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***Keigo* Perspective for Indonesian Migrants: A Study of Communication Challenges and Social Adaptation of Indonesian Migrants in Japan**

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the barriers to communication and social adaptation, especially in the work environment that requires the use of respectful language (*keigo*), experienced by Indonesian migrants in Japan. These barriers greatly affect the quality of life of migrants in Japan, which needs attention from the Indonesian government, along with the increasing demand for productive age workers from Indonesia due to the demographic impact of the Japanese population. Exiting conditions show that Indonesian migrants are not only required to have technical skills, but must be able to implement *keigo* in the work environment. The purpose of this study is to analyse the perspectives of Indonesian migrants on *keigo* and the challenges they face in communication and social adaptation of Indonesian migrants' lives in Japan. In this study, qualitative methods are used to explore the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by Indonesian migrants in communicating and adapting to the work environment. This qualitative approach will reveal the phenomena of language, social, culture, and behaviours of migrants deeply and holistically. This phenomenological research design will focus on the subjective experiences of Indonesian migrants in using *keigo* and how migrants interpret the challenges and can adapt. Indonesian migrants often struggle with understanding and correctly using *keigo* due to its complexity and the cultural nuances involved. The ability to use *keigo* effectively is closely tied to social adaptation for Indonesian migrants in Japan. This study will recommend that institutions sending workers to Japan conduct simulated *keigo* training to create a

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professional workforce.

Keywords: Communication Challenges; Indonesian Migrants; *Keigo*; Social Adaptation; Sociolinguistics

1. Introduction

The study “*Keigo* Perspective for Indonesian Migrants: A Study of Communication Challenges and Social Adaptation of Indonesian Migrants in Japan” explores the unique challenges faced by Indonesian migrants in Japan, particularly concerning the use and understanding of *keigo*, the Japanese system of honorific speech. *Keigo* is a crucial component of the Japanese language that reflects social hierarchies and levels of politeness, and its proper use is essential for effective communication and social interaction in Japan.

Keigo is a word used to indicate politeness in Japanese. *Keigo* has a high level of complexity because it consists of several levels (such as *sonkeigo*, *kenjōgo*, and *teineigo*) which are used according to social status, relationships, and conversational context^[1]. For Indonesian migrants, *keigo* communication skills are one of the biggest causes of stress and challenges for migrants^[2–4]. However, Japan remains in the top five (5) destination countries for Indonesian migration.

For many Indonesian migrants, the challenge of mastering *keigo* extends beyond language proficiency and touches deeper aspects of social adaptation. Unlike Indonesian, which has relatively straightforward markers of politeness, Japanese *keigo* requires speakers to constantly evaluate social contexts, such as age, occupation, hierarchy, and relationship closeness, before choosing the appropriate expressions. This constant negotiation can cause communication anxiety, as migrants often fear making mistakes that might be interpreted as rude or disrespectful. Such misunderstandings can hinder workplace integration, reduce confidence in social interactions, and even limit opportunities for upward mobility. Consequently, the inability to use *keigo* properly not only creates linguistic barriers but also affects migrants’ sense of belonging and acceptance within Japanese society.

Despite these difficulties, many Indonesian migrants adopt adaptive strategies to cope with *keigo*-related challenges. Some rely on simplified polite forms (*teineigo*) as a safer option in formal interactions, while others learn through workplace training, peer support, or community-based language programs. Over time, exposure and continuous prac-

tice help migrants gain confidence in managing different levels of politeness, which in turn fosters smoother social adaptation. Furthermore, maintaining resilience, cultural flexibility, and support from fellow Indonesian communities in Japan plays a significant role in easing the adaptation process. Thus, *keigo* not only becomes a linguistic hurdle but also a pathway for Indonesian migrants to achieve deeper cultural integration and to build stronger social networks in their host country.

Indonesian migrant workers are spread across various countries (**Figure 1**). The increase in the number of Indonesian migrants to Japan has occurred since Japan faced demographic challenges with a low birth rate and high life expectancy (population decline of around 0.5% per year, with more than 28% of the population over 65 years old) (<https://data.worldbank.org/>). This causes a high need for productive age workers from abroad, including Indonesia. Based on data from the Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Agency (BP2MI), 2024, there will be 297,434 migrant placements to Japan, an increase of 0.11% compared to 2023.

Along with Japan’s demographic conditions, this figure is predicted to continue to increase to 350,000 Indonesian workers in 14 sectors (<https://irij-jakarta.com/>). The challenges Indonesian migrants face are communication, social, and cultural adaptation, which can affect their quality of life and social integration. The following is an example of the results of data analysis of interactions between caregivers and the elderly from a study in 2023–2024^[5,6].

The results of the interaction analysis above show that the relationship between caregivers and the elderly is hierarchical, shaped significantly by power and age differences^[7]. In the context of Indonesian migrant workers in Japan, especially those working in the caregiving sector, this hierarchical dynamic presents unique communication challenges. Japanese communication culture emphasizes indirectness, formality, and especially the use of *keigo*, a system of honorific language that reflects respect based on age, position, and social roles. Migrants are therefore not only expected to perform physical caregiving duties but also to communicate appropriately within this culturally embedded structure.

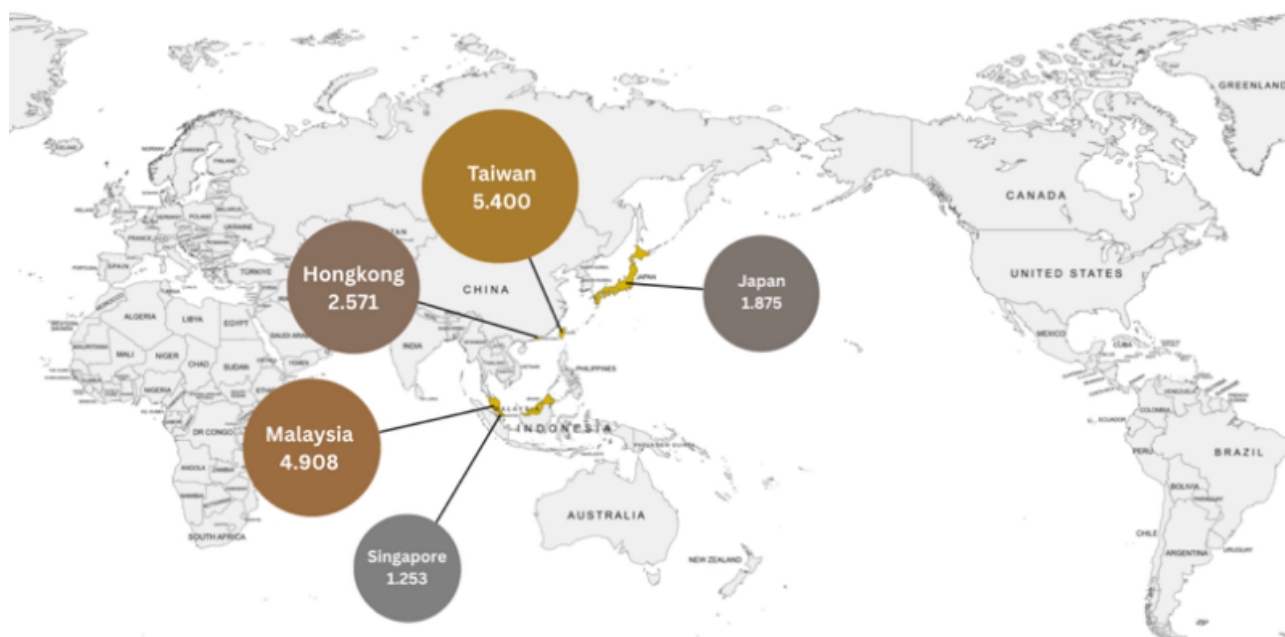


Figure 1. Countries of Placement of Indonesian Migrants, January–September 2024.

Source: <https://bp2mi.go.id/>.

Due to this relational structure, Indonesian migrants must possess more than just technical caregiving skills; they also need a deep understanding of Japanese linguistic and cultural norms. The inability to master *keigo* and the nuanced expectations of Japanese interpersonal communication can lead to miscommunication, misunderstanding, or even conflict in daily interactions. This, in turn, may hinder their social integration, reduce their confidence, limit their employment mobility, and affect their overall quality of life in Japan.

Moreover, the challenge of mastering *keigo* goes beyond mere language acquisition, as it reflects the broader issue of cultural adaptation and identity negotiation. Indonesian migrants, particularly those from rural areas with limited prior exposure to Japanese language and culture, often find themselves in situations where their professional competence is questioned due to communication barriers. While training programs in Indonesia and Japan provide basic linguistic preparation, many migrants still struggle with the context-specific application of *keigo* in everyday caregiving situations. This struggle can create psychological stress, feelings of inadequacy, and a sense of social distance from both their employers and the elderly individuals they care for. Such conditions may also reinforce stereotypes about migrant workers as less competent, thereby perpetuating

unequal power relations in the workplace.

In response to these challenges, several strategies can be considered to support Indonesian migrants in Japan. First, comprehensive pre-departure training should not only emphasize technical caregiving skills but also incorporate intercultural communication, including practical *keigo* usage in real-life scenarios. Second, ongoing mentorship and peer support networks in Japan can provide safe spaces for migrants to share experiences, reduce isolation, and collectively navigate cultural expectations. Finally, collaboration between Indonesian and Japanese institutions, including language schools, caregiving agencies, and migrant protection bodies, can play a crucial role in fostering sustainable adaptation. By addressing both the linguistic and socio-cultural aspects of migration, Indonesian workers can enhance their resilience, achieve better integration, and contribute positively to Japan's aging society while maintaining their dignity and professional growth.

From this background, several important questions emerge. How do these communication and adaptation challenges impact the broader social life of Indonesian migrants? In what ways do such difficulties affect their workplace experiences and professional development? Moreover, how do prolonged struggles with adaptation influence their emotional and psychological well-being?

This study seeks to explore these questions in depth. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights not only from a sociolinguistic perspective but also in terms of practical implications for policy and support systems. In particular, the research highlights the urgent need for institutional support—whether from the Indonesian government, Japanese training centers, or diaspora community organizations—in equipping migrants with the necessary language, cultural competence, and psychological resilience.

Ultimately, this study underscores that successful integration in a foreign society is not merely a matter of technical ability or economic opportunity. It requires communication fluency, cultural sensitivity, and supportive systems that recognize the complex challenges faced by migrants. By addressing these needs, institutions can play a transformative role in ensuring that Indonesian migrants in Japan not only survive, but thrive.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Social Adaptation Theory

Social Adaptation Theory is a framework used to understand how individuals, such as migrants, adjust and adapt to new social environments. This theory examines various aspects of adaptation, including language acquisition, cultural learning, and the adoption of social norms. When migrants enter a new country, they often encounter different cultural practices and communication styles, which can be challenging to navigate. Social Adaptation Theory seeks to explain how these individuals manage these transitions and integrate into their new communities. The components of social adaptation include:

- a) **Language Acquisition:** Learning the language of the host country is crucial for effective communication and integration. It allows migrants to participate more fully in social, economic, and cultural activities.
- b) **Cultural Learning:** Migrants often need to understand and embrace the cultural practices and values of their new environment. This includes learning about customs, traditions, and social expectations.
- c) **Adaptation to Social Norms:** This involves adjusting to the behavioral norms and societal rules of the host community. Understanding and adhering to these

norms can facilitate social acceptance and integration.

In the context of Indonesian migrants in Japan, one aspect that could be explored is the role of *keigo*, which is the system of honorific speech used in the Japanese language. *Keigo* reflects social hierarchies and politeness, and mastering it can be critical for social integration. Indonesian migrants may need to learn when and how to use *keigo* appropriately to navigate social relationships and professional interactions in Japan.

2.2. Japanese Speech Levels and Social Hierarchy in Japanese Communication

Basically, the language speech level focuses on language as a means of communication and language users. The factors that influence it consist of internal factors of the language form and external factors related to the social factors of the speaker community. The purpose of the language speech level is to form a social interaction that differentiates between the language spoken by the speaker. In Japanese, the form of the speech level is manifested in ordinary language or *futsūkei* and respectful language or *keigo*^[8].

According to Kondo^[9], this *futsūkei* can be used with close friends or family. *Futsūkei* is defined as an informal language used for fellow friends, family, younger people, or people who have a close relationship. From this explanation, it can be concluded that *futsūkei* ‘ordinary form’ (*futsūkei* ‘ordinary language’) is not included in the category of respectful language. *Futsūkei* is an informal form marked by the copula *da* and dictionary verbs at the end of the sentence^[10,11]. The following is an example of a *futsūkei* sentence:

- (1) *Kore wa nihongo no hon da*
‘This is a book in Japanese.’
- (2) *Hon o yomu*
‘To read a book.’

In Japanese sentence patterns, a sentence that ends with something other than a verb will be closed with a copula. The *futsūkei* form copula as a marker of informal language is *da*, so the sentence becomes *kore wa nihongo no hon da*. In example no. 4, the sentence ends with the verb *yomu* ‘to read’. This verb in Japanese grammar is called a dictionary form verb. As stated above, the dictionary form verb at the end of a sentence is a marker of *futsūkei* or informal sentences. Meanwhile, the marker for formal sentences is

known as *keigo*.

Keigo ‘respectful language’ is a variety of language that pays close attention to the use of language based on the relationship between the speaker (O1), the conversation partner (O2), and the person who is the subject of the discussion (O3). Regarding the meaning of *keigo*, Suzuki^[12] states:

“*Keigo wa, hanasu aite ya, sonoba, joukyou, yakuwari, nado ni yotte kawattekimasu. Nen-rei, joshi, senpai, shitashisa, tachiba no chigai ni yotte tsukaiwaketeikimasu.*”

“Respectful language is used based on the position of the person speaking, the setting, the atmosphere, and their position. It is also used based on age, superiority, seniority, and place.”

If the actor of the speech act understands how to speak well and correctly, then communication can run well. On the other hand, if someone does not understand how to speak well and correctly in communicating, then communication will not run well. Below (**Table 1**) are the correct and incorrect expressions in communication in the office/workplace^[13].

Table 1. Examples of Appropriate or Inappropriate Expressions in an Office Domain.

Appropriate Expression	Inappropriate Expression
<i>ohayōgozaimasu</i>	<i>ohayō</i>
<i>kore de yoroshiidesuka</i>	<i>koredeiino</i>
<i>itte kimasu</i> <i>itte mairimasu</i>	<i>ittekuruyo</i>
<i>motte kimashita</i> <i>mottemairimashita</i> <i>omochishimashita</i>	<i>mottekita</i>
<i>sumimasen</i> <i>moshiwakegozaimasen</i>	<i>waruindakedo</i> <i>gomen</i>

The column “examples of inappropriate expressions” is an informal language expression that is inappropriate when spoken in formal places such as offices (in conducting official communication). The inappropriate expressions when spoken to superiors. If an employee utters the wrong expression to a superior, the person will definitely be considered impolite or disrespectful to his superior. The expression is a form of *futsūkei* when spoken between friends or to conversation partners younger than the speaker. The conversation occurred in an informal place such as *kissaten* ‘a tavern/drink stall’ or at an entertainment venue.

Judging from the *kanji*, *keigo* (敬語) consists of the *kanji uyamau* (敬う) ‘respect’ and the *kanji go* (語) ‘language’. *Keigo* is used to show respect, maintain social distance, and assert hierarchy in interpersonal relationships^[14–17]. As *keigo* develops, the level of Japanese speech not only involves its respectful language, but also develops into the language used when communicating with people younger than the speaker or people of low social status. In such circumstances, the choice of language will definitely be different, the use of sentences is more varied between respectful forms and plain forms. The

level of Japanese speech, both *futsūkei* and *keigo* (consisting of *sonkeigo*, *kenjōgo* and *teineigo*) is studied from both linguistic and non-linguistic perspectives.

Sonkeigo, namely respectful language, is used to respect the interlocutor or the person who is the subject of the conversation. *Kenjōgo* is a language used to respect the conversation partner or the person who is the topic of conversation by demeaning one’s own actions/conditions. *Teineigo* is a polite language used in official/formal situations. The Japanese language level is one of the cultural riches in the Japanese language that is still used and preserved by the community of speakers. The preservation of this Japanese language level is very visible in communication in the office domain. The main key to good communication, especially for business people in this office domain, is the ability to carefully choose and sort words based on applicable rules.

2.3. Indonesian Migrants in Japan and Communication Challenges

The Shoushika phenomenon in Japan in 2020–2022 resulted in a domino effect, indicated by the low number

of births, and caused population aging. On the one hand, the ongoing population crisis will threaten economic growth in Japan. In response, in 2018, the Japanese Government issued an amendment to create controls to bring in high and low-skilled foreigners^[18].

Japan is one of the preferred migration destinations for Indonesian workers, whether as technical interns, professionals, or international students. This growing trend is driven by Japan's aging population and labour shortages, which have opened up opportunities for foreign workers, including those from Indonesia. However, despite the increasing number of Indonesian migrants in Japan, many still encounter significant communication challenges. These difficulties stem not only from differences in language structure but also from cultural gaps in communication styles, particularly regarding politeness norms^[19,20]. One of the most common issues is the misuse or inadequate use of *keigo*—the Japanese honorific language—which can lead to misunderstandings, social discomfort, or even exclusion in workplace or academic settings.

The ability of Indonesian migrants to socially adapt in Japan is closely tied to their Japanese language proficiency and their understanding of cultural communication norms. Japanese society places high importance on contextual communication, especially through the concept of *uchi* (insider) and *soto* (outsider), where *keigo* acts as a crucial linguistic marker of social distance and hierarchy^[12,21]. Migrants unfamiliar with these dynamics often experience culture shock, which can hamper their integration process^[22].

To better prepare Indonesian migrants for life and work in Japan, it is essential that *keigo* and related sociocultural communication norms be integrated into Japanese language training curricula at institutions responsible for dispatching migrant workers and students. Such training will not only improve communication competence but also enhance intercultural understanding and support smoother social integration^[7,23]. Good mastery of *keigo* can increase the chances of social integration of Indonesian migrants in Japan because the ability to speak Japanese politely will influence the local community's perception of foreigners^[24]. Migrants who successfully master *keigo* tend to be more accepted in the workplace and society^[25].

From the study of *keigo* related to the abilities of its speakers, including foreign workers in Japan, the social adap-

tation of migrants, particularly from Indonesia, has not been mentioned. This research is novel because it will analyze the perspective of *keigo* for Indonesian migrants by analyzing the social adaptation of Indonesian migrants in communicating and implementing *keigo*.

3. Research Methods

This study uses a qualitative research method. Qualitative research methods are approaches used to understand linguistic, social, cultural, and human behavioral phenomena deeply and holistically^[26]. The research design is a phenomenological research design that focuses on the subjective experiences of Indonesian migrants in using *keigo* and how migrants interpret challenges and can adapt. This research is exploratory and qualitative and refers to the interpretive paradigm.

Data in the form of information about communication challenges, social adaptation, and understanding of *keigo* faced by migrants in Japan and prospective migrants placed in Japan.

The data consists of information regarding communication challenges, social adaptation, and understanding of *keigo* faced by migrants in Japan and prospective migrants placed in Japan. The research respondents were prospective migrants, with sampling from labor-sending institutions in Lombok, West Nusa Tenggara, Yogyakarta, Bogor, and Cilacap. The selection of the Lombok region for sampling was based on the concentration of training for prospective Indonesian migrants in the central part of Indonesia, and the sampling areas of Yogyakarta, Bogor, and Cilacap as the training centers for prospective migrants in the western and eastern parts of Indonesia. For migrants in Japan, the sampling included Indonesian migrants in Saitama, Tokyo, and Maebashi.

Data were obtained through in-depth interviews, including questionnaires and direct observation. The research respondents were prospective migrants and migrants currently working in Japan, by sampling. The research design used was a phenomenological one, focusing on the subjective experiences of Indonesian migrants in using *keigo* and how migrants interpret challenges and adapt. This research is exploratory and qualitative, and adheres to an interpretive paradigm.

This study employed qualitative research methods. Qualitative research methods are approaches used to understand linguistic, social, cultural, and behavioural phenomena in depth and holistically^[26]. In this study, a qualitative approach was used to analyse the understanding of Indonesian migrants and prospective migrants undergoing preparatory training for Japan. This understanding of *keigo* can provide information regarding the migrants' perceptions of *keigo*. In addition to understanding *keigo* use, data also included an understanding of the social factors underlying *keigo* language choice.

Migrants preparing to depart for Japan and Indonesian migrants in Japan served as the study's respondents. The data collection techniques were as follows:

- a) Questionnaire
The questionnaire was designed in two types: one for migrants in Japan and one for migrants currently in Japan.
- b) In-Depth Interviews
After the questionnaire results were summarized, the next data collection technique was in-depth interviews. The interview questions were unstructured, meaning the conversation focused on observing the migrants' responses until the researcher obtained the desired data.
- c) Participant/Non-Participant Observation
This observation was conducted by the researcher by directly participating in language training activities at a Vocational Education Institution. In this case, the researcher taught *keigo* material and administered a *keigo* test to migrants preparing for interviews with users.
- d) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)
This discussion was conducted with Japanese language teachers. From these discussions, it was possible to understand how the teachers delivered *keigo* instruction in a simulated manner.

Qualitative data analysis included:

- Data Reduction: Simplifying data to focus on key points.
- Data Presentation: Creating a narrative.
- Conclusion Drawing: Interpreting the use of *keigo* by respondents, namely Indonesian migrants.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Communication and Adaptation Challenges

Intercultural Communication Theory is used to analyse how Indonesian migrants interact in Japanese culture, especially regarding the use of *keigo*. Language and Cultural barriers are a form of communication difficulty due to differences in the level of mastery of *keigo* and Japanese politeness norms. The problems faced by migrants are summarized as follows:

Language Level Selection Error

Mistakes in language selection occur due to migrants' lack of understanding of placing their position in language. Migrants as workers may use *futsūgo* or even the basic polite form, *teineigo*, which should use *sonkeigo* (for example when talking to a superior), so it is considered impolite. As in the following expression.

- (1) Context: A worker asks his boss to accept the strawberry production data report he wrote.

Indonesian workers: "*Kakunin onegaishimasu.*"

Kindly confirm.

The above expression shows a request from a worker to his superior regarding the results of the strawberry farming production report. After the report was completed, his superior submitted it by expressing; *kakunin onegaishimasu* with the hope that the results of his report would be checked again by his superior. In the domain of work in Japan, especially in conversations that have the meaning of a request, the expression of the request is conveyed with the *kenjōgo* variety to show that the speaker respects his partner. In this expression, it should be; *gokakunin onegaitashimasu*. This shows that the worker does not understand the language choice in the office domain.

The phrase *onegaishimasu* is sometimes preceded by the word *yoroshiku*. The use of *yoroshiku onegaishimasu* is said at the end of an introduction as in the following example.

- (2) Context of conversation: The first time workers were introduced to each other at an agricultural company.

Indonesian workers:

"*Hajimemashite*"

Let me introduce myself

“Rudi Hardianto *to moushimasu.*”

I’m Rudi hardianto

“*Yoroshiku onegaishimasu.*”

Pleased to meet you

The introduction is said by migrants when they first work in a Japanese company. In the context of *keigo*, the expression would be very respectful if changed into the *kenjōgo* form, namely, *yoroshiku onegaitashimasu*. The sentence’s ending *~shimasu* (*teineigo*/formal form) change with *~itashimasu* that the *kenjōgo* form.

4.2. Contextual Conditions that are not Understood

Keigo depends on social status, age, and situation (e.g., speaking to customers vs. coworkers). Migrants who don’t understand the context can make fatal mistakes like the ones in the following expressions. Context: A male staff member, while working, asked permission to take a piece of paper from his female superior’s desk.

(3) Male Staff:

“*Buchou, kore ichimai morattemo iidesuka.*”

Manager, may I take one of these?

(while pointing at a piece of paper)

Female Superior:

“*Hai douzo, gojiyuuni otori kudasai.*”

Yes, go ahead. Please feel free to take one.

Male Staff:

“*sumimasen, ja moraimasu.*”

“Thank you, then I’ll take one.”

In the conversation above, the superior, as the head of the department, uses the *sonkeigo* variety with the prefix *go-* in front of the word *jiyuu* (free). After this word, there is the verb *torimasu*, which, according to the sentence pattern above, is changed into the ordering form of the *sonkeigo* variety, namely *otori kudasai*. In this context, the superior uses the *sonkeigo* form but the male staff responds with the *teineigo* form; *sumimasen, ja moraimasu* (I’ll take one). The male staff should also respond with the *sonkeigo* variety to respect their superior. In this case, the staff does not understand their position in the conversation. Japan highly values seniority (*senpai-kohai*) and job status. Misuse of can be interpreted as disrespect.

Another reason based on the interview results is that

the staff from Indonesia did not receive *keigo* training, so they tend to use the *-masu* or *-desu* form as a marker for the *teineigo* form. So the staff cannot respond to the speech of the superior who uses the *sonkeigo* variety. Many migrants only learn basic Japanese (N5-N4 JLPT) without any *keigo*, which is usually taught at the advanced level (N2 and above).

On the other hand, there are differences in Japanese and Indonesian culture, namely in indirect communication. Japanese culture avoids confrontation, so criticism or rejection is often conveyed subtly. Migrants used to direct communication may not pick up on these signals. Japanese women are often expected to use more refined *keigo* than men. Female migrants from Indonesia may not be used to this norm.

4.3. Indonesian Migrants’ Perceptions of the Complexity of *Keigo* in the Japanese Work Environment

Difficulty in using *keigo* by foreign workers in Japan in the study by Wiyatasari^[25] showed that Japanese *keigo* communication with coworkers was stressful for EPA care workers. Some of them said that verbal communication with coworkers was difficult for them. They highlighted that speaking in *keigo* or formal Japanese was like learning a new language. Some of them said that their listening comprehension might be high, however, their ability to verbally articulate what they heard in Japanese was low. This lack of ability to use *keigo* sometimes results in cultural friction in the workplace.

Keigo is a very important aspect of Japanese linguistics professionally because it reflects social hierarchy, politeness, and work ethic. For Indonesian migrants, the use of *keigo* is often perceived as a challenge due to its structural and functional complexity. This perception can be seen from two aspects:

4.3.1. Structural Complexity

Keigo, an honorific Japanese language, is divided into three main types: *sonkeigo*, *kenjōgo*, and *teineigo*. *Sonkeigo* is used to elevate or show respect to others, *kenjōgo* is used to humble oneself or express humility, while *teineigo* refers to neutral polite language used in formal situations. Each of these forms serves different social functions, and the conversational context and the social relationship between the

speaker and the listener heavily influence their usage. However, complex grammatical markers in each type often cause difficulties for migrants or learners of Japanese, especially in choosing the appropriate form based on the communicative situation. Mistakes in using *keigo* can affect the clarity of meaning and how polite or respectful the speaker is perceived to be. In addition, changes in vocabulary and verb conjugation within *keigo* often do not follow regular patterns. For example, the verb *taberu* (to eat) becomes *meshiagaru* in *sonkeigo*, while *miru* (to see) becomes *goran ni naru*. These changes fall into special forms, or *tokubetsuna katachi*, which cannot be predicted based solely on general Japanese grammar rules. As such, they require memorization and a deeper contextual understanding. This complexity makes mastering *keigo* one of the main challenges in advanced Japanese language learning, particularly for non-native speakers who do not share a similar cultural background.

4.3.2. Functional Complexity

Keigo in the Japanese language is not merely a matter of grammar, but also reflects a deep understanding of Japanese cultural values, particularly regarding social hierarchy, politeness, and interpersonal relationships. Incorrect use of *keigo* is often not seen as a simple linguistic mistake, but rather as a sign of rudeness or an inability to adapt to the prevailing social norms. This creates particular pressure for foreign speakers, including Indonesian migrants, who must navigate the complexity of language variation in daily life, whether in the workplace or social interactions. In response to these challenges, *teineigo*, or the basic polite form, is frequently chosen as a “safe strategy” because it is perceived as neutral and easier to master than *sonkeigo* and *kenjōgo*, which involve more complex and context-dependent rules. The fear of making mistakes when using *keigo* often leads migrants to avoid speaking actively. As a result, some choose to speak as little as possible—or even remain silent altogether—to avoid communicative situations that require *keigo*. This strategy of silence is not merely due to a lack of knowledge, but rather a response to social pressure and the fear of being perceived as impolite. Over time, this can affect their self-confidence and participation in Japanese-speaking environments, limiting their opportunities for integration and interaction within the community.

Based on interviews with Indonesian migrants who experience difficulties in using *keigo*, several key factors

can be identified as the causes of their limited understanding of this honorific language. One fundamental factor is the difference in linguistic systems between Japanese and Indonesian. Linguistically, the Indonesian language does not have a hierarchical language system that explicitly incorporates honorific forms within its grammar. As a result, migrants struggle to internalize the concept of *keigo*, which heavily relies on social hierarchy, status, and speaker relationships. Concepts such as humbling oneself (*kenjōgo*) or elevating the listener (*sonkeigo*) are unfamiliar to most native Indonesian speakers, as these do not have direct equivalents in their mother tongue. Furthermore, Japanese language training programs offered by vocational training institutions in Indonesia typically focus only on achieving a basic level of Japanese proficiency, particularly the N4 level, the minimum requirement for working in Japan. These training programs emphasize practical communication skills and basic grammar, with little to no emphasis on *keigo* as an essential part of pragmatic competence in Japanese. This imbalance results in migrants being inadequately prepared to understand and use *keigo* appropriately when they enter the workplace or social environments in Japan, where the correct use of polite language is contextually expected and often socially required.

5. Conclusions

Indonesian migrants often perceive *keigo* as both a linguistic and cultural barrier due to its structural and functional complexities. Structurally, *keigo* involves intricate vocabulary and grammatical changes, including irregular verb conjugations and special forms not found in the Indonesian language system. This makes it difficult to understand and apply *keigo* correctly, especially since Indonesian has no hierarchical language structure that systematically reflects social relationships between speakers and listeners. Functionally, the use of *keigo* depends heavily on social context, such as status, age, job position, and familiarity, which requires a high degree of cultural sensitivity and pragmatic awareness. This mismatch between the Japanese and Indonesian language systems, compounded by the lack of in-depth training on *keigo* in Japanese language education programs in Indonesia, reinforces the perception that *keigo* is a particularly difficult aspect of the language to

master. Nevertheless, migrants do not entirely give up in the face of this challenge. Many develop adaptive strategies to cope with it, such as deliberately avoiding situations where *keigo* is required or opting to use *teineigo* which is seen as a safer and more neutral choice. These strategies reflect active efforts to adjust to the norms of communication in Japanese society, even though linguistic and cultural limitations continue to pose significant challenges in their integration process.

Indonesian migrants often struggle with understanding and correctly using *keigo* due to its complexity and the cultural nuances involved. The ability to use *keigo* effectively is closely tied to social adaptation for Indonesian migrants in Japan. The difficulty in understanding *keigo* usage, including understanding the underlying social factors, is also due to the lack of a speech level system like Japanese, which is quite complex in selecting vocabulary that conforms to *keigo* rules. When communicating, speakers must be careful in their language choices. This research can provide input on how labor-sending institutions can incorporate *keigo* training, which can be provided after training participants reach an intermediate level. Furthermore, prospective migrants should be introduced to Japanese communication culture, including understanding the speaker's position in relation to their communication partners.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, E.T.R. and H.; methodology, E.T.R. and S.A.F.; software, E.T.R. and F.F.; validation, E.T.R., H. and S.A.F.; formal analysis, E.T.R. and F.F.; investigation, E.T.R. and H.; resources, E.T.R., H., S.A.F. and F.F.; data curation, E.T.R., H., S.A.F. and F.F.; writing—original draft preparation, E.T.R.; writing—review and editing, E.T.R., H., S.A.F. and F.F.; visualization, F.F.; supervision, E.T.R., H., S.A.F.; project administration, S.A.F.; funding acquisition, E.T.R., H. and S.A.F. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Research and Community Service Institute, Universitas Jenderal Soedirman.

Informed Consent Statement

Written informed consent has been obtained from the participants.

Data Availability Statement

All data generated or analyzed during this study are included in this article. Further enquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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