

‘Young at heart’: discourses of age identity in travel agency interaction

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines, through discourse analysis at a micro level, how age identities become interactionally constructed through talk. After a brief overview of the constructivist arguments, the focus is on a single-case interaction between an older client couple and three travel agency assistants. The various means by which age is made salient by the participants and the ensuing age identities that are created for and by the couple in particular are investigated. The images of the ‘elderly’ as portrayed in holiday brochures, providing one dimension of the context of this encounter and being significant in older travellers’ self-identity construction, are also looked at. It is argued that discourse analysis has a useful contribution to make in social gerontology in that it can illuminate the interactive processes through which ageing and old age can be defined.

KEY WORDS – age identity, discourse analysis, travel industry, images of older people.

Introduction: identity construction

The dichotomy between personal and social identity has been commonplace in writings about identity, and implies a paradox: we are individuals but we gain a sense of self only through social identifications. This echoes the view of Berger and Luckmann (1967: 194) that ‘identity is formed by social processes’ which are ‘determined by the social structure’; identity is ‘maintained, modified and even reshaped by social relations’. Van Langenhove and Harré (1993: 82–83) suggest that, although people are often aware of their social identity as being a consequence of what they say and do in social situations, they rarely realise the multiplicity of social identities that are constructed in the successful management of everyday life (*c.f.* Goffman 1959). Also, they

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argue that personal identity, to the extent that this is a stable phenomenon, is a product of discursive practices and entails a multiplicity, and at times contradictory forms, of biographical talk. The contradictions and multiplicities can usefully be studied through discourse analysis.

The premiss of discourse analytic work on identity is that discourse is a socially constitutive process:

Social constructivism is principally concerned with elucidating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world in which they live. (Gergen 1985*a*: 3–4)

The social constructionist orientation challenges the traditional view that what we take to be commonly held social categories can be identified through direct observation, or through objective ‘knowledge of the world’. Rather, it is suggested, the so-called objective criteria for identifying age, for example, are determined by cultural, historical and other contextual factors, and the terms we use to talk about such categories of the world are the ‘result of an active, cooperative enterprise of persons in relationships’ (Gergen, 1984*a*: 5). In other words they are ‘social artifacts’ (Gergen 1985*a*; Gergen 1985*b*), rather than given or natural. In a social constructivist analysis, people’s concept of selfhood, including aspects of age (Gubrium *et al.* 1994), is looked at in the realm of social and face-to-face discourse, and it is here, it is argued, that people’s identities and selves are constructed. It is ‘the flow of continuous communicative interaction between human beings’ that is the central focus of concern and interest (Shotter 1993: 10; Shotter and Gergen 1989).

In this paper, age identity as part of an individual’s personal identity is viewed as constructed through talk. The participants’ conversational actions, offered at a particular time and in a particular context, can be shown to constitute specific situationally-bound age identities for them. An important aspect of this identity construction is, first, its negotiative nature (see, *e.g.* Coupland *et al.* 1991*b*; Coupland and Coupland 1994); the interactants typically engage in a negotiation of (age) identity. It can be argued, furthermore, that ‘ageing itself is open to being defined interactionally’ (Coupland 1991: 101) and it is a sociolinguistic perspective on ageing that can illuminate such interactive processes (see the collection of papers in a special issue of *Ageing and Society* 1991, Volume 11/2, Coupland *et al.* 1991*d*).

Secondly, the participants engage, through discourse, in identification work, locating themselves or their speaking partner in a particular (age salient) role or as a participant in some network of people (Hadden

and Lester 1978). This may also be done through differentiating the self or other as *not* belonging to a specific group. There are discursive means, then, by which people may selectively display identifying information at the micro level of conversation (Coupland and Nussbaum 1993: xxiii).

Age marking, or the making of age salient in talk, can be done in various ways. Coupland *et al.* (1991 *b*) found that in their corpus of face-to-face peer elderly and young-elderly conversations, age marking fell within two broad types: those which constitute 'age categorisation' and those which have been termed 'temporal framing processes'. Age categorisation by or for a speaker can happen in various ways, such as through a disclosure of chronological age, generational/family role or other age-related role reference. The second type of age marking takes place through discursive framing, as when an older speaker talks about the past and thus identifies him/herself temporally. In the following analyses, I examine such age marking processes in the talk of travel agency assistants and an older client couple. A close analysis of such talk is arguably very important for social gerontology; it can be shown how much of our experience of age lies within the realm of discourse.

Age-identity in this encounter (as elsewhere) is realised through alignments with and dissociations from a particular age cohort group, by a variety of explicit and implicit means. In other words, subject positions (*c.f.* Fairclough 1989; Harré and van Langenhove 1991; van Langenhove and Harré 1993) are adopted through participants taking up in-group or out-group positions, or through these being ascribed by one participant to another. In addition, humour in this interaction is intrinsically linked with ageing, and I will examine it from the perspective of age identity construction.

Ageing and leisure

The travel agency setting is potentially a rich site for identity work. There are, for example, transactionally salient reasons for older travellers/consumers to disclose age. The tourism and leisure industry offers holidays, usually between November and April, specifically catering for people who do not have a yearly schedule dictated by work, school or college – often advertised as 'holidays for the over fifty-fives'. These holidays are typically coach tours and package tours to popular holiday destinations. Many of the main tour operators now offer such

holidays and their brochures are available in travel agencies, alongside other holiday brochures. An examination of these brochures can be revealing in terms of the images that are portrayed. An underlying message, the very activity of holiday-making that is being sold, views life over 55 as a time of leisure and enjoyment (see Bernard and Phillipson 1995). This, consequently, promotes a distinctive definition of retirement as an age of opportunities and new discoveries, an age to be enjoyed. The holidays may be seen as part of new norms of age-related behaviour in Western societies, more specifically as examples of the ideology of 'positive ageing' (Tinker 1992; Featherstone and Hepworth 1995).

To explore one of the dimensions of the context in which face-to-face talk in a travel agency proceeds, I offer a few comments on the over fifty-fives' holiday brochures. From an informal survey¹, the cover pictures, as well as the photographs inside these brochures, typically portray 'young-old' people, in their 50s and 60s, rather than people older than this. The overall image of the brochures is lively; the holidays appear to be aimed at healthy and active travellers who seek the company of other people of a similar age who enjoy group activities. The very names of such holidays – 'Young at Heart', 'Golden Times', 'Golden Circle' – make metaphoric reference to age, and in the case of 'Young at Heart', to those who 'feel young'. Although the name may aim to counteract the negative stereotypical image of passive elderly people, the root metaphor (of young at heart) seems to equate being active with being young. Furthermore, as Hockey and James (1993: 73) point out, this phrase invokes parallels between the life experiences of elderly people and children.

Travel companies could argue that the images in these brochures are anti-ageist in that the 55-plus people are portrayed very much like other holiday makers in other travel brochures: active, fun-loving, sun-seeking, and pictured by the pool, sightseeing or enjoying local cuisine. However, at the same time, the elderly travellers are considered as a somewhat homogeneous group with similar interests, for example ballroom and tea dancing seem to be major attractions. Such uniform assumptions about the interests of people of a particular age are arguably ageist (*c.f.* Coupland *et al.* 1991 *c*, and in particular Coupland and Coupland 1993).

Another feature of the over 55's holidays, as explained in the brochures, is that the tour company provides the travellers with the services of hosts:

Wherever you decide to stay, you'll find our qualified hosts on hand to make your holiday a special one. Throughout your holiday they'll be

arranging a wide range of activities to keep you happily occupied and entertained, including the ever-popular sequence dancing. (*Sunworld, Golden Circle* 1994–1995: 2)

Golden Circle Hosts and Hostesses are the people whose job and vocation it is to make your holiday a happy one. Sometimes retired couples themselves, they are the kind of people who know how to get the best out of a holiday ... they are experts at organising activities to keep you occupied and entertained all day and every day. (1994–95: 4)

The hosts are also said to provide assistance for single travellers to get to know other people:

Many of our holidaymakers travel alone but find they're not alone very long. Our hosts will make the introductions and make sure you feel at home. (1994–95: 7)

What emerges from an examination of the travel brochures and the services offered is an underlying assumption that the travellers wish to be looked after by the hosts, need to be introduced to other guests and seek to have their activities organised for them. An identity of dependency on other (sometimes younger) people is created. Also, the activities available, although plentiful, seem to be entirely group activities. An overwhelming emphasis and an assumed purpose for the holiday is, then, to be with other people, to meet new people and to have the itinerary organised by other people.

Chaney suggests that the authors of the over fifty-fives' holiday brochures are not just describing places and organisations, 'they are also formulating ways in which people can understand themselves as members of an age-based social category' (1995: 209). This is clearly a self-identity construction in that, through identifying with the images of these brochures, people may engage in self-stereotyping: 'those who are ageing learn how and what it is they are to be and become' (1995: 217). Chaney identifies three prominent themes in the brochures. First, a presupposition of insecurity in the lives of people in this age group is realised through emphases on convenience of travel (through various local pick-up points, for example) and security (through assurances on safety, experience, expertise, size of the operating company, guarantees and insurance) (1995: 217). Second, there is a positive emphasis on communalism – the company of one's peers is an appropriate lifestyle – and the desirability (beyond financial gains) of clients booking in groups (1995: 218). Third, through what Chaney terms ritualisation, the brochures reiterate a sense of continuity, for example by the theme of repeat bookings. In this way, aspects of self-identity in an older individual that might have been threatened by change, are grounded

in ritual associations of what sort of occasion the holiday is going to be (1995: 219). I shall return to the brochures as they feature in the interaction discussed below.

Method, setting and participants

The case-study I focus on is part of a corpus of 144 audio-recorded interactions between 10 travel agency assistants (eight female and two male) and 170 clients (99 female and 71 male), gathered in seven different travel agencies around the Cardiff (South Wales, UK) area. 44 of the clients (26 per cent) were over 60 years old. The audio-recordings were supplemented by participant observation with the researcher remaining a 'complete observer' (see, for example, Jorgensen 1989: 55; Glesne and Peshkin 1992: 40). I selected this particular interaction for a detailed case-study because it includes lengthy sequences of age-salient talk and also otherwise provides rich data on age-identity.

The setting is a privately-owned travel agency that serves a community about five miles out of the centre of Cardiff. It is the only travel agency in this district and deals with all kinds of travel, including coach tours and cruises as well as the more usual package holidays. There are four members of staff in the travel agency dealing with clients: Mary, 40 years, Liz, 35, Emma, 25 and Alun, 24 years². The assistant, Alun, the first to serve the clients in this encounter, has been working in a travel agency for seven years. The manager of the branch, Mary, who has worked in the field for about 20 years, as well as Emma, who has six years' experience, also contribute substantially to the interaction.

I spent seven days in this travel agency observing the staff and recording Alun and Emma. During recordings, a small microphone was concealed on the assistant's desk. I observed and took notes of each interaction from a distance and operated the tape-recorder myself. The clients were informed of the recording as they were leaving the travel agency and their consent for the (anonymised) recording to be used for research purposes was sought. I also asked the clients a few demographic questions, including their age category, as well as how well they knew the assistant(s) they had been dealing with. Mr and Mrs Morgan reported their membership of the age category 71–75 years and having used the travel agency for a holiday booking a couple of times before, in fact they had booked a holiday with this travel agency

the previous month and had dealt with both Alun and Mary. They said they knew the staff ‘a little’. Mrs Morgan is a retired post-office clerk and Mr Morgan a retired stonemason. They live locally. This encounter took place around midday on a sunny Thursday in late July and lasted for 25 minutes. After the recording period, I also interviewed all staff about various aspects of their work as travel agents, and obtained information about their age and experience.

A single-case approach allows me to focus on discursive processes which may be generalisable, even though the interactive sequencing is, of course, unique to this particular encounter. The processes of age-identification and negotiation in this interaction are typical in these data, although, as I indicated above, they are at times more extensive than is the case in some other interactions. But it is at the micro-level sequencing of discourse that age identity and identification work is done, and, hence, is amenable to analysis.

Age identity construction

Very early in the interaction, after initial greetings and after the clients have specified the time of year they wish to travel, Mrs Morgan discloses age:

Extract 1³

- 18 Mrs Morgan: (breathes) now (1.0) um (2.0) you (1.0)
 19 you know we’re in our seventies and we’d
 20 like you to be with people
 21 Alun: fine
 22 Mrs Morgan: er there’s there’s no um (.) s a bit far
 23 to go by coach isn’t it to t Portugal?
 (.)
 24 Alun: it is er let me show you something ((let
 25 me))
 (Alun gives client a brochure)
 (2.0)
 26 Mrs Morgan: lovely smashing ((thanks)) very good
 (3.0)
 27 Alun: if you went (.) October you see this is =
 []
 28 Mrs Morgan: yeah
 29 Alun: = when the (1.5) over fifties brochures
 30 come in you see =
 31 Mrs Morgan: = yeah

- 32 Alun: so they (.) ((like here)) you know they
 33 they give um (1.0) special deals =
 34 Mrs Morgan: = yeah that's that's what I'm looking for

Mrs Morgan engages in age disclosure in line 19. That this is accompanied by pauses, filled pauses (*um, you know*) and hesitation may be an indication of her having trouble formulating it. Disclosure of chronological age (DCA) is of course a very explicit means of self-identifying oneself as belonging to a particular age group, and it is a group-formulation (*in our 70s*) that she produces. As the couple entered the agency, it was clear to us all that they were people who were of that age and so it was no surprise when Mrs Morgan said they were in their 70s. Nevertheless she seemed to have decided that age was important and explicitly sets the agenda for an intergenerational encounter.

Disclosure of chronological age has often been found to be formulaic (Coupland *et al.* 1991*a*), using either stative formats – ‘I am x years’ – or progressive formats, which can be either prospective – ‘I’m going on x years’ – or retrospective – ‘I was x years in May’ (1991*a*: 135). This way of putting it would suggest a difficulty here, perhaps not in formulating DCA itself, but in producing the age disclosure specifically as an account for wanting to be with people, and simultaneously for the type of holiday that is sought. Already, then, we can see that the social marking of age has constrained the nature of the business that remains to be transacted.

Later in the encounter, age categorisation is done jointly with the assistant and the clients. Mary, the manager of the agency, who was not a participant in the earlier age-disclosing sequence, has now joined the conversation:

Extract 2

- 275 Mrs Morgan: well er (.) what we want we as I said
 []
 276 Alun: mm
 277 Mrs Morgan: we'd like to go to Portugal we only want
 278 to go for seven days
 279 Mary: yes
 280 Mrs Morgan: we want to go with people (.) and we
 []
 281 Mary: do you
 282 want something like a Young at Heart
 283 type of holiday?
 []
 284 Alun: yes yes
 285 Mary: something like that

- 286 Mrs Morgan: []
 (very hesitantly) well uh
 (1.0)
- 287 Mary: is do you wan do you want to be
 288 categorised (.) as one of (.) one of =
 []
- 289 Mrs Morgan: (laughs)
 290 Mary: = the over fifty fives or
 []
- 291 Mrs Morgan: oh yeah
 []
- 292 Mr Morgan: yeah
 293 Mrs Morgan: we're over one definitely over the fifty
 294 fives (laughs)
- 295 Mr Morgan: []
 (laughs)
- 296 Mary: []
 (laughs) cos that's what they're they
 []
- 297 Mrs Morgan: yeah
 298 our own age group then you know yes yeah
 []
- 299 Emma: yeah not eighteen
 300 thirty
 []
- 301 Mr Morgan: thirty two =
 302 Mrs Morgan: = oh no no no no (laughs)
 []
- 303 Emma: you're sure?
 304 Mrs Morgan: positive (laughs)

This time Mrs Morgan's specification about a group holiday triggers Mary to suggest a particular type of holiday, aimed at older travellers. It is Alun who answers Mary's question with an affirmative (line 284), whereas Mrs Morgan herself hesitates (line 286) – 'well uh' is said in a level tone, at a slow speed. Mary then proceeds to indirectly elicit age disclosure from the clients in a way that looks on the surface to be particularly face threatening – threatening the clients' negative face (lines 287–288, 290). I borrow this notion from Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, in which individuals' public self image of 'face' (*c.f.* Goffman 1967; 1972) has two components. Negative face is defined as one's wish not to be imposed upon by other people, whereas positive face is the wish that one's wants are desirable to others. Negative face is, then, intrinsically linked to freedom of action and respect; positive face to solidarity and likemindedness. Conversation-*alists*, Brown and Levinson (1987) suggest, use varying politeness

strategies in order to avoid face threat and these strategies range from very direct ‘on record’ ones to those, for example, which mitigate the threat through indirectness and hedging (*i.e.* ‘off record’ strategies).

Mary’s formulation of her question *do you want to be categorised (. . .) as one of . . . the over fifty fives?* is interesting. Instead of asking ‘are you over 55?’ in a ‘bald-on-record’ manner in the most direct possible way (Brown and Levinson, 1987), she chooses to adopt a more indirect format. This reflects, first, her wish to redress the face threat of such a personal question. Secondly, it focuses on the active role of the clients in the age categorisation process: they seem to be given some choice in the matter. This links up with the notion of chronological versus contextual age. Contextual age ‘represents a person’s subjective experience of his/her life position and is measured in terms of health, economic, social, and mobility dimensions’ (Giles *et al.* 1992: 287). In Western societies, if an incongruence between these two notions of age is expressed, it is often more desirable for contextual age to be lagging behind chronological age. So, in this context, although it is clear for the participants (for example on the basis of appearance) that Mr and Mrs Morgan are chronologically over 55 years, they are given the choice to comment on or to self-construct their contextual age. However, the sequence takes place in an inherently humorous framework, accompanied by laughter, and may be ironic. In the question beginning on line 287 Mary may intend to be ironical, and what she says may be interpreted as such by others. The irony would be based on the apparent choice that the clients are offered for their (self) categorisation as over 55. I would suggest that the participants are all well aware that the couple really have no choice in this, and therefore Mary’s question is indeed ironical. Mrs Morgan starts to laugh before Mary’s turn in line 288 finishes. This establishes her alignment with the *over 55* age group.

The conversation then shows alignments and shifts of alignment regarding the age cohort groups with which the interactants wish to identify. Mr and Mrs Morgan express the fact that they are over 55, accompanied by laughter and including humour (lines 291–295 and 301). Mrs Morgan in particular creates an ambiguously specified in-group identity which Emma confirms by reference to the ages of potential clients who would definitely be of an out-group, which is in fact her own cohort group, 18–30 (lines 299–300 and 303). This is done through a humorous question, or age-tease, with reference to ‘Eighteen Thirty holidays’. Age-teases like these can be seen, to an extent, as rendering being old as laughable, and Mrs Morgan’s response, as laughter (line 304), seems the only type available to her. She is aligning

with the assistants in treating the tease as humorous, but at the same time she is also sharing the ideological representation of ageing in this way.

Extract 3

(following immediately Extract 2)

- 305 Mary: I can go I can go on that Young at Hea
 306 Young at Heart!
- 307 Mrs Morgan: yeah
- 308 Mary: they take anybody over thirty six
- 309 Emma: I went on a holiday with my =
 [
 310 Mary: as long as you're accompanied by
 311 somebody over fifty five (laughs)
 312 Alun: (slight laugh)
- 313 Emma: = grandparents and there was (.) two
 314 couples my age (.) myself and my
 315 grandparents we all went to
 316 Spain (1.0) and the one evening my
 317 grandfather and the two lads went out
 318 for a drink be back you know (.) in an
 319 hour or so half past midnight I'm
 320 sitting with the two girlfriends and my
 321 grandmother in the foyer (.) my
 322 grandfather had led them astray
 323 completely
- 324 Mrs Morgan: (laughs)
 [
 325 Emma: it was all my grandfather
 326 Mary: (laughs)
- 327 Mrs Morgan: it was his fault
 [
 328 Alun: (laughs)
 [
 329 Emma: ((they never)) went out with him the
 330 rest of the holiday he's the worst
 331 honestly you can take any sort of young
 332 couples away my grandfather'll be the
 333 worst (.) out dancing loves it
- 334 Mrs Morgan: good for him!
- 335 Mr Morgan: mm
- 336 Emma: I've seen better behaved people on Club
 337 Eighteen Thirty
- 338 Mrs Morgan: (laughs at length)
 [
 339 Mr Morgan: (laughs at length)
 [

340 Alun: (laughs)
 341 Mrs Morgan: (laughs) er good for him though er we we
 342 thought that perhaps there might be
 343 something um (.) a little bit reasonable
 344 you know to er we thought if we went
 345 October

The ascription of participants into age groups continues in this extract. Mary first aligns herself with the clients by stating that she could potentially join them on an over 55's holiday (lines 305–306 and 308), thus signalling solidarity. But she then distances herself by specifying that she would need to be accompanied by someone in the clients' age group (lines 310–311). She is concurrently distancing herself from Emma's age group as well by positioning herself among people over the age of 36.

Mary's alignment in line 308 triggers Emma to disclose that she has travelled with her grandparents, which is expanded into a short narrative about this holiday (309; 313–323; 325; 329–333; 336–337). This narrative functions, first, to express positive politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987) by 'coming closer' to clients; although Emma is an out-group member in terms of age, she can be seen as an in-group member in terms of being a fellow traveller, who would visit the same resort as the clients. Secondly, it is an expression of positive politeness in that it claims and presupposes common attitudes, seen to be shared by the interactants, in this case about what is expected and what is not expected behaviour of elderly travellers (lines 316–341). The humour of the narrative is based on what Harwood and Giles (1992: 421) call 'violation of expectations' in their typology of age-related loci of humour.

Emma's account reflects ageist and age stereotyping attitudes about what can and what cannot be taken as normative behaviour at a particular age; in other words, is concerned with age-appropriate behaviour, 'acting one's age' (Coupland and Nussbaum 1993). Emma can be seen to be describing an exception (violation of expectation) of the elderly stereotype, which in turn confirms the stereotype of elderly people as not drinking, dancing, and having a good time.

The age-category labels used by Emma in her narrative are interesting. Her grandfather is said to have gone out with *the two lads* (line 317). *Lads* clearly distinguishes the younger members of the threesome from the older member. Similarly, Emma says she was *sitting with the two girlfriends and my grandmother*, as opposed to something like 'the other three women'. The labelling that she uses again simultaneously groups the three younger females and dissociates them

from the one older female; thus, generationally-salient role identities are created for Emma's various travelling companions. Also, Emma's grandfather is said to be *the worst* (lines 330 and 333), in that he led the lads astray. This behaviour is contrasted with *better behaved people on Club Eighteen Thirty* (336–337), in other words considerably younger people. The news-worthiness of Emma's grandfather's behaviour is precisely his perceived bad behaviour, which is used to make a good story. The entertainment value of the story relies on the participants' shared assumption that the grandfather's behaviour is uncharacteristic of people of this age (the Morgans' age) and on his apparent ability to outdo Club Eighteen Thirty holidaymakers as regards dancing and going out. In this way the story is congratulatory, reflecting well upon his physical and mental state.

Mrs Morgan's expression *good for him* in line 334 is a response to Emma's characterisation of her grandfather's behaviour. She repeats it on line 341, but here it functions as a 'boundarying off' (Jefferson 1988), or closing of this entertaining, relationally oriented sequence. There is a transition at this point to the business at hand, accompanied by hesitation before she introduces a new topic in line 341–342 onwards. Alun does not actively take part in this sequence or age disclosure, although his appearance (from my observation) clearly positions him in an age-wise out-group in relation to the clients.

Active contrasting of the behaviour of people of different ages continues, again in a humorous frame, but now considering the assistants' ages. In the next extract, the participants position themselves in an age-salient manner, with the focus being on Emma's and Mary's ages:

Extract 4

- 249 Mr Morgan: (to Emma) you're all right with the men
 250 aren't you ((the way)) I see you
 251 running around you (laughs at length)
 [
- 252 Mrs Morgan: (laughs at length)
 253 Mary: ((3 syllables as long as they book)) oh
 254 I don't mind how many men er I don't =
 []
- 255 Mr Morgan: ((tiring)) yourself now (laughs)
 256 Mary: = mind though now how many men you get in
 257 here as long as they book ((I let you
 258 have 3 syllables))
 [

- 259 Mrs Morgan: no that's right you're good for
 260 business (laughs)
 261 Mary: that's that's why we employed her
 262 Emma: (slight laugh) (dramatically) I have my
 263 uses not many but I'm worth it
 [
- 264 Mary: ((as for me)) I'm
 265 long past my sell by date ((aren't I))
 266 (laughs)
 267 Mr Morgan: (surprised laugh)
 268 Mrs Morgan: ah no! (laughs)
 269 Mary: (laughs) that's our excuse isn't it?
 270 (.) I said you can bring the men in er
 271 Emma: oh my goodness gracious me!
 272 Mary: I can do the hoovering (laughs)

Emma's age and gender-related identity is expanded more in this extract. The topic of Emma's 'friendly' relationship with male clients is initiated by Mr Morgan in lines 249–251, a turn which can be seen as teasing. Emma has just been serving a young male client who is her acquaintance. Mary is ironic in 'allowing' Emma to bring in male clients. Mrs Morgan offers an agreement token to Mary in lines 259–260 and, simultaneously, positive politeness to Emma in that her utterance is complimentary. Emma's response to a potentially very face-threatening (negative and positive) *that's why we employed her* (261), here used as a joke, is humorously self-handicapping: *I have my uses not many but I'm worth it*.

Mary continues in a humorous frame. She is contrasting and distancing herself from Emma in line 264–265. She damages her own positive face by identifying herself as not only older than Emma but also as less attractive to men because of her age. This is what can be seen as being implied by her metaphorical expression *I'm long past my sell by date*. This turn is potentially very face threatening to Mrs Morgan, and in fact she denies Mary's evaluation in line 268. This sequence can be seen as expressive of the values attached to youth, especially in relation to looks, in Western culture (*e.g.* Featherstone and Hepworth 1989; 1990). What is significant here also is that Mrs Morgan would not be able to use the phrase *I'm past my sell by date*, or it would, at least, carry quite different implications, whereas Mary feels young enough to be able to use it in a way that would appear ironic.

Mary further contrasts her age identity with that of Emma's within a framework of division of office duties (lines 270 and 272): Emma brings in clients, more specifically men, while she does the hoovering. Within a matter of turns, Mary's identity in terms of status has shifted

from someone who employed Emma (line 261) to that of the office cleaner. It is only because of Mary's greater status and position of power that she is able to engage in this particular form of apparent self-denigration within role and age identity construction, and also maybe because she does not feel old and ugly. It can be suggested that this extract again displays ageist attitudes and hence is potentially damaging to travel agency business.

This and the previous extract make use of humour. Humour has been said to function as a useful indication of societal attitudes, including attitudes towards ageing (Davies 1977). Studies on ageing and humour have analysed representations of elderly people in jokes (*e.g.* Davies 1977; Palmore 1971, 1986; Richman 1977), in age-theme greeting cards (*e.g.* Huyk and Duchon 1986), and in the media (see *e.g.* Hockey and James 1993). Although many such studies highlight the inherently negative portrayals of elderly people in jokes, some, such as Huyk and Duchon (1986) suggest that humour can function as a strategy for coping with anxieties associated with ageing, to release tension and to invoke solidarity. In this interaction, humour arguably helps alleviate the face threat of disclosing age on the one hand (Extract 3), and enquiring about the other's age on the other (also Extract 3). By joking about her own age, compared with Emma's, Mary in Extract 4 is fostering solidarity, as is Emma in talking about her grandfather in Extract 3. Humorous comments about growing old, as in Mary's assessment of herself as being *long past [her] sell by date*, may reflect one's (unconscious) anxieties about ageing.

In the interaction in Extract 5, the assistants tell the client couple about the over 55's holidays. As discussed above, it was the clients' self-disclosure of age that initially legitimised and elicited this. It is Mary who most actively engages in the selling of such a holiday. After she has mentioned a few holiday companies by name, and suggested some possible holiday locations, she makes her first reference to the activities on offer on such holidays, in line 460:

Extract 5

- 452 Mary: it's Port er for it's Portugal you're
 453 thinking of is it?
 454 Mrs Morgan: well yes I think so oh what ((4
 syllables))
 455 Mary: [((tell you)) another
 456 place you you see in October November is
 457 Benidorm (2.0) Benidorm is quite nice
 458 you see that time of year as well

- 459 Mrs Morgan: is it?
 460 Mary: there's a lot of dancing and
 461 Emma: [that's where my
 462 grandparents were
 463 Mary: [you know that's pretty
 464 good as well erm even in the ((as well
 465 where's the er))
 466 Mr Morgan: I'll have to take up dancing lessons
 467 haven't I?
 468 Mrs Morgan: [yes he's not a dancer
 469 Mary: oh no you don't have to I'm only
 470 Mrs Morgan: [no no I yeah
 471 Mary: er you know I was thinking maybe =
 472 Mr Morgan: = after ten pints I would
 473 Mary: yeah
 474 Mrs Morgan: (laughs)
 475 Alun: [(laughs)

In the brochures of these holidays, ballroom dancing is portrayed as one of the prominent activities on offer for the holidaymakers, and special dance leaders are said to be on site. Mr Morgan responds in a self-handicapping manner to the information about dancing (466–467). Mary then has to try and repair the possible face-threatening act that she has committed against the hearer's positive and negative face, in lines 469 and 471. Mr Morgan shows positive politeness in turning this into a joke in line 472 which evokes laddish drinking culture, previously featured by Emma (and indirectly referred to here again in lines 461–462), and which now brings out a response from Alun.

The feature of hosts is presented by the assistants as a selling point, an extra bonus that is included in the price. Mary echoes the voice or the ideology of the brochures very closely. She shows the clients pictures of these hosts and refers to some of the activities listed in the brochure:

Extract 6

- 476 Mary: I I is it here somebody has got er
 477 they've got group leaders? erm where I
 478 seen that then (.) er in one of these
 479 brochures they've got erm oh
 480 Alun: [there's something in there
 481 Mary: there's hosts man (.) they've got hosts

- 482 on all their erm (1.0) Young at Hearts?
 483 to look after them?
 484 Alun: well well
 485 Mary: you see they've got er hosts you see
 486 those are the hosts (shows picture to
 487 clients) for that hotel? (.) and
 488 another host there (.) they've got a
 489 picture of the hosts it's Golden Circle
 490 host tea and biscuits daily (.) mystery
 491 welcome party guided all those are extra
 492 you know they're in
 []
 493 Alun: mm they're in in ((2 syllables))
 []
 494 Mary: little extras
 495 yeah what's that one (2.0) long stay
 496 what have we got erm
 []
 497 Mrs Morgan: what have you got for
 498 Brittany then (.) anything there?
 499 Alun: Brittany?
 500 Mrs Morgan: mm
 501 Emma: ((rainy there))
 []
 502 Mary: er no I wouldn't I no I would not that
 []
 503 Mrs Morgan: no?

It is interesting that Mrs Morgan changes the topic in line 497. It may be that she finds Mary's description of the holiday with expressions like *little extras* and showing pictures of the hosts patronising, or she might be dissuaded by Mary's reference to long-stay holidays in line 495, as this is not what the couple is interested in.

In the next Extract we can see that the holiday brochures can play a very direct part in the age construction process as their contents become the focus of attention. The holiday group activities that are advertised by the tour company are used as a selling point by the assistant. This enables the Morgans here, and arguably also clients in general, either to identify with the types of activities or distance themselves from them.

Extract 7

- 546 Mary: er but I noticed with Sunworld that
 547 they've got these little hosts you know =
 []
 548 Alun: yeah I

- 549 noticed that
 550 Mary: = which is another little some something
 551 new and er =
 []
 552 Mrs Morgan: mm
 553 Mary: = something nice you know? (2.0) but
 554 Benidorm is quite nice for that time
 555 of year (1.0) erm that's two fifty nine
 556 there again that's full board
 557 Alun: mm
 558 Mary: and you've got er let's see goes with
 559 Alun: []
 559 Alun: ((3 sylls))
 (Mary reads list rapidly from brochure)
 560 Mary: tea and biscuits mystery tour welcome
 561 party guided walking tour (breathes)
 562 regular dancing karaoke if you wanted
 563 Spanish classes bowling green keep fit =
 []
 564 Mrs Morgan: (laughs)
 565 Mary: = pistol shooting bingo games outdoor pool
 566 there's a night club if you wanted
 567 library buffet restaurant (.) and all
 568 that you know
 (5.0)
 569 Mary: so there's a (1.0) there's quite a lot
 570 of
 571 Mrs Morgan: going on there

Mary's *if you wanted* (in line 562) implies that she may doubt whether the Morgans would be interested in karaoke. Mrs Morgan's following laugh (in line 564) can be interpreted in two ways. Either she likes karaoke and is pleased it is included, or she considers it a far-fetched suggestion: she cannot imagine her and her husband singing karaoke or, indeed, participating in any of the activities that Mary has listed thus far. Mary's *if you wanted* provides Mrs Morgan with the chance to respond in some way. Laughter is ambiguous in that it is not an explicit agreement or non-agreement, but functions to display positive politeness.

That Mrs Morgan does not reply to Mary when she comes to the end of the list, resulting in a five-second pause, may indicate either that she cannot identify with the type of holiday being described or that she is very familiar with it. Either way she may realise that expressing either enthusiasm or disinterest could self-construct a particular age-related identity.

Extract 8

- 612 Mary: but (.) for the time of year it's nice
 613 you know it's really lovely (.) it's
 614 good I I've been a a few times I've been
 615 to Benidorm (.) it's not a bad little
 616 place at all (.) you know you're going
 617 to get the (.) people drinking
 618 everywhere you know what I mean
 [
- 619 Mr Morgan: oh yes
 [
- 620 Mrs Morgan: yes you get that
 .
 .
- 647 Mary: but the erm old part of Benidorm is
 648 quite quaint
- 649 Mrs Morgan: yes yes
- 650 Mary: you know? it's nice they've got little
 651 er nice little pubs there it's a bit
 652 like like we have here you know
 [
- 653 Mrs Morgan: yeah yes
- 654 Mary: and nice little shops and ...
 .
 .
- 664 Mrs Morgan: why did you say not Brittany?
 665 Mary: not for that time of year really

By prefixing so many nouns with *little*, Mary's conversational style here appears patronising (or, in Communication Accommodation Theory terms, over-accommodative, see *e.g.* Giles *et al.* 1987; Giles *et al.* 1991), approaching what has been termed 'secondary baby talk' (Caporael 1981). Over-accommodation is generated at inter-group level, being triggered, I would suggest, by the receivers' age and the consequent stereotype-driven perception by the speaker of the hearers. It may therefore be threatening to their (age) identity. Mary no doubt is pursuing relational conversational goals here, but while expressing (what at least to her would be the promotion of) liking, she is threatening the hearers' face-needs of respect. Evidence for the clients' interpretation of this in this way is that at the end of Mary's turn, Mrs Morgan changes the subject again, in line 664. There may, then, be a certain amount of 'misfiring' here in terms of what the interpersonal and conversational needs of the clients are, as perceived by the assistant and the clients themselves.

Conclusion

In any interaction, as I argued at the outset, how participants construct and manage identities is crucial to the experience of the social encounter and the consequences of it. In discourse analytic research, it is customary to analyse particular cases, or particular encounters, in depth. This is because identities, including age-identities, are necessarily particular to specific interactions and are projected, negotiated and managed in real time.

Age identity construction has been seen to take many forms in this one interaction. Following the opening of the encounter – very early on – Mrs Morgan offered a disclosure of chronological age, thus emphasising age and setting the scene for an intergenerational encounter. She framed the couple's old age as accounting for wishing to travel with other people (Extract 1). At times, then, the identities that were created for the elderly couple as travellers were self-initiated.

In two sequences of talk (Extracts 3 and 4) not strictly related to the clients' booking, Mary engages in age categorisation in a humorous frame. This is triggered by Mr Morgan's teasing moves regarding Emma's relations with male clients. When Mary constructs an age identity for herself which is derogatorily framed, this is potentially very face-threatening for Mrs Morgan. Also, in Extract 3, Emma's narrative about her holiday with her grandparents has underlying ageist assumptions about age appropriate behaviour. By making fun of her grandfather's apparently counter-normative behaviour, she is in fact confirming a particular stereotype of elderly behaviour. This stereotype in many ways contradicts the active and lively image of travellers of over 55 depicted in holiday brochures. So Emma's humorous tale may not only have potentially damaging consequences at the relational level, but also at the transactional level, as she is to some extent poking fun at the activities that elderly travellers may engage in on holiday (in Emma's words in Extract 3 *lead [others] astray*). Mrs Morgan's response *good for him* is, thus, interesting in that it may be an attempt to address their own positive face and to counterbalance the threat of the non-active stereotype that Emma's story implies. Although the non-active stereotype is never explicitly articulated, I believe that it can be inferred from the humour of Emma's story, and that it is the negative stereotype that stirs the above comment from Mrs Morgan.

Examples of how travel agency staff, and perhaps the industry at large, view older travellers were found in Extracts 5, 6, 7 and 8. The assistants in these encounters were seen to have adopted the images of the industry as represented in travel brochures, namely of elderly

travellers having specific needs regarding the type and nature of the holiday and its associated activities. A somewhat dependent role is created for such travellers, being looked after and entertained, for example, by tour company hosts. On the other hand, these types of holidays could be seen as anti-ageist, namely promoting an active lifestyle for older people (see Ylänne-McEwen 1999). Moral issues, then, underlie the discourse strategies adopted by assistants who sell these holidays.

In conclusion, the above analyses of talk in a single case-study have exemplified, first of all, how age identities become negotiated in face-to-face discourse and how this might be interpreted from a sociolinguistic perspective. Secondly, by linking the task of the assistants in this encounter (selling the clients a holiday), to the images portrayed in the brochures, it has been possible to illustrate institutional ageism at work. As many holidays are packaged with particular age-cohorts in mind (in this case the over 55s), travel agency assistants need to display a sensitivity to age-characteristics of clients. They therefore need to have knowledge and awareness for responding to the age-related preference of clients, as well as interactional strategies for dealing with the salience of age and ageing. In this particular encounter, those strategies were often grounded in humour as well as occasionally displaying characteristics of over-accommodative ('patronising') talk.

Discourse analysis can illuminate how the experience of ageing and later life is lived through face-to-face interaction. Older people in particular are likely to engage in age-constituting discourse in many other business settings as well, especially those that entail special rates and reductions. Other everyday settings may include situations involving self-introductions where issues of identity, including age-identity, become salient. These texts have also referred to broader societal themes of age-appropriate behaviour, as well as ageism and anti-ageism. Micro analysis can, then, usefully complement macrosociological surveys on attitudes towards older people and psychological work on images of age and old age.

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NOTES

- 1 I studied a sample of five of the brochures which the assistants informed me were widely available in all travel agencies and which were produced by the main tour operators. I call the survey ‘informal’ because I didn’t engage in a detailed study. A more detailed analysis can be found in Yläne-M^cEwen (1999).
- 2 All names are fictitious.
- 3 The Extracts (apart from Extract 2) are ordered chronologically, with the line numbering indicating the placement of each extract in the interaction as a whole. The transcript of the entire interaction comprised 877 lines and can be found in full in Yläne-M^cEwen 1996. The following transcription conventions are used: () non-verbal, paralinguistic, prosodic and contextual information; (()) unintelligible or uncertain transcription; ((3 syllables)) a guess is made as to the length of unintelligible talk; lined syllables – unusually heavily stressed syllables; [simultaneously starting talk; [overlapping talk; (.) short pause (half a second or less); (2.0) longer pause, in seconds; = contiguous utterances (also one speaker’s turn as continuing across lines of transcription); ... words omitted from transcript; um, mm, er, erm, oh – filled pauses, hesitations or exclamations; ? speech act having the illocutionary force of eliciting information (also rising intonation); ! emphatic utterance.

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