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Language Variation According to Age: Football Talk

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Abstract

There are not many sociolinguistics studies in Malaysia that focused on age as a factor in language variations. To add to the literature in sociolinguistics field, this study will compare and discuss the language use between two age groups of university students by looking at the similar and different linguistic features. The respondents were three male students aged 19 years old and three male students aged 25 years old who were studying in the same institution. The instrument was a set of questions that was used to interview the respondents on a topic which they favoured the most, football. The interviews were then transcribed and analyzed for the emerging patterns. It was found that the younger students made more grammatical errors and included more fillers than the older ones. Other than that, the juniors made more repetitions of words compared to the seniors who made more repetitions of phrases. In term of vocabulary, both groups used a lot of adjectives and registers in their speeches at almost the same frequency. The juniors, however, tend to use swear word in their speeches compared to the seniors who did not use swear word at all. It can be concluded from the findings that junior students committed more errors than senior students as there were differences in terms of grammatical errors, fillers and repetition made by the two different age groups.

Keywords: Language Variation, Age, Linguistic Features, Speech

Introduction

In the study of language and age, one of the primary concerns is how age affects the ways in which people use language. Around the world, it is evident that language varies much according to age besides gender and ethnicity. Holmes (2008) stated in her view the features of people's speech which vary at different ages. It is the sociolinguists' general consensus that not only pitch, but vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar can also differentiate age groups. Age-graded pattern or slang, another area of vocabulary, can reflect a person's age as it signals membership

of a particular group. It is viewed that when people belong to the same chronological age group, they often speak similarly. As there are many different age groups in a community, an individual may use different linguistic features with a range of other speakers.

Nevertheless, Eckert (1997) proposes to conduct studies away from chronological age and "towards the life experiences that give age meaning" (p. 167).

Sociolinguists in Malaysia, to a lesser extent, have focused on age as a social factor in language variation. How does language vary according to age in Malaysia then? Looking at age as "life experiences" instead of chronological age, are there differences in the speech productions between the group that has experienced the role of a teacher and the group which has not? How are they different in terms of grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary choice, use of taboo words and others? Can we observe the same patterns across this type of age? It is indeed of great concern to look into the problem thus adding more literature in the sociolinguistic field. It is imperative to describe such similarities or differences and the effects of age on the language of speaker's group. Therefore, by examining the language used by the aforementioned groups, the similarities and differences in their language in the chosen context can be further investigated.

The purpose of study is to explore the language use between two different age groups, namely the juniors (has not experienced the role of a teacher) and the seniors (has experienced the role of a teacher) from the same background. To give clearer view, the study investigated on the language used by junior group and senior group from TESL programme in Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA Malaysia. This study looked into the similar and different linguistic features of language used by both focus groups. The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To determine the similar linguistic features in the language used by the different age groups.
2. To identify the different linguistic features in the language used by the different groups.

Literature Review
In sociolinguistic studies, there are many terms used by researchers to describe age. According to Duszak and Okulska (2011), "people have "age", measured in years of their lifetimes or chronology of birth," (p. 3). Chambers (1995) explains the two indicators of age which are physical and cultural indicators. There are five physical indicators of age: childhood, adolescence, early/young adulthood, middle age, and old age. The physical indicators of age describe the different stages of life that humans go through. Chambers (1995) explains that "childhood is marked by superficial androgyny with boys and girls similar in height, weight, musculature, and other physical characteristics", adolescence is "when the most visible sex differences emerge'', early adulthood can be depicted as "the idealized 25-year-old – wrinkle-free, clear-eyed, slim-waisted – [which] is held up as a paragon by the clothing, dietary and cosmetics industries", middle age "brings wrinkling skin, weight re-apportionments in chest and abdomen, greying hair and, for men, receding hairlines", and old age "consummates the gradations begun in middle age...and carries additional markers of its own: decreasing size partly from stooped skeletal

features and partly from metabolic reversal (catabolism), receding gums making people "long in the tooth", and slowing of gait, coordination and reflexes" (p.147-

148). Eckert (1997) views these five indicators of age described by Chambers (1995) as "general life stages".

Clothing, activities, and attitudes are the cultural indicators which describe the age-graded elements belong to certain age groups (Chambers, 1995). "Certain attire characteristic" represents "certain age groups in successive generations". In terms of activities, Chambers (1995) provides examples such as "skipping for girls, quilting or lace-making for middle-aged and older woman in rural settings, recreational ice hockey for young adults in Canada and recreational non-contact ice hockey for middle-aged men, and lobby-sitting at the shopping mall in the mornings for older men" (p.148). As for attitudes, he explains the stereotypes that people "become more conservative as they grow older" and "older people are thought to be less flexible and less tolerant than young people" (p.149). Thus, examining these 3 factors can help us to estimate the age of a person.

People can also be classified into two types of cohorts: etic approach group and emic approach group (Eckert, 1997). In etic approach group, people are classified "in arbitrarily determined but equal age spans such as decades" while in emic approach group, people are classified "according to some shared experience of time" which "can be related to life stage or to history" (p.155). Chambers (1995) also mentions in his book the two linguistic indicators which are progressive creakiness in voice quality and pitch. The former is "the result of changes in muscle tone" which "in advance old age, when the speech rate slows, the voice quality often becomes tremulous" (p. 149-150). On the other hand, pitch is "produced by the rate of vibration of the vocal cords, measured in cycles per second or Herz (Hz)" (p. 150).

Sociolinguistic Studies on Age

Age-related studies in sociolinguistic field are usually related to language change which can be conducted according to apparent time or real time (Chambers, 1995; Eckert, 1997; Llamas, Mullany, & Stockwell, 2007; Murphy, 2010; Duszak & Okulska, 2011). Bowie (2011) states "the relationship between aging and sociolinguistic variation has not often been studied directly" (p. 29). Nevertheless, "a number of studies have been conducted that test the apparent time construct, and this must deal indirectly with issues of aging and variation, due to the nature of the topic" (Bowie, 2011, p. 29).

According to Llamas, Mullany, & Stockwell (2007), apparent-time studies are "a technique used to access language change by comparing the speech of younger speakers and older speakers within the same speech community at the same time" (p. 206) while real-time studies are "sociolinguistic investigations often of a longitudinal nature which follow real change over time" (p. 227). Romaine (2000) describes several studies that are age-related in her book. For example, a sociolinguistic research done in Sweden found that "the adult [speech] pattern also appears in the two younger age groups" and "the youngest speakers between the ages of 7 and 16 use more

standard forms than the young adults between the ages of 16 and 20" (p. 82). She also describes a study done in the Swiss village of Charmey in 1905

> The middle-aged generation of speakers fluctuated with respect to the use of both old and new norms as exemplified in the speech of the older and younger generations respectively. Another investigation some twenty-five years later demonstrated that the variant used by the younger generation had established itself as a new norm (p. 151).

Previous research has shown that people of different ages use language differently befitting their age group. According to Holmes (1992), adolescence is when the usage of a language feature peaks if the linguistic feature is different from what is being used in the community's standard language. This is because adolescence is a time when the peer pressure to not act like the norm is the greatest (Holmes, 1992). It was also found that the usage of standard variations of language increases between the ages of 30 and 55 (Tagliamonte, 2012).

Issues on Using Age as a Variable in Study
Besides the issue mentioned in the previous section which is "the relationship between aging and sociolinguistic variation has not often been studied directly" (Bowie, 2011, p. 29), there are another issues regarding the use of age as a variable in study. Andrew (2012), Murphy (2010) and Llamas (2007) are in agreement of the issue mentioned by Eckert (1997) which is the shortcomings of using chronological age in sociolinguistic studies. Andrew (2012) states Eckert (1997a, 1997b) was among the first to recognize this issue and "to explore alternatives for defining age categories and grouping age cohorts" (p. 40). "The age continuum is commonly divided into equal chunks with no particular attention to the relation between these chunks and the life stages that make age socially significant" (Eckert, 1997b, p.213, as cited in Andrew, 2012, p. 40). Eckert (1997) suggests sociolinguistic researchers to direct their focus "away from chronological age and towards the life experiences that give age meaning" (p. 167). In this study, the juniors have not gone through their teaching practicum and while the age difference with the seniors is only 5 years, the seniors have gone through teaching practicum. The practicum allows them to mingle with adults and experience life as a working adult.

Murphy (2010), on the other hand, explains the different types of age presented by Counts and Counts (1985):

> They define "functional age" as referring to changes in facility, for example, senses, as well as changes in appearance, activity, and bodily action. "Historical age", they state, refers to an individual's age as related to a specific event significant to the history of the society in which the individual lives. "Social age" refers to the rites of passage in a given society (p. 3).

Another issue brought up by Eckert (1997) is the middle-aged perspective in conducting research. "Sociolinguistic studies overwhelmingly embody a middle-aged point of view, yielding a more static treatment of middle-aged speech than of the speech of other age groups" (Eckert, 1997, p.

157). She further explains the issue: "studies of children focus on the process of socialization, studies of adolescents and young adults focus on learning adult roles, and studies

of the elderly focus on the loss of adult abilities" (p. 157). Thus, middle-aged life stage is the only one "seen as engaging in mature use, as "doing" language rather than learning or losing it".

Methodology
Samples and Sampling
This mini study implied the use of purposive sampling as it had been decided that the samples for the study would be involving TESL students. Six of them had been selected to participate in this study: three of them are 19 years old students from TESL undergraduate program in UiTM (juniors) and three of them are 24 years old students from TESL post-graduate program in UiTM (seniors). All six subjects are male students.

Data Gathering Instrument
This study was a qualitative research as interviews were carried out to obtain information from the subjects. A set of questions was prepared for the purpose and has been checked by an expert in sociolinguistics. It contains five questions that had been tailored to ask the subjects their opinion regarding the topic of football. The questions of the interview are as below:

1. What is your opinion on the English Premier League (EPL) this season?
2. Which team is your favorite team? Can you justify why?
3. Who do you think should be given the best player title in EPL this season?
4. Who do you think should be the best manager this season?
5. Which team do you think would be the most interesting team to watch during in the next UEFA European Championship (EURO)?

Data Collection and Data Analysis
Firstly, the permission to interview each respondent was sought. The respondents were also briefed about the purpose of the study, and how the data obtained would only be used for academic purposes and treated as confidential and anonymous. After the permission was granted, interviews were conducted face-to-face. With the permission from the respondents, the interviews were recorded and the conversation with each respondent was transcribed. The transcriptions were analyzed to look for the emergence of patterns in their speeches. Those emerging patterns are:

1. Grammatical errors
2. Fillers
3. Repetition
4. Vocabulary type

Data Analysis, Results and Discussions

The findings regarding language differences according to age are presented based on the emerging patterns found in the respondents' speeches. All are presented in tables and further described.

Grammatical Errors

Respondents (age)	19	24
Number of errors	15	2

Table 1 Frequency of grammatical errors

Throughout the interview, the respondents from the group of 19 years old have committed 18 grammatical errors. On the other hand, the respondents from the group of 24 years old have committed only two grammatical errors. The examples are as below:

"The person, who maintains formation, takes the ball, keep the ball, pass it well" (19 years old respondent)

Fillers

Respondents (age)	19	24
Number of errors	164	138

Table 2 Frequency of fillers

Table 2 shows the number of fillers made by all the respondents from both groups. During the interview, the respondents from the group of 19 years old have 164 fillers. On the other hand, the respondents from the group of 24 years old have 15 fillers fewer than the group of 19 years old. The examples are as below:

"Well..mm.. in my opinion, it has been. Mm..the most interesting season in the past five season…because…mm…you can see that season any team can beat any team" (19 years old respondent)

"Er… I think… yes I agree with er…..Qwe. Because it's very interesting season for me because as we all know Manchester united has been dominating BPL since many years ago. So many seasons ago. So er… it's good to… to see some changes" (24 years old respondent)

Repetition
In investigating the emergence of repetition in both groups, two types of repetitions were looked into. Throughout the interview, the repetition of a word and the repetition of a phrase were examined.

Respondents (age)	19	24
Repetition of word	7	11
Repetition of phrase	28	23

Table 3 Frequency of repetition of word and phrase

Table 3 shows the number of two types of repetition done by both groups. It is evident that the adolescent group made repetition of seven words meanwhile the young adult made repetition of 11 words. It indicates that young adult group made more repetitions of words compared to adolescent group. In contrast, the adolescent group made repetition of 28 phrases while the young adult group made repetition of 23 phrases only. It indicates that the adolescent group made more repetitions in terms of phrases compared to young adult group.

Respondents (age)	19	24
Repetition of word (frequency)	*Quite* (6) *Really* (2)	*Quite* (6) *Really* (4)
Repetition of phrase (frequency)	*You can see* (14) *I think* (5)	- *I think* (23)

Table 4 Frequency of most repeated words and phrases

Table 4 shows the frequency of the most repeated word and phrases for both groups. The word 'quite' is the word that was repeated the most by both groups with the frequency of six. Both groups also made repetition for the word of *'really'*. On the other hand, the most repeated phrase for both groups is different in which the adolescents made repetition of phrase *'you can see'* and *'I think'* but the young adult did not make any repetition of phrase *'you can see'*. However, the young adult group repeated the phrase *'I think'* more than the adolescent group did.

Vocabulary Type
There are three areas of vocabulary type scrutinized throughout the interview of the two different age groups. The three areas are the use of adjective, the use of register and the use of swear word.

The Use of Adjective

Respondents (age)	19	24
Frequency of usage	110	106

Table 5 Frequency of adjectives

Throughout the interview, the respondents from the group of 19 years old have used 110 adjectives in their speaking. Meanwhile, the respondents from the group 24 years old have used only 106 adjectives in their speaking. The examples are as below:

> *"You can see that even the <u>small</u> team can become a <u>big</u> threat to <u>bigger</u> team.."* (Speaker 2, 19 years old group)
> *"..can be considered as a <u>new</u> team among the <u>top</u> four in the BPL."* (Speaker 3, 24 years old group)

The Use of Register

Respondents (age)	19	24
Number of register	37	28

Table 6 Frequency of registers

Throughout the interview, the respondents from the group of 19 years old have used 37 registers in their speaking. Meanwhile, the respondents from the group 24 years old have used only 28 registers in their speaking. It indicates that the adolescent respondents used more registers compared to young adult respondents with a difference of nine registers. The examples are as below:

> *"..they were in the <u>middle table</u> of the <u>league</u> in the early <u>season</u>."* (Speaker 2, 19 years old group)
> *"..the way he controls the <u>midfield</u> position, the way he maintains the <u>attacks</u>, the way he <u>defends</u>.."* (Speaker 1, 24 years old group)

The Use of Swear Word

Respondents (age)	19	24
Number of swear word	1	0

Table 7 Frequency of swear word

Throughout the interview, the respondents from the group of 19 years old have used one swear word in their speaking. However, none of the respondents from the group 24 years old have used swear word in their speaking. The example is:

> *"it has been one <u>hell</u> over…"* (Speaker 1, 19 years old group)

Discussion

This study was focusing on language variation according to two age groups in apparent time. Several linguistic features for each group were compared to answer the research questions.

Grammatical Errors

It can be seen from the findings that speakers in junior group committed more grammatical errors compared to speakers in senior group. According to Eckert (1997):

> Age systems...serve to mark not only an individual's progress in the life trajectory, but the individual's progress in relation to societal norms. Age systems often involve sanctions to enforce age-appropriate behaviour; to enforce the normative timing of life events (such as the pressure on women to marry before a certain age), and life-stage or age-appropriate comportment.

A similar research finding was found in a previous study. It was found that older students make less grammatical errors than younger students. However, the type of errors that they make is still the same (Feltsen, 2009). Besides the number of errors, older and younger speakers were found to be using different grammatical variation.

In the case of this study, the senior group had experienced the role of a teacher or an educator when they underwent teaching practicum in Part 7 of their TESL degree and when they took teaching posts before pursuing their masters in TESL. They were aware of their speech production and tried to avoid grammatical errors. At this stage of life, they should be able to produce error-free utterances to suit their roles as educators. On the other hand, the junior group committed grammatical errors because they were less aware of their future roles as educators. Thus, they focused on getting the meanings delivered and the fluency of speech.

Fillers and Repetitions

In terms of fillers and repetitions, Bortfeld et al. (2001) describes what these disfluencies indicate:

> ...in certain circumstances, disfluencies can display metalinguistic information to listeners about a speaker's confidence (Brennan & Williams, 1995), inform listeners about a speaker's planning difficulties (Brennan & Schober, 2001; Schachter, Christenfeld, Ravina, & Bilous, 1991), or, possibly, serve as devices for coordinating conversational interaction (Brennan & Kipp, 1996; Maclay & Osgood, 1959; Shriberg, 1996; Wilkes -Gibbs, 1986).

From the findings of this study, the fillers obtained from the junior group'S speeches were higher than the senior group while the repetitions obtained from senior group were higher than the junior group. Thus, it can be concluded that both groups were similarly facing planning difficulties although the extent of the difficulties cannot be compared between the two groups.

Vocabulary Type

In terms of the vocabulary type, it can be seen that both junior and senior groups used a lot of adjectives in expressing their opinion and football registers. Both groups showed that they had broad knowledge in the football topic by applying football registers in their speech. However, there was one difference between these 2 groups which was a swearing word used by a speaker from the junior group. This finding is similar to what Barbieri (2008) found; younger language users tend to use more swear and slang words. They use a lot of markers of stance and are more emotionally involved than adults in their conversation. However, as only one speaker of this group uttered this swear word, we cannot generalized the findings to the other speakers of the same group. In another research, older speakers use more prepositional phrase while younger

speakers often use pronouns (Johannsen, Hovy, & Søgaard, 2015). This proves that the choice of words between older and younger speakers slightly differ from each other.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from the findings that there were differences in terms of grammatical errors between the junior and senior groups. Junior students committed more errors than senior students. However, for other features, there were no significant differences. Both groups used the features in quite the same numbers. The overall findings support Holmes (1992) that adolescence is the age when the usage of linguistic feature peaks. This study also attempted to investigate language variation according to age by defining age using "life experiences" as suggested by Eckert (1997) as they "give age meaning" instead of only focusing on chronological age. Bowie (2011) mentions "the relationship between aging and sociolinguistic variation has not often been studied directly" (p. 29); thus, this study tried to fill in this gap. Therefore, it is recommended that more studies are conducted in these two conditions: direct and defining age as "life experiences".

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