

PEOPLE WATCH

In this issue's People Watch, Anne McLellan Howard interviews Dr. Cyndi Dunn about her work in the field of Japanese keigo. In the first half of the interview, which was carried in the Fall 2008 issue of *Pragmatic Matters*, Dr. Dunn discussed her research of keigo in business manner training. In the second half of the interview presented here, Dr. Dunn talks about keigo in wedding speeches.

An interview with Dr. Cyndi Dunn

by Anne McLellan Howard

Dr. Cyndi Dunn is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Northern Iowa, who was a Visiting Research Fellow at Tsukuba University in the first semester of 2008. She visited Miyazaki at that time, and I met to talk with her about her research on Japanese keigo and business manner training.

Anne Howard: So how did you get into this field?

Dr. Cyndi Dunn: Well, it actually had its roots in my dissertation research. I've always been interested in keigo and really interested in style-shifting in Japanese: the difference between informal and formal. So my dissertation research was actually comparing female college students with women in their fifties and sixties, and looking at their style-shifting between conversations and actually giving reports at meetings, business meetings, whether of a college club or a social organization. And at that time, I discovered working with the college students that a lot of them were getting really nervous about their ability to speak appropriately in job interviews. And at that point I didn't really have the data to look at that but I decided that my next thing in Japan is going to be looking at that whole transition to the workplace. And then someone just casually mentioned to me that there are businesses that actually teach people that stuff. And I said well, wouldn't that be fascinating to look at. Because it's one of those great situations where, all of the cultural ideas are explicitly laid out there for you. You don't have to go subterranean trying to find the meanings behind the meanings, because it's all just laid out, here's what you have to do, here's why this is important.

AH: So, could you talk a little more about other stuff you've done with keigo?

CD: Yeah, well, a lot of my recent work has actually been looking at wedding speeches, and there too, it was a certain matter of a friend saying, well, if you're interested in keigo, what you should be looking at is wedding speeches and so since everyone videotapes their wedding reception, I just got videotapes from recently married friends. And then was looking at some of the metaphors and actually doing an interesting comparison with Naomi Quinn's work on American marriage metaphors and actually finding a lot of them are very similar: building a new home together, marriage as a journey, those kinds of things are in English and Japanese. But one of the things that I found interesting in a Japanese wedding speech was that there was a lot of emphasis on cooperation and working together. And so, in English we talk about working on our relationship, so the work metaphor is there, but in the US the focus is on building a better relationship together; but in Japanese it's working together to raise your children well or become better members of society or deal with the problems of old age so there the focus is much more outward, the couple against the world if you will. In fact, one man even used the metaphor, it's like being in a foxhole. And

you have to be fighting on the same side! Those guys are the enemy, not your spouse! Where I think with Americans I think that there's much more trying to make the relationship better. And that wasn't discussed much in the Japanese wedding speeches. And then I've been looking at the sort of general form of them because they're very formulaic.

AH: That's what I was going to ask you, do people actually sit down and write a wedding speech or do you just get one from a book and change the data? There's so many books about it I wondered if anyone writes their own speeches.

CD: Most of them didn't seem to have been culled from a book, and I say this because, quite frankly, if they had been they might have been better (laughs). What I found was, the beginning and the ending were very formulaic, and then there's this part in the middle where you're supposed to praise the bride or praise the groom and what happens is, it's very often, you know, the boss's boss, or their professor from college who hasn't seen them in three or four years, and they have to say something, they can't just stand up and say congratulations on your marriage and sit back down. And so what you would get would be, people, like in the workplace, explaining their business, and so there was one guy who went on and on about a company that made colored LCD screens, and he actually had a five-minute discussion of the technology involved in making good screens, and [then he said] the groom was very helpful with it. Or the bride's thesis advisor, when the bride did her senior thesis on the novels of Willa Cather, so you get this five-minute discussion of *My Antonia*. And the bride wrote a great thesis about it. Because they're stuck. And often the friends can tell much more personal stories. And those are the ones where you actually get a glimpse of the person's personality. And also the more senior people, when they actually do talk about the bride and groom, it's very stereotyped. All of the brides are beautiful, all of the grooms are hard-working young men with promising futures. Because the friends will tell about the time that they went to Hawaii for an international conference and got lost and couldn't catch the bus and were walking back for a long time. So you get a little bit more of the flaws.

AH: Interesting. And then the older people's speeches must be a lot more, like, advisory?

CD: Yes, because that's the other piece that they have, first there's praise of the bride or groom, and then a piece of advice for marriage. And that is where they often actually will quote, but the things they quote are fascinating too. I mean, they quoted old Chinese poetry, they quoted some Buddhist saying about marriage, then this guy quoted a newspaper editorial, this was at the depth of the recession, and it's a newspaper editorial about how businesses needed to focus on recovery, restructuring and recycling. And then he takes these three things and says, OK, let's apply these to marriage. And restructuring becomes cutting out the fat, and now the groom is going to be eating his wife's home cooking so you don't want to get too overweight. And recycling became being thrifty in your married life. But people take things that at first glance would have nothing whatsoever to do with marriage and then somehow turn it to make it say something else. One of the things I was looking at was the sort of, how the forms change when you go from the older more serious people who know the forms but don't know the couple very well, and then you get to the friends whose openings and closings are very minimal because they only know one or two fancy, flowery phrases but then the middle part is often much more personal and sort of idiosyncratic.

AH: Are you planning anything for the future?

CD: I'm so into this, I'd think I have several years' worth of papers.

Footnotes

¹Itadakimasu is the *kenjogo*, or humble form, of the verb *taberu*, to eat. Japanese people ritually say it before eating.

References

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