Verbal Play Across the Lifespan

Samantha E. Shune, MA, CCC-SLP, a Melissa C. Duff, PhD, CCC-SLP a,b
a Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders; b Department of Neurology, Division of Behavioral Neuroscience and Cognitive Neuroscience
samantha-shune@uiowa.edu • melissa-duff@uiowa.edu

Introduction

Verbal Play is Pervasive
Verbal play, or the playful manipulation of language, is an enjoyable component of daily interaction and serves important interpersonal functions.1,2 Attempts at verbal play and humor are recognized as such by partners who routinely not only respond to the playful episode—such as laughing at the joke—but also carry the theme over the course of the conversation or continued interactions, creating a common thread between partners and strengthening their relationship.

Verbal Play in Neurogenic Populations
Previous work with neurogenic populations reveals patterns of spared and impaired verbal play use. Despite managing severe language impairments, individuals with aphasia frequently and successfully deployed verbal play as a communicative resource.3 Conversely, individuals with hippocampal amnesia, presenting with profound declarative memory impairment in the context of preserved linguistic functioning, exhibited marked disruptions in their use of verbal play.4 In individuals with very mild Alzheimer’s disease (AD), however, verbal play remained a robust interactive discourse resource despite profound memory impairments with additional neurological, behavioral, and/or cognitive impairments.5

Verbal Play and Aging
Across our previous findings in neurogenic populations, we have also found potential age-related differences. While individuals with hippocampal amnesia and their partners (M age = 49.0 years) produced significantly fewer verbal play episodes than comparisons, no such differences were observed between the pairs with AD (M age = 77.0 years) and their companions. Further, while the distribution of verbal play functions did not differ between AD and their companion, pairs or between amnesia and their companion pairs, the older partners (with or without AD) had more extended verbal play episodes and episodes coded as teasing while the younger partners (with or without amnesia) had more referencing episodes. As no previous studies have explored the effect of age on the deployment of verbal play in communicative interactions, we examine this relationship in the current study.

The Current Study
The goal of this study was to document and characterize the quantity, quality, and interactional functions of verbal play in the communicative interactions of healthy younger and older adults and their familiar partners.

Based on our previous findings, we predict:
1) A greater number of verbal play episodes; and
2) A greater number of extended episodes, in the discourse of elderly participants as compared to younger participants.

Methods

Participants

10 healthy younger adults (Younger pairs) 5 females, M age = 37.9 years (range 27 - 49, SD = 8.9), M education = 17.1 years
10 healthy older adults (Older pairs) 6 females, M age = 79.5 years (range 70 - 88, SD = 6.6), M education = 16.3 years
20 familiar communication partners (spouse, sibling, friend) Younger pairs: M age = 35.7 years; M education = 15.1 years 
Older pairs: M age = 74.7 years; M education = 15.6 years

Data Analysis

Analysis was performed on data obtained as the younger and older pairs completed a collaborative referencing task 1,2.

Task completed across 12 trials, 6 trials per session on a single day

Data included:
Session instructions (participant, partner, researcher)
Trial interactions (participant, partner)
Inter-trial talk (participant, partner, researcher)

Over 19 hours of videotaped data (younger sessions = 8.0 hours; older sessions = 11.5 hours) were analyzed. Older pairs produced more total words across trials (101,199) than younger pairs (58,567).

Verbal Play Coding

Using a consensus coding procedure, we looked for all instances of telling funny stories or jokes, playing with sounds or making puns, overt teasing of others or self-deprecating humor, use of marked or playful voice or registers, singing or song-like inflections, and use of sound effects.

Coded for:
Resources deployed = verbal, prosodic, gestural Functions – referencing, teasing, narrative, other Interactional forms – simple, simple+, extended

Total Episodes

A total of 1,863 verbal play episodes were coded with no difference in the total number of episodes (p = .388) and episodes per 1,000 words (p = .709) produced in the younger and older pair sessions.

Results

Despite this similarity in frequency, these episodes more frequently occurred during the trials among younger pairs (61.8%) and between trials for older pairs (56.1%, p = .019).

In addition, while the episodes produced by the younger pairs were most frequently initiated by the director (66.1% versus 26.1% matcher initiated), the older pairs demonstrated a more equal level of participation in the initiation of these episodes (47.0% director and 37.6% matcher initiation). These differences in contributions between the younger and older pairs were significant (p = .044).

Resources, Functions, and Forms

All participants utilized a full range of resources, functions, and forms. However, differences between the groups emerged.

Comparison to the younger pairs, the older participants:

Task Trials Between Trials

...participated in more teasing episodes and less referencing episodes...

Figure 1. Total number of verbal play episodes by group and participant

Figure 2. Distribution of episodes within the sessions by group

Figure 3. Distribution of resources by group

Utilized more “modality” resources...

Figure 4. Distribution of functions by group

Figure 5. Distribution of interactional forms by group

Discussion

Summary

While all participants initiated and contributed to verbal play episodes, age-related differences in the quality and function of these episodes emerged. Older participants engaged in more complex, reciprocal, and extended verbal play episodes. Episodes were commonly deployed for the purpose of teasing each other and the researcher, in between task trials, supporting their communicative interactions. Younger participants, conversely, engaged in shorter verbal play episodes for the purpose of referencing cards during the trials, supporting successful task completion.

Verbal Play and Aging

Research has targeted the positive effects of humor, laughter, and social interactions on the aging process, suggesting a physical and psychosocial buffer from the negative changes that occur in the lives of the elderly.6 However, verbal play is not without social risks. This is particularly important in light of the changes that occur with aging, including changes in cognition, that may yield differences in the reactions to and interpretations of similar humorous attempts overtime, even within the same individual.

These findings represent an important step, both clinically and for research, in documenting the different ways that individuals across the lifespan orchestrate interactively meaningful communications through the use of interactive discourse resources like verbal play. The benefits of verbal play in healthy aging may similarly apply to populations with a variety of physical and psychosocial impairments, including dementia and TBI.

Future Directions

It is likely that aging also impacts the deployment of other interactional discourse resources (e.g., conversational narrative, reported speech) more broadly, warranting further investigation.

References