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APPLIED LINGUISTICS, PERFORMANCE THEORY AND MUHAMMAD ALI'S JAPANESE FAILURE

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ABSTRACT

One of the more colorful realizations of the age-old striking versus grappling rivalry came in 1976, in a fight billed as boxing versus professional wrestling. Unlike similar matches throughout history, however, this event featured the heavyweight world champion, Muhammad Ali, and the most popular Japanese professional wrestler of the day, Antonio Inoki. Investigating this event through the lens of applied linguistic anthropology reveals much about the contextual social dynamics at play. Sources including newspaper reports, interviews with witnesses and those involved, and private correspondence are considered as they unveil the complicated truth behind Ali vs. Inoki, the fight that marked a turning point in the career of history's most celebrated boxing champion. Analysis reveals that the event was a public failure because of communication breakdown on myriad fronts. Consequently, I argue that the fight itself should be viewed as a robust form of communication in which the nuances of dialect are at play.

Boxing and wrestling both fall under the category of 'combative art', displays of which are public affairs managed and frequented in the same manner as theater productions. They are therefore subject to the same social criteria as other, similar types of performance. This being the case, theoretical work in performance studies is crucial to the understanding of why some contests or performances succeed while others fail. To that end, I examine the case of Ali vs. Inoki, an unusual event in the history of both boxing and wrestling that exemplifies the ways in which such performances can fail as a result of lapses in communication and assumptions of responsibility. In the interest of organization, I have separated the key aspects of the combative performance into various sections which will complement one another and, together, will help in the attempt to understand this historic event.

ALI VS. INOKI

In 1976, Muhammad Ali still held the world heavyweight title, but he was approaching the end of his career. Due to the nature of boxing as a public spectacle, popularity with the audience is of key importance. Ali was known as a showman, gifted with a 'mouth that could sell tickets faster than a computerized vending machine' [Drake 1976a]. His skill with his words convinced promoters to bring him opponents; his skill with his hands ensured that said opponents returned home soundly beaten.

That same over-the-top, charming arrogance attracted the attention of Japanese fight fans. In March of 1975, a Japanese professional wrestling promoter met Ali at a party. Ali allegedly asked – off-the-cuff, it seems, as no reliable English-speaking witnesses have corroborated it – why there were no 'Oriental fighters' to challenge him [TV Asahi 2009]. The response from Japan came in the form of a challenge by wrestler Kanji 'Antonio' Inoki. Manager and fight promoter Bob Arum, who was involved with the overseas television distribution of the event, alleges that 'the whole thing was supposed to be fixed' [Hauser 1991: 336]. Reality, however, proved to be stranger than any fiction.

The contest was bizarre. The Japanese competitor spent much of the fifteen three-minute rounds on his back kicking the boxer's legs. It is important to note that, while the event was billed as a match of styles, in fact 'the rules [had] been so seriously modified that the contest [was] no longer boxing versus wrestling ... Ali [could] grapple or punch the man down [but] Inoki [was] not allowed to leg-dive or tackle' [Draeger 1976]. Here, then, was a pair of professional athletic performers operating outside their standard frames of reference and in accordance with rules that had been miscommunicated between the two camps. Ali was expecting a choreographed exhibition; Inoki was looking for a fight.

STYLE

The boxer versus wrestler premise is an interesting one as, cursorily, it's a nonsense competition. To my knowledge, a football versus yoga premise has never been of interest to spectators. The draw of an inter-sport event seems irrational on its face. Yet, mixed-style fights have seen extraordinary popularity with audiences since at least the early 20th century and are now a mainstay of television in the form of mixed martial arts (MMA) organizations like the Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC). Still, this match was unusual given that it was billed not simply as boxing versus *wrestling* but, more specifically, *professional wrestling*. Professional wrestling differs from all other varieties of wrestling insofar as it is a form of theater rather than athletic competition. For the premise of Ali vs. Inoki to make sense as a performance, we must turn to the issue of 'style'. Richard Schechner argues that 'each human group – family, circle of friends, workgroup, ensemble – develops its own dialect of movement. Artists are particularly adept at constructing variations of basic codes. This is what "style" is all about' [Schechner 1990: 32].

On a more minute level, these dialects of movement contain what Schechner calls 'bits' [Schechner 1990: 41]. A bit is one of the smaller parts of a given performance that, by itself, doesn't necessarily convey meaning to an audience, but, when fitted together with other bits, contributes to the greater whole of the given performance. For an individual to converse within the context of a style, he must first undergo a process that Schechner refers to as 'restored behavior' [Schechner 1985: 35]. The notion here is to 'get in touch with, recover, remember, or even invent these strips of behavior and then rebehave according to these strips' [Schechner 1985: 36]. By unlearning previously held assumptions and integrating a style's bits into their repertoire, the performer becomes conversant in that style.

Style is vital to understanding combative performance disciplines like boxing and wrestling. When two boxers compete, they have a mutual agreement. While each fighter is a unique human being, the overall aesthetic of a boxing match tends to involve predictable elements, primarily due to the rules in place. Likewise, professional wrestling performances are generally more alike in composition than they are different. Schechner's 'bits', then, are the smaller pieces from which competitions are created. The jabs, crosses, and hooks that make up a boxing contest and the holds, pins, and locks of a wrestling display are bits – the smaller units that make up a combative style's dialect of movement.

FRAME

Given that styles are, for our purposes, dialects, it is useful to examine what sort of communication is taking place by means of these dialects. In this case, 'communication' simply refers to the transfer of intended information from one party to another.¹ With this in mind, communication can be said to be successful when the intended information is understood by all parties. Conversely, different perceptions result in a failure to communicate.

While prizefighting and grappling may appear brutal at times, the purpose of these endeavors has nothing to do with senseless violence. Indeed, if pointless, unadulterated violence were the only reason for purchasing an event ticket, it would be both easier and more cost-effective to simply watch the evening news. Even Ali, in the midst of disparaging his Japanese opponent, felt it necessary to correct one of his handlers, who told Ali to 'kill him': 'No, I don't believe in killing. I only want to annihilate him' [Drake 1976b].

What, then, is the purpose of such rough play? Gregory Bateson holds that actions themselves, in play, can stand for something altogether different from the more intense actions they might represent in other contexts. When, in his example, animals are playing and they nip one another, that nip is representative of a bite. An actual bite would cause a different and serious interaction, so the nip is used instead. Further, the nip doesn't indicate that a fight is occurring, but rather that the situation at hand is play [Bateson 2000 (1955): 180].

When applying this logic to a prizefight, it is important to consider Ali's insistence that he doesn't believe in killing. Clearly, the idea of a fight, with rules and a referee, is not the same thing in his mind as uncontrolled violence between people, which I will refer to as a 'brawl'. In the case of a brawl, play ceases to be a concern and one should most certainly fear for one's life. So, one difference between a fight and a brawl rests in the ultimate likelihood of death. Bateson notes that a man watching a 3D movie in which a spear is thrown directly at him can be consciously aware that no physical harm will come to him, 'but these images ... really evoke that terror which would have been evoked by a real spear' [Bateson 2000 (1955): 183].

1 Gregory Bateson acknowledges that even animals communicate via play 'engaged in an interactive sequence of which the unit actions or signals were similar to but not the same as those of combat. It was evident ... that the sequence as a whole was not combat, and evident to the human observer that to the participant monkeys this was "not combat"' [Bateson 2000 (1955): 179].

While a fight is controlled with timed rounds, observed by a referee and a medical doctor, and stopped the moment a combatant appears to be in danger of permanent injury, the psychological experience of someone in the midst of a sanctioned fight may be no different from that of someone engaged in a brawl. However, his behavior remains in accordance with the rules of professional pugilism or wrestling, just as the man watching a 3D movie doesn't run out of the theater. Here, it is important to apply another one of Bateson's concepts: The psychological frame.

Bateson suggests that psychological frames are exclusive, inclusive, have 'premises', and are metacommunicative [Bateson 2000 (1955): 187-188]. The frame, by its nature, excludes that which is not in the frame. Logically, then, the frame includes only that which is seen within the boundaries of the frame. The term 'premise' indicates that the frame 'tells the viewer that he is not to use the same sort of thinking in interpreting the picture that he might use in interpreting the wallpaper outside the frame' [Bateson 2000 (1955): 187-188]. Last, the frame is metacommunicative in that the frame itself is important when interpreting the image within the frame [Bateson 2000 (1955): 188].

While psychological framing happens in all contexts at all times, it is helpful to examine a few ways in which the concept operates with regards to combative performance. The athletes, as people, function via their 'performer' frames within the ring. This is the primary level on which Ali and Inoki differ. In a typical boxing contest, one attempts to strike the opponent more times, or at least with greater force, than one is struck. It is preferable for one, as both a performer and an athlete, to knock one's opponent to the ground. Not only is the act of downing the other competitor exciting to an audience, in modern professional rules one need only floor one's opponent three times in a single round to achieve victory by 'technical knockout'. Professional wrestlers, however, are charged with working cooperatively to entertain fans. They aren't permitted to strike with closed fists. Perhaps most pertinent to the current issue, their objective is not to batter the opponent as in boxing. Even within the same ring, the boxer and the wrestler experience different psychological frames.

We can think of a performance in terms of what Schechner calls the 'whole performance sequence' [Schechner 1990: 43]. This includes all the preparation beforehand, the performance proper, and the experience thereafter. This, he says, qualifies the performance as a kind of ritual identical to what Schechner calls 'restored behavior' [Schechner 1990: 43]. This process of restored behavior – unlearning and then putting the bits together – is composed of parallel but different frames by the boxer and the wrestler. The boxer spends his time training, watching videos of his opponent, and generating a strategy to defeat the

combatant across the ring. The wrestler also trains, but in coordination with his partner, who assumes the role of enemy combatant only for a brief time and in an explicitly performative context.

In Ali vs. Inoki, the roles were strangely reversed. The Ali team believed that the event was to be an exhibition in which the two men would not genuinely try to damage each other. The manager/promoter Bob Arum later testified that 'what happened was, some Japanese guys came to Herbert [Ali's business manager] with the deal ... and the whole thing was supposed to be fixed' [Hauser 1991: 336]. In an interview for a TV Asahi special about the fight, however, Inoki's interpreter for the event, Ken Tajima, recalled that 'Ali asked me when the rehearsal [would be]. Mr. Inoki and I had thought from the beginning that it was a real fight. [I thought] he knew that, too. I said, "There's no rehearsal". He asked, "Isn't it an exhibition?" I think the Ali side was startled' [TV Asahi 2009, my translation].

GROUPS

The exchange between Ali and Tajima is indicative of how far down miscommunication went before, during, and after this event and it is the key to understanding why the public reaction to the event was so negative. In particular, this verbal interaction represents what Dell Hymes – employing Bateson's psychological frames – describes as 'an expressive aspect to the cognitive style of an individual or group' [Hymes 1962: 20]. Ali spoke as he thought, as did Tajima, but their modes of thinking were contradictory, so communication failed. This is one side of the problem that occurred inside the ring on the evening of the fight.

For the present purposes, we can consider a style (either boxing or wrestling) to be equivalent to a linguistic form. We have already established that styles are composed of bits which, put together, form the basis of a mode of communication. Like the monkeys that Bateson observed in play, the mode of communication need not be verbal to be understood. Hymes offers an elegant and succinct explanation:

The use of a linguistic form identifies a range of meanings. A context can support a range of meanings. When a form is used in a context, it eliminates the meaning possible to that context other than those that form can signal; the context eliminates from consideration the meanings possible to the form other than those that context can support. The effective meaning depends upon the interaction of the two. [Hymes 1962: 19]

When considering a style as a linguistic form, it becomes apparent that two people speaking languages as different as Japanese and English

(or boxing and wrestling) will, inevitably, not understand each other. By altering the rules, as legendary martial arts studies pioneer Donn Draeger notes, the event ceases to be the sum of its components and, in fact, bears little resemblance to them. Added to which, there is another level of miscommunication. Not only were the two performers speaking different languages (both literally and figuratively), the rules employed on the evening of the fight eliminated large portions of their individual styles' potential meanings.

The context provided to the participants in Ali vs. Inoki was one with which neither side was familiar. Consequently, the match was 'insufferably boring. For fifteen rounds, Inoki crab-walked around the ring, horizontal to the canvas, kicking at Ali's legs. That was the fight. Ali threw six punches' [Hauser 1991: 337]. Even within the professional wrestling context, Inoki's tactic was highly unusual. This occurred because the context provided (that is, the special rules of the match) precluded the possibility of traditional wrestling holds and takedowns.

Hymes goes on to say that 'members of a group have conceptions and expectations as to the distribution of speech functions among situations, and insofar as several functions are co-present, it is a matter of expectations as to relative hierarchy' [Hymes 1962: 38]. Because situations dictate both potential speech functions and potential meanings with a group, and because different groups may approach the same situation as part of unrelated frames, the expectations that the members of one group have of another when their frames overlap in the physical world may not match at all.

Ali vs. Inoki dealt with three groups, each of which perceived the situation as part of a different frame. The Ali team, specializing in boxing, didn't treat the fight as being of any real danger. Inoki's group, experienced in professional wrestling, prepared themselves for a legitimate match. The audience, too, must be considered as the primary reason for any professional athletic contest to take place. Without a paying audience, little cause exists to perform at all. Ali asserted on television in May of 1976 that 'people expect these things of me ... it's interesting. People want to know what would a boxer do with a wrestler. What's going to happen if Ali gets his arm twisted?' [Hauser 1991: 336].

The title at stake was, of course, not Ali's heavyweight belt, but rather one invented for the contest, the 'World Martial Arts Championship' [Nixon 1976]. While the frames in which the combatants functioned differentiated between boxing and wrestling, the target audience for the event understood both styles to fall under a single, larger frame called 'martial arts', thereby providing the chance to promote such an abnormal contest. It was the broadcast audience's frame that must be taken into account in order to understand why Ali vs. Inoki took place at all.

PERFORMANCE

Despite the confusion across cultures, language barriers, and styles, everyone involved, including the audience, agreed that the match was less-than-ideal. Arum referred to it as 'the nightmare to end all nightmares, and the best thing would have been not to do it at all' [Hauser 1991: 337]. *Stars and Stripes* reporter Kent Nixon quipped that 'the worst thing that can be said about the Ali-Inoki event is that it started. The best thing that can be said about it is that it ended' [Nixon 1976]. And Draeger commented that 'the whole thing was disgusting' [Draeger 1976].

It seems eminently straightforward that the outcome of a fight, whether boxing or wrestling, is binary. That is, one participant will win and the other will lose. The possibility also exists, although much less common, that a fight may be called a draw (neither opponent wins) or a 'no contest' (some unforeseen factor delegitimizes a contest, such as a natural disaster or an accidental injury). In the case of Ali vs. Inoki, the fight was ruled a draw by referee Gene LeBell [Nixon 1976].

Not all fights that end in a draw are regarded so poorly by the public, nor are all fights in which one party wins considered a success. Two fights prior to Ali vs. Inoki, the champion faced a relatively unknown challenger named Jimmy Young. Ali didn't take the fight seriously and came to the ring out of shape and much heavier than he'd appeared in any other fight up to that point [Hauser 1991: 333]. Hauser's description of the event is telling:

Young, who might have won with a more aggressive battle plan, was a largely passive figure. On six occasions when Ali had him cornered, the challenger literally stuck his head outside the ropes, forcing a halt in the action. The result, wrote Mark Kram, was 'some of the worst and most numbing rounds in heavyweight history'. Ali won a unanimous decision, but as a showman he'd failed. Even Angelo Dundee, who was legendary for looking at the bright side of things, acknowledged that Ali's performance had been 'the worst of his career'. [Hauser 1991: 333]

Richard Bauman's ideas of performance and responsibility are helpful at this juncture. His concept of performance 'calls forth special attention to and heightened awareness of the act of communication and gives license to the audience to regard it and the performer with special intensity. Performance makes one communicatively accountable' [Bauman 1992: 44]. Because we have already established that a style of fighting is a means of communication, this description of performance holds important implications for the athletes performing a fight. Beyond simply brawling, a fighter must show his skill in communicating to the audience.

Bauman suggests that 'the relative dominance of [a] performance ... will depend on the degree to which the performer assumes responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative skill and effectiveness as against other communicative functions' [Bauman 1992: 44]. That Ali neglected to 'assume responsibility' in his fight with Young explains why the champion received such negative criticism. We must note, too, that Young, with a more active strategy, might have made the display a success, but also slacked in his responsibility. It isn't enough, then, to simply outdo one's opponent; the combative performer must display communicative competence.

Competence is primarily displayed to the audience, but by what means does the audience validate the actions of the performers? Bauman says: 'All performance, like all communication, is situated, enacted, and rendered meaningful within socially defined situational contexts' [Bauman 1992: 46]. Society deems it acceptable that a performance is taking place, and so it does. Not only does it occur, but the parameters of the event are defined by the society – in effect, by the audience. By not having an established context for an event like Ali vs. Inoki, the audience was taking a greater risk than usual by allowing the performance to take place. The failure was chiefly the fault of the performers to successfully navigate the situation, but the audience, which actively took part in the event by patronizing it, also failed to some extent due to the fighters' decisions.

SPECULATION

The ring is where the bulk of the failure happened. Alfred Schutz offers an explanation on the personal level as to the mechanics behind the two performers' mutual failure. He describes a hypothetical scenario in which a musician is given a sonata to sight read [Schutz 1964: 167-168]. The musician, unfamiliar with the particulars of the piece at hand, must rely on previous experience to play the song, which 'becomes the scheme of reference for his interpretation of its particularity. This scheme of reference determines, in a general way, the player's anticipations of what he may or may not find in the composition before him' [Schutz 1964: 168].

This example is especially pertinent to the subject at hand because Ali and Inoki, both the highest-level practitioners in their respective styles, had experiences from which to draw assumptions. These experiences, as with the musician, include similar-yet-different cases, such as an opponent of a similar body type or a referee with a similar disposition. More abstractly, though, each performer has an image of how the other does or might behave. This, it seems, is as much at the root of Ali and Inoki's failed performance as anything.

Schutz' pianist is preoccupied with the thinking of the piece's composer, with the 'grasping of the composer's musical thought ... which become[s] "thematic" for [the pianist's] ongoing activity' of re-creation [Schutz 1964: 169]. While the action in the fight ring, in both boxing and wrestling, is improvisational in nature and generally lacks an erstwhile absent choreographer, the notion of thematic activity, like a shadow cast over the performer's efforts, is still highly applicable.

During the above-mentioned television interview, Ali speculated: 'I'm betting I can hit him before he can grab me. With my dancing and moving, I can't see him getting close enough to hit me without me hitting him. This man is a wrestler. He's not used to taking hard shots to the head' [Hauser 1991: 336]. Although his statements were intended to promote the fight (which, at that point, he still believed would be choreographed), they were also clearly intended to highlight how a fighter would actually approach such a situation.

The question of what the other performer would do also influenced the rules that were outlined for the fight. Draeger mentions that 'the main concern was to not injure Ali, causing Inoki to complain that by the rules and this concern there was damn little that he could do to make it look good' [Draeger 1976]. The rule prohibiting Inoki from performing any standard wrestling takedowns seems to have been thought up with the goal of displaying Ali's skill while making Inoki appear inept. Seemingly, the grappler's only option was to trade blows with the heavyweight boxing champion of the world – a notion that he likely found distasteful.

Prior to the fight, a public display of the participants' skill took place in which Inoki and several other professional wrestlers demonstrated various types of kicks. It was clear that Inoki intended to neutralize his opponent's advantage by targeting the only remaining exploitable area: leg strikes. Ali, upon seeing the tactic's undoubted effectiveness, became outraged and called for further rules to be put in place which prohibited 'kicks from a standing position' [TV Asahi, 2009, my translation]. Staged or not, Ali did not want to risk serious injury from an unplanned hard strike. Inoki's only recourse was the obscure attack of kicking from a prone position, which, in conjunction with Ali's unwillingness to wrestle, caused the performance to fail.

FAILURE

Bauman states that performance 'assigns to an audience the responsibility of evaluating the relative skill and effectiveness of the performer's accomplishment' [Bauman 1992: 44]. Based on reactions from *Stars and Stripes*, members of Ali's entourage, and the claim by Draeger that the arena janitorial staff at the vaunted Budokan needed 'almost a full day to clean up the garbage that was hurled at the two

"combatants" [for] their lousy performance' [Draeger 1976], it can comfortably be said that, in the public eye, the performance did not go over well.

While several factors led to this failure, the core issues centered on the fighters' contrasting approaches to the event and the audience's perception. The audience and the performers represented three different psychological frames, all of which encompassed the same event. Based on statements by Ali, it seems that the public (at least, the public who patronized the event in question) included both boxing and wrestling in the same frame, which we can label 'combat sports'. This enabled the promoters to market such an event of mixed disciplines.

Ali, an experienced competitor, perceived the frame of professional wrestling as 'not real' and appears to have planned accordingly. Inoki, a professional wrestler, also had a frame of understanding, but it focused on Ali and the notion that boxing is more 'real' than his own area of expertise. I propose that the framing tool serves to explain the confusion between the two performers when coupled with Schutz' explanation of thematic activity. Because the two performers practiced different styles (composed of related though notably different bits) they had to rely on previous experience for an image of what to expect from the other competitor, and therefore how to respond.

Due to the obscure rules applied prior to the event, Inoki was incapable of behaving as a wrestler might be expected to behave. Rather, he circumvented the rules intended to make him trade blows with Ali by assuming a horizontal position and kicking the boxer's legs. Because neither fighter had a reference of prior experience from which to draw, and because their respective styles lacked any modes of communication for such an arrangement, very little action took place.

Given that Inoki's goal was to win the match and Ali's was to avoid injury, neither performer took responsibility for the success of the performance. They also each failed in these respective aims, with Ali on the receiving end of lasting damage to his legs and Inoki falling short in his aim to defeat the heavyweight champion. In Bauman's model success hinges on 'a display of communicative skill and effectiveness' [Bauman 1992: 44]. Because physical communication in a combative dialect (either boxing or wrestling) calls for competent technique, which was not displayed by either participant, the performance was a failure. Finally, although one may argue that this conflict eventually resulted in a positive outcome (i.e., the combatants becoming friends), the value of the performative event was in the moment immediately before, during, and after the fight. Far-flung outcomes notwithstanding, the present model considers the event to have been a failure.

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