



Podcast: Language in Voice Acting pt. 2

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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

Welcome back to another episode of the Language Matters Podcast. My name is Lynden Caldwell. And we are joined once again, by the lovely guest, voice actor, Mark Allen Jr. On the last episode, we spoke a bit about your education and your degree in Japanese with the emphasis in language, linguistics, and culture. And I just wanted to ask a bit about how that specifically has influenced your voiceover work. I'm sure with your background in in voice acting and anime, this sort of knowledge of the culture in the in the linguistics the language of Japanese, I can't help but make the educated guess that it probably informs either decisions that you make, or, or ways that you will approach, shall we say, going into the booth. Although that's in our post pandemic setting, I'm not sure how much you're actually doing in the booth, right now.

Mark

I actually I have a booth at my house, we had to learn to just kind of adjust and record from home. So we have home booths.

Lynden

Gotcha.

Mark

But yeah no, it's it's affected it and influenced it in a lot of different ways that have kind of changed as the years have progressed. I started voice acting professionally in 2007. And even just the media escape

at that time, as far as anime was concerned, was very, very different. It still wasn't quite popular in the mainstream in the West. And so

Lynden

-during. That was still during like, right when things were still on Adult Swim and Toonami, primarily, right?

Mark

Yeah, that was about the only I think I think Sci Fi Channel did a run with some anime for a while. But that that was sort of a premium cable channel that even people who could get Cartoon Network probably didn't get. So it definitely was not as widespread as it is now. And at that time, there was usually a focus on trying to match the the vocal print and performance of the actor that you were dubbing. And so at that time, it was very helpful because knowing the, I guess the the tempo and pattern of sort of the various archetypes within the medium really helped me in terms of being able to identify and emulate those archetypes when we were dubbing it into English. As time progressed, and we start we sort of kind of moved away from just give it to us, but in English and more towards a more adaptive style, wherein trying to make what is happening make more sense to a western audience. Some of those things might have changed. So our, our typical archetypes might change. The way that we expect a certain character to sound, versus the Japanese version might change. So they're a little bit bolder with changing those sounds sometimes. And so, now the focus for me has is more on what is it that the the character is saying in Japanese, that is not being said in the adaptation? And that's not necessarily a hit on the people who are adapting the script so much as it is, is there more context here, that because I am educated in the language, I can pick up on it? And sometimes, I will point that out to a director. Sometimes we'll have a situation where, you know, especially with Simul Dubbing, which is the process of trying to release episodes, as soon as or as close to the Japanese release as possible. Sometimes we have to change scripts in the booth. We don't have time to send it back to a writer, and we just we have to get it done. It's not fitting the mouth flaps or it's not fitting the timing or too difficult to say or something, right? And in those situations, I've definitely become more we'll say bold about pointing out to my various directors like, "Hey, I don't know if it helps at all, but this is what they're saying in Japanese." And I've had a couple of directors really take to that and really enjoy that. And some directors just go, "Oh, that's interesting." And then we move on. And it's not a big deal.

Lynden

Right. Right.

Mark

It's the directors show. But it's you know, it's sometimes it can be helpful, because when you're when you suddenly have to change the line, and you've got an engineer, a director and an actor, none of whom are script writers, who all have to try and figure out okay, how can we change this line to fit what we need it to do without changing the meaning of the line, without destroying what it is that that that line is meant to convey? And so yeah, knowing the language definitely helps in that situation, especially knowing some of those variations in situational lexicon. So knowing that, oh, hey, in this situation, actually, I know he's, he's talking to a family member, and so, for a Westerners perspective, we tend to make that more familial language. But in the J, he actually used this more in this more formal form of the verb. So he's being extremely polite right now he's being extremely respectful. So that's going to influence both how I deliver the line. And if we need to change the line, that's something that I can point out and say, "hey, you know, he's giving a lot of deference right now. So we probably shouldn't be like, 'Yo, Dad, what's up?' Right? Maybe we should be focusing on like, 'Hello, Father,' like, you know, he's trying to be polite and respectful and a good son in this moment," you know, or whatever the situation might be.

Lynden

Right? That makes sense. That makes total sense. Does it also influence maybe on the more like, vocal quality side, maybe the choices that you you make when creating a character? Especially, I know, you had mentioned earlier that it was sort of like, it used to be that you needed to sound like the person who was originally doing the dub? Is it? Is it more? Is there more freedom now for you to sort of create this vocal space, based on how you interpret the character? Or

Mark

I would say, I wouldn't necessarily say that there's more freedom, because you could have done that back then as well.

Lynden

Okay.

Mark

But, part of the actor's job is to give the director what they want. And what casting directors do is, kind of make a decision based on- Okay, what does this person sound like in their performance of this character? And how does that mesh with everybody else do they sound like they're going to be in the same setting, if we put all of these voices in the same room? Do they all sound like they're talking in the same scope? So sometimes, you'll have these situations where the character that you are adapting,

because we're adapting the whole script, and we're adapting the whole show, your character has to fit in with everybody else. And so if the director's vision is not married to the original language sound, and this is true across any medium, this is true in live action dubs, or if you're dubbing animation from other countries as well. If the director's vision is not married to that original language sound, then what's more important is that you fit in with everybody else. And oftentimes, when you're auditioning, you don't know what everyone else sounds like. So you kind of just have to go with your instinct and say, "Okay, do I want to try and sound as close to the original performer? Or do I want to do something different?" And sometimes you have the freedom to do both. Sometimes you can give two takes, and then the director has both and can say, "Oh, they can sound almost exactly like the original. But also, here's this really cool idea that they have as well." So the casting director can then listen to both and see, okay, which one is you know, which one is going to fit? And if none of them fit in? Then they go with a different actor. And that's just how that works. But now,

Lynden

That makes sense.

Mark

I think it very much for me depends on the project. There are, there have been a number of anime that have come into my inbox for auditions wherein either it's a it's a property that's already been running for a while, so I kind of know what that sound is. And I can compare, okay, this is what the English sounds like, compared to the original. Did they go for something close to the original? Or are they doing their own thing? And then there are some shows as well, where the nature of the show is either heavily Western influenced, or does not conform to a lot of anime tropes. So in those situations, I tend to be a little braver and bolder with my choices and try and do something that's that, you know, in my head would fit this character without necessarily being a match for the original.

Lynden

Right. And I can understand how in those, particularly with the cases, and maybe I'm overstepping in this guess, but my guess would be that, in those cases, where the, the inspiration or the direction of the anime is particularly more Western influenced, your I imagine that your knowledge of both that sort of cultural competence from both the American side, being born and raised in the United States, but then also having that cultural knowledge of like, not only the language, but I imagine you have some semblance of like this is how Japanese people kind of view the rest of the Western world.

Mark

And it also helps to identify the archetypes because in Japanese, there's a sound and an almost its own dialect associated with gangsters. Whether that's somebody who's just a thug, or a ruffian, or someone actually in Yakuza, like that, there's a sound associated with that. So you hear that pretty frequently in anime. And so if you're doing something and it's being adapted into a show for the West, and they're trying to stray away from all those traditionally Japanese anime or archetypes, but still want this character to be a thug. You know, it helps to know like, hey, that's the sound of a thug that's like hard coded into his character. So when I'm doing my version of it, I still want to sound like a thug, just a non Japanese thug, because that sound doesn't read the same way when you take the words and conform them to English.

Lynden

Right. Right. And I imagine too with I know, I know the relationship between tone and then also again, pragmatic. We look at, again, the conjugation of the verbs, because that doesn't translate into English, I can imagine that there are other like, particularly phonetic, particularly vocal choices that you would want to make so that Western audiences would then also understand or sort of be on the same page as like a Japanese member of the audience watching the Japanese original dub of the show.

Mark

It's almost impossible for any English adaptation of an anime to read the same way. I say almost because again, there are, you know, there's an exception to every rule. For instance, Cowboy Bebop is pretty much... Cowboy Bebop is about the same experience, whether you watch it in Japanese or English. And I think what determines, which you prefer outside of just conversations about accessibility or convenience, what you prefer is probably going to depend on what kind of media or what kind of media you're already exposed to. So

Lynden

That makes sense.

Mark

If you watched a lot of Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and you watched a lot of Firefly, and you watched a lot of Charmed, right? Then Cowboy Bebop is probably going to be an English experience for you. And the experience that you get there is going to be extremely similar to the person who grew up watching Doraemon, Power Rangers, and, you know, Sailor Moon. And they may decide to watch it in Japanese. And they're going to have a pretty similar experience. And that's because that that show is such a unique situation wherein it is a Japanese anime, but it is extremely inspired by Western

influences, and cyberpunk and space. Not Space Punk. That's not quite the right word. Future punk either. I don't, I can't remember. But basically, stories about, you know, what life and space might be if it's not glamorous, if it's not Star Trek.

Lynden

Right.

Mark

Um, so because you already have a story, that at its core is rooted in western ideals, it's a lot easier to translate that, that experience into something that the West is going to get, without deviating too far from what the original message message is because the original message is already Western coded.

Lynden

Right. As opposed to maybe a show that is more shall we say Japanese centric perhaps?

Mark

There are a couple that come to mind. Yeah.

Lynden

Yeah! Yeah. I was gonna say the one that immediately comes to mind that's more recent might be Demon Slayer. That's that's very, that's very centered around even in just its aesthetic, it is very centered around Japanese culture and older Japanese mythology and

Mark

Right, because it's, it's, it's pre Meiji, if I remember correctly, which is a period of Japanese history, wherein Japan started to become exposed to more western influences. And so the country started to undergo a change. And so it switched a little bit from a more feudal setting, to something that was a little bit more nationally focused, wherein your your affiliation changed from being associated with whoever led your prefecture to a sort of a country wide, Japanese pride. You'll see a lot of shows that

are based in that time period as well. Another famous one is Rurouni Kenshin. And Rurouni Kenshin is another one that's kind of like, you know, that was dubbed around the same time as Cowboy Bebop, but the experiences are completely different because it is such a heavily Japanese story, both in influence and source material. It doesn't read, it doesn't read as easily to a western audience. It was sort of sold on "look at the samurai, aren't they cool?" And there's a lot of the cultural aspect of "this is the story about a samurai who no longer serves a lord, who's trying to give up his role as a killer and survive in a world where conflict is spreading faster than the country has really ever seen before." You miss out on a lot of the cultural aspects of that story because we don't have anything comparable in the West.

Lynden

And our language doesn't really, you know, our language doesn't really reflect that either I don't think at least not in, when I think of mainstream American English. There's not really a good way linguistically that we could put that either even if we were to try to convey the same meaning it just wouldn't come out the same. That actually brings me to a fun a fun little little bit that I want to talk about still talking about voice acting and this sort of knowledge of both of these these languages. You know, we talked a little bit about wanting to match the director's ideas of what voice acting should sound like to match an anime. But now I want to talk about specific instances when there is no director. I mentioned previously, in the last episode of our conversation that you voiced as Kurayami Seika from the Unexpectables

Mark

Yes.

Lynden

A role that is, for those unaware, it is not an anime. It is not a TV show, even. It is a live streamed Dungeons and Dragons improv podcast, where a handful of different voice actors and gaming enthusiasts come together to play the roles of the fictional characters that they themselves created. And I want to talk a little bit about if you don't mind, Seika, as well as Wihakayda.

Mark

Oh, yeah!

Lynden

Because I did notice with both of these characters, quite a few choices, that I that when I was listening back to some recordings that you did with both of those characters that I thought were really, really interesting. So for example, the first thing and I am so excited to talk about this was the fact that you introduced Seika. Monty, the Dungeon Master, is describing the situation. And then the moment that the other character who has Japanese inspiration comes on. Greckles comes on, and immediately you switch into, albeit a bit archaic, Japanese.

Mark

Yes. And archaic intentionally. It was I have listened back to that introductory speech several times because I'm insecure. And though I though I will always catch every stumble and every mistake. I'm glad that I did it because we weren't I wasn't exactly directionless. For at least that first episode. I knew what I was coming in there to do and I knew that my character was going to be important for Greckles's background and and sort of kickstarting what would sort of develop into a period of the show where we got to explore some of his past that had been kind of previously kept secret from pretty much everybody. And so I knew we had some of that. And Monty specifically approached me because she knew that I had some Japanese under my belt. And I think I may have been a bit of an overachiever with that intro speech. But I wanted to wow, the the performer who plays Greckles, Gaijin Goomba, as he's known. I wanted to wow him, because I wanted it to be a big moment, it would have been very easy to just show up and be like, "Oh, hello, I'm here to serve you." But I knew that if I gave it, the utmost in terms of making sure that this introduction sounds like a vassal reporting to his lord, that it was going to be so much more impactful for him.

Lynden

As a listener, I was stunned, honestly. I was not expecting that, when you did it. And you delivered it, I recognize you just said that you you were insecure. But from, from my perspective, as I as a Japanese language learner, it seemed very effortless. It seemed incredibly natural, particularly because of the setting. Sure, but the delivery. It was, I'm sure there were definitely moments where someone could be like, "Oh, this is clearly a learner of Japanese." But for me, it was a very immersive sort of moment where we really got to see, because you made this choice, we got to see this character bring forth the culture that he was representing. And so I was very, very interested to hear about like, why you chose to not only introduce yourself that way to the cast and then to the listeners, but then to also continue it because you didn't stop utilizing the honorifics and the intonation and references to the topics of honne and tatemae. Like, you were referring to the body language and the unspoken aspects that go into the Japanese language that, that take someone who really knows the language. And I just wanted to I just wanted to ask a little bit and talk a little bit about those choices as well. If you don't mind.

Mark

Yeah, well, I want to say thank you for noticing that. I, I know that Gaijin Goomba noticed, because we often talked about it, post live session. But it was something that I don't know how many listeners actually keyed into. There's certainly were choices I made that were very particular. For example, there is a there's an aspect of being a servant or being an underling with, particularly within samurai culture, where you're expected to agree with your lord. And so regularly speaking, if they were to say something that was correct, or if they were to ask you a question you would not respond with "Yes," you would respond with 'it is as you say,' but in Japanese, which would usually be you know, "sou desu", Gaijin and I both kind of dropped a lot of the actual usage of Japanese language just for the sake of not losing the audience too much.

Lynden

Right.

Mark

But I made it a point every time a question was asked to answer with "that is correct." And that was the closest association that I could make to that, because- without it being incredibly awkward. And I don't know how many people keyed into that. But that was something that I carried through all the way to the end of my run on that show. And that was a choice. You know?

Lynden

And I want to kindly also point out that that choice was not just a choice in words. I actually, I looked at some of your audio files, and I noticed the intonation. The intonation pattern you use when you say "that is correct" is very, it's very similar to what you would expect to hear if it translated into or utilized in the organic Japanese, as opposed to the English where you might hear someone say, "that's correct." And in the intonation difference, I also noticed

Mark

Well, and his his speech pattern is, is very much, I won't say it was perfect, because I will never say that anything I do is perfect. But I tried very hard to make sure that even in the common tongue, which for us is English, that his speech pattern, emulated that of his native tongue, which would be Japanese. There's a lot of times where I would catch myself and have to repeat myself or resay something. Because I started to talk and the rhythm wasn't right. Or I was hitting tonally in a different place than I should have. And so my brain would go, "No, that's wrong. Start over" So I would do it again, to make sure that it came out, you know, sounding like it should come from a person of that background. And I was the first person to really present that background in this setting. And so I will always be grateful for Monty

for letting me do that, because she had to put a lot of trust that I wasn't going to destroy her image, and what she was building for the players by doing so. And I think, you know, she didn't hate me. So it must have been, must have been okay.

Lynden

Yeah, um, but no, I think, you know, again, even from just the standpoint of a learner, I think it shows how much care that you put into your decisions, especially since you have the the ability in that setting to create those decisions to make very deliberate choices. Again, not just with your word choice, but with the intonation pattern. And the rhythm like, as you mentioned, the rhythm of which the words even are said, those are those little things that the, while the average person might not think of, from my, my perspective, as a linguist, I caught on to those and I was, I was curious. I was like, "Are these deliberate? Because if not, that's incredible, how much you learned from immersion. But if they are, that's even more fascinating. That's very interesting."

Mark

I really appreciate that you picked up on that because again, like I said, you know, I wasn't sure how many people did it was definitely, you know, I'm thankfully an experienced actor. And so, the majority of the time the stuff that you put into what you're doing gets missed. Not because, I don't want to sound I don't want that to sound like an insult. But it's more of the fact that like you're just a piece of the puzzle. You're a part of the performance. And so there are very few times where what you are doing is the only thing that's happening. So there are times when you make these kinds of choices that just get missed because they're not important to the viewers conscious experience. But if you don't do them, the viewer goes, "something's wrong." And so a lot of times that stuff doesn't get keyed in on so I'm very grateful that that you noticed that. I appreciate you bringing it up.

Lynden

Well, I think this is a great time for us to take another break. We will be back on the next episode of the Language Matters Podcast to discuss more about language and voice acting. See you then!