

Dissertation Abstract

This dissertation investigates how speakers in a community of older people creatively use language to construct their identities and how their linguistic practices use age as a social category to create distinctions and bonds. This community presents an interesting demographic situation: it is a non-residential, recreational, community center specifically designated for people over the age of 50, which allows multiple generations of “older” people to come together and interact. Although simply based on their participation in this age-delimited community its members might uniformly be considered “older,” age is a highly relevant category to its members—its significance is apparent in their daily interactions at the center. As such, this dissertation examines how age is a category that is not just a demographic marker of chronological age, but is also deployed and played with for social and interactional purposes. Based on 18+ months of ethnographic observation in this community, located in the Southeastern United States, this dissertation draws on qualitative analysis methods to contribute to our understanding of how identity construction is not only a lifelong process but also an interactionally emergent negotiation.

In particular, this dissertation explores the ideologies of time that are produced through older people’s discourses and how older speakers position themselves with respect to these ideologies. It examines how ideologies of time and related conceptions of aging are played with and negotiated in the act of constructing identities. It also analyzes the connections between these ideologies of time and hegemonic discourses about time and aging. For example, it examines the moments in which speakers align and disalign with popular discourses, both covertly and overtly, the discourse strategies used in these moments, and why certain ideologies of time remain largely unchallenged. By analyzing language and identity construction in this community, this dissertation seeks to complicate and provide alternate understandings of aging to both academic and popular discourses, in which older people are typically represented as “rigid” or “inflexible,” “communicatively close-minded” and “senile,” “inarticulate,” and “old-fashioned.” This project thus contributes to understandings of the relationship between language and age, an area that has received relatively little attention within the field of sociolinguistics. This perspective is not only theoretically important, but socially significant as well: the United States is currently undergoing dramatic demographic shifts that will result in a significantly older population. In terms of numbers, older people represent the fastest growing demographic in the United States, largely because the Baby Boomer generation is aging into the older population category; it is projected that 20% of Americans will be over 65 years old in 2030, compared to 12.4% in 2010. Against this social background of aging, this dissertation examines how older people in a community construct their identities within these shifting social contexts.