

‘We’ll be dead by then!’ – Comical Self-Disclosure by Elderly Japanese Women*

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0. Introduction

While the elderly population in developed nations increases, among the general public, elderly people are still often perceived as separate, with lives that are unrelated to those of more socially dominant age groups, and as uniform, without the range of individual variation found in youth. They tend to be seen as the target of health care, as consumers of social security savings, and as reminders of inevitable and fateful decline. In terms of their language, the decreased ability caused by age and illness has attracted more attention than the content and intention of their speech.

In sociolinguistics in general, the speaker’s age has been an important factor in analyzing the state and conditions of language use. However, despite some notable works in the last decade or so on language and the elderly in English-speaking contexts (e.g. Coupland, Coupland and Giles 1991, Coupland and Nussbaum 1993, Hamilton 1994, Hamilton (ed.) 1999, Williams and Nussbaum 2000) and a few cross-cultural communication study (Giles, Ota and Noels 2002, Ota, Giles and Gallois 2002), the study of discourse and language used by (and to) the elderly is still underdeveloped in comparison to the research achievements on the early years in life. It is conceivable that this inattention is related to the perception that the old age is the terminal point of one’s life after the peak of adulthood, indicating decline from the full competence, linguistically or otherwise. This perception in turn ignores an aspect of old age as the phase that displays the wealth of accumulated personal history and identity of its own.

Among studies on elderly speech, many have been conducted in the context of intergenerational discourse, largely that of first-time acquaintances, such as

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interviews by younger people (with some exceptions such as Hamilton's (1994) longitudinal interaction with an Alzheimer patient, and a peer gossip study by Saunders 1999). Such studies have found that the fact of old age and the associated hardships are foregrounded in the interactions. A frequent observation that characterizes speech of the elderly is "painful self-disclosure" (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991), in which unhappy personal information on one's ill health, immobility, disengagement, or bereavement is revealed, and the elderly often describe themselves in terms of negative stereotypes. Although it is important to investigate the motives and effects of elderly speakers' disclosure of these personal events to first-time acquaintances, it is possible that these negative and old-age focused characterizations of elderly discourse are heavily influenced by the settings of the conversations. Indeed, Coupland, Coupland, and Giles (1991) report more extensive use of "painful self-disclosure" by the elderly in intergenerational first-time acquaintance interviews than in a peer group setting. In a situation where participants do not share much in common – for example, if they did not gather for personal or professional purposes, but in response to the linguistic researcher's solicitation – it is possible that a clear age difference between the various speakers is an obvious and relatively uncontroversial property of the interlocutors that functions as a conversational topic. If the context remains at the level of introductions and small talk among non-intimates, we should not be surprised that the researcher finds the data to center around events stereotypically associated with age.

1. The Present Study

The present study is intended to add a number of other dimensions to the investigation of how elderly people verbally present themselves by drawing more attention to the multiplicity of interpretations that are available in the discourse of the elderly, not just the interpretation from the viewpoint of the analyst or of the young and socially dominant group. First, the data are of peer interactions among friends or relatives, a more naturalistic setting than the more often studied intergenerational conversations among first-time acquaintances. While it is true that intergenerational first-time encounters occasion 'natural' conversations, such a setting presents only one among many other equally, if not more, common settings of verbal interactions. Indeed, the past study of language used by women, for example, was greatly enhanced by the examination of female peer conversations, rather than confining research to mixed-gender situations or interviews. Studies of conversations among peers are likely to reveal different aspects of the verbal interaction of the elderly that are not clearly indicated in intergenerational interviews.

This study also focuses on conversations among elderly women who are in relatively good health. The focus on relatively healthy elderly is not to discount the seriousness of health issues in old age and their influence on communication, but to pay heed to lives of the less noticed and discussed population that in fact represent the experience of many elderly people. The life expectancy of Japanese

women at birth was 84.62 years in the year 2000 (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare survey), as compared with 77.64 years for males. Among the Japanese elderly population above age 65, approximately 50% are in the normal health with no need for nursing, and approximately 25% are in good health, making three-quarters of the Japanese elderly population in relatively good health. This suggests that, although there is a tendency to predetermine the elderly population as generally ill, that is not an accurate reflection of reality, and we cannot therefore hope to understand communication of the elderly without expanding the scope of our investigation to the population outside of the stereotyped images.

A third point that emerges from the data examined in this study is the complexity of the motivations underlying “painful self-disclosure” in peer group conversations among the elderly. As we will see in the discussion of the examples, stereotypical labels of elderly talk as ‘disengaged’, ‘egocentric’, and ‘grumbling’ (as pointed out by, e.g. Coupland, Coupland, & Giles 1991) present an inaccurate and unidimensional picture of a complex and multi-faceted expression of self by elderly speakers.

The examination in this paper is based on informal peer conversations of elderly Japanese women (above 65 years of age)¹ who are in relatively good health and who share a common background to various degrees. The occasions were not set up solely for the purpose of this research, but there were other independent purposes, such as gatherings of friends, or volunteer work.

One common feature that is noticeable in the ten 60-90 minute audiotape recordings of interactions that I examined is that the participants laughed often, even during verbal interaction similar to “painful self-disclosure”. Laughter during “painful self-disclosure” was not easily predictable from the stereotypical characterization of speech by the elderly. Although the events and situations referred to in such conversations could be considered as painful and negative, the recorded conversations reveal that the stories were told comically and without apparent solicitation of sympathy.

In this paper, I will concentrate on examples of such age-related disclosure that are presented with laughter and humor, and discuss the meaning and effects of such interactions. The presented examples suggest that disclosure of age-related personal matters does not necessarily carry negative import, but can be used to enliven story telling and strengthen solidarity.² References to age and decline, rather than being simply stereotypical images of complaint and unhappiness, may be viewed as complex images of awareness, coping, and ability to view the unwelcome situation objectively. It is hoped that the present study indicates the depth and breadth of verbal interaction of older speakers, providing reasons for anti-ageism, and emphasizes the importance of examining naturally-occurring data from a variety of contexts to gain insights into language use and speakers’ lives.

¹ As discussed by Eckert (1984), the biological age is not necessarily an indication of the person’s social age reflected in language, but I used 65 years of age for convenience in data collection.

² Saunders (1999) also found that gossiping is used for the reasons of solidarity despite the common view of gossip as “lazy small talk”.

2. Painful self-disclosure and humor

The examples I consider are from conversational data collected between summer 2001 and early 2003 for a larger interdisciplinary exploration of the interactions of language use, old age and gender, with particular attention to verbal interactions of elderly women in Japan. Peer conversations were recorded either by one of the participants of the conversation or by me. When I recorded conversations, I was mostly not an active participant but was engaged in another activity or conversation. The topics of conversation were various, but included experiences of past trips and plans for the future trips, food, shopping, sports, books, acquaintances' health and death, family members' health condition. As I mentioned earlier, there were many occasions of laughter, which is similar to an observation by Ervin-Tripp and Lampert (1992) of informal conversations among the younger people that they studied.³

I will discuss three examples in this paper: (1) a comical description of how the speaker's husband died without making any sound, (2) a twin sister's comment in response to her sister's discussion of expected events 20 years in the future, reminding her that she (or they) would be dead by then, and (3) an account of the speaker's recent forgetfulness.

The first example is from a 90-minute conversation among senior volunteers who belong to a seniors' association affiliated with an organization called the Life Planning Center that promotes elders' awareness in physical and mental health. When I visited the association, four senior volunteers, two female and two male, all aged above 75, were gathered in a room to receive telephone calls from other elders who might like a conversational companion over the phone. The volunteers take turns to perform this service. While they were waiting for phone calls, which were very few, they chatted among themselves.

In this segment of the conversation, two male participants were mostly quiet and listening. One of the female participants, N, had been talking about how lucky she was to receive the assistance of Dr. Hinohara, the founder of the Center, in advising with respect to her late husband's medical condition. N, the main speaker, is in her late 70's, while the other (female) participant, M, is in her early 80's. N's utterances are shown in bold and her utterances that are comical and/or that accompanied her chuckles are in small capitals. The designation '<laughter>' refers to some sustained laughing, while '<laugh>' marks a short and light laugh. The temporal positions of back channeling and laughs indicated in the translation in this and other excerpts are approximations due to the word order difference between Japanese and English.

(1) Husband's Death

N1: [tyanto sensei ga [moo teha [tehai-site kudasatte [
M1: [a [a, mo, oisyan mo [tyanto site, [aa
T1: [haa

³ In Ervin-Tripp and Lampert, 8.3% of the turns occasioned laughter.

- N2:** de sensei ga sugu tonndekite kudasutte [kangofu-san to [
M2: [a [aa
T2: [aa
N3: sorede nee, nakunatte ne, nijikan hodo site odenwa ga [kakatte
M3: [aaa
T3: [aaa
N4: de dodesuka tte sensei mo nijikan mae ni nak
N5: sore mo hontoni ne, sobani itemo wakan nai gurai
N6: UN TOMO SUN <LAUGHTER> TOMO KYUN TOMO IWANAIDE [NE
M6: [un
N7: ANO <LAUGH> WATASI MO SIROOTO DESU KARA [NE,
M7: [un
N8: iki ga tomatteru nante.
N9: yome ga ne, [soba ni ite, otoosama ne, ikisiterassyaranai mitai
desuyotte kara
M9: [un
N10: EEEE (ANIMATED) <LAUGHTER> NANTEYUTTE NE
M10: < laughter > so.
N11: soide koosite, nn sinzooni naan tomo wakannai n desu ne.
N12: soide raifu puranningu sentaa ni sugu denwa simasita no.
N13: sositara ne < LAUGH >
N14: NANKA ANOO ARE TISSYUPEEPAA O NE HANA NO SITA NI NOKKETE
[KUDA..
M14: < LAUGH > [uun un
N15: nokketemo ne ugoiteru ka ugoitenai ka wakan nain desu.
N16: sositara, moo sensei to kangohu san ga sugu kite kudasatta[te,
M16: [unn
N17: demo moo wakatta n desu ne moo
N18: KORE WA MOO DAMEDATTE < LAUGH >YUU KOTO GA NE
N19: daakara sensei no okage de nee, aan na.

Translation

- N1:** Dr. (Hinohara) had already made arrangements
M1: mm mm already a doctor was already arranged to be sent, hmm
T1: I see
N2: and the doctor rushed to my house with a nurse
M2: ah hmm
T2: ah
N3: and y'know, about two hours after my husband passed away, I got a
phone call
M3: mmm mm
T3: mmm mm

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- N4:** and, Dr. Hinohara asked me “how is he?”, (and I said) two hours earlier
- N5:** and it was really, you wouldn’t have noticed even if you were right next to him
- N6:** (MY HUSBAND) DIDN’T SAY A PEEP <LAUGHTER> OR EVEN A SQUEAK
- M6:** mm
- N7:** WELL <LAUGHTER> SINCE I AM A LAY PERSON, YOU KNOW,
- M7:** mm
- N8:** I couldn’t imagine that he stopped breathing.
- N9:** my daughter-in-law was beside us and said “Father (in-law) doesn’t seem to be breathing,” so
- M9:** uhuh
- N10:** “GEE, REALLY?” (ANIMATED VOICE) <LAUGHTER> I SAID
- M10:** < laughter > I see.
- N11:** so, like this, um, (I touched) his heart, but I couldn’t tell anything.
- N12:** so, I called the Life Planning Center right away.
- N13:** then <laugh>
- N14:** THEY TOLD ME THAT I SHOULD PUT A TISSUE PAPER UNDER MY HUSBAND’S NOSE.
- M14:** <laugh> mm
- N15:** even when I put the tissue paper on him, I couldn’t tell if it was moving.
- N16:** then, Dr. Hinohara’s nurse came to our house right away
- M16:** <laughter> I see
- N17:** but I understood then
- N18:** THAT MY HUSBAND COULDN’T < LAUGH > BE SAVED
- N19:** so, I’m thankful to Dr. Hinohara.

The theme of this stretch of narrative is bereavement, one of the core categories of self-disclosure associated with old age. The time of her husband’s death about 10 years ago is recounted by N calmly with expressions of gratitude to Dr. Hinohara, but her narrative becomes animated and even comical when she describes the specifics of how she encountered her husband’s death, and how she did not notice exactly when he died.⁴ What is most striking in this example is her utterance numbered N6. The expression *un tomo sun to mo iwanai*, which I translated as ‘[he] didn’t say a peep’, is a commonly used expression, literally meaning that someone does not say *un* or *sun*, and describes a state in which someone does not give even a slight verbal response. N may have expected to hear at least a slight sound at the last moment of her husband’s life, but this was not what actually

⁴ 5 – 10 years after a bereavement, according to Coupland, Coupland & Giles (1991), seems to be the common time to start recounting the story.

happened. She continues to express her surprise at this unexpected ending of her husband's life by adding *kyun tomo iwanai*, 'didn't even squeak'. The onomatopoeic *kyun* suggests a small creature such as a mouse or a tiny dog as the source of the sound. The association of a small creature's squeaks with one's husband's last moment, which would normally be expected to be described with dignity, is unexpected and humorous, illustrating N's surprise quite vividly, especially because the narrator appears to be a proper and traditional upper-middle class homemaker. N discloses her memory of the very moment of her husband's death comically with laughter. She goes on to describe further her surprise and confusion. N's reaction in N10 to the observation made by her daughter-in-law is given with an animated and vivid voice quality accompanied with laughter. The detail of testing breath by using a tissue paper in N14 adds another important but trivial aspect to the description of the situation, inviting a laugh. Humorous descriptions and laughs described above may be said to have contributed to the story telling of the important moment of N's husband's life by adding vividness of the situation, but a little laugh in N18, as the speaker recounts her realization that her husband would not come back, seems different, giving the impression of resignation and acceptance. I will discuss more the effects of laughs in self-disclosure later.

The next example was the basis for the title of this paper 'We'll be dead by then'. It is an excerpt from a conversation recorded at a family gathering at a Japanese restaurant. The group of eight people included three generations of women – four cousins in their early 70's (S, H, G & Y), of whom two (S & H) are twins; the grand-daughter (Lisa) of one of the cousins, along with her mother and English-speaking father (J). The four cousins generally carried out their conversations among themselves, leaving the younger ones on their own, although the conversations occasionally converged at least partially. Just before the excerpted part, the cousins were talking about their experience of past trips to Europe as well as about various room arrangements at the restaurant. One of the twins (S, 71 years old) wondered aloud about the bilingual ability of the child, Lisa, and started to ask questions to the child's father, J, crossing the lines of the conversation group boundary. Her twin sister H and her cousins were not actively engaged in this conversation as it started.

(2) Death in the future

[S has been wondering about bilingual literacy of a 7-year old, while H, her twin sister, and their cousins G and Y are only half engaged in that topic. J, the English-speaking father of the 7-year old (Lisa), joins in the conversation at this moment to respond to S.]

- S: zya kooyatte otoosan no kaita no wa yomeru wake ne, soizya
 J: un, yomeru
 S: e?
 J: motiron
 S: n, yomeru no ne. un. (pause) yonde wakaru wake da. eigo dakara.
 G: [with others, talking about other private rooms in this restaurant]

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S: ii wa ne. obatyan ni eigo osowaroo kana. Lisa tyan ni.

H, Y: < laughter >

H: LISA TYAN NI, O, SENSEI NI NARU KORO NI WA
SIN DEN <LAUGHING> ZYA NAI

Y, G, S, etc.: < loud laughter>

S: honto. nee.

Translation

S: then, she can read what her father (you) wrote, right? then

J: yeah, she can

S: huh?

J: of course

S: hmm, she can read. yes. (pause) She can understand it when she reads it.
Since it's in English.

G: [talking about other private rooms in the restaurant with H and Y]

S: That's nice. I might ask her to teach me English. Ask Lisa.

H, Y: < laughter >

H: BY THE TIME LISA BECOMES A TEACHER, YOU (WE) WILL BE DEAD
<LAUGHING>

Y, G, S, etc.: < loud laughter>

S: True. Isn't it.

When S says that she might want to ask the 7 year-old Lisa to teach her English, her twin sister and others began to shift their attention to this conversation, as indicated by their laughter. This utterance by S should not particularly be classified as an age-related disclosure, although adults make this type of unrealistic statement to half flatter children. Hearing this utterance, however, her twin sister H points out another reason why S's wish may be unrealistic – by the time Lisa grows up to be able to teach, S will be dead. Because of the frequent ellipsis of referential expressions in Japanese, it is not completely clear whether the person who will be dead is only S, or whether H also includes herself, as S and H are exactly the same age. This is not a stereotypical self-disclosure since the speaker points to the future death of another. S laughs and agrees with H's assertion. H's utterance in this sense can be viewed as an age-related wisecrack directed as much to herself as to her sister. H could have commented on the unrealistic nature of S's earlier utterance by pointing out Lisa's being still a child, or could have teased S by saying that she would never learn anything now which she had not learned already. But, by referring to a more shocking truth, H's utterance was more effective and comical in this instance of verbal communication. H's humorous remark could be misunderstood and possibly be taken to be offensive if H and S had not had a close relationship and if the audience had not shared that knowledge.

The third example is an excerpt from a conversation among five women who have traveled overseas together. Four members were in their 60's at the time of

recording, and K, the main speaker in this example, and N were in their mid 70's. One of the members invited all for a meal to talk over photographs from the last trip that all except K made. Just before the excerpt, the participants were talking about their past trips to Austria and K began to disclose her worry about her recent forgetfulness, which she presented as a possible sign of dementia, an impairment often associated with advanced age.

(3) Recent forgetfulness

[Talking about past trips in Europe]

- K1:** demo atasi nee, <cough>
K2: koo huu ni, mukasi no bun wa kooyatte omidasu kedo nee
 X2: un
K3: saikin no koto tasikani moo ne
K4: ISSYU NO TIHOO ZYA NAI KA < LAUGH. VOICE> [TO OMOO.
 N4: iya atasi soona no yo
 T4: [iya iya minna onnasi ne
K5: KATAPPASI KARA [WASURE TYAU [NO YO. <LAUGHTER>
 M5: [onnasi onnasi
 T5: [ie, minna hontoni. ne
K6: DAKARA NANNEN NI DOKO ITTA KA MO WASURETYATTERU NO <L'TER>
 M6: onnasi onnasi
 T6: moo syasin nannka

Translation

- K1:** but I, you know, <cough>
K2: like this, I can recall things from long past, like this, but
 X2: mm
K3: in terms of recent things, I really don't
K4: I almost think it's a kind of < laughing voice> dementia
 N4: I am like that, y'know
 T4: It's like everyone right?
K5: I forget one after another. <laughter>
 M5: same here, same here
 T5: everyone, really right.
K6: So, I've forgotten where I went in which year <laughter>
 M6: same here, same here
 T6: y'know, photos and all

When K mentions the possibility of her developing dementia, others jump into the conversation, repeatedly confirming that they all experience the same symptoms. These overlaps indicate the participants' involvement in the interaction. K's allusion to dementia and further reference to her forgetfulness can be understood

as a serious self-disclosure of age-related health problems, but the possible gravity of the matter is lightened because of the accompanying light laughter, sounding as if she was just reporting somewhat disturbing but also amusing facts.

The content of K's utterance can be viewed as a self-disparaging exaggeration, and, in that regard, it can be interpreted as comical, but K is the only person who is laughing. K's disclosure, however, elicited others' empathy. That outcome may be accounted for by the fact that K's conversants were her good friends who shared similar experiences and viewpoint. In fact, humorous self-disclosure has been suggested to display friendship and solidarity among English-speaking females in their late teens to 30's (Rubin 1983, Ervin-Tripp and Lampert 1992, Hay 2000). Here, similar observations are made in conversations of elderly Japanese female friends. If K's conversants had not had such background, but were, for example, intergenerational first-time acquaintances, it would be less likely that K's utterance would have prompted as clear empathy as we see in this example.

The humor and laughter in the case of K's self-disclosure, as well as in other examples that I discussed above, may have lightened the weight of the content of the self-disclosure. Ziv (1984), according to Ervin-Tripp and Lampert (1992), suggested the following four social functions of self-directed humor: (1) Equalizing: Redefining the social hierarchy by higher status individuals in order to create solidarity among group members of differing social status; (2) Defending: Protecting the self by identifying a weakness before anyone else does; (3) Sharing: Sharing similarities between self and others; and (4) Coping: Coping with weaknesses by making light of them. We could rephrase the discussion of example (3) as showing that humor was used as a coping and/or a sharing strategy. Indeed, Ervin-Tripp and Lampert (1992), who provided the headings to these functions, also found in their study that the coping and sharing strategies are most relevant to women's use of humor.

3. Conclusion

This paper presents examples of peer conversations among elderly Japanese women. As in intergenerational interview situations, the elderly women disclose age-related "painful" events and situations, but such "painful" stories are presented humorously and with laughter. Among the explanations suggested for the use of humor in conversations among elderly female peers, one is a strategy employed to help sharing and coping with difficult situations. Such an explanation is similar to that presented for the use of humor among young English-speaking U.S. females studied by Ervin-Tripp and Lampert (1992) and among young female New Zealanders of European descent studied by Hay (2000). The difficult situations presented in my study of elderly female speakers, however, are mostly age-related such as their decline in function, shortness of remaining lifespan or experience of bereavement. Besides the function of sharing and coping, it is likely that the elderly are aware of the conversational function of humor making the speech more vivid and interesting, especially when pointing out a humorous detail

in an otherwise sad situation. Humor might have also been used to indicate the speaker's intimacy with the target of description – a neighbor, for example, would not have the privilege to describe N's husband's death in the same way as N did in the first example. Finally, in connection to the intimacy and sharing functions mentioned above, humorous self-disclosure aided the reinforcement of solidarity among the speakers, again similarly to the cases of younger females observed in Ervin-Tripp and Lampert (1992) and Hay (2000).

In sum, whether young or old, female friends exhibit humorous self-disclosure in their conversations, and in that sense the elderly do not seem to be different from the younger generation, yet the topics of their self-disclosure are much more closely associated with decline and death, age-related topics that are not commonly shared by the younger speakers.

Some psychologists have observed that more complex emotions are found in the case of the elderly than in younger people (Carstensen, Pasupathi, Mayr and Nesselroade 2000). We see some of this complexity in the examples analyzed in the present study, in which painful facts are presented comically, and in which humor serves multiple conversational purposes. Painful age-related situations including the advanced stage of one's life are not denied, unlike the "postmodern" myth of the old age being "youth with gray hair" (pointed out by Coupland and Coupland 1999), and are not taken simplistically. Further analyses of naturally-occurring peer conversations among the elderly would, I believe, yield even more valuable insights into the emotional depth and complexity of this frequently misunderstood and undeservedly marginalized group.

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