

Addressing Ageism in Linguistics

The language of young people has been the main focus of linguistic study. Here at Newcastle University, we found that the typical methods of studying language are not suited to the study of older speakers' language.



So, what is the problem?

In the field of language variation and change (the study of how people's speech changes between different groups), older speakers are typically neglected and thought of as lacking diversity in the way they talk.

This reinforces ageist notions that older speakers are always conservative in their speech, or that they are 'set in their ways', which limits further research into language variation.

We wanted to explore how older speakers' language use is just as varied and diverse as younger speakers'.

What did we do?

In 2020, we interviewed 16 speakers of Tyneside English who were all retired, over 70, and long-term residents of Tyneside. We asked them about their lives, work, and their experiences of ageism.

In these interviews, we looked at two different aspects of interviewees' speech.

1. Their choice between words like **who**, **that**, **which** and **what** in certain positions in sentences.

For example:

"I had a great grandfather,
who/that/which/what was born in Paris."

2. Their choice between **have**, **have got** and **got**.
- For example:

"I have / have got / got happy memories of school".

As well as analysing speakers' use of language, we were able to extract some valuable insights from these interviews about the speakers' first hand experiences with ageism and their opinions on the treatment of the older generation by other age groups.

What did we find?

We found that older speakers' choice of, for instance, **who** over **that**, **which** and **what**, and **have** over **have got** and **got** was not significantly influenced by their gender or the number of qualifications they had achieved over their lifetimes.

Although these factors were insignificant, this could indicate that when studying whether older adults' all speak the same or not, different factors may need to be taken into consideration, such as: their level of contact with younger people, the size of their social networks, and even how old they feel (as opposed to how old they actually are).

Why is this important?

Acknowledging the diversity of older speakers can help us to eradicate ageist stereotypes within the field of language variation and change.

This could be achieved by...

- asking the speakers what they themselves think about their age. For instance, how old do they see themselves as being *mentally*?
- Studying speakers' social life. For instance, what is their marital status? Do they live alone? Do they have a large social network? Is their social network diverse?

These are all important questions to consider in future language variation and change research.

Acknowledging older speakers as a group of diverse individuals allows for a better understanding of their language and how it changes while preventing the perpetuation of ageist stereotypes in linguistics.