

lie

いいえ

(No!)

After a hot day's work, Mr. Ernest Lerner was having some beer with Mr. Yasuda, a Japanese acquaintance. Mr. Yasuda always had been a modest, pleasant person, but that evening Mr. Lerner felt somewhat irritated that Mr. Yasuda was being too agreeable. He kept saying *Ee, ee* or, *Ee, soo-desu-ne*, to whatever Mr. Lerner thought. Mr. Lerner began wondering if this gentleman ever had the word *lie* in his vocabulary.

When it was almost time to part, Mr. Lerner noticed that Mr. Yasuda had a very stylish, brand-new watch, and complimented him on it. Mr. Yasuda instantly replied,

lie, sonna koto-wa arimassen.

いいえ、そんなことはありません。

(No, it's no such thing!)

Mr. Lerner was surprised by his unusually decisive tone, and looked him in the face. Then Mr. Yasuda quickly added,

Yasumono-desu-yo, konnana.

(Just cheap stuff.)

* * *

Some Westerners wonder why Japanese hate to say *lie* and resort to almost every possible measure to avoid saying it, but there are situations when Japanese positively say *lie*. What are those situations?

Japanese have in their minds what might be called psychological difficulty in denying what other people think or wish. Saying "No" to someone's opinion or request seems to them like denying him as a human being and consequently destroying a good relationship with him.

When saying "No" does not involve any possibility of hurting someone or endangering the good relationship, Japanese feel free to say "No." To such a question as "Is this the right way to the station?" they say *lie* or *lie*, *chigai-masu* (lit. No, it's different.) quite readily.

The situation with the watch described above is the one when Japanese can most happily say *lie* because denying one's own superiority can help strengthen a good relationship. In the same way, Japanese are quite positive in denying what the other person thinks is his weak point. If you want to hear your Japanese acquaintances say *lie*, *sonna koto-wa arimassen*, try saying that your Japanese hasn't improved a bit since last year or that you're getting old and weak.

Konnichiwa

こんにちは

(Good afternoon)

Mr. Ernest Lerner went to his office late one day. It was almost two in the afternoon so he said, instead of *Ohayoo-gozaimasu* (Good morning),

Konnichiwa

こんにちは。

(Good afternoon)

There were several people working in the office. All of them turned to him, but they did not say anything for a moment; then some of them said *Konnichiwa* hesitantly; others just nodded silently.

Mr. Lerner did not understand. Why did *Konnichiwa* sound strange? Isn't it a perfectly reasonable greeting, corresponding to English greetings such as "Good morning," "Good day," or "Hello"?

* * *

As far as the hour of the day is concerned, it is proper to say *Konnichiwa* at two in the afternoon, but it is not appropriate to say it to one's colleagues.

Among the several greetings exchanged when

meeting people, *Ohayoo-gozaimasu* can be used to any person, to people in any relationship with you, but the situations where *Konnichiwa* and *Konbanwa* (Good evening) can be used are rather limited. These two are used with people who do not belong to one's own group.

Needless to say, they cannot be used among family members. People working at the same office are usually considered to be members of one's own group, though people's conception of the size or content of this group varies according to the individual.

The people at Mr. Lerner's office regarded him as a member of their group; which is why they were embarrassed to be greeted by him with *Konnichiwa*. If they had regarded him as an outsider, they would have accepted it as a matter of fact.

One more thing about *Konnichiwa* and *Konbanwa* is that they do not sound very polite and cannot be used to greet one's superiors. For example, a customer greets a clerk at the store with *Konnichiwa* or *Konbanwa*, but the clerk does not return the same greeting; he usually says *Irasshaimase* (lit. I'm glad you have come).

When Japanese feel *Konnichiwa* or *Konbanwa* to be inappropriate, they turn to various substitutes, among which referring to the climate is a very popular one; they often greet others by saying that it is very cold, or hot, or that it has been raining a great deal.

Doomo

どうも

(Indeed)

One word that bothers Mr. Ernest Lerner now is *doomo*. English-Japanese dictionaries give "indeed" and "somehow" as definitions for it, but he suspects that its actual usage covers a much wider range.

The people at his office, for instance, use *doomo* for many other purposes. They say *kinoo-wa, doomo* (*lit.* Indeed yesterday) when they meet; they say just *doomo* to thank others and to apologize. They also say *ja, doomo* when they part.

Doomo is used to cut answers short, too. When Mr. Lerner asked Mr. Takada how his study of English was going, he said *Doomo-nee*. He did not mean that his English had made great progress; he meant just the opposite.

Probably most Japanese do not realize how often they use, or overuse, this word. *Doomo* literally means "in all ways," or "no matter how I look at it." Actually it is used to mean various things. There are two very common uses of *doomo* — as a social expression and as an indication of negative judgment.

As a social expression it is used by itself to mean "Thank you," "Sorry," "Excuse me,"

"Thank you for coming," "Sorry to take your time," to mention just a few. The last two are equivalent to "Hello" and "Good-bye" respectively. In these expressions the part that follows *doomo* is left out; for example in the case of *Doomo arigatoo-gozaimasu, arigatoo-gozaimasu* is understood.

The second usage is also very common. If you ask someone a question and he just says *Watashi-wa doomo...* (*lit.* I somehow...) in a hesitant tone, he means that he does not know the answer. Or if you ask someone's opinion about something and the reply is *Doomo...* or *Doomo-nee*, it means that he feels negatively about it; Mr. Takada used *doomo* in this way when Mr. Lerner asked him about his study of English.

Doomo changes its meaning depending not only on the situation but also on the tone in which it is spoken. If you pronounce it quickly, it sounds casual. (Some people say *Doomo, doomo* quickly in greeting people; this sounds very casual and cannot be used when you want to be polite or formal.) But if you pronounce it slowly, it sounds sincere and polite. In stating negative judgment, it is pronounced in a hesitant, dangling tone.

Shitsuree-shimasu

失礼します

(Excuse me)

The other day Mr. Yasuda came to see Mr. Lerner at his office to discuss some business. Before entering the office, he stopped at the door and said,

(1) *Shitsuree-shimasu.*

失礼します。

This literally means "I'm going to be rude (enough to enter the office)."

When he approached Mr. Lerner, he bowed and said,

(2) *Senjitsu-wa shitsuree-shimashita*

which literally means "I was rude the other day (when we met)."

When Mr. Lerner asked him to sit down, he said,

(3) *Shitsuree-shimasu*

meaning "I'm going to be rude (enough to sit down)."

When he left, he said,

(4) *Doomo shitsuree-shimashita*

or, "I have been rude (enough to take your time).

Now I'm leaving)."

These four *shitsurees* mean respectively (1) Excuse me, (2) Hello, how are you? (3) Thank you and (4) Good-bye.

* * *

The word *shitsuree* itself means rudeness; *shitsuree-shimasu* literally means "I'm going to do something rude. Please excuse me," and *shitsuree-shimashita* literally means "I have been rude to you. Please forgive me." Both *shitsuree-shimasu* and *shitsuree-shimashita* are actually used to express gratitude as well as apology, and even to say good-bye. Similarly, other expressions such as *osoreimasu*, *sumimasen*, and *warui-ne* (lit. It's bad) are also used for both apology and gratitude.

Japanese may seem to be apologizing all the time, and this custom might irritate foreigners as being overly formal or even hypocritical. But Japanese themselves do not think that they are using the same expression for different purposes; to their mind, to apologize for being rude and to thank someone for his kindness are not two different things, but rather something like two sides of a coin.

Therefore, we would like to conclude this short article by saying,

Shitsuree-shimashita.

失礼しました。

(Thank you very much for reading it. We're sorry we took your time.)

Senjitsu-wa gochisoosama-deshita

先日は ごちそうさまでした

(Thank you for the treat the other day)

The other day Mr. Lerner met Mr. Saito after about two months. Mr. Saito greeted him by saying,

Senjitsu-wa gochisoosama-deshita.

(Thank you for the treat the other day.)

Mr. Lerner was surprised that Mr. Saito referred to their previous meeting that had taken place quite a while before; and he was even more surprised when he remembered that he had only bought him a cup of coffee at a coffee shop. It did not seem to be worth Mr. Saito's expressing gratitude again after two months.

But when he started thinking about it, he realized that almost everyone said the same thing as Mr. Saito had. He could not help wondering if one has to have a good memory in order to be polite in Japan.

* * *

The answer to Mr. Lerner's question is yes. A Japanese has to remember and express gratitude for the favors received at the last meeting. You might think it is not necessary because you already thanked him adequately at the time, but

it is customary to do so in Japan and is bad manners not to do so.

This custom may give you the impression that Japanese are overly conscious of the money they spend to treat others, but that is not the case. It is important to remember your meeting and having a good time together rather than who treated whom. You should refer to the previous meeting even when there was no giving and receiving of favors; in such cases you are supposed to say

Senjitsu-wa shitsuree-shimashita.

先日は 失礼しました。

(I was rude the last time we met.)

instead of *Senjitsu-wa gochisoosama-deshita*. What really counts is to show that you and the listener remember sharing the same experience; the memory of having the same experience helps to establish good relations between the two of you. Japanese consider it essential to start by establishing good relations before getting down to business. That is why this expression is used as a greeting when an English-speaking person would say "How have you been?" or just "Hello."

We have heard quite a few Japanese complain that their American acquaintances do not follow this custom: some of them even think it is rude.

Itadakimasu

いただきます。

(I'm going to receive your treat.
Thank you)

A few days ago Mr. Takada asked Mr. Lerner to have dinner with his family. They had prepared the New Year's dinner, very colorful and very special. Mr. Lerner decided to be as polite as he could. So when Mr. Takada said according to Japanese custom

Nanimo gozaimasen-ga doozo (There isn't much but please start eating), Mr. Lerner said politely

Itadakimasu.

いただきます。

(Thank you. — *lit.* I'm going to receive your treat.)

Then everybody else said the same thing and started eating. Mr. Lerner was a little surprised because he had thought that *Itadakimasu* was used by a guest to thank his host.

Most people say *Itadakimasu* before eating and *Gochisoo-sama* after eating even in their own home. Children are trained at home never to forget to say these phrases, and when they go to kindergarten or elementary school teachers rein-

force this training. Some people disregard this custom when they grow up, but others continue to say these phrases even when they eat alone.

Both *Itadakimasu* and *Gochisoo-sama* are expressions of gratitude. This gratitude is directed to everybody and everything that has made the meal possible. Thus they can be used both as an expression of gratitude to the host and as something like saying grace in the West.

When you are asked to start eating by your host, it is proper to say *Itadakimasu* before eating. And you should say *Gochisoo-sama* (*lit.* It was a real feast), or more politely, *Gochisoo-sama-deshita*, after eating. Then the host or hostess will say something to deny this praise, such as

Osomatsusama-deshita.

(You're welcome. — *lit.* It was a poor meal.)

It is not Japanese custom to say "I'm glad you liked it."

Another point about *Gochisoo-sama* is that it is used as an expression of thanks, not just for food, but also for hospitality. For instance, when leaving a party at someone's home, Americans might say to the host or hostess "Thank you very much. I had a wonderful time," but in Japan, people simply say

Gochisoo-sama-deshita.

ごちそうさまでした。

meaning "Thank you very much for everything you did to entertain me."

Onegai-shimasu

おねがいします

(Excuse me)

The other day Mr. Lerner went into a little grocery store to buy some bread. It was deserted; the storekeeper seemed to be in the back watching TV. Mr. Lerner was wondering how he could get the storekeeper's attention when a Japanese woman came in and said,

Onegai-shimasu.

おねがいします。

(Excuse me. — *lit.* Please do me a favor.)

After that Mr. Lerner observed the use of *onegai-shimasu* and found it to be a very convenient expression to know. *

There are several ways to attract a stranger's attention. You may hear *Chotto* or *Oi* being used but these are rather rude.

Moshimoshi is used not only to start a conversation on the telephone but also when addressing a stranger. When you have noticed that someone has dropped something, you may say

Moshimoshi, nanika ochimashita-yo.

(Excuse me, but you dropped something. —

lit. Something has dropped.)

When you need someone's help you can say *Onegai-shimasu* as well as *Sumimasen* or *Anoo*. *Onegai-shimasu* is used to call a clerk at a store or a waiter at a restaurant.

Onegai-shimasu is also used to mean "Please take care of this for me." When submitting papers such as application forms or bills in a government office, bank and the like, people say *Kore-o onegai-shimasu*. (Please take care of this.) They do not usually use the particular verb such as to sign, to accept or to pay. *Onegai-shimasu* can stand for all these verbs.

Thus when concluding a business discussion one often says

Ja, yoroshiku onegai-shimasu.

(*lit.* Well then, please take care of it kindly.)

Yoroshiku onegai-shimasu

よろしく おねがいします。

is also used when first meeting someone.

You may still remember hearing candidates saying over and over *Yoroshiku onegai-shimasu* during last year's general election. They seldom say directly "please vote for me"; *onegai-shimasu* is enough to convey their wishes and sounds more polite since it's not so direct.

Itte-(i)rasshai

いつて (い) ぶっしやい

(Please go and come back)

One morning when Mr. Lerner was hurrying to the station, his neighbor Mrs. Okada who was sweeping the road in front of her house said,

Itte-(i)rasshai.

いつて (い) ぶっしやい。

(Have a nice day. — *lit.* Please go and come back.)

Mr. Lerner did not know how to respond to this greeting, so he just said *Sayoonara*, although he felt this was not quite right. Later at the office, Mr. Takada told him that he should have said

Itte-mairimasu or *Itte-kimasu.*

いつてまいります or いつてきます。

(Thank you, I will. — *lit.* I'll go and come back.)

* * *

Itte-(i)rasshai and *Itte-mairimasu* (or *Itte-kimasu*) are exchanged in a home when a family member leaves. It is customary for someone going out to say *Itte-mairimasu* or *Itte-kimasu* (less polite), and for those remaining to say *Itte-*

(i)rasshai.

Those expressions are also used between non-family members when they feel that they belong to the same group. The concept of "group" differs in its range depending on the individual, but usually people living in a neighborhood or people working at the same company are regarded as members of a group. Thus, these expressions are used when a neighbor or a member of a company leaves temporarily.

Sayoonara (Good-bye) is not used among family members unless they expect that they will not meet again. If a husband says to his wife *Sayoonara* when leaving, that means he is not going to live with her any more.

When a family member comes home, he says

Tadaima.

ただいま。

(I'm home. — *lit.* (I'm home) right now.)

And his family members say

Okaerinasai.

おかえりなさい。

(Welcome home. — *lit.* You have come home.)

In English, people use various expressions when leaving and coming home, but in Japan, set expressions are used for these occasions: such expressions as *Konnichiwa* (Good day), *Konbanwa* (Good evening) or *Sayoonara* are not used among family members.

Sumimasen

すみません

(I'm sorry)

Mr. Lerner was invited to dinner by the Takadas last Saturday. He took some candy with him for the Takada's little son. When he handed it to the boy Mrs. Takada said

Maa, doomo sumimasen. (lit. Oh, I'm very sorry), and urged her son to thank him. The little boy said

Ojisan, arigatoo. (Thank you, Mr. Lerner — lit. Thank you, uncle), and then added gozaimasu to make his expression more polite; perhaps he remembered that he had always been told to be polite.

When Mr. Lerner started learning Japanese, he thought that *Sumimasen* just meant "I'm sorry" or "Excuse me," and wondered why Japanese apologize when they should thank. Now he knows that *Sumimasen* is used also as an expression of gratitude and that it is used as often, or even more often than, *Arigatoo* or *Arigatoo-gozaimasu*. But he does not understand how *Sumimasen* compares with *Arigatoo(-gozaimasu)* when it is used to express gratitude.

Sumimasen.
すみません。

is used to express gratitude when one feels that one does not deserve a kindness or when one didn't expect it. When Mr. Lerner gave her son a present Mrs. Takada said *Sumimasen* because she had not expected it (or was not supposed to expect it). If she had said *Arigatoo-gozaimasu*, it would sound as if she had expected it. Her son was too young to feel that way, so he said

Arigatoo.
ありがとう。

Many Japanese feel that *Sumimasen* sounds more polite than *Arigatoo(-gozaimasu)*, but the difference is not simply in formality but in the speaker's psychological attitude. It depends on how the speaker feels about the kindness someone else has done for him whether he chooses *Sumimasen* or *Arigatoo(-gozaimasu)*.

Suppose you have noticed that someone has dropped something in the street and have called his attention to it. Some people will say *Sumimasen* and some will say *Arigatoo(-gozaimasu)* to you. Generally speaking, women are more likely to use *Sumimasen* than men. There is also a difference in generation in the usage of this expression, as well as other expressions. Young people use *Arigatoo(-gozaimasu)* more often while older people prefer *Sumimasen*.