Podcast: Language in Voice Acting pt. 1

Release Date:
Host: Lynden Caldwell
Guest: Mark Allen Jr.
Description: Voice Actor Mark Allen Jr. joins the podcast to share how his degree in Japanese and studying culture and linguistics influenced his career in voice acting.

Transcript:

Lynden
Hello and welcome to the Language Matters Podcast. I'm Lynden Caldwell and today I have the pleasure of introducing a special guest to you all by the name of Mark Allen Jr. He is a fairly recently prominent voice actor with a few notable roles such as Yota Narukami in the Day I Became a God, Karin Sasaki in Fire Force, Kurayami Seika in the Unexpectables, as well as other notable roles in shows like Mobile Suit Gundam 2016, Hunter Hunter 2011, as well as I believe one of the Power Rangers video games, but also noted, Mark Allen Jr., or as I will be saying from now on Mark, is also a DJ, a storm catcher, and a streamer. Welcome to the podcast. I'm super, super happy to have you here.

Mark
Yeah, thanks for having me. I think that may be the first time I've been called a storm catcher, which sounds way cooler than any other name I've ever heard it called by so I'm gonna use that from now on.

Lynden
Awesome. It seemed like the most the most accurate, considering you seem to go out of your way to try to find them.

Mark
It's true

Lynden
-weirdly enough.

Mark
It's true. I, I've always shirked a little bit away from storm chaser, because that kind of has a connotation of the people who kind of charge headfirst into a storm to get up close and personal. And I'm more the guy, you know, from a little bit of a distance. So I can see

Lynden
Yeah

Mark
everything that's going on trying to make sure you know where safety things are and stuff like that.

Lynden
Yeah!

Mark
I like Storm catcher that has a nice ring to it.

Lynden
Yeah. So I wanted to just kind of start a little bit about something that I noticed in one of your streams. I can't remember if this was actually on one of the tabletop streams, or if this was just on a regular stream that you were that you were hosting. But you mentioned getting your degree in Japanese.

Mark
Yeah

Lynden
Um, do you kind of want to talk a little bit about that, because I know when when people think of like voice acting, they first think of like acting school, acting classes. So it might be a little little interesting to hear that your education actually started with foreign language learning?

Mark
Well, if that were the case, that would be true. My education was long and varied. I actually started college as an animation major and switched to an acting major after my first semester, I was an acting major for a year. And then I was an acting major with a music minor for a semester. And then after that, I was a Japanese major for five years. So I did kind of start in the actor area. But I kind of learned fairly early on that, you know, my career was existing and progressing without necessarily needing that piece of paper that said, I know how to act. And that coupled with some, shall we say, mix ups in the administrative aspect of my schooling, led to me just kind of falling away from our Acting Program at my school. But I had been trying to get into a Japanese class since my very first semester. And after two years of trying to get in, I finally got in. And after a week of taking the class, I decided to change my major to Japanese. I studied for five years at California State University at Fullerton and I got my degree in Japanese with an emphasis in Japanese culture and cultural linguistics.

Lynden
That is super awesome. Is there a particular thing that like when you were taking your first couple Japanese classes that really drew you to culture and linguistics? Or was it something that kind of happened, shall we say organically?

Mark
A little bit of both, um, I was already a fan of Japanese anime by the time I actually started really watching it and even you could argue studying it in high school. And I noticed during taking coursework that there were things that we were learning that typically you don't hear in anime, and I remember one of the very first I guess, aspects of me actually trying to learn and not just kind of be like, Hey, I like this, but like actually trying to learn. I asked a professor one day I said, "Why is it that the Japanese that we hear an anime is so informal when our approach to learning the language especially as foreign language learners, always starts with the more formal aspect?" And her explanation to me was mostly that because most anime is made in Tokyo, or the surrounding areas around Tokyo, the primary dialect in any anime is going to be Tokyo dialect. And it also is sort of the unofficial-official dialect of the country. So you could basically get by anywhere in the country, if you know a Tokyo dialect. But because it is

anime, because it is drama, and it is fiction, more often than not all of your characters have some sort of relation with each other. So either they're already familiar with each other, which makes things informal, or they're just incredibly rude. So they're just informal anyway. So I remember we had a long conversation about how it's important for foreign language learners to learn Japanese from a formal perspective first, because more often than not, any involvement, you're going to have an- excuse me, especially post college is going to be in a formal setting. So knowing how to speak politely and with respect is more important than necessarily sounding colloquial. And that led to me really trying to compare those two things, the informal speak versus the formal speak and figuring out you know, okay, what occasions are appropriate for someone who may otherwise want to be formal? In what situations? Could that person be informal? When could you use that informal language and not be disrespectful, but just be more friendly, you know, and it just kind of spiraled from there.

Lynden
Yeah. And, of course, those sorts of nuances in language, you know, while they're, they are still prevalent in English, they may not necessarily be as noticeable to us just because we're immersed all the time, right. And we sort of naturally shift into those sorts of backs and fourths, those different registers of, of speaking,

Mark
I think there's definitely a lot too in especially American English, you know, what defines you as rude or polite is often in your tone. Versus in Japanese, you have completely different conjugation all forms based on your status in any given situation. So whether you're talking to someone who is your superior at work, versus talking to a stranger on the road, versus talking to your niece or nephew versus, you know, it would never happen, but talking to the Emperor. You know, there are verbs and verb forms that you use in each of those situations. And we do not do that in English. We don't, you know, if I say I'm going to the store, it's always I'm going to the store, regardless of what your situation is. But if you're speaking in Japanese, you would say that differently, you would almost have a different verb, almost entirely, if you're in a formal setting versus an informal setting.

Lynden
Right. Did this ever in learning about these sorts of linguistic as as we like to call them, the morphosyntactic, or the the different elements that change, you know, meaning based on how a word is formed? Or the placement that we put it in those little nuances in Japanese? Did that ever impact the way that you see even your own native language or the culture around you at all?

Mark
That's a tough one. I don't want to say no, because the answer is probably yes. But I don't know if it was ever something that I was cognizant of, I think maybe subconsciously, probably. I think there are certain... there are certain customs and habits that you pick up anytime you're studying any language at length. I think anybody who's ever tried to learn a second language, or even a third language, a couple of years into it, you start to sort of notice that maybe the way that you approach words in your own language is going to start to change and your relationship with language in general starts to change. I know that, because there's so much of an emphasis on very efficient language in Japanese, my own manner of speaking kind of got a little bit more efficient in terms of: I always want to use the exact right word for what I'm trying to say. And so words have a very important meaning to me. So in some situations, someone might say a word, and I'll know what they mean. But what they said isn't exactly what they mean. And my brain kind of hits on that and goes "uh... do I correct this? No, it's probably it's probably fine." It's fine. Yeah.

Lynden
Yeah. And of course, those are those are the little things that you you, especially as you get farther along your language journey, you start to become more aware of like- I'm thinking about like my own language, language learning journey. And I think about the times where you learn, oh, the dictionary might say that this means one thing. But in actual practice, you would never ever use in this context, right?

Mark
There are certainly lots of- we would regularly have, I don't want to call them practice sessions, we had a sister school in Japan that occasionally schedules would line up where we could get lab time on the computer. Because, you know, this was 2010. Before, you know, things like TEAMs and Zoom and that kind of thing existed, we would get together and connect on Skype and, and try and converse with native speakers. And that was always funny, because we wanted to talk in Japanese so that we could work on our Japanese, they wanted to talk in English.

Lynden
Yeah.

Mark
And so we would often trade back and forth where you know, what they would say, in English would be grammatically correct. But it wouldn't sound right to a native speaker. And so we would share that with them. And then vice versa, we would say something in Japanese. And they'd be like, "Well, you're right. But it's it's an extremely book way to say what you're saying, here's how you would say that in a conversation." So it was very helpful to have that sort of back and forth. But it was always sort of like, cool. So what you're telling me is everything I'm learning is not practical in the real world. Got it?

Lynden
Yeah. Yeah, I think of I think the one time I was talking to one of the foreign exchange students at my university, and we were talking and she paused in the middle of, of our conversation switched into English and goes, I don't want to sound rude. But you kind of sound like a textbook, and I want to help you.

Mark
I've, I've heard, I've heard that. Occasionally, Americans who learn German, who then go to Germany, and try and speak in German, have often made people uncomfortable, because Americans when we speak, we tend to be more enthusiastic and more. I don't want to say emotional, but we tend to be a little bit more expressive, when we communicate.

Lynden
Right.

Mark
And in certain places, in Germany, they will stop you, and just let you know that you're kind of coming on a little strong. And I believe usually, if they're being polite, that's kind of where it ends. But if they're being a little bit more friendly, or if they're trying really hard to just let you know, like, hey, dial it down, they will tell you that you sound like Hitler. And it is because he was extremely expressive when he spoke. So if you, you know, so that's the kind of thing where if you're learning in a, in a, in an entirely

academic environment, it's very common for that language that you learn to be a little off once you start to use it in a world. That's one of those things that cultural linguistics likes to look at, as well as that, you know, how does the language evolve? In the real world? At the rate at which real world language does? Because conversational language evolves much faster than any textbook can keep up with. And how does that relate to what is used to teach foreigners the language? Because we often see a disconnect there between what the common folk will use in their native tongue and what foreigners will use when they're trying to communicate with them. Sometimes it can create altercations, even because, you know, what's being said is technically correct, but it now has a certain connotation or intonation that the layman would know. But a foreigner would not because they don't have that cultural connection.

Lynden
Right, right. I mean, even in English, like I think about the way that we often utilize specific lexicon, or words- lexicon, in certain circumstances to mean something in, you know, entirely different and even when we're talking in in academic or educational settings, we will rely on on a specific, shall we say, repertoire, in order to make sure that we sound a specific way. And so I can completely see see how how, yeah, you would you would definitely benefit from having those, you know, coming back to those Skype calls that you mentioned with those Japanese students. Did you did you ever get the chance to study abroad or was it just?

Mark
I unfortunately, was extremely lacking in the financial department during my seven years in college. So I was one of three students who graduated from my program without ever actually having made it to Japan, which was very difficult because you do have to do a lot of testing to determine your, your fluency level and things like that, that without having a lot of interaction, and without having that sort of- it's not flooding. That's not the word. I'm looking for- immersion without having that sort of immersive aspect to your education, it's very difficult to test very high on those fluency tests.

Lynden
Yeah.

Mark
Getting back to your question, though, and I just thought about this. So, particularly, I don't know if if we have a visual aspect to this, for those who who may not know me, I'm a mixed person. Racially speaking, ethnically speaking, I do kind of ascribe to Black or African American. And there's a an aspect in bla, excuse me, Black American English called code switching, wherein the way you say words, your rhythm, the words that you use, all of that can switch, depending on who you're around. Sometimes it's conscious, sometimes it's not. For me, it tends to be unconscious. But I do tend to speak differently, when I am in a setting surrounded by a significant number of other black people than I do, most other times in my life, mostly because my father is a speech pathologist. And so proper speech was very important to him. In Japanese, culturally speaking, there's a permanent form of code switching in that differentiation between polite speak and more familial speak. So just, you know, someone can be walking down the street talking with their friends in a very colloquial manner. And if they bump into someone immediately, they're switching into that polite speak.

Lynden
Right.

Mark

And so, and that's, that's hardwired into the language, it's coded into your verb choice, and the verb forms that you use in any given situation, and all of that, you know, it's learned as a child is growing up as well. So, yeah, that code switching does exist over there. And it's a different kind of code switching, but it is still code switching. So that might be something that I could definitely say I could compare to my own native speaking, that I learned in Japanese. Since I believe that was what your original question was.

Lynden
Yeah, I mean, I mean, I think it's really interesting that you make that comparison, because I think to conversations where people have this sort of idea that code switching looks one specific way. Right?

Mark
Right.

Lynden
And what you're, what you're indicating here, which is very, very true, is that code switching can look a multitude of different ways. In fact, depending on how we are looking at the type of the- another term that we use is code meshing, right. So when we're meshing two different codes together, two different languages, two different registers together, and we're utilizing them beyond just the singular word form, we might even refer to it as the meshing of two different languages or registers. Or, you know, in the case of dialectal variants, right, yeah, we might be switching between you brought it up before AAVE, African American Vernacular English, or Black American English, and what would be considered mainstream that is one form, but also, I think, to, in, in, even in, in, in conversations of my own personal study, the the switching between like a internet speech and normal speech, and I know that that's prominent, not only in English, but also in Japanese.

Mark
Absolutely, absolutely, especially among young people. Anyone of like high school age or below, and that's kind of nebulous in Japan, because high school is not compulsory. So you can test to get into a high school, but anything past junior high, which is ninth grade equivalency, or the age of 14? I think, 14-15? 15. You can test to get into a high school or you can enter the workforce at that point. And so you'll, you'll have people working, you know, someone might be working at behind the counter at a convenience store, you know, two years after high school, but they're still 17 years old. And so you'll still see that internet lingo, you'll still see the common phrasing from other people who might learn it in school because they still have friends, right? They all still hang out. So you get that crossing and you'll get the there's a there's a, I absolutely forget what it is called. But there's a term that relates to how quickly and the range at which changes in in in lexicon and cultural dialect kind of spread. This was something that I examined when I was still in school because I grew up In Southern California, and there are varying pockets of culture in Southern California, I grew up in Los Angeles County, but I attended college in Orange County, which is very different, almost a completely different dialect honestly. And so it was interesting to me because there were phrases, and and colloquialisms that we would use in my high school years in LA, that didn't make it to my college until I was, you know, a sophomore or junior in college. And it basically took six or seven years for that for that colloquialism to make it to, you know, to make the 50 mile trek from one place to another. And in certain other areas around the country and around the world, you might see the that proliferation rate kind of vary. I know that around mainland Japan, the main island in Japan, those changes spread very quickly, predominantly because of things like anime, and television dramas, and even the news sometimes. But the other islands which aren't necessarily directly connected media wise, it tends to spread a little bit more slowly. And that also ties

into the idea of this meshing, because you'll, you'll hit these pockets where that that changeover is ongoing. And so you'll hear some of the old and some of the new simultaneously, because the community hasn't decided completely yet to switch all the way over.

Lynden
Right.

Mark
And that kind of thing is so fun to me, because it's completely organic. Nobody, there's no council that gets together and says, "Okay, we're not using da-bomb anymore. It's outlandish and dated, we're not going to use it anymore. Now we're going to use fly," you know, or whatever, whatever they decide, right? Nobody meets and decides it's what you're going to do it just sort of organically happens. Media and culture as a whole, just sort of collectively decide without communicating that they're going to do it, what lingo they're going to use and what they're going to go with going forward.

Lynden
Do you do you find that this impacts and this could either be with regard to your education? Like did you ever find this to be like an issue? Because Because you had mentioned previously you were on your on Skype Skype calls with with Japanese students? Did you ever run into this issue? While you were while you were studying, or?

Mark
I don't think it was ever really an issue. It definitely was something that the students that I was speaking with would point out and say, "Oh, no one really says that anymore. Now we say this." I actually was in school right around the time that there's a there's a word in Japanese, I hesitate to give it a specific grammatical label, because it kind of gets used for everything nowadays. But it's "yabai".

Lynden
“Yabai.” Yeah.

Mark
“Yabai” is it can either be extremely good, or it can be extremely bad, or it can be a completely neutral expression of "Something has happened. And I'm commenting on it." And while I was in school, that sort of was just starting to become prolific in the cultural zeitgeist. So we regularly would have conversations where, you know, we're discussing each other's days, and I might say, "Oh, I had a good day, or I had a bad day." And I would use the language that I had learned in the classroom. And I would often get corrected, or not maybe not corrected, because there's Japanese culture is very big on respect. So you don't really correct people so much as suggested, there might be another way you could do something. And so it would be suggested, or recommended that I could use the "yabai" in that situation. And I remember it took me literal months, to figure out when you could use it, because it seemed to change, right? It could be good or bad, and you never really knew, unless you were, you know, sort of keyed into culturally, when you could use it, you never really knew where you could use it, I kind of liken it to the Canadian "ey", which I have also done a long, long form study on because when Americans like to do impressions of Canadians, they like to put "ey" at the end of every sentence, and it's not that simple. It's a it's a, it's a confirming affirmative. And so when you're making a statement that, you know, is true, and you're expecting the other person to affirm that what you know, is true. And so it's sort of equivalent to the Southern California "right" which we would put at the end of almost every sentence when we're trying to look for that affirmative. So these are things that like, if you don't grow up doing it and you're

not familiar with it, it takes a long time to kind of key in Okay, when is the right time to actually use this? And so yeah, I don't If I would ever say that it was a an issue so much as it was something that I didn't notice. And, you know, because Japanese culture is so respectful. Even the punk kids there were never really was a time where they would just, you know, laugh at me or whatever, usually just sort of like, "Oh yeah, you know, you could use this word instead and it'll it'll, it'll sound more natural, you know?"

Lynden
Yeah, that makes sense. Um, I do remember this this not to sound so millennial, but there was a tik tok I did see by a, a speaker who spoke both English and and Japanese talking about it was like, titled, like, "Problems with the word 'yabai'." And they would go through like all the different situations in which "yabai" could be used. And they were like, "Okay, so, so So what do you mean? What do you mean?"

Mark
Yeah, when the common like Yahoo Answers question is, when is it appropriate to you to use yabai? And the common answer is yes.

Lynden
Yeah.

Mark
Use it. Use it whenever, it's probably right.

Lynden
Okay, so while I think this is a great place for us to sort of switch gears in the conversation, I actually want to pause and wrap up the episode here. We will be back on the next episode of the Language Matters Podcast with more conversations with Mark Allen Jr. about language and culture and how his education with Japanese linguistics and Japanese culture has informed his previous and current voice acting decisions. Tune in next time to find out more about it.