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 oblige 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 (ninjoobanashi) 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 story-teller'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); Macrotopical 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 soliloguy 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 untruthful-ness; 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 ragugo humour is performancecentred. 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 "invitated" 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 bellow.

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.

- Osaka: Akubi no keiko, Katsura Beichou, Osaka, 9 September 1994 (commercialized tape, in Japanese).
- Tokyo: *Akubi-shinan*, Kokontei Shinshou, 17 July 1955 (commercialized tape, in Japanese).
- France: Les Bâillements, Nicolas Bataille, 24 January 2000, Marseille (personal recording, in French).

N. Bataille is a stage actor and producer famous of his works on Ionesco's *théâtre de l'absurde* as well as on French adaptation of Japanese plays. The audience of this study are Japanese residents in Provence and French spectators interested in Japanese culture. As for the Tokyo rakugo, a more recent recording was not available, but despite its oldness, his performance is comical enough for the modern Japanese people.

2.1.2. Text

A young man interested in yawn lessons asks his friend to accompany him there. At first, this friend refuses him because of absurdity, but after an insistent persuasion, he finally agrees to accompany the future-learner of yawn. In the classroom, the master of yawning teaches good manners of yawning and makes repeat the learner key-sentences to yawn, like "doing so, I'm bored, bored". The companion, sitting beside them meanwhile, gets angry and complains that the lesson is so much absurd and boring so that he finally yawns instead of the learner. The teacher says that the companion is more skilful than his learner, what is the punch-line. The text of this study starts from the companion's complaining.

2.2. Method

The text is divided into four episodes of thematic coherence. Speech analysis is based on an auditive method and reviewed by a trained phonetician. Talk is transcribed using the Jefferson's transcription system [17], [18], modified for the specific purpose of this study, i.e. in order to find out noticeable markers (prosodic, discursive, and linguistic) related to the laughter (see e.g. [19], [20], [21] for different methods). Selected criteria are simple and objective enough to avoid an impressionistic description. The following are the devices the most relevant the present analysis. Note that because of the ethnographic nature of the data, the method is holistic but not in-depth analysis, that couldn't be presented for lack of space.

2.2.1. Devices noted

- (a) Talk overlapping with audience's laughter
- (b) Tonal contrast (e.g. vivid/week)
- (c) Elongated pause
- (d) Short pause or absence of pause
- (e) Strong emphasis on the first word
- (f) Strong emphasis on a dialectalized adjective
- (g) Strong emphasis on a dialectalized predicate
- (h) Acceleration and/or rhythmic delivery
- (i) Normal delivery and/or calm tone
- (j) Rhematization of dialectalized adverb (metaenunciative), familiar pronoun
- (k) Insertion of a phatic, a gambit during laughter
- (l) Gnomic utterance, common sense
- (m) Mime elocution (yawning)
- (n) Voice change

Note that the term "dialectalized" means this remarkable feature is phonological, but not at word level. For example, a verb can be dialectalized at different levels:

- phonemic elongation of lexeme: YU:teru
- verbal inflection: wakaTTENnoya

• postverbal inflection with particle: hatariteruNYA

2.2.2. Transcript notation

- [...] Part overlapping with the audience's laughter
- : Elongating sound or syllable ($\pm 1/4$ second)
- + Pause (± 1/4 second)
- ↑↓ Marked rising and falling shifts in intonation
- °aaa Emphasis accent on the next syllable
- AAA Part spoken louder than the surrounding talk
- / Intonative discontinuity
- // Voice quality change
- h Audible aspiration (mainly a yawning voice)
- ((soft)) Description by transcriptionist
- > < Quicker delivery
- () Transcription doubt

3. Corpus

Data shows the original performance following the description of audience's laughter. Because of lack of space, the English translation is omitted here.

3.1. Osaka rakugo

- [A. Toward the final, character change]
- //++++ ano fuTAri↓ /a°HO↑ to chigau↓ ka[i (aitura) ++++ /e::↑ +++ => Laughter (breaking + continual): after the final verb, but before the pause, as soon as the rhematized subject
- /yo:↑] /maji°meNA↓ /kaO shite↓ /an°nakoto↓ /yu:↑ °TEru
 °NA↓ /[HONmani:↓ +]++ => Laughter (continual): after
 the verb, i.e. during the adverb
- /SE°ken no↓ /hi°to miNA↓ />HAtaRA°I°TEn YA[de↓
 (/honma) +++++ /trk ++++++++++++ => Laughter
 (breaking + continual): after verbal lexeme, i.e. on the dialectalized grammatical particle
- [B. Fist argument]
- /narau] °yatu mo /narau [°yatsu↓ ++++++]+ /oseru yatsu [mo↓ +++++ => Laughter (isolated): on the final position of the utterance
- 5. //>ano] KI:KO: ga /aHO ya↓ chu: nowa↓ /(washi) mae kara WAKA-TEN [no yakedo na< ++++ ts + => Laughter (breaking + continual): after the lexeme of the dialectalized verb, i.e. on the grammatical particle
- /a]no °senSEI↓ chu: °yatsu mo />MA°to°mo↑ YA na°i↑
 °DE:</[°ara:↓ +++]++++++ => Laughter (breaking + continual): during the rhematization
- [C. Second argument]
- 7. //°Akubi wa ZE°n kara detari + => No laughter
- 8. //>zen°shu:↑ no↓ /bo:SAN ga /ºki:↑ tara↓ /o°KORUDE:↓< /hon[ma ni oi ++ =>Laughter (breaking + continual + isolated): during the rhematization and appellative
- 9. /yo: an°na] koto↓ />nu°kashite °keru ka:↓ /(h)onmani< °E::↑ ts ++ => No laughter
- 10. /so°RA:(h)↓ /oma°era↓ /tokushin de ya-°ten noka↓ /shiran °kedomo↓ +++ => No laughter
- 11. /MA°tasare°teru mon no/ °mi: ni /na-TE°MI:↑ yo↓ /honma ++ ph ++++ => No laughter
- [D. Before the punch-line]
- 12. /(yo-)°PODO ko-chi no ho:gat +++++ => No laughter)
- 13. /taikutsude↑ h[hh]h => Laughter = isolated: during the pause)
- 14. /((yawning)) °t(h)aikutsu(h)de(h)\u03b4 haa:::::: hh => No

- laughter
- 15. $\ ^{\circ}TA^{\circ}MARAN \ ^{\circ}WAI\downarrow[+=> Laughter (isolated)]$
- [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. $//+++++>\circ NA:NI o \downarrow /i-TEnDAI \downarrow => No laughter$
- 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↓] °TAIku°tsu 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 utterance
- [D. Before the punch-line]
- 7. $^{\circ}$ KO-chi] no $^{\circ}$ ho: ga \downarrow /yo- $^{\circ}$ podo \downarrow + => no Laughter
- 8. /((yawning)) h °TAIkutsude(h) /°ta(h)ikutsu(h)de(h)↓ ++ => No laughter
- ((long yauning)) ha::::::h ++++ /ha:]::::::h =>
 Laughter (isolated + breaking): during the yawning performance
- 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]
- /i' faut °VRAIment le °VOI:R↑ pour le croire↓ ++++ => No laughter
- [B. First argument]
- 3. /quels °IMbéCILES \(\psi + /\^LE MAÎtre /et L'Élève ++ /\^AH \(\psi \) [+++ => Laughter (isolated): after a phatic, i.e. during the pause
- [C. Second argument]
- /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. $/p'^{\circ}t$ -être que ça vous a $^{\circ}MU$::SE \downarrow => 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)\pound +[++ => 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.

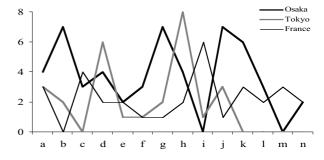
3.4. Results

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</i> , <i>h</i> , <i>g</i> , <i>j</i>	2: d, g, h, j*	2: c, g*, h, i, l
_	3: d, g, i, j, k, l		
В			
	4: <i>d</i> , <i>l</i>	3: d, h	3: c, f*, h, i, j, k
	5: b , f , g , h , k	4: b, d, h	4: a, i, l
	6: a, f, g, j	5: <i>a</i> , <i>j</i>	
C			
	7: b, c, l	6: <i>a</i> , <i>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: c, m
	15: b, d, e	10: d, h, g	11: a, e, m
Е			
	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 oberved 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 contextal 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 sociocultural dimensions of rakugo theatre.

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