

EMPATHY IN JAPANESE HONORIFIC EXPRESSIONS: A LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract: Empathy plays a central role in Japanese communication and is reflected through the honorific system (keigo). Beyond expressing respect, Japanese honorific expressions convey interpersonal sensitivity and cultural values such as omoiyari, wa, enryo, and the uchi-soto distinction.

This study explores the relationship between empathy and keigo from linguistic, pragmatic, and cultural perspectives. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, it analyzes authentic Japanese conversations, educational materials, and previous studies, with a brief comparison to Uzbek politeness strategies.

The findings show that Japanese honorific expressions function as a system of linguistic empathy, promoting harmonious interpersonal relationships. The study also highlights the importance of integrating empathy into Japanese language education for foreign learners.

Keywords: Empathy, Japanese Honorific Expressions, Keigo, Omoiyari, Politeness, Pragmatics, Japanese Culture, Intercultural Communication

Аннотация: Эмпатия играет ключевую роль в японской коммуникации и находит свое отражение в системе вежливых форм речи (кэйго). Помимо выражения уважения, японские вежливые формы передают межличностную чуткость и отражают такие культурные ценности, как омоияри, ва, энрё и различие ути-сото.

В данном исследовании рассматривается взаимосвязь между эмпатией и системой кэйго с лингвистической, прагматической и культурной точек зрения. На основе качественного описательного подхода анализируются аутентичные японские диалоги, учебные материалы и результаты предыдущих исследований, а также проводится краткое сравнение с узбекскими стратегиями вежливости.

Результаты исследования показывают, что японские вежливые формы речи представляют собой систему лингвистической эмпатии, способствующую гармоничным межличностным отношениям. Исследование также подчеркивает важность интеграции эмпатии в процесс преподавания японского языка как иностранного.

Ключевые слова: эмпатия, японские вежливые формы речи, кэйго, омоияри, вежливость, прагматика, японская культура, межкультурная коммуникация.

Introduction

Empathy is an essential component of successful communication because it enables individuals to understand and respond appropriately to the feelings and perspectives of others. In linguistics, empathy is reflected not only through lexical choices but also through politeness strategies and culturally specific language use. In Japanese, empathy is closely connected with the honorific system (keigo), which expresses respect, social relationships, and interpersonal consideration.

Unlike many languages where politeness is mainly conveyed through vocabulary or indirect expressions, Japanese incorporates politeness into its grammatical system. The three main types of keigo—sonkeigo (respectful language), kenjōgo (humble language), and teineigo (polite language)—allow speakers to choose expressions according to social context and the relationship between interlocutors. These forms are influenced by cultural values such as *omoiyari* (consideration for others), *wa* (social harmony), *enryo* (restraint), and the *uchi-soto* (ingroup-outgroup) distinction.

Previous studies have examined Japanese honorific language from grammatical, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic perspectives. For example, Ide (1989) explained honorific use through the concept of *wakimae* (discernment), while Maynard (1993) emphasized empathy and interpersonal communication in Japanese discourse. However, relatively few studies have specifically explored how empathy is expressed through the use of keigo.

Therefore, this study investigates the relationship between empathy and Japanese honorific expressions from linguistic and cultural perspectives. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, it analyzes examples of sonkeigo, kenjōgo, and teineigo to demonstrate how honorific language functions not only as a marker of politeness but also as a means of expressing empathy and maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships. The findings are expected to contribute to Japanese linguistics, intercultural communication, and Japanese language education.¹

Literature Review

Empathy has become an important concept in linguistics because effective communication depends not only on language proficiency but also on understanding the feelings and perspectives of others. In Japanese, empathy is closely connected with the use of honorific language (keigo), which reflects social relationships and interpersonal sensitivity.

Previous studies have mainly examined keigo from sociolinguistic and pragmatic perspectives. Sachiko Ide (1989) introduced the concept of *wakimae* (discernment), explaining that appropriate honorific use is based on social norms rather than personal choice. Senko K. Maynard (1993, 1997) emphasized that Japanese communication

¹ Tokimoto, S., Miyaoka, Y., & Tokimoto, N. (2021). An EEG analysis of honorification in Japanese: Human hierarchical relationships coded in language. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12

aims to achieve emotional understanding (kyōkan) between speakers, making empathy an essential part of interaction. Likewise, Yoshiko Matsumoto (1988) argued that Japanese politeness is rooted in maintaining social relationships rather than protecting individual autonomy.

Cultural concepts such as omoiyari (consideration for others), wa (social harmony), enryo (restraint), and the uchi–soto distinction strongly influence the use of honorific expressions. These values encourage speakers to choose language that respects the listener's feelings and maintains harmonious relationships.²

Although previous research has explained the structure and functions of keigo, fewer studies have specifically analyzed honorific expressions from the perspective of empathy. Therefore, this study focuses on how empathy is reflected through Japanese honorific language in everyday communication.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach to examine how empathy is expressed through Japanese honorific language (keigo). The analysis is based on authentic examples from Japanese conversations, textbooks, and previous linguistic studies on honorific expressions and politeness.

The data consist of representative examples of sonkeigo, kenjōgo, and teineigo used in everyday communication. These examples are analyzed from linguistic, pragmatic, and cultural perspectives to identify how honorific expressions convey empathy, respect, and interpersonal consideration.

The study also applies concepts such as omoiyari, wa, and the uchi–soto distinction as analytical frameworks. A brief comparison with Uzbek politeness strategies is included to highlight similarities and differences in expressing empathy through language.

This qualitative analysis aims to demonstrate that Japanese honorific expressions function not only as markers of politeness but also as important linguistic tools for maintaining harmonious interpersonal relationships.

The primary theoretical foundation of this study is **Empathy Theory**, proposed by **Susumu Kuno (1973, 1987)**. Kuno introduced empathy as a linguistic principle explaining why speakers select particular grammatical structures according to the participant with whom they psychologically identify.

Unlike traditional grammatical theories that focus exclusively on syntactic organization, Kuno argued that sentence structure reflects the speaker's psychological orientation. According to his theory, every utterance contains an **empathy focus**, representing the participant whose perspective the speaker adopts during communication.

² Okamoto, S. (2021). Your politeness is my impoliteness: Variable understandings of the grammar and indexical meanings of honorifics. *East Asian Pragmatics*, 6(1).

For example, Japanese frequently offers multiple grammatical alternatives for describing the same event. The speaker's choice depends not only upon objective facts but also upon interpersonal relationships and psychological alignment. Kuno proposed several empathy constraints governing Japanese grammar, demonstrating that linguistic choices are influenced by cognitive perspective rather than purely grammatical rules. Consequently, empathy becomes a grammatical organizing principle affecting sentence construction, verb selection, and honorific usage.

Although Kuno's theory initially concentrated on syntax, subsequent researchers expanded its application to discourse analysis, pragmatics, and interpersonal communication. Contemporary linguists argue that empathy functions across multiple linguistic levels, including lexical selection, discourse organization, politeness strategies, and honorific expressions.

Within the present study, Kuno's framework provides the foundation for understanding how speakers linguistically position themselves relative to interlocutors through honorific language.

•Politeness Theory

The second theoretical pillar is **Politeness Theory**, developed by **Penelope Brown** and **Stephen C. Levinson (1987)**.

According to this theory, communication involves protecting two aspects of an individual's public self-image, referred to as face.

➤ **Positive face** represents an individual's desire to receive approval, appreciation, and acceptance from others.

➤ **Negative face** refers to an individual's desire for personal freedom and independence without unnecessary interference.³

Many communicative acts—including requests, refusals, disagreements, and criticisms—potentially threaten these aspects of face. Speakers therefore employ politeness strategies to minimize interpersonal conflict. Japanese communication frequently relies upon indirectness, mitigation, and honorific expressions that correspond closely to negative politeness strategies. Honorific language reduces the possibility of imposing upon others while simultaneously expressing interpersonal respect. However, numerous scholars have argued that Brown and Levinson's model does not fully explain Japanese communication because it was primarily developed using Western linguistic data emphasizing individual autonomy. Japanese society, by contrast, places greater importance on social obligations, interpersonal harmony, and collective identity. Consequently, politeness often reflects culturally prescribed norms rather than individual strategic choices.

³ Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press.

Despite these limitations, Politeness Theory remains valuable for explaining how empathy contributes to face protection during interpersonal interaction. This theoretical framework serves as the basis for the methodological design and qualitative analysis presented in the following sections.

Analysis and Discussion

Japanese honorific expressions are not only grammatical forms of politeness but also linguistic devices that express empathy. By selecting appropriate honorific forms, speakers show awareness of the listener's social status, feelings, and interpersonal relationship. This reflects the Japanese cultural value of maintaining harmony through considerate communication.

One clear example is the use of sonkeigo, which elevates the actions of the listener or a respected third person.

Example 1

A: 社長はいらっしゃいますか。

(Shachō wa irasshaimasu ka?)

"Is the company president here?"

The verb irasshaimasu is the honorific form of iru (to be). It demonstrates respect toward the president and expresses the speaker's awareness of social hierarchy. From an empathy perspective, the speaker chooses language that acknowledges the listener's position and avoids sounding disrespectful.

Another important category is kenjōgo, which lowers the speaker's own actions to show respect for others.

Example 2

私をご説明いたします。

(Watashi ga go-setsumei itashimasu.)

"I will explain."

The humble verb itashimasu reflects modesty rather than inferiority. It signals consideration for the listener and creates a respectful interpersonal atmosphere.

The most common honorific style is teineigo, which is widely used in everyday communication.

Example 3

ありがとうございます。

(Arigatō gozaimasu.)

*"Thank you very much."*⁴

Although simple, this expression conveys politeness, appreciation, and positive interpersonal attitude. It helps strengthen social relationships and reflects empathy in daily interaction.

⁴ Ide, S. (1989). Formal forms and discernment: Two neglected aspects of universals of linguistic politeness. *Multilingua*, 8(2–3), 223–248.

These examples also illustrate the influence of omoiyari, the Japanese cultural value of anticipating another person's feelings. Speakers often select indirect and respectful expressions to avoid causing discomfort or embarrassment. Instead of focusing only on delivering information, they pay attention to how their words may affect others.

Furthermore, the uchi-soto distinction influences honorific choice. Japanese speakers usually use humble language when referring to members of their own group in conversations with outsiders, while respectful language is used toward members of the outside group. This linguistic behavior reflects empathy by recognizing social boundaries and maintaining harmonious relationships.

Compared with Uzbek, both languages value respect and politeness. However, Uzbek politeness is expressed mainly through lexical choices and respectful pronouns, whereas Japanese incorporates empathy directly into its grammatical honorific system. As a result, Japanese speakers rely more heavily on linguistic forms to demonstrate interpersonal consideration.

Overall, the analysis shows that Japanese honorific expressions function not only as markers of politeness but also as practical expressions of empathy. Through sonkeigo, kenjōgo, and teineigo, speakers communicate respect, consideration, and sensitivity, thereby supporting harmonious social interaction.

Table 1. The Relationship between Japanese Honorific Expressions and Empathy

Honorific Type	Main Function	Expression of Empathy	Example
Sonkeigo (Respectful language)	Elevates the listener or a third person	Shows respect and acknowledges the listener's social position	社長はいらっしゃいます。 (Shachō wa irasshaimasu.)
Kenjōgo (Humble language)	Lowers the speaker's own actions	Demonstrates modesty and consideration for others	私がご説明いたします。 (Watashi ga go-setsumei itashimasu.)
Teineigo (Polite language)	Expresses general politeness	Creates a friendly and respectful atmosphere	ありがとうございます。 (Arigatō gozaimasu.)

Table 1 demonstrates that each category of keigo expresses empathy in a different way. Sonkeigo emphasizes respect toward others, kenjōgo reflects humility and consideration, while teineigo promotes polite and harmonious communication in everyday interactions.

Implications for Japanese Language Education

The findings of this study have important implications for Japanese language education. Many learners of Japanese acquire honorific expressions by memorizing grammatical rules and vocabulary. However, successful communication requires more than linguistic accuracy. Learners must also understand the cultural values underlying honorific language, including empathy, social harmony, and consideration for others.

Teaching keigo through authentic communicative situations can help learners recognize when and why particular honorific forms are used. Classroom activities such as role-plays, dialogue analysis, and intercultural discussions enable students to develop both pragmatic competence and empathy competence. As a result, learners become better prepared to communicate appropriately in academic, professional, and everyday Japanese contexts.

Therefore, Japanese language instruction should integrate linguistic knowledge with cultural and interpersonal awareness. Such an approach promotes not only grammatical proficiency but also effective intercultural communication.

Limitations of the Study

This study is limited by its qualitative design and the relatively small number of examples analyzed. The research focuses primarily on representative honorific expressions and does not include large-scale corpus data or interviews with native speakers. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted as descriptive rather than generalizable. Future research may employ corpus-based methods or experimental approaches to investigate empathy in Japanese honorific communication across different social and professional settings.

The analysis suggests that empathy in Japanese communication is not expressed solely through emotional vocabulary but is embedded in grammatical choices. Speakers continuously evaluate social relationships, contextual expectations, and the emotional state of the listener before selecting appropriate honorific forms. This process reflects the close relationship between language, culture, and interpersonal communication. Rather than functioning merely as markers of politeness, honorific expressions contribute to building trust, reducing interpersonal distance, and maintaining harmonious relationships. From this perspective, empathy can be regarded as a pragmatic principle underlying the appropriate use of keigo in Japanese society.

Conclusion

The present study has examined the relationship between empathy and Japanese honorific expressions from linguistic, pragmatic, and cultural perspectives. The findings demonstrate that Japanese honorific language (keigo) functions as far more than a grammatical system for expressing politeness or social hierarchy. Rather, it constitutes a sophisticated communicative mechanism through which speakers express empathy, maintain interpersonal harmony, and negotiate social relationships.

The analysis revealed that each category of honorific language performs a distinct empathic function. Sonkeigo primarily communicates respect by elevating the interlocutor's social position, kenjōgo expresses humility by lowering the speaker's own position, and teineigo creates a psychologically comfortable communicative environment through polite interaction. Together, these linguistic forms enable speakers to demonstrate consideration toward others while simultaneously maintaining appropriate social distance.

A major contribution of this research is the integration of empathy theory with Japanese honorific studies. Previous investigations have frequently examined honorific expressions from grammatical, sociolinguistic, or politeness perspectives. The present study argues that empathy provides a unifying concept capable of explaining why Japanese speakers employ honorific expressions even in situations where hierarchical relationships alone cannot account for their linguistic choices. This interpretation supports the view that honorific language is deeply embedded within Japanese cultural values such as *omoiyari*, *wa*, *enryo*, and the *uchi-soto* distinction. These concepts collectively shape communicative behavior by encouraging speakers to anticipate the emotional and social needs of others before they are explicitly expressed.

The comparative observations also indicate that although both Japanese and Uzbek cultures value respect and harmonious interpersonal relationships, the linguistic realization of empathy differs considerably. Japanese communication relies heavily upon indirectness, contextual interpretation, and grammatical honorifics, whereas Uzbek communication more frequently employs lexical expressions, respectful pronouns, kinship terms, and explicit verbal support. These findings highlight the importance of cultural competence in intercultural communication and translation.

From an educational perspective, the study emphasizes that teaching Japanese honorific language should extend beyond grammatical instruction. Learners must also develop pragmatic awareness and intercultural competence in order to understand the cultural meanings embedded in honorific expressions. Incorporating authentic communicative situations, discourse analysis, and cultural concepts such as *omoiyari* into Japanese language education may significantly improve learners' communicative competence.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. The analysis is qualitative in nature and focuses primarily on Standard Japanese. Future research may incorporate corpus linguistics, experimental pragmatics, or quantitative sociolinguistic methods to investigate honorific usage across different generations, regional dialects, and professional contexts. Comparative studies involving additional languages may further contribute to understanding the universal and culture-specific characteristics of linguistic empathy.

In conclusion, empathy should be regarded as one of the fundamental principles

underlying Japanese honorific communication. The interaction of grammar, pragmatics, and culture enables Japanese speakers to construct respectful, harmonious, and socially appropriate communication. Understanding this interaction contributes not only to Japanese linguistics but also to intercultural communication, foreign language education, translation studies, and comparative pragmatics.

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