rising intonation. In this instance, you are expected to realize that you are in fact being asked for your name.

The frequently used filler, *chotto*, is typical when starting sentences awkward to say, or negative in some way, like:

■ *Chotto (komarimasu)*. A bit of problem.

■ *Chotto (dekimasen)*. (A little) impossible.

The reason why *domo* is so versatile—meaning “thank you,” “hello,” “how are you?,” “good-bye,” “I’m sorry,” and so on, can also be explained using this psychology. *Domo* literally translates “every how” or “in every way,” and is commonly understood to start sentences like:

■ *Domo (arigato gozaimasu)*.

In every way, it is precious. (Thank you.)

■ *Domo (sumimasen)*.

In every way I’m sorry.

This style of speech, starting sentences but leaving them hanging incomplete, is not peculiar to Japanese, of course, but it is very common in Japanese.

Another example is the first-time meeting greeting, *hajimemashite*. This simply means “for the first time,” which of course is the start of something like “for the first time, I have the pleasure of meeting you.” Again, the latter part is left unsaid.

So, as you become more fluent and people around you talk to you more naturally, be prepared to hear them speak to you without explicitly expressing the vital point in their communication.

Yamauchi is the president of International Communication Institute. After working for Sumitomo Corp. for 18 years, he completed Japanese-language teacher training at Cornell University.