

# Advantage Partnership Executive Search

## What is Keigo?

### Keigo

The Japanese language has many honorifics, parts of speech which show respect, and their use is mandatory in many social situations. Honorifics in Japanese may be used to emphasise social distance or disparity in rank, or to emphasise social intimacy or similarity in rank.

The system of honorifics in Japan is very extensive, including various levels of respectful, humble, and polite speech, and it closely resembles the honorific systems of the Korean language, and in some elements, Chinese.

### Types of Honorific

Honorifics in Japanese are broadly referred to as *keigo* (敬語, literally "respectful language"), and fall under three main categories: *sonkeigo* (尊敬語), respectful language; *kenjōgo* (謙讓語), humble language (or "modest language"); and *teineigo* (丁寧語), polite language. Linguistically, the former two are referent honorifics, used for someone being talked about, and the last is an addressee honorific, used for someone being talked to. Sometimes two more categories are also used, for five categories total: *teichōgo* (丁寧語) "courteous language" and *bikago* (美化語), "word beautification", but more often these are included in the above three: *teichōgo* as a kind of *kenjōgo* (humble), *bikago* as a kind of *teineigo* (polite)—these two other categories use the same forms as the general categories, but are used in different contexts, hence differentiated by some linguists. Each type of speech has its own vocabulary and verb endings.

For example, the standard form of the verb "to do" is *suru* (する). This form is appropriate with family members and close friends. The polite form of *suru*, the addressee honorific, is *shimasu*. This form is appropriate in most daily interactions. When showing respect, such as when talking about a customer or a superior, however, the respectful word *nasaru* and its polite form *nasaimasu* are used, and when referring to one's own actions or the actions of a group member, the humble word *itasu* and its polite form *itashimasu* are used. These respectful and humble words are referent honorifics, and thus can coexist with addressee honorific *-masu*.

### Polite Language

Polite language, *teineigo*, is characterized by the use of the sentence ending *desu* and the verb ending *masu* and the use of prefixes such as *o* and *go* towards neutral objects. Television presenters invariably use polite language, and it is the form of the language first taught to most non-native learners of Japanese.

Polite language can be used to refer to one's own actions or those of other people.

## Respectful Language

Respectful language, *sonkeigo*, is a special form or alternate word used when talking about superiors and customers. It is not used to talk about oneself. For example, when a Japanese hairdresser or dentist requests their client to take a seat, they say *o kake ni natte kudasai* to mean "please sit down". However, they would use the verb *suwaru* rather than *o kake ni naru* to refer to themselves sitting down. The respectful version of language can only be used to refer to others.

In general, respectful language is directed at those in positions of power; for example, a superior at work, or a customer. It also implies that the speaker is acting in a professional capacity.

It is characterized by lengthy polite expressions. Common verbs may be replaced by more polite alternative verbs, for example, *suru* (do) by *nasaru*, or *hanasu* (talk) by *ossharu* when the subject is a person of respect. Some of these transformations are many-to-one: *iku*, (go), *kuru* (come), and *iru* (be) all become *irassharu*, and *taberu* (eat) and *nomu* (drink) both become *meshiagaru*.

Verbs may also be changed to respectful forms. One respectful form is a modification of the verb with a prefix and a polite suffix. For example, *yomu* (read) becomes *o-yomi ni naru*, with the prefix *o-* added to the *i*-form of the verb, and the verb ending *ni naru*. The verb ending *-(r)areru* can also be used, such as *yomareru*.

Nouns also undergo substitution to express respect. The normal Japanese word for person, *hito*, 人, becomes *kata*, 方, in respectful language. Thus a customer would normally be expected to be referred to as a *kata* rather than a *hito*.

## Humble Language

In general, humble language is used when describing one's actions or the actions of a person in one's in-group to others such as customers in business. Humble language tends to imply that one's actions are taking place in order to assist the other person.

Humble language (*kenjōgo*) is similar to respectful language, in substituting verbs with other forms. For example *suru* (do) becomes *itasu*, and *morau* (receive) becomes *itadaku*. These two verbs are also seen in set phrases such as *dō itashimashite* (you're welcome) and *itadakimasu* (いただきます—a phrase said before eating or drinking).

Similar to respectful language, verbs can also change their form by adding a prefix and the verb *suru* or *itasu*. For example, *motsu* (carry) becomes *o mochi shimasu*. The use of humble forms may imply doing something for the other person; thus a Japanese person might offer to carry something for someone else by saying *o mochi shimasu*. This type of humble form also appears in the set phrase *o matase shimashita*, "I am sorry to have kept you waiting", from *mataseru* (make wait) with the addition of *o* and *shimasu*. Similarly, *o negai shimasu*, "please [do this]", from *negau* (request or hope for), again with the addition of *o* and *shimasu*.

Even more politely, the form *motasete itadaku* literally means "humbly be allowed to carry". This phrase would be used to express the idea that "I will carry it if you please."

The same forms may also be used when the speaker is not the agent, as a courtesy to the listener, as in the common phrase 電車が参ります (*densha ga mairimasu* "a train is arriving") at rail stations. In the case, the announcer himself is not arriving, but he is simply being courteous. Some linguists distinguish this from *kenjōgo* (where the speaker is the agent), calling it instead *teichōgo* (丁寧語) "courteous language", and defining it formally as:

Honorifics by which the Speaker shows consideration to the hearer through all expressions of the subject matter.

This category was first proposed by Hiroshi Miyachi (宮地裕). *Teichōgo*, as an addressee honorific, is always used with the *teineigo* (-*masu*) form, the politeness sequence (using *go* as an example) being 行く、行きます、参ります.

In humble language, name suffixes are dropped when referring to people from inside one's group. Thus, a Japanese-speaking company executive would introduce himself and his team by saying "I am Gushiken the president, and this is Niwa, the CEO."

Similarly to respectful language, nouns can also change. The word *hito*, 人, meaning person, becomes *mono*, 者. The humble version is used when referring to oneself or members of one's group, such as one's company.

## Word Beautification

Word beautification (*bikago*, 美化語, "beautified speech", in *tanka* also sometimes *gago*, 雅語, "elegant speech") is the practice of making words more polite or "beautiful". This form of language is employed by the speaker to add refinement to one's manner of speech. This is commonly achieved by adding the prefix *o-* or *go-* to a word and used in conjunction with the polite form of verbs. In the following example, *o* before *cha* and *senbei* and the polite form of the verb are used to this effect.

Example: お茶にお煎餅、よく合いますね *O-cha ni o-senbei, yoku aimasu ne*:  
Tea and rice crackers go well (together), don't they.

In finer classifications, the above example is classified as word beautification—rather than honorific speech—as the speaker is voicing a *general opinion* regarding tea and rice crackers and is not intentionally deferential towards the *listener*. In the following example, the speaker is directly referring to the listener and items received by them and is regarded as honorific language.

Reference:

Benjamin Barrett and Lewis Cook, けいご【敬語】 (2001) <http://www.jekai.org/entries/aa/00/no/aa00no31.htm>.