

Performativity of Japanese Laughter

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Abstract: Laughter is a complicated and highly sensitive human activity, implying ambivalent elements, such as spontaneity and performativity, innocence and tactics. It can elicit simply cheerful ambience but also facilitate powerful victimisation by provoking embarrassment of the target. Humoristic discourses are often heavily culture-specific in terms of the text and the situation wherein they are expressed. This is particularly true with Japanese humour, due to the insular and circumstantial nature of the language (e.g., Toyama, 1976) and the way communicative protocols are executed. This paper will examine manzai (Japanese stand-up comedy) and explore Japanese laughter, paying a particular attention to their performativity. Our discussions include the essential characteristics of laughter and humour and their social-cultural and psychological background (Benedict, 1946; Hibbett, 1998-2005; Kawai, 2005; Kitayama, 1993; Kotthoff, 1996; Norrick, 1993, 2001, 2004; Oda, 1986; Raskin, 1985; Sakuta, 1967; Schmitz, 2002; Umehara, 1972). Our hypothesis is that Japanese comical discourses are highly performative and staged, either physically or imaginably, installing the readers/audiences in a voyeuristic perspective, often as an accomplice of one of the participants of the humoristic performance.

Keywords: Laughter, Humor, Performativity, Manzai, Manga, Anime, Japanese Language and Culture

Introduction

LAUGHTER IS A highly sensitive human activity that involves such ambivalent and contradictory elements as innocence and purposefulness, spontaneity and performativity, and social camaraderie and hostile aggression. At times, it simply elicits cheerful ambience but at other times it facilitates powerful victimisation. Victimising others is the classic type of laughter, originally discussed by Plato and Aristotle and later, by Hobbs, Freud, and Keith-Spiegel. It is a universal human urge to laugh at others' mistakes, misfortunes or inferiority, because doing so imparts to us a sense of superiority and triumph.

The laughter of superiority functions as society's safety valve or sublimation of aggression (Klapp, 1962; Bakhtin, 1984). Throughout the world and across time comic fools serve as the butt of laughter, representing conduct to be ridiculed and rejected. As the "negative exemplars" of the society, the comic fools are symbolically "punished" (Mintz, 1985, p. 75), and it is well known that that public laughter was often employed as a punishment in various societies, including, for example, during the Edo period in Japan.

Laughter is a common and essential human activity that is seen in every society and has a deeper significance as a social and physiological response or phenomenon. From its emergence to its mechanism and function, it is closely connected to Others (Kimura, 1983, p.66). It is frequently triggered by something unexpectedly out of alignment. The simple

act of laughing can cancel or at times destroy the 'reality' of other's world and the meaningfulness of their presence and identity (Kimura, pp.71-2).

While some of the nature of laughter as described above is virtually universal, understanding why and how laughter emerges in the course of communication involves the investigation of culture or "group habitus" (Bourdieu, 1990) shared among the communicative participants. Shared common ground is a prerequisite for the communication of humor. In this sense, laughter is highly culture-specific. The meaning of laughter and the ways of expressions varies widely, derived from their social-cultural and psychological background (Benedict, 1946; Hibbett, 1998-2005; Kawai, 2005; Kitayama, 1993; Kotthoff, 1996; Norrick, 1993, 2001, 2004; Oda, 1986; Raskin, 1985; Sakuta, 1967; Umehara, 1972). This is particularly true with Japanese laughter, where meticulous care for situational appropriateness is seriously required.

This study explores laughter particularly in comedic discourse in Japan: *manzai* (stand-up comedy). It will point to the group habitus in Japanese laughter, i.e., a culturally preferred scheme of communicating humor in the Japanese comedic genres. We will argue that laughter in these Japanese comedic discourses is highly performative and staged, either physically or imaginatively, installing in the audiences a voyeuristic perspective. Further, we will note that the voyeuristic perspective is often achieved by making the audience as an accomplice of one of the participants of the humoristic performance.

Japanese Situational Appropriateness and Required Performativity

Japanese laughter is closely related to cultural specificity of Japanese society. When the cultural specificity is ignored and generalized, even phatic smiles can ironically distance the participants of the communication. For example, it is often said that 'vague Japanese smile' gives an impression of uncertainty, lack of confidence, secretiveness or even deceitfulness. This is however derived from the deep-seated insular nature of Japanese language, 'indoor language' (*shitsunai-go*) to use Toyama's term, which postulates tacit consent of each other's positioning in the conversations (e.g., status, sex and age) in order to meticulously determine the level of honorifics they use. Japanese immediate utterances (e.g., conversation) and associated facial expressions are not 'neutral' and 'consistent' to the person, but always circumstantially specific, e.g., a sequence of conversation in a certain time in a certain room with specific participants (e.g., a man with his supervisor). Without such situational specificity, it is difficult for Japanese to select their expressions. The habitual issue is derived from the strong homogeneity of Japanese society, in which the greater the shared knowledge, understanding and perspective, the less explicit explanation is required. This means that one's explicitness can be interpreted as a lack of respect to the other party's knowledge and intelligence.

Such a conformist society demands that people perform multiple roles according to each situation, rather than maintaining their personal integrity and preferences. The importance of such situational appropriateness, and people's resultant susceptibility for the fear of being laughed at is intense, as exemplified by the recently popular expression of laughing at others as 'KY', which stands for *k ūki ga y omenai* (lit. unable to read air/atmosphere). Very often, an incident is a tragedy to the person involved, but a comedy for a bystander. Naturally people try to position themselves as bystanders, or to laugh at themselves, thereby avoiding others' potentially harmful laughter.

As Inoue (1995) says, laughter is not welcomed in vertical society as it has the potential to reverse the social order. In such society, the doer of the laughter should be the superiors and the laughter thus becomes vindictive. Such a cultural foundation is not conducive to wit and dry humor, which require intellectual objectivity. This does not mean that laughter has been totally suppressed in Japan, rather that it is strategically used as a social vent to release or divert people's frustrations and complaints created by living in a suffocating, regulated group-orientated

society. For example, festivals originally signify the special topos of 'hara', or Bakhtin's notion of 'carnival', wherein social orders are reversed and many rules are overturned temporally to vent off the negative pressure, such as frustrations and complaints, in order to maintain social stability. As is commonly seen in many parts of the world, such topos is also seen in everyday life and society as a stabilizer of the society. The Japanese licensed sexual industries, such as Yoshiwara in the Edo period, are one of explanatory venues which hold strong fictionality, and thus performativity.

Similarly, the temporal freedom is often created by occasions with alcohol, such as being in *e nkai* (Japanese style banquet) where senior members of the groups such as company executives perform their role as fools and/or demonstrate their *kakushigei* (lit. hidden art; parlour tricks) to please their junior members. All indicate the crucial importance of the clearly defined topos. Laughter evoked by comical stage performances by professionals such as *yose*, *rakugo* and *manzai*, and visual and/or literary works including manga and anime are all considered in the same socio-cultural context. The clearly marked framework, such as *enkai* or *manzai*, is essential to ensure the safe space for the participants/audience to fully enjoy laughter. Such mechanisms frequently provide voyeuristic pleasure to the participants of the laughter. Reflecting such circumstances, a considerable portion of Japanese comedic discourses contain voyeurism and self-mockery, performed within commonly recognized frames.

A similar mechanism is utilized in manga (Japanese cartoons) and anime (animated manga) to evoke laughter, by signaling the comedic discourses. The word 漫画 (*manga*) in *kanji* (Chinese scripts) means casual, free drawing and implies comicalness. *Hokusai Manga* by Katsushika Hokusai (the *Ukiyo-e* artist) in the Edo period is comical and satirical, similar to western cartoons¹.

Most conspicuous laughter in manga is gags, popular in boys (*shōnen*) manga. The laughter elicited from them is often nonsensical and hysterical. The focuses are often related to bodily themes, particularly toilet humour. Some characters (e.g., *Komawari-kun*, *Obocchama-kun*) are too strong to be victimized, but the main schema is voyeuristic. The gag manga are easily identified by the characters' three-headed physique, which explicitly indicates the genre, i.e., gag, to the readers, so that they can laugh wildly. Such deformed bodies can also be seen in many manga (generally comical but not necessarily), when a character's body size and shape suddenly changes to gag style physique to indicate the comicalness of their act. In other word, the specific

¹ Manga has been developed through active intercultural exchanges with western cartoons and animations. Manga has enormous variety, from cheerful stories with cute characters, to gags and serious *genkiga*, which are extremely serious, realistic and dark.

physique functions as an indicator to frame the narrative as comical – sanctioned laughter.

Laughter is encouraged in such a frame, or topos. The framing is exemplified by the manga/anime, *Chobits*, particularly in the beginning part of its anime version. This manga/anime is rich in intertextuality and dexterously manipulated pretext, such as folktales of heavenly woman (or *Tanabata*/star festival) and Takahashi Rumiko's *Maison Ikkoku*. In the story, Hideki plays both serious and comical roles. He is a typical male protagonist of love comedies, who is not intelligent but has genuine warmth and sincerity. Lots of laughter, mostly regarding his ignorance and erotic desire, are staged throughout the story, often involving the audience by facing towards them, rather than characters in the story. For example, the anime opens when Hideki receives a letter to inform that he has failed to enter university. He suddenly turns to the audience and expresses his shock yet in a comical, self-laughing way. By doing so, this work clearly marks the topos of laughter and inviting audience to laugh in a safe place.

The Classic Laughter in *Manzai*: Superiority and *Kyōkan*

Manzai are Japanese traditional comedic stage performances, characterized by their mocking 'ritual'. The performance of *manzai* is comprised of comic dialogues between *boke* (the fool) and *tsukkomi* (the wit²). *Boke* is Other, who is innocent yet stupid and/or strange. Their personalities are simple and consistent and they are only communicating with the other, i.e., *tsukkomi*. *Tsukkomi* has however double personae - talking with *boke* whilst reporting and/or leaking their conversations towards audience, who enjoy voyeuristic perspective, perhaps slightly sadistic or pitying for the innocent *Boke*. The audience can experience multiple roles and emotions, as *boke*, as *tsukkomi* and audience. When *boke* is laughed at, they are the doer and the victim. Traditionally, the roles of *boke* and *tsukkomi* was fixed (e.g., Yasushi Kiyoshi and Itoshi Koishi), although recently the roles are sometime swapped.

Unlike stand-up comedy in the Western cultures, which attaches an importance to "creativity" "your own point of view" and "the stamp of uniqueness of your own" (Ajaye, 2002), in *manzai*, what is important is not creativeness but how well one can adjust and socialize into the community and existing patterns of comedy, such as "*mane*" (mimicking). Ota (1997) and Endo (2002) emphasize the importance

of "patterned humor" in Japanese society. Based on Tsurumi (2000), Ota contends that "*mane*" is an essential element of Japanese humor and provides shared laughter ("*kyōyū no warai*"); coherence/unity ("*ittaisei*") and security ("*anshin*"), to raise the degree of group harmony, to confirm group cohesiveness. It is contended that "*maneshi manzai*," which literally means, "manzai that does mimicking" is the root of contemporary *manzai* (Aiba, 1995; 2001, Yamakawa, 1997).

The importance of *mane* is reflected in the training of *manzai* performers. In *manzai*, one becomes a comedian through particular socialization process, including joining a comedy school or learning under a master as his disciple. This process is not only for comedians but also comedy writers (Adachi, 1994; Endo, 2002). Comedians of older times have their names from preceding great comedians or their masters (the system known as "*teigō*" (亭号) "*yagō*" (家号) (e.g., Yokoyama "Entatsu" from Tamagoya "Entatsu" (Nagaoki, 1978, p. 35), Miss Wakasa from her master Miss Wakana (Yamakawa, 1997, p.62)

In *manzai*, laughing at the comedian's foolish behavior is "the classic and basic type of laughter."³ Senzaki (1997) explains that the fool in *manzai* is "*boke*," because the comedian literally does *boke-ru* (to act dull and silly), and thereby evokes a sense of superiority in the audience's mind. He notes, however, that the laughter of superiority is different from scornfully laughing at the comedian. When audiences laugh at the comedian's foolish conduct, they laugh not only out of the sense of superiority but also as a result of experiencing "*kyōkan* (empathy, shared feelings)" and "*kōi* (affection, positive emotions)" toward the comedian (p.50).

A similar contention is made by Mintz (1985) in the context of stand-up comedy in the United States. He states, "the time-honored function of the standup comedian has been to provide a butt for our humor" (p. 75), asserting that as the comedian presents these personae on stage, audiences laugh at him or her and experience a sense of "superiority" and "relief."⁴ He explains that comedians play "[the] role of [the] negative exemplar" and "represent conduct to be ridiculed and rejected" (pp.74-75). He argues that audiences laugh at the comedian but, at the same time, they "secretly recognize" that the comedian's behavior and remarks are what they actually relate to their own experiences (p.74). In this way, as in *manzai*, the laughter of superiority in American stand-up comedy does not necessarily function under the dichotomous relation in which "we," audiences,

² The English translation of *tsukkomi* is adapted from Stocker (2006).

³ Senzaki, *Downtown o yomu*, 38, our translation from Japanese.

⁴ Neither Senzaki nor Mintz mentions it, but the laughter of superiority has been explicated by "superiority theory." Keith-Spiegel explains that the theory originates in the works of Plato and Aristotle and was elaborated in Hobbs. According to the theory, humans have the urge to laugh at others' mistakes, misfortunes, or inferiority, because doing so will satisfy our sense of superiority.

laugh at “him/her,” the comedian. Rather, audiences laugh at the comedian with a sense of shared feelings. He identifies various types of negative exemplars in stand-up comedy:

The grotesque, the buffoon, the fool, the simpleton, the scoundrel, the drunkard, the liar, the coward, the effete, the tightwad, the boor, the egoist, the cuckold, the shrew, the weakling, the neurotic, and other such reifications of socially unacceptable traits are enacted by the comedian to be ridiculed, laughed at, repudiated, and, finally, symbolically “punished.” (p.75)

The comicalness of the *manzai* is underpinned by *boke*'s strong resilience, or indifference, to *tsukkomi*'s harsh criticism and teasing, although such strength is generally perceived as a result of their extraordinary stupidity. *B oke*'s role is to express something and/or someone unusual, indecent (below average), unrealistic and/or hidden *honno* (truth, true voice). Conversely, *tsukkomi* represents normality, majority, decency and *tatemaie* (one's public opinions, principles). The audiences generally align to the latter and laugh at *boke*'s ignorance and deviant behaviors. *Tsukkomi*'s normality may be displayed with his formal attire, such as business suit, tie and glasses.

In *manzai*, the audience is positioned variably as addressed recipients or “ratified overhearers,” i.e., the overhearer is acknowledged by the speaker (Goffman, 1981) of the comedians' talk. The audience is framed as ratified overhearers when the comedians converse with each other while the audience listens as their dialogue unfolds. The duo sometimes also addresses the audience and involves them in the performance as addressed recipients. The *manzai* performances typically unfold with the following participation framework: The fool and the wit of the duo engage in a comedic dialogue, to which the audience listens from the participation status of ratified overhearers. By positioning the audience as overhearers of their *manzai* dialogue,

the comedians perform the routine on the basis of the distinction between their performance's inside sphere and the audience's outside sphere.

However, the *manzai* duos do engage with the audience during portions of the opening sequences. The duos frame their audiences as the addressed recipients at certain points of the routine. Even when framing the audience as addressed recipients, the *manzai* duos still perform their routine on the basis of the performer's insider sphere and the audience's outsider spectator sphere. The duos' boundary marking vis-à-vis the audience is manifested linguistically in their speech levels and speech varieties. The duo members usually address each other in the informal form and using a regional dialect, and thus, index their intimate stance to each other. This contrasts with their indexical exclusion of the audience. Sometimes, however, the members of the *manzai* duo exhibit misalignments in their stance to the audience. That is, one of the members signals the stance of inclusion to the performance sphere to the audience by speaking to them in the informal and/or dialect forms, while the other expresses the stance of exclusion with the formal and/or standard forms.

The boundary markings achieved through the speech level misalignment and register switching are demonstrated below in the excerpt of a performance by the popular comedy duo, Downtown. Downtown signal the inside/outside boundary by frequently alternating their speech levels (formal and informal) while addressing to each other and to their audience. The *boke* (fool)'s formal speech level contrasts with the *tsukkomi* (wit) character's intimate “*uchi* (inside)” language that signals the inclusion of the audience to the performance sphere. In the transcripts below, speech level has been marked in bold caps; the use of informal (i.e., dialect) versus formal (i.e., standard) speech appears in italics. English translation appears in italics at each line below the original. The duo's boundary marking via formal and informal speech levels is also noted in the transcript directly to the right of the line number as “+” and “-” i.e., the signaling of the outside *soto* stance and the signaling of the inside *uchi* stance, respectively.

[Downtown no gaki no tsukaiya arahende!! (Downtown: It's no kid's business!!)]

| | | |
|----|---|--|
| 1 | M | [mo: da^itai ano neta >iroiro< kae^na ikan no desu yo: (We've) gotta change our routines |
| 2 | H | = [so: so: .right |
| 3 | M | [shinneta oroshite kure: tte yu: koto de [ne^:= (We were told), "Have some new routines on stage" |
| 4 | H | [eh: Yeah |
| 5 | M | =[ano: iroiro kangaeterun desu ga [nakanaka mo:: neta^ mo ne: So we've been thinking but our routines |
| 6 | H | [u:n |
| 7 | M | daibu nakunatte kimashitene, We are running out of good stuff |
| 8 | H | ha^:. |
| 9 | M | [tsura^indesu.=hakkiri itte [daidokoro ga. It's tough, to be honest. (3 turns skipped) |
| 13 | M | >u:<=desukara< mo: kyo:^ wa mo: nande^mo yu:te + [FML] So today, whatever you tell (me). |
| 14 | | nande^mo yu:te kudasai. =mo: [nande^mo yarimasu kara ne, + [FML] (I) will do whatever you say |
| 15 | H | [ah so^o, – [INF] Oh really? |
| 16 | M | e toku^i no neta wa [ippa^i arimasukara. = + [FML] I have lots of parlour tricks (to entertain you). |
| 17 | H | ((addresses the audience, while pointing at M)) =takusan mo- toku^gi >takusan motteru. < – [INF] (He's) got- many tricks. |
| 18 | M | toku^gi ga ippai arimasu. = + [FML] I have many specialties |
| 19 | H | (facing to the audience and whispers into M's ear) =>ja< hito^tsu re: agete yu:[tatte:. – [INF] Then tell (them) one for example. |

The performance unfolds, as Matsumoto, the fool, takes the floor and confides to the audience that the duo has run out of routine materials and thus they are now on stage, willing to do anything upon request in order to entertain the audience (lines 13 and 14). Hamada then reacts to Matsumoto at line 15, “so^o, (will you?/really?)” and indicates that he did not know Matsumoto’s determination. Hamada’s epistemic stance enables him to detach from the performer standpoint in which he has control over the on-going performance. Instead, he nears the audience and shares the domain of *uchi* (inside), where they do not know what Matsumoto is going to do from this point on. Matsumoto then addresses both the audience and Hamada in the formal, detached speech level (line 16). With this speech level, Matsumoto indexes his *soto* (outside) stance not only to the audience but also to his partner comedian, indicating

that now Hamada does not share his *uchi* (inside) domain of knowledge.

This in-group/out-group boundary changes in line 17, when Hamada shifts back to the performance standpoint and declares his in-group knowledge and tells the audience that his partner comedian has many *tokugi* (specialties, or in this context, parlour ticks). Note that in this turn, Hamada still maintains the informal speech level and thus indexes a stance of *uchi* to the audience. Further, he exhibits a stance of *uchi* to Matsumoto as well (line 19). By indexing the stance of *uchi* both to the audience and to his partner comedian, Hamada serves as the mediator between Matsumoto and the audience.

Conclusion

This paper has examined laughter as an important communication device, discussing Japanese laughter

in comedic discourses, particularly focusing on *manzai*. It has demonstrated that Japanese laughter is strongly influenced by the culturally preferred scheme of communication. In such a society, laughter is highly performative and staged, either physically or imaginably, installing audiences, an accomplice,

in a voyeuristic perspective. It is often elicited by ritual or patterned mockery, derived from “group habitus” within clearly marked ‘carnivalistic’ topos where participants are safe and distant from everyday life and social order and conformist pressures.

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