Course Topic: Language, Society and Culture

Course Instructor

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Course Synopsis

Researchers have found that humans use language differently as they move from one age group to the next throughout their life-spans. They have also found that the language used to talk *about* people and the language used to talk *to* people varies between the different age categories. In this video, we will first divide humans into four broad age categories with which to discuss the topic of language use and age. We will then take a look at some of the various words and terms used to describe people in the different age categories. Next, we will discuss how people in each of the four age categories use language themselves. Finally, we will examine some of the distinct features of the language used to speak to people in each of the age categories, as well as some of the assumptions behind this language use.

Course Agenda

1. Age Categories
2. How Language is Used to Talk *About* Different Age Groups
3. How Different Age Groups Use Language
4. How Language is Used to Talk *to* Different Age Groups

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1. Age Categories

For the purposes of our discussion about language use and age, we are going to divide humans into four broad age ranges or categories:

Children (12 and under)	**Teenagers** (13-19)
Adults (20+)	**Seniors** (60+)
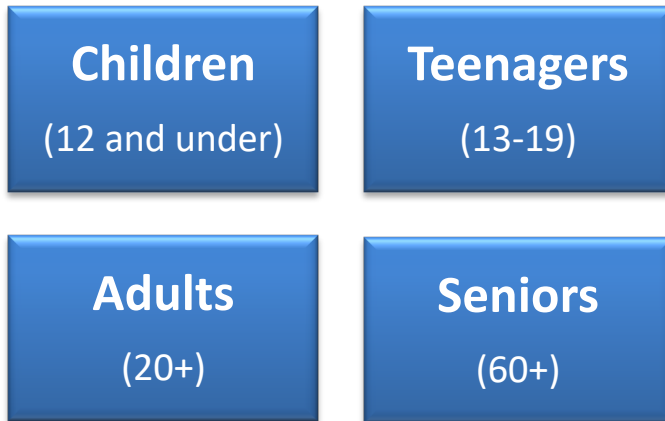
Adults consider themselves to be the 'keepers' of the language, and they control the standard language use. They often become frustrated when new slang or vocabulary is introduced or when grammar rules are broken because these changes push against the boundaries of standardization. **Teenagers** are considered to be the drivers of language change. They bring in new words and new ways of using language. This results in an added dimension to the standard generational tension that exists between adults and teenagers.

2. How Language is Used to Talk *About* Different Age Groups

Language That is Used to Talk About Different Age Groups

Vocabulary — Discourse
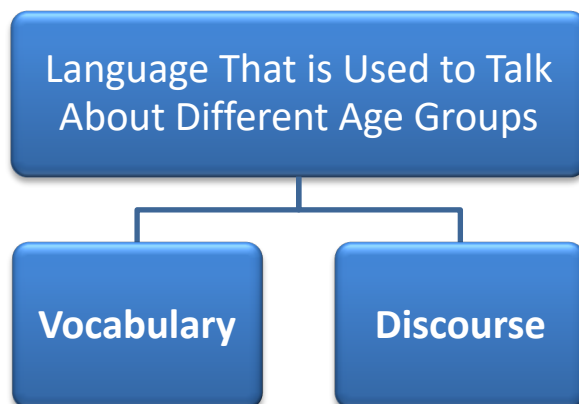
Pronunciation and grammar typically do not change when we are talking *about* different age groups, so we will focus our discussion on vocabulary and discourse.

Vocabulary

Activity #1: Use the chart below to brainstorm some words or terms that are used to talk about each of the four age categories. For each word or term, indicate whether it has a positive or a negative connotation by ticking off the appropriate column.

Words/terms used to talk about **CHILDREN**	Positive	Negative

Words/terms used to talk about **TEENAGERS**	Positive	Negative

Words/terms used to talk about **ADULTS**	Positive	Negative

Words/terms used to talk about **SENIORS**	Positive	Negative

Here are some terms that you may or may not have come up with. Think about what message each term conveys.

Children	Teenagers	Adults	Seniors
Anklebiter	Adolescent	Grown-up	Elder
Brat	Delinquent	In his/her prime	Geezer
Child	Juvenile	Mature	Old biddy
Cutie pie	Kid	Responsible	Old fart
Infant	Minor		Old folks
Kiddo	Pubescent		Old timer
Little one	Punk		Senior citizen
Munchkin	Teeny bopper		Spring chicken
Rugrat	Young adult		Wrinkly
Tyke	Youth		Young at heart
Young'un			
Youngster			

Discourse

Discourse can be divided into two categories: Text only (spoken and written) and multimodal communication (text with images, music, etc.). The discourse that we use to talk about people in different age categories often reflects the power that we assign to them. A great way to start to uncover discourse patterns about different age groups is to examine advertisements, either in magazines, on the radio, on the internet, or on television, that are targeted at particular age groups. The following is a list of some key characteristics or messages that advertisers focus on for each of the four age categories.

Children	Teenagers	Adults	Seniors
Bright colours	Being cutting edge	Adult responsibilities	Staying young
Cartoon characters	Being trendy	Mortgages	Having lots of energy
Cute, upbeat music	Being fashionable	Buying cars	Getting out to do fun activities
Advertising targeting parents of children:	Having the latest gadget	Making serious purchasing decisions	Staying healthy
Learning	Keeping up with everybody		Staying engaged
Education	Being in the know		
Development	Being part of the "cool" group		

3. How Different Age Groups Use Language

There are two types of research being done on how different age groups use language:

Synchronic research is conducted at a single point in time. This type of research involves analyzing the language use of participants in a specific age category at a specific point in time.

Diachronic research is conducted over multiple time periods. It involves following a group of participants and analyzing their language use as they move from one age category to the next. This type of research takes longer than synchronic research but it can uncover how language use changes over time within the same group of people.

How Children Use Language

This area of language use has attracted the most amount of research because it allows us to study the acquisition of first language. Children start with zero language when they're born and progress through various stages of linguistic proficiency as they grow.

- Pre-linguistic Stage
    - Cooing stage (1-4 months)
    - Babbling stage (5-12 months)
- One Word Stage (1 year)
- Two Word Stage (2 years)
- Telegraphic Stage (2-5 years)
    - Adding 20-30 words a day
- Fine-tuning (5-10 years)

Researchers tend to focus on the ages at which children make noticeable jumps in language proficiency, the rate at which children add new vocabulary words, and sound acquisition or refinement of pronunciation over time.

How Teenagers Use Language

Teenagers are the driving force behind language change. They often use informal language, slang, and experiment with new words and word formation. The teenage age category is usually the first place researchers go when they want to study language change within a specific language.

How Adults Use Language

Adults are considered the standard language users of any specific language group. Researchers look to adults to study standard grammatical and pronunciation patterns, as well as standard vocabulary and discourse usage.

How Seniors Use Language

Language use at the senior level reflects what happens to the brain as it ages. When seniors speak, they often show signs of hesitation, decreased speaking volume, slower speaking speed, and pausing to search for words.

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4. How Language is Used to Talk *to* Different Age Groups

The language we use changes when we speak to people from different age groups. For instance, the language we use to speak to children is often quite different than the language we use to speak to adults.

How we Speak to Children

Researchers have determined that there are many unique features in the language we use to talk to children. In fact, it is so distinct that it has been given a name - **Child Directed Language (CDL)**. Characteristics of CDL include:
- higher pitch
- slower speed
- simpler vocabulary and grammar
- shorter sentences
- repetition
- pauses
- use of nicknames and pet names
- use of questions and question tags
- exaggerated intonation
- clear and distinct pronunciation
- expanding upon and explaining

"Baby talk" is the way that we communicate with babies. It is so distinct that it is not considered part of CDL. Baby talk involves exaggerated intonation and pronunciation, like CDL, however it also includes the use of nonsense words and mimicking sounds the baby makes.

Researchers have identified several interesting things related to how we talk to children. The first is that when children are part of a larger group, they are often ignored when attempting to initiate a new topic into conversation. They are also interrupted and overlapped more than adults. Researchers also found that we tend to talk about children in their presence, and we use directive/instructive language when talking to them.

One of the underlying assumptions behind the use of CDL is the idea that children are "incomplete speakers" and our role, when speaking to children, is to help them develop their language. Another assumption is that CDL is used to reinforce the power differential that exists between adults and children. Finally, it is believed that the use of some CDL is meant to demonstrate caring to children, as they are a vulnerable age group.

How we Speak to Teenagers

The language we use to speak to teenagers is not nearly as distinct as the language we use to speak to children. This language alternates between how we talk to children and how we talk to adults, reflecting the 'in-between' position that teenagers occupy in the age spectrum. Sometimes teenagers act like children and sometimes they act more like adults. The language we use to speak to them often reflects the behaviour they are exhibiting.

How we Speak to Adults

This section requires no elaboration because the language we use to speak to adults is considered to be standard usage for any language.

How we Speak to Seniors

The language we use to speak to seniors is called **Elder Directed Language (EDL)**. The characteristics of EDL are very similar to those of CDL. They include:

- slower speaking pace
- higher speaking volume
- simpler vocabulary and grammar
- shorter sentences
- repetition
- no quick topic changes
- signalling of topic changes
- use of pet names and nicknames (Sweetie, Honey, Dearie)
- use of *honorifics*: placing seniors in an honored position due to their age
- use of the pronoun "we" instead of "you"
- asking questions and then answering them for the senior

Studies of EDL yielded very similar results to those of CDL. Researchers found that a senior's attempt to initiate a new topic is often ignored, they are interrupted more than adults, we talk about seniors in their presence, and we tend to use directive/instructive language with seniors.

One of the assumptions behind the use of EDL is that seniors are frail, not in good health and vulnerable, and that the presence of health issues can make communication difficult. Another assumption is that seniors have many interesting life experiences and stories to share. There is a power dynamic between seniors and adults that is similar to the one that exists between children and adults, mentioned earlier. And, once again, there is the assumption that EDL is used to demonstrate caring. Although, these final two assumptions seem to be in opposition, they are often at play simultaneously.

While researchers have concluded that there are many similarities between CDL and EDL, there is one difference between the two: The instructive element that is present in CDL due to the fact that children are still developing their language. This instructive element is, of course, not present with seniors because they are already proficient in the language.

Thanks for Participating!

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