

# Why should Japanese have all the pun?

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**社** 長さん、夏休みはどこに行かれるんですか？ (*Shachō-san, natsu yasumi wa doko ni ikareru-n-desu ka*, “Mr. Company President, where will you be going for your summer vacation?”) 避暑に聞いてくれ (*Hisho ni kiite kure*, “Please ask [about] my summer resort”).

Here, Chicago-born TV personality Dave Spector has substituted the kanji characters 避暑 (*hisho*, summer retreat) for 秘書 (*hisho*, secretary). So instead of “Please ask my secretary,” he came up with yet another of his outrageous *ダジャレ* (*dajare*, puns).

Typically, these sort of puns consist of a *ネタフリ* (*netafuri*, set-up) and an *オチ* (*ochi*, punch line). Their brevity — something Japanese are known to appreciate — also works in their favor. And they can be slightly naughty without actually descending into off-color humor. In the above case, for example, there’s a suggestion that perhaps the CEO will be enjoying his summer holiday in the potentially illicit company of his female employee.

The above is excerpted from a 2018 calendar bearing the catchphrase *ダジャレで元気!* (*Dajare de genki*, “Cheer up with puns!”) — but more on this later.

The Japanese word for pun, *ダジャレ* (*dajare*) evolved from the word *しゃれ* (*share*, witticism), with the prefix *da* added to suggest low-grade, trivial, insignificant or worthless. This view would appear to echo that of 18th-century English lexicographer Samuel Johnson, who dourly remarked that puns were “the lowest form of humor.”

I even learned a bilingual pun on my first

day in Japanese-language class. It applied to the name and location of our institution.

When somebody asked us 大学はどちら？ (*Daigaku wa dochira?* “Which university do you attend?”), we responded “ICU” (the abbreviation for International Christian University, which in Japanese is 国際基督教大学, *Kokusai Kirisuto Kyō Daigaku*). The other party, we were warned, would be prompted to reply ああ、三鷹？ (*Aa, Mitaka?* Oh, [the one in] Mitaka city?) — the joke being that since ICU is a homonym for “I see you,” the natural response would be 見たか (*mita ka*, “Did you see?”).

Anything topical or famous can serve as an inspiration for puns. Years ago, one of the series of マナーポスター (*manā posutā*, manners posters) displayed in Tokyo subway stations attempted to remind passengers not to leave behind their umbrellas.

It did this by parodying the title of Otto Preminger’s 1954 Western film, “River of No Return,” starring Robert Mitchum and Marilyn Monroe. In the movie, Monroe played a guitar while huskily crooning the eponymous theme song. The 1976 subway poster illustration showed her strumming an umbrella instead of a guitar, with the movie’s title changed by one letter, from 帰らざる河 (*Kaerazaru Kawa*, The River of No Return), to 帰らざる傘 (*Kae-razaru kasa*, the umbrellas that never come back).

With puns, even toilet humor can take on a whole new perspective. Last August, a maker of emergency-use toilets named “Poiretto” — itself a pun since “poi” implies discarding something — ran full-page newspaper ads topped by the catch phrase 尿意ドン (*nyōi don*). *Nyōi* means the urge to urinate (*nyō* means urine), but here it’s meant to pun 用意 (*yōi*, get set), which is then followed



Master of *Dajare*: Dave Spector’s 2018 calendar features 145 “happy gags.”

by *don!* meaning “go!” commonly used at the start of races. One letter removed results in an ad that means “get set, go!” thereby implying minimal waiting time when an “emergency” arises.

Spector is the undisputed master of puns in Japan’s 芸能界 (*geinōkai*, entertainment world). Twitter, with its 140-character limit, is ideal for this kind of humor, and Spector currently boasts close to 1.5 million followers, ranking him 42nd in the country overall — no small feat.

Spector tells me he tweets “between five

and 10 times a day,” sometimes saving the more quirky ones for night.

“I try to have one in the morning, too, for commuters,” he says, adding, “to avoid mistakes I never tweet out directly but type it elsewhere and then copy and paste after making absolutely sure it is accurate and adapts the best phraseology, since, as you know, you can’t edit tweets later, you can only delete them.”

Because of its huge number of homonyms, Spector feels Japanese is “arguably the best language in the world” for punning. “The word duplication is just too tempting to resist,” he says.

A few years ago Spector revealed his technique in an article in *Flash* magazine: とても小さいICレコーダーを24時間ずっと持っていて、思いついた時に吹き込むようにしてらんです (*Totemo chiisai IC rekōdā o nijuyojikan zutto mottete, omoitsuita toki ni fukikomu yō ni shiteru-n-desu*, “I always carry a very small IC voice recorder with me 24 hours a day, and when something occurs to me I record it.”)

Spector’s 2018 calendar features 145 “happy gags” and 12 famous says by U.S. presidents, of which he said about 70 percent are newly written, and the rest gleaned from past tweets. (“And somewhat edited for book style,” he adds.) Spector even self-deprecatingly puns his surname in the title: 今日もデーブ・スペクター カレンダー (*Kyō mo Dēbu Subettā karendā*). *すべる* (*suberu*, slip, glide) in Japanese showbiz slang means “bomb” or a joke falling flat.

The calendar retails for ¥1,960 including tax, and can be found in bookstores or ordered via Amazon Japan. A small price to pay for daily howls in the Year of the Dog.