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# Resignifying the Japanese father: Mediatization, commodification, and dialect



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## ABSTRACT

A new style of Japanese masculinity targeting the new middle class, specifically stereotypical salarymen, is highlighted in the 2013 Cannes Jury Prize Award winning movie, *Soshite Chichi ni Naru* (*Like Father, Like Son*). Belabored by the ongoing economic slump and ever-decreasing birthrates, masculinity is (re)presented both visually and audibly as a hands-on caregiving father who speaks a regional dialect.

Through mediatization and language commodification, Osaka dialect is resignified and linked to an affective, hands-on fatherhood. The juxtapositioning of Standard language and dialect serves to underscore a distinction between a cold, distant father and a warm, affective one. The film provides valuable insight into the emergence of a new ideal of fatherhood that is indexed through language.

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## 1. Introduction

In 2013, the film *Soshite Chichi ni Naru* (English title: *Like Father Like Son*) directed by Hirokazu Kore'eda debuted in Japan, reaching the tenth ranked grossing movie that year; it went on to win the *Jury Prize* at Cannes. This film introduced a new style of Japanese father, one that is caring, warm, and closely connected to his children. Additionally, he uses both Osaka dialect and Standard Japanese language forms. Drawing on Agha's notions of language commodification and mediatization (2011a, 2011b), this paper focuses on the unexpected and creative linkage of Osaka dialect to a new style of fatherhood, one that is hands-on and communicative rather than distant and silent. Specifically, focus is given to the use of Osaka dialect and stereotypical masculine language forms, as they are deployed in explicit narratives of time spent *with* children as better than money spent *on* children. Ultimately, the paper contributes to current scholarship on how media draws on ideologically saturated language practices to highlight cracks in contemporary models of ideal masculinity and 'good' fatherhood in one popular film product.

The parenting style of the Japanese father is stereotypically defined by post-war 'Japanese family values' which include being the breadwinner and familial head. This style of fatherhood requires a company job that allows for a stable, steady income. In Japan, such corporate jobs require long hours and are typically accompanied by a long commute time. This kind of career means that he is rarely home to spend time with his family; in short, he is an absent father who provides for his children materially.

This normative fathering style is linked closely to the stereotypical salaryman that appeared in the 1970s (Frühstück and Walthall, 2011; Vogel, 1971); an icon of the post-war era, the 'company warrior' toiled long hours at a white-

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collared job in order to rebuild the nation from its war torn rubble. The salaryman came to represent one of the most dominant styles of masculinity and remains an aspirational ideal for men (Darling-Wolf, 2004; Dasgupta, 2000; Gill, 2003, 2015; Hidaka, 2011; Roberson, 2003). Recently, this model has suffered in public opinion, particularly in the area of paternal absence from the family. Many Japanese young people born and reared in the 1970s and 1980s came to disprefer the lifestyle they observed – early morning departures and late night returns of their fathers to/from the company (Hidaka, 2011; McCreery, 2002). Attempts to remediate the salaryman father are visible in such governmental campaigns as the *Sunday papa* (*nichiyōbi no papa*) (Ishii-Kuntz, 1996); Sundays were singled out as days that the *father* was to be sure to join in family events.<sup>1</sup> Family togetherness was valorized, advertised, and encouraged through various governmental campaigns (Ishii-Kuntz, 1996). Despite the criticisms leveled at the absentee salaryman father, the accompanying perks – upward class mobility, access to good schools (or, at least good cram schools) for children, career stability, home ownership, etc. – were difficult to pass up. Over the past decade or more, the salaryman absentee fathering style has become increasingly discussed, disparaged, and problematized; indeed, the Heisei Recession (1991–2000) followed by the continuing economic recession has highlighted the ways in which men do not participate in domestic duties such as childrearing and other home chores. With male unemployment sharply increasing during the recession, their lack of participation in the home became highly visible. Nonetheless, women report still wanting to marry white collar salarymen (Darling-Wolf, 2004) as they, too, desire the stability and salary that come with such careers, although marriage rates continue to decline (Yasuda, 2012). More recently the government has launched the *ikumen purojekuto* ('active fathering project') as a large-scale attempt to reform men in a specific direction: to urge them to take a hand in child-rearing among other domestic duties (see [www.ikumen-project.jp](http://www.ikumen-project.jp)<sup>2</sup>; see Oyama, 2014 for a thorough discussion of *ikumen*). Assessments of the various programs to date, suggest that the efforts have not been very successful (c.f., North, 2015; Osawa, 2000; Yasumoto and Sano, 2014).

Contemporary film representations of the salaryman father echo the idea that the absentee father is a problem (Dasgupta, 2011; Iles, 2007). Film portrayals of Japanese families are dismal at best, certainly dystopic. Salaryman fathers are represented as disengaged and absent from their families and homes; they are portrayed as powerless, especially in the domestic sphere (c.f. Iles, 2007). After the burst of the economic bubble (in the 1990s) and the continued decline of the Japanese economy in general, fathers are portrayed in films as losing their jobs, committing suicide, and generally not in control of their lives. As Dasgupta notes, these films show a Japan 'characterized by an anxiety about failure and loss of authority, in particular masculine authority' (Dasgupta, 2011, p. 384, emphasis in original).

I argue that these issues are realized through audible as well as visual cues. *Like Father, Like Son* brings into sharp relief two cross-cutting issues, money (class) and time (connection), in portraits of two very different fathers. The childrearing father is a lower middle class<sup>3</sup> shopkeeper who speaks in a regional dialect; the other father is an upper middle class businessman who speaks in standard Japanese. Focus is given to the linkage of Osaka dialect, a non-standard regional language common in western Japan and well-known to Japanese filmgoers through constant exposure to Osakan comedians and television personalities, to a particular style of fatherhood in contemporary Japan in the film. The film is set in the Tokyo and Maebashi (eastern) areas of Japan which is associated with Standard Japanese; (the use of Osaka dialect in this setting is discussed at length below). The film links Osaka dialect (hereafter OD) to a demonstrable affective style of fatherhood that gives priority to hands-on engagement with one's children and deprioritizes the importance of the fatherly role as material provider. In short, the film serves to mediate the institution of fatherhood through the commodification of a regional Japanese dialect, OD. I argue that OD is a form of 'mediatized communication' which serves to 'formulate models of conduct ... designed to promote specific social practices' (Agha, 2011a, p. 163); in this case, the social practice of playing with and participating in the rearing of one's children. The film demonstrates a case of what Agha refers to as 'large scale re-grouping' (Agha, 2011a, p. 166) through recontextualizing OD not as regional geography but regrouped as a system of indices of the new connected father. In doing so, fragments of OD are deployed to do the work of affect and rapport. The dialect used in Maebashi (a form of Gumma dialect) was not a viable option for this film; Maebashi/Gumma is not associated with any particular role or characteristics within the Japanese national imagination. As such, OD was the most logical voicing to assign to the shopkeeper given its in position within Japan and Japanese media.

Specific attention is given to the audible fragments of OD used by the shopkeeper father; further attention is given to the ways in which the new kinder rapport-oriented father is discursively created through narratives that explicitly contrast time spent *with* children to money spent *on* children. This film presents a particular opportunity to investigate the contrasting indexicalities of connected- and disconnected-fathers that such a multi-modal text demands. Audible indexicalities of caring and connected versus distant and absent father are achieved via the use of dialect versus Standard language. They are complexly interwoven with visual indexicalities of class that contrast the shopkeeper as undesirable vis-à-vis his home, disheveled style, and skilled labor with the businessman who is constructed as desirable with his high rise condo, chic style, and white collar company position.

<sup>1</sup> In the 1980s, most children attended school on Saturdays.

<sup>2</sup> An English explanation of the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare ideas regarding *ikumen* can be found here: <http://www.mhlw.go.jp/english/policy/children/work-family/dl/psbbwfl.pdf> (accessed October 8, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Here I use Hashimoto's (2006) *kyūchūkan kaikyū* 'old/former middle class' designation.

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