

Why can't the Japanese speak polite English?

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Something that has puzzled me for some time is why the Japanese, for whom politeness levels are a critical issue in their own language, pay so little attention to the question of politeness when they study the English language. Governmental policy in English education over the last two decades or so has been to emphasize training in oral/aural communication skills, and a key goal of high school English programs is to produce students who can express themselves in colloquial English in a variety of everyday situations or, as the Education Ministry puts it, "transmit information, ideas, etc. appropriately in accordance with the situation and the purpose."

It would be easy to make a list of linguistic skills people need if they are to be conversationally functional in everyday life. The ability to make requests at the appropriate level of politeness (i.e. "in accordance with the situation and the purpose") would certainly be near the top of it. To demonstrate that even well-educated university students of higher than average intelligence lack this ability, I recently had fifty or so students translate 「大変恐縮ですが、財布を家に忘れてしまいましたので、1万円ぐらい貸していただけませんか」 into English, instructing them to make sure their translations matched the politeness level of the Japanese.

Ignoring the grammatical mistakes they made, I was able to classify their translations of the request part of the Japanese into four

basic patterns:

1. *Please lend me 10,000 yen.*
2. *I would like you to lend me 10,000 yen.*
3. *Will/Would/Can/Could you lend me 10,000 yen(, please)?*
4. *Would you mind lending me 10,000 yen?*

The first two of these aren't even request patterns, so it is rather shocking that any student who has spent at least six years studying colloquial English should think they are. Unfortunately, however, it is not particularly surprising that many of the students (about 20%) selected the first one, because English grammar books and textbooks published in Japan routinely mislead their readers on the subject of the imperative mood with comments like 「命令文の文尾や文頭に please を加えると、ていねいな表現になる」。 This is nonsense: whether an English sentence with a verb in the imperative mood is appropriately polite or not has very little to do with the presence or absence of *please*.

The imperative mood has many functions in English, some of which are intrinsically polite, such as making offers (*Have another cup of tea*) and issuing invitations (*Come in and make yourself at home*). But the examples that accompany textbook comments about the politeness of *imperative + please* are invariably straight orders, e.g. *Please open the door./Close the window, please*. I'm afraid I have to point out that such orders

cannot be magically converted into polite requests by the simple expedient of adding *please* to them! It is true that an order issued by someone who has a recognized right to issue it can be made slightly more polite by the addition of *please*. However, it still remains an order.

As teachers, you have a recognized right to issue a wide range of orders to your students: *Open your textbooks at page 36*, for example. Using the imperative mood to do this is entirely appropriate (i.e. not impolite), with or without *please*. However, there are also many orders that you do not have a recognized right to issue to your students or, indeed, to anyone else. One of them is *Lend me 10,000 yen*. Another is *Go to hell*. Adding *please* to the former has no more effect on the resulting “politeness” of the order than does adding *please* to the latter: both are extremely impolite!

As for *I would like you to*, I have no idea how anyone could possibly think it is a request pattern. Actually, it's a polite way of giving orders or instructions of the type you have a recognized right to issue. Doctors and dentists use it all the time: *I'd like you to bite down on this as hard as you can*. Needless to say, this is not intended as a request!

Would you, *Can you* and *Could you* are at least request patterns, although used in their most basic form (*Would/Can/Could you lend me 10,000 yen?*) they are at a vastly lower politeness level than 「していただけませんか」.

Will you, on the other hand, is not a request pattern at all, and although I'm used to seeing sentences like *Will you close the window?* mistranslated with 「窓を閉めてくれませんか」 in textbooks, I still feel a sense of outrage whenever I do. *Will you close the window?* may be slightly milder than *Close the window*(, *please*), but it is still

fundamentally an order and is, therefore, impolite if you don't have a recognized right to issue it. Whether it is actually milder or not depends largely on intonation.

The confusion over the politeness level of *Will you* on the part of textbook writers may be a result of the fact that when the pattern is used to issue offers or invitations, it is, as with imperatives, certainly polite: *Will you have another cup of tea?* / *Will you stay for dinner?* It should be noted, however, that there are other more common ways of issuing such offers/invitations, the most usual of which is *Would you like (to)*. Furthermore, the use of *Will you* to issue offers/invitations would strike many native speakers of English as slightly old-fashioned. The same applies to *Won't you*, which sounds more insistent and therefore less polite.

Would you mind is a very common pattern for making reasonably polite requests in English. However, it might well not be polite enough to persuade someone to lend you ¥10,000, particularly if you didn't know that person very well.

A few of my students did manage to come up with appropriate translations of the Japanese request, but I'm afraid more than 90% of them failed pretty miserably — those who used either of the first two patterns or *Will you* clearly had no idea at all how to make polite requests in English. And I'm afraid the fault lies with the textbooks they are using: not only do they give incorrect translations of patterns that are fundamentally impolite, but they also fail, generally speaking, to include any really polite English request patterns at all. I assume that as English teachers you know what these patterns are....