

# Contexts of the “Mottainai” Concept

Sylwia Maria Olejarz

Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw  
Faculty of Christian Philosophy  
Institute of Philosophy, Institute of Psychology

---

## Abstract

This article aims to analyze the Japanese concept of “Mottainai” and its possible new application.

*Keywords:* Mottainai, regret, Japan

---

## Introduction

Words in our daily life are basically used in order to: 1) describe 2) explain, 3) communicate reality, which surrounds us. However, the most intriguing is the performative role of language. Can words change reality? In this text I will consider this matter and I will try to answer to the above-mentioned question. The Reader will be led through the contextual “backwoods” of a peculiar word. Let me bring you closer to the Japanese concept of “Mottainai”.

### 1. The Meaning of “Mottainai”

The word “Mottainai” (もったいない, 勿体無い) is quite frequently used in Japanese language. Basically, it denotes a wide range of emotions, first of all, regret of wasting something which is still useful. According to Koujien, an authoritative Japanese dictionary, “Mottainai” means “squandering something, not making use of its value” (Koujien). This is a sort of regret, that something was not used properly, according to its intrinsic value. This word refers not only to things, but also non-material objects like time, relationships, feelings, efforts, career and other. By saying “Mottainai” Japanese people want to express their regret and disagreement on wasting of some “potentiality”.

The origin of “Mottainai” is rooted in Shinto tradition and is closely related to the Japanese concept of nature. We should not waste gifts of nature. Kawanisii explains it in the following way: “the idea that we are part of nature and should be in a very harmonious relationship with nature is very much a deep part of Japanese psychology” (Kawanisii).

The word “Mottainai” shows the uniqueness of spirit and depth of Japanese culture. It also reflects the extraordinary thinking way of Japanese people.

However, the concept of “Mottainai” started to be known also out of Japan. This happened thanks to Wanga-

ri Maathai (died on 25 September 2011), a Kenyan environmentalist, laureate of Nobel Peace Prize (2004). She learned this concept during the event related to Kyoto Protocols (2005) and impressed by its background she started to popularize the concept of “Mottainai” in her public presentations.

Thus, the word “Mottainai” started to be used in the context of environmental protection of various precious resources. People say “Mottainai”, when they see the waste or improper use of resources, for example food, water, but also other organic and non-organic materials.

The concept of “Mottainai” reveals a very special approach. A particular ethical “hint” (which can be translated as “don’t waste!” in English) is crystallized in this word. On the basis of this “hint”, a “Mottainai” movement emerged in Japanese culture. Let me acquaint you with this unique phenomenon.

### 2. “Mottainai Grandma”

The “career” of the word “Mottainai” in Japan is connected to the campaign called: <<Mottainai Grandma Reminds Japan: “Don’t Waste!”>> In this campaign Japanese refer to the image of Grandma, who in the easy and funny way teaches children, how to respect environment and stop wasting precious resources (food, water, wood, paper, etc.). In the book of Mariko Shinju, Grandma reminds the children:

“Leftover food on the plate. Last grains of rice stuck to the bowl.

She [Grandma] will come and say, “Mottainai!” “So much food left - mottainai!

May I eat?”

“Oh, you have more rice grains sticking to your face. Mottainai!”

And she licked my face all over...

“Let me lick more!”

splash splash Leaving the water running. She will come and say, "Mottainai!"

"One cup of water is enough! Don't Waste it - mottainai!"

When I throw away mandarin peels, she will come and say "Mottainai!" "Dry them in the sunshine. Put them in the bathtub. Mandarin peels will make you feel so good!" "A warm and sunny mandarin bath!"

(<http://mottainai.com/e/book/>)

The teaching of "Mottainai Grandma" is well known not only by children in Japan, but also in foreign countries. Another well known story is "Mottainai Obake" ("Mottainai Ghosts") that would haunt you at night, if you waste something.

The promotion of "Mottainai" activities is not only limited to children, but involves campaigns in entire Japanese society. For example, another famous action was the campaign "My-Hashi". The Japanese use a lot of disposable chopsticks (waste of wood). Thus, the campaign tried to encourage people to eat by one pair of personal chopsticks. Another thing is Furoshiki. Japanese Furoshiki (a square piece of cloth) is used for carrying things (for example shopping). The Japanese tried to replace plastic bags by Furoshiki.

The mentioned methods of application of the word "Mottainai" are connected to environment protection and sometimes compared to 3 R principles (reduce, reuse, recycle). This type of comparison is an example of stereotypical pigeonholing, because the concept of "Mottainai" is not a simple act of "reducing, reusing, recycling". 3R principles seem to be too "mechanical" and utilitarian, while "Mottainai" is a very subtle concept rooted in a long tradition of Japanese culture and is reach in a wide range of emotions. It involves both human heart (what does a person feel) and the sense of responsibility (what does a person rationally think; the sense of duty).

And here we have reached a very important point, which should be underlined. What emotions are enclosed in the concept of "Mottainai"? Let me take a look at this puzzling issue.

### 3. Expression of Regret

First of all, in the concept of "Mottainai" we can find some kind of regret, but also unique sadness and protest, that something was not used (or was not used properly), although it could be. However, it is different from the notion of regret known in psychology (basically, as a negative emotion). It is also different from the sorrow for the sins, which is practiced in Catholic religion.

Probably, the most distinguishable point in the concept of "Mottainai" is some kind of profound respect

towards the object that has been wasted. In "Mottainai" we can also find a kind of gratitude and sympathy with this object and nature, in general. The mentioned respect and sympathy give a strong hope and motivation to do something with this situation and to take some counter-measures in the future.

Here is the crucial point. It is very interesting to scrutinize, how the mentioned strong and positive (not negative!) emotions (moral emotions) can be used in a different context. Reflection on emotions associated with "Mottainai" led me to the following application. Let me show you this new perspective of the "Mottainai" concept.

### 4. Organ Donation and "Mottainai"?

Can we apply the concept of "Mottainai" in the context of organ donation? This is a very controversial issue. Thus, there is a question mark at the end of this phrase. However, two crucial points must be scrutinized: (1) the context of the process of decision making on organ donation and (2) the role emotions. Let me consider this complicated matter.

#### 4.1. Process of Decision Making on Organ Donation

The shortage of organs is a very serious and very delicate problem all over the world. What factors are important in decision-making process on organ donation? Basically, we can distinguish rational and emotional factors, as it follows:

- 1) cognitive-rational factor (for example, Theory of Planned Behavior)
  - 2) emotional and visceral aspects (Morgan et al, 2008).
- Moreover, O'Carroll (O'Carroll, et al 2011) adds also the third factor:
- 3) an "ick" factor (a basic disgust reaction to the idea of organ donation), which differentiate potential organ donors from non-donors.

The most problematic matter is organ transplantation from brain-dead donors. From the one hand, there are people, who don't agree for this type of donation and are against of the definition of brain death (because of rational and emotional reasons or "ick" factor).

On the other hand, some people think that in the case of brain death (recognized by medical experts as an irreversible state and actual death of a patient), it is better to donate brain-dead patient's organs than simply bury (or cremate) them. This hint was very thought-provoking. Looking at this opinion and this situation, the concept "Mottainai" can probably be applied.

However, let me consider the second point – the role of emotions.

#### 4.2. The Role of Emotions

Emotions, particularly moral emotions (encompassed also in the concept of "Mottainai"), have a very important regulative role as well as a motivating power (*"to do good and to avoid doing bad"*, Kroll&Egan, 2004). Emotions – (Latin *emovere*) trigger large quantum of energy. This energy, however, illustrates two poles – positive (constructive) and negative (destructive). The essential question is: how to redirect (motivate) this great potential of emotions' energy into positive side? Thus, the next question is how to use the positive energy of the concept of "Mottainai" and how apply it in the context of organ donation? It is very promising to reconsider the concept of "Mottainai" from this perspective.

The "Mottainai" concept is different from moral emotion of regret and also different from so-called anticipated regret. Anticipated regret (expecting of the feeling: "it could have been better, if we had acted in a different way"), has been recognized as an important predictor of intentions (Richard et al, 1995, Abraham et al, 2004) and is also a very promising in the context of decision making on organ donation. However, the concept of anticipated regret has a weak point - it has negative associations. Thus, it might be very interesting to examine the unique type of regret of "Mottainai" (connected to hope and gratitude) in the context of organ donation from brain-dead donors.

Following this path I want to stress that exposition to unique regret of "Mottainai" might have an invaluable impact on attitude and decision-making process on organ donation.

However, it is also very important to examine and compare both factors: anticipated regret and regret of "Mottainai" as a predictor of intention to register as an organ donor.

By verifying the predictor of intention to register as an organ donor, we can contribute to saving many lives of patients waiting for transplantation, not only in Japan, but also in other countries.

However, using the word "Mottainai" in the context of organ donation might be quite controversial. Let me explain this in detail.

#### 4.3. Argument Against Using "Mottainai" in the Context of Organ Donation

The application of the "Mottainai" concept might be considered as a controversial for the one very important reason. The word "Mottainai" is generally used while talking about things (もの). Of course, it is also used in the context of relations, time, actions, etc. However, saying "Mottainai" in the context of organ donation might have an unwanted implication that organs are treated in the category of "things".

Thus, the argument might be: "organ are not things (even after death) so, we cannot <<waste>> them" and that is why the application of "Mottainai" in this context is controversial.

We have considered (1) process of decision making on organ donation; (2) the role of emotions; and we have presented (3) argument against applying "Mottainai" concept in the context of organ donation. Thus, what conclusion can be drawn from our considerations? Let me throw the mooring line of conclusion.

#### Conclusion

The concept of "Mottainai" has been successfully used in the environmental context in Japan, as well as in other countries. The emotions associated with the word "Mottainai" are different from ordinary regret. The "Mottainai" concept triggers emotions of unique sense of regret (with hope and gratitude) and motivates people to act against wasting in future.

Can we apply this concept in the context of organ donation from brain-dead donors? This is an open research question. This application must be scrupulously clarified to the public in order to avoid misinterpretation. We must also be aware that this unusual context of "Mottainai" might have opponents (argument saying that "organs of brain-dead patients are not things").

In conclusion, the Reader will be left with no doubt that the concept of "Mottainai" has a great potentiality. However, there is a further need of research on the topic whether the application of the "Mottainai" idea might also bring good results in the context of organ donation. This challenge will be reported in future.

#### Take Home Message

Can words change reality? Indeed, "words can do things" (Austin, 1955). However, this "success" depends on us, the users of language, who put words into the socio-cultural context. Thus, let's re-think the word "Mottainai" in the context of organ donation (as a predictor of intention to register as an organ donor). This is a very crucial matter, because by verifying the predictor of intention to register as an organ donor we can contribute to saving many lives of patients waiting for transplantation.

#### References

1. Abraham C., Sheeran P. Deciding to exercise: The role of anticipated regret. *B. J. Heal. Psychology*, 2004; 9: 269-278.
2. Austin J.L. *How to Do Things with Words: The William James lectures delivered at Harvard University in 1955* / ed. by J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1990
3. Kawanisii Y., <http://m.npr.org/news/front/14054262?singlePage=true>

4. Koujien (dictionary).
5. Kroll J., Egan E. Psychiatry, moral worry, and moral emotions. *J. Psychiatric Practice*, 2004; 10: 352-360.
6. Morgan S.E., Stephenson M.T., Harrison T. R., Afifi W. A., Long S.D. Facts versus "feelings": How rational is the decision to become an organ donor? *J. Heal. Psychology*, 2008; 13: 644-658.
7. O'Carroll R.E., Foster C., McGeechan G., Sandford K. "The "ick" factor, anticipated regret and willingness to become an organ donor", *Health Psychology* (in press), 2011.
8. Richard R., van der Pligt J., de Vries N.K. Anticipated affective reaction and prevention of AIDS. *B. J. Soc. Psychology*, 1995; 34: 9-21.
9. Shinju M. *Mottainai Grandma*. Tokyo: Koudansha; 2005. <http://mottainai.com/e/book/>

#### Correspondence address

Sylwia Maria Olejarz  
 Cardinal Stephan Wyszyński University in Warsaw  
 ul. Wóycickiego 1/3  
 01-938 Warszawa  
 e-mail: gandras@o2.pl