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# What Funny Talks Reveal about Japanese Culture and Language

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## Abstract

For the last 10 years, the author has collected funny talks roughly two to three minutes in length, made by various Japanese speakers. One point that has been made clear by these talks is the fact that people's funny talks show cultural and linguistic differences that surpass the differences among individuals. This paper shows the following two features of Japanese culture and language from two aspects of content and manner of funny talks: (i) Japanese people tend to narrate their own funny experiences much more than ready-made jokes and anecdotes; (ii) Japanese people are lenient about disfluency. They even allow for a "pause/prolongation + continuation" type of disfluency within a single morpheme. These two features are not independent of but interconnected with each other by the nature of spoken language.

*Keywords:* funny talk; experience; disfluency; grammar; spoken language; Japanese

## 1. Introduction

For the last 10 years, I have collected "funny talks" roughly two to three minutes in length, made by various native Japanese speakers, through the "My Funny Talk Contest" (*Watashi no chotto omoshiroi hanashi kontesuto*, in Japanese, <http://www.speech-data.jp/chotto/>) and released these on the Internet, in video form with captions as the "My Funny Talk Corpus" (*Watashi no chotto omoshiroi hanashi koopasu*, <http://www.speech-data.jp/chotto/history.html>). Furthermore, for the last six years I have opened the contest to learners of Japanese in addition to native Japanese speakers, receiving entries through now from Japanese language learners in more than 20 countries/regions such as Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, China, France, Germany, Great Britain, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Russia, South Korea, Spain, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, the United States, and Vietnam (listed in alphabetical order). At this time, the recorded talks number 536 (264 from native Japanese speakers and 272 from Japanese language learners) (Table 1).

The number of talks by native speakers showed a major increase from 2010 (17 talks) to 2011 (72 talks). This happened because we simply thought that "bigger is better for a corpus," and worked hard to publicize the contest. However, we soon learned the pitfall of this simple idea. Judging of the contest is left up to voting by Internet viewers<sup>1</sup>, and if there are not a sufficient number of votes, then a contest cannot exist in the first place. However, from the perspective of the voters, who have to view and grade each of these stories by amateurs (which are not that interesting), an increase in the number of stories leads to a major increase in their burden, and thus in 2011 we had trouble finding Internet viewers who would vote for all the stories. Thus, this project is only viable due to a delicate balance between the contest and corpus, and if the corpus is prioritized too much (i.e., "the more stories the better"), the contest cannot maintain itself. After this experience, we cut back on publicity activities.

Table 1. Current breakdown of My Funny Talk Corpus.

Contest (year)	Talks by native Japanese speakers	Talks by Japanese learners	Captions/Subtitles
1 <sup>st</sup> (2010)	17	-	Japanese/English/Chinese/French
2 <sup>nd</sup> (2011)	72	-	Japanese
3 <sup>rd</sup> (2012)	43	-	Japanese
4 <sup>th</sup> (2013)	44	-	Japanese/Russian (6 talks only)
5 <sup>th</sup> (2014)	11	51	Japanese
6 <sup>th</sup> (2015)	23	51	Japanese
7 <sup>th</sup> (2016)	11	42	Japanese
8 <sup>th</sup> (2017)	12	63	Japanese
9 <sup>th</sup> (2018)	16	20	Japanese
10 <sup>th</sup> (2019)	15	45	Japanese
Totals	264	272	

Entries are recorded and released to the public not just as audio but as full video, and this is due to growing acceptance of the idea that "there are limitations on what can be done using an audio corpus with no video" (e.g. [1]-[3]). In the first academic year, 2010, seven stories were released in audio-only form as an "Audio Category," but this was a temporary measure due to technical trouble that made it impossible to record video. All of the other stories have video.

In addition to audio and video, Japanese subtitles are also attached to the entries and downloading is enabled. The rationale is to provide text information to enable use of language processing and rhythm analysis, and to provide support for stories whose audio is difficult to hear due to the recording environment. This also reflects concern for making the stories easy to understand for the viewer, particular for Japanese learners who are not Japanese native speakers, and do not have sufficient Japanese language abilities. In addition, for the 2010 stories, a trial was made of providing subtitles in English, Chinese, and French as well as Japanese, so the content can be understood even by learners of other languages with no experience learning Japanese. For the same reason, subtitles in Russian were provided for the stories in 2013.

These videos can be quoted freely by anyone for academic purposes, because legal problems relating to portrait rights, copyrights and similar issues are solved by exchanging documents beforehand with contest applicants, and in this regard My Funny Talk Corpus is clearly distinguished from content such as videos uploaded to youtube. As a result, despite its frivolous image, the My Funny Talk Corpus is the world's only Japanese language corpus with audio, video, and subtitles currently available to the public free of charge on the Internet. (See [4][5] for more details.)

We believe that recording and releasing documentation of this modern storytelling is significant in itself. However, the academic significance of the My Funny Talk Corpus goes beyond that. This corpus indicates two distinct features of Japanese culture and language. Below I shall show them one by one.

## 2. Content of funny talks

Native Japanese applicants show a strong tendency concerning the content of funny talks. They never talk stories of people unrelated to them (and in some cases fictional), such as one beginning, "After a shipwreck, a man landed on a desert island alone.." ("jokes and anecdotes" hereinafter). Native Japanese speakers are more interested in recounting their own funny experiences. For example, a look at the fifth My Funny Talk Contest (2014), which was the first to record talks from native speakers of other languages shows that while jokes and anecdotes were not particularly rare among the 51 talks in total from native speakers of other languages, which included eight such talks ("the true Russian man" [no. 31], "the three Swiss farmers" [no. 34], "Maruko-chan" [no. 55], "the President" [no. 56], "the husband and wife" [no. 64], "courage" [no. 65], "lining up" [no. 81], and "Christmas" [no. 100]), no such talk appeared among those from native Japanese speakers. The same is true of the contests of the other years. This tendency of Japanese speakers coincides with the previous observation in written text ([6]).

It is not the case that jokes and anecdotes are lacking in Japanese-language society. They are present in the forms of comic storytelling called *rakugo*. However, they have not developed in the form of marginal arts (arts by the general public, such as song parodies or graffiti, [7]), as opposed to mass arts (arts by professionals for consumption by the general public). Haruhiko Yamaguchi, Japanese researcher of pragmatics, analyzes this tendency as being rooted in the fact that in Japanese society there is no need to confirm consistency of the public quality of worldview in the private sphere ([8]).

The orientation of native Japanese speakers toward recounting of their own funny experiences can be observed even in grammar of Japanese language. Generally it is argued, regardless of language (although the English language often is used as an example) that discussions of experience must (at least to the speaker) be funny or interesting. Specifically, Harvey Sacks, originator of Conversation Analysis, argues that when a speaker in a conversation begins to discuss an experience of his or hers, then even though another speaker may interrupt at times, the right of utterance automatically returns to the speaker ([9]). Based on this fact, William Labov, sociolinguist argues that a recounting of experiences must be sufficiently funny or interesting to earn the consent of the others in the conversation to this automatic assignment of the right of utterance ([10]). But what Labov refers to is at the level of manners. Even an unfunny recounting of experiences is fully understandable to the listener (leading him or her to a judgment such as finding the speaker to be uninteresting). However, what we are discussing here is at the level of grammar. A violation would cause the listener to feel strange. See examples (1) and (2) below.

(1) [Explaining to somebody who arrived during the middle of watching a film about *rokurokkubi* (a monster with an extensible neck)]

a. ?? *kono ko, tokidoki kubi ga nagai no.* (7/25/42)

this child sometimes neck NOM long I tell you

“[lit.] This girl’s neck is long sometimes.”

b. *kono ko, tokidoki kubi ga nagaku naru no.* (45/15/14)

this child sometimes neck NOM long become I tell you

“This girl’s neck gets longer sometimes.”

(2) [Having a waiter ask the party at the next table to be less noisy]

a. *ano hito, sakki kara tokidoki koe ga ookii no.* (35/22/17)

that man a while ago from sometimes voice NOM loud I tell you

“That person over there has been getting noisy sometimes.”

b. *ano hito, sakki kara tokidoki koe ga okiku naru no.* (26/25/27)

that man a while ago from sometimes voice NOM loud become I tell you

“That person over there has been getting noisy sometimes.”

(NOM: nominative case marker)

In both examples (1a) and (2a), the adverb *tokidoki* (“sometimes”), which expresses frequency, is used to modify an expression describing a state (“*kubi ga nagai*” [“her neck is long”], “*koe ga okii*” [“his voice is loud”]). But frequency refers to the distribution of an event over time, and a state is not an event. Accordingly, normally adverbs expressing frequency are not used together with expressions of state. This is why example (1a) does not seem very natural. (According to a survey of 74 university students [conducted in 2017/2020], seven respondents considered it “natural,” 42 considered it “unnatural,” and 25 were “unsure.”) For the sentence to sound natural, the predicate needs to change from a description of state (“*nagai*”) to one of a type of event, growing longer (“*nagaku naru*,” as in example (1b)). (In the same survey, 45 respondents considered this to sound “natural” and 14 “unnatural,” while 15 were “unsure.”)

However, although a state itself is not an event, the act of experiencing that state is a substantial event. That is, if the expression of a state describes not merely the state itself but the experience of that state, then an adverb expressing frequency can be used with it. This is why example (2a) (considered “natural” by 35 survey respondents and “unnatural” by 17, while 22 were “unsure”) was preferred even more than example (2b) (considered “natural” by 26 survey respondents and “unnatural” by 27, with 25 respondents saying they were “unsure”).

In this way, a sentence can be envisioned as an expression of experience and a state interpreted as the event of experiencing the state only when the experience is funny or interesting (i.e., reportable, or worthy of being described to another). Ultimately, an experience is interesting if, at its core, it involves an intense physical sensation such as stimulation by the environment or an intense feeling of probing, such as when hearing toward a mysterious environment on an adventure (Sadanobu 2002; 2008; 2016b). Examples (1) and (2) differ on the presence or absence of such an intense physical sensation. While seeing a character with a longer than normal neck on screen while watching television is not a very strong physical sensation, a noise occurring nearby that is so loud that one must ask the waiter to ask the person to be quiet is a strong physical sensation linked directly to feelings of abhorrence or fear. Examples (3) and (4) below show a case of a probing feeling.

(3) [From Tourist A to Tourist B, in a sightseeing bus running in a foreign country]

*tokidoki jiin ga aru ne.* (40/21/12)

sometimes temple NOM exist isn’t it

“There are now and then temples around here, aren’t there?”

(4) [In explaining surroundings of the speaker’s house]

?? *uchi no kinjo wa tokidoki jiin ga aru.* (4/10/59)

my house GEN neighbourhood TOP sometimes temple NOM exist

“(Lit.) There are sometimes temples around my house.”

(GEN: genitive case marker, TOP: topic marker)

Here, the adverb *tokidoki* expressing frequency modifies the expression of state *jiin ga aru* (“there is to be truly scary [at times]”). While this statement sounded comparatively natural when spoken in a sightseeing bus running in an unfamiliar foreign country (40 respondents considered this to sound “natural” and 12 “unnatural,” while 21 were “unsure”), it sounded less natural when spoken in explaining surroundings of the speaker’s house (in which case 4 respondents considered it to sound “natural” and 59 “unnatural,” while 10 were “unsure”). This is because the sense of probing would be evoked in the case of (3), but not be evoked in the case of (4). The existence of temples itself is not an event but a state. But the speaker’s experiencing the existence of temple in probing is reportable, because it is a kind of adventure.

In this way, Japanese people’s persistence in reportable experience permeates into Japanese grammar and affect the naturalness of sentences.

### 3. Manner of funny talks

Although the speakers must have planned their talk before entering the contest, My Funny Talk Corpus abounds in disfluent speech. It might be natural for talks by Japanese learners, but there are plenty of fillers and speech fragments observed in talks by native Japanese speakers as well. What this indicates seems to be Japanese society’s leniency to disfluency. In Japan being fluent and being excellent are two different things and a man does not have to be fluent in order to be excellent.

Moreover, the disfluency of native Japanese speakers is partially different from that of Japanese learners. The most prominent difference between native Japanese speakers and Japanese learners lies in the after treatment of their disfluency. Japanese learners stop, go back, and restart their speech again when they get stuck. But native Japanese speakers often proceed to the remaining part without going back. Here are two examples of proceeding.

(5) *michiyuku hito no fun-iki ga oka shii n desu yo*

passerby GEN atmosphere NOM strange I tell you

“Passerby’s reaction was strange.”

[<http://www.speech-data.jp/chotto/2011/2011010.html>, 2:27-2:30]

(6) *ara keesa i tta hazu ya noni*

oh this morning go PAST should have

“Oh? my husband should have gone this morning.”

[<http://www.speech-data.jp/chotto/2011/2011007.html>, 1:00-1:01]

In example (5), a break occurs in the midst of the stem *okashi* of an adjective *okashi* (strange). And in example (6), a prolongation occurs in the simplex word *kesa* (this morning).

This trend can be observed even in some formal speech. In a press release held at Nov. 27 2017, Masatoh Kitamura, President of Yokozuna Promotion Council made a pause which lasted over one second in the middle of a simplex word *zentai* (overall).

(7) *zen tai no kuuki toshite*

overall GEN impression as

“As overall impression, ...”

The cause of this disfluent manner of talks by native Japanese speakers is worthy of investigating from linguistic point of view. One possibility which we pursue in our ongoing project is that the highly agglutinative head-final feature of Japanese language allows for such disfluent way of speaking. In non-agglutinative inflectional languages such as English, the single element *he* cumulatively expresses the two meanings of the third-person singular masculine pronoun and the nominative case. For this reason, when the word *he* is uttered within a sentence, the listener understands the new element as the third-person singular masculine pronoun, while at the same time proceeding smoothly to the sentence understanding that it is the subject. There is no need for buffering lexical information. Isolating languages, another kind of non-agglutinative languages such as Chinese are similar in that when *ta* (“he”) is spoken before a verb, the listener can understand it to be the third-person singular masculine pronoun and at the same time proceed to the sentence understanding that it is the subject. In contrast, Japanese language expresses the same meaning

by connecting the two elements of *kare* and *ga*. At the stage at which the listener has heard only *kare*, s/he cannot proceed to a sentence understanding. This third-person singular masculine pronoun cannot be placed into the sentence understanding process as the subject until the listener hears the next element, the nominative case marker *ga*. Until then, the listener needs to hold on to the meaning of *kare* in a type of buffer. From a cognitive point of view, agglutinative feature of a language means the indirectness between lexical and sentential process. In highly agglutinative languages, the buffer works as the interface between them. If this buffer is understood to play a filtering role with regard to disfluency, then it can be seen that a highly-agglutinative head-final language, with highly developed partial understanding process, is one that is more likely to permit pause and prolongation, ignoring grammatical boundaries. In such languages, the buffer prevents the trouble in lexical input from affecting sentential process by keeping the input until lexical process finds the right word and then is corrected ([11][12]).

#### 4. Spoken language

It is not the case that the orientation of native Japanese speakers toward recounting funny experiences discussed above is unrelated to tolerance for disfluency. These two characteristics can be considered together from the perspective of media ([13][14]).

The medium of text is portable and capable of preservation. As a result, the language of text tends to discuss general knowledge that can be read by anybody in any place. In addition, since people can read much faster than they can write, normally the writer and the reader are not in the same place. In a time and place where the reader is not present, a writer tends to consider his or her words carefully and revise the text into something highly fluent. In contrast, the medium of voice in principle is less portability and less capable of preservation. Voice is fleeting, disappearing the moment it is uttered. Accordingly, in private gatherings spoken language tends to be language that discusses personal experiences. In addition, since basically people speak and listen at the same speed, normally the interaction between speaker and listener is extemporaneous and takes place face-to-face in the same place. Spoken language is not a condensation of meaning based on careful consideration but tends to be disfluent, reflecting the speaker's unpolished consciousness.

Japanese has a long tradition of written language. But from the above points, we can consider spoken language too to remain extremely powerful. The orientation of native Japanese speakers toward recounting funny experiences and their tolerance for disfluency are expressions of this fact.

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