

Helping Break the Ice: Humor Across Borders

By Muramatsu Masumi

The dapperly dressed, newly elected prime minister of a certain major Asia-Pacific nation was about to be regally entertained at an elaborate luncheon in Tokyo a few years ago. The hosts were the major Japanese business confederations, and the list of participants read like a Who's Who of Japan's economic and financial world. Others included the visiting prime minister's retinue of cabinet members and senior diplomats.

The venue was the elegant dining room atop one of the landmark buildings facing the ancient moat that surrounds the Imperial Palace. From the head table the guest of honor and the hosts, behind whom I sat (*sans* plates, knives, and forks, often the fate of interpreters serving their VIP clients), commanded a scenic view of the palace greenery. Beyond that was the Japanese Diet building, a familiar Tokyo landscape.

The parliament in Japan has been called the Diet ever since the nation shed its feudal past and joined the modern world some century-and-a-quarter ago. There are few other national legislatures in the world that are called the Diet, but include those of Denmark, Sweden, and Paraguay. The Prussian parliament was also called the Diet. Etymologically it means 'public assembly' or 'a day's work,' I am told.

The first plate of hors d'oeuvres was being served. The prime minister, in an ice-breaking gesture, said to his host, "I think the Japanese Diet is more sophisticated than ours." Remembering that the visitor had been admiring the view from the panoramic windows a few minutes earlier, and having seen the often, rather raucous debate in his country's legislature, I translated (or more properly 'interpreted') this remark into Japanese as "I think your parliament is more refined than ours," implying that the Japanese legislators are better mannered than his compatriots. The host, somewhat befuddled by the guest's flattering remark, replied

politely to the effect that he could not share the prime minister's overly kind compliment. The latter did not seem to quite comprehend the import of his host's self-effacing, slightly sarcastic comment about his own elected officials.

Alas, it was my misinterpretation. The visitor, from the southern hemisphere, meant to compliment the host about the meticulously presented plate of Japanese hors d'oeuvres, pleasing to the eyes and obviously low in fat and calories. Japanese diet. *Mea culpa*.

I quickly apologized to the two principals, offering a minimalist explanation about the dual meaning of the word 'diet.' (Any lengthy or detailed excuse would not be in good taste.) They immediately comprehended the miscommunication, shared a laugh together, and exchanged toasts again. The ice was broken, only at the slight expense of the interpreter's face. No big deal.

If the above is an example of a happy start to a function—in this case, a formal dinner party (and dinner parties can often be staid, tiresome things) with a serendipitous *can faux pas* by an interpreter—the next is an example of an invited guest speaker's disarming speech opener.

Not long after he left the White House, former U.S. President Ronald Reagan visited Tokyo as a guest of a Japanese business and media group. The late former Prime Minister Fukuda Takeo, as an elder retired statesman, introduced Reagan as the guest speaker. The brief speech was being interpreted simultaneously from Japanese into English. Reagan's aide had to help him adjust his earphone over his hearing aid so that he could hear the English interpretation clearly.

As Fukuda's introduction reached Reagan's ears, the affable former presi-



dent nodded and smiled at his old colleague. Probably remembering the somewhat familiar voice transmitting Fukuda's message in English as the speech went on, and wondering where the interpreter's voice was coming from, he began looking around the dinner hall.

From the interpreters' booth where I was on duty with a younger colleague, I was of course watching what was happening. It is important for interpreters to closely observe the facial expressions of the speakers. Who they are looking at as they utter certain phrases can convey subtle nuances, and interpreters need to read the nonverbal message.

Reagan spotted me and, determining that my lips were in sync with what he was hearing, nodded and (as I knew he would) smiled at me. I only returned a polite and properly understated smile and a little nod. Waving one's hands in a situation like this would of course appear too familiar and would not be appropriate. An interpreter on his or her job at dinner with important guests

should, unlike children, be heard but not seen.

When his turn came to speak, Reagan, playing with the wireless receiver at the lectern, tilted his head as he often does before telling a joke or an anecdote, and said, "This (the receiver) reminds me . . ." and I knew he was going to launch his icebreaker on the audience. I was right.

The story he began to relate was from the time, as governor of California, he was attending an international conference in Mexico City to deliver an address as the delegate representing the U.S. As his speech in Mexico progressed, going very well he thought, nobody applauded. He finished his speech; no applause. Unhappily he sat down. The next guy stood up and began talking, but he was interrupted every now and then with thunderous applause.

Nonplussed, but just to join the crowd and be sociable, Reagan at one point got up and was about to applaud, when the U.S. ambassador to Mexico sitting next to him pulled his sleeve and told him, "I wouldn't do that if I were you, Mr. Governor. That guy is translating your speech." This self-deprecating anecdote, confessing the embarrassing error he almost made through not understanding Spanish—the language into which the man whom he mistook for another speaker, was rendering Reagan's speech—brought the house down.

For the Japanese audience, most of whom wore earphones to listen to the former president through interpretation, Reagan's unpretentious admission that he, too, needed language help in another land was comforting, putting him on the same level, so to speak, with themselves. Capable, confident speakers, big of heart, are comfortably capable of descending from the podium to relate more easily with the audience.

Incidentally, in rendering the foregoing, typically Reaganesque piece of humor into Japanese, I pulled a little trick in order to ensure that the audience would be as amused as the speaker intended. In translating the U.S.

ambassador's intervention, "That guy is translating your speech," I added two extra words; "into Spanish."

For people in the U.S., it would be quite obvious that Spanish is the language of their neighbor south of the border; but the same cannot be said in Japan. By inserting "into Spanish" I tried to ensure that everyone would immediately get the point of the humorous situation—Reagan almost applauding himself for his linguistic ineptitude.

Though interpreters are sometimes criticized for missing words or omitting some, there are many cases like this where we add words, at our own discretion, to ensure an accurate rendering of the message (and the personality or style of the speaker). We should never add anything to alter the meaning even slightly; editing a speech is the worst offense interpreters can make. In the words of Walter Kaiser, one of the great deans of the profession, with whom I enjoyed working at many a summit and conference, a good interpreter should "not translate the words, but convey the message."

When Prince Charles of the U.K. came to Japan in 1986, he addressed the Japanese Diet. Unlike President Reagan's speech in the same parliamentary hall three years earlier, which had been interpreted simultaneously, the Prince of Wales' speech was interpreted consecutively. Touching upon the ongoing exchange of visits and cultural events between the U.K. and Japan, the royal guest, after citing the increasing number of Japanese visitors to Britain, said: "And we were particularly delighted and honored that His Imperial Highness Prince Naruhito chose to continue his education at Oxford University, although (here the Prince's tone changed slightly), as some of you may be aware, had I been asked I might have advised him to choose Cambridge."

This princely piece of humor brought the house down (or I should say both houses, as it was a joint session of both the upper and lower chambers). Prince Charles was visibly pleased with the effect of his humor. Millions of

Japanese watched the event live on television nationwide and enjoyed a fine piece of British humor. I was glad the Prince's speechwriters had not persuaded him not to tell a joke to the Japanese people.

A modest contribution that I made as I interpreted this passage was that I added *watashi-no boko* before Cambridge, making it "Cambridge, my alma mater." This, I felt, would certainly make it clear to every Japanese listener to equate the Oxford-Cambridge rivalry, friendly as it is, to the similar relationship between Waseda and Keio universities.

Few people ever actually notice these subtle, but important, enhancements that we interpreters make, without of course altering the meaning. It is done in the interest of conveying the right message with the right tone. I suppose that is why I am writing this. Thank you, my gentle readers, for coming this far. And, having dropped a few names, I might as well identify the first prime minister as Mr. Paul Keating of Australia.

The first edition of Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* (1889) was beautifully illustrated by Daniel Carter Beard. Praising his work, Mark Twain said the illustrations were "better than the book—which is a good deal for me to say, I reckon." This is quoted from the back cover blurb of the classic in a recent University of California Press edition, *The Mark Twain Library*.

Lest I sound like a ham wanting to write my own blurbs, I must stress that some people, including all named in this article, have shown their appreciation for this interpreter's work. ■

[First in a six-part series]

Muramatsu Masumi is the chairman of Simul International, Inc. He has acted as interpreter for numerous important international conferences. They include nine summit meetings of heads of state and government of the seven industrialized nations.