

HUMOUR BY MALAYSIAN JAPANESE-SPEAKING TOUR GUIDES DURING TOUR SESSION IN CROSS-CULTURAL CONTEXT

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Abstract: This research concerns the use of humour in Japanese language by Malaysian Japanese-speaking tour guides. The goal is to explore the pattern of humour strategies in communicating with Japanese tourists in the context of a clash of Malay and Japanese cultures. Data were obtained from four recorded conversations between tour guides and tourists. The conversations were transcribed and coded. Tour guides consisted of four Japanese-speaking Malays and the tourists were all native speakers. The study identified four categories of humour employed in a cross-cultural context. The outcome of cultural and linguistic clash helped to influence the coordination and adjustment of communication behaviours. Malaysian tour guides adopted humorous strategies to foster a friendly relationship so that the tours may run smoothly. It is hoped that this research will serve as reference to those involved in Japanese language education for tourism, besides serving as a guide to strengthen cross-cultural communications to the next level.

Keywords: Humour, tour guide, Japanese language, comparison study

Introduction

The capacity to express and appreciate humour is gradually recognised as one of the efficiency elements of second language (L2) communication skills (Reddington & Waring, 2015). When someone engages in social interactions with people of different cultural backgrounds, they may struggle and fail to achieve their initial communication goal. This is because communication between cultures is inclined to misunderstandings, ambiguities and frustrations resulting from varying social and cultural norms due to diversity in the discourse systems (Norrick, 2003). Expressing humour in cross-cultural communication needs sophisticated linguistics, social order,

culture and communication competency (Moalla, 2014). Reimann (2010) registered that humour in communication between cultures is often applied to break the ice, develop relationships and to lighten the environment. According to the author, to make sense of humour to be understood and appreciated in different cultures, the initiator should not only be conscious of the social norms of his listeners. He must also be excellent in communication — choosing the right essence, being smart in finding opportunities and telling engaging stories to deliver a well-meaning joke. Most of the humour depends on knowledge sharing and background, but cultural humour that lacks such ingredients may end up being misinterpreted, leading to conflicts.

The above description is in line with the research by Puteri (2006), who declared that humour is comparatively a fragile linguistic component and its meaning depends on timeliness, appropriate environment, social context and cultural taboo. If these aspects are not adhered to, the humour will neither have a comical effect, nor will it leave any influence or impression. Therefore, by understanding the context of Malay and Japanese culture in using the Japanese language as a medium of communication between Malay Japanese-speaking tour guides and their Japanese tourists, the frequency of humour utterance, and its function and category applied by guides during tours are explored in this study. The conclusions may serve as a foundation for skills enhancement in speaking the Japanese language, which will have an immediate impact on tourist expectations.

Problem Statement

The culture underlying one community differs from another. In tourism, tourist guides need to coordinate and adapt to the culture of tourists. Therefore, the pattern, style, rules and features in telling humour are different and intricate from one culture to another. Hence, are the Malay tour guides uttering appropriate humour as outlined among their Japanese guests? And will the tourists respond similarly in their norms when giving feedback to the humour uttered by their hosts? With the exploration of these features, the skills of interpreting, communicating and responding to the utterance of humour to tourists will be intensified, and will also discursively promote communication skills of the tour guides.

It is important for Japanese-speaking Malay guides to acquire knowledge on how to praise and humour their guests. The guides are frontline workers and must possess an uncanny ability in speaking the

correct words that respect the linguistic and cultural aspects of Japanese tourists. The intention is to avoid miscommunication that causes cultural and ethnic offense, leading to dissatisfaction and anger among the tourists. As Tanaka (1988) demonstrated, it is imperative to comprehend the designs of the targeted language to meet the needs of tourists, who are precious clients looking for a memorable trip.

Research Questions

This research explores the use of humour by Japanese-speaking Malay tour guides. According to Wolfson (1983), the cross-cultural language speech act does not only vary in employment, but also in terms of delivery, frequency and function. Consequently, the characterisation of humour is studied in three questions:

1. What is the average frequency of humour used by guides during tours?
2. What categories of humour are uttered in each session?
3. What is the function of humour used by the guides?

Humour

Humour is defined as part of communication (Ulloth, 2002) and concluded by Tapley (2006) as an essential human nature and practice that belongs to daily life (Astedt-Kurki & Liukkonen, 1994), whereas Reimann (2010) defined it as a universal neurological phenomenon. Humour happens when there is a contradictory or inappropriate situation that runs off the track, which is supposed to be considered an incongruity when it is a misnomer (Mallan, 1993).

There are numerous interpretations of humour. Commonly, it stimulates amusement and happy experiences (Wilson, 1979). The definition of humour refers to the

emotion or state of mind that can produce laughter or a sense of amusement (Simon, 1988). Asmah (2000) related humour from the utterance point of view, which is to say words that hit the listeners' heart to invoke laughter, and even relieve tension in an angry situation. There is a different sense of humour, but the notion between each goal is to create amusement, happiness and joyful emotions. According to Nik and Faisal (2014), humour can happen anywhere, but its meaning varies from time to time, and from one culture to another.

A humorous situation depends on how a listener perceives it to be. Different people will have distinct tastes and similarly, when it comes to different cultures, some may find it funny while others not so. Nevertheless, the ability to enjoy and appreciate humour is universal. In other words, jokes are still shared among humans, even though their perception is inconsistent.

Academics have been investigating the concept and application of humour for centuries (Norrick, 2010), and it has been administered in multiple disciplines, such as education, sociology, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, medicine, communication and so on (Oshima, 2013; Ulloth, 2002). In education, the function of humour is regularly viewed as a stimulus to learning. This has been researched by Norul (2011), Shaffe *et al.*, (2011); Aria, (2002); Ivy (2013); and Ulloth (2002). The conclusions of these investigations characterised the usage of humour as something that held essential connections between teaching style as a stimulus to learning. It reduces formality between teachers and students, besides reducing stress, tension and anxiety to lighten up the mood. Ulloth's (2002) review granted a comprehensive summary to the function of humour, which is a valuable tool for educators to convey the essence of teaching, attract students' attention, build good relationships, and create an exceptional and

smooth learning environment. Ivy (2013) noted several advantages of using humour in the classroom:

- i. It boosts self-esteem, respect and morale;
- ii. It increases student motivation and engagement in learning;
- iii. It promotes a sense of acceptance that allows students to think creatively and critically;
- iv. It helps students see information in new and different ways;
- v. It provides fewer conflicting relationships between teachers and students; and,
- vi. It makes the teachers easily accepted by students.

Humour research is not solely focused on education; it also encompasses social communication. For instance, Astedt-Kurki and Liukkonen (1994) studied the effectiveness of humour in interactions between patients and nurses. Their research concluded that the application of humour in nursing services has contributed to job satisfaction besides boosting motivation. Meantime, a study by Hobbs (2007) that explored the advantage of humour among lawyers during trials found that it is effective in persuading the opposing parties to withdraw their cases. The author noted that the use of humour by lawyers was very aggressive in court and it is an indispensable approach in defending an argument and winning cases.

The domain of tourism is no exception to the use of humour. However, there is little research on its use to enhance tour sessions. Existing studies by Ong (2005); Huang (2010); Huang (2011); Beeftin (2011), and Roswati *et al.*, (2013 & 2017) recognised humour as one of the strategies employed to facilitate communication between guides

and tourists. Only Pearce (1984) listed the purpose of humour in tourism—first is helping travellers to focus on a description, second is assisting them to feel comfortable and relaxed in a new environment, and third is improving the relationship with tourists. However, the study did not focus on humour pattern in the context of natural interactions. The research only employed humorous stories from social sites as data, rather than actual interactions in tour sessions.

Humour in Japanese Society

Reimann (2010) explained that humour in Japanese society is governed by social etiquettes, such as hierarchy, harmony, formality, context, membership and the *Uchi no hito* (insider) or *soto no hito* (outsider) perspectives of an organisation or institution. This is in line with the conclusion by Hall (1976) that high-level context of languages, such as the Japanese language, relied profoundly on information sharing and relation to communicate and find the common ground of meaning with various rules. Besides, the protocols created by social features, such as *uchi* (internal), *soto* (external), *tatema* (external/explicit) and *honne* (internal/implicit), make humour impossible to express spontaneously or in unexpected situations. Accordingly, humour in Japanese society seldom exceed the boundaries of hierarchy and does not occur in formal situations. It is contradictory to other societies, where humour is utilised as a strategy of decency, besides bridging social gaps and easing communication.

Methodology

Research Design

This study concentrated on qualitative methods to gather data. This design was selected because it represented the language and cultural elements in actual situations of cross-cultural communication. Besides, it

also provided information on how the tour guides think and communicate when using humour.

Data collection comprised systematic observation that applied audio-visual recordings of interactions throughout tour sessions. Data collected were transcribed and the services of two Japanese language specialists were used to review the transcripts to ensure that they were consistent and accurate with the recording. The humour used by the Malay tour guides were highlighted.

Research Sample

Data were collected from four tour sessions conducted by four Malay Japanese-speaking tour guides (referred to as TG1, TG2, TG3 and TG4). These tour sessions were attended by 12 tourists identified as JT1 to JT12. The Malay guides had lived in Japan for at least one year and five months, where they were exposed to a good amount of Japanese custom and culture. They possessed at least four years' experience in managing tours that regularly ran one to four times per month. The Japanese tourists were travelling for leisure and their first visit to tourist destinations in Malaysia would create a genuine and natural synergy.

Research Data

All four tour sessions produced a total recording of 15 hours and 35 minutes. The excursions were conducted around Kuala Lumpur and Malacca under the Free Independence Travelers (FIT) package. The tourist destinations had great historical value and showcased the multicultural elements in daily activities, beliefs and environment of Malaysia, which presented a set of knowledge to connect with the tourists.

Procedures of Data Analysis

The data were coded and categorised according to Hay’s Taxonomy of Functions of Humor (Hay, 2008), which incorporated the scope of humour between two cultures and were able to demonstrate the application of the guides’ humour during interactions. Hay’s Taxonomy was used because it associated the context of real events in humour utterance, nature and spontaneity that reveal the elements of the clash between the two cultures.

Result and Discussion

Overall Utterance of Humour

The frequency of humour identified from the recording of all the touring sessions was 30 times. Figure 1 shows the percentage of humour use by each tour guide, in which TG1 seemed to be the most humorous with a score of 56.7 %, followed by TG4 (16.7 %) and TG2 and TG3 at 13.3 % each.

TG1 was three times more inclined to apply humour than his counterparts. It was highly probable that mastery of the Japanese language could increase the user’s confidence in speaking the language, which made it easier to utilise humour frequently. This could be seen in TG1, who had Level 1 qualification in the Japanese Language Proficiency Test, and the fluency of his speech could be heard throughout his session. This was supported by the statistics of his counterparts, who used less than 20 % humour in their sessions. Nevertheless, all guides had lived in Japan for at least four years and should have the right level of experience to interact with Japanese people.

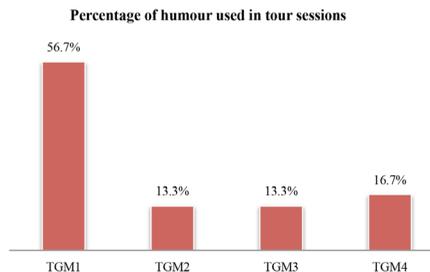


Figure 1: The use of humour by four Malay Japanese-speaking tourist guides in tour sessions.

Categories of Humour

Figure 2 shows four categories of humour utilised by the tour guides to achieve their touring objectives, with “Focus” being the highest at 55%, followed by “Building Relationships” (29 %), whereas the least applied were “Ice-breaking” and “Solidarity” (both at eight per cent).

Data analysis also found that 95.8 % of humour employed was on general socio-culture aspects, and not directly related to Japanese culture. Therefore, it was evident that the guides’ cultural knowledge of Japanese society was not a contributing factor to the use of humour throughout the tour sessions.

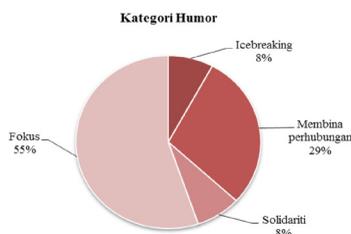


Figure 2: Humour categories used by four Malay Japanese-speaking tour guides to achieve touring objectives.

Humour as an Icebreaker

The application of this humour by the four guides was at eight per cent only. Humour in icebreaking had been described by Reimann (2010) and Lewis (2006) as a communication between cultures that was often applied to get people to feel at ease when being introduced to each other. Humour, as an ice-breaking tool, worked well by reducing the social distance between foreigners in a cross-cultural setting, as reviewed by Oshima (2013), who also stated that such a thing was universal in a less contextualized society.

Ice-breaking humour was usually applied at the beginning of the tours to reduce tension and the awkward feeling of being among strangers. This was in line with the definition of “ice-breaking” in the *Cambridge Business English Dictionary* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), which was an approach used to introduce members of a group to feel more relaxed during their time together.

Tour session 2 - 3:469

JT5:	Good Morning
TG2:	<i>Ee Good Morning Ee indogodato va akkam/ Ee Good Morning Ee in India language va akkam</i>
JT5:	va, va akkam
TG2:	va akkam, va akkam
JT5:	va akkam
TG2:	<i>Indogodattarane/ In the Tamil language said</i>
JT5:	<i>Indogo, tamarugo/ in India language, Tamil language</i>
TG2:	<i>Tamirugo (Warau)/ in Tamil language (Laugh)</i>
JT5:	<i>va akkam Ee/ vanakkam yes</i>

In the transcript above, TG2 applied humour at the beginning of his session by using a Tamil word game to invoke laughter from JT5. The utilisation of this humour

also aimed to lighten the mood in the first face-to-face meeting between TG2 and JT5. Humour was triggered in this situation when TG2 greeted JT5 in the Tamil language, which was not expected in the tour session.

Nevertheless, the application of this humour was not relevant as JT5 did not have the same background as TG2 in understanding the word *vanakkam*. This situation was proven when JT5 repeated the word *vanakkam*, indicating that he had just heard it for the first time, and no laughter was triggered. Only TG2’s laughter could be heard as he had the motive of applying humour for ice-breaking.

Building Relationship

The study also recognised humour through storytelling, which accounted for 29 % of the guides’ sessions. This was related according to the humour practiced in Japanese culture. According to Oshima (2013), Japanese people liked to share funny experiences about themselves, their friends and family members. The stories could be about personalities, surroundings, thoughts and behaviours of the storyteller, so that the storyteller and his audience could get to know each other better besides having a good laugh.

These stories were real experiences and not fiction. This was illustrated by TG5 telling about his experience in operating a group of Indian tourists for the first time. His story was about the Indian tourists’ attitude, who did not take punctuality seriously and had difficulty in following his instructions. TG5 said he once told the tourists to gather at the hotel lobby at 10am, but when he arrived at 10am, he could not even one Indian tourist was there waiting for him.

The message by TG5 was valid and considered a joke because a group of Indian tourists was supposed to be gathering at one place, but instead, the opposite situation

occurred. The situation did not fit into the place and circumstances that have been identified and was interpreted by some of the Japanese tourists as a funny incident.

The humour triggered laughs from JT13 and JT14, which warmed up the tour session, making it more friendly and relaxing. The features of this story allow JT13 and JT14 to attain a deeper understanding of TG5's career, and eventually, this would strengthen the relationship between the two parties. The transcript of their conversation is as below:

Tour Session 5 (206:214)

TG5: *So, de, ett tatoebadesu ne. wa, sono Indo kara no kankoukyaku watashi wa saisho no guruupu wa Indo kara no kankoukyaku shiranakattan desu yo. Sooiu shuukan, ne, dakara watashi wa koo ittan desu. Sono guruupu ni Ogyakusan, 10 ji ni robii shuugou onegaishimasu (JT14: Hai) Sono ato kuukoo chokusetsu ikimasu ne, de, watashi wa 10 ji tsuitara daremoinai*

JT13: *desu. (JT14: Hai, hai & JT13: ee) de, kaku heya denwashite Ogyakusan orinai to hikooki noriokuremasu yo (JT14: A, a) ne, yatto hitori hitori oritan desu yo. (JT13: O, o) de, orite de, nan ninka mata heiki de chotto matte ne, asa gohan ima kara tabemasu. < JT13 JT14 {Warau} > 10 jihan made desu kara (JT13 & JT14: {Warau}) resutoran sho, sono chooshoku ga (JT13: Ee). Ne, yappari ne, senpai kara hanashi kiku to Indo toka, Indoneshia kara no hito wa ne, (JT14: A) yakusoku suru toki, ichijikan mae iwanaito mazui. (JT13 & JT14: Aa) 10 ji shuugoo dattara 9ji. {Warau}*

TG5: *Mm, for example, tourists from India. My first group of tourists was from India. During that time, I still lacked knowledge about their culture. I told them [Ladies and gentlemen, please gather at 10 (JT14: Yes), and we will straight go to the airport.] As I reached there at ten, there were no tourists (at the lobby). (JT14: Yes, yes & JT5: Yes) and I called them at their respective rooms. [Ladies and gentlemen, if you do not come down now, we will miss the plane.] (JT14: A, a) Then, gradually they came downstairs (to the lobby). (JT13: O, o) They came down, and some of them said that they wanted to eat breakfast first. < JT13 & JT14 {Laugh} > Until half past 10.*

(JT13 & JT14 :{ Laugh} They had breakfast in a restaurant. (JT13: Ee). According to a senior, for Indians or Indonesian tourists, if one wants to (JT14: A) arrange a plan with them, it must be an hour early. Otherwise, it will lead to chaos. {Laugh}

Solidarity

The next category of humour is to foster solidarity. In this context, the humour was said to defend solidarity as it contributed to the positive relationship between tourist guides and their tourists. TG3 started off by saying that cats in Japan needed more fat than cats in Malaysia because the weather in Japan was colder. Hence, Japanese cats tended to be fat (large sized) to survive the cold conditions. He then drew a parallel of himself, saying since he was from Malaysia, he also did not need much fat to survive. JT8 saw the humour — Soo desu ne / yes is right — and responded with laughter. It created a comfortable environment that contributed to the success of the tour session. The transcript of the conversation is as below:

Tour Session 4 (817:820)

TG3: *Un, daijoobu?*
(*nobotteiru*)

TG3: *Mareeshiano nekowana, a, atsuikarane, Nihonno nekowa chotto eeto samuiyone, (JT8: Un) dakara minna shiboo motterune, aa. Mareeshiaha atsui, shiboo iranaikarane, (#: {warau}) hai, hontoo watashimo shiboo iranaikedo, (#: {warau})*

JT8: *Soodane.*

TG3: Are you okay?
(Hiking)

TG3: Cats in Malaysia, probably because of the heat, (weather) in Japan are a bit cold, (JT8: Yes) so all (cats) have fat. In Malaysia it is hot, and it does not need fat. Actually, I also do not need fat (#: {laughs})

JT8: Yes, correct.

Focus

The findings of this study recognised that humour was mostly used to draw attention to the highlights of the tours. Pearce (2009) listed three purposes of humour in tourism; first was helping tourists to focus on a description of their visit; second was helping them to feel comfortable and relaxed in a new environment; and, third was to create a relationship between tourists. In this context, it was usually used to reinforce the description or explanation of a place, object or person. This category of humour made the Japanese tourists focused on their experience.

According to James (2001), the practice of humour in education could enhance the attention and enjoyment of learning and helped to boost the students’ memory on what they learned. Therefore, the equivalent effects could occur in tour sessions. If humour was not used, the whole session

might feel bland and formal. The benefits of using jokes were also reinforced in a review by Shaffe et al. (2011), which stated that jokes could contribute to productivity and foster collaboration between colleagues.

In the transcript below, TG2 tried to make a joke on the use of a cane by saying that in olden days, wives who did not listen to their husbands would be caned. But today, it was the opposite where husbands would be caned by their wives if they failed to provide them with a good bonus. This analogy made JT5 and JT6 laugh.

Tour session 2 (456:460)

TG2: *de, sanbanme ha okusanga chanto (JT4: {warau}) iu koto kikanaito pacchi {warau}demo yono naka kawarimashita.*

JT5: *aaa*

JT6: *{warau}*

TG2: *Gyakunandesu yo. Dannaga chanto boonasu o morawanaito pacchi*

JT5& JT6: *{warau}*

TG2: and third, when the wife (JT4: {laughs}) did not listen to her husband’s words will be canned but today’s world became

JT5: *aaa*

JT6: *{Laugh}*

TG2: Instead, if the husband does not give the bonus, he will be canned

JT5& JT6: *{Laugh}*

Functions of Humour

The data analysis proved that the overall function of humour was to help tourists feel comfortable and relaxed in a new environment, and to develop the relationship between the tour guide and tourists. This research strengthened the conclusion by Pearce (2009), which stated

that humour could function well in building and maintaining good relationships. It was proven by the presence of laughter that made communication in tour session more pleasant and relaxing. In fact, the indirect use of humour was also seen as encouraging the Japanese tourists to become more familiar with their guides.

Conclusion

The findings of this study had added value to prior research by exploring humour in terms of its categories and functions in tourism. The use of appropriate humour in the Japanese language could intensify the effectiveness of communication between tourist guides and their guests. The application of right and relevant humour patterns that were suitable in the social context should be mastered by tourist guides because, according to Norrick (2003), when interacting with different cultures, there was a risk of exposure to misunderstandings, ambiguities and frustrations resulting from different norms arising from different discourse systems.

There was a need for a complete set of knowledge, and the functions of humour were also supported by Reimann (2010). Ergo, using humour in a way that would be well recognised and appreciated should not only consider the sensitivities and social norms of the target community, but should also be smart in finding opportunities to tell exciting stories.

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