

Role Language in Black Butler

Black Butler, or 「黒執事」, is an anime and manga series set in a supernatural version of Victorian era England. It follows Ciel Phantomhive, a young Earl and head of the Phantomhive household, solving crimes of the underworld. To avenge the death of his parents, Ciel makes a deal with a demon, Sebastian Michaelis. In exchange for his soul, Sebastian serves as Ciel's butler until he has gotten his revenge. The plot explores different themes like morality, identity, class, and revenge. Based on the different social statuses presented in the show, there are many different examples of role language, or 「役割後」. Role language in Japanese media allows viewers to gain an understanding on the social class and occupations possessed by each character. In such a hierarchical, historical setting such as 「黒執事」, the use of role language is strong. 「黒執事」 uses role language tied to social class and occupation to demonstrate character identities, bring power dynamics into light, and the uptight-like structure of the Victorian era, and this can be seen through the characters of Sebastian, Ciel, Baldroy, Mey-Rin, and Grell.

The idea of role language was introduced in 2000 by Satoshi Kinsui, but it wasn't until 2003 that it was defined. Role language is defined as “a set of spoken language features... that can be psychologically associated with a particular character type.” (Kinsui, 2003, p. 205). He then created six categories based on social and cultural groups: Gender, Age/Generation, Social class/occupation, Region/nationality/ethnicity, Pre-modern, and Imaginary creatures. Out of all of these categories, social class and occupation can best be described in 「黒執事」. In anime and manga, role language helps the viewer classify the role each person plays in the show and in 「黒執事」, role language aligns strongly with occupational hierarchy and power structure.

The first character depiction can be found within Ciel's butler, Sebastian Michaelis. Sebastian is considered “one hell of a butler” due to his ability to flawlessly execute his duties, all while saving Ciel from harm. When Sebastian speaks, he uses polite language, or 「敬語」, which matches his servant role. However, due to his true nature of being a demon, this language doesn't truly reflect him. When he's showing his true nature, his tone becomes more commanding, cold and archaic, which presents the double-sided sword of his double life.

Ciel Phantomhive is the thirteen-year-old Earl and head of the Phantomhive household. Despite his young age, he is cold, calculated, and smart. While he uses the more 'boy-like' pronoun 「僕」, the way he speaks follows more closely to an adult. He uses noble speech and speaks directly, asserting his dominance. He rarely uses honorifics when speaking to others, which reinforces his role in the hierarchical system.

The Phantomhive chef, Baldroy, is a hot-headed man who talks loudly and is of ex-military background. He uses masculine language, like the pronoun 「俺」, and speaks very

casually with a lot of slang, reflecting his working-class background. Other examples of this are using masculine sentence endings 「～ぜ」, and imperatives like 「やるぞ」. His accent can be compared to a Kansai-like dialect, trying to mimic a more Western-like accent. Baldroy's character is from America, so it can be assumed that the creators wanted to emphasize that he wasn't from the country by giving him a different accent than the other characters. He presents himself as a more macho-type, brash man compared to the other elegant, sophisticated men in the show.

Mey-Rin is the maid of the Phantomhive manor. She is very shy and gets very nervous, especially around Sebastian. She is extremely clumsy but has hidden sniper skills she utilizes when threats come to the manor. She stutters a lot, but always uses polite language, even when nervous, which reflects both her level of confidence and the role she plays as the maid.

The last character is Grell Sutcliff. Grell is a flamboyant grim reaper who is obsessed with Sebastian. They speak in a more exaggerated feminine type of speech, like 「～わよ」 and using 「あたし」 as their preferred pronoun, and is more bold, expressive, and dramatic, which defies their occupational and gender role. Grell's extremely femininity expressed through speech and clothing contrasts with the suspected character-type of a grim reaper. This adds a layer of complexity to their character. Other grim reapers, William T. Spears and Ronald Knox, show viewers what is traditionally characteristic of grim reapers: sharp, quiet, and very professional. Grell's character plays a bigger part when it comes to breaking gender and occupational stereotypes, and shows as an outlier when it comes to showing resistance to what is considered normal in the 「黒執事」 universe.

Seeing how each character in the Phantomhive Manor conducts themselves and the role language they use can help identify what type of character they are and the role they play in society. For the most part, characters never cross boundaries linguistically. For example, even though Sebastian is a demon from the underworld, he never speaks to Ciel with a sense of informality and remains using butler language. An example of this would be always using 「～でございます」. The use of 「敬語」 in Ciel and Sebastian's case emphasizes how servitude functions and the power of authority, even when it can be interpreted as theatrical. Likewise with Sebastian, Mey-Rin and Baldroy never speak out of line with Ciel, also reinforcing the role they play in the manor and shows a level of respect towards him. However, in Grell's case, the uniqueness of Grell's character compared to gender and occupational stereotypes during the Victorian era highlights a sense of resistance and complexity in identity. It is intentionally subversive, taking together traditional gay male 役割後, occupational authority, and affection towards Sebastian. It is a form of resistance doing this and can reflect how role language can not only reinforce social order, but can disrupt it completely.

In 「黒執事」, role language plays a huge role in understanding a character and how they hold themselves within society. Whether it's Ciel's use of formal, boss-like speech, or the Phantomhive's staff using 「敬語」 when speaking to Ciel, and even Grell's rebellious use of gay male 「役割後」, they all play a huge role in how we as viewers are supposed to interpret the role each person plays in society. Being able to understand role language and how it plays into anime and manga provides a deeper look into understanding how characters behave in

society. 「役割後」 isn't just a form of speech it's a form of social currency, showing who has the power, who obeys, and who chooses to defy the rules.