JAPANESE NUMBER PUNS

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Japanese is a language well-suited to word play, and a good example of this is telephone number mnemonics. English mnemonics must be based on the fact that both letters and numbers appear on the dial, but Japanese can use the numbers themselves. One reason for this is the simpler sound pattern of Japanese, well-suited for puns: there are tens of thousands of possible syllables in English, but (ignoring doubled consonants) only 91 in standard Japanese. Another reason is the fact that the numbers have both native Japanese and borrowed Chinese pronunciations, and sometimes more than one of each. Although some of these pronunciations are polysyllabic, they can be abbreviated by using only the first syllable, further increasing the combinations.

An employee of the Nippon Telegraph and Telephone Public Corporation has been collecting these puns for more than a decade, and in 1971 wrote a short article on them for a vernacular newspaper. The examples below are taken from it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English translation</th>
<th>Japanese original</th>
<th>Telephone number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>butcher</td>
<td>nikuya</td>
<td>2 9 8 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(san is an honorific suffix)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to read written matter</td>
<td>fumi yomu</td>
<td>2 3 4 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(the number of a bookstore)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ears (and) nose</td>
<td>mimi hana</td>
<td>3 3 8 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(there are 32 ear, nose and throat specialists in Tokyo with this number)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>customers) will not go!</td>
<td>iku na ya</td>
<td>5 9 7 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(bar hostesses felt this number was bad luck)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>murderer</td>
<td>hito koroshi</td>
<td>1 9 6 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(again, there was a complaint at this number being assigned)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are these puns is not considered, they are quite the numbers "death!" and was difficult the long waiting? and, insisted Box 44 -- dead.

There is a man (kazu) and the numbers "one-two-shi". There is a non-termites (come, all) a smile...

I close this.

OK, fine
There are, of course, many others, and part of the popularity of
these puns is due to the Japanese view of the pun in general -- they
do not consider it to be as low a form of humor as Americans do. In fact,
they are quite serious about taboos and superstitions connected with
the numbers four and nine (shi is a reading for both "four" and
"death" and is particularly avoided). Not many years ago, when it
was difficult to get a telephone number in Tokyo (they must be pur-
chased), some foreigners found that accepting an unlucky number
enabled them to get quick service. A friend of mine, dismayed at the
long waiting list he was asked to join to get a box at a Tokyo post of-
office, insisted that he couldn't wait, and in a short time was assigned
Box 44 -- death-death.

Number puns arise in other parts of Japanese life. August 7 is
known as "nose day" because ha-na (8/7) is Japanese for "nose".
There is a man in Shikokku with the license plate number 4771,
shi-na na. Since shinanai means "not die" in Japanese, he jokes
that he can safety drive as fast and recklessly as he likes.

I close this article by mentioning an experience I had in 1970.
There is a bandleader in Japan with the rather euphonious name of
One-Two Shimizu. When he writes his adopted name in phonetic
script (here given in Romanized form), it becomes wan-tsu. I com-
mented about this to a Japanese friend, saying that it seemed that
the man was Chinese -- after all, he was named Wan Tsu, I joked.
My friend, not knowing how bandleaders give the beat, said "No.
His name must be Kazuji -- written with the character for one
(kazu) and that for two (ji)."