Analysis of Keigo and Social Factors of the Uchi-Soto Concept in the Japanese Manga Bungou Stray Dogs

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Abstract

This study aims to describe the types of honorific language or *keigo* (*sonkeigo*, *kenjougo*, and *teineigo*) and the factors reflecting the *uchi-soto* concept in the manga *Bungou Stray Dogs* (Guild Arc) by Kafka Asagiri. This research adopts a descriptive qualitative method. Data collection was carried out using the observation and note-taking technique (*metode simak catat*) applied to dialogues within speech balloons in the manga. The data analysis technique involves four stages: classifying the types of *keigo* based on the theory of Sudjianto & Dahidi (2007), analyzing social factors based on Osamu Mizutani's (1987) theory, analyzing the classification results and social factors in light of the *uchi-soto* concept, and formulating conclusions to address the research questions. The findings reveal 68 conversation datasets comprising a total of 149 *keigo* occurrences across three categories: 32 instances of *sonkeigo*, 5 instances of *kenjougo*, and 112 instances of *teineigo*. The social factors triggering the emergence of the *uchi-soto* concept in *keigo* usage are familiarity, age, social relations, social status, gender, group membership, and situation. Furthermore, the *uchi* concept was identified in 33 data points, while the *soto* concept appeared in 35 data points.

Keywords: *keigo, sonkeigo, kenjougo, teineigo, uchi-soto*

1. Introduction

Language is an arbitrary sound system used by members of social groups to cooperate, communicate, and identify themselves (Chaer, 2014). Language also serves as a unifying medium between communities and individuals within social structures. Similar to Indonesia, Japan places tremendous emphasis on politeness, both in speech and in conduct. In Japan, polite and honorific language is formally termed *keigo* According to Terada (as cited in Sudjianto & Dahidi, 2007:189), *keigo* is employed to express respect toward the interlocutor or the referent being discussed. *Keigo* (敬語) is classified into three principal categories: *sonkeigo* (尊敬語 - respectful language), *kenjougo* (謙譲語 – humble language), and *teineigo* (丁寧語 - polite language) (Sudjianto & Dahidi, 2007).

The *uchi-soto* concept is a sociocultural framework marked by differentiated interpersonal treatment based on group demarcation, serving as a primary foundation for *keigo* usage. According to Yoshio Sugimoto (2003), *uchisoto* is a fundamental concept in Japanese society distinguishing the in-group (*uchi* / inside) from the outgroup (*soto* / outside). This concept is distinctly mirrored in language use within popular media, including manga, anime, and cinema.

Manga is a Japanese comic medium (Brenner, 2007). Language and dialogues in manga play a vital role in character development and narrative progression. Specifically, *keigo* functions not merely as a linguistic device, but also as an instrument to construct characterization, social dynamics, and the embodiment of *uchi-soto* boundaries. One prominent

manga is *Bungou Stray Dogs*, authored by Kafka Asagiri and illustrated by Sango Harukawa. First serialized in 2012 in Kadokawa Shoten's seinen magazine *Young Ace*, it achieved significant popularity, earning an 8.47 rating on MyAnimeList (accessed March 5, 2026).

This study identifies the types of *keigo* and analyzes the social factors prompting their usage as manifestations of the *uchi-soto* concept in *Bungou Stray Dogs*. The investigation centers on the Armed Detective Agency members' interactions—both among internal members (*uchi*) and with external parties (*soto*)—across Volumes 4 through 7 (Guild Arc). This study seeks to describe the *keigo* types and identify the underlying social factors reflecting *uchi-soto*.

Unlike previous studies by Sudarta (2024) and Salsabila & Hariri (2023), which utilized speech-level determinants from Toshie and Abdurakhman (2019), this study employs Osamu Mizutani's (1987) social factors framework to analyze the *uchi-soto* concept. It establishes *uchi-soto* as the primary theoretical anchor to examine how organizational group loyalty and boundaries govern speech style selection.

Theoretically, this research is expected to enrich academic insights into *keigo* and *uchi-soto*. Practically, it serves as a valuable resource for Japanese language learners to better grasp contextual politeness, assists educators in explaining *keigo* dynamics, and provides researchers with broader perspectives on socio-pragmatics in manga.

2. Method

The approach employed in this research is qualitative research using a descriptive qualitative method to identify and analyze the forms of *keigo* in the manga *Bungou Stray Dogs* and the *uchi-soto* concepts contained therein. Qualitative research is a research procedure that produces descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words as well as the observable behavior of individuals in a specific context, which is examined from an intact, comprehensive, and holistic perspective of the researcher (Grave, 2022:26–27). The data source in this study is a visual media artwork in the form of the manga *Bungou Stray Dogs* by Kafka Asagiri, volumes utilized in this research range from Volume 4 to Volume 7.

The data collection technique was conducted using the observation and note-taking method applied to conversations within the speech balloons of the manga. This study utilizes two types of triangulation to establish data validity, source triangulation and theoretical triangulation.

Data analysis was conducted qualitatively through four primary steps: classification, social factor analysis, interpretation, and conclusion drawing. First, the data is classified based on the types of *keigo* (*sonkeigo*, *kenjougo*, and *teineigo*) in accordance with the theory proposed by Sudjianto & Dahidi (2007), and then arranged into a classification table. Second, each *keigo* form is described alongside its corresponding social factors using Osamu Mizutani's (1987) theory. Third, the results of the *keigo* description and social factors are analyzed based on the *uchi-soto* concept. Finally, conclusions are synthesized based on the classification and description results to answer the research questions.

3. Result

3.1 Types of Keigo in Bungou Stray Dogs

Analysis revealed 149 total occurrences of *keigo* across 68 dialogue scenes, distributed as follows:

Table 3.1 Distribution of Keigo Types

No.	Volume	Sonkeigo	Kenjougo	Teineigo	Total
1	Vol 4	12	4	46	62
2	Vol 5	3	-	15	18

3	Vol 6	8	1	22	31
4	Vol 7	9	-	29	38
Total		**32**	**5**	**112**	**149**

As shown in Table 3.1, *teineigo* is the most dominant form with 112 occurrences, while *sonkeigo* accounts for 32 instances. *Kenjougo* is the least frequent, with only 5 instances recorded.

3.2 Social Factors of the Uchi-Soto Concept

The classification results of the 68 conversation dialogue data categorized by the *uchi-soto* concept revealed that 33 data points reflect the *uchi* concept and 35 data points reflect the *soto* concept. The emergence of the *uchi-soto* concept is based on social factors, namely familiarity (F1), age (F2), social relations (F3), social status (F4), gender (F5), group membership (F6), and situation (F7). The details of these data are presented in Table 4.2 below:

Table 3.2 Social Factors and Uchi-Soto

No.	**Volume**	**Social Factors**							***Uchi***	***Soto***
		F1	**F2**	**F3**	**F4**	**F5**	**F6**	**F7**		
1.	Vol. 4	8	7	25	13	2	25	22	12	18
2.	Vol. 5	4	1	8	4	1	9	5	6	3
3.	Vol. 6	10	4	13	3	-	15	3	11	4
4.	Vol. 7	10	3	13	4	-	14	6	4	10
	Total	32	15	59	24	3	63	36	33	35

Based on Table 4.2, among the seven social factors, group membership is the most dominant social factor to emerge, with 63 data occurrences. These social factors underlie the use of *keigo* and the *uchi-soto* concept. Interacting with fellow group members triggers the emergence of the *uchi* concept. Conversely, interacting with external organizations can bring about the *soto* concept. Next, the social relations factor appeared with 59 data points, the situational factor with 36 data points, and the familiarity factor with 32 data points. Meanwhile, other social factors include the social status factor with 24 data points, the age factor with 15 data points, and the least frequent factor is the gender factor with 3 data points.

Social factors such as familiarity and social status trigger the *uchi* concept when characters interact with fellow members of the same organization. This demonstrates that even within the same group, characters continue to use *keigo* when communicating with superiors. The *uchi* concept appeared substantially in Volume 4 with 12 data points and Volume 6 with 11 data points, indicating that high levels of interaction occurred within the same organization in both volumes. Conversely, the *soto* concept emerged when communicating with external organizations and strangers. In Volume 4, the *soto* concept was most frequently identified with 18 data points, due to encounters with external organizations driven by situational factors.

4. Discussion

4.1 In-Depth Analysis of Dialogue Data

1. Data 1

Context: Yukichi Fukuzawa, the Director of the Armed Detective Agency, inquires about the movements of the Military Police and City Police from his subordinate, Doppo Kunikida.

Kunikida Doppo: 既に複数の隊が検分を始めています。マフィアの隠蔽の甲斐あってか身元までは割れていませんが…

Sude ni fukusuu no tai ga kenbun wo hajimete imasu. Mafia no inpei no kai atte ka mimoto made wa warete imasen ga…

"Several units have already commenced their investigation. Whether owing to the Mafia's cover-up, the identity remains unrevealed so far…"

Bungou Stray Dogs, Vol. 4, Chap. 13, p. 7

Analysis: The *keigo* used is *teineigo* (polite language), seen in *hajimete imasu* & *warete imasen ga*, directly showing formal politeness (Sudjianto & Dahidi, 2007). Several social factors trigger the usage of *teineigo* in this dialogue. First, the social relations factor: Kunikida and Fukuzawa are colleagues at the Armed Detective Agency, there by both belonging to the internal *uchi* group. Second, the social status factor: Kunikida serves as a subordinate to Fukuzawa, who is the President/Director of the Armed Detective Agency. Third, the situational factor: the interaction takes place inside the Armed Detective Agency office, where Fukuzawa inquires about the tactical movements of the military and city police, following which Kunikida delivers his official status report (Mizutani, 1987). Based on the analysis, the *uchi* concept is manifested in the interaction between Fukuzawa and Kunikida as superior and subordinate. Kunikida adjusts his speech by using honorific/polite language when submitting his report to Fukuzawa to directly convey deference and respect to his superior. These findings demonstrate that although speakers belong to the same in-group (*uchi*), formality, hierarchy, and politeness must remain maintained during official work-related duties.

2. Data 2

Context: Yukichi Fukuzawa lies to Detective Minoura by claiming that Kyoka Izumi is his granddaughter. Minoura is initially suspicious but promptly accepts and believes the statement.

Minoura:お孫さん?

Omago-san?

"Your granddaughter?"

Bungou Stray Dogs, Vol. 4, Chap. 13, p. 13

Analysis: Represents *sonkeigo* (respectful language). The phrase *omago-san* to express deference toward the referent by elevating the social stature and dignity of the person being discussed (Sudjianto & Dahidi, 2007). Several social factors trigger the usage of *keigo* in this context. First, the social status factor: although Minoura expresses hesitation and doubt, he voices his suspicion using respectful language out of deference to Fukuzawa's esteemed standing. Second, the group membership factor: Minoura is a police detective representing an external entity (*soto*), which causes him to feel a sense of reserve and deference toward Fukuzawa, who serves as the Director of the Armed Detective Agency (Mizutani, 1987). Based on the analysis, the *soto* concept is evident in Minoura's use of *sonkeigo* as an external party (*soto*), employed to avoid jeopardizing relations with the Armed Detective Agency due to a misunderstanding. The research findings indicate that the use of *sonkeigo* by Detective Minoura functions as a manifestation of respect toward the referent by elevating the referent's status in response to the disclosed familial relationship between Izumi and Fukuzawa from the Armed Detective Agency, and the *soto* dynamic contributes to Minoura's willingness to accept and trust the information.

3. Data 3

Context: Francis Scott Key Fitzgerald decides to leave after being asked to depart by Yukichi Fukuzawa. Kenji Miyazawa, who is a member of the Armed Detective Agency acting as the host, offers to escort him out.

Miyazawa Kenji:お送りします。

Ookurishimasu.

"I shall see you out."

Bungou Stray Dogs, Vol. 4, Chap. 15, p. 99

Analysis: Type of *keigo* utilized is *kenjougo* (humble language) in *ookurishimasu* which conveys respect toward the interlocutor by humbling the speaker's own actions (Sudjianto & Dahidi, 2007). social factors trigger the usage of *keigo* here. First, the social status factor: Francis is the leader of The Guild, while Miyazawa is a member of the Armed Detective Agency. Second, the group membership factor: Miyazawa represents the internal *uchi* group, whereas Francis, as the leader of The Guild, represents the external *soto* group. Third, the situational factor: Miyazawa exercises hospitality etiquette and volunteers to see Francis off (Mizutani, 1987). Based on the analysis, the *soto* concept is evident in Miyazawa's use of *kenjougo* as an expression of respect by humbling himself when interacting with Francis, who is both the leader of The Guild and an external guest of the Armed Detective Agency. The research findings indicate that *kenjougo* serves as a form of hospitality etiquette toward the *soto* party, maintaining deference as a host without diminishing the dignity and prestige of one's own organization in the presence of an external faction.

4. Data 4

Context: Osamu Dazai from the Armed Detective Agency is ambushed by Port Mafia members, Gin and Ichiyo Higuchi. Osamu Dazai remains calm and unperturbed because he was already aware of the surveillance conducted by the Port Mafia, and because he was the original creator of that surveillance technique.

Higuchi Ichiyou: 監視はお見通しという訳ですか。

Kanshi wa omitooshi to iu wake desu ka?

"So it means you saw right through our surveillance?"

Bungou Stray Dogs, Vol. 6, Chap. 24, pp. 156–157

Analysis: Types of *keigo* utilized are *sonkeigo* (respectful language) and *teineigo* (polite language). *Sonkeigo* is present in the word *omitooshi* and *Teineigo* is present in the phrase *wake desu* (Sudjianto & Dahidi, 2007). Social factors trigger the usage of *keigo* in this interaction. First, the social relations factor: Osamu originally created the Port Mafia's surveillance technique, but later defected from the Port Mafia and joined the Armed Detective Agency. Higuchi regards Osamu as a former Port Mafia figure, prompting her to employ respectful language as an external party (*soto*). Second, the social status factor: to Higuchi, Osamu is a former senior and former Executive of the Port Mafia, whereas Higuchi is a subordinate serving under a Port Mafia executive member, leading her to adopt respectful speech. Third, the group membership factor: Osamu represents the Armed Detective Agency (*uchi* from the Agency's perspective) while Higuchi represents the Port Mafia (*soto*). As a member of the *soto* group, Higuchi uses polite/respectful language when speaking to Osamu (Mizutani, 1987). Based on the analysis, the *soto* concept is evident through Higuchi from the Port Mafia utilizing both *sonkeigo* and *teineigo* toward Osamu from the Armed Detective Agency (who represents the *uchi* group). The research findings indicate that Higuchi's (*soto*) use of *sonkeigo* serves as an expression of respect toward the referent by elevating the actions and status of the interlocutor, Osamu (*uchi*), while *teineigo* is employed to directly show politeness and formal distance across distinct organizational boundaries.

5. Data 5

Context: Atsushi Nakajima sits despondently on the stairs while Osamu Dazai stands nearby. Atsushi shares what he once read in an ancient scroll of a book, while Osamu stands and listens intently.

Nakajima Atsushi: …太宰さん 昔読んだ古い書巻にありました。「昔、私は、自分のした事に就いて後悔したことはなかった、しなかった事に就いてのみ何時 も後悔を感じていた」それに、こうもありました。「頭は間違うことがあっても、血は間違わない」...

Dazai-san.

Mukashi yonda furui shokan ni arimashita.

"Mukashi, watashi wa, jibun no shita koto ni tsuite koukai shita koto wa nakatta, shinakatta koto ni tsuite nomi, itsumo koukai wo kanjiteita."

Sore ni, kou mo arimashita. "Atama wa machigau koto ga atte mo, chi wa machigawanai."

"… Dazai-san.

Once, it was written in an ancient scroll I read.

'In the past, I never regretted things I had done; I only ever felt regret for the things I did not do.'

Moreover, it also said: 'Though the mind may err, the blood does not.'"

Bungou Stray Dogs, Vol. 7, Chap. 28, p. 192

Analysis: types of *keigo* utilized are *sonkeigo* (respectful language) and *teineigo* (polite language). *Sonkeigo* is present in *Dazai-san* and *Teineigo* is present in the verb *arimashita* (Sudjianto & Dahidi, 2007). Several social factors trigger the usage of *keigo* in this dialogue. First, the familiarity factor: although Osamu and Nakajima share a close bond of camaraderie and interact regularly, Nakajima—being junior to Osamu—consistently uses *teineigo* when speaking to him. Second, the age factor: Osamu is older than Nakajima, who is still an adolescent. Third, the social relations factor: Osamu is a senior detective while Nakajima is an apprentice/junior detective, leading Nakajima to employ *teineigo* to demonstrate deference. Fourth, the group membership factor: both Osamu and Nakajima belong to the same internal *uchi* group within the Armed Detective Agency (Mizutani, 1987). Based on the analysis, the *uchi* concept is evident in Nakajima's interaction with Osamu. Although both belong to the same *uchi* group and share an amicable rapport, Nakajima continues to honor Osamu as his senior in the Armed Detective Agency by using *teineigo* to directly convey respect. The research findings show that the use of *teineigo* by Nakajima serves as an expression of deference toward Osamu due to age and seniority within the Agency, notwithstanding their shared in-group (*uchi*) status. Furthermore, the *sonkeigo* honorific suffix used when addressing Osamu serves to elevate the interlocutor's social standing.

5. Conclusion

This study analyzed 149 *keigo* data points across 68 dialogue interactions in *Bungou Stray Dogs* based on Sudjianto & Dahidi's (2007) framework. *Teineigo* was the most prevalent variety (112 data points; using *desu*, *masu*, *o-*, *go-*), followed by *sonkeigo* (32 data points; using *nasaru*, *o-*, *go-*, *-san*, *-sama*), while *kenjougo* was the least frequent (5 data points; utilizing humble verbs like *mairu*, *itadaku*, *moosu*).

Regarding social determinants based on Mizutani (1987), group membership emerged as the most dominant factor (63 occurrences), followed by social relations (59), situational context (36), familiarity (32), social status (24), age (15), and gender (3). The *uchi* concept

occurred in 33 instances and the *soto* concept in 35 instances.

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