

A Brief Report on Japanese Synonyms: An Analysis of the Differences Between “*onegaisuru* (お願いする)” and “*tanomu* (頼む)”

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1. Purpose of this report

Proper use of synonyms is an important issue for foreign Japanese learners. Novice learners struggle with constructing Japanese sentences and do not care about distinguishing between synonyms. However, intermediate and advanced learners, who have become comfortable with Japanese language, find it difficult to distinguish between synonyms.

This report considers the usage of synonyms. Particularly, it seeks to clarify the differences between “お願いする” and “頼む.”

The following are sentences in which both “お願いする” and “頼む” can be used. These sentences were conducted by the authors, and it was up to them to decide whether “お願いする” and “頼む” could be employed.

- (1) 友達にチケットの予約を (○お願いした／○頼んだ)。
- (2) 忙しかったので、食事の支度を娘に (○お願いした／○頼んだ)。
- (3) 君には少し厄介な仕事を (○お願いし／○頼み) たいんだよ。

In the above sentences, both “お願いする” and “頼む” can be used, and it appears that the meaning of each sentence does not change remarkably regardless of which one is employed. However, in the following sentences, the use of one or the other is not allowed.

- (4) レポートの提出期限の延期を先生に (○お願いした／×頼んだ)。
- (5) アンケート調査への協力をみなさんに (○お願いした／×頼んだ)。
- (6) 寿司屋に出前を (×お願いした／○頼んだ)。
- (7) このレストランは、料理を (×お願いする／○頼む) とすぐに出てくる。

In sentences (4) and (5), the use of “頼む” is not allowed, and in sentences (6) and (7), the use of “お願いする” is not allowed. What rule governs the use of “お願いする” and “頼む?” This report will clarify the rule and make use of it in the field of Japanese language education.

The division of roles between Yamauchi and Matsuo in the creation of this report is as follows: First, Matsuo conducted an analysis based on grammatical judgment and clarified the rule for distinguishing between the two. Thereafter, Yamauchi verified the validity of the rule

that Matsuo clarified and made minor corrections as necessary. Yamauchi also wrote this report while discussing his revised proposal with Matsuo.

2. Previous research

We looked up “お願いする” and “頼む” using two Japanese dictionaries: the *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten* (日本国語大辞典) and *Kojien* (広辞苑). “頼む” is mentioned in both. Nonetheless, “お願いする” is not mentioned in either of them. This is probably because “お願いする” is not considered a single word. It would be regarded as a compound word in which “する” is added to “お願い.”

In the *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten*, “お願い” is listed, and it is described as a polite or humble form of the noun “願ひ.” As for “願ひ,” it is described as a noun made from the verb “願う.” Conversely, the *Kojien* does not contain the word “お願い.”

The following two points became clear from the descriptions in the two dictionaries.

- (a) Neither dictionary contains the word “お願いする.” Therefore, it is impossible to know the difference between “お願いする” and “頼む” from the two dictionaries.
- (b) The noun “願ひ” was derived from the verb “願う,” and “お願い” is a polite or humble form of “願ひ.”

Sentence (a) is discussed in Chapter 3, wherein the rule for properly using “お願いする” and “頼む” will also be clarified. Chapter 4 describes what is related to sentence (b). There are two kinds of “お願いする.” One is derived from “願う,” and the other is separate from “願う.” Chapter 4 discusses this issue.

3. Differences between “お願いする” and “頼む”

Before discussing the differences between the two, let us see what they have in common. Take another look at the following sentences given at the beginning.

- (1) 友達にチケットの予約を(○お願いした／○頼んだ)。
- (2) 忙しかったので、食事の支度を娘に(○お願いした／○頼んだ)。
- (3) 君には少し厄介な仕事を(○お願いし／○頼み)たいんだよ。

In the above sentences, the subject is omitted. All omitted subjects are considered “私,” and the indirect objects are “友達,” “娘,” and “君,” respectively. In sentence (1), the indirect object person is encouraged to act as “チケットの予約,” in sentence (2), the indirect object

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person is encouraged to act as “食事の支度,” and in sentence (3), the indirect object person is encouraged to act as “少し厄介な仕事.”

Consequently, what they have in common is that the subject person encourages the indirect object person to act as the direct object to achieve the state desired by the subject person.

To consider the differences between the two words, see the following sentences: In the following sentences, the use of “お願いする” is allowed and the use of “頼む” is not allowed.

- (4) レポートの提出期限の延期を先生に (○お願いした / ×頼んだ)。
- (5) アンケート調査への協力をみなさんに (○お願いした / ×頼んだ)。
- (8) 取引先の銀行に、無理を承知で追加の融資を (○お願いして / ×頼んで) みた。
- (9) 無理を言って、子供の世話を隣人に (○お願いした / ×頼んだ)。
- (10) 野球部の顧問を引き受けてほしいと担任の先生に (○お願いした / ×頼んだ)。
- (11) 少しは猫の面倒をみてくれるよう、猫嫌いの夫に (○お願いして / ×頼んで) みた。
- (12) 友達が台湾に行くので、お土産にはパイナップルケーキを (○お願いした / ×頼んだ)。

What the above sentences have in common is that the indirect object person may not accept the request of the subject person. In sentence (4), there is a possibility that “先生” will not accept “レポート提出期限の延期,” and in sentence (5), “みなさん” may not accept “アンケート調査への協力.” Similarly, in sentences (8)–(12), the indirect object person may not accept the request of the subject person. Therefore, “お願いする” is employed when the indirect object person may not accept the request of the subject person, but “頼む” is not.

There are sentences in which the use of “頼む” is allowed, but the use of “お願いする” is not allowed. See the following sentences below:

- (6) 寿司屋に出前を (×お願いした / ○頼んだ)。
- (7) このレストランは、料理を (×お願いする / ○頼む) とすぐに出てくる。
- (13) 資料のコピーは昨日秘書に (×お願いして / ○頼んで) おいたから問題はない。
- (14) 子供にお使いを (×お願いした / ○頼んだ)。
- (15) いつも世話になっている隣人に、旅行中の犬の世話を (×お願いされ / ○頼まれ) てしまった。
- (16) 母に (×お願いされ / ○頼まれ) て、薬局で頭痛薬を買ってきた。
- (17) 亡くなる直前に、父は「お母さんのことは (×お願いした / ○頼んだ) ぞ。」と僕に言った。

What the above sentences have in common is that the subject person assumes that the

indirect object person will accept the request. In sentence (6), the subject person assumes that “寿司屋” will accept “出前.” In sentence (7), the subject person assumes that the staff at “レストラン” will accept to serve “料理.” Similarly, in sentences (13)–(17), the subject person assumes that the indirect object person will accept the request. Therefore, “頼む” is utilized when the indirect object person would accept the request, but “お願いする” is not.

From the observations so far, the following rule is derived. “お願いする” is used when the indirect object person may not accept the request, and “頼む” is employed when the indirect object person will accept the request.

We consider sentences in which the use of both is allowed. Sentences (1)–(3) shown at the beginning of this report are shown again below.

- (1) 友達にチケットの予約を(○お願いした／○頼んだ)。
- (2) 忙しかったので、食事の支度を娘に(○お願いした／○頼んだ)。
- (3) 君には少し厄介な仕事を(○お願いし／○頼み)たいんだよ。

Regarding sentence (1), it is possible that “友達” may refuse to “チケットの予約” or that there is almost no possibility of refusal. Hence, both “お願いする” and “頼む” are allowed. Similarly, as regards sentence (2), it is possible that “娘” may refuse to “食事の支度” or that there is almost no possibility of refusal. With regard to sentence (3), it is possible that “君” may refuse to “少し厄介な仕事” or that there is almost no possibility of refusal. Therefore, both “お願いする” and “頼む” are allowed in these sentences.

4. Another meaning of “お願いする”

The meanings of “お願いする” and “頼む” seen in the previous chapter are generally like the English word “ask.” Nevertheless, “お願いする” sometimes has a meaning similar to the English word “wish.” See the following sentences: In them, the indirect object is “God” instead of “human,” in which case “お願いする” has a meaning like “wish.”

- (18) 試験に合格できるように、神様に(○お願いする／×頼む)。
- (19) 病気が治るように、お星さまに(○お願いする／×頼む)。
- (20) お母さんの病気が早く治るよう、お地蔵さまに(○お願いする／×頼む)。

The indirect object of each of the above sentences is “神様,” “お星さま,” and “お地蔵さま,” not “human,” and “お願いする” has a meaning like “wish;” hence the use of “頼む” is not allowed.

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It is not uncommon for the indirect object of “お願いする” to be something like “God.” By using a corpus, we can easily collect examples of “お願いする” where the indirect object is “God.” Using the search application *Chunagon* (中納言), we searched for the Balanced Corpus of Contemporary Written Japanese (henceforth BCCWJ) and collected examples. By searching for three types of character strings, “神様にお願,” “神さまにお願,” and “神にお願,” the following examples could be obtained.

- (21) 学問の神様にお願いしておけば受験はひとまず安心。
- (22) 皆さんに代わって、必ずや神様にお願いに行きます！
- (23) 私も日の神様、天照大御神様にお願いしました。
- (24) あなたも来年ですから今から神様にお願いしておきます。
- (25) 恥ずかしかけん、神様にお願いしていまの場所へ移したちゅうけんど、
- (26) シマフクロウさんは「すぐに天上の神様にお願いしてみては」と言いました。
- (27) せめて私たちの民だけは救われるように、いま神様にお願いするしかないわ
- (28) 前は、お父さんが皆さんのお願い事を神様にお願いするときにお賽銭をケチったせいで、
- (29) 「できる範囲で一生懸命がんばりますから、力を貸してください」と、いつも神様にお願いしているんです
- (30) 先生みずから仲間の連中ともども、そういういい生き方をするように神様にお願いしたいね。
- (31) 水子を観音様に返すには、こうして神様にお願いして頼み、葬式をして、送り出すのだという。
- (32) わたしらも神さまにお願いせなあきまへん
- (33) 日本の真五郎といふ船頭の神にお願いして、守護されて走らせてほしい。
- (34) 外間氏は《神にお願いして守護されて。》と注する。

Contrarily, it is quite unusual for the indirect object of “頼む” to be something like “God.” To verify this, the following searches were performed using *Chunagon* and BCCWJ as before.

- (35) Designate the lexeme “に” as the forward co-occurrence “one word from the key” and search for the key lexeme “頼む.”

Consequently, 1,679 examples were retrieved. Of these, we visually checked the first 500 examples, looking for examples in which “God” is an indirect object. There are only two examples where a word like “God” is used as an indirect object.

- (36) 出雲へ降りる途中、スサノオは食物が欲しくなり、オオゲツヒメノ神に頼んだ。
 (37) 自分の名前を知らせないようにと湖の精に頼んだ。

Hence, “お願いする” shown in the previous chapter and “お願いする” in sentences (18)–(34) are different verbs. “お願いする” in sentences (18)–(34) shown in this chapter is a humble form of “願う.” Therefore, the lexical meaning of “お願いする” is the same as that of “願う.” By contrast, “お願いする” shown in the previous chapter can be a synonym for “頼む” and is distinct from “願う” in meaning.

To briefly explain the differences between the two, “お願いする” shown in the previous chapter has a similar meaning to “ask” in English, and “お願いする” in sentences (18)–(34) has a similar meaning to “wish” in English.

Furthermore, the meanings of “お願い” and “頼み,” which are nouns of “お願いする” and “頼む,” inherit the meanings of “お願いする” and “頼む,” respectively. See the following sentences.

- (38) 友人が、「君に1つだけ(○お願い／○頼み)がある」と言ってきた。
 (39) 神様は子供たちの(○お願い／×頼み)を1つだけ聞いてくれる。

“お願い” and “頼み” in sentence (38) imply the English “ask;” therefore both are allowed to be used. Conversely, “お願い” and “頼み” in sentence (39) imply the English word “wish;” thus, the use of “お願い” is allowed, but the use of “頼み” is not. The noun “お願い” can imply both “ask” and “wish” like the verb “お願いする.” However, the noun “頼み,” like the verb “頼む,” implies only “ask.”

5. Conclusion

The rule for properly using “お願いする” and “頼む” that has been clarified so far is as follows:

- (40) Common point: The subject person encourages the indirect object person to perform a certain action to achieve the desired state.

お願いする : Used when the indirect object person may not accept the request.
 頼む : Used when the indirect object person will accept the request.

Additionally, the following two points were also clarified.

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- (41) “お願いする” is also employed as a humble expression for “願う.” When a word such as “God” becomes an indirect object, it has a meaning similar to “wish” in English.
- (42) The meanings of “お願い” and “頼み,” which are nouns of “お願いする” and “頼む,” inherit the meanings of “お願いする” and “頼む.” Therefore, “お願い” implies both “ask” and “wish” in English, but “頼む” implies only “ask.”

There is a word “*iraisuru* (依頼する)” that is like “お願いする” and “頼む” in meaning. The common point of sentence (40) also applies to “依頼する.” Therefore, it can be used in the same context as “お願いする” and “頼む” as follows:

- (43) 彼に翻訳の仕事を (○お願いした／○頼んだ／○依頼した)。

We will discuss later in another article how “依頼する” differs from the two words “お願いする” and “頼む.”

References

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