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TENSE IN JAPANESE THANKS

A comparison between the 1970s and 2021

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Abstract

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In this study, we compare how the two expressions *arigatou gozaimasu* (present tense) and *arigatou gozaimashita* (past tense) are used during sessions of the Diet of Japan in the 1970s and in 2021. We find that usage, apart from having generally increased, has shifted from predominantly past tense to mainly present tense. This shift is mostly resisted in the case where an expression of thanks is accompanied by an explicitly voiced desire to end a conversation or a topic. We believe that this is caused by Japanese people understanding the use of the past tense as a form of ending marker. In all other situations, we observe a substantial influence of personal preference on the choice of tense, which may or may not be caused by demographic factors. In consequence, we urge that future research use sample sizes large enough to avoid spurious results caused by an unfortunate selection of samples.

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Romanization conventions

Owing to the text-based nature of this work, the romanization system used in this essay is essentially that used to input Japanese text using a QWERTY keyboard, as opposed to the more common, sound-based Hepburn system. However, there are a few modifications made to improve legibility. First, spaces are used wherever it seemed appropriate. Secondly, the particle は is given as *wa* rather than

ha, so that it may be more easily identified as a particle. Finally, upper- and lower-case letters are used to match the surrounding English. The choice of case does not convey any additional meaning.

Contents

1 Introduction

One of the more remarkable aspects of Japanese is the existence of two phrases for thanking, *arigatou gozaimasu* and *arigatou gozaimashita*. While having multiple phrases with the same meaning is not in itself very peculiar - English, for example, has both *thanks* and *thank you*, the difference being mostly one of style - what is remarkable about this pair is that the only visible difference between them is their tense. *Arigatou gozaimasu* is in the present tense, and *arigatou gozaimashita* is the exact same phrase in the past tense. In English or Swedish, thanking phrases, if they have any tense at all, are always in the present tense, such as *thank you* (which is a shortened version of "I thank you"). The reason, quite self-evidently, is that the act of thanking takes place at exactly the same moment as the uttering of the phrase. However, in Japanese, we are confronted with a pair of options differing only in tense, and no textbook, style guide or scientific publication available to help us choose between them. The purpose of this study is to shine a light on the factors influencing the choice between these two expressions.

1.1 Thanking in Japanese

It is fair to say that a native speaker of Japanese has a wider array of thanking phrases to choose from than an English speaker. English thanking phrases mostly consist of variations on *thanks* or *thank you*, although phrases like *much obliged* are also possible. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, *thanks* comes from an Old English word meaning "gratitude" and is related to the word *think*, indicating that its fundamental meaning is similar to that of *much obliged* in that both refer to the current feelings of the speaker.

In Japanese, however, there is rather more choice. The expression you would commonly find in an introductory textbook is *arigatou gozaimasu*, along with its past-tense counterpart. While commonly spelled in hiragana, it actually has a kanji spelling as well: 有り難うございます (and various other spellings using the same kanji). The two kanji used here mean "exist" and "difficult" respectively. *Gozaimasu* and *gozaimashita* are polite forms of the archaic verb *gozaru*, which means "to be". The expression is derived from the word *arigatai*, which, according to the *Su-pa-daijirin* dictionary, originally refers to something or someone having difficulty existing, in the two senses "rare" and "living is difficult". From the former of these evolved the meaning of "so excellent as to be very rare" and thence "thankful". Unlike the English phrase, which refers to the feelings of the speaker, the Japanese word essentially conveys thankfulness by referring to a property of the event, i.e. the fact that it is of a rare excellence.

Further, the Japanese language has a selection of thanking phrases whose meanings correspond more literally to the action they are used for: *rei wo iu* ("(I) say thanks") and *orei wo moushiagemasu* ("(I) (humbly) give thanks"), as well as *kansha shimasu* ("(I'm) grateful"). Like their English counterparts, they can only be used in the present tense, or if they are used in the past tense they cease to be set phrases and simply become sentences.

Finally we have another expression, *sumimasen*, which, although commonly translated as "I'm sorry", is sometimes used in situations which would cause a Westerner to say *thank you*. In fact, whole papers have been written about the precise rules governing the choice between these two expressions (e.g. [4]). Whether fortunately or unfortunately for us, however, this phrase also has a past tense form *sumimasendeshita*, whose usage distinctions are also not well known. This topic will be treated in more detail in section 2.

1.2 Tense in English vs Japanese

In English, verbs are typically described as having past, present and future tenses. In Japanese, there are only two tenses, known as the ta-form and the ru-form, so called because of their most common endings. The ta-form *gozaimashita* actually does end in -ta, while *gozaimasu* and *sumimasen* are examples of the ru-form even though they do not end in -ru.

The properties of the ta- and ru-forms have been thoroughly described by Jacobsen [1]. The most salient point is that Japanese has no future tense; the ru-form is used for both present and future. For verbs indicating an unchanging state, the present is assumed unless other information is available; for verbs indicating events or actions, the base assumption is the future. There are also any number of minor differences relating to the ordering of events in sub-clauses. [1] However, none of these serve to shed any light on the difference between *arigatou gozaimasu* and *arigatou gozaimashita*.

There are a lot of books which use the expressions *ta-form* and *ru-form* rather than *present* and *past*, presumably because their meanings are different to the point where using the latter can be misleading. However, given that those differences do not appear to be relevant to this study, and that most of the present-tense verbs we will be working with do not end in -ru, we choose to use the expressions *present tense* and *past tense* from now on.

2 Previous work

Despite having no clear answer, the question of when to use the present or past tense of *arigatou gozaimasu* has attracted very little attention from linguists. Fortunately, though, this phrase is not the only set phrase to exhibit this behaviour. For example, we can make use of research on the afore-mentioned *sumimasen*, its more polite cousin *moushiwake arimasen*, and *omedetou gozaimasu* ("con-gratulations") to generate hypotheses for our study. However, we must note that the notion that the same rules govern all tense-changing set phrases is under dispute among the few researchers who have written on the topic. Some treat all of them in one go [6, 5], whereas others choose to divide them into separate groups [8], or treat only one specific phrase [7]. In the following, we will attempt to organize these various opinions by whatever reason for the tense change of *arigatou gozaimasu* specifically they support.

2.1 When did the hearer put themselves to trouble on behalf of the speaker?

The first thing one generally thinks of in relation to tense is that it is somehow related to time. Since the point of time when the speaker is feeling grateful obviously has to include the time of speech (otherwise the phrase would not be spoken), the event which the tense relates to would be the action one is grateful for.

This is the explanation espoused by Xu [8]. Although he divides the expressions into small groups and comes to slightly different conclusions about them, all of them relate to the time of action. For example, he believes that the expressions *arigatou gozaimasu*, *sumimasen*, and *moushiwake arimasen* are governed primarily by the time when the thing to be grateful or sorry for occurred, but that the present tense is used in some cases to emphasize that the speaker is still grateful or sorry [8, pp. 34-35]. By contrast, he thinks that *omedetou gozaimasu* tends to be in the present tense because the good luck is still current, as for example when congratulating somebody on getting married. Some phrases, like *akemashite omedetou gozaimasu* ("Happy new year"), are used so frequently that they no longer

change form. The past tense can be used only for one-time events, such as winning a race. [8, pp. 38-40]

This idea is supported by the literal meaning of *arigatou gozaimasu/gozaimashita*, which we determined in section 1.1 to be roughly "so excellent as to be rare". Incidentally, *omedetou gozaimasu* is related to the word *medetai*(happy, joyful, auspicious) and consequently means something along the lines of "this is happy / joyful". This also meshes well with Xu's conclusions.

2.2   Is the speaker trying to make the thing he is grateful for a thing of the past?

Another possibility is that the use of the past tense indicates a desire to force the action causing the thanks into the past or to conclude the conversation. This is the opinion of Tsunoda [6], who tells a story of a non-Japanese bridegroom who in his wedding speech mistakenly used *arigatou gozaimashita*, whereupon the organizer had to assure the Japanese guests that the wedding was not in fact over.

The author of the only actual study specifically about *arigatou gozaimasu* and *arigatou gozaimashita*, Watabe [7], comes to a similar conclusion. She looked at the usage of these phrases in the *Corpus of Spontaneous Japanese(CSJ)* and in television variety programs and found that the past tense tends to be used when trying to force a conversation to a close.

Watabe's conclusion is unknowingly echoed in Kimura's work on the various functions of *sumimasen* [3, pp. 287-288]. Kimura identifies five distinct functions of *sumimasen*: to request something, to get somebody's attention, to bring a conversation to an end, to apologize, and to express thanks. Although she does not point it out directly, it is notable that in her example for the third function - bringing a conversation to an end - the past tense *sumimasendeshita* appears instead of the present tense [3, p. 283].

Kimura also provides an overview of the etymology of *sumimasen*. [3, pp. 287-288] According to her there are two different ways of writing *sumu*, whose negative form is *sumimasen*. The first is 済む, which means "to finish". The second is 澄む, with the meaning "to be clear (e.g. water)". She believes that especially the second version shows a connection between the word and the sense of indebtedness which it signifies, although we would argue that "not finished" is just as effective in this regard - if you are in debt to a person then the interaction is not over and done with.

Whichever kanji you pick, though, this etymology does fit nicely with the theory that the past tense is intended to convey that the issue is settled. *Sumimasen* would mean either "not finished" or "(my mind) is not clear", whereas *sumimasendeshita* means "(it) wasn't finished" or "(my mind) wasn't clear". In the past tense, it is impossible not to hear an implied "but now it is".

2.3   Is the past tense more polite or emphatic?

A final possibility is that the different tenses have different levels of politeness or emphasis. Although the two concepts are not technically the same thing, they are somewhat difficult to disentangle because a desire to be polite may very well cause the speaker to exaggerate their feelings of gratefulness. Consequently, we will treat both of these together.

A scholar espousing this view is Yoshiyuki Morita [5]. He states that there are situations where ordinary sentences can be used in both the present and the past tense and still fundamentally mean the same thing. In this case, he believes the difference to be that the past tense gives a little more weight to the statement; it makes the sentence sound more final. From this, he argues that for example *arigatou gozaimashita* sounds as if the speaker were particularly communicating his conviction that he is indeed grateful to the hearer. In Morita's opinion, this would also serve to explain why some

particular expressions, such as *akemashite omedetou gozaimasu*("Happy new year"), do not have a past tense even though *omedetou gozaimasu* in general does: since the blessing is shared by both the speaker and the hearer, there is no need for two levels of conviction.

The idea that the past tense is more polite is at least partially supported by a study relating to *sumimasen* done by Kato of native speakers of Japanese doing role-plays [2, pp. 141-146]. It shows that 42% of the study subjects used a combination of past and present tense while apologizing, while the rest used the present tense only. It appears that nobody used the past tense exclusively. Although technically the study was about any and all expressions of apology, in practice, *sumimasen* and *sumimasendeshita* were by a large margin the most commonly used.

A point of particular importance is that none of the subjects used past tense in their first expression of apology. Only 5 out of the 32 subjects who used the past tense at all went back to present tense after using the past tense, indicating that the past tense is used to signal the end of one's apology. Generally, the past tense was only uttered once or twice per person who used it. Kato suggests that "the past tense of apology could be tinged with more politeness than the present tense, because when most apologisers used the past tense, it was after the interlocutor had accepted the apology" [2, p. 144]. However, it must be noted that this explanation is rather more complicated than simply "the past tense is more polite". It also lacks an explanation of why some subjects returned to the present tense after first switching to the past tense. Further, we observe that this pattern of starting out with the present tense and finishing off with the past tense also lends support to the theory that the past tense is meant to conclude the topic.

3   Method and data

The data used in this study are taken from the minutes of the Diet of Japan, maintained by the National Diet Library (NDL). The minutes consist of exact transcriptions of each meeting, including associated information about the date, speakers, and various other data. Unlike an ordinary conversation, meetings consist of a succession of longer speeches averaging about 9 sentences; it is rare for a speech to have only one sentence. The record of each speech also contains a certain amount of associated data, in particular the name of the speaker.

The NDL's server allows for automated download of the material in a computer-friendly format. When searching for a term - in our case "ありがとう" (*arigatou*) - it is possible to get either a record for the entire meeting in which the search term occurred, or just a list of the specific speeches in which it appears. Therefore, it is possible to obtain a great deal of context for each act of thanking. At the same time, the collection of material is enormous - there are nearly 300 000 speeches in which this search term appears at least once.

Since the material is eminently suitable for both qualitative and quantitative studies, we get to make a choice. In this case, we choose volume over depth. One reason is that the difficult nature of the language and context is more readily analyzed by a native speaker; another is that the more data points we have the less likely our results are to be an artefact of a non-representative sample.

For this study we choose to analyze two sets of speeches, which consist of all speeches in which the search term "ありがとう" occurs, between two particular dates. We feel justified in searching only for the hiragana spelling because the kanji version "有り難う" returns an insignificant 18 hits in the entire database.

The first dataset, hereafter called **recent**, consists of the 5000 most recent speeches at the time of the study. The dates range from 2020-11-26 to 2021-04-08. Since some speeches contain more than one instance of the term, this translates into 5576 separate instances. The second dataset, which we

will call **old**, consists of 5000 equivalent speeches from between 1972-05-16 and 1975-12-27, which contain the search term a total of 5191 times.

These two datasets provide an excellent basis for our particular research question because the language used in these meetings is extremely formal and *gozaimasu* and *gozaimashita* are virtually never omitted in formal speech. Nevertheless, both datasets do technically contain a small number of unaccompanied *arigatou*. In the case of the **recent** dataset, they are found exclusively in the context of talking about thanking somebody and are never used as an expression of thanks. An example would be the name of the project *#hirogare arigatou no wa*(”#Open the circle of thanks”), which appears to involve thanking Japan's medical professionals for their efforts during the corona pandemic on social media. The **old** dataset does seem to have a small number of *arigatou* which appear on their own as thanking phrases, but since they number less than 40 in a set of over 5000 we feel justified in ignoring their existence, not least because we cannot be sure that they are not the product of a typing error. As a consequence of this, we can from now on use *arigatou* as a cover term for *arigatou gozaimasu* and *arigatou gozaimashita*.

Further, we believe the two datasets to be comparable enough to be used to contrast the thanking behaviour in the 1970s and today, since the speakers will be elected politicians or expert witnesses doing much the same kind of work at both times. One important difference is that the **old** set is drawn from a time span about 6 times as big as the one which the **recent** set comes from. In terms of speeches, the **old** time span has 12 times as many as the **recent** one. This implies that speakers now use some form of *arigatou* about 12 times more frequently than they used to. This is a potentially important factor to consider because it means that the actions somebody is being thanked for may no longer be quite comparable.

Further, the **old** dataset suffers somewhat from misspelled words(e.g. *arigatou gosaimashita*), which probably has the side effect of some instances of *arigatou* not being included in the dataset because the search term itself was misspelled. This problem is notably absent in the **recent** dataset. However, the issue is so minor that it is highly unlikely to affect the results in any way, unless the stenographers had been making an unfortunate habit of leaving out social lubricants like thanking phrases in order to have time to record the more important material.

4 Results

In the **old** dataset, only about 11% of the occurrences are in the present tense, whereas in the **recent** dataset, the present tense accounts for fully 61%. This makes it immediately obvious that a quite substantial shift in usage has taken place in the intervening 50 years.

To investigate the precise nature of this shift, we choose to make use of the fact that instances of *arigatou* are very largely concentrated to the first and last sentences of the speeches in which they appear. As shown in table 1, only 23% and 16% respectively of *arigatou* are found in middle sentences. This difference is actually larger than it seems because the average number of sentences in a speech is 9, which means that there are 7 times more middle sentences than either first or last sentences. We also observe that the share of first sentences has increased, which implies that a lot of the total increase in the use of *arigatou* consists of first sentences.

We can tell from the results in table 2 that there are different rules involved in first and last sentences. While this is a little less obvious in the case of the **old** dataset, it is very apparent in the **recent** one, since 86% of last sentences involve *gozaimashita*, while first sentences are majority-*gozaimasu* with 75% being in the present tense. From the same table we can also see that the aforementioned shift

	Old	Recent
first	47	60
middle	23	16
last	29	22

Table 1: The distribution of *arigatou* over first, last and middle sentences. The percentages do not quite add up to 100% because of rounding errors.

	Old		Recent	
	gozaimasu	*gozaimashita*	*gozaimasu*	*gozaimashita*
first	10	88	75	24
middle	23	71	71	26
last	2	97	13	86

Table 2: The percentages of present and past tense in first, middle and last sentences. They do not quite add up to 100% because of rounding errors.

in usage is driven largely by a change in tense in first sentences. A similar shift can also be observed in middle sentences. In the following, we will analyze varying portions of the data to find the reason or reasons for these shifts.

4.1 The curious case of *zonjimasu*

There is one very remarkable fact about the **old** dataset (although it is only tangentially related to the question of tense), which is the existence of *zonjimasu* and *zonjimashita* as alternatives to *gozaimasu* and *gozaimashita*. We found this out by chance while trying to figure out why there seemed to be an unreasonable number of unaccompanied *arigatou* in the **old** dataset.

In point of fact, there are not very many instances of this word. In the **old** dataset, *zonjimasu* appears 25 times and *zonjimashita* 13 times. Neither is present in the **recent** dataset. This is not owing to any unfortunate selection of data for our datasets: *arigatou zonjimasu* appears 237 times in the entire set of minutes, while *arigatou zonjimashita* is found 253 times. The most recent appearance of either one was in 2009.

Zonjimashita is in and of itself very infrequently used. It is found only 1012 times in total (the most recent appearance being in 2019), meaning that a full quarter of all uses must be related to *arigatou*. The present tense *zonjimasu*, on the other hand, is an extremely common word and used in many other contexts. We note here that replacing *gozaimasu* with *zonjimasu*, as far as set phrases are concerned, appears to work only in the case of *arigatou*. It is not possible to say, for example, *omedetou zonjimasu*.

Although *arigatou zonjimasu* and *arigatou zonjimashita* are perfect examples of the phenomenon we set out to investigate, there are far too few instances of them to get any worthwhile results. However, the fact that they appear to have fallen out of use is itself an interesting result, because *zonjimasu* is sufficiently ingrained into the language to appear as a usage instruction in the *Su-pa-daijirin* along with *gozaimasu*.

4.2 Past tense as an ending marker

As seen in table 2, instances of *arigatou* found in last sentences are overwhelmingly in the past tense in both data sets. Last sentences, by definition, conclude at least one's own speech, if not the meeting.

Consequently, the past tense being used here supports the theory that it is meant to signal the end of something - although we do not know whether that something is the speech, the meeting, or something else altogether. Without knowing what exactly the speakers are picturing, we also cannot exclude the possiblity that the past tense is used here to signal that the hearers put in effort on behalf of the speaker before the thanks was spoken, for example by listening to the speech.

However, it turns out that quite a number of speakers do mention more explicitly that they are ending something. Therefore we attempted to filter out all instances where thanks were accompanied by some kind of explicit ending marker. The simplest of these are *owarimasu*("(I) conclude/finish") and *shuuryou shimasu*("(I) put an end to (it)"), but there are endless variations on both. Examples range from *shuuryou to sasete itadakimasu* ("(I) allow myself to put an end to (it)") to *owarasete itadakitai to iu fuu ni omoimasu* ("I am thinking along the lines that I would like to allow myself to conclude (this)"). Of particular interest in this context are those ending markers which make explicit reference to time, such as *jikan to narimashita node oetai to omoimasu* ("Since it is time, I think I would like to conclude") or *jikan desu node, mata gogo ni tsuzuki wo sasete itadakimasu* ("Since it is time, I will allow myself to continue this afternoon"). These indicate that at least some proportion of these ending phrases are used to force the meeting to an end, rather than to simply signal that one is finished speaking.

It turns out that a substantial number of last-sentence *arigatou* are accompanied by explicit ending markers. For the **old** dataset, these amount to 44% of all such instances, while for the **recent** dataset, they comprise 61%. In both cases, the percentage of *gozaimashita* is even higher than for last sentences in general (99% for **old** and 90% for **recent**, compared to 97% and 86% respectively). From this, we can safely conclude that the use of the past tense is strongly related to concluding an interaction, though it is not really possible to distinguish between the theory that the past tense is used to thank for something in the past (e.g. attention) and the theory that it is used to force a conversation to an end (because time is up).

It must be admitted that this is a somewhat roundabout way of approaching this question. A much less error-prone method than guessing what is being ended from the previous sentence would be to make use of the transcripts of the entire meetings and distinguish between thanks in the last speech of a meeting and any others. Unfortunately, the subset of data we used did not include information about the number of speeches for each meeting, although it should certainly be possible to download it from the NDL's webpage. However, given that there is such an overwhelming proportion of *gozaimashita* as it is, this might not show any great differences in result.

4.3   Tense and politeness/emphasis

By far the most accurate method to find out how polite or emphatic a particular expression is can be said to be asking a large number of native speakers how they perceive it. However, in order to reach an acceptable level of accuracy, you would need answers from a sufficiently large and diverse group, which in practice is difficult to achieve. Therefore, we will attempt to answer this question by looking at how tense correlates with other features of thanks known to be polite or emphatic.

Among these are reinforcing expressions such as *doumo*, as in *doumo arigatou gozaimasu*("Thank you very much"). Other words which can appear in place of *doumo* are *taihen*("very much"), *makotoni*("sincerely"), or *hontouni*("really"). We find that *gozaimashita* is indeed a little more common in situations where these reinforcers are used. In the **old** dataset, 95% of the 1245 instances used the past tense versus 89% in the dataset as a whole. For the **recent** dataset, which contains only 473 such instances, the numbers are 50% versus 39%.

Another way of emphasizing one's thanks is to say them more than once, possibly in a different way. Here, too, we notice a decided difference between the two datasets. In the **old** dataset, there are 208 instances of the expression *orei wo moushiagemasu*("(I) (humbly) give thanks") immediately following some use of *arigatou*. Of these 93% were of type *gozaimashita*. In the **recent** dataset, there was only one use of *orei wo moushiagemasu*, or at the very least only one which followed a use of *arigatou*. Unfortunately we cannot conclude very much from this with regard to tense on account of the small numbers, but we can say that the tendency to use double thanking has decreased.

As mentioned previously, both datasets contain somewhat more instances of *arigatou* than they do speeches - meaning that some speeches must contain more than one instance - and wonder if these are not also instances of double thanking. We have looked at some of these instances and come to the conclusion that first, it is far too difficult to check whether the two instances of thanks actually refer to the same event, and secondly, that in the case where we have made such a check it does not seem that they actually do so. This means that they are not instances of double thanking and consequently of no relevance to the subject we are studying.

We will illustrate this point with an example which we believe to be fairly representative, especially with regard to the fact that the first occurrence of *arigatou* appears in the first sentence and the other one in the last, with non-thanking-related sentences in between.

> *Arigatou gozaimasu. Tabun, tantou no kata mo kiite irassharu to omou no de, nanikashira riakushon ga aru kamoshiremasen. Ijou ni narimasu. Arigatou gozaimashita.*

> "Thank you. Probably, since I think the person in charge is also listening, there may be a reaction. That is all. Thank you."

The context here is that the speaker had been given the opportunity to ask some questions from a witness, who just attempted to answer it. We can guess, therefore, that the first act of thanking is intended for the witness's most recent answer, and the second one either for all the answers or for the opportunity to ask questions. We can see by this example both that it is difficult to pinpoint from the context what the thanking was intended for, and that most likely they are two different things.

4.4 Interpersonal variation

Now that we have made various tests to determine the accuracy or otherwise of the hypotheses found in the literature, we come to one suggested by the data itself. This hypothesis is that there is a considerable element of personal preference in the choice of tense. To investigate this, we looked at the utterances of the 198 speakers who used some form of *arigatou* at least 10 times in the **recent** dataset. We found that 149 speakers preferred *gozaimasu* (which is to say they used it more than half the time) and 49 preferred *gozaimashita*. Both groups used their preferred tense 72% of the time. If it were the case that the choice of tense is driven entirely by situational factors, we would expect all speakers to use *gozaimasu* 61% of the time (assuming that all speakers speak under the same circumstances). Instead, we see that speakers predominantly select their favoured expression.

A similar pattern can be seen in the **old** dataset, where there were 7 speakers preferring *gozaimasu*, which they used on average 57% of the time, while the remaining 141 speakers used *gozaimashita* on average 89% of the time. This is shown in table 3. As mentioned above, the average percentage of *gozaimasu* in the **old** dataset is about 11%.

This alone does not, of course, tell us very much, because there is the possibility that some speakers use *arigatou* more in first sentences and others more in last ones, which we already know follow

	Old		Recent	
	gozaimasu	*gozaimashita*	*gozaimasu*	*gozaimashita*
all	7/57%	141/89%	149/72%	49/72%
first	2/71%	67/93%	102/86%	22/76%
owarimasu	0	28/99%	4/71%	45/95%

Table 3: The number of individuals to favour this tense in this data subset / the average percentage of instances they used their favoured tense.

different patterns. Therefore, we repeated the experiment twice, once using all first sentences and once using the set of all last sentences preceded by *owarimasu* which we made use of in section 4.2. Since the number of speakers in the last group was small, we chose to study all speakers who used *arigatou* at least 5 times, rather than 10. These results are also shown in table 3.

The most important point about these results is how strongly attached speakers are to their preferred tense. We can contrast the results in table 3 with the average for all instances shown in table 2. We can see that in the **old** dataset, the vast majority of all speakers very strongly prefer the past tense, and there are just a few individuals who predominantly use the present tense. The speakers using *gozaimasu* in first sentences in the **old** dataset are also by some margin the group who seem most uncertain about their choice.

By 2021, however, by far the majority of all speakers prefer *gozaimasu*. In contrast to the **old** dataset, both groups prefer their favoured tense similarily strongly. This could be explained either by a general and gradual shift in usage or by increased polarization, where some parts of society learn to use the present tense and some the past tense. It is unfortunate in this context that the database does not include demographic information about the speakers.

One more thing which is driven home strongly by these results is the fact that the **owarimasu** subset is special. Not only is it the only set where no shift towards *gozaimasu* has (yet) taken place, but among all the speaker groups in the **recent** dataset, the ones using *gozaimashita* here are by far the most consistent, with their utterances being 95% past tense.

4.5 What can we say about middle sentences?

So far we have made no use at all of the *arigatou* which are not found in first or last sentences. The reason for this is that it is very difficult to find criteria for classifying any substantial number of them. However, there is one small group of middle sentences which is fairly distinctive: the group of *arigatou* immediately preceded by an introduction. A representative example would be *(speaker's name) de gozaimasu. Kyou wa, shitsumon no kikai wo itadakimashite, arigatou gozaimasu.* ("I'm (speaker's name). Thank you for the opportunity for questions today."). The total of number of instances is small (367 in the **recent** dataset and 133 in the **old** one), but the subset is quite interesting because an introduction is a very good indication that we are seeing the very beginning of an interaction here. Unlike most other cases, it is also evident here what somebody is being thanked for: the opportunity for the interaction. In this group, about 74% are *gozaimasu* in the **recent** dataset and about 31% in the **old** one. We note that this is a rather large percentage for coming from the **old** dataset.

5   Analysis

In the previous section, we made a number of interesting but disparate discoveries. What remains to be done is to try to fit these together to form a unified result. To begin with, let us re-iterate that we have found incontrovertible evidence of a substantial shift from *gozaimashita* to *gozaimasu*. 50 years ago, *gozaimashita* was the de facto default, whereas now *gozaimasu* accounts for nearly two thirds of all instances.

We use the term *default* advisedly, because it gives us an interesting new perspective on some of the papers presented above. Xu's [8] opinion that the present tense is used to emphasise that the speaker is still grateful implies that the past tense is the default. This is what we would expect to be the case if it is true that tense is governed primarily by the time when the action one is grateful for happened. Morita's [5] idea that the past tense carries more emphasis, on the other hand, implies that the present tense is the default. Despite contradicting each other, these two implications both contrive to be at odds with our data. Xu's article is from 2009, which is considerably closer to the **recent** than the **old** dataset. Morita's work is from 1988, which is closer in time to the **old** dataset.

We could resolve the contradiction in Xu's case by positing that Diet members spend a disproportionate amount of time thanking each other for things which have not yet occurred, compared to the population at large. By Xu's theory, such thanks ought to be in the present tense regardless of emphasis. However, this is not quite consistent with the only data subset we have where we can confirm that the object of thanks has not yet occurred: the introduction subset we used in section 4.5. Even in the most relevant **recent** dataset, the proportion of present tense instances was only 74%, which is a majority but hardly an overwhelming one. In the **old** dataset, the present tense made up only 31%. If there is any truth to Xu's theory, then, it would appear that it only became valid recently, and then not completely.

As regards Morita, it is not really possible to reconcile the idea of the past tense being particularly emphatic with the past tense being the default, so it is easy to dismiss this theory out of hand. However, we did find a significant relationship between the use of the past tense and the appearance of reinforcing expressions. It is possible, therefore, that Morita was right and the large amount of *gozaimashita* in our data sets is somehow peculiar to Diet sessions, which are characterized by extremely formal language. If so, it would be instructive, though difficult, to investigate whether this still holds in the **recent** dataset, which is characterized by much fewer *gozaimashita* and reinforcing expressions but on the other hand by many more *arigatou* in general.

One thing we definitely can confirm is Watabe's results regarding the relationship between the past tense and a desire to end a conversation. The clear difference we can see in the tense split of the **owarimasu** subsets in both the **old** and **recent** sets - despite the past tense being extremely common in the **old** dataset - shows both that there is a special rule for this type of situation, and that its effect is that speakers choose the past tense.

It is worth repeating here what we have already mentioned, which is that Kato's results regarding *sumimasen* can also be taken as support for this theory. Incidentally, we do not believe Morita's opinion to be entirely incompatible with it either, in the sense that a firm conviction of something and a desire to end a topic both have the result of obviating further discussion.

By the way, the **old** dataset contains a quote which makes clear that the speaker himself understands the act of thanking as an ending marker. The following is a response to the preceding speaker concluding his speech with *arigatou gozaimashita*:

> *Iya, arigatou to ittatte, mada owatta wake ja nai.*

"Well, even if (you) say thanks, (we're) not done yet."

However, the **owarimasu** subsets are only a small part of the entire datasets. More generally, our results show that there is a significant element of personal preference in the choice between present and past tense. The reasons for this are not clear. Unfortunately, the database does not contain any kind of demographic about the speakers, such as their age, sex, or geographical or social origin, although these should be technically obtainable, the speakers being public figures. However, given that an obvious shift has taken place in the last 50 years, a probable relevant factor is age. Possibly, the falling out of use of *zonjimasu* and *orei wo moushiagemasu* can be explained in the like manner.

6 Conclusion

We started out by observing that this question has barely been researched. When we did so ourselves, deliberately choosing quantitative methods and large datasets over qualitative methods with a restricted amount of data, we found evidence of the tense being influenced by factors relating both to the immediate context and to the speakers involved. Further, we found that both the amount of *arigatou* and the choice of tense has changed significantly over the past 50 years. In a way, therefore, the main finding of our study is this: there are so many factors at play here that large datasets are an absolute necessity to avoid spurious results as a consequence of an unfortunate selection of samples. It would be well to be sceptical of any results from very small studies, unless the subset they apply to is very well defined indeed. In this context, it is somewhat concerning that none of the papers we have cited make the faintest reference to the the demographics of their subjects.

Given that we have in no way exhausted this topic or the various similar questions it is related to, it seems fitting to conclude by giving an overview of the things still left to be done. One of them, as we have already mentioned, involves completing the speaker information in this dataset with demographic information. That way, we would be able to confirm or disconfirm to some extent the notion that the changes we have observed are part of a general linguistic trend. A competing explanation which can be examined at the same time is that these changes are down to a difference in composition between the Diet in the 1970s and today. This is also quite a reasonable theory, since the members of the Diet are elected democratically and public opinion on what kind of individuals to elect is subject to change.

Another interesting approach would be to do an in-depth context analysis in order to find other ways of classifying instances. In our case, we were only able to analyze a small portion of the last and middle sentences in our data sets. Since there is obviously at least some connection between the context and the tense, this work might produce some very interesting results. However, doing it so thoroughly that a computer can make the classification (which is necessary if we are to get a sufficiently large sample size) may be quite difficult.

Still another thing one could do would be to make use of a data set from further in the past. Although records exist for the Diet of Japan only from 1947 onwards - given that the Diet itself is no older than that - the NDL also maintains records of the Imperial Diet as far back as 1890, although we do not know how far these records can be used for the same purpose.

Finally, given how rich and easily worked the Diet records are, there is ample possibility to use them to research related questions about tense-changing set phrases in general. There are a substantial number of such phrases which appear reasonably frequently in the material, such as *sumimasen/sumimasendeshita*, *moushiwake arimasen/arimasendeshita*, *omedetou gozaimasu/gozaimashita*, or *shitsurei shimasu/shimashita* (various meanings: "excuse me", "thanks for having me", and so on).

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Of particular interest is the first of these, which, as we have mentioned before, is partly interchangeable with *arigatou gozaimasu*.

Quite apart from the fact that it may be possible for results from *sumimasen* to be transferred to *arigatou* directly, it may be worth investigating whether the 12-fold increase of *arigatou* is, for example, associated with a similar decrease in *sumimasen* or other expression. Further, given the potential relationship between tense and politeness or emphasis, looking for other types of reinforcing expressions might return interesting results, especially considering the fact that the commonly known ones we investigated seem to be on the way out.

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