

Laughing at Oneself: The Art of Self-deprecation

By Muramatsu Masumi

Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II was visiting Washington a few years ago, and it was President George Bush's honor to welcome her in a ceremony on the White House lawn.

The tall Texan host delivered his welcoming remarks, introduced the royal visitor, and then stepped down from the stand and yielded the floor. It was at this moment that several people around were heard to gasp: someone had forgotten to place an elevated platform so that Her Majesty could reach the microphones. Well, the best laid schemes o' mice an' men gang aft a-gley, as the poet Robert Burns warned us so long ago.

The only thing visible to the assembled camerapeople was the royal speaker's elegant lavender-colored, broad-brimmed hat, bobbing up and down behind the battery of bundled microphones as she glanced down at her speech now and then. The Queen was not amused, as the press reported. This incident took place before the year she described as the *annus horribilis*.

The next day the Queen was to address a joint session of the United States Congress. This time, the lectern and the microphones were set at the appropriate height, and all lenses and assembled legislators had an unobstructed view of the royal visage.

The Queen opened her address by saying, "I hope you can all see me from where you are." This unpretentious opener placed the blame, so to speak, upon her relative lack of vertical stature. Had she said something like "I can see you better today," it would have reminded everyone of the previous day's gaff. The regal humor brought the house down (and the senate, too).

The foregoing episode was widely reported in the U.S. press, and I have told the story to Japanese audiences several times, citing it as an example of so-called self-deprecating, or self-effacing, humor, which is practiced by many prominent public speakers, who thus disarm their audience and capture their attention.

One Japanese magazine, quoting my retelling of this regal anecdote, described it as taking place "when Mr. Muramatsu was interpreting for Queen Elizabeth II in Washington." Granted that I have interpreted for numerous world-class speakers and their Japanese counterparts, never have I been called on to be the go-between for two English-speaking heads of state, no matter how different their accents. Like the proverbial reports of Mark Twain's death, the magazine's story was greatly exaggerated, to say the least.

Nor was I on duty when President Bush fell ill and could not deliver his address at Prime Minister Miyazawa Kiichi's dinner in Tokyo four years ago. Half the world saw Mr. Bush fall into his host's lap and later watched as Barbara Bush, the president's wife, gave the speech for him.

Shortly thereafter he was giving his State-of-the-Union address before the U.S. Congress. His opening icebreaker was a smashing success: "I wanted to make sure it would be a big hit, but I couldn't convince Barbara to deliver it for me." I replayed the video tape and found that the president's Capitol audience applauded for a full 24 seconds in appreciation.

Mr. Bush, obviously pleased at this success, went on to say, "I see the speaker and the vice president are laughing. They saw what I did in Japan. They are just happy they are sitting behind me." By offering himself as a laughing stock in this way, he won his listeners' full attention.

Let me turn now to some of the people for whom I have acted as interpreter. Many of the world's best known economists are witty and entertaining speakers. One such man is John Kenneth Galbraith—one of "the two greatest modern Canadians the U.S. has produced," along with Marshall McLuhan (according to Anthony Burgess). Professor Galbraith always stands out conspicuously among his Japanese listeners. Responding to a comment about his rather pronounced height, Professor Galbraith used to say it allowed him to see "a broader horizon."

Milton Friedman of the Chicago school is one of my all-time favorite humorists. When a Japanese colleague told him about Professor Galbraith's worldview, Professor Friedman grinned and observed that his less than prodigious height left him "closer to reality." In contradistinction to his scholastic stature, the professor is less than five and a half feet. You can bet the Japanese feel very close to him (literally).

Another Nobel laureate in economics, Paul Samuelson, is a charmer, too. The very first time I did interpreting work for him was in 1971, when he gave a public lecture organized by the Nihon Keizai Shimbun. As is my custom, I had bought a copy of his latest book, which I hoped to have him sign. The tome I had chosen was the eighth edition of his eternal textbook classic, *Economics*. I do not pretend to read these speakers' books cover to cover. Even if I had the time to read them, I would still find most of the material somewhat beyond my comprehension. But I always try to read the preface, glance at the table of contents, thumb through the index section and read a little about some items that seem to be relevant to the interpreting work I am about to perform. And, being involved in publishing myself, I also read the publisher's blurbs.

I never ask for an autograph before interpreting, always after. Most people happily jot down a few complimentary words over their signatures. And some are more accommodating than others. When I asked Professor Samuelson if he wouldn't mind autographing a copy of his new book, he cheerfully accepted my request, saying something like "Sure, this means X cents (I forget the exact amount) in royalties for me." Coming from an economist, and a truly world-class one at that, it was quite charming.

What he wrote in the front of the book was even more captivating: "For Masumi Muramatsu, who improves my prose and clarifies my thought, Paul A. Samuelson." I merely interpreted his English speech into Japanese. But, judging from the audi-

ence's response and the subsequent questions and answers, he must have felt that I had done a reasonably good job. Still, it was a very nice thing to say.

Some 11 years later, in 1982, I had the opportunity to play a friendly game of doubles tennis with the professor after interpreting for him. I was paired with a Japanese businessman friend. Since I knew that Professor Samuelson, though older than the rest of us, was a shrewd and seasoned player. I paired him with a young Japanese woman friend of ours. She was probably the weakest player of the four, and the Nobel scholar feigned being a little nonplussed by the pairings. So I told him that it was "the best and the prettiest," punning on David Halberstam's "The Best and the Brightest." He smiled and accepted my suggestion.

After a most enjoyable match, he gladly obliged our requests for autographs. On the then latest 11th edition of his *Economics*, he inscribed: "For Masumi Muramatsu, who improves on perfection. Paul Samuelson." I like his tongue-in-cheek humor.

Still six years later, in 1988, I interpreted his keynote address to a Japanese-American symposium organized by New York University's Graduate School of Business, where he was named professor emeritus after his retirement from M.I.T. Nothing if not consistent, I had not failed to buy the latest 12th edition of his resilient classic.

This time, he wrote: "For Muramatsusan, worthy opponent and partner on the tennis court." Unlike our previous get-together, we didn't play tennis on that occasion. Possibly he remembered my tennis better than my interpreting (I am the eternal "intermediate" player). Oh, well. Actually, interpreting work is done best when the presence of the interpreter is barely noticed. Bad interpreters are always remembered, and they hurt the rest of us.

One Japanese public figure who is remembered by many as a man of quiet, unaffected humor is the late Prime Minister Ohira Masayoshi. I first met him in 1962 when he led a Cabinet delegation to Washington for a meeting of the Joint Japan-U.S. Ministerial Committee for Trade and Economic Affairs. He was at

that time minister for foreign affairs, and President John F. Kennedy hosted a luncheon at the White House.

I was to do a great deal of interpreting for him in later years, including during his tenure as finance minister and, eventually, prime minister. I often accompanied him on his travels abroad, to the U.S., Southeast Asia, and Australia.

His last overseas trip in 1980 took in Washington, Mexico City, Ottawa, and Vancouver. I was excused from duty in Mexico, as Spanish is not my bailiwick.

Vancouver was the site of the last public address he ever gave abroad. The host was Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau. As he did occasionally, Mr. Ohira read his rehearsed speech in English, giving me a chance to relax. In the middle of the speech, he read: "I take pleasure in announcing my government's intention to make a half-million-dollar contribution over the next three years to the Asian Centre at the University of British Columbia..."

He paused there to take a breath, leaving the somewhat important proviso "...for its Japan studies" dangling unread, when the packed audience of 1,100 people at the banquet enthusiastically applauded his generous gesture.

It would have been awkward for Mr. Ohira to just read the four left-out words after the applause had subsided. Ever shy, Mr. Ohira, wearing an embarrassed smile, scratched his head and added, "*Of course*, it's for Japan studies." The audience simply loved this spontaneous, unintended piece of humor, which could only have come from his willingness to be self-deprecatory.

Before he spoke, Mr. Ohira had to listen to a somewhat lengthy speech by his host. It was meant to introduce the honored guest, the Japanese prime minister. But, somewhat overwhelmed by the audience and wanting to reach out to them for political purposes, Mr. Trudeau could not resist talking about his domestic policies, which were either too subtle or uninteresting for the travel-fatigued guest to stay awake and listen to. I did my best to do what is called in the trade "whispered interpreting," rendering the English into Japanese simultaneously, sans any electronic apparatus, for Mr. Ohira's ears only.

But the poor man was beginning to nod off. Unfortunately, the headtable, where the host and the senior guests were seated, was set up on an elevated platform. Mr. Ohira's falling asleep would be plainly visible to all. Acting in my best professional (and partly patriotic) judgment, I attempted to keep him awake by lightly kicking one of the legs of his chair. I could do so easily, as I sat behind and between the two prime ministers (i.e. no dinner for me).

The first couple of kicks worked, and Mr. Ohira woke up. I then noticed that a Canadian dignitary sitting next to him had his arm resting on the back of Mr. Ohira's chair. He was sure to notice what I was doing and therefore what Mr. Ohira was doing. I then slid down slightly in my chair, placed my left knee under Mr. Ohira's chair, and pushed up on his behind through the upholstery.

This worked. I thus kicked my prime minister in the *derrière* several times during the balance of Mr. Trudeau's speech. A couple of times Mr. Ohira seemed to come to himself and nodded visibly, as if to acknowledge my contribution as much as to hide his awkwardness.

The heavy schedule of the hurly-burly visits to Washington, Mexico City, with its high altitude and thin air, and Canada had clearly exhausted the 71-year-old statesman. But still he pushed on. The next morning he flew to Belgrade to attend Yugoslavian President Tito's state funeral.

He returned to Japan only to throw himself into a rigorous general-election campaign, giving countless speeches for his party. Alas, it was all too much for him. He collapsed during the campaign and passed away.

Talking about self-deprecating humor and making yourself the butt of jokes, I imagine not many world leaders get their butts kicked by their trusted interpreters.

I apologize to Mr. Ohira. ■

[Third 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.