

All About Keigos

It is more than just grammar! It is more than just being nice!

Have you ever thought about why Japanese discussions seem to flow so naturally? Keigo, a system of honorific language that permeates Japanese conversation, is one such important component that leads to the above. It is a subtle dance of social respect that reflects relationships and hierarchies in a way that is strongly ingrained in Japanese culture.

Understand the Importance of Keigo

Being polite to someone is often seen favorably in Western nations. However, because of the "formality" system of the Japanese language, things are very different there.

Being overly cordial with someone who is older than you, has a better social status, or you have just met is frequently regarded as impolite. It is not that pleasant individuals don't appeal to Japanese people. However, until you have established a closer relationship that permits greater friendliness, it is usually preferred to remain formal and courteous when speaking with acquaintances.

Keigo Demands in the Professional World

Keigo is significant because it keeps social harmony in Japan intact. It is crucial in professional settings and job interviews because it conveys professionalism, humility, and a sense of social graces.

Making a good impression is facilitated by using the appropriate keigo, which demonstrates respect for the business partner or interviewer. By doing so, miscommunications may be avoided and a more upbeat and courteous environment will be created.

On the flip side, misuse can damage relationships in both personal and professional contexts by causing misconceptions or coming across as impolite.

Become Familiar with the Types of Keigo

We can classify keigo into three types, each designed to adjust the speaker's relationship with the listener.

1. Teineigo (丁寧語) - Politeness

- This is the most neutral form of keigo, used to maintain basic politeness. It is commonly used in everyday formal speech.
- **Purpose:** Ensures politeness, regardless of social status.
- **Example:** 「行きます。」(Ikimasu) – "I will go."

2. Sonkeigo (尊敬語) - Respectful and Honorific

- This elevates the subject of the conversation, often used when speaking about superiors or clients.
- **Purpose:** Shows respect to the person being referred to.
- **Example:** 「社長がいらっしゃいます。」(Shachou ga irasshaimasu) – "The president is here."

3. Kenjougo (謙譲語) - Humbleness

- This form humbles the speaker or the in-group, lowering their status while elevating the listener or another person.
- **Purpose:** The speaker shows humility, making themselves or their actions seem less important.
- **Example:** 「お持ちいたします。」(Omochi itashimasu) – "I will bring it."

Do Not Be Afraid of Keigos

Fundamentally, Keigo's purpose is to identify the subject of a statement.

Sonkei-go is exclusively used for the second or third person (you/he/she/they), as it elevates the listener or a third person. Conversely, kenjo-go is exclusive to the first person (I/we). Therefore, you can immediately say, "I (or we) saw it," without having to mention the subject, by only employing the verb *haiken suru*. Now, contrast this with the *mimashita* (見ました) ordinary masu form. Even though it implies "saw," context usually clarifies who was viewing. Keigo functions as a subtle kind of subject-based conjugation in this way.

Keigo's handling of formality and subject conjugations is similar to that of other major languages, such as French (*je suis / tu es / vous êtes*), Spanish (*yo soy / tú eres / usted es*), or German (*ich bin / du bist / sie ist*). The conjugation itself frequently reveals the identity of the subject where the subject is frequently omitted.

Similar to this, 90% of keigo follow the same pattern repetition.

For example, verbs ending in いたす (*itasu*), 差し上げる (*sashiageru*), or させていただく (*sasete itadaku*) usually refer to the speaker themselves. On the other hand, expressions like "o/go ~ni naru," "nasaru," "かていただく" (*shite itadaku*), or "してくださる" (*shite kudasaru*) indicate that they refer to you or a third party.

Certain verbs undergo complete transformations depending on the subject. Taking an example, when employed in the first person, 言う (*iu*) becomes 申しあげる (*moushiageru*), and when referring to someone else, おっしゃる (*ossharu*). You should learn these exceptions by heart, but understanding the general patterns will help you to understand most written and spoken keigo.

Keigo is ultimately just a collection of grammatical patterns.

They become easier the more accustomed you are to them. When you break it down, keigo is actually fairly simple—far from being unique or difficult.

This is Your Call to Begin Mastering Keigo

Keigo can seem intimidating, particularly to newcomers. Depending on your proficiency in the Japanese language, you can concentrate your efforts here:

Beginner: Give Teineigo priority

Teineigo is the most common politeness level that the Japanese expect a foreigner to have, thus it is important to pay attention to it. If anything, it might be safer to stick to the ~*masu* form rather than attempt too much keigo when you're insecure and end up elevating yourself at the expense of the other person.

Intermediate: Learn Sonkeigo

After you feel at ease using Teineigo, begin investigating Sonkeigo. This is meant to be a sign of honor and respect for the listener. For example, you could say "irasshaimasu" (the honorific version of "to be" or "to go") instead of "iku" (to go). Observe how people who are natural speakers use it, and try to apply it in the same way.

Advanced: Master Kenjougo

To reach this degree of keigo, you must have a thorough comprehension of social dynamics and Japanese culture. Kenjougo is a gesture of humility meant to bring oneself down to the listener. For example, you could say *mairimasu* (the humble version of "to go" or "to come") instead of *iku* (to go).

Keigo is very contextual and complex because it relies on the particular situation. As a more experienced student, concentrate on comprehending the nuances of keigo usage and modifying your speech appropriately.

And with that ... Remember

Keigo flows like quiet streams,
In words unspoken, softly gleams.

It uplifts another, bows the "I,"
A silent strength where trust can fly.

In interviews, its role is clear,
To raise the humble, draw you near.

In work, in meetings, where we strive,
Keigo keeps relationships alive.

It's not just language, but a key,
To harmony, and humility.

So when you speak, be mindful still,
For *keigo* shapes both heart and will.

In every phrase, with care, deploy,
The subtle art that brings great joy.