

Loss of face: An analysis of physical and social face overlap in Japanese

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Japanese social interaction and language are deeply rooted in social roles given to actors within the culture. When these roles are not fulfilled, a loss of “face” occurs and *kao wo tsubusu* (literally ‘to smash face’) may be used. The current study identifies the situations in which this expression is used. Based on the examination of the Japanese newspaper *The Yomiuri Shinbun* website’s *Hatsugen Komachi* advice pages, the use of *kao wo tsubusu* is not applied when speaking about oneself, but always to someone else. This use of the expression can be conceptualized by a distinction made between a 'relational' face (social roles and obligations) and an 'absolute face (identity and personal wants).

Out of the first 50 *Hatsugen Komachi* advice posts with *kao wo tsubusu*, the expression was observed in 54 situations. For each situation, the social and relational roles of the actors, what was at stake (circumstances), and whose face was smashed by the action of whom (agency) were analyzed. In all cases, smashing of face was related to the failure to carry out the cultural performance expected of certain social roles, broadly divided into social obligations expected in work and family environments and suggestions for work or a relationship. In taking on a role in Japanese society, a person takes on a mask given to them by cultural and social expectations and this mask is at stake in the circumstances examined. Role-related social face can be “transferred”, thus labeled as “relational face”. On the other hand, absolute face of individuals is not at stake. It is the face of the role they are playing through social convention that can be smashed when expectations fail to be met.