



Feng Chia University

Outstanding Academic Paper by Students

The Significance of Japanese Dialects in Shaping Individual Identities

Author(s): Anysia Emmanuel

Class: 2nd year of International School of Technology and
Management

Student ID: D1135964

Course: Advanced Writing

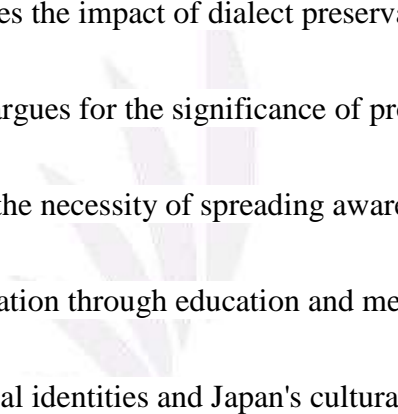
Instructor: Dr. Dean McDaniel Keith

Department: International School of Technology and Management

Academic Year: Semester 2, 2023-2024

Abstract

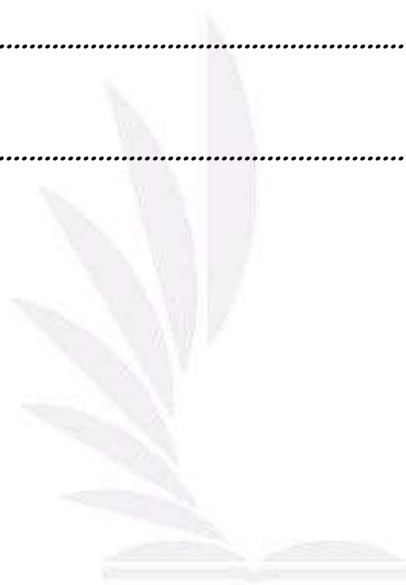
This paper focuses on the importance of preserving Japanese dialects in the formation of individual identities. Although Japanese dialects may seem trivial, they are in fact crucial in terms of today's concern over developing individual identity. Japanese dialects reflect linguistic characteristics and cultural backgrounds unique to each region, serving as essential elements in shaping individual identities. However, with the advancement of globalization and urbanization, the use of dialects is declining. This paper explores the impact of dialect preservation on the establishment of individual identities and argues for the significance of protecting dialects. Furthermore, it emphasizes the necessity of spreading awareness and implementing measures for dialect preservation through education and media, proposing efforts toward maintaining individual identities and Japan's cultural diversity.



Keyword : dialect, identity, diversity, Japan

Table of Content

<i>Chapter 1 Introduction</i>	3
<i>Chapter 2 Overview of Japanese Dialects</i>	4
<i>Chapter 3 Identity in Japan</i>	5
<i>Chapter 4 How Dialects Inform Identity</i>	7
<i>Chapter 5 Results of a Questionnaire About Japanese Dialect</i>	11
<i>Chapter 6 Conclusion</i>	19
<i>References</i>	21



Chapter 1 Introduction

Language reflects a complex interaction with culture, society, and personal expression, and plays an important role in shaping individual identity. Approximately 70% of Japan's land is mountainous, and because of the lack of interaction with other regions due to steep mountains and strong river flows, each region has developed its own unique history and culture. Just like the climate and natural features, these influence the way of thinking, values, lifestyle habits, and preferences of the people in the area, so people living in the same area have a unique language, temperament, and lifestyle customs that are unique to that area and there is a commonality between them (W.JAPAN, 2021). Therefore, Japan is a place with a rich linguistic diversity and the importance of dialects on the formation of individual identities. Japan boasts a wide variety of dialects, each with its own cultural heritage and social significance.

Chapter 2 Overview of Japanese Dialects

Japan, a country known for its cultural richness and linguistic diversity, boasts a tapestry of regional dialects that reflect its complex history and geography. While Standard Japanese, or "Hyojungo," serves as the national language, numerous dialects thrive across the archipelago, each carrying its unique linguistic nuances and cultural significance (Verbalplanet, n.d.). Even the accent of a word can be pronounced differently depending on the region. "Japan's geographic barriers such as mountains and rivers separate communities from one another and have also allowed for these people to put their own twists on the local dialect creating sub-dialects that are distinguishable only by locals in the area" (Motto Japan, 2019). "Each of Japan's 47 prefectures is considered to be part of one of Japan's 8 larger regions. The dialects used in each region can be largely divided into 4 groups which can again be split into 16 dialects" (Motto Japan, 2019).



This paper will focus on Standard Japanese, Kansai dialect, and Kyushu dialect.

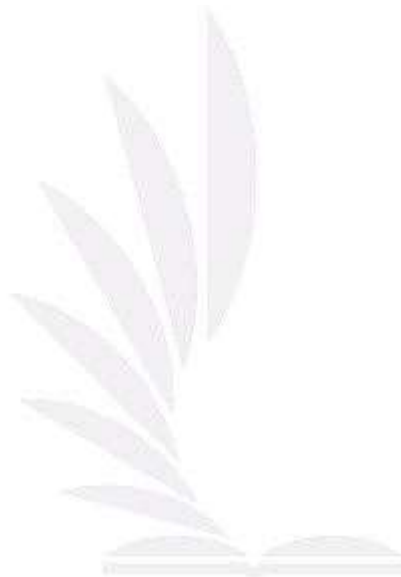
Chapter 3 Identity in Japan

Examples of common Japanese identities include group orientation, harmony with others, appreciation of culture, and self-restraint. Japanese culture tends to prioritize the group over the individual. This demonstrates a strong sense of belonging to one's family, company, or community. The concept of "Uchi-Soto" (内と外) highlights the importance of group harmony and maintaining relationships within the in-group while being wary of outsiders. For instance, we feel OUR family members, OUR organizations as the companies we work for, or the sections we belong to as "Uchi" and therefore their members are also "Uchi." Japanese people generally judge whether a certain person belongs to their inner circle "Uchi" or other than that "Soto" when we meet (Hokida, 2016). Moreover, group consciousness in Japan is strongly influenced not only by words but also by nonverbal signs and subtle nuances. Indirect communication and the ability to read the atmosphere are highly valued, contributing to smooth relationship-building within the group. Also, Japanese identity is deeply tied to its rich cultural heritage, including traditions, language, arts, and customs. Concepts such as "Wa" (和, harmony) and "Gaman" (我慢, endurance/perseverance) are integral to the Japanese cultural ethos (Open AI, 2024). The self-identity of

The Significance of Japanese Dialects in Shaping Individual Identities

Japanese people tends to emphasize relationships with others and social harmony.

There is a tendency to suppress personal emotions and desires in order to avoid conflicts with others, and to pursue the common interests, harmony, and unity of the group.



Chapter 4 How Dialects Inform Identity

"Speaking a dialect is part of a region's identity. Language is a part of the culture that each individual has built," says Nobuko Kibe of the National Institute for Japanese Language and Linguistics, an expert on Japanese dialects (Yanagii, 2013). In addition to the general identity of Japanese people mentioned earlier, there are also characteristics of identity brought about by dialects that vary by region. Dialects are perceived as part of the region or culture, and speakers may take pride in having their own dialect. Dialects are part of the identity of that region or community, and speaking dialects can strengthen local pride and solidarity. Furthermore, dialect speakers may express and emphasize their identity by using their own dialect. However, some dialect speakers may feel embarrassed because their dialect differs from the standard Japanese. Regional dialects that are usually used in private settings are often considered socially minor and informal compared to the nationwide standard Japanese. As a result, dialect speakers may have negative feelings toward their familiar languages and may feel ashamed of them as having strange accents. (Murata, 2024). Nevertheless, the situation has been changing in recent years. The younger generation has fewer negative perceptions of dialects and often views them positively

as symbols of identity, having words different from other regions, which also contributes to maintaining confidence among dialect speakers (Yanagii, 2013).

Standard Japanese is the language as the norm used in Japan's official texts, education, broadcasting, etc (Kotobank, n.d.). Firstly, standard Japanese is not a dialect. "Standard language" is the result of the government of the time trying to unify various dialects based on the language of the Tokyo region. It is that the words used in the Tokyo metropolitan area and its surroundings are conveniently referred to as standard language. In terms of actual spoken language, the words of NHK announcers can be said to be very close to the real Standard Japanese (Kotobank, n.d.). Standard Japanese is widely used throughout Japan, enabling individuals who speak it to easily establish friendships with people from various regions, thus tending to have a wide circle of acquaintances. Compared to dialect speakers, they are more likely to possess the ability to perceive things from a neutral standpoint, embrace diverse viewpoints, and exhibit flexibility in accepting diversity (社会言語科学会, 1998). However, when they are spoken to in a dialect, some of them easily misunderstand the other person's feelings because they are not used to the conversations with dialects.

Kansai dialect is one of the dialects that has a large presence in Japan and is spoken by the residents of Kyoto, Osaka, Nara, Mie, Wakayama, and Hyogo prefectures. According to Professor Fatsuno, "The Kansai dialect, especially the

Osaka dialect, is a peaceful language that equalizes relationships with others.” First of all, It's because it's a word that shortens the distance between you and the other person.

By adding “Nen” at the end of the word to show an attitude of confessing your feelings, or by addressing the other person as “Jibun,” which means ‘myself’ and is considered a first-person pronoun, you can draw the other person into your inner circle. Their ability to naturally draw others into their field may be related to the fact that Osaka is a business city (Murata, 2024). Next, humor using the Kansai dialect is one of the most important elements and culture for its speakers. Whatever the situation is, even when they say something bad or complain, they try to put something to make it funny. Therefore, people from the Kansai area are renowned for being extroverted and cheerful, and an open-minded sense of humor (Chebbouba, 2023). Also, it is said that dialect speakers tend to hide the dialect they speak but people from the Kansai area are the type of people who are proud to be able to speak their mother dialect in public.

The Kyushu region consists of eight prefectures. Linguistic diversity is a noteworthy aspect of this region. Unlike other regions in Japan, each area within a single prefecture in Kyushu has distinct characteristics that vary significantly (Hisa, 2024). For example, Hakata dialect, one of the Kyushu dialects, has been widely spoken in Fukuoka City, one of the centers of commerce. As a result, the people there

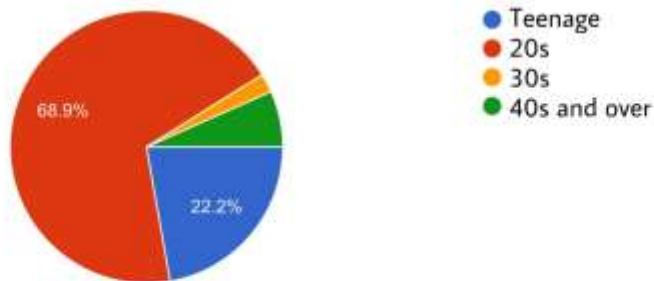
have become known for their friendly and open characteristics and they frequently brighten the atmosphere around them. (Kobayashi, 2008). The Kumamoto dialect includes strong endings and unique pronunciation, giving the speaker strength and clarity of self-expression. For instance, the ending "Bai" is used to convey affirmation or agreement, while "Tai" is used for emphasis or confirmation (Takanori, 2024). This allows individuals who speak the Kumamoto dialect to express their opinions with confidence and they tend to be more assertive.



Chapter 5 Results of a Questionnaire About Japanese Dialect

A questionnaire and survey was conducted regarding the impressions of Standard Japanese and dialects, as well as the impact that speaking one's own native Japanese has on oneself for this research. Responses were collected from 45 Japanese speaker participants, ranging in age from their teens to their forties. The results of some of the questions will now be analyzed.

Age
45 responses

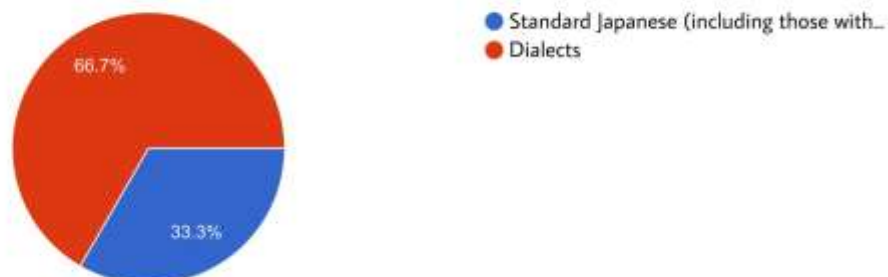


More than half of the results are from respondents in their 20s.

The Significance of Japanese Dialects in Shaping Individual Identities

Which Japanese do you speak?

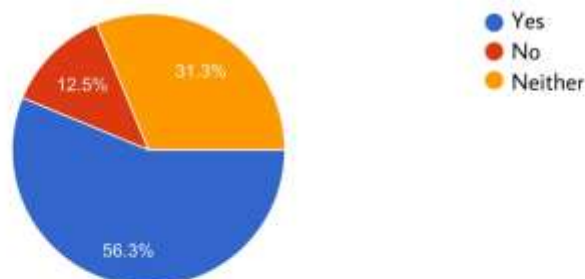
45 responses



Out of a total of 45 respondents, 30 were dialect speakers, while 15 were Standard Japanese speakers which also included those with very little dialect influence.

This is a question for Standard Japanese speakers. ① Do you like yourself speaking standard Japanese?

16 responses



Note: The number of respondents has changed because many Japanese people can speak both standard Japanese and dialects depending on the environment in which they grew up.

Although the fact that over half of the respondents answered "yes" suggests a generally positive attitude towards speaking standard Japanese, the 30% who answered "neither" indicates a significant portion of the population is indifferent or ambivalent about speaking standard Japanese. These respondents may not have strong

feelings either way, possibly viewing standard Japanese as a neutral or unremarkable part of their daily lives.

② How do you feel about yourself speaking standard Japanese?

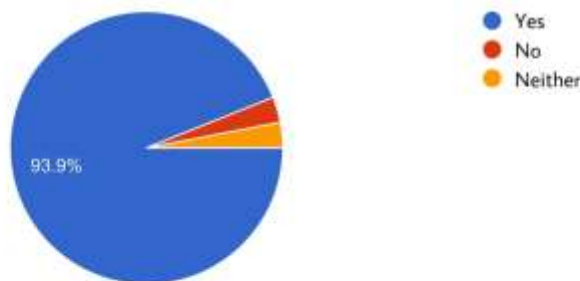
16 responses



The majority response, at 75%, was "I don't feel anything in particular." 12.5% wanted to speak a dialect, and the remaining two options were each chosen by only one person. Therefore, the impact of speaking Standard Japanese on its speakers appears to be relatively minimal, suggesting it might have little involvement in their sense of identity.

This is a question for dialect speakers. ① Do you like yourself speaking dialects?

33 responses



The same question was asked to dialect speakers. It is immediately apparent that the majority answered "yes." Only one person each answered "no" or "neither."

② How do you feel about yourself speaking a dialect?

33 responses

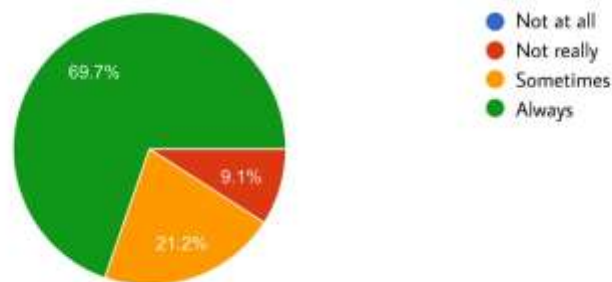


The majority consider their dialect to be a representation of themselves and a source of pride, but 27.3% responded that they don't feel anything in particular. One respondent chose "I want to speak Standard Japanese or another dialect." No one selected "I feel a lack of confidence and don't like it." Consequently, it can be suggested that speaking a dialect contributes to high self-esteem among speakers.

Comparing these results, it is clear that while the influence of Standard Japanese on its speakers is not particularly strong, dialects have a significant positive impact on the self-perception of their speakers.

③ Are you embarrassed or want to hide your dialect?

33 responses



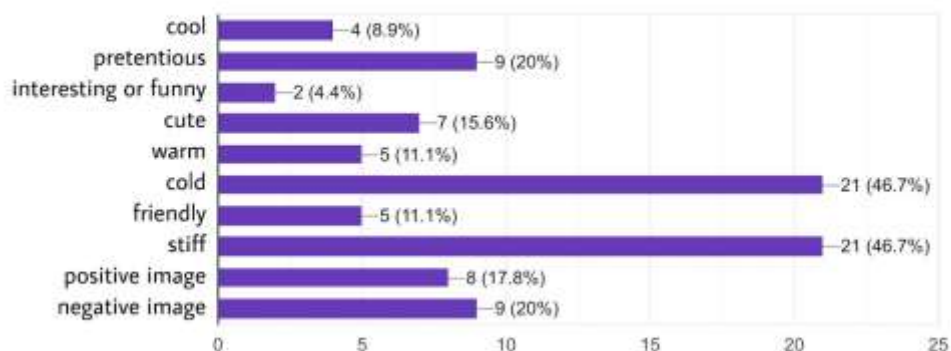
The largest proportion, at 69.7%, was "not at all." The next most common response was "not really" at 21.2%, with 9.1% saying they "sometimes" felt that way. However, 0% answered "always." Although it has often been said that many people feel embarrassed about their dialects because they differ from Standard Japanese, this survey indicates that such feelings are rarer today.

In summary, most Standard Japanese speakers responded that Standard Japanese has no particular impact on their identity, indicating they perceive Standard Japanese as a neutral language without specific characteristics. However, dialect speakers view their dialect as a means of forming their uniqueness and identity, given its distinction from other dialects. Therefore, if asked whether being a Japanese speaker among the world's various languages impacts their identity, it is plausible that more Standard Japanese speakers would answer "yes."

The Significance of Japanese Dialects in Shaping Individual Identities

What is your impression of standard Japanese? (Multiple answers possible)

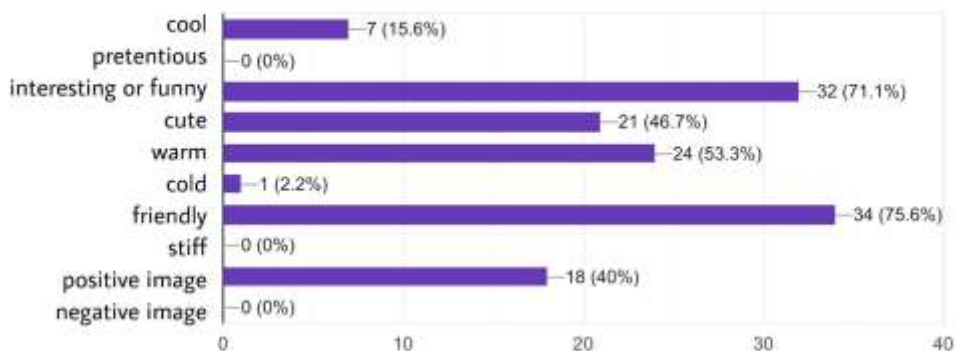
45 responses



The most common responses were "cold" and "stiff." Although the high number of dialect speakers among the respondents might have influenced these results, out of 15 people, about half of the Standard Japanese speakers (7 people) also chose these two options. This indicates that Standard Japanese does not have a particularly positive impression overall.

What is your impression of dialects? (Multiple answers possible)

45 responses

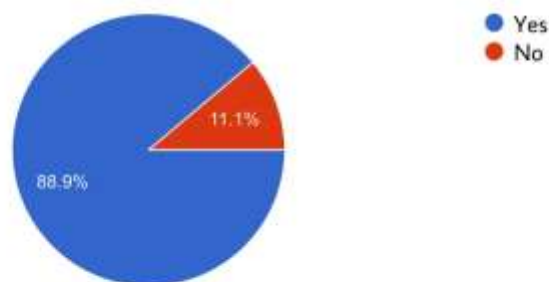


The option "friendly" had the most respondents, with 34 people choosing it, more than any other choice. The next most common responses were "interesting" and "warm."

The Significance of Japanese Dialects in Shaping Individual Identities

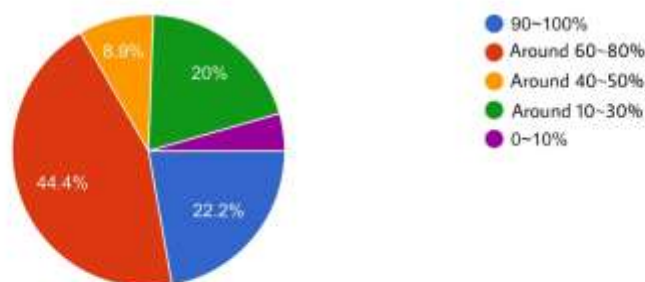
There were no respondents who chose "pretentious," "stiff," or "somewhat negative image," indicating that very few people hold relatively negative opinions. Overall, most respondents selected comparatively positive perspectives.

① Do you think the Japanese you speak (standard Japanese or dialect) influences your identity and personality?
45 responses



Out of the five people who chose "no," four were Standard Japanese speakers and one was a dialect speaker. However, a very large percentage of respondents, 88.5%, feel that the Japanese they speak influences their identity.

② How much do you think it affects you?
45 responses

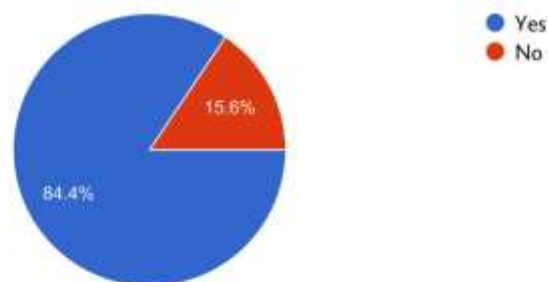


The largest proportion of respondents, 44.4%, felt that their language influenced their identity by 60-80%. The next most selected response was 90-100%, with 22.2%.

Given that 66.6% of respondents chose relatively high percentages, it is clear that Japanese language has a significant impact on their identity. Notably, those who selected 0-10% were all Standard Japanese speakers, but among the ten who chose 90-100%, two were Standard Japanese speakers. Therefore, it can be concluded that even though many Standard Japanese speakers indicated that they "don't feel anything particular about speaking Standard Japanese," some still believe it has a strong impact on their identity.

Do you think the Japanese you speak makes you more attractive?

45 responses

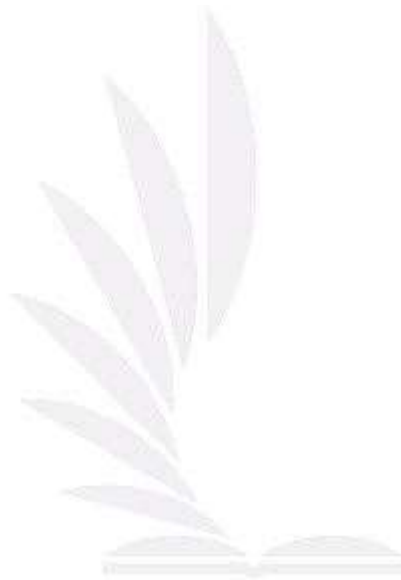


84.4% of respondents chose "yes," indicating they perceive their spoken language as one of the factors that make them attractive. Out of the seven people who chose "no," six were Standard Japanese speakers. As mentioned briefly in the section on Standard Japanese above, there might indeed be a perception that Standard Japanese is a neutral language.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper highlights the significance of Japanese dialects in shaping individual identities. While it is said that Standard Japanese is widely used and perceived as neutral, according to the results of the questionnaire, many people had a relatively negative perception of it. On the other hand, dialects play a crucial role in expressing uniqueness and fostering a sense of pride among speakers. Despite the historical efforts to unify dialects under Standard Japanese, the diverse linguistic landscape of Japan reflects its rich cultural heritage and regional identities. The findings from the questionnaire underscore the positive impact of dialects on the self-perception of speakers, with many expressing pride in their regional language. Dialects not only serve as markers of regional identity but also contribute to the social cohesion and cultural diversity of Japan. Furthermore, the influence of language on identity is evident, with a significant proportion of respondents acknowledging the impact of their spoken language on their sense of identity. While Standard Japanese speakers may perceive their language as having little effect on their identity, dialect speakers attribute a stronger significance to their regional language. Overall, the preservation of Japanese dialects is essential for maintaining cultural diversity and promoting individual identities. Efforts to raise awareness and implement measures

for dialect preservation are crucial for safeguarding Japan's linguistic heritage and fostering a sense of belonging among its diverse population. By embracing and celebrating linguistic diversity, Japan can ensure the preservation of its rich cultural tapestry for future generations.



References

- Chao, H. (2007, October 29). *The Inferiority and Superiority in the Personality of Japanese under the Influence of Geographic Factors*.
<https://www.hokuriku-u.ac.jp/library/libraryDATA/kiyo31/koku3.pdf>
- Chebbouba, S. (2023, January 16). *DIFFERENCES BETWEEN JAPAN'S MAJOR METROPOLITAN AREAS: KANTO AND KANSAI*. Arigato Travel.
<https://arigatojapan.co.jp/differences-between-kanto-and-kansai/#:~:text=Differe nces>
- Hida, M. (2022, August 25). *What is Kansai-ben? All You Need to Know About Kansai Dialect*. Japan Wonder Travel Blog.
<https://blog.japanwondertravel.com/what-is-kansai-ben-36028>
- Hokida, M. (2016, December 1). *英語で日本を伝えるなら... 「内と外」 & 今日*は映画の日. CyberAgent.
<https://ameblo.jp/communication-specialist/entry-12224546557.html>
- Kotobank. (n.d.). *標準語 (読み) ヒョウジュンゴ*. Digitalio.
<https://kotobank.jp/word/標準語-121288>
- Lien, K. (2023, February 27). *Japanese Personal and Public Identities*. Fiveable.

<https://library.fiveable.me/ap-japanese/unit-3/japanese-personal-public-identities/study-guide/ZTnGmZGLeGurGgSTxeMT>

Moor, L. (2024, March 4). *Learn Japanese: An Introduction to Japanese Dialects*.

Tokyo Weekender.

https://www.tokyoweekender.com/art_and_culture/japanese-culture/learn-japanese-dialects/

Motto Japan. (2019, January 30). *Standard Japanese vs. Regional Dialects*. Motto

Japan.

<https://motto-jp.com/study/en/tips/289/standard-japanese-vs-regional-dialects/>

Murata, K. (2024, March). 言葉の地位を問い直す。研究者が伝えたい「方言」の力と重要性. Ryukoku University.

<https://www.ryukoku.ac.jp/being/04/>

Ohkawa, K. (2007, December 13). 方言について. みかも新聞.

<http://www.sunfield.ne.jp/~keigo/sonota/hougen/hougen.html>

Takanori. (2024, January 25). 【熊本弁一覧】日常会話でよく使う方言を徹底解説. 元気豊富な暮らし.

<https://genki-hofu.jp/hougen-kumamotoben#%EF%BD%9E%E3%81%91%E3%82%93%EF%BC%88%EF%BD%9E%E3%81%A0%E3%81%8B%E3%82%89%EF%BC%89>

Verbalplanet. (n.d.). *The Different Japanese Dialects Across Japan*. Verbalplanet.

<https://www.verbalplanet.com/learn-japanese/blog/kanto-and-kansai-japanese-dialects.asp>

W.JAPAN. (2021, March 1). 【日本人の性格】同じ国でもこんなに違う？各地域の県民性のご紹介. Tsunagu Japan.

https://www.tsunagujapan.com/ja/wow_02567/

Yanagii, A. (2013, September 24). 地域・人を語る 方言. 慶應義塾新聞.

<https://www.jukushin.com/archives/14278>

社会言語科学会. (1998). *The Japanese journal of language in society*. 社会言語科学会.

