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First-Encounter Talks between Younger and Older Adults in Taiwan: A Conversation Analysis Approach

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Abstract

Outside of Western contexts, natural-conversation-based research on intergenerational communication is relatively rare. To help redress this imbalance, this paper explores the conversational styles of first-encounter talks between five pairs of college students and older adults in Taiwan, and infers the interactional norms that underlie them. It is found that younger Taiwanese adults tend to exhibit great formality in their conversational styles, manifested as frequent appeals to older people's positive face, and a preference for quick question-asking especially at the opening of the talks. Older adults, in contrast, exhibited lower levels of commitment to eliciting information from their interlocutors and were more likely to interrupt them. Younger adults appeared uneasy when hearing older adults' painful self-disclosures, as reflected in the former's minimal responses or quick shifts to other topics. The conversational styles pinpointed by this research are discussed in terms of how the observed intergenerational communication could be problematic.

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1. Introduction

Walker and Maltby (1997) have argued that intergenerational contact is relatively infrequent in our daily lives, and that a lack of such contact may make us reliant on stereotypes when deciding how to communicate with older adults. Such stereotyping may be especially prominent in first-time meetings, since we have no relevant individualised information about our interlocutors (Westerhof & Tulle, 2007).

Prior research has also suggested the existence of multiple stereotypes of older people (Hummert, 1990; Schmidt & Boland, 1986), some of which are negative in nature: e.g., Shrew/Curmudgeon, Despondent, Recluse, and Severely Impaired (Hummert, Garstka, Shaner, & Strahm, 1994). It has also been argued that communication with older people based on stereotypes – defined as simplified attitudes and biased prejudices – could have a range of problematic consequences, including undermining of the older adults' self-esteem and dignity, or even their communicative competence (Ryan, Hamilton, & See, 1994). Moreover, because inappropriate intergenerational communication can lead to dissatisfaction and other negative outcomes for both parties, it can reduce people's willingness to seek out intergenerational contact, in what Ryan, Hummert, and Boich (1995, p. 146) have termed the "communication predicament of ageing model".

Even though previous studies have referred to problematic intergenerational communication in relation to stereotypes of older people and the possible negative outcomes, some questions are left unanswered, such as how natural intergenerational conversations realise the connection and what conversational mechanisms could be identified to explain why intergenerational talks could sometimes be perceived unsatisfying by either the younger or the older interlocutors. To fill the research gap, this paper, therefore, intends to explore the conversational patterns that emerge from first-encounter conversations between younger and older Taiwanese adults, with a special interest in decoding the socio-cultural constraints and interactional norms that are applied or negotiated through these intergenerational communication events.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Communication Accommodation to Older Adults

As previously mentioned, negative stereotypes of ageing and the aged may lead to inappropriate communication-accommodation decisions during intergenerational communication (Anderson, Harwood & Hummert, 2005). *Communication Accommodation Theory* (CAT) is often used as a theoretical framework to explain the interpersonal or intergroup dynamics of communicators' adjustments of their communication patterns to each other's conversational needs (Farzadnia & Giles, 2015; Gallois, Ogay, & Giles, 2005; Watson & Gallois, 1998). Overaccommodation of older people occurs when speech styles are adjusted based on stereotypes of their incompetence or physical decrement rather than their individual needs. Underaccommodation, on the other hand, refers to a speaker using his/her own language style rather than attuning it to the conversational styles of others; and in the case of intergenerational communication, this can often be found in medical contexts (Hewett, Watson & Gallois, 2015), or among older people who stick to their own topics and their own styles despite any uncomfortable feelings that their younger interlocutors may experience as a consequence (Coupland, Coupland, Giles, & Henwood, 1988). In other words, problematic intergenerational communication does not arise solely from younger adults' patronising communication toward older adults – though notably, the reverse situation has drawn relatively little scholarly attention. An important exception was Giles and Williams's (1994) exploratory study, which indicated that older adults could patronise younger ones by not listening to them, showing disapproval, or being parental. Each of these three styles was judged negatively by undergraduate students, to varying degrees, with patronising disapproval perceived as reflecting negative intentions most strongly (see also Harwood, Giles, Fox, Ryan, & Williams, 1993). Since older adults' patronising of younger adults or underaccommodating has seldom been touched upon in the existing literature, this study will examine this topic as well.

2.2. Discourse Analysis of Intergenerational Communication

According to Tulle and Mooney (2002), the

discourse of ageing can help scholars to identify age-appropriate and normative expectations about later life and/or age-identity construction processes. However, the existing literature includes few discourse-analysis studies of intergenerational oral communication, apart from those conducted in the UK by N. Coupland, J. Coupland and their colleagues (Coupland, Coupland, & Giles, 1989; Coupland, Coupland, Giles, & Henwood, 1991; Coupland, Coupland, Giles, Henwood, & Wiemann, 1988; Coupland, Coupland, & Grainger, 1991). The remainder of this section is a brief review of their findings.

Painful self-disclosure (PSD) is considered more likely to be associated with older than with younger adults; as defined by Coupland et al. (1988), it includes topics such as bereavement, severe illness, immobility, loneliness, and financial or social troubles. Their discourse analysis of 20 pairs of young (aged 30-40) and older (aged 70-87) females' initial conversations suggested that PSD was more often initiated by older adults themselves than evoked by their younger interlocutors. Elderly PSD sequences were also more likely to be ended by the younger recipients than by the older speakers. The implicit or explicit elicitation of PSD from the younger participants during intergenerational conversations implied that they held stereotyped expectations of PSD as a resource of topics for first-time intergenerational communication. Revealing negative information to strangers is regarded as violating social norms (Berger & Bradac, 1982). It can also be judged negative and inappropriate though the receivers might also consider such an act more intimate (Bonnesen & Hummert, 2002). Various motives have been discerned for older adults' disclosures of painful experiences, including habit, coping strategies, and presentation of an age-based identity (Bonnesen & Hummert, 2002). Thus, one focus of the present study is how PSD is manifested and in what conversational contexts, based on a Taiwanese corpus.

How older people construct their age identity or reveal their age in conversations has been another important topic in discourse-analysis studies of ageing and later life. For example, Coupland et al.'s (1989) study of *disclosing chronological ages* (DCAs) indicated that older adults used age as an explanation for decrement in later life (known as *accounting DCAs*), or to highlight the discrepancy between their chronological older

age and their contextual age through positive evaluations of later life (*disjunctive DCAs*). Coupland et al. (1991) also noted that, in peer-elderly conversations, DCAs were frequently accompanied by themes of competitiveness, and led to mutual life-position appraisals. The same study found that DCAs generally took place in ritualistic sequences with predictable following moves, which can be categorised as compliment-giving, expressions of surprise, and denial or disbelief of the age. The researchers concluded that DCAs could work to invite evaluation of people's relative life positions, so as to earn respect and credit from their conversational partners. In another study, however, DCAs were deployed primarily as coping strategies in peer-elderly first-encounter talks (Coupland et al., 1991), while in intergenerational context they were presented from a victim perspective characterised by reduced mobility, economic hardship, and loneliness.

Discourse analysis of first-time intergenerational conversations in Asia is long overdue, given that such research has hitherto only been conducted in the West. The present study was conducted to fill this research gap, focusing on the mechanisms that guide younger and older Taiwanese adults' first-encounter conversations, including the sequences for opening such conversations, PSD and DCA.

2.3. Intergenerational Communication in Confucian Societies

Previous cross-cultural comparative studies of intergenerational communication have drawn attention to Confucianism, as a significant cultural factor in the diversity of intergenerational interactions between East Asian and Western societies (e.g., Giles et al., 2003; Williams et al., 1997). In particular, stress has been placed on the Confucian concept of filial piety, which prescribes ethical codes for intergenerational interaction. Confucian societies tend to be hierarchical and marked by strict requirements regarding communication, and to endow older people with greater power and respect than younger ones (Sung, 2001). In terms of prescribed communication norms, children in a Confucian society such as Taiwan are taught not to talk back or to challenge older people; and the resulting asymmetrical relationships, in particular, the deference younger adults expected to show when talking with older people, can

cause the young to experience negative emotions and dissatisfaction (Lin, Harwood, & Hummert, 2008). Moreover, in modern societies, younger adults are likely to experience conflicts between their desire for autonomy and freedom, on the one hand, and on the other, the need to be consistently polite and respectful to older people in face-to-face interaction (Zhang & Hummert, 2001). This could explain why younger people in Confucian societies report fewer positive outcomes from intergenerational communication than those in the West, as cross-cultural comparative studies have found (Giles et al., 2003; Lin et al., 2008; Williams et al., 1997). In Lin, Zhang, and Harwood's (2004) study of Taiwanese college students' cognitive perceptions of intergenerational communication, they identified five main communication schemas: "mutually satisfying", "helping", "mixed feelings", "small talk", and "mutually unpleasant" (p. 321). By implication, these five categories indicate the mixture of positive and negative feelings younger adults might have toward engaging in conversation with older adults in Taiwan. In positively valenced helping conversations, for example, younger Taiwanese adults considered intergenerational communication to be one-way (Lin et al., 2004): i.e., the older adults answered questions and revealed their personal life experiences, with the aim of teaching such experiences to younger generations (see also Makoni, 1996). On the other hand, younger adults expressed little intention of prolonging small-talk conversations, because this might lead to mutually unpleasant communications (Lin et al., 2004; Zhang, Harwood & Hummert, 2005; Zhang & Hummert, 2001). Yet, the validity of these intergenerational communication schemas has never previously been tested in natural conversations.

3. Methodology

This study adopts an approach known as conversation analysis (Sacks, 1995), a sub-type of discourse analysis especially well-suited to dealing with talk-in-interaction (Cameron, 2001), to identify the sequential patterns and interactional mechanisms negotiated by the younger and older participants. Because conversation analysis attempts to identify elements of social order as created by people's actions in their daily lives and conversations (Cameron, 2001), this approach will enable the researcher to explore various issues in the data, such as adjacency pairs (i.e.,

responses to older adults' DCA or to their accounts of life experiences, including PSD) and turn-taking management (What is the opening structure of young-old first-encounter conversations? Who initiates the conversations?). Hypothetically, the conversational mechanisms of intergenerational talk in the Taiwanese data should reflect greater politeness on the part of the younger participants, and/or power asymmetry due to age differences.

The corpus used in the present research comprises conversations by five pairs of participants. The five younger participants (three females and two males, aged between 20 and 25) were all college students taught by the researcher, and the five older ones (two females and three males aged between 60 and 75) were residents of Pingtung County, Taiwan, whom the researcher recruited in a park where people usually gather for social activities. The conversations took place in a local community centre, a freely accessible public space that offers a relatively informal atmosphere for casual chatting of the type deemed appropriate to the research purpose. Pairs consisting of one older and one younger participant were formed randomly, and told that the purpose of their conversation was to get to know each other. Each pair was required to chat for at least 10 minutes. This yielded a data corpus two hours in length, with a total of 1,533 turns. The conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed in Mandarin Chinese, and later translated into English for the presentation and explanation of the findings in this paper (see the corresponding Chinese transcripts in the Appendix).

4. Results

4.1. Opening Sequences: Lack of Mutual Introduction and Interview-like Interactions

In the opening stages of the studied intergenerational first-encounter conversations, the younger adults tended to show a stronger politeness orientation than their older interlocutors. This was reflected in their greater attention to self-introduction and greetings, while the reciprocal adjacency moves expected in first encounters were not observed in the subsequent turns by their older interlocutors.

Extract 1 covers the opening of the conversation between YA1 (male) and OA1 (male). The greeting (*Hi*, line 1) and self-introduction (*I am a*

student from NPUST, line 1) were both initiated by the student (YA1) while OA1 did not reciprocate with his own name or affiliation, abnormally for a first encounter. Instead, OA1 positioned himself in a superior role, by seeming to give permission for YA1 to start talking with him (*Okay*, line 2) and thus projecting greater power than YA1. The same pattern continued in YA1's next move: attempting to negotiate what to talk about by eliciting OA1's answer through polite expressions (*Well then, please, I would like to ask you*, line 3). YA1's seeking of OA1's consent regarding topics to talk about persisted for a number of turns (lines 3-4; lines 5-6; lines 7-8), indicating YA1's intention to let OA1 control the conversation, and to position himself in a subservient role.

More clues regarding this politeness dynamic could be observed preceding each of YA1's attempts to raise questions, further indicating his awareness of the need to mitigate the potential impositions on OA1 of his question-asking acts. A sense of formality can also be discerned in YA1's use of polite requests (*please*, line 3; *excuse me*, line 9; *please let me*, lines 12 and 14) before each of his moves to elicit OA1's opinions. At the beginning of the interaction, YA1's relative unease about taking the leading role in the process of mutually agreeing conversational topics was reflected in his tone of hesitation (*okay* (.) *well* (.) *then* (.), lines 5 and 12; *Okay then*, line 9; *well then*, line 14) and in his use of expressions generally intended to mitigate the intrusiveness of questions (*just a little bit*, lines 9 and 14; *slightly*, line 16).

It is obvious that YA1 was particularly concerned about displaying politeness, which might seem natural, given his status as a much younger adult. However, it might also register as over-accommodation to the need for respect expected by his older interlocutor: with the latter saying *don't be so polite* and *don't keep saying please*, both in line 13. Interestingly, despite acknowledging OA1's expectation of receiving lower degrees of respect from his younger interlocutor (*really, okay*, line 14), YA1 still persisted with the same conversational approach in the same turn (*please let me ask*, line 14). In other words, the Confucian norm of respecting older people seems to have overridden the possibility of speedy adaptation of conversational style to an individual conversational partner who happened to be older. As such, this might also be

regarded as an example of under-accommodation to the older adult's expectations about the intergenerational conversation he wished to have.

Extract 1: YA1-OA1 Conversation

1 YA1: Right (.) Hi (.) Well (.) I am a student from NPUST (.) My name is Tseng (.) Well that is I am here to chat with you today.

2 OA1: Okay, you can ask me questions or chat with me.

3 YA1: Well then, please tell me what you want to chat about?

4 OA1: Any topics.

5 YA1: Okay (.) Well then (.) Would you like to talk about politics? Or other topics?

6 OA1: Okay, sure.

7 YA1: Politics?

8 OA1: Fine.

9 YA1: Okay then, excuse me, I would like to ask you just a little bit about your

10 opinion regarding Shi-Min-Der's taking part in the presidential election.

11 OA1: He is gonna fail, without a doubt.

12 YA1: Okay (.) Well (.) Then (.) Besides this, please let me ask you about (.) that is, the recent student protests.

13 OA1: Don't be so polite (.) Don't keep saying please and you can just keep asking questions.

14 YA1: Really! Okay (.) Well then, please let me ask (.) May I ask just a little bit about your views on (.) the protests?

15 OA1: Those students are great and inspiring.

16 YA1: Well then (.) I would like to ask you slightly about (.) What do you think about NPUST?

17 OA1: NPUST seems to be well-acknowledged.

The power asymmetry prescribed by Confucian norms may also account for why YA1 tended to transform the intergenerational chat, at least at the beginning, into an interview-like conversation, featuring well-structured question-and-answer adjacency pairs: A question eliciting opinions about the politician Shi-Min-Der in lines 9-10, followed by an answer in line 11; a subsequent question about student protests (in lines 12 and 14) followed immediately by OA1's answer (line 15). A similar adjacency pair appears immediately after this (lines 16-17), on yet another new topic. This incoherence between questions and subsequent questions is itself a pattern, indicating that YA1 was committed primarily to moving the talk forward through questioning, rather than being genuinely

interested in OA1's answers. Similarly rapid topic-shifting moves, realised in one-question-one-answer adjacency pairs without extensive exchange of opinions on the raised topics could also be found at another conversation (as shown in Extract 2).

Extract 2: YA2-OA2 Conversation

- 1 YA2: I'm Yao and I'll be graduating this year
(.) I'm currently working at a café in Pingtung and preparing to go
2 abroad (.) This is my introduction (.) That's it
(1.0) Well then (.) Do you live here?
3 OA2: I live nearby.
4 YA2: Nearby? Do you mean very nearby? Do you come here every day?
5 OA2: My husband comes here very often. I only come here once a while.
6 YA2: Oh::: you only come here once a while (.) Well then (.) What do you do normally? For example,
7 daily chores like cooking, mopping and sweeping the floor=
8 OA2: =also taking care of my granddaughter.
9 YA2: Oh::: do you live with your grandchildren?
10 OA2: We live together.
11 YA2: How about sons and daughters-in-law?
12 OA2: Not with them (.) With my daughter who got divorced.

YA2 initiated the conversation by introducing herself (line 1), and followed this with the remark *That's it* (line 2), presumably expecting OA2 to use the following turn to introduce herself too, as would be the norm in first-encounter talks. However, the one second pause that followed indicated that OA2, like OA1, did not intend to do as expected. Hence, following this failure of transition between turns, the discourse marker *Well then* (line 2) was deployed, perhaps as a pause filler to bridge the interactional silence (Trihartanti & Damayanti, 2014). It also indicates an information transition point (Lin, 1999), after which YA2 was able to raise another question, in pursuit of a smooth interaction. Like YA1, YA2 automatically took up the role of eliciting information from the older interlocutor in the opening stage of their interaction, presumably to allow them to get acquainted quickly. And again as with YA1 and OA1, the initial turns in the YA2-OA2 conversation were structured by quick-shifting question-answer adjacency pairs (lines 2-3, 4-5, 6-8, 9-10, and 11-12).

All of this suggests that the job of increasing familiarity between two strangers is expected to be performed by the younger party. Extracts 1 and 2, to a certain extent, both revealed younger adults having some difficulty in giving extensive responses to older adults' utterances, and instead changing the subject to move the conversation forward. The same type of difficulty can also be observed in Extract 3, in which YA1 only contributed minimal responses or repetitions of arguments previously advanced by OA1, in later turns of the YA1-OA1 conversation.

4.2. Repetitions and Lack of Extensive Responses

Extract 3: YA1-OA1 Conversation

- 101 YA1: Do you have any topics that you would like to talk about?
102 OA1: I am now a farmer.
103 YA1: A farmer (.) A farmer
104 OA1: In the past (.) before I was 60 years old (.) before the age of 60, I worked in the construction industry
105 building tombs (.) Making grave monuments.
106 YA1: Oh, oh, grave monuments.
107 OA1: Yes, yes, I made them.
108 YA1: I think (.) I also think making grave monuments is pretty good.
109 OA1: I lost strength at 60 so I came back to work on my own farm. Now I'm almost 70(.) I work as I wish
110 growing betel nuts, banana or lemon.
111 YA1: Oh, oh, betel nuts, banana or lemon (.) I think working on the farm is also pretty good.
112 OA1: I am growing vegetables or something else now.
113 YA1: It's pretty good to have a harvest of vegetables.
114 OA1: Now my life is very plain (.) Being an older man (.) I could work on the farm in the early morning
115 until it gets too hot and it's time for me to go home to rest and have lunch.
116 YA1: That is pretty nice.

In Extract 3, YA1 continues to demonstrate consistently his respect by letting OA1 choose topics for discussion. In response, OA1 disclosed his current work identity as a farmer in line 2. However, YA1 did not pose constructive follow-up questions or provide relevant feedback that would have enabled deeper discussion of OA1's farming life. This is noteworthy, given that at a

first encounter, getting to know each other is made possible by drawing out information of mutual interest, not just by asking questions but also elaborating on the answers with personally relevant feedback or follow-up questions. In this case, YA1 simply repeated the key words in the preceding utterances by OA1: *A farmer* (.) *A farmer* in line 3, *Grave monuments* in line 6, and *betel nuts, banana or lemon* in line 11. Even though YA1 did respond to OA1's sharing of his life stories, mere repetition cannot be classified as serious engagement. Indeed, such a response style might project a sense of indifference to the older interlocutor, even though YA1 was still engaged in positive politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987), to the extent that he gave generally positive appraisals (*pretty good* or *pretty nice*, lines 8, 11, 13 and 16) of OA1's self-reported past work experiences (*Making grave monuments* line 5; *growing betel nuts, banana or lemon*, lines 9-10), current ones (*growing vegetables or something else now*, line 12), and current routines (*go home to rest and have breakfast*, line 15).

4.3. Age-Disclosure Sequences

Additional problematic intergenerational interactions could be found in conversational sequences where the older adults disclosed their ages. In this study, only the older adults engaged in *disclosing chronological ages* (DCAs), which they mostly initiated. In terms of Coupland et al.'s (1989) typology, the older participants mainly engaged in DCA accounting (i.e., using their ages to explain their decrements), and in response, their younger interlocutors tended to appeal to their positive faces.

For example, in Extract 3, OA1's first reference to a chronological age (60 years old, line 104) was to account for his reason for retiring from his previous occupation (making grave monuments, line 105); but it also functioned as health-in-ageing talk, that is, to account for his loss of strength (line 109). However, his disclosure of his current age (*I'm almost 70*, line 109) was accompanied by descriptions of a new working lifestyle, which even though characterised by potentially dull daily routines (lines 114 and 115) is satisfying ('I work as I wish', line 109). Although OA1 self-evaluated his current lifestyle as *very plain* (line 114) and age-appropriate (*Being an older man*, line 114), the specific information he provided about his harvest did not

seem to build an image of a plain life, but on the contrary, functioned to elicit positive older-age-evaluation from YA1, who responded with a series of expressions appealing to OA1's positive face (lines 111, 113, and 116).

In other sampled conversations in which the older adults revealed their ages, overtly positive evaluation of this information from the younger adults was also observed, albeit with a tone of surprise indicative of an inconsistency between the real age and the perceived age. However, in slight contrast to Extract 3, such responses were mostly rejected by the older interlocutors in their next moves, arguably to elicit reinforcement/repetition of the positive evaluations, or as a bridge to talking about older-age-related complaints (PSD). In Extract 5, YA3, a female college student, was talking with an older man, OA3.

Extract 4: YA3-OA3 Conversation

50 YA3: So, Grandpa, do you still have good relationships with your siblings?

51 OA3: Siblings? My eldest sibling is 73 years old (.) I'm the third one, born in 1947, getting to 70 years old=

52 YA3: =It is barely noticeable! Your age is really barely noticeable!

53 OA3: Not really (0.5) I feel strength less

54 YA3: You are okay (.) You can still work on the farm and it's good

Here, instead of giving a relevant answer to YA3's question on his relationships with his siblings, OA3 revealed his own and his eldest sibling's chronological ages. YA3 immediately responded with surprise at the incongruence between OA3's real age and how he looks (line 52). OA3 did not seem to appreciate YA3's positioning of him as younger-looking than his real age, however, as his next move (*Not really*, line 53) was a rejection of YA3's attempt to show positive politeness. He immediately redirected the age-related appraisal into a negative one (*I feel strengthless*, line 53), thus transforming the DCA into a health-in-ageing talk. The effect of such an exchange on chronological age, as seen in line 54, can be to elicit further positive appraisal from the younger interlocutor upon the older one's age-related status. A similar response pattern can also be observed in Extract 5; arguably, however, the older male stroke victim's (OA4, who used to be a teacher) next move to the

female student's (YA4) positive characterisation of his age appeared to be more face-threatening to her than OA3's had been to YA3.

Extract 5: YA4-OA4 Conversation

56 OA4: Let me tell you something (.) Longevity needs to come with health (.) If unhealthy and suffering (0.2)

57 [Do you think I am in good shape? You tell me.

58 YA4: [How old are you, teacher?

59 OA4: I'm 75.

60 YA4: Seventy-five years old? You really don't look like it (.) You look younger.

61 OA4: Oh cut it out! Gee! The coffin is for the dead, it has nothing to do with age.

62 YA4: Yeah (1.0) Do you go see doctors? Is it convenient in Neipu?

In this case, DCA was directly elicited by the student (*How old are you*, line 3). Interestingly, however, this occurred within an established health-in-ageing discourse context, with OA4 already committed to PSD (*unhealthy and suffering*, line 56). The participants' overlapping utterances in lines 57 and 58 seem to indicate that YA4's reaction to PSD regarding ailments was instinctive. The overlaps could also suggest that ailments are perceived stereotypically as being associated with the disclosed older age. Much as in Extract 5, disclosure of an older age (75, line 59) led to a surprised but positive appraisal of the incongruence between OA4's real age and his age as perceived by others, here specifically due to a younger look (line 60). And again, instead of showing appreciation for YA4's comment, OA4's next move was a disagreement with YA4's appeal to his positive face, delivered with a harsh tone (*Oh cut it out! Gee!* line 61). Within the same line, he followed this with a counter-stereotypical challenge to the association between older age and death, which seemed to imply that he had noticed YA4's attempt to disassociate him from his age. If YA4 thought that positioning OA4 in relation to a different (or better) status would be comforting and show her intention of being polite, her response strategy did not succeed.

In YA4's next move, her minimal response (*Yeah*, line 62) and quick changing of the subject via two other questions (*Do you go see doctors? Is it convenient in Neipu?*, line 62) could indicate her inability to deal with OA4's face-threatening response to her attempt to appeal to him with politeness and kind words. Her unease could also

have been signalled by the one-second pause following her minimal response, perhaps due to cultural taboos against discussion of death, and/or because OA4's response was unexpected and put her in an embarrassing position. A similar swerving away from death-related topics can also be found in Extract 6, transcribed from a conversation between an older male, OA5, and a younger male student, YA5.

Extract 6

129 YA5: Uncle, do you have health problems such as high blood pressure?

130 OA5: I have high blood pressure.

131 YA5: oh (.) Uncle, you need to be careful of your health.

132 OA5: It's difficult to avoid bad health when you get old.

133 YA4: You're right (.) It's difficult to avoid (.) Getting old must be so (.) Yes.

134 OA5: This year I'm (.) more than 60 years old=

135 YA5: =You look very energetic.

136 OA5: I was born in 1949 (.) How about your dad?

137 YA5: My dad is 52 years old.

138 OA5: Your dad is 52 years old? How about your grandpa?

139 YA5: My grandpa just passed away in September (.) He was 88 years old

140 OA5: Eighty-eight years old (2.0)

141 YA5: So (2.0) Uncle, what you like is (1.0) travelling around?

Here, once again, the older adult OA5 directed the intergenerational conversation into a health-in-ageing talk. In this case, in line 133, YA5 also demonstrated a stereotypical association between older age and ailments, as an echoing response to OA5's self-disenfranchising position that was realised in his prescriptive linkage of older age to declining health (*It's difficult to avoid bad health when you get old*, line 132). The disclosure of OA5's chronological age in line 134 also elicited a positive appraisal of his physical status from the younger party (*You look very energetic*, line 135), which in a way appears to contradict YA5's earlier claim of a more or less automatic linkage between old age and weakening health.

The immediate offer of the positive appraisal in line 135 as a response to the DCA in line 134 may indicate that YA5 considered such a response sequence to be necessary (to appeal to older

people's positive face with politeness) as well as rapid, probably instinctively reflecting a culturally prescribed norm. OA5's DCA later became a discourse context that led to a discussion about YA5's father's and grandfather's ages (lines 136-138), and accidentally directs the conversation to YA5's experience of bereavement (*My grandpa just passed away in September*, line 139). OA5's unease regarding the new topic of bereavement and death can be discerned in his next move (line 140), where he simply repeats the age at which YA5's grandfather died, adding no constructive input. The two-second-pause and lack of a smooth transition between lines 140 and 141 further indicates that both participants were not quite ready to deal with the topic.

In the next turn by YA5, the discourse marker *So* (line 141) and the subsequent two-second-pause suggest that, although he took the turn, he was still figuring out what to say. To break the silence as well as to disassociate both parties from death-related topics, YA5 instead posed another positively valenced question associated with a golden-ager lifestyle (*what you like is (1.0) travelling around?*, line 141) and the subject of death was completely dropped.

5. Discussion

This paper has presented the conversational patterns that could be observed in five pairs of intergenerational first encounters in Taiwan, with the aim of revealing the speech patterns and structures at the initial encounters between younger and older adults in Taiwan. The findings also shed some light on how Taiwanese older people mark their age and how younger adults respond.

The elicited intergenerational conversations were intended to be casual talks for making acquaintances between two strangers. Nevertheless, especially in the opening stages, the participants' verbal interactions resembled formal interviews, from which power asymmetry between the younger and older participants could be readily inferred. Specifically, all of the younger participants assigned themselves the responsibility for asking questions, while the older ones automatically positioned themselves either as information providers (like interviewees, waiting to be asked questions) or in the role of educating the younger generation about what they have experienced. However, unlike true interview scenarios – in

which the interviewers tend to assume absolute control over the turn-taking – the younger adults in the present research either felt they needed to be empowered to ask questions by their older interlocutors, or were more cautious about their next move to raise a question (as in YA1's case). It was clear from the negotiations implicit in these question-asking sequences that greater power was held by the older adult in each pair.

Alternatively, the observed first-encounter intergenerational conversations can be framed as reflecting a Taiwanese cultural expectation that members of the younger generation will elicit life stories or opinions from their elders, for the purpose of learning lessons or acquiring wisdom from them. This tends to support the intergenerational communication schemas identified by Lin et al. (2004), in particular the 'helping' schema whereby Taiwanese college students expressed the main purposes of intergenerational communication as to prompt older people to talk about their life stories, learn from such stories, and thus make them happy.

While this interactional norm was mutually acknowledged, the older participants in this study hardly engaged in any of the question-asking or other speech acts to express mutual interest that would normally be seen among people getting acquainted. This might reflect a related, but non-identical, Taiwanese cultural belief that the young should merely listen, and refrain from expressing their own opinions when talking with older adults. This belief may also have been reflected in the younger participants' rapid topical shifts and feeble or non-existent attempts to elaborate on topics previously raised through mutual exchanges of views. Moreover, even the younger participants' question-asking seemed only to be conducted to fill time or make the conversational progress smoothly. Logically, all of the above-mentioned communication styles and patterns would tend to limit the possibility of either generation achieving either social or psychological satisfaction through intergenerational conversation, by giving each party a sense that the other is not curious about his/her thoughts and intentions.

It was found that younger adults were scrupulous about expressing themselves politely and making appeals to their older partners' positive face, while the latter did not generally reciprocate, and sometimes expressed displeasure at such

approaches. In other words, there was a notable generational imbalance in the efforts made to maintain others' face. This could easily lead young people to develop negative perceptions of talking with older adults, and hence to reduce their motivation to interact with older strangers in the future. In theoretical terms, this imbalance could be interpreted as a form of underaccommodation by older adults toward their younger interlocutors.

In this study, DCAs were observed, but mostly from the older adults, in line with what Coupland et al. (1989) termed accounting DCAs. This age-marking strategy is arguably face-threatening, as older adults who use it are often simultaneously engaged in PSD regarding their long-term ailments or declining physical strength. In such a discourse context, the younger adults in the present study responded ritually, with positive and comforting comments (see also Coupland et al., 1988; Coupland et al., 1991). Showing positive politeness toward older adults' DCA seemed to be perceived by the younger participants as appropriate, or perhaps as a means of showing respect. However, this sense of appropriateness may have been misplaced, as the adjacent responses from their older interlocutors always included a direct disagreement with whatever positive comments had been made – in some cases, prompting the younger person to pile on additional complimentary comments. Moreover, instead of simply presenting themselves as victims (see also Coupland et al., 1991), older adults might strategically use age-related complaints as a means for strengthening their own self-esteem. In the current study, the younger people's responses ritually framed their elders' ages in line with what Coupland et al. (1989) called disjunctive DCAs: i.e., that the older adults are in better shape than one might expect, given their ages. The older adults' responses, meanwhile, could be interpreted as reflecting a specific characteristic of Chinese communication, *Ke qi*: being humble, modest and self-effacing in response to compliments (Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998). However, instead of simply being humble and *Ke-qi*, the older adult participants directly rejected the younger adults' positive evaluations of their age statuses, and often accompanied such rejection with additional self-handicapping comments, e.g., regarding their weakness due to old age. Such speech actions could, in the long term, reinforce negative stereotypes of older age in the minds of their

younger interlocutors, and at the same time damage the younger adults' positive face, insofar as their attempts to show respect were not obviously appreciated.

PSD in this study was initiated only by the older participants, and tended to be themed around ill-health or dying. It often occurred when older adults disclosed their chronological ages. The younger recipients of older adults' PSD seemed completely overwhelmed by these topics, and usually could only react via simple pacification, or in some instances an immediate shift in conversational topic. This unpleasant situation appeared to reflect the younger adults' mental distance from the ageing process and related issues. Stereotypical associations between older age and ailments could also be discerned in the younger adults' responses to their elders' PSD.

In sum, similar to previously reviewed studies on DCAs and PSD, older adults were the ones who initiated DCAs in talks with younger adults and the next move from the younger adults also seemed to be predictable, that is, to give positive comments often realising their disbelief of the revealed older age with surprising expressions. Older adults in this study, like those observed by Coupland et al.'s (1989), tended to use older age as accounts for decrements stereotypically expected in later life and therefore, also engaged their younger interlocutors in talks involving PSD. This present study, however, extends previous discourse analysis on DCAs and PSD (Coupland et al., 1988; Coupland et al., 1989; Coupland et al. 1991) by identifying some communication behaviours that have not been discussed, such as the interview-like verbal interactions at the opening stage, realizing power asymmetry, as well as the effort the younger participants in this study made to show politeness and deference in their communication with older adults. This study also attempted to identify older adults' underaccommodation to younger adults' communication needs to explain why the examined intergenerational talks could be unsatisfying and problematic in nature.

Some limitations of the present study should be noted. First, its conversation-analysis findings were drawn from just five sampled conversations, all of which involved residents of the same country, and hence may not be generalizable to intergenerational conversations in Taiwan as a whole. Second, due to space limitations, the data

contained a range of conversational features that could not be discussed in this paper: for example, interruptions – mostly by the older adults – and the contexts or sequences in which they occurred. This topic is worthy of further study, because it could also be a manifestation of power asymmetry between younger and older interlocutors, and/or a possible reason for unsatisfactory or unpleasant communication schemas as perceived by Taiwanese younger adults (Lin et al., 2004). Code-switching may also be worth examining in future research on accommodation in intergenerational communication in Taiwan, due to the existence of Taiwan's local dialects, Taiwanese (Southern Min) and Hakka, in addition to simply Chinese. The participants in this study only used Chinese to converse, even though the older participants were all Hakka people who could also speak the Hakka dialect. Taiwanese younger adults mostly do not know how to speak that dialect, so code-switching between Chinese and Hakka did not occur in the data. However, code-switching between Taiwanese and Chinese would be likely in cases where the older adults shared a Taiwanese ethnic identity with their younger interlocutors.

Future research could usefully collect a series of conversations between the same pairs of younger and older adults, to confirm whether their conversational styles and the interactional norms they reflected were subject to change over the course of longer-term acquaintanceship. Likewise, it would be worthwhile to collect data from natural intergenerational encounters in a wider variety of conversational contexts, such as family meals or workplace interactions, so that similarities and differences in ways older people construct their age-identities across different real social situations could be compared. A comparative examination of young-old vs. old-old first-encounter conversations (see also Coupland et al., 1991) could also help identify whether Taiwanese older adults change their ways of age-telling when their addressees' ages vary.

In conclusion, the present research is the only Taiwanese study and one of just a handful worldwide to investigate the communicative patterns and interactive mechanisms of natural intergenerational first-encounter conversations. Its finding that being the questioner in such conversations is not a source or position of power for younger adults was unexpected, and could

only have been arrived at via the qualitative approach used, i.e., conversation analysis. Further exploration of natural intergenerational conversations in a broader range of social contexts and additional areas of Taiwan can be expected to lead to the identification of more culturally specific speech features and related phenomena.

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Appendix: Extracts 1-6 in Chinese

Extract 1

- 1 YA1: 好的(.)你好(.)那個(.)我是屏科大的學生(.)我是屏科大應外系的曾同學(.)然後就是今天來就是想要跟您聊天這樣
- 2 OA1: 好啊你問啊你聊啊
- 3 YA1: 那請問您想要聊?
- 4 OA1: 甚麼話題都可以聊
- 5 YA1: 好(.)那(.)您想要聊政治嗎? 還是說?
- 6 OA1: 好可以啊!
- 7 YA1: 政治?
- 8 OA1: 嗯
- 9 YA1: 好 那不好意思請問一下
- 10 您對施明德出來參選有甚麼看法嗎?
- 11 OA1: 他絕對不會贏的
- 12 YA1: 嗯(.)那(.)呢(.)除了這個以外(.)想請問一下您對(.)就是學運
- 13 OA1: 你不要那麼客氣(.)不要說請問啦 你就一直問就好。
- 14 YA1: 喔!好(.)那請問(.)想問一下就是您對太陽花學運的看法呢?
- 15 OA1: 那學運太好了且具啟發性
- 16 YA1: 那想要(.)想請問一下就(.)您對於我們屏科大有甚麼特別的看法?
- 17 OA1: 你們屏科大好像風評不錯

Extract 2

- 1 YA2: 我叫姚然後今年大學畢業(.)現在在屏東的咖啡館上班準備要出國這樣(.)
- 2 先自我介紹(.)就這樣(1.0) 那(.)你住在這裡嗎?
- 3 OA2: 我住在附近
- 4 YA2: 附近啊?所以很近是不是?每天都會來

這邊?

- 5 OA2: 我先生比較常來(0.5)我偶爾會來
- 6 YA2: 喔:::偶爾會來一下(.)那(.)平常都在做甚麼? 彼如說
- 7 做家事像煮菜拖地掃地=
- 8 OA2: =還有照顧孫女
- 9 YA2: 喔:::現在孫女一起住嗎?
- 10 OA2: 一起住
- 11 YA2: 那兒子媳婦呢?
- 12 OA2: 沒有(.)跟離婚的女兒

Extract 3

- 101 YA1: 您還有甚麼比較有興趣的話題或是比較想聊的
- 102 OA1: 我是做農的啦
- 103 YA1: 做農的(.) 做農的(.)
- 104 OA1: 以前我(.)六十歲以前(.) 我六十歲以前是做建築業的
- 105 做墓仔埔的(.) 做墓碑
- 106 YA1: 喔喔墓碑那個
- 107 OA1: 對對我是做那個
- 108 YA1: 我覺得(.)我也覺得滿不錯的啊
- 109 OA1: 我六十歲做那個沒力氣了就回來種自己的田啦我快七十歲了(.)自己高興怎麼做就怎麼做
- 110 種檳榔啦(.)香蕉啦(.)檸檬啦(.)
- 111 YA1: 喔喔檳榔香蕉檸檬(.)我覺得做農作也是滿不錯的
- 112 OA1: 種點菜啦甚麼的
- 113 YA1: 有成果就是滿不錯的
- 114 OA1 現在都過得很平淡啦 (.)老人家了(.)可能上午去田裡啦，
- 115 太陽大了就休息了時間到了就回家吃飯
- 116 YA1: 這樣滿不錯的

Extract 4

- 50 YA3: 那阿公也是跟自己的姊弟妹感情都不錯嗎?
- 51 OA3: 姊弟妹嗎? 現在老大也 73 歲(.)我是老三我 36 年次的快要 70 歲=
- 52 YA3: =看不出來!真的看不出來!
- 53 OA3: 還好啦 (0.5) 沒有體力
- 54 YA3: 還可以啦(.)還能種田還不錯

Extract 5

- 56 OA4:我跟你講(.)長壽要健康(.)如果不健康

一直受苦(0.2)

57 [所以我這會好嗎? 你說

58 YA4: [老師是幾歲?

59 OA4: 75

60 YA4: 75 歲喔? 看不出來捏(.) 保持得很年輕

61 OA4: 少來了! 唉呀! 棺材是放死人的不是放年紀大小的問題

62 YA4: 對啊 (1.0) 所以您有在就醫嗎? 內埔方便嗎?

Extract 6

129 YA5: 阿伯現在身體有高血壓之類的問題嗎?

130 OA5: 我有高血壓

131 YA5: 那(.) 阿伯要注意健康喔

132 OA5: 免不了有年紀了

133 YA4: 對(.) 免不了(.) 年紀大一定會這樣(.) 對

134 OA5: 我今年(.) 是六十幾歲=

135 YA5: =阿伯精神看起來很好

136 OA5: 我 38 年次(.) 你爸幾年的?

137 YA5: 我爸 52

138 OA5: 你爸 52? 你爺爺呢?

139 YA5: 我爺爺九月剛過世(.) 88 歲

140 OA5: 88 歲(2.0)

141 YA5: 那(2.0) 阿伯喜歡是(1.0) 到處跑跑嗎?