

# Politeness in Japan

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This is a brief introduction of “Politeness in Japan”.

## 1. Politeness

A refined manner or politeness is very important in Japanese culture, as indeed it is universal in all civilizations each having its own way of expressing manners. According to Dr. Inazo Nitobe in his book “Bushido” written in 1899, “Politeness should be the outward manifestation of a sympathetic regard for the feelings of others.”

Confucianism is one of the fundamental ideas of Japanese politeness. Confucianism stresses loyalty, justice, sense of shame, refined manners, modesty and honor among other values. For example it stresses respect for the elderly, and still it is very important in our society. That’s why age and rank matter a lot in Japanese protocol. For example, yesterday was a national holiday in Japan, Respect-for-the-aged Day.

Japanese code of conduct is sometimes rather exaggerated even for ourselves, and we don’t expect foreigners to behave like Japanese. But if you know the background for the behavior, it will help you to have a better understanding and strengthen relationships.

## 2. Language

Our population is more than 120 million. Japanese is the sixth most spoken language in the world, but it is spoken mostly in Japan.

Japanese has a complicated system of honorific expressions, and it’s troublesome for Japanese learners. A speaker chooses words taking into consideration the relationship between himself and the person he is speaking to (according to social status, rank, age, gender, the favor that he owes, etc.). There are two types of honorific expression; one is to use respect (i.e. elevate the listener), and the other is modesty (i.e. to humble the speaker).

Euphemism is one of the Japanese examples of politeness. We avoid rejecting something outright, and sometimes we receive criticism for this as listeners often don’t immediately realize whether we mean “Yes” or “No”. Especially, Japanese try not to say “no” directly, and this often causes confusion in international negotiations. Japanese tend to avoid seeing things in black and white, and we rather prefer to leave a “grey zone”; we hesitate to decide in a binomial way. As a foreigner, you should know this so as not to get frustrated in the negotiations, and should just try to distinguish between “Yes” and “No” by nuance and non-verbal signs.

We have a family name and given name, and use the names in this order. We tend to call one another by family name in the business scene, putting *san* instead of Mr. or Mrs. When you get closer, you might propose using nickname or each other’s given name.

## 3. Visit to a Japanese house

We take off shoes inside the house, as we distinguish strictly between outside and inside

the house. We generally take some small gifts when we visit somebody's house. When we hand over the gift, many foreigners are surprised when they hear "this might not suit you", but this is because we humble ourselves. When we visit somebody's house, we generally take sweets and flowers, so on.

A bit more information about customs. When we sit down in the tatami-room, the most important guest sits on the honored seat, which is located farthest from the entrance. The host or the least important person sits next to the entrance. We Japanese don't give tip in hotels or transportation facilities but one can if you want show special thanks in Japanese Inns (ryokan). But in such a case, it is better to put the tip in an envelope. It is superstitious, but there are some unlucky numbers. 4 and 9, which are associated with death and suffering due to the pronunciation, hotels tend to avoid these numbers.

#### 4. Bowing (*Ojigi*)

Bowing is an essential part of Japanese custom to show respect, thanking, greeting or apology. In stead of shaking hands, we bow, and it depends on time and people how long and deep you bow. Generally men keep their hands in their side, and women put their hands together on their thighs with fingers touching.

#### 5. Business-card (*Meishi*) exchange

A business-card is a small card describing a person's name and occupation, and we often start the conversation in meeting by exchanging business-cards. Please put the card in a proper case, so it is not torn or damaged when you hand it over.

The visitor presents the card first, and when there are many people, subordinates should offer their card first. Hold the card in both hands with the writing towards the receiver. When you receive the card, it should be treated with reverence. Leave it on the table during the meeting.

#### 6. Manner when eating

We have a variety of dishes, and most of them try to make the most of the natural flavor of fish or shellfish which harmonizes with steamed rice. In fact, Japanese have been eating rice for more than 2000 years! In formal Japanese cuisine, before having rice, soup and pickles, we would have sashimi (raw fish), grilled fish, deep fried and boiled foods, vegetables and fish in different sauce, and seaweeds with vinegar.

Sushi is one of the most popular Japanese foods. In early 1800s, the people of Edo (currently Tokyo) became famous as gourmets, and they started nigiri-zushi, fish and shellfish caught in Edo Bay (currently Tokyo Bay) on small clumps of sushi rice.

Sake is traditional Japanese alcohol, made by rice and clean water. Rice is milled to a fine white grain and steamed, and then two simultaneous processes take place; the rice is broken down into sugar through the action of Koji microorganisms, and at the same time the sugar is fermented into alcohol through the action of natural yeast.

#### 7. Conclusion

Last but not least, the most important thing about politeness is respect for others. Our ways of acting are apparently different, but basically the meaning might be the same in many civilizations.

# Here are some Japanese greeting words

Ohayou gozaimasu      good morning      おはようご  
ざいます

Konnichiwa      good afternoon      こんにちは

Sayounara      Bye-bye      さようなら

Ogenki desuka?      How are you?      お元気です  
か?

Gennki desu      I' m fine      元気です

Arigatou gozaimasu      thank you      ありがとう  
うございます

Gomennasai      I' m sorry      ごめんなさい

Sumimasen      Excuse me      すみません

Itadakimasu      before meal      いただきます

Gochisousamadeshita after meal  
さまでした

ごちそう