

# Chapter 10

## Kansai Style Conversation and Its Role in Contemporary Japan

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### Introduction

Japanese society has in many ways entered a phase of movement away from conformity. This can be observed in many aspects of life; in business, export articles stemming from manga, fashion, art, and various forms of subculture, are receiving increased attention abroad, and in terms of sociolinguistics, people more often base their identity on character traits, deviating from previously held social norms. Furthermore, there has been a loss of stigma attached to some non-standard Japanese language varieties (Vaage 2010). Japanese people now use these varieties as positive “identity pegs” (Goffman 1963), that is to say a means to confirm their character, or position in society. In today’s Japan there is a tendency for people from rural districts who move to the big cities to keep their original dialect, and not switch to some form of Tokyo standard Japanese, as was common during the 70’s and 80’s in Japan. Speaking rural dialects in an urban setting is sometimes considered “cute” or “cool” (Tanaka 2011).

The study of role language (in Japanese referred to as *yakuwarigo*), advocated by Kinsui (2003, 2007, 2011), has emerged from these sociolinguistic changes. Role language in Japanese works in such a way that when we hear a certain language use such as vocabulary, intonation or grammar, we can imagine a certain person or character (i.e., the role). Thus the method for role language studies is the opposite of classical sociolinguistic research: In a typical sociolinguistic survey, the relevant social variables are set, and the researcher then proceeds to investigate the language use of the people falling within these variables, whereas for role language research, the language use is set, and the object is to investigate what kind of image (attributes

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or stereotypes) the language use projects. The original framework for role language research was created for virtual Japanese, that is to say the sometimes peculiar language used in manga, anime or other forms of popular fiction, but I would like to argue that this framework can also be applied to actual spoken or written Japanese as well, in the sense that Japanese speakers actively and intentionally use role language to serve various social purposes, such as ice-breaking, emphasizing intimacy, standing out from others, or simply for fun.

The current paper will investigate the role, or rather, the position of Kansai style conversation in light of recent social changes mentioned in the first paragraph, while taking into account recent developments in sociolinguistic research. The term “Kansai style conversation” needs further explanation, but for the time being it will refer to the language, including communicative and pragmatic elements, commonly used in the Kansai area of Japan. There is great dialectal diversity within Kansai, and the boundaries are sometimes unclear, but in this paper Osaka will be considered the center and source of the dialectal prototype, and informants born and raised in the prefectures Osaka, Hyogo, Kyoto, Nara, Wakayama and Shiga will be placed in the group referred to as “Kansai natives,” and everyone else as “non-Kansai natives.” Although this paper can only scratch the surface of sociolinguistic changes occurring in Japan today, focusing on the Kansai area as the second largest metropolitan area in Japan must be the most relevant starting point for any inquiry into non-standard Japanese, because of the area’s general influence on Japanese society.

## **Kansai Dialect**

The Kansai dialect has been for a very long time, and still is, earning a certain prestige all over Japan. The reason for this is most likely historical. Before the Edo-period the capital and government of Japan was situated in Kansai, and Osaka, Kyoto and Kobe have continued to be important centers for culture and trade. Furthermore, Osaka is also known as the entertainment capital of Japan, and Kansai is still fostering the greatest amount of humorists or entertainers, commonly referred to as *owarai geinin* in Japanese. This is partly due to the influence exerted by the entertainment conglomerate Yoshimoto Kogyo situated in Osaka, and partly due to the peculiar character of people born and raised in the Kansai area (i.e., their personality and communication skills). In fact, Kinsui – a keynote speaker at the NAJAKS conference – lists “fond of humor, likes to make people laugh, talkative” as the most prominent characteristic of the Osaka or Kansai native (2003, p. 82). The results of the survey in this research also confirm this situation; both Kansai natives and non-Kansai natives described Kansai natives as being funny and social, and non-Kansai natives as being not as funny, and sometimes socially cold.

Although not sufficiently studied, to most Japanese it is clear that a lot of Kansai natives have a kind of social skill that many non-Kansai natives do not possess. This paper will explore what the sociolinguistic manifestation of the

so-called inherent humorous or social quality of the Osaka and Kansai native actually is. Indeed, the Kansai dialect, or more precisely Kansai style conversation is the preferred norm for Japanese comedy routines nationwide. Various styles and formats for humor exist in Japan, such as *rakugo*, comical storytelling, and *manzai*, a comical dialog between two people taking on the role of *boke*, the silly man, and *tsukkomi*, the straight man, respectively, but whatever the format, the language and pragmatic structure tend to follow the same patterns. It can be noted that even entertainers that are not Kansai natives still use Kansai dialect and Kansai style conversation when performing or appearing in popular media (including television, radio, film and internet). In other words, Kansai style conversation is not something that can be easily separated from Japanese humor itself.

This paper will address the following questions: What exactly are the sociolinguistic and pragmatic properties of Kansai style conversation in contemporary Japan? What is the role of Kansai style conversation inside and outside of the Kansai area? What is Japanese people's assessment of Kansai style conversation, and can any regional differences be found in this respect? And finally, how important is humor for Kansai style conversation, and how important is Kansai style conversation for humor?

The term Kansai dialect is fairly accepted within Japanese linguistics. It refers to the dialect spoken in the larger Osaka, Kyoto and Kobe area of western Japan. As mentioned above, although there exists some variation within Kansai, – i.e., the language variety spoken in Osaka is slightly different from the variety spoken in, for example, Kobe or Himeji – its speakers are considered a sufficiently cohesive group to validate the term Kansai dialect. People in rural areas of Kansai also speak a similar variety, so it cannot be considered a city dialect per se. The author agrees with such an analysis, but will argue that it is necessary to elaborate on which sociolinguistic and pragmatic features should be included in the term dialect.

This paper proposes five groups of properties of the Kansai dialect, or rather language use in Kansai: vocabulary, grammar, honorifics, pitch accent and phonology, and pragmatics. Firstly, Kansai natives have a rich inventory of lexical items that are not considered a part of standard Japanese; *akan*, is used instead of *dame* (no), *batsu* (wrong), is referred to as *peke*, several adjectives have their Kansai counterparts such as *sugoi-gotsui* (great) and *ataakai-nukui* (warm), and in many cases word pairs exist in both standard Japanese, and Kansai dialect, but with different connotations, such as the pair *baka* and *aho*, both meaning idiot, where *aho* is condescending in standard Japanese, and *baka* condescending in Kansai dialect. Secondly, the Kansai dialect exhibits a different grammar from standard Japanese. This is especially noticeable in verb endings (negation *-nai* becomes *-hen*), and sentence final particles (the emphasizing particle *-yo* becomes either *-ya* or *-de* depending on the whether speaker is making a request or conveying information). Thirdly, Kansai natives make use of an extra set of honorifics not present in standard Japanese. As an alternative to the three standard Japanese honorifics types – *sonkeigo*, honorifics towards the subject of the action (i.e., the speaker elevates the subject), *kenjogo*, honorifics towards the object of the action (i.e., the speaker lowers the subject), and *teineigo*, honorifics towards the hearer (i.e., generally using

language considered polite including the so-called *bikago*, such as the honorific prefix *o-*) – Kansai natives have the choice of also using the honorific opposition *-haru* and *-yaru/-yoru*. *-Haru* is used for talking about the actions of someone with a higher status than the speaker, whereas *-yaru* or its alternate *-yoru* is used for talking about the actions of someone with lower status. Interestingly, in recent research Strycharz-Banaś (2012) has revealed that there is an ongoing change in the usage of *-haru*. Whereas *-haru* was previously used mainly by women for third person referents, younger generations use it for second person referents, and the majority of users are also men. It should also be noticed that in Kansai there is no tradition for using *kenjogo* for actions performed by someone in your own in-group. The fourth group of properties of the Kansai dialect, different from standard Japanese, is pitch accent and phonology. For example the [u] in the copula *desu* is dropped in standard Japanese ([des]), but usually pronounced in Kansai ([desu]), and final [i] in adjectives is usually omitted in Kansai but pronounced in standard Japanese, thus adjectives such as [kawai], scary, are realized as [kowa]. Furthermore, the type of pitch accent is different: Keihan style accent is used in Kansai, whereas Tokyo style accent is considered the standard, and used by influential institutions such as the national broadcaster NHK. The fifth and final group of properties of the Kansai dialect is what the author prefers to call pragmatics. Kansai natives make use of humor elements such as *boke* and *tsukkomi* in daily interaction, whereas non-Kansai natives typically do not, except for professional comedians and entertainers. In this group of properties it is also necessary to include certain set phrases with special pragmatic functions such as *nande yanen* or *chau wa* which point out that something was odd in the previous statement and serve as important components in *tsukkomi* routines.

The final group of characteristics is usually neither included nor considered in discussions of dialects within Japan, or dialects in general. This is probably due to both its lack of visibility outside of the Kansai area, and limited understanding of the connection between Japanese humor and the Kansai dialect. However, as some studies – including this paper – show; *boke* and *tsukkomi* are nonetheless components of the language and communication of Kansai natives, and should thus be included in any study of dialects that aspires to paint a complete picture. Several researchers have tried to compensate for this void in the dialect paradigm by proposing terms such as “Osaka-like discourse” (*Osakateki danwa*, Koyano 2004), or “Kansai-like conversational style” (*Kansaiteki kaiwa sutairu*, Kibe et al. 2013), thus incorporating pragmatic components such as *boke* and *tsukkomi* in their scope of research. This paper will use the term “Kansai style conversation” to cover the five properties of speech and conversation in Kansai, that is to say both traditional dialect markers, and pragmatic interactional components such as *boke* and *tsukkomi*. It should be pointed out that *boke* and *tsukkomi* are indeed occasionally visible outside of the Kansai area, but normally only in popular media, primarily television, or when interaction with Kansai natives is taking place somewhere outside of Kansai. Again, this is in opposition to within Kansai, where *boke* and *tsukkomi* are visible in everyday conversation and interaction between Kansai natives.

## Background

Before proceeding to discuss survey results on the properties of Kansai style conversation and the speakers' assessment of it, it is reasonable to write a few words about the structure of Japanese humor and the function of *boke* and *tsukkomi*. As can be easily noticed in intercultural interaction, amusement is often culturally dependent. There is a tendency for Japanese people not to find Western humor funny, and for Westerners to think that Japanese humor is uninteresting. This is because the structure of Japanese jokes and Western jokes is fundamentally different. Almost needless to say, people within the same culture may have different senses of humor, and within the so-called West we find that, for example, British humor is not always similar to American humor. Still, if we should have any ambition to take on the difficult task it is to compare humor and joke structure between cultures, we need to extract the joke into its most basic form. The joke must also not be reserved for the intellectual elite, but rather, accepted and understood by the general public and most age groups. Most fitting for our purpose here, will probably be the basic North American joke, frequently found in situation comedy and stand-up comedy routines, because of its simplicity and wide viewership. It has been pointed out in previous research that this type of joke in most cases takes the form of a set-up and punch line twofold arrangement (Raskin 1985). Taking into account these assumptions, this paper proposes the following joke structure for American and Japanese humor:

[American joke structure]

Set-up → Punch line

[Japanese joke structure]

(*Furi* →) *Boke* → *Tsukkomi*

In the American joke, the set-up is a narrative or storytelling, whereas the punch line is an element of surprise or something unexpected that ends the joke. This pattern is sometimes referred to as the incongruity-resolution (IR) joke in Western literature (Ruch and Hehl 1983). These jokes contain story elements with incongruity that are solvable as opposed to nonsense jokes without any solution. As for the Japanese joke structure, the *furi* part is optional; in some jokes it is present, and in some it is omitted. Basically, it is a verbal nod that serves as a sign that the next line that follows should be something silly or funny. The *boke* then, is the silly part of the joke, and in many cases the person who utters the *boke* twists reality in some way, or gets some part of a larger picture wrong. The term *boke* is used both for the role and the comic line itself. However, the Japanese joke does not stop there. The *boke* must be followed by *tsukkomi* for the joke to be complete. *Tsukkomi* is thus a reaction to the *boke*, trying to set things straight, or bring the interaction back to reality. It is almost like the person playing the *tsukkomi* part is angry with the *boke* part. This is why a *tsukkomi*-line is often accompanied by a slap on the other person's chest or head. The following comedy act, adapted from Nanbara (2010), might serve as an

illustration of the difference in American and Japanese joke structure. A North American comedy act might proceed like this:

-My girl is the best. She's smart. She's very pretty. And to top things off she has a very special feature.

A protruding Adam's apple.

In this joke, the part up to "...very special feature." serves as the set-up, whereas the remaining part is what is known as the punch line. The humor of this act lies of course in the surprise element of the pretty girl actually being a man, and this is the point where Western people would laugh. Turning this joke into Japanese, it might look something like this:

*-Ore no kamisan saiko da ze. Totemo atama ga yokute, saiko ni bijin de, omake ni tokuchoteki da.*

*Nazenara, nodobotoke ga deteiru kara sa.*

The last part where it is stated that the Adam's apple is protruding, is the *boke*, or the silly part. However, no Japanese would laugh at this point, the reason being that there is no *tsukkomi* component. Hence for the comedy act to be funny, somebody would have to insert a *tsukkomi* line like below, and that would be the point where Japanese would laugh of the joke.

*-Otoko yanka!* (It is a man!)

In Western humor, this part is left unsaid. Notice that in *otoko yanka*, the Kansai dialect copula *ya* is used. The *tsukkomi* would not be considered as natural or funny if the standard Japanese equivalent *otoko ja nai ka* would be used. Notice also that as saying the right *boke* or *tsukkomi* at the right timing is a social skill; occasionally it happens in everyday conversation that no one follows up the *boke* line. This is known as *suberu* (literally to slide) in Japanese. In Japanese humor it is also possible that one person utters both a *boke*- and a *tsukkomi* line in the same turn. This is known as *noritsukkomi*, but is only possibly if someone else gives a verbal nod (*furi*) first, thus in any case the Japanese joke structure requires two or more participants.

In other words, compared to Western humor, Japanese humor relies on dual interaction and the mutual cooperation of two or more parts in its production. Whereas stand-up comedy is a one-man act in the West, this is rare in Japan, where *manzai* is the most common comedy act, produced in most cases of a *boke* and *tsukkomi* duo. This division of roles might be somewhat equivalent to what is known as the silly man and straight man, or foil in older Western humor. Thus longer Japanese humor routines are actually dependent on interaction between the *boke* and the *tsukkomi* in the following manner:

*... boke → tsukkomi → boke → tsukkomi ...*

What concerns the discussion in this paper, is the fact that this type of interaction is present in conversations between people who are Kansai natives, sometimes

even in formal communication styles. Japanese people are aware of this fact, and it has been touched upon in previous research (Kinsui 1992, 2003, Koyano 2004, Kibe et al. 2013), but none of these papers have given the topic itself a thorough investigation. Kibe et al. mentions that in their survey conducted at universities in Osaka and Tokyo, 49.7% of the Kansai native students answered that they uttered *boke*-lines “a lot” in conversations, compared to 29.7% of the Kanto (greater Tokyo area) native students. As for the question “do you follow up with a *tsukkomi*-line if someone says a *boke*-line?” 64.8% of the Kansai native students answered “a lot,” compared to 27.0% of the Kanto native students. The students were also asked if they felt that *ochi* (a comical twist) was necessary in conversation. 51.7% of the Kansai natives answered that they felt “very strongly so,” compared to only 8.1% of the Kanto natives. Thus we see that there is a difference in normative attitudes towards what conversation and interaction should be like.

## Perceptions of Kansai Conversation

This paper will present some results from ongoing research on Kansai style conversation by the author. In November 2012, 131 volunteers, of various ages, all living in the Kansai area, participated in a questionnaire survey consisting of free-writing questions about their image of Kansai natives and their dialect, and about humor and the usage of components such as *boke* and *tsukkomi*. Later, 46 people were called back for follow-up interviews to elaborate on their answers. For the purpose of this paper, the variables are limited to the Kansai native/non-Kansai native opposition. Of the informants, around half (69 people) were Kansai natives in the sense that they were born in Kansai (counting the prefectures Osaka, Hyogo, Kyoto, Nara, Wakayama and Shiga), and had lived there most part of their life. The other half (62 people) were born outside of the Kansai area, and had also spend their formative years outside of Kansai. Although gathering informants living in various areas of Japan would have had its merits, targeting only people living in Kansai provided a sample of people dealing with Kansai style conversation on a day to day basis, and having a high degree of consciousness and awareness of the differences between standard Japanese and Kansai style conversation.

When asked to identify characteristics of the way people in Kansai speak (using the word *shaberikata* in Japanese to eliminate answers such as lexical items), the informants gave the following answers – given in keywords – in order of frequency; *tsukkomi*, *boke*, *ochi*, funny (*omoshiroi*), high-spirited (*nori*), *noritsukkomi*, loud (*urusai*), talkative, and talking in a fast tempo. *Boke* and *tsukkomi* also appeared as a set. However, surprisingly often *tsukkomi* also appeared alone. Some informants pointed out that *tsukkomi* didn’t necessarily need to follow a joke; it could also be used for speech acts such as disagreeing or showing surprise. There were no significant differences between Kansai natives and non-Kansai natives; however some non-Kansai natives used neutral expressions rather than positive ones when describing Kansai natives.

As for Japanese people's intuition and assessment of Kansai style conversation and elements such as *boke* and *tsukkomi*, some differences were found between Kansai native and non-Kansai natives. I will examine the results in turn, starting with Kansai natives: In all Kansai native families and in-groups there existed some kind of *boke*- and *tsukkomi* interaction. The degree seemed to vary, but even those informants who responded that they had a serious tone at home, would still participate in plenty of *boke*- and *tsukkomi* interaction when spending time with friends. The general response was that *boke* and *tsukkomi* were simply something that Kansai natives could not be without. In most families this interaction (and other tokens of Kansai style humor) seemed to be an integral and even indispensable part of everyday conversation and communication.

As mentioned above, *boke* and *tsukkomi* rely heavily on the interplay between two people. With regards to role assignment, most people replied that they tended to play mostly the *boke* part or mostly the *tsukkomi* part. This was sometimes seen in relation to the fact that a lot of informants saw themselves as being a certain type or character (often referred to as *kyara*). In other words, the role must match the *kyara*. For example, if a person considers himself or herself as a *tennenkyara* (innocent, ditzy character), this would only be compatible with playing the *boke* part, and uttering *boke* lines. However, most people confessed to being able to play both parts; so even if *boke* is the default part of a certain individual, this person will most likely utter a *tsukkomi*-line if called for in a particular situation. A slight majority (56.5%, or 39 of 69 people) admitted to preferring the *boke* role, but the sample was too small, and the social variables too complicated to say anything certain about preference based on the current survey.

Furthermore, the survey results showed that Kansai natives felt that in interaction with non-Kansai natives, when taking on the *boke* part in the conversation, much of the time no one would volunteer to follow up with the *tsukkomi* part. This would mean a stop to an interaction that would normally go on if both the parts were Kansai natives. The standard reaction Kansai native felt they got when they uttered *boke*-lines in conversation with non-Kansai natives, tended to be smiles or small laughs rather than *tsukkomi*-lines. In a larger perspective, there was a tendency for Kansai natives to assert that non-Kansai natives were less funny or interesting in a social setting (as indicated by the two main senses of the Japanese adjective *omoshiroi*).

Although the amount of data is insufficient, it can be noticed in passing that there seemed to be surprisingly little correlation between the *boke*- and *tsukkomi* roles and sociolinguistic variables of status and power. In most situations, Kansai natives seemed to have no problem playing the *tsukkomi* part when talking to their seniors or even strangers. This is surprising considering that sometimes impolite and condescending language comes with this role.

As for the group of non-Kansai natives living in Kansai, all answered that they were familiar with the concepts of Kansai style conversation, and knew the structure and rules of *boke*- and *tsukkomi* interaction enough to be able to laugh of it. Despite knowing of Kansai style conversation, in general, non-Kansai natives felt that they were not confident enough to actively produce it. Even when trying to



produce *boke*- or *tsukkomi* lines, sometimes their timing would be off, or the pressure of failing to be funny would eventually make them fall passive, leaving the mood making to the Kansai natives. Hence we can conclude that most non-Kansai natives primarily have a passive knowledge of the properties of Kansai style conversation. The phrase for getting a laugh in Japanese is *warai wo toru* (taking the laugh), suggesting that humor is something you actively have to produce by uttering *boke*- and *tsukkomi* lines. In other words, it seems hard to be inadvertently funny when it comes to *tsukkomi* lines.

When asked to what degree humor plays a role in life, 16.1% of the non-Kansai natives (10 out of 62 people) answered that humor was not important, compared to 0% in the Kansai native group. Still, the majority of non-Kansai natives showed an interest in humor, and wanted to master *boke* and *tsukkomi*. They were happy when they were able to produce a laugh, when their attempt at *boke* was picked up and retaliated with a *tsukkomi*, or when they were complimented by Kansai natives. Being funny is said to be more of a compliment in Kansai than being cool, pretty or handsome. What is more, non-Kansai natives answered that they found it difficult to identify themselves clearly as either a prominent *boke*- or *tsukkomi* role, but most seemed to have a preference for either one, although this was in most cases based on an assessment of their own character rather than previous experience in *boke*- and *tsukkomi* interaction. It is also worth noticing that a few non-Kansai natives did not find Kansai natives funny, and responded that they were not interested in humor and Kansai style conversation. It seems reasonable to conclude then, that active competence in properties of Kansai style conversation such as *boke* and *tsukkomi* is learnable, but difficult to acquire if not born and raised in Kansai.

## Concluding Discussion

To sum up, this paper has argued that Japanese humor elements such as *boke* and *tsukkomi* are a part of Kansai style conversation, and of the identity of people from the Kansai area. Pragmatic aspects like these are often overlooked parts of dialect studies, probably because they are heavily interrelated with culture. However, we have seen that humor is something that cannot be separated from language and culture.

As this paper has shown, the humor structure of Japan and the West is fundamentally different, and most importantly, the point of laughter is different. *Tsukkomi* is hardly ever present in Western humor, but is indispensable for Japanese humor. Naturally, some difficulties also arise in translation between Japanese and English. Translators are sometimes at loss as to what to do with *tsukkomi*, and the result is often a pragmatic hole or void left in the translated product. Furthermore, probably due to logistic reasons, comparative research on popular culture, humor, and society is often Tokyo-based. This is a problem, because Japanese humor is Kansai-based. Thus there is still a low mutual understanding of humor and leisure.

Tomosada and Jinnouchi (2004) were early in observing that the Kansai dialect gives people a favorable impression all over Japan, and that elements of Kansai style conversation are frequently used by design in conversations among friends in order to lift spirits. They argue that Kansai style conversation is friendly, fun and carefree, and serves as an important counterpoise to the slightly pessimistic value system of Japanese people in recent times. It seems only natural that a lot of Japanese comedians come from the Kansai area, considering how important *boke* and *tsukkomi* is for everyday interaction. Because of this, the Kansai dialect continues to earn its prestige in Japan, in spite of the fact that the center of culture and commerce has gradually been shifting towards Tokyo.

The social position of certain dialects changes with time; they go in and out of fashion. Although this paper could only focus on a small part of Japan, in one moment of time, it will be exciting to follow the future of Japanese dialects. Language mirrors social structures, and is therefore a suitable object for research on general social change.

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