

The Implications of Puns

My high school counselor told me that, in an exam similar to the PSAT, my English scores showed that I had a large vocabulary but was probably misusing the language with puns. Ah, 'twas true, 'twas true. However, Howard Nemerov, former poet laureate of the U.S. under whom I studied poetry writing in college, defended the idea of *double intent* when forming a conceit for creative writing. One form of a *double intent* is commonly known as a pun. Little did I know in high school that I was ahead of my time.

I always like to understand the Japanese term for the technique or kata I am learning. Sometimes the name contains a pun (that is, a double meaning) that can reveal more about the *waza/kata* itself. Most karate-ka that practice the form know that Empi was originally named Wanshu, the proper name in Japanese of a Chinese emissary to Okinawa. Few karate-ka however realize that there are potential hidden meanings to both the older and the more current name. The sound of the unwritten word *Wanshu* can suggest Arm-Hand. Big deal, you say, until you realize that Empi not only means Flying Swallow, but can also mean “long arm” and is an alternative word for the more common term *hiji* or elbow. Can we see a special use of the elbow, and an extended arm and hand in the kata Empi? An *empi* (also transliterated as *enpi*) can be “a small shovel”. Are there movements that spade downward in the kata?

I do not know if the Japanese would recognize Empi (em-pee) and Empei (em-pay) as a pun if the pronunciations are too different to the Japanese ear, but consider that Empei/Enpei can mean both “reinforcements” or “cover” as in hiding something. Any reinforced movements in Empi kata? Any hidden hand techniques?

In one school of Shinkage Ryu swordsmanship, Empi means “Flying Monkey”; another school of Shinkage Ryu translates it as “Flying Swallow” while in one school of Katori Shinto Ryu the same word means “Flying Circle”. Any flying moves in kata Empi? Any circles?

What about names of other kata? The kata Matsukaze, for example, means “Pine Wind” or “Wind in the Pines” probably referring to the sideways sequence that happens twice in the form. Its original name was Wankan (“King’s Crown”). Is there a reference to some unusually shaped Asian coronet? More likely, it was a play on words. *Wan*, as we have seen can mean “arm” or “forearm”, while *Kan*, one of the most multi-faceted words in Japanese, can mean, among other things, “a pipe or tube”, “an interval”, “a metal link”, or “a lever”. That sideways stance change also employs several variations of blocks and strikes using both arms. Could Wankan meaning “King’s Crown” also have held implications in the various meanings of its syllables?

It is impossible to know if these plays-on-words were intended as any sort of educative device. And I do not want to imply that understanding the possible implications of Japanese terminology will improve your skill level. But that understanding might just get you to look at a kata new way, resulting

in your investigating potential applications you did not see the first few hundred times around. After all, few of us, without the benefit of a name to analyze, would think of a Flying Monkey or a Flying Circle when practicing Empi, nor an Arm Link or Arm Lever when practicing Matsukaze. Maybe we should.