

An Examination for Styles of Japanese Humor: Japan's Funniest Story Project 2010 to 2011

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Abstract: The styles and types of Japanese jokes and funny stories are significantly different from ones in multicultural societies. The jokes in low context societies are more universal for people with diverse cultural background, and jokes are told as a tool of ice breaker, as it functions to reduce the distance between strangers. However, Japanese jokes, or more likely funny stories, are told among close friends and family members to gain solidarity. From April 2010 to March 2011, I have conducted a website called "Japan's funniest story project" in order to collect funny stories from all ages and sexes of Japanese. The contributions are carried on the website and readers vote for the funniest story of the week. I have categorized and analyzed the top ten stories of each month. The result of this research showed that many of the funny stories and most of the popular ones are language related ones which include puns and word plays. Another interesting finding was that most stories are written as personal experience in the style of conversation. These findings indicate that Japanese funny stories or humor are used for inner circles. At the end of this paper I attempt to explain those above in terms of social contexts.

Keywords: Japanese humor, funny stories, humor in communication, website research

1. Introduction

In April 2010, "Japan's funniest story project"¹ was established to collect funny stories from Japanese for a year. The prompt research for this project was "the scientific search for the world's funniest joke" (2002) by Richard Wiseman. It was set up in collaboration with The British Science Association, receiving more than 40,000 jokes and 1.5 million ratings on the web site. The jokes were collected from 70 different countries, but Japan was not one of them. Later, Wiseman commented that it didn't seem like there is culture or custom of humor in Japan; therefore, there were no jokes contributed from Japanese (an interview from NHK TV program, 2005).

Wiseman's comment did not sound fair, because most Japanese don't find English jokes funny and they don't tell jokes in English. Even the funniest joke of the world did not make the Japanese audience laugh. The joke below is the first place winning joke of the world's funniest joke project, submitted by a 31 year-old male from Manchester in the UK.

¹ This website survey project had quite an impact on Japanese society and the top three ranking stories of the week were introduced on a TV show called "The Golden Hour" of Tokyo Metropolitan TV every week from 9:00 pm to 10:00 pm. "Japan's funniest story project" took up part of the TV program for a year from April 5, 2010 to March 31, 2011, from the beginning till the end of the project.

Two hunters are out in the woods when one of them collapses. He doesn't seem to be breathing and his eyes are glazed. The other guy whips out his phone and calls the emergency services. He gasps, "My friend is dead! What can I do?" The operator says "Calm down. I can help. First, let's make sure he's dead." There is a silence, then a shot is heard. Back on the phone, the guy says "OK, now what?" (from web site "LaughLab" <http://www.laughlab.co.uk/> Dec.2, 2011)

This joke does not make Japanese laugh, as much as it does the English speaking audience. And it is difficult for most Japanese to believe that this is the world's funniest story. English ability may be one of the contribution to the Japanese reactions because some Japanese do not understand the double meaning of "make sure". Beyond this linguistic obstacle, the problem is more essential. Jokes such as this one can be categorized as "ready-made jokes," which are usually fictional and repeatedly told among people. This type of jokes is about someone unknown; so it is difficult for Japanese respondents to feel sympathy or share laughter together with the joke teller. Japanese often tell funny experiences about themselves or friends or family members. Stories should tell the other about personality, environment, thoughts and attitude of the teller, so that the teller and listener get to know each other more and gain solidarity (Oshima, 2005). Because of that, the purpose of funny stories is not only to laugh together. With the funniest story project among Japanese, most stories were almost expected to be bonding, non-fictional personal experiences.

Hill & Fitzgerald states, "much of what appears in print about humor comes from a Western, especially USA and Western European, perspective. We seriously need to compare what we now have available with conditions in many other cultures" (Hill & Fitzgerald 2002, p. 105). The world's funniest joke was most likely elected, and Wiseman's comment was made with a Western or English-speaking perspective. In this paper, I hope to introduce the Japanese perspective of humor.

This research project has employed the term "funny story" instead of "joke", because there isn't an appropriate Japanese word for "joke". Even in Japanese, it would have to be the loan-word from English "joke", "*jo-ku*", and the definition of "*jo-ku*" is too ambiguous. Some people assume that "*jo-ku*" means American or English jokes. There is a Japanese word "*ko-banashi*", literally meaning small story, which actually indicates short funny stories. Therefore a funny story (*Omoshiroi hanasi*) is considered more familiar and well understood than joke (*jo-ku*).

Omoshiroi could also be expressed in both hiragana writing system (おもしろい) or kanji writing system (面白い), but in this project, *Omoshiroi* in hiragana system is adopted. The term *Omoshiroi* has double meanings—interesting and funny. The kanji writing system is usually used more in a formal, proper, and serious situation and in this case, the kanji writing system (面白い) gives an impression of "interesting" instead of "funny". Whereas the hiragana writing system (おもしろい) is softer and more casual than kanji, therefore it gives an impression of "funny" instead of "interesting". In order to collect as many funny, laughable stories as possible, the project started with much concern with these linguistic adaptations. But before presenting the findings of the project, I will briefly introduce some of the important studies of humor in the past.

2. Some Approaches to Humor Studies

Humor is studied by experts in many fields, such as sociology, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, medicine, communication, and so forth. Many theories of and approaches to humor were discussed in the past. Among those, three approaches are usually recognized as classical theories of humor; relief/release theory, superiority theory, and incongruity theory. Relief/release theory is described as discharge of tension by early scholars such as Freud (1905/1976). He developed relief/release theory and integrated it with elements of incongruity theory. According to Superiority theorists such as Hobbes (1660/1987), humor is an expression of superiority. He states: "Laughter is nothing else but sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmity of others, or with our own formerly" (Hobbes 1660/1987, p. 20). Evidently, humor and power, hierarchy, conflicts and aggression are strongly related and therefore it is still an important area of humor studies.

Incongruity theory with several varieties became the most influential predominant approach among humor scholars. They are defined: "Humor arising from disjointed, ill-suited pairings of ideas or situations or presentations of ideas or situations that are divergent from habitual customs form the base of incongruity theories" (Keith-Spiegel 1972, p. 7) or "Incongruity is usually defined as a conflict between what is expected and what actually occurs in the joke" (Shultz 1976, p. 12), or "The notions of congruity and incongruity refer to the relationship between components of an object, event, idea, social expectation, and so forth. When the arrangement of the constituent elements of an event is incompatible with the normal or expected pattern, the event is perceived as incongruous" (McGhee 1979, p. 6-7), and among others (Attardo and Raskin, 1991; Oring, 1992; Ruch, 1998).

Even though these theories and approaches are mostly developed in Western perspective, they are deliberative and adaptive to the situation of Japanese humor in general. Based on these approaches, especially on incongruity theory, the outcome of "Japan's funniest story" project will be analyzed.

3. Research Method

From April 1 of 2010 to March 31 of 2011, "Japan's funniest story project" gathered funny stories from all over Japan on its own website. The website is conducted entirely in Japanese aiming at Japanese contributors and voters. I have updated new stories contributed to the site every Sunday, and the voters can start voting from Sunday night. All the stories are numbered in order and voters vote on the number of their favorite story. The website system doesn't allow a voter to vote on the same story, nor to vote more than once each week. At the end of each month, I reported the top ten to fifteen stories of the month. The number of stories depended on the number submitted. For example, in some months, only eleven stories gathered all the votes of the month. Or in other months, the votes were scattered among twenty different stories. All the stories are available on the site, as well as the monthly rankings. This accessibility permits voters to vote on past stories as well, except the ones they have already voted on.

During the year, 569 stories were submitted and 1949 votes on those stories were received.

However, nine stories of 569 were inappropriate, which meant that they attacked a particular person, included dirty words, or were too long; those nine stories were not carried on the website for a vote. The website had an instruction to limit the story within 600 letters in Japanese. It also warned that inappropriate stories will not be accepted by the project and will not appear on the website. Therefore, only 560 stories were available to be analyzed and categorized.

However, I must admit the limitation of conducting a survey through the Internet. Submitters as well as voters are limited to only those who have access to internet financially and ability of using it. Therefore, both submitters and voters tend to be in their twenties to sixties, higher educated, with a strong interest in humor, and also there is certain number of repeaters. Also, the data on their age and sex are not as reliable as in an individual face-to-face survey. However, beyond these concerns, the survey through the website still benefits the project in terms of the numbers of submitters and voters, being regionally borderless, and therefore capturing broad range of types, purpose, and usage of humor in Japan.

4. Characteristics of Submitters

Observing the submitters by different age groups, 37 stories were submitted from people aged 10-19, 103 stories are from the 20-29 age group, 89 stories are from 30-39, 111 stories are from 40-49, 145 stories are from 50-59, 65 stories are from 60-69, and 15 stories are from people in their seventies or over. And four stories were submitted by subjects of unknown ages (see Figure 1).

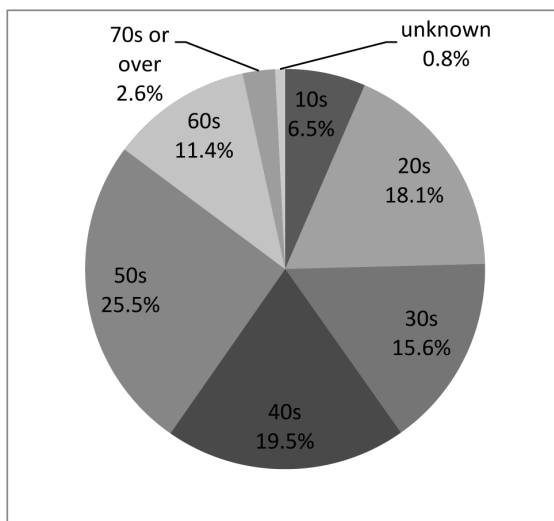


Figure 1. Age Groups of All Submitters

Previous studies indicate that men between their thirties and fifties create most jokes and humorous stories because they have the most social contacts (Davies, 1996). According to this research in Japan, people in their fifties submitted the most, then forties, and twenties.

However, there is a slight difference when the stories are restricted only to the funny ones. As the result of votes, there are top ten stories every month. Among those 118 stories², 26.3% were submitted by people in their forties, 20.2% by fifties and then 20.2% by thirties. Therefore, respondents in their forties actually submitted most of the funny stories (see Figure 2). There weren't significant differences by sex. 306 stories were submitted by males, 255 stories were submitted by females, and eight stories by people of unknown sex.

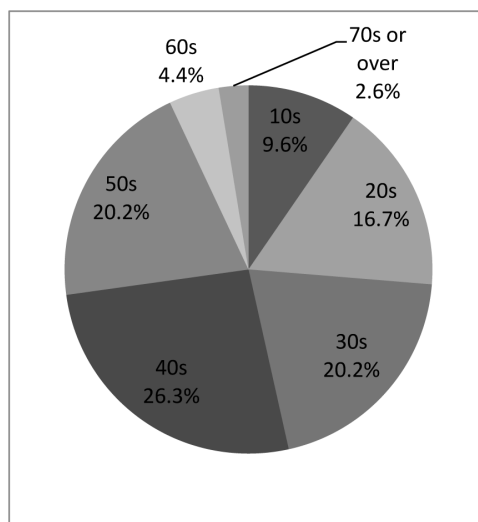


Figure 2. Age Groups of Monthly Top Ten Stories (118 Stories)

The mid-report of this research project “Japan’s funniest story” was presented as “Why are Japanese not funny? Types of funny stories instead of jokes told in high-context society” at the 22nd International Society for Humor Studies Conference in June 2010, held in Hong Kong. There were many meaningful comments given, and one of them was from Christie Davies: “Humor is usually created by males. But even in Europe, females tend to tell their own experiences and laugh at each other. It is quite an interesting tendency that Japanese tell funny experiences in such style. At the same time, many Japanese females submitted their stories. In Europe, it’s usually males who tell jokes. The Japanese style of humor may be similar to European females” (June 24, 2010 by Davies in Hong Kong).

The funny stories submitted to this project mostly reflected each writer’s personal experience or the experience of friends/family members. At least, they are written as if they

² The Top ten stories of each month for a year should provide 120 stories to analyze. However, the Tohoku - Pacific Ocean Earthquake occurred on March 11 of 2011 and submission and votes stopped for a week. Even after people started submitting and voting, it wasn’t as much as before. People seemed to avoid laughing and having fun after the earthquake. Therefore, there were not enough stories or voters and therefore, only eight stories were voted for top ten. As a result, there are 118 stories to categorize.

were part of the story. Some of the stories ranked higher in Top Ten of every month are famous, and possibly repeated from elsewhere, but those stories are still told in the style as if they were personal episodes. It seems like the submitters are aware that stories about a third person are not popular.

Kuipers (2001) also analyzed that people with higher education would rather avoid repeating themselves by telling “ready-made” jokes. Traditionally, Europeans including Dutch often told “ready-made” jokes to each other, but this has been changing, she says. Telling personal and original stories or personal experiences is much more popular. Considering people with higher education share a certain level of knowledge, meaning that they maintain their conversation in a high context environment, this also explains why Japanese who have conversation in a high context society prefer telling humorous personal experiences.

Those personal experiences are often about the speaker or someone (or something) related to the speaker or listener. Therefore, telling a funny experience is about sharing the past and the laughter which helps to bring people closer and build a better relationship. As Oshima states: “Because the purpose of humor for most Japanese is to enforce solidarity, telling personal experiences makes better sense instead of telling ready-made jokes which are about nobody they know” (Oshima 2011, P. 50). People in high context society (Hall, 1976) are more comfortable with funny personal experiences.

For example, the same story could sound funnier depends on how it’s told because the level of sympathy changes. Here is an example from one of the stories contributed in December, 2010.

#438 [lodging] – rated third place in December, 2010

It’s about my mother. She took a trip with her best friend from junior high school. The elevator of the (Japanese style) inn they reserved was broken. My mother and her friend said, “Well..., that’s OK.” And they decided to stay there anyway. Their room was number 2 on the 11th floor. They took the stairs because the elevator was broken. My mother’s friend said, “let’s tell each other a scary story while we are taking the stairs, one story for each floor.” So they were having an exciting fun time up to the 10th story on the 10th floor. When they started going up the stairs of the 10th floor, the last scary story was told by my mother’s friend, “I forgot to get the key at the front desk.”

Suppose this story is not about the writer’s mother and we rewrite the story, it would be something like below.

[lodging]

Two good girlfriends took a trip together. The elevator of the (Japanese style) inn they reserved was broken. One of them said, “Well..., that’s OK.” And they decided to stay there anyway. Their room was number 2 on the 11th floor. They took the stairs because the elevator was broken. One said, “let’s tell each other a scary story while we are taking the stairs, one story for each floor.” So they were having an exciting fun time up to the 10th story on the 10th floor. When they started going up the stairs of the 10th floor, the last scary story was told, “I forgot to get the key at the front desk.”

The story becomes simpler, but perhaps it is uneasy to picture the scene and the personality of the characters in the story. The humor of the story is the same, but the readers feel less affinity for the writer. Because of its style, it gives an impression of being fictional or not original. Therefore when the third person is the main character of the story, the story is not as funny to many Japanese.

5. Categories of Funny Stories

I have categorized all stories submitted as language related, showing a reflection of society or culture, universal, and non-sense. Stories related with language were the largest group, therefore I have separated them into five different groups as below. Language related stories are based on presupposition of understanding Japanese well, and also understanding a few words of English and Chinese.

- 1) Language related
 - 1.1) Mis-said, mis-heard
 - 1.2) Homonymy, pun, wordplay
 - 1.3) Foreign language related
- 2) Reflection of society or culture
- 3) Universal
- 4) Non-sense

23.4% of all 560 stories are categorized as reflecting of society or culture, and this was the largest group. Then universal stories are 19.3% of all, and mis-said/mis-heard stories are 18.7% of all stories. And language related stories all together are 45% of all 560 stories (see Figure 3). Because not all stories are funny, the data must be looked at more closely to find out what types of stories are funny to many Japanese.

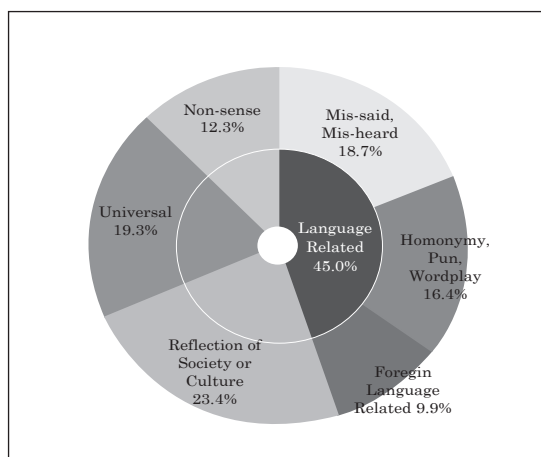


Figure 3. Percentages of Each Category for All (560) Stories

To accent the funniest submissions, monthly top ten stories were also categorized. Stories ranked top ten are popular, sometimes well-known stories, but it means everyone's favorite stories. The largest group is mis-said/mis-heard (27.1%), and then universal (19.5%). The third largest group is reflection of society or culture (13.6%). What is remarkable here is that the total of language related (mis-said/mis-heard, pun/homonymy, word play, English/foreign languages, and foreigners' Japanese) is much larger – 65.2% of 118 stories (see Figure 4), whereas it was 45% of all 560 stories (see Figure 3). Moreover, the portion of language related category is larger with monthly top three stories (66.7% of 36 stories) and monthly top stories (74.9% of 12 stories). The breakdowns of details are shown in Figure 5 and 6 below.

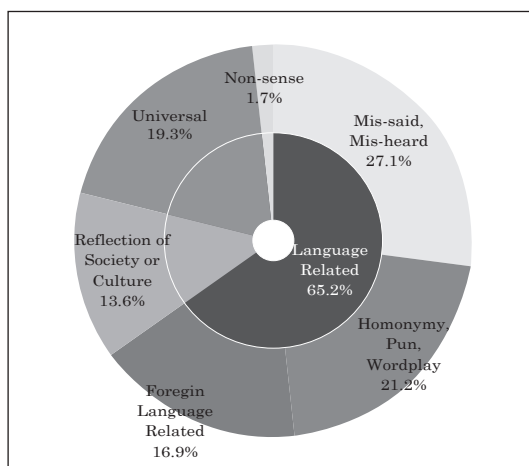


Figure 4. Percentages of Each Category for Monthly Top Ten (118) Stories

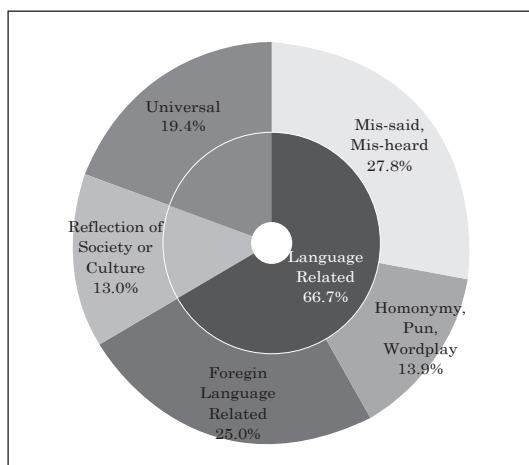


Figure 5. Percentages of Each Category for Monthly Top 3 (36) Stories

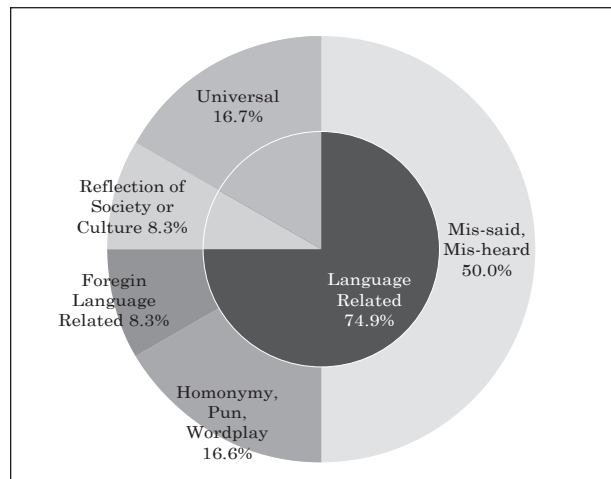


Figure 6. Percentages of Each Category for Monthly Top 1 (12) Stories

This close examination of the rankings reveals that many of funnier stories are related to words and languages. Based on this supposition, many of Japanese funny stories cannot be translated into other languages. This might explain the absence of Japanese jokes in the “world funniest joke” contest, or counter one of the wide spread stereotypes, “why don’t Japanese tell jokes?”

An interesting tendency between males’ stories and females’ stories also emerged. The sex of monthly top ten submitters (118) revealed male:female:unknown ratio of 50:67:1 respectively, and slightly more females submit funny stories. However, the number of male submitters was higher in categories such as reflection of society and culture (male:female/11:5), and word play (male:female/7:3). The number of female submitters in the category of mis-said/mis-heard (male:female/9:23), was higher in English/foreign languages (male:female/2:9), and in foreigners’ Japanese (male:female/2:7). Males seemed more sensitive and interested in the movement and change of society, also politics, economics, and current affairs from newspapers and TV news. These are the favorite topics of males in particular (Lakoff, 1975). Females tend to submit stories of mis-said/mis-heard by sudden unexpected coincidence in spontaneous conversations. Whereas males’ word plays are more elaborated and made to be humorous. Females seemed to respect more the atmosphere of the place, and the emotional bond, and share it at where they are. For contrast, males seem more logical, less emotional, and their stories don’t necessarily relate to the place or the situation.

Another interesting tendency was that many stories on English/foreign languages or foreigners’ Japanese were submitted by females. It shows their strong interest in foreign languages, foreigners, and foreign countries. According to Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO), 20,689 Japanese students studied abroad in 2005 and 70% of them were female. Among students who study in departments of foreign studies or foreign languages at universities in Japan, 66% are female and 34% are male.

Other categories (pun/homonymy, universal, and non-sense) had about the same number of male and female submitters and there weren't any particular tendencies.

In order to provide some ideas I have translated some of the funny stories from each category.

5.1. Language Related

5.1.1. Mis-Said, Mis-Heard

One of the most popular kinds of funny stories is stories based on something mis-said or mis-heard by clumsy middle-aged to elderly people or small children. The first example shows the Japanese sense of understanding. Japanese don't have a tipping system at hotels, neither in Korea. However, many Japanese are aware that some people appreciate tips in foreign countries. This group of Japanese women tried to be nice by tipping, but it sounded that the doorman requested *Kimuchi* instead of some cash. It sounded so because they were in Korea.

#99 [Korea, indeed] (2nd place in May, 2010)

I went to Korea with two of my friends. At the hotel, the doorman kindly carried our suitcases to our room, so I tried to hand him some tip. Then he said, with fluent Japanese, "No, no. Only *Kimuchi* is enough for me." *Kimuchi*...! Indeed, we are in Korea. He wants *Kimuchi* instead of some cash. I thought Koreans really love to eat *Kimuchi*. But we just arrived in Korea, I hadn't bought any *Kimuchi* yet. I didn't have any *Kimuchi*, so I thought I was in trouble. Then after little conversation, we found out his actual line was a very humble one, "No, no, Only *Kimochi* is enough for me." **Kimuchi* is a Korean word for a famous delicacy. It is spiced Korean cabbage with red pepper. *Kimochi* in this case, is a Japanese word for kind heart. There is a Japanese phrase "*Kimochi dake de kekko desu.*" 気持ちだけで結構です。It means "Your kindness is good enough for me." It is a humble way to say "No, thank you." Even though the doorman spoke such good Japanese, he mispronounced the word *Kimochi*, or the writer mis-heard the word.

Here is another example of a mis-heard or maybe mis-read story. On the application form, it explains to fill in the blanks with numbers. However, this old man did not read it or mis-read it, he filled them with his favorite food. This also reflects Japanese aging society. The increasing number of elderly people who don't follow recent social common sense provides us a new experience. It used to be rude to laugh at older people who should be respected, but because elderly people are not a minority in Japanese society anymore, it seems that people are allowed to laugh at aging.

#498 [My customer] (3rd place in January, 2011)

I work at a bank. There was a customer who was seeking a new cash card and he was filling out the form. He was a really old man and it was taking so long. Then he completely stopped at where he should decide and fill in his personal identification

number in four boxes like these □□□□. He said, “What’s this..?” So I said, “Oh, you can fill it in whatever you want. Write what you like.” Then he wrote “su ki ya ki” in those four boxes. I see...he likes *sukiyaki*...

*Sukiyaki is a popular meal with sliced tender beef and vegetables in sweet soy sauce based soup. It’s common to use four digit numbers for the personal identification number for a bank card in Japan. But the customer was so old that he didn’t realize that he should write numbers in those boxes. So he filled it in with his favorite food instead.

There is another aspect to stories in this category. The stories involve conversations. It seems that participants of conversation cooperate with each other to make normal conversation a funny one. And such conversational humor tends to create spontaneous humor as Martin says, “the other kind of humor is what I call ‘conversational humor’ which is the more spontaneous, witty comments that people make” (Martin 2009, p. 34). Conversation humor is seen in many of the funny stories submitted to this project, but also in Japanese daily conversation. Takekuro defines Japanese conversational humor as: “impulsive speech behaviors in which participants spontaneously create something humorous, ironic, and witty in order to provoke amused laughter” (Takekuro 2005, p. 86). The participants of those stories don’t have the intention to make their conversation humorous, however, sometime after the incident, they look back and laugh at it. Even with spontaneous conversational humor, sometimes it takes mental distance to take it as humor (Morreall, 1997). Weingaertner (2007) who had lived in Osaka, Japan and had been an active comedian as *Manzai* duo called ‘Altbayaern’, says that Japanese don’t tell jokes in daily conversation but instead, people make funny comments along the topic without interrupting the flow of conversation.

5.1.2. Homonymy, Pun, Wordplay

Japanese language includes many homonyms. Nagashima (2005) explains that because there are only 111 phonemes in Japanese language, “the 111 phonemes give rise to at least 450,000 words, which inevitably supply plenty of phonetic homonyms” (Nagashima, 2005, p.76). Because of the phonetic characteristics, homonym jokes are very easy to create and have been considered vulgar and low comedy. Typically, men of 40 or over make homonym jokes at work and force their subordinates to laugh at the jokes, and younger people hate it. However, when it comes to the text form of funny stories, many homonym jokes were observed and many people voted for them.

#2 [Family business] (1st place of April, 2010)

A friend of mine went to a job interview. The interviewer asked, “So, what is *ka-gyo*?” My friend answered proudly, “Yes, it’s *ka ki ku ke ko*!” He still wonders why the interviewer asked him such a question.

**ka-gyo* has double meanings. One is family business. The interviewer asked what the interviewee’s family does. Another is one of the lines of Japanese fifty (kana) syllabary order. There are ten lines and each has five syllables. *Ka-gyo* is the line which starts with *ka*. Any five year-old could say what is *ka-gyo* (*ka ki ku ke ko*) which makes it an inappropriate question at a job interview.

Nagashima (2005) also describes that Japanese believed in power, spirit, and soul possessed with words. And puns or *sha-re* greatly draw attention to themselves, send strong messages and are memorable. Therefore, *sha-re* was traditionally created by men and appreciated. Brau (2008) provides different insight to Japanese possession of *sha-re*. She states, “*sha-re* which not only means witticisms, puns, plays on words, and jokes, but also fashionable person, fashionable behavior. ... What these two meanings of *sha-re* share is a playful attitude toward living, an attitude that prizes aesthetic distance” (Brau, 2008, p.86).

#254 [That’s not what I asked] (5th place in July, 2010)

This is when my daughter was just before entering kindergarten, she did something bad and I had to do the right thing. I told myself, “This is important. She has to learn how to say ‘I’m sorry (*gomen nasai*)’”. So I looked into her eyes and said, “Now, what do you have to say?” daughter “....???” “You know, say it, ‘go’. And what’s next?!” “...six?”

**go* means five in Japanese. The writer wanted to remind her daughter the word, *gomen nasai*, so she started with the first letter. But her daughter, assuming that she is probably three years old, thought next of five (*go*) is six.

Another example again, expresses characteristics of Japanese language. The ways of counting objects is different in Japanese, therefore small children could misunderstand.

#315 [How to count horses] (5th place in September, 2010)

When I was an elementary school student, my teacher asked students. “Fish are counted 1-ppiki, 2-hiki. The birds are 1-wa, 2-wa. Now, how do you count horses?” I raised my hand and answered, “Yes! It’s 1-chaku, 2-chaku!”

*In Japanese, small animals are counted 1-ppiki, 2-hiki, something long is counted 1-ppon, 2-hon, books are counted 1-satsu, 2-satsu, etc. Large animals like cows, elephants, horses are counted 1-tou, 2-tou. Students learn how to count each object in elementary school. However, this writer must have been to horse racing a lot, most likely taken by his father. He thought horses are counted 1-chaku, 2-chaku which mean 1st place, 2nd place.

Horse racing is one of the most popular forms of gambling among Japanese men and even after having a family and children, some still go to horse races. It is not so much these days, but taking children to horse racing was considered inappropriate because of the gambling. So fathers often tell their children that they are going to the zoo or farm to watch some animals and actually take them to horse racing.

5.1.3. Foreign Language Related

Since many Japanese are aware of some English, Chinese, or Korean words, some funny stories are based on some linguistic knowledge. This category also includes Japanese as a foreign language. The number of foreigners learning Japanese has increased recently and

because of that, there are many funny stories submitted on Japanese as a foreign language. Their misunderstandings of some Japanese words are impossible for Japanese to come up with. Therefore, the stories on this particular topic brought shocking laughter to many Japanese readers.

#23 [Japanese writing] (1st place in March, 2010)

In Japanese class, foreign students always give answers that make us laugh. This time the question was to use “*donyori*” correctly in a sentence. Then one of the students raised his hand and said, “Yes, I like soba more than udon!” (watashi wa udon yori soba ga suki desu.) 私はうどんよりそばが好きです。...What an answer!

**donyori* means dull, overcast, or gray. The teacher was expecting a sentence like “The sky is dull today.” (kyou wa sora ga donyori site iru) However the student used it as parts of two different words – udon (a kind of noodles) and yori (more than).

It is only funny to people who understand the meaning of *donyori* correctly. When the word becomes more difficult, the story becomes less popular. It seems that simple words with simple mistakes are understood widely.

Language awareness is essential for popular bilingual puns. Stefanowitsch (2002) introduces various English-German puns in print ads and journals such as advertising phrase “Fit for Fahr’n (fun)” by Mitsubishi. In German, *fahr’n* means “to drive” so that “Fit for Fahr’n” has double meanings; fit for fun and fit to drive. Japanese-English bilingual puns are also found in ads and commercials. For example, an advertisement phrase “JR Ski Ski” of JR (Japan Railway) has been used and popular since 1991. Ski in English means ski as a sport in snowy winter mountains, and ski (*suki*) means “like” in Japanese. The message is “I like skiing” and JR provides a bullet train which takes you straight from Tokyo to the ski resort.

5.2. Reflection of Society and Culture

According to many humorists, jokes mirror society (Davies, 1996). Jokes and funny stories reflect what is happening in the society and they also record what happened in the past when the joke was created. Satirical jokes and plays on politics are good examples. Kuipers says that, humor “creates a sense of shared ‘conspiracy’ in the context of illicit activities like gossiping or joking about superiors” (Kuipers 2008, p. 366). However, politics or Imperial House are not popular topic to joke about among Japanese.

#321 [Name is important] (3rd place of September, 2010)

I went to eat at Denny’s one day. A foreign waiter came and took my order. I saw his name plate on his chest, and it says “Jonathan”.

*Denny’s and Jonathan’s are very similar and both popular family type franchised restaurants. They are commonly considered rivals. The writer thought if one’s name is Jonathan, it makes more sense to work at Jonathan’s instead of Denny’s. Recently, there are some foreign staff working as part of their job training.

Below is one of very few political stories contributed to the project.

#549 [No sex questioned] (2nd place of March, 2011)

I heard that Kim Jong-il of North Korea has five substitutes to stand by just in case.
And one of them is actually a lady.

*Kim Jong-il looks like a middle-aged lady because of his body shape and hair. Even a woman can play his double. This story was submitted before the death of Kim Jong-il in December 2011.

There weren't any other funny stories about Japanese or foreign politicians submitted at all during the project. Lack of interest in Japanese politics seems to be the background. The prime minister of Japan rotates every so often and nothing changes. As Benton (1988) says, the political jokes change nothing. There are several particular topics that Japanese hesitate to joke about: Imperial Family, International affairs including foreign politicians, and wars. Those topics usually provide very popular jokes in the Western side of the world. In other words, "in the use of humor as a 'weapon', hostility, aggression, superiority, and rivalry are often used interchangeably," (Kuipers 2008, p. 368) is not common purpose of using humor in Japan. Again, humor is mainly used for inner circle to strengthen the bond.

5.3. Universal

Universal stories are not as popular among Japanese. People consider those stories too "shallow" to actually crack up. They are funny all right, but they are something people have heard of somewhere. If the story is not new, original, or personal, it doesn't make Japanese laugh very much. Universal means global or non-cultural. It doesn't require a lot of knowledge behind a joke.

#232 [Proposal] (2nd place of July, 2010)

A: I have been asked to marry the other day.

B: Oh, I have been asked to marry by two people at the same time.

A: You have? Who did?

B: My parents.

#525 [Why!?] (3rd place of February, 2011)

I heard this story from my friend.

In maths class at her elementary school,

Teacher: OK, here is a question for you. You have five apples. I ask you to give me two apples. Then how many apples do you have?

Student: Five.

In fact, the submitters themselves might have heard of the story or joke somewhere and translated into their own words. There was a story, "I can't stop smoking" "Really? It's easy. I've done it seven times already." The project website has received an e-mail that commented,

“I have heard of this joke before. This is an English joke”, from a British male living in Japan.

5.4. Non-sense

Non-sense jokes are sometimes difficult to understand. Whether it is funny or not, depends on how great a distance it goes from the range of normal or expected pattern of behavior. As Paolillo explains; “...depending on metaphoric value-laden, cultural knowledge will be interpreted as NONE, or nonsense, outside their cultural context” (Paolillo, 1998; p. 283). The teller and hearer must share a sense of cultural context or particular knowledge to judge a joke as non-sense. Therefore, stories are categorized in this section based on the Japanese cultural context.

#466 [Errand] (8th place of December, 2010)

I asked my 6 years old, 1st grade son to run some errands.

Me: Can you go and buy some apples, potatoes and cucumbers? Do you think you can do that?

Son: Yeah, I’m fine.

Then he came back from shopping.

Son: They weren’t there, so I bought some radishes, onions, and egg plants!

In this story, there is no good reason for the boy to buy radishes, onions, and egg plants instead of apples, potatoes and cucumbers in the Japanese context. The boy only picked random items at vegetable shop. The point is that he just bought nothing his mother asked for. However, I must admit that this story might make some sense in different cultural context, therefore it may not be non-sense otherwise.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to report types of humor or funny story that Japanese feel comfortable through the “Japan’s funniest story” emerged website. After studying 560 stories submitted over a year, a unique style of humor has been discovered. Unlike “ready-made” jokes in English, Japanese funny stories are told (or written) in a way as a personal experience. Also, most stories were written in conversational style which makes the stories more intimate, emotional, and personal. The result of this web site research supports how Japanese only use humor among close friends and family to gain solidarity instead of identifying oneself or breaking the ice. People show each other how close they are, how well they know each other by joking about individual behavior and personalities (Oshima, 2011).

The outcome of this research also provided some refutation of a “myth” — why Japanese don’t tell jokes. As even a well-known humor scholar Mintz says, “my own view is that relatively stable and homogeneous societies have less use for humor than dynamic and heterogeneous ones” (Mintz, 1999, p. 237). One of the two main causes for this myth is the language barrier. Many funny stories are based on Japanese language skills. I have attempted to translate some of them above in this paper, but however I do, I must come with explanations which ruins the humor.

Another cause, more importantly, is the social context. Japanese society is considered as

one of high context society which means the range of normal or expected pattern is narrower rather than wider in low context society. In order to create humor, one only needs to take a small step out of the normal range. However, such incongruity may be so small that members of low context society don't see that as incongruous. For example, a man in a hurry running into a house with his shoes on seems funny to Japanese because he is expected to take his shoes off when he walks into a house. However, the same scene means nothing funny or strange to people with different customs.

According to Hall, high context refers to societies or groups where people have close connections over a long period of time. Many aspects of cultural behavior are not made explicit because most members know what to do and what to think from years of interaction with each other, seeking strong boundaries, less verbally explicit communication, more internalized understandings of what is communicated (Hall, 1976). In Japanese high context society, funny stories are told to make sure what is normal among them and develop better relationships since people already share a lot of information as common sense. And funny personal experiences help to understand each other more. Therefore, funny stories are made by members of inner circle, instead of the outer circle. The more exclusive stories are understood by certain members of a group, the funnier it becomes for the member.

English jokes are often used as an ice breaker, expression of identity, or delivery of a message. In other words, many English jokes are said to engage a broader audience and therefore they are understood by many with different cultural or social backgrounds. Japanese funny stories are not made or told for the broader audience, which indicates why Japanese rarely try to tell their jokes or funny stories in English.

An example of conversation between Japanese female university students is given in Oshima's (2005) article.

Student A: Your *tokkuri* sweater is cute.

Student B: You mean, you call this *tokkuri*? (laugh)

Student C: Never! (laugh)

Student A: Really? (laugh) What do you call it?

Student B: What? (laugh) You are joking! It's a turtleneck! (laugh)

Student A: Oh! (laugh) That's right! (laugh) It's a turtleneck! (Oshima 2005, p. 35)

*tokkuri means small sake bottle.



Figure 7. A Tokkuri (Sake Bottle) and a Sake Cup

It is a conversation understood only among these three girls and they burst out laughing for over five minutes during this short conversation. It is only normal for this inner circle of girls to call it a turtleneck sweater which is a modern term. *Tokkuri* sweater is an old term which is only used by elderly or non fashionable untrendy males. The fact that one of the young females called this particular sweater *tokkuri* is out of the normal range for them. Student A happened to live with her grandmother, and because she is used to hearing her grandmother calling such a sweater *tokkuri*, the term came out of her mouth at the scene. The incongruity exists at such a small gap in an extremely high context situation. Obviously, other Japanese speakers who are outer circle (male students, professors, etc.) did not find this conversation funny or did not understand it at all.

An extremely high context situation can be seen at small groups of friends or family members in low context society as well, and extremely intimate humor is shared among them, and perhaps those are not understood by anybody in the outer circle. Those jokes do not go around the world even if they happened to be English ones. Besides the point that they are in Japanese language, clearly, Japanese high context funny stories don't go around the world because they are not created to send messages, identify themselves, or reduce tension for the outer circle. However, Japan is facing to be part of global society and working with the outer circle, which leads people finally to be aware of serious need for skills of flexibility, creativity, and establishing relationship with minimum conflicts in their communication. And humor is a good tool to accomplish those. Humor mirrors the society. When funny stories for the outer circle are submitted, it may be an indicator of a broadened Japanese society.

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