

“This Is What We Have in Common”: Use of Humor between Japanese and American Factory Workers

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This paper investigates the use of humor between Japanese and American workers on a southern US factory floor, a highly task-oriented setting. While working as a liaison officer, I gathered ethnographic and discourse data through observation, interviews, and video-taping of interactions. Most previous “intercultural” studies observe non-native speakers who occupy inferior positions in a given context. However, in the present setting, the Japanese workers are superior to the local American workers with respect to their experience and hierarchy. Thus, interactions between the two groups took place in the context of more balanced power relations. The purpose of this study is to examine how, despite their serious linguistic limitations, workers in the two groups managed to utilize humor while working together. Firstly, humor strengthened the bonds among them. In using humor, the workers of the two groups made the most of what they had in common. Secondly, humor functioned to release tension in stressful situations. Finally, it was used for a contestive purpose from the American, or the subordinate, side. The findings of this study present not only the multifunctional nature of humor, but also the fact that “national characteristics” are not necessarily the most prominent aspects in the analysis of “intercultural” interactions.

An American worker at Japan Die Company (hereafter JDC)¹ once told me that even though the Japanese and American employees sometimes had difficulties communicating with each other, one thing they had in common was humor. This comment struck me as odd since I had had the assumption that humor was (national or ethnic) culture specific. This assumption derived from my own experience in the US, and now in New Zealand, where I encountered countless instances of jokes at parties and in sitcom episodes which were not funny to me while everyone else could not stop laughing. Therefore, at JDC, I had assumed that the workers would stick to discussing job-related issues only, using a survival level of English. What I found was quite the contrary; humor was something many of the workers greatly valued and appreciated for its unifying effect. They did not have anything in common with respect to nationality and ethnicity, but they did share identity through other social groups such as socioeconomic background and gender. These

¹ All the individual and company names appearing in this article are pseudonyms.

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commonalities, as well as their shared work experience, were the main assets they made use of in their humor on the floor.

1. Introduction

Studies have investigated the usage of humor in the workplace (Holmes, 1998; Marra, 1998), compared Japanese and American usages of humor in business meetings (Yamada, 1997), and analyzed humor used in Japanese-American intercultural settings (Miller, 1995). The main foci of Yamada's study (1997) are the cultural characteristics of Japanese versus American humor, and Miller (1995) discussed a bonding process through Japanese and Americans' use of humor in a white-collar office setting. Now, investigation of the usage of humor in an intercultural setting needs to take place. Such investigation can shed light not only on Japanese-American interactions, but also on the nature of interactions between sociolinguistically restricted interlocutors.

What I call "humor" here is close to "joking," a nonserious communicative behavior, which is probably universal (Sherzer, 1985). That is, there is room for interlocutors not to rely on their cultural and linguistic background in order to use humor. I follow the definition of humor by Holmes (1998): "utterances identified as intended by the speaker(s) and perceived by participants to be amusing" (p.1). Only "successful" instances of humor, which induced laughter, were selected for the present analysis.

This paper is part of a larger study on the use of various communicative strategies in an intercultural work setting (Sunaoshi, 1999), and it analyzes how and why humor was used between Japanese and American workers on the production floor. The fieldwork took place at JDC, a Japanese-owned manufacturing company operating in a southern state of the US. At the time of the fieldwork in 1997, the plant was in its start-up period, and the Japanese and American workers had worked together for eight months. All the key employees, including managers, engineers, and technical support members (hereafter TSM) were sent from Japan to the US plant, where their main jobs were to set up and run the plant, and to train local workers inexperienced in die modification and panel production.

The data were drawn from participant observation and videotaping of interactions between Japanese TSM and American workers on the production floor. The excerpts used in this paper are a mixture of videotaped and handwritten data. A number of the excerpts come from field notes. The examples during less busy moments occurred not when I was using my video camera, but when I was "hanging out" with the workers on the floor. I then wrote down what was said as accurately as possible. On the other hand, humor that functioned as a tension releaser did take place while I was videotaping, since these instances of humor tended to be used while there was tension, i.e. when the workers were in the middle of working on something, which was when the video camera was on.

JDC stamps car panels for a major European auto assembler, using custom-made dies. The dies require modifications in the process of panel production, and many of the necessary skills cannot be encoded in a manual, thus the need for experienced TSM. Some TSM were on long-term assignments, staying in the US for three to four years with their families. Other TSM were on short-term assignments, typically helping the US plant for a few months only. All the TSM were high school educated, having only minimal exposure to English prior to their assignments in the US. As for the American workers, many of them were locally hired, and none of them had knowledge of Japanese people or language.

Overall, the workers from the two different groups had started working together with little knowledge of each other's linguistic or cultural background.

2. Motivation to Use Humor

Use of humor can change the social distance between the interlocutors, be it horizontal or vertical. In the present setting, humor contributed to decreasing the distance, thereby creating rapport or momentarily lessening a power differential. The question to be asked then is: What motivated the workers to want to use humor for this purpose?

I believe that the workers had good reasons to make their workplace interactions successful. They needed to get their job done efficiently and effectively. Use of humor was one of several communicative strategies the workers used with each other to achieve this goal. What then led both the Japanese and American workers to use humor to get along in the workplace, and what enabled them to do so?

First, because of several sociohistorical antecedents the Japanese and Americans' respective interactional power dynamics were relatively balanced. That is, on the one hand, English currently enjoys the most prominent ethnolinguistic vitality in the global linguistic market; in addition, the plant was located in the US, a predominantly English-speaking country. These facts manifested as English being the code choice in the plant, placing Japanese TSM in a disadvantageous position. On the other hand, within JDC, the American workers were in the position where they had to learn and follow orders from the Japanese. As a result, both sides had sufficient reasons to want to make things work in order to get things done. This is unlike common situations in previous literature where extremely asymmetrical power dynamics placed far more burden on the minority to have a successful interaction.

Second, despite their different national and ethnic backgrounds, the Japanese and American workers had commonalities that enabled them to utilize humor in the workplace. They turned out to hold similar values and beliefs, including those about family and those deriving from their heterosexual masculinity, as will be shown in the examples below. Though far from identical, the workers possessed similar sets of cultural and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1991) in their respective communities of origin. It was no coincidence that they had these commonalities. These commonalities were largely derived from possessing equivalent economic social status in their respective countries, which also hold similar economic status relative to the rest of the world.

They also worked together daily and shared the same goals at work. The interactions analyzed in this paper are between the TSM and American workers only. They took place in the Die & Maintenance (D+M) area of the plant, where the most intense Japanese-American interactions occurred every day. The TSM who worked there did not belong to the managerial class, though they were in supervisory positions with respect to their American colleagues, teaching them how to modify dies. For this reason, when I say "shared work experience" or "shared goals," I specifically mean the deadlines of die modification, the need to fix dies to produce higher quality panels, and all the day-to-day difficulties, frustration, and fun (during breaks and after work) the TSM and their American co-workers shared.

3. Use of Humor between the Japanese and American Workers on the Floor

When discussing work-related issues, the Japanese workers' English proficiency and the Americans' ear for making sense of the Japanese workers' limited utterances were crucial; however, these abilities were not necessarily relevant for the workers of the two groups to share humor. A good example of this was the situation of Tomita, a long-term TSM. In terms of his English language competence level, he was the most limited among the long-termers, and he was the only one who did not go to the in-house after-hours English class. Nevertheless, many of his American co-workers often pointed out that he was the funniest of the Japanese. Among the Americans on the floor, there were some the Japanese found particularly "funny and friendly,"² though these Americans did not necessarily work with the Japanese on a day-to-day basis.

What functions does humor have? As Holms (1998) and Marra (1998) point out, it is inevitably multifunctional. Humor can have an amusing effect if done successfully, but it can simultaneously have other functions as well. I observed three patterns in the function of humor in the present data. First, humor functioned as a way to create rapport by focusing on what the Japanese and American workers had in common. Humor consequently functioned to strengthen in-group membership (cf. Miller, 1995). Second, it was used as a tension releaser in the middle of working on a stressful project. And third, it was used for a contestive (Holmes, 1998) purpose, a "bottom up" way for subordinates to challenge power relations. For the subordinates in Holmes's study, use of humor seemed to be one of the few acceptable means available to them to tell the boss what to do or to express criticisms of the boss (pp. 5-6). The same was observed in my data.

Because humor is multifunctional, the following subsections are grouped according to the most significant function observed in the particular use of humor, though it may have had secondary and tertiary meanings as well.

3.1. *Humor as a Bonding Tool*

The first function observed was the use of humor to focus on what the workers had in common and, consequently, to strengthen the bonds among the workers. Here, similarities derive from identification with a common socioeconomic background and heterosexual masculinity. By focusing on similarities rather than pointing out how different they are (which can be a source of laughter as well), they strengthened their ties as co-workers. The first example below indicates how humor was used based on their shared social role in their families; namely "married men" whose wives did not like their husbands to go out after work. Through conversations with the Japanese and American workers, I found that they in fact shared a lot in terms of their attitudes and beliefs about family, male-female relationships, and the roles that they and their spouses should play.

(1) "Upset wife"

There is no urgent job to be done at the moment. Rick, a worker in the Machine Shop, and Tomita, a long term TSM, are talking about different pizza toppings as they draw them on a piece of paper. The researcher happens to walk by them. Then, Scott from the Assembly walks up to us and asks the researcher (S=Scott, Y=researcher, T=Tomita, R=Rick):

² It is interesting that the Japanese workers often listed these two qualities together to express positive impressions of American workers.

- 1S: <to Y> ask him <=Tomita> where he's gonna party at
- 2Y: <translates S's question into Japanese for Tomita>
- 3T: <to S> no, go home
- 4S: why
- 5R: <to T> your wife <with two index fingers pointing up from his head, accompanied by a momentary serious expression="angry">
- 6 ((everyone laughs))
- 7S: <to T> call <with "dialing" gesture> "car trouble"
- 8T: he he he he <laughter>
- 9 ((Others laugh, too.))

Note that I was initially asked to give a translation to Tomita, but the interaction quickly moved back among the workers themselves, and I was back to being an observer. Regardless of Tomita's limited English compared to the other long-term TSM, he was capable of, and willing to, engage himself in this interaction. In other words, every worker present here, including Tomita, was engaging in the co-construction of humor. As seen, the interactants here all shared the idea of a marital relationship between a husband and a wife as the norm (which does not necessarily mean they had such marital relationships in reality). Even though Rick was single, he also shared that norm. That is, the husband works hard and feels like going out after work. However, his wife, who is waiting at home, would not be happy if he partied too much. As much as they are tempted to sneak past their wives, they are not willing to annoy their wives very much. Or perhaps more accurately, the "upset wife waiting at home" is a shared experience and can be used as a humorous excuse (with some truth to it) to other co-workers.

The second example is the type of humor coming from what I call "being silly boys," where the workers, especially Americans, used simple objects and/or derogatory words to induce laughter, as boys play and laugh with their peers by acting in a pseudo-mean manner. This type of humor was widely used and triggered laughter on the floor. As much as this type of humor strengthened the Japanese and American workers' ties by emphasizing their shared background, in this case, "appreciating a type of silliness," this type of humor also functioned as an effective tension releaser.

- (2) "Quack quack"
(Continued from (1)) While the crowd is still hanging out in the same area, Raymond in the Quality Control walks up. He points to Scott and says to the researcher and Tomita:

- 1R: <pointing to S; telling Y and T> *kichigai*[crazy]
- 2S: He speaks (turkey)

- 3R: <gets a small pouch/toy looking object from his chest pocket, and blows air into it> “quack, quack” <*the toy makes the duck-like noise*>
- 4 ((everyone laughs))
- 5R: <walks away>

Like most other American workers, the word *kichigai* “crazy” was one of the few Japanese words Raymond knew. Even though they were not really interested in learning the language seriously, they were nonetheless quite enthusiastic about learning swear words as well as “insult” words like this one. The reverse was true as well: the Japanese workers were enthusiastic about learning English swear words and other “bad” words. One reason that they wanted to and did learn those words, according to some American workers, was that they could then understand what the Japanese TSM meant when they were angry or upset. Another reason many of both Japanese and American workers gave was that they could be funny to each other, just like Raymond in (2) above.

When this interaction took place, Raymond had been carrying the toy he used in line 3 in (2) in his pocket everyday. Whenever he had a chance, he used it to make people laugh in different areas on the floor, be it American or Japanese. Raymond seemed to be particularly excited about making the Japanese laugh. The use of the toy did not involve complex language or require knowledge of American culture, which the Japanese TSM most likely lacked. Blowing air into the toy involved neither, and was virtually guaranteed to get a laugh from the Japanese workers.

A similar technique was used by Rick in the Machine Shop. He stored a small manila envelope in one of the tool boxes on the floor. He would take the envelope to someone, either an American or Japanese worker, and ask him to open it, claiming that he had trouble opening it himself. In fact, there was an elastic object inside, which would expand and jump out of the envelope if someone tried to take it out, producing a surprising and funny effect. Rick tried it with me as well. He said it was a good way to make people laugh, especially new Japanese short-termers. He believed it was a good icebreaker.³

Even though the Japanese and American workers could not talk about abstract ideas with their limited linguistic resources, they nonetheless learned and built impressions about each other over time based on the interactions they could have. Sometimes the depth of their insights about each other surprised me, considering the Japanese workers’ limited English competence. For example, after the interactions in (1) and (2), Tomita told me with a serious face, “*Aitsu toboketekkedo, kekkoo kireru rashii zo*” (that guy [Scott] is [acting] silly, but I heard he’s quite sharp). In this manner, I heard them talking about each other.

The Americans said that it was easier to work with Tomita than some other Japanese whose English was better, but lacked a sense of humor. This comment demonstrates that the Americans find it an important quality for the Japanese to be able to balance the serious business side with the relaxing funny side. From the Japanese point of view, too, it was important for the Americans to be funny and nice guys. Humor could function much

³ Both Raymond and Rick (Americans) were the initiators of the humor described here. It is interesting to see them play “the host” as if to make their Japanese guests (to their country) relaxed.

the same way in interactions between native speakers. However, it was perhaps even more important for the workers at JDC, since the use of humor sometimes compensated for their limited linguistic resources.

3.2. *Humor as a Tension-Releaser*

The next example shows how humor was used as a tension releaser at a stressful moment. It is when the cylinder stopper trouble occurred during a Saturday night shift. Rob (R) and Hashida (H) were the night shift staff. Earlier in the interaction, Rob moved the crane to lift a part of the die, and while he was trying to do so under Hashida's guidance, they found that something had broken inside. After examining the broken part by taking out some of the other parts, they understood what was wrong but they did not know what to do next. The following excerpt starts when Rob walks up to Hashida, who has been working on the broken part unsuccessfully, and asks what needs to be done next (line 1).

(3) "Me? Sad" [Excerpt from F-6)-ii]

1R: what to do now

2H: aa[oh] what to do now + me? sad (uha ha ha) sad
<with mock crying by "wiping
tears with a fist," simultaneously
laughing>

3 ((R & H laugh together))

(4) Hashida's mock crying as humor: Line 2 of Example (3) above (in the D+M area)



Both Rob and Hashida were shocked that the part had broken, and consequently were stressed out at the time of this interaction. Much later on, they found out that the broken part was not solely Rob and Hashida's fault, but that the problem had originated partly

when the die had been assembled in Japan and also during panel production when, unbeknownst to Rob and Hashida, it stuck. However, at the time of (3), their assumption was that the cylinder stopper broke because Rob had tried to lift the part, which had been stuck to start with. This led to Hashida's comical reaction, as shown above. Hashida's reaction broke the tension and led to laughter. His behavior also worked to shift frames from a "serious problem solving moment" to a playful one by pretending to be a helpless coward, which was in fact the last thing he was at that moment.

3.3. *Humor for a Contestive Purpose*

Example (5) continues from (3). After they both laughed, Hashida says that it is okay to leave the broken part for now and suggests lifting the remaining part from the die in order to work on it in the meantime.

- (5) "Using the crane"
Rob and Hashida walk over to the other side of the die, where the crane controller is. Now Rob smiles and directs his open palms towards it and then to Hashida, as if indicating "please, you lift it this time" (see photo below). They both start laughing again, hitting their arms and shoulders against each other (see (6) below). Hashida, all the while laughing, grabs the crane controller and starts lifting the remaining part.

Rob asks Hashida to use the crane by gesturing "Please" in a humorous way:



- (6) Rob and Hashida start laughing and as Hashida walks to the crane controller, they hit their shoulders against each other's



Here again, the humor used is multifunctional. At one level, it was a continuation from the tension releaser started in (3). It also indicated their shared trouble and difficulty right then. At the same time, it was Rob's indication of avoiding further responsibilities through using humor in a contestive way. In fact, there was a danger on Rob's part that his action could be taken as telling Hashida (his superior) what to do, which would violate the norm of their vertical relationship. The problem initially occurred when he was asked by Hashida to move the crane. This time, Rob did not want to carry the responsibility of lifting the part.

In fact, right after the trouble happened, while Hashida was out of sight, Rob told me that it was this kind of difficult time when he sometimes felt frustrated. He had followed Hashida's instruction, during which he had asked Hashida a couple of times if he could keep lifting a part of the die that needed to be examined. However, the part could not be removed from the die; it was already stuck because it was already broken. At this point, one possibility was that the part had broken because it had been pulled too much by the crane when it was initially stuck. And Rob was the one who tried to pull the part even though it was stuck (because he was told to do so by Hashida). Thus, Rob's comment indicated his frustration toward their language limitation on one level, but on another level, he was frustrated because he felt he had merely followed Hashida's instructions. In (5), through laughter, Rob's refusal to take on the responsibility again was conveyed. Hashida accepted this. Rob successfully delivered his negative message toward Hashida by being humorous, which would have been inappropriate if done directly.

4. Conclusion

As seen in this paper, humor was used on the floor between the Japanese and American workers for several different purposes. Uses of humor were inevitably multifunctional, and included strengthening the workers' ties by focusing on shared backgrounds, releasing tension, and covert contesting.

Despite their linguistic limitations, the workers made use of humor and valued it, and it contributed to their effectively working together. Humor was constructed through the use of both verbal and non-verbal communicative resources in order to compensate for their linguistic and (national) cultural differences.

This study also suggests that “national characteristics” are not necessarily the most prominent aspects in the analysis of “intercultural” interactions. Furthermore, the data show that meanings are locally created and co-constructed between interlocutors. That is, the participants did not simply attempt to employ what we might consider “stereotypical” American or Japanese humor. Instead, they were fully capable of utilizing humor as a communicative strategy, based on sociolinguistic resources they had in the given context.

Transcription Conventions

<text>: Additional information to understand the flow of interaction

((text)): Action by multiple (often all) members in the interaction

underline: Emphasis

“car trouble”: text in quotation marks indicates the speaker utters this part in someone else’s voice (i.e. acting)

kichigai [crazy]: a Japanese word in italic followed by its gloss

+, ++, +++: pauses, from short to long

(text): less audible speech with the author’s best guess

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