

# **Non-use of humour in science and engineering presentations by Japanese graduate students: Language, cultural or discourse community barriers?**

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Humor is often used in Anglo-American situations to establish a common ground between the speaker and the audience, but its use entails not only cultural but also linguistic aspects, which are difficult to classify and identify, and therefore are difficult to control. Nevertheless, as English is essential today as an international medium of communication, pragmatic competence in relation to humor is becoming increasingly important.

Brown and Levinson (1987:124) define joking as “a basic positive-politeness technique, for putting someone at ease.” Boxer and Cortes-Conde (1997:275) in their article on conversational joking and identity display describe humor as being “a highly valued verbal art across societies.” They (1997:275) continue with “indeed, in much of western civilization, humor is an essential ingredient of everyday interaction and of socialization.” Further support for this view of the importance of humor in American lifestyles comes from a review by Mintz (1999) of how humor is used as both a unifying and a divisive force.

An Internet literature search yields details on several humor-related courses offered at American universities. At the University of Texas at Austin, Department of Linguistics, Jocelyn Cohan offers a course entitled the “Linguistics of humor.” She considers “Humor is a basic part of human experience: we find it in one form or another in every culture.” Thus, humor appears to be a valued feature for enhancing communication by native speakers of English.

Humor can be valuable in academic situations according to Maggie Richy of Roberts Wesleyan College, New York (personal comment), who thinks that laughter can clear the students' affective filter, which can be “clogged with negative emotions” that can prevent the absorption of information (Wycoff, 1999). In other words, Richy perceives humor as a way of promoting learning in the classroom. A strong proponent of this view is Berk

(1998), who wrote a book on how to include humor in the classroom and professional presentations.

The use of humor seems to be so pervasive that when it is not forthcoming, awkward circumstances may result. Raskin (1984) reported the discomfort of an audience due to the lack of humor in an academic lecture. When Carl Popper lectured to University of Michigan undergraduates, the audience was visibly uneasy because of the lecturer's total humorlessness. This led to a burst of laughter after approximately 25 minutes into the talk when the lecturer made a slip of the tongue. Raskin noted that "the American habit of opening a formal talk with some humorous remark" had led the audience to wait for some sort of joke and had led to frustration when it had not come.

A 1988 study by Downs et al. revealed that an average 50-minute lecture in a US university had 13.33 attempts at humor by the instructor, or about one humorous remark every 3.75 minutes. Humor can even be found at "serious" lectures in physics. In a corpus database of British conference presentations in physics, Umesaki (1998) reported the following quote from a report of a study of vibrational modes of vitreous boron oxide: "And I shall endeavor not to keep you from your lunch." It came immediately after the speaker had described the specific aim of the lecture.

Clenell (1999) in an article in the *ELT Journal* points out a case of miscommunication arising from pragmatic failure and the need for training students in cross-cultural communication at different levels of language use. A student, while understanding the words spoken to her in a practice interchange session, misunderstood their intention as being rude and "racially motivated." Fortunately, the session had been taped for analysis and study of the intonation showed that the speaker had actually intended to sound friendly and humorous. This example is an indicator of the problems which can arise when trying to deal with humor in a second- or foreign-language context. There are not only linguistic but also extra-linguistic factors involved (Okamura & Show, 1999).

These observations suggest the importance of acquiring humor competence as a part of pragmatic communicative competence for successful encounters in academic situations. The question thus arises as to how this sense of humor can be effectively handled in the EFL classroom.

With respect to the second language situation, Vega (1989), quoted in Attardo (1994:211), hypothesizes that "the capacity of making and understanding humor in L2 is part of communicative competence at large, and so should be taught as such." Attardo discusses this and comes to the conclusion that "humor" itself need not be specifically taught because the "knowledge necessary to process jokes is not necessarily limited to jokes themselves." Instead, he advocates teaching the following for "humor competence": "what scripts are available in a given culture for humorous purposes, which scripts are unavailable (tabooed), and in which settings humor is considered appropriate."

In order to effectively teach humor competence in an EFL (English as a foreign language) situation, we decided that we first needed to clarify how humor is viewed by those in different academic fields. An area in which English is now the primary medium of international communication is that of the sciences. The example from the physics

presentation mentioned above, suggested that there might be a place for humor even in academic presentations in the hard sciences. We therefore conducted a survey of science graduate students in Japanese universities, who would benefit most from instruction in preparation for professional work. The study was also extended to include academic staff in these fields.

## **2. METHODS**

### **2.1. Subjects**

The subjects were 134 graduate students in the sciences (biosciences, engineering) from various universities in Japan. Many had not yet experienced giving presentations in English. Therefore the research was expanded to include university staff in science fields (52 in biosciences, pharmaceutical sciences, medicine). As a reference group, we used the data from our previous work (Noguchi et al, 2000) for university staff whose areas of speciality were language education and linguistics and new data of 10 people in the same area (total 49 people). The total number of subjects was 249 (m: 151, f: 79, no answer: 19, ranging in age from 20's–60's; 14 English speakers served as a control group for the Japanese subject data from a previous study).

### **2.2. Questionnaire**

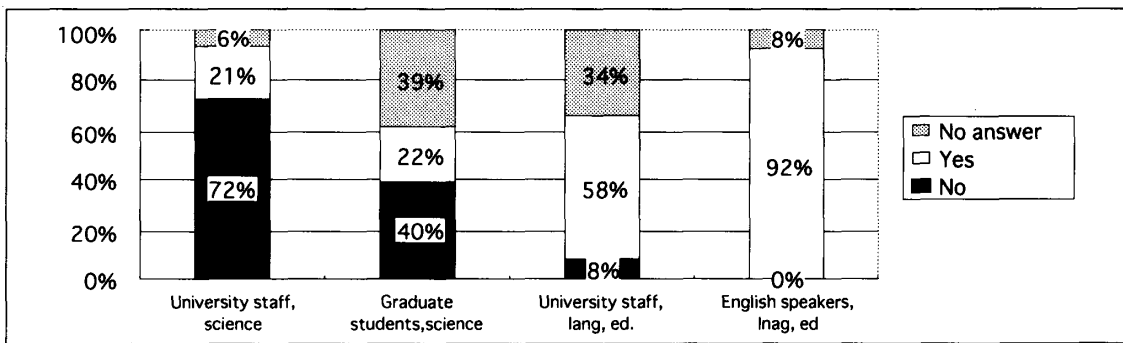
The questionnaire was based on that used in the previous study (see Appendix A). The questionnaires were distributed to graduate students at class and to university staff at their offices from January to July, 2000.

## **3. RESULTS**

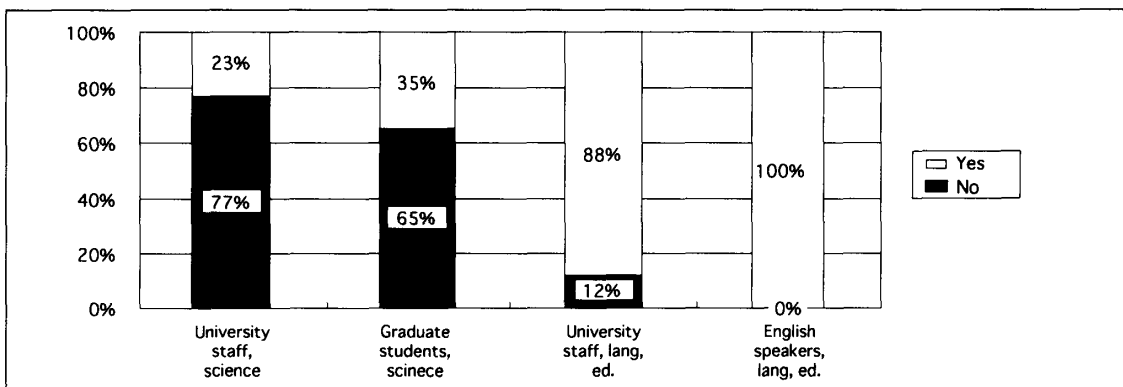
### **3.1. Overall responses**

Overall, 31% of the science group (students and staff) said that they would use humor in their presentation either in English or in Japanese, but 79% would not. As shown in Figure 1, 72% of the university staff in science areas would not use humor, and 40% of the graduate students also would not. However 58% of university staff in language education responded that they would use humor. The previous study showed that 92% of English native speakers said that they use humor. Interestingly, 74 of the subjects (54 science students, 3 science staff, and 17 language staffs) did not answer this question, which may indicate that the notion of using humor in academic presentations may not have been familiar to those people.

Figure 2 shows the results of the data after exclusion of those who did not answer the first question. Humor would not be used by 65% of the graduate students and 77% of the university staff in science areas, while it would be used by 88 % of university staff in language education and 100% of English native speakers responding to this question.



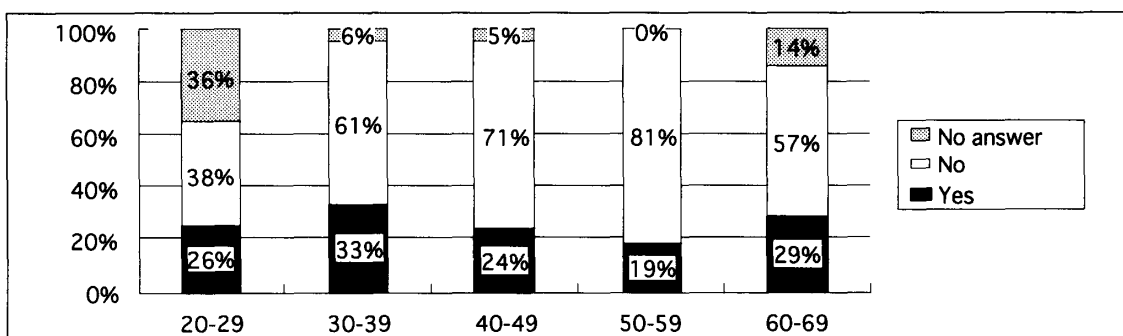
**Figure 1. Percentages of humor usage by subject group** (staff, science n = 47; students, science n = 133; staff, lang. ed. n = 49; English speakers, lang. ed. n = 13)



**Figure 2. Percentages of humor usage by subject group** (excluding answer question 1) (staff, science n = 44; students, science n = 85; staff, lang. ed. n = 33; English speakers, lang. ed. n = 12)

Some science group subjects stated that they only used humor when they had a presentation in English, while others stated the opposite of only using humor in their Japanese presentations. Some subjects stated that they may or may not use humor depending on the scale of the conference.

Figure 3 shows the responses to the question on the use of humor in academic presentations categorized by age group. Our hypothesis was that older people might use humor more than younger people, but no clear differences were noted among age groups.



**Figure 3. Percentages of humor usage by age group** (20-29, n = 117; 30-39, n = 18; 40-49, n = 21; 50-59, n = 16; 60-69, n = 7)

### 3.2. Purpose of using humor

The most frequently chosen reason for using humor was to create a relaxed atmosphere in both Japanese and English presentations by Japanese speakers (47%, 53%). The second reason given for using humor was to attract attention (17%, 22%). Despite the difference in language, the presenters in all groups used humor in similar ways. Establishing empathy with the audience was the most important to university staff in science (30% in English, 40% in Japanese), but not to graduate students (13% in English, 19% in Japanese). On the other hand, creating a relaxed atmosphere was chosen as the most important by graduate students (39% in English, 40% in Japanese), but not by university staff in science (30% in English, 25% in Japanese). This may be because university science staff members have more experience with presentations.

### 3.3. Presentation beginnings

The respondents were asked to give sample opening lines of their presentations. Both English and Japanese presentations began with a self-introduction, an outline or explanation of aim. However the expression of gratitude was the first choice for English (17%) but the fourth in Japanese (7%) (see Table 1). Another difference noted was the explanation of aim, which was the first choice for Japanese presentations, but only the third choice for English presentations. This indicates that the subjects usually begin their presentation in a straightforward manner in Japanese, but tend to present some expression of appreciation in English.

A salient point was that almost all graduate students did not express gratitude when using Japanese nor did university staff in science areas, while both graduate students and university staff expressed gratitude in English. University staff in language education did not choose to express gratitude in either language. The data showed that graduate students and university staff seem to change their styles of presentation between Japanese and English.

Comparison of Japanese speakers with the native English speakers showed that some native speakers included anecdotes and jokes, which the Japanese speakers did not. Furthermore some Japanese speakers included an excuse for various reasons in both presentations, but none of the native English speakers did.

**Table 1. Presentation beginnings-comparison of Japanese speaker data with native English speaker data**

Language category	JS in English (247)	JS in Japanese (325)	Native English speakers (28)
Outline	25%	24%	29%
Explanation of aim	24%	28%	14%
Self introduction	17%	21%	7%
Expression of gratitude	17%	7%	4%
Anecdote	5%	6%	14%
Joke	3%	4%	18%
Excuse	3%	6%	0%
Other	7%	5%	14%

Note: Language of presentation JS, Japanese Speakers; (numeral), total number of responses

### 3.4. Presentation beginnings by subject and group category

University staff in English education gave different responses, especially for English presentations. Graduate students and university staff showed similar tendencies to begin their presentations with an outline, explanation of the aim, or self-introduction, but not with a joke or anecdote. However, the university staff in English education showed a clearer preference for presenting their aim or outline at the beginning. Table 2 shows that humor is rare at the beginning of a presentation by Japanese speakers.

**Table 2. Presentation beginnings by subject category (Japanese speakers)**

Subject category	Graduate students (E) (145)	Graduate students (J) (215)	Uni. staff, science (E) (86)	Uni. staff, science (J) (90)	Uni. staff, lang. ed. (E) (9)	Uni. staff, lang. ed. (J) (19)
Outline	27%	26%	21%	21%	36%	24%
Explanation of aim	22%	26%	27%	34%	36%	21%
Self introduction	20%	24%	10%	10%	27%	28%
Expression of gratitude	13%	4%	26%	16%	0%	0%
Anecdote	6%	7%	2%	2%	0%	7%
Excuse	3%	6%	2%	6%	0%	7%
Joke	3%	3%	3%	6%	0%	10%
Other	7%	5%	8%	6%	0%	3%

Note: Language of presentation (E), English; (J), Japanese; (numeral), total number of responses

## 4. DISCUSSION

### 4.1. Non-use of humor

This study sought to survey the views on humor and its usage in academic situations by Japanese graduate students and staff in science fields in order to inform language teaching for professional purposes. We found that overall all, humor is not frequently used by these subjects in academic presentations and as many as 38% display a negative attitude to its usage.

To analyze the answers of why humor was not used, 132 answers were classified into the two categories shown in Table 3: category (A), 62%, for a positive attitude to humor, and category (B), 38%, for a negative attitude. Each group was further divided into three sub-categories.

**Table 3. Reasons for non-use of humor by Japanese speakers with positive and negative attitudes toward humor**

(A) Positive attitude		(B) Negative attitude	
(1) No time to spare	27	(4) No need for humor	18
(2) Lack of composure	35	(5) Concern about a superior	14
(3) Lack of confidence	30	(6) Indifference and lack of knowledge	8

- 1) *No time to spare.* Category 1 had 27 responses of having “no time” to spare. Usually the time allowed for a paper presentation in the natural sciences is very short, about 10 to 15 minutes.

- 2) *Lack of composure.* Category 2 had 35 responses of the respondents saying that they were too tense and nervous to use humor.
- 3) *Lack of confidence.* Thirty people gave this as a reason for not using humor. Some written responses were “Once I tried, but it was not successful.” and “If I am more experienced, I would like to make my presentation in a more pleasant manner in order that the audience can enjoy and understand.”

The above three sub-categories were negative responses to the usage of humor given by respondents who had a positive view toward it. There were three other sub-categories for respondents who had a negative attitude toward humor usage.

- 4) *No need for humor.* Eighteen people claimed that humor is not necessary in such a serious occasion as an academic presentation. They view humor as something trivial and distracting from the serious matter of an academic environment. Some typical answers were “Humor has nothing to do with the content of my presentation,” “I don’t need humor” and “I think humor is not suitable for the atmosphere of the occasion and the place.” Inoue (1999) points out that “Japanese politicians lack in sense of humor.” As an explanation, he suggests that the negative attitude of Japanese newspapers toward “unseriousness,” which may contribute to the impression of the Japanese being “serious.” (Nagashima, 1999; Takekuro, 1999).
- 5) *Concern about a superior.* One interesting negative response given by fourteen students was a concern about what their superior would think. We interpreted this as reflecting the culture-bound tendency of the Japanese vertical society. Some of the answers from the graduate students indicated their anxiety about the possibility of “failure” of their humor. They were afraid of damaging their superior’s face if the attempt at humor was not successful. Some responses were “My boss will not permit me to use humor if he listens to my rehearsal”; “I am aiming to make presentations with humor, but the reality is that in the academic meeting on a large scale, I can’t use it in the presence of my boss, because I am afraid of losing his face”; and “In Japan it is difficult to use humor, because the whole atmosphere is very serious and strict. Especially young people find it difficult to use humor in front of their superiors.”
- 6) *Indifference and lack of knowledge.* Category 6 had eight of those who were not interested in humor or who had fixed ideas about it. As one of the purposes of our study was to find ways to make non-native speakers of English realize the importance of humor on the international stage and to teach its effective usage, these answers should not be neglected. Some examples were “I have never thought of using humor in my presentations and never been trained to do so. Through this questionnaire I noticed the different value judgment of humor between Japan and the English-speaking countries” and “Using humor is rare in Japanese academic presentations. I think that people are afraid of giving an impression of insincere. So, I was rather surprised that there are people who are researching humor in academic presentations.”

In sum, this analysis has shown that many Japanese academics and graduate students have a positive attitude toward humor but do not feel confident enough to use it properly.

However, there are also many who possess a negative view of humor usage in academic presentation. These findings suggest the importance of Joyce Merrill Valdes's comment (1995:142): "It is wise to introduce the topic of humor at an early stage, as the understanding of what is funny in another language is one of the last attainments of language students." One important issue that was discovered was the problem of face. Alison Ross (1998:2) states "...If someone signals their intention to say something humorous the listeners are immediately ready to laugh...." Thus if the superiors in the audience could be good-will listeners, humor in academia may become more acceptable even among students in scientific fields.

#### 4.2. Analyses of presentation opening sentences

The question then arose of how presentations were begun if humor was usually not used by our subjects. We therefore examined the opening sentences of the presentations and classified them into eight types: topic, expressions of gratitude, greeting, self-introduction, greeting + topic, self-introduction + topic, gratitude + joke, and others. The topic category includes the contents of the topic, presentation, its aim, an outline, and the background of the study. The numbers in the parentheses in Table 4 correspond to those of the data.

**Table 4. Presentation beginnings in Japanese and English by Japanese speakers**

Subject category	Science students (E) (58)	Science students (J) (73)	Uni. Staff Science (E) (20)	Uni. staff Science (J) (42)
Topic	41%	47%	45%	79%
Thank	25%	4%	35%	14%
Greet	10%	3%	10%	0%
Self-intro.	10%	22%	0%	5%
Self-intro .+ Topic	6%	22%	0%	0%
Greet. + Topic	3%	0%	10%	2%
Thank + Joke	0%	1%	0%	0%
Other	5%	1%	0%	0%

Note: Language of presentation (E), English; (J), Japanese; (numeral), number of subjects

The most commonly used opening for both English and Japanese presentations by both students and university staff members is related to the topic, followed by self-introduction or an expression of gratitude to the audience or the organizers or the chairperson. Only one lecturer uses a joke at the beginning and two students apologize about their poor English ability. Both students and lecturers use similar speech openers but the English versions of the lecturers were longer and better than those of the students from the viewpoints of grammar and genre. For example, one student expresses his gratitude by saying "Thank you, Chairman," while a lecturer says, "Thank you for your kind introduction. It is my great pleasure to have an opportunity to talk about our work". Another student says, "Today, I would like to talk about", while another lecturer starts with, "The fatty acid composition and levels of redinol and tocopherol...." The students



tended to be more casual, perhaps due to their lack of experience, saying, for example, “Nice to meet you” or “Hello, everyone.” As for Japanese presentations, the students and lecturers use almost the same beginnings. For example, a student says, “It is my great honor to have this opportunity to make this presentation.” while a lecturer says, “It is my great pleasure to talk about my work.”

#### 4.3. Comparison of English and Japanese presentation beginnings by the same person

Comparison of the English and Japanese beginnings by the same presenter revealed that 13 of the 46 students and 5 of 12 lecturers used different styles. For example, one student begins his English presentation by greeting the audience with “Nice to meet you” but in his Japanese version, he only says, “I would like to begin my presentation now.” Another student begins his English presentation, expressing his gratitude to the audience, “Thank you, chairperson, Ladies and Gentleman (sic),” while in his Japanese version, he only says, “The first slide, please.”

In the same way, one lecturer thanks the audience, saying, “It is a great honor for me to have an opportunity...” while he immediately starts his Japanese version with: “I am interested in the physical transportation systems of a vacuole....”

Another lecturer first greets the organizers and audience then uses a joke related his field of study, for example, “protein vs. people sorting to the meeting room” in his English presentation. However, he starts his Japanese version by describing the outline of the topic with no attempt at humor. The basic difference seems to be the feeling for a need to establish rapport with the audience for English presentations, but to take such rapport for granted when making a presentation in Japanese. This difference may arise from the tacit culture reflected by the Japanese language.

### 5. Pedagogical considerations

As the original aim of this study was to find ways to improve student presentations in English, the expressions offered by the students were analyzed for errors. These could be classified into two types: grammatical errors and genre errors. Here genre errors refer to errors in register, discourse markers and other macro problems of the 61 responses. Twenty-nine were classified as having grammatical errors and 17 as having genre errors. Table 5 presents some examples and how they can be improved.

**Table 5. Examples of English presentation openers by students**

Original text	Suggested revisions
*At first, I'd like to introduce...	“First, I'd like to introduce...”
*In my study we find...	“In our study we found....”
*Nice to meet you	I am very happy to be able to present....
*Thank you, Chairman	Thank you, Mr. Chairman / Mr.AAA / Ms.AAA / Prof. AAA”

## 6. CONCLUSIONS

With the aim of helping Japanese students improve their English communication skills, this questionnaire survey was conducted with Japanese graduate students in sciences to discover their views toward the use of humor in their academic presentations. Their responses were compared with those of their lecturers and responses from lecturers in language teaching and linguistic fields. The study showed that many (62%) have positive attitudes toward using humor in academic presentations, but are not able to use it properly. These findings suggest that Japanese graduate students in science and engineering tend to have a positive view toward using humor in their English presentations, and thus should be open to instruction on how to use it.

The non-use of humor among these Japanese students could be traced to the lack of time and language ability. While the former is an external constraint, the latter can be dealt with by specific language instruction. This support process could then be extended to how to introduce short bits of humor which could help promote rapport with the audience.

This study was begun based on our finding of a very positive attitude toward the use of humor in academic presentations by both Japanese and native English speaker university staff in language education and linguistics fields. However, the present findings suggest that the acceptance of humor might vary with the field of speciality. Thus, further study should be done within similar subject areas in Anglophone situations to try to more sensitively set the pedagogical targets for learners of English as foreign language.

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## Appendix 1: Questionnaire on Academic Presentations (Form J)

The Humor Studies Group is conducting a research project on humor in academia. We would like to ask your help in responding to this questionnaire.

Please circle the appropriate choice or write in your responses (in English or Japanese).

**1. When you give an academic presentation, how do you begin it?** (Several choices acceptable; please number your choices with 1 indicating the most important choice.) [学会などにおいて口頭発表をする場合、どのように始めますか。複数回答可；一番よく使うものから順番に書いて下さい。]

In the case of an English presentation [英語で口頭発表をする場合] :

In the case of a Japanese presentation [日本語で口頭発表をする場合] :

- 1.1 With an anecdote (逸話、小話)
- 1.2 With a joke (ジョーク)
- 1.3 With a self introduction (自己紹介)
- 1.4 With an outline (発表のあらまし)
- 1.5 With an excuse (お詫び)
- 1.6 With an explanation of aim (目的の説明)
- 1.7 With an expression of gratitude (お礼)
- 1.8 Other: (please specify) (その他、詳しい説明をお願いします)

**2. Please give an example of the opening sentences of a sample presentation** [学会などにおいて口頭発表をする場合、どのように始めますか。最初の部分を書いて下さい。]:  
In the case of an English presentation [英語で口頭発表をする場合]:

In the case of a Japanese presentation [日本語で口頭発表をする場合]:

**3. Do you purposely try to use humor in your presentations?** [口頭発表において意識的にユーモアを入れるようにしますか。]

3.1 YES

3.2 If YES, where in your presentation? [もしあれば、発表のどの部分で使いますか。]

3.3 If YES, for what purpose? (Several choices acceptable; please number your choices with 1 indicating the most important choice.) [もしあれば、どのような目的で使いますか (複数回答可; 一番よく使うものから順番に書いて下さい。)]

In the case of an English presentation [英語で口頭発表をする場合]:

In the case of a Japanese presentation [日本語で口頭発表をする場合]:

3.3.1 To establish empathy with audience (聴衆との共感を測る)

3.3.2 To create a relaxed atmosphere (雰囲気や和ませる)

3.3.3 To attract attention (注意をひく)

3.3.4 To illustrate your main points (主張の説明)

3.3.5 Other: (please specify) (その他、詳しい説明をお願いします)

3.4 NO

3.5 If NO, why? [もしユーモアを入れなければ、どうしてですか。]

**4. What is your mother tongue?** 「母語」

**5. What is your academic field?** 「研究（勉強）の分野」

**6. Which best describes your current situation of employment or affiliation?** 「所属」

6.1 University（大学教員） 6.2 Junior college（短期大学教員）

6.3 High school（高校教員） 6.3 Junior high school（中学教員）

6.4 Student: 「please specify level, e.g. university graduate student（大学院生）」

6.5 Other: (please specify)

**7. Which age group are you in?** 「年齢層」

7.1 20-29 7.2 30-39 7.3 40-49

7.4 50-59 7.5 60-69 7.6 70 and above

**8. Are you** 「性別」

8.1 Male 8.2 Female

**9. Country of current residence** 「現在住んでいる国」: (please specify)

**10. Length of current residence** 「現在住んでいる国での滞在期間；生れた時からであれば“from birth”」: (please specify)

**11. Country of origin** 「どの国で生まれ育ちましたか」: (please specify)

**12. Comments:**