

It's not 'broken' but 'being fixed': semantic games in Japanese when stuff fails

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Indefinite suspension: 'Decision made to suspend use of the Tokyo Olympic emblem,' the caption on the screen says, letting passers-by know the latest development in the scandal over logo plagiarism in September 2015. | KYODO

Nobody likes bad news. If something is out of order, has turned for the worse or just doesn't go as planned, we are normally not too fond of hearing about it. Breaking bad news is thus a highly sensitive social activity that may easily involve casualties on the part of the deliverer, a phenomenon known as "shooting the messenger." To avoid such

bloodshed, the Japanese language offers a number of words and expressions that help convey bad news in a maximally innocuous way.

The domain where this can most easily be studied is public spaces — for instance, when there is a cash dispenser out of order, a broken toilet or an electric signboard that doesn't work. To be sure, Japan can take some pride in the fact that unlike in many other countries, these things usually work amazingly well. But in those rare cases they don't, this makes it even harder to appropriately announce such circumstances.

The most straightforward way to acknowledge dysfunction in the public arena would be the term 故障 (*koshō*, out of order). However, being straightforward is perhaps not what is most required here — which is why the expression is often avoided. A more favorable way to announce that something is broken is to call it 利用中止 (*riyō chūshi*) or 使用中止 (*shiyō chūshi*), “usage suspended.” I could never quite figure out the difference between the two, but the point for both is that they go without any acknowledgement of defect or brokenness. In addition, “suspended” conveys some minimal degree of hope that the apparatus in question won't remain that way forever but will be fixed in due time.

An even more optimistic way of communicating that something is out of order is 調整中 (*chōsei-chū*). The term suggests that a device is presently being adjusted or repaired, even when there has been no discernible repair work going on for days. A term with a similar promise of quick recovery is 整備中 (*seibi-chū*, under maintenance). “Hold on, we're working on it!” is the message in both cases.

Another exceedingly convenient term is 不具合 (*fuguai*), most commonly used to announce some unforeseen defect of electronic products such as engine parts, refrigerators, TV sets and the like. The term is championed by manufacturers (though not necessarily consumers) because unlike the ugly 欠陥 (*kekkan*, defect), it implies some nonsystemic, single-case problem — even when a whole product series is being recalled. This may be why,

according to a recent NHK survey (bit.ly/nhkfuguai), use of *fuguai* has increased exponentially during the past three decades. While back in 1993 the term occurred a mere three times in the station's news programs throughout the year, it is now mentioned more than 100 times annually.

Breaking bad news gently is not only a matter of using the right nouns; it can also be substantially softened if you know your verbs. One of my personal favorites is the compound 見合わせる (*miawaseru*), which refers to a large number of possible activities, including the mere exchange of glances. However, when you hear it in public transport announcements, such as 只今運転を見合わせております (*Tadaima unten o miawasete orimasu*), you can be sure it's bad news: "For the time being, all operations have been suspended."

The compound verb 見送る (*miokuru*) is a similar case. Again, this can have a rather innocent meaning, such as to "see someone off." However, when it comes to plans, deliveries or long-awaited decisions to be "seen off," this means that the issue in question has been shelved, held back or postponed. Since these are in fact quite nasty activities to have to announce, there is a whole battery of other verbs that can be mobilized here too. Try, for example, 再検討する (*saikentō suru*, re-examine, review) or 白紙に戻す (*hakushi ni modosu*, take back to the drawing board, start afresh).

A particularly interesting expression is 割愛する (*katsuai suru*, omit), which of late has gone through some noteworthy semantic extension. Being a combination of the two characters for 割る (*waru*, break) and 愛 (*ai*, love), the term originally used to emphasize that one would let go of something only with the utmost reluctance: "We really would have loved to, but ..." However, the term has now increasingly come to be used in situations that clearly do not involve any real emotional hardships for the person in charge of the cut. Another recent NHK survey (bit.ly/nhkkatsuai) reveals that most people today consider *katsuai* largely synonymous with

more straightforward expressions for doing away with things unwanted or unneeded.

As a nonnative receiver of bad news, you may find these expressions somewhat ambiguous or even intentionally misleading. However, if you should happen to be in a position of having to decline, reject or announce something unpleasant yourself, you will surely appreciate the great potential of Japanese to deliver bad news the easy way.