

The Meaning of “Osu” / “Oss” (+ When You Should NEVER Say It)

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Imagine there was a magical word.

A word that could be used for nearly everything in life.

Wouldn't it be great?

Well, for many Karate people, there is such a word.

I'm talking about “Osu!” (pronounced “Oss!”)

Ever heard it?

I bet you have.

(And if you haven't, this will be a great introduction.)

In a lot of Karate schools around the world, the term “Osu!” seems to mean literally everything these days. Ranging from: “hi”, “hello”, “goodbye”, “okay”, “thanks”, “excuse me”, “hey there”, “come here” and “go there”; to “what's up”, “look at me”, “do it this way”, “that way”, “do you understand?”, “I understand” and “train harder”.

It is the ultimate utility word for many Karate-ka.

Insanely useful.

And insanely m-i-s-u-n-d-e-r-s-t-o-o-d.

If “Osu!” feels like an all-purpose secret word that you can use with your dojo buddies while on the phone, at the mall, when doing dishes or walking your dog – you're not only using it horribly wrong but also promoting the kind of group-think mentality that got popular culture to the dreadful stage it's at today.

That's right.

You're the reason Justin Bieber is still around.

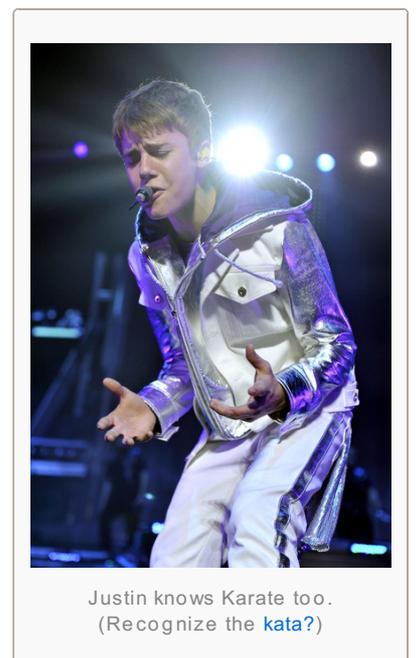
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Jokes aside, let's get serious for a sec:

What exactly does this magical “Osu!” even mean?

- Where does the term come from?
- When should you use it?



- Why do some people use it for everything?
- Do you really *need* to use it?
- Most importantly; what is the #1 situation when you should NEVER use it?

So many questions...

Luckily, I got some answers:

The History & Origins of “Osu!”

According to history, the expression “*Osu!*” first appeared in the Officers Academy of the Imperial Japanese Navy, in the early 20th century. This, combined with the fact that “*Osu!*” is non-existent in traditional dojos of Okinawa, tells us two things:

1. **The term did not originate in the birthplace of Karate (Okinawa).**
2. **It has militaristic undertones.**

In other words, “*Osu!*” comes with a lot of historical and cultural baggage, which you should be aware of if you are one of those people who mechanically utter it 24/7 – so that you can decide for yourself if “*Osu!*” is something that truly resonates with your authentic self or not.

That being said, when it comes to the exact linguistical history of the term “*Osu!*” several theories exist on its true meaning and origins. In this article I will just briefly walk you through the most popular ones.

And hey, if it gets too confusing at any point, keep this in mind: Many Japanese people don’t even know themselves where the expression comes from.

Funny, right?

Anyways, with those caveats out of the way, let me now present three of the most prevailing theories on the origins of “*Osu!*”.

Let’s go:



It's a phenomenon – even in Japan.

#1: The Kyokushin Theory

The first theory, hailing from the realm of Japanese full-contact *Kyokushin Karate*, says that the term “*Osu!*” stems from a longer phrase known as “*Osu no Seishin*”.

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in this particular case, *Osu!* is a combination of two different **kanji** (Sino-Japanese characters), namely the verb '**osu**' which means "to push", and '**shinobu**' which means "to endure/suffer" or "to hide".

Put together, these two kanji form a new compound word, which can symbolize a lot of stuff, depending on who interprets it: "combat spirit", "the importance of effort" "the necessity to overcome all obstacles by pushing them aside", "advancing with a steady positive attitude", "not showing suffering" and "the spirit of perseverance" are some of the commonly cited meanings of this "Osu!" version.

In other words, since Kyokushin Karate requires extreme amounts of physical conditioning and *cojones* – according to this theory you are verbally reminding yourself to breach your comfort zone by putting your physical/mental limits to the test every time you say "Osu!".

Pretty badass, so to speak.

But, is 'The Kyokushin Theory' the main reason for today's ubiquitous usage of "Osu!"?

That remains a mystery.

It is nonetheless a plausible theory.

#2: The 'Good Morning' Theory

The next theory comes from Dr. Mizutani Osamu – a linguistics professor at the University of Nagoya in Japan – and is based around his academic work in the field of language and social studies (*Mizutani, Osamu. Japanese: The Spoken Language in Japanese Life. (Tokyo, Sotakusha, Inc., 1981), 59-60.*).

Dr. Mizutani, who is frequently quoted in *The Japan Times* as a "language expert", talks in his work about a fascinating experiment he once conducted with a group of random people in order to observe the various ways in which subjects would return a simple **morning greeting**.

Put briefly, Dr. Mizutani greeted unknown people on the streets of Nagoya with the expression "*Ohayo gozaimasu!*" (the most polite Japanese equivalent of "Good morning!") and noted the different responses.

The result?

Although most of the subjects replied in a similar manner ("*Ohayo gozaimasu!*"), during the course of the experiment Dr. Mizutani noticed that greetings changed as situations changed. Joggers, for instance, involved in an athletic activity, responded with considerably **rougher language** than people who were just out for a stroll or walking on the streets.

Matter of fact, Dr. Mizutani found that most of the joggers responded with shorter and shorter forms of the greeting, i.e. "*Ohayossu!*", "*Ohayoosu!*", "*Oossu!*", or simply... "*Osu!*".

So, the conclusion drawn by Mizutani was that "*Osu!*" is a very rough masculine expression used mainly by young men toward other men, most often while engaged in athletic activities, and that it literally means "*Hi ya!*" in English.



Mas Oyama – founder of Kyokushin Karate



"Hi ya!"

But, is Dr. Mizutani's observation of "Osu!" the main reason for our omnipresent usage of "Osu!" in modern Karate?

That remains a mystery.

The theory is just that – a theory.

#3: The Onegaishimasu Theory

This last theory, which I will call 'The Onegaishimasu Theory', is similar to the previous 'Good Morning Theory' in the sense that a longer (formal) expression gets shortened to a more pragmatic (but less respectful) version.

In this case, the original phrase is "*Onegaishimasu*", a word that most Karate practitioners have surely heard, or perhaps even used themselves, in the dojo.

Although "*Onegaishimasu*" is one of the most common expressions used in Japanese everyday language, it's actually a pretty hard-to-translate term in English, and the closest equivalents I can come up with are "*Please*", "*Do me the favor*", or "*Grant me the pleasure*", i.e. inducing a mutual feeling of reciprocity and gratitude.

(Read my article from Okinawa on the full meaning of "*Onegaishimasu*" [here](#).)

So, how does "Onegaishimasu" transform into "Osu!"?

Well, I actually noticed this phenomenon unfold myself on several occasions when I lived in Japan: While most regular students would exclaim "*Onegaishimasu*" as they bowed to each other before beginning an exercise, a couple of youngsters would always gradually shorten the phrase, until, by the end of class, the only thing that could be distinguished from the intended "*Onegaishimasu*" was a simple "*Osu!*".

Needless to say, these same youngsters would regularly shorten the expression "*Otsukaresamadeshita*" (a traditional phrase said after one finishes training/work/school) to a simple "*Tsukare!*".

So...

Is this the ultimate reason for why so many Karate people use "Osu!" like crazy?

That remains a mystery.

We can do little more than speculate.

When You Should NEVER Ever Use "Osu!"/"Oss!"

Now, with the history lesson out of the way, let's go to the last part of this article.

Although the usage of "*Osu!*" has reached embarrassing heights in



Although the usage of *Osu!* has reached embarrassing heights in modern Karate today, particularly in the Western hemisphere, people are bound to keep using it because of its newfound meaning in Karate circles as a handy, all-encompassing utility word.

And that is fine.

You should definitely do what you sensei says.

But, no matter what reason or meaning you attach to "*Osu!*" there's something to be said for the universally appropriate time and usage of the term.

And that is this:

Never say it to a Japanese person – unless he is younger than you, or wants you to say it (and when it comes to women, don't say it at all.)

You see, at the end of the day, it doesn't matter if the term "*Osu!*" derives from the philosophical concept of "*to endure pain and suffering*" (The Kyokushin Theory), from the greeting "*Ohayo gozaimasu*" (The 'Good Morning' Theory) or from the phrase "*Onegaishimasu*" (The Onegaishimasu Theory): As a rough, masculine expression, "*Osu!*" should be used very carefully, especially toward Japanese and people of higher rank/status/age than you – and more so if you are a woman.

This is a touchy subject, folks.

"Osu!" expresses a strong assertiveness, masculinity and "let's-kick-butts" spirit.

So choose your situations wisely.

Don't use it as a prefix and suffix to everything uttered.

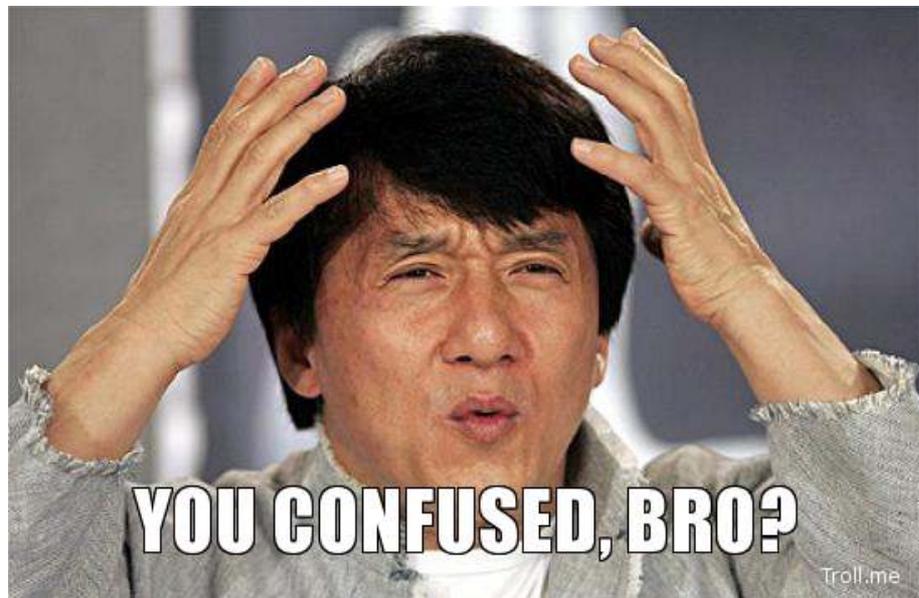
Don't take part in the "Osu!" festival just because you want to feel special.

Think for yourself.

Although it's fun to imitate Japanese culture (in some dojos, this seems to be what 90% of class is about), and it's not a federal crime to use "*Osu!*" inappropriately, it should be used in full understanding of its meaning and implications – and only if you genuinely feel you can stand for it.

"But Jesse-san, what the heck should I say instead?"





All right.

You've read this far, understood the facts, absorbed the information, taken a stand and decided to cut down on your usage of "Osu!" a little bit.

Great.

So what should you say instead?

Well, that depends entirely on the situation.

In 9 times out of 10, there are two very good options:

- Say "hai!"...
- ...or say *nothing*.

That's how we do it in Okinawa – the birthplace of Karate – as well as in many other places (including mainland Japan) where the "Osu!" parade hasn't arrived yet.

Simply put; just shut up and train.

And if your sensei asks you something, you answer with "hai!", which is the most commonly used Japanese word for "yes"/"understood"/"affirmative".

However, if you feel uncomfortable with this whole who-am-I-kidding-I'm-not-even-Japanese thing, just try "Yes", "Yes, sir", "I understand" or "Understood" when addressed by an instructor looking for your understanding or acknowledgement.

(After all, why pretend to be from another culture when you're not?)

But don't listen to me.

At the end of the day, what people think of your Karate is none of your business anyway. So go ahead and say "Osu!" if you want to – especially if your sensei demands it.

Just make sure you're comfortable with the meaning of it.

And try not to use it in a rude or disrespectful way, mmkay?

Because that's not really Karate.

