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“WITH YOUR PERMISSION”:
A NEGOTIATION STRATEGY OF “FACE”
IN CONTEMPORARY JAPANESE

ABSTRACT

This article examines the Japanese causative expression *sasete itadaku* and argues its function as a linguistic politeness strategy in communication. It further develops that *sasete itadaku* is a skillful and creative linguistic device used to promote “face” in not only inter- and intracompany business communications, but in everyday interpersonal communication, as well.

INTRODUCTION

Every language has its own system of linguistic politeness in which the participants negotiate to save face for each other in interpersonal communication. Interestingly, the Japanese language embeds such face-saving strategies syntactically and morphologically within the language itself. In particular, the rich and intricate system of politeness (e.g., honorifics) plays a major role in interpersonal negotiation that includes business communication.

Essentially there are two ways to be linguistically polite in Japanese. One way is to elevate the relative position of the addressee, and expressions of this type are called *sonkeigo* (“honorific polite expressions”). The other way is to lower the relative position of the speaker, and expressions of this type are called *kenjoogo* (“humble polite expressions”) (Makino and Tsutsui 2003). For example, the plain non-polite dictionary form of *iu* (“to say”) can be expressed either in *sonkeigo* or *kenjoogo* as follows.

- (1) a. *ossharu*, “to say” (honorific polite form)
- b. *mooshiageru*, “to say” (humble polite form)

Note that the two expressions have the same denotative meaning of “to say,” but their connotation differs. For example, the humble form of *mooshiageru* in (1b) is appropriate when the speaker is addressing the president of the company because the speaker should lower himself in relation to the president. When the speaker is speaking about the president and the president is the subject of the sentence, then the honorific form of *ossharu* in (1a) should be used to elevate the president in order to show respect for him. Thus, the

following utterances in (2 a, b) are culturally and socially appropriate, while (2 c, d) are inappropriate.

- (2) a. *Shachoo ga watashi ni ossharu.*
 “The president speaks (to me).”
- b. *Watashi ga shachoo ni mooshiageru.*
 “I humbly speak to the president.”
- * c. *Shachoo ga watashi ni mooshiageru.*
 “The president humbly speaks to me.”
- * d. *Watashi ga shachoo ni ossharu.*
 “I speak to the president.”

The two expressions in (2 c, d) are considered rude or ignorant in social appropriateness by native speakers of Japanese. One can say that these expressions indicate a lack of “communicative competence” (Hymes 1971) even though grammatically they are correct. It is said that in Japanese one’s social and psychological attitude toward referents is clearly and obligatorily marked by the intrinsic linguistic system of politeness (e.g., Matsumoto 1989; Ide 1989). As such, the appropriate politeness level becomes crucial in Japanese.

Either elevating the addressee or lowering the speaker accomplishes the purpose of being polite to the addressee. One may wonder if there is an expression that does both; that is to say, elevates the addressee and lowers the speaker at the same time. Indeed, such a linguistic mechanism exists. In particular, the expression *sasete itadaku* (“to humbly receive permission”) has been more frequently used, and has gained popularity in contemporary Japan (Iguchi 1995; Kikuchi 1997; Yonezawa 2001; Shimizu 2003; Nihongo Bunsho Kenkyuujo 2010).

SASETE ITADAKU : TWO IN ONE

The expression *sasete itadaku* is a compound of two verbs, *saseru* (“cause,” “let”) and *itadaku* (“receive”). When the causer makes or lets the causee do something, the causative verb *saseru* is used. Essentially, this situation can be considered as a permission-granting act because the causer allows the causee to do something. Through suffixing the humble verb *itadaku* to the gerundive

form *sasete*, the whole expression, *sasete itadaku*, expresses the causee’s humble and gracious receiving of permission to perform a certain action from the causer/permission granter. Observe the following example.

- (3) *Hatsugen sasete itadakimasu.*
 “(I) humbly receive permission to speak.”

For example, this expression can be used when the speaker is going to express his opinion to the board members at a meeting. The causative expression elevates the position of the addressee or the causer, because usually permission is granted from a person in higher position, the causer, to a person in lower position, the causee. Furthermore, the receiving verb *itadaku* is a *kenjoogo*, and clearly indicates the modesty of the speaker. In other words, *sasete itadaku* elevates the addressee and at the same time lowers the speaker. It is almost like two *sonkeigo* and *kenjoogo* in one, and is considered very polite and socially appropriate in business.

In their study of linguistic politeness strategies, Brown and Levinson (1987) propose two “faces” that need to be satisfied: the positive face and the negative face. The positive face is the desire to be respected by others, and the negative face is the desire not to be impeded by others. In this theory of politeness, the Japanese expression *sasete itadaku* may be viewed as a device to promote the positive face of the addressee; that is, to show respect toward the addressee. Let us examine how this expression serves as an effective way to promote the positive face, or mitigate any threat to the positive face in the case of a face-threatening situation.

FACE STRATEGY TOWARD THE ADDRESSEE

How does a company appropriately convey the intention of buying another company’s products to that company in the Japanese business context? An advanced learner of Japanese or even some native speakers of Japanese who may not be familiar with business situations may come up with the following expression.

- (4) *Anata no kaisha no shoohin o koonyuu shitai to omoimasu.*
 “(We) think that (we) want to purchase your company’s product.”

The above expression in (4) is grammatically correct, but it sounds too direct as if it were an English translation of the Japanese equivalent. In

particular, in Japanese, it is awkward to directly express one's want or volition with *shitai* ("want"). This becomes even more relevant if the sentence is to be used in the formal business context. So, how should we express an intention in a business context? According to Hirokane (2006), the expression in (4) should be changed into the following expression in (5), which is most appropriate in such a context.

- (5) *Kisha no shoohin o koonyuu sasete itadakitai to zonjimasu.*
 "(We) humbly think that (we) humbly receive permission to purchase the product of your honorable company."

Formal business-oriented vocabulary words such as *kisha* ("your honorable company"), and *zonjiru* ("be aware") drastically improve the appropriateness of the sentence. These substituted words make the expression formal and professional, compared to the equivalent words in (4), all of which are considered colloquial Japanese.

However, the most significant and noteworthy improvement in (5) is the use of the causative expression of *sasete itadaku*. This expression frames the business deal as if the company were humbly seeking permission to carry out their plan rather than overtly and directly expressing their intention to the other company (even though it is offering a welcome proposal to the other company!). An interesting point is that although seeking permission is not necessary from a Westerner's perspective, the company is seeking permission so that it can lower itself, which in turn is elevating its counterpart. This leads to the promotion of the positive face of the addressee. Differing from the Western egalitarian viewpoint, the Japanese value and encourage the unequal relationship between parties, with the other party always higher than one's own. This strategy helps maximize the efficiency of the positive face strategy.

The above example in (5) is an instance of the politeness strategy using *sasete itadaku* to target the addressee's positive face. Is there any instance of politeness strategy aimed toward oneself (the speaker/sender) rather than the other party (the addressee)? In what follows, we will examine such an instance.

FACE STRATEGY TOWARD ONESELF AS WELL AS THE ADDRESSEE

Informing the addressee of undesirable, even harmful news is always a challenge. This is because it may put not only the addressee's positive face

in danger but also the sender’s positive face as well. It is a clear instance of a face-threatening act or FTA. For example, rejecting one’s request may send a message to the addressee that the addressee, as well as the request, is not desirable. At the same time, the act of informing the addressee of such a decision may put the sender in an undesirable position in the eyes of the addressee—after all, who in the world welcomes the bringer of bad news? Thus, in informing someone of a rejection, one has to mitigate the FTA for oneself, as well as for the addressee.

The following is a business document informing a company about the decision to refuse the request of that company. The document starts with a few fixed expressions of greeting, and then it goes into the main body informing the reader of the rejection decision. Observe the following.

- (6) *Shanai de kentoo itashimashita kekka, zannen nagara, konkai wa otorihiki o miawa sete itadaku koto to narimashita.*

“After careful consideration internally, (we) are sorry to inform (you) that (we) humbly receive permission to decline the business proposal.”

It explicitly states the decision to refuse the business proposal. This is interesting given that Japanese is considered to belong to a high context culture (Hall 1976), and its communication style is assumed to be implicit. Unlike the commonly held expectation, the document is very explicit and straightforward, but interestingly, “in a Japanese way.” Note the causative expression of *sete itadaku* (the use of *sete* instead of *sasete* is due to differing verb forms, but has the same meaning). Instead of framing the decision as a volitional act (which is the case), the document proceeds as if the decision were made with the full agreement of the addressee through skillfully and creatively taking advantage of the causative expression. By doing so, the document protects the sender’s positive face because it presupposes that the decision did not originate from the sender. At the same time, through making the addressee a permission granter, the document elevates the position of the addressee and as such, it is successful in preserving the addressee’s positive face as well. In other words, the causative expression mitigates the FTA for both the sender and the addressee.

Following the above statement stating the decision, the company document continues and adds the reason for declining the business offer. The document states that they are in the process of reviewing their international operations and as a result of this process, they state that they cannot give a positive

response at this time. After stating the reason, the document continues by offering an apology for not being able to comply with the request, and provides future business possibilities as a prospect. Observe the following continuation of the document, in which the expression *sasete itadaku* appears.

- (7) *Gokitai ni soezu makoto ni mooshiwake gozaimasen. Mata no kikai ni oyaku ni tateru yoo na koto ga gozaimashitara, zehi kyooryoku sasete itadaki tai to zonjimasu.*

“(We) apologize for not being able to meet your expectations. By all means, (we) hope that (we) will humbly receive permission to do business with you if an opportunity arises in the near future.”

Here, once again, the causative expression conveys the sense of politeness toward the addressee, and by doing so it also makes the sender appear as a desirable party. Framing the sender as a subordinate to the addressee ensures that the undesirable decision was conveyed to the addressee with the maximum level of mitigation of the threat to the positive face for both parties.

SASETE ITADAKU FOR CUSTOMERS AND EMPLOYEES

This causative expression is not just limited to inter-company documents. It is widely observed in various announcements as well as advertisements addressed to general customers. The following example is a sentence found in a travel agent’s letter addressed to a customer who asked for an information packet.

- (8) *Irai itadaite ita shiryoo o soofu sasete itadakimasu node, yoroshiku gosashoo itadakimasu yoo yoroshiku onegai itashimasu*

“(We) humbly receive permission to send (you) the requested information. (We) humbly ask (you) to receive it accordingly.”

Interestingly, in this case, there is no clear FTA involved. Complying with the addressee’s request to send the information and actually sending the information does not constitute a threat to the positive face of the addressee (or that of the sender). Even though there is no need to mitigate any apparent FTA, the causative expression is used in (8). One reason for this is the fact that the causative expression reduces the intentionality or the volition of the sender who is doing the favor (of sending the information packet) to the addressee. With this expression in effect, the addressee (the customer) may not have to identify him/herself as the recipient of the favor because supposedly

there was no “active” favor-giver. In other words, the addressee does not have to feel indebted for receiving the favor.

The following sentence is from a cellular phone company’s document addressed to a customer who is applying for service.

- (9) *Mooshikomi naiyoo o shinsa suru ni Atari, kojīn shinyoo joo hoo kikan e shookai tooroku **sasete itadaku** koto ga gozaimasu.*

“In order to examine the application information, (we) may humbly receive permission to contact and register with a personal information agency.”

In the document, the cellular phone company conveys the message that they may contact an information agency such as a credit bureau to check the customer’s financial background. The act of background-checking may be a FTA to the addressee’s positive face, because the act presupposes that the addressee may not be fully trustworthy. Here, the causative expression comes into play and helps mitigate the FTA to the addressee’s positive face. Also it may mitigate the threat to the company’s positive face as well.

The following sentence is from a company announcement about a method of awarding a promotional prize. Once again, the causative expression is skillfully employed.

- (10) *Toosensha no happyoo wa shoohin no hassoo o motte kae **sasete itadakimasu.***

“(We) humbly receive permission to substitute sending a prize for the announcement of a prizewinner.”

Ideally, the announcement of a prizewinner should precede the act of sending the prize to the winner. However, the company saves the trouble of making the announcement by directly sending the prize to the winner. The company wants to politely convey the decision to simplify the award notification process. One way is to make the decision appear as if it were not solely made by the company, but with the permission (or even with the cooperation) of its customers. The causative expression is the linguistic device used to accomplish the task. This usage helps create the atmosphere that this decision was made in accordance with the customers’ interest.

The use of the causative expression is not confined to documents addressed to customers. Often a company treats its own employees in the same polite manner. Observe the following examples from internal company documents addressed to the company’s employees.

- (11) *Ryoo shataku too ga kongetsu yori ika no toori henkoo to narimasu node, gorenraku sasete itadakimasu.*
 “Regarding the company housing arrangements, (we) humbly receive permission to inform (you) that the following changes will become effective starting this month.”
- (12) *Sakihodo odenwa nite gorenraku sasete itadakimashita toori, gogatsu do kyuujo nite kyuujo gaku o choosei sasete itadakimasu node gogakunin o yoroshiku onegai itashimasu.*
 “As (we) humbly received permission to inform (you) over the phone earlier, (we) ask (you) to confirm that (we) humbly receive permission to adjust your salary starting in the month of May.”

In (11), the company’s housing department informs an employee of its new housing arrangement. In (12), the company’s personnel department informs an employee of a salary adjustment. In each case, it is obvious that the company does not need to secure permission from its employees to make the announcement. This is much more evident in (12), because the salary adjustment is actually a salary increase (which is welcomed by the employee), and clearly there is no “permission” required from the party receiving the benefit. However, the causative expression contributes to the conveyance of the meta-message of respect toward the employees even in those cases.

SASETE ITADAKU EVERYWHERE

Aside from functions such as informing of decision, rejection, and notice, the causative expression is also used in various occasions. The following examples illustrate occasions involving making appointments and ordering goods.

- (13) *Ojama sasete itadaku jikan desu ga, juugatsu tsuitachi no juu rokuji de onegai dekimasu ka?*
 “As for the time (for us) to humbly receive permission to visit, may (I) ask for 16:00 on the first of November?”
- (14) *Onsha yori ichiban tsuyoku susumete itadakimashita roku ban no shoochin o chuumon sasete itadakimasu.*
 “(We) humbly receive permission to order the product number 6 which was strongly recommended by your honorable company.”

In (13), the causative expression is used to perform the transaction of making an appointment. In (14), the same expression is used to perform the transaction of ordering goods. In this sense, the causative expression can be seen as another instance of the commonly used linguistic politeness strategy in business transactions.

It is interesting to note that the use of the expression is not just confined to the business world, but rather, as if a national phenomenon, the expression has permeated society in general. Even the Prime Minister of Japan uses this expression. It is rather unusual for the Prime Minister to use the expression of humbly seeking permission from an addressee or a referent who is highly likely to be lower in social position. The frequency of its use is relatively low, but former Prime Minister Hatoyama is well-known for his use of such expressions. An examination of his official address to the Diet (equivalent to the US President’s State of the Union Address) after winning the 2009 general election shows instances of this expression.

- (15) *Aomoriken ni yuuzei ni maitta sai, oozei no katagata to akushu **sasete itadaita** naka de, watashi no te o hanasoo to shinai hitori no obaasan ga irasshaimashita.*

“At the occasion of my public address in Aomori prefecture, there was one elderly lady who tried not to let go of my hand among those with whom (I) humbly received permission to shake hands.”

- (16) *Senjitsu hoomon **sasete itadaita** aru chooku koojoo no ohanashi o mooshi agemasu.*

“(I) will speak about the chalk factory which (I) humbly received permission to visit the other day.”

- (17) *Seiji ni wa yowai tachiba no hitobito, shoosuu no hitobito no shiten ga sonchoo sarenakereba naranai. Sono koto dake wa watashi no yuuai seiji no genten to shite koko ni sengen **sasete itadakimasu.***

“In politics, the viewpoints of those who are weak and those who are in the minority have to be respected. (I) humbly receive permission to declare this point as the foundation of my politics of fraternity.”

It is interesting, even humorous, to imagine that the Prime Minister would need permission to shake hands with an ordinary elderly woman. Of course, in reality he does not need “permission” to shake hands. However, the causative

expression helps frame himself as a humble and amiable politician instead of a self-important and authoritative one. It promotes his positive face. We may call the causative expression a form of positive face strategy even for the Prime Minister.

Aside from politicians, the expression is also used by celebrities. Observe the following example, in which a young female TV star announces her engagement to a Kabuki (Japanese traditional play) superstar at a press conference.

- (18) *Ichikawa Ebizoo san to kekkon o zentei ni otsukiai o sasete itadaite orimasu. Soshite kinjitsu chuu ni konyaku o suru koto ni narimashita.* (November 20, 2009)

“(I) humbly receive permission to date Mr. Ebizoo Ichikawa with the understanding that we will get married. And it was decided that (we) will get engaged in the near future.”

Even though the female TV star is herself a celebrity, Mr. Ebizo Ichikawa, the Kabuki superstar, is far more prominent than she is, and this perception of hers is clearly indicated by the use of the causative expression. To her, perhaps, she was literally given permission to date the Kabuki star. Correctly framing herself with the expression makes her appear as a humble and amiable person.

Finally, it is interesting to note that the causative expression can be used even when there is no apparent causer or permission granter. Observe the following example taken from Kawakami (1993).

- (19) *Watashi wa kokugogaku o benkyoo sasete itadaite orimasu.*

“I humbly receive permission to study Japanese linguistics.”

Kawakami (1993) states that he prefers the sentence in (19) to a sentence without the causative expression in describing his occupation. He points out that the causer/permission-giver studying linguistics is not a specific individual in this case. Rather, it is a much broader entity such as *seken-sama* (“the world” or “society”), and the sense of gratitude toward *seken-sama* is embedded in the expression by allowing him to study linguistics, or any subject for that matter. The causative expression is quite suitable for him to express his appreciation of being able to make a living by studying linguistics.

Incidentally, this importance of *seken-sama* or society has long been emphasized in Japanese cultural values, with origins dating back to the

Oomi Shoonin, or “Oomi Merchants” of the Edo period (1603–1868). This well-known group of peddlers promoted the importance of *seken-sama*, and is said to be the first who frequently used *sasete itadaku* in conducting business (NHK Minna de NihonGO Seisakuhan 2010). It is clear that *sasete itadaku* represents the most fundamental and traditional principle of Japanese business—expressing gratitude toward *seken-sama* for one’s success.

CONCLUSION

An interesting characteristic of the causative expression *sasete itadaku* is that it is used even when there is no actual causer-causee relationship between the relevant parties. It will create such a relationship just like magic even if no relationship yet exists. If the relationship already exists, it will further strengthen it. The causative expression is a skillful and creative linguistic device to promote “face” in inter- and intra-company business communications, as well as everyday interpersonal communication.

In business communication with foreign companies (or any intercultural communication), it becomes crucial to acquire and use foreign language linguistic competence in not only grammatical, but more importantly, communicatively appropriate ways. In this article, we have examined the Japanese causative expression as a symbolic example where communicative competence (Hymes 1971) becomes quite relevant. In Japanese society, which values *amae* (“sweet dependence”) or mutual dependence over individual volition or independence (Doi 1981), the causative expression becomes extremely important because it promotes mutual relationships between the speaker (sender) and the addressee. The awareness of culturally rich expressions such as the causative expression will certainly enhance successful business communication with the Japanese.

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