



OSS or OSU: My Bow and My Deepest Respect

There is a Japanese word that is frequently used today by many people who practice martial arts (especially in karate). It is a word that is now known almost everywhere in the world. That word is OSS or OSU. However, if you ask various martial arts instructors what the exact meaning of that word is, as well as its origin—that is, where exactly it comes from—only a few instructors will be able to give a precise answer to that question. Many martial arts experts, as well as various teachers, historians, and even scientists from around the world, have been debating this word for quite some time and searching for a clear answer to that question.

The word OSS or OSU is used in various martial arts around the world: in almost all styles of karate, in American Kenpo, in Kajukenbo, in judo, in Jiu Jitsu, in ninjitsu, in aikido, in sumo wrestling, in sambo, in Brazilian jiu-jitsu, in partial and full-contact karate, in kickboxing, in taekwondo, in Muay Thai, in Kung Fu Sanda, in kendo, in the art of kobudo, as well as in many others. The word is also known to many members of the police and military, and is familiar among wrestlers, boxers, fencers, as well as among people who practice MMA. We can say with certainty that the word OSS (or OSU) has taken root in many martial arts. Some instructors will tell you that the word OSS (or OSU) is a universal expression that does not have a single meaning, but several. Thus, depending on the situation, the word can mean: "Yes," "I understand," "Please," "Thank you," "I'll do it," "Here you go," and it can also be used as a greeting, such as "Good morning" or "Goodbye." But is that really the case?

To answer that question, we must examine several different theories about the origin of this word, as well as what its true meaning is in martial arts. Some martial arts experts will tell you that, essentially, there are only three different theories about the origin of this word and its meaning. I would disagree with that, because I believe there are actually several theories about the meaning of this word. However, let's begin our exploration of this word step by step. The word OSS or OSU is pronounced and spelled slightly differently depending on the country. Most people spell the word as OSS or OSU; the difference lies mainly in the spelling, although both forms are correct and acceptable. The actual pronunciation of the word is closer to the sound "OHSS."

Some martial arts instructors will tell you that the origin of the word OSS (or OSU), as well as its use, originally comes from Japan, but not from Okinawa, the birthplace of karate. Such a claim is only partially correct. To determine this more clearly, let's begin by examining the various theories regarding the origin and meaning of this Japanese word. One of the best-known theories comes from the Japanese language expert Dr. Mizutani Osamu, a professor at Nagoya University, who published a work titled "Japanese: The Language Spoken in Japanese Life." In his work,

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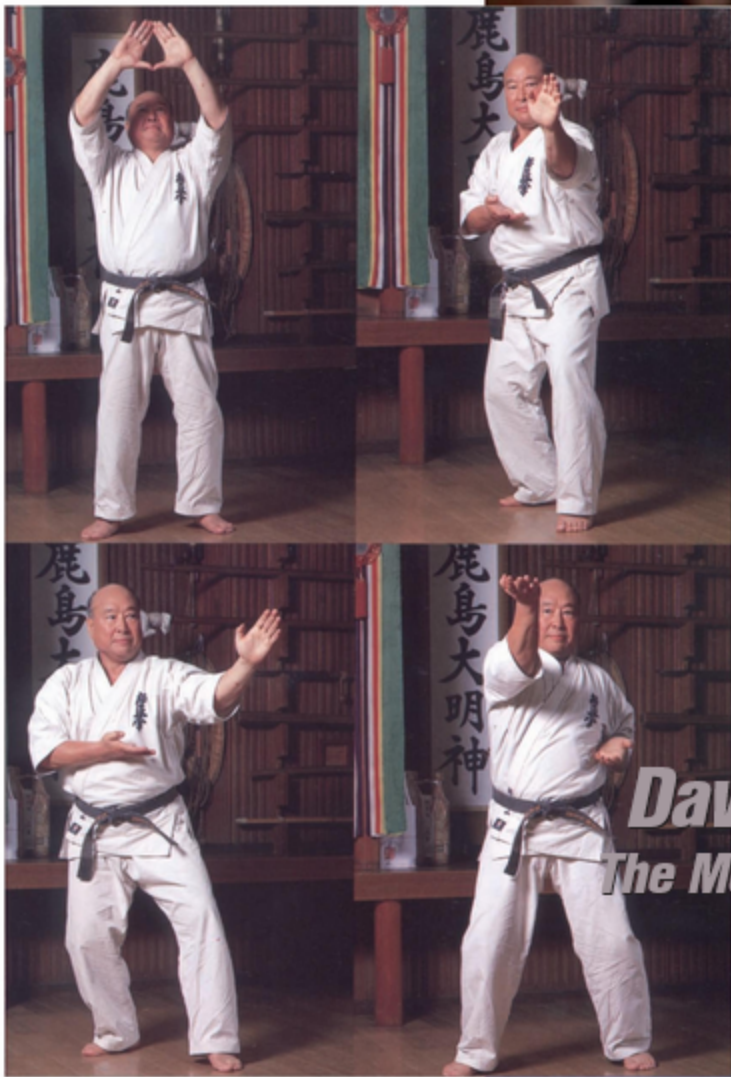
Professor Dr. M. Osame devoted special attention, among other topics, to the study of several well-known greetings used in Japan.

Dr. M. Osame concluded in his research that the Japanese word OSS (or OSU) could be an abbreviation of the official and formal Japanese expression "Ohayo gozaimasu." The Japanese rarely use this expression when they wish to politely say "Good morning" to someone. Dr. M. Osame also believes that the word OSS (OSU) may represent a more colloquial expression, used mainly by men when addressing one another, and that, in such cases, the word has a meaning similar to the English expression "HEY YAK." However, we might also have reason to question this academic work published by Dr. Osame, since we do not know the exact number of participants who took part in the research, nor their ages. For that reason, the true credibility of the study—that is, the actual extent of this word's use in different regions of Japan—remains uncertain. Furthermore, a legitimate question arises: what connection might this have to the use of the word in martial arts (karate, judo, sumo, ju-jitsu, kendo, aikido)?

The second theory is based on certain historical research suggesting that the word OSS may have been coined by a samurai of the Saga clan, Yamaoto Tsunetomo (1659–1719), on the island of Kyushu. The samurai Tsunetomo is the author of the well-known book "Hagakure," in which he explains aspects of the martial and spiritual life of Japanese samurai warriors. In his book, among other things, Tsunetomo mentions that the young warriors of the Saga clan in the 17th and 18th centuries greeted each other every morning on their way to school with the word OSS. However, this theory also has its shortcomings, since, although it points to the historical possibility that the word OSS was used by samurai, it actually tells us nothing about the meaning of the word itself.

There is also a third theory suggesting that the word OSS (or OSU) could be an abbreviation of the phrase "Onegashimasu" (pronounced oh-na-guy-she-mus), which roughly translates to "Please take care of me" or "I place myself in your hands." But what direct connection would this have to martial arts? It would only make sense in the situation where a young student arrives at a dojo, though even this theory should be viewed with some skepticism. Some instructors claim that the word OSS (OSU) is a polite way of saying "please" and that it is an informal form of the expression "onegashimasu." But is that really the case? We cannot say with certainty that the word OSS (or OSU), in the context of modern martial arts, actually has that meaning.

There is also a fourth theory, promoted more strongly in Kyokushinkai karate (though the same theory is also quite well-known among others), known as "Osu no Seishin." According to this theory, the word OSU (or OSS) is considered an abbreviation of two words: the verb "osu," which means to push or exert oneself with force, and the word "shinobu," which means to endure. However, is there really a direct connection to the phrase "Osu no Seishin" when, in reality, the word "oshi" means to exert oneself with force, while "shinobu" means to endure? Therefore, we can say that it is, at the very least, somewhat strange to claim that the word OSU (or OSS) is an abbreviation. And if it



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is, exactly which Japanese words would it be abbreviated from—that is, from which specific phrases: "Osu no Seishin" or "Oshi Shinobu"?

Furthermore, regarding some instructors who claim that the word OSS (or OSS) represents the warrior spirit and reflects the importance of patience, determination, and perseverance in the martial arts, we can only say that we are not entirely convinced by that interpretation. Some Kyokushinkai karate instructors even go so far as to claim that the word OSS (or OSS) first appeared within Kyokushinkai karate itself. Well, that is not the case. Masutatsu Oyama published his first books in Japan in 1958, and it was not until around 1966 that he did so in America and Europe. By then, the word OSS (or OSS) was already in use in Europe among martial arts practitioners. As you can see, this theory also has certain shortcomings and fails to answer the basic questions: Does the word really come from there, and what is its true meaning?

There is also a theory that claims some history books tell us the word dates back to the early 20th century, when it first appeared at the Imperial Japanese Navy Officers' Academy. However, this theory is refuted by another that tells us that in his book—"The Book of Five Rings" or "Go Rin No Sho," written by Miyamoto Musashi, a famous katana warrior—he wrote that samurai use OSS/OSSU or other similar phrases to gather their inner strength, as well as to pay homage to their opponent on three occasions: before combat, in the middle of combat, and after combat (which often ended fatally). This theory is sometimes used in BJJ, and some instructors claim that the word OSS/OSSU serves as a compliment, as well as self-encouragement, and even as admiration for the proper execution of a technique. However, this is not the correct explanation, nor is the use of the word.

Some instructors claim that the word OSS (or OSSU) has appeared in certain movies and suggest that this is "proof" of something, but they do not explain exactly what it is supposed to prove. They also mention some chefs who use the word OSS (OSSU), as well as certain television hosts and others, but they fail to explain what this has to do with martial arts. Certain aikido instructors claim that the word OSS (or OSSU) is an abbreviation of the expression "Ohayo gozaimasu," which translates to "good morning" (according to Dr. Osame's research). However, this claim should be viewed with a high degree of skepticism, as it does not actually explain anything meaningful. Some world-renowned martial arts masters do not support the use of the word OSS (or OSSU) at all, as they consider it inappropriate, artificial, and meaningless.

Among certain instructors, we can particularly highlight the words of the well-known master Fumio Demura (1938-2015), who said:

"OSS is not a good word. People often say OSS, OSS, OSS. Do they even understand the word? I don't even fully understand it myself. In Japan, only gangsters use this word at the time."

And yes, that's true. Now we come to the Japanese gangsters. You might be wondering: what do Japanese gangsters have to do with the word OSS (or OSSU), and if they have anything to do with it, how does that relate to martial arts? Well, yes, it does. The Yakuza is the best-known Japanese organized crime group, famous for its strict hierarchy, rituals, and full-body tattoos. The most prominent clans are the Yamaguchi-gumi, Sumiyoshi-kai, and Inagawa-kai. They engage in extortion, blackmail, gambling, and other illegal activities.

What interests us most is the fact that members of these clans often greet one another with the word OSS. For them, the word signifies humility and serves as an expression of mutual respect. In Japan, Yakuza mem-



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bers had influence over many professions: merchants, restaurant owners, butchers, artisans, as well as the police, politicians, and numerous other professions, including martial arts instructors. They collaborated with some instructors, while others were even exorbed or used as trainers for their members. One of the largest Yakuza clans was based in Naha, Okinawa. For this reason, instructors in Okinawa often avoid using the word OSS to prevent any association with gangsters or the Yakuza clan. Interestingly, some Okinawan martial arts styles use emblems that are identical or slightly modified versions of the symbols of the Yakuza clan, specifically the Kyokushinkai-ryu, Ryu Kyu Kempo, Goshin-ryu Kempo, Ryu Koku Seindokan, as well as some ju-jitsu styles.

The Yakuza uses the term OSS in reference to the samurai's Bushido code, specifically its seven key virtues: Meiyu (honor), Yu (courage), Gi (integrity), Rei (respect), Jin (compassion), Makoto (honesty and humility), and Chugi (duty and loyalty). In other words, they associate the use of OSS with the Bushido code, which in turn has strong ties to Japanese martial arts. The yakuza is not the only mafia organization that greets with OSS; even some branches of the Chinese triads use a similar greeting, combining a bow with the word OSS, especially among members in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, and the United States. In short, the Japanese generally avoid using the word OSS because it directly evokes associations with the underworld. For this reason, they mostly refrain from using it in public, even within their dojos and martial arts training centers.

Although it is true that in some Japanese high schools and universities certain sports teams use the word, and that some athletes also use it, and that it appears in certain martial arts, in most cases the Japanese rarely use this word outside of martial arts centers—that is, outside the dojo—and are not in favor of its use. Despite this, the word OSS (or OGU) has become firmly established in martial arts around the world. Some use it frequently, often even excessively, while others use it more sparingly. But do you really know when this word should be used in martial arts? According to the unwritten rules, it should actually be used much less frequently than is commonly believed.

The word is always used the moment you enter a martial arts center or dojo, even as you take your first step inside. Even if no one is in the dojo when you arrive, you say "OSS" (or "OGU") upon entering, as a bow and greeting—that is, as an act of respect toward the martial art you practice and toward the dojo itself. If an instructor and some students are already in the dojo, you greet them with a single "OSS" (or "OGU"). If the instructor was not in the dojo when you arrived and enters later, you greet them separately with "OSS" (or "OGU"). When leaving the dojo, it is generally not necessary to say this word. In competitions, the word is used only once, either when greeting your opponent and their coach, or when greeting the judges. If you are successful and go up on the podium to receive a medal or trophy, you say OSS (or OGU) as a sign of gratitude toward the tournament organizers. Once you leave the competition, you are no longer required to use the word.

If you are in a dojo and an instructor is speaking to you or explaining something, you are not required to respond with the word OSS (or OGU). Similarly, if you are in a competition and your instructor is guiding you,



explaining tactics, techniques, or other instructions, you are not required to respond with OSS (or OSU). In martial arts, the word is simply not used in these situations. Many people then ask: what does the word OSS (or OSU) really mean in the context of martial arts? The answer is, actually, quite simple. If you ask several instructors of different martial arts from around the world to explain, in simple terms, what the word OSS (or OSU) essentially means to them, about 95% of them will give the same answer: "My bow and my deep respect." Some instructors even use the word OSS (or OSU) at the end of written correspondence as a closing greeting, expressing deep respect for the person to whom the letter is addressed.

And finally, here is one more theory regarding the use of the word OSS (or OSU) in modern martial arts, researched by Professor David "Sensei" Stainko of Croatia, which at first glance may seem completely strange or even absurd.

When karate, judo, ju-jitsu, aikido, kendo, and other Japanese martial arts began to be practiced in Europe, the word OSS (or OSU) arrived a little later. European instructors understood that the word was accompanied by a bow toward the person it was addressed to, as a sign of respect. And, incredible as it may seem, that was all they knew about the word at the time. A bow, then the word OSS (or OSU), and it made sense to them. Why? Because they knew that in Japan, as part of its culture of etiquette, bowing is very common. However, Europeans (as Westerners) quickly associated this Japanese custom with one of their own earlier traditions, which made it easier for them to understand and accept. From there, they began to use it frequently in martial arts, integrating it naturally into their practice.

Thus, in Germany as early as the 17th century, merchants used a well-known greeting, "Mein Bogen," and in Austria,

the same greeting was said as "Mein Bucken." This greeting was performed by bowing the head or the upper body toward the person being greeted, and it became known as "my bow." This greeting was not only known in Germany and Austria, but was also common in Switzerland, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, and parts of Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, the Czech Republic, Poland, Serbia, and even Russia. In other words, the "my bow" greeting was a widely recognized custom throughout Europe. European martial artists simply combined this familiar custom of bowing with a new word, OSS (or OSU), when adopting Japanese martial arts. They applied something already familiar to them as a solution to something that was otherwise foreign and unknown to them. And, more importantly, they made no mistakes. In this way, Europeans not only adopted this Japanese custom but, in a sense, helped spread it among martial arts enthusiasts worldwide.

Thus, the bow represents humility, and the words OSS (or OSU) express one's deep respect for the person being addressed, and this is universally accepted in the martial arts. When someone addresses you with a bow and says OSS (or OSU), that simple word conveys their deep respect for you, and that is the greatest recognition you can receive from another person in the martial arts. This brief three-letter word, when spoken, represents much more than reciting titles, more than using words for ranks, and even more than giving gifts or making other gestures. In martial arts, everything begins with respect. My bow and the spoken word "OSS" or "OSU," as a sign of my deep respect for you, say everything about me. I hope this explanation clarifies what many people in martial arts frequently say and do, even though many of them only partially understand—or do not understand at all—why they do it.



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