OLD AGE AND THE AGEING INDIVIDUAL: SOCIAL AND LINGUISTIC ASPECTS

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Abstract

The article addresses the issues of representation of old age and the ageing individual in the discourse of sociology. The topicality of such works is quite obvious, since with the increase in life expectancy, many academic studies have focused on old age and its new meanings in societies from different perspectives. This predetermines the need for the interdisciplinary analysis of old age and the ageing self. Also, this study closely examines vocabulary units that are used to designate an older person in English. The material for the analysis has been selected from present-day lexicographical sources. We conducted a qualitative study using the analysis of dictionary definitions and defined attitudes and perceptions of ageing and older adults as encoded in language units. The research highlights that as a socio-cultural product, language is influenced by two views on ageing: successful ageing, ignoring the physical dimensions, and that of decline, creating negative stereotypes of ageing, associated with weakening, diseases and dependence of the person. The paper addresses the above questions from the perspective of linguistic ageism, manifested in vocabulary units describing older people as silly, incompetent, eccentric, with outmoded fixed ideas, attitudes or tastes. Viewed in a positive light, ageing individuals are represented in language as experienced people, with wisdom and respect, when old age means transformation and continued self-fulfilment, rather than decline. The findings of the analysis provide implications for further studies of old age in different discourses that will contribute to a deeper understanding of the notion old age in its social and cultural contexts, as well as the concept OLD AGE in general.

Keywords

1. Introduction. Old age and ageing have been the topical subjects of discussion in many fields of science in recent years. The most widely accepted reason for this is that with the increase of life expectancy the elderly have transformed into a growing segment of community[2]. The issue of the population ageing has been highlighted by researchers and governments who consider the most important change will be the marked transition towards a much older population structure, a development which is already apparent in several EU Member States. In 2017, nearly one fifth (19 %) of the EU population was aged 65 and more[3]. It is assumed that in Europe by 2025, 22 % of the population will be aged 65 and over, and by 2050, this will have increased to 33 %[4]. The share of people aged 80 years or more should more than double by 2080 to reach 13 % of the whole population.

Public perceptions of ageing and older people reflect our *cultural* background and are based on *social* stereotypes, prejudices and fears. Kelly et al. state that ageing research "has tended to focus on age related disease at the expense of neglecting examination of the social and cultural influences on the ageing experience"[5]. Accordingly, ageing was usually viewed as a process of inevitable decline. The changing views of the scientific world around the process of growing old, together with the closely-related social changes that the prolonged life span originated in the second half of the twentieth century, gradually created a narrative of success that contrasted with the dominant narrative of decline[6]. This led to the appearance of the new notion of "successful ageing", i.e., "aging that reflected the minimum number of problems, the minimum degree of decline"[7].

Important aspects in social and cultural systems shape age perception and age identity by altering the experience of chronological age. Moreover, common description and trends in the media regarding old age influence the research interest.

In the discourse of sociology, this stage of life has been given different names: *the eighth stage* (Erikson, 1963) *the ninth stage* (Erikson, 1997), *the third stage* (Weiss and Bass, 2002), *the fourth stage* (Vincent, 2003) or, *the young old, the older old* (Hinck, 2004; Neugarten, 2006), *senescence and elderhood* (Thomas, 2004) etc. Language, the words we select, presents an intermediary between the society and an individual, "because our choices of vocabulary […] represent our thinking to ourselves and influence the thinking of others"[8].

In this sense, the words chosen by an individual provide a strong indication about that person's beliefs, and possibly actions, towards members of an identifiable group. To Gullette, "language usage may cause unintentional lacks of consideration, at best; and at

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[2] Tenenbaum-Precel, 2011, 4

[3] Population Structure and Ageing, 2018

[4] Attitudes about Ageing: a Global perspective, 2014 [5] Kelly et al., 2016, 1

[6] Gual, 2015

[7] Successful Aging

[8] Gullette, 2018, 251

worst, disseminate harmful ideas and hate speech, and help to keep ageism alive, despite efforts in many domains to combat it"[9].

How to call people who are older has always been a debatable issue. Linguists, sociologists, gerontologists have published a lot of researches on the ways of naming this age group. They believe that "the language of ageism is rooted in both explicit actions and implicit attitudes which make it highly complex and difficult to identify. Continued examination of linguistic encoding is needed in order to recognize and rectify language-based age discrimination"[10].

Thus, for example, the results of the survey, conducted in the 1980s in the USA, indicated that the most liked terms were *senior citizen, retired person, and mature American*[11]. At that time, the term ''elderly'' was regarded as neutral and nonstereotypic. However, in recent years, the term "elderly'' has become associated with physical disabilities for people who need constant care[12].

"Senior citizens" is a euphemism for 'old person' coined in the 1930s for people who needed a place to go, senior centers, to have a good lunch. The dictionaries explain that this term "refers to people whose stage in life is generally called old age"[13]. "People are said to be *senior citizens* when they reach the age of sixty or sixty-five because those are the ages at which most people retire from the workforce"[14]. At present, it implies "mostly impoverished older people, and it is far from being the way older people want to think of themselves. "Ageing" also sounds for them as declining"[15].

So, what is old age? How can we define an older person in relation to culture and social values? How are popular perceptions of old age encoded in lingual units? These seem to be the questions with no easy answer.

In order to fill in this gap, the present research **is aimed** at characterizing the social representation of ageing and ageing individuals and assessing the effects of the narratives of decline and that of success on the designation of older people in language. **The object** of the study is social discourse on ageing and the vocabulary about older adults in English. **The subject** of the study is the representation of *OLD AGE* in social discourse and the analysis of lexical units to refer to older people in English.

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[9] Gullette, 2018, 251-252

[10] Gendron et al., 2016, 997

[11] Language about Ageing

[12] Graham, 2012

[13] Collins English Dictionary

[14] Dictionary.com

[15] Graham, 2012

[16] Little, 2014

[17] Kalla, 2006, 8

[18] Tornstam, 2005

2. Methodology.

Many attempts have been made to analyse and propose new ways of understanding ageing in academia, chronologically, culturally, functionally (e.g., Biggs & Powell, 2001; Gendron et al., 2016; Hinck, 2004; L Tornstam, 2005, Weiss &Bass, 2002, etc.). In this research, we adopt a qualitative approach with the analysis of lexical units to designate an older person, selected from different lexicographical sources.

The paper aims to explore the representation of old age in sociological academic discourse, integrating the method of definitional analysis of the units to name an older person, selected from present-day online dictionaries of English. The present research is based on the belief that society is a complex system of physical, environmental, social, legal, cultural etc. processes. This predetermines the need for the interdisciplinary study, when old age is approached in multiple dimensions, not only as a *lingual* unit, but also a *social* construct in the unity of biological and cultural aspects.

3. Results and Discussion.

3.1. Defining OLD AGE in social contexts: challenges and approaches.

It has become accepted that age is problematic to define. As a result of the increase in the natural life span and better possibilities for ageing individuals in the field of medicine and biology, the once clear cut marker for old age is not that clear anymore. Ageing, as an inevitable process, is commonly measured by chronological age and a person aged 65 years or more is often referred to as 'elderly'[16]. The beliefs about ageing depend on social contexts. This assumption leads to regarding old age as a social construct.

Chronological definitions of old age in a social context develop together with the biomedical interest in physiological aspects of old age as a stage of life, whereas medical definitions of old age greatly influence the understanding of this notion in other fields. The most common approach which dominates in the older age discourse is its medicalization. This bodily presentation of ageing is usually associated with weakening, diseases, decline and dependence of the person. Accordingly, old age is considered to be a problem causing great extent of decline and deteriorations, illnesses and weaknesses which should be prevented[17].

However, the understanding of ageing individuals is often different across the cultures due to differences in their lifestyle, societal norms and overall health. Another approach discusses the conceptions of fulfilment, contentment and well-being in older age, which promote self-realisation and preserved agency[18]. The period of mental richness, experience and wisdom, old age is viewed as a time of satisfaction and continued self-fulfilment. Present-day inventions in the fields of biotechnology and genetics can slow down

the ageing process itself and prolong the quality of human life.

Academics discussed the meanings of old age as the reflection of biological, cultural, social features on diverse levels, from individual ontogenesis to the society in general. Thus, in social gerontology, old age is traditionally viewed as a human property in two corresponding contexts (e.g., Powell & Biggs, Featherstone & Hepworth, etc.):

● *bio-medical*, when ageing is associated with the changes in the human body;

● *social*, when ageing means getting experience, wisdom and power.

Researchers of the bio-medical approach believe that old age brings weakening, illnesses, decline and dependency with it. By contrast, "successful ageing" denies some of the changes that accompany old age and, in fact, promote the idea of later life as time of reflection, maturity and harmony[19].

In the discourse of social psychology, there have been numerous attempts to corroborate the theory that personality continues to develop through life and that culture, society and history greatly influence this process. People follow the spiralling path of development, and old age becomes the last opportunity to think of and understand previous developmental achievements[20]. Such approaches highlight that ageing means *transformation, development*, but not necessarily *decline*.

According to disengagement theory[21], ageing is considered to be a developmental process influenced by biological, individual and social factors. Sociologists noticed that disengagement theory started from the observation that old people are less involved in the life in comparison to younger people. Accordingly, ageing is a natural process involving a decline of physical and cognitive properties which results in "a mutual withdrawal of the elderly from society and of society from its elderly"[22]. Thus, the narrative of decline seems to emerge as the dominant age ideology. For the person, it means loneliness, limited social interactions and less participation in the life of the society. The ageing individual experiences despair and disappointment at his/her failures, approaching the end of life, "what went wrong in earlier times cannot be changed or mended and dreams not actualized by this stage, will never come true"[23].

On the other hand, sociologists apply *activity approaches* to ageing (Nuland, 2007), the main emphasis of which is "keeping the elderly as active as possible, cognitively, socially and physically. The assumption is that activity – being engaged in everyday life, in leisure assignments, in social interaction – will keep the mind and soul of the old person as lucid as possible, essentially, extending his or her middle age"[24].

It is also evident that cultural contexts provide relevant influence on social understanding of aging. Old age is an independent life period and the main purpose of social research is to compare old age performance with norms typical for younger generations.

It has been mentioned that "the proportion of elderly people in the population, the rate of population aging and differences in values and representations that might affect the beliefs and evaluations about elderly people, and old age are some of the factors that justify the understanding that people from different cultural contexts might constitute groups with different social representations"[25].

3.2. Representation of ageing individuals in language.

The academic studies discussing representations related to ageing individuals, as well as the issue of old age receive a mixed representation formed by both positive and negative elements. The research proves that these representations are generally constituted by two dimensions: biological and psychological.

What does it mean to be elderly? Some define it as an issue of physical health, while others simply define it by chronological age. In the science of sociology, the older adult population is divided into three life-stage subgroups: the young-old (approximately 65–74), the middle-old (ages 75–84), and the old-old (over age 85). However, age is not merely a biological function of the number of years one has lived, or of the physiological changes the body goes through during the life course. It is also a product of the social norms and expectations that apply to each stage of life[26].

When referring to old people and analysing this time in the human life course, sociologists usually employ the vocabulary that captures some of the most common meanings and perceptions about age (e.g., *seniors, the elderly, older people, old people, old age*). These beliefs are commonly based on the theory of disengagement, emphasizing that older adults retire and are no longer employed. However, we may also observe the reference to *elderhood* as "the revolutionary liberating potential that is often misinterpreted and misunderstood. The source of its richness lies in the transition to a life defined by the experience of Being-Doing"[27]. This leads to a different social interpretation of both old age and the ageing individual, because "elders are viewed as the wise leaders of human society [...] a group elevated from

[19] Kalla, 2006, 6

[20] Erikson, 1997

[21] Cumming&Henry, 1961

[22] Tenenbaum-Precel, 2011, 8

[23] Tenenbaum-Precel, 2011, 7

[24] Tenenbaum-Precel, 2011, 18

[25] Wachelke &Contarello, 2010, 369

[26] Little, 2014

[27] Thomas, 2004, 126

the rest of society because of its high rank and virtues of wisdom and leadership"[28].

As a socio-cultural product, language is influenced by these diametrically opposed views on aging. Both age narratives are represented in contemporary interpretations and representations of aging in language: "the narrative of success ignoring the physical dimensions of aging and the master narrative of decline which dominates in the youth-oriented societies and creates negative stereotypes of aging often invisible even to older people themselves"[29].

The vocabulary about the ageing individuals in English can be subdivided into several groups. Firstly, these are the units which designate the persons as to their age groups: e.g., *sexagenarian – (60-69), septuagenarian (70-79), octogenarian (80-89), nonagenarian (90-99), centenarian (100 and over), supercentenarian (at least 110 years old).*

Also, there are lexical units generally considered to be neutral or nonageist, that appear in professional publications (e.g., *generian (an elderly person), elder(s), the elderly, pensioner(s), OAP (old age pensioner), senior/senior citizen(s) (no longer employed), old man, older people, older adults,* etc.).

As far as in 1979, the National Council on the Aging in the USA provided a list of ten terms (*aged person, elderly person, golden ager, mature American, middle-aged person, old man/old woman, old timer, older American, retired person, senior citizen*) considered to be acceptable among older adults to define people over the age of sixty-five[30].However, in the course of time, with the changes in social attitudes to ageing and anti-ageist movements, the preference for the terms to refer to older adults has also changed.

In the present-day world of academia, it has become commonly accepted that "wording that replaces aging and explicates ageism helps undo submission to the ideology of life-course decline, liberating observation, potentially undoing internalized ageism and lessening the widespread fear of growing older"[31].

The editors of the *Thesaurus of Aging Terminology*[32]*,* recommend to change the term "elderly" by "older adult," claiming that it has become the preferred professional term.

In one of the interviews of *The New York Times* blogger Judith Graham, the change in the naming preferences is also mentioned:

We've tried "elder," but people don't like that because it reminds them of patriarchy and the church.

We replaced "old age" with "aging," which carried more of a sense of dynamism, but now that doesn't work either because of the anti-aging movement.[33]

The analysis of lexicographical sources, conducted within this research, helps to define the main semantic domains of nouns used to designate an older person in English. The identifying words and phrases have been singled out on the basis of their dictionary definitions.

Firstly, we can observe neutral or non-stereotypical lexical units to refer to older people in general or to allude to age relations in the family, or ancestors:

e.g., *old man, grandparent/father/mother (male/ female ancestor), grand-daddy (coll. the first or oldest of its kind), ancestor (a person from whom one is descended, earlier in a family line), ascendant (an ancestor), progenitor (a forefather, ancestor in direct line), precursor (a person that goes before), predecessor (an ancestor, a forefather), forefather.*

Some of these words represent older people as a group, in the collective meaning: e.g., *the aged, the elderly, the old, eldership (a group of elders), boule (an advisory council of elders),* etc.

Moreover, there are some favourable terms used to imply older adults, when "getting old" equals to getting "a lot of experience": e.g., *veteran (a person of long experience, esp. in some occupation), old-timer (informal veteran, a person who worked in a place for a long time), elder statesman (ex-politician with experience), water dog (old experienced sailor), (old) stager (a person of much experience, old hand), gray matter (experienced executives hired to give a firm the appearance of credibility and refutability in a company dominated by young entrepreneurs).*

When represented in a positive light, there is another group of synonyms to designate an older person who is authority, with power, a person enjoying respect: e.g., *old man (authority), grandfather/ mother (respectful familiarity in forms of address), elder (an older person with a respected position in a society), elder statesman (old and well-respected politician who still has influence), grandsire, gaffer (boss), dame (dignified, matronly woman), duenna (Sp. an elderly woman in charge of girls or unmarried women).* These words verify the social meaning of older age as a time of wisdom, maturity and power.

In Western gerontology, the notion of "successful aging" has already been popular for more than half a century. It usually combines life satisfaction, happiness, good health and longevity. Researchers state that true happiness can be achieved by preserving high mental and physical function, active engagement with life leading to a high happiness rating; and satisfying sexual activity[34].

Older people often preserve their cognitive abilities, they lead an active lifestyle, enjoy life, youth culture, continue to participate in activities in their communities. This is also reflected in English by the recent coinages to refer to older people:

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[28] Tenenbaum-Precel, 2011, 16

[29] Gual, 2015

[30] Language about ageing

[31] Gullette, 2018, 251

[32] Diliberti&Eccles, 1994

[33] Graham, 2012

[34] Al'mukanov, 2014, 212-216

e.g. *adultescent (enjoying youth culture, syn. kindalt),* *downager (acts younger than his/her age),* *perma youth (keeps an appearance of youth maintained overtime),* *superager (SuperAger) (coined in 2012 – a person over 80 who exhibits little cognitive decline),* *eldreweds (who get married later in life),* *grand boomer (grandparent who is a member of the baby boom generation),* *alpha boomer (an active older person who belongs to the oldest segment of the baby boom generation and has significant disposable income),* *oldster (a person who has transitioned from adulthood into olderhood, has a desire to live life to the fullest, travel, exercise with insatiable thrust for learning.*

At present, older adults, especially those from baby boom generation, are both active and adventurous, seeking for enjoyable experiences, e.g. *Sea Changer (a person who retires to a seaside dwelling),* *gray nomad (Austral. E an elderly retired person who spends time travelling around the country in a mobile home)* and interested in purchases, e.g., *the grey market (people over 50 considered as a group to which products can be solved)*; continuing to enjoy their life (including sexual), although it is not always approved of by society since certain behaviours are considered unusual or outside the norm for an older person (which is marked in dictionary definitions as *disapproving*): e.g., *coughar (an elder woman who seeks sexual relations with younger men),* *manther (an older man who seeks romantic relationships with significantly younger women),* *sugar daddy (a rich older man who lavishes gifts on a young woman in return for her sexual favors)* or trying to assist their family members: e.g. *granny-nanny (a grandmother who cares for her grandchildren while their parents are working).*

On the other hand, "hegemonic decline ideology, although contested, stamps itself all over, under, through and around the term aging"[35] influencing common vocabulary for older adults negatively. The common and the most widespread perception of older adults is that they are over 65 and have finished their working lives: e.g., *senior citizen, pensioner, old age pensioner*. They are retired and receive pensions from the government.

In this respect, we also have to mention a group of English words about older adults and aging which disparage them in various ways. In these vocabulary units, older people are represented as old-fashioned, conservative, with outmoded fixed ideas, attitudes or tastes:

e.g., *fogy (fogey)(old-fashioned or conservative in attitudes),* *dinosaur (outmoded, old-fashioned, resistant to change),* *antediluvian (Bibl. Before the Flood - a very old, old-fashioned person),* *has-been (no longer popular or effective),* *fossil (a person who is old-fashioned or has outmoded, fixed ideas),* *geezer (a queer, old, eccentric person)* *old school (conservative ideas),* *old maid (prudish, old-fashioned and fussy),* *Jeremiah (pessimistic about the future).*

Sometimes, the reference to older adults is in terms of preconceived stereotyped notions. Such notions include distortion (which is the attribution of negative physical, behavioural, and mental traits of older adults) and degradation (which alludes to the practice of representing older adults as physically obnoxious or intellectually inferior). Linguistic ageism is manifested while describing older people as silly, incompetent, strange or eccentric:

e.g., *dodo (from Port. – jerk, foolish, old-fashioned person),* *fart (slang – old person regarded as a fool or nuisance),* *(old) geezer (slang or dialect eccentric man or rarely woman),* *codger (old man, strange or humorous in some way),* *buffer (a silly old man),* *hag (ugly and vicious old woman),* *biddy (coll. an elderly woman regarded contemptuously as annoying, gossipy),* *grimalkin (an elderly woman characterised by malice, intending to do harm),* *hag (an ugly old woman, a witch),* *dotard (Am.E foolish and doddering old person),* *duffer (coll. an elderly person, incompetent, ineffectual).*

Also, there are units which clearly designate the bodily changes in the older adults: e.g., *wrinkly (informal, humorous an old person),* *gray-beard (an old man).*

Some units represent ageing individuals as feeble and weak, feeling useless: e.g., *dotard (Br.E weak and confused),* *crock (an old person who is feeble and useless),* contributing to a negative ageist view of older adults, since old age, thus, is considered to be a period of deterioration and decadence.

"Getting old" often equals to being lonely:

e.g., *empty-nester (an elderly person whose children grew up and left the house),* *elder orphan (coined in 1993 - an elderly person with no family),* *old maid, spinster, old maid (often old-fashioned, offensive and derogatory terms to call an elderly unmarried woman),* *feme sole (unmarried, spinster or widow).*

Linguistic ageism is also manifested in the inappropriate forms of address to older people, which may have the effect of infantilizing, especially the use of diminutives (e.g., *auntie, granny*, etc.), and informal familiar terms, such as *pop, old girl/boy* with the reference to older adults.

4. Conclusions.

The analysis conducted within this research proves that old age is a multifaceted phenomenon, presenting both challenges and opportunities for research. Social perceptions of ageing and ageing individuals depend on the approach and are represented with two main paradigms: the paradigm of successful ageing oriented at transformation and development, and the one of decline focusing on the physical deterioration and creating negative stereotypes. Vocabulary about older adults and ageing is also influenced by these perceptions. This research provides implications for further study of old age and ageing individuals in different types of discourses. This can help to specify not only the notion of old age as a lingual-cultural phenomenon, but also provide criteria for defining the concept OLD AGE.

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[35] Gullette, 2018, 252

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Анотація

У статті розглядаються питання репрезентації старості та особи старшого віку у дискурсі соціології. Актуальність таких робіт є цілком очевидною, оскільки через подовження тривалості життя старість та її значення у суспільстві з точки зору різних напрямків постають у центрі уваги багатьох дослідників. Це визначає необхідність проведення міждисциплінарного аналізу понять старості та людина старшого віку. У роботі також запропоновано аналіз словникових одиниць, які вживають-ся на позначення старшої людини в англійській мові. Матеріал аналізу представлено вибіркою із сучасних лексикографічних джерел. Дослідження проведено із застосуванням дефініційного аналізу, що дозволило визначити підходи та уявлення про старіння та літніх людей, як такі, котрі закарбовані у семантиці мовних одиниць. У дослідженні наголошується, що мова як соціокультурний продукт знаходиться під впливом двох поглядів на старіння: успішне старіння, при якому ігноруються фізичні аспекти, та старіння як занепад, що викликає появу негативних стереотипів, пов'язаних зі слабкістю, хворобами та залежністю особи. У роботі зазначені питання розглядаються з точки зору мовного ейджизму, а саме через мовні одини-ці, котрі описують літніх людей як дурнуватих, некомпетентних, дивакуватих, із застарілими ідеями, поглядами, смаками. З позитивного ракурсу, виділено одиниці, які позначають осіб старшого віку як досвідчених, мудрих людей, котрі користу-ються повагою, при цьому старість позначає радше трансформацію і продовження самореалізації, аніж занепад. Результати аналізу змальовують перспективи подальших досліджень старості у різних типах дискурсу, що спрятиме глибшому розумін-ню соціально-культурного змісту як поняття особи старшого віку, так і концепту старість загалом.

Ключові слова

Старість, старіння, літні люди, мовний ейджизм, особа старшого віку, соціальний дискурс, міждисциплінарний підхід.