

# A Comparison of Humor between Japan and America

97E117 Mari Yamada

## I. Introduction

People from different countries have different ideas of humor. You can see the differences of the national characters at the reaction toward a joke in the following:

When a Frenchman hears a joke, he laughs when the joke is only half told.

When an Englishman hears a joke, he waits until it is finished and then laughs.

When a German hears a joke, he philosophizes over it all night and laughs next morning.

When a Japanese hears a joke, he just smiles without understanding it.

When an American hears a joke, he doesn't laugh because he has already heard them all.<sup>1</sup>

As you know, each nation has a different reaction to a joke. This also means we have a different sense of humor. I think that there is a big difference of sense of humor especially between Japan and America. For, I have been feeling and thinking "How interesting the Americans are!" since I started learning English and had some opportunities for communication with foreigners. Why are they so different from the Japanese?

I want to discuss the matter in terms of several things such as the history, the background, the use of humor and other factors. And I hope I will get a bit of sense of humor by the time I finish writing this thesis.

## II. What's Humor?

Firstly, we should correctly know what humor is. As a matter of course, a humor includes a comical laugh. However, is it just comical? Moliere who is an American philosopher, says that "humor is within enjoying a gap."<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, on a proper meaning, nothing has humor with no heart. For instance, people laugh at an animal since they see a human attitude or humane expression on it. People sometimes laugh at a hat but actually they laugh at the shape people gave or the humane caprice.<sup>3</sup> Therefore we can say there is no source of a humor in nature. A source of parody is also in the laughing person, too.<sup>4</sup> People laugh because we find something humane in it.

"Humor is also an expression of superiority among people. So, nobody thinks

that they want to be an inferior to their neighbors. After all, a comical person is always the weak and sometimes not perfect at least a moment."<sup>5</sup> Let's look at the example.

One day, a deafman met an other deafman who had a fishing tackle. "Are you going to fish?", he asked. "No, I'm going to fish!", the other answered." I see. I thought you're going to fish!", he said.<sup>6</sup>

In this story, there are four people. The narrator, two deafmen, and the listener. Two deaf men are the people who are put in an inferior state. Therefore this story is comical. First, they are deaf. Second, they tried to have a conversation the same as people who can hear, affectedly. Third, it showed that they are definitely deaf by the story which has a cold cruelty. Finally, they are trying to keep their unhappiness back from us, poorly. It, however, appears in front of us by their nonsense conversation.<sup>7</sup>

In Western Europe before modern ages, people thought that one of the original meaning of humor is "the cardinal humors" and the rate of them (blood, phlegm, choler, and melancholy) decided one's temporary feelings. Besides, they believed that if they keep the balance, they were healthy. If not, they will be sick. So, it is said that people who lack the cardinal humors can't understand humor. We can understand it easily in this American joke.

An American ice cream car is often called "the good humor truck" The original meaning is that if you eat this cold food in a very hot day, your feelings (the cardinal humors) would become good. That is to say, the car sells good health or feelings.<sup>8</sup>

I feel that a humor is good for our health and a part of our body indeed. So, it is important for us to have sense of humor and use it.

### III. Misunderstanding

Recently, Japanese often have a lot of opportunities to meet foreigners and are forced to show humor. When they attend a party and have a meal together. Then they always hear two or three funny jokes of foreigners. Next, they are annoyed at the foreigner's request, "Please tell a Japanese joke."<sup>9</sup> This request often makes the Japanese stiff because they are weak at this in this situation. Therefore, foreigners have a image that the Japanese are just a "serious bunch of workaholics."<sup>10</sup>

The Japanese, however, have a sense of humor as well as Americans. They are just not used to the foreign sense of humor and have no custom of telling a joke during a conversation. Besides, they don't often tell jokes as a means of communication.<sup>11</sup> They just smile without jokes when they try to communicate with others, and this also make an misunderstanding. Why? The following is the good reason, I think.

It seems to be greatly related to Japanese old manners and customs. Japanese

distinguish between 'hare' (formal situations) and 'ke' (casual situations), in other words 'tatemae' (professed intention) and 'honne' (real intention). Japanese use them properly according to time and case. In this case, it is needless to say, laughter is 'ke', 'honne', and casual. In today's world of internationalization, and increased cross-cultural contacts, this has caused the misunderstanding which is "Japanese have no sense of humor." However it cannot be denied that Japanese strongly feel that laughter indicates a lack of seriousness. (A 1998 editorial in the Tokyo Shinbun, focused on humor in Japan.)

The Japanese often say, "I can't understand American jokes. They are not interesting." What is the problem? I have thought that the cause of it is just the difference of culture. However, I found other reason which is that the Japanese are not just used to the American life and jokes. So, if they hear American jokes every day or live in America, they would be able to understand them.<sup>12</sup> I also found following reasonable opinion.

In fact, there are so many similarities between American and Japanese humor. If you want to understand American humor, first of all you should understand your own Japanese humor. This is not related to an understanding of English language.<sup>13</sup>

On the contrary, the following case also happens. "The writer who is not Japanese thinks that almost all Western jokes translated in Japanese are not interesting." Why does this happen though the American should be used to jokes? Or does Japanese language make the jokes useless? Can't We tell a joke in Japanese? The reason is not the difference of mind, it is the difference how we translate them.<sup>14</sup> If we translate Western humor into Japanese, most of the jokes get blurred and become boring.<sup>15</sup>

The most important thing in communicating with foreigners with jokes is 'sensitivity.' In Japan, when talking to foreigners, most people switch off the function of humor enjoyment, so they rarely have a joking relationship.<sup>16</sup> I think that the Japanese lose a chance to communicate with foreigners at this point. It is wasteful! In the next chapter, the historical backgrounds of this misunderstanding will be explained.

#### IV. Background

##### a) Japan

It seems that the characteristics of humor have changed throughout Japanese history. Generally speaking hearty laughter was a feature of humor in the Nara period. From the Heian to Kamakura periods wit became popular. Humor which is rough and powerful was born in the Muromachi period. In the Edo period the humor of wit and poetry developed.<sup>17</sup>

Until the Middle Ages, Japan had a literature of laughter running parallel to America and Europe, but its continuation was suddenly stopped by the Tokugawa

shogunate (1603~1867). At that time, however, there was a literature of a laughter indeed. But it was hidden or in a zone where an inspector couldn't find it.<sup>18</sup>

Why did the Tokugawa prevent humor? A book which introduces Japanese ways of thinking says this. The apparent lack of humor in political or ceremonial speeches delivered by Japanese leaders may be a vestige of Confucian influence. Confucianism, a system of proper behavior among the ancient warrior class, advocated gravity and discouraged laughter in public.<sup>19</sup> Why did Tokugawa believe in Confucianism? Because the ruling powers were afraid of an attack for failure and criticism by the laughter of people.

From the Sengoku period (1477~1573) laughter was thought to indicate a lack of seriousness or immorality. Tokugawa Ieyasu, perhaps to assure future stability, established Confucian principles which removed humor from political functions.

Thus he banished laughter from the Samurai's world, regarded it dangerous, and extended these rules to tradesmen.<sup>20</sup>

In the Feudal age of Japan, in the Samurai's world, people said that 'they laughed with one of their cheek, once three years.' It means how seldom they laughed. In those days, the leader tried to maintain public order which was helped by forbidding laughter. Even in the army laughter was prohibited.<sup>21</sup> After this, the Japanese shut out laughter from formal scenes.<sup>22</sup> The Tokugawa family knew that laughter had an essence of "the tail wags the dog."<sup>23</sup>

Thus, in Japan, laughter was controlled and sometimes suppressed by the rulers who thought laughter was dangerous to the political power of Tokugawa military family. Therefore some people had a belief that "so as not to be laughed by others" and guarded against a laugh and were afraid of laughing for a long time.<sup>24</sup>

Even nowadays, Japanese politicians who have taken over the Edo period's ruling class and Confucianism's thoughts are insensitive to laughter. It seems that they put stress on the effort not to be laughed at by someone. In this way our lives today are an extension of the Edo period.<sup>25</sup>

After World War I, Japan has been behind in humor. The Japanese do not reach the Western about wit. One of the reason is that the Japanese are calm and like harmony and not good at telling a wit which is nasty, and also they are serious by nature and do not like trifling jokes. Actually, the Japanese mind does not work nastily. Humor is not only a sharp wit, but also an appearance of elegant and light feeling sense. It sometimes appears in a warm heart and honest and a stage of leaving a limit of intellect ego. In such humor, the Japanese are excellent. At least in the Edo period, it was better than Western one.<sup>26</sup>

#### b) America

In 1516, blacks were brought to North America from Africa. The blacks brought with them many aspects of African language, for example words like

*banana, banjo, okra*, and things like that. After the British came to the New World, the Dutch, the French, German, Scots, the Irish and the Spaniards crossed the Atlantic Ocean. They named most place names of America, and then the uses of American English were born. Once America was called "the melting pot of races," but now America is called "mosaic of races." That is to say that races do not fuse perfectly; each race keeps its characteristic and the races coexist. When the group that were overwhelmed in the place they lived formerly began to get a freedom in the New World, American humor was formed, Polish jokes and Jewish jokes, too.<sup>27</sup>

Especially, California is one of the unique states in America. It was in California that social trends such as Hippies, toplessness, cults, and cohabitation were started. There are probably many curious persons in California. There is a joke, "How many Californians does it take to change a light bulb?" The answer is "four. One to screw in the bulb, and three to share the experience."<sup>28</sup>

Now, how do American grow up? The answer is the training since their childhood. Here, there is a big difference from Japanese society. American society trains the budding humorous man, so they grow up this way. So, there are a lot of joke books for children in America. The following are two of them.

"What did the curtains say to the carpet?"

"Stop looking under my dress."

"What is black and white and red all over?."

"A sunburned zebra."<sup>29</sup>

Thus, American children learn how to tell a joke step by step, while enjoying it. I can see that American society deals with jokes leniently. I also think that the power of society has a great influence on our life.

There are many talk show programs in America. "The Johnny Carson show" which starts at 11:30 p.m. was popular there before. The content was that the M.C. Johnny Carson, invited guests who were singers, public entertainers, writers, or other famous personalities. Then he told funny jokes, and the audience laughed. He also had a partner Ed whose job was to give a hearty laugh to his jokes, Ed was also popular.<sup>30</sup>

Recently, Jay Leno and David Letterman are the popular American comedians. Each of them has a TV talk show program at night. Generally they give a funny monologue and make the guests welcome. They also attract the audience with their jokes and make a mild atmosphere.

We can see humorous ways from national characters. Westerners are good at looking at things objectively, so they often see words from a humorous point of view.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, Westerners are traditionally the hunting people who has been fighting because their land leads to the different race's land.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, in order

to get along with neighbors without fighting, they use a humor as “a lubricant” of communication. I think it is very good that they chose humor instead of a war.

## V. Sense of Humor

### a) Japanese Humor

There is a proverb, “Fortune comes from a merry gate.” (warau kadoniha fuku kitaru) So, on a festival or a casual scene, a vaudeville theater and a play, even the Japanese have laughed freely.<sup>33</sup> They also like it indeed.

Japanese humor (*kaigyaku* or *kokkei*) has produced over the centuries many forms of literary and theatrical entertainments, such as *kyogen* (comic interludes performed between no plays), *kyōka* (satirical short poems in tanka style), *senryū* (short humorous poems in haiku style), *rakugo* (comic story telling), and *manzai* (comic stage dialogues). These traditional genres of humor, which reveal the truth in life sometimes with a touch of irony and pathos, have been largely part of the common people’s culture.<sup>34</sup>

The Japanese are a race for valuing words, and Japanese is one of the most prosperous pun languages. So, Japanese are sensitive to words because it has the most homonym words in the world, and it is easy to say a cheap joke. For example, (no translation)

pun:

“Kinyoubi ni uttattemo kayoukyoku”

“Ichimai demo senbei”

“Jiisanga tabetemo babarōa”<sup>35</sup>

senryū:

“Naki naki mo yoihou wo toru katamiwake”

(People choose the better one in spite of crying when they distribute mementos.)<sup>36</sup>

I think there is a lot of excellent humor in Japan similar to American. Therefore if the Tokugawa family had accepted humor all over Japan, Japanese humor would be alive and lively in the world nowadays.

Every known type of humor is enjoyed by people today—punning jokes, parodies, satires, tall tales, impersonation, and so on. Comics and humorous novels are among the best selling books, and slapstick comedies and rollicking gags performed by funny TV personalities and cutups, though not always irresistible,

are getting the highest audience ratings. Probably the best way to see what kinds of humor are attracting people is to watch TV comedians. (TS)<sup>37</sup>

Thus there are several kinds of humor in Japan. Especially it is easy for us to watch a comedy on TV, but as you know, it is not always interesting. For, there are many inexperienced comedians who don't know how to get the audience to laugh and inexperienced audiences who don't know how to laugh.<sup>38</sup> A weak point of recent Japanese comedy is that they make light of skills achieved by training, and finally we lost the truth of laughter by overstating unnecessarily to laugh at it.<sup>39</sup> That is to say, Japanese humor is in a critical situation so far. Accordingly, I think we should return to the starting point.

#### b) American Humor

"Humor is a lubricant of communication."<sup>40</sup> Americans think of humor in this way, so they always use their sense of humor, I think. Then comfortable atmosphere comes following the humor. "The nurse was so pretty that when she took his temperature she took off 10 percent for personality." This is really quick-witted and the Japanese can't make jokes like this.

It is said that no matter how excellent a manager, a politician, and a scholar if they don't have a sense of humor, their abilities aren't admired. In this case, the humor is measured by how well they can tell jokes in front of people. When people meet for the first time, the atmosphere is tight and awkward at any cost. So they want to change the atmosphere to a relaxed one as soon as possible. This is the utility of jokes. After all, a joke in a speech is one of an expression of doing a service. Americans are trained in the spirit at schools, at home, in neighborhoods and in other always since childhood. Therefore, even a strict serious person can tell a joke that can make many people laugh. The people who are politicians, managers, and scholars have a lot of opportunities to speak in a public scene and are conspicuous. Actually the importance of doing a service permeates all over the American society.<sup>41</sup> "People who are good at telling jokes are good at pausing at the appropriate time. This must be by nature, but this comes from daily training. In America, there is such an environment in a daily life."<sup>42</sup>

I think that one of the most different thing is the target of laughter. For, I am surprised that Americans, especially the comedians, often tell jokes about their leaders—presidents, generals, mayors, and bishops. And this becomes a strong criticism. The Japanese rarely do that because of their history and characters.

Why do Americans laugh at their leaders?

One of the reasons of that is the difference of social position between the general public and the leaders for Americans, the unhappiness of the leaders is more comical than that of tramps. If they could feel a sense of one's own superiority

to people who are higher in rank than them, they would be happy.<sup>43</sup> Another reason is the difference of a knowledge. If an elementary school student makes a mistake, nobody laughs at him. Since they don't have to prove their intellectual superiority over other students. Even if they do it, they couldn't get their satisfaction. However, if a teacher made a mistake, the students would laugh at him.<sup>44</sup>

That's why these things happen in America. "Jokes which have no age limit, no sex distinction, no distinction between superiors or inferiors, and no formal or informal limit. This American culture is very different from Japanese society."<sup>45</sup>

Now, let's look at politician's jokes; it is important for American politicians to have a good command of jokes, and to display a sense of humor although the politicians are an easy target of jokes. It is said that Mr. Reagan was a president who was good at making people laugh.

A goodwill and a sense of intimacy which is caused by an effective humor hide a one's weak point generally. So specialists who are called "political gag writers" are active. (Time, 1938, 8.15)<sup>46</sup>

In technology Japan is far in advance of America, but in the area of humor of politicians, Japan is far behind America. Let's look at the president's jokes.

Mr. Reagan, who got badly injured in an accident in an attempted assassination, showered jokes in an operating room and raised his reputation very much. This is a special characteristic of America where society highly estimates the value of humor.

At that time he said to his wife, Nancy, "Honey, I forgot to duck." This phrase was the most famous. Duck is a kind of water-bird as a noun, but as a verb this means to move one's head or upper body down quickly so as to avoid being seen or hit. After the operation, he told jokes one after another on the bed. Although he couldn't speak, he handed in some notes to the doctor or the nurses. The following is one of them. "If I'd gotten this much attention in Hollywood, I would not have left." This is a joke about the good care he received when being surrounded with many people. He said to Maureen who inquired after his health, after he could speak, "One of my new suits was ruined." This is American humor.<sup>47</sup>

In Japan, there were some leaders who showed a sense of humor on the international scene. For instance, the late Prime minister Taihei and the ex-prime minister Fukuda made the audience laugh effectively. At that time Mr. Muramatsu interpreted. In spring 1981, Premier Suzuki visited America and a welcome dinner party, sponsored by, the Japan Society, was held in New York where he arrived. This was a comparatively rare example, he told a light joke at first. This was reported in a Japanese newspaper. The head line said, "It's Rare. Good Fortune Joke."



He said, "When I was in college, I was an outstanding scholar in all subjects except in English. So that I'll not cause you indigestion, I have brought from Japan one of the best interpreters, Mr. Muramatsu, at some cost. Unquestionably, he is better paid than I am."<sup>48</sup>

Thus Japanese leaders sometimes tell jokes, but not always.

## VI. Conclusion

I found that there are two major interesting differences of humor between Japan and America. One is the difference of their historical backgrounds. In Japan, laughter was restricted for a long time. Especially, laughter was forbidden at formal situations. On the other hand, laughter has been encouraged in America, and they have freedom to laugh.

Another is the difference of the targets of laughter. In Japan, they laugh at those inferior to them. On the other hand, Americans laugh at their superiors. For example, Americans laugh at their leaders when they fail, but the Japanese would frown at them when they fail.

I am relieved that Japanese have sense of humor, but their sense of humor doesn't appear in public to my regret. Actually, they laugh freely in front of TV at home and theaters, but this is just training as receivers of laughter. They are short of training as senders and producers of laughter. Conversely, Americans are surely senders and producers of laughter.

Today we live in a global society. Therefore humor is indispensable in order to approach people from other nations. In this point of view, humor is wisdom of life. It seems that Americans are good at using it. So, Japanese should imitate American humor and train little by little. For this, we need social supports, so Japanese society should change, firstly. Then if we can come to have to sense of humor like Americans, our lives would become happier, and we will spend our lives more calmly. Moreover it will broaden our horizons, too. In society today, we need to give and take not only information but also humor.

## Notes

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4. Pagnol, Marcel. *Warai ni tsuite* (Iwanami Shinsho, 1953), p.8.
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6. Pagnol, p.83.
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8. Gill, Robin. *Omoshiro Hikaku Bunkakou* (Kirihara Shoten, 1984), p.158.
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18. Shimizu, Akira. *Warai, sono Ijo to Seijo* (Keiso Shobo, 2000), p.217.
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43. Pagnol, p.64-65.
44. Pagnol, p.66.
45. Matsuka, pp.162-163.
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(卒業論文指導教員 C.Joy Williams)