

Dealing with changes -- Discourse of elderly Japanese women

Yoshiko Matsumoto
Stanford University

Much of the previous research on elderly speech has studied intergenerational discourse of first-time acquaintances, such as interviews by younger people, and has 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, or bereavement is revealed, and the elderly speakers describe themselves in terms of negative stereotypes. Although it is interesting that elderly speakers disclose to first-time acquaintances personal events that refer to physical and social changes in their lives, it is also possible that these negative and old-age focused characteristics of elderly discourse are heavily influenced by the settings of the conversations, where the age difference between discourse participants is the single most salient property of the interlocutors.

Given the abundance of stereotypes of elderly women (e.g. as feeble and as asexual), the study strives to avoid sources of unconscious bias embedded in the choices of discourse practices to be examined, in the methodology, or in the interpretations posited for specific phenomena. Focusing on verbal interactions that are similar to “painful self-disclosure,” I will examine in this paper two sets of spoken discourse data of elderly Japanese women in relatively good health: informal peer conversations and interviews with a younger (non-first time) acquaintance. I will consider meanings and effects of such interactions and how old age and gender are factors of positive or negative identity of the individual speakers in dealing with changes in their lives. The data reveal that the interpretations that can be given to references to age and decline go beyond the stereotypical images of complaint and unhappiness, e.g., images of acceptance, awareness and ability to view their situation objectively, as well as self-analysis of adjusting one’s established persona to the changing reality.

The conversational and interview examples from elderly Japanese women suggest that disclosure of age-related personal matters does not necessarily carry negative import, and show a complex negotiation among the speaker’s intention, social constraints, and expressions of personal and social identities. Taking as example the verbal interactions of older Japanese women, this study emphasizes the importance of considering a multitude of pragmatic and social meanings that work together to express one’s persona.