

【研究ノート】

“You Had Better Stop Using ‘Had Better’ Carelessly!” — Connotations of English Expressions

Tatsuroh YAMAZAKI

This paper discusses English utterances that Japanese learners of English tend to make without realizing the various connotations or shades of meaning of the words they use. For convenience Japanese students of foreign languages are inclined to memorize one expression (e.g., individual word, phrase or clause) with one equivalent Japanese translation. These learners may often erroneously conclude that expressions in two independent languages share identical semantics and can be used in the same manner in the same social situations. Based on this assumption, speakers may equate the following pairs:

- 1) *-shita hô ga ii* / “you had better,”
- 2) *junshin-na* / “naïve,”
- 3) *yasui* / “cheap,”
- 4) *susunde -suru* / “willing,”
- 5) *hazukashii* / “ashamed,”
- 6) *hayatte-iru* / “popular,”
- 7) *-shi-yô* / “let’s,”
- 8) *sâbisu* / “service.”

References to specific dictionaries will be made using abbreviations listed

in the appendix.

1. *-Shita hô ga ii* / “you had better”

Japanese *-shita hô ga ii* is usually used to show kind advice or suggestions for other people such as *Sono tenji-kai (o) goranni natta hô ga ii desu yo* (“You should see the exhibition.”). Unfortunately, “you had better” is introduced in one English-Japanese dictionary with the sentence below.

[E1] **You had better** go. (*SED*)

This illustration is not very helpful for language learners because the context of the utterance is not specified at all. Learners may assume that E1 above could be used safely in any contexts regardless of circumstances or listeners. “You had better,” however, is often used when some bad consequences may be expected to follow, as in the next example.

[E2] **You had better** send this fax as soon as possible. This will avoid any misunderstandings later.... (*GEJD*)

This example is more specific and appropriate because the reasoning (i.e., to avoid misunderstandings) is provided in the second sentence. The tone of the phrase “you had better” is serious and urges the listener to carry out the specified action. The next sentence presents a more serious situation, which may indicate the listener is in trouble.

[E3] **You had better** call Misaki and apologize before it is too late.

In this sentence, it is suggested that something bad will happen if the listener doesn’t act as soon as possible. E3 can also have a threatening tone, depending on the situation. A more extreme case of threatening is

observed in the following statement.

[E4] **You had better** pay me \$100,000 immediately, or else!

This language is typically used for blackmailing, implying some serious thing will surely occur if the person ignores or does not obey the order.

To sum up, “you had better”

- i) is used in specific situations rather than for general advice, and
- ii) may sound like strong advice, a demand or threat with the aim of sparing the listener from bad consequences.

Therefore, it is not advisable to use this expression with someone that the speaker is barely acquainted with or with people who are clearly senior to the speaker.

We have exclusively dealt with the situation above where “you” is the subject. We’ll now consider cases in which “we” is the subject, “we had better.” Note the next example.

[E5] **We had better** take the next train; otherwise, we won’t make it to the concert in time.

This sentence functions as a strong suggestion and a warning to both the listener and speaker. Since the recipient of this advice is not only the listener, but also the speaker, E5 does not sound as strong as “you had better...,” which targets the listener without involvement of the speaker. In other words, the speaker doesn’t take any responsibility for whatever may happen to the listener. The next sentence shows the softening effect of using “we” instead of “you.”

(In a lobby, Mr. S talks to a noisy group of people.)

[E6] Umm, could you keep it down just a bit? This is a shared space, so **we**

need to be thoughtful of everyone here. (NHK *E-tere*, 12/5/16)

“We” here means everyone, including the speaker and the listener. It would sound far much stronger and more demanding if “you” were used in place of “we.”

As mentioned above, “you had better” is not a mild suggestion or gentle advice. What expressions can possibly be used instead, without offending the listener? “Should,” obviously, is a possible alternative expression:

[E7] I think all cyclists **should** wear helmets.

This is not directed at any particular person, but a caution to bicycle riders in general. Also see E8 below.

[E8] It’s a great festival. You **should** go and see it.

The second sentence with “should” denotes advice, and even if the listener does not follow the advice and does not go as a result, there will be no problem or any accompanying punishment. Therefore, we could assume that “should”

- i) can be used in general, non-specific situations, and
- ii) does not have any threatening connotation.

Another alternative expression besides “should” is “it might [would] be better for you to...” in the example as follows.

[E9] **It might [would] be better** for you to call Misaki and apologize before it is too late.

Compare this sentence with E3 discussed above. While E9 mildly suggests that the listener should call and apologize, E3 demonstrates the more

threatening nature of the sentence.

“You might [may] as well” is another phrase which may be translated as *-shita hô ga ii*. But this is used when there is more than one specific choice to consider. Tschudy (2016b) mentions that this phrase can have two meanings, “First, it’s better to do something than not to do it.... The second meaning is that there’s no reason not to do something.” Respective examples follow.

[E10] If you’re going to a foreign country, you **might as well** learn a few phrases in the language.

[E11] If you’re going to have something to eat, you **might as well** have something healthy.

2. *Junshin-na* / “naïve”

In any language there is usually a large group of lexical items with favorable connotations for complimenting or praising. For example, in Japanese, *junshin-na* means “pure-hearted” or “unspoiled.” For Japanese speakers the loanword *naïbu* (<Fr. “naïve”) also carries favorable meanings of “innocent” or “unspoiled.”

[J1] *Kanojo wa junshin de naïbu dakara, minna ni suka-reru-n desu ne.*
 (“Since she is so pure-hearted and innocent, everyone loves her.”)

There is nothing wrong with this Japanese complimentary statement. Since this connotation of *naïbu* is deeply rooted in Japanese, students often inappropriately use it in all cases in English as a compliment as in the example below.

[E 12] ??Our boss is so **naïve**. That’s why everyone loves him.

In native English, this sentence does not carry the meaning that the speaker really intends to express about his/her boss' attractive personality.

In English today “naïve” is used in a rather derogatory or disapproving sense^{*1}: lacking experience of life, knowledge, wisdom or good judgment. Consider the sentences below.

[E13] I can't believe you were so **naïve** as to trust him! (*OALD*)

[E14] He has been particularly criticized for lack of military experience and **naïve** views of welfare. (*ODE*)

In these sentences, “naïve” is an unfavorable trait. In E13 the speaker criticizes the listener's foolish judgment due to his/her inexperience in life. Likewise in E14, the phrase “naïve views” implies simple-minded, inexperienced, ignorant opinions.

3. *Yasui* / “cheap”

Another example of an English expression which carries negative nuances is the word “cheap.” Japanese learners understand this word is equivalent to *yasui* in *Kono yôhuku wa yasui* (“These clothes are inexpensive.”). Therefore, their literal translation of *yasui* may produce the following example.

[E15] These shoes are very **cheap**.

E15 obviously states that the meaning of the merchandise is inexpensive, but “cheap” can also connote inferior quality of the product or *yasuppoi* in Japanese. Therefore, if native English speakers are satisfied with the quality and the product does not cost as much as they had expected, they may use a euphemistic expression such as, “These shoes are very

reasonable,” or simply say, “These shoes are very **economical,**” instead. The word “inexpensive” also means that something does not cost much, but it is a more formal term.

The word “cheap” conveys a negative meaning in the expressions: a “cheap novel” (= worthless novel), a “cheap trick” (= contemptible trick) and a “cheap shot” (= mean act).

4. *Susunde -suru* / “willing”

A third example in this category is “willing,” typically used in the phrase “be willing to.” Japanese learners of English usually use this phrase with a very positive meaning equivalent to *susunde -suru*, which roughly means “be ready to do.” However, “willing” does not always indicate “being very positive about doing something.” Instead, it may frequently be translated as *-suru koto o itowanai* or “not being against doing something.” See below.

[E16] Employers are looking for young people who **are willing to** work extra hard. (Yamazaki et al., 2015)

[E17] How much **are they willing to** pay?

The phrase “be willing to” in these sentences does not indicate that the people are “eagerly ready to do something,” but only shows that “they don’t particularly object to doing something.” In other words, they may not be very happy about approving the idea, but under the circumstances they will agree to it.

If “strongly wanting to do something” has to be expressed, the following wording can be used.

[E18] I **was eager to** get back to work as soon as possible. (*LDCE*)

[E19] He **was enthusiastic about** going abroad for his vacation. (*GEJD*)

5. *Hazukashii* / “ashamed”

Japanese students tend to automatically use “ashamed” for *hazukashii* as a convenient English translation. These terms are particularly interesting when contrasted, due to the two different cultural patterns: Western “guilt culture” versus Japanese “shame culture.”*2

For Japanese people *hazukashii* is used in the following cases.

[J2] *Kanojo wa kanningu ga bare-te tégaku ni nari, hazukashii omoi o shita.*

(“When she was caught cheating and suspended from school, she felt ashamed of herself.”)

[J3] *Shota wa kyanpasu no hodô ni battari taore-te, hazukashii omoi o shita.*

(“Shota was embarrassed when he fell face first on the campus sidewalk.”)

If Japanese students are asked for the English translation of J2, they can usually correctly use “ashamed,” because *hazukashii* is equivalent to “ashamed” in many Japanese minds.

However, in the case of J3, Japanese learners would also use “ashamed” for the English translation: “Shota was “ashamed” of himself when he fell face first.... Native speakers would say “embarrassed.” This is one of the major drawbacks of presumed one-to-one correspondence between the vocabulary of two different languages.

As accurately described by Wilkinson (1978), “*Hazukashii* is a typically Japanese word, and cannot be translated by a single equivalent. In English, if you say you are ‘ashamed,’ you are measuring yourself against abstract objective standards of right and wrong and are feeling qualms of conscience, so in effect you are *yamashii* *3 as well as *hazukashii*.”

He further explains “when you have done something stupid, then for

Westerners there is no shame involved, because there is no moral guilt, and so we say ‘embarrassed’; and if we hold back from doing something for fear of making a mistake, then we may say we are ‘shy of’ doing it.” Somebody may also be “shy” or *hazukashii* (or *hazukashigari-no*) due to his/her disposition or natural character.

Based on the observations discussed in this section, we could illustrate the relationship between the aforementioned words in the following fashion (See Table 1.).

Table 1

< Jpn. >	< Eng. >
➤ <i>yamashii</i> , <i>hazukashii</i> (moral guilt involved)	→ “ashamed”
➤ <i>hazukashii</i> (moral guilt not involved)	→ “embarrassed”
➤ <i>hazukashii</i> (disposition or being afraid of making mistakes)	→ “shy (of)”

This table suggests, for example, that *yamashii*, and *hazukashii* which involves moral guilt, can be translated as “ashamed” in English.

6. *Hayatte-iru* / “popular”

Another example of a Japanese vocabulary item which must be translated differently depending on the situation is *hayatte-iru* or “widely spread.” This Japanese term may also be translated as “popular” as shown in the following examples.

[E20] The music is very **popular** with youngsters all over the country.

(*Sono ongaku wa zenkoku no wakamono no aida de hayatte-iru.*)

The word “popular” in this sentence means “liked or admired by a (particular) group of people,” conveying a favorable meaning. Since *hayatte-iru* means “widely spread,” it is used not only for something good, but also for unfavorable things such as contagious diseases or shoplifting.

Like *hayatte-iru*, the loanword *popurâ* (<Eng. “popular”) also simply indicates a condition of something widely spread, so the following J4 is acceptable in Japanese.

[J4] *Katsute-no Nihonde wa ... hijôni popurâ datta baidoku mo...*

(*Diamond Online*, 9/14/2016)

(“In the past in Japan, syphilis was prevalent....”)

Therefore, it would also be likely for Japanese students to use the word inappropriately in English as follows.

[E21] ??In the past in Japan, syphilis was very **popular**....

The following table summarizes the above-mentioned points and provides correlations between the vocabulary of Japanese and English.

Table 2

< Jpn. >	< Eng. >
➤ <i>hayatte-iru</i> , <i>popurâ</i> (e.g., songs, clothing)	→ “popular”
➤ <i>hayatte-iru</i> , <i>popurâ</i> (e.g., diseases / unfavorable things)	→ “be prevalent, be going around”

This table shows that, for example, the words *hayatte-iru* and *popurâ* can be translated as “popular” in English in the case of songs, clothing, etc.

7. *-Shi-yô* / “let’s”

The expression *-shi-yô* (or *-shi-mashô*, in polite form) is usually translated as “let’s.” “Let’s eat out tonight” or *konban wa gaishoku-shi-yô* is a proposition or an offer. Because of this one-to-one correspondence between the terms in two languages, the phrase “let’s + NOUN” (or NOUN-*shi-yô*) is often used in Japanese advertisements. Expressions like **“Let’s DIY!”* and **“Let’s dancing!”* are in vogue now and simple for Japanese people to use in commercial messages, although they realize that such wording is not grammatically correct in English.

If Japanese learners of English rely too much on this one-to-one translation, they may wind up with quite strange expressions. Below is a restaurant sign found in a suburb of Tokyo.

Plate



The last line reads, **“Let’s tell me about your life.”* It should grammatically be either *“Tell me about your life”* or *“Let’s talk about your life.”* We can assume that the sign is a literal translation of *anata no seikatsu ni tsuite hanashi mashô*. However, as *“let’s”* is a convenient equivalent of *-shimashô* in Japanese minds, it has been automatically added to the beginning of this sentence. This is a case of language interference; literal translation of Japanese wording interferes with production of an acceptable English sentence.

“Let’s” is the abbreviated form of *“let us,”* and if not otherwise specified, *“us”* means both the speaker and the listener together. Therefore, the strangeness of the expression on this restaurant sign, is that it proposes the idea that you and I should talk to **me**.

8. *Sâbisu* / *“service”*

The Japanese word *sâbisu* (<Eng. *“service”*) is a loanword and carries the following meanings, which do not all correspond with the meanings of its English counterpart:

- A) work that is done for others as an occupation or business,
- B) an act of assistance or benefit; a favor,
- C) a thing or work that is given or provided free of charge,
- D) selling something at discount prices, or discounted products.

Respective examples of each meaning are as follows:

- A) *basu sâbisu* (*“bus service”*) and *sâbisu sangyô* (*“service industry”*),
- B) *kazoku sâbisu* (*“quality time”*) and *sâbisu seishin* (*“hospitality”*),
- C) *sâbisu zangyô* (*“unpaid overtime”*) and *muryô sâbisu* (*“freebie”*),
- D) *shukketsu dai-sâbisu* (*“greatly discounted price”*) and *môningu sâbisu* (*“breakfast special”*).

While the Japanese *sâbisu* expressions in group A’ above have the same meaning as in English, the words belonging to B’, C’ and D’ carry unique meanings and cannot be translated into English using “service.”

Japanese use *kazoku sâbisu* <lit. “family service”> in group B’ above in the following way:

[E22] Spend time with your family. (Americans often call this “quality time.”) (Tschudy, 2016a)

Another possible erroneous translation by Japanese learners may derive from group C’ above. For instance, *sâbisu zangyô* <lit. “service overtime”> in the sentence, *Nihon no sâbisu zangyô no jittai wa hidoi* (“The current situation regarding working extra hours without pay is very serious in Japan.”) illustrates the source of their mistake. They may translate the Japanese sentence in the following way: ^{??}“The current situation regarding extra ‘service’ work is very serious in Japan.” This may naturally happen, because “service” can mean “no payment or free of charge” to Japanese people.

The third type of erroneous translation by Japanese learners belongs to group D’ above. Since *sâbisu* in this group means “discounted price,” the term is used in the following way: *Ano sûtô wa yûgata sâbisu (o) suru yo* (“At the supermarket they reduce prices in the evening.”). The learners may change the Japanese into the following English sentence: ^{??}“At the supermarket they have ‘services’ in the evening.” It may sound as if they have religious services or extra services, such as delivery or special packaging.

Using some examples of *sâbisu* we have illustrated various possible translations of the word, into English by Japanese. However, it is beyond the scope of this paper to introduce all the possible translations. *4

Concluding remarks :

Based on the observations of Japanese words and English counterparts, it can be concluded that the “one-to-one translation” approach is dangerous and misleading. ESL students should realize that each and every word or expression has different nuances and they must learn grammatically correct and socially appropriate uses and connotations from readings, news broadcasts and movies with the help of native speakers of English and teachers.

The following points were made and illustrated in this paper.

- Japanese learners of English tend to produce English utterances without realizing the various connotations or shades of meaning of such expressions.
- Japanese students of English are inclined to remember one English expression with one equivalent Japanese translation for convenience: e.g., “*-shita hô ga ii* / “you had better,” *hazukashii* / “ashamed.”
- The phrase “you had better” is used in specific situations rather than for general advice, and may convey strong advice, demands or threats to save the listener from bad consequences.
- To give general advice, the expressions “should” and “it might be better for you to...” are more suitable than “you had better” to avoid being offensive to listeners.
- English “naïve” today is used in a rather derogatory or disapproving sense: lacking knowledge, good judgment or experience in life.
- The word “cheap” may connote inferior quality of products.
- Unlike the phrase “be eager to,” “be willing to” shows no particular objection to doing something.
- The phrase *hazukashii* is a culture-bound expression and requires

different translations depending on the situations: e.g., “ashamed,” “embarrassed,” etc.

- The Japanese word *sâbisu* originates from the English word “service,” but it has different meanings: e.g., work or a thing that is given or provided free of charge.
- *Sâbisu* words should not automatically be understood to mean “service,” but translated to suit the particular situation in which they are used: e.g., “free of charge,” “hospitality” or “special.”

Notes:

*1 In many English dictionaries, one of the meanings listed for “naïve” is positive, but this is not the first or most common meaning which comes to mind for native speakers of English.

*2 For more on the distinction between “guilt cultures” and “shame cultures,” see Ruth Benedict’s *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture* (1946). Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

*3 The word *yamashii* can be translated as “guilty.”

*4 Some other typical examples are listed here.

➤ *Kôreisha dei-sâbisu* <lit. “elderly day service”> →
Eng. “The facility is designed for “**elderly day care.**”

➤ *Sâbisu* [= omake] <lit. “service”> →
Eng. (At a store) This is “**free of charge**” or “a freebie.”
(At a grocery store) I’ll “**throw in**” an extra apple.
(At a restaurant) This is “**on the house.**”

➤ *Sâbisu ranchi* <lit. “service lunch”> →
Eng. The “**lunch special**” at the restaurant is really good.

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<Appendix>

The following dictionaries are referred to:

- CDKW** *Concise Dictionary of Katakana Words*. 4th ed. Sanseido. 2010.
- DJR** *Daijirin*. Sanseido. 3rd ed. Akira Matsumura.2014.
- DWE** *Dictionary of English Word Meanings & Etymologies*. Sanseido. 2004.
- GEJD** *Genius English-Japanese Dictionary*. Taishukan. 2011.
- GKJ** *Gendai Katakana-go Jiten*. Obunsha. 2011.
- LDCE** *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*. 5th ed. Longman. 2009.
- NJED** *New Japanese English Dictionary*. 5th ed. Kenkyusha. 2008.

- NOAD** *The New Oxford American Dictionary*. 2nd ed. Oxford. 2005.
- OALD** *The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*. 8th ed. Oxford. 2010.
- ODE** *Oxford Dictionary of English*. 2nd ed. rev. Oxford. 2005.
- OEJD** *O-lex English-Japanese Dictionary*. Obunsha. 2008.
- SED** *Shin Eiwa Daijiten*. 6th ed. Kenkyusha. 2011.

