

# An Ethnopragmatic Analysis of Japanese Speech Acts *O/Go-N-Sama*

日本語発話行為「お／ご-N-さま」の民族語用論的分析

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## 1. Introduction

This study focuses on Japanese speech acts with the morphological structure *o/go-N(oun)-sama* and demonstrates that it mirrors Japanese speakers' world-view. In the framework of the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM; Goddard 1998, 2006, Wierzbicka 2003 among others), speech acts reflecting culture values have been under intense investigation. Goddard (1998), for example, argues that the wealth of English speech act verbs can be ascribed to Anglo culture, which is particularly interested in “specifying the interplay between causation and volition” (p. 156). In comparison, the number of Japanese speech act verbs is smaller. Interestingly, however, Japanese has a set of speech act nouns with the *o/go-N-sama* structure (Otomo 2010). It combines a certain type of root noun to form speech act expressions, many of which are frequently exchanged in everyday interactions. Let us take *o-tsukare-sama* as an example of this structure. This is one of the most common greetings in the Japanese speaking community, which can be a “hello,” “goodbye,” “thank you,” or even “cheers!” when toasting. It might also be a surprise to some Japanese learners when this literally means “a person who is tired.” How can it be used as a greeting in such various situations? This study aims to discuss :

1. How the honorific use and the speech act use of *o/go-N-sama* are related.
2. What semantic components are shared among the *o/go-N-sama* speech act nouns.
3. What kind of cultural script underlies the *o/go-N-sama* speech acts.

The subsequent section takes a brief look at the two uses of *o/go-N-sama*. Section 3 exam-

ines the semantics and pragmatics of this structure, which mirror Japanese cultural assumptions. The last section draws a conclusion.

## 2. Focus of research

### 2.1. The honorific use of *o/go*-Noun-*sama*

The structure in question has honorific and speech act applications. Let us start with an overview of the constituents of this structure. The prefixes *o-* and *go-* and the suffix *-sama* are all honorific morphemes. Thus, in the former use, *o/go*-N-*sama* expresses the speaker's deference to the person that the root noun refers to. For instance, *o-kyaku* (“customer”)-*sama* and *o-ko* (“child”)-*sama* sound more polite than just *kyaku* and *ko*.

- (1) a. *o- kyaku -sama*  
       HON-customer-HON  
       “one’s dearest customer”
- b. *o- ko -sama*  
       HON-child-HON  
       “one’s dearest child”

As touched on in Otomo (2010), there is no difference in meaning between the two prefixes *o-* and *go-*. Although *o-* often combines with words of Japanese origin (e.g., *o-kuruma* (“car”), *o-hanashi* (“talk”)), and *go-*, with those of Chinese origin (e.g., *go-setsumei* (“explanation”), *go-shuppatsu* (“departure”)), this is not always the case. *O-kyaku-sama* in (1a), for example, has a root noun of Chinese origin.

The suffix *-sama* is an honorific title, which follows a proper noun like *Sato-sama* (“Mr./Ms. Sato”). One thing to be aware of here is that this honorific marker is also combined with common nouns that refer to a person or people. Some of the *o/go*-N-*sama* expressions are, therefore, used as address forms to show respect and/or politeness to the addressees. Among them are *o-kyaku-sama* in (1a), *o-kaa-sama* (“mother”), and *o-joo-sama* (“young lady”).

### 2.2. The speech act use of *o/go*-Noun-*sama*

Turning now to the latter use, we find that this structure can also function as a speech act with a certain type of root noun embedded. The following are some examples with their rough transla-

tions.

- (2) a. *O- tsukare -sama.*  
 HON-fatigue-HON  
 “I appreciate your hard work.” [appreciation]
- b. *O- sewa -sama.*  
 HON-help-HON  
 “Thank you for your help.” [giving thanks]
- c. *O- machidoo -sama.*  
 HON-to wait long-HON  
 “I’m sorry I kept you waiting.” [apology]
- d. *Go- chisoo -sama.*  
 HON-feast-HON  
 “Thank you for the wonderful dinner.” [giving thanks/compliment]
- e. *Go- shuushoo -sama.*  
 HON-bereavement-HON  
 “Please accept my condolences for your loss.” [condolences]

Examples in (2) are characterized by their root nouns. That is, all of them are event nouns. With this structure, one can perform a wide variety of speech acts, such as appreciation, giving thanks, apologizing, complimenting, and even giving condolences. This set of speech act expressions deserves a closer look, and its semantics and pragmatics help us better understand the way people interact in the Japanese community.

### 3. Analysis

Considering *o-tsukare-sama* can be a “hello,” “goodbye,” “thank you,” or even “cheers,” it is assumed that there is no exact equivalent of this in other languages like English. To explicate the *o/go-N-sama* structure free from linguistic and ethnocultural bias, this study adopts the NSM approach, which is defined by Goddard (2008) as “a decompositional system of meaning representation based on empirically established universal semantic primes, i.e., simple indefinable meanings which appear to be present as identifiable word-meanings in all languages” (p. 1). Semantic primes are, in other words, the vocabulary of the NSM. They are claimed to be intuitively com-

prehensive, self-explanatory and universal across all natural languages. The NSM vocabulary consists of 65 semantic primes, such as I, YOU, THIS, and DO, just to name a few. Explications are composed exclusively of these semantic primes in NSM syntactic frames.

Let us now explicate what the utterances *o-tsukare-sama* and *o-sewa-sama* denote, respectively. As mentioned earlier, *o-tsukare-sama* is a greeting exchanged on a daily basis, typically between colleagues at work. What the speaker (S) does with this phrase is to acknowledge the tough situation in which the hearer (H) is involved, and express his or her appreciation for H's efforts.

(3) *O-tsukare-sama*.

- [1] I say : “*o-tsukare-sama*”
- [2] I say this to you because I am thinking like this :
- [3] You did something
- [4] You couldn't not do this
- [5] You couldn't do this in one moment
- [6] You did this for some time, maybe for a long time
- [7] Because of this,
- [8]       you feel something bad now
- [9]       you don't want to move your body anymore
- [10] You don't want something like this to happen anymore
- [11] I can feel the same way as you
- [12] I want you to feel something good
- [13] Because of you, something good happened to someone
- [14] Because of this,
- [15]       I feel something good toward you
- [16]       I think you are someone above me

An utterance is made up of two elements: a proposition and modality. In case of *o/go-N-sama*, there is a semantic division of labor between the root noun and the honorific morphemes. The propositional content is denoted by the root noun, whereas S's mental attitude toward this proposition is implied by *o/go-* and *-sama*. When it comes to *o-tsukare-sama* above, the root noun *tsukare* describes the situation of H being tired from hard work. This is explicated in [3] – [10].

The rest of the constituents, *o-* and *-sama*, on the other hand, represent S's modality ; empathy for H's feelings ([11] – [12]), appreciation for the effort ([13]), and respect to him or her ([14] – [16]).

*O-sewa-sama* is another greeting often heard during everyday social interaction. The noun *sewa* means “to look after somebody/something” or “to take care of somebody/something.” One typical situation where *o-sewa-sama* is used is when a parent expresses gratitude to a person who has taken care of their child.

(4) *O-sewa-sama*.

- [17] I say : “*o-sewa-sama*”
- [18] I say this to you because I am thinking like this :
- [19] Someone near me wanted me to do something for this someone
- [20] I couldn't do this something
- [21] Because of me, you couldn't not do this
- [22] You did this for some time, maybe for a long time
- [23] Because of this,
- [24]       you feel something bad now
- [25]       you don't want to move your body anymore
- [26] You don't want something like this to happen anymore
- [27] I can feel the same way as you
- [28] I want you to feel something good
- [29] Because of you, something good happened to this someone
- [30]                       something good happened to me
- [31] Because of this,
- [32]       I feel something good toward you
- [33]       I think you are someone above me

As is the case with the previous example, the root noun *sewa* in *o-sewa-sama* provides the propositional information ([19] – [26]). To put it simply, H took care of S's business on behalf of S, even though H knew that this caused him or her some trouble. S, therefore, empathizes with H's burden ([27] – [28]), acknowledges his or her effort ([29] – [30]), and conveys gratitude and respect to him or her ([31] – [33]).

From the above (and other realizations omitted due to space limitations), the semantic template for *o/go-N-sama* can be drawn out as follows.

(5) The semantic template for the *o/go-N-sama* speech acts

- [34] I say : “*o/go-N-sama*”
- [35] I say this to you because I am thinking like this :
- [36] Something bad happened to you
- [37] Because of this, you feel something bad now
- [38] You don't want something like this to happen anymore
- [39] I can feel the same way as you
- [40] I want you to feel something good
- [41] I feel something good toward you
- [42] I think you are someone above me

Attention should be drawn to the fact that the speech act use imposes a selection restriction on the root noun. That is, not all event nouns can occupy the N slot of the structure. As shown in the examples (2a – e), nouns embedded in the structure depict the hearer's situation which is not necessarily desirable, such as fatigue from hard work (2a), trouble of taking care of someone (2b), to be kept waiting (2c), trouble of preparing a dinner (2d), and bereavement (2e). See again [3] – [10] for *o-tsukare-sama*, [19] – [26] for *o-sewa-sama*, and what it comes down to is [36] – [38] for the *o/go-N-sama* template. The speaker then shows empathy ([39] – [40]) and respect ([41] – [42]) for the interlocutor suffering such an unfavorable situation. Note also that the honorific use and the speech act use of *o/go-N-sama* are connected with each other, in that both express the deference paid by the speaker to the addressee.

Before leaving this section, it is important to examine Japanese cultural values behind the *o/go-N-sama* speech acts. As is well known, Japanese speakers often say sorry when English speakers say thank you. Himeno (1992) claims that this is because the former follow “the principles of considerate expressions,” which state that “say that cost to other is high.” Indeed, Japanese speakers underscore how much they owe the hearer as a means of showing their gratitude. Here is a cultural script that is deeply ingrained in the Japanese community.

#### **A Japanese cultural script :**

many people think like this :  
when something good happened to me because of someone,  
I can't not say something like this to this someone :  
“I feel something bad because you couldn't not do something”

This explains their verbal behaviors, including not only their expression of sorry, but also most *o/go-N-sama* speech acts like *o-tsukare-sama*, which is translated into different English applications depending on the context.

#### 4. Conclusions

This study has demonstrated these findings. First, the honorific use and the speech act use of *o/go-N-sama* are closely related in that both imply the speaker's reverence to what the root noun refers to. Another is that the *o/go-N-sama* structure enables us to perform various speech acts and represent our mental attitudes toward the interlocutor who is undergoing an unpleasant situation. Lastly, considering that it is a Japanese cultural norm to acknowledge the cost paid by the interlocutor and show respect to them, it makes sense that the *o/go-N-sama* speech act structure is productive to some extent and serves as a useful tool that is applicable to various contexts.

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