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AGE AS A SOCIAL INTERACTION FACTOR

У статті розглядається вік як важливий соціолінгвістичний фактор, виявляються елементи вікової стратифікації суспільства, визначається вікова структура ролей в сім'ї та суспільстві, аналізується мовленнєва поведінка типова для певної вікової групи.
Ключові слова: *вік, вікова стратифікація суспільства, вікова структура ролей у суспільстві та сім'ї, вікові маркери, вікові стратегії.*

В статье рассматривается возраст как важный социолингвистический фактор, выявляются элементы возврастной стратификации общества, определяется возрастная структура ролей в семье и обществе, анализируется речевое поведение, типическое для определенной возрастной группы.
Ключевые слова: *возраст, возрастная стратификация общества, возрастная структура ролей в обществе и семье, возрастные маркеры, возрастные стратегии.*

Article deals with age as sociolinguistic factor. Importance of age in terms of status is revealed. Age stratification pattern is defined. Family roles are investigated from the perspective of age-appropriateness. Young-to-elderly language strategies are highlighted.
Key words: *age, age stratification, age structure of roles, family roles, age markers, young-to-elderly language strategies.*

The article is devoted to the analysis of age as sociolinguistic factor.

Topicality is predetermined by the growing interest of linguists in this country and abroad to the development of the communicative competence of children (W. Labov, A. Halliday, B. Ackerman, M. Swain), age gradation and linguistic peculiarities of a certain age group (Ch. Hockett, H. Helfrich, N. Coupland, O. Halapchuk, M. Olikova), discourse organization of children (H. Sacks, J. Gerhard), age peculiarities of bilinguals speech (J. Ferguson, B. Spolsky).

Age is an important factor for social interaction and social organization. Since age groups form social strata with particular obligations and resources, we can speak of an age stratification system as a component of social structure.

Contrary to popular belief, the life span or the biological limits to which our species is able to survive has not increased or decreased since ancient times. What has changed is life expectancy. When Julius Caesar was born some 2,000 years ago, the average life expectancy was only twenty-two years. In reality, it was not much longer by the time George Washington became president, at which time people on the average could expect to live to the age of thirty-five. Although Washington himself lived to an old age, infant and childhood diseases, childbirth mortality, and epidemics took their toll among his playmates.

In terms of status, age is important in three different ways. First, like gender, age is an ascribed characteristic. At any particular moment, we are a specific age (though we may try to look younger or older) so that age provides a very clear basis for the division of labor.

Every society contains some elements of age stratification that affect opportunities, experiences, and relationships. Age stratification results from two factors – the age structure of the population, or the number of people of various ages within the society; and the role structure, or number of roles available to be filled. The age structure and the role structure of any society always have the potential to be in balance or out of balance with one another, depending on the number of people available to fill the needed roles.

Every society is composed of an age structure of persons and an age structure of roles. The age structure of persons (or *age strata*) is the number of people in each age category, such as from age fifteen to twenty, twenty-five to thirty-five, thirty-five to forty-five, and so forth. The age structure of a society may be illustrated as a population pyramid which summarizes the distribution of the population by age and sex.

Age becomes a criterion according to which a certain status is automatically assigned to us at every stage in our lives. Age may be formalized as a basis for possessing a certain status: for example, in the United States and other industrialized nations, laws control the age associated with school attendance, employment, military service, voting, election to public office, and marriage. Even the circumstances related to such apparently individual behaviors as driving a car, buying liquor or cigarettes, or responsibilities for criminal behavior are governed by our age status. Persons are assumed to be incapable of making moral choices until they reach a certain age and, therefore, cannot be held responsible for conduct that would be either tolerated or considered criminal if committed by someone above that age.

A second point consists of the fact that age, unlike gender, is always a transitional status. We are constantly moving from one age to another. Age provides a kind of cultural roadmap of our lives–a notion of where we should be going and what we should be doing at a particular point in our life. Every culture contains norms about what is appropriate behavior at various periods in the course of life, and defines the usual set of passages or transitions from one age to another. Moving from one age status to another is accomplished by socialization to age-appropriate behavior. The expression *act your age* means precisely that: conform to age-related expectations.

The age structure of roles in a society is made up of the statuses and opportunities that are open to people of a given age. For example, as the number of jobs available either expands during periods of economic growth or contracts during a recession, one way to control the flow of workers is to change the age requirements for entering the labor force (by lengthening the period of schooling), or for leaving it (by raising or lowering the age when one receives Social Security).

Family roles are also subject to changing definitions of age-appropriateness. Countries that are trying to control the growth of their population can reduce the birth rate by rising the age of legal marriage, as in the People's Republic of China

today. Conversely, where high birth rates are encouraged, as in Eastern Europe, the legal age for marriage will be lowered.

Third, although in every society some age groups are more powerful, more wealthy, and have more prestige than others, the unique aspect of age as a status is that during our lives each of us can expect to occupy positions of varying dominance based on age.

The balance between age and role structures determines the age stratification pattern of any society. Age is a relative concept, constructed both personally and socially. Age is not only a number but a social construct, defined by norms specific to a given society at a particular time in history. In many societies, the line between childhood and adulthood is marked by a public celebration – *a rite of passage*. This is a ritual or ceremony that symbolizes the movement from one age status to another; it defines the meaning of this movement or transition and establishes cultural markers both for the society and the individuals involved.

Age is associated with the role structure in the family and in social groups, with the assignment of authority and with the attribution of different levels of communication. It is highly likely that the social category of age is reflected in speech behaviour. Older and younger members within a single community differ with respect to the linguistic devices they use. Age markers include phonological, syntactic, semantic, extralinguistic and paralinguistic factors.

Young-to-elderly language strategies had been highlighted in many sociolinguistic studies. The following strategies are distinguished within the framework of the Speech Accommodation Theory:

– *speech convergence*–adaptation to each other's speech at several communicative levels: the phonological level (speech rate, pause and utterance length), the lexical level (using familiar vocabulary) and the syntactic level (low complexity in terms of the number of consistent and coding rules);

– *speech divergence*–accentuation of believed linguistic differences between the target individuals and others through psychological factors (address forms); on the phonological level (careful articulation); and on the lexical level (slang or dialects);

– *speech maintenance*–an attempt to neutralize a convergent or a divergent strategy;

– *speech complementarity*–modifications that accentuate valued sociolinguistic differences between interlocutors occupying different social roles.

Speech can mark stages of age through the total life span. The most important principles governing the acquisition process are the principles of progression from maximal to minimal contrasts. H. Helfrich believes that three stages can be distinguished in syntactical development: (1) single-word utterances (at one year of age); (2) two-word utterances (18-20 months); and (3) three-word phrases (from 20 months up). At least five dimensions of syntactical usage in speech of children aged 5-13 can be seen: general fluency, embeddedness, finite-verb structure, noun-phrase structure and qualified speech [2].

Still more interestingly, a phenomenon called *age-grading* [3] exists in many societies. It means that there are linguistic forms which are used only by children at the peer-oriented stage and which are transmitted from one generation of children to the next without being used by adults.

Age-grading of the elderly has not yet been marked successfully and uniformly. For instance, N. Coupland and his co-authors operationalize *the elderly* as those over sixty-five years of age, while recognizing the tremendous diversity inherent in the category, especially in terms of psychological age. What they mean by *the young* can cover a very wide age range and for their purposes include adolescents up to even the so-called *ageing* (that is those of around fifty-five years) [1].

In mainstream sociolinguistic studies, age has figured as a variable only to the extent that it may show patterns of dialectal variation within communities [4].

However, there seem to be two synchronic possibilities across the full range of age-related speech behaviour: first, that many elders, in dialectal and other communication respects, may not only be responsive to changing norms but actually contribute to their establishment and second, that elderly speech may have its own "intrinsic" stylistic qualities which reflect elderly speakers' communicative needs and their social, psychological and other circumstances.

Potentially important differences exist with relation to situational perceptions, interaction goals, and various language devices between the young and the elderly.

A speaker's verbal and non-verbal behaviour is affected not only by his or her own age but by that of the addressee. Old people are spoken to in a different way than young people are. Baby talk is used by adults and even by other children when speaking to infants.

A speaker marks the age of the person he is addressing in his speech. As the study of address forms in various contexts shows, there are markers which indicate both the age of the listener and the age of the speaker.

For Helfric, a distinction will be made in terms of "sender age marker" and "receiver age marker" [2]. A single linguistic feature may function both as a sender age marker and a receiver age marker. For instance, if an elderly person user speaks in a high-pitched voice only when speaking to young children, the high pitch will be a possible receiver marker of age. The first kinds of sender markers are static, whereas the second are dynamic.

This kind of relationship between marker and age may be either invariant or probabilistic. An *age-exclusive* marker would be a linguistic feature which is used only by members of a specific age class. *Age-preferential* usage refers to differences in the relative frequency with which specific features occur in a certain age class.

Analysing the speech samples of different ages, some linguists found a decrease in the verb-adjective ratio with increasing age. Older people tend to define more situations as formal and therefore prefer a more quantitative style.

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