

**THE REALIZATION OF DIRECTIVE SPEECH ACTS THROUGH INTERROGATIVE FORMS IN JAPANESE BUSINESS DISCOURSE**

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**Abstract.** This article examines the linguopragmatic functions of directive speech acts realized through interrogative forms in Japanese business discourse. In commercial and professional communication, speakers frequently ask an addressee to perform a specific action, provide an answer, wait, call back, supply information, or clarify a deadline. In Japanese, such directive intentions are rarely realized through direct imperative structures; rather, they are conventionally encoded through fixed interrogative request formulas. Based on indirect interrogative constructions used in Japanese corporate interaction, the study identifies their key pragmatic functions: soliciting action, mitigating illocutionary force, maintaining business etiquette, and preserving the addressee's negative face by leaving a formal possibility of refusal. The analysis demonstrates that interrogative forms in Japanese business discourse function not merely as instruments of information seeking but as highly conventionalized indirect directive devices.

**Keywords:** Japanese language, business discourse, directive speech act, interrogative form, fixed request formulas, indirect expression, mitigation, negative face, auxiliary verb, business etiquette.

**Introduction**

In Japanese business discourse, the speech relationship between interlocutors is often established not through explicit instructions or strict demands, but through cautious, context-appropriate, and respectful linguistic means. In situations such as business telephone communication, negotiating a response deadline with a partner, clarifying information, requesting a callback, or asking the interlocutor to wait, the speaker expects the addressee to perform a specific action. Substantively, such speech acts have a directive nature because they guide the addressee toward a particular course of behavior.

However, in Japanese business speech, the intention to induce action is predominantly expressed not through direct imperative forms, but through fixed interrogative request formulas. For instance, although the meaning "please wait" can be conveyed by an explicit imperative, formulaic interrogative-request structures combined with appropriate honorific forms are perceived as more natural in business communication. In these constructions, the interrogative form is structurally preserved, yet its primary pragmatic function shifts from information seeking to directing the addressee toward an action.

Within the framework of P. Brown and S. Levinson's Face Theory, such indirect interrogative forms can be interpreted as strategies for mitigating a face-threatening act. Since a request potentially restricts the addressee's freedom of action, it may threaten the addressee's negative face, understood as the desire not to be imposed upon and to retain freedom of choice [6]. Japanese business discourse therefore tends to encode directive intentions through interrogative formulas that soften the illocutionary force and present the expected action as a matter of the addressee's possible consent rather than as an obligation imposed by the speaker.

Studies on Japanese communicative acts note that Japanese interaction is characterized by relatively stable communicative patterns and politeness strategies [9, pp. 101–107]. From this perspective,

interrogative requests in business discourse should be analyzed not as mere information-gathering tools, but as linguopragmatic instruments that induce action while simultaneously preserving the interpersonal relationship between interlocutors.

In the present article, a directive speech act in interrogative form is understood as an expression that is grammatically organized as a question or as a fixed interrogative formula, but pragmatically expects a specific action from the addressee. In such expressions, the meanings of “question” and “request” intersect. The speaker appears to leave the choice to the addressee, while the communicative situation reveals the action-inducing function of the interrogative form.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the pragmatic functions of directive speech acts realized through interrogative forms in Japanese business discourse. The analysis focuses primarily on fixed constructions used in business contexts such as telephone communication, response reminders, deadline clarification, callback arrangements, and information requests. The study does not propose a general model or a definitive classification of Japanese directive speech acts; rather, it limits itself to identifying the linguopragmatic functions of selected fixed interrogative request formulas.

### **Materials and Methods**

The research material consists of fixed interrogative request phrases used in business telephone conversations, callback situations, deadline clarification, response reminders, and information requests. Eight conventionalized expressions were selected and analyzed as representative examples of interrogative forms with directive force. The examples are based on the materials presented in H. Kaneko's manual *Nihongo Keigo Torēningu* [13].

The study applies functional-linguopragmatic analysis, speech act analysis, contextual analysis, and analysis based on the criteria of directness and indirectness. Each example is examined according to the following parameters: grammatical form, fixed interrogative structure, expected action from the addressee, communicative situation, means of mitigating illocutionary force, and compliance with business etiquette.

The problem of action-inducing speech acts is considered within speech act theory in relation to directives. In the context of Japanese communication, speech acts that directly or indirectly induce the interlocutor to act, as well as their role in communicative effectiveness, have been emphasized in previous studies [1, p. 2]. This approach provides a theoretical basis for interpreting interrogative expressions not as simple questions, but as speech tools that guide the addressee's action under specific communicative conditions.

In the study of request speech acts, the degree of directness and indirectness is an essential criterion. P. Carrell and B. Konneker demonstrate that requests can be differentiated according to grammatical form, politeness, and degree of indirectness [2, pp. 73–96]. S. Blum-Kulka and E. Olshtain, within the framework of the CCSARP project, show that request strategies vary across cultures and that politeness cannot be measured solely by the degree of indirectness [4, pp. 196–213]. From this perspective, although Japanese fixed interrogative phrases are grammatically questions, in business contexts they function as conventional indirect directive expressions.

In Japanese, the meaning of inducement is not restricted to specialized imperative forms. L. Yu. Khronopulo points out that imperative semantics in Japanese may be conveyed through non-imperative means whose primary meaning is different [5, p. 57]. V.E. Iosifova also emphasizes that the communicative situation is decisive in determining the inductive meaning, while interrogative form may perform the function of indirect inducement [7, p. 15]. Studies on the semantics of

uncertainty and mitigating expressions in Japanese and Uzbek communication demonstrate that such devices help maintain relations with the addressee and reduce illocutionary pressure [10, pp. 70–86]. The present article examines this issue more narrowly, specifically within the scope of directive speech acts realized through interrogative forms in Japanese business discourse.

### Results

Directive speech acts in interrogative form occur particularly frequently in business telephone communication. In the following situation, an employee asks the interlocutor on the phone to wait:

「このまましばらくお待ちいただけますか。」

*Kono mama shibaraku o-machi itadakemasu ka.* — Could you please wait like this for a moment? [13, p. 165].

Although this expression is grammatically interrogative, its primary function in the communicative context is to request that the addressee remain on the line. The speaker does not issue a direct command to “wait”; instead, the utterance asks about the addressee’s possibility or willingness to perform the action. As a result, the addressee’s territory of independence, or negative face, is not directly violated, and the expression is perceived as polite. Thus, in this example, the interrogative formula functions to request a waiting action rather than to obtain information.

In the same type of telephone conversation, the employee may offer to call back in order to avoid making the interlocutor wait excessively:

「こちらからおかけ直しいたしましょうか。」

*Kochira kara o-kake-naoshi itashimashō ka.* — Shall we call back from our side? [13, p. 165].

Here the interrogative form expresses an offer rather than a demand. The action is to be performed by the speaker, but it is presented as dependent on the addressee’s consent. This interrogative formula reorganizes the communication process: the interlocutor may accept the offer or choose another solution. The question therefore functions as a device for mitigating the communicative situation and maintaining business etiquette.

When requesting a telephone number for a callback, the interrogative form likewise performs an action-inducing function:

「一様のお電話番号をお教えいただけますか。」

*-sama no o-denwa bangō o o-oshie itadakemasu ka.* — Could you please tell me your telephone number?

[13, p. 165].

Although this expression superficially resembles an information-seeking question, in a business context it expects a clear action from the addressee, namely stating the telephone number. The formula transforms the direct meaning “tell me your phone number” into a respectful request. The honorific forms 「お電話番号」 and 「お教え」 express respect toward the interlocutor, while the auxiliary verb 「いただけますか」 conveys the meaning of humbly requesting the action from the addressee.

The following example is aimed at reconfirming a number:

「もう一度確認させていただきます。03-xxxx-xxxxでよろしいでしょうか。」

*Mō ichido kakunin sasete itadakimasu. 03-xxxx-xxxx de yoroshii deshō ka.* — Let me confirm once more. Is the number 03-xxxx-xxxx correct?

[13, p. 165].

In this case, the interrogative form performs the function of verifying information and obtaining confirmation from the addressee. The formula 「でよろしいでしょうか」 is more formal and respectful than a direct equivalent such as “is it correct?” It helps prevent errors and secures the addressee’s confirmation in a manner appropriate to business communication.

In situations involving deadlines and reminders about a response, interrogative forms are also consistently linked with business etiquette. For example:

「それで、目途としてはいつごろになるでしょうか。」

*Sore de, meto to shite wa itsu goro ni naru deshō ka.* — So, approximately when might it be?

[13, p. 154].

In context, this sentence directs the addressee to indicate a specific date for a response or decision. The formula 「いつごろになるでしょうか」 cautiously conveys the meaning “When will you be able to respond?” without direct pressure. It functions not only to obtain temporal information, but also to coordinate a deadline and maintain the partnership.

An addressee’s request to delay a response may also be presented in interrogative form:

「もう、二、三日お待ちいただけませんか。」

*Mō, ni-san-nichi o-machi itadakemasen ka.* — Could you possibly wait another two or three days?

[13, p. 154].

The negative interrogative form 「お待ちいただけませんか」 conveys the request in an even more cautious manner. It contains an action-inducing meaning, yet it is not realized as a direct demand. The negative question leaves the interlocutor with a formal option of refusal, thereby reducing the possible threat to negative face.

In reminders about a response, the interrogative meaning may appear in an implicit structure that is not a complete question but nevertheless directs the addressee toward an expected answer:

「あのう、催促がましくて誠に恐縮なのですが、○○の件、確か今週中にお返事いただけるとのことだったと思いますが、……。」

*Anō, saisoku-gamashikute makoto ni kyōshuku na no desu ga, ... no ken, tashika konshū-chū ni o-henji itadakeru to no koto datta to omoimasu ga...* — I am terribly sorry if this sounds like a reminder, but regarding the matter of ..., I believe it was mentioned that a response could be given within this week...

[13, p. 154].

There is no explicit question mark here, and the sentence is left incomplete, which is characteristic of ellipsis in Japanese discourse. Nevertheless, pragmatically, the expression prompts the addressee to provide a response. The phrase 「催促がましくて誠に恐縮なのですが」 mitigates the potentially negative illocutionary pressure created by a reminder and frames the request as a cautious reference to a previously agreed condition.

In certain cases, the interrogative form also signals the speaker’s readiness to perform an action on behalf of the addressee:

「もし、お差し支えがなければ、私が代わってお話をお伺いしましょうか。」

*Moshi, o-sashitsukae ga nakereba, watashi ga kawatte o-hanashi o o-ukagai shimashō ka.* — If it is convenient for you, shall I listen to the matter on your behalf?

[13, p. 165].

The component 「もし、お差し支えがなければ」 explicitly leaves freedom of choice to the interlocutor, while the interrogative construction expresses the speaker's humble offer of assistance. The question thus balances the communication along the vertical axis of business relations and prevents the speaker's initiative from being perceived as an imposition.

### Discussion

The analyzed examples show that interrogative forms in Japanese business discourse perform several interrelated pragmatic functions. First, they shift the action-inducing meaning from a direct command to an indirect request. In situations involving waiting, providing information, confirming a number, specifying a deadline, or responding to a reminder, interrogative formulas guide the addressee toward the necessary action without imposing it overtly.

Second, interrogative formulas maintain business etiquette and protect the addressee's negative face. In formal communication, it is essential to present a request cautiously and mitigate its illocutionary force. By using interrogative constructions, the speaker avoids the discomfort that may arise from a direct demand and creates the impression that the addressee retains a conditional choice. This pragmatic mechanism is consistent with Brown and Levinson's understanding of negative-politeness strategies, where the speaker minimizes imposition and acknowledges the addressee's freedom of action [6].

Third, interrogative forms may perform a sequential or procedural directive function. In such cases, the speaker does not simply ask one isolated question, but organizes the next step in the business interaction: waiting, calling back, confirming information, giving a deadline, or providing a response. The interrogative form therefore contributes to the orderly progression of the communicative process.

Fourth, some interrogative constructions function as offers rather than requests. In these cases, the speaker proposes to perform an action for the benefit of the addressee, while leaving the decision to accept or reject the offer to the addressee. Such formulas combine directive force with consideration and therefore occupy an intermediate position between request, offer, and coordination of business procedure.

Within the scope of this article, the interrogative form has not been examined as the only or universal means of realizing directive speech acts. The analysis is limited to fixed constructions that express action-inducing meaning in a mitigated manner within Japanese business discourse. From this perspective, the article clarifies the relationship between grammatical form, pragmatic function, mitigation, and business etiquette in selected communicative situations.

### Conclusion

This article has analyzed the pragmatic functions of directive speech acts realized through interrogative forms in Japanese business discourse. The materials show that, in business communication, interrogative forms are used not only to obtain information but also to direct the addressee toward a specific action through an indirect and face-sensitive communicative mechanism. This demonstrates that grammatical form and pragmatic purpose do not always coincide in Japanese business interaction.

The analysis confirms that fixed interrogative request formulas mitigate direct commands, reduce illocutionary pressure, preserve the addressee's negative face, and maintain business etiquette. By presenting the expected action as a question, possibility, or conditional option, the speaker avoids overt imposition while still achieving the directive purpose of the utterance.

The findings also indicate that interrogative forms in Japanese business discourse often possess a procedural or sequential function. They help organize the next step in communication, such as waiting, confirming, calling back, setting a deadline, providing information, or responding to a reminder. Thus, interrogative directive speech acts function as an important pragmatic mechanism for coordinating business interaction.

The observations presented in this article do not constitute a complete model or final classification of directive speech acts in Japanese. They are limited to identifying the linguopragmatic nature of selected fixed interrogative request formulas in corporate communication and demonstrating their role in indirectness, mitigation, negative-politeness strategy, and business etiquette.

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