

**International Lecture of the Eurasia Foundation, Fall Semester 2022**  
**Series Lectures (12): “Asian Community: The Construction and Transformation**  
**of East Asiaology”**  
**Topic: The History of Expressing Gratitude**

For the 12th session of the Eurasia Foundation International Lecture of 2022 at the Chinese Culture University, we invited Professor TAJIMA Masaru from Meiji University to deliver a lecture entitled “The History of Expressing Gratitude.” Professor Tajima has studied the history of the Japanese language for many years. In the lecture, Professor Tajima divided the history of Japanese expressions of gratitude into three periods: the classical Japan period, the late medieval Japan period, and the late early modern period and introduced and explained the historical changes in these periods including (1) changes in thoughts; (2) Changes in language and behavior system regarding “expressing gratitude.”

First of all, the expression of gratitude from the Classical Japan period to the medieval Japan period was to express the meaning of “feel ashamed, abashed.” The representative example was “かたじけなし,” the original meaning was “fearful, sorry.” The next representative example from the medieval Japan period was “ありがたし”, the original meaning was “sorry.” The last example was “すみません” in the late early modern era, the original meaning was “consideration, think.” The common basis of the original meaning of these words were “feel in a difficult position, not knowing what to do.” Yanagita Kunio has already proposed the same conclusion many years ago.

In order to examine the actual state of language use in each periods, Professor Tajima investigated the Christian literature written by Christian missionaries, the Nippo Jisho (日葡辞書, Japanese-Portuguese Dictionary), Isoho Monogatari (伊曾保物語, Translation of Aesop’s Fables), Heike Monogatari (平家物語, The Tale of the Heike), The Taiheiki (太平記, Chronicle of Great Peace) and The Rakuyōshū (落葉集, Collection of Fallen Leaves), Nihon Daibunten (日本大文典, The Art of the Japanese Language) etc. as materials for specific vocabulary, and also refer to Okura Toraakira’s collection of Kyogen (大藏虎明本, written version in 1642) to confirm in which situation these expressions of gratitude would be used.

At the beginning, the expression of gratitude was “from lower to upper (from superior person to junior person),” while “from upper to lower (from junior person to superior person)” would use expression of joy or condolences. In modern times, people in higher positions also began to use gratitude expressions, and it became a two-way usage that can be used regardless of status. Therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between the two different usages, “from upper to lower” and “from lower to upper”.

Specifically, at that time “from lower to upper,” people would use “かたじけなし”

to express gratitude, while “from upper to lower” people would use words such as “嬉し (ureshi)”, “悦喜(Ekki)” and “満足(Manzoku).” However, we can see from the “imperial edict (an official document issued by the emperor, an article similar to the Chinese imperial decree)” in The Shoku Nihongi (續日本紀, Chronicle of Japan Continued) that the emperor expressed his gratitude to the gods (this is “from lower to upper”), and he also expressed gratitude to the deceased minister Fujiwara no Fuhito, Fujiwara no Nagate (this is the usage of “from upper to lower”). Therefore, when the superior people started to use the term “かたじけなし” to express gratitude to junior people, a new term “ありがたし” was used for junior people to express gratitude to the superior people. People used to use this word only to sacred objects such as gods and Buddhas or monks. Just like the Chinese character “有難し” shows, it was originally used to express a very rare thing, and to give a positive evaluation of the other party's kindness. With the widespread use of “かたじけなし,” it seemed less respectful than it was. Thus, people started to use other words, such as “過分 (Kabun),” “勿体無し (motainashi),” “冥加無し (myoganashi),” to express gratitude exaggeratively. “すみません (Sumimasen)” meant “causing trouble to the other party,” which means showing solicitude for the other party's emotions, that is, an expression based on “think of and considering the other party.” Other expressions of gratitude were also produced along the thought process of “don't know what to do → give positive comments → show solicitude for the other party.” Even in the stage of “give positive comments” and “show solicitude for the other party,” it was based on the thoughts that “don't know what to do.”

In the late modern period, due to the stability of the society, the status gap between people began to narrow, and people gradually became concerned about each other. At this time, the term “きのどくな (Kinodokuna)” was used “from upper to lower”, and the term “すみません” was used “from lower to upper.” The superior people would use the term “きのどくな” when received the gift. The term “すみません” meant that the speaker is psychologically uncomfortable and it is a usage that changes from apologizing to thanking.

In the late modern period, red-light district became the birthplace of new expressions of gratitude. According to the description of the popular novels at that time, it can be seen that degree adverbs “だんだん (Dandan)” and “おおきに (Ookini)” were used in the Kyoto area as expressions of gratitude. Among them, the term “おおきに” first appeared in Edo (now Tokyo), but it failed to become popular, and became popular after it was introduced to Kyoto. In Edo, people started to use “どうも” as an expression of gratitude.

The words of gratitude are not created to express gratitude. They are words that already exist and were used to describe the gratitude at heart for the kind behavior of the

superior. These terms later became expressions of gratitude people used in daily life. We can have a clear idea of the thought of thanks in various historical periods by examining the origin of the terms used in each expression of thanks.

(Web link: <https://eurasia.pccu.edu.tw/index.php>)

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