I’m sure she has nothing wrong with her mouth. In the old days in Japan, when women laughed they generally tried to do so silently by covering their mouths with fans or their kimono sleeves. This was because they didn’t want to make a spectacle of their emotions. Not to show their feelings was thought to be a kind of virtue, and showing their teeth when laughing was considered a little rude. That’s why many women have a habit of covering their mouths when laughing. These days, it’s mainly done by elderly women. Also, there was a practice in olden times called ohaguro in which people—mainly women—dyed their teeth black. There are various theories why they did this. One theory goes that ohaguro teeth give a mysterious impression of hiding a person’s emotions. Let’s discuss the mysteries of Japanese laughter.

When I first met my friend’s mother, I noticed she covered her mouth every time she laughed. I thought she must have something wrong with her mouth, but it looked all right to me. Why did she need to cover her mouth? Does it mean something?

Quiz: When you put “あ(a) い(i) う(u) え(e) お(o)” in front of the sounds at left, it sounds more like spoken Japanese. Match the types of laughter in 1 to 5 with the meanings in A to D.

1) あははは 2) いひひひ 3) うふふふ 4) えへへへ 5) おほほほ
ahahahaha ihihihii uufufufu ehehehehe ohohohoho

A) Creepy laughter. It also can represent feminine laughter.
B) Laughter when people intend to do something wrong or hatch a plot.
C) Embarrassed laughter when people fail to do something or are trying to hide their shyness.
D) Cheerful laughter.
E) Feminine laughter, often by elderly women.

Answers: 1) - B) 2) - E) 3) - A) 4) - D) 5) - C)

The following are phrases using the kanji 笑 wara(u) or shō, which means laugh or laughter. Choose the correct word to complete the expressions.

a) 一円を笑う者は( )円に泣く ichien o warau mono wa en ni naku

b) 笑う門には( )来る warau kado niwa ( ) kitaru

Answers: 1) - 1) 2) - 2) 3) - 3) 4) - 4) 5) - 5)

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