Ageing and Cognitive Linguistics:

What naming practices can reveal about underlying cultural conceptualisations

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“The Cultural Model of Ageing in Australian English”
Structure of the talk

1. Introduction
2. Main hypotheses of research
3. Novel conceptual categories
4. Category extension
5. Novel metaphors
6. Conclusions
Ageing: a sensitive subject
Use of euphemisms
BUT: semantic perjoration
*Senile*: “belonging to old age”
Samuel Johnson’s dictionary: “a senile maturity of judgment”
“euphemistic treadmill” (Pinker 2002)

Introduction: An Old Age Revolution?

- Median age of Australian population: 33.4 years (June 1994) to 37.3 years (June 2014)
- 1994–2014: proportion of 65+ increased from 11.8% to 14.7%; 85+ from 1.0% to 1.9%
- Next 40 years: 65+ around 25%
Introduction: An Old Age Revolution?

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics
Introduction: An Old Age Revolution?

- Low fertility rates
- Medical breakthroughs
- Baby boomers

Kalache (2012), former Director of the WHO’s Health of the Elderly program: “Never before have we seen a cohort hitting the age of 65 who are so well informed, so wealthy and in such good health … [we] are … redefining what it means to age. We are witnessing the emergence of a ‘gerontolescence,’ a new period of transition” (emphasis added)

Main Hypotheses of Research

- Ageing: undergoing major **reconceptualization** in Australian English
- Best analysed within a cognitive/cultural linguistic framework of euphemistic (figurative) language
- Reconceptualization of ageing manifested in:
  1. the emergence of novel conceptual categories;
  2. category extension; and
  3. novel conceptual metaphors
Rowe and Kahn (1987): “successful ageing”

absence of physical and cognitive disabilities, social and productive engagement

emotional well-being and social and community involvement (e.g., Depp and Jeste 2009)

own respondents: both objective and subjective qualities are deemed significant: healthy, positive, happy, involved

successful ageing: at odds with negative outlook of old age


**Novel Conceptual Categories**

- **successful ageing**: subordinate-level category of ageing
- Ageing not a general process any longer that affects everybody similarly
- **COMPETITION** frame
  - *successful agers* vs. “losers” who “didn’t try hard enough” (Horin 2012)
- Less entrenched in AusE vs. *healthy ageing*
  - 1987–2014: yearly average frequency of 1.9 (first appearance in 1993)

American myth of success (Weiss 1969): every American has the right to “mold his own life” (p. 1)

self-improvement: originating in Puritan notion of calling (McGee 2005)

Australia: success as a less central schema?

healthy ageing: pro-active attitude to ageing via cause-for-effect metonymy

But less direct individual responsibility

Australian welfare state


older Australians vs. seniors (50+)


Media: higher token frequency of seniors between 1987–2014

But: average annual growth rate of seniors is 17% ⇔ older Australians 41%

Overgeneralization via metonymy: older Australians blurs entry age of “senior citizenship” by whole-for-part metonymy ⇒ ageing as a scale ⇒ category of “old Australians” included in more general and larger category of “older Australians”
Category extension

- scale open on both ends!
- no strict boundaries between middle agers and older Australians – latter increasingly similar to former
grey nomads: “someone who is 55 or older and is taking a long term camping trip around Australia”
Source: Google Images
Novel metaphors

- Benczes and Burridge (to appear, 2015): naming practices of aged care facilities in Melbourne, 1987 vs. 2013
- 2013 sample: greater degree of euphemistic usage by using wider array and larger proportion of appealing names
- 1987 sample: vast majority of facilities (82%) were nursing homes ⇒ evoked HOSPITAL frame
- 2013 sample: FAMILY frame ⇒ conceptualized facility as upper-class family home (Trinity Manor, Broughton Hall, Kew Gardens)
- VACATION frame ⇒ conceptualized facility as holiday resort (Edwards Lodge, Princeton View, Villa Franca; Casa Serena, Embracia)
- FAMILY frame: community and permanence ⇔ VACATION frame: individuality and transience

Conclusions

• Change taking place in conceptualization of ageing in Australian English
• Negative associations replaced by more positive concepts such as independence and personal fulfilment
• current expressions and “euphemisms” not further by-products of the euphemistic treadmill
• euphemistic usage $\Rightarrow$ increasingly orthophemistic (Allan and Burridge 2006)

Thank you!

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Source: Google Images