

MEDIA MIX

The 'tough love' of sumo and the military can turn ugly

By PHILIP BRASOR

Euphemism is a required art for anyone who communicates with the public, be they politicians or PR flacks. The idea is to change or otherwise soften concepts that may be considered too blunt. Matters regarding sex, bodily functions and death are often euphemized so as not to offend delicate sensibilities, and sometimes euphemisms are used to cover up realities their users don't want clarified, such as the use of the word "ianfu" (comfort women) to describe World War II sex slaves.

But there is a kind of tipping point beyond which the softening aspect becomes ironic and the game is revealed. Take the Japanese verb *kawaigaruru*, which means "to adore" or "to fondle." It also has an ironic usage that means "to discipline," the idea being that you can express love to others by punishing them for their own good. In this usage "kawaigaruru" is not a euphemism, since the real meaning of the core idea is emphasized through irony. However, even the English word "punish" doesn't really jibe with the concept here, since the usual Japanese translations, these being "*seisai suru*" and "*korashimeru*," can also incorporate the idea of teaching a lesson.

"Kawaigaruru" was used extensively in the coverage of the 17-year-old sumo wrestler who was beaten to death by his stablemates, supposedly at the order of their stablemaster, in June 2007. In English, we might call this sort of action "tough love," and, certainly, sumo authorities would like everyone to look at the case in that light. The victim was reportedly disillusioned with the sumo world and wanted to quit. The beating, done with wooden rods

and beer bottles, was meant to bring him to his senses, but in reality the action seems to have been borne of an impulse at once simpler and less edifying: anger.

"Kawaigaru" has been used in some of the news reports related to another case of death by collective violence, that of a 25-year-old petty officer in the Maritime Self-Defense Forces. This young man was a member of an elite special task force in Etajima, Hiroshima Prefecture, who decided to quit the task force and was set to be transferred to a submarine unit. On Sept. 9, just before his transfer, he was forced to fight 15 team members in hand-to-hand combat. Every time he fell, the two instructors present forced him to stand back up and face his next opponent. The 14th opponent struck a blow to his chin that knocked him out. He remained in a coma until Sept. 25, when he died.

The incident wasn't reported by the media until almost two weeks later when an MSDF officer held a press conference to announce that the MSDF would conduct its own investigation. The parents of the petty officer have already said they hold the MSDF responsible for their son's death and question the official explanation that he died in a routine "training session." Their shock and anger were exacerbated by the MSDF's use of another ironic term. At the press conference, the officer said they told the family that the fighting exercise was "intended to be a *hanamuke* (parting gift)" to the young man.

Even the jaded journalists were appalled. The word *hanamuke* literally means "pointing the nose." The idea behind the term is that when a person is about to leave on a long journey, his friends "point" (*mukeru*) the "nose" (*hana*) of his horse in the direction of his destination. *Hanamuke* sometimes carries the same "lessons to be learned" subtext that "kawaigaru" carries, but the officer's matter-of-fact use of the term seemed to indicate he really believed that the violence was a "parting gift," a last gesture of comradeship. In an editorial, the *Asahi Shimbun* expressed confusion, commenting that the MSDF was obviously numb to the possible reaction and "couldn't

comprehend" what outsiders, such as the parents of the young man, would think.

However, this ironic connotation of "hanamuke" is understandable to most people. Apparently, it is used to describe the same sort of thing in *yakuza* culture. The implication is that when someone decides to leave a group, particularly a group that has made a special effort to accept that person, it is an implicit renunciation of the group's trust.

As a "parting gift," the group can be expected to express whatever resentments it holds about the person leaving. Moreover, the father has told the media that his son was bullied by his fellow team members, which is probably why he decided to leave the special task force in the first place.

Like the world of sumo, the world of the professional soldier is considered one that operates according to its own code, and therefore the regular authorities feel reluctant to get involved in its internal matters. Another troublesome aspect of the MSDF hazing incident is that the Defense Ministry didn't hear about it until it was reported in the news.

As Tokyo Shimbun pointed out, the MSDF has been embroiled in a series of scandals lately, ranging from leaking classified information to lethal accidents stemming from alleged dereliction of duty, all of which the MSDF has tried to keep a lid on. This opacity and exceptionalism are a throwback to the MSDF's origins in the Imperial Navy, which was considered the elite military branch and above the concerns of civilians.

Suicide is on the increase in the Self-Defense Forces, and several weeks ago Shukan Kinyobi magazine published a list of 135 cases internally prosecuted since April 2007 for which SDF members received disciplinary measures. The offenses included violence, sexual assault, drunk driving and theft. The most serious punishment was 45 days in jail, but the vast majority involved nothing more than a single night's detention.

As long as you stay in the group, the group will take

care of you, even if you commit a crime. But once you try to leave, you're dead meat, and that's definitely not a euphemism.

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