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Formulating Age: Discursive Dimensions of Age Identity

Sociolinguistics has established a substantial part of its recognized territory around the contrastive analysis of socio-demographic categories: socio-economic class groups, the sexes, regional or ethnic groups, and so on. While textbooks continue to reflect this interest, contemporary sociolinguistic research itself has become wary of invoking some of the traditionally conceived social categories. Despite its seminal impact on the field, the quantitative, social differentiation paradigm (cf. Labov, 1966; Trudgill, 1974) has frequently been criticized for its deterministic assumptions regarding social classification processes, treating socio-economic groupings and situational types as pre-ordained independent variables in correlational designs with limited explanatory potential (cf. N. Coupland, 1988; Smith, Giles and Hewstone, 1980).

The sex/gender issue thrives as a focus for contrastive, quantitative investigations, though there have been vigorous arguments put forward *against* the view that sex can be appropriately treated as a clear-cut and objective socio-demographic variable. For instance, Smith (1985) contends that individuals cannot be uncritically assumed to be prototypes of their sex-group, and that gender identity is, in fact, a matter of degree, with large individual differences in both femininity and masculinity (p. 165; cf. also, Kessler and McKenna, 1978). Similarly, a growing tradition of work on race and racism has challenged the assumed naturalness of ethnic categories as analytic units (cf. Husband, 1982). Potter and Litton (1985) pin-point the same general problem in the assumptions underlying research on social representations.

As we noted in chapter 1, sociolinguistic studies have almost entirely neglected older populations, and a major aim of this book is

to promote sociolinguistic interest in an under-investigated social group, 'the elderly'. On the other hand, we recognize that category-based sociolinguistics has important deficiencies. Can these positions be reconciled? Our general position is that sociolinguistic research *can* justifiably sustain, and, in fact, needs to develop, its concern with socio-demographic categories and with the elderly in particular; but in doing this it must modify its assumptions about the *status* of categories themselves. We want to argue that studies need to focus on *processes* of *categorization*, on the premiss that categories are to a significant extent actively constructed by ingroup and outgroup members during communicative exchanges, and are thereby themselves quite directly amenable to sociolinguistic study. By implication, we believe that a trend in sociolinguistics to abandon social categories themselves would be an inappropriate reaction to well-founded criticisms.

The social constructivist approach we are endorsing is one that has been coherently argued in the socio-psychological literature (cf. P. Berger and Luckman, 1967; Gergen, 1985; Gergen and Davis, 1985; Shotter and Gergen, 1989). Recently, Potter and Wetherell (1987) have argued that discourse analysis can claim priority as the means of displaying social construction processes in action, their context-dependence and their variability. It is interesting, then, to note that at least one team of researchers, well known for earlier quantitative investigations, has independently reached a very similar position regarding the future of research in the language and sex roles area. West and Zimmerman (1985) conclude a review of that literature as follows: 'Where researchers have turned their attentions from gender as an isolated variable in sociolinguistic surveys to speech as a kind of action between humans of varying situational identities, we have developed a much richer understanding of the ways in which discourse helps construct the fabric of social life' (p. 119).

In this chapter we want to show the validity of Potter and Wetherell's general claim, and to parallel West and Zimmerman's priorities, through an analysis of how dimensions of *age identity* – inferable categorisations of speakers as elderly group- members in some specific respect – surface and are managed in a corpus of cross-generation and within-generation talk. We argue that 'elderliness' is in significant ways manufactured and modified in sequences of talk in which older speakers are involved, through the agency of elderly *and younger* speakers. We shall show that elderly identity can be a highly

unstable phenomenon, reflecting the local circumstances in which it is produced. At the same time, this is not *at all* to undervalue the emotional or somatic implications of identity formations for the individuals concerned. On the contrary, as we argued in the first chapter, we assume that there are high stakes here for esteem, satisfaction and even health.

Themes of elderliness arise pervasively and in many different forms in talk between older and younger people, to the extent that old age can in itself be a substantial agenda for talk involving older people. This chapter provides a general overview of age-identity marking processes in one conversational data-set; here, too, we consider the implications for social attitudes to ageing and for intergenerational relations. The specific themes and processes that we identify are then examined in greater detail in following chapters. We start with an introductory discussion[1] of how age identity has been investigated in earlier traditions in social psychology.

Approaches to Age Identity Analysis

Within social psychology we find support for our emphasis on categorization processes in recent trends in the conceptualization of not only identity in general, but also of age identity in particular.

Direct concern with the notion of age identity began with research aimed at assessing the age at which people come to think of themselves, or are thought to become, old. Researchers often asked people simply to classify themselves as old or elderly as opposed to not old, middle-aged or young (for example, Tuckman and Lavell, 1957; Tuckman and Lorge, 1954). An important finding was that people tended to dissociate themselves from the category 'old' and judge themselves as younger than their age in years (Blau, 1956; Riley and Foner, 1968; Tuckman and Lorge, 1954; Zola, 1962), a phenomenon that became known as 'denial of ageing' (Bultena and Powers, 1978).

Since then, there has been more concern to investigate the meaning behind such age identifying or disidentifying statements (see, for example, Guptill, 1969; Mutran and Burke, 1979). Measuring the meaning or content of age identity as a static, intra-

individual construct is, however, only one way of broaching the task of investigating people's self-concepts in old age. As Gordon and Gergen (1968) have pointed out, one may study the self as *process* as well as the self as structure. Studying the aged self as process is strongly advocated by symbolic interactionists (see, for example, Spence, 1986) and Meadian theorists (for example, Chappell and Orbach, 1986) who share a concern with the negotiated and constantly renegotiated nature of people's social and personal sense of identity – what Ainley and Redfoot (1982) have described as the 'essentially embodied nature' of age identity or 'identity-in-the-world'. Clearly, one approach to this task is to study the ways in which individuals introduce and formulate age-identifying statements, and modify them in relation to the actual or anticipated reactions of others, in sequences of talk. Potter and Wetherell's (1987) review arrives at this position as a general rationale for a discourse analytic perspective in social psychology as a whole.

The Interactive Study Data Context

Here (and in several later chapters) we focus initially on one particular data-set: a corpus of 40 videotaped interactions where pairs of volunteer subjects, women aged 70–87 and 30–40 years, took part in first-acquaintance conversations. When participants were recruited, they were simply told they were to converse with 'people of different ages'. Each pair of speakers, who had never met previously, were then asked to 'get to know one another'. They were left alone, knowing they were being videotaped, for eight minutes. Each pair was also recorded for a two-minute period after their 'get acquainted' session, unaware that cameras were still running, though these two subcontexts are not distinguished in analyses for this chapter.

The elderly women, most with (grossly characterized) upper-working-class backgrounds, were members of two day centres in Cardiff, Wales; most lived alone and were widowed. The younger women were mostly lower-middle-class and married, and were recruited through an advertisement in a local newspaper. Twenty of the dyads were intergenerational (purely for ease of reference we refer to them as young–old); 10 were peer-young and 10 peer-

elderly. We recognize the risks involved in working with such gross labels, though later analyses are, in fact, sensitive to variations in age (however defined), circumstances, experiences and, indeed age identifications within the groups we now call 'old' or 'elderly' and 'young'. In fact it is precisely the fluid and contingent nature of categorization processes that we are intending to make clear.

According to the study design, therefore, each subject participated in two interactions, one within and one across generation. All relevant sequences were transcribed (using notation developed from that of Jefferson, as summarized in chapter 2, note 1 and explained in more detail in Atkinson and Heritage, 1984). Several short extracts from the data are reproduced below, and, more extensively later, as examples of the processes we discuss.

Because we do not make explicitly generalized claims here, the particular nature and constraints of the data we are using are not critical. On the other hand, we are interested in how age identities surface in interaction, and the open-ended task we set participants might itself have encouraged them to mark their generational identities. Relative age was, at least to some extent, made salient in the design of the study, as participating speakers were aware they would be talking to two differently aged people. Again, self-identification was to an extent required by the 'get to know one another' rubric. Our thinking was that the controlled contrast between inter- and intragenerational conversations, plus the guarantee that participants in the study were non-familiars, at least offered us a clearly defined experimental basis from which to work in this exploratory study. But, as we shall point out, what previous descriptions there are of young–old and peer–elderly discourse do, in fact, endorse our most general finding in this chapter: that the marking of elderly identities is pervasive in social contexts where older speakers are involved, and is achieved in diverse and complex ways.

Dimensions of Elderly Identity Marking

It is not possible to delimit absolutely the means by which older adults can signal, or come to be associated with, elderliness. Such

associations may be highly indirect and result from participants or observers doing a good deal of inferential work to which we have no easy access. Also, we cannot expect uniformity across the generations or even individuals in what are taken to be central or peripheral attributes of elderliness. We can expect different traits to be subjectively associated with particular category labels in this semantic field: not only 'elderly', but also 'old', 'pensioner', 'retired', and many other terms (see pp. 15–16). For reasons like these, the taxonomy of elderly identity-marking processes we describe is necessarily very general, though, in fact, also rather conservative. We identify broad dimensions that can easily overlap one another and are certainly interrelated in continuous discourse. But we want to show that they constitute at least a significant portion of the means by which the older speakers in our data project or conversationally 'acquire' elderliness. First we outline the fundamental subcategories, with examples; we then consider the socio-psychological functions that age-identity marking can fulfil for elderly speakers and their conversation partners.

The six basic categories fall under two general headings: age-categorization processes and temporal framing processes.

Age-categorization Processes

This heading subsumes those discourse sequences through which an older speaker comes to be viewed (or is predictably viewable) as inhabiting an 'elderly' category. Either the category is explicitly defined as old age, or it implicitly (stereotypically/prototypically) characterizes old age.

Disclosure of chronological age The first process involves identifying the individual (self or other) as elderly in terms of age in years. Disclosure of chronological age is quite frequent in the data (elderly speakers tell their age in 12 of the 20 intergenerational encounters); this might be surprising, at least in view of supposedly general taboos against the making of intimate disclosures in first-meetings with strangers (C. R. Berger and Bradac, 1982). There also appear to be folk norms of etiquette specifically precluding age- telling by women.

Telling age is arguably the most explicit means of self identifying as elderly, though people will, of course, differ in the age boundaries

they set to the age category labels they use. A particularly interesting finding is that many of the chronological age disclosures in the data appear as expressed attributions for ill health, as in the fragment[2] from 12, where E2 says 'I'm I'm not very well these days too (.) I'm seventy last Octo[ber]', clearly implying she means her age to function as an account for her being unwell (see pp. 137–8).

Age-related category or role reference A second age-categorization process is the invoking of a category label itself (as a noun or some form of modifier) in reference to an individual or her peer group. We find a wide variety of particular category labels used, including 'old', 'elderly', 'pensioner' and 'geriatric'. Sometimes the category is invoked appositionally to a first-person pronoun reference, that is, self is co-identified as category member, as in the following fragment: 'I think us pensioners are very lucky really' (I29, E16). Sometimes the main propositional content of an utterance is to identify self with the category: (I4, E2) 'I'll have to pay for that myself and I'm a pensioner'; 'I'm great grandmother now for two' (I39, E19). Often, the elderly category is implied in making another disclosure rather than the topic of a disclosure in its own right, as in: 'well I've got two grandchildren and four great grandchildren [*laughs*]' (I26, E13). Focusing on succeeding generations in this way is by far the most frequent way in which elderly speakers refer to their generational role, and for some elderly people in the data, there is no shortage of triggers to a generational identity: E20 tells her young partner she has well over 50 grandchildren and between 20 and 30 great-grandchildren. Sometimes an elderly life position is invoked, though without a specific category label being used: 'you've got to make the best of it (.) especially at our age' (I20, E10); 'well of course when we get old we get little presents don't we?' (I35, E18).

There is of course a wide range of particular orientations to the age categories here. Very often 'old' is invoked as an outgroup category, even by speakers we are referring to as elderly. For example, in I20 E10 refers to 'Molly . . . an old lady' in identifying one friend among others at the day centre she attends. It appears to follow that she takes the general population of the day centre (for 'the elderly') to be *not* 'old'. Again, in I21, E12 tells her young conversation partner that 'some of the people at the day centre are quite confused . . . they're really geriatrics'. The term 'pensioner' on the other hand, as we have seen, is often tolerated in use as an ingroup category reference.

In general, the category is necessarily fuzzy-edged, for example because the pronoun 'we' in peer-elderly talk often refers ambiguously either to the two co-present participants alone or to members of the social group 'the elderly'. In this context any talk that is interpretable as an appeal to shared experience or consensus (and, by implication most of the discourse processes we discuss in the remainder of this taxonomy) will readily imply shared elderly category-membership.

Age identity in relation to health, decrement and death To the extent that people associate later life with declining health (cf. the discussion of decremental myths in chapter 1), commentaries on one's own ill health (at least of specific types), declining abilities and eventual death can imply elderliness. As we shall show in chapters 4 and 5, we find high frequencies of 'painful' self-disclosure (PSD) by elderly speakers in the present data, both among their peers and intergenerationally. We define PSD as the revealing of a cluster of categories of personal and often intimate information on one's own ill health, bereavement, immobility, loneliness, and so on.

Very similarly, Taylor (1987) has analysed what he calls the 'production of frailty' in discourse. His data are audio-recorded conversations between elderly home owners and their student lodgers. Taylor, too, argues that elderly people habitually use frailty to construct elderly identity in the personal narratives they tell: 'Accomplished in and through discourse, an elderly identity of frailty orients communicators to illness and death and reflects the allocation of power within elderly/other relationships'.

The elderly speakers in our data very frequently comment on aspects of their own decline, infirmity or dependency, as they see it. For example, in I38, E20 says 'I cannot now I cannot concentrate to buy [presents for her grandchildren]'; in I18, E10 attributes her momentary loss of attention to her age: 'what was I going to say (.) oh god now it shows my age'. More generally, age (and, in the following fragment, chronological age) appears to be taken to provide an adequate account for frailty: 'and I'm I'm not very well these days too (.) I'm seventy last Octo[ber] . . . so I find I can't do it so good' (I2, E2).

Even when the ill-health, frailty or incapacity is not reported as a current state, elderly speakers often still *orient* to their own decrement in their talk. In this way they establish a life position along a decremental scale. For example, (I16, E7): 'I don't think I'm quite ready for anything like that yet' (referring to the Meals on Wheels

catering service); and later: 'it's not so frightening going into a home [a residential home for the elderly] because they don't even know they're there themselves so when our time comes we know we're going to be like that'. Similarly, in I4, E1 anticipates her own increasing dependency and even, implicitly, her own death: 'I'm only hoping I can carry on because there's nothing like your own home'; and later: 'I pray I'll keep my faculties until I go'.

Overall, there are few overt references to death in the data. At one level this is not surprising given that speakers are first acquaintances in a relatively public speaking context. Still, other databases we have examined (with Romola Bucks) show that sensitive interviewers can induce many elderly people to talk extensively and openly to strangers about death, including their own (see also Nussbaum, Thompson and Robinson, 1989). In the present interactive data death is implicated in sequences where elderly speakers are appraising their lives retrospectively; expressions invoking a perspective on 'all my life' (for example, E5 in I10) are not uncommon. On one occasion, in a young–old conversation (I20), E10 reveals that her husband and her grandchildren's other grandparents are now dead, so that she is 'the only nanna'; as the younger woman comments, 'the only one now'. In sequences like these the end of the life span is tacitly but clearly invoked.

Even denial of infirmity, in the form of disclaimers and supposedly resisting stereotypes of decline with age, can implicate an ageing identity and so leave elderliness 'in the air' in elderly talk. For example, in I26, E14 says: 'well I'm always busy you know (.) they talk about old age and "you're lonely" (.) well believe me I'm never lonely and I'm never bored and I'm always busy doing something'; and in, I3, E1 says: 'well I lead quite a busy life although I'm eighty-six.'

Temporal Framing Processes

In addition to the more and less direct invocation of elderly categories in talk, we find various means by which elderly speakers in the data relate their personal experiences from distinctive temporal perspectives that come to mark them, again indirectly, as 'elderly'. This further set of possibilities again shows how older people's discourse can function to construct age identities, this time through narrative techniques that locate the narrator in a particular life-span position (cf. N. Coupland

and Nussbaum, in preparation). Under this second general heading, which is concerned in various ways with time past or the present in relation to the past, we want to recognize three subtypes.

Adding time-past perspective to current or recent-past states or topics In a series of studies, Boden and Bielby (1983, 1986) have shown that talk about the past frequently functions among peer-elderly pairs as a topic resource that informs talk about current states and circumstances. Their case is that 'among old people there is a broad recalling of the past in the context of the present which achieves for them a shared sense of meaning: this feature of talk is far less salient amongst young adults' (1983, p. 308). From our own data at this stage we want to make a simpler case: that the strategy of time-shifting – into the past, from focus on the present or recent past – predictably encodes an elderly identity for the speaker at that point in the discourse. Consider the following fragments:

I21, E12: I'm a widow nearly seventeen years ago;
I20, E10: I've been going there [to the day centre] for eleven years;
I22, E11: I wanted to see where he was buried and all after how many years (.) thirty odd years;
I10, E6: I retired in 1974 I'd been nursing for forty-six years . . . came down to Cardiff in 1952 and I was at the CRI [hospital] until I retired . . . my mother died when she was forty-five in 1933.

In these examples the matter being reported is a state, activity or event that is current or linked to the relatively recent past. The elderly speaker nevertheless locates these topics within a clearly time-past frame, extending the report into time past.

All the above examples, in fact, use numerical markers of time past, and they can therefore easily encourage the sorts of inferences about elderly categorization that we discussed earlier. Some instances of what we are calling the time-past perspective category could therefore be equally considered as age categorization processes in terms of their identity consequences. A further example is provided in I6 when a young speaker (Y3) asks her elderly partner 'and what made you decide to move?'. (The older woman has recently moved from a large house to a small flat.) E3 replies: 'well (.) I spent all my time years ago in Radnor Street (.) I had 25 years of (.) marvellous (.) no worries or troubles (.) two nice children you know (1.0) and er and then the War

came of course didn't it (.) so um my son then he was er (.) getting on for twenty he went and er (1.0) my goodness what I had after . . .'. What follows is a protracted life-history narrative.

Self-association with the past Talk about the distant past can, of course, function as an elderly identity marker in its own right (independently of the time-shifting strategy). It can certainly establish an historical divide between an elderly speaker and a younger speaker. This is particularly probable when older people come to associate themselves with the past, a perspective that sometimes involves overt self-*dis*sociation from the present. Older speakers sometimes comment on how the past, for them, is a matter of places or experiences that no longer exist:

I29, E15: of course I remember Llanedyrn when it was all country we used to go for walks and that before any of that was built;
I22, E11: I wouldn't recognise the place (.) it's years since I've been up this part of the city . . . years ago I used to come up here scrubbing floors;
I21, E12: you wouldn't know . . . don't know if you ever heard of it it was R D Jones' the Carlton (.) when I left school at sixteen I went straight there.

The second and third fragment above are interesting in showing polarized patterns of dissociation. In the second, the speaker is marking her own estrangement from newly developed areas of the city; in the third, the elderly woman is marking the younger woman's estrangement from time past ('you wouldn't know'). At times elderly speakers present themselves as dislocated in quite fundamental ways from contemporary life: in I34, E17 says: 'it's a good thing I suppose for the younger ones but I'd like to see old Cardiff as it was . . . I'm lost in my own city now . . . . In I32, E15 is just as explicit in attributing her experience of disengagement to age-category differences *per se*: 'I don't like it [the city centre] so much now . . . it's a bit busy for an older person.' Markers of cultural estrangement, and none is clearer than E11's reference to scrubbing floors in the fragment from I22, also fall in this category. The very notion of scrubbing floors, pretty much an outmoded domestic chore reminiscent of the first part of this century, seems to invoke elderliness and implicit change.

Recognizing historical, cultural or social change A third, and again overlapping, process in the temporal framing set is commenting on general social change (that is, not necessarily focusing on personal experiences, though it is, of course, within this sort of topic area that discourses of personal estrangement are likely to occur). We find that social change often provides an independent topic-agenda for intergenerational and peer-elderly talk. For example, in I14, Y7 remarks on patterns of language shift in Wales: 'your generation were speaking Welsh weren't they?' Economic circumstances provide another common theme. For example, E16 in I31 says: 'in those days you had to work hard to make ends meet because you had no money'; and, conversely, in I32, E15 remarks: 'we're lucky today because our parents didn't have a pension.' Sometimes elderly speakers make global assessments of times changing: for example, in I20, E9 says: 'but times are so different aren't they? . . . everything's fast isn't it? (.) you've got to sort of run with it.'

Relationships between Categories

The six subcategories above are an informal taxonomy of age identity-marking processes, at least as they surface in our data. We should repeat that the categories are in no sense pure and discriminable sets. Each could be further subdivided; fitting particular conversation sequences into each category is very much dependent on contextual factors, so each is fuzzy-edged. We are only providing a guide to the diversity of discourse processes that can be involved in marking elderliness in conversation. Also, there are differences in kind across the strategies listed. Borrowing terms from the work of Le Page and Tabouret-Keller (1985), we can say that some categories are relatively 'focused' in that they can be delimited relatively sharply. (The disclosure of chronological age is probably the most focused in this sense; in chapter 6 we give a more developed contextual account of the management of age disclosure in this and another data context). Others are highly 'diffuse' categories and less easy to differentiate – the temporal framing set as a whole is diffuse in this sense. Still, the taxonomy does highlight several key issues in the way elderly identity is conversationally 'managed' and allows us to consider some implications.

The various dimensions we have isolated do not only overlap but actually *conspire* in the construction of elderly identities. The themes of old age are in several ways *structurally interrelated* in the discourse sequences we are examining. We have referred to themes of change providing a context for expressions of dislocation – of the old from the contemporary world, or of the young from time past. As we shall see in analyses of the structure and distribution of painful self-disclosure sequences, the telling of age can function as a salient pre-context for the disclosure of own problematical circumstances. Conversely, ill health or its denial appear to establish a preference for age disclosure (in expressions of the type 'I'm doing well for eighty-five, and so on). In these ways age identity is best seen as, on the one hand, an intrinsically rhetorical projection and, on the other, as an inference to be drawn from the interplay of various age, health and other circumstantial or experiential reports.

Variable Identities

One major contribution that the discursive approach to social identity makes is that it demonstrates *variation* where consistency might otherwise be assumed. For example it would be wrong, and in fact perhaps ageist, to assume that an elderly identity uniformly designates an undesirable life circumstance. We have perhaps given the impression that the elderly identities being encoded in the interactive study data are predominantly negatively weighted. Overall this might be an accurate reflection, though it is vital to recognize extreme *affective variability* across particular instances.

For example, most of the invocations of elderly generational identities (described under 'Age-related category or role reference') – statuses and experiences of parenthood, grandparenthood and great-grandparenthood – project very positive social roles. Both elderly and young speakers construe these generational roles as functional for society as well as for the older person herself, her family and friends. An instance would be the following, where E9 expresses feelings of warmth and accomplishment that are endorsed by her younger recipient, Y10:

EXTRACT 3.1

E9: so the people that get older get older the younger
ones get older then you get closer don't you
Y10: that's very true I think yes (.) oh
E9: now my granddaughter's thirteen . . . but I see a lot of
them it's lovely yeah=
Y10: =yes it is nice I think it's nice you know you need
the children need grandparents

But there are other ways of projecting grandparenthood. In I39, E19 follows her disclosure that she has two great-grandchildren with the comment: 'makes you look old doesn't it?' E19 at least seems to have some reservations about the great-grandmother life position, and she perhaps finds the role at odds with her contextual age. Subtle details of prosody and non-verbal style, which are not easily captured in a conventional transcription, also allow humour and irony to sway the affective balance, so it is often unclear how elderly people are in fact construing their own elderliness behind the veils of impression management and social convention.

Being elderly can, as we have seen, be projected in positive ways or seemingly neutrally as 'the way we are'. Still, it is true that many attributions made in the data do indeed reflect old age as a handicap or a constraint. The fragments above show elderly speakers construing elderliness in terms of poverty, immobility, progressive ill health and dependency. Some of these construals are unmistakably pejorative, as in the use of the term *geriatric* to designate an incompetent out-group. When, in I35, E18 associates ageing with gift-getting – she says 'well of course when we get old we get little presents don't we?' when she has been appreciatively discussing Father Christmas's visit to the day centre – she is endorsing the stereotypical trappings of second childhood and the inverted-U model of ageing we discussed in chapter 1.

The data also show clear instances of variable age identity-projections within the same individual. When Potter and Wetherell (1987) advocate a discourse analytic perspective on social identity (and other key constructs in social psychology), they stress the inherent instability of identities, and indeed all social categories that are negotiated 'on-the-ground' (cf. Giles and Coupland, 1991a). Potter and Wetherell claim that 'social psychology not only tends to play down the issue of variation in areas crucially concerned with it,

but . . . the procedures psychologists regularly use for dealing with discourse have, often inadvertently, acted as management strategies for suppressing variability' (p. 39). Certainly, age categorizations in our corpus can be variable in the way Potter and Wetherell suggest. Individual speakers are, for example, prone to making superficially inconsistent self- and other-categorizations at various points in their talk. For example, E9 (who was E10's conversation partner in the earlier fragment of I20, where E10 refers to 'Molly . . . an old lady') was ready to use the same category identification of Molly, but later identifies people who use the day centre as those who are 'old like me you know'.[3] Membership of the category 'old' is therefore at one level a token to be manipulated for immediate purposes in the discourse. A speaker is not uniformly 'old' or 'not old'; rather, she self-selects and self-projects in and out of the category, aligning herself momentarily with 'the old' in respect of some currently salient, desired (or at least tolerated) trait, and then setting herself outside the same group in relation to some other criterion.

The Interpersonal Contextualization of Identity

This fluidity of self- and other-identification may seem to deny the very essence of the concept of an identity, if we take it to be some relatively durable and significant personal alignment or self-appraisal. It might also seem to deny the ultimate significance of group identity to the individuals concerned. We think these are unjustified interpretations.

First, it would be wrong to regard the variation we find as erratic or random. The data above all suggest that age-identity marking is a *relative* process, with one's own or other person's elderliness being constructed *vis-à-vis* some other identity. Since the concepts 'old' and 'elderly' are, like a whole class of attributives in language, essentially gradeable qualities, it is not surprising that apparently the same categorization can be opted into and out of according to contextual demands. This does not need to imply that the self-concept correspondingly varies. When, in I21, E12 tells her young conversation partner that 'some of the people at the day centre are quite confused . . . they're really geriatrics', the term 'geriatric' is presumably intended derogatively of an out-group precisely to enhance the speaker's own identity.

The clearest cases of identities being negotiated relatively are when themes of competitiveness arise, often in peer-elderly encounters. In I26, E14 tells her partner she is 'very busy knitting for her two grandchildren'; E13's response (quoted above) is: 'well I've got two grandchildren and four great grandchildren [*laughs*].' This contrastive establishment of generational roles becomes clearly competitive when E14 in turn replies 'oh! you've done better than me'. The implications of 'doing better' here are interesting. On the one hand, a survival ethic is invoked, and the resisting of decrementing forces, forces against which individual life positions can be appraised. On the other hand, prominence is given to the relative positions of the two individuals, each acting as a life-span reference point to the other. Very similarly, as we shall see in chapter 6, age telling among elderly peers is often reciprocated, leading again to mutual life-position appraisals.

Again, there is evidence in the data that age-related roles in discourse can be fashioned, or certainly constrained, by interlocutors, their expectations and assumptions. In relation to ill health and the other personal topic areas we take to define painful self-disclosure (see chapter 4), for example, young speakers play a significant role in eliciting this information, directly or indirectly, from elderly speakers. Older people who are questioned quite specifically in this way about their health, family histories, the past, times changing, life at a day centre and so on will be obliged to an extent, if only by the global requirement of being cooperative, to answer appropriately. When they do this and engage in talk about these topics, they may easily reinforce their perceived elderliness. Also, in peer-elderly talk, elderly people will predictably be under some pressure to accommodate to the projected identities of their interlocutors – a case of the phenomenon we termed 'ideological matching' in chapter 2. In cases like these it seems appropriate to consider age identities, in context, to be *mutually* constructed to a considerable degree.

Negotiating Personal Identity

What might be the consequences of the processes we are discussing for older people's own self-concepts and identities? By whatever

means the variability in age identification comes about in discourse, it seems plausible to argue that individuals have the opportunity, or perhaps the obligation, to actively negotiate *their own* identities here as part of a truly dynamic psychological process. For example, if a contrast is established between a speaker's own good health or mobility and her contextually older peers, the effect may be to deny a decrementing elderly identity while covertly invoking it as a possibility. In some cases, then, people who select and project themselves *out* of a stereotypically 'old' social group (when we have seen that several peers do indeed orient to their own decrement, present or anticipated) may be doing so strategically, following a partially conscious decision to resist dispreferred alternatives. The discourse sequences in which such self-presentations are embedded ('is my projected identity credible? credited? challenged? endorsed?') are likely to be key processes constituting the bottom line of people's self-appraisals. As we shall see in later chapters, elderly people's disclosures of troubles and age often appear to form part of well-rehearsed and even ritualistic sequences, with various predictable, aphoristic next moves such as complimenting or expressing surprise, denial or disbelief. Particularly in gerontological contexts, this is where we find evidence of the impact of rhetorical practices on identity and well-being, and the crux of the relationship between discourse and health.

Social Constuctivist Interpretations

Notwithstanding the variation we have pointed to, we find that elderly identities, along the multiple dimensions we have explored in this chapter, pervade the contexts of our interactive study data wherever elderly participants are involved. The sheer scale of this seems significant in its own right. It is, of course, true that age-identity markers and age-related disclosures will surface in talk particularly where age has become a salient dimension. And we might be tempted to think that age salience is a natural result of older and younger speakers coming into contact. We believe that this is an ageist assumption. In other intergroup contexts (in talk between the sexes, ethnic groups, the social classes, and so on), we would assume that speakers could *potentially* align as group members and mark this in

their talk, but we would not assume this was inevitable or even predictable. Why should we assume that elderly category membership is more 'naturally' salient?

This raises the related question of whether participants themselves approach cross-generation conversations with the same assumptions. Are younger speakers prey to the expectation, which is still ultimately ageist, that their partner's being elderly makes elderliness available as a resource for their conversation, as a principle to guide their selection of topics and organization of conversational rights and obligations? In this chapter we have introduced some descriptive evidence that this might be so, though more detailed investigation (in later chapters and, of course, beyond the scope of this book) is needed.

Some might also argue the case that the life circumstances of the elderly, or, at least, those older people in the present study, make it inevitably the case that decrement and disadvantage should surface as themes of talk. Again, we think this position is unwarranted. The 20 elderly people in our interactive data are by no means a maximally disadvantaged group; all of them are reasonably mobile and enjoy at least moderately good health, and they all live pretty well independent lives in the community. As is probably the case across the life span, our life circumstances do tend to offer us predictable topics for talk. But this does not mean that it will be the age-salient dimensions of our experiences that will be most prominent, let alone the negative aspects of these, particularly in relatively public, self-monitored speaking contexts.

For these reasons, we need to explore more particular motivations or belief contexts that could underlie elderly people's predisposition to present themselves as elderly and/or deny their elderliness in first encounters like those we are studying. To end this chapter, it might be useful to anticipate some of the arguments we develop in later chapters in connection with much more detailed analyses. Goals that we can infer govern elderly people's age-identifying discourse include:

1 (minimally) to elicit engagement and a range of positive responses from an individual interlocutor, from praise ('I lead quite a busy life although I'm eighty-six') to sympathy ('I'm not very well these days too I'm seventy');
2 to stake a claim, at the intergroup level, for owed respect,

attention, interest or care and to revel in the heroicism of old age *per se*; or to redress stereotyped assumptions that these orientations are always appropriate, and thereby earn respect and credit in other dimensions;

3 to enact a set of relative evaluations, for example of the life position of an elderly speaker in relation to other elderly people (present or not) or to other reference individuals or groups;
4 to defuse a potentially threatening situation, perhaps simply the get-to-know-one another task requirement, through self-handicapping (see the discussion of this strategy in chapter 2);
5 relatedly, to transfer age from the implicit to the explicit agenda, thereby defusing the threat imposed by uncertainty (Berger and Bradac, 1982);
6 to tap the existential function of talk: to try to come to terms with the balance between one's own chronological age and contextual age, and reduce one's own uncertainty about present states and future possibilities.

All of these motivations appear to have relevance as forces driving age-identity management, in specific respects and at specific points, to the data we are exploring. The discourse analysis perspective we are adopting requires interpretations that reflect the sequencing and local placement of individual conversational moves and strategies, and it is at that very specific level that we are most confident in the particular interpretations we offer. Having argued that age identity needs to be seen as a discursive formation, we would not be happy to pursue questions about absolute or primary socio-psychological functions underlying the encoding of elderly identity in general.

Still, for many elderly people there does appear to be a range of potentially *positive* functions served by what are predominantly negatively loaded self characterizations and self disclosures in talk. We can show how self projecting on some dimensions as 'elderly' can establish a baseline for positive personal appraisal, express positive and valued experiences of ageing, score points against competing peers and also at times satisfy the conversational expectations of others. More detailed analyses of these strategic possibilities could go a long way towards offsetting the stereotypes that are available to label elderly talk as 'egocentric', 'grumbling' and 'disengaged'.

With a greater awareness of the identity loading of elderly talk, the caring and counselling professions could and should give far more

emphasis to styles and strategies of face-to-face interaction with older people. Training and other interventionist initiatives in the area of elderly communication (and we consider some particular instances in chapter 8) need to attend in much more detail to conversational options, for example, in considering ways of responding to elderly troubles-telling or life narratives (see also Coleman, 1989; Thorsheim and Roberts, 1990). Discourse analysis would appear to offer a way forward for theorists and practitioners in the evaluation of medical consultations, home-care assistance and less institutionalized types of social support. The malleability of age identities that we have pointed to offers good grounds for assuming that training and intervention based around sociolinguistic awareness might conceivably 'cut through' and improve support and counselling effectiveness and psychological well-being.

For inter-generational encounters as a whole, the so-called generation gap, the data we have introduced in this chapter help us to identify some potential routes to miscommunication, and the maintenance of the 'hard' intergroup boundaries that we considered in chapter 2 (see also Giles, 1979). The age identity projections of younger and older participants in the study differ fundamentally, despite some superficial similarities. The young women, like the older women, though far less regularly, comment on social change – for example, in talk of child-rearing experiences. There are certainly age-identity implications here ('we are mothers with shared experiences') but without the estrangement potential we noted between young and old. Elderly people's reflections on change are made very often in the presence of young interlocutors, who have, by definition, limited potential to share or match the elderly's historical experiences. On the other hand, if younger speakers reflect on change, their elderly interlocutors, of course, have equal potential.

Again, rhetorical sequences reflecting social or cultural change carry an intrinsically contrastive age-identifying potential. Young speakers in the data also occasionally rue the passing of time and their own accompanying 'decrement'. Y6 in I11 facetiously says she has 'passed the perfect physical age for having babies', which she considers to be 17.[4] She also feels she has passed what she calls 'the perfect mental age', 25. Very significantly, her self-deprecation, to a young peer, suggesting she is 'always falling asleep at the drop of a hat', is said flippantly, with laughter. In this respect, then, a dimension of age-identity signalling and sometimes even the same precise contents

of talk are equally available to individuals across the lifespan, though with quite *different* particular identity consequences. (An older woman claiming she fell asleep 'at the drop of a hat' would be inviting attributions of far more literal decrement.)

Cross-generation talk does in these ways draw on different agendas, and different rhetorical possibilities or probabilities within shared agendas. Consequently, accommodative options in this context are likely to be severely curtailed, often with no preferable strategy readily available. As we have already suggested, there may be an inadequate experiential base for young interlocutors to draw upon in circumstances where a neutral option might otherwise be to match anecdotes, opinions or ideologies. Where the usual accommodative possibilities are not available, there is a risk of young people's discourse styles to the elderly involving overaccommodation (see chapter 2) and talk being modelled on fossilized, stereotyped construals of the old. 'Elderspeak', demeaning and de-individuating language, can surface in just these contexts, and, as part of this self-perpetuating process, generation-groups can come to be consolidated as culturally distinct formations. A discursive perspective on age identity can, at least, give us access to the means by which such dilemmas and disjunctions may arise, and then begin to offer us clues as to how we can resolve them.

4

'My Life in Your Hands': Processes of Intergenerational Self-disclosure

This chapter examines the interactional dynamics of one of the processes we listed in chapter 3 of age-identity formulation in talk: the telling of ill health, troubles and difficult life circumstances. We will therefore be illustrating, in one particular dimension, the fundamental theme of the volume: that examining conversational strategies, particularly in intergenerational contexts, is an appropriate route to understanding how older and younger group members align to one another, and hence to understanding social ageing itself. At the same time, we shall be asking what discourse analysis has to contribute to a long-established tradition of research in communication science – the study of self-disclosure and 'disclosiveness' (see Holtgraves, 1990), which has to date all but ignored matters of sequential organization and the detail of disclosure in action.

In chapter 5 we provide a more quantitatively based and interpretive account of intergenerational troubles-telling, building on the sequential analyses that we introduce here. To allow our own approach to be compared, and contrasted with existing research in the self-disclosure paradigm, the present chapter begins with a brief discussion of what is implied by this concept and an outline of alternative ways of approaching self-disclosure.

Perspectives on Self-disclosure

At the most general level self-disclosure can be viewed as a set of possibilities within what Goffman (1959) calls conversational