

Honorifics in the Japanese Language

Japan is very well known for being very polite and respectful. This respect makes up a vast part of not only the culture, but the behavior seen in Japanese people. In the Japanese language, there is an honorific language known as keigo. Keigo has a way of showing status and social hierarchy based on what kind of honorific is being used. Keigo has three different kinds of branches; hearer honorifics, referent honorifics, and bikago.

Bikago can be found in all three forms of keigo. It is a little different from the others given it is not meant to express politeness towards the speaker or the listener. Bikago uses prefixes -o or -go depending on the word. -O prefixes are mostly used for words with a Japanese origin, and it can be used when referring to people. On the other hand, -go is used for words that stem from Chinese origins. Some ways to check whether -o or -go should be used is by checking the kanji. If the kanji is able to stand alone as a word with hiragana, then an -o would be used. If a kanji cannot be a word by itself or combining hiragana, then the speaker would then want to use -go. Below are a few common examples of bikago.

English	Japanese
How are you?	お元気 (ogenki)
Money	お金 (okane)
Wedding	ご結婚 (gokekkon)
Tea	お茶 (ocha)

Hearer honorifics, also known as teineigo, is most commonly used in daily life among strangers to express politeness and respect. This is also the form of Japanese a person will use with acquaintances or with individuals they are not close with. In comparison to the other forms of keigo, teineigo is slightly less formal, but it is still polite. It is the form most, if not all, new Japanese speakers learn first.

The conjugation for these verbs are simple. If the verb is an -u verb, then drop the -u and add -i to the verb. Finally, add masu to the end of it. For an example, if the verb was to cry, なく (naku), then drop the -u and change it to -i. With that, なく(naku) would then change into なきます(nakimasu). As for -ru verbs, drop the final -ru and add -masu to the end of it. For instance, with みる(miru), once the -ru is dropped, it would then turn into みます(mimasu). As for irregular verbs, the conjugation is somewhat different, but it is very easy to keep track of. In a sense, it is like a combination between -u and -ru verbs. Irregular verbs will normally end with -suru. Drop the -suru and change it into -shimasu. For example, びっくりする(bikkurisuru) would turn into びっくりします (bikkurishimasu) after dropping the -suru and adding -shimasu to the end.

Some more examples can be found in the table below:

English	Japanese Dictionary Form	Conjugation
To go	行く- iku	行きます - ikimasu
To drink	飲む - nomu	飲みます - nomimasu
To eat	食べる - taberu	食べます - tabemasu
To find	見つける - mitsukeru	見つけます - mitsukemasu
To study	勉強する - benkyousuru	勉強します - benkyoushimasu
To place an order	注文する- chumonsuru	注文します - chumonshimasu

Here are some example sentences using teineigo:

私は毎日お水を飲みます。
 Watashi wa mainichi o-mizu wo nomimasu.
 I drink water everyday.

私は本を読みました。
 Watashi wa hon wo yomimashita.
 I read a book.

私は見ません。
 Watashi wa mimasen.
 I can't see.

With referent honorifics, there are two branches: sonkeigo and kenjougo. Both forms of sonkeigo deal with an important aspect known as uchi and soto. Uchi means inside; in uchi, this means people within the speaker's social group. This can be the speaker's family, their coworkers, and themselves. Soto on the other hand is the opposite; this is people outside the speaker's group such as their boss, strangers, and teachers. Mastering this is necessary given the speaker will have to change how they speak depending on who they are speaking to.

Sonkeigo, mostly referred to as honorific language, is used to describe someone else's actions and the actions of others someone may respect. Sonkeigo may be used towards customers, a boss, elders, or others that may have a higher status. In other words, sonkeigo is primarily used within business settings and for the speaker's outside group. Sonkeigo is never used in casual settings such as with close friends and family or to describe one's own actions. It may come across as either too formal or perhaps strange and egotistical – egotistical if it is being used to refer to one's own actions. Some words may have certain honorific verbs as shown in the table below:

English	Japanese Dictionary Form	Honorific Verb
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To go To exist To come	行く(iku) いる (iru) 来る (kuru)	いらっしゃる (irassharu)
To eat To drink	食べる (taberu) 飲む (nomu)	召し上がる (meshiagaru)
To give	くれる (kureru)	くださる (kudasaru)
To do	する (suru)	なさる (nasaru)
To sleep	寝る (neru)	お休みになる (oyasumi ni naru)
To watch	みる (miru)	ご覧になる(goran ni naru)
To speak	言う (iu)	おっしゃる (ossharu)

As seen in the table, not every verb has a set honorific verb to follow with it. For those that do not have a special honorific verb, they use the general formula below:

お/ご (o / go) + verb stem + になる (ni naru)

A few examples with verbs that will use this formula are:

お買いになる
O kai ni naru
To (graciously) buy

お帰りになる
O kaeri ni naru
To (graciously) return

Below are a few examples featuring this honorific:

部長、何か召し上がりますか？
Buchou, nani ka meshiagarimasuka?
Manager, would you like something to eat / drink?

In this sentence, the speaker is asking their manager if they would like to do the honor of eating or drinking anything. The speaker is respecting the manager's action of eating or drinking, hence the usage of sonkeigo here.

The second branch of referent honorifics, kenjougo (also known as humble language), is used to describe one's own actions. Kenjougo can also be used to modestly talk about family members or talk about the company they work for– so individuals that are within their group. It is never used to describe someone else's actions. Similar to sonkeigo, kenjougo is primarily used in business situations. Kenjougo also has its own special verbs as well. Their verbs can be found in the table below:

English	Japanese Dictionary Form	Honorific Verb
To exist	いる (iru)	おる (oru)
To go To come	行く (iku) 来る (kuru)	まいる (mairu)
To say	言う (iu)	もうす (mousu)
To do	する (suru)	いたす (itasu)
To eat To drink To receive	食べる (taberu) 飲む (nomu) もらう/ くれる (moaru / kureru)	いただく (itadaku)
To be / have	ある (aru)	ござる (gozaru)
Subject link	～です (desu)	～でござる (degozaru)
To humbly visit or ask	—	うかがう (ukagau)
To give	あげる (ageru)	さしあげる (sashiageru)

Like sonkeigo, not every verb has a special humble verb. In the case a verb without a special humble term is used, most verbs can follow this general formula:

お/ご (o / go) + verb stem + する (suru)

先生は明日学校に参りますか？

Sensei wa ashita gakkou ni mairimasuka?

Are you coming to the school tomorrow, teacher?

Given kenjougo is meant to explain the speaker's own actions, this honorific should never be used towards someone higher up. A few example sentences using this honorific can be found below:

私はバルジョナオータムと申します。

Watashi wa barujouna ootamu to moushimasu.

My name is Autumn Barjona.

私は二年間日本語を勉強しております。

Watashi wa ni nen kan nihongo wo benkyoushite orimasu.

I've been studying Japanese for two years.

In these sentences, the speaker is speaking about themselves while humbling themselves down. In a sense, they are lowering the status of themselves by using kenjougo. For instance, if this was an interview, these are the kind of sentences someone would expect to hear when responding back to questions someone higher up may give them. If the speaker were to respond using sonkeigo, then the speaker could come across as potentially rude or boastful of their achievements.

References

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