

In what ways is it impolite to say no in Japan?

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7 Answers

Kaicheng Liang, lapsed japanophile
Written Jul 29, 2011

Generally speaking, it is impolite to say no by saying 'no' (いいえ *iee*).

Pulitzer Prize-winning author and columnist Dave Barry[1], in his 1992 book 'Dave Barry Does Japan', came up with the following primer for understanding this unusual cultural quirk[2]:

ENGLISH STATEMENT MADE BY JAPANESE PERSON	ACTUAL MEANING IN AMERICAN
I see.	No.
Ah.	No.
Ah-hah.	No.
Yes.	No.
That is difficult.	That is completely impossible.
That is very interesting.	That is the stupidest thing I ever heard.
We still study your proposal.	We will feed your proposal to a goat.

I want to say this is exaggerated, but it really isn't (except maybe the goat part). In short, Japanese people are so polite that they strenuously endeavor not to inflict on others the disappointment that can come with an outright rejection (I discussed this fear of inflicting *meiwaku* i.e. trouble, difficulty, distress in an older answer about

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are never bluntly denied, even if that is the intention of the speaker.

Here are some ways that Japanese people say no:

いやあああ... (*iyaaa... ummm...*)

followed by one of the below:

(in roughly increasing casualness/rudeness)

1. ちょっとむずかしいですね。 (*chotto muzukashii desu ne*. This is a little difficult.)
2. ちょっときついですね。 (*chotto kitsui desu ne*. This is a little tight/uncomfortable.)
3. ちょっと時間かかりますね。 (*chotto jikan kakarimasu ne*. This will take up a little time.)
4. ちょっと困りますね。 (*chotto komarimasu ne*. This is causing me some distress.)
5. ちょっと... (*chotto... uh...*)
6. ちょっと無理かな...ごめん。 (*chotto muri kana... gomen*. This might be beyond me... sorry.)

The keyword is *chotto* (lit. a little), which implies 'a slight problem'. Even the apology, which indicates an inability to help, is avoided except in very casual conversation - the ideal outcome is to find a compromise in which some help can still be rendered.

Of course people know to take these deferences to mean a pretty outright negative, so these expressions are not misleading in the least. They are simply polite yet explicit ways of saying 'no'.

[1] <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dav...>

[2] <http://www.uwplatt.edu/geography...>

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Brandon Holmes, Currently live in Tokyo, lived off and on in Japan past 20 years



Written Feb 11, 2016

In all actually it's **almost always** impolite to directly say no, when if it might adversely affect someone else.

Obviously it's perfectly fine when stating facts. Do you own a car? No, I don't. Are you American? No, I'm Canadian.

It's one of the most fundamental differences many Westerners can not grasp because in Western culture which considers it nearly always better to be direct and people are ethnocentric by default.

In reality, Westerner's do the same thing but the Japanese take it even further. Westerner's will not directly answer if they truly believe it will hurt the other person's feelings. How many people would answer honestly if a friend asked if the report they worked on all weekend was really bad or if a husband's wife asked if he thought she was fat.

If a guy asks a girl out on a date, she might reply that she has to visit her grandma on Saturday...or she has to do her hair.

Japanese also believe that intelligent people from a good family know how to be subtle and understand other's subtleness. Again, that concept exists in Western culture but the Japanese take it even further.

Here is a clear and easy guide to translating an answer from a Japanese person, if you do not know them very, very well and they don't directly say "yes", then it's always, always a no. Not a maybe, it's no.

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Hidetsugu Yanagimoto, residence designer and home inspector



Written Sep 24, 2015

Once, our communities were so small and saying 'no' produced fiction which led to ostracizing.

But The situation is changing.

Younger people, let's say under 30, become saying 'no' directly.

Japanese politeness is fading, but we are getting extroverted.

I guess we don't mind if people who's native language is not Japanese say 'no'.

Don't hesitate to say 'no'.

Teach us how to say 'no'.

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William Flanagan, Long-time manga and anime translator



Written Feb 12, 2016

There are some excellent answers here already, but I just wanted to add something.

There is a time when it is polite to say no.

It is always polite to say no when someone is paying you a compliment. (In fact, it's almost required to refuse or downplay the compliment.)

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Sören Tiitsmann, lives in Paris

Updated Feb 4, 2016



As it's impolite to say no, it's also impolite to make somebody say no. In Japan you are supposed to guess the probably answer and not put the poor person through the discomfort of having to turn you off.

The word "iie" is only effectively used as responses to compliments, or when giving positive answers.

- Wow, you speak really good English!

- Ahh, no no, there's no such thing.

- Sorry to disturb, are you busy right now?

- Ah no, no, go ahead!

According to my dictionary it means "nah", "nahh", only then "no", but after that has examples mostly in the use of "no, thank you".

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Sakebiga, worked in japan, studied 日本語for years Girlfriend is japanese, fluent in japanese

Written Nov 5, 2015



The most impolite way to say no is

違えよ! (chigau yo > chigee yo)

Or 要らねえよ (iranai yo > iranee yo)

Its a very rude way of saying "no"

Or " i don't need it"

Its hard to explain but you need CONTEXT to be rude in japanese.

you cant just say "いえ!" (No) and be rude. It sounds weird and robotic.

Depending on the situation you'll use a different word.

EXAMPLE!

Q: "アメリカ人ですか?" (Are you american?)

A: "違えよ!" (No ...)

If you said "いえ!" To that question... the japanese people will think you're a stupid broken robot.

If they're offering you something, saying no in a rude way is done differently again.

EXAMPLE

Q: "お湯飲みたい?" (Do you want some warm water?)

A: " 要らねえよ" (Don't need it)

this is a very rude and callous way of declining an offering.

You RARELY just say "いえ"

Unless your an annoying robot.

I hope this made some sense bro

Long story short: The way you are rude changes by context. Learning japanese is a complicated path to take and everything is intertwined so trying to explain one little bit of it without the restwell you're guaranteed to understand 2% of whats being taught here.

Just go learn the whole language and it will make sense.

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"Oh my god— your hands are so tiny!" Then they call over their friend, who's known



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Lee Majors, I'm about halfway, learnt a hell of a lot and still have lots to learn.

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