

Perceptual Dialectology in Japanese-English video game translations

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This paper examines the differences in the perception in differences of dialects of both Japanese and English as perceived by non-linguist players of video games translated in both languages. Voiced characters in video games, like all speakers, utilize a dialect. Just like in film, the dialects that these characters use is often an intentional decision, and a dialect is chosen to influence the opinion of the audience. While an English speaking audience may have cultural knowledge of English dialects, they are likely lacking the cultural implications of Japanese dialects, and vice versa.

In a handful of video games made by both Japanese and American companies, players were asked to differentiate the geographical and sociological differences in the observed dialects. Data was gathered in from English speakers in English language versions of the games, and Japanese speakers in the Japanese language versions of the games using Preston's Five Points method. The information in both languages was compared along geographic, socio-economic, and formality lines, comparing and contrasting the features of the dialects that those surveyed assigned to the characters.

The results of these illustrate several curiosities about the perception of Japanese and English dialects by their native speakers. Game designers, during the localization and translation process, make intentional choices about which dialects characters will use, making sure to pay special attention to the cultural implications of those dialects. A character perceived to use a formal or elegant dialect of English is likely perceived to use a similar Japanese dialect. Similar dialectic features were also found between languages on the basis of education, wealth, social status, and even geography. This data emphasizes the connection between a speaker's perception of dialects of a language, and the greater perception of dialects within the culture of that language.