

Guchi Guchi, Gu-Chi-Chi?

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When I moved to Sapporo from Nakashibetsu, my friends and I grouped ourselves into two by playing rock-paper-scissors. I said, “guchi guchi, gu-chi-chi.” Everybody froze. Oh, my. Did I mess up? “In Sapporo, guchi guchi, atta-chi is correct,” said my friend. I was so embarrassed. I wondered why my version was different.

Professor Takashi Kobayashi, a researcher on dialects at Tohoku University, told me this difference comes from the imagination of local children. There are over 70 versions of this phrase: the Tokyo version is “gutsu-pa-jas” while the Osaka one is “gu-pa-gu-pa-gu-pa-de-hoi.” Every version shows how diverse Japanese dialects have become.

Words born in the central parts of Japan have spread, transformed by the influence of local climates and traditions over many years. So, dialects contain pieces of their local cultures and values. Just as the Japanese word “mottainai” has a unique set of values and cannot be expressed with the English word “wasteful,” “shibareru” means freezing cold in the Hokkaido dialect, and there is no substitute for it in standard Japanese. Each word has special meaning to that group of people.

After the East Japan Earthquake, some victims got angry at the slogan “ganbarou Miyagi” in standard Japanese, meaning “hang in there, Miyagi” because they felt forced to do so by others. However, when they heard “makenezo, Miyagi” in the Tohoku dialect, they felt encouraged and answered “unda-unda makene” meaning “yes, I’ll never be beaten.” A dialect speaks to the souls of its users because it has been passed down for generations.

Dialects can also have a great effect on who we are. When I lived in Fukuoka, I was a social boy who liked playing with friends. We used Hakataben, which is fast and straightforward. For example, “katarashite,” meaning “let me in,” was a magical word which enabled us to easily make friends. After I moved to Hokkaido, I began losing my Hakataben. “Katarashite” became “please allow me in” which sounded more modest. The more Hakata dialect I lost, the less social I became. Dialects play an important part in our memories and personalities. We should cherish them.

However, according to UNESCO, eight dialects in Japan, like “Yonaguni-go” in Okinawa, are dying. Associate professor Sumiyo Nishiguchi at the Otaru University of Commerce told me half of the dialects in Hokkaido will disappear soon. Words like “shitakke” meaning good-bye, “kawai” meaning tired, and “namara umai” meaning very delicious will disappear forever. If these words disappear, we will lose colorful expressions that allow us to express ourselves. Without them, we will all sound the same. This will make our lives boring.

A language disappearing means we lose one human cultural asset. Today, our society pursues an efficient style of communication. Dialects are considered to disturb communication, so dialect speakers feel uncomfortable about using a dialect. This invisible pressure makes dialect speakers feel there is no place for them in society. However, our society should be more accepting. We should value language diversity just like our society should respect each individual. Every dialect is equally precious.

The Japanese government is trying to preserve dialects by recording them. In Okinawa, story-telling in dialects is a part of school. In Tohoku, local schools started a play using only Tohokuben. As a result, students feel comfortable using their dialects in school. My suggestion to preserve dialects is speak them in your family. I talk with my parents in Hakataben and with my grandparents in the Nakashibetsu dialect. We are kind of a trilingual family. Next time, when playing rock-paper-scissors, I will proudly say, “guchi guchi, gu-chi-chi.”