

# Humour through the Visual Narrative of Comicbook Characters' Emotional States

## *Analysing Fullmetal Alchemist*

Li-Chi Chen

Eryk Hajndrych

**Abstract:** This study analyses how humour is constructed through multimodal devices in *Fullmetal Alchemist* (2002-2010, Square Enix). The results of analysis show that comicbook characters' positive and negative emotions can be used as a source of humour via the drawing techniques of super-deformation (i.e., a style of art used to render normally proportioned characters into smaller and cuter forms); symbols (i.e., arbitrary or conventional signs used to represent the invisible); episodisation (i.e., a process of creating a fictional episode); mimetics (i.e., sound-symbolic words); circumfixes (i.e., a class of bound morphemes around a character); suppletion (i.e., an umlaut-style substitute); and symbolic acts (i.e., characters' acts used to portray their emotions and which are symbolic within a certain culture). These drawings techniques are used to portray or exaggerate characters' emotional states. We conclude that the comicbook series analysed involves complex multimodal interactions between text and image, and that characters' various emotional states are perceived as amusing, in the sense that they are associated with human behavioural attributes.

**Keywords:** comics, emotions, *Fullmetal Alchemist*, multimodality, visual humour

**Résumé :** Cet article analyse la construction de l'humour à travers des techniques multimodales dans *Fullmetal Alchemist* (2002-2010, Square Enix). Il montre que les émotions positives et négatives des personnages de *comics* peuvent être utilisées comme une source d'humour grâce à des techniques de dessins comme la super-déformation (qui donne des formes plus petites et 'mignonnes' à des personnages normalement proportionnés) ; le symbole (lorsque des signes conventionnels ou arbitraires sont utilisés pour représenter des phénomènes invisibles) ; l'épisodisation (une façon de créer un épisode fictionnel) ; la mimétique (des mots symbolisant des sons) ; le circumfixe (une classe de morphèmes liés à un caractère) ; le remplacement (la substitution à la manière d'un *umlaut*) ; et des actions symboliques (lorsque des personnages agissent de façon à montrer leurs émotions, actes qui sont symboliques dans une certaine culture). Ces techniques de dessins sont utilisées pour montrer ou exagérer les états émotionnels des personnages. Notre conclusion est que cette série de *comics* utilise des interactions multimodales complexes entre le texte et l'image et que les émotions variées des personnages sont perçues comme amusantes, en ce qu'elles sont associées à des attributs du comportement humain.

**Mots-clés :** *comics*, émotions, *Fullmetal Alchemist*, multimodalité, humour visuel

## 1. Introduction

Emotions, from a psychological perspective, can be viewed as “multicomponent response tendencies that unfold over relatively short time spans” (Fredrickson 2001: 219) or as “any mental experience with high intensity and high hedonic content (pleasure/displeasure)” (Cabanac 2002: 80), which typically occurs when one perceives a significant positive or negative change in his/her life (Ben-Ze’ev 2000). Despite the somewhat different definitions of emotion given by different psychology researchers, emotion can be conceptualised as a complex mental response to stimuli, which also varies across cultures. For example, Poles are found to be emotionally frank as they are not afraid of expressing how they feel (Wierzbicka 1994, 1999). Japanese people, in contrast, tend to suppress their emotions in the presence of others (Yuki et al. 2007). In light of this, it seems difficult to specify Japanese emotions, especially in face-to-face interactions. However, this is not the case with characters in Japanese comics – *manga*. Like humans, comicbook characters, are designed to have emotions. Comicbook artists use many ways to convey the expression of emotion, ranging from exaggerated facial expressions and hand/arm positions to squiggles drawn around body parts (Abbott & Forceville 2011). It is possible, therefore, for a reader to identify a character’s emotions.

Although much attention has been paid to how the expression of emotion is manifested in comicbooks (Forceville 2005; Eerden 2009; Shinohara & Matsunaka 2009; Abbott & Forceville 2011), there has been relatively little attention paid towards how the expression of emotion contributes to humour in comics. Not surprisingly, comicbook characters’ various emotions can be designed as the source of humour. As pointed out by Bergson (2014 [1911]), people may laugh at animals when we observe human behavioural attributes in them. Similarly, when we read comics, we may find amusement in the characters’ various emotional states, as we detect human behavioural attributes in them.

Using the 27 volumes of *Fullmetal Alchemist*, this study aims to analyse how characters’ emotions are visualised and used to construct humour from a sociocultural and multimodal perspective. As our analysis will show, there are many drawing strategies employed to visually construct characters’ emotions as a source of humour. In the following, Section 2 describes the materials and research methods used in the analysis. Section 3 presents a qualitative analysis of the data. Finally, Section 4 discusses and concludes the findings of this study.

## 2. Comicbook synopsis and research methods

### 2.1 Comicbook synopsis

The findings of this study are based on an analysis of images and texts from the 27 volumes of *Fullmetal Alchemist*, one of the best-selling Japanese *shōnen manga* series (comics for adolescent boys). This comicbook series was first serialised in Square Enix’s *Monthly Shōnen Gangan* between July 2001 and June 2010, and the individual chapters were later published in 27 volumes between February 2002 and November 2010. The story of the comicbook takes place in Amestris, a fictional country. In this fictional world, there are alchemists who can create almost anything they want, but in return they have to provide something of equal value according to the Law of Equivalent Exchange. Although *Fullmetal Alchemist* takes place in a fictional world, this comicbook series expresses strong Japanese cultural elements. More specifically, none of the characters in this comic are Japanese, but they behave as if they are.



 <p style="text-align: center;">Fig. 1</p>	<p>1. パン！  ‘pan: actual sound made by grabbing an assaulter when stopping a punch’</p>
 <p style="text-align: center;">Fig. 2</p>	<p>1. 出てけ！  ‘Get out!’  2. ペっ  ‘pe: actual sound made by quickly throwing an object out’</p>

Fig. 1 & 2: Hiromu Arakawa, *Fullmetal Alchemist* Vol. 1, 2002.

In this example, Fig. 1 shows how Edward Elric defends a sudden attack. Although the weapon used is a gun, the way Edward responds is like a defensive strategy against an attack with a *Japanese samurai sword*. In Fig. 2, when the Elric brothers are kicked out of the house, they retain the standard posture for sitting on a *tatami floor*. In short, this comicbook series offers us a forum for analysing and discussing visual humour in Japanese comics, which is perhaps influenced by the artist’s life experience as a Japanese person. As Japanese humour (and in our case, humour in Japanese comics) “is uniquely suited to the conceptual structures of the Japanese and may display unique characteristics that are often criticised by foreigners for being too silly or too hard to understand” (Chen 2017: 21), it is hoped that the findings of this study will open a window into better understanding Japanese humour, or humour in Japanese comics.

## 2.2. Multimodality

As pointed out by Seyfeddinipur & Gullberg (2014: 1): “Language is fundamentally multimodal.” More specifically, visible bodily actions are often used to complement, to supply, to substitute for, or to alternate with spoken words (Kendon 2004). While speech interacts with gestures in face-to-face communication, *text* and *image* can also be used as two modes of communication, which multiply each other in constructing various meanings (Bateman 2014). The relationship between text and image can be taken as a case of multimodality (McCloud 1994; Cohn 2016; Cohn et al. 2017), which provides an interesting challenge for analysis. Moreover, since comics involve complex interactions between text and image, they are multimodal by nature. Many previous studies have analysed different aspects of comics, such as their narrative structures (McCloud 1994; Cohn 2013a, 2013c, 2016; Cohn et al. 2017); their types, functions and effects of panel and page layouts (Cohn 2011, 2013b, 2013c; Cohn et al. 2012; Pederson & Cohn 2016); their visual morphology (Forceville et al. 2010; Cohn 2013c; Cohn & Ehly 2016); as pictorial runes (Kennedy 1982; Forceville 2011); in terms of the use of speech balloons and thought bubbles (McCloud


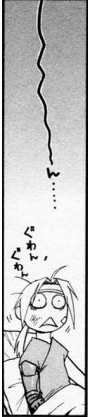
1994; Forceville et al. 2010; Cohn 2013c, 2013d); and the visualisation of sound effects (Forceville et al. 2010; Guynes 2014; Pratha et al. 2016). Not surprisingly, the complex multimodal interactions between a text and the various aspects of an image contribute to the funniness of comics. However, not much ink has been spent discussing how multimodality can be applied to the analysis of mechanisms of visual humour in comics. By focusing on the characters' various emotions as a source of humour – in terms of the human behavioural attributes that can be observed in them (Bergson 2014 [1911]) – this study intends to analyse how Japanese visual humour is multimodally constructed in the chosen comicbook series.

### 3. A character's emotional state as a source of humour

In our data, a character's various emotional states can be created using, what we call, *super-deformation*; a *symbol (in a carrier)*; *episodisation*; *mimetics*; *circumfixes*; *suppletion*; and *symbolic acts*. In the following, all these strategies will be illustrated and discussed.

#### 3.1. Super-deformation

As McCloud (1994) has observed, almost all comicbook artists use at least some small measure of *cartooning* in order to allow their readers to *mask* themselves into a character. As further explained by McCloud, the more realistic a drawing of a comicbook character gets, the fewer readers can project themselves onto that character. In the following, Edward is presented as super-deformed, so that the readers can mask him or herself in this figure and feel his emotion, while at the same time be entertained.

 <p style="text-align: center;">Fig. 3</p>	<p>1. ばしー          ‘bashii: actual sound made by slapping someone in the face’</p>
 <p style="text-align: center;">Fig. 4</p>	<p>2. ぐわんぐわん          ‘guwan guwan: a word describing vertigo’</p>

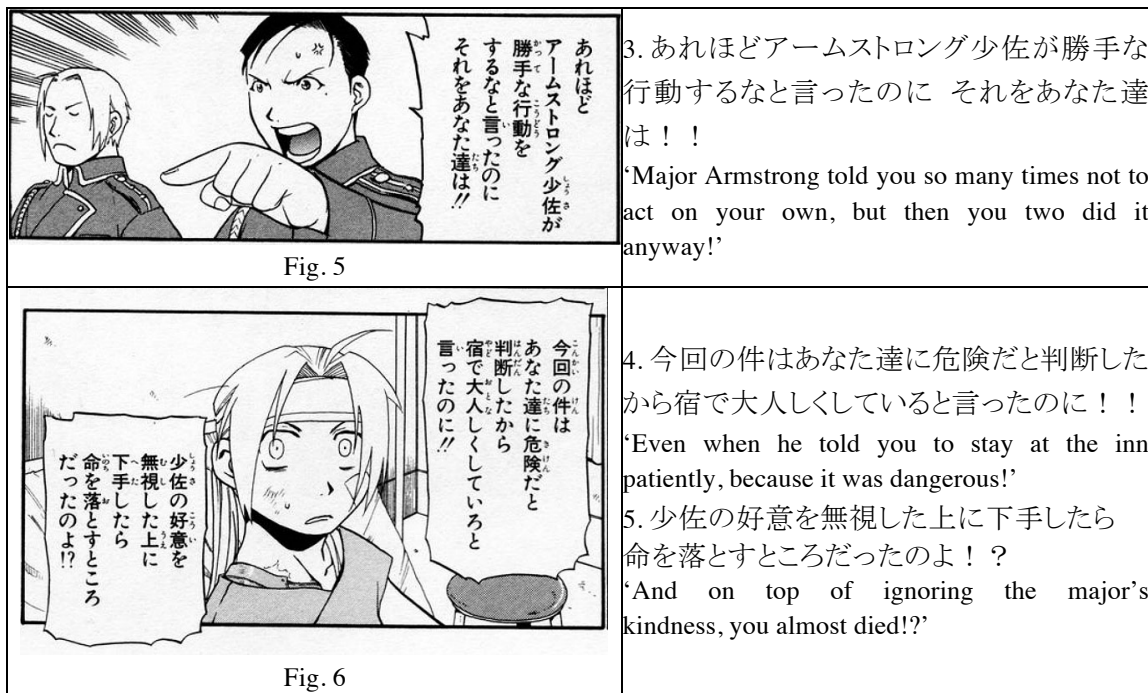


Fig. 3-6: Hiromu Arakawa, *Fullmetal Alchemist* Vol. 4, 2003.

In Fig. 3, we see Edward being slapped by Second Lieutenant Maria Ross. From lines 3-5, we know that Edward was slapped because he ignored Major Armstrong’s suggestions, which were made for his own benefit, and risked his life by acting on his own. As further shown in Fig. 4, Edward is shocked by the unexpected slap. Although Edward’s emotional state is physically shown by using the Japanese mimetic word *guwan guwan* in the background (see line 2), his shock is also shown by his wide-open eyes and mouth. This mimetic word is a *gitaigo* (words describing states and manners; also see 3.4.) that is often used to describe a sensation of whirling and loss of balance.

Compared to his face in Fig. 3 and 6, Edward’s face in Fig. 4 is reduced to three circles and an upside-down triangle. The three circles are used to represent his head and shocked eyes, whereas the upside-down triangle is used to represent his shocked open mouth. By using a super-deformed figure in a comic, an artist can reduce the seriousness of an action and exaggerate the emotion of a figure. As Cohn has stated: “Among the more unusual, some characters will suddenly become ‘super-deformed’ – taking on a hyper-cartoony or ‘deformed’ style – to show a spontaneous general lack of seriousness or exaggerated emotion (especially anger, joy, or surprise)” (2013c: 158). As the super-deformed figure of Edward lacks seriousness, his emotional response to the unexpected slap may appear funny. This may make it is easier for readers to identify themselves with Edward and understand his emotional state; it is also easier for them to perceive the funniness conveyed by his emotional response. As such, super-deformation is an efficient way of creating visual humour related to a figure’s various emotions. Interestingly, a psychological experiment conducted by Yuki et al. (2007) has shown that Japanese people tend to focus more strongly on the eyes than on the mouth when they interpret the emotions of others, as they are part of a culture where emotional subduction dominates. This may account for why, in Fig. 6, Edward’s eyes are still bigger than usual, making it is easier for readers to perceive his shock.

A super-deformed figure can also be presented with just a few simple lines and dots. In the following, the normally realistically proportioned Elric brothers are rendered into two subjective and iconic figures, which are interpretable only by the reader’s mind.

<p>人造人間だったりして</p> <p>Fig. 7</p>	<p>1 人造人間だったりして 'Could it be that he's a homunculus?'</p>
<p>まっさかー!!</p> <p>はははははは</p> <p>だよなあー!!</p> <p>Fig. 8</p>	<p>2. まっさかー!! 'Like that's possible!' 3. はははははは 'Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha' 4. だよなあー!! 'Yeah, right!'</p>
<p>はあー</p> <p>Fig. 9</p>	<p>5. はあー 'sigh'</p>

Fig. 7-9: Hiromu Arakawa, *Fullmetal Alchemist* Vol. 11, 2005.

Prior to the above interaction, the Elric brothers were talking about whether King Bradley (later revealed to be a major villain in the series) is in fact a homunculus, as he is ridiculously strong. In portraying the Elric brothers discussing something serious, they are normally realistically proportioned. As we can see in Fig. 7, Edward has not yet been super-deformed. In addition, he is placed right in the middle of the panel; according to Ōtsuka et al. (2017), this position marks the end of a serious discussion. They observe that experienced Japanese comicbook artists tend to place a figure or an object in the middle of a panel to create the impression of an ending for a visual narrative and show the end of the volume. Fig. 7 can clearly be regarded as paving the way for subsequent panels. As we can further see in Fig. 8, the Elric brothers are slightly super-deformed, while in Fig. 9, they have been reduced to simple lines and dots. While Fig. 8 marks a short joking moment during a serious discussion, Fig. 9 highlights the cruel reality that they have to go back to their previous discussion, as their problems have not been resolved. Their sighing (see line 5) reinforces the impression of their frustration and helplessness. The change in their mood may be a source of humour in the above extracts.

In comics, a character can be presented in various forms. Itō (2005) introduces the notion of *kyara*. While a character is part of a comicbook series, with his/her own personality, inner thoughts, experiences, place of birth, family, etc., *kyara* is the graphic or symbolic representation of this character or a bundle of basic traits of this character (Itō et al. 2007). As Fig. 9 shows, the Elric brothers are presented with just a few lines and

dots, but experienced readers can easily recognise the similarities between them and their *kyara*. Despite the various forms of a character's *kyara*, this character's nonverbal behaviour, along with visualised dialogues and inner speech, becomes the source through which readers can gain a complete picture of how this character interacts with others in the comicbook. In summary, super-deformed figures can be presented with a few lines and dots, which are interpretable only by the reader's mind.

### 3.2. Symbols

A symbol is an arbitrary or conventional sign. It is possible for an arbitrary symbol to become conventional if this symbol is used by many people, as is the case in comicbooks. As noted by McCloud: "Whenever an artist invents a new way to represent the invisible, there is always a chance that it will be picked up by other artists. If enough artists begin using the symbol, it will enter the language for good" (1994: 129). Among these symbols, the heart symbol ♡ is frequently used in comics to show a figure's liking for someone or something. In other words, the heart symbol can be regarded as a visual indicator of a figure's positive emotion. As its use exaggerates a figure's emotion, it thus creates humour.



Fig. 10: Hiromu Arakawa, *Fullmetal Alchemist* Vol. 5, 2003.

As we can see in Fig. 10, Winry Rockbell appears excited. Winry is an amateur surgeon and mechanical repair specialist and she is excited to see the new model of the automotive armoured prosthesis (also see lines 1-2). The heart symbol shows Winry's excitement upon seeing the Gotts 11<sup>th</sup> year model. According to Tresidder (2008), the heart symbolises the source of various affections, including love, compassion, charity, joy, or sorrow. It is also the source of spiritual illumination, truth and intelligence. Amidon & Amidon contend that Plato (428-348 B.C.) derived his view of the heart from metaphysical thinking, rather than empirical study, and pictured "the heart as a 'knot of veins' that gushed blood in moments of passion or 'when danger is foreseen'" (2011: 27). In brief, the heart was viewed by Plato as the wellspring of passion.

Whether the use of the heart symbol in Japanese comics is influenced by Western culture or not, it appears to have the same function. More specifically, everyone can ♡ something or someone with a passion. In Fig. 10, however, the heart symbol is used to reinforce *kawaii* 'cute', one of the most important components of contemporary Japanese popular culture, which "celebrates sweet, adorable, innocent, pure, simple, genuine, gentle, vulnerable, weak, and inexperienced social behaviour and physical appearances" (Kinsella 2013: 220). Moreover, Winry's *kawaii* pose can be regarded as *burikko* style, a term with negative connotations that is used to describe a female adult (usually in her 30s or 40s) who likes to *act cute*.<sup>1</sup> This

<sup>1</sup> According to Schilling (1997: 113-123), Japanese idol singer/actress Seiko Matsuda can be regarded as greatly contributing to popular *kawaii* culture. She created the *burikko* style to charm her audiences with her childish *cuteness*. This included wearing

style was later adopted by many young women and appealed to many Japanese men. This is perhaps due to the fact that in cute culture, young women may be popular among men because of “their apparent weakness, dependence and inability, rather than because of their strengths and capabilities” (Kinsella 2013: 237). The study by Frith et al. (2004: 59) has further shown that cute, girlish images have become popular not only in Japan, but also in other East Asian countries, such as Taiwan and Singapore. They have argued that these cute girlish images are used to portray Asian women in childish ways, perhaps “to diminish their standing in society as full-fledged adults” and to avoid appearing threatening to men. However, experienced readers of *Fullmetal Alchemist* know that Winry is inclined to lash out violently and frequently uses her wrench as a weapon when being irritated by the Elric brothers. Therefore, there is a contradictory image of a violent tomboy feared by the powerful alchemists and a sweet, adorable *burriko*-styled *kawaii* girl, which can act as a source of humour reinforced by the use of the heart symbol.

As the heart symbol is frequently used in Japanese comics to show a female character’s excitement upon seeing something cute, which, in general, is not an automotive armoured prosthesis, the application of most people’s stereotype of a *kawaii* girl’s ♡ for something ‘not cute’ thus creates humour.

### 3.3. Episodisation

According to Phillips (1995), the term *fiction* refers to something created by the human mind. Chen (2017) further observed that the use of *fictional episodes* is a strategy to bring about laughter in talk-in-interaction. In our data, we also observed that *episodisation*, i.e., visualising how a comicbook character creates a fictional episode, is a drawing technique frequently used by Japanese comic artists to create visual humour, as the following extracts show.

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. 兄のエドワード・エルリックってのがやり手の錬金術師だよ 'Edward Elric, the older of the brothers, was a pretty good alchemist.'</li> <li>2. 12の時に最年少で国家錬金術師になったって 'He became the youngest state alchemist at age 12.'</li> <li>3. 今は15か16かなあ 'Now he's 15 or 16.'</li> <li>4. 金髪金目でちよいと目立つ風貌だったな 'He had golden hair and pupils and his atmosphere stood out.'</li> </ol>
<p>Fig. 11</p>	

children’s clothes on television, standing bowed-legged, or talking in the accent of a Kyūshū country bumpkin. Her *kawaii* style can be regarded as suggesting the retention of youthful attitudes and behaviours in later adulthood.



<p>Fig. 12</p>	<p>5. 赤いコートと三つ編みも目立ってたぞ 'His braids and red jacket stood out too.'</p> <p>6. 最年少ですごい錬金術師… 'The youngest and an amazing alchemist.'</p> <p>7. 三つ編みの目立つ少年……？ 'An outstanding youth with braids.'</p>
<p>Fig. 13</p>	<p>8. 天才錬金術師 'Genius Alchemist'</p> <p>9. エドワード・エルリック様 'Edward Elric-sama'</p> <p>10. 超身長 'Super tall'</p> <p>11. かしこそう 'Looks smart'</p> <p>12. さわやか 'Handsome'</p> <p>13. やあ！ 'Hey!'</p> <p>14. こんな感じ？ 'Like this?'</p>

Fig. 11-13: Hiromu Arakawa, *Fullmetal Alchemist* Vol. 8, 2004.

Prior to the above interaction happening, the coal mine had collapsed. After the coal miners have been saved by May Chen (the girl in Fig. 12 and 13), they tell her that this was the second time they had been saved by alchemists. As we can see in Fig. 11 (lines 1-5), the coal miners tell May Chen what they know about Edward Elric. As these coal miners and their families are able to laugh and live happily thanks to Edward and his younger brother, they are very thankful to him. Thus, their comments on Edward (see lines 1-5) are unreservedly positive. Based on the coal miners' description of Edward, May Chen summarises the coal miners' remarks and comes to the conclusion that Edward is a handsome, tall, and genius alchemist, as shown in lines 6-12. Although Edward has amassed an impressive reputation throughout the land, he is in fact quite small for his age, despite his constant attempts to look taller, which is also a repeated source of humour in the series. In addition, May Chen's imagination of Edward's appearance contradicts the facts. As we can see in Fig. 13, Edward is portrayed in her mind as a prince, which is manifested in her use of the *sama* suffix (see line 9) to address Edward, showing respect and politeness – it is also used for certain ranks of nobility. The roses in the background, which can be seen in Fig. 13, highlight May Chen being blinded by unrealistic romantic notions. As observed in many studies (e.g., Shinohara & Matsunaka 2009), comics for girls tend to use nonnarrative signs in the background to show a character's emotional state. As such, the roses reinforce the impression of May Chen's excitement about Edward.

The imagined space of the prince-like Edward in May Chen's created fictional episode may evoke experienced readers' memories of Japanese girls' comics. As Schodt has observed, characters in Japanese girls' comics tend to be depicted “in enlarged, standing poses that occupy one side of the page, as if to show

off their elaborate costumes while the story unfolds beside them” (1983: 90-91). As can be seen in Fig. 13, Edward occupies one side of the visualised scene in May Chen’s created fictional episode in an enlarged, standing pose to show off his drop-dead gorgeous looks. May Chen’s imagination of Edward presents him through a fictional episode, in which Edward is tall, handsome and princely. While the coal miners and the readers know the truth, May Chen immerses herself in her own fictional episode. In so doing, Edward becomes a tall and handsome alchemical genius. It is through the contradiction of the truth in May Chen’s created fictional episode that the humour is thus created. In addition, the more positive the physical traits Edward is imagined to have, the more humorous the created fictional episode becomes. In other words, the use of episodisation in Fig. 13 is based on May Chen’s inner speech and the visualisation of her imagination.

In the following extracts, however, the use of episodisation is based on a stage-lighting effect that many Japanese comicbook artists use to create visual humour through showing a figure’s emotional breakdown.


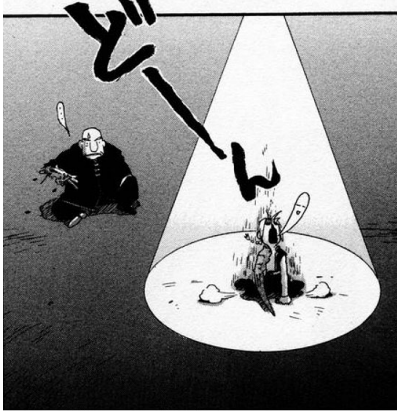
 <p>Fig. 14</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. ここまで来て... 'I came all the way here...'</li> <li>2. やっと戻れると思っただのに... 'And I even thought I could restore myself...'</li> <li>3. 偽物..... 'And it's all fake.'</li> <li>4. ヨロ... 'yoro: a word describing someone in an unstable state'</li> </ol>
 <p>Fig. 15</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. どーん 'do-n: bang'</li> </ol>

Fig. 14 & 15: Hiromu Arakawa, *Fullmetal Alchemist* Vol. 1, 2002.

Prior to the above scenes, Edward had been looking for the philosopher’s stone. He thought that Cornello (the man on the left in Fig. 14 and 15) had it. However, a real philosopher’s stone is supposed to be perfect, but this one had broken. The fact that Cornello’s stone is fake makes Edward collapse in despair, as can be seen in lines 4 and 5: *yoro* is used to describe an unstable state, while *do-n* is used to describe a person hit hard. In Fig. 14, Edward’s emotional breakdown also scares Cornello. As further shown in Fig. 15, Edward’s emotional breakdown is visually presented with a stage-lighting effect, astral projection, and *giongo* (used to refer to words mimicking actual sounds made by inanimate objects and

nature). Clearly, episodisation is used in Fig. 15, as the stage light centres on Edward. Its function is to centre the reader’s attention on Edward’s emotion.

In the following, humour is also created using episodisation. The funniness, as we will see, comes from the conflict between an experienced reader’s expectations and a created fictional episode.




 <p>Fig. 16</p>	<p>1. ただいまー！ ‘I’m back!’</p> <p>2. 大通りの方が騒がしかったけど ‘The main street is fairly noisy.’</p>
 <p>Fig. 17</p>	<p>3. 何かあった…… ‘Did something happen...’</p>
 <p>Fig. 18</p>	<p>4. ははははは ‘Ha, ha, ha, ha.’</p> <p>5. つかまえてごらん ‘Catch me if you can.’</p> <p>6. うふふふふ ‘He, he, he, he.’</p> <p>7. まちやがれー ‘Wait you little...’</p> <p>8. わんわん ‘Woof woof.’</p> <p>9. チュイ〜ン ‘chuiin: actual sound made by starting a chainsaw’</p>

Fig. 16-18: Hiromu Arakawa, *Fullmetal Alchemist* Vol. 8, 2004.




In Fig. 16 and 17, Winry Rockbell returns and is surprised to find that Edward Elric has broken his mechanical armour again. As an amateur surgeon and mechanical repair specialist, Winry takes responsibility for maintaining Edward’s mechanical armour. However, she spent a few days fixing it not long ago, and thus she is irritated by Edward’s mechanical armour being broken due to his belligerence. Her anger is visualised in Fig. 18, where she is shown chasing Edward with a chainsaw. Fig. 18 is highly symbolic for the experienced reader. This can all be seen in the marked elements presented in the macropanel, which is used to portray multiple active entities (see Cohn 2013c), including the setting sun, a running dog, an open field, and, most importantly, a young couple smitten with and chasing each other. These elements are combined and used by many Japanese comicbook artists to signal youthful puppy love,

only appearing, however, in a comicbook character’s imagination. Thus, Fig. 18 presents a fictional episode. However, Winry’s chainsaw contradicts the harmony and romance of this fiction and thus is a source of humour. While the run-and-catch scene may signal puppy love, here it can also be interpreted differently due to the presence of Winry’s chainsaw. The laughter in lines 4 and 6 further reinforces the funniness.

In summary, the marked elements in Fig. 18 indicate that the scene is a fictional episode. Winry’s chainsaw, however, contradicts the impression of romance and puppy love and the contradiction acts as a source of humour for experienced Japanese comicbook readers.

### 3.4. Mimetics

Many scholars agree that Japanese mimetic words are comprised of *giseigo* (words mimicking animal and human sounds) and *giongo* (words mimicking actual sounds made by inanimate objects and nature). The class of Japanese mimetic words also include *gitaigo* (words describing states and manners); *giyougo* (words describing movements and actions); and *gijougo* (words describing feelings). As defined by Akita (2009: 10), mimetic words are “words symbolising something (audible or inaudible) by means of linguistic sounds.” Moreover, mimetic words have various functions in Japanese comics. Since their use helps to convey various expressions and sensations (Hasada 1998), they are frequently used in Japanese comics to vividly present a character’s different behaviours, as well as to reinforce the funniness of a character’s emotion.

 <p>Fig. 19</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. いい子だから兄さんをはなしてあげて 'Be a good boy...let my brother go.'</li> <li>2. ねっ 'OK?'</li> <li>3. しっしっ 'shi'shi': actual sound made by shooing away an animal'</li> <li>4. ガル? 'grrr.'</li> </ol>
 <p>Fig. 20</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. ガルルウ!! 'grrrr.'</li> </ol>
 <p>Fig. 21</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. ねっ 'Now.'</li> <li>7. カッ 'ka: a word describing the state of suddenly becoming angry.'</li> </ol>

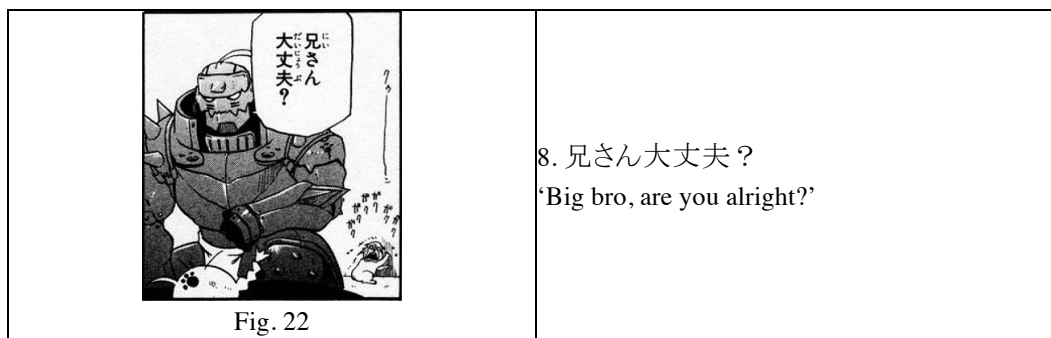


Fig. 19-22: Hiromu Arakawa, *Fullmetal Alchemist* Vol. 5, 2003.

As line 1 and Fig. 19 show, Alphonse Elric (the character on the righthand side) is trying to save his brother (the character beneath a bulldog). The bulldog, however, does not seem to make any concessions, irritating Alphonse. As we can see in Fig. 20, the bulldog's angry face is highlighted as an 'Initial,' which initiates the tension of the narrative arc (see Cohn 2013c: 70).<sup>2</sup> In Fig. 21, Alphonse's anger is constructed using super-deformation, a micropanel, and the mimetic word *ka*. He is super-deformed so that readers can interpret his emotion (McCloud 1994). In addition, a micropanel is also used to highlight his angry face. Interestingly, the use of *ka* also signals Alphonse's anger. This is a Japanese *gitaigo*, in the sense that it is used to indicate Alphonse's sudden increase of blood pressure in anger. Note how *ka* is enlarged and takes up the whole lower part of the panel to exaggerate Alphonse's anger. Furthermore, as a phenomime, a *gitaigo* can further be defined as referring to words depicting one's emotional or psychological state, bodily feelings, or nonauditory senses. The contrast between a gentle Alphonse (in Fig. 19) and an angry Alphonse (in Fig. 21) is a source of humour. As we can further see in Fig. 22, the bulldog is scared by Alphonse's sudden emotional shift, and this is also a source of humour.

### 3.5. Circumfixes

According to Cohn (2013c), there is a class of bound morphemes in visual languages, which appear above the head of characters and are frequently used to show a character's emotional or cognitive state. These are 'upfixes,' which in comics may include "hearts (love), stars (pain), gears (thinking), exclamation marks (surprise), zzz (sleep), question marks (curiosity), dollar/yen/euro/etc. signs (greed), circling birds (wooziness), dark scribbles or rain clouds (bad mood), bubbles and/or sparks and spirals (drunkenness), skull and crossbones (death or anger), or lightbulbs (inspiration)" (Cohn 2013c: 42-43). In addition to the above upfixes, Japanese comicbook artists are found to frequently use a circumfix; more specifically, an *ignis fatuus* – a glowing, mysterious light seen at night, chiefly over marshy ground. This sign is placed around the character to visualise their gloomy mood in a humorous way.

<sup>2</sup> In terms of Cohn (2013c: 70), the narrative arc of this example starts with an 'Establisher' in Fig. 19, followed by an 'Initial' in Fig. 20, a 'Peak' in Fig. 21, and a 'Release' in Fig. 22.



Fig. 23: Hiromu Arakawa, *Fullmetal Alchemist* Vol. 3, 2002.

Prior to the above interaction, Edward Elric had been looking for research files on the philosopher's stone. These files had been shoved into a bookshelf of the wrong genre, meaning that they had previously been destroyed by fire. Upon realising this, Edward becomes upset, as he will have to start from scratch. His gloomy mood can be seen from the vertical halftone lines on his upper face, as well as the *ignis fatuus* around him. In particular, humour comes from the use of the circumfix, as Edward is presented as if he is walking gloomily across marshy ground at night. In linguistics, a circumfix has two parts: one at the beginning of a word and the other at the end. In comics, however, a circumfix may have two or more parts, which are placed around a character. As Fig. 23 shows, the sign of the *ignis fatuus* is a circumfix that is placed around Edward. This sign metaphorically symbolises *spookiness*, *darkness*, and perhaps *depression*, and thus it is used to specify Edward's gloomy mood, but in a humorous way. Experienced readers of Japanese comics, upon seeing this sign, may know immediately that Edward is in a bad mood. Furthermore, when Edward's bad mood is visualised by the use of an *ignis fatuus* as a circumfix, readers may connect his bad mood to the feeling of him walking alone across marshy ground late at night. This is perhaps due the fact that Japanese people (as do many other Asian people) believe that when one is out of luck, s/he may attract ghosts (as symbolised by the *ignis fatuus* in our case); or that his/her bad luck is due to ghosts. In particular, Japanese readers may find Fig. 23 amusing, as it reflects a particular element of their life or social culture.

### 3.6. Suppletion

In comics, one can sometimes see an umlaut-style substitute for the eyes using a number of signs (Cohn 2013c). In Japanese comics, a character's anger is often portrayed using an 'eye-umlaut' or 'mouth-umlaut.' For example, an angry character's eyes can be replaced with a sign representing burning fire, his mouth replaced with sharp fangs, or his tongue replaced with a snake's forked tongue. These are visual metaphors used to give a humorous effect. In our data, we further observed that in Japan, a character's feet can be replaced by another sign relevant to his/her sudden emotional stress. The feet-umlaut portrays a character undergoing a sudden out-of-body experience caused by extreme shock. As this exaggerates the character's emotion, it thus creates humour.



 <p>Fig. 24</p>	<p>1. ぶっ壊れたってあんたちよっと！！ ‘Busted up, wait one minute!’</p> <p>2. あたしが丹精こめて作った最高級機械鎧をどんな使い方したら壊れるって言うのよ！！ ‘Just how were you using that first-class automail that I had so painstakingly made?’</p> <p>3. いや それがもう粉々のバラバラに ‘Got totally smashed into little pieces.’</p>
 <p>Fig. 25</p>	<p>4. バ…… ‘shocked’</p>

Fig. 24 & 25: Hiromu Arakawa, *Fullmetal Alchemist* Vol. 3, 2002.

In Fig. 24, Winry Rockbell is angry about finding that the mechanical armour that she had made for Edward Elric had been smashed into little pieces. In Fig. 25, her sudden emotional stress, caused by anger and shock, has further made her feel dizzy. Her extreme shock is visualised by her sudden out-of-body experience, which is portrayed using an umlaut-style replacement for her feet. As one’s being out of his/her body perhaps indicates death or a near-death experience, the feet-umlaut is thus used to portray Winry as a spirit leaving her body due to intense emotion, so as to exaggerate the impression of her extreme shock. This is also an attempt to create humour.

The use of feet-umlaut to portray a character as a spirit or ghost in Japanese comics may perhaps have been influenced by Maruyama Ōkyo’s (1733-1795) ghost paintings, including *Ghost of Oyuki* and *Spirit Returning in Incense Smoke*. As observed by Kajiya (2001, 2011), in Japan ghosts were shown with feet before the middle of the Edo period. After Ōkyo contrived this new way of painting ghosts, the footless type of ghost emerged and has since been widely imitated. Thus, Ōkyo can be regarded as establishing the convention of footless ghosts. While footless ghosts can also be found in Western comics or cartoons, such as in *Casper the Friendly Ghost* or *The Real Ghostbusters*, the ghosts’ upper bodies and faces are also cartooned. In contrast, Japanese ghosts are portrayed using only feet-umlauts. More specifically, their upper bodies and face remain the same. It seems reasonable to argue that the use of a feet-umlaut to portray a character as a spirit, or as a ghost, is specific to Japanese culture. Thus, while portraying Winry as a spirit to exaggerate her shock can create humour, the use of a feet-umlaut can be attributed to the conventional image of Japanese ghosts, i.e., ghosts without feet.

### 3.2. Symbolic acts

In Japanese comics, a character's emotions can be visualised using certain symbolic acts (i.e., actions by characters with a symbolic meaning within a certain culture), which are known to experienced readers. For example, a character flipping over a table helps to exaggerate his/her anger, despite the fact that the table does not necessarily appear in the context of the interaction between the characters. As the use of this symbolic act exaggerates the character's anger, it thus creates humour. Like negative emotions, a character's great joy can also be visualised by portraying the symbolic act of shedding tears or that of performing the Japanese hurrah, which can be seen in the following example.



Fig. 26: Hiromu Arakawa, *Fullmetal Alchemist* Vol. 6, 2003.

As can be seen in Fig. 26, the Elric brothers are happy that they have finally caught something to eat after a period of starvation. Their great joy can be seen in their facial expressions – they are grinning from ear to ear. However, the use of symbolic acts further reinforces the degree of their positive emotion. For example, both Edward and Alphonse are shedding tears of joy, and Edward is performing the Japanese hurrah (as indicated by his raised hands ready to shout out). Indeed, tears can be associated with feelings of being overwhelmed with joy, elation, or gratitude (Vingerhoets & Bylsma 2015). In addition, the Japanese hurrah was used on many joyous occasions in olden times in Japan (de Garis & Sakai 2009: 5). A story offered by de Garis & Sakai further explains its use. In the reign of Kanmu, the 50<sup>th</sup> Emperor, there was a drought in Japan. As there had been no rain for five months, it was impossible for crops to grow. One day, the Emperor prayed and it started raining. All the courtiers stamped their feet joyfully and shouted *mansai* (now changed to *banzai*). On February 11, 1889, when Emperor Meiji held a military review in front of the Nijūbashi Bridge of the Imperial Palace, students of the Tokyo Imperial University also shouted *banzai* to show their happiness that the Constitution of Japan had been promulgated. Thus, the use of these two symbolic acts can be said to visualise the two characters' great joy, but in a humorous way.



#### 4. Conclusion

In this study, how comicbook characters' emotional states are used to visualise humour has been illustrated and discussed. Analysing images and texts from *Fullmetal Alchemist*, we can see that the drawing techniques that have been used to humorously construct characters' emotional states include the use of *super-deformation*, *symbols*, *episodisation*, *mimetics*, *circumfixes*, *suppletion*, and *symbolic acts*. Results have further shed light on what is perceived to be humorous to readers of Japanese comics. Since the ways readers perceive humour when reading comics are complicated, and are influenced by many factors, the implications of this study have been discussed with a special focus on emotions, which are associated with human behavioural attributes.

While the depiction of characters' various emotional states can be the source of humour in the comicbooks analysed, many of the examples discussed are about characters' negative emotions caused by misfortune, such as shock; frustration and emotional breakdown; anger; and gloom. This may be seen as what van Dijk & Ouwerkerk consider a seemingly atypical type of joy: *schadenfreude*, which is a joyful feeling that one may experience "when someone else suffers a mishap, a setback, a downfall, a calamity, an adversity, or any other type of misfortune" (2016: 1). In fact, people often fail to empathise with outgroup members and may experience *schadenfreude* in relation to them, especially with those of higher status or who are more competitive (see Cikara & Fiske 2012). Certainly, comicbook characters are considered to be outgroup members. Although they are products of certain cultures and might look or talk like people from within these cultures, they are fictional characters. It is not considered immoral to laugh at their misfortunes. On the contrary, their misfortunes have been created to entertain the readers.

In a nutshell, comicbook characters are designed to have various emotional states, and it is the depiction of these emotions (and in our cases, negative emotions caused by misfortune) via the use of the aforementioned drawing techniques that makes readers laugh. While readers may mask themselves into these characters to feel their emotions, they can always be detached from them, as comicbook characters are fictional and are created for amusing purposes.

#### Bibliography

- ABBOTT, M. & FORCEVILLE, C. (2011). "Visual representation of emotion in *manga*: 'Loss of control' is 'loss of hands' in *Azumanga Daioh* Volume 4". *Language and Literature* 20 (2): 91-112.
- AKITA, K. (2009). *A Grammar of Sound-Symbolic Words in Japanese: Theoretical Approaches to Iconic and Lexical Properties of Mimetics*. PhD. Thesis. Kobe University.
- AMIDON, S. & AMIDON, T. (2011). *The Sublime Engine: A Biography of the Human Heart*. New York, NY: Rodale.
- ARAKAWA, H. (2002). *Hagane no Renkinjutsushi [Fullmetal Alchemist]*, Vol. 1. Tokyo: Gangan Comics.
- ARAKAWA, H. (2002). *Hagane no Renkinjutsushi [Fullmetal Alchemist]*, Vol. 3. Tokyo: Gangan Comics.
- ARAKAWA, H. (2003). *Hagane no Renkinjutsushi [Fullmetal Alchemist]*, Vol. 4. Tokyo: Gangan Comics.
- ARAKAWA, H. (2003). *Hagane no Renkinjutsushi [Fullmetal Alchemist]*, Vol. 5. Tokyo: Gangan Comics.
- ARAKAWA, H. (2003). *Hagane no Renkinjutsushi [Fullmetal Alchemist]*, Vol. 6. Tokyo: Gangan Comics.
- ARAKAWA, H. (2004). *Hagane no Renkinjutsushi [Fullmetal Alchemist]*, Vol. 8. Tokyo: Gangan Comics.
- ARAKAWA, H. (2005). *Hagane no Renkinjutsushi [Fullmetal Alchemist]*, Vol. 11. Tokyo: Gangan Comics.
- BATEMAN, J. A. (2014). *Text and Image: A Critical Introduction to the Visual/Verbal Divide*. London: Routledge.

- BEN-ZE'EV, A. (2000). *The Subtlety of Emotions*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- BERGSON, H. (2014 [1911]). *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Mansfield Center, CT: Martino Publishing.
- CABANAC, M. (2002). "What is emotion?". *Behavioural Processes* 60 (2): 69-83.
- CHEN, L.-C. L. (2017). *Taiwanese and Polish Humor: A Socio-Pragmatic Analysis*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- CIKARA, M. & FISKE, S. T. (2012). "Stereotypes and *schadenfreude*: Affective and physiological markers of pleasure at outgroup misfortunes". *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 3 (1): 63-71.
- COHN, N. (2011). "A different kind of cultural frame: An analysis of panels in American comics and Japanese *manga*". *Image and Narrative* 12 (1): 120-134.
- COHN, N. (2013a). "Visual narrative structure". *Cognitive Science* 37 (3): 413-452.
- COHN, N. (2013b). "Navigating comics: An empirical and theoretical approach to strategies of reading comic page layouts". *Frontiers in Cognitive Science* 4: 1-15.
- COHN, N. (2013c). *The Visual Language of Comics: Introduction to the Structure and Cognition of Sequential Images*. London & New York, NY: Bloomsbury Academic.
- COHN, N. (2013d). "Beyond speech balloons and thought bubbles: The integration of text and image". *Semiotica* 197: 35-63.
- COHN, N. (2016). "A multimodal parallel architecture: A cognitive framework for multimodal interactions". *Cognition* 146: 304-323.
- COHN, N. & EHLI, S. (2016). "The vocabulary of *manga*: Visual morphology in dialects of Japanese visual language". *Journal of Pragmatics* 92: 17-29.
- COHN, N., TAYLOR, R. & PEDERSON, K. (2017). "A picture is worth more words over time: Multimodality and narrative structure across eight decades of American superhero comics". *Multimodal Communication* 6 (1): 19-37.
- COHN, N., TAYLOR-WEINER, A. & GROSSMAN, S. (2012). "Framing attention in Japanese and American comics: Cross-cultural differences in attentional structure". *Frontiers in Psychology: Cultural Psychology* 3: 1-12.
- DE GARIS, F. & ATSUHARU, S. (2009). *We Japanese: The Customs, Manners, Ceremonies, Festivals, Arts and Crafts of Japan*. Oxon & New York, NY: Routledge.
- EERDEN, B. (2009). "Anger in *Asterix*: The metaphorical representation of anger in comics and animated films", in Forceville, C. J. & Urios-Aparisi, E. (eds.), *Multimodal Metaphor: Applications of Cognitive Linguistics*. Berlin & New York, NY: Mouton de Gruyter: 243-264.
- FORCEVILLE, C. J. (2005). "Visual representations of the idealised cognitive model of anger in the *Asterix* album *La Zizanie*". *Journal of Pragmatics* 37 (1): 69-88.
- FORCEVILLE, C. J. (2011). "Pictorial runes in *Tintin* and *The Picaros*". *Journal of Pragmatics* 43 (3): 875-890.
- FORCEVILLE, C. J., VEALE, T. & FEYAERTS, K. (2010). "Balloonics: The visuals of balloons in comics", in Goggin, J. & Hassler-Forest, D. (eds.), *The Rise and Reason of Comics and Graphic Literature: Critical Essays on the Form*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland: 56-73.
- FREDRICKSON, B. L. (2001). "The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions". *American Psychologist* 56 (3): 218-226.
- FRITH, K. T., CHENG, H. & SHAW, P. (2004). "Race and beauty: A comparison of Asian and Western models in women's magazine advertisements". *Sex Roles* 50 (1/2): 53-61.
- GUYNES, S. A. (2014). "Four-colour sound: A peircean semiotics of comic book onomatopoeia". *Public Journal of Semiotics* 6 (1): 58-72.
- HASADA, R. (1998). "Sound symbolic emotion words in Japanese", in Athanasiadou, A. & Tabakowska, E. (eds.), *Speaking of Emotions: Conceptualisation and Expression*. Berlin & New York, NY: Mouton de Gruyter: 83-98.
- ITŌ, G. (2005). *Tezuka Isu Deddo: Hirakareta Manga Hyōgenron-e [Tezuka Is Dead: Towards an Open Theory of Manga Expression]*. Tokyo: NTT Shuppan.
- ITŌ, G., NATSUME, F. & AZUMA, H. (2007). "'Kyara/kyarakutā' gainen no kanōsei [Possibility of a concept of 'kyara' and 'character']", in Azuma, H. (ed.), *Kontentsu no Shisō: Manga, Anime, Raitonoberu [The Thought of Contents: Manga, Anime, and the Light Novels]*. Tokyo: Seidosha: 127-159.

- KAJIYA, K. (2001). "Reimagining the imagined: Depictions of dreams and ghosts in early *Edo* period". *Impressions* 23: 86-107.
- KAJIYA, K. (2011). "Nihon no chūsei oyobi kinsei ni okeru yume to yūrei no shikaku hyōshō [The visual representation of dreams and ghosts in the middle ages and early modern Japan]". *Hiroshima Shiritsu Daigaku Geijutsu Gakubu Geijutsugaku Kenkyūka Kiyō* [Arts Studies Bulletin of Hiroshima City University, Faculty of Arts and Graduate School of Arts] 16: 37-44.
- KENDON, A. (2004). *Gesture: Visible Action as Utterance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- KENNEDY, J. (1982). "Metaphor in pictures". *Perception* 11 (5): 589-605.
- KINSELLA, S. (2013). "Cuties in Japan", in Skov, L. & Moeran, B. (eds.), *Women, Media and Consumption in Japan (ConsumAsian Series)*. New York, NY: Routledge: 220-254.
- MCCLOUD, S. (1994). *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- ŌTSUKA, E., ASANO, T., NAKASHIMA, C. & QI, M. (2017). *Sekai Manga Juku* [World School of Manga]. Tokyo: Kadokawa.
- PEDERSON, K. & COHN, N. (2016). "The changing pages of comics: Page layouts across eight decades of American superhero comics". *Studies in Comics* 7 (1): 7-28.
- PHILLIPS, N. (1995). "Telling organisational tales: On the role of narrative fiction in the study of organisations". *Organisation Studies* 16 (4): 625-649.
- PRATHA, N. K., AVUNJIAN, N. & COHN, N. (2016). "Pow, punch, pika, and chu: The structure of sound effects in genres of American comics and Japanese *manga*". *Multimodal Communication* 5 (2): 93-109.
- SCHILLING, M. (1997). *The Encyclopedia of Japanese Pop Culture*. New York, NY: Weatherhill.
- SCHODT, F. L. (1983). *Manga! Manga! The World of Japanese Comics*. New York, NY: Kodansha America Inc.
- SEYFEDDINIPUR, M. & GULLBERG, M. (2014). "From gesture in conversation to visible action as utterance", in Seyfeddinipur, M. & Gullberg, M. (eds.), *From Gesture in Conversation to Visible Action as Utterance: Essays in Honour of Adam Kendon*. Amsterdam & Philadelphia: John Benjamins: 1-12.
- SHINOHARA, K. & MATSUNAKA, Y. (2009). "Pictorial metaphors of emotion in Japanese comics", in Forceville, C. J. & Urios-Aparisi, E. (eds.), *Multimodal Metaphor: Applications of Cognitive Linguistics*. Berlin & New York, NY: Mouton de Gruyter: 265-293.
- TRESIDDER, J. (2008). *The Watkins Dictionary of Symbols*. London: Watkins.
- VAN DIJK, W. W. & OUWERKERK, J. W. (2016). *Schadenfreude: Understanding Pleasure at the Misfortune of Others*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- VINGERHOETS, A. J. J. M. & BYLSMA, L. M. (2015). "The riddle of human emotional crying: A challenge for emotion researchers". *Emotion Review* 8 (3): 207-217.
- WIERZBICKA, A. (1994). "Emotion, language and cultural scripts", in Kitayama, S. & Markus, H. R. (eds.), *Emotion and Culture: Empirical Studies of Mutual Influence*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association: 130-196.
- WIERZBICKA, A. (1999). *Emotions across Languages and Cultures: Diversity and Universals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- YUKI, M., MADDUX, W. W. & MASUDA, T. (2007). "Are the windows to the soul the same in the East and West? Cultural differences in using the eyes and mouth as cues to recognise emotions in Japan and the United States". *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 43 (2): 303-311.

This study was financially supported by a Mobility Grant from the Chiang Ching-Kuo Foundation for Scholarly Exchange under contract MG002-N-16. Our gratitude also extends to Square Enix for their prompt response to our inquiry and for allowing us to cite their images for academic use, which means a lot to us.

**Li-Chi Chen** is an assistant professor in the Faculty of Linguistics at Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poland. His research interests lie in discourse analysis, pragmatics, and sociolinguistics, particularly in the fields of the linguistics of humour, language and gender, language and culture, nonverbal communication, and comicbook studies. He also has an interest in teaching Chinese as a foreign language.  
Email: [leszek.chen@gmail.com](mailto:leszek.chen@gmail.com)

**Eryk Hajndrych** is a research-teaching assistant in the Faculty of Linguistics at Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poland. His research interests lie in Asian literatures, focusing on contemporary Taiwanese, Japanese, and Chinese literary works, and sociopragmatics, particularly in the fields of language and culture and visual language.  
Email: [ehajndrych@gmail.com](mailto:ehajndrych@gmail.com)