

The 恩 [*on*] concept: dependency-acknowledging speech acts in Japanese

Fiona Webster

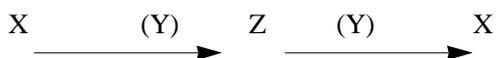
Abstract

One of the challenges for learners of the Japanese language is the understanding required to recognise and effectively employ speech acts. These are utterances which are intertwined with cultural values and social relationships prevalent in Japanese society, and indeed any linguistic community. This paper analyses the concept of *on*, or the particularly Japanese phenomenon of bestowed benefit and incurred debt. This speech act occurs in various language transactions in Japanese, in both formal and informal contexts, and this paper attempts to analyse and comment on some authentic exchanges for their semantic and pragmatic implications, with follow-up comments on implications for teachers and learners of the Japanese language.

Introduction

Non-Japanese speaking background (NJSB) learners of the Japanese language are regularly faced with pragmatic challenges posed by Japanese speech acts which are intrinsically linked to cultural values and social relationships within Japanese society. One of the most important of these is the concept of *on*, a fusion of ‘bestowed benefit and incurred debt’ (Lebra, in Lebra & Lebra: 106). This concept of *on* is reflected in many ways, and conveyed in several major utterances, which can be interpreted as speech acts. This reciprocal arrangement is widely employed in formal and informal dealings, and analyses of several authentic interactions are included in this paper. Finally recommendations are given for NJSB learners of Japanese and teachers of Japanese as a second or foreign language to assist with creation of more effective language learning activities and materials dealing with dependency-acknowledging speech acts.

Japanese:



X promises to do something (Y) for Z. It is then expected that at some time in the future, Z will return this favour (Y), or *on*. Z is thus committing him/herself to some future obligation towards X as part and parcel of requesting something of Z.

Dependency and the *on* concept

Japanese society has been noted for its people's intricate relationships with one another, and various levels of intimacy and status. This is borne out in the language in many ways. Verb-endings vary according to the relative status of speakers, and up until the Second World War, there were even special verb-endings reserved exclusively for talking about the Emperor and his family (Chang: 50). Particles such as *o-* are added to nominal groups to elevate the other participant to a higher status, and relationships between participants are recognised in the early stages of an exchange so as to equip participants with appropriate knowledge to make suitable language choices.

Japanese speakers are sensitised from a very early age to reciprocal dependency on one another, and this occurs throughout the language. Commonly used idiomatic phrases are used to display this dependency so that, for example, “when strangers are introduced to each other, they say *yoroshiku onegai shimasu*, which is the equivalent of “how do you do?” but conveys the future dependency of the greeters on each other” (Lebra and Lebra: 50). One can also place this dependency onto a third party, as in *Otōsan-ni yoroshiku o-tsutaete kudasai* (“please pass on to your father my acknowledgement of my dependence on him”) whereas in English we might simply say “give my regards to your father”.

These devices for acknowledging dependence on other people are typically coupled with expressions of respect (Wierzbicka: 78), so that speakers simultaneously place themselves in a lower position than that of the listener. This is achieved by utilising special verb endings (eg. *orimasu*) and honorific particles (eg: *go-*), and indicates that they or a person close to them need to be taken care of by the addressee.

This mutual dependence involving bestowed benefit and incurred debt has been labelled the *on* concept (Lebra, in Lebra & Lebra: 106). *On* is a Japanese word for favour/benefit/kindness (Takahashi and Takahashi: 952), and as such can be seen as a fusion of these English words. The compulsion to repay *on* is motivated by two factors. The first is that of gratitude-motivated compulsion, where the recipient wishes to repay spontaneously for the benefit received because s/he is grateful to have received it. Secondly, and more onerously, recipients of *on* are often eager to repay in order to get rid of the *on* load, as it may become quite burdensome over time (Lebra, in Lebra & Lebra: 109).

Following are some examples of dependency-acknowledgement speech acts from authentic Japanese exchanges. The literal and/or contextual (semantic) meanings are given, the context in which the utterances occurred, and finally the implied future obligation of the speaker to the listener (pragmatic meaning). They are drawn from three distinct domains – business (internal), business (external) and family.

Samples of dependency-acknowledging speech acts

Business – external

These exchanges were recorded in the office of a Japanese female manager of a private language school in Sydney. It being a commercial business, the role of this manager was to enrol as many students as possible, and thus the language used in the following exchanges is appropriate for a client ⇔ service provider relationship – it elevates the position of client to superior, and manager to inferior. This is quite distinct from a typical student ⇔ teacher exchange in Japanese, where the degree of respect shown by the student to the teacher would be high.

i. *osore-irimasu* = thanking you in anticipation

[occurring at close of a telephone conversation where manager leaves message with colleague of prospective new student, asking him/her to return manager's call]

Speaker's implied future obligation to the prospective student: to be in office when prospective student returns call

ii. *mite itadaku you-ni onegai...* = I would appreciate your looking over...

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[manager requesting that a prospective new student look over proposal for English lessons to be provided]

Speaker's implied future obligation: to be entirely accountable for lessons provided as set out in proposal

iii. *kochira kousou yoroshiku onegai itashimasu* = my feelings exactly – I humbly request this of you

[towards the end of a conversation between manager and new student, indicating reciprocal gratitude and request to proceed with lessons as discussed]

Speaker's implied future obligation: to ensure that lessons meet with new student's approval

Business internal

These telephone exchanges were recorded at the desk of a male tour supervisor of a large Japanese inbound travel company in Sydney.

iv. *yoroshiku onegai shimasu* = if you would be so kind

[following a confirmation between a tour supervisor and a member of the services division within the one travel company – confirmation of tour arrangements. Status is fairly equal between two speakers, except possibly for age differences.]

Speaker's implied future obligation: future dealings will be satisfactorily carried out

v. *onegai itashimasu* = if you could possibly do me the favour of doing this

[following an exchange between tour supervisor and less familiar staff member in services division, about lack of clarity of travel details, and implied request that details be clearer in future. Use of *itashimasu* indicates mark of respect from speaker to listener]

Speaker's implied future obligation: if this condition is met mutual cooperation will continue

vi. *onegai shimasu doumo* = okay, see you then

[following exchange about lunch arrangements between two colleagues in travel company – listener of higher status than speaker as indicated by final “thank you”]

Speaker's implied future obligation: to be on time at agreed meeting place

vii. *onegai itashimasu, doumo* = if you wouldn't mind, I'd be much obliged
[following exchange between tour supervisor and in-house colleague about future
tour arrangements, requesting higher status or less familiar colleague to follow
through and ensure things go to plan]

Speaker's implied future obligation: to continue to provide accurate information
to colleague so that tours can operate efficiently

viii. *itsumo osewa-ni natte-orimasu* = we are always indebted to you
[pre-announcement by tour supervisor to request that a superior's colleague pass on
message to superior to call speaker back]

Speaker's implied future obligation: to continue doing his/her best for smooth
running of the business

Family

These exchanges were noted while listening to my (Japanese) husband speaking to
his family in Japan on the telephone. The family were to take care of our daughter
while my husband attended some business meetings.

ix. *Maya-chan onegai-ne* = please look after Maya
[father leaving daughter in care of his parents while going away for a few days'
business]

Speaker's implied future obligation: to bring back a gift from his business trip

x. *katte-oite kureru-ka* = please buy her something from me
[man asking brother to buy something for their mother's birthday]

Speaker's implied future obligation: to pay back his brother!

xi. *makashite oite-kure* = leave it up to me
[man telling brother he will take care of brother's holiday hotel bookings]

Speaker's implied future obligation: that hotel will be of suitable standard and
bookings accurate

Notes to the above samples

Each sample differs in structural and lexical terms. As a formulaic addition to
exchanges of dependency-acknowledgement, morphological variety occurs

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according to the relative status of the two speakers. The verb in (iii) for example (*itashimasu*) is the more formal variety of the verb in (iv) (*shimasu*) indicating the perceived status of the speaker in (iv) is much lower than the listener. This is appropriate for a business person when speaking to a client or customer. Whereas in (iv) both speaker and listener are of equal social status. Other examples of lower status (or less familiar) speakers are (v) illustrating the use of *itasu*, and (vii) using *itasu* and *doumo*.

Naturally, in the exchanges between the two brothers (x) and (xi) the relationship is one of the most relaxed, indicated by the shortened forms of *kureru*, and less rigid or definite transfer of *on*.

In sample (ii) the speaker is cut off and therefore unable to complete the utterance. The use of *onegai* alone as a dependency-acknowledging speech act is possible, but only in very familiar settings between two participants of equal status such as sample (ix).

The expression in (i) (*osore irimasu*) is commonly used to express gratitude, when occurring at the end of a sentence. When said at the beginning of a sentence its meaning is closer to “excuse me” or “sorry to bother you”.

The expression *osewa-ni narimasu* (a variation of which is seen in [viii]) is possibly a more explicit commissive than *yoroshiku onegai shimasu*. It is quite often used in everyday business dealings, to pre-announce an order (especially over the telephone) and indicates to the listener that something is about to be requested, and to be prepared for it. In its past tense form (*osewa-ni narimashita*) this expression has the speaker acknowledging the dependency s/he has had on the listener thus far, and a humble indirect commitment to reciprocity of that dependency. In its present continuous form (as in sample [viii]) it is typically coupled with *itsumo* to reinforce the continuing nature of the dependency relationship, and associated gratitude of the speaker towards the listener.

Finally, sample (xi) illustrates the use of the speech act verb *makaseru*, or “to leave a matter to/entrust a person with” (Takahashi & Takahashi: 952). In this case, more of an onus is placed on the speaker than the listener, but even still it is definitely an

(expected) reciprocal arrangement. Thus if someone offers to take care of things, or to *makaseru*, in Japanese it is expressed as a request that the listener allow the speaker to take on this responsibility, as indicated by the imperative marker *kudasai*, *choudai*, or other dialectal or morphological variants. This preferred arrangement has been noted by Wierzbicka (p78), in that whereas English speakers might say “I want to do X”, Japanese find it easier to say “I want **you** to do X”. So instead of the concept “I want to do something for you”, in Japan it is more appropriate to express the idea that “I want you to allow me to do something for you”, eg. *sasete itadakemasu-deshou-ka* (“Would you kindly let me do...”).

Semantic and pragmatic structure of Japanese dependency-acknowledging speech acts

As evidenced in the preceding discussion, four major speech act verbs emerge from the data which represent dependency-acknowledgement. These are:

- i. *onagai suru*
- ii. *osore iru*
- iii. *makaseru*
- iv. *osewa-ni naru*

These speech act verbs will now be analysed individually, together with their morphological variations, locutionary meaning (basic literal meaning) and illocutionary force (the effect the utterance has on the listener). Naturally, in different contexts each speech act verb can take on slightly different locutionary meaning and illocutionary force.

- i. *onagai suru* (appearing as *onagai shimasu*, *yoroshiku onagai shimasu*, *onagai itashimasu*, etc.)

I say: I ask/request of you... **locutionary meaning**

I say this because: I want you to do something for me, and I acknowledge I will be indebted to you for your favour... **illocutionary force**

- ii. *osore iru* (appearing as *osore irimasu*, *osore irimashita*, etc.)

I say: sorry to trouble you/I'd appreciate if you could... **locutionary meaning**

I say this because: Although I realize this may inconvenience you, I want you to

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do something for me and acknowledge I am indebted to you... **illocutionary force**

iii. *makaseru* (appearing as *makashite choudai*, *omakase*, *makashite kure*, *makashite oite*, etc.)

I say: leave something up to me... **locutionary meaning**

I say this because: I want you to let me do it, and I will be accountable for what I do... **illocutionary force**

iv. *osewa-ni naru* (appearing as *osewa-ni narimasu*, *osewa-ni narimashita*, *osewa-ni natte-imasu*, etc.)

I say: I'll avail myself of your assistance:... **locutionary meaning**

I say this because: I'm going to ask you to do something for me, and I appreciate I am obliged to you for your assistance... **illocutionary force**

Limitations and areas for further research

The limitations of this study include the small sample size plus issues surrounding the gender-specificity of the Japanese language. A more comprehensive study would need to analyse a broader cross-section of authentic texts, and possibly also texts taken from an in-country Japanese context rather than Australian context. It would also be interesting to note generational differences between the use of dependency-acknowledging speech acts used in current youth culture in Japan and their parents' age group, for example. Finally, the interpretations of meaning are always open to contextual variations and fine semantic differences. However they are an attempt at explaining how an English speaker should understand the intended meaning of these speech act utterances.

Implications for teachers and learners of Japanese

It is most important that learners of Japanese appreciate the magnitude and complexity of social relationships in Japanese society, which are reflected in the language. Miscommunication problems are typically pragmatic rather than semantic in nature, once an intermediate level in Japanese is achieved.

To cite an example, as a foreigner living in Japan, if you play tennis your partner will usually begin the game with *yoroshiku onegai shimasu*. At first, the Japanese

language learner might wonder what the socio-cultural implications of this phrase are – is s/he expected to pay for court hire? Is s/he expected to let the opponent win? In fact no – the expression’s illocutionary force is to effectively lower the status or ability of the tennis partner. A rough translation might be “well, I’m probably not very good at tennis but please put up with my poor playing ability”. The reciprocal relationship means that the speaker is then obligated to playing an acceptable standard of tennis so the partner can enjoy the game.

It has been commented that many of these speech act verbs simply do not translate into English. Thomas Dillon admits in his amusing article that after twenty years in Japan, he still hasn’t come up with an English replacement for *yoroshiku onegai shimasu*, but that in Japanese

...life without *yoroshiku* is like a sandwich without bread. It doesn’t hold together so well. If I don’t drop a *yoroshiku* on someone I’ve just met or leave a *yoroshiku* at the cleaners along with my linen or clip a *yoroshiku* on to my post office request to mail a package, the whole exchange seems sadly incomplete” (Dillon: 3).

Why study speech acts in the language classroom? In Searle’s own words, the idea of *incompleteness* is reiterated:

A great deal can be said in the study of language without studying speech acts, but any such purely formal theory is necessarily incomplete. It would be as if baseball were studied only as a formal system of rules and not as a game. (Searle: 17)

For teachers aiming to develop true communicative effectiveness in their learners, it is essential that these particular speech acts, specifically dependence-acknowledging devices, are recognised and taught early on. As many of them are formulaic, they can be integrated into even beginner Japanese language programs. It is important that learners come to grips with elements of social status, politeness and sensitivity to reciprocity. As Anna Wierzbicka points out “the important thing is to show deference and to acknowledge one’s dependence on other people rather than to avoid imposition” (p77). For some NJSB learners of Japanese, this added yoke can be very difficult to become accustomed to, especially for those who have lead an otherwise independent lifestyle – Dillon (p1) felt his life became “militarized” when told he had to use more *aisatsu* (greetings, which include these speech act verbs). It is, however, as an essential part of the Japanese language and culture that requires speakers of the language and members of the culture to regard it as an honour to take care of someone. Without attention to these important

speech acts verbs, a learner can come across as abrupt, thoughtless and insensitive to Japanese native speakers; so in the language classroom, tasks such as production questionnaires and role plays (see Sasaki: 458) should be integrated into language lessons. Thus, along with designing materials and tasks to assist learners of Japanese in acquiring organizational competence, it is also most important that teachers focus on pragmatic competence, by raising learners' awareness about the concept of *on* and its linguistic and sociocultural implications.

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