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# The Pragmatic functions of *bikago* in Japanese honorific speech: Evidence from the drama *Asa ga Kita*

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## Abstract

This study investigates *bikago*, a type of *keigo* or honorific form in Japanese, as represented in the historical drama *Asa ga Kita*. The primary aim is to analyze the use of *bikago* in relation to the five communicative elements proposed by Kabaya: interpersonal relationships (*ningen kankei*), place (*ba*), feelings (*kimochi*), content (*nakami*), and delivery form (*katachi*). Drama *Asa ga Kita* narrates the story of a tomboyish young woman who enters the male-dominated business world during a time of significant social change in the Meiji period. This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze the use of *bikago* in the dialogues. The findings reveal that *bikago* frequently appears in contexts with *ba* levels of 0 or +1, exerting particular influence on the *nakami* element of communication. Moreover, while some words retain their meaning without *bikago*, others require the prefixes *o-* or *go-* to be meaningful and appropriately interpreted. The results further demonstrate that these prefixes function not only morphologically but also pragmatically, serving as strategies to mark politeness, convey emotion, and construct social identity. Data from the drama illustrate how *bikago* is strategically employed across different interpersonal relationships, settings, and communicative purposes, thereby reflecting the cultural expectations of the Meiji period. Theoretically, this study contributes to Japanese pragmatics by situating *bikago* within broader discussions of identity, gender, and social status. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of incorporating *bikago* into Japanese language pedagogy to enhance learners' pragmatic competence and cultural awareness.

## Abstrak

### Fungsi pragmatik *bikago* dalam tuturan kehormatan bahasa Jepang pada drama *Asa ga Kita*

Penelitian ini mengkaji *bikago* sebagai bentuk kehormatan dalam bahasa Jepang dalam drama berlatar belakang sejarah, berjudul *Asa Ga Kita*. Drama yang berlatar periode Meiji dan mengisahkan seorang perempuan tomboi yang gemar berhitung dan tertarik untuk terlibat dalam dunia bisnis pada masa yang belum pernah terjadi sebelumnya. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengkaji penggunaan *bikago* dalam kaitannya dengan lima elemen komunikasi yang dikemukakan oleh Kabaya yaitu hubungan antarmanusia, tempat, perasaan, isi, dan bentuk penyampaian. Penelitian ini menerapkan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif pada penggunaan *bikago*. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa *bikago* banyak digunakan pada konteks dengan level tempat 0 atau +1, serta penggunaannya berpengaruh signifikan terhadap elemen *nakami* dalam komunikasi. Selain itu, kata dapat tetap memiliki makna tanpa *bikago*, sementara kata lain memerlukan prefiks *o-* atau *go-* agar memiliki makna. Prefiks *o-* dan *go-* tidak hanya berfungsi secara morfologis, tetapi berfungsi juga secara pragmatis sebagai strategi untuk menandai kesopanan, menyampaikan emosi, serta membangun identitas sosial. Penggunaan *bikago* dalam drama menunjukkan bahwa *bikago* digunakan secara strategis pada berbagai hubungan interpersonal, konteks, dan tujuan komunikasi, yang mencerminkan ekspektasi budaya pada periode Meiji. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini memperkaya kajian pragmatik bahasa Jepang dengan menempatkan *bikago* dalam diskusi yang lebih luas mengenai identitas, gender, dan status sosial. Secara praktis, hasil penelitian ini menekankan pentingnya pengintegrasian *bikago* dalam pengajaran bahasa Jepang untuk meningkatkan kompetensi pragmatik dan kesadaran budaya bagi pemelajar bahasa Jepang.

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## 1 Introduction

Communication is strategy to interact and to deliver message from speaker to interlocutor. As a strategy, politeness is usually used by speaker to preserve the self-esteem of the speaker and the hearer. When interacting with others, it is important to use courteous language so that interlocutor feels appreciated and at ease and that there are no misunderstandings caused (Kartika & Jumanto, 2024).

In everyday conversation, Japanese also has a variety of languages that are adapted to the situation, circumstances, and to whom we are speaking. This variety of language is known as *keigo* (敬語). "*kei*" means "respect," and "*go*" means "language." *Keigo* is generally used to speak to superiors or people of higher status, to people they have met for the first time. In the Japanese (内外) *uchi-soto* concept, *keigo* is used when talking to people who are not part of the group or *uchi* (Kusumarini, 2022).

Japanese speakers and learners know *keigo* as part of the polite language that indicates changes in grammatical form, terms of address, word selection, etc. Some factors are considered when speakers are going to use *keigo* in their speech, such as when, with whom, social standing, and gender. These factors are quite challenging for non-Japanese especially for Japanese learners when using *keigo* in daily practical. In Japanese communication, *keigo* is an essential feature of language use, yet it often poses considerable challenges for foreign learners, especially at the early stages of study. Some challenges arise from the impact of the changing forms of words within the *keigo* system. This makes *keigo* quite challenging both structurally and in everyday use. Japanese language learners also find it difficult to use *keigo* depending on the person they're speaking to, the topic, and the situation. This leads to common mistakes, including mixing up in using respectful and polite forms. (Maruki, 2022).

*Keigo* is a polite style of Japanese language used to show respect to the person or person being spoken to. A different form of *keigo* is sometimes described as being higher or more polite or lower or less polite than the other form (Takeuchi, 2023). *Keigo* in Japanese is part of politeness strategy, where the using of politeness based on three aspects, i.e. social distance, power and rank of imposition. Politeness strategy theoretical framework in linguistics stated by Brown and Levinson and Leech. The use of *keigo* in Japanese conversation can be understood linguistically as influenced by social variables such as relative status, familiarity, or power dynamics (Derible, 2024). Brown and Levinson, along with Leech, outline several functions of *bikago* within the framework of politeness theory. The use of *bikago* o- and go- can convey positive politeness when used to express solidarity. However, in other contexts, these forms can also function as negative politeness markers when used to maintain social distance. This dual role underscores that *bikago* is not merely ornamental language, but rather a linguistic resource strategically utilized to negotiate and articulate interpersonal relationships. Politeness strategies in business situations also emphasize several principles in six maxims, i.e., tact maxim, generosity maxim, approbation maxim, modesty maxim, agreement maxim, and sympathy maxim. Previous studies about politeness, especially *keigo* use in business situations, concluded that *keigo* use not only emphasizes correctness in grammatical aspects but politeness strategies are also essential parts to be considered and implemented (Yuniarsih et al., 2022).

The author was inspired by the book Japanese Politics by Yasuko Obana. This book discusses politeness in a general sense and its use in Japanese. One of which discusses role identity as a process that determines polite behavior (Obana & Yasuko, 2021). Obana and Yasuko's explanation of the role of identity aligns closely with the context of the drama *Asa ga Kita*. The narrative portrays Asa as a tomboyish girl who enters the traditionally male dominated business world of the Meiji period. Her determination and ambition stand in stark contrast to the conventional roles assigned to women at the time. In this drama, the use of *bikago* functions not only as a politeness strategy but also as a

means of negotiating social identity, illustrating how linguistic choices reflect and adapt to shifting societal role expectations. From this book, the author reads more deeply and finds elements that the author can use as a measure for analytical data (Obana & Yasuko, 2021).

In the same topic of *keigo*, the book 「敬語表現ハンドブック/ Keigo Hyougen Handbook, Kabaya introduces five elements that support pronunciation using *keigo*. As *keigo* is used by speakers to the person, they are talking to when conveying a message. The five elements that support communication are introduced as follows: relationships between people (人間関係/ *ningen kankei*), places (場/ *ba*), feelings (意識/ *kimochi*), content of thoughts (内容/ *nakami*), and forms of delivery (形式/ *katachi*) (Kabaya et al., 2009). As explained by Kabaya, there are three centers of human relations, including hierarchical relationship, closeness of relationship, position/role. There is an awareness of expressing honor by considering the relationship between the speaker and the interlocutor, three positions/level positions of the interlocutor are given as explained by Kabaya to facilitate the use of *keigo*. Strong awareness of a “high or not close position” is a plus sign (+1), strong awareness of a “low or close position” is indicated by a negative sign (-1). Kabaya’s explanation of the five elements in *keigo* usage i.e. *ningen kankei* (interpersonal relationships), *ba* (place), *kimochi* (feelings), *nakami* (content), and *katachi* (form); serves as the primary analytical framework in this study. This perspective offers a new approach to the analysis of *keigo*, one that moves beyond the examination of morphological formations or lexical changes to emphasize the pragmatic and social dimensions of its use. Consequently, Kabaya’s framework provides a more comprehensive understanding of the functions of *keigo*, particularly *bikago*, across diverse communicative situations and contexts. Previous research also concluded that Japanese native speakers used different backchannels expression in different setting, whereas backchannels considered as politeness. This research also analyzed that there is different placement of backchannels. Furthermore, when there is a psychological distance between interlocutors, the placement of backchannels also differs (Nurjaleka, 2021). Some research also mentioned that using of *keigo* closely related with gender and women role in social context to maintain the norm (Okamoto & Morimoto, 2023; Sherwood et al., 2023)

In 2007, the Japanese Ministry of Education (日本文化庁) introduced five new *keigo* categories, which were summarized in 敬語の指針/ *Keigo no Shishin*. The five categories of *keigo* are 尊敬語/ *sonkeigo* / respectful variety, 謙譲語/ *kenjougo* / self-polite variety, 丁寧語/ *teineigo* / formal-self-polite variety, 丁寧語/ *teineigo* / polite variety, and 美化語/ *bikago* / beautifier variety (Maruki, 2022). One type of *keigo*, besides *teineigo*, *sonkeigo*, and *kenjougo*, is *bikago*. *Bikago* is a variety of words that are used as a beautifying style in the narrative so that it has a polite meaning for the listener. *Bikago* is usually used with noun, marked with using of prefixes *o-* and *go-* (Fithriyana & Hamidah, 2020). Examples of words in *bikago* are お酒/ *osake*/ Japanese alcohol, お天気/ *otenki*/ weather, ご飯/ *gohan*/ food, ごほうび/ *gohoubi*/ reward. In Japanese, *bikago* refers to beautified speech, often using honorific prefixes like “*o-*” and “*go-*” Japanese mothers use *bikago* more with daughters to enhance refined language skills. *Uchi-soto* concept also influence the using of language variety, while *bikago* also reflect speaker’s social position (Arfianty & Mulyadi, 2024).

Previous research found the use of *bikago* in terms of words and speakers. From word formation, the results showed that the words included in *bikago* were formed from Japanese words originating from *o-wago*, *go-kango*, *o-kango*, and *o-konshugo* (Mulyadi et al., 2022). Another previous research also found that *keigo* in general context, is used by Japanese women to express politeness, etiquette, and emotional. Japanese women also use *keigo* to maintain their image in the society (Arfianty et al., 2023). *Bikago* also usually is used by woman than man and use to show that speaker has high class social which has its own function (Bahiyah et al., 2021). *Bikago* is also used strongly in communication between hotel staff and guests. As a service provider industry, the relationship

between hotel staff and guests is an asymmetrical relationship so that they are using formal language (Kusumarini, 2022). A review of these existing researches on *bikago* reveals that most studies have predominantly emphasized its morphological aspects, particularly the formation of words with the prefixes *o-* and *go-*. Other scholarly works have examined the appearance of *bikago* in popular cultural products such as *anime*, or have investigated the broader use of *keigo* by women as a strategy of politeness and the construction of social identity. In the context of initial interactions, the use of linguistic forms, including *bikago*, functions as a strategic means of negotiating the appropriate level of formality between participants (Elden, 2023). Although *bikago* has been classified as a type of *keigo*, several previous studies have shown that its position within the politeness system often serves as a marker of refinement, affective nuance, or speech style related to the speaker's gender and self-image. This research will position *bikago* not simply as a type of *keigo* but as a pragmatic phenomenon that will be analyzed using the five elements of Kabaya theory. Furthermore, prior research has not employed Kabaya's five-element communication framework, which offers a more comprehensive perspective for examining the pragmatic functions of *bikago* beyond its morphological characteristics. Kabaya's five elements provide a pragmatics-oriented framework for analyzing honorific use, because they explicitly link linguistic form (*katachi*) with interpersonal relations (*ningen kankei*), situational context (*ba*), speaker's stance (*kimochi*), and intended message (*nakami*). In this study, the five elements of Kabaya are treated as a pragmatic lens to examine how *bikago* not only shapes the surface of speech but also indexes social relations, distance management, and the speaker's attitude toward the interlocutor and the communication situation.

The authors were interested in the emergence of a new type of *keigo* called *bikago* and conducted this research. The main issue discussed in this research is the analysis of the use of *bikago*, which is a variety of Japanese *keigo*, in Japanese television dramas. This research aims to find and determine the use of *bikago* as part of *keigo* found in the Japanese television drama *Asa Ga Kita*, which is the data corpus for this research. The expected results from the analysis are *bikago* words, a detailed explanation of *bikago* found in the Japanese television drama *Asa Ga Kita*. The objective of this research is to provide a deeper understanding of the use of *bikago* using five aspects of *keigo* explained by Kabaya, as part of Japanese *keigo* for Japanese language learners so that readers can use it appropriately. In addition to addressing existing research gaps, this study is expected to yield both theoretical and practical contributions. From a theoretical perspective, it enriches the field of Japanese pragmatics by offering an analytical account of *bikago* within the broader framework of *keigo* and politeness strategies. From a practical standpoint, the findings provide valuable insights for learners of Japanese, given that *bikago* is rarely examined in depth in classroom instruction. Nevertheless, *bikago* occupies a crucial role in facilitating communication that is both socially appropriate and culturally nuanced.

## 2 Methods

The authors used qualitative research methods. The qualitative approach used in this research is a series of activities or a process of filtering data/information that is appropriate regarding a problem in certain conditions in the life of the object. In the data collection method, the authors use a textual analysis method where the scenario/script in a drama is taken as data. The data for this study were taken from dialogues in the drama *Asa ga Kita* episodes 1–28. From all episodes, the researcher first identified all dialogues containing the prefixes *o-* and *go-*. The researcher selected dialogues in the drama that met the criteria for *bikago*. Speech whose interaction context is unclear (for example, the speaker-interlocutor relationship or speech situation is not clear), data that are repetitive in nature with the same function and similar situations are also excluded from the data corpus. Through this filtering process, 15 *bikago* data were obtained which were analyzed in depth using the framework of Kabaya's five elements of communication. The data analysis in this study used textual analysis and

descriptive interpretation. Each example of bikago was analyzed using Kabaya's (2009) framework, which includes five communicative elements: ningen kankei, ba, kimochi, nakami, and katachi, along with the revised keigo categories outlined in Keigo no Shishin (2007). The researcher also used a theory-based approach to coding by labeling each data item based on three factors: (1) how it is expressed linguistically, (2) the relationship between the person and the situation in which it occurs, and (3) the role it plays in communication within that context. The coded data were then analyzed to find recurring patterns in how bikago contributes to meaning, politeness, and social position in the play. Based on the descriptive analysis, conclusions were drawn about the pragmatic function of bikago in the context of Asa ga Kita.

### 3 Findings

This section will explain the findings obtained from drama episodes 1-28. The findings presented in this table consist of 15 data points distributed in several tables according to the five elements presented by Kabaya.

**Table 1: Distribution of Bikago by Prefix**  
[Source: Drama Asa Ga Kita Episode 1-28]

Prefix Type	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)	Example <i>Bikago</i> Forms
O-	13	86.67	おいど /oido, お琴 /okoto, お文 /ofumi, お花 /ohana, お雛 /ohina.
Go-	2	13.33	ご入学/gonyuugaku , ご寝所 /goshinjo
Total	15	100	

**Table 2: Distribution of bikago across emotional categories**  
[Source: Drama Asa Ga Kita Episode 1-28]

Emotional Category	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)	Example <i>Bikago</i> In This Category
Positive	12	80	お猿 /osaru, お呼び /oyobi, お守り袋 /omamori bukuro, お針子 /ohariko, ご寝所 /goshinjo.
Negative	0	0	
Neutral	3	20	おいど /oido, お花 /ohana, おとと /ototo
Total	15	100	

**Table 3: Distribution of *bikago* by situational context**  
[Source: Drama Asa Ga Kita Episode 1-28]

Ba Level	Description	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)	Example Scenes
0	Private/domestic setting	13	86.67	Conversations take place in living rooms at home, in offices, at

Ba Level	Description	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)	Example Scenes
				shop entrances, in private letters.
+1	Semi-public/formal setting	2	13.33	A conversation that takes place in a formal room in a formal setting.
-1		-	-	
Total		15	100	

**Table 4: Distribution of *bikago* by interpersonal relationship [Source: Drama Asa Ga Kita Episode 1-28]**

Relationship Type	Frequency (N)	Percentage (%)	Example Speaker-addressee pairs
Family	7	46.67	Parents-children, mother-in-law-daughter-in-law, husband-wife
Employer-employee	1	6.67	Employer-employee
Others	7	46.67	People who meet for the first time, business partners.
Total	15	100	

## 4 Discussion

### 4.1 Summary of Key Patterns in *Bikago* Usage

The findings in this study indicate several patterns that illustrate the use of *bikago* in the drama *Asa Ga Kita*. In this drama, the most frequently used form of *bikago* is the o- form in several situations, most notably in private settings and formal settings with positive emotional attitudes. In terms of function, *bikago* in this drama is used not only for beautification or refinement, but also in expressions that shape meaning.

### 4.2 *Bikago* Within Kabaya's Communicative Elements

Through the five elements of Keigo described by Kabaya, we can see that the use of *bikago* in *Asa Ga Kita* is closely related to interpersonal relationships (*ningen kankei*), place/situation (*ba*), feelings (*kimochi*), and also the content of the message (*nakami*). Regarding the relationship between speaker and interlocutor, *bikago* is used in several variations, including those with close relationships (family relationships) and those with complete strangers (university owners and new students). Analysis shows that *bikago* is used both when the speaker addresses interlocutors of higher or more distant social status, as well as when speaking to close family members. This demonstrates that its use cannot be dismissed as simply a matter of social distance.

From a place or situational perspective, *bikago* is used in situations at level 0, such as at home, in a shop, or in a room with a familiar setting. It also occurs in level +1 situations, such as in a meeting hall or at a formal ceremony. In domestic spaces like the bedroom, living room, or even an animal pen, the use of *bikago* when referring to objects (*ohinasan*, *omamoribukuro*, *osaru-san*) carries emotional meaning or is culturally marked. In all these contexts, *bikago* is typically associated with

feelings of joy, pride, affection, and gratitude, all of which have positive connotations. The pattern of *bikago* use in the drama *Asa Ga Kita* demonstrates a contextual relationship between what is conveyed (*nakami*), how it feels (*kimochi*), where and in what situation it is conveyed, and to whom it is conveyed (*ningen kankei*).

### 4.3 Pragmatic Functions: Beautification, Politeness, and Meaning

The data findings in this study reveal a pragmatic function in the use of *bikago*. Its primary function is to enhance or refine language. In some instances, *bikago* does not alter the lexical meaning of nouns, such as in the words *gonyuugaku*, *ohana*, *okoto*, etc. In these instances, the use of *o-* or *go-* softens the sound, conveys warmth, and softens emotions. The use of *bikago* in the data found in this study also demonstrates a second function: maintaining politeness or face. In conversations with guests, customers, and social superiors, *bikago* indicates the speaker's orientation toward the other person's face and the formality of the situation. For example, when referring to flowers when addressing a superior, the term *ohana* is used instead of simply *hana*. In this situation, *bikago* is used to conform to the expected respectful situation. The third function relates to meaning formation or lexicalization, as in the words *okeshou*, *oido*, and others. If the *o-* or *go-* form is omitted, the meanings lack contextual meaning.

### 4.4 Stance-Taking, Identity, and Interactional Consequences

Beyond these functional distinctions, the data show that *bikago* is an important resource for stance-taking and identity construction. Female characters in particular use *bikago* when engaging in activities that are culturally coded as feminine, such as handling *ohinasan* during *hina matsuri*, receiving *omamori bukuro* from a mother, or talking about *oshiroi* and *okesho* in scenes of make-up and self-presentation. In these contexts, *bikago* indexes a stance of softness, care, and aesthetic sensitivity, contributing to the portrayal of gendered roles in the Meiji period household. At the same time, male characters also draw on *bikago* to position themselves: for instance, when Shinjirō comments on Asa's expression while doing *okeshou*, or when a businessman respectfully refers to Godai's *oyobi*, their word choices reveal admiration, concern, or playful irony towards others.

The analysis also supports the view that the pragmatic status of *bikago* is ambiguous and context-dependent. Some tokens clearly operate as honorific or polite forms in asymmetrical relations or formal *ba*, while others function primarily as stylistic or affective devices in symmetrical or intimate relationships. Still others are so conventionalised that their honorific force is weak or backgrounded, even though the *o-/go-* prefix remains segmentable. This variability is evident, for example, in the contrast between highly ceremonial uses such as *gonyūgaku* in an entrance ceremony, relationally respectful uses such as *ohana* addressed to an employer, and playful or affectionate uses such as *ototo* in family banter. Rather than treating *bikago* as uniformly honorific, the data suggest that it operates on a continuum from clearly relational politeness to largely lexicalised or stylistic usage.

## 5 Conclusion

*Bikago* constitutes a distinct type of *keigo*, as classified within Kabaya's most recent framework on the categorization of *keigo*. The analysis of *bikago* through Kabaya's five elements of communication suggests that *bikago* is often aligned with *nakami* (the content of an utterance). By refining the surface form of expressions, *bikago* modifies the intended meaning so that it becomes more socially appropriate and culturally resonant. The element of *kimochi* (the speaker's emotional stance) is also evident, as *bikago* is frequently employed to convey politeness, empathy, and affection, particularly in interactions among family members. In terms of *ningen kankei* (interpersonal relationships), *bikago* operates across both close (-1) and more formal/distant relationships (0, +1), serving either to maintain respect with new interlocutors or to reinforce harmony within intimate ties.

The element of *ba* (place) further indicates that *bikago* is predominantly used in settings with levels 0 and +1, ranging from domestic spaces to formal ceremonial venues. Finally, the element of *katachi* illustrates how the prefixes *o-* and *go-* embellish linguistic forms; while some words retain meaning without them, others require these affixes to remain interpretable and contextually appropriate. The findings of this study indicate that, beyond being merely a decorative prefix, *bikago* has a pragmatic function in stance-taking and social positioning. Theoretically, these findings enrich the field of Japanese pragmatics by demonstrating that *bikago* cannot be understood in isolation; rather its functions must be examined through the interplay of Kabaya's five communicative elements, which together highlight its pragmatic and social significance. This study also contributes to cross-linguistic research on politeness by highlighting the function of *bikago* within the framework of Japanese pragmatics, consistent with critical perspectives on honorifics and politeness rituals (Kádár et al., 2024). Practically, this study suggests the importance of integrating explicit instruction on *bikago* into Japanese language pedagogy. Such integration would enable learners not only to grasp grammatical functions but also to develop pragmatic competence in employing *keigo* appropriately across contexts. This result is pedagogically applied in classroom settings. For Japanese learners, understanding *bikago* can serve as an important strategy for developing pragmatic competence and achieving culturally appropriate communication.

Future research may broaden this inquiry by comparing the use of *o-* and *go-* across different grammatical categories, such as verbs (*dōshi*) and pronominals (*daimeishi*). Additionally, methodological approaches such as corpus-based studies with native speakers could yield further insights, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of *bikago* in the communicative practices of contemporary Japanese society.

## Disclosure Statement

The author(s) claim there is no conflict of interest.

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