9. Age as a Sociolinguistic Variable

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1 Introduction

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.

The study of age in relation to language, particularly the study of sociolinguistic variation, lies at the intersection of life stage and history. The individual speaker or age cohort of speakers at any given moment represents simultaneously a place in history and a life stage. Age stratification of linguistic variables, then, can reflect change in the speech of the community as it moves through time (historical change), and change in the speech of the individual as he or she moves through life (age grading).

Much of the work that focuses on age in the field of variation concerns the disambiguation of age-stratified data, determining when change in apparent time, or time as reflected in age, is a reflection of historical change in real time and when it represents age grading. On the one hand, historical change will inevitably be reflected in age stratification. But for change in apparent time to regularly reflect change in real time, the speech of an age group would have to correspond in a predictable way to the state of the language at some fixed life stage. This means that the individual's linguistic system would have to remain relatively stable throughout life, or any changes in the linguistic system during the life course would have to be regular and predictable. Yet progress through the life course involves changes in family status, gender relations, employment status, social networks, place of residence, community participation, institutional participation, engagement in the marketplace – all of which have implications for patterns of variation. It is unlikely that speakers pass through all the identity changes of a lifetime without making any changes in their use of sociolinguistic variables.

Resolving the ambiguity between age grading and change in apparent time involves grappling with some fundamental linguistic issues: To what extent, and in what ways, can a speaker's language change over the life course? How are these changes embedded in life stages and life events? And to what extent does age interact with other social variables such as class, gender, and ethnicity? Answers to these questions require an understanding of the linguistic life course. Yet although age is one of a small number of social variables routinely included in community studies, there has been no concerted study of variation from a life-course perspective. Like gender, age correlates with variation by virtue of its social, not its biological status (although biology of course is part of the social construction of age and gender). The study of age as a sociolinguistic variable therefore requires that we focus on the nature and social status of age and aging. A life-course perspective raises some new issues in the study of variation, and points out blank spaces in our knowledge. The following
discussion will begin with an examination of the reflection of linguistic change in age stratification, and move on to an examination of the social nature of age and its relation to variation.

2 Apparent and Real Time

Community studies of variation frequently show that increasing age correlates with increasing conservatism in speech. With just the evidence from apparent time, it is ambiguous whether the language patterns of the community are changing over the years or whether the speakers are becoming more conservative as they age – or both. Without evidence in real time, there is no way of establishing whether or not age-stratified patterns of variation actually reflect change in progress.

Several kinds of evidence have been called upon to provide real-time evidence: A number of studies have sought to approach real time by combining data on variation in apparent time with general sources on earlier stages of the language. Sources such as old recordings (Kemp and Yaeger-Dror, 1991), geographical evidence (Eckert, 1980), and historical accounts (Labov, 1972b, 1966) of the dialects under study have been used to contextualize contemporary data, and to establish the possibility that current age differences represent a continuation of an ongoing change process.

The validity and interpretability of evidence in real time depends on the extent to which the samples representing different time periods are comparable: How close is the match between communities, and between the speaker samples across and within communities? Replications of community studies at some time distance are obviously the best source for evidence in real time. Such studies are still relatively rare, but the lengthening history of the study of variation, particularly since Labov’s 1966 New York City study, is beginning to produce replications. Two kinds of re-study of the same community are possible: studies of age cohorts as they pass through time, and studies of life stages as they are occupied by successive age cohorts. Studies in real time can also either follow the same individuals (panel study) or they can collect samples of comparable but different individuals at successive points in time (trend study). A trend study with an age-graded sample is the only kind that can unequivocally show change in progress as it shows successive cohorts at each life stage. A panel study is the only kind that can unequivocally show change in the individual lifetime, as it sees the same people at different life stages. Trend studies, however, can yield convincing evidence of both kinds of change.

Most community studies of change in real time have been trend studies, such as Hermann (1929) in Charmey (Suisse Romande), Cedergren (1984) in Panama, Fowler (1986) in New York, and Trudgill (1988) in Norwich. These studies confirm that many, but not all, age-stratified variables represent change in progress. Gauchat (1905) found apparent time evidence of five changes in Charmey. Over 20 years later, Hermann (1929) revisited Charmey and compared the speech of 40 speakers with Gauchat’s evidence. From these comparisons, Hermann found evidence of change for four of the five changes in apparent time reported by Gauchat. Bailey and others (1991) compared apparent time data from the Phonological Survey of Texas, gathered in the late 1980s, with data from the Linguistic Atlas of the Gulf States (Pederson et al., 1986), gathered in the mid–1970s. While this study covered a wider geographical area and hence cannot be considered a re-study of a community, it targeted a fairly specific area and population. Indications of change in progress from the apparent time data in the later sample were confirmed by differences between the two samples. Trudgill (1988), revisiting Norwich at 20 years’ remove, found that variants occurring only in the speech of young people at the earlier time had caught on as changes and were spreading through the earlier age groups.

Other studies in apparent time have found evidence not only of historical change, but of age grading. Cedergren (1984), in her trend study of Panama City, compared two age-graded samples with a time depth of 20 years. In a comparison of equivalent age-graded samples at two points in history, differences due to change in real time are reflected in differences between successive cohorts at the same age, while differences due to age grading are reflected in differences within cohorts between the two times. Cedergren’s data (described in detail in Labov, 1994: 94–7) show a clear increase in the lenition of /t∫/ between successive cohorts at the same age, indicating a progress of change across the community. At the same time, in the middle-aged groups (roughly 30 to 70 years of age), the speakers increased their use of lenition over the 20 years between studies. Thus the same change that affected the community as a whole affected the speech of individuals in their lifetimes, showing that adult speakers can be active participants in sound change.
Paunonen (1994) separated men and women in a study that combined a trend study and a panel study, comparing three age cohorts, at two different points in time, of men and women who were young, middle-aged, and old in 1970 and 1990. One change examined in this study, the replacement of synthetic with analytic possessive constructions, showed change across cohorts but little change in the speech of individuals. The other, however, the reversal of a normative insertion of /d/, showed both community and individual change, both of which showed important gender effects. The trend study showed that women in general were becoming less normative through time. The panel study found older women mirroring this trend within their own lives: Those who were middle-aged in the 1970s were less normative in the 1990s, when they were old. (Paunonen's attribution of this development to change in the situation of women in Finland will be discussed in section 4.) On the other hand, men, and women who were young in the 1970s, became slightly more normative as they aged.

Paunonen's finding that gender interacts with age is most likely not unusual particularly, perhaps, in times of change in gender norms and practices. Labov (1994) has emphasized that uncovering patterns of change requires isolating segments of the community that participate differently in change. It has been established that women commonly lead in sound change, as do the upper working and lower middle classes. The progress of sound change can best be traced by separating these groups out in age stratifications. Studies that separate age stratification by class (Fowler, 1986 (n.b. discussed in Labov, 1994: 86–94); Labov, 1994: 53) and by gender (Labov, 1991), have shown that grossly combined age figures can mask specific group effects. If speakers are combined in age groups without attention to such effects, what might look like an overall age difference could actually be more specifically located. Studies like these are crucial to our understanding of variation over the life course. But our interpretation of complex results like those in Paunonen's study depends on an integrated view of variation over the life course.

3 Approaches to Age

Community studies of variation rely overwhelmingly on chronological age to group speakers; indeed to the Western social scientist, chronological age is age. However, inasmuch as social and biological development do not move in lock step with chronological age, or with each other, chronological age can only provide an approximate measure of the speaker's age–related place in society. To the extent that age stratification reflects historical change alone, the date of acquisition would be sufficient to group speakers in relation to time. And since individual differences in that age are relatively small in relation to the life span, chronological age would be an adequate measure. However, evidence that some kind of individual change takes place throughout life necessitates a longer view of development, and investigation of the social changes that underlie correlations with chronological age.

Because the span of ages is so great, it is difficult for community studies to achieve fine–grained age differentiations with any statistical significance. This necessitates the grouping of speakers, frequently in fairly broad age ranges or cohorts. Community studies have defined cohorts etically and emically. The etic approach groups speakers in arbitrarily determined but equal age spans such as decades (e.g., Trudgill, 1974; Labov, 1966), while the emic approach groups speakers according to some shared experience of time. This shared experience can be related to life stage or to history. Some studies (e.g., Wolfram, 1969; Horvath, 1985) have grouped speakers according to general life stage, particularly childhood, adolescence, young adulthood. As will be discussed in section 5, shared external events have also emerged as coherently defining linguistic cohorts.

While aging is universal, it is incorporated into social structure and invested with value in culturally specific ways. In all societies, age has significance because the individual's place in society, the community, and the family changes through time. The marking of maturation, whether by chronological age or by life event or stage, is regulatory, involving both authorization and control. The accomplishment of particular age–related landmarks authorizes the individual to assume particular roles, freedoms, and responsibilities. At the same time, it obligates the individual to give up old ones. Age systems, then, serve to mark not only an individual's progress in the life trajectory, but the individual's progress in relation to societal norms. Age systems often involve sanctions to enforce age–appropriate behavior; to enforce the normative timing of life events (such as the pressure on women to marry before a certain age), and life–stage or age–appropriate comportment. This can have
a variety of linguistic instantiations, from pressure for linguistic conservatism in adulthood to pressure to use vernacular features in pre-adolescence.

In industrial society, chronological age, measured as an accumulation of years since birth, serves as an official measure of the individual's place in the life course and in society, by reference to a societal dating system. But while chronological age lays out age as a homogeneous continuum based on calendar time, it is imbued with meaning by a variety of life landmarks, which are not necessarily evenly distributed over the life course. Certain birthdays are associated with transformations of personal (e.g., sweet sixteen) or institutional (e.g., legal majority) status. Simple decades can also have major social significance – unrelated to official landmarks, they serve more to mark a homogeneous passage of time as well as transformations in general life stage. Other aspects of the passage through life are less specifically tied to chronological age and more tied to life events, such as changes in religious status (bar and bat mitzvah, baptism), institutional status (first day of school, retirement), family status (marriage, first child), legal status (naturalization, first arrest), and physiological status (loss of the first tooth, onset of menses). These events in turn are associated with life stages: childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle age, old age. It is these general life stages that are most frequently invoked to explain behavior.

Although the relation of chronological age to biological and social age is approximate, it is given primacy in industrial society. The answer to an inquiry about an individual's age is invariably given in chronological years, not in terms of family or institutional status, or in terms of physical maturation. Indeed, family and institutional status and biological maturation are taken as indicators of chronological age, rather than vice versa. This can be reversed in societies that do not traditionally use chronological age. Fortes (1984: 110), for example, observed the Ashanti assigning a chronological age of 16 to females at the time of their nubility ceremonies, even though their actual birth dates were unknown. This was apparently a way to align their own assessment of these women's age with colonial law, under which women aged 16 and over were classified as adults.

Differences in age systems across cultures can have important sociolinguistic implications. Cross-cultural differences may show differences in life events, in the domains that are significant for the definition of those events, in the relative importance of generation and birth order, in the construction of cohorts, etc. An age-set society, for example, which groups people born within a period that can be as long as ten years, emphasizes solidarity within that set, frequently in opposition to other sets. In such a society, one might expect to see less continuous age stratification of variables than in an age-graded society in which the individual progresses according to personal developmental landmarks.

The relation between age and other social factors will also differ across cultures. Age systems do not affect people identically across the board. For example, the restriction of age sets in an age-set society to males, while women's age is treated more fluidly, no doubt could also have implications for interactions between gender and age in variation. Indeed, gender is quite explicitly constructed partially in its interaction with age. Certain landmarks, such as coming of age across societies, are gender-specific, and family, legal, and institutional status are commonly different for males and females. Guttmann (1975) even hypothesized a universal crossover between gender and age, claiming that while women become more autonomous, competitive, aggressive, and instrumental with aging, men become more dependent, passive, and expressive. Ethnic differences in industrial society may well juxtapose different age systems within a single community, so one cannot necessarily expect chronological age to correspond uniformly to social age even within a speech community. Class differences in industrial society also involve differences in age systems, since many aspects of the life trajectory are class-based. Entrance into young adulthood, for example, is earlier for working-class than middle-class youth; and the relation between adult status and relation to the linguistic marketplace is also different for these groups.

It is important also to recognize that a middle-aged perspective pervades social research. Sociolinguistic studies overwhelmingly embody a middle-aged point of view, yielding a more static treatment of middle-aged speech than of the speech of other age groups. A number of researchers (e.g., Baltes and others (1980)) have pointed out the middle-aged bias in social science research. Studies of children focus on the process of socialization, studies of adolescents and young adults focus on learning adult roles, and studies of the elderly focus on the loss of adult abilities. (See
Coupland and others (1991) for a critique of ageism within a sociolinguistic context.) Thus only the middle-aged life stage is treated outside of a developmental perspective: Only the middle-aged are seen as engaging in mature use, as “doing” language rather than learning or losing it. And the emphasis in research on language use in the early and the late years is on age-related cognitive and physical abilities, while the emphasis in research on the intervening years is on age-related forms of social participation.

The emphasis on adult socioeconomic class and on the standard language marketplace as tying class to language puts an adult focus on variation studies. Researchers tend to see adult patterns as defining variation, hence as constituting the sole target of development. Thus the development of patterns of variation is viewed as subsequent to early language development, and dependent on the development of adult-like social awareness. In other areas of language development, however, researchers (e.g., Ochs, 1988; Schieffelin and Ochs, 1986) have taken the integration of language development and socialization as fundamental. And inasmuch as the input for language development is itself variable (Labov, 1989), it would be ludicrous to believe that children ignore variability only to “acquire” it later on. The focus on adult social practice in the study of variation may well obscure age-specific use and interpretation among children. For this reason, a balanced view of sociolinguistic aging must merge a developmental perspective with a mature-use perspective for all age groups.

The developmental perspective recognizes that development is lifelong: Indeed, life is about change. Throughout the life course, speakers have a sense of moving forward in years and in maturity, anticipating the next developments in their lives and assuming new ways of being – and perhaps new ways of talking – as they go.

A mature-use perspective recognizes that sociolinguistic competence is age-specific, and that the speech of members of an age group is fully appropriate to that life stage. Taking middle-aged language as a universal norm and developmental target obscures the fact that ways of speaking at any life stage are part of the community structuring of language use, and that the linguistic resources employed at any stage in life have social meaning for and within that life stage. Thus small children are not simply striving to be older children; this striving is fully integrated into their competence at being small children, and strategically exercised.

An important factor in children's lives is a developmental imperative (Eckert, 1994): an emphasis on growing up, on being age-appropriate, or not being a “baby.” This imperative continues in other forms throughout life, but is particularly intense and foregrounded in the earlier years. Emotional issues associated with maturation, and the relation between age-appropriateness and social status at all early ages is likely to be the ground on which children begin to develop a sense of the relation between linguistic features and social identity and status. The use of baby talk marks a developmental stage, but it also constitutes an important register (Andersen, 1990; Ferguson, 1977; Gleason, 1973) for a wider age group. Baby talk is clearly linked with small children's social identities, and it is only reasonable that the transition from baby talk as one's sole competence to baby talk as a stylistic device for children who are no longer limited to that way of speaking would be seamless. Baby talk is also not childbound. It serves not only as a register to use when speaking with small children, but features of baby talk are used among speakers of all ages, including mature adults. In this sense, certain aspects of child identity and social relations endure in the linguistic strategies of older people, making children's linguistic resources a community-wide resource. A life-course perspective, therefore, would begin with children's linguistic resources, social identities, and strategies, rather than with those of adults, and speculations about the age at which children have “complete” control over patterns of variation (e.g., Romaine, 1984: 102) would give way to speculations about how children's patterns are transformed into adult patterns. An adult bias leads the variationist to search children's speech only for variables that have been studied in the adult population, but it is possible that the beginnings of social awareness in language variability lie in other, childhood-specific, linguistic material.

While we are used to thinking of social maturation as age-related in the early and the late years, we are less likely to think of similar changes in mid-life as age-related. But it is difficult to find a difference between anticipating a promotion from elementary school to junior high, and anticipating a promotion from manager to vice president. In both cases, the individual anticipates and is concerned about the challenge of new experiences and expectations, and with honing new skills as he or she
moves into a new life stage. A study of age as a sociolinguistic variable has to include perspectives based in a broader range of life stages.

4 The Linguistic Life Course

Some areas of language and variation development are better documented than others. Much more is known about fine age differences in the early years than in the later years, and in fact, less is known about age-related patterns of variation the farther we move along in the life course. Thought about the relation between variation and age centers around a set of life stages that are “native categories” in US culture, and commonly used as explanations for people’s behavior: childhood (which includes pre-adolescence), adolescence (more finely divided into early adolescence and adolescence), adulthood (which is more finely divided into early adulthood and middle age), and old age, which is interestingly enough viewed separately from adulthood. Only adulthood is seen as a life stage that is independent of the care and support of adults, and it is not surprising that independence is an important issue for both adolescents and the elderly.

The emphasis in the field of variation on the vernacular and standard language as poles of social stratification and of stylistic ranges has led to a view of language development that involves a developing awareness of the standard language (Labov, 1964). Awareness of standard language involves awareness of the standard language market (Sankoff and Laberge, 1978), which is defined primarily in terms of participation in institutions – particularly educational and commercial – and in the social networks that support those institutions. Institutional age limits and landmarks, therefore, can have an important effect on many aspects of people’s lives. It may determine their social networks as well as their need for language varieties. Children’s and adolescents’ lives are dominated by the institution of school and schooling, adult lives are dominated by the workplace, and many elderly lives by the retirement or nursing home. While the former two are bastions of standard language norms, the linguistic norms embodied in institutions for the elderly are more complicated.

Meanwhile, the local community, as the home of the vernacular, is another site for the development of resources for variation. While in the larger scheme of things the local vernacular marketplace exists in opposition to the global, standard marketplace, there is more going on in either marketplace than simple opposition to each other. The vernacular of one local community may live not only in opposition to the standard, but to surrounding vernaculars. And within communities, gender dynamics and age dynamics involve many things other than standard language concern. While standard language as embodied in an economic marketplace is of central importance to the understanding of variation, once again it is not what dominates the language development of children; rather, central concerns of children come to accommodate the socioeconomic sphere over time. An important focus on children is what aspects of identity are tied up with variation as it develops, and how socioeconomic concerns come to play a role.

4.1 Childhood

Quantitative research on variation in the early years of childhood is quite recent. Roberts’s work with 3-year-olds in Philadelphia (Roberts, 1993; Roberts and Labov, 1992) has shown that children’s language at this early age is inherently variable, much the same as the speech of the older people that serve as their models. This work has shown that 3-year-olds show variation in their use of both stable sociolinguistic variables (such as −ing, and t/d deletion) and in their use of patterns of local variation representing change in progress (such as the raising of short /a/ in Philadelphia). Labov (1989) found adult-like linguistic constraints in t/d deletion and −ing in the speech of three children aged 4, 6, and 7. The details of these patterns are dialect-specific, and closely approach those in the speech of adults in the same community.

There is also a good deal of evidence indicating that certain patterns cannot be learned after a fairly young age. Arvilla Payne’s work (1980) in the Philadelphia suburb King of Prussia, showed that children moving in from a different dialect area before the age of 8 or 9 picked up simple local vowel shifts. They did not have the same success, however, at developing the Philadelphia short /a/ pattern, which required a knowledge of word-class assignment. Rather, it appeared that only children whose parents were from Philadelphia developed this pattern completely. Payne’s conclusion was that while children may be able to add lower-level rules until adolescence, they cannot restructure their
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grammars as readily. Chambers's study (1992) of six Canadian children moving to Britain also provided evidence of a cutoff. In this case, Chambers found a close to perfect development of the opposition between long and short /o/ for a 9-year-old, and a sharp decrease in success for speakers over the age of 13.

If it is clear that patterns of inherent variation are acquired along with the rest of the phonological system, it is less clear what kind of social meaning these variables have for the child. It is well established that children develop sociolinguistic competence from the earliest stages of speech. Andersen (1990) provides ample evidence that children from a very early age engage in complex register variation and are acutely aware of the relation between social roles and language variability.

Gender differences have been shown repeatedly in many aspects of linguistic behavior by the age of 4 (e.g., Staley, 1982), and children in early elementary school are already responsive to gender stereotypes in language (Edelsky, 1977). This is no doubt related to the fact that gender is probably the earliest and most intense category membership imposed on very small children. But early gender differences revolve around discursive strategies, and are clearly related to behavioral judgments such as whether one is “a nice girl.” No doubt similar dynamics are at work when African-American children show early on in elementary school an awareness of the relation between Standard English and the school institution (Houston, 1969). Where there is a foregrounded relation between kinds of linguistic behavior and aspects of social identity, one may reasonably expect children to develop linguistic skills to reflect that relation. The relation between gender and variation, however, is far less straightforward than the relation between gender and the kinds of gender–differentiated language features that have been found among young children, for example, the amount of speech and the use of obscenities.

Researchers have sought evidence of the social use of variation in adult-like correlations, particularly with gender and class, and in patterns of stylistic variation. Stylistic variation quite obviously requires some kind of awareness of the significance of variables. But the younger the age group, the greater the chances that socioeconomic, and in some cases ethnic differentiation in language is not a matter of attending to sociolinguistic differentiation but of selective exposure. Since small children (particularly preschool children) are more isolated by socioeconomic class and ethnicity than by gender, gender differentiation could provide more convincing evidence that children are attending to social differentiation in their use of variables.

There are no robust correlations of variables with class or gender among very small children. This does not so much reflect negative results as lack of data. However, both differentiation and stylistic use appear among young elementary school children, and intensify through childhood to become quite full–blown in pre-adolescence. Romaine (1984) provided nonquantitative evidence of stylistic variation in the use of (a) (/aw/–[u]) in the speech of 6-year-olds in Edinburgh, and Biondi (1975) found stylistic use of despirantized /θ/ and among 6-year-old Italian-American children between speech and reading style. Labov (1989) found stylistic variation in the use of t/d deletion and -ing by 6-, 7-, 9-year-olds. The most robust data on stylistic variation in children, however, begins with the speech of pre-adolescents, around age 10. Reid (1978) showed variation in two speech styles among 11-year-old boys, in the use of -ing and in the use of the glottal stop. Romaine's data from Edinburgh show variation in the use of the same two variables among 10-year-olds, between speech and reading style. The most robust findings on gender differences in variation are also among older children, beginning at age 10. Macaulay (1977) found gender differences in 10- and 15-year-olds, with a considerably greater difference among the 15-year-olds. Biondi (1975), as well, found gender differences among Italian-American children in Boston. In all these cases, boys were using more nonstandard forms than girls. Socioeconomic stratification also shows up regularly in the speech of pre-adolescents (Wolfram, 1969; Macaulay, 1977; Romaine, 1984).

It is possible that children learn some of the social functions of certain variables before they have developed the linguistic constraints, and that they use these variables on occasion – perhaps as conscious markers in particular lexical items. It is also possible that they develop fine linguistic conditioning for some variables before they put them to social use. It is inadvisable to take evidence from one variable as indicative of the entire system, since, inasmuch as different variables within a dialect may have quite different social functions, children may well develop awareness of some earlier than others. It is possible, for example, that children develop use of stable variables that are clearly related to formality (such as -ing) before sound changes in progress that are likely to have more complex social connotations. At any rate, to the extent that children develop patterns of
sociolinguistic variation, one can expect the motivations to be age-specific and more local than those of adults. Fischer’s (1958) work with New England school children is unusual in its attention to age-specific categories. In his short study showing stylistic variation in the use of -ing, he found a greater use of the full form in the speech of a “model” boy than in the speech of a “typical” boy. While this was a brief study, its considerable interest lies in the attention to social distinctions that are significant to school-age children: status as a troublemaker or teacher’s pet can have greater significance than socioeconomic status. The relation between school orientation and class, which will be discussed in the next section, may in fact be an important factor in the continuity of linguistic patterns.

It has been recognized for some time (Hockett, 1950) that from a very early age, adults are not children’s primary linguistic models. Interaction with siblings, neighbors, and friends exposes younger children to changes in progress as manifested in the speech of their older peers, and affords them the kind of social participation needed to understand the social meanings of those changes. Differences between children’s patterns and the more conservative adults’ patterns exist in a setting of foregrounded child–adult relations, and the developmental imperative imbues slightly older children with status that may serve as motivation for younger children to emulate them. Class differences in childhood friendship networks and neighborhood patterns can expose children differentially to the influence of older children. The working-class neighborhood orientation, for example, puts children beyond parental watch and into networks that include older children, particularly under the care of older siblings and their friends (Eckert, 1989). Thus there is plenty of opportunity for variation to develop social meaning among children that is quite specific to their own social practices, and it is in these practices that we must seek explanations. Meanwhile, the nature of children’s linguistic input (i.e., how much time is spent with peers, and in what activities) may well differ dramatically across certain social boundaries such as class, gender, and ethnicity.

4.2 Adolescence

Adolescence as a life stage is specific to industrial society and the modern era. Of particular significance for sociolinguistics is that during adolescence, people who are in fact becoming adult are normatively denied adult roles, and isolated from the adult sphere in institutions of secondary education. In the US, children anticipate entrance into secondary school with a mixture of eagerness and trepidation. They see this new life stage as bringing greater freedom and new opportunities on the one hand, and making new social demands on the other. Kids do not all feel equally well prepared for this new environment, and status differences begin already in elementary school around this preparedness (Eckert, 1994). “Popular” groups take form, providing their members with a vaster network and hence information, protection, and support in a new environment, and fast change and construction of style— including linguistic style— becomes a crucial part of activity.

Part of what makes secondary school frightening and titillating to younger children is the fact that it is officially a time for children to move away from the family sphere and become officially their own people. In the US particularly, adolescents are expected to involve themselves in age-segregated networks. Eckert (1989) has speculated that the US public high school, by isolating students in a comprehensive institution, serves as a hothouse for the construction of identities. The tremendous symbolic activity that goes on in this context involves a good deal of linguistic innovation. It can be supposed that this is a product of an age cohort constructing itself by constructing difference within, on the one hand, and opposing itself to the adult and child age group on the other: a modification and acceleration of a process that no doubt begins in childhood.

Adolescence is the focus of development of the social use of the vernacular, and in general is seen as the time when linguistic change from below is advanced. Adolescents lead the entire age spectrum in sound change and in the general use of vernacular variables, and this lead is attributed to adolescents’ engagement in constructing identities in opposition to—or at least independently of—theirs elders.

As the official transition from childhood to adolescence, adolescence is a time when children are expected to become serious about their adult occupations. It is therefore a time of transition from their parents’ social sphere to one that they construct for themselves. Adolescent social structure and social practice is part of this process of construction. While patterns of variation in many community studies show children and adolescents participating in socioeconomic stratification according to their parents’ socioeconomic class, this does not mean that adolescents are simply their parents’ children.
Rather, socioeconomic mobility appears to be sufficiently low at this stage for many adolescents' own identities to conform with those of their parents. There is some evidence that a break does happen at this point. Wolfram's data (1969) on African-American English in Detroit show perfect correlations with class for children and adults, but less perfect correlations for adolescents. Macaulay (1977) also found better correlations for adolescents than for preadolescents. Eckert (1988), in a Detroit suburban study that included only adolescents, found parents' socioeconomic class disappearing as a correlate with variation in favor of the age-specific social categories that mediate social class for the adolescent age group. Habick (1991) found similar categories correlating with variation in a high school in southern Illinois. In these high schools, vernacular style is associated with a purely adolescent "burnout" style, which embodies class but which also brings class together with forms of school participation and class-based adolescent social values (Eckert, 1989).

One can see the connection between these adolescent developments and the early use of -ing by "typical" and "model" boys in Fischer's study. Studies of smaller networks in adolescence have also established direct connections between peer-group participation, orientation to vernacular culture, and patterns of variation. Cheshire's (1982) study of an adolescent social network, as defined by the use of a playground in Reading, could be seen as providing an analogous view of adolescents. Cheshire found correlations between linguistic variables and participation in "vernacular" culture, which she defined primarily in terms of "toughness" (carrying weapons, criminal activity, skill at fighting, swearing). Labov's work (1972a) with African-American early adolescents showed correlations of linguistic variables with places in social networks as defined by peer groups that defined themselves in relation to Harlem's vernacular culture and in opposition to legitimized institutional culture.

4.3 Adulthood

If adolescence is the life stage in which speakers push the envelope of variation, conservatism is said to set in during adulthood. Adults have regularly been shown (Labov, 1966; Wolfram, 1969; Trudgill, 1974; Macaulay, 1977; Horvath, 1985) to be more conservative in their use of variables than younger age groups. This conservatism has been attributed to the pressure for use of standard language in the workplace. Sankoff and Laberge (1978) showed a correlation between the use of standard variables in Montreal French and participation in the standard language marketplace as defined by normative institutions and the social networks that support them. These correlations were found among speakers who, by normal socioeconomic measures, would be grouped together, thus providing some evidence of a direct relation between institutional participation and the use of standard language. Nichols (1983) in her study of African-American women in the south, also showed the linguistic demands of the workplace as a key factor in patterns of variation.

In the same way, studies of social networks (Milroy, 1980; Edwards, 1992) have shown a relation between the use of vernacular variables and engagement in locally based networks. It is quite possible that the crossover pattern (Labov, 1966), whereby both stylistic extremes of the speech of the lower middle class cross over the values of the socioeconomic groups on either side (working class and upper middle class), is a function of that transitional group's simultaneous engagement in locally based networks and in standard language institutions.

While increased conservatism has been the main linguistic change attributed to adults, there is evidence from studies in real time that this is certainly not universal. Paunonen's findings (1994) in Finland, for example, showed women becoming more normative in their use of /d/ as they moved from early adulthood to middle age, but other women becoming less normative as they moved from middle to old age. He attributed this to changes in women's position in society, presumably associating a greater sense of choice and power with flouting of standard norms. However, one would expect this to be more true of the younger women than the older. It is possible, on the other hand, that older women are finding greater freedom with the release, for example, from family responsibilities – and perhaps they always have. Many women shed a variety of normative concerns along with their childrearing responsibilities, and it may well be that a relaxation of their language use is one aspect of this. Labov (1991) has pointed out mothers' roles in instilling standard language norms in children. If this is indeed so, one might consider child-rearing to constitute a standard...
language marketplace for women analogous to the workplace outside the home.

In general, though, adulthood has emerged as a vast wasteland in the study of variation. In sharp contrast to the year-by-year studies of children and adolescents, adults have been treated as a more or less homogeneous age mass. There have been no studies that attempted to substitute etic age categories, such as decades, with major life transitions such as family status, job status, or retirement. Indeed, although it has been claimed that people relax their conservatism somewhat after retirement, this has not been explicitly examined.

The retiring and retired age group is the least studied of all. The elderly constitute a heterogeneous group, but also a group whose numbers progressively diminish. Labov (1972), based on some evidence that older men's speech is less conservative than the immediately younger age group, suggested that older men's linguistic behavior seems to relax as they lose concern with power relationships. Disengagement from the marketplace could bring a loss of concern with standard language norms in general, and this loss of concern could be a matter of choice, in which one simply enjoyed greater egalitarianism. On the other hand, many of the aged suffer an unwelcome loss of power: they become physically vulnerable, many become economically vulnerable, and disengagement from the marketplace deprives many of influence. In addition, as the cohort ages, its numbers decrease, bringing a loss of age-group power. Keith (1980) observes that residents of retirement housing create communities with strong egalitarian norms, and suggests that this is held in common with other groups that are excluded from arenas of power.

Edwards (1992) uncovered two important differences between those on either side of the age of 60 in an inner-city neighborhood in Detroit. Gender was a significant variable only among those aged 60 and older, and the same older age group used a considerably higher proportion of AAVE variants than the younger age groups. An important social difference dividing these two large age groups is in network structure: The older speakers had the most locally based social networks. Bott (1957) observed that working-class people in enduring locally based networks show greater gender segregation, with men and women retaining their separate gender-segregated friendship networks into adulthood. Thus the network differences between the two age groups could explain both of the linguistic differences. If this is so, the differences must be differences in social change in the neighborhood, whereby the older people have been less geographically mobile, while the younger people's linguistic patterns are reflecting greater mobility. This case points to the importance of social change to age differences in variation.

5 Cohorts, Generations, Eras

To the extent that social and political events can affect the way people speak, age differences in variation can reflect social and political change. This gives a new meaning to the age cohort, and a new way of viewing the grouping of speakers into cohorts. Baby boomers and depression babies constitute emic cohorts in American society. Just as life stage is invoked to explain behavior, so is cohort membership – and indeed the two can overlap. When Americans whose childhoods coincided with the Depression reached middle age, both their cohort membership and their life stage were invoked to explain individuals'fiscal conservatism. The same puzzle of balancing historical insertion with life stage arises in the explanation of patterns of linguistic variation as well.

Several authors have examined the relation between age-based patterns of variation and speakers' experience of major historical events that happened during the age span of the population. Work on Quebec French (Clermont and Cedergren, 1979; Kemp, 1979; Kemp and Yaeger-Dror, 1991) has shown a variety of abrupt patterns of change in the speech of those born before and after the years of the Depression and World War II. This has been attributed to changes in linguistic norms accompanying political, social, and economic transformations in Canadian society during this period.

In addition to remarkable events or eras, fairly specific kinds of social change can bring about different relations to linguistic markets, and these changes commonly affect specific groups differently. Laferriere (1979) pointed out that differences in the educational and social mobility trajectories of three immigrant groups in Boston (Irish, Italian, and Jewish) could account for their differential use, as a group, of particular Boston phonological features. Speakers of the same age but from the different ethnic groups therefore represent quite different phases in the social history of
their ethnic group.

Rickford (MS pp. 105–7) points out that changes in Guyanese attitudes about the education of girls yielded a major education differential between females under and over the age of 15. This differential could be expected to cause women overall to use fewer standard forms than men, and young people overall to use more standard forms than older people. Thus what looks like an overall effect is quite specifically located in society and in history. Indeed, the significance of age and the very stages of life do not stand still. Hence those at a particular life stage now may have a different experience of that stage than those who passed through it a generation ago.

6 Directions to Take

Aging has not yet been explicitly studied as a sociolinguistic variable; rather, we have had to rely so far on patchy knowledge of particular life stages. Filling in the picture will require attention to events in age spans that we have thought of as uninterrupted (e.g., middle age), and to the experience of life stages that are remote from our own (e.g., childhood and old age). In both cases, some of our assumptions may be part of the social construction of aging, and as social scientists we need to question those assumptions at the outset.

Just as each life stage needs to be examined in terms of its own practices, meanings, and experiences, those very life stages themselves may well be group–specific. Age groups are not necessarily uniform across or between communities, as different cultural and material conditions make different life trajectories. The normative nature of white middle–class age groups in itself is part of the experience of other groups. Adolescence, for example, is normatively a life stage in which people are free from economic and family responsibilities, rendering deviant a large proportion of people who fall in that age range. At certain times in history, there may be vast differences between age norms and actual practice for some, as social change affects the life trajectories of certain groups. Particularly in developmental studies, the overstudied English–speaking white middle–class child dominates our understanding of development. This leaves us with a very partial view of early linguistic development. Generalizations about development, whether social or linguistic, need to be examined and perhaps challenged in the light of evidence from a broader range of communities.

Because of the complexity of the social factors to which it corresponds, chronological age, like other major social variables such as social class and gender, is only a rough indicator of a composite of heterogeneous factors. The challenge for sociolinguistics, particularly for the study of variation, is to tease apart these various – and sometimes conflicting – factors. This requires directing our focus away from chronological age and towards the life experiences that give age meaning.

1 Style difference are commonly elicited with the use of reading tasks. With children, particularly small ones, the interpretation of differences in reading style is particularly problematic.

Cite this article

<http://www.blackwellreference.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9780631211938_chunk_g978063121193811>

Bibliographic Details

The Handbook of Sociolinguistics
Edited by: Florian Coulmas
eISBN: 9780631211938
Print publication date: 1998