Capturing life span change in language use: Some methodological remarks

When human language behaviour is studied, oftentimes insufficient attention is given to acknowledging and representing development, i.e. change over the life spans of individuals, to later extrapolate to hypotheses about societal language change or properties of language in general. To address this problem a researcher is to commit to a meta-theoretical orientation to human development (see Erber 2010: 35-38). The life-span developmental perspective views development as a "multifaceted, ongoing process" (Erber 2010: 37) and assumes a reciprocal relation between the organism and the environment.

One aspect of the study of language is its situatedness in, and dependence on, the social context. Human communication in the context of social relationships is commonly explored by means of sociolinguistic surveys and interviews. Analysis is preceded by participant sampling, which is the first stage of the research process at risk of bias and exclusion. If the study populations are young, well-educated adults, e.g. students, conclusions cannot be drawn about speakers in general. In the research on particular stages of language development the focus is usually on children, teenagers, or older adults. Midlifers are typically left out, although they are assumed to be 'default speakers' with respect to age.

Another methodological issue is defining the category of age as a sociolinguistic variable. Traditional, variationist studies have treated age inflexibly, in chronological terms: age is the number of years since birth. Age cohorts were identified for analyses of conditioning linguistic variation or exploring language change through apparent time studies. Modern interactional sociolinguistics is relying on age as an emergent category, defined by the social context and constructed by the interaction participants themselves. Importantly, interaction participants draw on their 'generational intelligence' (Biggs and Lowenstein 2011: 2) to understand the lifecourse, and they are thus able to meaningfully relate to the age- and generational other (see also Gerstenberg 2019).

Thirdly, language use is influenced by societal norms of behaviour. Although "chronological age is a poor predictor of behavior" (Pecchioni et al. 2004: 170), it does function as an index to guide people's expectations and to activate stereotypes. These, in turn, give rise to norms and expectations about age-appropriate language use.

Some methodologically-oriented questions will be posed: (1) What is people's awareness of how their own and others' language use changes, and can this change and awareness be accessible to researchers? (2) How do language attitudes and behaviours change over the life span, and how can this be captured in research?

The methodological reflections about "non-typical populations or less common study contexts" (to quote CfP) will be illustrated by examples from a qualitative data corpus probing life-span change in language use. The discussion will address aspects of methodology and topics in life-span sociolinguistics: (1) approaches to participant sampling (agewise), (2) attitudes, varying across the life span, to concepts such as ageing, (3) (auto-) stereotyping as sources of discriminatory behaviours, (4) speakers' discursive means to communicate across generations. Ultimately, a more age-aware and inclusive research practice will be endorsed, toward a better "understanding of the linguistic lifecourse" (Eckert 1997: 152).

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References

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