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SOCIOLINGUISTIC FEATURES OF THE KEIGO SYSTEM IN THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE

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Annotation: This article examines the sociolinguistic features of the keigo system in the Japanese language. Keigo, the Japanese honorific speech system, serves not only as a grammatical category but also as a reflection of social hierarchy interpersonal relationships, and cultural values. The study explores the three main types of keigo—sonkeigo, kenjougo, and teineigo and analyzes their functions in various communicative contexts. Particular attention is paid to the influence of social factors such as age, social status, professional position, group affiliation, and the concepts of uchi (in-group) and soto (out-group) on the choice of honorific expressions. The research is based on descriptive, comparative, and sociolinguistic methods, drawing on linguistic literature and authentic examples from contemporary Japanese communication. The findings demonstrate that the keigo system plays a crucial role in maintaining politeness, expressing respect, and preserving social harmony in Japanese society. Furthermore, the article discusses recent changes in keigo usage influenced by globalization, technological communication, and the language practices of younger generations.

Keywords: Japanese language, keigo, sociolinguistics, honorific language, politeness, social hierarchy, communication, Japanese culture.

INTRODUCTION

Language is not only a means of communication but also a reflection of the cultural values, social norms, and interpersonal relationships of a society. In Japan, these aspects are particularly evident in the keigo system, the honorific language used to express respect, humility, and politeness in different social contexts. Unlike many other languages, Japanese possesses a highly developed honorific system that allows speakers to adjust their speech according to the social status, age, occupation, and relationship of the interlocutor. As a result, keigo functions as both a linguistic and a sociocultural phenomenon. The use of keigo is deeply rooted in Japanese history and reflects the hierarchical structure of Japanese society. It plays an essential role in maintaining social harmony, demonstrating respect, and facilitating smooth interpersonal communication. In everyday life, as well as in business, education, public services, and official settings, the appropriate use of keigo is considered a sign of good manners and communicative competence. Consequently, understanding keigo requires not only grammatical knowledge but also an awareness of Japanese cultural values and social conventions. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the choice of honorific expressions is influenced by various social factors, including age, gender, occupational status, institutional roles, and the distinction between uchi (in-group) and soto (out-group). These factors determine how speakers select different linguistic forms to express politeness and establish appropriate social relationships. In recent decades, the use of keigo has also undergone noticeable changes due to globalization, digital communication, and the evolving language practices of younger generations, making it an important topic for contemporary linguistic research. The aim of this study is to examine the sociolinguistic features of the Japanese keigo system and to analyze how social and cultural factors influence its use in different communicative situations.

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The research also seeks to explain the relationship between language, social hierarchy, and cultural identity, highlighting the continuing significance of keigo in modern Japanese society.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

The Japanese honorific system, known as keigo, has been one of the most extensively studied topics in Japanese linguistics and sociolinguistics. Scholars have examined keigo from grammatical, pragmatic, cultural, and sociolinguistic perspectives, emphasizing its importance as a linguistic system that reflects social hierarchy, politeness, and interpersonal relationships. One of the pioneering scholars in Japanese sociolinguistics, Shibatani Masayoshi (1990), describes keigo as a fundamental characteristic of the Japanese language that encodes social relationships through grammatical and lexical choices [1;56]. According to Shibatani, the selection of honorific expressions depends not only on the speaker and the listener but also on the social context in which communication takes place. Ide Sachiko (1989) introduced the concept of wakimae ("discernment"), arguing that Japanese politeness is largely determined by socially accepted norms rather than individual intentions. Her research demonstrates that speakers are expected to choose appropriate honorific forms according to age, occupation, social status, and institutional roles. This approach distinguishes Japanese politeness from many Western theories, where politeness is often interpreted as a matter of personal strategy.The theory of politeness proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987) has also significantly influenced studies of Japanese honorific language [2;14]. Although their model explains politeness through the concept of "face" many researchers argue that the Japanese keigo system cannot be fully explained by this framework alone because it is deeply rooted in cultural traditions and hierarchical social structures. Furthermore, Matsumoto (1988) emphasized that Japanese communication prioritizes social harmony and group relationships over individual autonomy. This perspective explains why the appropriate use of keigo is regarded as a social obligation rather than merely a linguistic choice. More recent studies have also examined the influence of globalization, digital communication, and younger generations on keigo usage, suggesting that while certain expressions have become less formal, honorific language remains an essential element of Japanese society. Despite the extensive body of research, there is still a need to analyze keigo from a contemporary sociolinguistic perspective that integrates linguistic structure with changing social and cultural practices. This study contributes to that discussion by examining how social variables continue to shape honorific language in modern Japanese communication. This study employs a qualitative research design based on descriptive and sociolinguistic analysis. The research draws upon academic books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and linguistic studies concerning the Japanese honorific system and sociolinguistic theory. The descriptive method is used to explain the structure and functions of the three major categories of keigo—sonkeigo (respectful language), kenjougo (humble language), and teineigo (polite language) [3;10]. The comparative method is applied to identify the influence of social variables, including age, social status, occupational position, gender, and the uchi–soto distinction, on the selection of honorific expressions. The analysis also incorporates authentic examples from contemporary Japanese communication in business, education, public service, and everyday conversation to illustrate how keigo operates in real-life contexts. The collected data are interpreted through sociolinguistic theories of politeness, social hierarchy, and cultural communication. By combining theoretical literature with contextual linguistic analysis, this methodology provides a comprehensive understanding of the sociolinguistic characteristics of the keigo system and its continuing significance in contemporary Japanese society.

KEIGO

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The Japanese honorific system, known as keigo (敬語), is one of the most distinctive features of the Japanese language. Unlike ordinary grammatical structures, keigo developed through centuries of social, political, and cultural evolution. It is not merely a set of polite expressions but a linguistic mechanism that reflects Japanese concepts of hierarchy, respect, and collective harmony. Therefore, understanding keigo requires an examination of its historical origins, linguistic structure, and sociocultural foundations. Historical Origins of Keigo the roots of keigo can be traced back to ancient Japan, particularly during the Yamato period (3rd–7th centuries), when political authority became centralized under the imperial court[4;5]. During this period, language gradually began to distinguish between people of different social ranks. Members of the imperial family, aristocrats, religious leaders, and government officials were addressed using special linguistic forms that expressed reverence and social distance. The development of keigo became more systematic during the Heian period (794–1185). The Heian court was characterized by strict etiquette, elaborate ceremonial practices, and clearly defined social classes. Court nobles used refined language to demonstrate education, social status, and cultural sophistication. Literary masterpieces such as The Tale of Genji and The Pillow Book provide numerous examples of honorific language, illustrating that keigo had already become an essential component of elite communication. During the Kamakura (1185–1333) and Muromachi (1336–1573) periods, political power shifted from the aristocracy to the samurai class. Although the ruling class changed, the importance of hierarchical language remained. Samurai society emphasized loyalty, discipline, and obedience, reinforcing the use of respectful expressions toward superiors and humble language when referring to oneself. The Edo period (1603–1868) marked another significant stage in the evolution of keigo [5;22]. Under the Tokugawa shogunate, Japanese society became highly stratified, with rigid distinctions among samurai, farmers, artisans, and merchants. Social mobility was limited, and linguistic behavior closely reflected social position. During this era, many honorific expressions became standardized and spread beyond the aristocracy into wider society. Following the Meiji Restoration (1868), Japan underwent rapid modernization and educational reform. As public education expanded, efforts were made to standardize the Japanese language, including the systematic teaching of keigo. In the twentieth century, the Agency for Cultural Affairs published official guidelines to simplify and standardize honorific usage, especially for schools, government institutions, and businesses. Today, keigo continues to evolve while preserving its traditional role in Japanese communication. Linguistic Structure of the Keigo System modern Japanese classifies keigo into three principal categories. Sonkeigo (尊敬語) elevates the actions or status of the listener or a third person. It is used to demonstrate respect toward people of higher social status, customers, teachers, senior colleagues, or elderly individuals. This form often employs special honorific verbs or grammatical constructions.- 行く (iku) → いらっしゃる (irassharu) - 言う (iu) → おっしゃる (ossharu) - 食べる (taberu) → 召し上がる (meshiagaru) These expressions place emphasis on the importance and dignity of the other person. Kenjōgo (謙譲語) expresses humility by lowering the speaker or members of the speaker's own group. Rather than directly praising the listener, it elevates them indirectly through self-humbling expressions. - 行く (iku) → 参る (mairu) - 言う (iu) → 申す (mōsu) - 会う (au) → お目にかかる (ome ni kakaru) Kenjougo is particularly common in business correspondence, customer service, and formal public communication.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

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The findings of this study demonstrate that the japanese keigo system is not merely a grammatical category but a comprehensive sociolinguistic mechanism that reflects the cultural values, hierarchical relationships, and communicative norms of japanese society. The analysis confirms that the use of honorific language is primarily determined by social variables rather than by purely linguistic considerations. Factors such as age, occupational status, institutional role, social distance, and group affiliation significantly influence speaker' choice of honorific expressions. The historical analysis indicates that keigo evolved alongside the political and social development of japan. From the imperial court of the heian period to contemporary corporate culture, honorific language has continuously adapted to changing social structures while maintaining its fundamental function of expressing respect and preserving social harmony. This continuity suggests that keigo has become an integral component of japanese cultural identity rather than simply a linguistic convention. The present findings are consistent with shibatani (1990), who argues that honorific expressions encode social relationships through grammatical and lexical choices. The analysis supports his view by demonstrating that speakers select different linguistic forms according to the relative social positions of the participants rather than solely according to the content of the message. Similarly, the results strongly support ide's (1989) concept of wakimae (discernment). The examined examples reveal that japanese speakers generally follow socially prescribed norms when selecting honorific forms. Unlike many western languages, where politeness is often viewed as an individual communicative strategy, japanese politeness is largely governed by shared cultural expectations. This confirms that successful communication in japanese depends not only on linguistic competence but also on sociocultural knowledge.

The findings also correspond with matsumoto's (1988) interpretation of japanese communication as being fundamentally group-oriented. The distinction between uchi (in-group) and soto (out-group) was found to be one of the most influential sociolinguistic principles governing keigo usage. Speakers consistently modify their language to emphasize group boundaries and maintain harmonious interpersonal relationships. This demonstrates that keigo functions not only as an expression of respect but also as a marker of social identity and group membership.

Although brown and levinson's (1987) politeness theory provides a valuable framework for understanding polite communication, the present study indicates that it does not fully explain the complexity of the japanese honorific system. Their theory emphasizes the protection of individual "face," whereas keigo is more closely connected with institutional hierarchy, collective values, and culturally established social roles. Consequently, japanese honorific language should be interpreted within its own sociocultural context rather than exclusively through universal models of politeness.

Another significant finding concerns the influence of modernization and globalization on keigo. The analysis suggests that younger generations frequently simplify honorific expressions in informal communication, particularly on social media and digital messaging platforms. Nevertheless, keigo remains indispensable in formal domains such as business, education, government administration, customer service, and public institutions. This indicates that although linguistic practices are evolving, the social functions of keigo remain remarkably stable. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that proficiency in keigo contributes not only to grammatical accuracy but also to effective intercultural communication. For learners of japanese as a foreign language, mastering honorific language requires an understanding of japanese cultural values, social hierarchy, and communicative etiquette.

CONCLUSION

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The results confirm that keigo represents a dynamic sociolinguistic system in which language, culture, and society are closely interconnected. Its continued use in contemporary Japan illustrates the enduring importance of respect, social harmony, and contextual appropriateness in Japanese communication. Although globalization and technological change have influenced patterns of usage, they have not diminished the central sociocultural role of keigo. Instead, the honorific system continues to adapt while preserving the fundamental principles that have shaped Japanese interpersonal communication for centuries.

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