

Whimperative Expressions in Japanese

——Why are they in negative questions?——

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1. Introduction

In ordinary conversation, we often use indirect speech rather than direct speech for the sake of politeness, euphemism, or irony. Linguists as well as philosophers and sociologists have had discussed the characteristics and differences of indirect speech in each language and culture. The purpose of this paper is to see how much of the English pragmatic explanation applies to Japanese indirect speech, and examine the reasons Japanese whimperatives are expressed in negative sentence patterns. “Whimperative”, which Sadock first introduced, means an interrogative construction that can function as request, offer, and so on.

First, I will look at whimperative sentences of Japanese mainly in comparison with English, especially focusing on their illocutionary force of request and offer. Secondly, I will point out some characteristics of Japanese indirect speech. Finally, I will consider reasons why Japanese use negative sentences more often than English to express whimperative sentences, as well as other indirect speech acts in Japanese.

2. Whimperatives in Japanese

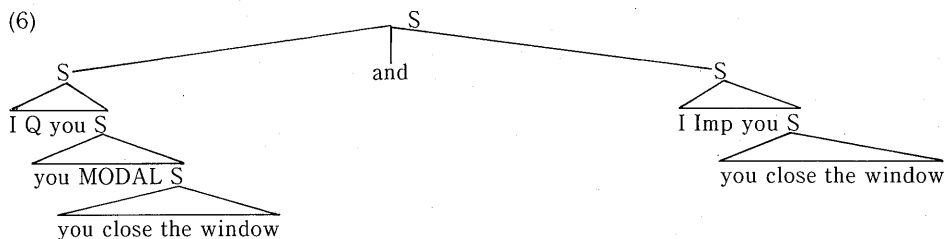
First of all, whimperatives in the sense of Sadock has proposed have to be introduced. Let us first look at the following sentences:

- (1) Will you close the window please?
- (2) Can you lend me some money please?
- (3) Won't you have a seat please?
- (4) Could you pass me the salt please?
- (5) Do you want to set the table now?¹⁾

Sadock calls these sentences whimperatives which have the superficial form of a

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question (and also the intonation of a question) but have the illocutionary force of imperatives. The analysis given by Sadock as a conjunction of a question and an imperative is:



The structure shown in (6) clarifies what Sadock means by "whimperative": a conjunction of a question and an imperative. According to his theory, conjunction reduction would yield a clause that was dominated by two performative verbs. One of the two would account for the form and the other would account for the force and cooccurrence restrictions on the whimperative sentence.²⁾ Here, for the sake of the purpose of this paper, I do not intend to investigate on the theory any further.

Japanese whimperatives have been studied systematically by Kageyama and Tamori.³⁾ Their research examined nine question sentence patterns which can be used to get people to do things. Let us see each of these whimperatives with an example sentence:

- (7) questions with verbs of giving and getting

Asu kite kuremasen ka?

'Don't you give me a favor of coming tomorrow?'

- (8) questions with conditionals

O-tabe ni nattara?

'How about eating?'

- (9) simple questions

Tabemasen ka?

'Don't you eat?'

- (10) questions with 'try'

Tabete goran ni narimasen ka?

'Don't you try and eat?'

- (11) questions with 'can'

Ashita puuru ni ikemasen ka?

'Can't you go to a swimming pool tomorrow?'

- (12) questions with 'have'

Kozen ni o-mochi dewa arimasen ka?

'Don't you have change?'

(13) questions with 'know'

Tanaka-san o go-zonji dewa arimasen ka?

'Don't you know Mr. Tanaka?'

(14) questions with 'understand'

Toshokan e iku michi ga o-wakari dewa arimasen ka?

'Don't you understand the way to the library?'

(15) questions of reason

Naze o-tabe ni naranai no desu ka?

'Why don't you eat?'

Some of the English translations sound obscure. It exemplifies the difference between English and Japanese in the way of illocutionary force. I will touch upon this problem more later.

Eight of the nine example sentences of (7) to (15) are in the negative form. This tendency of using negative sentence pattern in Japanese does not seem to be restricted to request and offer. Other whimperatives of Japanese tend to be in a negative form rather than a positive counterpart.

(16) Itte wa ikemasen deshoo ka?

'Aren't I allowed to go?'

Is it a universal characteristic of whimperatives? Or does it characterize Japanese whimperatives? If it is a characteristic of Japanese, I would like to find out its reason and its mechanism in use.

When we talk about the preference of either a positive sentence or a negative sentence, of course in a normal situation these seem to be positive rather than negative. On this subject, Geoffrey Leech gives two reasons; 1) negatives are less informative than their positive counterparts. 2) it will imply that when negative sentences are used, they must be used for a special purpose.⁴⁾ The first reason which Leech notes seems logical. In a normal situation a positive sentence holds much more information than its negative one since the positive sentence indicates one-to-one correspondence. For example, as for a sentence "Jack is an English teacher," the positive sentence can only mean one thing, but its negative, "Jack is not an English teacher," could mean a million other things.

After mentioning the general principal on uninformativeness of negation, Leech also discusses some cases which do not apply this generalization. He says that negative sentences are more 'marked' than positive ones.

...the motivation for which may be politeness or simply euphemistic reticence in the expression of opinion and attitudes. Such cases are independently explicable, and do not detract from the general point about negation being pragmatically interpreted as denial.⁵⁾

There is a pragmatic reason why Japanese tends to use negative questions more than positive ones, compared with English.

Consider the following pairs of positive and negative sentences expressing offers and requests:

	A (formal)	B (informal)	
(17)	Irimasu ka?	Iru?	'Do you need it?'
	Irimasen ka?	Iranai?	'Don't you need it?'
(18)	Tabemasu ka?	Taberu?	'Do you eat it?'
	Tabemasen ka?	Tabenai?	'Don't you eat it?'
(19)	Hoshii desu ka?	Hoshii?	'Do you want it?'
	Hoshiku arimasen ka? ⁶⁾	Hoshikunai?	'Don't you want it?'
(20)	Arimasu ka?	Aru?	'Do you have it?'
	Arimasen ka?	Nai?	'Don't you have it?'
(21)	Ikimasu ka?	Iku?	'Do/Will you go?'
	Ikimasen ka?	Ikanai?	'Don't/Won't you go?'

The series of A is called formal sentence pattern. These are used when you are speaking in a formal situation or talking to a person whom you do not know well or whom you want to keep a certain distance in relation. The series of B, on the other hand, is the speech used among friends in group, or those in an intimate relation.

I chose not to use the honorific version of the verbs in the sentences above (for example, 'go-iriyoo desu ka' for 'irimasu ka'), because we are not talking about when to use honorific negative or positive questions, and when to use simple formal sets. Since we are not talking about these preferences in this paper, let one version represent the other.

As we have seen in the examples (17) – (21), negative questions in comparison of positive counterparts sound somewhat softer as offers, and less impositive as requests. When the speaker utters 'Tabemasen ka,' he is making an offer, hoping that the hearer would accept the offer, however, the speaker is afraid that giving the offer might hurt the hearer's pride of receiving food from the speaker. Especially in asking a favor or even in making an offer, Japanese feel that it is necessary to avoid forcing the hearer to act in a certain way. Uttering the sentence in negative is more tentative and gives hearer room to decline. On this subject Leech (1983: 108–9) explains in the following way,

using English examples:

Indirect illocutions tend to be more polite (a) because they increase the degree of optionality, and (b) because the more indirect an illocution is, the more diminished and tentative its force tends to be.

Answer the phone.

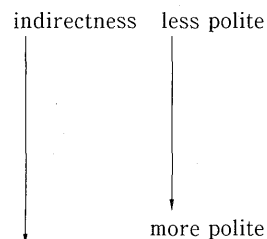
I want you to answer the phone.

Will you answer the phone?

Can you answer the phone?

Would you mind answering the phone?

Could you possibly answer the phone?



As you see in the arrows, there is a correlation between the degree of the imposing force. In other words, the more indirect the sentence becomes, the greater allowance of not doing the intended action the hearer will have. As a result, it becomes progressively easier for the hearer to reject. I think this idea would apply to the Japanese use of negative question in requests and offers. In other words, in my examples (17)–(21), negative sentences give the impression of being more polite, because they increase the degree of optionality. (For example, in the negative of (21) in comparison of its positive counterpart the speaker is giving the hearer a broader choice for not going.) Also it is because the speaker's force becomes more diminished and tentative. (For example in the negative of (18) in comparison of its positive counterpart the speaker is hoping the hearer to eat the thing but less pressure is on the hearer to eat it.)

3. Problems of Negative Questions

There is another point I should mention here concerning Japanese negative questions. That is, we switch 'yes' (hai) and 'no' (iie) in answering negative questions in neutral contexts. Thus, the typical answers to negative questions in Japanese will be like 'Yes, he didn't,' and 'No, he did.'

(22) A: Yamada-san wa kinoo kimasen deshita ka?

'Didn't Mr. Yamada come yesterday?'

B: Hai, kimasen deshita. 'Yes, he didn't come.'

Iie, kimashita.

'No, he came.'

These may sound illogical to the speakers of other languages who have been used to the language that emphasizes consistency such as English. However, it is as logical as English, because the hearer will agree with “Yes” for the speaker’s negative sentence and then repeat the negative sentence structure (Yes, I agree with you. He didn’t). In the same way, if the hearer disagrees, the hearer would answer with “No” and then repeat the positive sentence (No, I don’t agree with you. He did).

However, negative questions seen as whimperatives do not act the same way as above. In accepting an offer or request stated in the interrogative, the hearer now answers with ‘hai.’ It is quite understandable when we think that it shows the hearer’s agreement towards the speaker. In declining the offer or rejecting the request, however, something like ‘iya kekko desu’ or ‘iya desu’ or rather than straight ‘ie’ (No!) These utterances of hesitation convey the following “I understand what you mean, but (with some reason) I don’t want to accept/do the act.” (23) is an example of answering the offer.

- (23) A: Konban nomi ni ikimasen ka?
 ‘Won’t you go to drink with me tonight?’
 B: Hai. ‘Yes.’
 *lie. ‘No.’
 Iya desu. ‘No.’

There is a characterizing feature in the way of answering to requests in Japanese. Observe the following examples:

- (7) A: Asu kite kuremasen ka?
 B: Hai. ‘Yes.’
 Iya desu. ‘No.’
 (8) A: O—tabe ni nattara?
 B: Hai. ‘Yes.’
 Iya desu. ‘No.’
 (9) A: Tabemasen ka?
 B: Hai. ‘Yes.’
 Iya desu. ‘No.’
 (10) A: Tabete goran ni narimasen ka?
 B: Hai. ‘Yes.’
 Iya desu. ‘No.’
 (11) A: Ashita puuru ni ikemasen ka?
 B: Hai. ‘Yes.’

- *Iya desu. 'No.'
 Iie. 'No.'
- (12') A: Kozeni o—mochi dewa arimasen ka?
 B: Hai. 'Yes.'
 *Iyadesu. 'No.'
- (13') A: Yanaka—san o go—zonji dewa arimsen ka?
 B: Hai. 'Yes.'
 *Iya desu. 'No.'
 Iie. 'No.'
- (14') A: Toshokan e iku michi ga o—wakari dewa arimasen ka?
 B: Hai. 'Yes.'
 *Iya desu. 'No.'
 Iie. 'No.'
- (15') A: Naze o—tabe ni naranai no desu ka?
 B: Hai. 'Yes.'
 *Iyadesu. 'No.'
 Iie. 'No.'

Some differences can be seen among the nine question patterns that Kageyama and Tamori have introduced. To show the hearer's agreement to a question and to give his assent to a request are both signaled by 'hai,' whereas to deny the speaker's statement and to refuse his request are manifested by different morphemes. First four examples (7)–(10) can be answered with 'iya desu' as it is shown in (7')–(10'). However, the latter five (11)–(15) can be answered with 'iie' but not with 'iya desu.' as shown in (11')–(15'). According to Kageyama and Tomori, the difference between the examples such as (7')–(10') and the examples as (11')–(15') is the speaker's attitudes toward the possible answers. In the first four, the speaker assumes that the hearer will carry out the act if asked, while in the other five sentences, the speaker is not sure whether the hearer will perform the required act. This kind of uncertainty strongly indicates that those five are essentially questions. The difference between the two groups of nine sentence patterns of requests conveys a very unique characteristic of Japanese. This kind of research on other usages of whimperative expressions (such as offers) has to be done, however I am not going to discuss it any further in this paper.

4. Other Japanese Indirect Expressions Compared with English

As it is recognized widely, there are also many different ways of making one's requests and offers indirectly other than using whimperatives. One of them is facial

expression and body languages, and also tone of voice can express very many things with these non-verbal factors. Another interesting way can be seen in the following sentences:

(24) Chotto sumimasen ga, asu wa o-hima deshoo ka?

'I am sorry, but are you free tomorrow?

(25) Yokattara, hanashite mimasen ka?

'Won't you try to talk to me if you like?'⁷⁾

(26) Anoo, kore wa nan-to-yuu kanji deshoo ka?

'Uh, I wonder how you pronounce this kanji.

(27) Eeto, kore ga futatsu hoshii no desu ga....

'Uh, I want to have two of these.'

Each of the adverbs and phrases in the sentences above has an effect in softening the abruptness. In other words, it has the role of covering up the core sentence of request or offer to make it sound indirect for the hearer. Basically it has the same kind of effect as whimperatives. 'Chotto' (a little), which is less formal and more colloquial, is used so often in so many different situations, but in this particular case, chotto sounds indirect by trying to diminish the hearer's cost for not staying so long. The speaker is generously stating that he is going to bother you but will leave soon. The difference between 'anoo' and 'eeto' is critical. Both of them express some kind of hesitation but clearly they are different in meaning. Anoo, which is the prolonged version of 'ano' (that), shows the speaker's hesitation of asking a great favor to the hearer, therefore always it holds a feeling of forcing the hearer's cost. (This does not mean, it actually causes the hearer's cost. Sometimes this form might be used in giving a present to someone.)⁸⁾ Eeto is more or less the equivalent of English 'uh...' which indicates the speaker is sorting out the words that might come after 'eeto' or thinking of what to say. You could take it as a hesitation, in the sense that the speaker is wondering whether he should say what he is going to say or not.

In English, too, this kind of indirect speech can be seen in directives.

(28) I'm sorry but could you tell me what time the next bus leaves, please?

(29) May I ask your name?

(30) I wonder if you would lend me your book.

(31) We regret to inform you that Prof. Iwasaki has passed away.

(28), which is very similar to the Japanese example (24), apologizes first for causing a trouble to the hearer and then asks what the speaker wants. The core sentences for

example 'lending the book' in (30) are embedded in other sentence structures. It makes the utterances indirect, and as a result, it will be easier for the hearer in either accepting or declining the speaker's intended action.

Related to negative questions, I would like to comment on the English usage that have illocutionary force of request and offer. Look at the following:

(32) Won't you sit down?

(33) Can't you sit down?

(32) is usually taken as an offer. It sounds politer than its positive counterpart ('Will you sit down?'). On the contrary, example (33) is not an offer; rather, it imposes the act of sitting down on the hearer. In the case of (33), it is less polite than its positive counterpart. Why do some cases of indirect illocutions function as impositives and other cases do not? According to Leech,

... "Won't you help yourself," etc., is polite in an offer. The negative question is... a question about a negative proposition, which itself implies the denial of a positive proposition. The sense can be spelt out literally as follows: 'I hope and expect you to help yourself, but now it appears that you will not help yourself; is this really so?' In effect, it pays the hearer the compliment of holding a polite belief, and at the same time politely (from the speaker's point of view) expresses disbelief in that belief, and the speaker invites the hearer, in spite of ostensible reluctance, to accept the offer. In this way the question is biased towards a positive outcome.⁹⁾

I have considered this matter examining example sentences such as (32) and (33) and some others with 'would't ...' and 'couldn't ...'. The negative question form becomes politer only when the speaker is considering the situation of the hearer who is hesitating receiving benefit from the speaker. In other cases it may sound even insulting with a certain tone of voice.

Compared to Japanese, it seems that English negative sentences with a certain illocutionary force are used only to a limited degree, namely in the case of 'commissives' (the speaker is offering some things). In Japanese, as we have seen earlier, negative sentence patterns hold broader usages. This phenomenon is easier to consider from the pragmatic point of view rather than syntactic, because it is deeply related to the Japanese culture. The Japanese have a tendency to feel and show hesitation or sorrow in making offers or requests because it might cause the cost to the hearer. The more hesitant the speaker becomes, the more indirect his utterance tends to be. In order to make the utter-

ance indirect, Japanese use many ways, such as negative questions or embedding the core sentences in other structures.

5. Conclusion

After introducing the idea of 'whimperatives,' I tried to clarify the characteristics of Japanese whimperative sentences; specifically the negative sentence pattern. I have seen that on the illocutionary force of request and offer, Japanese have a tendency to use negative sentences more often in Japanese than in English. I explained this problem from the Japanese mentality of hesitation. I also studied some interesting problems related to the indirect speech act: 1) problems of negative question, and 2) other indirect expressions.

Notes

- 1) Georgia Green, "How to Get People to Do Things with Words: The Whimperative Question," *Syntax and Semantics* 3, 107–142(New York: Academic Press, 1975).
- 2) *ibid.*, 108–109.
- 3) Taro Kageyama and Ikuhiro Tamori, "Japanese Whimperatives," *Papers of Japanese Linguistics* 4, 13–53(1975–76).
- 4) Geoffrey Leech, *Principles of Pragmatics* (London: Longman, 1983).
- 5) *ibid.*, 102.
- 6) However, this form is often avoided, because in Japanese it is considered to be inappropriate to ask one's desire in a formal speech.
- 7) Kageyama and Tamori.
- 8) "Ano, kore uketotte moraemasu ka?" ('Uh, will you please accept this?'), however this sentence implies that the speaker is hesitating in giving a present with some reason or other.
- 9) Leech, 110.

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