

Uses of Humor in America

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Introduction

Humor brings joy to the heart and is often considered an essential aspect of what it means to be human. It can smooth social interactions, softening criticism and helping participants relax and feel closer to each other (Takekuro, 2006). Yet researchers have found it very difficult to define what humor is. Chapman & Foot, in their introduction to *Humor and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications* (2007), point out that although “everyone thinks he knows” what humor is, psychologists and other researchers have had great difficulty defining it. In fact, they argue that, “amongst psychological humour theorists, there appears to have been a distinct reluctance to define humour and laughter” (Chapman & Foot, 2007, p. 2).

In *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (2007), Rod A. Martin quotes several dictionary definitions of *humor*, then summarizes their content, saying:

humor is a broad term that refers to anything that people say or do that is perceived as funny and tends to make others laugh, as well as the mental processes that go into both creating and perceiving such an amusing stimulus, and also the affective response involved in the enjoyment of it.

(Martin, 2007, p. 5)

Chapman & Foot (2007) note that in trying to define *humor*, a distinction needs to be made between three meanings of the word: 1) something that serves as a stimulus to make people laugh, 2) a response to that stimulus (usually laughter), and 3) the disposition to laugh (that is, a sense of humor) (p. 3). They also summarize research in this field, explaining that incongruity and surprise are regarded as important “ingredients” of humor. Another area of research, based on superiority theory, posits that humor can also be seen “as a form of disparagement or deprecation” (Chapman & Foot, 2007, p. 5).

Martin (2007) explains three main psychological functions of humor: 1) eliciting the positive emotion of mirth, 2) promoting social communication and influence, and 3) relieving tension and helping to cope with adversity. In explaining the second function, he says that humor can be used to convey implicit messages, including criticism and acceptance of differences in a heated discussion. He notes that teasing and other functions of humor can be “quite aggressive” (Martin, 2007, p. 17).

Both Martin (2007) and Chapman & Foot (2007) point out that the social value placed on humor has changed dramatically over time. Ancient Greek philosophers tended to look down on it; Aristotle actually claimed that it was “degrading to morals, art and religion” and called it “a form of behaviour from which civilized man should shrink” (cited in Chapman & Foot, 2007, p. 1). Later on in the West, however, Ben Johnson, Moliere and Swift acclaimed satire—a form of humor—as a potential antidote for social hypocrisy (Chapman & Foot, 2007, p. 1).

Martin (2007) traces later changes in attitudes towards humor in the West. He points out that before the 18th century, laughter was always considered to be a way of making fun of or scorning

others. This use of humor developed into the concept of *ridicule*, which in 18th century Europe became a popular technique used in debate to make one's opponent appear to be laughable to others. Gradually, such one-upmanship was transformed from expressions of contempt to displays of wit and gamesmanship. However, European views of humor continued to change, and by the 20th century, sympathy was considered to be essential for humor (Martin, 2007, p. 24).

Martin (2007) also argues that norms on where humor is appropriate have changed dramatically in the West. In America in the 1860s, it was considered impolite to laugh in public, but today, humor and laughter are acceptable "in virtually all social settings" (Martin, 2007, p. 24).

Not only do attitudes towards humor change over time, but they also vary according to culture. Martin (2007) points out that different cultures have varying norms for what they consider to be suitable subjects for humor and for the kinds of situations in which it is considered appropriate to laugh.

As an American who is a long-term resident of Japan, I have personally experienced such differences in cultural norms regarding humor. I have occasionally shocked Japanese by making a joke or laughing in a situation where it is not considered appropriate in Japanese culture. Also, I have often heard Japanese people refer to "American jokes" as something strange and hard to understand.

It is the purpose of this paper to summarize research comparing Japanese and American humor and then to use examples from my own experience and American movies to explain some of the major uses of humor in America that differ from the way humor is used in Japan. It is hoped that this effort will make American jokes and humor more accessible to Japanese students of English.

Previous Research on Conversational Humor in Japan and America

Takekuro (2006) points out that it is often said that "Japanese lack a sense of humor" (p. 85). However, Davis (2006) argues that this is a misconception based on lack of exposure. She claims:

humor in Japan is an irrepressible force—if one knows where and when to look for it. However, ... humor is not always permitted to appear in the same places and under the same conditions as in European cultures.

(Davis, 2006, p. 1)

Takekuro (2006) tried to clear up Western misunderstandings about Japanese humor by doing a comparative analysis of spontaneous jokes in everyday conversation based on analysis of recorded conversations as well as realistic audiovisual materials. For her study, she compared three Japanese movies and six Japanese television dramas with six American movies of approximately the same running time. She also analyzed two hours of conversation among friends in Japanese and English. In selecting movies and television dramas, she avoided completely comical material as well as highly unrealistic scenarios, instead focusing on material that would illustrate "normal conventions for acceptable social behavior" (Takekuro, 2006, p. 87).

Takekuro (2006) first analyzed the overall number of jokes in her data. She found far more jokes in English than in Japanese; in fact, they were used four times more often in English. In terms of the percentage of utterances, there were three times more jokes in English than in Japanese (p. 89).

Takekuro (2006) then analyzed her data in terms of the relationship of the participants in the conversation. She found that for both Japanese and English speakers, the majority of jokes were used with people they were close to: friends, partners and family members. However, while Japanese

jokes were used almost exclusively with such close interlocutors, almost half of the English jokes—45%—were used in conversations where the participants were *not* close (p. 89). Takekuro suggests that this is because Japanese culture clearly divides people into groups: *uchi*, *soto* and *yoso* (in-group, out-group and strangers), and it is hard to get beyond the barriers between these groups.

Finally, Takekuro (2006) analyzed the formality of the situations in which conversational jokes occurred, and found another significant difference between the two cultures. There were no jokes in formal settings in the Japanese material, while there were actually many more English jokes in formal situations than in informal ones: 43 in the former as opposed to 18 in the latter. Takekuro also found a total of 19 English jokes in business settings, both formal and informal, but only one in a Japanese business setting, and that occurred in an informal situation. She concludes that her

data suggest that Japanese conversation has more limiting conditions for jokes than English conversation does. Japanese jokes are limited to situations in which participants know each other well and the degree of formality is low. ... On the contrary, a general trend of jokes in English conversation appears to be that jokes are generally acceptable, regardless of the participants and the degree of formality.

(Takekuro, 2006, p. 90)

In addition to the above quantitative analysis, Takekuro (2006) also analyzed the jokes in her data qualitatively. She found that Japanese conversational jokes tend to be highly context-dependent and are often based on words that were previously used in the conversation, as seen in the example below, which was taken from an actual conversation she recorded.

Japanese Conversational Joke Example

Chie and Tsuyoshi are two young Japanese friends who are talking about another friend of theirs who lives overseas on a tropical island. He is bored and has nothing to do because all the shops on the island close at 4 P.M. Chie comments that it's like they are using "winter time", when days end early:

Chie: そんな常夏の国でおまえ冬時間かよって

Sonna tonatsu no kuni de omae fuyu jikan kayotte

[It's like they have winter time (when days end early) in that country of endless summer!]

Tsuyoshi: そんなん自分の時計を二時間遅らせてさ一人でなんちゃってサマータイムやりゃあいいじゃん

Sonnan jibun no tokei wo nijikan okurasete sa; hitori de nanchatte, sama-taimu yarya ii jan.

[Well, he should just put his watch back two hours, and make his own private "summer time".]

(Takekuro, 2006, p. 92)

Takekuro (2006) points out that in this conversation, Tsuyoshi picked up Chie's phrase "*fuyu jikan*" (winter time) and made a play on it, saying that their friend should reset his watch and have his own private "*summer time*" (daylight saving time). Takekuro argues that in her data, the discourse context of Japanese jokes does not expand (p. 92).

In contrast to this context dependency, Takekuro (2006) explains that English jokes have a tendency to move out of the context into an imaginative description, as in the following example from an American movie.

American Conversational Joke Example 1: *Working Girl*

The heroine of the movie, Tess, has just been fired from her job and her colleagues are very concerned about her, so they offer her an envelope of money. One asks what she will do now.

Tess: “Oh, you know. Play some golf. Redecorate the country house.”

(Quoted in Takekuro, 2006, p. 93)

Tess’s answer employs incongruity, one of the common “ingredients” of humor cited by Chapman & Foot (2007), as noted in the introduction to this paper. That is, Tess and her coworkers are all working class, and the kind of lifestyle she describes here is incongruous with her circumstances; in fact, it’s out of the question for any of the participants in this conversation.

Takekuro (2006) suggests that Tess’s “imaginative description brings in new information from outside the existing discourse-context and broadens the scope of the context” (p. 93). Takekuro refers to this as expanding the context to “outer space” (p. 93). She reports that this kind of joke based on an imaginative description accounted for half of the English jokes in her data (Takekuro, 2006, p. 93).

Takekuro (2006) concludes that differences in the types of jokes common in Japanese and English-speaking cultures derive from differences in the kind of rhetoric prevalent in each culture: “word-bounded rhetoric” in Japanese culture and “far-fetched rhetoric” in English-speaking cultures. She goes on to tie these differences in rhetoric to differences in communicative styles, stressing that Japanese communication tends to place emphasis on harmonious relationships, while in English communication, individualism and self expression are given more importance. She argues that Japanese-style “word-bounded rhetoric” creates the impression that the speaker is paying attention to the interlocutor. In contrast, English-style “far-fetched rhetoric” allows speakers to display their own sense of humor (Takekuro, 2006, p. 94).

Another comparison of Japanese and English humor was made in Haru Yamada’s *Different Games, Different Rules: Why Americans and Japanese Misunderstand Each Other* (1997). This work focuses on Yamada’s research in business interactions in the two cultures and explains how cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings. In one chapter, she compares how teasing is used in American and Japanese business. Yamada asserts that in Japanese business culture, teasing can be used to show closeness, especially more than is considered appropriate in that situation, as seen in the example below.

Japanese Conversational Joke Example 2: *Teasing the Boss*

In a meeting at a bank, the CEO, Mr. Kondo, lights up a cigarette. One of his subordinates, Mr. Satoh, goes out of the room to get an ashtray. On his return, he says to Yamada (the author, who is videotaping this meeting for research purposes), “*Koko kin'en desu kara*” [This is a no-smoking room]. His boss, Kondo, laughs and smokes away. Yamada comments:

By pointing out the breaking of a regulation which in theory was made by the principal decision

maker, Kondo himself, Satoh dares in front of the entire group to step across the limits of a hierarchical boundary to poke fun at the CEO.

(Yamada, 1997, p. 108)

Yamada (1997) points out that another way Japanese use teasing to show closeness is by commenting on their interlocutor's physical appearance to gauge time spent apart. For example, when she meets the above CEO Kondo for the first time in many years, he comments on how she hasn't changed much—even her hairstyle is the same. He mentions that they hadn't seen each other in over 20 years: "Not since my early thirties. I've changed, haven't I?" Yamada notes that he is inviting her to tease back. She takes him up on it, saying he is much thinner now. This type of teasing is intended "to bring back a rapid sense of interdependence through intimacy" (Yamada, 1997, p. 108).

In contrast, Yamada's (1997) research found that American businessmen often tease each other to jockey for control of a meeting. Although she notes that the Japanese teasing came close to barbs, the impression given was that the parties involved were emotionally close enough that these "stabs" didn't hurt. On the other hand, she found that the teasing among American business colleagues had more "bite" because it is used to establish status (Yamada, 1997, p. 109).

It should be noted here that the kind of teasing described by Yamada (1997) has been pegged as the kind of humor that Western males tend to prefer. Deborah Tannen (1995), an American sociolinguist who specializes in the relationship between gender and language, states that males often use "razzing, teasing, and mock-hostile attacks" in their humor (p. 72), and that women may actually mistakenly perceive these forms of humor to be "genuinely hostile and personal" (p. 73). Their reaction mirrors that of the Japanese businessmen who witnessed such teasing by American businessmen (Yamada, 1997). Therefore, rather than regarding such one-upmanship as a Western or American style of humor *per se*, it may be more accurate to view it as a Western *male* style of humor.

As seen above, Takekuro (2006) has shown that humor is used in different settings in Japan and America, and that it is used much more frequently and in a wider variety of circumstances in English-speaking countries than in Japan. Meanwhile, Yamada (1997) has shown how the use of teasing differs in Japan and America.

However, Chapman and Foot (2007) state that, "Humor plays a myriad of roles and serves a number of quite different functions" (p. 4). In the rest of this paper, I will try to explain a number of the major functions of humor in American culture that seem to differ from the functions of humor in Japan.

Telling Jokes vs Making Jokes

In discussing humor, it is important to distinguish between different forms of this phenomenon. Martin (2007) divides humor into three main forms: jokes, spontaneous conversational humor and unintentional humor. In this paper, I will discuss the first two of these forms, which I distinguish by using the terms *telling* jokes and *making* jokes.

Telling jokes involves the presentation of humorous material that was developed in advance, often by someone else. Such prepared jokes often involve puns or plays on words. In other cases, they may make fun of specific groups of people in order to impart a sense of superiority to the listener, as pointed out by Chapman & Foot (2007). They can be compared to Japanese *kobanashi* (小咄) and the kind of stories told by Rakugo artists (Chibukuro Online, 2008).

Such prepared humor is generally reserved for professional entertainers in Japan, but in the United States, the ability to tell a joke is considered an important social skill and tends to be developed early in life. For example, American elementary school children often learn jokes from joke books or other children and then retell them to family members when they return home. One of the first jokes children often learn is the following:

American Prepared Joke Example 1: Children's Joke

Q: What's black and white and red (read) all over?

A: A newspaper.

This joke involves a play on words: the color *red* and the verb *read*, which are pronounced in the same way.

A famous prepared joke that plays on national stereotypes and is often told by adults in America is shown below.

American Prepared Joke Example 2: Playing With Stereotypes

Q: If heaven is an American salary, a Chinese cook, an English house and a Japanese wife, what is hell?

A: A Chinese salary, an English cook, a Japanese house and an American wife.

There are numerous variations on this joke: substituting cars for salaries and making German cars heavenly and Chinese cars characteristic of hell, or substituting French cooks for Chinese cooks or American houses for English houses. However, the point is to create humor by lining up an array of good and bad stereotypes.

Another common type of prepared joke makes fun of individuals or groups who are considered stupid. The punch line usually involves the element of surprise that someone could be so foolish.

The Japanese term “American joke” usually refers to the kind of prepared jokes described above (American Joke *de anata mo* entertainer, 2011). While the content is similar to Rakugo and Manzai material making fun of *manuke* (fools) in Japanese, there are two main differences: 1) the groups that are made the butt of the jokes are different in the two cultures, and, most importantly, 2) in America, amateurs tell such prepared jokes in a wide variety of settings, including family gatherings and parties, while in Japan, recounting prepared jokes is normally left to professional entertainers.

Among the many American uses of prepared jokes, one that stands in stark contrast to conventional Japanese uses of humor is the convention of telling a joke at the beginning of a speech. Where Japanese speakers tend to begin a speech with an expression of humility—often apologizing for real or imagined deficiencies, in America speakers are advised to start their speech with a joke, which serves as the “icebreaker”. In other words, a joke is thought to help “warm up the audience”, allowing listeners to relax and breaking down barriers between the speaker and listeners that might make it harder for them to accept what the speaker has to say. The following are two examples of this use of jokes taken from American movies.

Telling a Joke as an Icebreaker, Example 1: From *New Year's Eve*

Sam Ahern Jr., the son of the owner of a company which hosts a large party every year on New Year's Eve, is scheduled to give the opening speech at the party for the first time this year in

place of his father, who has recently passed away. Here is how he begins the speech:

“Hi. I’m Sam Ahern Jr. I’m not gonna give a long speech. Socrates gave long speeches, and his friends killed him.”

Here, the speaker deftly relaxes his audience by suggesting that, in order to avoid Socrates’ fate, he will limit the amount of time he will talk. The audience in the movie responds by chuckling.

Telling a Joke as an Icebreaker, Example 2: From *Disclosure* (2:01:23 ~ 2:01:55)

In this scene, the CEO of the company where the action in the movie takes place has gathered his staff together to announce the successful completion of a merger after a week in which many difficulties have arisen. He starts out with a quote:

“The Chinese say, ‘may you live in interesting times.’”

Then he plays on that idea: “Well, this merger is the most interesting merger I’ve had since my second marriage.”

In what was undoubtedly a prepared joke, the CEO compared a merger to a marriage, and suggested that the troubles they had to overcome in their merger negotiations were similar to the difficulties of arranging for a second marriage, which may be complicated by problems left over from the divorce that ended the first marriage. As in the first example, the audience responds to this icebreaker with chuckles.

In contrast to the kind of prepared humor seen in the above examples, what I call *making jokes* involves spontaneous introduction of humor into everyday conversation. This is the type of humor Takekuro (2006) explored in her article. In the remainder of this paper, I would like to analyze examples of the use of spontaneous conversational humor in America, focusing mainly on humor found in American movies.

The examples are taken from the following movies and television series: *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), *Disclosure* (1994), *New Year’s Eve* (2011), *Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), *The West Wing, Season 1, Episode 7* (1999), *Wall Street* (1987), *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (2010), and *Working Girl* (1988). These movies and television series were chosen because they were deemed to be fairly realistic portrayals of everyday life in America, including how humor is used.

Uses of Spontaneous Conversational Humor in American Culture

Spontaneous conversational humor has been classified into the following eleven forms: 1) irony, 2) satire, 3) sarcasm, 4) overstatement and understatement, 5) self-deprecation, 6) teasing, 7) replies to rhetorical questions, 8) clever replies to serious statements, 9) double entendres, 10) transformations of frozen expressions, and 11) puns (Martin, 2007, p. 13).

Puns

The last of these forms, puns, is common in conversation in both Japan and the United States. A pun is a humorous form of word play involving different meanings of the same word or different words that have the same pronunciation (homophones). Although it may take a large vocabulary and

a quick wit to come up with a pun during ordinary conversation, in both Japan and the United States, puns are generally welcomed with groans. In Japan, they are referred to as “*oyaji gyaggu*” (“gags made by old men”, or “middle-aged humor”) and are often greeted by the expression “*samui*” (“that gives me the chills”).

In America, on the other hand, listeners pretend that puns “stink”, and in addition to groans, might respond with a demand to “Open the window”. In fact, the famous English writer and creator of the first English dictionary, Samuel Johnson, is reputed to have called puns “the lowest form of humor.”

Thus, puns are one form of spontaneous conversational humor that is received in much the same way in Japan and the West: showing understanding by pretending to dislike them.

Teasing

Martin’s (2007) third and sixth forms of humor (sarcasm and teasing) have already been discussed to some extent in the above summary of Yamada’s (1997) work. The kind of teasing used to jockey for control of a meeting that Yamada (1997) reported was also seen in the following example from an American movie.

American Teasing Example 1: Jockeying to Gain Control, from *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (8:08 ~ 9:54)

A young stockbroker called Stan is trying to get other members of his group to encourage their customers to buy the stock of an oil company. Ed, one of the other members of the group, doesn’t agree with this strategy, arguing that they would be better off recommending stock in a company that is developing a futuristic form of alternative energy. They trade barbs in a highly charged debate.

Stan teases Ed, referring to Ed’s idea as, “Beam me up, Scottie.” This is a reference to Star Trek—an old American TV series about space travel in which people could be electronically “beamed” from one place to another. In other words, he is suggesting the alternative energy company is based on a fantasy. He also calls Ed a “Brainiac”—a combination of “brain” and “maniac”—suggesting that he is smart but crazy. In addition, Stan asserts that the alternative energy company will not make any money soon.

Ed teases back, “Right. This coming from the guy who said Google was a bubble.” This implies that Stan misjudged how well Google stock would do. In this way, the two young men use digs and barbs (teasing) to struggle for control.

This example supports Martin’s (2007) assertion, quoted above, that some forms of humor, especially teasing, can be “quite aggressive” (p. 17).

Another use of teasing in America is to indirectly express displeasure. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, Martin (2007) states that humor can be used to convey implicit messages, including criticism. The following is an example of this use of humor.

American Teasing Example 2: Indirectly Showing Displeasure, from *Disclosure* (40:20 ~ 41:52)

In this scene, a new line of products is being shown in a meeting with the CEO of the company and some other visiting executives. Tom, one of the members of the product development team, has been purposely misinformed of the time of the meeting, so he arrives late. The CEO shows

his displeasure at Tom's tardiness by using an ironic tease:

CEO: "Tom, so glad you could join us."

The line "I'm so glad you could join us" is a very common way to tease someone about being late in America. Depending upon the intonation used, it can be taken as a light tease or a strongly sarcastic show of displeasure. In this scene, the CEO is obviously displeased, so the humor appears to be more of the type Martin (2007) labels as "aggressive".

However, I also found a number of examples of teasing in business scenes in American movies that were not aggressive, but rather seemed more typical of the kind of humor Tannen (1995) said (Western) males like. A few of these examples are presented below.

American Teasing Example 3: One-Upmanship, from *Wall Street* (7:18 ~ 7:35)

In this scene, Bud Fox, a young stockbroker, is talking to a client on the telephone. The client previously told Bud to buy some stock for him, but now the price of the stock has fallen and he is refusing to pay for it. Bud's boss takes over the phone call. Afterwards, he tells Bud that if the client doesn't pay for the stocks, Bud will have to pay for them. This would cost Bud a large amount of money. He is upset. Another young stockbroker sitting near Bud asks what the problem is. After Bud explains the situation, the other stockbroker responds as follows:

Fellow Stockbroker: "Could've been worse ..." (*sounding like he is going to cheer Bud up. Then he pauses, and finally adds*) "Could've been **my** money!"

This is obviously a tease aimed at one-upmanship, and the fellow stockbroker laughs at his own "joke". Immediately afterwards, however, he hands Bud some money, so clearly, he is not really being nasty.

There were a number of this kind of "witty responses", which are called "digs", "barbs" and "zingers", in *Wall Street* and other movies that included scenes from American business, lending support to Yamada's (1997) assertion that this kind of humor is common in American business.

Another example of teasing in American business that I found in an American movie seems to be less a display of one-upmanship and more a kind of friendly banter. It is presented as American Teasing Example 4 below.

American Teasing Example 4: Teasing to Show Closeness, from *Disclosure* (40:20 ~ 41:52)

A young Division Head in an electronics company is showing some visiting executives some new technology that allows users to access real files and data using virtual reality. Bob, the CEO of this company, tries out the new system and asks what the data is in a file that appears on the screen.

Division Head: "I believe it's all your financial records, Bob."

Bob: "Turn that damn thing off!"

The laughing intonation of the two interlocutors in this scene makes it clear that the Division Head

is teasing and that Bob understands this; he is just “playing along” with the dangerous imaginary scenario in which his financial records have been made available to anyone with the new technology.

The impression given is much like that created in the example given by Yamada (1997) of a bank employee teasing the CEO (see Japanese Conversational Joke Example 2 above); the teasing is a sign that they are close enough to be able to withstand such “barbs”, despite the hierarchical nature of their relationship. However, unlike in the Japanese example, the context in this American example has been expanded to an imaginary level—a common feature of American jokes (Takekuro, 2006).

These examples suggest that in America, teasing can be used for a number of purposes: to compete for power, implicitly display displeasure, as a means of male bonding through humor, and as a sign of closeness. While the first three may be characteristically American, the last one is similar to one of the ways Japanese use teasing.

I’d now like to move on to consider some other uses of spontaneous humor in American conversation.

Showing Concern

Martin (2007) argues that humor is often used to convey implicit messages and suggests that they tend to be negative. However, I found a number of examples of the use of the kind of “context expanded” jokes described by Takekuro (2006) that indirectly expressed concern for the interlocutor. I will present two examples here.

American Spontaneous Joke Example 1: Joking to Show Concern, from *Wall Street* (1:43:42 ~ 1:45)

In this scene, the main character of the movie, Bud Fox, has just found out that his father, who works in the airline business, has had a heart attack. Bud therefore goes to the hospital to see his father. The last time they talked, they had an argument. Bud feels very bad about that and wants to tell his father that he loves him, but their relationship so far has not involved open displays of emotion. Bud begins the conversation with two jokes.

Bud: “Hiya Dad. You’re looking younger every day. Didn’t I tell you never to lift a 747 by yourself?”

In the second joke (“Didn’t I tell you never to lift a 747 by yourself?”), Bud builds on the fact that his father works with airplanes to create an imaginary narrative of how his father might have caused his own heart attack: by single-handedly lifting a 747, one of the largest airplanes ever built. This is the kind of American humor described by Takekuro (2006), in which the discourse context is expanded to “outer space”. In joking with his father in this way, Bud is trying to express his concern for the way his father works so hard and how it has adversely affected his health. Only after making these jokes is Bud able to be more direct and tell his father that he loves him.

The next example also shows how such context-expanded humor can be used to show concern.

American Spontaneous Joke Example 2: Joking to Show Concern, from *Working Girl* (1:45:10 ~)

Towards the end of the movie, the heroine, Tess, is set to start a new job as an account executive. Up until now, she has only been a secretary. Her lover, Jack, seems to be worried about her. He

has a lot of experience in business and knows that the competition is fierce. On the morning of her first day at the new job, he gives her a lunch box. It is filled with the kind of things American school children take to school. He lists them up, including “An apple for the teacher” (a very old tradition in America). Then he says:

Jack: “Play nice with the other kids. Make sure you’re home before dark.”

In this way, Jack greatly expands the discourse context to jokingly create a metaphor in which to express his concern for Tess: he pretends to regard her as a beloved child he is sending out into the world.

Although it is generally thought that Americans are much more direct in expressing their feelings than Japanese are, this use of context-expanded humor seems to be one way that Americans use to express themselves indirectly.

Getting Out of a Difficult Situation

Another way jokes are used in America is to help the speaker get him/her-self out of a difficult situation, as seen in the following example.

American Spontaneous Joke Example 3: Getting Out of a Difficult Situation, from *The Pursuit of Happyness* (41:18 ~ 45:57)

Chris Gardner has an important job interview scheduled, but the day before, the police came to his home while he was painting it and arrested him for unpaid parking tickets. He is released in time to get to the interview, but has not had time to change his clothes, so he is wearing an undershirt and paint-covered jacket. During the interview, the top interviewer asks him a few ordinary interview questions, but keeps returning to the problem of his appearance. Finally, he says,

Top Interviewer: “Chris, what would you say if a guy walked in for an interview without a shirt on ... and I hired him. What would you say?” (*He is obviously pointing out to Chris that it would look strange if he hired Chris when his appearance is so bad.*)

Chris responds: “He must have had on some really nice pants.”

The ingredient of humor in Chris’s joke is surprise: the top interviewer expected Chris to be ashamed and not to answer. Instead, Chris came up with a somewhat plausible reason of why someone might be hired even if he didn’t have a shirt on. Again, we see the kind of expansion of the discourse context that Takekuro (2006) described as typical of American jokes. Chris’s response makes all the interviewers laugh—and Chris gets the job. Thus, he has been successfully able to make a spontaneous joke that gets him out of a difficult situation.

Brightening Up a Sad Situation

Yet another use of humor in American conversation is making jokes to brighten up a sad situation. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, Martin (2007) states that one of the three main psychological functions of humor is “relieving tension and helping to cope with adversity” (p. 17). He

argues that “humor replaces the feeling of anxiety, depression, or anger that otherwise would occur” in the darkest circumstances (p. 19). He cites the humor used by holocaust survivors and cancer patients to help maintain morale by “preserving a sense of mastery, hope and self-respect, and thereby enabling individuals to survive in seemingly hopeless circumstances” (p. 19).

This is actually what Tess was doing in the American joke Takekuro (2006) cited, which was quoted above and is reproduced here.

American Conversational Joke Example 1: *Working Girl*

The heroine of the movie, Tess, has just been fired from her job and her colleagues are very concerned about her, so they offer her an envelope of money. One asks what she will do now.

Tess: “Oh, you know. Play some golf. Redecorate the country house.”

(Quoted in Takekuro, 2006, p. 93)

It can be inferred that Tess made this joke to make her colleagues feel better and alleviate their concern for her. She didn’t want them to worry about her so much.

The following examples found in movies and television further illustrate this use of humor.

Spontaneous Joke Example 4: Brightening Up a Sad Situation, from *Bend It Like Beckham*

Jessminder has joined a women’s soccer team but now that it’s time to practice in her uniform, she refuses to go out on the field because one of her legs has a bad scar on it. Her coach comes over to where she is sitting in the bleachers and talks to her, showing her that he, too, has a bad scar on one of his legs. He asks her how she got hers. She explains that when she was eight years old, she was trying to cook beans on toast and, since she was too short to reach the stove easily, she jumped up and her pants caught fire. The coach sympathizes and says “Sorry.” To lighten the mood, Jessminder says, “I know, it put me off beans on toast for life.” Both the coach and Jessminder then laugh.

American Spontaneous Joke Example 5: Brightening Up a Sad Situation, from *The West Wing* (Season 1, Episode 7, 42:30 ~ 43:15)

The President of the United States was at a State Dinner when he was called away because a big hurricane is approaching the east coast of the United States and a fleet of navy ships has been caught in it. It appears that they will all be lost, but radio contact has been made with one small boat in the fleet. The President is put on the radio to talk with Harold, a young radio man, who is the only person still alive on the boat. As Harold describes the situation, it becomes clear that there is no hope left—the hurricane will undoubtedly sink his boat soon. In a very sad and worried voice, the President then makes a joke:

President: “Well, I don’t know, man. Sounds pretty bad, Harold. I think I’d ask for my money back.”

This is another instance of incongruity used as an ingredient of humor (Chapman & Foot, 2007). As a member of the navy, Harold obviously didn’t pay any money to go on this trip, so it doesn’t make

sense for him to ask for his money back. This joke is another example of the kind of “outer space” imaginative description that Takekuro (2006) pointed out as being characteristic of American jokes. It is meant to make Harold laugh. Sadly, he doesn’t.

Most likely, Japanese would not feel it appropriate to joke at such a time—or indeed, in any of the situations depicted in Spontaneous Joke Examples 1 through 5. For in addition to the use of humor being limited to members of the in-group (*uchi*) and to informal situations in Japan, it seems that Japanese humor is generally restricted to non-serious contexts.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that there are differences between Japan and America in terms of *who* tells prepared jokes: generally only professionals in Japan, as opposed to virtually anyone in America. Moreover, it explained that there are differences in the content and uses of spontaneous conversational humor in these two cultures as well. According to Takekuro (2006), Japanese conversational humor tends to be limited to word-level context, while American conversational jokes often expand the discourse context into highly imaginative realms. Japanese conversational humor tends to be limited to informal conversations between in-group members, while English speakers make jokes in a wide range of situations, both formal and informal, and with all sorts of interlocutors. In addition, examples from movies and television series suggest that Americans use humor to lighten up serious situations in a way that Japanese might think inappropriate.

Perhaps it is such different ways of making spontaneous jokes and differences in judgment about when jokes are appropriate that leave many Japanese feeling mystified by “American jokes”. It is hoped that this paper will help clear up some of the mystery surrounding American humor.

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