

How to Speak Kuma-ben

By Aurora Tsai

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Kumamoto (熊本) translates roughly to, "Origin of the Bears," so when I learned I would be going to "Kumagun" when I first received my placement 2 years ago, which I imagined meant "The Bear District," I was naturally excited. There are no bears here, I disappointedly found out after I arrived.

However, I do encounter plenty of "Kuma-ben," the name of the Japanese dialect spoken here. It's similar to Kumamoto-ben, but has many differences, mainly in the different words they use for things. I stumbled through my conversations, trying to understand Kuma-ben when I first got here, but over the years I've learned quite a lot and use it all the time with my students. Below, I've compiled a list of word/grammar explanations.

Dictionary of Kuma-ben Terms

This is a short list of words used in Kuma-ben. I also have a longer list of Kuma-ben terms compiled by my friend, who is a local here in Kumagun.

Kuma ben	Standard Dialect	Meaning
なんば	なに	What
よか	いい	Good
じゃあじゃあ	そうそう	Yah, that's right
ぬっか	あつい	Hot
ぎゃー	めっちゃ、とても	Very
うちん	うちの	My
ぎゃあ	家	House
おどもしらん	さっぱりわからない	I don't understand at all
ひやか (older people use)	さむい	cold
だんだんなあ	ありがとう	Thank you
ひゃあ	ハエ	Fly
びきたん	カエル	Frog
ほめく	蒸し暑い	Humid and hot
もぞかあ	かわいい	Cute, pretty
ひんのよか	かっこいい	Cool
アマメ	ごきぶり	Cockroach
えくらい	酔っぱらい	Drunk person
打ち上げ	反省会	Party after an event
ぐらしか	かわいそう	Pitiful
こゆい	こい	Thick (liquid), dark
はわく	はく	To sweep (with broom)
なおす	かたづける	To clean up, put away

The Grammar of Kuma-ben

1.) Plain-negative conjugations; changing ~ない to ~ん

- わからない→わからん
- 知らない→知らん
- おぼえていない→おぼえっとらん (see grammar below)

2.) changing i-adjectives to “ka” endings.

- *oishii* becomes *oishika!*
- *kawaii* becomes *kawaika!*

3.) the “hows”

- どんな(に), どうやって→ どうぎゃん
- こんな (に), こうやって→こぎゃん
- そんな(に), そうやって→そぎゃん
- あんな(に), あいうふうに→あぎゃん

4.) Progressive verbs; changing ~ている to ~ておる

- 知っている→知っとおる
- 持っている→持っとおる
- 取っている→取っとおる

5.) Plain-form questions; changing の to と

- 出かけるの?→出かけると?

6.) Asking questions with progressive verbs; ~ているの? to ~とっと?

- 何をしているの?→なんばをしとっと?
- このいすを取っている?→このいすをとっとと?
- マスクを持っている→マスクをもっとと?

7.) Exclamatory particles; changing よ、わ、ね to ばい、たい

- “Bai” is a stronger version of “tai,” so I hear “tai” more often and even in more formal conversations.
- あのね→あのたい

8.) “Because”; changing から、ので to けん

- どこか行くと?
- うん。夜にお客さんが来るけん、買い物すつとたい。

9.) “But”; changing が to ばってん

- わかったけど、むずかしいのよ→わかったばってん、むずかしかつとたい

10.) “I have to ~”; changing ~いかないといけない to ~いかんばん

研修があるけん、熊本市に行かんばん。

kenshuu ga aru ken, kumamoto shi ni ikanban.

“I have a training session, so I have to go to Kumamoto City.”

These are just a few words and grammar points I have come across quite often during my stay in Asagiri Town, Kuma-gun. I would be interested to hear any other Kuma-ben terms people have come across. I'd also like to hear if you notice any differences between Kuma-ben and Kumamoto-ben since my trips to Kumamoto City are なかなかなか! (標準語：なかなかない)