

Why “*Hai*” and “*Iie*” Are Not “Yes” and “No”

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Abstract : Japanese *hai* or *ee* and *iie* or *iya* more closely correspond with English *right* and *wrong*, while Japanese expressions showing existence are the most appropriate for expressing the meaning of *yes* just as those for non-existence fit *no*. Although this is confirmed by English, Japanese and bilingual dictionaries, and is consistent with the different pragmatics of each language, we cannot expect this obvious fact to be observed by many due to a variety of complex circumstances.

A solution to a small but thorny problem

Put simply, Japanese *hai* or *ee* and *iie* or *iya* more closely correspond with English *right* and *wrong* than with *yes* and *no*. This fact alone goes a long way in explaining both the reluctance to say “no” and the frequent confusion when “yes” really means “no.” Cultural differences are often cited, but I see this mechanical failure to choose the more literally correct *right* and *wrong* as the main culprit. If I am right, then, the real question is just why hasn't the obvious long been adopted and a lot of nonsense avoided.

Before addressing why, I wish to present a classic case of confused usage that should provide a clear basis for understanding the mechanical problem. Then I shall review the history of both the Japanese and English terms in question, presaging some of the cultural factors that created the existing situation and finally present why I think correction of the obvious will remain a long time in coming. The following is clearly not a case of “Yes, we have no bananas!”

An all too typical exchange

RON : How's it going Yasu?

YASU : Yes, pretty good...

RON : Say, didn't you try to call me last night?

YASU : Yes.

RON : Well, what did you want?

YASU : Nothing.

RON : But you did call, didn't you?

YASU : No, I didn't.

RON : I thought you just said you called me last night!?

YASU : No, I never said such a thing!

Yasu had good teachers, and was not fooled by Ron's tag question. But, with the traditional translation method, he learned to equate every English expression with a Japanese one (just as most foreigners are taught Japanese with equally frustrating results). He actually was thinking something more like the following in Japanese:

RON : Are you healthy, Yasu?

YASU : Right, I feel very healthy...

RON : By the way, the situation is that you did not attempt a call last night, or...?

YASU : Right.

RON : Uh, is there something wanted by you?

YASU : There is nothing.

RON : However, there was a call by you, wasn't there?

YASU : That's wrong! There wasn't (a call by me).

RON : It was thought by me that last night there was a call by you was exactly said by you!

YASU : You're wrong! Such a thing was never said by me!

(See the Appendix for a parallel rendering in Japanese)

Behind the breakdown

We can easily imagine variations such as "You don't like this dress (tie), do you?" "Yes!" "Well, okay; I guess I'll wear it..." These also get mixed up with exchanges like "Do you want something to eat (drink)?" "No...." "Well, I guess I can wait." All results are disappointing for all involved, but the latter are said to be due to Japanese culture and the former to misapplication of when to use the right word. True enough, but the latter is as much "how to think Southern" or "how to speak Minnesotan," or just like my neighbors in Michigan and Saitama: hardly unique to Japan! But how many Japanese home-stays in the English speaking world have soured from the start with "I hope you don't mind a little dust." "Yes!"? Certainly no one would dare say "wrong" which is precisely what most Japanese mean when they say "no" while thinking *iie*. If the opposite is "Yes," then that is what we get.

What English dictionaries reveal

So, then, we must know what *yes* and *no* actually mean in Japanese. But we should look in our English dictionaries first. *Yes*, we will learn, came from an Old English word thought to be a combination of the adverb *yea* (= truly) plus a West Saxon form of *to be*. As my third edition of *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* explains, "1. In answer to a question not involving a negative; = 'it is so'. (Formerly usu[ally] more emphatic than *yea* or *aye*; in later use taking the place of these.)" *Aye* also is adverbial, (= ever, continually).

Reading on, we find *yes* was the standard affirmative answer to a negative question and carefully distinguished from *yea* (as preserved in the King James *Bible* but eventually replacing all forms at about that very same time). I.e., the adverb *yes* asserts the existence of something. This is further

born out in ironic and concessionary use, as well, along with assent to commands or directions. Clearly, in many of these instances “yes” can be substituted with “right,” hence *hai* is hardly wrong to use for English *yes* if *hai* does mean *right*, as I claim.

The problem is clarified, however, if we note the adverbial *yes* is paired with the adjectival *no*, in English rather than adverbial *not*. I presume this pairing is in analogy to the logical *aye* and *nay* (= not ever) as adverbs, but as pointed out by Onions et al, at Oxford, under *nay* “In older use, *nay* (like *yea*) was usu[ually] employed when the preceding statement, etc., contained no negative; otherwise *no*.” I.e., when *yes* replaced all affirmative choices, so did *no* for negative ones. In the end, we have given new grammatical status to *yes* and *no* as “substantives,” or terms expressing existence (or non-existence; i.e., as a state or condition). Thus, Japanese expressions expressing existence are the most appropriate for expressing the meaning of *yes* just as those for non-existence fit *no*.

What Japanese and bilingual dictionaries show

This conclusion is confirmed if we look at Japanese dictionaries. First, bilingual dictionaries reveal some interesting facts. Hepburn's Japanese-to-English dictionary shows that at the end of the Meiji era, Chinese characters were still in use for *hai* and *ie*. (This is confirmed in Japanese-to-Japanese dictionaries.) While this Biblical scholar and missionary supplies *yes* as the equivalent of *hai*, he does not show *ee*; at the same time, he shows *iiye* and *iya* with the same Chinese character, but distinguishes them after equating them with *no* but labeling them adverbs. His distinction probably reflects the colloquial or less formal use of the latter: the former, he says indicates non-existence and the latter the

same plus the element of desire or will. The Chinese characters, however, indicate adverbial use of a different nature. The one for *hai* is later shown to be synonymous with *just* as in "just now" (*tadaima*) in turn equivalent with "exactly" or "only" as in "the only one" and the like. In approximate apposition, the one for *iiye* and *iya* indicates rejection, refusal, unacceptability, wrongful. Japanese-to-Japanese dictionaries are the best to trace these points, but these facts are relatively unknown to most Japanese who will insist there are no Chinese characters for *hai* or *ee* and *iie* or *iya* and difficult even for some of them to trace without training in Japanese linguistics. (My readers can confirm this by asking what characters were used for *hai* or *ee* and *iie* or *iya* of themselves if they are Japanese, or by asking any educated Japanese along with how would they find out.)

Instead, most will rely on English-to-Japanese dictionaries. These, however, in their inconsistency, point to my conclusions if analyzed carefully keeping our history of *yes* and *no* in mind. Most importantly, *no* is accurately shown to be an adjective of absence and non-existence. As a substantive it is shown as a form of negation, but too quickly equated with *iie* (and *iya* by implication) rather than its key idea of non-existence. This facileness is confirmed in Japanese-to-English dictionaries for Japanese (most of which will not even bother to show English pronunciation even when in separate volumes and with a front-piece showing the international phonetic alphabet!). More interesting is the fact that *yes* is all too quickly equated with *hai* (and *ee* by implication) without due notice of its apposition to *no* as explained in the same English-to-Japanese dictionary that accurately explained *no*. The substantive function of existence in *yes* seems to get short shrift in trying to define its Japanese equivalent.

Linguistic and cultural differences combine

Here is where linguistic differences get confused with cultural differences, simply because linguistic pragmatics depend on cultural factors as well as grammar. Some of these differences are evident in our example above. Ron's "How's it going" assumed some shared knowledge of Yasu's affairs and was an opening for Yasu to mention any changes or even problems; otherwise, it remained a polite greeting. Yasu assumed a standard Japanese greeting and treated it almost mindlessly as he would in Japanese. His first "Yes" was slightly compensatory for not responding quite as he would in Japanese but confirmation that he was paying attention. His second "yes" was assumed to be equal to *hai* and affirmed "right, I did not try to call" but Ron thought it affirmed the existence of a call. The rest is history where Yasu's *nos* are less denials, but statements that Ron is terribly mistaken.

(Yasu still might have avoided any problem if he had observed my Oxford dictionary's aside that *yes* is "Now usu[ally] accompanied by a short assertive phr[ase] echoing the preceding statement" if contradicting a negative statement or situation. [E.g., "It's not raining now." "Oh yes it is!"] Although he was not contradicting the negative, but affirming it, he would be sensitive to the fact *yes* affirmed the existence of something which was not what he was doing. He was affirming the correctness of Ron's negative expression.)

English pragmatics

The pragmatics of English assume a subject-predicate relationship even when only one is expressed. Affirmation or denial normally refer to the subject (along with its predicate) unless the predicate alone is clearly indicated:

Did you hit my dog?

No. (I don't know who did.) / No, I hit *my* dog.

Did you hit my dog?

Yes. (I did hit it.) / Yes, and mine, too!

Do you like tea?

No, but my spouse does. / No; coffee, please.

Do you like tea?

Yes, but my spouse doesn't. / Yes, with milk.

Ambiguous answers are possible and may provide humor if deliberate (or not!) : E.g., "Yes, but not my spouse." (Whoops! Why don't you like your spouse? Oh, your spouse likes coffee, not tea!) Such ambiguity depends as well on the subject-predicate implicature.

Japanese pragmatics

Japanese pragmatics, however, normally assume the verb reflects the aspect from the speaker's position along with honorifics or their lack or even opposites to clarify relations with others and other elements in a sentence. Consequently, affirmation or negation refer to the verb (whether spoken or assumed) together with all constituents that determine the situation for the speaker. Affirmation can amount to no more than recognition or understanding of what the speaker believes, not agreement with its truth or not. Further, when right and wrong (expressed as *hai* or *ee* and *iie* or *iya*) are far too reaching, more restrictive forms of affirmation and especially denial are preferred (*so, desune...; asoka; yappari/yahari,...; sore mo iemasu; zehi*; etc. apply to situations for limited affirmation like reluctant *yases* or *yes, buts* while *shikataga nai; inai; arimasen; chigau; aru kedo...; dekinai*; even *muzukashi* etc. are clear denials [as any foreigner looking for inexpensive apartments knows all too well] and all where we would say *no*

in English). So the famed reluctance to say “no” is really the reluctance to say “you’re / that’s wrong / false!” expressions used advisedly with caution in English, too. As for “right” when we really don’t mean it or simply to show we are listening or understand...why, we do the same in English even with *yes* (although both are more readily used ironically in English, but seldom so in Japanese—talk about potential for cultural misunderstanding!).

What really matters

The simple solution is to use *right* whenever Japanese would use *hai* or *ee* and use *wrong* for *iie* or *iya*. The complexities and nuances involved in the above explanation may be ignored safely altogether. “I hope you don’t mind a little dust.” “Right!” (= No, I don’t mind) “It’s still raining.” “Wrong” (= No [because it has stopped]). “It’s not raining?” “Right” (= No, it isn’t) “Is John absent?” “Right” (= Yes, John is absent) “Then, John did not come.” “Right” (= No, John didn’t.) Similarly, Japanese should be encouraged to use *yes* and *no*, but should restrict it to mean some one or something or some condition is present or not, but not when they would use *hai* or *ee* and *iie* or *iya*. “Isn’t it raining?” “*Right[?!]*” “*Wrong [?!]*” “This question is the same as “Is it raining?” “*Right[?!]*” “*Wrong [?!]*” Properly understood (just as with tag questions present), these questions cannot be answered with *hai* or *iie* in Japanese, either. The question is of existence, and needs *yes* (*aru*) and *no* (*nai*) or their equivalents about what is happening.

After some time, then, students will become aware of when *right/wrong* and *yes/no* can and cannot be freely substituted and be less restricted in their choices. Just as they already have been spending years to say *wouldn’t you* when Japanese says *would you* [*shimashou*] and *let’s* when Japanese says *why*

don't we [*shimasenka*], etc. in other tortured mix-ups of negative and positive. We should not say “never mind that the negative and positive expressions are equivalent in both languages” since it would be far better to learn positive for positive and negative for negative to reduce potential confusion overall.

Ignoring the obvious

This preference to use positive for negative and vice versa points to part of why the obvious solution is unlikely to find full-scale adoption any more than will anyone rush to start teaching basic pronunciation and phonic association with English spelling patterns just because every other language (as taught on NHK, for example) logically does so. As an exception, English pronunciation and listening skills consequently are universally recognized as Japanese students' weaknesses. Simple solutions are not avoided because they are simple, but because cultural and economic factors intervene to make solutions more difficult to implement or even undesirable for some if not many. That is to say, there is the whole educational system and the inertia of literally tons of dictionaries. Who collectively or singly has a voice authoritative enough to revise all teaching methods, and the materials used? Certainly, there are other, even greater problems, as well, including misleading and incorrect dictionary entries working both ways, from English-to-Japanese (say, such as *hare* and *rabbit* or *beans* and *peas*) and Japanese-to-English (such as *neji*, *mame* and various colors). Pronunciation front-piece aside, most Japanese-to-English dictionaries do not show pronunciation at all. Pronunciation itself needs to be taught more urgently just as we need the elimination of the translation method and of examination hell, etc., etc.

In conclusion

The only glimmer of hope I see is that teachers independently recognize some of these points and take the liberty to make life easier for their students and the English speakers whom they deal with. Beyond that, the popular media could introduce changes as well, revealing as well as helping to create the commercial opportunity provided by a demand for better tools and materials for English language study. The needs are so many and great that simply one point cannot hope to be addressed. So that is why even when people understand why “*hai*” and “*iie*” are not “yes” and “no,” there is likely to be little change in teaching this factor without changing the whole approach to English teaching in Japan.

In the interim, I hope more and more teachers and students will realize how much closer *right* and *wrong* are to *hai* or *ee* and *iie* or *iya* and cross-cultural communication will be improved at least that much by using such knowledge and awareness.

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Appendix

ロンの思っていること

ロン：ヤス、どうかね。(二人でやった事とかロンの知りたがっているヤスの重要な事、ビジネスの事、など)

ヤス：そう、何事もすべてOKだよ。

ロン：あのね、昨夜おれに電話をくれたよねえ。

ヤス：うん、そうだよ。

ロン：それで、何の用だったんだね。

ヤス：何でもないよ。

ロン：あれ、お前は昨夜電話をしたんじゃないのか。

ヤス：しないよ。

ロン：あれー、お前は昨夜電話をしたと確かに言ったと思ったんだがねえ。

ヤス：いーや、おれはそんなこと言わなかったよ。

ヤスの思っていること

ヤスさん、(様?) お元気ですか。

はい、とっても元気ですよ。

ところで昨夜電話をしませんでしたか。

はい。

それで、何の用だったんですか。

何でもないですよ。

しかし、昨夜電話をしたのではなかったんですか。

いいえ、そうじゃないですよ。

昨夜電話をしたとおっしゃったように思いましたけれど。

いいえ、そんなこと絶対にございませぬ。