

## A Subjective Report of Pragmalinguistic Failure

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### Abstract

This paper begins with a subjective history of the writer's L2 (Japanese) learning experience. It is followed by a detailed description of three instances of pragmalinguistic failure, each related to the correct use of *keigo* (honourific formal Japanese according to many definitions). *Keigo* is both an indispensable part of sociolinguistic life in Japan and a major linguistic challenge to almost all foreign Japanese language learners, and even some native Japanese speakers. To be exact, the speech acts concern requesting/asking another person to do something, offering to do something for another person and statements indicating that a third party has done something for one's self. The language difficulties stem from both the complexity of the grammar and from *wakimae*, or rather the lack of *wakimae*, which can be defined as the innate awareness of one's societal position in relation to other's societal position and also the situation actors find themselves in at the time of speaking (Ide et al. 1992). This sort of social knowledge is a necessary element for the skillful use of *keigo*. *Wakimae*, or lack thereof, along with imperfect knowledge of *keigo* grammar rules, is considered a significant source of this Japanese language learner's pragmatic troubles. Finally, some ways are considered to help overcome the challenges presented by *keigo*.

Keywords: pragmalinguistic, polite, discernment, *keigo*, *wakimae*

Subjective Language Learning History: My Japanese language study began twenty years ago in 1987 in Toronto, Canada. For eighteen months, every Saturday morning, from 9 AM to 12 PM, I attended a beginners' level class at the Canadian Japanese Association. A non-professional teacher taught the classes. I continued there for eighteen months until I left for Japan in November 1989.

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From my first day in Japan I realized that my studies in Canada would be almost useless as far as real communication with Japanese native speakers was concerned. I could not understand anybody because they seemed to speak so fast and all my attempts to speak were met with bemused looks. It seemed as if the Japanese I had learned from the textbook and the Japanese that people I met actually spoke, were completely different. Therefore, during this first year I attempted to learn more native-like Japanese with regular, one to one English/Japanese language exchanges but by the end of the first year I did not feel as if I had made much progress and decided to commit myself to studying formally.

For 10 months in 1990-91 I attended a Japanese language school, five days a week from 1:00 pm to 5:00 pm. The curriculum included listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Upon graduation I believed that I had achieved a high beginner/low intermediate level, although my language skills were inconsistent. My reading and writing were lower than my speaking and listening because I found, and still find, *kanji* (the Chinese characters used in Japan), very difficult to memorize.

Since 1991 I have continued to study Japanese in various situations. I have attended two more formal classrooms for short periods. I have studied to take the official Japanese Proficiency Test. There are five levels; five being the lowest and one the highest. I have passed levels three and failed level two. For the last three years I have studied two hours a week with a private tutor using an intermediate level textbook. As well, I have certainly picked up some language skills by simply living in Japan and using it to navigate my way through day-to-day life. Perhaps my language level would be considered high intermediate at the present time. I feel capable of handling most casual conversational situations. I am also constantly reminded though, especially in my workplace, of my limitations. My vocabulary is stretched when topics become specialized and my knowledge of grammar and pragmatic knowledge is far below that of a native speaker, resulting in more bemused looks from others even after all these years.

*Keigo*: An account of my pragmatic failure must first begin with a brief description of *keigo*, the kind of Japanese that offers the greatest challenge. First, *Keigo* is often translated as honourific formal Japanese, suggesting it is a kind of language reserved for only isolated, ceremonial situations instead of daily life. This would be a very mistaken belief because *keigo* is, in fact, woven into almost all aspects of social life in Japan at almost all ages. It would be very difficult for any Japanese language speaker to go

through a day without using or hearing *keigo* at all. Second, it would also be a mistake to think of *keigo* as a single type of language. In reality it encompasses a spectrum of formal levels, which for the sake of simplicity, can be classified into four levels; *futsu go* / daily language, *teinei go* / standard polite language, *sonkei go* / language that exalts the addressee, and *kenjo go* / language that humbles the speaker. It may seem odd to include “daily language” but it should also be considered an extension of *keigo* for two reasons. First, there are times when a person of higher social rank can respond with daily language to a person of lower social rank who has spoken with more formal language. It would be considered entirely appropriate and even expected by both parties. Second, if two friends of equal social rank are speaking, it would be very odd, even insulting, if one of them were to speak to the other in a more formal language. It would be seen as an attempt to create social distance where no social distance should exist. Too much formality between friends of equal social rank is, conversely, impolite. It is complicated. Choices about which kinds of *keigo* to use are based upon a range of personal and environmental features that establish social difference and distance between individuals. Wetzell, in *Keigo in Modern Japan*, outlines these.

Contextual features of the relationships among conversational players that impinge on perceived differences include: venue, benefaction, in-group/out-group relationships, and just plain what’s at stake. Demographic features that come into play include age, gender, area of geographic origin (“dialect”), socioeconomic class, and profession.<sup>1</sup>

“Above” and “below” are helpful spatial metaphors for imagining the world of *keigo*. When addressing people in a position “above” one’s self, *sonkei go*, *kenjo go*, or at least *teinei go*, is used. When addressing people in a position either “below” one’s self or equal to one’s position, *futsu go*, or *teinei go* in some cases, is used. In general, age is above and youth is below. Seniority in an organization/group is above. A junior is below. Out-group is above. In-group is below. Men, at least the men who are in positions of authority, are above. Women, at least the ones who are in more subservient positions, are below. Those who can grant favours/help are above. Those who ask for favours/help are below. Those in prestige professions, or who derive prestige from family lineage or

some other source of fame, are above. Those in professions with less prestige are below. Those with greater monetary wealth tend to be above. Those with less monetary wealth tend to be below.

The grammatical differences between *futsu go*, *teinei go*, *sonkei go*, and *kenjo go* are apparent in verb phrase endings, the addition of auxiliary verbs, and the use of honourific prefixes for some verbs and also some nouns, pronouns, and names. The three speech acts, which have most often resulted in pragmatic failure for most foreign Japanese language learners, are related to asking for and offering help, and also the reporting the receiving of help. In the following three tables the various forms of each act are presented. Typical dialogue sentences follow each table to demonstrate how the *keigo* is used. The main verb is *hakobu*, meaning, “to carry”. In the sentences following table 1.1 A offers to carry something for B. In the sentences following table 1.2 A asks B to carry something. In the sentences following table 1.3 A simply states a fact, that someone is carrying something for A. For the sake of clarity, all the conversations take place in a university setting, a traditionally hierarchical social environment where the use of *keigo* is *de rigueur*. The dialogues are followed by English translations. Unfortunately, the translations cannot convey the exact nuance of the Japanese.

Figure 1.1

Present simple <i>Hakobu</i> To carry	<i>Futsu go</i>	<i>Teinei go</i>	<i>Sonkei go</i>	<i>Kenjo go</i>
Offering directly to another person to carry something for them.	Hakonde ageyo ka.	Hakonde agemasho ka.	Ohakobi shimasho ka.	Hakabasette itadakimasho ka.

*Futsu go*- A: Tanaka, *hakonde ageyo ka*.

B: *Arigato*.

A: Tanaka, shall I carry it for you?

B: Thank you.

The characters in this dialogue, A and B, are probably friends of equal age and social position. They can speak to each other without concern in casual language.

*Teinei go-* A: *Tanaka-sensei, hankonde agemasho ka.*

B: *Sumimasen. Arigato gozaimasu.*

A: Professor Tanaka, shall I carry it for you?

B: Oh sorry. Thank you very much.

The characters in this dialogue, A and B, may be colleagues/acquaintances, but they are not close friends. Perhaps B is a bit older or has a little more seniority at the university hence the slight formality.

*Sonkei go-* A: *Suzuki-sensei, ohakobi shimasho ka.*

B: *Tanomu.*

A: Professor Suzuki, shall I carry it for you?

B: Please go ahead.

The characters in this dialogue, A and B, very clearly possess different ranks. B may be the head of a faculty, or at least a very senior professor, and A is much younger and of lower rank.

*Kenjo go-* A: *Ueda-sensei, hakabasette itadakimasho ka.*

B: *Tanomu.*

A: Professor Ueda, shall I carry it for you?

B: Please go ahead.

Again, the distance between A and B is great. B might be the President of the university and A is any younger professor.

Figure 1.2

Present simple <i>Hakobu</i> To carry	<i>Futsu go</i>	<i>Teinei go</i>	<i>Sonkei go</i>	<i>Kenjo go</i>
Asking another person directly to carry something	<i>Hakonde kurenai ka (men)</i> <i>Hakonde kurenai (women)</i>	<i>Hakonde kuremasen ka</i>	<i>Hakonde itadakemasen ka</i> Or <i>Hakonde kudasaimasu ka</i>	X

*Futsu go-* A: *Hakonde kurenai ka.*

B: *Ii yo / Wakatta.*

A: Can you carry it for me?

B: Sure / OK.

Again, the characters in this dialogue are close friends, probably of the same age and rank. A can ask a favour of B without worrying about using language that is very polite.

*Tenei go-* A: *Sumimasen ga hakonde kuremasen ka.*

B: *Kashikomairimashita.*

A: Excuse me but can you carry it for me?

B: Certainly.

In this dialogue both A and B are using standard polite language. “*Kashikomairimashita*” is a phrase frequently used in the service industry. Perhaps B is one of the office staff. It would be unlikely for another professor to use the same phrase.

*Sonkei go-* A: *Honto ni sumimasen ga hakonde itadakemasen ka.*

B: *Wakkata. / Hoka no mono ni hakobaseyo.*

A: I am truly sorry but can you carry it for me?

B: I see. / I'll ask someone else to do it.

This is a highly unlikely dialogue because it is clear that B is of a very much higher rank than A. Perhaps A is a junior professor and B is the head of the faculty. Perhaps A is injured and B is the only other person around to ask for help. It is within the realm of possibility but, again, highly unlikely.

*Kenjo go-* There is no dialogue here because *kenjo go* is used with those who are truly much higher in rank than oneself in a hierarchy. It is unthinkable to ask someone so high above to do something for oneself.

Figure 1.3

Present simple Hakobu To carry	<i>Futsu go</i>	<i>Teinei go</i>	<i>Sonkei go</i>	<i>Kenjo go</i>
Stating that a third person is carrying something for you	<i>Hakonde marau</i>	<i>Hakonde moraimasu</i>	<i>Hakonde itadakimasu</i> (very unlikely scenario)	X

*Futsu go*- A: *Tanaka ni hakonde marau.*

B: *So desu ka.*

A: Tanaka is carrying it for me.

B: Is that so?

Here, A states that Tanaka is carrying something for A. Tanaka is not present and B merely acknowledges the statement. Tanaka is either a close friend of A, or for some reason, A is choosing to speak of Tanaka in a very casual language.

*Teinei go*- A: *Suzuki-san ni hakonde moraimasu.*

B: *Wakarimashita.*

A: Mr./Ms. Suzuki is carrying it for me.

B: I see.

Mr./Ms. Suzuki might be an acquaintance, but not a close friend; therefore standard polite *keigo* is used. Maybe A wishes to show a moderate degree of respect to Mr/Ms. Suzuki by speaking of him/her with standard polite language.

*Sonkei go*- A: *Fujita-sensei ni hakonde itadakimasu.*

B: *Honto desu ka.*

A: Professor Fujita is carrying it for me.

B: Is that true?

Here A states that Professor Fujita, who must be a senior professor and above A's rank, is carrying something for A. By making this statement with *sonkei go* A is showing respect to Professor Fujita, even though the eminent professor may not be present. Naturally, B is surprised because it is very unlikely that Professor Fujita would do something so menial.

*Kenjo go*) There is no example for *kenjo go* because it is usually reserved for those at the very top of a hierarchy and it is just not possible that the heads of a university would carry anything for A.

These examples of *keigo* hopefully make one point extremely clear. Speaking Japanese correctly and effectively means that one is constantly forced to reposition one's self socially, adding and taking away self-status and adjusting language accordingly, depending on the addressee and the environment. The individual who is capable of doing this is said to have *wakimae*. This individual can discern the values that surround and connect individuals in Japanese society and this allows them to participate fully in the social life of Japan. It may be more accurate to think of *keigo* then, not as honourific polite language, but as the language of discernment. For any foreign Japanese language learner, especially an adult learner, this may be the most demanding and important challenge. Without learning discernment and the language of discernment it is not possible to participate fully in the social life of Japan. It would be possible to communicate the crude meaning of a speech act but the addressee might very well choose to reject or ignore the speech act if the imbedded message of situational appropriate respect is absent. The addressee would perceive the speaker to be someone unable to produce and respond to the social messages contained in each speech act, making the speaker someone who cannot really understand Japanese society and therefore someone with whom it is not possible to establish a completely functional (in Japanese terms) social relationship. On the surface, *keigo* errors may look like mere grammatical errors. In reality the foreign Japanese language speaker who speaks, but without discernment, is also making socially fatal pragmalinguistic errors.

Teaching Discernment: *Keigo* is considered to be a necessary language skill but it is also considered to be an advanced language skill. This means that small children are not expected to know more than the basic elements. In fact, even many adult native Japanese speakers have trouble navigating the complexities, leading many fourth year university students embarking on their job searches to brush up on their *keigo* skills at seminars conducted by university career centres before taking part in the job interviews.

For adult foreign Japanese language learners, *keigo* is not studied in any detail until the student reaches at least an intermediate level. There are a wide variety of Japanese language texts and

educational videos in the intermediate and advanced levels that focus on the explanation and practice of roles and situations. Many Japanese language teachers also challenge their students to create their own skits, assigning different status roles and situations to students. In addition, an excellent source of realia is TV. In particular, NHK, the national television station is widely known for the uniformity and formality of many of its show announcers.

It would not be wrong to say that this is a very prescriptive view of language learning, one that in today's world of linguistic plurality (i.e. world Englishes) seems rather reactionary. At the present time there is no other choice though. *Keigo* embodies deeply ingrained cultural and social beliefs, communicates status, and even confers status on its speakers. Any individual who wishes to learn Japanese and then use it to participate in the social life of Japan must do their best to master this all-important facet of Japanese language. It is a goal, which I embarked upon many years ago, and one that I do not expect to achieve for many more years to come.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> *Keigo in Modern Japan, Polite Language from Meiji to the Present*, Wetzel, P., University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, 2004, p 6

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