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LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE KEIGO (HONORIFIC FORMS) SYSTEM IN THE JAPANESE LANGUAGE

Mohitabon Farhodjon qizi Usmonboyeva[a,*], Mohidil Sherali qizi Xodiyeva[b]

[a] *Third year student at Uzbekistan State World Languages University Foreign language and literature: English language*
[b] *Teacher at the Department of Japanese Philology Faculty of Oriental Philology Uzbekistan State World Languages University*
✉ 05mohitabon@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the linguistic and cultural characteristics of "keigo", the system of honorific forms in the Japanese language . The keigo system is one of the important communicative elements of Japanese and serves to express respect, humility, and social hierarchy in the process of communication . The article examines the main types of keigo — sonkeigo, kenjōgo, and teineigo — as well as their grammatical and pragmatic features . In addition, the connection between the keigo system and cultural values, social relations, and communication culture in Japanese society is discussed.

Keywords

Japanese language, keigo, honorific forms, linguistics, culture, sonkeigo, kenjōgo, teineigo.

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Introduction

The Japanese language stands out among the languages of the world due to its unique grammatical structure, writing system, and speech culture[1]. This language is mainly used in Japan and is spoken by millions of people. During the historical development of the Japanese language, its phonetic, grammatical, and lexical characteristics were formed, making it significantly different from many other languages[2]. One of its distinctive features is the extensive development of linguistic units that express respect and social relations in communication.

In Japanese society, respect, social order, and harmony are considered important values. Therefore, the language also reflects these cultural values[3]. In Japanese, there are special linguistic forms used to express respect and politeness, which are known as "keigo". Through the keigo system, the social distance between speakers, age differences, professional status, and levels of respect can be expressed[4].

The keigo system is an important communicative tool in the Japanese language and is widely used in both formal and informal communication. It plays a significant role especially in workplaces, educational institutions, official meetings, and everyday conversations when addressing elders. This system is not only a linguistic phenomenon but also an important means of regulating cultural and social relationships.

The main purpose of this article is to analyze the linguistic structure of the keigo system in the Japanese language and to explore its cultural characteristics.

[1]Shibatani, M. (1990). The Languages of Japan
[2]Ifazo. (n.d.). Yapon tili: tarixi, xususiyatlari va ahamiyati.
[3]Hendry, J. (2012). Understanding Japanese Society.
[4]Ide, S. (1989). Politeness in Japanese.

General Characteristics of the Japanese Language

Japanese belongs to the group of agglutinative languages. In such languages, grammatical meanings are expressed through various suffixes. The typical word order in Japanese is subject–object–verb. In addition, the Japanese writing system is complex and consists of three scripts: kanji, hiragana, and katakana.

Another important characteristic of the Japanese language is the wide development of linguistic units that express social relationships. Through language, the relationship between speakers, the level of respect, and social status can be expressed. This makes Japanese a pragmatically rich language.

Linguists emphasize that historical, cultural, and social factors have played an important role in the development of the Japanese language. Since social hierarchy and respect are highly valued in Japanese society, these features are also reflected in the language system. As a result, the keigo system emerged.

Linguistic Characteristics of the Keigo System

Keigo is a system of linguistic forms used in Japanese to express respect, humility, and politeness. This system is formed through grammatical and lexical means and serves to express social relationships between speakers during communication[5].

In linguistics, keigo is usually divided into three main types:

Sonkeigo (尊敬語)

Sonkeigo is the respectful form of language. It is used to show respect toward the listener or a third person[6]. This form is typically used when referring to people of higher status.

For example:

行く (iku) – to go

いらっしゃる (irassharu) – respectful form

Here, a special respectful verb form is used.

Kenjōgo (謙譲語)

Kenjōgo is the humble form of language. In this form, the speaker humbly refers to their own actions, thereby showing respect toward the listener[7].

For example:

言う (iu) – to say 申す (mōsu) – humble form

Kenjōgo is usually used in formal situations or when communicating with people of higher status.

Teineigo (丁寧語)

Teineigo is the polite form of speech. It is the most commonly used honorific form in everyday life. It is mainly formed by adding the endings **–masu** or **–desu** to verbs[8].

For example:

食べる → 食べます

The endings desu / masu indicate polite speech.

Teineigo is commonly used in formal communication, when speaking with strangers, or in situations where politeness must be maintained.

Cultural Characteristics of the Keigo System

The keigo system is closely connected with the cultural values of Japanese society. In Japanese culture, respect, humility, and collectivism play an important role[9]. Therefore, language serves as a tool to express these social values.

Social hierarchy is highly significant in Japanese society. For example, in the workplace, honorific forms are required when employees communicate with their supervisors[10]. Similarly, keigo is used when addressing people who are older.

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[7]Ide (1989). Politeness in Japanese.
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In addition, the concept of **“ wa “** , meaning social harmony, is very important in Japanese culture. The keigo system helps maintain this harmony[11]. The correct use of honorific forms ensures mutual respect and social balance within society.

Difficulties in Learning the Keigo System

The keigo system has complex grammatical and pragmatic rules, which makes it difficult to learn. Especially for foreign learners, using honorific forms correctly can be challenging[12].

Language learners often face difficulties in determining which honorific form should be used in a particular situation. This is because keigo depends not only on grammatical rules but also on social context[13].

Therefore, learning Japanese requires not only grammatical knowledge but also an understanding of the cultural characteristics of Japanese society.

Conclusion

The keigo system in the Japanese language is an important linguistic and cultural element. Through this system, respect, humility, and social relationships between speakers are expressed. Keigo consists of three main types, each performing specific functions in communication.

The findings show that the keigo system is closely connected with the cultural values of Japanese society. Expressing social relationships through language is one of the important features of Japanese culture.

Therefore, analyzing the keigo system from both linguistic and cultural perspectives is essential for a deeper understanding of the Japanese language.

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