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SPEAKING IN RANK: A COMPARATIVE ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF HIERARCHICAL LANGUAGE PRACTICES IN JAVANESE AND JAPANESE CULTURES

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Abstract

This study examines how hierarchical values are expressed and maintained through language in both Javanese and Japanese societies. Its goal is to explore the role of language in articulating and reinforcing social stratification in two different cultural settings. Using a comparative ethnographic approach, the study examines how these linguistic systems function within their respective socio-cultural contexts. The results show that both languages employ language codes heavily influenced by factors such as age, social status, and proximity between individuals. This linguistic practice not only functions as a marker of politeness but also as a tool to manage power dynamics and uphold traditional norms. The discussion highlights how language choices serve as mechanisms for asserting social standing and shaping identities within hierarchical structures. In conclusion, this article demonstrates that understanding language practices provides valuable information about cultural concepts, emphasizing respect and obedience within social hierarchies. It also advocates for further cross-cultural research to deepen the understanding of how language reflects and influences social hierarchies.

Keywords: hierarchy; Japanese; Javanese; Speaking level.

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INTRODUCTION

Language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a

tool for cultural expression, serving as a primary resource for forming individual and collective identities (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). In some societies, language is frequently used to showcase and reinforce unequal social relationships. This phenomenon is especially noticeable in Javanese and Japanese cultures, both of which employ complex speech hierarchical systems that mirror relationships between speakers (Foley, 1997; Sugimoto, 2010).

In Javanese, the layered speech level system is indicated by the *unggah-ungguh*. The choice of speech level is determined by factors such as age, familiarity, and social status (Errington, 1988). Meanwhile, the Japanese use the *keigo* system to manage hierarchical relationships that are common in Japanese society. Despite their different cultural contexts, both languages highlight social standing distinctions through language choices (Ide, 1989; Wetzel, 2004).

Several studies have tried to examine how specific linguistic structures operate in everyday communication. For example, Sumekto et al. (2022) have studied the difference in the use of *ngoko* ("low") and *krama* ("high") speech levels in Central Java, Indonesia. The use of *ngoko* is usually among peers or in informal settings, indicating familiarity and friendliness, while *krama* is reserved for more formal occasions or interactions with individuals of higher social status, signifying respect and politeness. This linguistic sensitivity enables speakers to adjust their communication styles effectively, expressing respect or closeness with their interlocutor.

Wajdi et al. (2013) expanded on the concept of using "code-switching" in the Javanese language. Their analysis revealed that speakers use *ngoko* and *krama* strategically to convey hierarchical politeness and clarify social rank during conversations. These findings support the theoretical framework proposed by Brown & Gilman (1960), which explores the relationship between the form of address and power dynamics. By engaging in code-switching, speakers exhibit a strong awareness and sensitivity to hierarchical structures within their social contexts.

Meanwhile, in Japan, researchers are studying a traditional system of respect known as *keigo*. They have come to see the system not just as formal rules of etiquette but as a framework embedded with ideology and culture. This perspective suggests that the use of *keigo* reflects the social and cultural norms that shape interactions in Japanese society, subtly indicating social hierarchy.

Momo et al. (2008) found in their research on the neurocognitive aspects and behavior of respect language that there are variations in language levels used by individuals during communication, adjusted to personal characteristics and age groups. These findings suggest that the ability to interpret and employ expressions of respect can vary significantly among individuals and groups.

Although some studies have examined the relationship between language and social structure in each culture (Barešova, 2015; Errington, 1988; Sumekto et al., 2022), there is a lack of comparative ethnographic research on speech level choices and hierarchical expressions in communication. This

study aims to fill that gap by describing how linguistic practices in Javanese and Japanese cultures reflect and regulate social interaction.

What makes this research unique is its comparative ethnographic approach, emphasizing the social context of language in community interactions rather than focusing solely on formal linguistic structures. By exploring aspects of politeness and how speakers negotiate social status and identity, the study enhances cross-cultural understanding of language as a symbolic tool for maintaining social hierarchies across Southeast and East Asia.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative comparative ethnography approach to examine the linguistic practices that embody hierarchical values in Javanese and Japanese cultures. This method was selected to capture the social significance inherent in different speech levels and forms of respect within the unique social contexts of each culture.

Data collection involved a combination of observation, unstructured interviews, and literature reviews drawn from relevant ethnographic and sociolinguistic sources. The research was conducted in Java, Indonesia, and Japan, with data gathering occurring between July 2021 and July 2024. Conversational data and field notes from both cultural settings were transcribed and organized. These materials were then analyzed alongside the interview data to identify hierarchical markers, including honorific expressions, speech levels, and terms of address.

Following this, a comparative analysis was performed to uncover the hierarchical values embedded in the linguistic practices of both societies. To enhance the credibility and validity of the findings, data validation was conducted through source and method triangulation, as well as confirming interpretations with informants.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section focuses on the research findings and discussions. Its structure reveals hierarchical expression patterns seen in both cultures and includes a comparative analysis.

1. Hierarchical Linguistic Coding

The politeness theory developed by Brown & Levinson in 1987 explains people's efforts to maintain their self-esteem through linguistic strategies called "face." In interactions, individuals often consciously use techniques such as topic transfer, indirect language, or specific word choices to ensure their speech does not sound lacking in understanding or too harsh, thereby protecting their self-esteem. This theory suggests that social interactions within society influence an individual's speech style, guiding how to maintain modesty and preserve self-esteem.

However, the politeness theory has faced criticism. Some critics question its ability to explain hierarchy in societies with deeply rooted values and culture. This criticism has led to further research on decency to examine hierarchical values in more specific cultures, like Javanese and Japanese cultures.

a. Javanese Speaking Level

The Javanese language is known for its complex speech level system. According to Ekowardono et al. (1993) and Sudaryanto (1989), the system

mainly consists of two primary levels: *ngoko* and *krama* (see chart 1). As mentioned earlier, ngoko is an informal way of speaking used among friends and family, which encourages a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. In contrast, *krama* is typically used in formal settings to show respect to the listener, such as during ceremonies or when speaking to elders and individuals in positions of higher social standing. This speech level reflects social relationships and cultural norms in Javanese society.

The complexity of speaking Javanese highlights the importance of respecting interlocutors. It also serves as the foundation for discovering the hierarchical values in Javanese conversations. When speaking Javanese, speakers must carefully choose their speech level and adjust their language according to the social status of their conversation partner, thereby embodying the core values of Javanese culture.

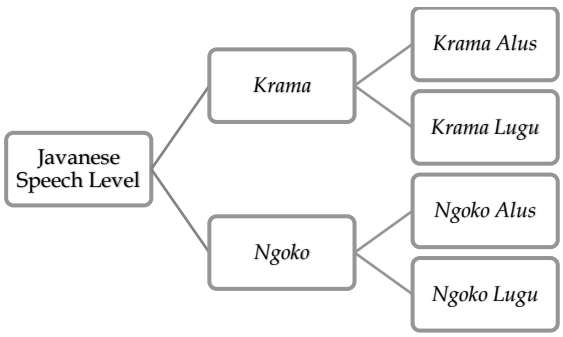

Chart 1: Distribution of speech levels by (Ekowardono et al., 1993; Sudaryanto, 1989)

An example of how Javanese language levels are used can be seen in a conversation between the participants:

> Mom: "*Sowan nggone Pak Budiman. Nggone anak yatim, ndherek apa piye?"* (I'm going to visit Mr. Budiman to meet the orphans there. Are you coming with me?)
>
> Son : "*Tumut, nitih menapa?"* (I am, but how do we go there?)

In this dialogue, the mother speaks with her son using *ngoko*, which is appropriate given his age and higher status. Conversely, boys talk to their mothers using *krama*, since she is younger and holds a lower position in these interactions.

Based on the observation, participants believe that the use of the Javanese language remains a vital part of Javanese society. A member of the Language Agency in Yogyakarta noted that the community has a strong understanding of this system, which is highly valued. He states that, "Typically, subordinates tend to use good manners when talking to their superiors," emphasizing the deep-rooted respect for hierarchical relationships.

The importance of this structured language is evident in educational settings. A Javanese teacher described a school program called "*Kemis Njawani*" (Thursday in Javanese), which encourages the use of *krama* every Thursday. The initiative aims to foster respect and cultural identity among students. The teacher explained,

> "When I speak, I use *krama*. This practice is essential to help students internalize social etiquette."

This indicates that the practice of this language reflects larger societal values.

Young children typically learn the use of structured *krama* through socialization at home and in school. For example, in the observation in Surakarta, Indonesia, when a father asked his

daughter about her daily activities, she replied, "*nyerat pelajaran*" (writing lessons). She intentionally used the *krama* form of "*nyerat*" (writing) instead of the more casual "*nulis*." This response demonstrates her effort to show respect to his parents and spot the subtle social manners embedded in their interactions.

Additionally, interactions between students and older individuals, such as those observed in school, further demonstrate this practice. One student said,

> "*Menawi kula piyambak remen basa Jawi, nyinaoni basa Jawi nggih remen*" (I enjoy learning Javanese because it's fun).

In this statement, students deliberately choose *krama* over the informal *ngoko* to show politeness. If translated into *ngoko*, "*kula*" (I) would be "aku", which is considered rude when addressing older people. This careful word choice reflects students' understanding of the social hierarchy.

This finding aligns with the work of researchers such as Smith-Hefner (2009), Tamtomo (2019), and Zentz (2015), who reveal that the Javanese speech level system encompasses linguistic, political, and moral aspects that reflect the community's ideology. Geertz (1960), in his influential ethnographic study, explains how the Javanese language reflects the hierarchical structure of palace culture and bureaucracy, emphasizing the strong connection between speech levels and core values such as strength and respect.

Based on observations and supporting statements from researchers, it can be concluded that Javanese speakers are mindful of hierarchical relationships, rather than merely following rigid language rules. This evidence underlines the active relationship between language use and social structure in Javanese culture.

b. *Keigo* in Japanese

The Japanese language also has a layered system of respect called *keigo*, which is divided into three main categories: *sonkeigo* (polite language), *kenjōgo* (humble language), and *teineigo* (formal polite language) (Ide, 1989; Maynard, 1997). An informant from Gifu, Japan, said that:

> "The three categories are still relevant today. In addition, these categories can even be subdivided into more specific levels of speech tailored to individual situations."

Along with this, Barešova (2015) categorizes *keigo* into more complex categories: *sonkeigo* (respectful language), *kenjōgo* (humble language), *teineigo* (polite language), *bikago* (beautified language), and *teichōgo* (polite language). Each category has a specific function determined by social conditions, the nature of interpersonal relationships, and the differences in social status among speakers. This idea is supported by Fukushima (2019) and Okamoto & Shibamoto-Smith (2016), who argue that mastery of *keigo* involves not only grammatical understanding but also sensitivity to the complexity of Japanese society, cultural insights, and social awareness.

The use of *keigo* appears in both casual and formal settings. However, it is most prominently used in Japan's service industry. The culture enforces strict rules on interactions between service providers and customers to maintain a respectful

distance. Service employees are trained to use *sonkeigo* when speaking to clients to raise the customer's status while also employing *kenjōgo* to humble themselves. A practical example is a bank situation where a staff member might say to a customer (participant in this study) wanting to close an account:

> "*Dewi-sama, kouza wo kaiyaku saremasuka. Shōshō omachi kudasaimase*" (Mrs. Dewi, I understand you want to close your savings account. Please wait a minute).

In this conversation, the "*-sama*" suffix is crucial because it conveys high respect, typically reserved for esteemed customers or individuals of higher social standing. This is preferred over the more common "*-san*," which indicates an even higher social status. The phrase "*koza wo kaiyaku saremasuka* uses *kenjōgo* and *teineigo*. The *"kaiyaku saremasu"* expresses a humble desire to complete a task. Following this, "*Shōshō omachi kudasaimase*" demonstrates the application of *sonkeigo*. It politely asks customers to wait, fostering subtle refinement that makes customers feel valued and recognized, thus maintaining a respectful vertical relationship. Constructing such polite expressions not only facilitates smooth interactions but also reinforces social functions and social hierarchies. Mastering *keigo* involves understanding the rules, which helps build a professional identity and social status in professional environments. Additionally, corpus-based studies reveal how *keigo* systematically conveys status (Liu & Kobayashi, 2022).

In the context of banking service terminology, the phrase "*kaiyaku saremasu*" is typically used by the second party, usually the company, to outline the account closure process. In contrast, customers convey their desire to close an account with the term "*kaiyakushitai*". It's worth noting that Japanese closing phrases can differ based on the topic at hand. The term for a bank account in Japanese is "*kouza*", while "*kaiyaku*" pertains specifically to the act of cancellation of a contract. The verbs associated with this action are "*suru*" (to do) and "*sareru*" (to be done). In this situation, staff often avoid the overly formal and somewhat stiff "*de gozaimasu*" when interacting with customers. Instead, they use "*saremasuka*", which remains polite (*teineigo*) yet more approachable.

In Japan, phrases like "*yoroshiku onegaishimasu*" and "*shitsurei itashimasu*" serve as social lubricants in workplaces, demonstrating courtesy and respect. So far, the use of *keigo* has been developed through institutional training aimed at enhancing professionalism and familiarity. For example, business etiquette sessions teach new hires how to incorporate honorific language into their professional persona (Dunn, 2013). Overall, the use of *keigo* reflects Japanese cultural values that emphasize respect, hierarchy, and context in communication.

2. Contextual Sensitivity and Index Shifts

Both languages exhibit a remarkable level of contextual sensitivity, allowing for real-time adjustments in speaking style based on the interlocutor. For instance, when chatting with peers, the speech level used is *ngoko*. However, if an older person unexpectedly joins the conversation, the speech automatically shifts to a more formal manner. This change indicates a good awareness of social hierarchy in speech.

This sensitivity is also evident in Japanese speakers, who demonstrate flexibility in using *keigo* by adjusting to the social function and number of participants in the conversation. This may involve changing verb forms, using specific honorific titles, or selecting appropriate sentence particles. Communicative strategies and ideological frameworks drive these adjustments. In particular, Japanese discourse illustrates how choices regarding honorific suffixes and sentence structures reflect a complex interplay of linguistic ideologies, contextual factors, and social hierarchies—not just strict adherence to social classifications (Okamoto, 1997).

In contrast, switching between *ngoko* and *krama* in Javanese interactions results from real-time hierarchical adjustments. This is especially common in public settings, where communication between service providers and recipients requires awareness of each other's relative status.

3. Cultural Values Embedded in Language

In Javanese culture, there is a phrase, "*ajining dhiri saka lathi*," which translates to the belief that a person's self-esteem is linked to their speech. The choice of words and speech level can reflect a speaker's dignity and personal identity within Javanese culture. This relationship is particularly significant for younger generations, as their understanding of speech levels serves as a marker of their cultural identity.

In Japan, sociolinguistic norms are shaped by concepts like "*wa*," which represents harmony, and "*enryo*," meaning restraint. These ideas reflect the cultural values that influence communication styles. Although these values are deeply rooted in the collective social consciousness, they continue to influence modern communication practices. Japanese interactions typically rely on collectivism and high-context communication, where subtle cues and indirect speech are essential. This approach helps maintain hierarchical relationships and group harmony, both of which are vital to Japanese social order. The emphasis on respect and consideration for others' feelings creates a complex web of sociolinguistic nuances that support these cultural ideals in the interactions.

4. Metalinguistic Awareness and Challenges

Informants from Javanese and Japanese cultural backgrounds reported changes in the way formal language is used in both languages. Sometimes, it is found that speech level is misused in conversations. This trend appears to stem from generational shifts in language use and communication styles. In the context of Javanese, young speakers are increasingly opting for *ngoko*, a more informal and familiar form of speech, or even Indonesian, for their daily conversations. According to Said (2025), there is a concerning decline in the quality of speech levels among youth Javanese. This issue is especially pronounced in urban areas with diverse linguistic communities, where the mixing of languages often results in a decline in the use of formal speech in interactions.

A statement from a representative of the Central Java Language Agency reinforced this:

> "Did you know that many Javanese speakers prefer *ngoko*? I myself also struggle to use *krama*, especially among others."

This highlights the difficulties of mastering current speech levels and reflects a broader trend of declining proficiency in using formal language appropriately.

Similarly, in Japan, some young people find it challenging to use the strict form of *keigo*. This difficulty is especially evident in informal online media, such as social media and chat apps, where communication tends to be more casual and straightforward. Younger speakers are actively creating new polite language, as seen in the emergence of the suffix "*-ssu*" as a marker of politeness. This trend not only indicates a generational change but also reveals a deeper tension around the proper use of honorifics (Akagi et al., 2020). A language instructor from Yamaguchi said,

> "The use of Japanese has changed lately. Some students use the wrong words when talking to others."

These comments reveal subtle shifts in how language is used within the community. It also indirectly threatens the hierarchy and cultural values in both cultures.

Research by Okamoto & Shibamoto-Smith (2016), Smith-Hefner (2009), Tamtomo (2019), and Zentz (2015) shows that, despite some awareness of these traditional norms—their existence and relevance—their practical use is increasingly strained. This trend reflects the ongoing negotiation between preserving cultural traditions and adapting to the demands of modern communication, posing challenges for younger generations as they navigate a rapidly evolving linguistic landscape.

5. Comparative Perspectives and Cross-Cultural Insights

This section offers a comparative overview of the main linguistic and cultural features of both languages. It examines the dimensions that influence how speakers handle social hierarchies and express their identities.

Table 1 below summarizes these findings, highlighting the elements such as speech levels, cultural values, and the challenges they present. These observations lay the groundwork for understanding how language ideologies are communicated and perpetuated in interactions.

Table 1: Comparative Insights on Javanese and Japanese

Feature	Javanese	Japan
Speech level	*ngoko, krama*	*teineigo, sonkeigo, kenjougo*
Cultural Values	*ajining dhiri saka lathi*	*wa, enryo, tatemae*
Moves to Change Levels	age, kinship, and regulatory formalities	roles, ranks, in/out-of-group status
Cultural Values expressed	respect, humility, harmony, identity	harmony, social distancing, self-control
Challenge	language shift, Indonesian influence	youth resistance, digital informality

Comparative sociolinguistic studies of Java and Japan are relatively scarce, but few explore broader social trends in hierarchical Asian cultures. Both languages exhibit vertical discourse structures, using distinct mechanisms that reflect each culture's unique context.

The Javanese language features a complex system of speech levels that reflects the social hierarchy and

individual roles in various situations (Smith-Hefner, 2009). Although this hierarchy remains significant, the younger generation appears to be using these speech levels less often. Evidence suggests a decline in adherence to traditional linguistic norms, driven by evolving linguistic practices and societal changes (Zentz, 2015).

Mass education and modern influences help maintain the Javanese speech levels, but they do not guarantee the successful preservation of the prestige attached to these levels, particularly in formal language. Still, in public performances and ceremonial settings, speech levels remain important markers of cultural identity and social status, even as their everyday usage declines (Tamtomo, 2019). Balancing the preservation of linguistic traditions with adaptation to contemporary communication styles—shaped by globalization and changing youth behavior—highlights broader trends in sociolinguistic practices across different age groups.

On the other hand, the Japanese system of politeness remains essential for communication in Japanese society. *Keigo* comprises polite expressions that operate within a dynamic framework that varies based on factors such as social status and interaction context (Okamoto & Shibamoto-Smith, 2016). Categories within the honorific system are chosen according to social hierarchy and relationships. For example, *sonkeigo* conveys respect when addressing someone of higher status, while *kenjougo* expresses modesty regarding one's actions. *Keigo* embodies a conscious awareness of social dynamics and function within society, serving as a form of politeness. It helps maintain social harmony by recognizing and reinforcing Japan's hierarchical structures.

As noted earlier, in Javanese and Japanese cultures, the use of correct speech levels closely relates to perceptions of moral character, social competence, and relational dynamics. Misusing a speech level or honorific is often perceived as disrespectful and as a sign of social immaturity or ignorance (Fukushima, 2019). This underscores that linguistic forms shape and uphold hierarchical relationships, functioning as both connectors and markers of difference.

There is an assumption that globalization, digital media, and generational shifts influence these traditional linguistic systems. In Indonesia and Japan, young speakers are increasingly negotiating the complex balance between conventional norms of decency and modern ideals that emphasize equality and self-expression (Nurdin et al., 2021). This cultural shift indicates that hierarchical language structures remain relevant but have become more flexible, context-sensitive, and open to negotiation.

Using a comparative approach, this study offers a clearer understanding of how language functions in articulating and maintaining social hierarchies within Java and Japan. Through speech levels, honor systems, and politeness strategies, speakers convey meaning while managing identities and social relationships within their cultural frameworks. To fully grasp these complex dynamics, it is crucial to examine how linguistic structures interact with cultural values and social norms. This perspective deepens the understanding of how language

expresses and sustains hierarchies, providing a nuanced view of the socio-cultural fabric of these societies.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates how language reflects cultural values, particularly in societies with pronounced social hierarchies. In Javanese and Japanese cultures, respect is emphasized through specific linguistic practices, which involve complex systems of speech levels. Although these systems differ—using *unggah-ungguh* in Javanese and *keigo* in Japanese—their primary purpose is similar: they promote respectful relationships and support social cohesion. A closer look reveals the cultural reasons behind these practices. For Javanese, using *krama* relates to ancestral wisdom and moral identity, while in Japanese culture, *keigo* functions as a performative marker of social harmony (*wa*) and embodies key ideals of politeness (*enryo* and *tatemae*). Importantly, this research shows that hierarchical language is not a static concept, but a flexible process that can be negotiated. Factors such as context changes, speaker intent, and group dynamics significantly affect linguistic choices.

Additionally, the study highlights the challenge of maintaining this hierarchical system amid globalization and cultural shifts. The rise of digital platforms has also led to a decline in traditional speech norms, especially among young people. Nevertheless, the lasting importance of these linguistic customs, even when adapted, indicates they remain crucial cultural symbols.

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