

Humor in Manzai Stand-up Comedy: A Historical and Comparative Analysis

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Abstract: This paper explores the history and humor of manzai, or contemporary Japanese stand-up comedy. It will highlight a particular characteristic of manzai, which is the strong tradition of dialogue in performing comedy. The dialogue tradition in manzai will be contrasted with the tradition of the comic monologue in American comedy from a historical perspective. Cross-cultural distinctions will be discussed along with excerpts from actual comedy performances, through which some patterns of constructing humor are illuminated. The paper will also highlight particular elements of humor observed in manzai while drawing insights from the literature on Japanese comedy, American comedy, as well as humor studies. Examining manzai in its historical development and its characteristics, the present study attempts to provide insights into humor and comedy in Japan.

Keywords: Humor, Manzai, Stand-up Comedy, Japanese Comedy, American Comedy

Introduction

HUMOR BRINGS PEOPLE together through shared laughter, for we exchange humorous remarks based on shared knowledge and life experiences. Yet communication of humor involves more than enjoying social camaraderie. In the context of “carnival,” or the folk culture of humor in medieval Europe, Bakhtin argues that a comedian would provide an audience with “a new outlook on the world,” while liberating them from their conventional ways of thinking, reasoning, and behaving.¹ That is, the audience perceives humor when their common schemes of perception are taken over by schemes with “a completely new order” of perception.²

Stand-up comedy is similar to other kinds of major comic entertainment where common values are both reinforced and reconstructed through the communication of humor. In the context of American stand-up comedy, Ajaye and Gelbart contend that a comedian presents a viewpoint that not only foregrounds shared knowledge but also stimulates, challenges, and influences audience perceptions.³ For this reason, stand-up comedians are said to be “cultural critics”⁴ and “our spokesperson[s], mediator[s], and articulator[s] of our culture.”⁵ As Mintz puts it, a stand-up comedy performance is an ideal site for social and cultural study: “the student of a culture and society cannot

find a more revealing index to values, attitudes, dispositions, and concerns [than] the performance of stand-up comedy.”⁶

Building on these contentions about American stand-up comedy, this paper considers *manzai*, or Japanese stand-up comedy, as comic entertainment in which culture is constructed discursively through the communication of humor. The paper explores *manzai*’s history and humor while highlighting a particular characteristic of *manzai*, i.e. the strong tradition of dialogue in performing comedy. The dialogue tradition in *manzai* will be contrasted with the tradition of the comic monologue in American comedy from a historical perspective. This cross-cultural distinction will be discussed along with excerpts from actual comedy performances, through which some patterns of constructing humor are illuminated.

The discussion will then turn to the characteristics of humor in *manzai*. In this part, too, I will conduct a contrastive analysis of *manzai* with American stand-up comedy. The contrastive approach is taken here because some elements of humor in *manzai* will become distinct vis-à-vis those in American stand-up comedy by way of comparison. As Mintz contends, comedy performance offers rich accounts of our society and culture. Yet even richer accounts should yield if comedy from one culture is contrasted

¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 34.

² Ibid., 34.

³ Ajaye, *Comic Insights: The Art of Stand-up Comedy*; Gelbart, “Send out the clowns.”

⁴ Koziski, “The standup comedian as anthropologist: Intentional culture critic,” 57; Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*, xvi.

⁵ Mintz, “Stand up comedy as social and cultural mediation,” 75.

⁶ Ibid., 71.

with that from another culture. The analysis will identify types of humor that distinguish *manzai* from American stand-up comedy as well as types of humor observable in both contexts.

Compared to extensive works on American stand-up comedy with reference to American culture and society, much less has been explored on *manzai* despite its long-term popularity. Besides, the literature on *manzai* is mostly written in Japanese, thus it fails to reach wider audiences who might be interested in understanding Japanese culture and society from the point of view of comedy performance. The other objective of this paper is therefore to introduce works on Japanese comedy to readers of English.

History of *Manzai*: The Dialogue Tradition

Manzai started in the thirteenth century as a New Year's (*oshōgatsu*) ritual to wish for longevity and prosperity.⁷ At first, *manzai* was not intended as entertainment but was purely ritual conducted by two persons who provided tokens of blessing along with singing and dancing. The difference between the old-time ritual *manzai* and modern comic *manzai* is marked by the *kanji* characters.⁸ While modern *manzai* is spelled as “漫才,” expressing the “comic” (漫) ‘*man*’ “talent” (才) ‘*zai*’ of the performers, *manzai* was originally “萬歳,” meaning, “numerous”⁹ ‘*man*’ (萬) “years” ‘*zai*’ (歳).

Since its early days, *manzai* was performed in the duo format that comprises “the serious *tayū* and comical *saizō*” characters.¹⁰ The two characters were both deities but they had distinctive functions for the performance; the *tayū* performed solemnly, while the *saizō* sang and danced comically and added a celebratory tone to the performance.¹¹ The contrast was not only the *tayū*'s seriousness as opposed to the *saizō*'s comicality. Another contrast is that while the *tayū* and *saizō* were both divine characters, the *tayū* was much higher in rank than the *saizō*. Non-

etheless, the *saizō* would mock the *tayū*'s serious performance and thereby subvert the established hierarchy.

During the Muromachi period (1336-1573), the comical aspect of the ritual enhanced as the playful rebellion of the *saizō* against the *tayū* became more evident and frequent.¹² By the Edo era (1600-1867), *manzai* pivoted on humorous interactions between the two deities.¹³ In the dialogue, the *saizō* would comically distract the *tayū*'s solemn performance, and the *tayū* would reprimand the *saizō* in response. This structure appears to be the template of contemporary *manzai*; Stocker defines contemporary *manzai* as “the antagonistic yet friendly, fast-paced dialogue” between the wise person and the fool.¹⁴

By the end of the nineteenth century, *manzai* was no longer a ritual. *Manzai* performers became entertainers who presented comic acts in front of live audiences at *yose* (寄席), the public entertainment theater that literally means “sheets” ‘*se*’ (席) that “gather crowds” ‘*yo*(*se*)’ (寄(世)).¹⁵ The duo changed their names from the divine characters to the theatrical personae, i.e. *boke* (the fool) and *tsukkomi* (the wise person). With this change, *manzai* was endowed with a new set of *kanji* characters, that is, “万才”.¹⁶ The new characters (i.e. numerous “万”¹⁷ talents “才”) indicate that the entertainment is filled with a variety of talents of *manzai* performers.¹⁸

Manzai at the time was comprised of various types of acts. *Manzai* performances presented singing, dancing, comic monologues and dialogues, improvised comic acts known as *niwaka* (literally meaning, “sudden” or “unexpected”), short comic storytelling called *karukuchi* (“light-mouth”), and parodies of political speeches and higher-class theater performances like *kyōgen* and *kabuki*.¹⁹ The content of *manzai* typically involved obscene, vulgar materials and, therefore, *manzai* was temporarily banned in certain districts during the nineteenth century.²⁰

⁷ Goto, “Bugaku, ennen, nō, kyōgen, manzai, kōjakumai,” Maeda, *Kamigata manzai happyaku-nen-shi*; Okada, “Manzai no rekishi to tenbō”; Tsurumi, *Tayū saizō den: Manzai o tsuranuku mono*.

⁸ Tsurumi, *Tayū saizō den*.

⁹ “*Man* (萬)” is also used as a numerical unit, “ten thousands”.

¹⁰ Goto, “Bugaku, ennen, nō, kyōgen, manzai, kōjakumai,” 114, my translation from Japanese.

¹¹ Goto argues that the combination of seriousness and comicality is also found in traditional Japanese theater performances such as *nō* and *kyōgen*.

¹² Maeda, *Kamigata manzai happyaku-nen-shi*; Tsurumi, *Tayū saizō den: Manzai o tsuranuku mono*; Yoshikawa, “Popular performing arts: Manzai and rakugo.”

¹³ Inoue, *Manzai: Osaka no warai*; Maeda, *Kamigata manzai happyaku-nen-shi*.

¹⁴ Stocker, “Manzai,” 299.

¹⁵ According to the etymological dictionary, *Gogen yurai jiten* (available online at <http://gogen-allguide.com>), “寄(世) (*yo* (*se*))” of the *yose* theater is a shortened form of the verb, “*yoseru*,” or “to gather (crowds)”. In the past, the theater was also called “*hito-yose-seki* (people-gather-sheets)”.

¹⁶ Aiba, *Manzai nyūmon hyakka*.

¹⁷ The new character (“万”) is an abbreviation of “萬”. Thus, like “萬,” “万” means “ten thousands,” as well as “numerous”.

¹⁸ Inoue, *Manzai: Osaka no warai*.

¹⁹ Inoue, *Manzai: Osaka no warai*; Yamakawa, *Kamigata geinin banashi*.

²⁰ Aiba, *Manzai nyūmon hyakka*; Akita, *Watashi wa manzai sakusha*; Nagaoki, *Kamigata shyōgē kenbunroku*; Yamakawa, *Kamigata geinin banashi*.

As Japan was experiencing democratization and modernization at the beginning of the twentieth century, the content of *manzai* performances significantly changed. *Manzai* eliminated variety acts and concentrated on humorous dialogue between the fool and the wise person. Kizukawa discusses how *manzai* underwent drastic changes in its content, largely due to the contribution of Akita Minoru, one of the most prolific writers of *manzai* routines in the post-WWII era.²¹ Akita would often express that his mission as a comedy writer was to change the vulgar humor in *manzai* into “humor that families at home feel safe to laugh about.”²²

Because the new *manzai* emphasized the conversational element, *manzai* then was often called “*shabekuri* (*shaberi*) *manzai*,” which can be translated as “chatty *manzai*” or “talking *manzai*.” In the 1930s, the change was marked by the new spelling, “漫才.” The new character, “漫 (*man*),” was drawn from the emerging popular entertainment at the time, *manga* (漫画) or comic cartoon. The change was meant to borrow the cutting-edge image of *manga* and to distinguish the new form of *manzai* from its stigmatized predecessor (i.e. “万才”).²³ Since then, *shabekuri manzai* has been the predominant form of *manzai*.

Today, *manzai* (“漫才”) generally refers to *shabekuri manzai*.²⁴ *Shabekuri manzai* (hereafter referred to as “*manzai*”²⁵) is performed by male-male, male-female, and female-female duos. As Aiba explains, male-male duos have been the dominant pattern of contemporary *manzai*. Some of the male-male duos are brothers (e.g., Yumeji Itoshi & Kimi Koishi, Nakagawake), but at present the majority of them are friends from school or classmates at training institutes for comedians.²⁵ Male-female combinations, typically married couples, were common until the 1960s.²⁶ Currently, however, a few male-female duos perform *manzai*. Female-female duos have always been rare compared to the other two combina-

tions.²⁷ Even today, female duos are the minority in the entertainment genre.

The content of *manzai* greatly changed in the 1980s when a younger generation of comedians introduced “*honno manzai*,” i.e. *manzai* that expresses *honno*, or uncovered gut feelings, that are often concealed by *tatema*, or external pretense.²⁸ *Honno manzai* consistently attacked the weak and the marginalized. Ota argues that *honno manzai* appealed to audiences of younger generations particularly because it exposed *honno* as opposed to hypocritical *tatema* in the society.²⁹

Honno manzai is generally considered a “boom,” or short-lived trend, whose peak passed by the mid-eighties.³⁰ Along with the boom of *honno manzai* in the eighties, the target audiences of *manzai* shifted from the general public across different generations to the younger generations. In particular, late teens and those in their early twenties became the main target audience, and popular comedians were idolized among teenagers.³¹ Today, though comedians are no longer considered idols, *manzai* still targets younger audiences, such as those in their twenties and thirties, in addition to teenagers. Consequently, contemporary *manzai* performances tend to center on topics that interest the younger generations, like childhood, school life, popular culture, and relationships.

Dialogue as a Crucial Vehicle to Express Humor in *Manzai*

Ever since the distinctions between the roles of “the serious *tayū* and the comical *saizō*”³² were established as an integral component of ritual performance, *manzai* has consistently been performed in pairs. Maeda argues that “*manzai* is an entertainment in which two persons embody the “*ken-gu kankei* (wise-fool relation)” and contends that the contrast between the wise person and the fool is what constitutes *manzai*.³³

²¹ Kizukawa, *Kamigata no warai: Manzai to rakugo*.

²² Ibid., 78, my translation from Japanese.

²³ Horie, *Yoshimoto kōgyō no kenkyū*; Kizukawa, *Kamigata no warai: Manzai to rakugo*; Maeda, *Kamigata manzai happyaku-nen-shi*; Nagaoki, *Kamigata shyōgō kenbunroku*.

²⁴ Maeda asserts it is wrong to equate *manzai* with *shabekuri manzai*. He lists other types of *manzai*: *onkyoku-manzai* (*manzai* accompanied by music performance), *odori-manzai* (dance *manzai*), and *shigusa-manzai* (*manzai* that consists of impersonations, parody, or gesture in mimicry). However, as Maeda acknowledges, comic dialogue is by far the most common content of modern *manzai* performance.

²⁵ Aiba, *Manzai nyūmon hyakka*.

²⁶ Aiba, *Kamigata manzai nyūmon*.

²⁷ See Aiba, *Manzai nyūmon hyakka*.

²⁸ Furukawa, *Sengo kamigata owaraikai no nagare to sono shūhen*; Inoue, *Osaka no bunka to warai*; Kizukawa, *Kamigata no warai: Manzai to rakugo*; Ota, *Shakai wa warau: Boke to tsukkomi no ningen kankei*.

²⁹ Ota, *Shakai wa warau*.

³⁰ Furukawa, *Sengo kamigata owaraikai no nagare to sono shūhen*; Inoue, *Osaka no bunka to warai*; Kano, “*Manzai metsubōron*”; Kizukawa, *Kamigata no warai: Manzai to rakugo*.

³¹ Furukawa, *Sengo kamigata owaraikai no nagare to sono shūhen*; Inoue, *Osaka no bunka to warai*.

³² Goto, “*Bugaku, ennen, nō, kyōgen, manzai, kōjakumai*,” 114, my translation from Japanese.

³³ Maeda, *Kamigata manzai happyaku-nen-shi*, 201, my translation from Japanese, emphasis added.

Building on Maeda, Inoue maintains that the “*ken-gu kankei* (wise-fool relation)” is the basic structure of *manzai*.³⁴ In addition to the contrast between the “*ken* (wise)” and the “*gu* (fool),” Inoue lists other sets of contrasts that *manzai* represents: “wisdom vs. silliness, order vs. chaos, common sense vs. non-sense, *tatema* (external pretense³⁵) vs. *hon* (true feeling), responsibility and irresponsibility, rigidity vs. flexibility, reality vs. lie, spirit vs. flesh, actual rules vs. rules governed by desire, sacred vs. secular, the beautiful and the ugly.”³⁶

Such juxtapositions are constantly made in contemporary *manzai* performances, as the *boke* (the fool) and the *tsukkomi* (the wise character) exchange their opposing points of view. This is illustrated, for example, in the *manzai* dialogue by the comedy duo Yokoyama Yasushi & Nishikawa Kiyoshi, transcribed and extracted below with English translation in italics:³⁷

[Excerpt from the DVD series, “20 *seiki meijin densetsu: Bakushō!! Yasushi Kiyoshi Manzai daizen-shū* Vol. 6 (20th century master legend: An explosion of laughter!! The complete works series of Yasushi Kiyoshi *manzai* Vol. 6)”]

(Y=Yasushi, the fool; K=Kiyoshi, the wise character; A=Audience)

1. Y: *kimi ntoko nankawa yappari otoshiyori> nan^ya kanya ittatte mo: <*
2. *sannin hodo ittennoya.= At your place, there are three seniors anyway.*
(Three lines skipped)
6. Y: [taihenyarona shikashi:= *I guess it's not easy.*
7. K: =*hitori me^ndo: mitekureruka, Can you take care of one of them?*
8. Y: *iran iran.* ((Face frowns)) *Don't need any, don't need any.*
9. *hahahahahah[hah*
10. Y: [*iran. (.) washi toshiyori kirai. Don't need. I dislike elders.*
11. A: *hahahahahahahahah*
12. K: *so^:yu: koto dewa ikemasen[yo:~? That is not good, okay?*
(Skipped lines))
27. K: =*oto:san oka:san ga oruka^ra ~h umareta koto ni taishite >yappa*
28. *sorya<kansha sena akan[shi, We should feel grateful for the fact that we were given birth because of our fathers and mothers.*

29. Y: [sorya ma so:yarone:~?=*Well that's right.*

30. K: =>*honma< niju:isse:ki ni mukatte= Really, with the twenty first century nearing,*

31. Y: =*ho: ho:=*

32. K: =*ko:re:ka shakai o muka ↑ ennoy-akara: the society is changing into an aging society -*

33. Y: *sense: wa ko: osshattemasu=* ((Turns his body to the audience with a smile on his face.)) *The “teacher” is saying so.*

34. K: =[>(omae-)<You-

3 5 . A :
=[*hahahahahahahahahahahahahahah*

At line 1, Yasushi refers to Kiyoshi's parents and parents-in-law as “seniors (*otoshiyori*)” living at his house. When Kiyoshi asks Yasushi in a joking manner if he can take care of one of them (lines 8 and 10), Yasushi immediately rejects the request and bluntly tells Kiyoshi that he dislikes elders (“*iran. washi toshiyori kirai*”). Yasushi's *hon* (gut feeling) invites the audience's laughter, as noted at line 11.

Kiyoshi responds to Yasushi, representing a *tatema* perspective. He further continues to preach to Yasushi; at lines 27 and 28, he says, “We should feel grateful for the fact that we were given birth because of our fathers and mothers (“*oto:san oka:san ga orukara umareta koto ni taishite yappa sorya kansha sena akan*”).” Kiyoshi begins to sound more like a politician at lines 30 and 32 as he tells Yasushi that “with the twenty-first century nearing, the society is changing into an aging society (“*niju:isse:ki ni mukatte ko:re:ka shakai o mukaennoyakara:*”).” The audience might have found this statement by Kiyoshi particularly humorous since he was indeed a politician at the time while also working as a comedian.³⁸

Then, at line 34, Yasushi directs his utterance to the audience and teases Kiyoshi's serious *tatema* opinion: “The teacher is saying so (“*sense: wa ko: osshattemasu*”)” (line 34). Yasushi frames his partner comedian as a respectable politician, referring to him as “*sensē* (literally, “teacher”),” a deferential reference term for politicians. Furthermore, he uses the hyper-polite form, “*osshattemasu* (“say”)” to Kiyoshi. Here, Yasushi creates a boundary between Kiyoshi and the rest of the participants (i.e. Yasushi and the audience) who, as lay citizens, listen to the politician's speech. Subversive humor emerges as Yasushi signals distance to Kiyoshi while bonding

³⁴ Inoue, *Manzai: Osaka no warai*, 33, my translation from Japanese.

³⁵ The English translation of *tatema* and *hon* are adopted from Lebra, *The Japanese self in cultural logic*.

³⁶ Ibid, 33, my translation from Japanese

³⁷ This example is transcribed according to the transcription conventions in Atkinson and Heritage, *Structures of social action: Studies in conversation analysis*. See Appendix for the full description of the conventions.

³⁸ Nishikawa Kiyoshi was elected as a politician and joined the House of Councilors (*Sangiin*) in 1986. On Kiyoshi's dual career, see Adachi, *Itai hōdai: Kamigata manzai shi*, Aiba, *Kamigata manzai nyūmon*.

with the audience. As illustrated with this example, humor in *manzai* emerges as two comedians with contrasting personae exchange their views. The audience laughs, perceiving the constant juxtaposition between *majime* (serious) and *fu-majime* (non-serious), *tatema* (external pretense) and *honne* (gut feeling) among other sets of contrasts.

Cross-cultural Distinction: The Monologue Tradition in American Stand-up Comedy

In contrast to the long history of dialogue in Japanese comedy, American stand-up comedy has a strong tradition of monologue. Koziski-Olson traces the origin of contemporary American stand-up comedy in the performances of clowns, jesters, tricksters, and fools throughout the world and across time, including ancient Greece and Rome, Africa, Asia, mediaval Europe, as well as in indigenous societies in South and Central America.³⁹ In addition, American stand-up comedy also has roots in several comic entertainment genres that emerged in the United States in the nineteenth century. One of the earliest ancestors of stand-up comedy is minstrelsy, a variety show popular in the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁰ Minstrelsy involved a comedian called “the stump speaker.” The stump speaker would provide “monologues [ranging] from pure nonsense to lampoons of social or philosophical issues.”⁴¹

Stebbins⁴² considers that one of the first stand-up comics in the United States was Mark Twain. Twain toured the country and presented so-called “humorous lecturers” for approximately fifty years beginning in 1856. Stebbins notes that a comic monologist like Twain was “a lecturer who was often funny,” and thus, “not a pure stand-up comic.”⁴³ Nonetheless, Stebbins asserts that Twain would entertain his audience in a way similar to the way that the stand-up comedian does today. Stebbins illustrates the similarity by describing the lecturing style of Twain:

[Twain] delivered monologues of various lengths on numerous subjects, many of which

were treated not only with wit but also with satire. Twain would lounge onstage, drawling out tall tales and anecdotes, pausing skillfully while his audience roared with laughter at certain passages.⁴⁴

Standing in front of live audiences, the comic lecturer presented verbal narratives and evoked audience laughter. The tradition of the comic monologue was in this way established at an early stage in the history of American entertainment.⁴⁵

Vaudeville, a live variety show that started in the 1880s and prospered until the 1920s, is another important source of American stand-up comedy.⁴⁶ Vaudeville offered various types of performance: acrobatics, dance, music, magic tricks, comic dialogue, improvised skits, and parodies of political and religious rhetorics.⁴⁷

McLean notes that among the wide range of performance, comic monologue and dialogue comprised the integral part of the vaudeville show.⁴⁸ He contends that comic monologue was essential to the performance:

The vaudeville comics may have practiced a hundred (of jokes) that was new, but they drew upon a strong American tradition in humor in their use of the monologue as a vehicle.⁴⁹

Humor in vaudeville was often conveyed in monologue, and this communication style was “a strong American tradition in humor.”⁵⁰

Quoting Page’s instructive book for aspiring vaudeville writers, McLean identifies the typical structure of the vaudeville monologue. He explains that the vaudeville monologue would “build toward several major points by means of subordinate giggles and chuckles,” and “the best material” comes at the end to “evoke the greatest amount of applause.”⁵¹ Apparently this structural pattern applies not only to the vaudeville monologue but also to the contemporary American stand-up comedy narrative. Just like the comic monologue in vaudeville, the stand-up comedy narrative presents a series of subordinate

³⁹ Koziski-Olson, “Stand up comedy.”

⁴⁰ Bushman, “The Stand-up comedian on television”; Koziski-Olson, “Stand up comedy.”

⁴¹ Bushman, “The Stand-up comedian on television,” 24-25.

⁴² Stebbins examines stand-up comedy in Canada. However, in his review of the history of stand-up comedy, the author discusses the history of American stand-up comedy, as Canadian stand-up has grown out of American stand-up comedy.

⁴³ Stebbins, *The Laugh-makers: Stand-up Comedy as Art, Business, and Life-style*, 7.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁵ Bushman mentions that in addition to comic lecturers like Twain, other nineteenth-century entertainers, such as the Yankee yarn-spinners and tall-tellers of the Missouri Valley, also entertained live audiences with comic monologue.

⁴⁶ Bushman, “The Stand-up comedian on television”; Franklin, Joe Franklin’s *Encyclopedia of Comedians*; Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*; Koziski-Olson, “Stand up comedy”.

⁴⁷ Koziski-Olson, “Stand up comedy”; Nilsen & Nilsen, *Encyclopedia of twentieth century American humor*.

⁴⁸ McLean, *American Vaudeville as Ritual*.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

joke lines that ultimately lead to the punch line. The pattern is evident, for example, in the following routine by comedian Sharon Houston, whose performance was aired on *Comedy Central*, a cable and satellite television channel in the United States:

[Excerpt from Sharon Houston's performance in "Premium Blend" on *Comedy Central*, May 10, 2002]

1. SH:uh:: I am half Cuban half Texan=my father is a big Cubano and he
2. has a pinky ring to prove it. (.) >frightening<
3. A:huh huh huh
4. SH:h he: uh: he: uh: he- he's *very* emotional.he tends to blow things
5. out of proportion for example >if I were to< disagree with my
6. father? (.) I defy him.
7. (0.1)
8. A:huh huh huh huh
9. SH:(he's like that. right) hh he's got a *very* thick (.) Spanish (.)
10. accent. but he was born in this *country*.
11. A:huh huh huh huh ha:: ha:: ha::
12. SH:okay.
13. (.)
14. SH:he's trying to prove something. (.) right,
15. A:hahahahah
16. SH:born in this country- the only time he loses his accent >is< when he
17. uses profanity.
18. SH:hh he says things like ((with heavy Spanish accent)) Charon. do
19. you think those people in Hollywood care about you, (.) ((Switch
20. to American nazalized accent)) they don't give a ra::t's a::ss.
21. A:HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA ((applause follows))

In this excerpt, Houston first introduces small "points" for laughter, as she describes her own father (lines 1-2, lines 4 through 6). In line 9 and afterward, the narrative focuses on her American-born father's "very thick Spanish accent". As Houston continues the narrative on her father's accent, the "subordinate giggles and chuckles"⁵² emerge in lines 11 and 15. "The greatest amount of applause"⁵³ occurs at line 21, when Houston delivers the punch line by acting

out how the father "loses his accent" when expressing "profanity." In fact, by simply tracking the audience turns, we can see that their laughter increases turn by turn (3, 8, and 11) and becomes the loudest at line 21 (i.e. immediately after the punch line). The increase in the volume of laughter indicates that the comedian develops the narrative by gradually intensifying the degree of humor, leading up to the maximum at the punch line.

The monologue is historically the popular communication style to convey humor in American comic entertainment. The tradition was carried on in contemporary American stand-up comedy. Bushman considers the stand-up comedian to be a comic performer who presents "a succession of jokes or otherwise humorous comments while *standing alone* before an audience".⁵⁴ Mintz similarly maintains that stand-up comedy is:

an encounter between a single, standing performer behaving comically and/or saying funny things directly to an audience, unsupported by very much in the way of costume, prop, setting, or dramatic vehicle.⁵⁵

In this way, American stand-up comedy is generally considered as solo act mainly comprised of verbal performance.⁵⁶

It should be noted, however, that both Bushman and Mintz assert that confining the term "stand-up comedy" to solo verbal performance is "strict and limiting."⁵⁷ In Bushman's view, comedy teams like the Smothers Brothers, Rowan & Martin, and Nichols & May could also be considered under the category of stand-up comedy. Bushman contends that these comedy duos were "strikingly similar to pure stand-ups in an essential way" in that they all "perform humorous material before live audiences largely unsupported by elaborate props, scenery, dramatic narrative, or supporting casts."⁵⁸ Solo performance is nonetheless the standard style in American stand-up comedy at present.

Humor in *Manzai*

Drawing insights from works on Japanese comedy, American comedy, as well as from humor literature and theories of humor, the rest of the paper will explore the nature of humor in *manzai* in comparison to humor in American stand-up comedy. We will

⁵² Ibid., 112

⁵³ Ibid., 112

⁵⁴ Bushman, "The Stand-up comedian on television," 23, emphasis added.

⁵⁵ Mintz, "Stand up comedy as social and cultural mediation," 71, emphasis added.

⁵⁶ This tendency also applies to the British context (see McIlvenny et al., "I really wanna make you laugh: Stand-up comedy and audience response," Rutter, *Standup as Interaction: Performance and Audience in Comedy Venues*) and the Canadian context (see Stebbins, *The Laugh-makers: Stand-up Comedy as Art, Business, and Life-style*).

⁵⁷ Mintz, "Stand up comedy as social and cultural mediation," 71.

⁵⁸ Bushman, "The Stand-up comedian on television," 24.

first examine types of humor in *manzai* that are also commonly observed in American stand-up comedy.

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

In *manzai*, laughing at the comedian's foolish behavior is "the classic and basic type of laughter."⁵⁹ Senzaki explains that the fool in *manzai* is called "*boke*," because the comedian literally does *boke-ru* (to act dull and silly), and thereby evokes a sense of superiority in the audience's mind. He notes, however, that the laughter of superiority is different from scornfully laughing at the comedian. When audiences laugh at the comedian's foolish conduct, they laugh not only out of the sense of superiority but also as a result of experiencing "*kyōkan* (empathy, shared feelings)" and "*kōi* (affection, positive emotions)" toward the comedian.⁶⁰

A similar observation is made by Mintz regarding American stand-up comedy. Mintz explains that comedians play "[the] role of [the] negative exemplar" and "represent conduct to be ridiculed and rejected."⁶¹ He identifies various types of negative exemplars in stand-up comedy:

The grotesque, the buffoon, the fool, the simpleton, the scoundrel, the drunkard, the liar, the coward, the effete, the tightwad, the boor, the egoist, the cuckold, the shrew, the weakling, the neurotic, and other such reifications of socially unacceptable traits are enacted by the comedian to be ridiculed, laughed at, repudiated, and, finally, symbolically "punished."⁶²

Mintz asserts that as the comedian presents these personae on stage, audiences laugh at him or her and experience a sense of "superiority" and "relief."⁶³

Mintz argues that audiences laugh at the comedian but, at the same time, they "secretly recognize" that the comedian's behavior and remarks are what they actually relate to their own experiences.⁶⁴ In this way, as in *manzai*, the laughter of superiority in American stand-up comedy does not necessarily function under the dichotomous relation in which

"we," audiences, laugh at "him/her," the comedian. Rather, audiences laugh at the comedian with a sense of shared feelings.

Narratives of "Us": Uniting Through Humor

Humor has long been discussed in relation to solidarity among social group members. According to Martineau, social members establish group solidarity, specifically by communicating two types of humor: humor that positively portrays group members or their social habit, and self-deprecating humor that deals with the "faults, weakness, or undesirable characteristics" of the group.⁶⁵ Both types of humor are common in American stand-up comedy. Gelbart describes stand-up comedians as "the correspondents of our common experiences," who present narratives of "us," i.e. "what we look like, how we grew up, how we didn't, how we relate, how we don't."⁶⁶ Bushman states that stand-up comedy "mirrors the American experience."⁶⁷ Revealing both positive and negative aspects of the common experiences, stand-up comedians evoke humor that fosters emotional bonding among social members.

Manzai performers also convey narratives that reflect common values in the society. According to Akita, *manzai* dialogue between the fool and the wise person replicates a scene from daily life where two people confide in each other about ordinary life experiences.⁶⁸ Building on Akita, Inoue argues that laughter in *manzai* is "*kyōkan no warai* (laughter of empathy/shared feelings)."⁶⁹ Audiences share the humor of *manzai* based on their common experiences, and, by doing so, they reinforce their group identity and solidarity.

Subversive Humor in *Manzai*

As noted earlier, humor sometimes functions as a subversive force against order and control by bringing common values and norms into question. The rebellious force in humor has been discussed by scholars in various disciplines. For example, Douglas

⁵⁹ Senzaki, *Downtown o yomu*, 38, my translation from Japanese.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 50.

⁶¹ Ibid., 74-75.

⁶² Ibid., 75.

⁶³ Neither Senzaki nor Mintz mentions it, but the laughter of superiority has been explicated by "superiority theory." Keith-Spiegel explains that the theory originates in the works of Plato and Aristotle and was elaborated in Hobbs. According to the theory, humans have the urge to laugh at others' mistakes, misfortunes, or inferiority, because doing so will satisfy our sense of superiority.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 74.

⁶⁵ Martineau, "A model of the social functions of humor," 118.

⁶⁶ Gelbart, "Send out the clowns," 11.

⁶⁷ Bushman, "The Stand-up comedian on television," 23.

⁶⁸ Akita, *Watashi wa manzai sakusha*.

⁶⁹ Inoue, *Manzai: Osaka no warai*, 31.

examines jokes from an anthropological perspective and argues that jokes function as “anti-rites” and contest social order.⁷⁰ Douglas draws insights from Bergson and Freud and contends that humor is “subversive,” as it involves “a victorious tilting of uncontrol against control, an image of the leveling of hierarchy.”⁷¹

The subversion illustrated by Douglas is apparent in the performance of *manzai*. Aiba asserts that although the contrast between the wise person and the fool in *manzai* is generally considered as that of “*majime* (the serious person)” and “*fu-majime* (the non-serious person),” what the fool actually embodies is the spirit of “*han -majime* (the anti-seriousness).”⁷² Aiba argues that with this “anti-serious” spirit, the comedian “rebels against power and authority” and “uncovers deceptions in the serious.”⁷³

Subversion in *manzai* is also discussed in Inoue.⁷⁴ According to Inoue, *manzai* demonstrates the contrast between “chaos and order,” or “*honno* (true feeling) and *tatema* (external pretense),” among others.⁷⁵ In his view, *manzai* symbolizes the subversive force in society; in *manzai*, “chaos” challenges “order,” and “*honno*” overpowers “*tatema*.”

Expressing Subversion in Comedy: Cross-cultural Distinction

Subversive humor is certainly not a unique quality of Japanese *manzai* but it is rather a type of humor observable in comedy across cultures. Regarding American stand-up comedy, Gilbert contends that a stand-up comedian is a “licensed social critic,”⁷⁶ because he or she “can critique the dominant culture, speaking the truth with impunity.”⁷⁷ In other words, “the comic functions as a heckler of the status quo.”⁷⁸ Keough contends that American stand-up comedians like Lenny Bruce and George Carlin, i.e. comedians known for their controversial material, aim to have their audiences “see things in a new way or, rather, as things really are without the frosting.”⁷⁹ According

to Keough, these comedians reveal “the truth beneath the surface,”⁸⁰ and their manner of doing so is straightforward, and oftentimes, aggressive. Keough illustrates Carlin’s aggressive style of presenting critique by quoting Carlin himself: “(as a stand-up comedian,) [y]ou get to name the targets, you get to fire the bullets.”⁸¹

While social commentaries may be expressed straightforwardly or aggressively in American stand-up comedy, critique in Japanese *manzai* tends to be attenuated. *Manzai* that involves critical commentary is particularly called “*boyaki manzai*,” which can be translated as “grumbling *manzai*.” In *boyaki manzai*, comedians, especially, those who play the fool role, convey criticism on social, political, and everyday matters. Instead of expressing critiques straightforwardly, however, *manzai* comedians “grumble (*boyaku*)” on stage.⁸²

Kizukawa differentiates *boyaki* from *fūshi* (satire), stating that the latter is “laughter as a weapon (*buki to shite no warai*)” that “stabs”⁸³ the very target, while *boyaki* is not. According to Kizukawa, *boyaki* is the “comedians” strategy to attack their target from a safe zone.”⁸⁴ As Inoue suggests, *boyaki* is a murmur or a private, casual whine that the speaker keeps to himself or herself while addressing a third party who is not responsible for the cause of whining. Social critiques in *manzai* are thus not directed at the target; they are transformed into *boyaki*, or murmurs.

What Characterizes Japanese Humor: A Case of Stand-up Comedy Performance

The historical and cross-cultural perspective taken in this paper has elucidated particular elements of humor in *manzai*. In contrast to American stand-up where solo performance is the predominant style, *manzai* has long been and still is performed in the duo format.⁸⁵ The *manzai* comedy duo expresses a set of contrasts with their stage personae or sometimes their real-life personalities as well as attitudes,

⁷⁰ Douglas, “Jokes.” This is pointed out in Mintz, “Stand up comedy as social and cultural mediation,” Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*.

⁷¹ Douglas, *Implicit Meanings: Selected Essays in Anthropology*, 152.

⁷² Aiba, *Manzai nyūmon hyakka*, 11.

⁷³ Ibid., 11.

⁷⁴ Inoue, *Manzai: Osaka no warai*.

⁷⁵ Inoue, *Manzai: Osaka no warai*, 33.

⁷⁶ Gilbert, *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*, 17.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 22.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 22.

⁷⁹ Keough, *Punchlines: The Violence of American Humor*, 194.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 180.

⁸¹ Ibid., 172.

⁸² Kizukawa, *Kamigata no warai: Manzai to rakugo*; Inoue, *Osaka no bunka to warai*.

⁸³ In fact, the *kanji* character, “shi (刺),” of “*fūshi*” means “to stab.”

⁸⁴ Ibid., 43, my translation from Japanese.

⁸⁵ The strong tradition of duo format in *manzai* is particularly remarkable in the contemporary scene particularly when we consider the fact that solo performance is much more common than duo not only in American stand-up comedy but also in Australian, British and Canadian stand-up comedy.

remarks and viewpoints about particular issues in the society. Humor emerges as the dialogue between two comedians exposes an ostensible gap between, for example, *majime* (serious) and *fu-majime* (non-serious)/*han-majime* (anti-serious), order and chaos, as well as the gap of *honne* (true feeling) from hypocritical *tatemae* (external pretense). The duo format is in this sense essential in the Japanese stand-up performance to create humor and invite audience laughter.

What also characterizes humor in *manzai* is that subversive laughter tends to lose its aggressiveness as comedians disarm controversial critiques and express opinions in the form of *boyaki*, or grumbling. In *boyaki manzai*, the comedian projects his or her image as a “losers” and elicits audience laughter by evoking a sense of superiority as well as *kyōkan*, or empathy, in the audience’s mind. On this point, *manzai* sharply contrasts with American stand-up comedy where controversial remarks may be openly, and sometimes aggressively, expressed, as indicated in Carlin’s allusion of shooting a gun at the target.

By examining the history and humor of *manzai*, the present study attempted to provide insights into

what is considered humorous among members of Japanese society and how they communicate humor. While its focus is limited to the Japanese and American contexts of performing stand-up, the current study aims to serve as one example that offers a comparison of humor across cultures. For better understanding about humor across cultures, it is necessary to investigate comedy performances from other cultural contexts as well. At the same time, because inquiries into the interrelationship between culture and humor go far beyond the performance of stand-up comedy, further research on humor across genres and types of discourse would be highly desirable.

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Appendix

Transcription Conventions

[Based on Atkinson and Heritage]

Symbols	Meaning	Example
:	sound stretch	my:
::	longer sound stretch	uh::
upper case letters	increased volume	and THE^N
° °	decreased volume	°and°
underline	stress	<u>very</u> emotional
period	final, falling intonation	he uses profanity.
question mark	final rising intonation	with my father?
^	non-final rising intonation	fir^st of all
comma	continuing intonation, slight rise	right,
↑	sudden rising intonation	↑GO::D
=	latched speech	and=uh
> <	compressed speech	>if I were to<
-	false restarts	I- I would
square brackets	overlapping speech	got off the [a^irplane, [right.
parentheses	uncertain hearing	(wha:^t.)
(.)	micro pause	
(1.0)	timed pause	
·h	in-breath	
·hh	longer in-breath	
(h)	aspiration	
(hh)	longer aspiration	
hah heh huh	laughter	

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