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Taiwanese Jokes from Views of Sociolinguistics and Language Pedagogies

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## **Taiwanese Jokes from Views of Sociolinguistics and Language Pedagogies**

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### **Abstract**

Researches have showed that joke telling is a type of verbal behavior associated with the field of sociolinguistics (e.g., Al-Khatib, 1999). This study aims to report Taiwanese jokes and their sociological functions that people in Taiwan attempt to communicate in jokes. Besides, this study will report what the typical topics and characteristics of Taiwanese jokes are and how language teachers can apply English jokes to make their students familiar with the social structures of the other nations. Through three examples of typical Taiwanese jokes, this study constructs and analyzes the mechanisms and structures in the jokes, and explains why these jokes would sound funny from Martinewu's (1972) views.

The reader of this paper will gain an access to understand the characteristics of Taiwanese jokes and recognize the social backgrounds of Taiwan where the jokes are developed. Moreover, the language teachers will be informed about an effective pedagogy designed in this study in terms of reducing learning anxiety and raising language proficiency through high motivations due to holistic joke pedagogy.

*Keywords: Joke teller; social phenomena; pedagogy; holistic*

### **Introduction**

Many scholars in the field of education notice the functions of joke not only inspire the learners' emotions and learning motivation, but also raise language learners' fluency in oral communication and textbook reading. Ness (2009) in her article, *Laughing through re-readings: Using joke books to build fluency* mentioned that "...the use of joke books can promote fluency in young readers." (p. 691) In her study, "...One young girl's fluency improved measurably, and her engagement and motivation to read the particular kind of text involved played a significant role." (p. 691) Jokes in textbooks or in classmates' oral descriptions would raise the language learners' learning effectiveness, since it makes the speakers and the listeners feel

relaxed. Therefore, their level of comprehension and motivation of talking can be increased.

### *Definition of Joke*

A definition of joke regarding Language and Psychology can be found in many scholars' articles (e.g., Al-Khatib, 1999; Martineau, 1972; Ness, 2009). In Wikipedia (2009), joke is defined as follows.

A joke is a short story or ironic depiction of a situation communicated with the intent of being humorous. These jokes will normally have a punchline that will end the sentence to make it humorous. A joke can also be a single phrase or statement that employs sarcasm. The word joke can also be used as a slang term for a person or thing which is not taken seriously by others in general. A practical joke or prank differs from a spoken one in that the major component of the humor is sometimes physical rather than verbal.

Above descriptions are various definitions and interpretations for what joke is. Generally speaking, not many people know jokes can be found in ancient humans' records associated with the subjects of psychology and sociolinguistics. In the following parts, we will display how jokes have been researched from perspectives of Ancient Sociolinguistics. The following information can also be uncovered in Wikipedia (2009).

### *Antiquity of Jokes*

Jokes have been a kind of human culture since at least 1900 BCE. A fart joke from ancient Sumer, near today's southern Iraq, is at present regarded as the world's oldest joke. A contemporary investigation of a text titled *Philogelos* meaning "The Laughter Lover" provides the current sociolinguistics scholars a glance of ancient human being's sense of humor. This earliest joke found on the globe was composed in the area of Greece by Hierocles and Philagrius. A document filled with jokes can be dated to the third or fourth century AD. It includes about 260 jokes. Considering the definition about sense of humor in our own culture in the second millennium, the humor of ancient people can be understood easily, since both senses of humor in current and ancient times are astonishingly similar. Ancient jokes also had stereotypes, the absent-minded teacher, the eunuch, and people with hernias or bad breath.

### *Psychology of Jokes*

Some people might not be able to live well without reading several daily jokes or comic strips in the Reader's Digest or daily newspaper. From a psychologist's view, reading jokes and laughing for a while might release our stressful emotion in a better way than taking medicines. It is the best drug that can cure our depression. Moreover, telling jokes might help us to break a cold war between couples, colleagues or

classmates.

The 18th-century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1790) indicated why we laugh at the language through the joke. Based on his explanation regarding joke's issue as a subject matter of sociolinguistics study, he believes that people would laugh since they expect the part of humor and enjoy the psychological effect which our tense expectation is accumulated and gradually turns into nothing. Immanuel Kant, in *Critique of Judgment* (1790) mentioned "Laughter is an effect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing." The following is one joke reacted by Kant. It is now 219-year old.

An Englishman at an Indian's table in Surat saw a bottle of ale being opened, and all the beer, turned to froth, rushed out. The Indian, by repeated exclamations, showed his great amazement. - Well, what's so amazing in that? asked the Englishman. - Oh, but I'm not amazed at its coming out, replied the Indian, but how you managed to get it all in. - This makes us laugh, and it gives us a hearty pleasure. This is not because, say, we think we are smarter than this ignorant man, nor are we laughing at anything else here that it is our liking and that we noticed through our understanding. It is rather that we had a tense expectation that suddenly vanished.

#### *Joke as a Synthesis of Philosophy and Linguistics*

From one of the most famous Jewish American comedians, as well as a New Yorker, Woody Allen's view, a joke is most funny when it can be showed in a format of maximum level of humor with a minimal number of words. In fact, his principle has been considered as one of the key technical elements of a joke. The following joke is an example from Woody Allen: "Sex alleviates tension. Love causes it."

From this famous joke written by the three time Academy Award-winning American film director, we can infer that there are senses of logic, philosophy and embarrassing human nature in just six words. The combinations of sense within these six words are factors why people would listen to the sentence, try to realize then open their mouth and laugh. God created separate individuals, but joke makes the individuals understand each other's common embarrassment cause by the body and emotion. Joke provides a chance where separate people can comfort each other.

#### *Strategies for Good Joke-tellers*

Based on Al-Khatib's (1999) research, "Some people have a natural ability for telling jokes....Joke telling is a skill and its effectiveness are dependent on both a desire to tell and a practice of telling." (p. 269) He suggested nine strategies deduced from his 30 participants of a research, describing what characteristics a good joke tellers should have. Generally speaking, a joke teller should:

...have a sense of humor,... a natural flair, ...be

eloquent, ...quick-witted, ...have a socially acceptable character, carefully coordinate the movements of some parts of his/her body with the content of the joke being delivered, ...have ability to imitate act and coordinate the movement of his/her hands, ...be able to make sure the joke telling situation is appropriate to both the situation and the setting. (p. 270)

The above strategies should be good principles of telling jokes that a language trainer should apply for teaching language based on the joke-telling content. Students should welcome the attractive, energetic and unconventional types of language pedagogy.

### **Literature Review**

The present study is based on Al-Khatib's 1999 article, Joke-telling in Jordanian society: A sociolinguistic perspective. In his article, various aspects of Jordanian jokes are examined to show how these jokes are created. What effectiveness the jokes might be generated on the receivers. With different results of study, the researchers of this article analyze the Taiwanese jokes from a total different view of a society in Taiwan.

In addition to Al-Khatib's 1999 study, Bixler (1996) also conducted a study to investigate the functions of joke in education. In his "Beyond the joke book: Using age-appropriate humor", he reveals that "Humor can also enhance learning and information retention and increase attention span. Development of humor is described in the framework of Piagetian developmental theory." (p. 34)

Kutiper and Wilson (1993) in their co-written article, Ritickling literature: Educational implications for joke and riddle books in the elementary classroom, "...suggests that, rather than ignoring the enormous interest of children for joke and riddle books, educators can take advantage of humor's natural attraction by using it to involve children in reading and to provide worthwhile learning experiences. Discusses humor as an instructional tool, classroom use of joke and riddle books, and teacher resources." (p. 32) They imply that teachers should fully apply jokes in order to help their students learn in a motivating and stimulating way.

Joke in the fields of sociolinguistics and education; have been discussed in the 1990s. As a matter of fact, it is really not easy to find many research based on this significant topic after 2000. Therefore, the researchers of this study feel there should be more studies on the issue of joke's application in language teaching, even through the researchers know that analyzing the discourse in joke may not be easy. The major reason is that usually the laughable points are associated with the human embarrassment on their body reaction or any kind of social tragedy.

### **Research Questions of This Study**

1. What are the characteristics of Taiwanese joke?
2. How Taiwanese joke is created?
3. What are the resources of the joke ideas?
4. What are the implications of joke from the perspectives of sociolinguistics and cultural study?

### **Methodology**

This study can be described as a study of joke analysis. Three typical Taiwanese jokes were found from a popular joke blog. From researchers' professional view of sociolinguistics and cultural study, this paper will reveal why the jokes are funny and the implication behind the language and the humor.

With an attitude of reporting the characteristics of Taiwanese joke, this paper will also show the readers the resources of the Taiwanese joke tellers, common topics of Taiwanese jokes and the embarrassing point in the Taiwanese joke.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to raise the awareness for language teachers that the joke telling can be applied in a language learning classroom. Besides analyzing the typical Taiwanese joke from aspects of sociolinguistics and cultural study, this article will provide some suggestions how to create pedagogy that teachers can apply to teach with jokes.

### **Limitation of the Study**

1. The limitation of the study is that only three jokes might not reflect the whole characteristics of typical Taiwanese jokes.
2. The joke on the joke blog might not fully express the laughable points of classical Taiwanese joke since some jokes' laughable points are associated with body language and sound of the joke teller.

### **Three Typical Taiwanese Jokes**

According to Freud (1960), it takes not one or two, but three to make a complete joke. These are three roles involved into a common joke, the jokester, the butt of the

joke and the listener. In our daily life, jokes are like medications and treatments that will cast our anxieties away and can be good for health. Consequently, many sociolinguists regards that jokes should be included in the research fields of sociolinguistics (e.g., Benton, 1988; Martineau, 1972).

Based on three typical jokes from the websites of Taiwanese jokes (Asian jokes.com & Joke fun blog, 2008), the present study points out that many current Taiwanese jokes are mostly elicited from TV news or newspapers. Due to the prompt development of mass media and current change of society phenomena in Taiwan, a lot of jokes posted on the websites of jokes are mostly news reported before.

Based on the cultural orientation which Taiwanese are interested in marital arts, western legistration systems and fortune telling, the jokes with Taiwanese traits are frequently associated with above three topics. The following three jokes are examples that demonstrate Taiwanese jokes, which are typical types of jokes told among Taiwanese people. They sound like both like news reports and jokes.

#### *Jokes related to Sex and Martial Arts*

It could be considered the ultimate test of one's manhood. Two Taiwanese Chi Kung experts set a world record by pulling an 11-ton truck with their penises. Hundreds of enthusiastic spectators watched as the two masters performed the test of strength in preparation for plans to pull an airplane in the same way. According to Chi Kung master Tu Chin Sheng, students of this particular martial art course could hang up to 200 kilograms from their manhood. Sheng also added that this is a great way to strengthen the sexual performance.

#### *Joke related to Law for Pets*

People in Taiwan may soon be raising dogs only to be pets and not as the main ingredients for stews and stir-fries. In a preliminary vote, Taiwan's Legislature Yuan has passed a bill that bans people from selling or eating dog meat. The legislation is expected to be formally passed next month, officials said. "Westerners treat dogs as their best friends or family members and we should no longer tolerate such savage practices," said Cheng Tao-lung, who worked for a lawmaker who supported the bill. Under the proposed law, those selling or eating dog meat would be fined 10,000 New Taiwan dollars. Food stalls serving dog meat were once easy to find around Taiwan. Many Taiwanese believe the meat is nutritious and strengthens the body against the cold winter. In recent years, a growing number of Taiwanese have stopped eating dogs and most of the dog meat restaurants are in the countryside.

#### *Joke related to Society Phenomena on TV news*

His wife severed his penis and flushed it down a toilet after he refused to end an extramarital affair. The woman, who turned herself in to police after the incident, told

reporters that she was furious about her 60-year-old husband's affair and lost control. She spiked her husband's drink with sleeping pills and used a knife to slash off his sexual organ when he slept, authorities said. The man's life was not in danger, but doctors said the damage was permanent.

### **Results of Joke Analysis**

#### *Evolution and Characteristics of Jokes in Taiwan*

Similar to what Al-Khatib (1999) mentioned that joke is socio-culturally conditioned, the present study relies heavily on the assumptions about the milieu and the social context. While reading in the above three jokes, we can identify that the humor of them are based on the current social trends, Chinese people's habits and local legislation developments in Taiwan, which are associated with the topics of an expanding democratic system, superstitious habits, and interest of local culture and martial arts. All of them sound like jokes as well as news on television or in newspapers.

The way of the joke evolution is similar to the world jokes. What makes them different might be that news in Taiwan can be interpreted and exaggerated into jokes. The reason might be that on this island people are come from different origins and are diversified, including complex races, different view in terms of democracy, and various regions and traditions, many conflicts and updated social phenomena take place every day.

From a sociolinguistics perspective, through listening to or reading the jokes, we might be able to have a glance at the local culture and habits. According to Al-Khatib (1999) "Jokes turn out to be a rich source of information about the ways language interacts with society and culture." (p. 285) While studying jokes around the world, the language learners might be able to assess the social emphasis or cultural norms in a certain area.

#### *Joking as a Functional Linguistic Phenomenon*

In order to make available a sufficient explanation of joking as a serviceable linguistic phenomenon, several models have been advanced by a number of sociologists and sociolinguists. Martineau (1972) proposed form of verbal comedy, which is fixed in nature, proves to be highly serviceable for examining jokes in terms of a sociolinguistic standpoint.

This form supposes that the purpose of the social mechanism called wittiness and fun can perfectly be analyzed in three structural settings: (1) those within a specific group; (2) those in an intergroup situation aiming at one of the two groups; and (3) those in an intergroup situation focusing on the interaction and relationship between



the two groups. They are explained as follows.

*Funny settings within a specific group*

First of all, the specific group of the martial art in Chinese race is implicated in the joke. Other race besides Chinese and Taiwanese people might not be able to point out the ridiculous part of the statement. No any physical theory developed in the western world can be applied to defend for the ridiculous statement since the Chinese usually resort to mysterious power when talking about martial art developed thousands years ago.

*Funny settings in an intergroup situation aiming at one of the two groups*

Secondly, the social phenomenon points out that the occupational groups of doctor and the policemen play their roles through their professional and responsible attitudes. The other group of the couple might try to find help from the occupational group, but finally they can only follow the advice from the professional point of view. The situation aiming at the occupational groups of doctor and policemen, serving a funny point that all they can do is to follow their occupational obligations. No one among these two groups can eternally help the affair problem in the society. The extramarital affair is the major factor of the social miserable event; however, none in the aimed group is able to assist the terrible story taking place every day.

*Funny settings in an intergroup situation focusing on the interaction and relationship between the two groups*

In the first joke, we can find the funny points produced from the interaction and relationship between the human beings and the dog and the interaction and relationship between the illegal restaurant and the law makers. The funny points as well as the miserable points of this joke were generated from the motivation of the law makers who would like to protect the animals, but finally they found it was not easy due to the rural dog meat stalls still existed in the countryside.

Moreover, even though the regulation had been established, many Taiwanese businessmen still kept their habits of ignoring the motivation of protecting the animal and manage their restaurant in rural areas. That is, the interaction and relationship taking place in this dog funny story are based on the long-term friendship between the human beings and the dog, and tricky correlation between the lawmaker in the supervision side and the businessmen in the lower social status.

### *Applying Materials and Contents of Jokes as an Effective Language Pedagogy*

Trachtenberg (1979) suggested the use of jokes in the English as a second language class can promote oral fluency, awareness of sociolinguistic rules, and understanding of certain values from views of culture. Through applying materials and contents of jokes, language teaching can be much more dynamic and culturally informative. Many linguists have held a positive attitude toward telling jokes (e.g., Bergon, 1981). Filling laughs and meanings of diverse cultural perspectives through worldwide jokes is an effective pedagogy that would reduce the learners' anxiety in English learning. Based on Krashen's (1981, 1982, 1985) theory, by reducing anxiety in learning, students are able to enhance their language acquisition.

### **A Suggestion of the Holistic Type of Pedagogy through Joke Telling**

From a professional point of view, joke telling can be a type of holistic pedagogy, which contains listening, speaking, reading, and writing process of teaching and learning. The following is a holistic pedagogy that the researchers may design for both students and teachers to enjoy language teaching and learning through funny jokes.

First of all, the teacher can provide his/her students with jokes as learning materials and elucidate through Martineau's (1972) three basic structures of a joke. Students thus can obtain opportunities of reading many jokes in the early process of joke teaching. After that, the teacher can create a speaking and listening environment through sharing the read-aloud jokes. It is suggested that students share their reflections toward the read-aloud joke in groups, since jokes serve a kind of social interactive function.

In order to make students immerse themselves in a stimulating and enjoyable joke learning environment, Many Things Org. is a website that provides more audio jokes for students to listen. After evolving in three language forms of reading, listening, and speaking, students were finally recommended to write a joke based on their memory or reflection on a joke they had learned.

### *Valuable Resources of Joke Pedagogies*

From the website at <http://iteslj.org/c/jokes.html>, English teachers should be able to find resources of jokes, which demonstrate for students how an interesting and funny story can be delivered through forms of dialogues or small talks. English teachers can apply Martineau's (1972) three basic joke structures from the linguistic perspective and explain to students the mechanisms in the joke that elicit the funny responses.

Also, the sociological functions of joking in the Taiwanese society should also be fully clarified to the students in order to make them more involved in the trainer's teaching and their joke learning. Students can be encouraged to recall numerous jokes that they have heard before and to share with their classmates and the language trainer. It is anticipated that students would condense their emotional block through telling hilarious stories and raising their awareness in the content of the lecture.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the joke pedagogy's application through the holistic type of language training, several advantages have been motioned in the above sections. According to Trachtenberg (1979):

A joke is a speech act which requires a great deal of communicative competence on the part of the speaker and the hearer. The comprehension no less than the telling of a joke also requires a fair degree of sociolinguistic familiarity with the target culture. (p. 89)

Telling jokes not only helps children practice language but also encourages them to think (Brewster, Ellis and Girard, 2003). Hence, this study suggests that language teacher can take joke into consideration as their powerful pedagogies for students to explore the social phenomenon as well as to stimulate their creativity. To sum up, in an interesting environment of teaching and learning through jokes, students will be able not only to raise their holistic abilities in listening, speaking, reading and writing jokes and funny stories, but also to be more familiar with the current social phenomena and trends. In the light of this, joke should be applied as an effectual pedagogy in the language curriculum in Taiwan.

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