

let's dating

being a cunning linguist...

aka speaking the language of love

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In my early days in Japan, my language skills were seriously lacking, which limited my hook-ups to Japanese lads who happened to be able to speak English. I eventually wised up to the fact that as I was a guest in this country, it was my duty to attempt to learn the language and show my respect for my adopted home. Plus, I realized I would statistically enhance my chances of getting booty if I could converse with the majority of the population.

People often say that the best way to learn a language is by dating someone who's a native speaker, but clearly those people have never tried to learn Japanese. It would sometimes seem that the Japanese language has been created for the sole purpose of confounding foreigners. However, I've put in some hard time (ha ha) trying to learn the ins and outs of this language in a dating context, and it very rarely has anything to do with what you learn in the classroom.

The first hurdle you are likely to encounter is the politeness problem. Every Japanese text I know of starts off with "*desu*" and "*masu*" forms, which are pretty unsexy as far as verb forms go. I mean, they're fine for greeting your neighbors or going to tea with Nana (and as those Flight of the Conchords fellows say, "Ain't no tea party like my Nana's tea party"), but in a romantic relationship, using "*desu*" and "*masu*" is just plain weird. If, however, you ever want to show your significant other that you've lost that loving feeling, using some polite language gives them a not-so-subtle hint that you're trying to metaphorically move away.

A word to the wise: if you wanna use Japanese to get someone on their knees, you're gonna need to drop the prim and proper stuff and get down and dirty with the dictionary. The dictionary form, that is. This can be ever-so-slightly confusing, since, unlike with the polite forms, there's no distinction between "I" and "you" (to make a question out of a dictionary form, you simply use rising intonation). This can lead to all sorts of fun since "*denwa suru*" can mean both "I'll call you" and "Are you gonna call me?" Let me know how that goes for you.

Once you've mastered the verb situation, you'll then be in danger of what I like to call the "Dude Talks Like a Lady" syndrome. Basically, any guy who learns Japanese from his girlfriend risks punctuating his speech with one too many "*ne*'s and inadvertently coming across as... someone who wouldn't be too out of place at one of Nana's aforementioned tea parties. Just remember, if you're a manly man, less is more when it comes to "*ne*".

The opposite is also true: women who learn Japanese from their boyfriends tend to come across as overly masculine. Some instances of male speech are more obvious than others. Replacing anything that ends in "*ai*" with "*e*" (so "I don't know/understand", usually pronounced "*wakaranai*", becomes "*wakarane*" - or "stinky", instead of "*kusai*", is pronounced "*kuse*"), for instance. But who would have known that men have their own words for things like buttocks or food? Apparently "*ketsu*" and "*meshi*" are off limits to the fairer sex.

One of the major differences between Japanese and English is how you talk to the object of your affection, particularly when you'd like to express, well, your affection. In English, we tend to say we "like" someone in a couple of different contexts. We can like our boss or teacher, or we can "like" the cute guy/gal who sits across from us in chem class junior year. But once we actually get serious about someone, we tend to switch to the word "love" instead.

This is not really the case in Japanese, though. It seems strange that one of the first sentences I learned - "*Watashi wa sushi ga suki desu*" - is basically the same as the sentence used to reveal one of the deepest things you can feel for another human being. In case you weren't aware, the way you tell someone you love them in Japanese is by saying "*suki desu*" or, more likely "*suki*", which is usually translated to "I like you". The literal way of saying "I love you" in Japanese, "*ai shiteru*", is so strange to Japanese people [*In Kansai, at any rate...* - Ed] that they probably feel more comfortable expressing this sentiment in English than they do in Japanese.

The basic rule for speaking Japanese with your lover, then, could be summarized as follows: if you're not tongue-tied, you're probably doing something wrong. *Ne?*

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