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What is honorific language (keigo)?

Pera Pera Penguin's

5-minute Japanese Class by Hitomi Hirayama



Vol. 62

I don't really feel comfortable the way one of my colleague talks to me. One day at work, I suggested her for lunch, saying, "lunch ni ikō!" (Let's go for lunch together!) But she said, "mōshiwake-gozaimasen mada shigoto ga arimasu" (I'm afraid I haven't finished my work yet). Then, she casually asked another colleague, "coffee nomu?" (How about some coffee?). I am not her boss, but for some reason, she always uses polite Japanese every time she talks to me. Is it because I'm a foreigner? Or is it because I don't speak good Japanese?

■■■ Oh, it's nothing to do with your Japanese! The reason why she uses honorific forms (**keigo**) is to maintain a certain distance in your relationship. By using **keigo**, she subtly expressed her inner feelings, although you didn't realize it. Using **keigo** in such a way is completely different from the old-fashioned, conservative usage. I will explain **keigo** in a number of lessons. After this, you will feel like a psychologist!

----- Basically **keigo** is polite but...-----

The usage of **keigo** must be adapted according to a hierarchical relationship based on the status and rank of the speaker and listener. Therefore, many Japanese are unwilling to use **keigo** as they feel it is extremely troublesome to use in conversation. But modern **keigo** has become a mere facade. The reality is that it does not always function in a time-honored conservative way.

1. Present-day **keigo** is used for the speaker's benefit!

Other people might conclude that a speaker is poorly educated or has been raised in an improper way if he/she is not able to use **keigo** according to the time, the place and occasion, not just the hierarchical relationship.

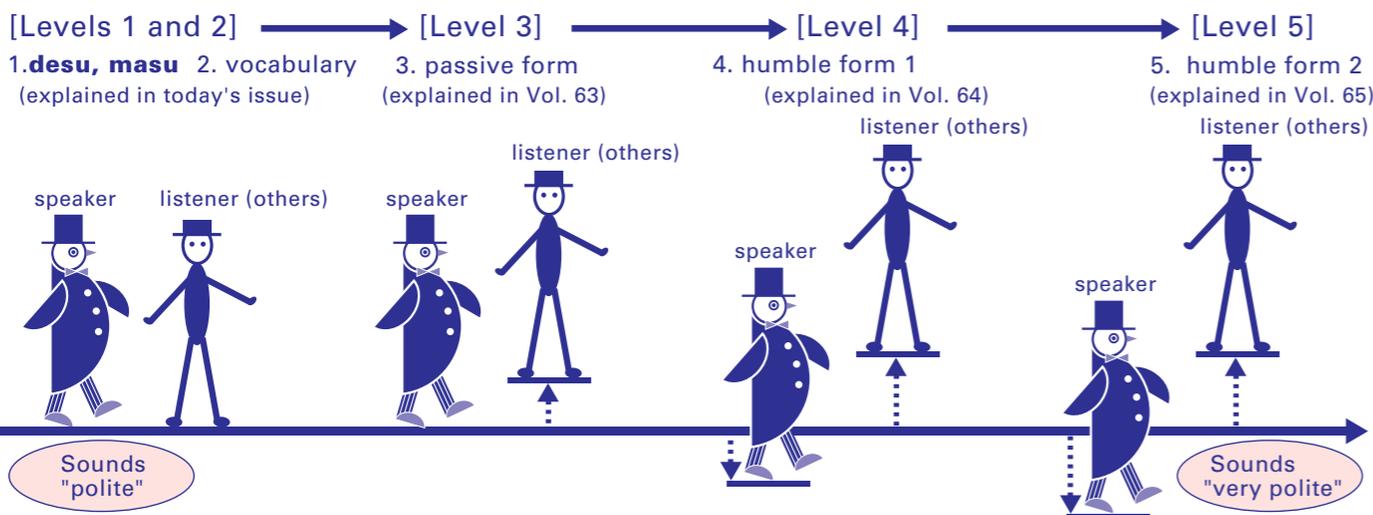
Let's try !

- | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Shall we be going? | 2. Is it raining? |
| 3. I forgot. | 4. Do you have time? |
| 5. I don't drink alcohol at all. | 6. I couldn't do it. |
| 7. It is not convenient. | 8. I think so. |
| 9. What do you like? | 10. I can't remember. |
| 11. I hope so. | 12. It's a small world. |
| 13. What for example? | 14. It's too bad. |

- Answers
- | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. soro-soro ikimasu ka? | 2. ame desu ka? |
| 3. wasuremashita | 4. ojikan arimasu ka? |
| 5. osake wa zen-zen nomimasen | 6. dame deshita |
| 7. benri dewa arimasen | 8. sō omoimasu |
| 9. nani ga osuki desu ka? | 10. omoidasemasen |
| 11. sō dato ii desu ne | 12. yononaka semai desu |
| 13. tatoeba nan desu ka? | 14. zannen desu |

A. In public areas..... e.g. At work, or talking with customers, etc. Level 1 ~ Level 5

The higher the implied status of the listener (others), the politer it sounds, even if the respect shown is only perfunctory!



2. Present-day **keigo** is used to imply one's thoughts and feelings!

Using **keigo** in this way can be advantageous to the speaker. If you learn to recognize this usage, you will be better placed to read the thoughts and feelings of others. (It will be explained in Vol. 66)

- B. Obtaining an advantage when you are in a disadvantageous position.
e.g. Having others accept an apology or grant permission or an "unreasonable" request, etc.
- C. Establishing a distance in human relations..... e.g. Ending a relationship with a listener.

Level 1. **keigo** with [**desu, masu**, and **o/go** + noun, i-adj., na-adj.]

★With this type of **keigo**, your Japanese starts to sound more polite, and your reputation improves.

Even if you are not familiar with the polite form of speech, you may find these easy to use. Using **desu, masu** and **o/go** in your Japanese is enough to start speaking politely, polite enough to talk with the prime minister. Vol. 38 explains "o/go" in detail, so take a look at the past issues.

- | | |
|---------------|---|
| noun, na-adj. | desu / deshita / dewa arimasen / dewa arimasen deshita |
| i-adj. | desu / katta desu / kunai desu / kunakatta desu |
| verb → | masu / mashita / masen / masen deshita |

Level 2. **keigo** with [Vocabulary]

★ If you use this type of **keigo** in business, your way of talking starts to sound more "intellectual."

Written language is frequently used in TV news, speeches and conferences. It sounds very polite when written Japanese is added to spoken Japanese. That is why literary expressions are commonly used in polite Japanese.

Some frequently used words are listed below. Try to determine the **keigo**

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. But..... demo → | 2. a little while ago..... sakki → |
| 3. the other day..... konoaida → | 4. today..... kyō → |
| 5. yesterday..... kinō → | 6. tomorrow..... ashita → |
| 7. this morning..... kyō no asa → | 8. last night..... yūbe → |
| 9. the day before..... mae no hi → | 10. who..... dare → |
| 11. I'm surprised..... bikkurishita → | 12. about 2kg..... daitai 2kg gurai → |
| 13. as I expected..... yappari → | 14. I'm sorry..... suimasen → |
| 15. here..... koko → | 16. there..... soko → |
| 17. over there..... asoko → | 18. where..... doko → |
| 19. this person..... kono hito → | 20. not at all..... chittomo → |
| 21. every one..... minna → | 22. many, a lot ippai → |
| 23. Do you know?..... shitemasu ka? → | 24. Why ?..... dōshite → |
| 25. very..... sugoku → | 26. therefore..... dakara → |
| 27. various, varied..... ironna → | 28. later..... ato de → |
| 29. good/ fine..... ii → | 30. because, so..... kara → |

- Answers
- | | |
|------------------------------------|----------------------|
| 1. shikashi | 2. sakihodo |
| 3. senjitsu | 4. honjitsu |
| 5. sakujitsu | 6. asu |
| 7. kesa | 8. sakuya |
| 9. zenjitsu | 10. donata |
| 11. odorokimashita | 12. yaku ___hodo |
| 13. yahari | |
| 14. sumimasen / mōshiwake arimasen | |
| 15. kochira | 16. sochira |
| 17. achira | 18. dochira |
| 19. kono kata / kochira no kata | |
| 20. sukoshimo | 21. minasama |
| 22. takusan | 23. gozonji desu ka? |
| 24. naze | 25. totemo |
| 26. desukara | 27. samazama na |
| 28. nochihodo | 29. yoroshii |
| 30. ___node | |

Use **keigo** in the following sentences.

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. There was an earthquake last night.
ゆうべ地震があった。
yūbe jishin ga atta | 2. I knew I was right!
やっぱりそうだった!
yappari so datta ! |
| 3. I canceled because I was busy.
忙しいからキャンセルした。
isogashii kara cancel shita | 4. Thanks for the other day.
この間はどうぞ。
kono aida wa dōmo |
| 5. I'm terribly sorry, but I will be about 20 minutes late.
ごめん、だいたい20分ぐらい遅れる。
gomen daitai 20-pun gurai okureru | 6. May I interrupt you?
ちょっといい?
chotto ii ? |
| 7. Do you know that?
知ってる?
shitteru? | 8. (in a speech) <Thank you very much for attending> even though you are all busy.
皆さん今日は忙しいところ.....
minasan kyō wa isogashii tokoro..... |
| 9. I will contact you later.
あとで連絡するね。
ato de renraku suru ne | 10. Who is that?
あの人は誰?
ano hito wa dare? |

- Answers
- | |
|---|
| 1. sakuya jishin ga arimashita |
| 2. yahari sōdeshita! |
| 3. isogashii node cancel shimashita |
| 4. senjitsu wa arigatō gozaimashita |
| 5. mōshiwake arimasen, yaku 20-pun hodo okuremasu |
| 6. sumimasen yoroshii desu ka? |
| 7. gozonji desu ka? |
| 8. minasama honjitsu wa oisogashii tokoro..... |
| 9. nochihodo renraku o shimasu |
| 10. achira no kata wa donata desu ka? |