

“I’ve become a grouchy old woman”: Social construction of shared meaning and negotiation of old age identity

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Age is a social variable that linguists have assumed to be a static aspect of identity and often represent solely in terms of numbers, although certain scholars have encouraged an emic approach to age (e.g., Coupland, Coupland & Giles 1991; Coupland 2009; Nikander 2009). In this paper, I further this social constructionist perspective of age by examining the moment-by-moment negotiation of the social meanings of self-identification as “an old woman.” I analyze how two women, ages 75 and 87, associate multiple social meanings with the referential label “old.” I demonstrate the ways in which this semantic variation allows for the reproduction and reinterpretation of popular stereotypes of old age and gender within a local context, examining how the culturally circulated stereotype of “grouchy old women” is reproduced, negotiated, contested, and reclaimed locally.

The data analyzed were collected during ethnographic fieldwork in an older women’s hair salon. I analyze eight minutes of a fifteen-minute conversation, in which two women discuss one speaker’s self-assessment that she has become a “grouchy old woman.” I argue that age should be treated as a fluid category of identity, as its meaning can be negotiated across a single interaction. In other words, the meanings of “being old” cannot be assumed to be static. Rather, paradoxically, the aging process may be concurrently constructed as difficult (it’s hard though when you get to be my age), inescapable (but we all get old unfortunately...their time’s coming) yet volitional (when I get old I’m going to be mean and drive everybody crazy), and dynamic (I’ve become a grouchy old woman).

However, it is not just the locally negotiated variant meanings of “old” that are relevant in the discursive construction of age; rather, these local meanings are mediated through social relationships and popularly-circulated discourses. As Coupland (2009) points out, “age-identity and change are in many different regards negotiated at the intersection of private and public domains” (860). Therefore, when analyzing the multiple meanings of “being old,” it also becomes necessary to examine how public discourses of “oldness” are appropriated and contradicted locally. In particular, I analyze how these women also recirculate popular notions of *older adults as belonging to a homogenous and static group identity* (*have you heard of the grouchy old women?*). These speakers reproduce, but in some ways contradict, this overtly negative characterization through multiple interactional strategies: they draw on the collective experience and inevitability of aging, emphasize the privileges of old age, and highlight the humorous aspects of being “a grouchy old woman.”

Exploring the variation of meaning surrounding referential expressions of old age and the ways in which age is discursively constructed, this paper contributes to our understanding of the relationship between age as a social variable and the linguistic construction of identity. Instead of focusing on youth identity (e.g., Bucholtz 1999; Eckert 2000; Mendoza-Denton 2008), this paper illustrates the necessity of understanding identity construction as a lifelong process and examines the ways in which older adults negotiate and construct their age-identities in interaction.