

# BASIC JAPANESE through comics

## Lesson 42 • *Wake*—the reason why

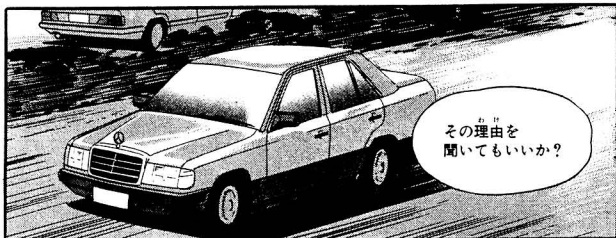
**Wake** is a **handy noun** for a variety of uses, but unfortunately, the array of meanings and usages can make it difficult for beginners to grasp. *Kenkyūsha's New Japanese-English Dictionary* (known as the “Green Goddess” among translators) lists three basic meanings:

- 1) “Reason/grounds/logic” (e.g. *wake o kiku* = “ask the reason”)
- 2) “Circumstances/situation/case” (e.g. *sō iū wake nara* = “if that is the case”)
- 3) “Meaning/sense” (e.g. *wake no wakaranai* = “meaningless”)

These three meanings occur in quite a number of idiomatic expressions, such as . . . *wake ga nai* (“would never [be/do]”) and . . . *wake ni wa ikanai* (“can hardly/can’t very well [do]”). The examples in this lesson demonstrate *wake*’s basic meanings, some of these idiomatic expressions, and two special cases any beginning student of Japanese should know: *iwake* (“an excuse”) and *moshiwake nai* (“I apologize”).

### **Wake** = reason

**Shima is being chauffeured to Bangkok.** The driver of the car has proven to be integral to the success of Shima’s business trip in Southeast Asia, and so Shima offers to help him get a job at his company’s local factory. The driver declines, however, stating that he hates the Japanese. Shima inquires why—and learns that the driver’s father died at the hands of the Japanese during World War II.



#### **Shima:**

その理由を  
Sono wake o  
for that reason (obj.)

きいても いい か?  
kiite mo ii ka?  
if ask good/okay (?)

“Is it okay if I ask the reason for that?”

“May I ask why?” (PL2)

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- 理由 (normally read *riyō*) means “reason”; the use of these kanji helps make it completely clear that *wake* here means “reason” rather than “situation/circumstance.”
- *kiite* is the *-te* form of *kiku* (“ask”).
- *-te mo ii* (or just *-te ii*) is the standard phrase for giving permission; adding *ka* makes it a request for permission: “is it okay if . . . I may I . . .?”

## Wake = situation

Suzuki was planning on going fishing with Aya-chan, and was fantasizing about spending some romantic time alone with her. When Hamazaki appeared to say he was joining them, Suzuki couldn't conceal his disappointment. Now Hamazaki wants to know what's going on.



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**Hamazaki:** 俺 と行く のが そんなに 嫌な 訳? それとも  
*Ore to iku no ga sonna ni iya-na wake? Sore tomo*  
 I with go (nom.+subj.) that extent disagreeable situation or

彩ちゃん とふたりっきりで 行きたい 訳? どっち?

*Aya-chan to futarikiri de ikitai wake? Dotchi?*

(name-fam.) with two-(alone) by/as want to go situation which

“Is it the situation that going with me is that disagreeable

(to you)? Or is it the situation that you want to go with

Aya-chan? Which is it?” (PL2)

“Is going with me that unpleasant? Or do you just want

to go alone with Aya-chan? Which is it?” (PL2)

**Suzuki:** た、 他意 なんか あります か!!

*Ta-tai nanka arimasu ka!!*

(stutter) ulterior motive such a thing exist (?)

“D- does anything like an ulterior motive exist?”

“I have no ulterior motive at all!” (PL3)

- *futarikiri* comes from *futari* (“two people”) + *kiri* (“just/alone”) and is generally used to describe situations where two people are alone in a romantic sense.
- Suzuki’s question is purely rhetorical; he is strongly denying that he has any kind of ulterior motive.

## Wake = meaning

In the whimsical manga *Urusei Yatsura*, Ataru is wearing a boxing glove that moves on its own. The glove gets him into lots of trouble—for example, by making him place his arm around girls. Lum, his girlfriend, is not convinced that the glove is acting of its own accord.



© Takahashi Rumiko / Urusei Yatsura, Shogakukan

**Ataru:** おれ ではない、この グローブ が 勝手に...  
*Ore de wa nai, kono gurōbu ga katte ni...*  
 I/me is not this glove (subj.) on its own  
 “It’s not me! This glove is (moving) on its own...”  
 (PL2)

**Lum:** なに わけ の わからない こと いってる っや!!

*Nani wake no wakaranai koto itte-ru tcha!!*

what situation of not understood things is/are saying (dial.)

“What incomprehensible things are you saying?”

“What are you talking about? That makes no

sense!!” (PL2)

- some form of *ugoku* (“move”) is implied at the end of Ataru’s sentence.
- *wake no wakaranai koto* = “incomprehensible things/non-sense/gibberish.”
- ending sentences with *tcha* is Lum’s own personal “dialect” in *Urusei Yatsura*; here it’s equivalent to the explanatory *no* used to ask a question.

*Wake no wakaranai* as a modifying clause implies that the thing it modifies makes no sense, is incomprehensible, or is meaningless.

Verb + *wake da* = that means . . .

**The man on the right, Fujita,** is the former mail clerk at the Hotel Platon. He has just discovered that Inoue is the hotel's current mail clerk, which means that Inoue is his *kōhai* — i.e., his “junior/successor” in that position.



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**Fujita:**

すると 私 の  
*Suruto watashi no*  
 then I/me of

後輩になる訳だ!  
*kōhai ni naru wake da!*

junior to become situation is

“Then the situation is that you are my *kōhai*.”

“So that means you’re my *kōhai*!” (PL2)

**Inoue:**

後輩!?  
*Kōhai!?*

junior

“Your *kōhai*!?” (PL2)

- *suruto* is a conjunction, “in that case/then.”
- *kōhai*, literally “comrade/colleague who goes after,” is the counterpart to *senpai*, “the comrade/colleague who goes first.” The terms apply to one’s “junior/senior” status within a given group, such as at school, in one’s company, in one’s particular job within a company, or in various social organizations. Sometimes, though by no means always, the *senpai-kōhai* relationship is one of “predecessor” and “successor,” as here. Always present is the implication that the *kōhai* must show respect to his *senpai* as a kind of “mentor,” and the *senpai* should look out for his *kōhai* as a “protégé” of sorts — even if they’ve never met before.

V + *wake da* literally means “the situation/case is that . . .,” but here it is more like “that means . . .” This expression is also frequently used to confirm what the other person has said or implied. Simply form a question by replacing *da* with *ka* or the more polite *desu ka*. For example, *iku wake desu ka?* (“does that mean you’re going?”).

. . . *to iu wake da* = that’s the gist of it

**Dr. Slump** is talking with a video of his father, who is giving him a recipe for a love potion that will enable him to get a wife. His father finishes the explanation and asks if his son understands everything.



© Toriyama Akira / Dr. Slump, Shueisha

**Video/Father:**

...というわけだ。わかつたか  
 ... *to iu wake da. Wakatta ka?*  
 (quot.) situation/explanation is understood (?)

“That’s the situation. Do you understand?”

“That’s what you have to do. Do you understand?” (PL2)

**Dr. Slump:**

わかりました。

*Wakarimashita.*

(I) understand

“Yes.” (PL3)

- *wakatta* is the plain/abrupt past form, and *wakarimashita* is the PL3 past form, of *wakaru* (“come to know/understand”). In an exchange like this, the answering *wakatta/wakarimashita* is essentially a “yes.”

. . . *to iu wake* is a very useful expression for summing things up. The summary or explanation comes first, then *to iu wake* followed by *da/desu*, *datta/deshita* or *de* (the conjunctive form of *da/desu*).

Verb + *wake (ga) nai* = there's no way!

This OL has the reputation of being a pushover. Her co-workers are constantly taking advantage of her inability to stand up for herself. Here one of them has given her a large task at 5:00 PM and insisted that she have it done by the next morning. She protests, but to no avail.



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OL: どーしていつも 前 の 日 になっ

*Dōshite itsumo mae no hi ni natte*  
why always before of day at/to become

押しつける の よー!  
*oshitsukeru no yō!*  
push/force onto (explan.) (emph.)

**"Why do you always wait until the day before to push work on me?" (PL2)**

出来る 訳 ない じゃない!!

*Dekiru wake nai ja nai!!*  
be able to do situation not exist does it?

**"The situation of being able to do it doesn't exist, does it?"**

**"There's no way I can get it done!!" (PL2)**

- *dōshite* is a colloquial *naze* ("why/how come").
- *natte* is the *-te* form of *naru* ("become"); here the *-te* form essentially makes *mae no hi ni natte* into an adverb for *oshitsukeru* ("push/force onto").
- *ja nai* is literally "is not" but here is being used as a rhetorical question, actually registering a strong complaint.

... *wake (ga) nai* means "the situation of ... does not/would not exist." It is often used in combination with potential ("can/be able to") forms, where it means "could never/can't possibly." Both with and without the potential it carries some of the feeling of the English "(there's) no way!"

Verb + *wake ja nai* = it's not that ...

Mr. Suzuki has just learned that his dinner partner was married once but soon divorced. He asks whether that means she has given up—implying that it's never too late to try again.



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Mr. Suzuki: もう 締め 訳 じゃない んでしょう?

*Mō akirameta wake ja nai n deshō?*  
already gave up situation/case is not (emph.) is it  
"It's not the case that you've already given up, is it?"

**"That doesn't mean you've completely given up, does it?" (PL2)**

FX: ニコ

*Niko* (effect of cheerful smile)

- *akirameta* is the plain/abrupt past form of *akirameru* ("give up/resign oneself"). *Mō* is literally "already," but with *akirameru* it has more the feeling of "completely."

Note the substantial difference in meaning between ... *wake (ga) nai* ("the ... situation doesn't/wouldn't exist") and ... *wake ja nai* ("it's not the situation/case that ...").

**Wake ga chigau = the situation is different**

**Kurata is a front desk clerk** and Matsuda is her supervisor at the swank Hotel Platon. Matsuda is also the hotel's pool supervisor. When Kurata boasts about her friend the lifeguard, Matsuda jealously claims that lifeguarding isn't nearly as demanding as supervising the entire operations for the pool area. But when a visiting doctor explains how difficult it is to become a lifeguard and about the many responsibilities the job entails, Kurata gets to gloat.



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**Kurata:** ネ ...ただの 責任者 とは、  
*Ne ... Tada no sekininsha to wa,*  
 see? a mere person in charge from as-for

ちよつと訳 が 違います!  
*chotto wake ga chigaimasu!*  
 little situation (subj.) is different

"See? Compared to a mere supervisor, the situation is a bit different."

"See? It's a wee bit different from being a mere supervisor." (PL3)

**Matsuda:** な・る・ほ・ど!!  
*Na ru ho do!!*  
 I see

"I see." (PL2)

- using *chotto* ("a little") here is a case of deliberate understatement; she means "a lot."
- *chigaimasu* is the PL3 form of *chigau* ("is different"); ... *to chigau* = "is different from."
- *naruhodo* expresses one's understanding of what has been said: "I see/indeed/really."

**Verb + wake ni wa ikanai = I simply can't**

**Yawara is in a championship jūdō bout** for the world title. Her opponent is determined not to lose and repeats over and over to herself that she must not allow that to happen.

**Opponent:** 負ける わけ に は いかない!!  
*Makeru wake ni wa ikanai!!*  
 lose situation to as-for not go  
 "I simply cannot lose!" (PL2)

**Sound FX:** ガ ガ...  
*Ga Ga...*  
 (effect of grappling)

... *wake ni wa ikanai* makes a very emphatic statement that the action/event cannot be allowed to occur: "I simply can't/I can't very well/I can hardly/no way can I (allow)..."



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**liwake = (an) excuse**

**Katō is the lifeguard** at the Hotel Platon mentioned on the previous page. Matsuda, the pool supervisor, is berating Katō for flirting with girls around the pool. In reality, the girls were simply flattering Katō because they were impressed with a dashing rescue he had just made of a girl in the pool.

**Katō:** あ、あれ。あれはあの娘たちが...  
 A. are. Are wa ano ko-tachi ga...  
 oh that that as-for those girls (subj.)  
 "Oh, that. Those girls were just..." (PL2)

**Matsuda:** 言い訳 など いりません!!  
*liwake nado irimasen!!*  
 excuse such a thing don't need  
 "I don't need to hear any excuses!!" (PL3)

- *ano ko*, when written with the kanji 娘, means "that girl"; the suffix *-tachi* makes it plural: "those girls."
- *ii* is the stem form of *iu* ("say"), so *iiwake* is literally "stated reason" → "an excuse."
- *irimasen* is the PL3 negative form of *iru* ("need/require").



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**Mōshiwake nai = (I) apologize**

**Mōshiwake nai** and its more polite form, *mōshiwake arimasen*, are standard phrases for apologizing. The polite form is the expression of choice when the occasion demands great gravity, as is the case here. Fujiko has discovered that she is pregnant and Hanazono, her boyfriend, is bowing low as they explain the situation to her parents.



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**Hanazono:** 申し訳ありません!!  
*Mōshiwake arimasen!!*  
 excuse doesn't exist  
 すべて 自分の 責任 です!!  
*Subete jibun no sekinin de arimasu!!*  
 all/entirely my responsibility/fault is  
 "I have no excuse. Everything is my responsibility."  
 "I am deeply sorry. It is entirely my fault." (PL3)

- *mōshi* is the *-masu* stem of *mōsu*, the PL4-humble equivalent of *iu* ("say"), so *mōshiwake* is essentially a more polite form of *iiwake*, "excuse." Note, though, that the word *iiwake* cannot be substituted when making an apology.
- since *arimasen* is the PL3 form of *nai* ("not exist/not have"), *mōshiwake arimasen* is literally "(I) have no excuse." But usually it's better thought of as "I'm deeply/terribly sorry" or "Please accept my deepest apologies."
- *jibun* is used as a personal pronoun mostly by military personnel and male athletes.
- *de arimasu* is the PL3 form of *de aru*, a more formal equivalent of *da/desu* ("is/are").

