

JAPLISH RIDDLES

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A couple of years ago, a craze for riddles swept Japan; this inspired an article by James Bailey in the August 22, 1975 issue of Tokyo Weekender, which A. Martin Cohen passed along to me. Many examples (39 out of 54, by my count) in the article are bilingual, or at least involve English loan-words; I give a sampling below.

Word Ways readers are already familiar with Japanese number puns in the February 1976 and May 1977 Word Ways; here are 3 more:

Q: Several kings got together for a chat; how many were there?

A: Ten. to is 'ten', so they were tokingu (talking, in Japlish).

Final -u is often pronounced lightly or not at all.

Q: At what age did Beethoven first exhibit his genius?

A: Ten. -sai is the counter for 'years of age', and tensai means 'genius'.

Q: Which American rock group has four or five members?

A: Chicago. shi ka go means 'four or five'.

Three of the riddles involve American state names:

Q: In what American state is it always morning?

A: Ohio, or ohaiyo, as in ohaiyo gozaimasu, 'good morning'.

Q: What American state is famous for its waterworks?

A: Missouri, or mizurii. Mizu uri means 'sell water'.

Q: What American state frowns on love affairs?

A: Georgia, or Joja. Joji iya means 'love affairs are disgusting'.

As the last example suggests, many riddles have an erotic undercurrent. Here are a couple of the milder ones:

Q: When is a k-i-s-s only a k-s-s?

A: When it lacks love, or ai.

Q: Where in England are sex-change operations often performed?

A: Essex, or Esekkusu. Ese means 'false', and sekkusu is, of course, sex. Together: false sex.

Finally, here is the most labored Japanese pun in the whole article:

Q: What do people drink who think doctors are god-like?

A: Doctor Pepper (dokuta peppa). Peppa sounds like peipaa 'paper'; kami, the usual Japanese word for 'paper', also means 'god'.