

Osaka-Ben

By Tony Lei, 2019 SF student Ambassaor

I sat in the back seat of the car and gazed at the streaming lights of the street signs. Riku, my new Japanese friend, discussed with his mom about dinner that night. His mom turned around and suggested “kushi-katsu”, a Japanese dish of deep fried skewered vegetables and meats, for dinner. I stared back at her with a look of confusion and she replied with, “Wakarahen?” My face of confusion turned into a face of bewilderment. ‘Wakarahen’? What does that word mean? I started questioning if my three years of Japanese knowledge was enough. I tapped my buddy on the shoulder and asked about ‘wakarahen’. He responded with the three words everyone says when they see a calculus problem, ‘I don’t understand’. Apparently, it meant “Do you not understand?” and I learned something new that day.

Throughout Japan, even though everyone speaks Japanese, many people in different regions have their own dialects. For example, Tokyo has Tokyo-ben or Tokyo dialect and Osaka has Osaka-ben. Many common words and phrases are different from Tokyo and Osaka and it’s what makes the dialect unique. Some common words that are different are ‘thank you’, ‘I don’t understand’. Our Japanese textbooks do not mention these differences and it’s an experience you will have to see for yourself.

During my three weeks in Osaka, I paid close attention to people’s speech and communication with Osaka-ben. Although I had zero knowledge of it in the beginning, I learned quite a bit of Osaka-ben after those three weeks. Each time I didn’t understand the Osaka-ben, I had to build up the courage to ask about its meaning. I heard Osaka-ben is used everywhere. Whether it be at schools, supermarkets, trains, or just on the streets. Hearing all of these words exclusive to the Kansai region, I wondered about the importance of having a dialect. Of course, there was no better way to find out than to speak it for myself. I decided that every night, after my daily agenda, that I would sit down and learn about Japanese with my host mom, Mrs. Teranishi, a heartwarming and beloved lady around the age of 60. I asked her to teach me Osaka-ben and my knowledge of the once mysterious Kansai dialect grew a little more each night. Mrs. Teranishi laughed at my weird pronunciation and it took us two or three nights to get two words down. After I learned a dozen of Osaka-ben words, I felt confident to use them.

After watching the long awaited anime film of the summer, *Weathering with You*, Riku and I were invited to a dinner party with his mother at a Chinese buffet restaurant atop a shopping mall. It was a party with around two dozen people, with half as many adults than kids running around. I sat myself down on the white beach chairs next to Riku and introduced myself. What really surprised them wasn’t my self introduction, it was the Osaka-ben I used after. They were surprised that I knew Osaka-ben and were curious to ask me more and more questions. Throughout those three weeks, I learned about the importance of a dialect.

I learned that having a dialect was like the region's identity. It was a secret language for the people of that region and a secret code to foreigners to decipher. I felt more connected with the locals because I was able to communicate with them through their own language. Despite our cultural differences, I bonded with the Japanese students, new friends, and people whom I never thought I would have crossed paths with. Having a common language is key to understanding one another, but if we zoom out of the tight lens we have of everyone in the world, we start to realize that every one of us is human and we can all be connected by the common language of humanity.

