

Prosody — A Laughing Matter? A Crosscultural Comparison of a Humour Phenomenon (*Rakugo*) in France, Tokyo, and Osaka

Tsuyoshi Kida

Laboratoire Parole et Langage, CNRS-UMR 6057
Université de Provence (France)
kida-t@wanadoo.fr

Abstract

An empirical crosscultural data analysis of a storytelling spectacle in Japan, *rakugo*, has been conducted to evaluate the role that the prosody plays in humour. It has been found that laughing effects depended on the interaction of prosodic features and dialectal markers as well as the audience's reaction in storytellers' discourse. That is, the prosodic account to explain the humorous value of performance could be in conjunction with other socio-cultural factors.

1. Introduction

Analysing spectacles is a delightful pastime of spectators. It is so too for scientists, as it obliges them to appreciate spectacles as spectator, to think instead of actors. Such participative observation is more fascinating when data are culture-specific and even crosscultural, as we could find out unconsciously interiorized cultural matters. This paper is such an exercise.

1.1. What is *rakugo*?

Rakugo, a one-man telling show of humorous story originating from an old urban culture of Tokyo, Kyoto and Osaka, has a long tradition like Western humoristic spectacles (e.g. burlesque, Comedia della Arte). Based on an oral tradition, its stories and oral techniques are conveyed from one generation to the next. The term *rakugo* appeared in 1804, written in two Chinese characters "fall" and "word", and generalized in the mid 19th, but its origin had been a private show during the civil war period in the 16th [1]. The first public show was held in the 18th, leading to the birth of professional performers. Then emotional genres such as tragi-comic (*ninjo-banashi*) or heroi-comic were acted out too until the end of the 19th, during which *rakugo* was perfectionized as a popular entertainment. This historical background reflects most sketches. Some classical storylines are "retro", including *samurai*, *geisha*, *shogun* as personae, but like in Western, the audience of today appreciates all titles given that everyday events and human emotions are universal and timeless topics.

The text is divided into two parts. The preliminary part (*makura*) is talked to the audience. It starts with an opening speech (*maeoki*), variable according to time, space, and storyteller's favour [2]. The talk continues with anecdotes around the main topic along with imitations, light jokes and short comic narratives. Storytellers humorously conduct the topical development and use this part to give to the audience information on a background of the main story [3]. The main part (*hondai*) is the long reported dialogue of a ready-made story, finishing by a punch-line (*ochi*). Therefore, the whole show is made of preface, background, story and punch-line, all appearing in the conversational narratives [4], [5].

1.2. Studies on *rakugo*

The humour of *rakugo* has been investigated since the 1940s [6]. Thirteen tactics attested to date can be classified into four levels: Linguistic level, like a pun (e.g. homophony, paronymy, metaphor, parable, allegory, catachresis); Macro-topical level (absurd logic, inconclusive consequence, circularity, cause-effect inversion); Micro-topical level (e.g. misunderstanding, gradational humour); Communicative level (rhythm-tempo, mime-gesture) [1], [2], [7]. The punch-line is played as a soliloquy or an exchange between the characters [2], presenting little logic with regard to the context, but acted out as if the fact was consequent. It is conform to the surface level (content and form), but not to the level of common sense (i.e. a violation of quality maxim [8]). As a professional, the storyteller Katsura Suzaku [9] described four punch-line varieties: Suspense, based on an un-truthfulness of the fact; Reflection, working on audience's doubt on an untruthfulness; Oddity, revealing a lie or an untruth because of an accidental strange event; Convergence, which eventually convinces the audience of an "artificial truth". He emphasizes techniques of how to manipulate the audience's mind by a series of tension-detente, idea pointed out by Kant [10], Schopenhauer [11], and other modern authors [12]. Katsura's performance theory does succinctly complete text-oriented research, but his view of *rakugo* humour is performance-centred. It is possible to consider the performance with audience's laughter like Bergson [13], conversationists and ethnographers. In conversation, recipients' laughter is not arbitrary, but "invited" with certain cues (e.g. post-utterance completion laugh particles by virtue of a contagious mechanism of laughter [14]). It is reasonable to think that laughter is finely negotiated [15] and this negotiation and the interactive tuning are observable at the intonational and rhythmic levels [16]. Albeit difference of settings, the collaborative work of this sort must be valid to *rakugo* discourse.

2. Analysis

This paper, speculative, is a crosscultural study of spectacle comparing three storytellers' performance of a same content. The goals are to ask: 1) how storytellers perform a humour spectacle by means of prosody; 2) what crosscultural similarities and differences are observable in prosody. The data concerns only a small part of the sketch explained below.

2.1. Data

2.2.1. Sources

The sketch to compare is titled *Yawn lesson* respectively acted out by a storyteller in Osaka, Tokyo and France.

laughter

15. /°TA°MARAN °WAI↓ [+ => Laughter (isolated)
[E. Punch-line]
16. //O::] O°TSURE°SAN wa /GO°KIYO:na↓ [++ =>
Laughter (breaking): just after the utterance

3.2. Tokyo rakugo

[A. Towards the end, character change]

1. //+++++>°NA:NI o↓ /i-TEndAI↓ => No laughter
2. /o°me:tachi wa fu°TA::ri de /ku°darane: °koto↑ [i-TE↓
°YO::↑ /°(h)o::ntoni:↓<]++ => Laughter (isolated): on the
rhematized adverb

[B. First argument]

3. //((ironic tone))>sendo: san /fune o uwate no (h)o e ya-
(te)kure /kore kara hori e aga-te /i-pai ya-te hh /yoru wa
naikai de /°shinjo demo asobo /°fune mo i:ga /ichin'chi
no-teru to /°TAIkutsude /taikutsude h /°narane:↑ /a: a:<
=> No laughter

4. //>na°NI↑ ga °TAIkutsu [°DEYO: ++ => Laughter
(breaking + continual): on the verb

5. /ya-°te°te↓] °TAIkutsu KAYO::↓ /°TEme: WA:↓ [+ =>
Laughter (isolated): just after the utterance

[C. Second argument]

6. /E:] °SA-ki kara↓ /MA-teru↓ /°ore no mi ni↑ /°NA-te↓
/°MIRO↓ [h ++ => Laughter (isolated): just after the ut-
terance

[D. Before the punch-line]

7. /°KO-chi] no °ho: ga↓ /yo-°podo↓ [+ => no Laughter
8. //((yawning)) h °TAIkutsude(h) /°ta(h)ikutsu(h)de(h)↓ ++
=> No laughter
9. ((long yawning)) ha:::[::ah ++++ /ha:]:::[:h =>
Laughter (isolated + breaking): during the yawning per-
formance
10. na°RANE:↓ => no Laughter
[E. Punch-line]
11. //A: °otsuRE↑ NO HO: ga↓ /°KIYO: °DAYO↓ (hhh) ++
=> Laughter (breaking): after a normal pause

3.3. French rakugo

[A. Towards the end, character change]

1. //+++++ c'est °PAS °CROYable +++++
=> No laughter
2. /i' faut °VRAiment le °VOI:R↑ pour le croire↓ +++++ =>
No laughter

[B. First argument]

3. /quels °IMbécILES↓ + /°LE MAÎtre /et L'Élève ++
/°AH↓ [+++ => Laughter (isolated): after a phatic, i.e.
during the pause

4. /ils] sont °VRAIMENT °faits pour
°S'EN°TENDRE↓ [+++++ => Laughter (breaking +
isolated): just after the utterance

[C. Second argument]

5. /et] °MOI alors là-deDANS qu'est-ce que je deviens↓ +
°HEIN + (b') +++ => No laughter

6. /de °QUOI j'ai l'air↓ ++ /pendant que vous faites votre
CIRQUE là↓ + /°HEIN↑ (d') +++ => No laughter

7. /p°t-être que ça vous a°MU::SE↓ => No laughter

[D. Before the punch-line]

8. /mais alors °MOI pardon↓ +++++ => No laughter
9. //((yawning)) OH↑ ce que je m(h)'ennuie(h)↑++++ => No
laughter
10. //((yawning)) h je(h) m(h)'ennuie(h)↓ [+++ => Laughter
(isolated): after the utterance

11. ((yawning)) A::HH je(h) m(h)'en(h)nuie(h)↓ [++ =>
Laughter (isolated): during the utterance

[E. Punch-line]

12. //°AH:: VOTRE AMI::↓ /°LUI::↑ + /IL A °L'AIR
/°TRÈS:: douÉ [++++ => Laughter (breaking): after the
utterance.

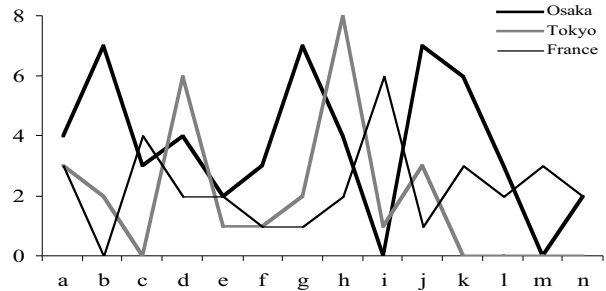
3.4. Results

In order to dissect the texts above, the table presents cues used by each storyteller in every utterance. The figure below holistically recapitulates the tendency of their performance.

Osaka	Tokyo	France
A		
1: b, f, i, j, k, n	1: b, f, i, j, h, n	1: c, i, n
2: <i>a, h, g, j</i>	2: <i>d, g, h, j*</i>	2: c, g*, h, i, l
3: d, g, i, j, k, l		
B		
4: <i>d, l</i>	3: d, h	3: <i>c, f*, h, i, j, k*</i>
5: b, f, g, h, k	4: b, d, h	4: a, i, l
6: a, f, g, j	5: <i>a, j</i>	
C		
7: b, c, l	6: <i>a, h</i>	5: a, i, k*
8: b, c, g, h, j, k		6: c, i, k*
9: a, g, h, j, k		7: c, i*
10: i		
11: g, i, j, k		
D		
12: b, e, i	7: a, h, i	8: d, e, i*
13: <i>b, c, i</i>	8: d, m	9: c, m
14: d, i	9: m*	10: <i>c, m</i>
15: <i>b, d, e</i>	10: d, h, g	11: <i>a, e, m</i>
E		
16: a, i, n	11: d, e, h, n	12: e, h, n

*= variant; italics = small laugh; bold face = laugh breaking

Figure: Crosscultural Variation of Performance



4. Discussion

The most common feature among the three storytellers is the onset of utterance overlapping with the end of the audience's laughter (a). In this case, discourse is always prosodically little stressed (except for the character change and the entry towards the punch-line at the onset of episode A and D). Furthermore, it is observed that the low key is choiced at the end of utterance. This cue means that the interpretation of utterance needs "equative" logic [22] eliciting thereby an interactional completion by laughter. Thus the storytellers carefully conduct a prosodic *mise en scene* of the onset of each utterance. This way of inviting laugh is, however, quite different of the way in conversational settings [13], [23].

As for crosscultural differences, the Osaka storyteller pays more attention to the end of utterance (additional rhematization (j) and phatic insertion (k)), but his most striking arts are use of melodic contrast (b) and accentuation of dialectally marked words (f, g). Tokyo storyteller's speech is rhythmic and speedy (h), without neither pause (d) nor connector (k). He uses fewer dialectal words than the Osaka storyteller, given that the Tokyo dialect is less obvious than Osaka one. Finally, the French actor shares some features with Osaka one, like long pause (c), but is different in a normal delivery, a calm tone (i) and no dialectal use (f, g). Due to an absence of dialect shared with the audience, it is understandable that this aspect is not relevant to the French rakugo. Note that curiously, rhematization does not appear in his performance at all (j), and phatic insertion (k) is only moderately used, unlike the Osaka performer overusing it.

In brief, one of keys to a successful performance in rakugo appears to know how to take into account the audience's laughter during the talk. Storytellers need to know how to manage their pause between utterances. Cross-cultural similarities can exist at a communicative level, only to the extent that prosodic and discursive devices are universal. These techniques may be used to prevent or repair uncomfortable moments during which there is no laugh from the audience. This principal is not, probably however, limited to the humour, but valid to others kinds of entertainment.

Another device is the prosodic emphasis on culturally shared terms, this variable among the storytellers. The Osaka storyteller takes advantage of a dialectal salience related to the audience. Conversely, this point penalizes the other storytellers. The Tokyo performer tends to compensate it by a dynamic delivery of speech, which may be a cultural tradition of Tokyo. The French performer, in contrast, being unable to find any common ground with his audience, at neither a sociopragmatical nor a communicative level, seems to have difficulty in his performance. This suggests two issues: firstly, analysis of prosodic cues does go with contextual interpretation [24], and secondly, humour spectacle is not only a performance art, but also a joint work of the storyteller and his audience, who are tied by a sociolinguistic relationship. Prosodic prominence observed around dialectally marked elements is such evidence. This issue is read in the next quotation: "All interaction proceeds, and can only proceed, on the basis of the existence of a great deal of common ground between the participants: that is, what knowledge speakers (think they) share about the world, about each other's experiences, attitudes and emotions" [22]. In fact, prosody is important in the storytelling, but its function cannot be explained without taking into account the socio-cultural dimensions of rakugo theatre.

References

- [1] Yamamoto, S. 1996. *Rakugo Handobukku* (Handbook of Rakugo). Tokyo: Sansei-dou.
- [2] Nomura, M. 1994. *Rakugo no Gengogaku* (Linguistics of Rakugo). Tokyo: Heibon-sha.
- [3] Kida, T. 2000. Cross-cultural transposition of humors. A performance of rakugo in French. Paper presented at the "International Humor Conference", Kansai University, Osaka (Japan), 24-26 June.
- [4] Atkinson, J. M. 1984. Public speaking and audience response: Some techniques for inviting applause. In *Structures of Social Action*, Atkinson, J. M.; Heritage, J.,

- eds. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 370-409.
- [5] Goodwin, C. 1986. Audience diversity, participation, and interpretation. *Text*, 6(3), 283-316.
- [6] Enomoto, S. 1988. *Koten Rakugo no Chikara* (Force of Classic Rakugo). Tokyo: Chikuma-shobou.
- [7] Maeda, Y. 1966. *Kamigata Rakugo no Rekishi* (History of Eastern Rakugo). Tokyo: Sugimoto Shoten.
- [8] Grice, H.P. 1975. Logic and conversation. In *Syntax and Semantics 3: Speech Acts*, Cole, P.; Morgan, J., eds. New York: Academic Press, 41-58.
- [9] Katsura, S. 1980. Kinchou no kanwa to sage no 4 bunrui (Detente of tension and 4 classes of punch-line). *Kamigata Geinou*, 68.
- [10] Kant, I. 1790/1951. *Critique of Judgement*. New York: Hafner.
- [11] Schopenhauer, A. 1818/1966. *The World as Will and Representation*. New York: Dover.
- [12] Escaprit, R. 1960. *L'humour*. Paris: PUF.
- [13] Bergson, H. 1900/1993. *Le rire : essai sur la signification du comique*. Paris: PUF.
- [14] Jefferson, G. 1979. A technique for inviting laughter and its subsequent acceptance declination. In *Everyday Language. Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Psathas, G., ed. New York: Irvington, 79-96.
- [15] Müller, K. 1992. Theatrical moments: On contextualizing funny and dramatic moods in the course of telling a story in conversation. In *The Contextualization of Language*, Auer, P.; di Luzio, A., eds. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 199-221.
- [16] Selting, M. 1992. Intonation as a contextualization device. In *The Contextualization of Language*, Auer, P.; di Luzio, A., eds. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 233-258.
- [17] Psathas, G. 1990, ed. *Interaction Competence*. Washington D.C.: University of America.
- [18] Jefferson, G. 1978. Sequential aspects of storytelling in conversation. In *Studies in the Organization of Conversational Interaction*, Schenkein, J., ed. New York, Academic Press, 219-248.
- [19] Couper-Kuhlen, E.; Auer, P. 1991. On the contextualizing function of speech rhythm in conversation: Question-answer sequences. In *Levels of Linguistic Adaptation*, Verschueren, J., ed. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1-18.
- [20] Goodwin, C.; Goodwin, M.H. 1992. Assessments and the construction of context. In *Rethinking Context*, Duranti, A.; Goodwin, C., eds. Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 147-190.
- [21] Gumperz, J.J. 1992. Contextualization and understanding. In *Rethinking Context*, Duranti, A.; Goodwin, C., eds. Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 229-252.
- [22] Coulthard, M. 1992. The significance of intonation in discourse. In *Advanced in Spoken Siscourse Analysis*, Coulthard, M. ed. London: Routledge, 35-49.
- [23] Norrick, N.R. 1992. *Conversational Joking. Humor in Everyday Talk*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- [24] Labov, W.; Fanshel, D. 1977. *Therapeutic Discourse*. New York: Academic Press.

Acknowledgement

I'd like to thank to an anonymous reviewer for his commentary, and G. Carley, L. Fulwood and E. Scott for their linguistic review of the earlier version of this text. Needless to say, all mistakes resting here are, however, mines.