

# 5 Ways to Understand and Identify Japanese Dialects

Regional differences in spoken Japanese are vast but here are the five key places they vary.

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Photo: [Becca Takano](#)



As anyone that has spent any time living in the same area of Japan can attest, the Japanese language is surprisingly malleable. Each of the major areas in Japan has little twists on basic Japanese that subtly, or not so subtly, tell the listener which region the speaker comes from and even which part of that region he/she identifies with.

When it comes to these regional differences, the Japanese language uses three words to talk about them: 表現<sup>ひょうげん</sup> (expressions from a particular area), ~弁<sup>べん</sup> (suffix for dialect) and なまり (accent). The major 弁s that most people encounter are 大阪弁<sup>おおさか</sup>, 博多弁<sup>はかた</sup>, 名古屋弁<sup>なごや</sup> and, of course, the countless ones in the 関東<sup>かんとう</sup> region, or Tokyo and its surrounding area.

[**Note:** There are three major dialects in Kansai (Osaka, Kobe and Kyoto) that comprise what we typically know as 関西弁<sup>かんさい</sup>. Therefore, for the purposes of this article anyway, I've referred to 大阪弁. However, often when people talk about 関西弁 they are usually referring to 大阪弁 — though technically these are different.]

While writing about *all* the differences in the Japanese language between regions is a big enough topic that entire books have been written on the difference between all the Tokyo dialects alone, there are generalizations on what words are commonly changed regardless of the area.

As a general rule most Japanese dialects vary on the following five points.

## 1. Verb endings

One of the most notable differences between regional dialects is the use of sentence endings. When I first arrived here and could barely put together a sentence in Japanese, I was aware that the らん ending to sentences that I was hearing in Ishikawa was a local variant. Although, admittedly, this was after many fruitless hours looking up 曲<sup>ま</sup>がらん? (“Shall I turn?”) in a dictionary!

One of the most distinctive endings is found in the Kyoto area. Here, they have the smooth sounding and utterly charming え ending to verbs. This can cause some confusion, as sentences like 行<sup>いき</sup>ますえ (“I’ll go”) can sound like questions instead of statements. The smooth sound that sentences like this have is one of the reasons why many Japanese people associate Kyoto’s

dialect with sophistication and being cultured.

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A softer sound is found in the Hakata dialect which has the distinctive ばい ending. Using this, 行ったよ (“I went”) can be said as 行ったばい.

The opposite to these smooth sounds is found in the nearby Osaka area. Here, the ending is the far more gruff sounding や. While some Japanese people find that sentences like 行こうや (“Let’s go”) are tough on the ears, they soon find that Osakans are fiercely proud of their endings and love yelling them out regardless of their audience.

## 2. Adjective modifiers

While ばい, や and え commonly modify verbs, there are also modifiers for nouns and adjectives in most dialects.

Unsurprisingly, the <sup>この</sup> <sup>や</sup> お好み焼き (savory pancake) -loving city of Osaka uses one of these that sounds just as gruff as their や ending: な. Visitors will often hear the な-ending attached to things that the speaker feels passionate about such as in the wintry exclamation <sup>さむ</sup> 寒いな (“It’s cold!”). This expression is also found in its neighboring city, Kyoto (albeit with a slightly softer sound).

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As well as な, visitors will also hear よ changed で or わ in 大阪弁, too. For example, one of the most distinctive changes in the Osakans dialect is いいよ into ええで. The わ ending was also confusing to me when I first arrived in Osaka since わ is considered a feminine sound in many parts of Japan — but interestingly not in Osaka.

Not to be outdone, Nagoya likes to use に for the same purpose, leading to the difficult to pronounce yet undeniably charming よかったに that is so distinctive of the region.

### 3. Negatives

The ない-ending to verbs is another change that separates all the different dialects. Japanese people simply love saying “no” using the most colorful language possible.

One of the more interesting of these is found in Hiroshima where 食べる<sup>た</sup> is a colorful phrase for not wanting to eat. This sounds similar to the Nagoya area where べん changes to せん, making 食べない (not eat) into 食べせん. In some parts of Tokyo, you will also hear the similar sounding 分かんねえ<sup>わ</sup> — which is a tongue-twisting way to say that you don't understand something.

Of course, a place as down to earth as Osaka is always going to have a strong, colorful way to say something negative. Osaka locals love using negatives like 飲め<sup>の</sup>へん (not drink) and 食べへん. As if that weren't enough, いけない is changed into the most commonly used phrase: あかん.

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Now, if this isn't tricky enough, じゃない (not) is also altered in most dialects, often in a different way to other verbs. Unsurprisingly, the Kansai dialects have a version of this as じゃない is often changed to やんか or ちゃあか leading to the tough-sounding そうちやうか (“is that so”) that is heard all throughout the bars in the area.

Intriguingly, this is similar to the Hakata dialect where it is the slightly different やない. Tokyo, on the other hand, abbreviates the ない part, instead changing じゃないか into じゃん.

## 4. だけど

だけど, or “however,” is one of the most basic conjunctions. It's often used to connect two contradictory opinions about the same thing. For example: “なつがす好きだけど、あつにた耐えられない。(I love summer, but the heat is unbearable).”

Naturally because this conjunction is so useful, it is often changed in dialects. Generally, the だ sound is changed for a similar sound such as や or じゃ so it is still easy to say, but reflects the local area's character.

*Naturally because this conjunction is so useful, it is often changed in dialects.*

Similarities between Hakata's and Osaka's dialects can also be heard in the way that だけど is changed in both areas. In the Kansai region, you will often hear this said as やけど. This is also found in the Hakata dialect, too. Only slightly different is Hiroshima where the だ is changed to じゃ making it じゃけど instead.

## 5. しまう

Another commonly used phrase is してしまう, or “resulting in.”

Unsurprisingly, this is also very commonly changed from area to area. Surprisingly the almost ubiquitous *しちゃった* variation was originally a local variant for *してしまった* from parts of Kanto. Now this phrase has become nationwide. Many areas use *ちゃった*, plus its own variant.

One of the most noticeable of these is, of course, Osaka again. In many of the really local areas of the city you will also hear *してしまう* abbreviated *してまう* and *してしまった* to *してもうた*. Once again showing just how much *大阪弁* there is out there.

*... writers often use these subtle nuances to add a little bit of local color to spice up their characters*

While these are some of the more obvious differences between regions, to further complicate things different areas can have their own identities and whether or not someone says something can tell you a little something about their character. Whether the person is a gruff, rough-and-tumble person speaking *大阪弁* like *Shrek* or a new money wannabe socialite using pretentious *ざます* like Suneo's mother in *Doraemon*, writers often use these subtle nuances to add a little bit of local color to spice up their characters.

So now over to you!

*Have you ever heard any of these variations? How about your part of Japan, what do they use?*

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