Age and Generation-specific use of language

Jenny Cheshire
Queen Mary, University of London

1. Concepts, terminology and overview

The relation between the ageing process and language use has traditionally been analysed from two points of view: the changing language used during the lifespan of an individual, and the language of different cohorts of individuals living within a speech community. *Age-specific* use of language refers to the first approach, with *generation-specific* use of language reserved for the latter. The distinction has been an important one in the analysis of language change, for if we assume, with Labov (1994, 107) that individuals tend to preserve their speech patterns as they move through their lifespan, then the study of generation-specific language necessarily involves the study of language change. However, it is not always possible to clearly separate the concepts of age and generation since, as Eckert (1997, 151), points out "age and ageing are experienced both individually and as part of a cohort of people who share a life stage, and/or an experience of history". The analysis of age and generation-specific use of language used to be seen as relatively straightforward, but a series of publications since the 1990s have problematised this area of research and put into question distinctions that had previously been taken for granted.

Eckert (1997, 156) highlights the distinction between *chronological age,* or the number of years since birth, *biological age*, or physical maturity (which does not necessarily, of course, correlate exactly with chronological age), and *social age*, which is tied to life events such as family status (including marriage or birth of first child) or legal status (Eckert gives as examples naturalization or date of first arrest). Coupland and his colleagues use contextual *age* in much the same way as *social age* (Coupland 1997, 34). In western societies chronological age is usually the starting point for research on age and generation-specific use of language, but for societies elsewhere in the world this may be impossible. In the African context, for example, people may not know their absolute chronological age: if they are asked for their age, the clerk of the tribal authority may assign one based on physical appearance (van Eeden 1991, 33, cited in Makoni 1997, 61). In some communities social rituals may be more important benchmarks than the year of birth. Thus for some rural Xhosa men their own initiation sequences relative to other men's are the basis for social categories relevant to the concept of age. Women and men cannot be categorised in the same way in this society, however, since for women the relevant age-related social categories involve marital status, with widows who do not remarry assuming an important role that is otherwise restricted to men (ibid.). This point is valid generally, because in all societies gender and other relevant social variables interact with the age variable, however it is defined, making comparisons between different age groups far from straightforward.

Age may be a more meaningful social category in some cultures than in others. Ota, Harwood, Williams and Takai (2000, 34) found that for 18-19 year olds a group identity in terms of age was stronger for Americans than for Japanese. Furthermore, being young

appeared to be a more positive experience overall for the young American adults: the young Japanese in the sample were more ambivalent about their experiences of being young than were the young Americans. The authors relate this finding to the social changes currently underway in Japan, where there is a gradual shift of culture from traditionalism to a more modern or western culture in which being young is a more positive and more powerful life stage.

More is known about the language used at some life stages than at others. There has been more research on the language of childhood and adolescence than on the language of the middle years – an unfortunate state of affairs given the middle-aged bias that exists in work on age and generation-specific use of language (and, indeed, in social science research generally (Eckert 1997, 157)). Eckert (ibid) points out that "only the middle-aged are seen as engaging in mature use, as "doing" language rather than learning it or losing it". The research of Giles and his research associates in eleven countries (Giles et al. 2000) can be seen as confirming the vitality of middle age. In a series of experiments involving undergraduate students they found middle aged people to have greater ethnolinguistic vitality than younger or older people (the mean age seen as marking the onset of middle age was around 31, with 52 the mean for the onset of old age, though there was some cross-cultural variation between eastern and western countries (op.cit., 319)). Vitality was measured by a version of the Subjective Ethnolinguistic Vitality Questionnaire (see Bourhis et al. 1981), which includes items assessing judges' perceptions of young, middle-aged and older adults in terms of their strength in areas such as government, education and business institutions, and their social prestige and influence. The high profile of the middle-aged presumably explains why researchers have implicitly seen their language as a standard against which the language of both older and younger speakers can be measured. Thus children's language has been conceptualised in developmental terms, with adult language seen as the target; conversely, the language of the elderly has been analysed as a degeneration and decline from the middle-aged adult norm.

It is becoming recognised, however, that adult language, as well as child language, develops in response to important life events that affect the social relations and social attitudes of individuals. There is a move to analysing the speech of members of a given age group as fully appropriate to that life stage rather than comparing it either implicitly or explicitly to the language of the middle years. In this vein Sealey (2000) marks an innovative approach to child language, analysing the language used to represent and 'construct' children in contemporary British culture and exploring how the social status of being a child is represented in the language used by and to children. The work of Coupland and his colleagues takes a discourse-based approach to the analysis of the language of the elderly and of language and ageing in general (see, for example, Coupland Coupland and Giles 1991). Paoletti (1998) examines the social construction of older women's identities in Italy. Both the older and the younger stages of the life span are beginning to be explored in detail, then: but detailed research on the important period of middle-age remains to be done.

2. Age –grading

Age-grading refers to a change of behaviour with age that repeats itself in each generation. Some writers use the term to refer only to language used by children that is repeated in every generation without ever being used by adults (see Hockett 1950, 423), such as children's skipping chants or terms used in childhood games (see, for some of these terms, Bauer and Bauer 2000). More commonly, however, the term refers to age-specific differences in a more general sense, characterising the language considered appropriate to and typical of different stages in the life span. For example, some British teenagers in the 1980s used *wicked* for 'good'; this usage seems to have stopped, however, as they have grown older and abandoned in-group slang words. This, then, is an *age-exclusive* feature, used only during the teenage years. The actual slang vocabulary may change from one generation of teenagers to another, but the process of coining specialised in-group vocabulary during this period of life persists.

Age-grading may also involve the use of *age-preferential* features which are used by speakers of all ages in the community, but more frequently by some age groups than others. Age-grading is not necessarily associated with language change, since individuals may change their language during their lifetime, whilst the community as a whole does not change (Labov 1994, 84). Indeed, one of the greatest challenges in the analysis of language change in progress is deciding when age differences in language use reflect a change in community norms, and when they reflect stable age grading (see section 3).

2.1 Age-exclusive features

Some age -exclusive features may be due to maturational factors, reflecting, in other words, biological age. Examples are the one-word utterances typical of children aged about one year, or the 'trembling voice' associated with elderly speakers (Helfrich 1979, 85). Features such as these would, of course, be expected to occur universally**.** Other age-exclusive features are culture-specific, reflecting societal attitudes towards different age groups. Thus Romaine (1984, 164) reports that babies are neither expected nor encouraged to speak in Japan, and that in Korea and amongst the Chipewyans silence is encouraged as part of the normal process of growing up, as a way of showing respect to older people. Conversely, in the white "Anglo' middle-class communities where much of the research on child language acquisition has been conducted, children are encouraged to talk from babyhood and tend to be seen as legitimate participants in adult conversation. Even here, however, the forms used by adults when speaking to children mark children as low-status participants in the interaction. Parents, for example, tend to use unmitigated directives to their children, which aim to prohibit undesirable behaviour but which simultaneously mark the unequal role relationship. Research on various languages has shown how parents and other adults instruct their children about the ways they are expected to speak as children rather than as adults: see, for example, Sealey (2000, 146-8), and Schieffelin and Ochs (1986). The address terms used by adults to children also mark their inferior social status: speakers of languages with two or more second person pronouns use the informal pronoun to children (and animals) rather than the polite form, and in English and many other languages non-reciprocal address forms such as *dear* or *sweetie* may be used to children (Holmes 1995, 146).

Childhood seems to be a life stage that is universally salient, but the salience of other life stages is more likely to vary cross-culturally, with a corresponding variation in age-exclusive features. Thus where the elderly are treated with respect there may be linguistic features used only by this age group. The Zuñi 'sacred' forms reported by Newman (1955) provide an example. There are also slang Zuñi forms used only by young speakers, which older speakers pretend not to understand, thereby creating an age-exclusive youth register. Equally, in societies where age is an important component of social status, there are certain linguistic features that must be used by younger people when speaking to people. In Thailand, for example, passengers call a taxi driver *lung*, 'uncle' or *phii*, 'older brother' if they estimate him to be older than they are; and there is a large number of first, second and even third person pronouns in Thai whose use depends on the relative age of interlocutors as well as on gender and other social and contextual factors (Intachakra 2001).

In the West and beyond, adolescence became an increasingly culturally salient life stage during the second half of the twentieth century, marked linguistically in a range of ways. The vocabulary of adolescent slang has been studied for some time (see, for example, T. Labov 1992, Andersson and Trudgill 1990), as has the association between belonging to the youth culture and the use of English. Clyne (1984, 167ff) for example was among the first to document the use by German speaking teenagers of English phrases such as *hello friends* and English-influenced phrases such as *es törnt mich an*,'it turns me on'. Preisler (1999) and Høgsbro (1995) explore the informal everyday use of English amongst young Danes as a defining aspect of Anglo-American-influenced youth subcultures. The scope of research in this field is now very broad (see art. XX), to the extent that 'youth language' is now recognised as a distinct field of research generating university courses, conferences and large-scale research projects (Androutsopoulos and Scholz 1998, vi).

Research on youth language has pointed to the difficulty of maintaining the distinction between age-exclusive and age-preferential use of language. Androutsopoulos (1998) provides an integrative overview of variationist research on age-preferential phonological and morphosyntactic features (see section 2.2 below), research on crossing (Rampton 1995) and other discourse strategies, and traditional slang and argot studies. He argues that these usages all function as social markers of 'youth' and that they should therefore be conceptualised as complementary aspects of the same phenomenon. A further significant outcome of the focus on youth language has been the recognition of the important role of adolescents in language change, especially in the grammaticalisation of features that may originate in slang vocabulary. Androutsopoulos (1999) gives several examples, including the grammaticalization of German *null* from a cardinal number (literally, 'zero') to a negative marker, as in *Themen, sie mich null interessieren*, 'topics which do not interest me', arguing that the source of the new negative marker was the widely used idiom *null Bock*. The grammaticalisation of BE *like* as a quotative verb, which is rapidly innovating throughout the urban centres of the English-speaking world, is a further example (Tagliamonte and Hudson 1999).

2.2. Age-preferential features

The theoretical framework within which analyses of variation and change are conventionally carried out assumes two opposing systems of speech norms within a community: the overt norms of the dominant social class, to which all socioeconomic classes aspire in their careful speech styles, and the covert norms of the 'street culture', which produce the consistent vernacular of the urban working class (Labov 1973, 83). Within this framework analyses of variation by speech style and age, or by social class and age, have shown a curvilinear pattern of age differentiation for sociolinguistic variables that are not undergoing change. The pattern, shown in Figure 1 (from Downes 1998, 224) is for the less prestigious variants to be used more frequently by younger speakers, and also by older speakers, with the prestige variants used relatively more frequently by middle-aged speakers.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE
(from Downes 1998)

Figure 2 shows the distribution for the (ng) variable in Norwich (from Chambers and Trudgill 1998, 78), The variable involves the final syllable in words such as English *running* which has the phonetic variants [ ] and the more prestigious [   ].

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE
(from Chambers and Trudgill 1988)

This pattern of age differentiation is assumed to be the normal pattern for stable sociolinguistic variables, although it cannot be assumed that it will be found universally, especially, Chambers and Trudgill say (op. cit., 79) if social conditions are different. A particularly striking recurrent observation is that adolescent speakers from all social classes in a wide range of urban communities use a significantly higher number of variants that are socially stigmatized than do speakers of other ages. Figure 3, from Wolfram and Fasold's early Detroit study (1974, 91) illustrates this pattern for the use of multiple negation (where the stigmatized form would be *she don't want nothing,* and the prestige variant *she doesn't want anything*). Wolfram and Fasold comment that a similar distribution could be indicated for "any number of phonological or grammatical features" (1974, 91). Similar findings have been reported for other languages (see, for example, Silva-Corvalan (1981) for Spanish).

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE
(from Wolfram and Fasold 1974)

Explanations for these recurrent findings have been offered in terms of the social pressures that people experience at different stages of their lives in the western urbanized societies where the research has typically been conducted. It is suggested that when speakers are young, the influence of the overt norms is likely to be relatively weak; peer group pressures on the other hand will be strong, so that young people will be more

influenced by their friends than by anyone else (Cheshire and Milroy 1993, 20-21). In their middle years, people's lives tend to become more public, and they have to adapt to the norms and values of the mainstream society. These may be experienced as a result of pressures of work, personal independence or geographic and/or social mobility, all of which lead to greater variability in social relationships. For older, retired people, on the other hand, the pressures to conform to societal norms may weaken once more (see Chambers and Trudgill 1998, 79; Downes 1998, 225).

Figure 2 shows that the curvilinear pattern of age differentiation holds across different speech styles; it also shows that style-shifting tends to be sharper for younger speakers than for older speakers, especially between casual and formal styles. Interestingly, research on language attitudes has suggested that older speakers (aged 70 and above) are more tolerant than younger speakers of regional accents (Paltridge and Giles 1984, 79). It is conceivable, then, that an increased tolerance of regional and social variation in the speech of others is linked to the observed decrease in the stylistic variation of elderly speakers.

However, Labov's account of the multiple regression analyses of variation carried out as part of the Philadelphia Neighbourhood Study reveals a different picture. Here elderly speakers did not use a higher proportion of the stigmatized variants of three stable sociolinguistic variables: (ing), negative concord and (dh). (The (dh) variable is the first sound in words such as *them,* which is pronounced as [ ] or as [dh]. The variables showed a similar distribution with age, with the highest values for the stigmatized forms occurring in the speech of 16 year olds, then falling off rapidly with increasing age. For the adult group the pattern of age distribution was flat, with little or no differences between the different adult age groups. The most significant social variable was social class, with gender also important. Figure 4, from Labov (2001, 111) illustrates the pattern for multiple negation (the (neg) variable).

INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE
(from Labov 2001)

Variables such as these, then, that have a high level of social awareness, are likely to show consistent age-grading within most communities, with use of the stigmatized forms peaking in adolescence (in Philadelphia, at around the age of 16) and with individuals apparently then modifying their use of these variants during their lifetime. The behaviour of the oldest age group appears to vary from one community to another. It is difficult, however, to compare the results of studies that do not use identical age groupings (the upper age group used by Trudgill (1974), for example, was 70 and above, whereas in the Philadelphia Neighbourhood Study the upper age group was 60 and above). It is not clear whether the different patterns of age-preferential age-grading found in Philadelphia, Norwich and elsewhere reflect differences in the methods of analysis (cross-tabulation of age and style, versus multiple regression analysis) or differences in the social conditions in Philadelphia and elsewhere. In both cases, however, it is clear that age alone cannot account for the age-preferential distributions, whether these are as shown in the curvilinear pattern of Figure 1, or the dramatic peak at age 16 in Figure 4. Labov found

social class and gender to be additional relevant social factors; the explanations given by Chambers and Trudgill appeal to variability in social relationships and to the different social pressures experienced at different stages of the life span. Language change may sometimes be based on age alone: Chambers (1995), for example, reports a lexical change, the use of *couch* rather than *chesterfield* in Canada, whose distribution is unaffected by social class, gender or other social factors except age. More usually, however, other factors interact with age, and a full understanding of the relation between age and language use, therefore, requires these factors to be investigated along with age. Variationist research typically uses the sociodemographic variables commonly used in social science research, namely age, gender, social class and ethnic group. Many other aspects of people's identities, lifestyles and psychobiographies, however, may be equally relevant to an understanding of the relationship between age and language use. The tension between the need for replicable large-scale research within a community and the need for small-scale detailed ethnographic study is as relevant to the social variable of age as it is to gender (on which see Cheshire in press).

The problem is that however socially responsive the approach to categorising speakers into age groups may be, these age groups can never take account of the relevant social relationships and life experiences of the individuals who make up the age group. The Philadelphia Neighbourhood Study, for example, divided the linear age span in a way designed to account for what Labov (2001, 101) describes as the important life stages of modern American society. Thus the age groups reflect "the changing social relations across speakers' life histories that affect their 'acquisition and use of linguistic norms and their ability to put them into practice" (ibid.). The life stages are: alignment to the pre-adolescent per group (ages 8-9), membership in the pre-adolescent peer group (10-12), involvement in heterosexual relations and the adolescent group (13-16), completion of secondary schooling and orientation to the wider world of work and/or college (17-19), the beginning of regular employment and family life (20-29), full engagement in the work force and family responsibilities (30-59), and retirement (60s). For "the main extent of adult life" (ibid) speakers were grouped by decades. This clear description of the methodology used makes it possible to use the same categories in similar studies in modern America, and perhaps in other western urbanised societies too. Comparisons can be drawn between the linguistic variation found in these different communities, thereby advancing our understanding of the nature of age-grading in stable linguistic variation and of the mechanisms of language change. Clearly, however, the assumptions inherent in this categorization will not apply to the lives of many of the individuals who fall within each of the age groups. Predetermined life stages such as these cannot take account of all the important events and experiences that make up each individual's life history, nor are they intended to do so. This kind of understanding of the relationship between age and language use would entail ethnographic studies of what Eckert (1997, 167) describes as "the life experiences that give age meaning". To date few studies of this kind have been carried out (see, however, the discussion of Dubois and Horvath's work in section 3 below).

It should also be noted that in some societies age may not be a relevant social factor at all: Holes (1983), in fact, found that for his quantitative analysis of variation in the

Arabic spoken in Bahrain the most useful demarcation of speakers was in terms of sect, literacy and urban versus rural origin, rather than in terms of age.

3. Generation-specific use of language and language change

For many years studies of linguistic change in progress relied on the concept of 'apparent time' (cf. also art. xx). This involves analysing the speech of a structured sample of people of different ages, and assuming that patterns of variation that differ from the 'normal' pattern shown in Figure 1 indicate that a change is in progress in the community. It has long been recognised, however, that the concept of apparent time is problematic. Behaviour that we may assume to be generation-specific may in fact reflect age-grading, so that it will be outgrown as speakers grow older, and will not become part of the community norms. It cannot be assumed either, that older speakers are not influenced by the speech of younger members of the community, and vice-versa. Chambers and Trudgill felt obliged in 1980 to comment that 'the hypothesis of apparent time remains to be tested" (1980, 166).

Since that time, however, a number of real-time studies have been carried out which allow the predictions made in earlier studies to be considered alongside data from real time trend studies and panel studies (see Labov 1994, chapter 3). An example can be taken from Trudgill's research in Norwich, England. Figure 5 shows the distribution of the (e) variable in Trudgill's 1968 Norwich sample (see Trudgill 1974). The variable concerns the backing of (e) before /l/, as in *help* or *hell.* There are three variants: [ε], [ɘ] and [ʌ], with [ʌ] the most extreme local pronunciation and [ε] the RP variant. A high (e) index indicates a high use of the local variant and a low index, correspondingly, indicates a high use of the RP variant. Speakers under the age of 30 use the local variant very frequently, especially in casual speech, whereas older speakers (aged 50 and above) exhibit the usual pattern of style shifting. The assumption here, then, was that a change was in progress in the Norwich speech community towards an increased use of the local variant, and that the change was led by younger speakers (see Trudgill 1974, 105).

INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE
(from Trudgill 1974)

In 1983 Trudgill recorded a further seventeen Norwich speakers, aged between 10 and 25 (see Trudgill 1988). This group could then be compared with the younger age group of the earlier study. In their casual speech style the seventeen new speakers used the local variant only slightly more frequently than the youngest age group of the earlier study, but in their reading style and word list styles there was a very sharp increase in the use of this variant. Trudgill interpreted these results as indicating that the change had now almost reached completion (so that *hell* and *hull* are now synonyms in casual speech for young people in Norwich). In 1968 the change had been stigmatized, hence the young speakers had tended to use the overtly prestigious variants in their more formal speech styles. By 1983 the local pronunciation was becoming accepted in the community, and the other

variants were therefore used less frequently. The prediction that Trudgill had made in 1974, then, on the basis of the apparent time study, was accurate.

Further studies in real time suggest that the distinction conventionally drawn between age-grading and generational change may be a misleading opposition, as age-grading may be involved in the mechanism of certain types of change (Labov 1994, 97). For example, a replication by Joy Fowler in 1986 of Labov's well-known department store survey (Labov 1966) shows that for the importation of constricted [r] in New York City age-grading is the dominant configuration. Fowler found repeated age-grading for both the highest and the second highest social class stores. Succeeding generations of speakers, then, have followed the same age-grading pattern. However there was also a steady increment of the use of constricted [r] at the lower level, showing that a real-time change is taking place (Labov 1994, 97). The age-grading effect is much larger than the generational change. For example, in the highest class store (Saks) the shift of one hundred per cent use of [r] from the youngest age group to the group 20 years older remains at the high rate of forty per cent in the later study, whereas the upward movement between the first study and the second (carried out 24 years later) is only ten per cent. Furthermore, the dominance of age-grading over generational change is not confined to the spread of constricted [r] in New York City: similar results were found in Cedergren's trend study of the lenition of (ch) in the Spanish of Panama City (Cedergren 1984, reported in Labov 1994, 94-97).

Labov's conclusion is that generational change is the basic model for sound change (1994, 112) but that, as we have seen, age-grading may also be involved – perhaps more so for some variables in some locations than for others. Generation-specific language, then, can be assumed to reflect sound changes in progress. Lexical and syntactic changes, on the other hand, do not seem to spread through the community in the same way. A common pattern for lexical change is for all members of the community to change their frequencies of use together, or to acquire new forms simultaneously (Labov 1994, 84; see, for example, Payne 1976). This may also be a basic pattern for syntactic change (see Sankoff and Brown 1976, Arnaud 1980).

3. Generation-specific language in bilingual communities

The study of generation-specific language acquires a special significance for research into language maintenance, language death, code-switching and borrowing. Language shift typically takes place over three generations. For example, a migrant group in London from, say, Turkey, may arrive in London with Turkish as their first language and will begin to acquire English as a second language. Their children will then be bilingual in Turkish and English, using each of the languages in different domains (English, for example, at school and Turkish with their parents) and may also codeswitch between Turkish and English. Their children may then speak only English. This, of course, is an idealised model but it indicates the kinds of important differences that may be found between the different generations in this type of situation.

Research into the language of different generations of bilingual speakers can contribute to important theoretical questions. Budzhak-Jones and Poplack (1997), for example, use data from two generations of Ukrainian –English bilingual speakers to address the vexed question of whether single word items from one language occurring in a stretch of discourse from another language should be considered loan words or single word codeswitches. The first generation speakers in their small study were aged between 57 and 76, had been living in Canada for at least forty years, and used Ukrainian as their primary language in the course of 'normal daily interaction' (op.cit., 230). The second-generation speakers were aged between 20 and 31, and used Ukrainian sporadically, mostly in communication with older people. For them English was their primary language of interaction, although like the first generation speakers they said that they had acquired Ukrainian as their first language. Using the stepwise multiple regression procedure incorporated in Goldvarb 2.0 (Rand and Sankoff 1990), Budzhak-Jones and Poplack analysed 399 English-origin nominals and a comparative sample of 481 Ukrainian nominals. Their analysis suggested that the first generation speakers fully controlled the quantitative conditioning of linguistic variation in the marking of nominal inflection, but that the second generation speakers did not. Budzhak-Jones and Poplack were therefore able to argue that it is essential to distinguish 'native' speakers from 'non-native' speakers in the study of bilingual discourse. The first generation speakers in their sample, they claim, could be considered native speakers whereas the second generation speakers could not. Items borrowed from English, even if only for the nonce, were fully integrated by the first generation speakers into Ukrainian, and should therefore be considered integrated loanwords rather than single-word codeswitches.

A different example of generation-specific language comes from the research of Dubois and Horvath (1999) on language change in Cajun English. Dubois and Horvath analysed the use of seven phonological variables in the speech of three generations of speakers from rural areas of Louisiana. During the period of history represented by the three generations language shift from French to English has been taking place. The sociolinguistic situation, Dubois and Horvath say, is one of a stable closed community in the process of language shift, such as are found in many urban areas of the world, including, for example, the barrios of Los Angeles and New York City, and the migrant enclaves in Sydney. Dubois and Horvath's findings force them to question several of the assumptions of variationist research on sound change, such as the principle that women tend to be innovators in change from below, as well as leaders in change from above. Dubois and Horvath show that in Cajun English the distribution of sound changes across the generations is intimately tied to the external events that have shaped the lives of the three generations of speakers. For example, English was made the compulsory language of education during the period when the older generation would have been of school age; for them, therefore, English is a second language, and any social meanings attached to variation are realized in French (op.cit., 304). Their English has little to do with the usual understanding of change except for the important fact that their ways of speaking provided the source for future changes within the community. The middle-aged generation experienced the effects of industrialization and urbanization and the consequent imposition of an external norm for the speaking of English. The younger

generation, on the other hand, lived through a period of Cajun renaissance where a Cajun identity became salient but could be signalled only through English.

Living out a life against the backdrop of these different historical events defined different social and economic roles for men and women at different historical times, so that the effect of the basic social variables of social network and gender on language variation was different for each generation. The inclusion of age as a variable, then, was profoundly important for understanding the effects of these familiar social variables. As Dubois and Horvath point out, age as a measure of an individual's chronological development was not what was important; instead age "is fundamentally important to identify the generations within the speech community affected by important historical events. The effects of gender are strongly conditioned by generation, and the generations are strongly conditioned by sociohistorical contexts" (op.cit., 311).

4. Social implications

The most obvious social problems concerning age and generation-specific differences in language are connected with education. One such problem resulting from age-grading behaviour could affect children from families that do not expect them to take part in adult conversations (such as the working class Black community referred to as 'Trackton" by Heath (1983) or those British families where children are expected to speak only when spoken to). Clearly these children will be less forthcoming in oral discussions in the classroom than children from families that have treated as more equal partners in conversation. For discussion of these and other cultural differences, and their educational implications, see Romaine (1984, 159-228).

The pattern of preferential age grading whereby adolescents use a higher proportion of stigmatized variants than speakers of other ages may also impinge on school performance. Teachers and parents may react negatively if they perceive a heavy use of stigmatized features and do not realise that this is likely to be a temporary phase. The association between the use of nonstandard linguistic features and stereotypes of laziness, carelessness and other negative characteristics has been well documented (see Edwards 1979, 89-95). Research where teachers were asked to judge pupils with a white working class accent (Cockney London or Birmingham), an Indian accent, a recognisably Black London English accent and Received Pronunciation found that the white urban working class guises were consistently downgraded on criteria used in public examinations in England and Wales to assess oral performance (Sachdev, Elmufti and Collins 1998). The visible Black and Asian minority guises fared better, but there was the predictable bias in favour of the RP guise.

Language use typical of youth language is also relevant to educational issues. Edwards (1989), for example, discusses the use of Patois by both Black and White pupils in teacher-pupil interactions in the classroom, where it can be used to exclude or challenge teachers or to make confrontational comments to the teacher. On a more positive note, age and generation-specific differences in language use can be put to use within

classrooms as part of general discussions and explorations of language variation and language awareness (Rickford 1996).

A further body of work on language and age with obvious social implications concerns research on the language of the elderly, the language of ageing and intergenerational talk (see, for example, Coupland Coupland and Giles1991; Harwood, Giles, Fox, Ryan and Williams 1993). Indeed the aims of this type of research include predominantly applied linguistic, social goals.

In an earlier article on this topic for the first edition of the Handbook I noted that there had been little research with age differences as the primary focus and that the lack of information and interest on age differences in language use had been deplored by a number of researchers. The work I have briefly reviewed in this article shows that this is no longer the case. Age as a social variable has been deconstructed and problematised, and the potential of research on this topic for our understanding of the relation between diverse aspects of language and society has been recognised. In some areas of research, notably the construction of an age-related identity in discourse, and social psychological issues of age identity, the relation between language and age has been directly addressed. Although many gaps in our understanding remain, it now seems more likely that our knowledge will improve.

5. Literature (selected)

Andersson, Lars /Trudgill, Peter (1990) *Bad Language*, Oxford.
Androutsopoulos, Jannis K. (1998) Forschungsperspektiven auf Jugendsprache: ein integrativer Überblick, in: *Jugendsprache*, Androutsopoulos, Jannis K./ Scholz, Arno, eds., Frankfurt am Main, 1-34.
Androutsopoulos, Jannis K. (1999) Grammaticalization in young people's language. The case of German, in: Belgian Journal of Linguistics, 155-76.
Androutsopoulos, Jannis K./Scholz, Arno, eds., (1998) *Jugendsprache*, Frankfurt am main.
Arnaud, René (1980) Quelques observations quantitatives "en temps réel" sur un changement: L'accroissement d'emploi de la forme progressive dans la première moitié du XIX siècle, in: Communications au XXe Congrès de la societé des Anglicistes de l'Enseignement supérieur, Poitiers
Bauer, Laurie/Bauer, Winifred (2000) Nova Zealandia est omnis divisa in partes tres, in: *New Zealand English Journal* 14, 7-17.
Bourhis, R. Y./Giles, H./Rosenthal/D. (1981) Notes on the construction of a 'Subjective vitality questionnaire' for ethnolinguistic groups, in: *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 2:145-55.
Budzhak-Jones, Svitlana/Poplack, Shana (1997) Two generations, two strategies: The fate of bare English-origin nouns in Ukrainian, in: *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 2, 225-58
Cedergren, Henrietta (1984) Panama revisited: Sound change in real time, Paper given at NWAVE, Philadelphia.

Chambers, J.K. (1995) The Canadian –US border as a vanishing isogloss: the evidence of *chesterfield*, in: *Journal of English Linguistics* 23, 155-66.

Chambers, J.K./Trudgill, Peter (1998) *Dialectology*, 1st edition, Cambridge.

Chambers, J.K./Trudgill, Peter (1998) *Dialectology*, 2nd edition, Cambridge.

Cheshire, Jenny/Milroy, James (1993) Syntactic variation in non-standard dialects: background issues, in: *Real English: The Grammar of English Dialects in the British Isles,* Milroy, J./Milroy, L., eds.,. Harlow, pp. 3-33.

Cheshire, Jenny (in press) Sex and gender, in: *Handbook of Language Variation and Change* , J.K.Chambers/N. Schilling-Estes/P. Trudgill, eds., Oxford.

Clyne. Michael (1984) *Language and Society in the German-speaking Countries*, Cambridge.

Coupland, Nikolas (1997) Language, ageing and ageism: a project for applied linguistics? In: *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 7, 26-48.

Coupland, Nikolas/Coupland, Justine/Giles, Howard (1991) *Language, Society and the Elderly*, Oxford.

Downes, William (1998) *Language and Society*, 2nd edition, Cambridge.

Dubois, Sylvie/Horvath, Barbara (1999) When the music changes, you change too: Gender and language change in Cajun English, in: *Language Variation and Change* 11, 287-314.

Eckert, Penelope (1997) Age as a sociolinguistic variable, in*: The Handbook of Sociolinguistics*, Coulmas, Florian, ed., Oxford, 151-167.

Edwards, John (1979) *Language and Disadvantage*, London.

Edwards, Viv (1989) Patois and the politics of protest: Black English in British classrooms, in: *English across Cultures, Cultures across English: A Reader in cross-cultural Communication*, García, O./ Otheguy, R., eds., Berlin, 359-72.

Giles, Howard/Noels, Kim/ Ota, Hiroshi/ et al., (2000) Age vitality across eleven nations, in: *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 21, 308-23.

Harwood, J./Giles, H./ Fox, S./ Ryan, E.B./ Williams, A/ (1993) Patronizing young and elderly adults: Response strategies in a community setting, in*: Journal of Applied Communication Research* 21, 211-26.

Heath, Shirley Brice (1983) *Ways with Words*, Cambridge

Hockett, Charles (1950) Age-grading and linguistic continuity, in: *Language* 26, 449-59.

Holes, Clive (1983) Patterns of communal language variation in Bahrain, in: *Language in Society* 12, 433-57.

Høgsbro, Kjeld (1995) *Arbejdspapir vedrørende de metodiske forudsætninger for analysen af subkulturers brug af talemåder og begreber fra det engelske sprog*, Working Paper, Copenhagen: Institute of Social Development.

Helfrich, Hede (1979) Age markers in speech, in: *Social markers in Speech*, H. Giles/K. Scherer, eds., Cambridge, 63-107.

Holmes, Janet (1995) *An Introduction to Sociolinguistics*. Harlow.

Intachakra, Songthama (2001) *Linguistic Politeness in British English and Thai: A comparative analysis of three expressive speech acts,* University of London unpublished PhD thesis.

Labov, Teresa (1992) Social and language bundaries among adolescents, in: *American Speech* 67, 339-366.

Labov, William (1966). *The Social Stratification of English in New York City*, Washington, D.C..

Labov, William (1993. The linguistic consequences of being a lame. Language in Society 2: 81-115.

Labov, William 1994) *Principles of Linguistic Change. Volume 1: Internal Factors*, Oxford.

Labov, William (2001) *Principles of Linguistic Change. Volume 2: Social Factors*, Oxford.

Makoni, Sinfree (1997) Gerontolinguistics in South Africa, in: *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 7, 49-56.

Newman, Stanley (1955) Vocabulary levels: Zuñi sacred and slang usage, in: *Language in Culture and Society*, Hymes, Dell, ed., New York, 397-406.

Ota, Hiroshi/Harwood, Jake/Williams, Angie/Takai, Jiro (2000) A cross-cultural analysis of age identity in Japan and the United States, in*: Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 21, 33-43.

Paltridge, John/Giles, Howard (1984) Attitudes towards speakers of regional accents of French: effects of regionality, age and sex of listeners, in: *Linguistische Berichte* 90, 71-85.

Paoletti, Isabella (1998) *Being an older woman: A study in the Social Production of Identity*. Mahwah, N/J.

Preisler, Bent (1999) Functions and forms of English in a European EFL country, in: Standard English: The Widening Debate, Bex, Tony/Watts, Richard J. (eds.), London, 239-68.

Payne, Arvilla (1976) *The Acquisition of the Phonological System of a Second Dialect*, University of Pennsylvania unpublished PhD thesis.

Rampton. Ben (1995) *Crossing: Language and Ethnicity among Adolescents* , Harlow.

Rand, David /Sankoff, David (1990*) Goldvarb: A variable rule application for the Macintosh (Version 2)*, Université de Montréal: Centre de recherches mathématiques.

Rickford, John R. (1996) Regional and social variation, in: *Sociolinguistics and Language Teaching*, McKay Sandra Lee/Hornberger, Nancy H., eds., Cambridge, 151-94.

Romaine, Suzanne (1984) *The Language of Children and Adolescents: The acquisition of communicative competence*, Oxford.

Sachdev, I./Elmufti, N./Collins, P. (1998) Oral assessment and accent evaluation: Some British data, in: *Social Psychological Perspectives on Second Language Learning*, Agnihotri, R.K./Khanna, A.L./Sachdev, I., eds., New Delhi, 187-203.

Sankoff, Gillian/Brown, Penelope (1976) The origins of syntax in discourse: A case study of Tok Pisin relatives, In: *Language* 52, 631-66.

Schieffelin, B.B. and Ochs, E., eds. (1986) *Language Socialisation across Cultures*, Cambridge.

Sealey, Alison (2000) *Childly Language: Children, Language and the Social World*, Harlow.

Silva-Corvalan, Carmen (1981) Extending the sociolinguistic variable to syntax: the case of pleonastic clitics in Spanish, in: *Variation Omnibus*, Sankoff, D./Cedergren, H., eds., Edmonton, Alberta, 75-90.

Tagliamonte, S./Hudson, R. (1999) Be like et al. Beyond America: the quotative system in British and Canadian youth, in: *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3, 147-72.

Trudgill, Peter (1974) *The Social Differentiation of English in Norwich*, Cambridge.

Trudgill, Peter (1988) Norwich revisited: recent linguistic changes in an urban English dialect, in: *English Worldwide 9*, 33-49.

Van Eeden, J. (1991) *Ageing and seniority in a rural Xhosa community*, HSRC/UCT Centre for Gerontology, University of Cape Town.

Wolfram, Walt/Fasold, Ralph (1974) *The study of social dialects in American English*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.

Jenny Cheshire
Queen Mary, University of London