

Language of Deference

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Politeness leads to civility. It lubricates interpersonal relationships. It also acknowledges someone's place in society and in a hierarchy. Learning how to be polite in any language represents a major step in becoming a skillful speaker of that language. This requires going beyond saying "please" and "thank you." Being deferential means knowing how to exercise linguistic mechanisms that can make greater the metaphorical distance between the speaker and the referent (that is the recipient of the speaker's deference), making reference more indirectly, leaving room for differing opinions, and so forth. The Japanese language is rich in ways of making deferential statements and the evidence for this comes from the earliest historical records.

Choose Different Words

One such politeness strategy often employed is to use politer vocabulary. This is akin to English euphemism of substituting pass away for die in polite situations. In the same vein, in Japanese one may use o- prefixed words (o-mizu 'water'), instead of the variants without it (mizu 'water'). The verb gozaimasu is a politer variant of desu 'be', so Musuko de gozaimasu is politer than Musuko desu 'This is my son.' This is a lexical approach to politeness, because such situations all involve substituting one set of words with politer versions. Another well-known mechanism is the use of courtesy and job titles, such as president, doctor, etc. Japanese makes frequent use of them (e.g., -san attached to one's last name functions much like Ms. and Mr.).

Use Different Grammar

In addition to a lexical approach to politeness, there is also another approach that is based on grammar. There is a politeness strategy to indicate the humbleness or possible inaccuracy of the speaker's knowledge and give credit to the hearer's or someone's superiority (in terms of knowledge, hierarchy, etc.) in a situation. In English, say in a meeting, we often preface our comments by downgrading our own view, as in "in my humble opinion . . ." or "of course I am new and I don't know much about this, but . . ." or "I could be wrong but . . ." These are used, even when the speaker thinks that he is right and the other person wrong, to indicate not only that the speaker will gladly (at least, on the surface) submit to different views, but also to show that he is humble and respectful of other people's views. The humble expressions may be mixed with exalting comments, such as "you have twenty years of experience you know this a lot more than I do, but . . ." or "you have a better handle on the situation than I do but . . ." Both

types--humbling and exalting--are employed to make situations less confrontational and therefore more polite. Note that by humbling self and/or exalting others, one achieves an important goal in politeness behavior, that is, creating a greater metaphorical distance between the speaker and the hearer (or other referent). Note also that humbling expressions "demote" the speaker and exalting expressions "promote" the hearer (or the referent). In this essay, I will use ↓ for humbling expression, ↑ for exalting expression, and + for simply polite expression. Japanese employs these three basic strategies frequently and extensively--and these are built into choices the speakers make about which grammatical patterns to use, so that, like the English examples above, they may achieve a certain deferential distance in social situations.

Relativity of Keigo

A note of caution. One should note carefully that using polite forms (called keigo 'language of politeness, deferential language' in Japanese) does not begin with knowing who absolutely outranks whom. Neither is it a matter of knowing to which class or socioeconomic strata the speaker or the hearer belongs; politeness is pegged to how each of the participants in a linguistic situation (say, a meeting) sees/asserts his or her position in relation to others. In a typical social and work situation, when the speaker humbles himself and exalts the hearer, the hearer is likely to respond by humbling himself and promoting the speaker. As one can see humbling and exalting is reciprocally performed by the two parties, like riding a see-saw. In an example below two people talk about some business matter.

Katō-san, rei no mitsumori desu ga, ashita made ni itadakemasu↓ka?

Ms. Katō, that estimate, may we have↓ that by tomorrow?

Ee, osokunatte sumimasen. Ashita no asa motte mairimasu↓. Irasshaimasu↑ka?

Ah, sorry it's so delayed. I will bring↓ it over tomorrow. Will you be↑ there?

In this example, each of the speakers uses humbling form for his or her own action. In addition, Ms. Katō uses the verb *irasshaimasu*↑ to refer to the hearer's being there. These two people may differ in seniority, pay, rank in respective companies, but most of that is immaterial; each treats the other with keigo, in a reciprocal conversation that moves to elevate the other and humbling the self, much like riding a see-saw.

The foregoing example is simple, since only two people are involved. A reference to a third person makes everything a little more complicated. Suppose Sakuma at Company X visits Company Y. Sakuma asks a Japanese worker Ueno of Company Y if his CEO (Matsuda) is planning to go to a meeting.

Sakuma: *Shachō irassyai masu ka?*↑ "Is your CEO going↑ (to a meeting)?"

Ueno: *Ee, mairimasu.*↓ "Yes, she is↓."

Here *irassyaimasu*↑ is a deferential, elevating way of asking if Matsuda is going to some place. By using this verb, Sakuma is showing respect to Matsuda. Ueno, who is outranked by Matsuda, nonetheless responds using the humbling verb *mairimasu*↓ to describe Matsuda's action. Thus by saying this, Ueno is humbling his own CEO's action!

This illustrates two important principles at work in keigo. One is that who is humbled and who is exalted is relative to the situation; it is an error to assume that its use is a function of who absolutely outranks whom, a point made earlier. This underscores the importance of the first principle-relativism. (Before the 11th century, however, keigo was based on an absolute ranking in a given linguistic situation.)

Another point to be made is that, as illustrated in the second example above, keigo use is influenced greatly by how the participants in a situation (here Sakuma and Ueno, who made reference to a third person Matsuda) are related to each other from the speaker's point of view, particularly in relation to who is in-group and who is out-group (sometimes called the *uchi-soto* relationship).

In-group and Out-group

In the above section involving a visitor to a company, I remarked on how the speaker perceives the ranking of the conversation participants (the speaker, hearer, and a third person referred to in the sentence) determines the choice of predicate. There is, however, a little more to say about group affiliation which prominently affects keigo use.

All Japanese people belong to any number of groups-social, school, familial, corporate, hobby, etc. When speaking, the speaker's identification to a specific group relative to that linguistic situation must be taken into consideration concerning how to describe an action or condition of the participants and other referents. So, depending on who is participating in a particular linguistic situation, the speaker's identification with a specific group and his perspective as to where he or she fits in that group shift dynamically. Thus, a skillful speaker must be able to track these quick shifts and adjust language use appropriately. Also, although the group-affiliation shifts from one conversation to another, one thing that is consistent and needs always to be kept in mind is that the speaker always belongs to the smallest group, that of an in-group.

To illustrate the function of these groups and how they change their memberships fluidly, let us consider three situations, first using the example of Sakuma (a client of Ueno's company), Ueno and Matsuda we used briefly above. In the situation we

discussed above, we saw that Sakuma referred to the CEO's action deferentially, using an exalting verb *irasshaimasu*↑ 'go' (exalting). In response, Ueno used a humbling verb *orimasu*↓ 'go' (humble) to describe his CEO's action. This is explained by the fact that Ueno and CEO belong to the same company, the same in-group. Sakuma belongs to the out-group, in her and Ueno's perception. These in- and out-group affiliations determine what keigo should be used.

Now to the second situation. Suppose Sakuma leaves, and Ueno and his colleague Yamamoto begin to discuss the CEO. In their conversation about Matsuda's itinerary, both Ueno and Yamamoto will likely refer to their CEO's attending the meeting as *irasshaimasu*↑ 'go' (exalting). Why? In this situation, the in-group is made of Ueno and Yamamoto, and the CEO now belongs to the out-group, thus the use of exalting language, in their acknowledgment that CEO ranks higher than theirs in this linguistic situation.

The next and third example illustrates more how these dynamic shifts of group affiliation affects language use, see below.

Sakuma (to Ueno): *Shachō irasshaimasu ka?*↑

"Is the CEO going?"

Ueno: *Yamamoto-san, shachō irasshaimasu ka?*

"Ms Yamamoto, is our CEO going?"

Yamamoto (to Ueno): *Ee, irasshaimasu.*↑

"Yes, she is."

Ueno (to Sakuma): *Ee, mairimasu.*↓

"Yes, she is."

Sakuma: *Jitsu wa watashi mo mairimasu.*↓

"In fact, I am going too."

In the second line, Ueno asks Yamamoto if she knew if Matsuda would be going, using an exalting verb *irasshaimasu* to refer to Matsuda's action. Yamamoto responds using the same verb. In this two-line mini-dialogue, therefore, Ueno and Yamamoto constitute the in-group and Matsuda is in out-group (and Sakuma is not involved in this mini-dialogue within a dialogue). This explains their use of the verb. In Line 4, Ueno is back speaking to Sakuma. At this point, Ueno represents the Company Y and his

in-group comprises of Yamamoto, Matsuda and himself. The out-group is Sakuma. Thus he proceeds to use humbling *mairimasu* for Matsuda's action. In the last line, Sakuma, the only member of her in-group, says that she is going↓ too. Observe how in-group and out-group membership changed.

To Use Keigo or Not to Use Keigo

Use of keigo is optional in the sense the speaker is empowered to describe situations more deferentially or less deferentially. Like any other linguistic choice, making the choice of using too little or too much gives rise to various suggested interpretations. Consider this variation—if Ueno and Yamamoto both feel that they do not need to acknowledge CEO's status to each other, they could choose to describe the CEO's action as *iku* 'go', a verb which has no exalting or humbling connotation. This may happen after hours when they let their hair down over a drink, while, for instance, complaining about how badly they are treated at this company.

One further example of using less—consider another variation of the situation involving the visitor, in which Ueno and Yamamoto do not show any deferential attitude to their CEO.

Sakuma (to Ueno): *Shachō irasshaimasu ka?*↑

"Is the CEO going?"

Ueno: *Yama-san, shachō iku tte?*

"Hey, Yamamoto, any news if our chieftain is going?"

Yamamoto (to Ueno): *N, iku yo.*

"Uh-huh, I know she is."

Ueno (to Sakuma): *Ee, mairimasu.*↓

"Yes, she is"

Sakuma: *Jitsu wa watashi mo mairimasu.*↓

"In fact, I am going too."

Ueno and Yamamoto's utterances to Sakuma does not change but the dialogue between them does. It is characterized by a more direct way of interaction and a neutral, non-deferential way of referring to CEO's attending the meeting (the verb *iku* 'go'). If a situation like this takes place, Sakuma takes back any number of different

impressions about this company. Possibilities include that that workers are not trained as to their proper professional language use (Isn't it rude to have to see that display? Is the misuse just ignorance? Intentional?), the CEO's not running the company well (Does she lack power? Does she choose not to exercise power? Does she use a more egalitarian management style?), that the younger workers do not acknowledge a hierarchical ordering of workers (Alas, it's so hard to get good help nowadays), that Ueno and Yamamoto have developed a personal relationship (Why are they speaking so directly to each other? Are they in love? It is so unprofessional and improper), just to name some obvious interpretations.

In summary, use of keigo not only smoothes out bumps in interpersonal relationship by showing politeness to those involved but also acknowledges and, one can argue, perpetuate, one's place in a linguistic as well as larger social situation. In recent years, it has been observed that less keigo is in use, a reflection perhaps of what is to come for interpersonal relationships in Japanese society.

Negotiating One's Keigo Equilibrium with Someone

One can see that it makes sense to use keigo, but can one ever overuse it? Keigo is in a sense off-putting, since much emphasis is placed on creating distance and indirectness between the speaker and the referent. Socially, keigo has such a regulating effect, as it creates and maintains a social distance. But how does it handle dynamic social situations? How do people metaphorically get closer or move further apart?

As can be surmised from above, one moves closer to someone else (getting to know someone in a workplace, becoming involved in a romantic situation, for instance) by using less keigo about the action of the hearer or the speaker. The same breakdown of keigo may be reciprocated, signaling that the hearer is ready to accept breaking the keigo barrier a bit more. Such an overture may not be answered favorably, in which case the hearer will not go beyond a certain level of keigo breakdown, indicating where the formality line is drawn between the two. There, one has discovered the state of equilibrium with the person in question in the area of personal distance, i.e., the comfort zone. The formality line may be subject to negotiation between the two parties, a judgment that needs to be made at the beginning of every interaction. Such a line may vary from one situation to another. Imagine this: a worker and his superior are likely to maintain a certain corporate keigo protocol at work—it is part of professional demeanor. But when the worker goes out for a drink after a long day with the superior, he is likely to speak more directly to the superior, using less keigo. In fact the worker may understand this flexibility to mean that the supervisor is a human, caring person.

More use of keigo means higher formality. This idea can be readily understood when one considers a situation in which a child's parents call out, "Miss Hanna Patricia Thornberger, please come to the dining room." Hanna would know immediately that she is in trouble from the fact that this utterance represents a high formality situation. Analogous to this, frequent and meticulous use of keigo will impart the same effect. Further, high use of keigo can also give the sense to the hearer that he or she is treated rudely. This may sound paradoxical but it stems from the fact that careful use of keigo results in a great, unrealistic distance between the speaker and the hearer, so much so that the sense of impersonal, unfriendly detachment is created, which is then associated with rudeness.

Giving and Receiving

The idea of humbling and exalting is particularly useful in understanding expressions of giving and receiving. To describe how objects and favors are exchanged (e.g., buy someone a winter coat, write a letter of recommendation, open a door for someone), Japanese has a number of ways to show the speaker's standing relative to the participants in the situation; in fact, without using these special devices, almost all situations that involve transaction cannot be described in Japanese. This is quite different from a situation in English, in which the verb give is appropriate in all situations (e.g., The Queen gave me a medal in recognition of my service. Mr. Rogers gave the fish some food. I gave Rover my TV dinner.)

Suppose someone wants to say "I received a souvenir from X." If X is the speaker's younger brother or sister, it will be appropriate to say *Otōto ni omiyage o moratta*. *Moratta* is the predicate that means "receive something from someone in the same or lower ranking (or receive from across/down)" (where this word ranking is to be understood as we discussed above). If the speaker considers X to outrank him, say, X is his teacher Hanada-sensei, it would be appropriate to say *Hanada-sensei ni omiyage o itadaita*↑ to his classmate. The predicate choice is *itadaita*↑, not *moratta*, because *itadaita*↑ means "receive something from someone who outranks the speaker."

Donatory expressions-or expressions involving receiving or giving-are not limited to cases in which an object changed possession; it is used when describing a favor done. Suppose one wants to say "My teacher wrote me a letter of recommendation." Here a donatory verb (*kudasatta*↑ 'gave down to me a favor of') is combined with a special form of a verb (*kaite* 'write'). So this situation is expressed as *Sensei ga (watashi ni) suisenjō o kaite kudasatta*↑ (lit. "My teacher did me a favor by writing a letter of recommendation for me"). Some situations which may not be readily seen as "doing a favor" from an English speaker's point of view may in fact involve giving and receiving. For instance, in English one may simply say "Ms. Yanagi came to my recital." But if the speaker feels

that Yanagi came all the way to attend a recital-it took time and energy and that the speaker is grateful-he would say Yanagi-san ga kite kudasatta "Ms. Yanagi did me a favor by coming".

The choice of which donatory verbs should be used when depends on the relative ranking of the persons in a situation, as well as who belongs to what group.

Keigo Takes a Special Effort to Learn

Learning all this sounds daunting. Learning social graces in Japan, and this involves control of using keigo, is often something must be consciously and diligently attempted, typically when a young person enters a work situation. This does not happen with any intensity until this point in a Japanese person's life because it is not until this time when one goes out of the familial and school setting and ventures into more open social situations requiring keigo. Although there may be an acknowledged hierarchy in a family, family members do not usually use keigo to each other. There are several exceptions to this rule. One is that family members tend to use more keigo to talk about older member of the family such as grandparents. The man of the household-the father-may elicit more keigo behavior from his wife. Not much more can be said about this with certainty, as keigo behavior differs from one household to another. School children may learn to use some keigo to their teachers progressively as they go through their education.

Thus, it is safe to say that most keigo learning takes place after one leaves school. Company's new recruits often go through weeks of training to become accustomed to the corporate culture, including the proper language behavior involving keigo. Depending on what type of work is involved, one learns the intricacies of keigo there, such as which lexical items are exalting and which ones humbling. Others include which words can be used just to show politeness without any reference to in-group and out-group, how to quickly grasp what one's in-group is. And phone manners. A real skill is involved when answering a phone call, since one would not have advance knowledge who is on the other end-it could be a family member of one's superior (exalt both the family member and superior, humble self), one's coworker's friend (use exalt or neutral for the caller and the coworker, humble self), one's own family member (speak as one would normally), important client (exalt the caller, humble the company including self), one's superior wanting to speak to someone under one's supervision (exalt superior, humble self and underling), coworker reporting in sick (maintain the workplace keigo equilibrium), or just someone who got the wrong number (neutral). If this sounds exhausting, it is!

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Suggested Reading

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