



GENDER-SPECIFIC FEATURES OF AGE-RELATED VERBAL EXPRESSION IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This article explores the gender-specific aspects of verbal expression related to age in the English language. Drawing on a corpus of idiomatic expressions, literary examples, and sociolinguistic data, the study reveals how language encodes gendered perceptions of aging. Results show a marked asymmetry in how male and female aging is conceptualized, evaluated, and verbalized. The analysis also reflects the influence of cultural stereotypes on phraseological units. The findings highlight the need for a nuanced understanding of linguistic age representation in gender studies.

Keywords

gender linguistics, age, idioms, verbal expression, English, stereotype, phraseology

1. Introduction

In recent decades, linguistic research has increasingly turned to the intersection of language, age, and gender. As part of broader sociolinguistic inquiry, this study investigates how the English language encodes age through gendered idioms and expressions. Previous studies (Lakoff, 1975; Romaine, 2003) have demonstrated that language reflects and reinforces social norms, including attitudes toward aging and gender roles. The aim of this paper is to analyze the verbal representation of age in gendered terms, particularly within idiomatic expressions, to uncover how language may shape or mirror societal perceptions of aging in men and women.

2. Methods

This study uses a mixed-method approach:

- Corpus analysis: A selection of idioms and fixed expressions were drawn from major English phraseological dictionaries, such as The Oxford Dictionary of English Idioms (Spears, 2010) and McGraw-Hill's American Idioms Dictionary (2007), focusing on entries containing age-related lexemes (e.g., "old", "young", "elderly") with gender-specific referents.
- Contextual analysis: Examples from English literature (e.g., works by Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, and Virginia Woolf) and modern media were reviewed to assess connotative usage.
- Sociolinguistic perspective: Analysis of pragmatic functions and evaluative markers to determine differences in how aging is represented for men and women.

3. Results

3.1 Gendered asymmetry in idiomatic expressions

The analysis revealed an uneven distribution of age-related idioms across genders. Female aging is more frequently associated with pejorative or mocking connotations. Examples include:

- Old maid – a woman past typical marrying age, with a negative social judgment.
- Mutton dressed as lamb – an older woman trying to appear youthful, implying ridicule.

- Spinster – a socially marked term denoting an unmarried older woman, now largely replaced by more neutral terms.

In contrast, male aging idioms often carry neutral or even positive undertones:

- Silver fox – an attractive older man.

- Distinguished gentleman – reinforcing dignity in age.

- Sugar daddy – although morally ambiguous, implies economic power and desirability.

3.2 Semantic domains and evaluation

Female-associated idioms tend to focus on physical appearance and social desirability. Male-related idioms emphasize experience, status, or eccentricity (e.g., old codger, grumpy old man).

In addition to idioms from dictionaries, classical literary examples vividly illustrate how aging is gendered through language:

- In Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice" (1813, T. Egerton), Lydia Bennet mocks her 23-year-old sister by calling her "an old maid", implying social failure.

- In Shakespeare's "Much Ado About Nothing" (1600, Andrew Wise), Beatrice jests about her unmarried state by using the idiom "lead apes into hell", a euphemism for the fate of spinsters.

- In Jane Austen's "Sense and Sensibility" (1811, T. Egerton), Colonel Brandon is called an "absolute old bachelor" at the age of 35.

- In Virginia Woolf's "To the Lighthouse" (1927, Hogarth Press), the character Lily Briscoe reflects on her solitude with the phrase "a skimpy old maid", embodying internalized social stigma.

4. Discussion

The results demonstrate clear linguistic asymmetry in the representation of aging. These differences reflect entrenched gender roles: femininity is tied to youth and appearance, while masculinity is associated with experience and authority. Thus, aging women are linguistically devalued more harshly than aging men.

The persistence of such idioms in modern English indicates a slow shift in language despite growing awareness of ageism and sexism. Though contemporary discourse increasingly embraces terms like age-positive and empowered elder, these expressions have yet to permeate colloquial phraseology at large.

These findings align with previous gender-stereotype models in language, such as Tannen (1990) and Holmes (2008), who argue that language functions both as a mirror and a mold of societal values.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that gendered idioms in English not only reflect but perpetuate stereotypical views of aging. The asymmetry in phraseological representations reveals societal discomfort with aging in women and a relative tolerance—if not admiration—of aging in men. Further research should explore how such expressions evolve in online discourse and cross-cultural comparisons.

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