

*Ageing and Society*

# Special Issue

## Sociolinguistic Issues in Ageing

Edited by

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# Preface: Sociolinguistic Issues in Ageing

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Social science is renewing its interest in language and communication processes for a cluster of overlapping reasons. Discourse and text-based approaches have recently been portrayed as a 'revolution' in psychology (e.g. by Shotter and Gergen)<sup>1</sup> and in social psychology (e.g. by Potter and Wetherell).<sup>2</sup> Over a much longer period, sociology has supported some of the most innovative and radical approaches to language and interaction, originally under the label of ethnomethodology (as represented by Cicourel)<sup>3</sup> and later as conversation analysis (see the collection by Atkinson and Heritage).<sup>4</sup> These developments are taken by many to represent a realignment in social analysis generally, a reappraisal of what routes to social understanding we can possibly access that are *not* fundamentally involved in situated communicative activities.

Mixed in with a good deal of scepticism about whether traditional methods – for studying, for example, sociostructural dimensions, social groups, social attitudes, and social identities – are, in fact, adequate, proponents of discursive social science are beginning to produce new kinds of data, and indeed new kinds of questions. These hinge on matters of language and interaction – as the media through which categories and identities are routinely negotiated and modified, and therefore where social processes are most open to analysis. As Maynard<sup>5</sup> puts it, social organisation generally might need to be seen as inherent in 'the interaction order'.

For linguists and communication researchers, this ideological and even epistemological shift is a welcome opportunity to make contact with a broader social science community, and to demonstrate the products of three decades of 'sociolinguistic' research. What the term sociolinguistics precisely designates has always been in dispute, even in Labov's seminal treatment,<sup>6</sup> though, for this special issue, we define it broadly to encompass all approaches to language and communication that are explicitly socially grounded. By these means, we are able to

display, in this issue, something of the range of available research into language and ageing in social contexts.

And where ageing is concerned, it is, in fact, very important to distinguish *sociolinguistic* from other linguistic approaches. This is because the dominant tradition has been to research older populations from a more psycholinguistic orientation, often in controlled, laboratory conditions and on the assumption that language in ageing will show various forms of decrement, or at least deficiency, *vis-à-vis* younger groups (see Coupland, Coupland and Giles' for a review). There is a considerable risk here that research into linguistic ageing may itself perpetuate societal biases in presupposing that what is knowable, and therefore researchable, about older people relates to 'problems' and incapacities. In fact, the literature on linguistic decrement in so-called 'normal ageing' shows many inconsistencies (as Bayles and Kaszniak conclude).<sup>8</sup> And this is perhaps, as colleagues and I have argued, because there has been so little attention to contextual factors, including older people's goals and motivations as communicators, and the nature of the social settings and networks they inhabit.

It is therefore very pleasing to be able to assemble a collection of papers here which demonstrate the sorts of avowedly *sociolinguistic* research that are now beginning to flourish. This special issue of *Ageing & Society* developed out of a Fulbright International Colloquium on 'Communication, Health and the Elderly', convened at the University of Wales conference centre in Gregynog, mid-Wales, December 1988. This interdisciplinary forum<sup>9</sup> was one of the first UK venues to have explored social gerontological themes from diverse but generally sociolinguistic standpoints.

In the present issue, Williams and Giles consider an integrated series of social psychological studies on language, communication and ageing. They argue that ageist assumptions and beliefs centre, in diverse ways, on language forms used by and to older people. Their paper also proposes a model of communication processes in relation to ageing which specifies identity and health consequences. As such, the paper establishes an important backdrop for the issue, and for this research area as a whole and its applications.

Two papers then explore recent language and communication research in medical and (institutional) caring settings respectively. Adelman, Greene and Charon review a quite extensive literature on the doctor/older patient consultation, and report data from their own research. They attend to the issue of ageism in geriatric medicine, and pinpoint those aspects of routine practice that doctors, and indeed elderly patients, need to attend to in order to achieve a better

consultative balance, and thereby no doubt better health outcomes. Nussbaum develops a perspective for research into language and interaction in nursing home environments. Based on his extensive research in the USA, he discusses the obstacles to the development of relationships and satisfactory life-styles during institutional care, and proposes agenda both for future research and better everyday practice.

Wood and Ryan's paper integrates social psychological studies of attitudes with that most centrally sociolinguistic topic of address-forms, in exploring how talk *to* older people is both mediated by group perceptions and itself mediates intergenerational relationships. In line with the general theme of the collection, we see how even very local aspects of communication practices are implicated in structuring our social world, and elderly people's place in it. Coupland, Coupland and Grainger illustrate the more text-based sociolinguistic tradition, reviewing a series of studies on intergenerational conversational strategies involving patterns of self-disclosure and the management of age-telling. They then develop a detailed, qualitative analysis of just two conversations, involving the same older woman in conversation with an elderly peer and a younger woman. They do this to demonstrate how starkly different 'age identities' can be constructed conversationally. The implication is, as Williams and Giles's model specifies, that ageing itself is open to being defined interactionally.

The editors and authors of this issue hope that these papers, necessarily selective as they are, might stimulate greater interest and even involvement among social gerontologists in the linguistic and communicative aspects of ageing. It seems to us that there are interactional considerations whenever we try to examine social groups, social practices, social institutions and social policies. Understanding the sociolinguistic dimensions of ageing – and research here is certainly only just beginning – could therefore be an important new avenue for social gerontology.

## NOTES

- 1 Shotter, J. and Gergen, K. J. (eds), *Texts of Identity*. Sage, London, 1989.
- 2 Potter, J. and Wetherell, M., *Discourse and Social Psychology: Beyond Attitudes and Behaviour*. Sage, London, 1987.
- 3 Cicourel, A. V., *Cognitive Sociology*. Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1973.
- 4 Atkinson, J. M. and Heritage, J. (eds), *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984.
- 5 Maynard, D., Language, interaction and social problems. *Social Problems*, 35, 4 (1988) 311–34.
- 6 Labov, W., *Sociolinguistic Patterns*. Philadelphia University Press, Pennsylvania, 1972.

- 7 Coupland, N., Coupland, J. and Giles, H., *Language, Society and the Elderly: Discourse Identity and Ageing*. Blackwell, Oxford.
- 8 Bayles, K. A. and Kaszniak, A. W., *Communication and Cognition in Normal Aging and Dementia*. Taylor and Francis, London, 1987.
- 9 Giles, H., Coupland, N. and Wiemann, J. (eds), *Communication, Health and the Elderly (Proceedings of Fulbright International Colloquium 1988)*. Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1990.