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Transposing Culture through Conversation: An Ethnographic Approach to Anime Fandom

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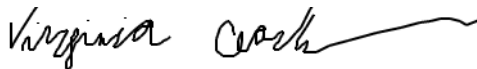**TRANSPOSING CULTURE THROUGH CONVERSATION: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO ANIME FANDOM**

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

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May 2015

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<u>Transposing Culture through Conversation: An Ethnographic Approach to Anime Fandom</u>

Anime: a fusion of culture, a continuous volley between East and West. Harboring a complex and multilayered history, anime integrates a wide variety of cultural influences, from ancient Japanese folklore to 19th century European comics. Perhaps most fascinating of all is the global community of viewers that engage with the medium. As fans network through this common thread of interest, local clubs and organizations often form as a means to collectively celebrate the art. Thus, it's not altogether impossible that such communities might develop distinct customs and practices, particularly ones that reflect upon the transcultural nature of anime fandom.

At the University of Mary Washington in Fredericksburg, Virginia, there exists one such community known as JADE, the Japanese Animated and Dramatic Entertainment club. Founded in 2001, JADE offers anime viewings as well as discussion hours on a weekly basis. Members hold high levels of commitment to both the club and the anime. From a research perspective, JADE stands as a notably unique subculture of UMW. This observation can be confirmed by the results of this study, which demonstrate how various syntactic and lexical patterns affect the way in which cultural realities are depicted in discourse. Such linguistic processes, in the context of JADE, often form hyperbolic versions of the world as a means of performing humor, expressing camaraderie, and asserting covert identity.

<u>Origins of Anime</u>

The challenge in studying anime is determining where specific elements of the art form originate. Though often perceived as a purely Japanese product, the historical roots of anime suggest otherwise. Joseph L. Dela Pena says of manga, the comic-like predecessor of anime, "Some of manga's most prominent characteristics, such as motion lines and word balloons, can be attributed to Western influences on manga." Dela Pena further cites examples of early comics created by and for foreigners in Japan, such as *The Japan Punch* by Englishman Charles Wirgman in 1862, or *Tobae* by Frenchman George Bigot (Dela Pena 2006: 4-5). Though a Western presence was largely felt at this time period, Antonia Levi indicates "It was not until after World War II, however, that [...] cartoons arrived officially, as part of the cultural effort to 'defeudalize' Japan by exposing Japanese to Western ideals of individualism and freedom" (Levi 2013: 5). Undoubtedly, Western undercurrents run deep through the history of anime.

That's not to say, of course, that this strain of cultural exchange is unidirectional. Just as the West has altered the core nature of anime, so has anime altered the fundamental makeup of the West. Andrew McKevitt writes "...the case of anime illustrates how non-elites have engaged the processes of globalization by using the consumption of a foreign cultural product to create new social communities reflection cultural heterogeneity in local U.S. settings" (McKevitt 2010: 896). McKevitt's statement seems to imply that Western audiences wield a fair amount of agency in the consumption of foreign products. This of course raises some inherent issues in the equality of globalization. As Koichi Iwabuchi asserts, dynamics of social, political, and economic power between nations perpetuate a systematic imbalance and ensure a hierarchy of status (Iwabuchi 2010: 89).

So what do we make of such interactions between East and West? On one hand, this cultural exchange promotes a creative blend of art and narrative, a medium of innovation and

reinvention. On the other, nations seem to be at odds against each other, as globalization spreads and consequently fuels competition for power. Furthermore, it is difficult to discern the exact nature of relations between Japan and America specifically in the context of anime, as the backlog of history greatly convolutes circumstances. It cannot simply be identified as mere "cultural exchange," which suggests a clean, straightforward transaction between nations of equal power (Rogers 2006: 477). Anime's past is far too complex to be marked up as a simple handshake. Rather, the term "transculturation" as defined by James Lull seems to provide a more accurate interpretation for what anime is at its core. Lull interprets transculturation as ''a process whereby cultural forms literally move through time and space where they interact with other cultural forms and settings, influence each other, produce new forms, and change the cultural settings'' (Lull 2000: 242). This seems to better describe the overarching trajectory of anime and its nature as a conglomeration of culture. However, even transculturation is not quite the right term, as it also holds imperialistic implications, which would not apply in the case of Japan and America (Rogers 2006: 491). Better still is the term "transacculturation," proposed by Marco Pelletteri "to point to dynamics of inclusion of themes, concepts, and Japanese imagination values in the fringes of Italian/European fans of Japanese comics and animation" (Pelletteri 2011: 214).

What this study seeks to unearth is how the transposition of Eastern media into a Western realm motivates linguistic processes, and conversely, how those processes further motivate cultural transposition. As the medium of anime provides a caricaturized lens of the world, not entirely unlike a carnival funhouse mirror, I propose that members of JADE extend this caricaturization into their language use. These linguistic choices, however, are not necessarily

conscious or active decisions. On the contrary, I assert that such choices are the manifested byproduct of years of transacculturation, the result of global action and reaction.

Methods

Participants, Setting, & Instruments

Between the months of February and April of 2014, I collaborated with my two colleagues, Chelsea Chin and Moira McAvoy, in conducting a sociolinguistic ethnography of JADE. The three of us first submitted project proposals to the Institutional Review Boards, and once those proposals were approved, we distributed to consent forms to JADE as the initial step of our research. The club generally held two meetings a week—one dedicated to watching anime and another reserved for the discussion of anime. Though the Wednesday anime viewings in Trinkle 204 were typically more popularly attended with approximately 23-30 members present, the majority of my audio data was collected during the Sunday discussion hours in Monroe 210. While there are not as many members present for Sunday discussion, I was able to gather a greater amount of conversational and interactional data at these meetings which were facilitated by JADE officers Joe and Glowworm. To further investigate the community, I conducted a total of three interviews, two of them on a one-on-one basis, and the third conducted with two members simultaneously. The average interview time was 26 minutes.

In recording my data, I alternated between two identical SONY audio recording devices. Notes were taken manually by notebook and pen. Programs used to view, organize, and analyze data included Audacity, Microsoft Word, and Google Drive. Photographic data was captured with a Nikon D3100, or in some cases, with a Nexus One smart phone.

Over the course of the semester, JADE selected four series to watch during the Wednesday night viewings. These are the four series, presented in the order that they are normally watched: *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*, *Kokoro Connect*, *Bakemonogatari*, and *Psycho-Pass*. Typically, the club watched two or three episodes of *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*, one episode of *Kokoro Connect*, one episode of *Bakemonogatari*, and two to three episodes of *Psycho-Pass.* Most episodes, in these cases, were just below or just above a 20 minute time frame. This line-up of shows exhibits a great spectrum of genre, as each program holds its own distinct charm and appeal. What all shows do share, however, is the fact that all of them fall into the category of shonen or possibly seinen, both of which are demographic genres designed for young male audiences. It's important to note that JADE holds a roughly even divide between male and female members, unlike the surrounding university population, which was reported to have 64% females and 36% males in the Winter 2012 – Spring 2013 school year (Forbes).

On April 23, 2014, JADE held their final meeting of the semester. During this time I distributed debriefing forms informing participants of the general nature of this article and its implications.

Researcher's History

As with all ethnographies, there's a certain amount of bias the researcher holds coming into the field site. In my case, I held some prior knowledge of anime, manga, and the surrounding culture. During my middle and high school years, in fact, I identified as a fan of these mediums, though I never attended any clubs or organizations. As a result of my limited experience, I held a rudimentary foundation of prominent series, movies, and directors going into this ethnography. My knowledge, however, proved to be greatly inadequate in the context of

JADE, where members hold an extensive and thorough awareness of the vast world of anime. Over the course of my research, however, I've gained a much more comprehensive understanding of anime and its surrounding culture.

It may also be of interest to note that my up-bringing did not solely take place in the United States, but also in Saudi Arabia between the ages of 8 and 18. As such, I believe my multicultural experience has granted me a greater consciousness of international relations, especially in the context of globalization. I disclose this detail for the risk observer's paradox, which persists in all research, and acknowledge that my background may have very well influenced my findings (Labov 1972: 113).

Data and Analysis

Syntactic Function and Application

Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of our speech, pronouns assign distance, gender, and number to nominative entities. They allow us to form perspectives, to discern relations, and to establish identity. In the case of JADE, pronouns are often employed in order to distinguish and separate cultures, whether that be as a reflection of geographical distance or as an allegation of one's national identity. Take, for example, the following data from an interview with JADE participant Glowworm. To provide some context, the question she's answering is "How would you describe anime or manga to someone who's wholly unfamiliar with it?"

1. "Um…I'd sa:y...um, it's just like, you know, regular, like—like Western
2. comics or like a TV show, but it's different because it's a different culture
3. writing it. It's not like our Western people who have their own way of writing
4. it. Like—it's like A-Asian culture who's got their own beliefs, their own
5. morals, and so, in a way, the stories could be the same like-like magic
6. adventures and all that, but it's got like different kind of feel to it because of
7. the—because the—most of anime takes place in Japan. You will rarely find
8. like foreigners, or in a foreign country, unless they're like, I think more

9   Western-minded Asians, 'cause Japan is very xenophobic."

In line 3, we observe the use of the first person plural possessive "our," which acts firstly as a cultural identity marker, and secondly, as a widely inclusive term to express commonality between the speaker herself and her listeners (the researcher, the audio device, and the hypothetical "someone" described in the interview question.) The "our" in line 3 stands in stark contrast to the third person plural possessive "their" used in lines 4. Also significant here is the demonstrative pronoun "who" in the contraction in line 4. While our speaker could have easily used "that" or "which" to indicate Asian culture, she instead opts for the humanizing form "who." From this perspective, the collective culture gains a face of its own, appearing less political or institutional, and much more approachable. Such pronominal forms offer gain insight into Glowworm's perspective and identity, which appear to have been hybridized as a result of her fandom. To confirm these deductions, we can also examine the lexicon of lines 7-8. The simple choice of using "foreigners" here to mean non-Japanese citizens would suggest that Glowworm has empathetically grounded herself in Japan. The term only works relative to the nation.

Other times, pronouns serve to immerse listeners into spoken narrative. One participant, Proteus, had the opportunity to travel to Japan in August of 2013 for four or five days. Because of his firsthand experience in the country, he could relate observable customs and trends to fellow members of JADE. The most effective instances of such narratives utilized second person pronouns, as though the listeners themselves were directly involved. The following is one such example:

1   Proteus: You work six or seven days a week for eight hours and you go—you
2   work—you go, you work, you go, you work—you have a break every once in a
3   while, like a vacation [?] and then you retire. And then you can start a family,
4   which is why a lot of people aren't starting families, which was one of the reasons

5   they were going into a population crisis.

The repetition implemented in lines 1-2 mirrors the kind of repetition of daily work in Japan. Because Proteus sustains the second person over this period of time, he enables his listeners to mentally simulate this lifestyle and sympathize with these individuals.

On the contrary, the second person can also be implemented to invoke an accusatory tone. In the following data set, four JADE members gradually shift from the third person plural "they" to the second person "you."

1   Joe: Do you guys remember seeing that article where they were calling it
2   racist for Americans to cosplay? Do you remember that?
3   Meow: What? No!
4   Joe: [Yeah! It was some ## thing]
5   Meow: Why?
6   GW: [Oh, yeah, like the Japanese get super angry when the American
7   cosplay as anime characters.]
8   Joe: And, yeah. It's super weird because—
9   GW: And then they totally cosplay as Disney princesses.
10   Birdy: Yeah!
11   Joe: Yeah—
12   GW: Even though they only wa—
13   Birdy: That's racist!
14   GW: Yeah! Ughh.
15   Joe: No, first off, it's racist to say certain races can't do it. Second off,
16   they're saying it like Japan respects cosplay.
17   Birdy: Yeah!
18   Joe: But they—But they—
19   GW: Even though they don't wanna talk about anime!
20   Joe: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, that's why—they're like "This is like a cultural
21   heritage thing." Like, you guys don't talk—you actively—you actively
22   do not wanna talk about anime or—
23   Meow: It's not a cultural heritage!
24   Birdy: Yeah!
25   GW: Yeah, you look down on cosplay as this weird sex thing that older
26   men wanna see and younger women do.

In this case, Joe uses "they" to refer to the author(s) of the referenced article online. The trouble with using "they" here is that it is unclear as to whether Joe means a single author whose

gender is unknown, or multiple authors, or perhaps the larger nation of Japan. Joe later adopts

the quotative marker "be like" to attribute a voice to the nation as a collective entity in line 20.

This allows the smooth transition to the second person, allowing speakers to smoothly engage in

hypothetical dialogue with this personified version of Japan.

But pronouns aren't the only means of manipulating syntax. Anaphoric locative adverbs

act as a fundamental staple of conversation in JADE's discussion of Japanese tradition and

culture. More often than not, the nation of Japan is referred to through the amorphous phrase

"over there," in which the adverb stands as an anaphor for Japan. What's crucial to note here is

the distance between the anaphor "there" and the anaphoric reference "Japan." As the entire

conversation revolves around this one nation, the location is generally assumed by the speakers.

Because of this assumption, "over there" almost seems to take on exophoric qualities, as though

Japan is simply extra-linguistic information. Subsequently, Japan holds the paradoxical position

of being so ideologically close that its referential terms can remain ambiguously general, and yet

so geographically far and culturally divergent that its referential terms further distance the nation

from the speakers. Let's examine these following instances, where all utterances were delivered

within the span of one Sunday discussion held on April 13, 2014. Please note that each of these

utterances has been individually plucked from its context, and do not originally occur in such

close succession.

1   Proteus: U-um, there's actually uh something one my buddies who goes <u>over there</u> a
    lot—
2   Proteus: That was the—I wanna say that was the weirdest—the AKB 48 are the
    weirdest [thing I saw <u>over there</u>. ₃]
3   Joe: The yakuza, the organized crime <u>over there</u>.
4   Proteus: That's just something you should know before going <u>over</u>. Oh! Um—
5   Joe: Ah, it was a lot like what happened to the Okinawans actually in mainland Japan
    back a few—in the 1890s when they first came <u>over there</u>.

Through the distancing effect of the adverbial phrase, the very concept of Japan seems wholly

removed and intrinsically exotic. Simultaneously, however, that same phrase manages to cast

Japan in a light of familiarity, of close proximity. This syntax accurately reflects the paradoxical

nature of anime and the hybridized identities of JADE members—Westerners who so strongly

relate to Eastern culture.

Lexical Function and Application

Just as syntax conveys certain perspectives on culture, so does lexicon shape perceptions

and representations of the palpable world. While it's difficult to draw any concrete conclusions,

my data seems to suggest that members of JADE tend to construct hyperbolized versions of

reality. Vocabulary, then, plays a key role in the production of such narratives. We can observe

this in action in the following interaction:

1   Proteus: […] And the reason is there are certain stores that will only serve—
2   Glowworm: [Japanese. Yeah.]
3   Proteus: —[local, like do]mestic customers. They won't serve um foreign
4   customers for that very reason.
5   Joe: Yeah.
6   Glowworm: They're probably super polite about it though. Like "Please leave."
7   But it's like, "If you don't leave, we'll get out our katanas! [Which has been
8   #folded over twenty times!"]
9   Joe: ["We'll #call #up the yakuza groups."] Yakuza groups are super weird over
10 there too. Like you'd expect them to be like these giant criminal guys, but no—
11 Proteus: No.
12 Joe: —they—they-they-they have offices! They have business offices they work
13 out of!
14 Proteus: Yep.
15 Glowworm: They wear business suits!
16 Proteus: Oh yeah.

For clarification, the term "yakuza" refers to organized crime in Japan, and has been

colloquially dubbed "the Japanese mafia" (Bruno n.d.:1). The term "katana" refers to a

traditional Japanese sword, a prototypical icon of East Asian weaponry. These Japanese lexical

borrowings are employed in conjunction with the phrases "business offices" and "business suits," terms typically thought of as modern, or Western, or some combination of both. This clear distinction in lexicon promotes a dichotomy of Japanese representation. At one pole, we have the Japanese portrayed as polite, reserved, hardworking people. At the other pole, they are depicted as skilled, stealthy fighters, harboring expertise in the martial arts, or something equally predictable. In lines 1-8, we observe how the mundane shopkeeper is imaginatively transformed into expert swordfighter, an anachronistic feudal samurai, it would seem. Lines 1-16 demonstrate the perfect inverse of this—the highly violent mafia member showcased as an outwardly average citizen. The two extremes play off of each other in performing humor, as each image is so vastly different from the other.

We should keep in mind that fact that most members of JADE have not had the opportunity to visit Japan. Without firsthand experience, the culture is largely perceived through transitional mediums designed for entertainment: books, film, the internet, and so on—all mediums that have been deliberately hyperbolized. It should be noted that these mediums, then, affect the way in which cultural realities are transposed and therefore received. Furthermore, such mediums perform similar strains of humor, and may hold a substantial degree of influence over dedicated consumers. Anime, for example, often orients humor toward Western audiences. Take, for instance, *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*. The series features a number of characters (primarily deities) which are named after famous American rock stars, such as Tom Petty and ACDC. In one discussion hour, Glowworm and Joe converse on how various anime make references to *The Terminator*, including the series *Seto no Hanayome* and *Sakurasou no Pet na Kanojo*. Joe remarked "I-it's good. I like it when I see a reference to American things in Ja-Ja-

[anime for some reason.]" Allusions such as these fortify the transacculturation in anime, grounding the product thoroughly in both East and West.

That said, anime does not shy away from cultural insensitivity. On the contrary, many content creators enjoy poking fun at traditional beliefs and practices through the medium. In the second season's finale of *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure,* an elderly Joseph Joestar (who's American) has his foot run over by a stranger. At first, he dismisses the incident and forgives the stranger, but upon finding out the stranger is Japanese, JoJo "takes it back" and alters his response to a violent kick to the shin. The scene ultimately ends on JoJo saying "Oh well, I do like my Sony Walkman," as he plugs into his Japanese-designed cassette player. This memorable scene is only one of many that satirize American attitudes and hypocrisy. As Rayna Denison points out, there are some definite benefits in this vein of honest farce:

> "Unlike more negative discussions that incorporate jihad and the politics of aggressive
> political resistance to perceived westernization, [...] positive occidentalism enables
> ambivalent, ambiguous representations of cultural others that inherently and creatively
> mix 'elements of multiple cultural origins' within anime." (Denison 2010: 226)

Ultimately, this is what the medium entails—the blending of cultures for creative and innovative purposes. On a surface level, some aspects of anime and the surrounding fandom may come across as slightly rude or offensive. But in a medium where humor takes precedent over cultural sensitivity or political correctness, such acts are deemed as acceptable, even encouraged.

With this understanding, I'd like to introduce the next data set with a degree of delicacy. While the content of the conversation be problematic on a number of different levels, I do not believe any single individual is at fault here—not entirely, at least. Instead, I believe the hyperbolic language and imagery at work here merely reflect that same language and imagery utilized in various anime series. To provide some context, members of JADE were examining a

photograph of Hirohiko Araki, the series creator of *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*. Also note that all

members present are Caucasian.

1 Birdy: Asians don't age.
2 Joe: He-He-He's looked like this for twenty years.
3 Meow: He's immortal!
4 Joe: It's actually scary, like—
5 Birdy: [I think it happens overnight.$_1$]
6 Glowworm: [He might be a vampire.$_1$]
7 Joe: A-Actually the government once invited him to do a study on supernatural
8 powers. Where they hooked him up to like an alternate reality machine, like, it's
9 supposed to use your mind to like see how you see different realities or some
10 stuff. And h-he was like part of that study. It was—it was—it's really like funny
11 what this guy gets involved with because everyone loves his stuff.
12 Birdy: I think there might be a transformation overnight. I think that they look
13 super young up until like one night, and then they wake up and they've got like
14 [the-the-the- $_2$] Fu Manchu and they're all wrinkled.
15 Joe: [The-the-the- $_2$] Their hair just all falls out all in one night
16 Birdy: Yeah, it's [like overnight, there's no median.$_3$]
17 Glowworm: [Their hair falls out, or just turns blindingly white.$_3$]
18 Birdy: They're super young and then bam, old man.
19 Joe: They—They—They just molt like birds.

Examining the language here, we observe the incorporation of supernatural or fantastical lexicon,

such as "immortal," "vampire," and "transformation," in lines 3, 6, and 12 respectively. The

simile "molt like birds" in line 19 would also fall into the category of the fantastical, as this

utterance conjures a very distinct image. This is anime caricturization simply extending into

linguistic caricturization. The change is described as sudden, as suggested by "overnight" in lines

12 and 16, "one night" in line 15, and "bam" in line 18. The usage of onomatopoeia greatly

resembles the comic-book style of manga, in which sounds are conveyed through text. Though

many anime series no longer follow suit, some series remain faithful to the graphic novel

tradition, and write out sounds on-screen, as in *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure*. We also see examples

of modifiers and intensifiers throughout this interaction, as in "super young" in line 16,

"blindingly white" in line 17. Assertions are heightened through use of quantifiers, such as

"everyone" in line 11, or "all" in line 15. Another essential aspect of this data set lies in the gradual pronominal shift from the third person singular "he" to the third person plural "they."

What this data demonstrates is not only the influence of anime upon perception and humor, but also how members of JADE collaborate. During these brief forty seconds, participants exchanged ideas, elaborated upon said ideas, and contributed to a distinct style of wit and humor shared among the group. Such actions are essential in the long term process of establishing camaraderie, though that camaraderie may be built upon harmful stereotypes and degrading humor.

Conclusion

Over the course of my research, I found that many speech patterns present in JADE often reflected various elements of anime. Members of the club utilized syntax to situate themselves in a somewhat paradoxical position as both residents of the West and companions of the East. Their pronouns and adverbs demonstrated a complicated status in this, as many participants aligned themselves closely with Far East Asian narratives and products while still maintaining a sense of geographic distance. Just as anime exhibits a complex history of transacculturation, so does JADE demonstrate cultural duality through members' discourse. Participants also reflected elements of anime as they utilized hyperbolized lexicon and analogies to express humor. As noted earlier, such linguistic practices may manifest in offensive or problematic ways, indicating a higher value on humor and camaraderie than political correctness within the JADE community.

Study Limitations and Further Research

A number of challenges arose over the course of the semester. Firstly, the weekly pool of participants present at the discussion hours proved to be fairly small. In some ways, this was beneficial for gaining deeply thorough qualitative data of a few specific individuals. In other ways, this was not so advantageous for acquiring a more comprehensive understanding of JADE as a whole.

The study was further limited by my own inexperience with ethnographic research. Lacking any sort of prior practice, I was hesitant about the prospect of performing an ethnography of this length and scale. The process became much less daunting as time passed by, but once my techniques and strategies were finally shaping up, the semester was over. In a similar vein, my initial exposure to anime and manga was very narrow in the early weeks. The plethora of references tossed around felt absolutely overwhelming and impossible to manage. As anything does, it took time for me to acquire the jargon of the club and to gain a working knowledge of current and popular series. Now that I've acquired that knowledge, I wish I had more time to record and analyze data, to pick up on trends that occur throughout the whole of JADE, and not only within the discussion hours.

If further research were to be conducted on this topic, it should delve into influencing factors as to why individuals tend to follow certain linguistic trends in some instances, and divergent trends in other cases. In any case, this research seems to support the theory that cultural realties are reliant upon syntax and lexicon in the interactive speech of JADE members. I maintain that such linguistic processes, form distinctly unique versions of Eastern and Western cultures as a means of performing humor, expressing camaraderie, and asserting covert identity.

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