

**On the Japanese Commercial Transaction Frame:
How Culture-Specific Information Fits into a Semantic Frame***

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1. Introduction

The general scenario of giving and receiving is framed in Japanese in terms of what relationship is formed between a giver and a receiver, and from whose vantage point the act of giving or receiving is described. Its complexity is made clear by comparing Japanese verbs of giving and receiving with English ones. Looking only at verbs of giving with respect to the relationship between a giver and a recipient, for instance, we will see that Japanese has at least three different verbs that correspond to the English verb *give*.

- (1) a. Zyon-ga musuko-ni hon-o yatta.
John-NOM son-DAT book-ACC give.PAST
'John gave a book to his son.'
- b. Zyon-ga tomodati-ni hon-o ageta.
John-NOM friend-DAT book-ACC give.PAST
'John gave a book to his friend.'
- c. Zyon-ga sensei-ni hon-o sasiageta.
John-NOM teacher-DAT book-ACC give.PAST
'John gave a book to his teacher.'

The choice depends on who is higher in status. The recipient of the book described in (a) is seen as inferior to *John* while that in (c) is regarded as superior to the giver. The verb *ageru* in (b) is neutral in this respect and is used as a common *give* verb in present-day Japanese.

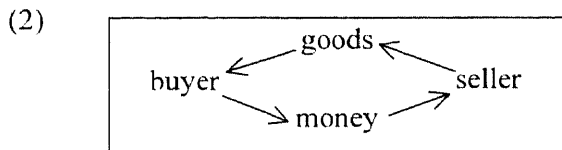
The commercial transaction frame, on which my discussion centers, is a sub-type of the giving/receiving frame. We can expect that verbs involved in this frame will show a similar encoding pattern to that we have just observed. The chief objective of this paper is to demonstrate that at least one of the verbs of commercial transactions does show such a pattern.

In section 2, I will discuss some peculiarities of the commercial transaction frame in Japanese. Though the Japanese transaction frame has almost the same structure as the English one, there are a few marked differences. The first important point is the folk concept of 'service.' This is roughly defined as an entity or act offered by a service provider, such as a shop assistant for satisfying customers, not as compensation for the money paid by customers. Even more important is that Japanese connects politeness with the high and low relationship between the buyer

role and the seller role. Most importantly, I will discuss in section 3 how this frame-semantic knowledge is applied to the use of an object honorific expression in the *o*-verb-*suru* form. Specifically, Shibatani (1994) observes that the verb *kau* ‘buy’ is incompatible with this construction and uses this fact as evidence for his assumption that the verb is a two-place predicate. I will argue against his idea and show that it is because the pragmatic constraint required by the object honorific construction is not compatible with the pragmatic feature of the subject entity of the verb that the verb and the construction cannot be unified.

2. Commercial Transaction Frame

The commercial transaction frame illustrated in (2) was brought into the spotlight by Fillmore (1977). He demonstrates how the frame is structured and in what way we use this knowledge to describe commercial events.



He deals with English nouns and verbs associated with this frame, including *buy* and *sell*. The difference between *buy* and *sell* lies in from which perspective an event of transaction is described. The verb *buy* describes it from the buyer’s point of view while *sell* structures it from the seller’s point of view.

The Japanese counterparts, *kau* and *uru* (‘buy’ and ‘sell’), are the same in this respect. However, a simple question arises: Does this mean that the commercial transaction frame in Japanese has exactly the same internal structure as that in English? Given the basic premise of the Frame Semantic approach to language that a frame represents part of our structured background knowledge of experience, beliefs, and/or practices (cf. Fillmore and Atkins (1992)), the way of structuring a frame may differ from language to language. Thus, there is a possibility that the Japanese commercial transaction frame may differ in detail from the English one. In the next section, I will detail the structure of the Japanese transaction frame.

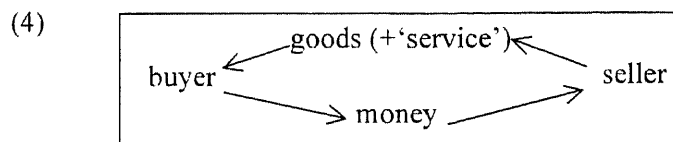
2.1. A Folk Semantic Model of Commercial Transaction

Although everyone will probably agree that the basic structure of the commercial transaction frame is almost the same between Japanese and English, I would like to point out that there are some obvious differences between them. One of them is associated with the concept of ‘service.’ The original concept in English is characterized as compensation for the money paid by the customer. While this

concept has taken root in the Japanese business community, the folk concept of ‘service’ in Japanese takes on a different characteristic.¹ It can be observed in the use of the word *saabisu* ‘service,’ a loanword from English. ‘Service’ in Japanese can be defined as being provided free of charge, in contrast to the original notion of service in English. It is offered for the purpose of satisfying customers.² The linguistic data in (3) mirror this feature.

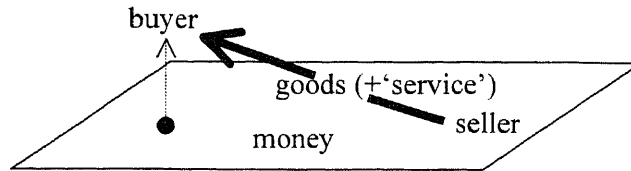
- (3) a. [A shopkeeper, referring to a complimentary gift, says]
 “kore saabisu ne.”
 this service is
 ‘This is a free gift.’
- b. [A customer asks for a discount]
 “takai kara, sukosi saabisu site yo.”
 expensive because, a.little service do
 ‘It’s too expensive; bring the price down a little more.’

The ‘service’ refers to the complimentary gift in (3a) and a discount in (3b). In traditional Japanese business practice, shops and companies try to satisfy their customers by adding value to their commodities so that they seem to be worth more than the money paid by their buyers, with the result that the seller can earn a good reputation. Added value like this is called ‘service.’ This model is illustrated in (4):



There is another way of giving ‘service’ to buyers. For the purpose of satisfying buyers, shops and companies treat them politely.³ Their polite behavior and respect for their customers can be reflected in language. It is worthwhile to mention that some expressions reveal that buyers are placed at a higher status. For example, when a store clerk makes out a receipt to a customer, he or she may write on it the word *ue* ‘up,’ instead of the customer’s name, to refer to the customer. Another example is *okaiage*, an expression referring to the act of buying. It is formed from three morphemes: *o-*, the beautification prefix, *kai*, a nominalization of the verb ‘buy,’ and *age*, which literally means ‘to raise.’ An important point to stress here is that the third morpheme indicates the upward direction. This suggests that an object bought by a customer figuratively moves ‘up’ to the customer. These two facts show that the customer is figuratively placed at a higher position, as illustrated in (5):

(5)



I do not intend that the buyer is always located at a higher position. The buyer may be viewed as being higher in status when it is addressed by, for example, the vocative honorific *okyakusama*, which morphologically consists of three parts: *o-*, a beautification prefix, *kyaku* ‘customer, guest, visitor,’ and *-sama*, an honorific. The choice of words for the buyer is, however, affected by some pragmatic factors such as the presence of the buyer at the speaker’s utterance, the interpersonal relation between the seller and the buyer, and so forth.⁴ The buyer may be referred to simply as *kaite* ‘buyer’ or *kyaku* ‘guest, visitor’ if it is described only with regard to the role it plays in a transaction event.

- (6) a. *kono mise-no kyaku-ni-wa wakai zyosei-ga ooi.*
 this shop-POSS guest-DAT-TOP young women-NOM many
 ‘This shop has many young female customers.’
- b. *konnani takai-to, kaite-ga tukanai.*
 so expensive, buyer-NOM buy.not
 ‘(It) is so expensive that no one won’t buy it.’

In this case the buyer is not elevated to a higher status.

To sum up, in this section we have seen two characteristic features. First, the concept of ‘service’ in Japanese is different from that in English, and it is regarded as the extra value the seller adds to their goods. Second, the buyer is placed at a higher status when it is served with politely.

In section 3, we will see how this frame-semantic knowledge about commercial transactions is used with reference to a Japanese object honorific expression in the *o-verb-suru* form.

3. Application of Frame-Semantic Knowledge about Commercial Transactions

My chief concern in this section is to consider why it is difficult for the verb *kau* ‘buy’ to occur in the object honorific form, as exemplified in sentence (7):

- (7) **Boku-wa sensei-ni sinbun-o o-kai-sita.*
 I-TOP teacher-DAT newspaper-ACC O-buy-SURU.PAST
 ‘I bought the teacher a newspaper.’

Before demonstrating why the sentence in (7) is horrible, I would like to refer to Shibatani (1994). He adduces the fact in (7) as evidence that the verb *kau* is a

two-place predicate and does not accommodate a goal NP. I will reveal that there is another reason for which the sentence in (7) sounds awkward, claiming that it does not support Shibatani's idea that *kau* does not contribute a Goal role.

3.1. Object Honorific Construction

Before reviewing Shibatani's points, we will briefly look at what the *o-verb-suru* construction is. This form is used to express the speaker's politeness by downgrading the status of the referent of the subject, with the result that the honored person, or the "target of honorification," becomes relatively higher in status.⁵ Take sentence (8) for instance:

- (8) Watasi-ga sensei-ni sono koto-o o-hanasi-sita.
 I-NOM teacher-DAT that matter-ACC O-tell-SURU.PAST
 'I told the teacher that matter.'

The teacher as the target of honorification, in Shibatani's (1994) words, "triggers the object honorification process." The speaker lowers her own status to show politeness to the teacher.

3.2. The Incompatibility of the Verb *Kau* with the *O-Verb-Suru* Construction

Shibatani (1994) deals with benefactive constructions in Japanese and Korean (although Korean is outside my scope) and discusses how the benefactive auxiliary verb *-te yaru* in Japanese (as well as its counterpart in Korean) is unified with a main verb. One of his claims is that the auxiliary verb can contribute a *ni*-marked goal nominal. This happens when the main verb is a two-place predicate. According to Shibatani (1994:46), the verb *kau* 'buy' has a valence of two, and it needs the help of the auxiliary verb *-te yaru* to add a goal NP.

- (9) Taroo-ga Hanako-ni hon-o katte yatta.
 I-NOM Hanako-DAT book-ACC buy give.PAST
 'Taroo bought a book for Hanako.'

In (9) the main verb *kau* and the auxiliary verb *-te yaru* are unified to form the complex predicate *katte yaru*. The two verbs share the Agent role, instantiated as the subject NP *Taroo-ga*. The Theme role, instantiated as the direct object NP *hon-o*, is contributed by the main verb while the Goal role, syntactically coded as the indirect object NP *Hanako-ni*, is associated with the auxiliary verb.

Shibatani gives the sentence in (7), reproduced as (10) here, as evidence to support the two-placedness of *kau*.

- (10) *Boku-wa sensei-ni sinbun-o o-kai-sita.
 'I bought the teacher a newspaper.'

He explains the oddness of this sentence by saying that “the verb *kau* ‘buy’ does not accommodate a goal NP, and therefore fails to trigger the object honorification process” (p.50). Even though the auxiliary verb *-te sasiageru*, the honorific form of *-te yaru*, is added to it, the acceptability does not change.

- (11) *Boku-wa sensei-ni sinbun-o o-kai-site sasiageta.
 I-TOP teacher-DAT newspaper O-buy-SURU give.PAST

This is unacceptable for the same reason as the case of (10). The goal NP, which Shibatani assumes to be provided by the auxiliary verb, is not associated with the main verb’s thematic frame. It hence fails to cause the object honorification process for the main verb.

3.2.1. *The Valency of the Verb Kau*

A question arises as to the valency of the verb *kau*. I have found on the Internet some data in which the verb takes a goal NP without the auxiliary verb. Some are cited in (12), where the target structures are underlined.

- (12) a. Doobututati-to tappuri hureatta boku-wa, koko huzi safari paaku-de
Magii san-ni omiyage-o kau koto-ni sita.
 ‘After playing a lot with animals, I decided to buy Mr. Magii a gift at Fuji Safari Park.’
 (<http://blog.jtb.co.jp/modelplan/setsuyaku/archive/2006/07/07/353.aspx>)
- b. Kodomo-ni keitai-o kau riyuu-wa “anzen-no tame”-ga 78%
 ‘It is for their safety that 78% of parents bought their kids cellphones.’
 (<http://www.itmedia.co.jp/news/articles/0712/22/news003.html>)
- c. Musuko-ga watasi-ni tokei-o kau to iu episoodo-ga umare nai mono darooka...
 ‘I wish my son would buy me a watch.’
 (<http://smashmedia.jp/blog/2008/07/001677.html>)

This set of data shakes Shibatani’s assumption that the verb *kau* does not accommodate a goal NP. Rather, it should be concluded that the verb can contribute a Goal role.⁶ If this conclusion is right, Shibatani’s argument about the incompatibility of the verb with the object honorific construction is no longer valid. If a Goal role is associated with the verb, the incompatibility cannot be attributed to the lack of a Goal role in the verb’s thematic structure. We must then consider why sentences (10) and (11) are not acceptable.

3.2.2. *Pragmatic Incompatibility of the Verb with the Construction*

Our frame-semantic knowledge about the Japanese commercial transaction

frame offers the key to explaining why the verb *kau* cannot occur with the object honorific construction. Remember that the status of the buyer role can be elevated in that frame, as we have seen in section 2.1. This happens when the buyer is treated with politeness. Since the clerk is very likely to serve the customer politely in normal circumstances, there is a good chance of uttering honorific expressions including the *o-verb-suru* form in transaction events. If the clerk describes the buyer's purchasing goods with the object honorific construction, however, the uttered sentence would hold an inconsistency between the way the buyer should be treated and the way the clerk has actually treated the buyer. The object honorific construction requires the subject NP to be identified as the person viewed as being lower than the target of honorification. This property is incompatible with the buyer's higher status in the transaction event. For this reason, the verb cannot enter into the object honorific construction.

It is noteworthy that a synonym for *kau*, *koonyuu suru*, conflicts with the *o-verb-suru* construction.

- (13) *sensei-ni hon-o go-konyuu-suru.
 teacher-DAT book-ACC O-purchase-SURU
 'I'll buy the teacher a book.'

This suggests that the compatibility of a verb with the object honorific construction is not determined on the basis of the individual lexical property, but that we exploit our frame-semantic knowledge about commercial transactions to use the construction properly.

There is further evidence to support my argument. The buyer role in the transaction frame is not the only entity whose status is elevated by the service provider. Users of public transportation and hotel guests also receive 'service,' and their status may be raised. Verbs referring to acts on the part of the 'service'-receiving entities, such as *syukuhaku suru* 'staying at a hotel' and *zyoosya suru* 'taking public transportation,' are unable to enter into the *o-verb-suru* form. Observe:

- (14) a. *sensei-ga syoyuu nasatte iru ryokan-ni go-syukuhaku-suru.
 teacher-NOM own.POLITE hotel-LOC O-stay-SURU
 'I'll stay at the hotel owned by the teacher.'
- b. *sensei-ga unten nasaru basu-ni go-zyoosya-suru.
 teacher-NOM drive.POLITE bus-LOC O-get.on-SURU
 'I'll get on the bus the teacher is going to drive.'

It is worthwhile to note that the conventional practice in commercial events may be overridden by other pragmatic factors. The verb *kau* in the *o-verb-suru* form is awkward under normal circumstances, as we have seen. In the example in (15), cited

from the short novel *Keshi-no naka* written by Yokomitsu Riichi in 1969, however, the verb occurs in the object honorific construction.⁷

- (15) “Ano ouma-wa, watakusi-ga koko-no bokuzyoo-de o-kai-site sasiagemasita.”
 ‘I bought that horse at this ranch for the Emperor of Japan.’

In this story Johan, a Hungarian interpreter who was fluent in Japanese, conducted Kaji, a Japanese visitor, around Budapest, Hungary. He uttered the sentence in (15) when he and Kaji were talking about a horse named Shirayuki, owned by the Emperor of Japan. Since the Emperor is the head of state, everyone should be polite to him. This factor overrides the verb *kau*'s pragmatic feature. Hence, the verb is coerced into the object honorific construction. Therefore, the sentence in (15) becomes feasible.

4. Conclusion

This paper has discussed defining characteristics of the Japanese transaction frame and demonstrated how the knowledge about the frame is applied; specifically, to the case of the verb *kau* in the object honorific form.

In section 2, we have seen that what is called ‘service’ in Japanese is a different concept from the English original. The main purpose of offering ‘service’ in Japan is to satisfy customers, including buyers, free of charge. One way of doing so is to treat them politely. Accordingly, honorific expressions are often used to show respect toward them. As the transaction frame, a subtype of the general giving/receiving frame, is structured upon what relationship exists between the seller and the buyer, verbs involved in this frame encode pragmatic features like who is considered to be higher in status. The subject entity of the verb *kau* ‘buy,’ i.e. the buyer role, can be elevated to a higher position when he or she is served with politeness.

In section 3, I have argued that such knowledge is the key to understanding why the verb *kau* ‘buy’ cannot enter into the object honorific construction. The subject referent of the verb is likely to be viewed as higher while the construction requires the subject referent to be lowered. This conflict leads to the oddness of the verb in the *o-verb-suru* form.

NOTES

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¹ Although the word *saabisu* was borrowed from English, Japanese had previously had some expressions with a similar sense. An example is *omotenasi* 'special treatment, hospitality.' Another can be seen in the phrase *sanpoo yosi*, the motto of merchants from the Oomi area in the Edo period. Its central idea is that transactions should be carried out for the benefit of buyers, resulting in benefits to the whole society.

² The word *saabisu* in Japanese is extended in two ways. One sense is developed to mean 'free of charge,' as illustrated by a phrase like *saabisu zangyoo*, which means 'unpaid overtime work.' The other meaning, 'to satisfy someone,' has emerged as the result of the attenuation of the type of the entity who enjoys 'service.'

- (i) a. kyuzitu kurai otoosan-ni saabisu site kure yo.
Literally, 'offer your father 'service' on a holiday'
- b. kazoku saabisu
Literally, 'family service'

In these examples, *saabisu* is provided within a family. In (a), the father asks his children to satisfy him by paying thoughtful attention to him. Such a request of his is described as 'service.' The (b) expression is used by hard workers who usually spend little time with their families. It implies that they manage to spend time with their families. In addition, in companies, 'service' is sometimes given to one's boss to flatter him/her.

³ I hasten to add that I do not mean that shops and companies in English-speaking countries are not courteous to their customers. Rather, the point to notice here is that the Japanese language connects politeness to the high-and-low relationship between buyers and sellers.

⁴ It is important to note that even those who receive public service such as transport and administrative services may be called by this term.

⁵ I borrow the term "target of honorification" from Matsumoto (1997).

⁶ Applying three tests for identifying the syntactic status of the *-ni* marked goal NP concerned in this paper, presented in Sadakane and Koizumi (1995), I have found that the NP does not have syntactic features as observed with NPs marked by the *-ni* case, but rather it behaves like postpositional phrases. This result probably suggests that the Goal role in the thematic frame of the verb *kau* is an extra-thematic element. I will leave this matter to future work.

⁷ I owe this finding to the Aoroza Bunko project at <http://www.aozora.gr.jp/>.

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