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**Level: Master 1 Field of study: LS**

**Module: SOCIOLINGUISTICS**

**Course Number: 09**

**Course Title:** **LANGUAGE AND AGE**

**1- Defining Age (Eckert, 1997:156):**

*- Chronological Age – Age since birth*

*- Biological Age – Physical maturity, puberty, losing hair.*

*- Social Age – Events such as marriage, birth of first child, etc.*

**2- Age-grading[[1]](#footnote-1):**

In [linguistics](https://www.revolvy.com/page/Linguistics), age-grading is a phenomenon in which speakers in a community gradually alter their speech habits as they get older, and where this change is repeated in every generation. It has been shown, for example, that in some speech communities it is normal for speakers to modify their language in the direction of the acrolect[[2]](#footnote-2) as they approach middle-age, and then to revert to less prestigious speech patterns after they reach retirement age. Age-grading is something that has to be checked for in apparent-time studies of linguistic change to ensure that false conclusions are not being drawn from linguistic differences between generations.

Age plays a role as a factor that influences people’s linguistic choices. By analysing children, teenagers and adults’ speech, sociolinguists agree that speech has age-graded features. These features show differences among different age groups in terms of:

*1-Pitch (*tone of voice: *physical, social, cultural*):It is difficult to determine the gender of a five year old child talking on the phone. When boys and girls hit puberty, they develop different pitches. Men are lower in pitch, women are higher in pitch.

Not only pitch that makes a difference with age and language but there are language patterns that are appropriate for 10 year olds and teenagers that disappear as they grow older. Age-graded features like:

*2. Vocabulary:*

-Swear words: Teenagers tend to use more swear words than children or adults. Men restrict swearing to all-male settings whereas women reduce their swearing in all settings.

-Slang: An area of vocabulary that young people use. It signals membership to the age group of teenagers. E.g. “wicked!” “rad!” to describe something they approve, “groovy” vs. “cool” to identify the person’s generation.

*3. Pronunciation*: Different pronunciations can be a real give-away in guessing a person’s age. E.g. pronouncing “often” as /ɔ:fən/ is old-fashioned as opposed to the more modern /ɔ:ftən/ in British English. Another example is the use of *RP vs. non-standard*

*4. Grammar*: E.g. “dreamt”, “learnt” and “burnt” vs. “dreamed”, “learned” and “burned”.

**3-Apparent-time and Real-time studies:**

***3.1 Apparent-time studies*:** studies of linguistic change which attempt to investigate language changes as they happen, not in real time, but by comparing the speech of older speakers with that of younger speakers in a given community, and assuming that differences between them are due to changes currently taking place within the dialect of that community, with older speakers using older forms and vice versa. As pointed out by Labov, who introduced both the term and the technique, it is important to be able to distinguish in this comparison of age-groups between ongoing language changes and differences that are due to age-grading.

***3.2 Real-time studies:*** studies of linguistic change which attempt to investigate language changes as they happen, not in apparent time by comparing the speech of older speakers with that of younger speakers in a given community, but in actual time, by investigating the speech of a particular community and then returning a number of years later to investigate how speech in this community has changed. In secular linguistics, two different techniques have been used in real-time studies. In the first, the same informants are used in the follow-up study as in the first study[[3]](#footnote-3). In the second, different informants, who were too young to be included in the first study or who were not then born, are investigated in the follow-up study.

**REFERENCES**

- Eckert, P (1997):  Age as a sociolinguistic variable,

-Trudgill, P (1992): Introducing Language and Society

-<https://www.revolvy.com>

1. The term “age-grading” was first introduced by anthropologist/linguist [Charles F. Hockett](https://www.revolvy.com/page/Charles-F.-Hockett), but has been defined as it is used today by sociolinguist [William Labov](https://www.revolvy.com/page/William-Labov) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. A variety which is socially the highest, most prestigious variety in a social dialect continuum. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Also known in sociolinguistics as panel study [↑](#footnote-ref-3)