

# POLITE LANGUAGE IN MODERN JAPAN

Wetzel, Patricia J. 2004. *Keigo in Modern Japan. Polite Language from Meiji to the Present*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 304 pages, ISBN 0 8248 2602 7

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**K**eigo is the Japanese word for 'polite' or 'honorific language'. The term is also used to cover the more general phenomenon of 'linguistic etiquette'. Although aspects of *keigo* are present in every language, one can assign Japanese *keigo* a special place in the field of socio-linguistic enquiry, as it was its critical examination by Japanese and other linguists in the late 1990s, together with the response to the seminal publication of Brown and Levinson's *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Use* (1987), that marked the wave of scholarly attention to 'politeness'.

The study of 'polite and honorific language' has subsequently become central to socio-linguistics, resulting in numerous publications examining the phenomenon within different frameworks of enquiry and in different languages. The interest in 'politeness' has recently spawned its own journal, the *Journal of Politeness Research*, and its own society, the Linguistic Politeness Research Group. 'Politeness studies' includes research on such variables as morphological and non-morphological coding of politeness, social distance, power, authority and degree of imposition of linguistic acts in different discourse contexts either in a single language or across languages. This domain of inquiry thus acts as a bridge and also constitutes a vital aspect in a related field of research known as 'intercultural communication'.

Patricia Wetzel, author of *Keigo in Modern Japan*, deserves recognition for providing the linguistic community with a timely and in-depth study of politeness phenomena in Japanese. The book, which critically incorporates original Japanese resources, has two parts. The first gives an account of aspects of Japanese *keigo*; the second provides original Japanese texts and English translations of the most important 'official' (National Language Council) guidelines on the proper use and functions of *keigo*.

## What is keigo?

The first part begins with an introduction answering 'What is *keigo*?' Here Wetzel concludes rather generally that 'By its nature *keigo* represents the Japanese linguistic response to the boundary between self and other, much as person does in Indo-European languages' (p.6). The discussion here also highlights Wetzel's rightful claim that although morphologically marked honorific language has long been a structural feature of the Japanese language, the term *keigo* itself – along with a certain '*keigo*-ideology' – was invented only at the beginning of the 20th century by Japanese grammarians in consultation and co-ordination with the National Language Council. This makes *keigo* just as much a response to contact with 'western languages' as it is the result of attempts to codify

the then contemporary, spoken Japanese language (of Tokyo) as the nationwide standard for instruction and communication. The ideology that Wetzel alludes to here is vague, yet very much alive – evident in popular ideas such as *keigo* is uniquely Japanese; *keigo* creates social identity; *keigo* is important in communication ('I want to be more confident and better versed in *keigo*'); *keigo* is 'in a state of disarray' (the young generation cannot use it properly, if at all).

These introductory remarks introduce an outline of some 'western' analyses of *keigo* (Ch.1, 'Keigo in Linguistics'), contrasted with examples of work within the *kokugogaku* (Japanese language philology) paradigm (Ch.3, 'Keigo in Kokugogaku'). The author points out that it was Roy Andrew Miller (1967) who spread the notion in the West that Japanese women use more polite language than men, echoing the ideological Japanese claim – based on the Confucian heritage – that there is a special 'women's language' defined at least in part by women's more frequent and elaborate use of *keigo*. Actually, there is no good empirical evidence for any linear relationship between the use of *keigo* and gender, or even age. Wetzel further argues that 'in many circumstances, *keigo* has nothing whatsoever to do with politeness' or 'deference' (p.16) but fulfils important ancillary functions including, but not restricted to, such phenomena as the structuring of discourse and discourse modality. Wetzel concludes that '*keigo* ideology' is just 'more complex' than often acknowledged in most works of 'western' linguistics, a view one cannot but support.

This leads to a historical account of *keigo* studies in *kokugogaku* (Japanese language philology). It provides the nomenclature used in the classification of (morphologically codified) *keigo* according to *teinei-go* (polite forms), *kenjo-go* (humble forms), *sonkei-go* (honorific forms), *bika-go* (beautifying forms), the all-embracing *taigo-hyogen* (expressions of consideration) and the *hi-gengo-hyogen* (non-linguistic expressions). The last comprise matters such as 'neat clothing', attitudes, manners and behaviour. The author successfully shows philological preoccupation with questions of terminology, the lack of distinguishing between language and the context of language use, and lack of rigour in many *kokugo*-grammar analyses.

'Inventing Keigo: Standardization' (Ch.3) details the 'official' interventions of various language councils since the beginning of the 20th century, providing a lucid history of *keigo* prescriptivism: how, when, where and why the 'received set' was recommended. To understand this discussion it is important to realise that 'language politics and planning' remains a living and influential activity in Japan (as it does elsewhere); Wetzel rightfully sees it as 'a by-product of the formation of national identities' (p.43) driven by the still prevalent opinion

that 'linguistic stabilization is a precursor to modernization' (pp.44-45). It is here that *keigo*-related information in the two appendices is most useful: by presenting the original Japanese text alongside excellent translations, it gives readers a first-hand impression of the nature of 'official advice and guiding' on *keigo*.

## The trouble with our youth

'Keigo as Common Sense' (Ch.5) draws examples from various settings to illustrate 'what it means to be Japanese' and how *keigo* is not just 'linguistic forms and rules' but a force that impinges on everyday life. The immediate period after the second world war is regarded as the 'golden age' of *keigo*, followed by a time of relative disinterest before the 1970s spawned '*keigo*-nostalgia'. The present '*keigo*-disarray' results in limited active and 'correct' use of *keigo* among younger generations, leading to the publication of numerous 'how-to-do-*keigo*' manuals and courses for 'proper language use'. But the 'how-to-do-*keigo*' manuals and courses, as Wetzel found out by attending one, did not emphasise linguistically-oriented *keigo* training but 'proper [prescribed] general conduct' in social situations. Thus the target is not linguistic content, but such matters as greeting rules or even non-verbal aspects of public speech or behaviour.

Wetzel's book is ground-breaking and this review cannot do justice to the wealth of information presented on any of the various aspects of Japanese *keigo*. To get at the details, the reader must inspect the volume for himself, as it provides a wealth of content and bibliographical information in English and Japanese that I have not found anywhere else. From there one can proceed to detailed and theoretically grounded research on almost any aspect of 'polite language' – in Japanese or any other language. ◀

## References

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