

Ageing: Speech Dissolutions

The research presents the analysis of speech disabilities that are brought about by ageing. The dissolution affects linguistic communication because it afflicts cognition and perception as a whole. Age is much more complex than a simple biological category. Chronological age tells only a small part of anyone's story—and can be quite misleading at times. The focus should be directed “away from chronological age and towards the life experiences that give age meaning” (Eckert, 1997).

Three areas of inquiry that have served to center clusters of research in the area of discourse and aging are revealed. They are: (1) language and communicative abilities in old age; (2) identity in old age; and 3) social norms, values, and practices in old age. Some of these researchers look specifically at subgroups of the over-all elderly population who are known to have difficulties with communication, such as individuals with Alzheimer's disease, different types of aphasia, and hearing loss. Others attempt to characterize the decline, maintenance, or improvement of such abilities within the healthy elderly population.

The changes that accompany healthy aging are analysed: 1) increasing difficulty with lexicon retrieval; 2) decreasing syntactic complexity in spoken and written discourse production; 3) increasing “off-target” verbosity; 4) decreasing sensitivity to audience.

Speech dissolution due to natural forces of maturation, as in aging, points to the fact that language is closely related to other aspects of human behavior, particularly to cognition.