

GRAMMATICAL AND FUNCTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF FIXED MITIGATING EXPRESSIONS IN DIRECTIVE SPEECH ACTS WITHIN JAPANESE ORAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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Abstract. This article analyzes fixed expressions that reduce speech pressure in the realization of directive speech acts in Japanese oral business communication. In business interaction, the speaker often expects the addressee to perform a certain action: wait, provide information, respond, clarify a deadline, call back, or explain the content of a problem. Such speech acts are directive in meaning, yet in Japanese they are usually expressed not through direct commands but through mitigating fixed expressions such as 「申し訳ございません」, 「恐れ入りますが」, 「少々」, 「しばらく」, 「恐縮なのですが」, and 「お差し支えがなければ」. The article examines fixed formulas used in telephone business communication, reminders, complaint handling, and call-back situations. The analysis shows that mitigation formulas in Japanese oral business communication help preserve directive meaning while presenting it in an etiquette-based, cautious, and polite form.

Keywords: Japanese language, oral business communication, directive speech act, speech pressure, mitigating fixed expressions, request formula, etiquette, fixed constructions.

Introduction

In Japanese oral business communication, directive intent is rarely expressed in the form of an open command or a strict demand. One of the main characteristics of business communication is that while achieving their communicative goal, the speaker must maintain respect for the addressee, avoid causing discomfort, and adhere to business etiquette. For this reason, directive meaning in Japanese is often expressed through mitigating introductory formulas, interrogative forms, expressions of apology, time-limiting fixed phrases, and conditional phrases.

In oral business communication, such instances are particularly prominent in situations such as telephone conversations, reception desk interactions, service workflows, responding to complaints, reminding about responses, and making callbacks. For example, if the addressee is asked to wait, the speaker does not phrase this as a direct command, but rather through polite fixed expressions like "could you please wait a moment?" or "please hold the line." Here, the directive content is preserved, but the speech pressure exerted on the addressee is reduced.

Studies on the Japanese communicative act emphasize the importance of considering etiquette, levels of politeness, the communication situation, and the status of the addressee in Japanese interaction [6, pp.101–107]. N.T. Khalmurzaeva demonstrates that speech etiquette and honorific forms are among the core factors shaping the communication process in the Japanese communicative act [6, pp.101–103]. From this perspective, in Japanese business discourse, fixed expressions such as 「申し訳ございません」 (I am terribly sorry), 「恐れ入りますが」 (Excuse me, if it is not too much trouble), 「少々」 (A little / a moment), 「恐縮なのですが」 (I am sorry to trouble you, but...), and 「お差し支えがなければ」 (If you do not mind / if it is convenient) are viewed not merely as markers of politeness, but as linguopragmatic tools that adapt directive speech acts to business etiquette.



Research dedicated to mitigating expressions in Japanese and Uzbek communication notes that meanings of ambiguity, assumption, and caution serve to reduce speech assertiveness, maintain relations with the interlocutor, and tactically manage the conversation [7, pp.70–86]. In this article, this issue is examined within the framework of Japanese oral business communication, specifically through the example of fixed expressions that mitigate directive speech acts.

The purpose of the article is to analyze the characteristics of how directive speech acts are expressed through speech-pressure-reducing fixed expressions in Japanese oral business communication. The article does not propose a broad general model or a definitive classification; the analysis is conducted solely within the scope of certain fixed constructions used in telephone communication, responding to complaints, reminding about a response, and callback situations.

Material and Methods

The research material comprises mitigating fixed expressions used in Japanese oral business communication during phone calls, reminding about responses, handling complaints, making callbacks, and asking the interlocutor to wait. Nine formulas were selected for analysis, seven of which are examined in the article as the primary analytical material. The examples are based on materials provided in the textbook *Osnovy biznes kommunikatsii v yaponskom yazyke* (Fundamentals of Business Communication in the Japanese Language) by N.T. Khalmurzaeva and the manual *Nihongo Keigo Torēningu* by Hiroyuki Kaneko. The source *Osnovy korporativnogo obshcheniya v yaponskom yazyke* was not used as analytical material in this article.

The methods used in the article include functional-linguopragmatic analysis, speech act analysis, contextual analysis, and analysis based on the criteria of direct and indirect expression. In each example, the following aspects were taken into account: directive content, mitigating fixed expression, communication situation, expected action from the addressee, the mechanism for reducing speech pressure, and compliance with business etiquette.

In speech act theory, directives are interpreted as speech acts through which the speaker directs the addressee toward a specific action. In the studies of Achilova, it is specially emphasized that directive speech acts in the Japanese language can manifest in both direct and indirect forms [1, p.2]. This approach allows expressions containing mitigating fixed phrases in Japanese business communication to be viewed within the scope of directive speech acts.

In studies on request speech acts, the degree of directness and indirectness is an important criterion. Carrell and Konneker show that requests can be distinguished based on grammatical form, politeness, and the level of indirectness [2, pp.73–96]. In the CCSARP approach developed by Blum-Kulka and Olshtain, the degree of directness and indirectness also plays an important role in request strategies [3, pp.196–213]. In this article, these approaches are used not as a ready-made classification, but as a theoretical basis for explaining fixed expressions that reduce speech pressure.

In the Japanese language, directive meaning is not limited solely to special imperative forms. Khronopulo points out that imperative semantics in Japanese can also be expressed through non-imperative means [4, p.57]. Iosifova, on the other hand, demonstrates that the speech situation is the decisive factor in determining the content of an incentive utterance (побудительное высказывание) [5, pp.4–5]. From this point of view, requests involving fixed expressions such as 「申し訳ございません」, 「恐縮なのですが」, and 「お差し支えがなければ」 can direct the addressee toward a specific action in a business situation, even if they are not grammatically imperative.

Results



In Japanese oral business communication, introductory fixed expressions of apology are among the active means of reducing speech pressure. In telephone communication, an employee uses the following expression before transferring a call that went to the wrong department:

「申し訳ございません。こちらは営業課ですので、人事課の方にお回しいたします。そのままお待ちください。」 *Mōshiwake gozaimen. Kochira wa eigyō-ka desu node, jinji-ka no hō ni o-mawashi itashimasu. Sono mama o-machi kudasai.*

— I am sorry. Since this is the sales department, I will transfer you to the personnel department. Please hold the line. [8, p.162].

In this example, the main directive content is expressed in the formula 「そのままお待ちください」 (please hold the line). However, the fixed expression 「申し訳ございません」 (I am sorry) preceding the utterance softens the inconvenience caused to the addressee by being put on hold. Here, the employee asks the interlocutor to wait, but delivers the request along with an apology and service etiquette. Thus, in this example, the apology formula functions as a fixed expression that directly mitigates the directive content.

In utterances directing the addressee to wait, time-limiting fixed expressions such as 「少々」 (a little/a moment) and 「しばらく」 (for a while/a certain time) also reduce speech pressure:

「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 for a moment like this? [8, p.155].

In this expression, the addressee is asked to perform the action of waiting on the phone. The fixed expression 「しばらく」 (for a while) presents the waiting time as a limited and temporary action. The interrogative form, moreover, creates an effect as if leaving a conditional choice to the addressee. Therefore, although the action of waiting is requested in this construction, the speech pressure is significantly lower compared to an open command. In the example, the interrogative form and the time-limiting fixed expression together soften the directive content.

In a callback situation, the speaker suggests their own action to avoid keeping the addressee waiting:

「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 you back from our side? [8, p.155].

Here, the speaker does not demand a direct action from the addressee, but rather offers their own action of calling back. However, this offer is also a way of continuing the communication and expects agreement or refusal from the addressee. The form 「いたしましょうか」 humbly expresses the speaker's action. For this reason, this formula mitigates the inconvenience in communication and gives the addressee the opportunity to make a decision.

When asking for a phone number, the employee does not directly say "tell me the number," but resorts to a request formula in the form of a question:

「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 the phone number of Mr./Ms.? [8, p.155].

In this expression, the forms 「お電話番号」 (phone number) and 「お教え」 (to tell/teach) maintain respect toward the addressee. The question formula presents the action of providing information as a voluntary response from the addressee. However, in a business context, this expression expects the action necessary to obtain information. Thus, in this example, speech pressure is lowered through the interrogative form of asking for information, the honorific prefix, and the cautious address pattern.



When responding to a complaint, the employee asks the customer for time. In this situation, the speaker first states their own action — checking into the matter — and then asks the customer to wait:

「早速調べてみますので、しばらくお時間をいただけますか。」 *Sassoku shirabete mimasu node, shibaraku o-jikan o itadakemasu ka.*

— I will look into it immediately, could you please give me a moment of your time? [8, p.131].

In this expression, the part 「早速調べてみますので」 (as I will check immediately) shows that the employee is taking responsibility. The part 「しばらくお時間をいただけますか」 (could you give me a moment of your time?) asks the customer to grant some time. Here, the request is presented not as a direct demand, but as a question justified by a reason. As a result, the action expected from the customer — giving a certain amount of time — is expressed in a polite manner that aligns with service etiquette.

The employee may also request additional information when clarifying the details of a complaint:

「詳しい内容をお聞かせいただけませんか。」 *Kuwashii naiyō o o-kikase itadakemasen ka.*

— Could you please let me know the detailed content? [8, p.131].

In this expression, the customer is asked to explain the essence of the problem. The negative question form 「いただけませんか」 (could you not do it for me?) makes the request more cautious. Here, the employee requests information from the customer, but this request is delivered not in the form of "tell me," but as a polite and indirect question. Therefore, this formula serves to protect the addressee in a complaint situation, prevent their dissatisfaction from escalating, and obtain the necessary information.

In a follow-up/reminder situation, the speaker first evaluates their own action as intrusive in order to soften the request:

「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...*

— Um, I am terribly sorry if this sounds like a reminder, but regarding the matter of ..., I believe it was mentioned that we could receive an answer within this week...

Source: *Khalmurzaeva N.T. Osnovy biznes kommunikatsii v yaponskom yazyke, p. 154* [8, p.154].

In this expression, the part 「催促がましくて誠に恐縮なのですが」 (I am truly sorry for seeming to press you, but) reduces speech pressure before asking for the response. The speaker reminds that a response is expected, but does so not in the form of a demand, but by politely recalling the previous agreement. In this example, the mitigating introductory fixed phrase serves to present the request aimed at the addressee in a cautious and formal, rather than sharp, manner.

Leaving a choice to the addressee is clearly observed in the formula 「お差し支えがなければ」 (if it is convenient/if you do not mind):

「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 you do not mind, shall I listen to what you have to say on their behalf? [8, p.155].

In this expression, the speaker offers their own service action. The component 「もし、お差し支えがなければ」 (if you do not mind) shows that the addressee has a choice. The part 「お話をお伺



いしましうか」(shall I listen to your words?) presents the offer in the form of a question. In this type of construction, the speaker expresses readiness to take charge of the communication, but prioritizes the addressee's consent. Through this, speech pressure is lowered.

Discussion

The reviewed examples show that reducing speech pressure in Japanese oral business communication is carried out through several fixed phrases and stable formulas. The first group includes introductory fixed expressions of apology and caution. They proactively acknowledge the inconvenience being caused by the speaker and divest the directive content of harshness. Such formulas are actively used, especially in phone conversations, putting people on hold, reconnecting, and responding to complaints.

The second group consists of time-limiting fixed expressions. Phrases conveying meanings of "a little," "a certain time," or "a moment" present the demand to wait or give time as a brief and temporary action. Through this, the speech pressure imposed on the addressee is reduced. This dynamic ensures that directive content in Japanese business speech is delivered not as an open demand, but as a polite situation-appropriate request.

The third group is related to interrogative request-demand fixed expressions. In such formulas, the speaker presents the action expected from the addressee not as an open command, but as a question or conditional proposal. Therefore, the addressee's personal space is entered with caution. The interrogative form here functions not just as a grammatical question, but as a pragmatic tool that preserves business etiquette.

In the fourth group, the speaker mitigates the situation by offering their own action. In such cases, the directive content stems from the speaker themselves rather than the addressee, yet the addressee's consent remains paramount. In this respect, the question formula works as a means of continuing communication, restructuring the situation, and ensuring non-conflictual interaction.

The fixed expressions analyzed within the scope of the article demonstrate that a directive speech act in Japanese business communication is not expressed solely by grammatical imperatives. It is frequently adapted to the business situation through formulas of apology, caution, interrogative forms, conditional introductions, and service etiquette. This further complexifies the relationship between linguistic form and pragmatic function in Japanese communication.

Conclusion

In this article, the manifestation of directive speech acts through speech-pressure-reducing fixed expressions in Japanese oral business communication was analyzed. Based on the reviewed materials, it can be stated that directive intent in Japanese business speech is often actualized not in the form of an open command or a strict demand, but through cautious, etiquettical, and indirect formulas. This state of affairs shows that a directive speech act manifests in connection not just with grammatical form, but with the communication situation, the attitude toward the addressee, and the level of speech pressure.

Several directions for reducing speech pressure are observed in the analyzed materials. Introductory fixed expressions of apology and caution proactively acknowledge that the speaker is causing an inconvenience to the addressee. Time-limiting fixed expressions present demands like waiting or giving time as short and temporary actions. Request-demand fixed expressions in the form of a question affect the addressee as if leaving a conditional choice. Offers in the form of a proposal, on the other hand, reduce pressure in communication by having the speaker offer their own action.

The observations made within the scope of the article demonstrate that fixed expressions reducing speech pressure in Japanese business discourse are of major importance in adapting





directive speech acts to etiquette, maintaining respect toward the addressee, and ensuring conflict-free communication. At the same time, this conclusion is limited to the analyzed examples and does not propose a general model or a definitive classification of directive speech acts in the Japanese language.

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