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JAPANESE PEOPLE WATCHING SUBTITLED JAPANESE- LANGUAGE TV SHOWS: FUNCTION OR AESTHETIC?

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Introduction

This paper looks into the development and function of Japanese subtitling on television shows in Japan. In the mid-1990s, subtitling of Japanese television programs began to grow. Significantly, this phenomenon was not a mere extension of the long-standing practice of providing Japanese subtitles for imported foreign language television programs and films. Rather, this was a new use of subtitles, i.e., the addition of Japanese subtitles for Japanese television programs. This novel use, which started with documentaries, was initially motivated by the desire to help audiences better understand interviewees whose speech was not fully intelligible. New computer technologies have led to even more sophisticated techniques for integrating subtitling with colorful graphic images. As a result, the use of subtitling has spread from documentary and news programming to various entertainment shows scheduled for both prime-time and late night. Today, Japanese television viewers are exposed to massive amounts of subtitling on a daily basis. In fact, many of the top-rated prime-time and late night programs feature subtitling in one or more of their segments.

The burgeoning popularity of subtitled programs in Japan leads to several questions. Why has subtitling become an identifiable phenomenon? Also, why has subtitling endured and, indeed, grown to become such a prominent feature across such a wide spectrum of contemporary Japanese television programming? This paper proposes to answer these questions about Japanese subtitling by examining the phenomenon's origins, growth, and overall impact, with a consideration of future implications for both producers and consumers of Japanese television. In the process, the paper will explore the impact of subtitling on program format, program content, and the aesthetics of television as a presentational medium. The paper will also examine the changing structure of the Japanese television industry and the shifting viewing habits of the Japanese television audience as forces driving the subtitling phenomenon.

Development and Functions of Japanese Subtitling

Most scholars agree that the recent vogue for Japanese subtitling began in documentaries as a means of helping viewers better understand what was being said by on-screen interviewees who were not professionally trained to speak articulately or clearly on camera.¹ Indeed, members of the general population often speak with an accent, a dialect, a soft voice, or imperfections. Such problems are often exacerbated when interviewees are older people, children, or persons with speech disabilities. In documentary and news situations where the subject's identity needs to be protected, the voice of the shrouded interviewee is often electronically disguised, thus making that person more difficult for viewers to understand. In other instances where the filmmaker has little or no control over the shooting site, environmental noise and other distractions sometimes ruin the on-location soundtrack. Eventually, documentarists found that they could use such audially flawed yet visually authentic footage by subtitling the content of interviewees' responses either verbatim or in summarized form.

Starting in the 1980s, entertainment television programs such as variety shows, reality shows, and talk shows increasingly featured ostensibly non-professionals, as opposed to professionally trained actors and entertainers.² This trend intensified significantly due to increasing budget constraints imposed on the television industry after the onset of Japan's economic depression in the early 1990s. In broadcasting, professional performers, of course, work for guaranteed wages stipulated by industry and union agreements. In contrast, there is no minimum pay for non-professionals. Indeed, many non-professionals, lured by the prospect of their "fifteen minutes of fame," are happy to appear on TV without financial compensation. Thus, it makes business sense for television producers to use as many non-professionals as possible. Significantly, there are only a few professionals whose star power is sufficiently strong enough to guarantee consistently high viewership and ratings. This, in turn, has helped create a talent market of non-professionals groomed and used and promoted as overnight sensations. Such nonprofessionals are essentially disposable.

¹ For example, see Kitada Akihiro, "Terebi no shisen to ura-riterashii," *Gengo* 31/13 (December 2002): 42-47; Shiota Harumi, "Media to kanrensei," (online article retrieved from <http://homepage2.nifty.com/nishitaya/lec2002c2.htm> on March 6, 2004); and Sakamoto Mamoru, "Hanransuru jimaku bangumi no kōzai," *Galac* (June 1999), pp. 36-39.

² Sakamoto, "Hanransuru jimaku bangumi no kōzai," p. 36.

Indeed, when the drawing power of an overnight sensation begins to fade, he or she is immediately replaced by a new novelty, who is trotted before the cameras where the process starts cycling anew.

As a result, and due largely to subtitling, the use of non-professional talent with less than perfect speech has become a common feature of Japanese prime-time entertainment programming. Among members of this non-professional talent pool are the elderly, non-native speakers of Japanese, people with strong dialects, very young children, and even the inebriated. For example, a program called *Sokoga hendayo Nihonjin* (This is Where the Japanese Are Weird) (1994-2003) featured foreigners living in Japan, with each episode consisting of their discussions in Japanese about quirky aspects of Japanese people and society. Since none of the participants are native speakers of Japanese, all of their remarks are subtitled. For Japanese viewers, these “strange-speaking” foreigners with their varied and quirky styles of accents and pronunciations are among the show’s main attractions, with subtitling being the principle means for making the participants’ foibles and follies clear.

Another example, *Sanma no karakuri TV supaa* (1995-present) includes various segments that incorporate non-professional people who speak non-standard Japanese. The show also features several quiz show segments. In one, inebriated participants call home in hopes of trying to get answers to quiz questions from family members. In another segment, contestants aged 70 and over compete to answer simple questions. *Karakuri TV* also features street interviews of native English speakers about their “Oh-my-god” experiences. These participants are asked to first explain their terrible experiences in English and then to repeat the same response in their quirky Japanese. A “Video Letter” segment consists of video recording of messages from parents living in local areas to their sons and daughters living in Tokyo. Most parents speak very emotionally in strong accents laced with dialects. All of these segments use extensive subtitling because the funny things said by the participants would not be clear without printed transcriptions to clarify and reinforce what is being said.

The purpose of the type of subtitling mentioned above is to make clear for viewers what has already been spoken on camera by contestants. With the growing sophistication of computer-generated captioning, Japanese subtitling has added increasing amounts of information, thereby expanding the meaning of what is being presented, especially when computer graphics are combined with written text to supplement or enhance meaning. For instance, the names of celebrities can be superimposed on the

screen along with written transcriptions of their speech so that viewers can more easily and quickly identify those particular celebrities.³

A newer variation of subtitling involves the enhancement of on-screen comments by changing the size and color of fonts embellished with various visual effects. Instead of simply retracing the spoken content of on-screen conversations, subtitling is now used strategically and selectively to emphasize punch lines, malapropisms, and other funny moments in conversations. This use can be seen in the show called *Majikaru zunō pawaa* (Magical Brain Power).⁴ This quiz show first used subtitling to help viewers understand the discussions of more than ten contestants (including professional singers, actors, and actresses). But the subtitling later developed into a strategic means for emphasizing or exaggerating laugh lines, a technique that became a distinctive feature of the show. This, in turn, evolved into the use of varied character sizes and colors with special effects and graphics (e.g., fonts that fly around the screen, exaggerated long vowels, and jumping question marks). Other variety and talk shows soon adapted this strategic use of subtitling to increase entertainment value.

Another genre that began to employ extensive subtitling is what is now called the “reality” show. This genre usually features a person or group of people placed in variously contrived situations in which they are confronted with the challenge of achieving specific goals.⁵ Reality shows are shot mainly outside the studio with limited equipment and preparation because of the unscripted and spontaneous unfolding of the events which distinguish the genre. As a result, most of the synchronized on-screen location speech is far from perfect, thus requiring subtitling. In addition, most of these shows subtitle the comments of the narrators or producers along with those of the on-screen cast. Subtitled narration between sequences, which accompanies the narrator’s spoken words or the unspoken interior thoughts of the producer, adds dramatic effect to the narrative by emphasizing or exaggerating twists and turns in the show’s implicit dramatics. These subtitles designate and enhance the pause leading into punch lines and unexpected surprise developments. For example, *Susume*

³ This “reference” function of subtitling is used extensively in variety talk shows, such as “SMAPxSMAP” (CX, 1994-present) and “Love love aishiteru” (CX, 1995-2001).

⁴ Aired on NTV 1990-1999.

⁵ Frances Bonner, *Ordinary Television* (London: Sage Publications, 2003), p. 26.

denpa shonen (Go! Electric Wave Boys) was one of the first shows that featured punctuating set-up words such as “BUT,” “AND THEN,” or “HOWEVER,” as full-screen subtitles between sequences.⁶ These linguistic bursts emphasize and forewarn of unexpected developments in the sequence to follow, and have proved to be effective in holding viewers’ attention by heightening the sense of excitement and humor.⁷

Ainori (Love Ride) also demonstrates the effective use of subtitling in a reality format.⁸ The show deals with a group of young adults traveling around the world in a van who try to establish love-matches within the group. The cast members’ emotional ups and downs are exaggerated with various subtitles that reprise portions of the narrator’s remarks. One segment which aired in September 2001, showed a male cast member trying to hit a softball to impress the group’s females. Accompanying the sequence was a superimposed graphic of burning fire placed over the young man’s eyes which was subtitled, “HIS AGGRESSIVE SPIRIT WAS ON FIRE.” The sequence’s next shot showed him swinging wide of the ball with the full-screen subtitle, “THREE STRIKES OUT,” accompanied by the sound of a bat swooshing through the air. *Ainori* also features subtitling to summarize the emotional outcome of a sequence in comedic ways through the use of special visual and sound effects. In one episode, when the passionate advances of a male cast member failed to attract a female cast member, a full-screen subtitle proclaiming “ALL THE EFFORTS CAME TO NAUGHT” was dramatically flashed to the accompaniment of shocking sound effects. Another function of subtitling is to advance the narrative. For example, in a scene from *Ainori*, as one of the men proposes, the audience learns that the couple has become lovers and plan to return to Japan. To underscore the young man’s steamy proposal, his words were subtitled in full and in a manner suggesting the heated prose of a romance novel.

In such reality shows, subtitling functions as a driving force, pushing the development of the overall narrative line, thus demonstrating many of the characteristics of “classic realist narrative” as articulated by television theorist John Fisk.⁹ According to Fisk, the classic realist narrative tries to “construct a self-contained, internally consistent world which is real-

⁶ Aired on NTV 1992-1996.

⁷ In “Hanransuru jimaku bangumi no kōzai,” Sakamoto attributes this innovative use of subtitling to Kazuo Gomi, the first producer of the show.

⁸ Aired on CX 1999-present.

⁹ John Fisk, *Television Culture* (London: Routledge, 1987), pp. 130-131.

seeming.”¹⁰ Although, at least theoretically, reality shows are not scripted, many of the episodes of such series take on aspects of Fisk’s kind of classic realism due largely to elaborate post-production. Indeed, producers of reality shows construct rough story outlines with linear cause-and-effect progressions which bind the apparently chaotic reality segments together. In the post-production process of these shows, subtitling is added along with other sound and visual effects to, among other things, enhance the logic of the cause-effect flow of the narrative. In other words, subtitling, although written after the shoot, functions like a script.

For example, in the case of *Ainori* mentioned above, a specific event is presented as the cause for one cast member falling in love with another. In that episode, one of the men helps an orphan with his homework and the child starts crying with joy. In the next shot, one of the women gazes raptly, presumably at the boy and man.¹¹ Here, the subtitle and narration announce, “AT THIS MOMENT SHE REALIZED THAT HE IS HER MAN.” This sequence is a good example of how editing and subtitling can establish a clear cause-and-effect link between otherwise unrelated shots and/or sequences with a subtle, abstract, or obscure meaning.

It is interesting to note that even some Japanese prime-time television dramas use subtitling. Television drama, one might reasonably presume, is a genre that can stand on its own without the intervention of subtitling since the author, director, actors, and other members of the crew can plan and control the deployment of all production elements. Yet, a prime-time drama entitled *Antique* employed occasional subtitling to provide background on the setting and characters, and to give voice to the inner thoughts and emotions of the protagonists.¹² This, and the other example cited above, suggests that by the late-1990s, subtitling had become such a commonplace in Japanese television programming that it had become naturalized as a non-intrusive element in *Antique*’s otherwise scripted narrative style.

Discussion

The development of Japanese subtitling and the resulting shift in television programming formats in the 1990s seems to reflect some of the significant changes in the Japanese economy as well as in broadcasting

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 130.

¹¹ Aired in September 2002.

¹² Aired on CX in fall 2001.

technology. The collapse of the stock market and real estate bubbles of the early-1990s caused increased pressure on the Japanese television industry to be more cost conscious and competitive. The 1990s also saw significant increases in satellite broadcasting subscriptions, a recent distribution service that had started in the 1980s. By 2000, more than ten million households in Japan had satellite subscription services.¹³ This meant that viewers had considerably more channels from which to choose, thus increasing competition among television program providers. The combination of these conditions resulted in a need for television producers to originate more and cheaper program ideas that would attract and hold increasingly more selective and fickle viewers.

The public's embrace of reality shows that could be shot mainly on location and use non-professional talent became increasingly attractive to producers. As a result, the substantially more costly television dramas which required expensive talent (i.e., actors, directors, and writers) and elaborate studio sets started to decline in number and popularity.¹⁴ Ultimately, it was subtitling that made it possible for non-professionals with unorthodox speech to be cast in prime-time programs. Subtitling also enabled less than perfect, on location synchronized sound sequences to be used. At the same time, subtitling enhanced the shorter and more briskly paced segments of talk and quiz shows by emphasizing funny lines and by supplementing information that was either vague or simply not present in the original footage. Also, this significantly helped accommodate television audience's increasingly shortened attention spans. In sum, subtitling helped prepare for the emergence and establishment of new and cost effective programming forms.

These shifts coincided with extensive innovations in computer technology in television production, especially in the post-production processes of digitally-based editing and sound mixing, which were also introduced in the early-1990s. In fact, computer based non-linear editing had virtually replaced video recorder-based linear editing systems in television production facilities by the mid-1990s. Significantly, computer-

¹³ "Current State of Satellite Broadcasting" (<http://www.mainichi-msn.co.jp>).

¹⁴ Nishitani Marika cites the proliferation of television channels as the main cause of the decline of prime-time drama in her "Wakamono muke renzoku dorama no henka," *Suzuki kenkyūshitsu sotsugyō ronbun* (Thesis, 2002), pp. 13-15 (<http://pweb.sophia.ac.jp/~s-yuga/semithesissummary02.pdf>).

generated systems greatly sped up the process of adding subtitled words to the image. Other computer-generated special effects also proliferated and became widely disseminated among post-production facilities. Therefore, the rapid increase in the use of subtitling can also be understood as a consequence of the proliferation and integration of newly developed, digitally-based television production technologies.

Seen from another angle, the emergence of subtitling also marks a new style of entertainment in Japanese television. During the 1970s and 1980s, most of the prime-time dramas and comedy shows were dependent on the talents of experienced professionals. These performers presented carefully scripted narratives with flair and panache. One popular representative of the scripted approach was the *owarai būmu*, or comedy boom, of the 1980s.¹⁵ The two popular comedic styles of the period, which are still performed today, were stand-up comedy duos (*manzai*) and comedy skits (*konto*). *Manzai* duos consist of an intellectually challenged but funny person (*boke*) and a straight man (*tsukkomi*). The humor is based largely on the funny lines and situations deriving from the clash between the *boke*'s and *tsukkomi*'s contrasting personalities. The successful *manzai* presentation depended on well-written scripts, mastery of the art of comedic delivery and timing, and the skillful use of body language. In contrast, *konto* provokes laughs from a slapstick-based style of physical humor, rather than from the wordplay at the heart of *manzai*. *Konto*'s skit comedians, to succeed, exemplified a masterful performance style requiring humorous movements, poignant expressions, and the deployment of costumes carefully designed to appear bulky. *Manzai* and *konto* both require careful planning and elaborate rehearsals. Once prepared, there is little production or post-production work except for crediting the performers and crew.

Although not relying on elaborate production values, the *manzai* and *konto* styles of entertainment in the 1980s were costly largely because of hefty talent fees. Also, the long-term success of these programs was largely dependent on the star power of individual performers and the ability of those stars to pre-plan and perform their complex routines without extensive rehearsals or re-takes. Because each segment of the program was highly planned, there was little room for modifying or improving a show in

¹⁵ One of the most popular shows of *owarai būmu* was titled *Oretachi hyōkinzoku* (We Are the Funny Tribe), which aired on CX from 1981 to 1989. The show featured *manzai* duos such as Kitano Takeshi's "Two Beat."

post-production once the performance had been taped. Finally, this fixed form of entertainment did not have a long television shelf life. Once aired on national television, the specific performance lost its aura of newness or novelty value. By the end of the 1980s, the popularity of scripted comedy shows rapidly waned.¹⁶

Compared to scripted comedies and dramas, unscripted formats such as variety talk shows and reality shows offer producers greater flexibility at lower costs. All that is needed for a new project is a carefully planned concept. Once the concept is set, it can be repeated with different casts or settings (as with the successful U.S. reality series *Survivor*). These shows, of course, do not require professional performers or extensive rehearsing. Thus, non-professionals with less than perfect speech can be cast in main roles. Their comments and conversations do not even have to make sense, since subtitling and editing can shape the on location footage for continuity as well as humor. In this sense, the unedited tape is “raw material to be mined and reworked.”¹⁷ Mastery of the art of subtitling along with sensitive editing is central to the genre’s success. Not including dramas and newscasts, programs using subtitled segments comprise more than one-third of prime-time programming on Japanese commercial television. Further affirmation of the success of Japanese reality television is the fact that these shows frequently rank among Japan’s top ten in terms of ratings.

Subtitled television shows can be seen as a new entertainment form significantly different from the dominant comedy forms of the 1980s, the *manzai* and *konto*. In *manzai*, humor is based on the give-and-take of spoken language, while with *konto* the humor is more visual or physical. In part, the difference is explained by the fact that the *manzai* form existed before television mainly in the forms of live performance and radio broadcast, while *konto* emerged after television became an established part of Japanese life.

It is significant to note that subtitled shows emerged in step with developments in computer technology. Much of the humor resulting from subtitles is based on a visual presentation of language, which it seems reasonable to suggest can be seen as a combination of the speech-centered *manzai* with the visual-centered *konto*. Television in the 1990s was no longer a medium that merely combines audio and visual. Thanks to

¹⁶ Sakamoto, “Hanransuru jimaku bangumi no kōzai,” p. 7.

¹⁷ J. T. Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), p. 229.

advancements in computer technology, television today has acquired an additional channel of communication: on-screen written text.

Subtitling, now virtually omnipresent in Japanese television, also has problematic aspects. The Broadcasting Research Group reports that many viewers have become tired of what is perceived as an overuse of subtitling, especially in poorly produced programs.¹⁸ This team reveals that for many, subtitling without a well thought out strategy detracts from a show's quality. Moreover, subtitling adds yet one more stream of information to an already cluttered television image – and, therefore, television experience – in which viewers often feel a sense of sensory overload. A related complaint has to do with the redundancy of information doubled in speech and subtitling. Sakamoto Mamoru also criticizes the frequent incorrect use of kanji in subtitling. In sum, subtitling is no longer a sure bet in terms of producing high ratings.¹⁹

Some viewers have expressed concern about what they perceive as the declining quality of the performing arts, especially those including entertainers and comedians on Japanese television.²⁰ Since elaborate editing and special effects with subtitling can construct as well as heighten humor, there are viewers who feel that some entertainers no longer feel obliged to give top performances since their performances can be heightened in post-production. Other viewers accuse subtitling of over-determining content by making everything too clear and obvious.²¹ Accompanying this view is the sense that producers show disrespect for Japanese viewers by treating them in what is sometimes regarded as an infantile manner. J. T. Caldwell describes the contemporary trend of digitally packaged television as “stylistic exhibitionism,” where everything is excessive and over-determined with little space left for imagination.²² Since meanings are often excessively clear in subtitled segments, reading subtitles tends to leave little room for viewers to actively engage content by interpreting and making meaning for themselves. This, some contend, tends toward greater passivity among viewers. Compared to Stewart Hall's “active audience” fully

¹⁸ Broadcasting Research Group, Department of Art, Japan University, “Teroppu no seitai-gaku” [Ecology of Telop], *Galac* (April 2000): 7-13.

¹⁹ Sakamoto, “Hanransuru jimaku bangumi no kōzai,” p. 39.

²⁰ Broadcasting Research Group, “Teroppu no seitai-gaku,” p. 11.

²¹ Sakamoto, “Hanransuru jimaku bangumi no kōzai,” p. 39. Also see Kitada Akihiro, “Terebi no shisen to ura-riterashii,” pp. 42-47.

²² Caldwell, *Televisuality*, p. 5.

engaged in decoding media messages offered in a progressive manner, the passive audience's pleasure is limited.²³

While most media scholars are critical of excessive subtitling, Shiota Hideko points out more abstract and intangible effects of subtitling on Japanese viewers.²⁴ According to her, subtitled shows involve a compound system of information transmission. The content of a program is mediated not only by the television medium itself, but by the producers who are in charge of the post-production process. This two-tiered view of television invokes what Shiota calls "the observer's viewpoint" among television viewers.²⁵ She claims that if a viewer is successful in seeing the struggle or cooperation of the parties involved in the production of a subtitled segment (e.g., cast members, writers, directors, television network executives, among others), the viewing experience should be more profound and thus also more pleasurable. She suggests that a viewer who fails to achieve this observer's perspective tends to find subtitles excessive and boring.²⁶ At the same time, Shiota acknowledges that a compound communications system using subtitles (where contrasting messages "sent" and inflected by both producers and on-camera talents) creates a "shared impression" on top of "shared knowledge."²⁷ Therefore, sophisticated subtitling could potentially yield an emotional response as rich as that produced by reading poetry. In this sense, subtitling could be seen as a kind of contemporary aesthetic related to postmodernism.

Conclusion

In spite of their inherent problems, subtitled shows have become a staple of Japanese television. Today's young people who grew up watching subtitled shows admit that they cannot imagine variety shows without subtitles flying about the screen.²⁸ If subtitled shows continue to thrive, they might eventually become another traditional aspect of Japanese television. But, with further technological innovations, subtitling could even become

²³ Stewart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding," *Culture, Media, Language* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), pp. 128-139.

²⁴ Shiota Hideko, "Moji teroppu to suiron moderu," *Hyōgen kenkyū* 74 (2001): 49-55.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

²⁸ Broadcasting Research Group, "Teroppu no seitai-gaku," p. 11.

obsolete. In Japan, digital broadcasting started in December 2003. It will be interesting to see how the high resolution images and high quality sounds of digital broadcasting will further transform the nature of Japanese television in general, and the practice of subtitling in particular.