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

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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 (ninjoo-banashi) or heroic-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 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 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 “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

2.1.1. Sources

The sketch to compare is titled Yawn lesson respectively acted out by a storyteller in Osaka, Tokyo and France.
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 on yawning, 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 skillful than his learner, what is the punch-line. The text of this study starts from the companion's complaining.

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 (met-enunciatiorial), 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: wa:kattaTE:No:ya
...
3.2. Tokyo rakugo

[A. Towards the end, character change]
1. /+++>°NA:NI o /i-TEnDAI ++ => No laughter
2. /°me: tachi wa fu°/TA:ri de /ku°daranè: /kotot ++ /i-TE  
°YO:°/1 °(h):/tonot:; /i<++ ++ => Laughter (isolated): on the 
  rhematized adverb

[B. First argument]
3. /ta° /TAlkutsu° /°DEYO: ++ => Laughter 
  (breaking + continual): on the verb
5. /°ya° /TEme: WA:; /+ ++ => Laughter (isolated): after the 
  utterance

[C. Second argument]
6. /°ki° /MA-teur: /°ore no mi ni /°NA-teç 
°MIRO: /h ++ ++ => No laughter
7. /°NA-teç /KAYO:;/°TE:me: WA:; ++ => 
  Laughter (isolated): just after the 
  utterance

[D. Before the punch-line]
8. /°kii:° /KU° /°TAIkutsude: /I-pai 
  ya-te /°narane: /°MIRO: /h /°YO:: 
  ++ => Laughter (isolated): during the 
  utterance
9. /°ko:° /ho: ga /°KIYO: °DAYO: 
  /°ore no mi ni /°TEme: WA:; /+ ++ => 

3.3. French rakugo

[A. Towards the end, character change]
1. /++++++>°NA:NI o /i-TEnDAI ++ => No laughter
2. /°ME: tachi wa fu°/TA:ri de /ku°daranè: /kotot /°i-TE  
°YO:°/1 °(h):/tonot:; /i<++ ++ => Laughter (isolated): after the 
  utterance

[B. First argument]
3. /°ki° /MA-teur: /°ore no mi ni /°NA-teç 
°MIRO: /h ++ ++ => No laughter
7. /°NA-teç /KAYO:;/°TE:me: WA:; ++ => 
  Laughter (isolated): just after the 
  utterance

[C. Second argument]
5. /°ki° /MA-teur: /°ore no mi ni /°NA-teç 
°MIRO: /h ++ ++ => No laughter
6. /°ME: tachi wa fu°/TA:ri de /ku°daranè: /kotot /°i-TE  
°YO:°/1 °(h):/tonot:; /i<++ ++ => Laughter (isolated): after the 
  utterance

[D. Before the punch-line]
8. /°ki° /MA-teur: /°ore no mi ni /°NA-teç 
°MIRO: /h ++ ++ => No laughter
9. /°ki° /ho: ga /°KIYO: °DAYO: 
  /°ore no mi ni /°TEme: WA:; /+ ++ => 

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.

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

*= 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 
laugh (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 sociolinguistic relationship. The Osaka performer is moderate used, unlike the Osaka performer overusing it.

In everyday talk, all mistakes resting here are, however, mine. Needless to say, all mistakes resting here are, however, mines.