

Persona over Realism: Kansaiben and Code-Switching in Japanese Media

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Introduction

The dialects spoken in Japan are unique in that they are often hidden by the users depending on the situation they are in, making their personal dialects a sort of tool that can be used. The dialect spoken in the Kansai region (Kansaiben) is often associated with comedians, criminals, and idiots. It is no wonder, then, why it is often hidden when speaking to people of other regions, or even while at the workplace or while giving presentations while in school. In the media, however, such switches are rare or even non-existent. Media, being a reflection of reality, should contain examples of this circumstance which happens daily in many people's lives. However, because of the comfort of having familiar personas and characterizations being identifiable by the audience, a character speaking kansaiben becomes a flat aspect of character rather than a round, complex one that we see in day-to-day life.

Code-Switching

Code-switching often refers to the switching between languages when two bilingual people are speaking to one another. Also, it can refer to a switch between dialect or language variety. It is commonly seen in Spanglish speakers as well as African American Vernacular English speakers in the United States. Within the Japanese language, code-switching happens in a variety of situations pertaining to those speaking one of Japan's dialects. Japanese dialects are often used in informal situations, where-as in formal situation standard Japanese dialect is expected. Therefore, while in the workplace, while talking to a teacher or giving a presentation, or when a famous person is in an interview, standard Japanese will most often be used. Code-switching is an integral part of Japanese language and Japanese dialects.

Tropes

Kansaiben is a dialect in Japanese often associated with criminals, comedians, and idiots, with the media being at the forefront of creating those stereotypes. Japan's biggest comedians hail from Kansai, comic sidekicks in anime often speak with a Kansai dialect, as well as bad guys and criminals in classic anime. New tropes and stereotypes are arising, as well, like the "Idiot from Osaka" stereotype that is common in modern anime. While regional and dialectal stereotypes are nothing new or different in media, the fact that the common Japanese code-switch is so rarely present in these forms of media presents a problem. If these characters are supposed to be realistic reflections of society and how people think and feel, it would be more realistic if this switch was a part of their character. With media improving and more shows pushing the envelope of quality, this switch should have surfaced somewhere along the line.

Trapped within Tropes

The anime *Azumanga Daioh* (2002) is credited for both creating and deconstructing the "Idiot from Osaka" trope, branching from a real-life stereotype. Its character Kasuga Ayumu is one of the most clear examples of the trope, even though she goes a long way to combat and deconstruct it from the very first episode. In the fifth section of the first episode, she is introduced as a foreign exchange student to the class. She goes in front of the class to give her traditional Japanese self-introduction, and does so in standard Japanese. Her teacher thinks this is silly, requesting that she instead say it with a thick, over-the-top Kansai dialect. Though Kasuga insists that no one would ever introduce themselves like that, even in Osaka, the teacher persists. Later, her classmate comes over and asks her why she isn't doing stereotypical Kansai things, like being loud or eating takoyaki, to which she replies that she considers herself a quiet person and would never have takoyaki in her lunch. Her classmate doesn't accept her answer and grants her the nickname "Osaka". Here we see the writer deconstructing the trope by showing how trapped characters that speak Kansaiben are within themselves. Kasuga has the very rare ability within media to speak standard dialect by code-switching in a realistic manner, but the other characters in the show force her back into her stereotype, not allowing her to be realistic. The writer then goes along with the other characters, proving her to be "the idiot from Osaka" by allowing the audience inside her head to show her comedic, dense way of thinking and getting by in the world. Though Osaka tries her best to get it together, she does what all the other kansaiben speaking characters do: fail and just slip by, trapped under their persona.

Celebrity Transcendence?

Japanese celebrities are capable of bridging this gap between reality and persona in a way that anime characters have been shown to be incapable of. Japanese writers have chosen to leave these characters incapable of any sort of realistic kansaiben switch to allow the audience to get a better grasp on them as characters, leaving several aspects of them one-dimensional to ease things onto the audience. Celebrities like Sanma Akashiya, however, are not always constrained by writers and can escape this, expressing themselves in ways they please. Though they do not do it often, as their persona is important to their career, they can and will break their persona to use code-switch based politeness strategies.



Conclusion

Within Japanese media, fictional characters are trapped within their persona, and while they can be a dynamic or shifting character, the basic traits of their initially established tropes are impossible to transcend. Celebrities themselves create personas to abide in the real world, though they are not as limited by the screen and separation from the audience, and are therefore able to choose opportunities to slip out of their persona and code-switch freely and realistically.



Figure 2.3. Characters falling under the archetypal traits of Kansai tropes

Acknowledgements & References

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