

Rejoiced by abuse! : Comic Monologue and Solidarity Building Strategy in Contemporary Japan

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Abstract

This paper examines the seldom studied Japanese comic monologue, in which a storyteller repeatedly makes sarcastic remarks to the audience. In much joking behavior, there is the potential for aggression and solidarity to be ambiguously present. However, the comic monologue is enthusiastically accepted by the Japanese audience despite the potential for aggression (impoliteness). The popularity of the comic monologue shows that the continuous sarcastic remarks can be an effective strategy for building solidarity among the audience in the Japanese context. In particular, the comic monologue is successful in creating an *uchi* ('inside') world or "space of involvement" wherein the audience can share knowledge, experience, and concerns with others and be free from various social norms which constrain their everyday behavior. This suggests that the analysis of humor is not complete without taking into account its wider cultural context as well as its local linguistic context.

Key words: humor, politeness, solidarity, *uchi*

Introduction

Humor should not be considered marginal or insignificant communication behavior. Indeed, humor has been paid close attention by scholars, including linguists and anthropologists (e.g., Fillmore 1994, Hockett 1977, Norrick 1986, 2000, Sherzer 1985). Humor is a part of our communicative competence because it involves a wide array of pragmatic knowledge about discourse rules, communication strategies, social norms of language use, as well as world knowledge. In other words, humor is a reflection of language and culture. Given this assumption, one interesting question about humor is whether there is a culture specific aspect to humor. In particular, is Japanese humor similar to that found in the West? In reviewing humor in literature, Feinberg (1971) states that basic themes and techniques are similar to both East and West. On the other hand, in her examination of Japanese comic strips, Austin (1994) argues that there are jokes which are characteristic to the Japanese language. For example, she points out that because the Japanese language has a proclivity for incorporating many foreign words, many loan words are used in jokes. In this paper, through an examination of comic monologue, I will answer the question of whether Japanese comic monologue exhibits its cultural aspect in humorous story telling.

Japanese humor by professional storytellers

Although Japanese people may be generally perceived as quiet, hardworking, serious, oral as well as written Japanese jokes are found abundantly in contemporary Japan. For example, well-established forms of Japanese jokes such as *rakugo* 'storytelling' and *manzai* 'stand-up comedy' are popular on TV and radio. At one point, there was the so-called *manzai buumu* ('*manzai* boom'), in which *manzai* personalities appeared almost everyday on TV. Today, many of the professional storytellers are still active in mass media and they frequently appear on TV and radio in various capacities such as masters of ceremonies, reporters, commentators, and actors. Several have become millionaires. In addition to their appearance in the mass media, they perform regularly in *yose* ('traditional Japanese variety theater') in metropolitan areas, as well as in various halls in small towns across the country.

For this study, I have selected Ayanokooji Kimimaro, one particular comic monologue speaker. For one reason he has been extremely popular in *yose* and cultural halls. In addition, his performance includes abundant sarcasm, satire, and severe criticism of the audience; yet, he has been successful in gaining support from the audience. This apparently paradoxical relationship between his performance and the audience makes this storyteller distinctly different from others. Generally, speaking negatively about the audience or abusing them does not lead to acceptance or support. However, Kimimaro's audience accepts his severe criticism, sarcasm, and abuse. They not only accept the abuse, but also welcome, enjoy, and love the abuse. His performance has been packed with fanatic supporters. How does this happen? What is the explanation for this apparent discrepancy? In what follows, it will be shown that this oral abuse is skillfully used to create a sense of solidarity between the audience and the storyteller. In other words, one form of solidarity building strategy is embedded in this seemingly severe criticism and abuse toward the audience. It seems that abuse, if it is skillfully incorporated in the storytelling, can become an effective tool for building solidarity among the audience in the Japanese context. The data for the present study come from audio tape-recorded performances of storytellers at *yose* and culture halls in Tokyo and Osaka in 2005.

Studies in humor

One of the most commonly observed forms of joking is the pun. Hockett (1977: 262) calls this type of joke "poetic," which means to "turn on accidental resemblances between words in sound and in meaning." For example, the following classic one-liner can serve as an example of this type of humor.

- (1) A panhandler came up to me today and said that he had not had a bite in weeks, so I bit him.

Following Norrick (2000), this one-liner joke is schematically represented as follows.

- (2) BUILD-UP A panhandler came up to me today and said he hadn't
PIVOT had a bite in weeks,
PUNCHLINE so I bit him

In the build-up phase, the audience forms the conventional frame in which a panhandler seeks a handout from a passer-by. The phrase "have a bite" is interpreted as "to eat." However, this conventional frame suddenly vanishes in the punchline and an unexpected new frame is constructed, in which "bite" is now interpreted as "to be bitten" in its literal sense and the panhandler transforms himself from a beggar to a victim and the passer-by becomes an attacker. The double meaning phrase "have a bite" serves as the pivot of the joke. Koestler (1964: 35) explains this double meaning of a word or phrase in humor by his coined term "bisociation", in which the word is "made to vibrate simultaneously on two different wavelengths." Indeed, this type of joke is commonly observed in Japanese humor as well. Observe the following Japanese joke taken from a storyteller at a *yose* theater in Tokyo.

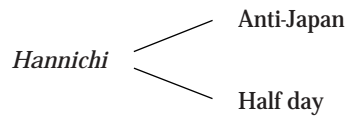
- (3) Anatagata ga shoomen kara miru mono o hanashika wa kakudo o kaete miru.
Kakudo o kaeru to nanigenai dekgoto mo kekkoo omoshiroi neta ni naru
Ee . . . tsui kono mae made wa terebi shinbun de zutto hoodoo sareteta no wa
Hannichi demo . . . taihen na koto deshita
Ishi nageraretari, mado o kowasaretari taihen na koto deshita. . . DEMONE
Watashi wa . . . hannichi demo de . . . YOKATTA TO OMOTTERU . . .
ichinichi demo nara. . . [laughter]

"Things you look at from the front, we story-tellers look at from the side. When we change the viewpoint, everyday things can become an interesting source for storytelling . . . Well, . . . just quite recently, the most heavily reported event was the anti-Japan demonstration (in China) . . . It was a terrible event. Stones were thrown (into Japanese embassy and consulate buildings in China), and windows (of the buildings) were broken. It was a terrible thing to happen. . . HOWEVER, I think that the anti-Japan demonstration WOULD HAVE BEEN GOOD . . . because it was not an all-day demonstration

The storyteller explains how he looks at things differently and creates humor by actually demonstrating his humor to the audience. He talks about the recent anti-Japanese demonstration, which even escalated to include physical damage to the Japanese consulate and embassy. He says how awful it was for the Japanese people. This introduces a frame in which the anti-Japan demonstration is a major concern to the Japanese. This frame is suddenly broken when he says the

demonstration was actually good for the Japanese. This comment is not what the audience normally would expect. Everyone thinks that the anti-Japan demonstration is undesirable and should have been avoided, yet the storyteller openly and bluntly claims that the demonstration was good. However, in the next transition, the storyteller says that the *hanichi demo* was good because it was not a full-day demonstration. He is using the phrase “*hannichi demo*” as a pivot (as well as a punchline) between anti-Japan and half day. In Japanese, *hannichi* is a homonym and it can be interpreted as either anti-Japan (first frame) or half day (second frame). In writing, there are different characters for anti-Japan and half day respectively, but in pronunciation they are identical. In the audience’s frame, *hannichi* was anti-Japan, but in the storyteller’s frame it was half day. Thus, in the storyteller’s mind, the demonstration was good because it ended in a half day, rather than lasting a full day. In other words, the storyteller used the “bisociation” of the phrase *hannichi* humorously, which entertained the audience. The “bisociation” of the word *hannichi* is represented below.

(4)



Kimimaro’s humor

This type of linguistic joke is commonly observed in many professional Japanese storytellers’ performances, and as such, the linguistic pun or “poetic” joke is a universally effective joke in various cultures. However, much of Kimimaro’s humor does not come from the linguistic pun, but from rather straightforward critical and negative comments about the audience. In the opening statement of his comic monologue, Kimimaro jumps into a very comical but blatantly critical comment on the physical appearance of the audience. Observe the following example.

- (5) Arigatoo gozaimasu. Kyoo no okyakusama wa hontoo ni kirei desune, kuchibeni ga. [laughter]
 Onikai no okyakusama, hontoo ni okirei desune, kubi kara shita ga. [laughter] Ee, demo
 yappari kirei desune. Watashi wa josee o miru me ga nai no desu. [laughter]

“Thank you so much. Today’s audience is really beautiful, isn’t it? At least the lipstick (is beautiful). The audience on the second floor, you are so beautiful, aren’t you? But only below your face (is beautiful). Well, none the less, you are indeed beautiful. (Because) I do not have an eye for the beauty.”

Japanese is characterized as a language of topic-comment structure, rather than the subject-predicate structure in many Western languages (Kuno 1975). One of the consequences of the topic-

Each blunt negative comment induces a burst of laughter from the audience. The audience is ridiculed over and over again, and at every ridicule, he/she laughs and appears to enjoy the ridicule.

As a general rule, people are not likely to be pleased with “impolite” remarks. In their politeness theory, Brown and Levinson (1971) maintain that there are essentially two “faces” or psychological desires among humans, both related to the concept of “politeness.” One is called positive face, which is the desire to be respected and valued by others. The other is called negative face, or the desire not to be impeded by others. According to Brown and Levinson (1971), we often employ a politeness strategy to mitigate an act, which could potentially threaten each face. Within this politeness theory, it can be said that all of the statements in (5)-(8) constitute a face-threatening act (FTA) to the positive face of the audience. The desire to be respected or valued is threatened by the negative comments. The audience’s positive face is openly threatened, but no one seems to be in the least offended by the unconstrained, blunt act of criticism. Quite the contrary, they are actually amused and entertained by the act. The apparent face-threatening act has been turned into an act of enjoyment and pleasure through laughing. In other words, Kimimaro’s humor is created through a face-threatening act.

Most of Kimimaro’s humor is created by commenting on various negative aspects of aging for middle-aged men and women, including physical decline and loss of love between husband and wife. The following statement is about the middle-aged couple who is bored with their married life.

(9) Mukashi darin datta shujin mo ima dewa dararin desu. [laughter]

Saikin danna no ocha o nomu oto mo iya ni nari, danna no ocha ni ichido iretai torikabuto [laughter]. Kekkōn shitate no koro tsuma wa mukuchi de otonashikatta. Sorega imaja pechakucha pecha kucha shaberi [laughter] Tsumano kuchi ichido tsuketemita manpokei [laughter]

“(Your) husband who used to be handsome is now flabby. These days, (you) become irritated even by the noise of him drinking tea. (You) feel you want to pour aconite into your husband’s tea. In the newly wed period, (your) wife was reserved and did not talk much. Now she has changed completely and chatters all the time. (You) feel you want to put a pedometer on her mouth.”

In the above example, Kimimaro speaks about the wife’s as well as husband’s thoughts. The wife remembers her husband as a young, handsome, physically fit man in old days. Now to her disappointment, her husband has become a physically flabby unattractive middle-aged man. She almost feels like poisoning her husband. Kimimaro also describes the husband’s thoughts. A husband laments over his wife’s unexpected change from a reserved quiet young woman to a noisy, annoying middle-aged woman. He thinks that a pedometer is a nice fit for her mouth, which never stops talking. Again, the audience is drawn into a swirl of laughter by the remarks.

Kimimaro and solidarity strategy

As the examples in (7) - (9) have shown, the storyteller's joke stems from sarcasm directed toward the audience. Interestingly, the majority of face-threatening acts are not followed by any mitigating comment, yet it is accepted by the audience with a burst of laughter. Private topics such as aging are usually not discussed openly in public; yet, people are not only not offended by Kimimaro's harsh remarks, but rather they enjoy the remarks. How does Kimimaro transform the face-threatening act into a cheerful, enjoyable experience for the audience? Some of the jokes can be explained by the fact that the subject of the jokes is inferior. Though it may sound cruel, people often laugh at a subject which is inferior to them. However, this line of analysis does not go far because the audience is aware that the subject of the jokes is themselves. One possible interpretation is that the surprising outcome is due to the creation of *uchi* ('inside') world, which the Japanese audience finds comfortable. The *uchi* can be defined as a world that is shared, 'us', familiar, informal, and known (Bachnik & Quinn 1994). Makino (1996) describes *uchi* as the "space of involvement." Being group-oriented rather than individual-oriented, the Japanese find comfort in being in *uchi* or a group where they share experiences and values. In the *uchi* world, the Japanese often express *honno* ('true sound') or what a person really thinks. This is where Kimimaro comes in and assumes a role of spokesperson for all who have an untold concern about aging. By virtue of discussing the very private issue of aging for the audience, he transforms each individual into someone who belongs to the same *uchi*. In other words, members of the audience are strangers to each other in the theater, but Kimimaro makes them feel as if they were members of *uchi*, or the same group who shares similar concerns such as aging. Kimimaro openly discusses what everyone is reluctant, yet desirous to speak about. Through the jokes of Kimimaro, everyone realizes that their concerns are similar, and in that sense they become members of the same *uchi* circle. This in effect creates the perception of solidarity or closeness among the audience including the comedian. Kimimaro creates a virtual world of *uchi*, where the audience interacts by sharing laughter. More universally, in their theory of politeness strategy, Brown and Levinson (1987) point out that jokes can be considered to be a positive politeness strategy, which is a part of their sub-strategy of "claim common ground." They state that "jokes may be used to stress that shared background or those shared values . . . Joking is a technique for putting H [hearer] at ease (Brown and Levinson 1987:124)." Although joking is potentially a positive face-threatening act, paradoxically it can be a strategy to enhance the positive face of the addressee.

The majority of Kimimaro's harsh statements are not mitigated by any repairing comment, but occasionally he shows compassion and encourages the audience by directing them to some positive aspects in a comical manner. Observe the following.

(10) Dare datte toshi nanka toritaku arimasen

Toshi o toru to shimi wa fue shiwa wa fue mekata made fue [laughter]

Koresuteroruu, chuusei shiboo kettoochi [laughter]
Ariamaru hodo no hika shiboo [laughter], fueru mono bakkari desu
[laughter], heru no wa chokin to kami no ke gurai desu [laughter]

“Nobody wants to get old. When you get older, more spots and more wrinkles appear on your face, you gain more weight, more cholesterol, more neutral fat, higher blood-sugar level, unwanted subcutaneous fat, are all increasing. The only things decreasing are your savings and hair.”

Skillfully using a rhyme of *fueru* (‘increase’), Kimimaro continues to describe the negative aspects of aging by emphasizing that all unwanted things (e.g., wrinkles, cholesterol) increase and that wanted things (e.g., savings) do not increase. These are the common characteristics accompanied by aging and people cannot avoid them. They are very personal concerns, which members of the audience are afraid to discuss with others. He continues the same topic, but offers a solution to the problems of aging.

(11) Demo mono wa kangae yoo desu

Okusama shimi nanka ki ni suru hitsuyoo wa arimasen
Shimi wa buroochi da to omoe ba ii [laughter]
Ibo wa kuro shinju, [laughter] shiwa wa dezain, tarumi wa akusesarii,
[laughter] pukkura to fukuranda hara wa shokuryoo tanku [laughter]
Dekkai oshiri wa nenryoo tanku, [laughter] soo omoeba ki ga raku desu

“However, we can have a different view. Ladies, you need not worry about a spot. Think of a spot as a brooch. A wart is a black pearl, wrinkles are the design, slack is an accessory, the big tummy is a food pantry, and the big buttocks are the refuel tank. If we think this way, we will be relieved.”

In a humorous manner, Kimimaro points out that we can change our way of thinking by associating the source of the problem with positive things. Of course, such a comical solution may be short-lived, but Kimimaro attempts to show the audience that a different approach is possible. In the following examples, again in a humorous manner, Kimimaro suggests that the audience have an easy-going approach to the issues of aging.

(12) Watashi ni wa shujii ga orimasu kedo, juui desu. [laughter] Sono sensei ga iu ni wa moo seikaku de kimaru n da soo desu. Kuyokuyo shinai hito nan da soo desu. Nagaiki dekiru hito wa. Hito no iu koto wo toyakaku kini shinai hito ga nagaiki shiteru n da soo desu.

“I have a family doctor. He is a veterinarian. According to him, personality is the key. Those who do not worry are the people who can live long. Those who do not worry about what others say can live long.”

After making a joke about his family doctor being a veterinarian, Kimimaro advises the audience not to worry too much. The Japanese are often more nervous about how they may appear to others than Westerners. Makino (1996) points out that *seken* ('others' or 'the world') is the governing concept for speech and behavior of the Japanese people in everyday life. Given such a national trait, Kimimaro's suggestion proves its merits for the Japanese audience. He offers another similar suggestion, again in a joking manner.

(13) Aseru koto nai desu. Kuyokuyo surukoto nai desu. Ningen no shiboo ritsu wa hyappaasento desu. Watashi dake wa daijobu, kou iu kimochi ga daiji desu. [laughter]

“You need not be impatient. You need not worry. The mortality rate for humans is 100 %. ‘I, but not others, will be fine,’ this view is most important.”

Likewise, in the following sequences, after his usual sarcastic comment, Kimimaro offers a comfort to those who worry about their physical appearance.

(14) Busu wa kootsuu jiko ni au no de shoo ka? Okusan anshin shite kudasai. Awanai no desu. Untenshu ga yokemasu. [laughter]

“Do ugly women get involved in traffic accidents? Please be relieved, ladies. They do not get involved in accidents. Drivers avoid them.”

Kimimaro ridicules the females in the audience by saying that they are free from traffic accidents because a driver would avoid ugly women. The statement is a rather harsh comment including the use of the politically incorrect word *busu* ('ugly woman'). However, Kimimaro supplements with the following comment.

(15) Minasama, kirei toka kirei ja nai wa kankei arimasen, ningen de ichiban daiji na mono wa kenkoo de gozaimasu. Kenkoo de sae are ba okusama no yoo na kao demo, [laughter] sono yooni rippa ni ikirareru nodesu. [laughter]

“Dear everyone. It is unimportant whether or not you are beautiful. The most important thing for humans is health. As long as you are healthy, even if you are ugly, you can live well.”

Kimimaro points out that health is the most important thing and people should stop worrying about their appearance. Interestingly, he presents this message by wrapping it in sarcasm. He comments that you can live a fine life even though you are indeed ugly, and the comment is met with a burst of laughter from the audience.

Ide (1989) points out that the language behavior of the Japanese is heavily constrained by social conventions and the Japanese have less freedom than Westerners in how and what they express. According to Ide (1989), the socially prescribed norms or *wakimae* (‘discernment’) dictate the speech behavior of many Japanese and this *wakimae* constraint is in sharp contrast to the Western concept of “volition” which allows speakers a considerable freedom in what they can say (see also Hill et al., 1986). Given that the Japanese are under constant pressure of *wakimae*, it is expected that personal concerns remain quiet and not openly discussed. This is where a person like Kimimaro comes in. He is free from all socially prescribed norms or *wakimae* by virtue of being a comedian. He is free to say whatever he wants, and he becomes a voice for the audience who does not have the freedom Kimimaro has. He brings all of the concerns into the public domain and openly discusses them in a joking manner, pointing out that others share these same concerns. In turn, this ritual of sarcasm creates the effect of building a sense of solidarity among the audience. You are not the only person with worries; everybody has the same concerns and problems. They are brought to the world of *uchi* where they are in effect consoled and relieved by the storyteller.

Jokes in English

Our next question is whether or not the solidarity building strategy through sarcastic jokes is commonly observed in a non-Japanese context. In order to answer this question, an extensive review of jokes in other cultures needs to be conducted. However, my on-going research in English seems to suggest that there are not many comedians such as Kimimaro who focus on the issue of aging and make continuous jokes throughout the performance. In the following example, a popular comedian, Ellen Degeneres, talks about procrastination. She describes a chain of behaviors, which delays her ultimate task of writing a show.

(16) I thought, “now I have to write a show” so . . . I thought, “What do I want to say?” “What do I want to talk about?” so I sat down at my desk and I was staring at my desk and I thought, “Wow, that’s dusty.”: I can’t write with my desk all dusty like this.” So I went downstairs to get a rag and um, on the way downstairs, my kitten was on the stairway playing with a piece of dust [laughter] or something and um . . . and I went to uh, pet the kitten cause it did the thing where they roll on their back and show you the belly. And you gotta reward that. You can’t

pass that up so . . . [laughter] I sat down. I was petting the cat for about . . . I don't know, forty-five minutes [laughter] something like that. And, then I went downstairs and by that time I had forgotten why I went downstairs [laughter] and I was staring around trying to remember and I thought "I should paint this room." "I wonder what color this is?"

The comedian talks about her experience with procrastination in detail and it induces laughter from the audience. However, it is not a topic directly related to aging as is the case with Kimimaro. Nor is it an overt criticism or sarcasm directed toward the audience. Instead, it is the self-denigration of the comedian. The audience laughs at an inferior subject who happens to be the comedian herself. In Kimimaro's case, it is his comments on the physical state of the audience and not that of Kimimaro. Although the data in English context is by no means complete, it appears that, unlike the Japanese comedian, Western comedians are staying away from the topic of aging; they get their source of humor from their own behavior rather than that of the audience.

Although jokes about aging are rare in English, we find jokes about people's sexual orientation. In the following gay jokes, Ellen Degeneres uses inclusive "we" to indicate that she and all of the audience are gay.

(17) But that's all right because we're all here and with all of our differences, we all have one thing in common. We're all gay. [laughter] Now there are people out there going, "Do they think we're gay because we're here?" [laughter] I told you this would happen. We're not going to understand a word of this. No, that's, that's my one obligatory gay reference. I have to say something gay otherwise some people might leave here tonight going, "she didn't say anything gay. She is not our leader. What happened to our leader?" [laughter]

The comedian tries to advance the perception that they all share the identical sexual orientation even though everything else might be different. The assertion that everyone attending the talk show is gay was met with laughter, cheering, whistling, and applause. The humor comes from the element of surprise. The audience is caught by the unexpected statement that everyone is gay, which is obviously not true. People know that everyone is not necessarily gay. Some may be gay, but some others are not. The unexpected statement jolts the audience into laughter. The humor relies on the incongruity between the expected (i.e., everyone is not gay) and the unexpected (i.e., all are gay). It is different from Kimimaro's liberating nature of humor, in which the audience is being freed from the various social conventions or *wakimae* ('discernment'), and find the *uchi* ('inside') world where they share the same concern about unavoidable aging. Thus, even though the comedian seems to create the perception of an intimate atmosphere, it is fundamentally different from the *uchi* world Kimimaro created in his comic monologue.

Conclusion

The examination of the comic monologue by Kimimaro, a popular comedian in Japan, has shown that the apparent face-threatening act of joking is an effective way to create the virtual reality of *uchi* ('inside') world among the audience. In the *uchi* world, the audience is at least temporarily relieved of the burden of concerns such as aging by experiencing the ritual of constant sarcasm directed at them. With the help of the comedian as their spokesman, the audience can laugh their concerns off and find a shelter from the outside world where they have difficulty in expressing their *honno* ('true sound'). Given that the Japanese are said to be group-oriented rather than individual-oriented as in Western culture (e.g., Nakane 1972), they seem to find peace of mind by being a member of a given group. Through his skillful linguistic manipulation, the comedian makes each audience member feel that he/she shares the same concerns and that he/she belongs to the same *uchi* world.

The research result is still preliminary at this stage. However, it appears that the solidarity building strategy in jokes is readily acceptable in the Japanese context. This implies that there exists a cultural trait in comic monologue or humor telling. In particular, the study has shown that continuous sarcasm on the topic of aging, which is very popular among the audience, is apparently unique to the Japanese context. It would be interesting to investigate whether or not similar types of jokes can be found in other societies that are predominantly group-oriented and in which various social norms or *wakimae* ('discernment') dictate language behavior of individual members. For this, we have to wait for future research.

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Rejoiced by abuse! : Comic Monologue and Solidarity Building Strategy in Contemporary Japan (AZUMA)

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