Melodic Speech Patterns in the Traditional Japanese Kyōgen Theatre: A Strategy of Contrasting Structures

Zvika Serper

To Nomura Mansaku, the greatest living kyōgen actor

Kyōgen are comic short plays that serve as interludes between the serious no dramas, together comprising the nōgaku, the Japanese traditional aristocratic theatre. They can be farce, satire, tragi-comedy, etc., dealing with the daily life of the lower and middle classes. Relationships between an ordinary man and his wife or lover, and those between a master and his servant are the most common themes in kyōgen, in contrast with the more serious super-human appearances of ghosts, gods, and demons in no. Kyōgen can be considered as the realistic antithesis of no not only on the dramatic level, but as regards the acting too.

Vocal expression in kyōgen, as in no, consists of both speech and singing, although the proportions differ completely in the two styles, with far more speech than singing in kyōgen. Similar to the other traditional theatre arts in Japan, the art passes from father to sons or disciples, and the acting patterns accumulate and crystallize throughout the generations, including the melodic speech patterns. There is no notation of these patterns in the professional texts, and to date no analysis has been attempted of these traditional speech patterns. The kyōgen speech served as one of the main sources for the speech of kabuki, the traditional popular theatre that developed later, and therefore it embodies the nucleus of the presentational speech art of all Japanese traditional theatres. In the present analysis of the principles and aesthetic of the kyōgen speech patterns I hope to shed some light on these Japanese theatrical speech patterns and provide greater insight into their complexity.

In this article I contend that the kyōgen actor molds the various melodic speech patterns through contrasting structures, reflecting a strategy that emerged from the Chinese yin/yang (in/yō in Japanese) quintessential concept of harmony and dynamism of contrasts. The ancient writings of the creators and consolidators

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of kyōgen reflect their awareness and philosophical obligation to this ancient Chinese concept. The most important treatise in the kyōgen history is Waranbegusa ([To My] Young Successors), written by Ōkura Torasaki, a head of Ōkura School of kyōgen and a most important seventeenth century kyōgen actor and theoretician. When relating to this principle as a cosmic and philosophical concept, his approach is sometimes only theoretical or even ornamental, but he also provides instruction for its practical application to quite a few elements of acting. A similar work from the other existing school, Izumi, was published by the kyōgen actor Nomura Matasaburō X in the 1930s, under the title Izumi ryū kyōgen kissho (The Izumi School’s Secret Treatise of Kyōgen), and it too applies the concept of harmony of contrasts to the art of acting. For example, concerning vocal expression, both writings indicate a contrasting way of voice production by the kyōgen actor in the very unique and ritualistic nō piece Okina. In the first dance by Sanbaso (“Momi no dan”) in the piece, performed by a kyōgen actor, he emits many meaningless shouts (kakegoe), such as ya, ha, iya and hon, without any dramatic context. These are identical to the vocal interjections of the nō drummers, and this is the only case in which such shouts are performed by an actor and not by a drummer, in the entire repertoire of nō and kyōgen. Ōkura Torasaki distinguished between the sounds ya and ha in these kakegoe, claiming that ya is a straight voice while ha is a reverse one. According to Nomura Matasaburō the sounds ya, o and ha, in these kakegoe shouts, embody yin and yang (but he does not specify the distinction).

I believe that this quintessential concept of contrasting structures is embodied in several aspects of vocal expression in kyōgen. Analysis of the melodic speech patterns reveals contrasting elements similar to those existing in the Japanese language as well as in the Chinese language and melodic art. Each of these two languages developed completely different contrasting elements, which I assume to have originated in the same Chinese concept of harmony of contrasts. Japanese distinguishes between regularly pronounced syllables and accentuated syllables; and between the regular duration of a syllable and its two-fold prolongation. Chinese melodic art was directly molded under the influence of the yin/yang concept and comprises four tones: first, level tone; second, high rising tone; third, low dipping tone; and fourth, high-falling tone (Fig. 1).
These tones comprise the contrasts of rise and fall, level and oblique, linear and rounded, and high and low. Analysis of the various components of kyōgen speech reveals that the actor uses all of these contrasts, enlarging and developing them to manifest their dynamic potential in the melodic patterns.

In this article I have analyzed the kyōgen speech pattern components using a computerized graphic description of intonation pitch and volume. My findings reveal several differences between the intonation contours of the basic speech pattern and those of the special melodic patterns of verbal repetitions and nonverbal vocal expressions, which embody distinctive moments in the plays. Besides the clearer wave plot and pitch contours of these unique vocal expressions, they are also far more diverse and comprise more contrasting components. Following the analysis of the basic speech pattern, I offer an analysis of these unique patterns of expression and the way in which the actor uses contrasting structures to mold them.

Basic Speech Pattern

Analysis of the basic melodic speech pattern reveals two main contrasting elements: stressed against unstressed syllables and rise in pitch against its fall. The kyōgen actor Shigeyama Sennojō suggests four general elements that distinguish kyōgen speech from everyday talk: 1) the clear pronunciation of every syllable; 2) the slow rhythm; 3) the exaggerated accentuation of each word; and 4) a fixed rhythm to the flow of speech.

The basic melodic pattern is reflected through a unique saying concerning kyōgen speech: “Three rises in pitch, in each of which the second syllable is raised.” The kyōgen sentence is usually divided into several parts and the second syllable of each part receives an especially strong pronunciation - okoshi (“raising up”). For example, the intonation of the first spoken sentence in the play Kagyū (The Snail) is:

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korewa / dewano / hagurosan yori / idetaru yamabushi
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(I am a warrior priest from Mount Haguro in Dewa).

The actor creates a contrast between the stressed and the unstressed syllables combined with undulating intonation of rise and fall. Both pitch and volume usually reinforce this undulating impact (Fig. 2: Nomura Mannosuke 1984):
Figure 2. “I am a warrior priest from Mount Haguro in Dewa.” (Kagvô)

The sentence is divided into four waves of three/three/seven/eight syllables with two pauses, after the first and the third waves. A straight correlation between pitch and volume of the okoshi of the second syllable increases the undulating pattern of the speech, as can be seen in the enlarged volume analysis graph (Fig. 2a):
The basic contrasting element in this pattern is that between the rise and fall of pitch, graphically resembling the ideogram of the number eight in both Chinese and Japanese - \( /_\backslash \), symbolizing the division of an object into two parts. As Ōkura Toraaki notes in *Waranbegusa*, these are not just parts but, rather, symbols of *yin* and *yang*. The left side of the ideogram, *hetsu*, is *yin*, and the right side, *hotsu*, is *yang*.14 Similarly, John Hazedel Levis divides the oblique (ts’ê) tones in Chinese into dichotomous rising tones (shang sheng): *yang*, and falling tones (ch’ü sheng): *yin*.15 In this specific kyögen sentence the actor creates three moderate waves of rise and fall of pitch and volume, followed by a sharp rise and fall of pitch. These undulating intonations combined with stressed syllables characterize most of the kyögen actors’ speech patterns.16

**Verbal Repetitions**

The verbal repetition comprises a single word or a phrase, and it always expresses a dramatic or climactic moment. Against the usual undulating wave of pitch pattern, the actor uses the following contrasting combinations: linear rise in tone against a fall in tone; oblique rise or fall against a level tone; and repetition of the same pattern but with higher or lower pitch. The dimension of time too is embodied in the dialectical treatment of the *ma* - \( -\), which can be either a pause within the spoken phrase (caesura), or a prolonged duration of speech.

Whereas the unit of rise and fall of pitch in the basic speech pattern is rounded and connected, creating quite a soft impact, the actor intensifies the contrast in the repetitive pattern by a sharp linear rise followed by a pause before an equally sharp linear fall. The play *Kamabara (Suicide with a Sickle)* ends in the main character, Taro, abandoning the suicide, an act that forms the climax and catharsis of the play. This moment is climactically repeated using contrasting styles of delivering the text.17 The final moment in the play has Taro talking to an imaginary girl but in a very realistic way, using the basic undulating intonation. The actor concludes this encounter and the play itself by repeating the word “goodbye” (“saraba”), creating a unique structure by linearly raising the intonation of the first “goodbye”, and upon repetition starting the pitch higher than the peak of the first pronunciation and then dropping it lower than the starting pitch of the first “goodbye” (Fig. 3: Nomura Mansaku 1969):
Beside the clear contrast of the opposite pitches, the pitch range of the repetition is much greater, and its duration is about fifty percent longer. This pattern strongly resembles the contrasts between direction, pitch and duration of the two components of the ideogram "eight" in Chinese and Japanese (Fig. 4), and between the second and fourth Chinese tones (Fig. 5).

The actor also uses greater volume upon repetition, thus intensifying the dichotomy between the two intonations of the word.

Another clear yin/yang contrast between the two parts in a verbal repetition resembles the contrast between level, negative tonal movements (p’ing: "level") and oblique, positive tonal movements (ts’e: "oblique") in the Chinese melodic art. The level tones correlate to tranquility, smoothness, restfulness and passivity —yin (Fig. 6), while the oblique tones correlate to activity and change—yang (Fig. 7).
In the play *Bunzō (The Tricky Memory Trick)*, instead of a smoothly undulating intonation, the actor develops a sharp contrast between level and oblique intonations. The main character in this play, a master, recounts a very expressive story, *katari*, of the historic war between the two famous Samurai clans—the Heike and the Genji. The story contains repetitions of complete sentences, intensifying the quintessential ecstatic quality of *katari*. For example, at one moment in the story he says: “Trying to behead him but [the sword] does not penetrate” (“*kakedomo kakarezu*”), and then repeats this. The first time the sentence is spoken in a very moderate rise and fall of pitch, creating the feeling of a level feminine intonation, but on the first syllable of the repetition the pitch rises drastically and then drops sharply until the end (Fig. 8: Nomura Mansaku 1977):

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[Waveform graph showing pitch changes]
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Figure 6. Negative tonal movements (*p’ing*)

Figure 7. Positive tonal movements (*ts’e*)

Figure 8. “Trying to behead him but [the sword] does not penetrate. Trying to behead him but [the sword] does not penetrate.” (*Bunzō*)
The contrasting pattern formed here is very similar to the contrast created between the Chinese (first) level tone and (fourth) high-falling tone (Fig. 9):

![Figure 9](image)

The first and fourth Chinese tones

The actor uses a variation of the same pattern in another sentence in the story, indicating its intentionality. Here, however, instead of repeating a short sentence, once level and once oblique, the actor repeats a longer sentence but each time divides it into the same two contrasting components. He divides the sentence: "He jumps saying ei and then he falls" ("ei yato hanureba korori to korobi") into two parts: the first part comprises a very moderate rise and fall, creating a fairly level intonation, and after a very short pause the pitch rises drastically at the beginning of the first syllable of the second part and then drops sharply until the end, reaching the same closing pitch as the first part. The contrast between the two components is also intensified through a contrasting compression of syllables. Although the number of syllables in both parts is almost the same (8:7), the first part is over twice as long as the second is. This contrasting duration intensifies the oblique masculine impact of the compressed second part following the soft and feminine drawn-out feeling of the first part. The whole sentence is then repeated based upon the same two-part pattern, with a slightly higher pitch and longer duration of each component of the pattern, making the repetition a little more expressive (Fig. 10: Nomura Mansaku 1977):

![Figure 10](image)

Figure 10. "He jumps saying ei and then he falls. He jumps saying ei and then he falls."
Nonverbal vocal expression in kyōgen comprises both meaningful and meaningless sounds: onomatopoeic sounds (giseiori) are used as a concrete reflection of the mimetic action, as well as meaningless sounds of encouragement (kakegoe), as a subjective expression. This kind of vocal expression too is based upon contrasting components.

In the play Bōshibari (Tied to a Pole) the main character uses onomatopoeic sounds to accompany the mimetic action of opening doors. Tarōkaja and Jirōkaja, the two servants who are tied-up by their master in order to prevent them from drinking his sake [wine], manage to enter the wine cellar and drink it anyway. The stage is empty and the cellar doors and latch are represented through mimetic actions and the nonverbal vocal expression of Tarōkaja. He lifts an imaginary latch with the pole, to which his hands are tied, and says: "pin."

He then slowly slides back the left door: "gii", and the right door more easily: "gara, gara gara gara." Analysis of the intonations of these three onomatopoeic sounds reveals structural contrasts: the first sound, "pin", is short, sharp and high pitched, while the second, "gii", is prolonged, flat and low pitched (Fig. 11: Nomura Mansaku 1983):

![Figure 11. Vocal expression of removing an imaginary latch and barely sliding back the left door in Bōshibari](image)

This contrast expresses both the characteristics and the spatial directions of the actions. The short, sharp and high pitched sound pin represents the vertical tossing of a light object, while the prolonged, flat and low pitched sound gii represents the horizontal moving of a heavy object. One would expect the actor to repeat the sound of the first door when opening the second, similar one. But here he reveals the concept of contrast, for the image of the second door is presented by repetitions of a two syllable sound (gara), beginning with the same consonant, but rhythmically...
and sharply intoned, in contrast to the previous prolonged two syllables (gii). The actor pronounces gara with a relatively quick and moderate rise and fall of pitch, and then repeats it three times with a strong rise in pitch and volume on the first gara and a fall on the last two repetitions (Fig. 12: Nomura Mansaku 1983):

Figure 12. Vocal expression of easily sliding the right door back in Bōshibari

Comparing this vocal expression for opening the second door with the same component performed three years later by the same actor reveals the great artistry of this Japanese traditional actor. In addition to the contrasting openings of the two identical doors, the actor also creates another contrast within this last and more expressive vocalization of opening the second door. In the 1983 version the actor performed the vocal expression in such a way that its second part was stronger in pitch, volume and duration than the first part. But three years later he performed it in an opposite structure: he made the first part stronger than the second by repeating the first gara, creating a ma (pause) between them, and shortening the duration of the second part (Fig. 13: Nomura Mansaku 1986):

Figure 13. Vocal expression of sliding easily the right door back in Bōshibari - volume contour
The play *Kirokuda* (*The Half Delivered Gift*) reveals a very similar vocal pattern, but this time unconnected with mimetic actions, and thus illustrating the intentionality of this contrasting structure also as a pure melodic pattern. In this play, Tarôkaja, a servant, is leading twelve oxen with difficulty through a snowy mountain pass. Of course, the stage is actually bare and the whole business is manifested through text and pantomime. This section in the play is a uniquely realistic one, and therefore considered a very difficult part in the kyõgen repertoire. While leading the oxen on and off stage, he urges them on repeatedly: “sasei // hosei // cho / cho / chochochochocho...” —meaningless vocal expressions whose pitch and rhythmic patterns are very similar to those of “pin // gii // gara / gara / garagaragara,” analyzed above. The first two sounds are constructed in contrasting fashion: sasei is intoned in a high pitched sharp rise against the very moderate and prolonged rise and fall of hosei. Then cho is said twice, separately, followed by staccato repetitions in quick succession (Nomura Mansaku 1985a; Nomura Manzô VI ([1978] 1997)). The actor does not perform any specific movement while emitting these sounds, and their contrasting structure emerges from a pure melodic ideal.

The kyõgen actor also uses nonverbal vocal expression as kakegoe, calls of encouragement. In the play *Kane no ne* (*The Sound of Bells*), Tarôkaja, the servant, misunderstanding his master’s order to check “the gold price”—*kane no ne*, as “the bell’s sound” (pronounced identically in spoken Japanese), goes to several temples and rings their bells. During this action the actor emits both calls of encouragement and onomatopoeic sounds. While grasping the clapper rope and swinging it, he repeats *ei* three times, and then imitates the sound of each bell: *jan, mo, mo, mo, mo, mo.* The encouragement call comprises a contrast between the first two connected *ei*, emitted while swinging the rope and the last separate *ei*, emitted after the actor has completed the swinging, creating two dichotomous parts (Fig. 14: Nomura Mansaku 1985b):
This call is molded through similar contrasting components to those of the vocal expression of lifting the imaginary latch and with effort sliding back the first door in Bōshibari (Fig. 11), but in the opposite order: the first and second connected ei comprise a moderate short rise and long fall of pitch, set against the third, separate ei, which is intoned with a sharp long rise and short fall in pitch. In addition, the peak and range of pitch and volume of the second part is much stronger than in the first part. This very expressively intoned non-verbal encouragement call is dichotomously juxtaposed with the successive almost flat onomatopoeic vocal expression of the bells.

While the kyōgen actor usually functions within the nō play as a local figure (ai kyōgen) who recounts the background of the shiie (main character) or discusses it with the waki (deuteragonist) in an interval between the two parts of the play, he sometimes instead plays a minor independent character within the nō play itself, and as such is able to add his special nonverbal vocal expression to the nō play too, since the nō actor does not employ such expressions. In the nō play Funa Benkei (Benkei in the Boat) the kyōgen actor plays a boatman who rows the boat carrying Yoshitsune and his men. During his conversation with the other characters while rowing the boat he emits kakegoe, expressing both self-encouragement and emotional reaction as well as simply creating onomatopoeic sounds. In each type of expression the actor creates two dichotomous parts. When miming the rowing he calls ei ei, which he then repeats as an expression of self-encouragement (Fig. 15: Nomura Mannosuke 1983):

Figure 15. Encouragement calls while rowing a boat in Funa Benkei
Whereas the same previously analyzed sound followed the basic pattern of undulating rise and fall, the pitch pattern here is completely opposite: the fall precedes the rise—the first *ei* is a minor and short fall whereas the second *ei* is a continuous prolonged rise to an extreme pitch, creating two contrasting pitch components in direction and duration. This pattern is very similar to the third tone in Chinese (Fig. 16):

![Figure 16. The third tone in Chinese](image)

The actor then vocalizes his feeling towards the sea, which becomes stormy with high waves. He emits the sounds: *ariya, ariya, ariya...* many times, expressing his surprise or excitement. In contrast to the prolonged, strongly intoned and equal duration two parts of the preceding call, the actor now quickly repeats the sound *ariya* twice, with flat intonation, and then repeats it at an ever increasing rate, fifteen times, connecting the sounds together without pause or breath (Fig. 17: Nomura Mannosuke 1983):

![Figure 17. Excited vocal expression towards the growing waves in Funa Benkei - volume contour](image)

This expression of feeling towards the waves is followed by a vocal imitation of the waves themselves, comprised of a contrast between surge and calm. The actor adds to the word “wave” (*nami*), the sound *o*, pronouncing it twice separately and then repeating it six times at increasing speed: *namionamionamio...* manifesting
the waves' surging in a sharp linear rising intonation; after a short pause he then whispers a prolonged shshshshsh, in a low level tone, expressing the calming of the waves (Fig. 18: Nomura Mansosuke 1983):

In summary
As we have seen, the traditional kyōgen actor creates a harmony and dynamism by utilizing contrasting structures in molding his melodic speech patterns. He employs every possible formation, based upon the various contrasts: stressed and unstressed, rise and fall, oblique and level, linear and rounded, separated and connected, prolonged and compressed, strong and weak, high and low, staccato and legato. The richness and depth of the kyōgen verbal and nonverbal speech patterns that comprise these contrasts, which were created by generations of actors, can serve as a model of a total medium for any actor in contemporary presentational theatre attempting to find new dimensions for his vocal expression in the theatre.

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Recorded Sources

Nomura Mannosuke
1983
1984
Kyōgen: Kagyū. Tape recording, Tokyo, Höshō Nōgakudō, 20th, April.

Nomura Mansaku
1969
Kyōgen: Kamabara. NHK TV, 10th, August.
1977
Kyōgen: Bunzō. Tape recording, Tokyo, Kita Nōgakudō, 26th, June.
1983
Kyōgen: Bōshibari. Private lesson, Tokyo, 15th, November.
1985a
Kyōgen: Kirokuda. Private lesson, Tokyo, May-June.
1985b
Kyōgen: Kane no ne. Tape recording, Tokyo, Höshō Nōgakudō, 13th, May.
1986
Kyōgen: Bōshibari. NHK TV, 2nd, January.

Nomura Manzō VI

Yamamoto Tōjirō
1982
Kyōgen: Futari daimyō. NHK TV, Tokyo, 5th, May.

2. According to this concept, all phenomena in the universe are brought into being by the interactions of two opposing forces, each of which requires the other in order to exist. The Chinese philosophers termed the two poles of each contrast yin and yang. Yin represents passivity, negativity, femininity, cold, dark, etc. Yang represents activity, positivity, masculinity, heat, light, etc. At all times there is a harmonic balance between the two contrasting poles, which exist side by side. They also create a dynamic state in which they maintain, replace and contain each other. Like other cultural aspects in Japan, the traditional theatre too was influenced by this concept.


6. Nomura Matasaburō (September) 106.


9. The upper window (intonation pitch) presents a fundamental frequency plot, which displays time on the horizontal axis and the estimated glottal frequency (f0) in Hz on the vertical axis; the lower window (volume) presents the wave plot amplitude display (in volts) as a function of time (in milliseconds).


12. The stressing of the second syllable originates in the eight-beat system (yatsu-byōshi) of the no singing, in which the second syllable falls on the first beat. Another source for this practice is nagauta (a school of narrative music) which has a tradition “to start singing” from the second syllable.
Sometimes, in order to diversify the intonation, the stress is moved to the first or the third syllable. See, Araki and Shiroyama 175-176, and Takechil41.


14. Ōkura Torakib, Hironobuosuka 117.


16. More than in the other Japanese traditional theatrical forms of no and kabuki, the speech patterns in kyogen are varied according to the family tradition even more than according to which of the two existing schools, Izumi and Ōkura, they belong. Kobayashi Seki classified the various families of kyogen between two poles—realism and non-realism. See Kobayashi Seki, Kyogen Meiji hyakunen (The Meiji period's hundred years of kyogen). Kyogen: "Okashi" no keifu (Kyogen: Genealogy of the 'Funny'), vol. 4 of Nihon no koten geino (Japanese Classical Performing Arts), edited by Geinoshi kenkyukai (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1970) 322. The non-realism is offered solely by the kyogen actors of Yamamoto family of the Ōkura School in Tokyo, who usually mold their speech pattern differently: instead of undulating intonations, they usually use an almost linear rise in intonation, creating a more stylized speech pattern. For example, the introductory sentence: "I am known by everybody" ("kore wa izure mo gozonji no mono de gozaru") in the play Futari daimyō (The Two [Feudal] Lords) [Koyama Hiroshi, ed. Kyogenshu: jo (Collection of Kyogen Plays: Part One), vol. 42 of Nihon koten bungaku taikei (Collection of Japanese Classical Literature) (Tokyo: Iwanami shoten, 1978) 216] is performed by Yamamoto Tōjirō in this way (Fig. 19: Yamamoto Tōjirō 1982):

17. For analysis of the various styles of speech in the last part of the play, see Zvika Serper, "Exploration Through a Concept: Japanese Classical Acting as a Model of Harmonic Contrast", Contemporary Theatre Review, vol. 1, No. 2 (1994) 70-72.


19. Levis 52.
20. 52.
22. Beijing yuyan xueyuan I: 11.
27. Beijing yuyan xueyuan I: 11.
29. There was almost no result in the upper window, perhaps indicating that there is no change in the pitch of intonation.
30. During this whisper no intonation pitch was recorded for the upper window of this part.