Ageing Identities and Women's Everyday Talk in a Hair Salon

The ageing of the world's populations, particularly in Western developed countries, is a well-documented phenomenon; and despite many positive images of later life, in the media and public discourse later life is frequently depicted as a time of inevitable physical and cognitive decline. Against this background, Heinrichsmeier presents the results of her two-year sociolinguistic study examining how a group of older women of different ages negotiated their way through their own and others' expectations of ageing and constructed different kinds of older – and other – identities for themselves. Through vivid and nuanced analysis of their chat and practices in a small village hair salon, Heinrichsmeier reveals these women's subtle and skilful manipulation of stereotypes of ageing and the impact of the evolving talk on their identity constructions. Her study, which provides numerous short extracts of talk in both the hair salon and interview along with more detailed case studies, highlights the importance of such apparently 'trivial' sites – for both studying older people's identity work and as loci for positive identity constructions and well-being in later life. This book will be of particular interest to graduate students and scholars working in sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, conversation analysis and gerontological studies, as well as those interested in approaches integrating ethnography and language.

Rachel Heinrichsmeier is a Visiting Research Fellow at King's College London. Her research focusses on identity construction in interaction, particularly older-age, gender and institutional identities, and combines a conversation analytic-informed discourse analysis with ethnographic methods.

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Rachel Heinrichsmeier

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- Chapter 4 is adapted from: Heinrichsmeier R. (2018) Tired, but not (only) because of age: An interactional sociolinguistic study of participants' variable stances towards older-age categorial explanations in everyday hair-salon talk. *Journal of Aging Studies* 46 45–57 © Elsevier 2018.
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Transcription Notation

<i>Symbol</i>	<i>Indicates</i>
00:00:00	Time elapsed in format hh:mm:ss
(0.0)	Pause in seconds and half seconds
(.)	Micro pause
=	Latching between utterances
[]	Point of overlap onset and cessation
—	Stress on underscored syllable
↑↓	Pitch rise or fall in the following syllable
WORD	Utterance loud relative to surrounding talk
°word°	Utterance softer/much softer than surrounding talk
°°word°°	
< >	Utterance slower than surrounding talk
> <	Utterance faster than surrounding talk
wo:rd	Syllable stretched out. More:: represents more stretching
.h	In-breath
£word£	‘Smile voice’: the utterance between the £/£ produced through a smile
wo(h)rd	‘Plosiveness’ in the word, in this book, exclusively laughter
(???)	Transcriber unable to determine what was said
(word)	Transcriber’s best guess at unclear word/phrase
((word))	Transcriber’s descriptions

Adapted from Jefferson (2004)

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Abbreviations

CA	Conversation analysis
CBA	Category-bound activities/attributes
ECF	Extreme case formulation
FPP	First pair part
MCA	Membership categorization analysis
S&S	Shampoo and set
SPP	Second pair part

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Introduction

Talking about Getting Older

“The trouble is I can’t um alter my fashion or whatever just because I’ve got old,” exclaimed Mrs France (aged 68) as Joellen shampooed her hair. “I’m still a check shirt and jeans person.” On another occasion, Joellen was chatting with Mrs Farming, 90 and recently widowed. “It’s my lack of energy that is appalling really,” sighed Mrs Farming. “Well, Adele,” said Joellen. She paused, then, with a slight laugh, went on, “At ninety years of age you’re entitled to have a little bit of lack of energy.” “I know,” replied Mrs Farming, but she sounded doubtful. So each conversation continued, with Mrs France mulling over her sense of appropriate attire for her 68 years of age and Mrs Farming lamenting her lack of energy.

These women were among the participants in my doctoral research into older identities in a small village hair salon, Joellen’s Hair Palace. In this book, I draw on audio-recordings of their and seven other women’s conversations with Joellen and her staff as their hair was shampooed, cut, styled and dried. Focussing on the detail of their exchanges, I examine how these women negotiate their way through their own and others’ expectations of ageing as they construct different kinds of older – and other – identities for themselves.

This book is written against a background of increasing longevity and growing numbers of older people as a proportion of many countries’ populations. In the UK, for example, the proportion of people aged 85 or older is projected to double over the next 25 years (ONS, 2017); whilst globally, over the next 30 years, the number of those aged 80 or over is projected to triple (United Nations, 2018). But in most Western developed societies, being ‘old’ or even ‘older’ is not one of the most desirable identities. For women, ageing and the ageing body may be particularly problematic, especially if, as some authors theorize (Coupland, 2003; Hurd, 2000), who they *are* is strongly associated with aspects of how they *look*. And in a society in which ‘the ideal female body is healthy, thin, toned, shapely, wrinkle free, and young’ (Hurd Clarke et al., 2008: 1085), the *ageing* female body increasingly falls short of these ideals. All is not lost, cries the beauty industry, as powerful media images urge women (and increasingly men too), to invest in a range of cosmetics to enable them to ‘dump a decade’ (Coupland, 2009b: 962). But that very

2 Introduction: Talking about Getting Older

call marks older age as undesirable. More generally, older people risk being seen as trivial or as of no account, becoming invisible (Bytheway et al., 2007: 31). Although many positive images of later life can be found, for example, in magazines aimed at older people (Lumme-Sandt, 2011), negative and decremental associations continue to dominate; and in the media and public discourse later life is frequently depicted as a time of inevitable physical and cognitive decline. Older people *en masse* are variously pathologized or cast as burdens (Fealy et al., 2012; Segal, 2013), portrayed as the thieves of younger people's futures (Willettts, 2010), or bombarded by the injunctions of a consumerist society to take personal responsibility for deferring their decline (Katz and Calasanti, 2015: 28; Westerhof and Tulle, 2007: 238ff).

These different perspectives are underpinned by negative views of ageing and an homogenization of older people, robbing them of their individuality and depriving them of the opportunity of being more than just 'older'. And of course, we *are* all much more than just our age: we are also women (or men or trans or intersex); workers (or unemployed or retired or volunteers or students); and daughters, partners, mothers (or sons, partners, fathers). We can be categorized by our nationality or our ethnicity or our religious affiliation (or lack of one) or our criminal record or our place of residence or our sporting interests and so on. In short, even if some of us might reasonably be categorized – on sight – as 'older people', we are always more than that; and being 'older' is not always what is most important to us in any particular encounter.

Exploring the subtle and nuanced identity work of older people, letting their voices be heard, is an important project to give us some insights into the multifarious identities and ways of being in later life. It is important not only because there are increasingly greater numbers of older people in our world, but also because – barring early death – we shall one day all ourselves grow old.

Overview of the Book

The first two chapters of this book provide the background to this study. In Chapter 1, I outline in broad-brush terms the way ageing is portrayed in many Western societies. I then discuss the way identity is understood in this book and offer an overview of studies examining older people's identities in interaction in different settings. In Chapter 2, I introduce the site for this research, Joellen's Hair Palace; give an account of the study's methodology; and provide an overview of the analytic frameworks, Conversation Analysis and Membership Categorization Analysis, on which the detailed analysis of extracts draws.

Chapters 3 and 4 are thematically related. These focus on participants' most explicit orientations to later life through expressions like at

90 years of age'. I examine the associations participants make with such expressions, how they're designed and received, and the kind of identity work done by their use and reception. By focussing on three case studies, I show that even in instances where age is explicitly named, other identities may be more salient, and that the use of ageing-relevant terms and expressions is in the service of wider interactional projects than claiming or attributing older age.

Chapters 5 and 6 turn to the *prima facie* business of the salon, appearance. In these two chapters, I discuss the way ageing is made relevant and orientated to in participants' practices, in the stances they adopt towards their appearance, and in particular salon sequences, even when no explicit mention of ageing or older age is made.

Chapter 7 moves us further from explicit orientations to ageing to examine the way ageing is made relevant in a particular stereotypical salon discursive practice, namely participants' stories about recent and forthcoming events in their lives, which I dubbed 'busy stories'.

In Chapter 8, I use three case studies to show how the repeated small moves we have examined in previous chapters work together to produce fine gradations of older identities as well as more diverse identities. We examine the fleetingness of some identities, the more enduring nature of others; and the way that my participants, even the oldest, still construct themselves as selves-in-the-making. We also, though, explore the constraints on identity constructions in later life.

Finally, in Chapter 9, we step back from the immersion in the detail of participants' talk and practices to examine some of the wider implications. We note the subtle and nuanced distancing from stereotypical decline attributes of ageing achieved by my participants, examine the potential for constructing positive older identities in everyday settings like Joellen's Hair Palace, and reflect on the methodological implications of the study.

I close this chapter with brief introductions to the women who took principal roles in this research: Joellen herself and her two members of staff; the nine clients I recruited, who ranged in age from 55 to 90 (mean age 74, median 75); and myself as researcher.

Participants

These participants feature large in the pages of this book. Below I provide a minimalistic summary of each of them to orientate the reader. Over the course of the following chapters more details will emerge, and to some extent their own voices will be heard (albeit strongly mediated by my own selection and interpretation). All names, of course, are pseudonyms, except that of the researcher. Form of names (title/surname vs. first name) reflects how they were addressed in the salon.

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Salon-Workers

Joellen, stylist and the owner of the salon, was 56 at the start of my fieldwork. Married with two sons and twelve grandchildren, she had owned the shop for around 30 years. She had not spent her entire career in the provinces, however: "After all, I did use to work in Bond Street," she said once.

Clare, 47 at the start of the research, was the mother of a teenage son. Her work involved shampooing clients' hair, 'passing up' rollers, perm rods, etc. to the stylist, preparing clients for the hood-dryers, taking payment, making appointments, and doing washing, cleaning and the running of errands.

Bethan was 24 when I first met her. She was the other stylist and the youngest of my participants. She had worked at Joellen's for around eight years, starting as a Saturday girl when still at school.

Clients

Mrs Farming (sometimes also called *Adele*) was 90 at the time I recorded her appointments and interview. She sometimes talked authoritatively about attire or appropriate ways of caring for skin, drawing on her long career as a beautician. She had been coming to Joellen's for around 30 years for a shampoo and set. Shortly before the start of the appointment recordings her husband of 60 years died. They had no children.

Mrs Pace was 89 at the time of the research. She was married with three children and grandchildren, and had once worked as a sales-woman in a small boutique. She had been having a weekly shampoo and set at Joellen's for some 20 years.

Lesley, single and relatively-recently moved to the area, had worked in the City as a young woman, and later as a catering secretary for a club. She was 83 at the time of the study, and she too came for a weekly shampoo and set.

Mrs Farthing celebrated her 81st birthday just before I interviewed her at the end of the appointment recordings. She had a cut and blow dry every six weeks or so, sometimes booking an additional appointment for a wash and blow dry for special occasions and colouring her own hair at home. Married with no children, she had had a varied career in government and professional firms, and had been coming to Joellen's for around ten years.

Violet was just short of 76. She had been coming to Joellen every four weeks for some ten to twelve years for a cut and had her hair highlighted every four to six months. She had worked for many years in local government and was now retired. She was widowed with two children and grandchildren.

Mrs France, 68 and widowed, had like *Mrs Farming* been coming to Joellen's for around 30 years. She had a cut and blow dry every five weeks and coloured her hair (sporadically) at home. Officially retired, she continued to work on a small-holding and lived with her daughter and granddaughter.

Mrs Sargent, widowed and re-married, was 67, and had once worked in banking. She had been coming to Joellen's for about eight years and like *Mrs France*, she had a regular cut and blow dry but attended slightly more frequently, every four weeks. She also coloured her own hair.

Jessica was 61, widowed, and just entering retirement from her most recent career as market researcher. She too had been coming to Joellen's for around seven to eight years. She had a cut and colour but was irregular in her attendance, with as much as six months between appointments.

Joanna, aged 55, married with three grown-up children and two grandchildren, was the only one of my participants to be unequivocally still in paid employment, in a local commercial services provider, at the time of the research. Like *Lesley*, she was a relative newcomer to the area. She came every seven to eight weeks for a cut and colour.

Researcher

Rachel turned 50 during the course of the research and is married and working. She started going to Joellen's as a client for a cut and colour upon commencing research in the site. This led to much more frequent hair appointments: from every four to six months (like *Jessica*) to every seven to eight weeks (like *Joanna*).

Notes

- 1 Chapter 4 is adapted and extended from *Journal of Aging Studies*, 46, Heinrichsmeier R. 'Tired, but not (only) because of age: An interactional sociolinguistic study of participants' variable stances towards older-age categorial explanations in everyday hair-salon talk', pp. 45–57 © Elsevier 2018.
- 1 Chapter 6 is adapted and extended from: Heinrichsmeier R. (2018) 'So long as there's hair there still': displaying lack of interest as a practice for negotiating social norms of appearance for older women. *Ageing and Society* 39: 1360–1386 © Cambridge University Press 2018.

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