

# The Negotiation of Face in Humor Directed to Self and Extended Self<sup>1</sup>

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**Key words:** self-directed humor, extended self-directed humor, face, stacked humor

## 1. Introduction

Conversational humor frequently occurs in casual talks in interaction. Among various kinds of humor, self-directed humor is particularly grounded on solid relationships between the speakers, because it is a risky act that potentially harms the face of the speaker (Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006). Studies report that female speakers often make self-directed humor (Ervin-Tripp and Lampert 1992, Hay 2000, Kotthoff 2000, Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006), and that this tendency becomes more salient in the same-sex group conversations among women for their identity displays (Boxer and Cortes-Conde 1997, Ervin-Tripp and Lampert 1992, Hay 2000, Lampert and Ervin-Tripp 2006). Furthermore, female speakers are observed to use what Ervin-Tripp and Lampert (1992) call “stacked humor,” a kind of humor that builds on the previous speaker’s humorous key. According to Ervin-Tripp and Lampert (1992: 114), women in their study were “more likely to collaborate or duet in creating humor,” and they “maintained the humorous key across participants, resulting in a larger amount of humor elicitation overall by women.”

Based on those previous studies of women’s self-directed humor, this study further explores the dialogic dimension of self-directed humor by Japanese women, paying special attention to the interactional patterns in constructing humorous frames among the speech participants. Furthermore, this study investigates how face is negotiated in conversational hu-

mor directed to the speech participants and their family members. This paper provides a case study in which the subjects are urban Japanese female friends in their early thirties.

This study broadens the notion of self to include “extended self” — collective selves within a single *uchi* space. In other words, this study treats the self not on the individual basis but on the collective basis, particularly as a member of family. Given that, self-directed humor in the current study extends to the case where the speaker makes humorous remarks targeted to one’s own family members. In my data I found many instances where the speaker humorously denigrates her family members in the same way she does about herself. This fact, as well as the notion of *uchi* — a concept of Japanese self within a group of social organization (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003, Ide 1982) — has led me to hypothesize that self-directed humor for Japanese speakers can be extended to humor about, or targeted to, their family members. We will call this phenomenon *extended self-directed humor* (hereafter referred to as ESDH), distinguished from *self-directed humor* (hereafter referred to as SDH) which normally excludes humor directed to any other person than the speaker themselves. The female speakers in my data often disclose funny and silly stories, real or imaginative, about themselves and about their family members. This paper aims at presenting how this is dialogically manipulated through interaction. The research questions are: how do the other participants react to those humorous disclosures of self and extended self? And what implications does that bare in terms of face?

## 2. The data and methodology

The data are drawn from naturally occurring casual conversations totaling 112 minutes among three urban Japanese female friends in their early thirties. Three speakers, K, S, and N have been long-term friends for over fifteen years. K and S are married, while N is not; and only K has children. The conversations took place at K’s house where K’s two small children were around. Five sequences of SDH and ESDH were selected for qualitative analysis. The examples were transcribed, using the transcription conventions proposed by Du Bois et al. (1993).<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Different framing patterns between SDH and ESDH

The findings are that the speech participants frame (Bateson 1972, Goffman 1974, 1981, Tannen 1993) the ongoing speech activity as humor in both SDH and ESDH, but show different framing strategies between the two.

In many instances of SDH and ESDH observed in my data, the initiator of SDH was either the first-person or second-person speaker. When teased by the second-person, the first-person catches on, and develops SDH. In doing so, the humorous key is typically maintained, manifesting “stacked humor.” In contrast, the initiator of ESDH was always the speaker whose family members are the target of the humor, and the other speech participants did not perform stacked humor.

#### 3.1. SDH

To SDH uttered by one of the speech participants, the other speech participants support framing of humor by adding similar personal stories (Example 1 and 2) or by jointly constructing a single humorous story (Example 3). Among the three, the first two examples report personal experiences that have actually happened, while the third example is a somewhat fictitious story connected to reality to some extent.

In Example (1), the female friends, K, S, and N, are having dinner at K’s house. They are eating Vietnamese “spring rolls,” which S brought as one of the dishes. Prior to the excerpt, S has remarked that the rice paper of spring rolls that they are eating is a little too hard and dry. S and K have agreed that the rice paper would get softer if soaked in water. In line 1 of the excerpt below, K suggests to spray some water on the rice paper, to which S agrees in line 2. Since they are eating at K’s house, it is expected that K is the host who offers anything the guests want. Against that expectation, in lines 3 and 7, K performs humorous self-disclosure that she will not bring a sprayer, implying that she is lazy, not very committed to being a good host. Her playfully self-mocking stance is indexed by her laughter in line 4. After K’s humorous self-disclosure is appreciated by both N and S, as their laughter shows in lines 6 and 8–10, respectively, S says in line 11 that she herself is also lazy. This confession unfolds S’s own story that

discloses her laziness, exposing her negative face in a humorous way. The humorous key concept of “laziness,” while not literally mentioned, is maintained.

(1)<sup>3</sup>

- 1 K: *ja kirifuki ka nanka [de],*  
then sprayer or something with  
‘Then, with sprayer or something.’
- 2 S: [(H)] *un,*  
yes  
‘Yeah.’
- 3 K: ... (1.5) *in dake.*  
say only  
‘I’m just saying.’
- 4 @@
- 5 S: (H)
- 6 N: @@
- 7 K: @@@ *deteko-nai yo.*  
come.out-NEG FP  
‘I’m not gonna bring it.’
- 8 S: @@
- 9 @@
- 10 @
- 11 <@ *yoku iw-areru,*  
often say-PASS
- 12 *watashi mo @>.*  
I too  
‘(My husband) often tells me so, too.’
- 13 K: @@@
- 14 N: @@
- 15 S: ... <Q *nanka,*  
somehow

- 16        *takuhaibin ga kiteru mita=i Q>*,  
package NOM arrive seem
- 17        *toka itte*,  
QT say  
‘I’m like, “I think a package has arrived,”’
- 18    K:    @@@@
- 19    S:    <Q *ii ne=*,  
          nice FP
- 20        *mabou ga tsuka-[eru] to=Q>*,  
magic NOM use-can then
- 21    K:                                    [ @ ]
- 22    S:    [2 *toka* 2] *iw-are-chau no*.  
QT say-PASS-PFV FP  
‘And he says, “It’s nice you can use magic.”’
- 23        [2 @ @ 2]
- 24    N:    @@@
- 25    S:    <Q *iu dake de yat-temora-eru noka na? Q>*  
          say only by do-BEN-can Q FP
- 26        *tokatte iw-are-[chau @@@]*.  
QT say-PASS-PFV  
‘And he goes on, “You think all you have to do is ask and  
someone will do it for you?”’
- 27    N:                                    [ @ @ @ @ ]

It is intriguing that S’s humorous self disclosure manifests itself as a role-play of two characters enacted by a single person. She plays the role of herself (lines 15–16) and her husband (lines 19–20 and line 25) in the form of reported speech with recognizable acting voice quality. S’s story reveals her laziness: she was not willing to get the door for a package delivered to her house; instead she wanted her husband to do that for her. S also reports that her husband teased her for her deeds. This is a true story she has experienced before, as she frames it in lines 11–12 before she starts her

humorous self disclosure. S's contribution of her self-directed humor in comparison to K's demonstrates an instance of stacked humor. Throughout the play frame starting from line 3, laughter abounds as an index of recognition and appreciation of SDH.

Similarly, Example (2) shows active humor support by the co-participants in the form of stacked humor. In this context, K is carrying the food to the guest room, not from the refrigerator, but from the hallway of her house. It was a cold day in December in Tokyo when this conversation was recorded. Due to the fact that the central heating system is not common in Japan, the temperature in the hallway can drop very low to a level even lower than in the refrigerator. Seeing K coming from the hallway with the food, S expresses her surprise in line 4. K first responds seriously in lines 5–6 that storing food in the hallway makes sense because it is the coldest place in her house. S finds humor in the incongruity that food is stored in the hallway, not in the refrigerator, and laughs in line 7. This reaction suddenly switches the contextualization of the current speech activity from a serious conversation to a humorous one.

(2)

- 1 S: *nanka do- --*  
somehow
- 2 *dokka kara --*  
somewhere from
- 3 *do- --*
- 4 *doko kara detekuru no tte[in kanji].*  
where from come.out FP QT like  
'It surprises me where (the food) comes from.'
- 5 K: *[ichiban,*  
most
- 6 *maga-ya de ichiban] samuin da [2 mon koko 2].*  
our-house in most cold COP FP here  
'Because this is the coldest place in our house.'
- 7 S: *[2 @@@@ 2]*

- 8 N: <☺ *a wakaru* ☺>.  
oh understand  
'Oh, I understand.'
- 9 K: <☺ *chotto fum-are-chatta kedo* ☺> @  
a.little step-PASS-PFV although  
'Although (the kids) stepped on (the food) a little.'
- 10 N: <☺ *uchi mo ne* ☺>,  
my.place too FP  
'In my house, too,'
- 11 <☺ *samui toko tteinto* ☺>,  
cold place QT  
'The cold place is,'
- 12 <☺ *butsu-ma toka ne* ☺>,  
Buddha-room QT FP  
'The Buddhist's altar room, for example,'
- 13 S: [@@@@]@@@@@
- 14 K: [@@@]
- 15 N: [2 <☺ *mikan toka oite-aru no* ☺> @@ 2]  
tangerine QT put-there.is FP  
'We leave the tangerines there.'
- 16 S: [2 @@@@@@@ 2]
- 17 N: <☺ *rooka toka sa* ☺> @@  
hallway QT FP  
'Or in the hallway.'
- 18 S: [3 @@@@@@ 3]
- 19 N: [3 <☺ *reizooko yori* 3] *samui nda mon ne* ☺>.  
fridge than cold COP FP FP  
'(Those places) are colder than the fridge, aren't they?'
- 20 K: *soo*.  
right  
'That's right.'
- 21 [4 *reizooko yori samui* 4].  
fridge than cold  
'(Those places) are colder than the fridge.'

22 S: [4 @@@@ 4]

23 K: *bontoni.*  
really  
'Seriously.'

In line 9, K catches on to the play frame, disclosing that the negative side of keeping the food in the hallway was that her kids stepped on the food a little. This utterance occurs with smiling voice quality,<sup>4</sup> followed by a pulse of laughter, which are both indices of her playful stance. K's remark in line 9 hints at the continuity between the self and extended self: when K humorously denigrates herself, in a passive sentence, for her awkwardness to get the food a little messed, she is implying that her kids are the agents. Nonetheless, this example is categorized as SDH because K does not explicitly direct humor at her kids. After showing her comprehension of K's humor, N stacks humor in line 10 by contributing her similar personal story about her household. N's humorous disclosure is parallel to K's in that her family including herself is the target of humor. N says that her family also keeps tangerines and such in the hallway, and even in the Buddhist's altar room because those places are the coldest in her house. This juxtaposition of the sacred and the common generates semantic incongruity, and consequently, humor.

The play frame in this example starts with S teasing K, which K catches on to and develops into humorous self disclosure involving her family. N also picks up on this humorous sentiment by portraying her SDH overlapped by ESDH. The abundant occurrences of laughter and smiling voice quality throughout the passage from line 7, index the speech participants' footing in the play frame.

The boundary between the reality and fantasy is relatively thin in Example (3). The humor is somewhat grounded in the real world, but it is creatively developed into the world of "pseudo-plausability" (Chafe 2003, 2007). In this example, S is talking about stretch marks of a pregnant woman. Among the three speakers, only K has been pregnant. Based on her experience, in line 6, K starts to explain how a pregnant woman's abdomen expands. In line 7, K playfully states that the condition is perfect



for cleaning the navel.

(3)

- 1 S: .. <A *nanka* A> *sore o ne*,  
          somehow that ACC FP
- 2 N: .. *un*,  
      *yeah*  
      ‘Yeah,’
- 3 S: .. *nanka fusegu ne*,  
      somehow prevent FP
- 4 ... *kuriumu mitaina no ga arun desho?*  
      cream like NMLZ NOM there.is FP  
      ‘Is that right that there is some kind of cream that prevents  
      (stretch marks)?’
- 5 N: .. *un*,  
      *yeah*  
      ‘Yeah,’
- 6 K: .. *nanse obeso ga nakunarun da kara.*  
      EMPH navel NOM disappear COP because  
      ‘The navel disappears (when one gets pregnant).’
- 7 ... (1.2) *obeso sooji ni wa motteko--*  
      navel cleaning for TOP suitable  
      ‘It’s perfect for cleaning the navel.’
- 8 .. *obeso no bun <HI made HI> birogaru kara=*,  
      navel of part to expand because  
      ‘Because (the abdomen) expands to the part of the navel,’
- 9 S: .. *a=*,  
      *oh*  
      ‘Oh,’
- 10 .. [*soke ka=*],  
      so FP  
      ‘I see,’
- 11 K: .. [*kodomo ga*] *dekiru to.*  
      baby NOM emerge when  
      ‘When one gets pregnant.’

- 12 N: .. *a=n*,  
wow  
'Wow,'
- 13 K: .. *un*,  
yeah  
'Yeah,'
- 14 .. *obeso mo* <☺ *nakunatte* ☺>,  
navel too disappear  
'The navel disappears and,'
- 15 S: .. *goma tori hoodai tte* [<@ *kanji* @>]? (SNIFF)  
dirt take all.you.can QT like  
'Like, you can take out all the dirt (from the navel)?'
- 16 K: [ *sou*,  
yes  
'Yeah,'
- 17 *goma tori*] *hoodai*.  
dirt take all.you.can  
'You can take out all the dirt (from the navel).'
- 18 S: [2 @@@@ 2]
- 19 N: [2 @@@@ 2]
- 20 K: ... <HI <F *ko=nnani* F> *haittetan da* HI> *mitaina*.  
this.much be.inside COP like  
'Like, "Wow, I never knew that there was so much (dirt) in  
(my navel)."'

Interrupted by six intonation units, K resumes her humor in line 14, using the same humorous concept, a "pregnant woman's navel." Her playful stance is indexed by her smiling voice quality. This time her utterance is jointly constructed by S's utterance in line 15 where S rephrases the humorous key concept of *obeso sooji* ('cleaning the navel'), introduced by K in line 7, to *goma tori hoodai* ('take out all the dirt'). Thus, S actively participates in K's humorous story telling. In lines 16–17, K agrees with S by repeating the key word, *goma tori hoodai* ('take out all the dirt'), and in line 20, K even acts out how she would be surprised to find a lot of dirt out of her navel by using an imaginative reported speech. K's story is connected to reality

based on her experiencing pregnancy, and her abdomen expanding. However, she gives it a humorous twist, pretending she is really removing as much dirt as possible from her navel, therefore utilizing the benefits of her abdomen's expansion. Even though it can be true that a pregnant woman would indulge in cleaning her navel, it does not seem to be taken seriously.

This example demonstrates the active interaction for developing a single humorous story. A humorous key is maintained between the speakers in which reality and fabrication overlap. Compared to the previous two examples, which showed humor support through the disclosure of an additional self-directed humorous story, Example (3) shows humor support through the joint construction of a single storyline that keeps the single target of humor on K throughout the play frame.

All the above three examples have demonstrated "stacked humor," showing women's active humor support to each other to co-construct and develop the play frame. This is achieved either by adding another self-directed humorous story, thus shifting the target of humor to the new speaker, or by jointly creating a single storyline that maintains the same target of humor. Furthermore, in these examples, the former case is factual, while the latter is rather imaginative with some connection to reality. In both cases, the nature of humor is typically denigrating, disclosing the speakers' negative face. The participants seem to enjoy sharing such self-disclosure of negative face. Accordingly, active humor support between the female peers seems to function as the positive means of creating rapport among them.

### 3. 2. ESDH

In ESDH, humor is directed to the speaker's own family member. Unlike the case of SDH, where the humor can start by another speech participant's teasing, ESDH, in my data, was always initiated by the speaker whose family member is the target of the humor. In other words, the participants do not start mocking their friend's family members. This attitude persists in the process of play framing; that is, participants do not produce stacked humor onto the ESDH of their friend's family. The following is two examples of this type, both of which are performed by K.

The fact that the speech participants are at K's house, as well as that only K has both a husband and children, seems to trigger many occurrences of K's ESDH.

In Example (4), the co-participants' reaction to K's ESDH is limited to word repetition and laughter. In other words, they do not support the ESDH, nor add comments that impose judgment. Watching S playing with K's children, especially with her daughter, N starts to tease S in lines 1–3. N asks S if S is the girl's good friend, treating S at the same age level as the little girl. S joins play framing, answering in lines 4 and 7 that she has become the girl's friend.

(4)

- 1 N: .. *mou Shino wa mou* --  
already Shino TOP already
- 2 .. <☺ *nakayoshi-san nano* ☺>  
good.friend-ADD FP
- 3 <☺ *mio-chan [tōka to wa* ☺]>.  
Mio-ADD or with TOP  
'Shino, are you Mio's good friend?'
- 4 S: *[sou nano]*.  
so FP  
'Yes, I am.'
- 5 @ [2 @ 2]
- 6 N: [2 *mou* 2] --  
already  
'Already.'
- 7 S: (0) <☺ *mou o-tomodachi* [3 *nano* ☺] > @@@ [3]  
already HON-friend FP  
'I'm her friend.'
- 8 N: [3 <☺ *o-tomodachi* ☺] > @@@ [3] @@ [4 @ (H) 4]  
HON-friend  
'Friend.'
- 9 K: [4 <☺ e- 4] *ezukes*-[5 *are* 5] *teru* [6 *kara* ☺] > 6],  
tame.with.food-PASS because

- 10 N: [5 @ 5]  
 11 [6 <@ e- @> 6],  
 12 K: [7 <☺ *kono ko* ☺> 7].  
           this child  
           ‘Because my daughter is tamed with food (from Shino).’  
 13 N: [7 <@ *ezuke* @> 7].  
           tame.with.food  
           ‘Tamed with food.’  
 14 (H) @@@

Staying in the same play frame, in lines 9 and 12, K says that her daughter is tamed by S for the sake of food. Thus, K switches the target of the humor from S to her daughter, taking a further step to create an animal world. The word *ezuke* (‘taming an animal with food’) is a metaphor, putting her daughter down as if she is a dog, for example. This may be grounded in the reality to the extent that S often brings food, such as candies, to K’s children when she visits K’s house. Interpreted that way, K’s utterance can be viewed as humorous disclosure, exaggerating the reality to a fantasy in which her daughter behaves nicely to S in order to get candies. To K’s humorous remark about her daughter, N reacts by repeating the humorous key word *ezuke* (‘taming an animal with food’) in line 13 while laughing. As a matter of fact, N has reacted to S’s humor in the same way with laughter and word repetition in line 8. The repeated word *otomodachi* (‘friend’) was taken from S’s immediately preceding utterance in line 7. A question may arise as to why N did not participate in S’s humor construction although the humor was directed to S, N’s friend. This can be explained by the fact that N has already participated enough in the humor construction whose target is S. Indeed, it was N who started the humor by teasing S in lines 1–3. After this passage, the play frame closes and the speakers shift the topic to something more serious. In sum, Example (4) does not show active interaction in constructing the play frame when it is directed to a speaker’s family member — an extended self. The play frame is minimally maintained by the word repetition and laughter that index the participants’ footing in the play frame.





key word and/or give a laugh.

These findings indicate that “face” is negotiated in everyday conversation, even in humorous interaction among close friends. Close friends interact in very relaxed contexts which allow them to speak relatively freely and still preserve face. My data showed particular patterns as to how SDH and ESDH are manipulated: speech participants neither initiated nor joined the humor construction that is targeted to family members other than their own. No matter how close they are, and how relaxed the context is, the Japanese female subjects in my data did not cross the line to mock their friend’s family members, despite the fact that they did mock their friends as in Example (3).

Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997) claim that mocking a person who is absent in the context has the “potential of biting.” This “potential of biting” is prominent when the absent person of the target humor is the *uchi* member of the speaker present at the conversation. The *uchi/soto*, or “in-group/out-group” members, are widely acknowledged of the Japanese interpersonal relationship (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003, Ide 1982). Eckert and McConnell-Ginet use the concept of *uchi/soto* to explain the intricate honorific system of Japanese. This illustrates that the significant factor of choice in the honorific language depends upon whether or not the person being spoken about is an *uchi* or *soto* member in relation to the speaker and addressee. On the same token, I argue that the *uchi/soto* distinction is at stake for the different interactional patterns in humorous conversations between SDH and ESDH.

In the examples of ESDH in my study, the person to whom the humor is directed to is K’s daughter in Example (4), and K’s husband in Example (5). The speaker who produces the humorous utterances about them is K in both cases. To K, her daughter and husband are both *uchi*, that is, in-group members. On the other hand, to S and N, they are *soto*, that is, out-group members. Since K is an *uchi* member of the target persons, she can direct her humor to them without having to be afraid of hurting their face. In contrast, because S and N are *soto* members of the target persons, and especially because they are in front of K who is the *uchi* member of the target persons, they refrain from performing humor directed to them, try-



ing not to threaten their face. Therefore, even though S and N are close to K, they would not intrude the *uchi* space of K's family.

Note that there is another *uchi* space in this study, which is the friendship between the three speech participants. This explains why they can comfortably tease each other or participate in the construction of their friend's SDH. Their friendship enables them to present one's own negative face at ease, as well as to address each other's negative face, unless they bring it to an extreme. The figure below illustrates the two *uchi* spaces which K simultaneously belongs to.

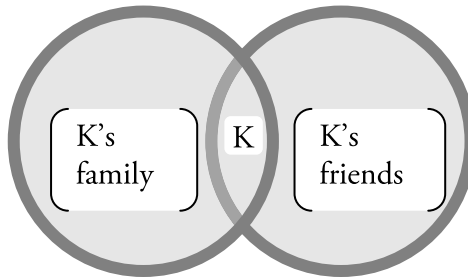


Figure. K's two overlapping *uchi* spaces

Thus, in talks in interaction, speech participants constantly monitor the social relationship that encompasses the absent persons who are being spoken about. This study of the humor interaction has the potential to be applied to other areas of discourse that investigate the social positioning of the speakers.

#### Notes

1 This paper has been elaborated from Takanashi (2007), a paper presented at the 10<sup>th</sup> International Pragmatics Conference in Göteborg, Sweden, in July, 2007.

2 The following is the basic transcription conventions used in this study:

Truncated intonation unit	--
Truncated word	-
Lengthening	=
Long pause	... (N)
Medium pause	...

Short pause	..
Speech overlap	[ ]
Latching	(0)
Sniff	(SNIFF)
Inhalation	(H)
Rise-fall tone	/ \
Higher pitch level	<HI HI>
Widened pitch range	<W W>
Allegro: rapid speech	<A A>
Forse: loud	<F F>
Laughter	@
Laughing voice quality	<@ @>
Quoting voice quality	<Q Q>

3 The following is the list of gloss used in the examples of this study:

ACC	accusative
ADD	address
BEN	benefactive
COP	copula
EMPH	emphasis
FP	final particle
HON	honorific prefix
NEG	negation
NMLZ	nominalizer
NOM	nominative
ONMT	onomatopoeia
PASS	passive
PFV	perfective
Q	question particle
QT	quotative
TOP	topic

4 The symbol for transcribing smiling voice quality was devised by the author and first used in Takanashi (2004).

Smiling voice quality	<☺ ☺>
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