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Language, Culture and the Dynamics of Age

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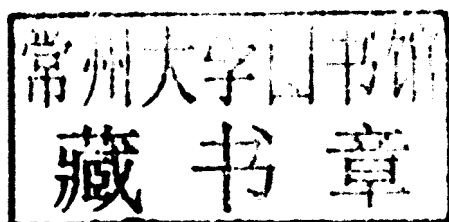
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Language, Culture and the Dynamics of Age

edited by

Anna Duszak and Urszula Okulska



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Part I. Introduction

Chapter 1

Age and language studies

Anna Duszak and Urszula Okulska

1. Connecting language and age

What is the connection between language and age? On the one hand, the intimate relation between the two seems natural and somewhat obvious: language and age are central properties of man, they are biologically based, cognitively, experientially and socially co-constructed, and made manifest in social interaction. So people “have” age, measured in years of their lifetimes or chronology of birth. They “have” language too in that they possess linguistic competence. Likewise, people “do” age and they “do” language in that they look and behave in certain ways, and talk (and write) in a particular fashion. Individually and socially, humans experience aging and language use as *dynamic* processes that centrally involve growth, maturation and decline. Both evolve under socialization (and enculturation), taking place in family, school, workplace and various public settings.

On the other hand, language and age are poor isolates, no matter whether examined each in its own right, or taken in tandem. So, biological age is not to be dissociated from the genetic dispositions of an individual, his/her style of living, temperament, or culturally and socially recognized age rights and obligations. Linguistic competence, too, is an outcome of a variety of factors, including one’s exposure to linguistic variation, meta-linguistic training and language awareness, or socialization in specialist communication skills. If language engages the whole of man in his/her capacities and doings, then age “leaks” through life stages and speaking styles indexing them.

In social perception, the salience of age in communication varies. In some sense, displaying age, or attributing it to others, is like managing *face*. As pointed out by Scollon and Scollon (1995: 38), “[t]here is no *faceless communication*” (emphasis in the original) and, we would venture, there is no “ageless communication” as well. Still, as with face, age need not be a salient factor in communication. If age difference may matter in, say, interactions between adults and children, then in many contexts the actual age of the interactants is negligible, or simply “invisible”. Paying no attention to age is

like not noticing politeness because in the ongoing interaction no threat can be detected to one's face image. As Kasper (1990: 193) put it, "[c]ompetent adult members comment on absence of politeness where it is expected, and its presence where it is not expected." Similarly, it seems, age may be brought into the picture, when for some reasons it is found relevant or foregrounded, to refer here to the foreground-background distinction in people's modes of presentation (after Schlenker and Pontari 2000).

Thus, even though age *is* indeed relevant for language studies, its actual place in meta-linguistic research is not at all obvious or well-established. Sometimes it is perceived as central, yet more often age is believed to act as a "hidden" dimension in social action. The real issue is what perspective we adopt towards language.

What is then the place of age in language studies? First of all, age is salient in much of sociolinguistic research and, independently, in language acquisition studies, where it has always been a key factor. Yet outside of the sociolinguistic venue, mainstream language research has largely ignored age, or presupposed its operation as a default factor in social life and communication. One of the editors (Anna Duszak) briefly addresses this division of labor in modern linguistics (this volume), noting that text and discourse studies, including pragmatics and (im)politeness theories, have been marked by the "the regime of the (age-less) adult". That is to, they invariably suggest models of a mature and fully competent user of a language. This position found its articulation in postulates of central, prototypical, if not "ideal" readers (and writers), constructed as frames of reference for debating the various processes of discourse production and interpretation. More recently, a discourse-community view of communication (esp. in the tradition of Swales 1990) highlights the concept of an *expert*, a specialist disposing of advanced field and discourse competence. Indirectly, such default categories of *core* competences connote age: an expert is a "mature" adult, whereas younger adults as a rule assume the roles of novices, apprentices or peripheral members of a given community (see, however, below).

Important for researching age in communication were contacts with cognate fields of study, and with social psychology and sociology in particular. In sociolinguistics a groundbreaking development came with the work of Coupland, Giles and associates, which started in the 1980s as an interdisciplinary endeavor with a clear focus on detrimental aspects of aging, language deterioration, loss and attrition. This was a project that raised a number of important issues for therapeutic and ethical concerns of caring for the elderly, and raising age-awareness, in particular in Western societies. The current

volume makes a point of contact with this tradition, hosting papers devoted to communication problems of and with the elderly. Yet it also moves towards an important extension of such studies in the face of new challenges for the elderly and the "pre-elderly". These include new circumstances of living (and communicating) in migrant and emigrant populations, the participation in inter-generational debates over historical traumas, current crises and new challenges of the socio-economic realities of globalization, or the e-literacy imposed by the young.

The work by Coupland, Giles and associates has been important for its contribution to interactive, discursive and constructionist approaches to age in social interaction. It participated in the redefinition of traditional sociolinguistic correlates of age values and linguistic variables in terms of communicative accounts of how age is displayed, managed and challenged in communication. Today interactional sociolinguistics partakes in discursive elaborations on other sociolinguistic categories, so that age is made to compete for salience with gender, ethnicity or occupational characteristics of individuals and groups. It remains under the strong influence of social psychology, the ethnography of communication and conversation analysis, or general cultural studies.

Outside of sociolinguistics, interest in the role of age in communication is growing, with focus being placed on the dynamic, relational and relative nature of aging as a social process. Most importantly, some of such work interprets age as a viable component of *social identities* investigating into how age-concerns (and age-arguments) are enacted in discourse, and how they construe what are cooperative, competitive and confrontational styles of social interaction. It is this line of thinking that construes the leading argument for the structuring of this volume and sets two emphases on how age is positioned for doing linguistic *and* social analyses: age for social identification, and age-as-identity in communication across age groups.

2. Age as (social) aging

A discursive perspective on age offers new vistas on the role of language in the life of an individual and whole social groups. It does this by accommodating cognitive, cross-cultural and critical interpretations, as well as providing new domain-specific and cross-cultural evidence. Still the legacy of earlier sociolinguistic studies remains important in that this is the work that laid out the basic concerns in addressing the role of age in language. Among them is

the difference between *age* and *aging*, and between biological (chronological) and contextual aspects of age (and aging). Discussing the then state-of-the-(sociolinguistic)-art in studying age in relation to language, Eckert writes:

Aging is central to human experience. It is the achievement of physical and social capacities and skills, a continual unfolding of the individual's participation in the world, construction of personal history, and movement through the history of the community and of society. If *aging* is movement through time, *age* is a person's place at a given time in relation to the social order: a stage, a condition, a place in history. Age and aging are experienced both individually and as part of a cohort of people who share a life stage, and/or an experience of history. (Eckert 1997: 151, emphasis in original)

In their attempts to establish correlates between age and language features, sociolinguists tried to "immobilize" age and its languages too. They spoke of age cohorts defined in terms of selected brackets of age values, and worked with descriptive categories such as children, preadolescents, teenagers, adults or the elderly. Sometimes subtle age boundaries were proposed, as illustrated by two numeric elderly age-groups, the "young-old" (64–76) and the "old-old" (with 77 onwards) (Coupland et al. 1991: 7). At the same time it was increasingly recognized that any biologically based age-brackets are relative, for chronological age cannot be separated from an organism's "contextual age" – "an aggregated index of life-circumstantial and subjective factors" (in Coupland et al. 1991: 8). Indeed, arbitrary divisions may be needed in order to cope with aging, whether individually or socially, but our understanding of age is cognitively, physically, socially and culturally co-constructed. Hence it is complex and variable, so that social categorizations of people as "young" or "old", "the elderly" or "the old", are only generalizations based on metaphors deriving from individual and social experience. If such divisions may be inexpedient for the self-presentation or social categorization of people in general, life-stages are only transitional moments in a permanent flow of time and language.

The contextual nature of age and aging suggests that age-based labeling could be essentially an *ideological* strategy in the construction of meaning, to use the terminology common for most discursive approaches and critical discourse studies in particular (for some discussion, see, e.g., van Dijk 1998; Eggins and Martin 1997: 237; Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999: 29; Fairclough 2003: 9). Some sociolinguistic work pointing to relative readings of age values is actually consistent with such positioning on age. So,

sociolinguists cautioned that adults are not homogenous groups, that variation in language use occurs on all levels, and that age grading may be culturally marked. Eckert notes (1997: 159), for instance, that in US culture, old age is “interestingly enough viewed separately from adulthood.” Fornäs (1995: 3) argues that what is *young* is established in relation to what is understood as *childish* and what as *adult*, and that such estimates go well beyond language and that they engage a wide spectrum of semiotic markers.

All the chapters in this volume address directly or indirectly this fuzzy, transient and dynamic nature of age, on the one hand, and discourses of age, on the other. So, for instance, Okulska demonstrates that the John Paul II Generation – technically established with reference to chronology and locality (Poland) – is a socio-cultural phenomenon feeding on international and all-generational sharing of the Pope’s humanistic stance and his “civilization of love”. In turn, Ardington demonstrates how the transition between late childhood and adolescence is made manifest in a change in the style of interaction, when teasing and playful collaborative exchanges stop, and when name-calling, insulting or other confrontative practices begin. In this way the contribution adds to other work exploring this socially valid theme of “early” aging and the young’s learning how to distinguish between polite and impolite ways of social being in monolingual and multilingual settings (cf., e.g., Eder 1985; Baroni and Axia 1989; Grimshaw 1990; Rampton 1995).

Clearly, our conceptualizations of age and aging are always localized: age as a socio-cultural concept is defined relative to a given culture, historical time and a set of social and linguistic values. The dynamics of age is conditional, and among other things it helps to determine a society’s general social and linguistic change. Everywhere age “progression”, in terms of biological growth *and* contextual learning, is taking place against the background of simultaneous accumulation of linguistic assets, resources and styles. In all cultures and at all times aging involves valuation that has to reconcile a paradox. On the one hand, it is *good* to be aging since growth – biological, social and linguistic – combines with increased agency, responsibility, causality and social power. On the other hand, aging is *bad* in that it connotes the unavoidable deterioration and loss of capacities and powers. The highs and lows of age rights, and cut-off points marking when aging ceases to be *good*, are likely to be culturally and historically determined, as well as continually negotiated, conserved or contested in inter-generational dialogue.

It is this dynamics of social perceptions of age that lends itself to consideration for a new agenda in age-and-language interaction in modern societies. The critical discursive turn in the social sciences affords an integrative

perspective on age variation and valuation pleading for combined social and linguistic analyses. Linguistic age research needs, it seems, stronger integration with such socially minded and language-sensitive accounts of the various processes of integration and disintegration within and across modern societies. A host of issues are begging for attention: globalization, tradition and modernity, new information technologies, ageism and medicalization, cross-cultural communication and new multilingualism, and generational change. Among the focal questions are the following: how does age partake in the ongoing social and discursive change, and how does it contribute to the struggle over power and for power? How do age values influence, if not actually define themselves, the identities that people adopt and attribute to others in their discursive actions? The papers in this volume selectively but pointedly tackle such concerns. The pivotal topics are age-based *identities* and their *voices* across discourse.

3. Age and discursive construction of social identities

In contrast to the initial preoccupation with how age values correlate with language features and how talk indexes life-stages, we can witness of late a growing interest in the ways in which age and its *voices* partake in the discursive construction of social identities. It is at this point that age research enters into a wide stream of language-and-identity studies, drawing on theories of identity developed in other disciplines, and in social psychology in particular, and rapidly gaining ground in linguistic research (for some useful summaries of identity theories see Breakwell 1992; Wieseman and Koester 1993; Simon 2004; for identity studies in linguistics see, e.g., Rubin 1995; Ivanič 1998; Duszak 2002; Joseph 2004; Cortese and Duszak 2005; Benwell and Stokoe 2006; de Fina et al. 2006; cf. also references in chapters to this volume). The sociolinguistic variables of gender, ethnicity and age became the main loci of interactional approaches to identity construction (cf. on gender and ethnicity: Gumperz 1982; Wodak and Benke 1997; Litosseliti and Sunderland 2004; Okulska 2006; on age Rampton 1995, 1999; J. Coupland and Gwyn 2003; N. Coupland and Nussbaum 1993; Williams and Thurlow 2005; Ylänne-McEwen 1999; Nussbaum and J. Coupland 2004; N. Coupland et al. 1991; Giles et al. 2003). A separate scenario of age-and-identity research opens up with a rapid growth of studies in the language in the professions (e.g., Gunnarson, Linell and Nordberg 1997; Niemeier, Campbell and Dirven 1998; Bargiela-Chiappini and Nickerson 1999; Geluykens and Pelsmaekers