

Shiru and Wakaru

To Know You Is Not Necessarily to Understand You

Believe it or not, one of the first instructors I had when I was a sincere, impressionable beginning student of Japanese at a great educational institution that shall remain nameless but which is situated very close to the shores of Lake Michigan in a very windy city, once told me that the reason the Japanese say *shitte iru* rather than *shiru* for "to know" was to avoid the embarrassment of having to say *shirimasu*, containing the *shiri* that means "backside" (in the sense of "butt" or "tush"). Even more amazing than the fact that she told me this was that I BELIEVED HER! What's that? They told you the same thing?

No, impossible. Any decent textbook will give you the straight dope early on, complete with the information that it's okay to say *shiri* in *shirimasen* when you have to tell someone you don't know something.

Well, if *shirimasen* is okay, why not *shirimasu*?

Obviously, there is something more going on here than delicate avoidance of an anatomical feature—especially among the Japanese, who are far less delicate than we are in discussing physical matters.

The fact is that *shiru* does not mean "to know." It means "to come to know"—"to find out," "to learn."

As the Japanese conceive it, "knowing" consists of finding out about something and keeping it in your brain. When you want to say "I know" in Japanese, you have to say "I have found out about that and I still have it up here where it belongs," or, "I am in a state of having found out."

Shitte iru is very common, but you won't hear *shiru* being used very often in conversation. Unless you realize

that *shiru* doesn't mean "to know," however, it could seem stranger than it actually is when you encounter it, as more often happens, in written material. Thus, when Nakamura Mitsuo tells us that the Japanese *mazu gaikei no mohō ni yotte kagaku o shiri* [blush] etc., he is saying they first learned about science through the imitation of external forms, not that they knew science—and certainly not in the biblical sense.

When you want to say "I don't know" in Japanese, you need to say "I haven't found out about it yet" (*shirimasen*) rather than "I am not in a state of having found out about it" (*shitte imasen*), which, if you could get away with it, would sound more like a declaration of ignorance to be maintained: "I intend to remain in a state of not having found out about it," and although this may, in fact, reflect your own personal conviction, it would sound very strange.

Aside from these problems of meaning and form, *shiru* is not too mysterious. It is transitive, taking direct objects the same way that "know" does in English: *Aro hito o shitte imasu ka* / "Do you know him?" For speakers of English, however, *wakaru* is much trickier.

Wakaru, when it causes trouble, does so through a combination of back-translation and misunderstanding of *wa*. Because "understand" is a transitive verb in English ("I understand that"), students tend to think of *wakaru* as a verb that people do to things (*Waiashi wa sore o wakaru*; wrong). Under ordinary circumstances, *wakaru* does not take an *o*-object. People don't *wakaru* things; things themselves do *wakaru*; they "are clear" or they "are understandable," and if we happen to be in the neighborhood, they are clear to us. Notice I said *to* us. If we are going to put people into a sentence about things being clear, they are usually followed by *ni*, as in *Watashi ni wa wakaranai*. When the people in the sentence are *not* followed

by *ni*, you should think of this as a kind of contraction: *Watashi wa wakaranai* is short for *Watashi ni wa wakaranai* / "To me, it is not clear."

The trouble probably starts with those contracted forms. *Watashi wa wakaranai* looks awfully close to the transitive English "I don't understand (it)." If you've read "Wa and Ga: The Answers to Unasked Questions," however, you realize that a *wa*-topic is never the subject of a verb. And if you've read the paragraph before this one, you know that *people* don't do *wakaru*: things do it themselves, so for that reason, too, *watashi* can't be the subject of *wakaru*. Kenkyusha gives us *Share ga wakaru* as "to see [i.e., understand, or get] a joke" and *Share ga wakaranai* as "miss the point of a joke." In both cases, you are saying that the joke itself (subject marked by *ga*) *wakaru*'s or doesn't *wakaru*. If we put "me" into the latter sentence, we get a form that looks like this:

Watashi ni wa sono share ga wakaranai.

Let this be our model for a "full" expression in which the understander and the understandee are both named in a sentence using *wakaru*. A natural English version of this model would be "I don't get that joke," but of course it is a good translation only because it avoids any attempt to reflect the Japanese structure, which is something like "To me, that joke doesn't clarify itself." Perhaps better would be: "That joke doesn't make sense to me."

So you think, Hey, that's easy! The subject of *wakaru* is going to be marked by *ga*! No problem!

Uh, not so fast. Sometimes it'll be *ga* but often it'll be *wa*, too.

And this brings us to another source of vagueness regarding *wakaru*. It seems to be drowning in *wa*'s: some-

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times the understander is marked by a *wa*, and sometimes the thing the person is understanding or not understanding is marked with a *wa* instead of a nice, clean *ga*. Let's look at some of the examples from Kenkyusha's long definition of *wakaru*.

Kimi ni wa koko no imi ga wakaru ka / "Can you make out the meaning of this passage?" This corresponds to our "full" model and should be no problem—unless you're not friends with the speaker, who is being far from polite.

Watashi no iu koto ga wakimasu ka / "Do you understand what I'm saying?" Here, the "you" is understood from context, but otherwise we're still with the model.

Sonna koto wa watashi ni wa chinpun-kapun de wakaranai / "It's all Greek to me." Here, the "to me" looks familiar, but the "matter" that we are not understanding is marked by *wa* and comes at the beginning of the sentence. If you've read "Wa and Ga" and "The Myth of the Subjectless Sentence," though, this shouldn't be much of a problem. "As for matters such as that: to me, they [zero pronoun: actual subject] are nonsense and understandable."

Kimi no iu imi wa wakatte iru / "I know what you mean." As far as the meaning of what you're saying goes, it [zero pronoun] is in a state of having become clear." (More on *wakatte iru* later.)

Kare ni wa sono share wa wakaranakatta / "The joke was lost upon him." Wait a minute, here's the same dictionary that gave us *share ga wakaranai* now suggesting *share wa wakaranai*. Why can't they be more consistent? Actually, with a negative verb like this, *wa* would be more common than the *ga* of the model sentence, merely because *in* a negative sentence you usually want to throw the emphasis ahead to the negative verb. With *wa*, it's more

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"He didn't get it." With *ga*, it's more "He didn't get it."

Sore o wakaraseru koto ga dekinakatta / "I could not get it across to them." This might look like an *o*-object with *wakaru*, but with the causative, you're causing somebody to act upon something. Plain vanilla *wakaru* does not take objects—except (there's always an exception), as Makino and Tsutsui point out, "when 'non-spontaneous comprehension' is involved . . . in which the experienter makes a conscious effort to understand something," e.g., *Jakku wa Rinda no kimochi o wakarō to shinai* / "Jack does not try to understand Linda's feelings."

And finally a word on permutations: *wakaru*, *wakatta*, *wakatte iru*: "It is clear," "It has (just) become clear," and "It is in a state of having become clear (some time ago)." In English, we might say for these, respectively, "I understand," "Oh, now I understand!" and "Alright already!" *Wakatte iru* is a way of shutting someone up: "Look, that was clear to me long before you opened your mouth" = "I know." Of course, if you politen it up, *wakatte imasu*, it's a bit softer. *Wakarimasu* tells people you are understanding what they are now telling you. "Is it clear? Yes, it's clear." *Wakarimashita* denotes instantaneous understanding of something you hadn't seen before: "I see!"

If you read Makino and Tsutsui's neat little article on *wakaru*, meaning "the [spontaneous] process of figuring something out," in contrast to *shiru*, meaning "to get some raw information from some outside source," you, too, will doubtless find yourself saying, *Aa, wakarimashita!* This is another instance in which English tends to fudge distinctions that Japanese keeps clear. We say "I know," both when we mean "I comprehend that concept" and when we mean "I am aware of that fact." So the answer to "What are you going to do tonight?" is "I don't know yet," meaning "I haven't figured it out yet" / *Mada wakarimasen*, not

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"I have not come to know that fact yet" / *Mada shirimasen*. JSL 1:10:280-81 also offers some enlightening analyses and the useful contrasting pair:

Tanaka-san o shitte imasu ka / "Do you know Mr./s. Tanaka?"

Michi ga wakarimasu ka / "Do you know the way?"

Taming Tame

The word *tame* can be confusing because it seems to have two entirely different—in fact, virtually opposite—meanings. Sometimes it seems to mean "because so-and-so happened," and at others it seems to mean "in order to make so-and-so happen," which is sort of close to "for the sake of," another common interpretation. How can we tell the difference? By far, the easiest way is to ask the author. Failing that, we are left with our old friend, G. D. Context. One clue that will *not* work is the presence or absence of *ni* after the *tame*. Either kind of *tame* can have a *ni* after it, so don't expect a mechanical approach to work. Look at these pairs:

Shiken no tame (ni) benkyō shita / "I studied for the exam."

Shiken no tame (ni) ikenakuratta / "Because of the exam, I couldn't go."

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Sakana o taberu tame ni tsuri o shite iru / "He is fishing in order to eat fish."