

Usage Change of “Kamoshirenai (kamo)” (May/Might) in Japanese and Its Modality Function

-From the Point of View of Pragmatics-

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0. Introduction

This paper analyzes Japanese epistemic modality “kamoshirenai (kamo)” (may/might) from the point of view of pragmatics. In Japanese there are many expressions which are obstacles to communication. “Kamoshirenai (kamo)” is one of them. Depending on age, the expression can be either acceptable or not acceptable. According to *The Iwanami National Language Dictionary* vol.7, “kamo” is defined as “to express emotion that possibly happens”. Another national language dictionary *Kojien* vol.7 defines “kamoshirenai” as “not sure of the possibility”. Both of them defined it to express predictability/possibility or conjecture. Therefore, a format that dare not to assert cannot be used as seen in (1).

Context: After the speaker eats or drinks something,

(1) “Kore suki kamo.” (I may might like it.)

When (1) is understood as predictability/possibility or conjecture, the speaker is not sure of his/her feeling of likeness. However, a written questionnaire survey of 157 college students from 18 to 25 years of age I conducted in 2018 showed 56 students use (1) after they eat or drink something. 29 students use it when they like what they eat, 12 students when they are not sure if they like it or not and 1 student use it when he doesn't like it.

Such spoken expressions are often used among the younger generation. In this paper I point out that the modality of “kamoshirenai (kamo)” as shown in (1) is not used as its original meaning; predictability/possibility or conjecture, the usage and meaning have been changing, and consider its modality functions.

1. Previous Research and This Paper's Position

First this section clarifies targeted “kamoshirenai” in this paper and second, takes a general view of previous research, Kunisawa (2013)⁸.

The most known modality classification is “epistemic” and “root”. Generally epistemic conveys or supposes a possibility of whole matter (or material/proposition) (Sawada 2018: 19)¹¹.

In this paper “kamoshirenai (kamo)” used in (1) is positioned as epistemic. And verifies in what meaning a speaker uses it and how a listener grabs the meaning when “kamoshirenai (kamo)” is not used as the original meaning; predictability/possibility or conjecture.

“Kamoshirenai” tends to be regarded as “euphemistic expression” in Japanese language education (Hirata (2001)³, Aso (2002)¹ and Kou (2006)⁷. Yamaoka Et al. (2010)¹² use the term “consideration expression” instead of “euphemistic expression”; linguistic representation which is used with consideration for good interpersonal relationship, Jinnai (2006)⁵, Horio (2004)⁴ and Murata (1994)¹⁰ use the term “blurring expression”, Kekidze (2003) ⁶uses the term “softening expression” which is used to allow the speaker to assert themselves while when avoiding strong expressions.

1.1. Consideration Expression

Yamaoka (2010)¹² examines “kamoshirenai” based on the concept of positive face; the desired to be liked, appreciated, approved, etc., negative face; the desire not to be imposed upon, intruded, or otherwise put upon, and the acts which have potential threat to those desires called FTA (face threatening act) proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987)². “Kamoshirenai” is roughly divided into the following; judgement of possibility usage as seen in (2) and interpersonal consideration usage as seen in (3). The latter is derived from politeness functions (Yamaoka 2016: 6)¹⁴.

(2) Ashita wa ame ga furu kamoshirenai. (It may/might rain tomorrow)

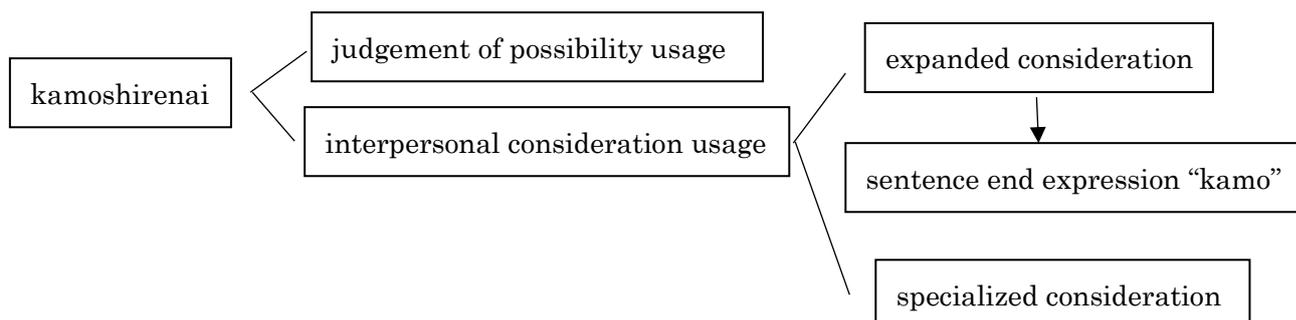
(Yamaoka 2016: 6)¹⁴

Context: Criticizing an opponent

(3) Kimi no setsumei sukoshi wakarunikui kamoshirenai.

(Your explanation may/might be little difficult to understand.)

(Yamaoka 2010: 5)¹²



Yamaoka (2015: 318)¹³ defines consideration expression as “linguistic representation which is used above a certain habituation with consideration to the maintenance of good personal relationship on interpersonal communication”.

Interpersonal consideration usages are expanded consideration and specialized consideration. Expanded consideration is the original meaning (judgement of possibility) expanded to consideration as a result of habituation. Expanded consideration usage as seen in (4) and (5) is subjective expression to avoid assertion. It can reduce the risk of conflict of opinions by deliberating argument as in (4) and soften FTA like warning as in (5). It is often used as politeness.

(4) Kokono ramen, sugoku oishii kamoshirenai. «assertion»

(This restaurant’s ramen noodle may / might be very good.)

(Yamaoka 2016: 6) ¹⁴

(5) Gomen. Kimino iyahon no oto, ookii kamoshirenai. «warning»

(Excuse me, but your earbuds may / might be too loud.)

(Yamaoka 2016: 6) ¹⁴

“kamo” works as politeness function by sugarcoating assertion (4) and warning (5). In (4) the speaker assert his/her opinion hesitantly consider the listener. In (5) the speaker sugarcoats the warning to avoid hurting the listener’s feelings. Among younger speakers the contracted form “kamo” is often used (Yamaoka 2010: 206)¹².

Japanese “kamoshirenai” can be appear in the middle of the sentence or in the end. Yamaoka (2018: 4) positions “kamoshirenai” seen in (1), (2), (4) and (5) as sentence end expression.

1.2. Water Down

Kekidze (2013)⁶ states that there are two usage of “kamoshirenai”. One is the original meaning and another is to water down the expression. The original meaning expresses the judgement of “possibility”. See example (6).

(6) (Looking at the sky) Ame ga furu kamoshirenai kara, kasa wo motte ikinasai.
(It may /might rain, so take an umbrella with you.)

Kekidze (2013: 297)⁶

In (6) the speaker judges that “there is a possibility of rain” as looking at appearance of sky and express it with may/might. As seen in (1), “kamoshirenai” is not used as its original meaning. Is used to avoid strong expression even though a speaker is able to assert. Kekidze (2003) ⁶calls the use “softening expression” and defines as following. “Softening expression” is used to avoid strong expression even when the speaker is able to assert, the speaker dare to use it (Kekidze 2003: 293)⁶. (7) and (9) are nonassertive format examples of “water down”.

(7) Nandaka hayaokishita sei mo atte chotto nemutai kamo.

(I may/might be kind of sleepy because I woke up early.)

(www1.nyan.ne.jp/~rekone/kako/nikki11.htm)

(Kekidze 2003: 293)⁶

(8) Sorenishitemo kono hon wa yomiowaru made zuibun kakarimashita. Josho wa sutto iketakedo dai 1 sho de kanari tsukaretakamo.

(Still it took so long to finish reading this book. The introduction was easy but I may/might have gotten tired in the first chapter.)

(www11.u-page.so-net.ne.jp/db3/fuyuki02/dia11.htm)

(Kekidze 2003: 298)⁶

Since “sleepy” and “tired” mentioned above are speaker’s feelings, the speaker can assert them. Therefore the role of “kamoshirenai (kamo)” is watered down (Kekidze 2003: 288-29)⁶.

Based on the previous research, I propose the category of “kamoshirenai” as used differently from the original meaning. In this paper, when “kamoshirenai” is

used by the speaker to avoid strong expression even when the speaker is able to assert, the usage is expanded to consideration in interpersonal relationships and the format is the end of sentence expression as Yamaoka (2015)¹³ proposed.

1.3. Kunisawa (2013)⁸ “Oishiikamo” (May / Might Be Delicious) Acceptability Research

Kunisawa (2013)⁸ explains that sugarcoat expression is even though the proposition certainly valid for the speaker, the speaker choose to not assert. (10) is an example.

- (9) A: Kono keki oishiikana? (I wonder if this cake tastes delicious.)
 B1: (Before eating) Oishii kamoshirenai. (It may/might be delicious.)
 B2: ?? (After eating) Oishii kamoshirenai. (It may/might be delicious.)
 (Kunisawa 2013: 1)⁸

(9)-B1 is acceptable because the speaker hasn't taste the cake. Therefore, there is a possibility that the speaker say delicious or not delicious. (9)B2 is not acceptable because after the speaker has tasted the cake, the speaker can give one judgement. However, Kunisawa (2013)⁸ on 180 Japanese native speakers aged in their teens through their late sixties (30 people each per age decade) showed that the younger age groups tended to be more accepting of such usage. The actual question is (10) and table 1 is the result.

Context: A and B are eating the same food at a restaurant. A thought the food was delicious.

- (10) A: Kore oishii kamo (kamoshirenai). (This may/might be delicious.)

Table 1. Acceptability of “oishii kamo” after Eating Food (%)

	total	teens	twenties	thirties	forties	fifties	sixties
(10)	24.7%	41.7%	31.7%	28.3%	16.7%	15.0%	15.0%

(Kunisawa 2013: 1)⁸

The younger age groups tended to be more accepting of “kamoshirenai” such usage seen in (10). Kunisawa (2013)⁸ points out that when the speaker states the speaker's opinion or perception, the younger age groups tended to use this expression more because they consider the possibility of the listener's different

opinions or perceptions and leaves several possibilities. However, the speaker and listener's modality is not mentioned enough.

This paper focuses on the younger age groups who are tended to be more accepting of such usage and reveal how they used it, whether in meaning, context, intention and/or modality functions. It also points out they have been changing.

2. Hypothesis

“Kamoshirenai (kamo)” is used when the proposition is not certain, as predictability/possibility or conjecture. When the proposition is certain but it is used to show consideration, it is a consideration expression. As seen in (1), when the speaker says “like” after eating or drinking something, it is said that “kamoshirenai (kamo)” is cannot be used. However, a written questionnaire survey of 157 college students from 18 to 25 years of age I conducted in 2018 showed 56 students use (1) after they eat or drink something. 29 students use it when they like what they eat, 12 students when they are not sure if they like it or not and 1 student uses it when he doesn't like it (multiple answers allowed, shortage number is students who did not answer).

This paper proposes the following hypothesis: As seen in previous research the original meaning of “kamoshirenai (kamo)” is to express emotion that “possibly happens” and “not sure of the possibility”. However, they are not the only meanings.

“Kamoshirenai (kamo)” is used to avoid asserting and used as sugar coated way to soften expressions and is expected to be used more by women. Also, it is used as slang and does not have much meaning of the word. They use it just on the spur of the moment.

The following examines “kamoshirenai (kamo)” based on the hypothesis from the point of view of pragmatics.

3. Method / Questionnaire Survey

As seen in Kunisawa's (2013) ⁸research, the younger age groups tended to be more accepting of “Oishii kamo” (may/might be delicious) acceptability. The written questionnaire survey focuses on the younger age groups who are tended to be more accepting of such usage to reveal how they used it, whether in meaning, context, intention and/or modality functions. (See fig. 1)

The written questionnaire survey was conducted on 157 college students who were Japanese native speakers (male 99 and female 58) July, 2018.

4. Result and Discussion

On question Fig 1-3) Do you say “Kore suki kamo” (I may/might like it) after eating or drinking something? 56 students answered “Yes”. The percentage is 35.6%. The ratio of male and female is 24.2% and 55.1% (rounded to one decimal point). The ratio of female students is much higher than males, as expected.

On question Fig 1-4) if you say “Yes”, in what situation do you use it? 29 students use it when they like it, 12 students use it when they are not sure if they like it or not and 1 student uses it when he does not like it.

Students who use “kamo” when they like it, they use it to express “surprise/unexpectedness” and “scale”, to see “people’s reaction” and as a slang.

“surprise/unexpectedness”

- The food I ate for the first time is unexpectedly good
- The food I drink or eat for the first time is good
- When I eat food that I labeled it as not good, actually it is good but somewhere in my heart I don’t want to admit it.

“scale”

- It is good, alright but not very good
- There is feeling of like but not very strong
- Not sure if I like or not but tend to more like
- I like it but not enough to say that I like it very much

“people’s reaction”

- When I want to get others to agree with me
- When I’m embarrassed to say “like” suddenly or moderately seeking agreement
- When I am worried if others agree with my opinion
- When concerned about other people’s reaction
- When other people like it and I don’t
- When other people’s evaluation was “normal” or “not quite” but I think it is good

“slang”

- I use it just on the spur of the moment
- It is like a slang. I put “kamo” for the time being
- When it is delicious to liven up the atmosphere

As factors above, students who use “kamo” even when they are sure they like it. The answer “eat for the first time” is often seen. When eating some food and when it tastes good or it is better than the expectation, they use “kamo” to express “surprise” and “unexpectedness”. For example, after eating new rice ball product one would say “Kono onigiri meccha suki kamo” (I may/might like this rice ball very much). In this case the likeness is at the superlative degree. Therefore, this “kamo” is thought to be used for not expressing scale but surprise and unexpectedness.

“Kamo” also expresses scale. The scale has wide range of degree of likeness from like it but not quite very much, to when there is a choice between like and dislike it would be closer to like. There are individual differences.

Also, when the speaker chooses not to assert even when you can, it is same as asking the listener “Isn’t it good?” The speaker wants the listener to say “it is good” as well.

Another usage is when they want to see other people’s reaction. There are two cases, one if for themselves (the speakers) another is for other people (listeners). “kamo” is used when the speaker’s opinion is different from listeners. The speaker is considering other people reaction. The purpose of the use is for listeners not to have negative image of the speaker. It is like self defense. Contrary to this situation, the speaker also uses “kamo” for listeners. When the speaker has different opinion from others, the speaker use “kamo” to not to assert to not to make the listener uncomfortable.

Lastly, “kamo” tends to be used as slang and does not have much meaning of the word. It seem that it has effect having friendly feelings for each other. They use it to liven up atmosphere by sharing the same buzz term. They use it just on the spur of the moment. Some of the answer says “I use it before I notice”.

Students who answered “not sure” on question Fig 1-4) use “kamo” in the following situations.

- Not sure if I like it or not
- When I can’t judge right away
- When it is difficult to judge on the first bite, I would say it before the second bite
- When I have doubt my feelings
- When I can’t be certain
- When I guess that I will like it gradually as I continue eating it
- When there is a possibility that I will not like it anymore as I continue eating it

They use “kamo” as original modality (predictability/possibility or conjecture) when they hesitate to judge, guess their own feelings for the future or sure if they like it or not.

Students who answered “I don’t like it” on question Fig 1-4) use “kamo” on following situations.

- When I eat food that is recommend by a friend as delicious, I use it because I don’t want him to feel uncomfortable.

The speaker uses “suki kamo” (may/might like) even though he doesn’t like it because he is considering his friend’s feelings.

On question Fig 1-5) “Do you understand what it means even you do not use it?” 97 students answered “Yes” and 4 students said “No”. 96% of them do understand even though they do not use it. (When rounded to one decimal point)

The interpretation is asked in question Fig 1-6). On question Fig 1-6) “When do you think they use them?” to the students who said “Yes” on question Fig 1-5). Their answers are related to “predictability / possibility”, “surprise/unexpectedness”, “scale”, “people’s reaction” and as “slang”. The following is their written answers.

“predictability/possibility”

- Not sure of the taste because eat it for the first time
- When the speaker can’t assert
- When the speaker a question on my feelings
- When the speaker has no confidence in his/her sense of taste
- When the speaker can’t define clearly if he/she likes it or not on first bite
- When the speaker eat something for the first time and he/she likes the taste but not sure if he/she want to buy it again in the future
- When the buy the food for the first time. The first bite was good but he/she probably wouldn’t think it’s good if the amount is too much or when I get bored to the taste.

“surprise/unexpectedness”

- When the speaker thinks the food is good when he/she eat it for the first time
- Use it in regard to the food the speaker eat for the first time in my life
- When the food is better than the speaker expected
- When the taste good which is different from packaging image
- Better than the expectation

“scale”

- Neither good nor bad but rather good
- Does not 100% like it but it comes under the heading of like
- If the speaker had to say, he/she would have to say that he/she like it
- Doesn't mean like it very much but not dislike
- Relatively weak feeling of liking it
- Not the best but comes under the heading of like
- A little below like
- Like but the priority is low
- Like it but not like it very much
- There is no clear reason in why the speaker said he/she likes it but he/she thought it that way somewhat

“people's reaction”

- I think female tends to use it more because it soften the expression by not asserting. Also, since “kamo” can express possibility, she can change her opinion easily
- When the speaker doesn't like it but he/she can't clearly say that in front of people who like it
- To confirm one's self and others when the speaker's expectation is different from the result
- In front of people who say “really bad” while the speaker doesn't think so or it's edible, he/she would use “kamo” to equivocate
- When the speaker is aware of people's reaction
- Even when the speaker is sure but when he/she doesn't want to assert to avoid to be contradicted
- Adjust one's views to those of others
- When someone recommends it as good and can't say it's not good
- When the speaker wishes to use vague expressions to make an unclear statement by not asserting
- When people don't agree with the speaker
- When the speaker thinks it is pretty good while other people say “not really good”
- When someone recommends the food and asks “How is it?”
- A request for the consent
- Hesitate to say “like” as a first speaker
- Anxious for consent

“slang”.

- When girls want to increase the sense of unity with her own age group girlfriends. To share the same atmosphere or fashion by using the same slang.
- I think the speaker thinks it warm up or enliven the atmosphere without giving it much though
- I imagine that young people who are exquisitely sensitive to current fashions use that
- When the speaker feels he/she likes it

The above is written by students who do not say “Kore suki kamo” after eating or drinking something. They take “kamo” as predictability/possibility or conjecture as well as the students who actually say it. They have mutual understanding of express “surprise/unexpectedness” and scale. The scale is from high to low depends on individuals as seen in question Fig 1-4). It means not the highest level in common. On “people’s reaction”, the answers are in common. The listener understands that the speaker uses it to maintain harmony of people's opinions or actions by avoiding assertions. The listener understands that the speaker is trying to protect his/her self or not to hurt the listener’s feelings. Also, when the speaker says “Kore suki kamo”, the listener understand that the speaker is asking for the same opinion. Lastly, “kamo” is used as slang and doesn’t have much meaning of the word.

This paper verified in what meaning the speaker use epistemic modality “kamoshirenai (kamo)” and how the listener grab the meaning when it is not used as its original meaning; predictability/possibility or conjecture from the point of view of pragmatics. As a result it is revealed that “kamoshirenai (kamo)” is used to express “surprise/unexpectedness”. It has no sense of consideration as seen in previous research. It is a new a modality of it.

Used it to express “scale” is also a new modality. It shows that the way it is used has been changing.

The function to soften an FTA by avoiding assertion is seen in this research as well as in the previous one. Yamaoka (2018: 6)¹⁵ mentioned that controlling infringement to not to hurt other people’s feelings connect to approbation maxim/minimize dispraise to other in politeness principle proposed by Leech (1983)⁹. Also, he mentions that disagreement avoidance to protect own self is related to agreement maxim/minimize disagreement between self and other, and sympathy

maxim/minimize antipathy between self and other. For example, when the speaker thinks the food tastes good but the speaker is not sure if his/her friend feels the same, the speaker provides for his/her retreat. The purpose is to not be uncomfortable. It is self defense.

It is also revealed when the speaker courts the listener's approbation, the speaker uses “kamoshirenai (kamo)” to convey his/her opinion softly.

Lastly, it is used as slang. “kamoshirenai (kamo)” itself does not have meaning. It is used to increase the sense of unity with their own age group friends or/and to share the same atmosphere or current fashion by using the same slang. It seems to have a function to warm up or enliven the atmosphere.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined epistemic modality “kamoshirenai (kamo)” usage on the speaker and listener’s modality from the point of view of pragmatics. As a result it became clear that when “kamoshirenai (kamo)” is not used as its original meaning but used to avoid strong expression, even though the speaker is able to assert, the usage is expanded to consideration or even loses any meaning at all. The usage has been changing and new modality functions were born.

The original meaning of “kamoshirenai (kamo)”; predictability/possibility or conjecture has not gone totally but the usage has been changing. Leech (1983)⁹ gives a detailed explanation of convention and motivation on pragmatics. In modality and speech acts, there are some required questions; why the modality was uttered or why the action was done. Such reasoning which concerned with modality or speech act, it is called motivation. In pragmatics principle, a speaker intentionally chooses the expression in the context. The meaning is not conventional. But when the context is generalized the awareness of motivation becomes milder, and the pragmatic meaning becomes conventional.

Modality is a must for communication, like interpersonal relationships, which requires consideration for others. It is to avoid friction with others by using weak and indirect method (Sawada 2018: 10)¹¹. In modern Japanese language, assertion tends to be disliked, as are strong expressions, and sugarcoating expressions are often used. As in news media report that there are many of young people are “afraid to be hurt” in modern Japanese society. Such an interpersonal relationship mentality reflects in language performance as well (Kekidze 2003: 303)⁶.

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Fig.1

Research Date: July 11th 2018

1) Male · Female

2) Age

3) Do you say “Kore suki kamo” (I may/might like it) after eating or drinking something?

Yes → Go to question 4) · No → Go to question 5)

4) If you say “Yes”, In what situation do you use it?

5) If you say “No”, Do you understand what it means even you do not use it?

Yes → Go to question 6) · No

6) If you say “Yes”, When do you think they use it?