

MATSUYAMA OUTLOUD, September 2023

—Voices of the WGO? Staff and Members of the Volunteer Guide Seminar—

September Thought

"She don't need..."

In *Thirteen Moons*, a novel written by Charles Frazier, a woman living in the late 19th century Appalachian Mountains talks this way.

One of my American friends, an English teacher, sometimes uses "she/he don't" phrases outside of class. I wondered why some native speakers say that, so one day, I posted my question on two social media groups. One of them is a group that enjoys discussing English grammar. The other are English as a second language speakers living in the States. About forty people living in America replied. Two Japanese people in the Northeastern part of the country had never heard this grammatical usage. But other residents in New York, Ohio, Alabama, and other States said that they'd heard it used in daily conversation. And, one said that it was nonsensical to examine whether spoken English is grammatically correct or not. As an English teacher, I'm curious about why this incorrect grammar has been used for such a long time.

In junior high school English classes, Japanese seventh graders learn about the third person singular present tense, "she/he does". This grammar is hard for them to get used to.

During a recent English lesson, they not only practiced this tense orally but wrote it over and over in order to acquire this grammar pattern. Then I played the song "Just the Way You Are" by Bruno Mars to allow the students to listen for sentences, including the phrase, "she don't..."

I explained, "You have to learn correct English. But remember that grammar can be simplified or ignored in daily conversation. In lyrics, the rhythm of words is sometimes more important than grammar. "She/he don't" looks like a big mistake, but actually sounds cool for native speakers."

According to the social media group, it used to be considered an example of African-American Vernacular, but it was not something used only among Black people. I learned that regardless of age, race, social status or education, Americans have been using it for a long time.

Japanese students tend to fear grammatical mistakes and hesitate to speak out. Because English is a school subject evaluated strictly through testing, they are taught not to make mistakes. If Japanese people feel awkward about speaking English, it's the failure of this country's educational system. Actually, in many situations, native speakers understand what you mean regardless of grammatical errors. Or they don't even notice your mistakes. And it's no big deal to make such mistakes.

I always encourage my students to speak English freely.

(Miwa N.)

"Tell me, do you really have a national holiday to celebrate senior citizens in Japan? The elderly are respected in your country. Is that true?"

Long ago, Margaret, a retired professor, asked me this question after church in Saint Paul, Minnesota. She was referring to our 'Keiro-no-hi,' or "Respect-for-the-Aged Day" celebrated in September. She didn't mention America's own 'National Grandparents Day', which falls on the second Sunday of September after Labor Day, a day on which Americans pay recognition to their parent's parents, something which began in the American South during the 1970s. But this day set aside to give thanks to grandparents is merely an observance, not a public holiday.

For her, Minnesota was not an Age-Friendly place, and with a deep sigh, Margaret said that she wished she lived in Japan.

A young Korean woman joined in our small talk and told us that October 2nd was "Seniors' Day" in Korea. She believed this sort of holiday was unnecessary in her country because people respected older persons there anyway due to their Confucian teachings.

This year, we celebrate "Respect-for-the-Aged Day" on September 18th. September 15th was the holiday's original day but this was switched to the third Monday of September 2003 in order that we could have a long weekend.

According to Noriko, a friend of mine who is a professional calligrapher, 820 people in Ehime celebrated their 100th birthdays this year. These were people born between April 1923 and March 1924. Annually, our governor honors new 100-year-old citizens for their contributions to society and sends them gifts and *shojo* certificates. Writing these honorary certificates using a delicate brush is Noriko's job, and she wrote less than 700 certificates last year. But after she prepared over 800 certificates last month, she was so exhausted she couldn't get up for days. Beyond simple physical exhaustion, Noriko frequently felt sadness when death notices were texted to her by the prefectural government even as she wrote the congratulation letters to those who would have received them had they lived.

Noriko's hard work prompted me to visit my mother-in-law who lives far from Matsuyama and bring her favorite flowers.

(Kazuyo Kajiwara)