

# The Function of Humour in British English and Japanese

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## **The Function of Humour in British English and Japanese**

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Since the days of Antiquity, humour has been regarded by thinkers and philosophers with a degree of suspicion. Much of the issue of the dubious nature of humour relates to the connection it has with vulgarity and also with the perceived necessity of having a victim for others to laugh at. This complicated and ambiguous relation between the joyful release of laughter and the darker elements to it was contemplated by both Western and Eastern scholars, in a manner that was both similar and yet different due to the differing cultural powers at play. In Europe where the Church had great power the official theological line was that Jesus Christ had never debased himself by laughing while a part of the Japanese mythology features Amatarasu Omikami being lured out of a cave by the comedic and vulgar dancing of Ame-no-uzume-no-mikoto. In this way, the complicated relationship that exists with regards to the ethics of humour can be seen.

From a linguistic perspective, humour has been considered in numerous manners. In addition to the General Theory of Verbal Humour (Attardo & Raskin, 1991) the function that humour plays within communication has been touched upon from a number of different perspectives, (Martineau, 1972; Collinson, 1988; Hay, 2000). This means that it is possible to designate a set of functions that humour appears to serve within the context of interpersonal communication.

Broadly speaking, humour serves either a psychological function or a social function, meaning that either the major target of the intention of the interlocutor is themselves or the relationship they have with others. Psychological functions include operating as a means of self-defence, coping with either something contextual to the conversation as well as more esoteric issues, and through a desire to seek approval or be liked. Social functions include increasing solidarity within the group, causing or exacerbating conflict with a perceived out-group, polarising those present into core groups, and controlling others.

As such, the difference that might exist in the manner in which humour functions in British English and Japanese was investigated. Firstly, data was taken from recordings of natural conversation for conversation humour. Then, recordings of Prime Minister's Questions were used to ascertain the manner in which humour functions in a situation that can be considered to be outside of the classification of normal. Following on from this, the presentation of the candidates and the manifestos were considered with regards to their use of humour in both the British election of 2017 and the Japanese election of 2017.

Humour was used slightly more frequently in the British conversational data than the Japanese. The times when it served a social function were equal, but there appeared to be more instances of humour serving a psychological function in the conversations in British

compared to those in Japanese. For both cultures, the major function that humour served was that of solidarity to bring those present together and consolidate their relationship. It does therefore seem to be the case that humour functions in a similar manner in both cultures in this context.

When the situation of Prime Minister's Questions was considered, it became apparent that there was a clear difference in the results regarding the existence and function of humour. In the British data set there were numerous incidences of humour. This was at a slightly smaller frequency than as occurred in the natural conversation data set but still not dissimilar in the frequency. The function it served was primarily social, though with the major aim being conflict or occasionally polarisation rather than the solidarity common in friendly conversations. In the Japanese data set, however, there was very little humour present. It could therefore be deduced that Prime Minister's Questions in Britain is an arena where humour is appropriate and potentially regarded as a weapon in the arsenal of debate whereas in Japan it is less appropriate and solely down to the personalities of those producing humorous utterances.

This discrepancy continues on into the existence of joke candidates in Britain but not Japan as seen by both their presentation, which often involves fancy dress, and their manifestos, which tend to read like parodies of the serious manifestos put out by the major political parties. The career politicians belonging to major political parties did not however use humour as a cornerstone of their candidacy campaigns, though it is still apparent that joke candidates can be used as a humorous form of political protest. In Japan it does not appear to be the case that this is a common manner of approaching elections.

From this data it is possible to conclude that humour in daily life has a similar function in both Britain and Japan, though the psychological function is more commonly used in Britain than Japan. The social function where humour is used primarily to create solidarity is the most important function of humour in both cultures. However, leaving daily life behind, in the realm of politics humour can be seen to be much more heavily used in British English than in Japanese. In Prime Minister's Questions in Britain it is reasonably routinely used as a means of inspiring greater conflict between the varying ideologies that are present, and in elections it is something of an accepted tradition for joke candidates to stand for specific seats using their entire candidacy as a medium for parody and protest. In Japan, these uses of humour are scarce, showing a difference in the way that humour is used.

There is a suggestion from this that the Japanese sense of humour is kinder or more sensitive than the British, who can view it more as a means of being nasty as well as being funny in a more neutral sense. Likewise, the attitude towards politics and the respect it deserves may also play a role in the use or lack of humour in political situations.