ROCZNIKI HUMANISTYCZNE
Tom LXXI, zeszyt 6 – 2023
ZESZYT SPECJALNY / SPECIAL ISSUE
DOI: https://doi.org/10.18290/rh237106.6s

AGNIESZKA KIEŁKIEWICZ-JANOWIAK

EUPHEMISING AGEING IN POPULAR AND ACADEMIC PUBLICATIONS ON THE LIFE COURSE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

1. INTRODUCTION

Margaret Morganroth Gullette has claimed that the social ideology of ageing-as-decline, along with its narrative, is imposed on people from relatively early on in their lives. Anxiety of ageing has been described in teenagers or even young adolescents. Gullette (2004, pp. 3–4) gives an account of children's experience with the "face aging" simulation booth in the Boston Museum of Science; the dominating response was disgust and the strong assertion: "I don't want to get old". Additionally, psychological research suggests that many people around the world are experiencing "combined concern and anticipation of losses centered around the aging process" (Lasher & Faulkender, 1993, p. 247). Apparently, this is affecting people across the life span. For example, Lori Harris and Stephanie Dollinger (2001), using the Aging Anxiety Scale, found comparable levels of anxiety about ageing in undergraduates as well as in adults of a range of other age groups. Significantly, attitudes did shift, but not anxiety levels, when students' awareness was raised by education: "taking a course on aging appeared to foster more positive attitudes toward older adults, but it did not have the same benefits on anxiety and attitudes toward personal aging" (Harris & Dollinger, 2001, p. 664).

The taboo value of (talking about) death has widely been discussed (see, for example, Ariès, 1974; Kellehear, 1984; Saake, 2008; Graham-Wisener, 2022). Perhaps by its close association with the inevitability of death on the one hand, and by contrast with the ubiquitous 'cult of youth', ageing is taboo too, particularly in the context

Agnieszka Kiełkiewicz-Janowiak, Associate Professor at Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Faculty of English; e-mail: akiel@amu.edu.pl; ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0350-8275.

of perpetual cultural pressure to rejuvenate our bodies and souls to become younger, even at a relatively young (biological) age. However, age critics have for long been concerned with the repression of old age (Woodward, 1991) and gerontophobia. This, in turn, paves the way to ageism. Nikolas Coupland and Justine Coupland (1999, p. 183) pointed out the possibility that "pathologising fear and hatred of ageing and the elderly is one ageist strategy for legitimising discrimination".

Over the last few decades, culture and research into ageing have shifted focus to representing ageing in positive terms, inspired by the model of "successful ageing", which — since it was introduced in 1987 — assumes avoidance of disease, maintenance of cognitive and physical function, and social engagement (Rowe & Kahn, 1997). This encouraged researchers to study the process of 'ageing successfully', and people at large to seek the means to attain it. Understandably, the idea has been discussed in most media and publications — popular and scholarly alike. Attempting to counter the pressures of ageing-as-decline culture, they set out to convince their audiences that this state is within their reach and to teach people how to make it happen. Those less keen to accept the connotations of optimism and enthusiasm behind the word 'successful', may find the agenda of "ageing well", "ageing better"[1] or "comfortable ageing" more appealing (see Loe, 2017; Calasanti, 2015[2]). One way or another, the individual was required to adopt a preventive and optimistic approach to life. However — as was pointed out by critics — favourable structural and social conditions were also needed. This overall shift in the representation of ageing through the life span — from a stigmatised to a desirable condition — might be achieved, at least indirectly, via linguistic means. Kate Burridge (2012, p. 72) refers to "verbal vanishing creams and linguistic makeovers" to describe the linguistic interventions which are to implement the politics of permanent youth and well-being.

Language is believed to play a crucial role in dealing with the anxiety of older age or the menacing prospect of growing old. How we name concepts which relate to such a vulnerable sphere of human existence should receive more attention, especially from linguistics. One rhetorical device to investigate is euphemisation. At the basis of applying it, in conventional as well as very innovative ways, lies the conviction that linguistic choices have consequences for (social) reality.

This paper is exploratory in nature and as such represents the emergent process of a qualitative investigation. The preliminary investigation of how both popular culture and academic disciplines refer to the life course, and specifically to ageing, will bring

[1] See, for example, Centre for Ageing Better at https://www.ageing-better.org.uk

[2] For an overview of the literature on "successful ageing" see Martinson and Berridge (2015).

forward — against the background of the basic human sensitivities — insights into disciplinary perspectives on (naming) the processes in question.

2. EUPHEMISATION

Keith Allan (2001, p. 148) defines euphemism as "a word or phrase used as an alternative to a dispreferred expression." The reason for creating a new, euphemistic word or phrase for an old, already existing, dysphemistic one is usually social. Euphemisms are used by members of society at large, to "disguise disagreeable reality" (Benczes et al., 2018) or, in another researcher's words, "to avoid and camouflage life's harsh realities" (Halmari, 2010, p. 828). However, the motivations involved may be more complex:

> [E]uphemistic expressions can of course be motivated by a desire not to offend, but they are also motivated by the wish to display in-group identity markers, the wish to upgrade whatever they denote, and even the display of wit. Euphemism can have a more sinister motivation too: to blur reality, not so much to avoid offence, but to deceive.… But euphemisms are not simply "linguistic fig-leaves"; many artful euphemisms conceal only as little as to be all the more titillating. In the mouth or pen of a political satirist, euphemisms can be deliberately provoking. (Allan & Burridge, 2006, pp. 96–97)

Importantly, it is impossible to find uniformity in how value is attached to a euphemism (or, for that matter, a dysphemism). The evaluative meaning depends on the judgment of a particular speaker in a specific context of use (Burridge, 2012), and it changes over time, both for individual language users and societies (see also Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 96). Nonetheless, speakers are ready to pronounce judgements on the "strength" of X-phemisms (i.e. euphemisms, dysphemisms, or orthophemisms[3]) without familiarity with their context, and researchers and lexicographers, for the purposes of analysis and description, use surveys which rely on these out-of-context judgments to represent X-phemisms in dictionaries (Burridge, 2012, p. 66).

The functions of euphemisms may be conveniently presented by listing the headings of the sections in Burridge's (2012) informative *Introduction*:

1. The protective euphemism — to shield and to avoid offense
2. The underhand euphemism — to mystify and to misrepresent

[3] Allan and Burridge (2006, p. 1) explain in simple terms the three kinds X-phemistic expressions as follows: "orthophemism (straight talking), euphemism (sweet talking) and dysphemism (speaking offensively)". See also Allan (2012, p. 5) for different motivations of remodelling as a source of X-phemisms.

3. The uplifting euphemism — to talk up and to inflate
4. The provocative euphemism — to reveal and to inspire
5. The cohesive euphemism — to show solidarity and to help define the gang
6. The ludic euphemism — to have fun and to entertain. (Burridge, 2012, pp. 66–71)

Creating a euphemism and/or suggesting its usage is usually well-intentioned: it is meant to avoid offensiveness and, therefore, it basically has positive connotations.[4] However, when a euphemism is meant to "disguise a topic", that is when it involves deception, this may "lead to the deprecation of the term 'euphemism' itself". Burridge (2012, p. 68) deftly describes this situation by quoting George Orwell: "expressions 'designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind' (*Politics and the English Language*, 1946)." No wonder the positive connotations of euphemism, drawn from the good intentions that motivate them, disappear as speakers become aware of their manipulative impact.[5] There are also types of euphemism with a more ambitious intention of appealing to the intellect of the user and the audience alike: euphemism-as-art (e.g. satirical) and euphemisms deriving from concerns about equality and diversity. Euphemisms may also support in-group belongingness or exclude outsiders. Finally, they are often humorous inventions, created to amuse. Possibly, they may combine a few of the above functions. Joan Erber (2010, p. 13), a gerontologist herself, observes that "[s]ome gerontology researchers jokingly refer to older adults as chronologically challenged, chronologically gifted, and chronologically advantaged." This expresses humour and in-group solidarity.[6]

2.1 TABOOISATION AND EUPHEMISATION OF AGEING

Ageing is a social and cultural taboo.[7] One possible response to it might be through interventions in language, which may be euphemistic (or, indeed, dysphemistic[8]).

---

[4] Allan and Burridge (2006) point out that the word 'euphemism' itself may acquire negative connotations and may therefore — along with well-intentioned political correctness — work against its own motivations.

[5] For other types and examples of "dishonest euphemism" see Burridge (2012, p. 68).

[6] See also Allan and Burridge (2006, p. 90) for political correctness as a joke and Burridge (2012) for the notion of "[l]evity towards what is feared" (2012, p. 72).

[7] Segal (2014) observes that when Simone de Beauvoir wrote her book *La Vieillesse* (1970), "the topic [of old age] was so forbidden that her title, '*Old Age*', appeared in English under the euphemistic title, *The Coming of Age* (1971)."

[8] As Terry (2020, p. 60) explains, because the meaning of X-phemisms is fundamentally dependent on the context of the speaker's intention and the interlocutor's interpretation, in a "dysphemistic euphemism" "the speaker uses a dysphemistic term without meaning to be offensive and without offending

Their function is to distance oneself from problems associated with old age, such as sickness and vulnerability, including one's own. With respect to ageing, the taboo value may be ascribed to the physical, psychological and social aspects of representing ageing, for example: displaying the ageing bodies[9] and exposing the ageing minds, disclosing chronological age (see Coupland et al., 1989, p. 132), or just talking about the ageing self and others. These behaviours usually invite euphemism — some sort of cover-up, a verbal disguise that would alleviate the threatening impact of even raising the topic.

It is important to point out that euphemisms are multifunctional and serve a range of expressive and communicative needs, some of which may not be obvious. Burridge (2012, p. 72) gives examples from "hospital slang", whereby — often by playfulness — medical personnel wish to distance themselves from the sickness and death in their professional life. Similarly, frivolity is common among staff in aged care facilities. In both contexts, another major function of euphemism is in-group consolidation and protection (see task 5 above: "to show solidarity and to help define the gang").

The above-listed tasks to be performed by euphemisms are implemented by a variety of linguistic means. Burridge (2012, p. 72) divides the many different linguistic devices used in the formation of euphemisms into three mechanisms:

> ANALOGY, including metaphor (e.g. *mellow, seasoned, golden ager, sunset years*), substitution, e.g. understatement (e.g. *past it, of a certain age, no spring chicken*), metonymy (e.g. *grey hairs, go grey, turn white, third age*), hyperbole, i.e. opposite of understatement (e.g. *past one's prime, over the hill*)
>
> DISTORTION, i.e. modification of forms, including shortening (e.g. *geri* for geriatric), acronyms or initialisms (e.g. *OAPs* for Old Age Pensioners, *woopies* for Well Off Older Persons, *maffies* for Middle Aged Affluent Folks), ellipsis, where references to age are excluded (e.g. date of birth not expected in a CV), or when an element of a comparative construction is omitted (e.g. *older person* — paradoxically "not as old as *old*", *elder* = superior in age and experience), circumlocution (e.g. *living on borrowed time, to have seen better days*)
>
> BORROWING, including internal borrowing from varieties of the same language, for example from learned language (e.g. *octogenarian* for *eighty-year-old*) or from slang (e.g. *crumbles* for "the frail and elderly at death's door"); and external borrowing (e.g. from French doyen or doyenne for the most senior member of a body of people).[10]

---

the co-speaker." The speaker's motivation might be to distance themselves from the taboo value of the reference. Dysphemistic euphemism, like euphemism, to use Allan's (2012, p. 6) words, might be "preferred because it focuses away from the (potentially) offensive".

[9] See Alex Rotas' (2014) book, *Growing old competitively: Photographs of masters athletes*; see also the notions of the "unwatchability of elderly nude forms" (Woodward, 1991) and of elderly frailty (Coupland & Coupland, 1999, p. 184, extending Woodward's idea).

[10] For more euphemising strategies and examples see Burridge (2012, pp. 73–78).

Burridge underlines that the above devices are commonly combined, for example *at the evening of one's days* and *the autumn* or *the winter of one's life* for 'old' as well as *mutton dressed up as lamb* are metaphorical, long-winded and hyperbolic, while *no spring chicken* is a metaphor and an understatement (Burridge, 2012, p. 73).

Euphemisms are used by those societies whose members are confronted by the taboo value of ageing and old age, and the insecurity of living in the ageing-as-decline culture (see Gullette, 2004). The above devices are the means to euphemise the words and phrases that are considered dysphemistic in a given social context. Many of them are well-known, and function as models for forming new ones, as dictated by the needs of new circumstances. Certain other patterns, which may not be readily classified as euphemisms, turn out to have a euphemising effect. For example, as reported by Helena Halmari (2011), in the 1990s it was proposed for psychological and educational publications (e.g. prescribed by the American Psychological Association) to replace phrases with premodified nouns (e.g. *disabled people*) with postmodification expressions (e.g. *people with disabilities*). This practice was dubbed a "people first" approach, in which "the person is put before the disability" (Guth & Murphy, 1998, as quoted by Halmari, 2011, p. 829). Many government organisations changed their names accordingly, which often involved not only syntactic but also lexical change to form a euphemism, for example "The President's Committee on Mental Retardation" was renamed to "The President's Committee for People with Intellectual Disabilities" (Halmari, 2011, p. 829).[11]

Allan and Burridge (2006, p. 98) quote one handbook for non-discriminatory language: "responding to others with care and sensitivity involves describing people accurately, from an informed position. Euphemisms, or unnecessarily vague terms patronise people".

This attitude indeed seems to appeal to many contemporary writers on age(ing), who have given up 'elderly' to replace it with the older term, namely 'old(er)', for instance, to use 'older adults' instead of 'the elderly'.[12] On the other hand, Benczes

[11] Arguably, this structure could in fact be classified as an orthophemism, since it directly describes the phenomenon. I owe this observation to Professor Anne White (UCL).

[12] Trucil et al. (2021) traced the usage of "reframed terminology" (such as showing preference for 'older adult' rather than 'elderly' or 'senior') in 629 articles published between 2016 and 2019 in the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, which adopted (in 2017) the American Medical association Manual of Style, with its recommendations for the language used to describe older people. The reframed terminology consistently (though slowly) increased. In the second part of the analysis, U.S.-based news coverage (200 million news articles) was examined for the same period, and found relatively little fluctuation in usage. The authors concluded: "Changes in how we think, speak, and act take time.… [W]e hope these early changes, however small, point to a rising tide that can continue to lift all ships" (2021, p. 266).

et al. (2018) observe that "like elderly (which has been in the language since the early 1600s), *aged* and *ageing* have in common that they allude to taboo topics in a very remote way; their association lacks any sort of precision, and it is perhaps this that allows them to remain unobtrusive and escape the corrosion of expressions such as *senile* and *geriatric*" (2018, p. 104). The authors themselves have used the term "elderly" throughout their article.

2.2 THE LIFE CYCLE OF EUPHEMISMS

As is commonly observed, euphemisms are relatively short-lived. "As society's prejudiced perceptions foment, the euphemistic value is diluted and the negative connotations quickly reattach themselves, requiring the formation a new euphemism" (Burridge, 2012, p. 79). Indeed, in a recent publication Kate Burridge and Réka Benczes (2019) explicate the power of taboo as a driver of language change. Stephen Pinker (1994, 2002, p. 213) has written about the phenomenon of the "euphemism treadmill", whereby "[terms for concepts] become tainted by their connection to a fraught concept, prompting people to reach for an unspoiled term, which only gets sullied in its turn" (Pinker, 2008, p. 320). Benczes et al. (2018) point out the complex conditioning of the "life expectancy" of euphemisms; for example, the formations which rely on humour (such as *chronologically gifted* or *seasoned citizen*) tend to disappear from usage earlier than other, more "low profile" euphemisms (2018, p. 103).

3. DATA AND AIMS

As noted above, creating and deploying euphemisms is context dependent. In general, a dysphemism or euphemism acquires the quality of offensiveness or lack thereof depending on the intention of the speaker and the perception by the listener, as well as the circumstances of use. The latter may be specific to, for example, academic presentation and debate, and very different from those of the popular forum.

The dataset in this exploratory study is an initial selection of several books (listed in References) and research articles in a range of disciplines: sociology, psychology, literary studies, and linguistics. These publications, authored by major scholars in research on life-course phenomena, have been very influential (because they are highly cited) in the broad area of age studies. They are also highly appreciated by the present author for having voiced key ideas which have marked new turns in age-related research. An additional set of texts, used here for reference, has been popular guides on personal development, written by experts in various areas for the

general audience. Their authors usually draw on scholarly research and are guided by the desire to give research-informed advice to enhance readers' quality of life.

In this paper we reflect upon how age studies scholars, experts and commentators choose to apply the generally known ageing-related euphemisms, incorporate them in their work, and thus legitimise them. Several texts of book length have been initially coded for ways of naming referents who are growing older (at any age) or the process of moving in the direction of later life. In a subsequent, systematic study with the use of Atlas.ti, qualitative data analysis software (Paulus & Lester, 2016), the coding will be based on the code categories inductively formulated in the course of the current, exploratory text interpretation. Additionally, our focus is on how the authors of the texts under scrutiny engage in metalinguistic comment, in that they explicitly acknowledge the constitutive role of language and discourse in social reality. Our initial observations on the practices and reflections by the major authorities in life course studies will lay the groundwork for a systematic analysis to be undertaken in a subsequent study. We believe that studying the process of euphemisation should be informed by a range of insights from users in different areas of the academic world as well as general public sphere.

In the following, we will first look at a few categories of concepts that often undergo euphemisation: (1) naming people in the various life stages, (2) referring to ageing and the life course, (3) naming the research area devoted to human life span. Throughout the paper, as well as in its final section, we will reflect on whether and how authors assume that linguistic practices have an impact on speakers' awareness and social reality.

4. NAMING PEOPLE AND LIFE STAGE CATEGORIES ACROSS DISCIPLINES

In the case of making reference to people, a term or phrase may be understood to work against disadvantaged groups (Allan, 2001, p. 153). It is then perceived as offensive or discriminatory, due to its value expressing the speaker's negative and stigmatising attitude to others. One such social grouping which may be thus discriminated is defined by age.

We often rely on referring to people's (and our own) chronological age, whether known or just estimated, for understanding the life course and societal change in general. For this purpose, researchers also use categories which have been called "age categories" or "life stage categories". In social sciences research participants are often divided into cohorts, marked seemingly in abstraction of context by reference to their members' chronological age (i.e. approximately the same year of birth). However, "cohorts" are in fact understood strictly in relation to shared context:

as groups of people who "are likely to have a common set of experiences as they travel through life" (Erber, 2010, p. 41). Although developmental psychologists or sociologists define cohorts by the year of birth, they are much aware of significant diversity in individuals' experience (Erber, 2010, p. 41; Bengtson et al., 2005, p. 495) and the fact that age "serves as the analytic link between changing lives, changing family relations, and changing historical contexts" (Bengtson et al., 2005, p. 494).[13]

In earlier linguistic research the type of reference to the position of the informant or participant in their life course was dependent on the kind of access to the demographic information: researchers created age groups (cohorts) based on chronological age data elicited in the data collection process. In sociolinguistics, the age categories have usually been part of metadata in the investigation of language variation. For example, these categories have always been used in linguistic research investigating processes of change, whether structural, societal or developmental. Sociolinguist Penelope Eckert (1997, p. 151) has defined age, showing its embeddedness in the context of time, place and social relations: "If aging is movement through time, age is a person's place at a given time in relation to the social order: a stage, a condition, a place in history." Even though age is a social factor whose complexity is widely appreciated in the study of language variation, most studies give a simple indication of age (expressed in the number of years) as an index of acquired linguistic ability and experience.

There has been some criticism about the inadequate representation of age cohorts in social science (e.g. Baltes et al., 1980; Franssen et al., 2020). For instance, the middle-aged people are central and yet, paradoxically, the most invisible in social research. On the one hand, middle-age is assumed to be the default value of adulthood, on the other, the most frequently researched populations are young adults, usually students, the most easily accessible as research participants.

Significantly, in linguistics the focus is primarily on the one end of the life span, the youngest — children and adolescents — because this is the time of the individual's life when language is acquired and when it develops dynamically. The assumption of language stability (i.e. non-development) through adulthood makes old age the other life stage of interest to linguists: the time when certain language skills are partially declining. However, what we should aim at is, in Eckert's words, "understanding the linguistic life course" (Eckert, 1997, p. 152) as a whole.

Across disciplines a distinction may be made between the broad-brush, quantitative approaches to describing human behaviour, and qualitative studies of microscale mechanisms in social, psychological or cultural contexts. The latter, rather than re-

[13] For a review of life course concepts see also Hendricks (2012).

lying on pre-imposed categories, such as those based on participants' chronological age, will be interested in uncovering more nuanced socially-grounded categories as situated in a range of contexts (see Schilling, 2013). It is exactly these locally defined social circumstances which make some life stages more socially and psychologically vulnerable. Therefore, the way people of different ages are categorised and referred to may be more or less fine-grained, depending on the section of the ageing continuum. Distinctions are then made, for example, between "young old" and "old old" or "third age" and "fourth age" in the later part of life.

Moreover, outside the academic and institutional contexts the most vulnerable and, therefore, often unmentionable stage in human life seems to be the later part of life. People may find it rather uncomfortable to refer to both their own and others' old age. For instance, the choice to name people with reference to their age (*old person* or *senior*, *old people* or *the elderly* or *older adults*, *old age* or *late life* or *late adulthood*) is felt to have consequences in defining their main characteristics as mostly age-related. This is often contested. In 1994 the World Health Organization's "Health of the Elderly" program was renamed to "Ageing and Life Course Programme", which was explicitly motivated by the negative connotations involved in the former name ("the elderly") and the perceived inclusivity of the latter term ("ageing") (Benczes & Burridge, 2015, p. 127). It is interesting to consider the timing of this decision in the context of the year of publication of influential books referring to later life: the term "elderly" did occur in the titles of major linguistic handbooks, e.g. *Language, society, and the elderly: Discourse, identity, and ageing* (Coupland et al., 1991).

The generic term, "the elderly", was amply used in numerous other prominent age studies volumes in the 1990s (see, for example, Bytheway et al., 1989; Coupland et al., 1991; Hamilton, 1999). This may have been due to the fact that the studies they discussed indeed referred to the oldest old and frail people and populations. However, at the same time, already in the early 1990s, the editors of a gerontological textbook made this reservation: "Although the term 'elderly' occurs in this selection of readings, we prefer the term 'older', because, being relative, it avoids categorisation and the attendant stereotyping. We do not consider this to be a case of pedantic semantics. But others do" (Johnson & Slater, 1993, p. 1). This assertion of the editors was followed by examples of comments in the public debate on what kind of reference is appropriate.

The category labels preferred in academic publications on age-related research have changed over the decades. A brief look at the titles of eight articles published in a recent issue of *Ageing & Society* ("an interdisciplinary and international journal devoted to the understanding of human ageing and the circumstances of older people in their social and cultural contexts") reveals numerous references to groups/

populations or life stage periods under scrutiny: "older persons in Belgium", "older women in the United Kingdom", "middle-aged and older adults in China", "older Chinese couples", "later life", "the second half of life".[14]

In what follows, more examples of publications will be given to illustrate an array of usages in a range of research areas, where the choice of labels for age categories seems dictated by the research topics, conceptualisation of age, ageing, or life course, but also by the authors' understanding of how naming matters.

Research oriented toward the qualitative investigation of discourse and interaction has considered age data and age categorisation in their social context. Therefore, the use of the relevant terms usually indicates their understanding as situated (in the context of participants and social relations, and in the context of the communicative situation). In an article on how change and continuity are managed discursively, Pirjo Nikander (2009a) analyses interactive data from "baby-boomers", a label which describes a generation of then middle-aged people, who do age-talk and reflect upon "notions of physical or psychological lifespan change". This cohort-based naming of the participants is an expression of the relevance of their shared generational experience with respect to historical events, cultural symbols, etc. The main title of Nikander's earlier publication, a 2002 book *Age in action: Membership work and stage of life categories in talk*, demonstrates a rather general reference to age as an index, while the subtitle implies the author's social ethnographic approach, with emphasis on the conceptualisation of age as a highly contextualised stage in life.

5. REFERRING TO AGEING AND THE LIFE COURSE

The very title of Joan Erber's (2010) book, *Aging and Older Adulthood*, is orthophemistic and precise about the part of the life span it is devoted to. As a handbook, the publication expectedly sets an example of being considerate about names and naming. This attitude is explicit in a section called "Terms for the 65+ age group". The author is very specific, if arbitrary, in saying that *old* and *elderly* "are used more often to refer to individuals in the old-old and oldest-old groups. Although there is no firm rule, *elderly* often refers to older adults who are in frail health or reside in institutional settings such as nursing homes" (Erber, 2010, pp. 12–13). She continues by discussing the perception of the terms in question — as favourable (or not) — by the referents themselves and warns the readers of the risk of being accused of ageism.

[14] *Ageing & Society* FirstView articles can be found at https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/ageing-and-society/firstview

In raising the topic of reference terms the scholar clearly implies the consequential nature of naming. In her book, she is consistent in using 'older' as a descriptor: *older adults, older Americans,* etc. She does suggest, though is not explicit about, declaring it "neutral" or "plainly denotative".

Julia Johnson and Robert Slater's (1993) *Ageing and Later Life* is an edited collection of articles written by leading experts in social gerontology. "We are constantly reminded that we are part of an ageing society" — the editors begin their introduction by thus referring to an alarmist way the British Census results were announced in the media as "an unpredicted explosion in Britain's elderly population" (Johnson & Slater, 1993, p. 1). The common way to refer to the population in question (by demographic experts and the media alike) was by the phrase "an ageing society", which Johnson and Slater wished to describe by referring to authentic human experience.[15] The editors' ambition was to provide "first-hand accounts from older people, because those who are younger have not had the same experience of age" (1993, p. 1).

The academic books in the early 1990s seem no different from how today's media address the naming dilemma. Joe Pinsker, the author of a recent popular article from *The Atlantic*, an American magazine published in Boston, discussed issues of naming people who have reached later life. He quotes Ina Jaffe, a reporter at National Public Radio:

> American English speakers are converging on an answer that is very similar to *old* but has another syllable tacked on as a crucial softener: *older.* The word is gaining popularity not because it is perfect — it presents problems of its own — but because it seems to be the least imperfect of the many descriptors English speakers have at their disposal.[16]

The alternative terms are deemed "fraught or outmoded": for instance *senior* involves too much ambiguity, *elderly* "was more common a generation ago, is hardly neutral — it's often associated with frailty and limitation", *retiree* "doesn't apply to an older person who never worked or hasn't stopped working" and *geriatric* "is precise, but sounds far too clinical" (Pinsker, 2020).

The academics consulted (by the author) for the purposes of the article opt for terms that they consider simple, descriptive, and straightforward. Pinsker quotes Karl Pillemer, a professor of human development at Cornell University, who says: "I actually think those of us who are in our 60s and beyond ought to reclaim *old*." This seems hard to accept for most older people, and the example brings out a possible contrast between attitudes of human development experts and non-academics. Another professor referred to in the article, anthropologist Elana Buch of the University

[15] Margaret Morganroth Gullette, 24 years later, in 2018, would consider this label ageist (see below).
[16] https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/01/old-people-older-elderly-middle-age/605590

of Iowa, thinks problems with accepting certain terms are due to societal ageism rather than the linguistic labels themselves; she favours *older adults* and *older people* as phrases that are "simple, descriptive, and foreground the personhood/adulthood of the people being described". Likewise, Professor Pillemer expects these terms, as generally inoffensive, soon to become widespread. Indeed, this is confirmed by searches through the Corpus of Contemporary American English, which at the same time show a decline in the occurrence of 'elderly' over the last 30 years. 'Older', on the other hand, "seems to irritate the smallest number of people" (Pinsker, 2020). The prescriptions of use implemented in the media may be another indicator of the current connotations of the names in question: "*The New York Times*' stylebook says of the word *elderly*, 'Use this vague term with care,' and advises, 'For general references, consider *older adults*, or, sparingly, *seniors*.'" (Pinsker, 2020). *The American Heritage Guide to Contemporary Usage and Style* (2005) juxtaposes the possible contrasting connotations of the term 'elderly': it may imply dignity and respect as well as frailty and diminished capacity. "Regardless of other connotations, a phrase such as *the elderly couple in the second row* suggests greater age than if the couple were described as *older*" (2005, p. 159).

The appeal of the simplicity and neutrality of the phrase 'older adults' is that it has a chance of bringing the practice of the two genres — academic and non-academic — together. While 'older' includes the notion of age being relative, the second component of the phrase, 'adults', avoids describing the people with reference to any specific feature (e.g. employment, as in 'retiree' or 'pensioner').

Nevertheless, as Benczes et al. (2018, p. 102) metaphorically point out, "[t]ime typically blows the cover of any euphemistic disguise". Due to semantic pejoration "the negative associations reassert themselves and undermine the euphemistic quality of the word, and the next generation of speakers grows up learning the word as the direct term (orthophemism)" (Benczes et al., 2018, p. 102). Next, in the euphemistic treadmill,[17] could come the idea of reclaiming the word 'old', to close the cycle.[18]

The authors of popular books on ageing in later life usually opt for openly euphemistic phrasings, possibly ones believed to upgrade old age, or at least to avoid

[17] Academic writing in the popular press may be illustrated by a New York Times op-ed by Stephen Pinker, professor of cognitive sciences, published in 1994. Pinker describes the phenomenon of "the euphemism treadmill" thus: "People invent new 'polite' words to refer to emotionally laden or distasteful things, but the euphemism becomes tainted by association and the new one that must be found acquires its own negative connotations" (Pinker, 1994).

[18] Jill Shaw Ruddock, mentioned below, may have proposed a cultural version of the "mill" which asserts that "Old is the new old", rather than suggesting that "50 is the new 30".

offence to others. Guides on health and personal development[19] are typically written by experts (psychologists, physicians, business consultants, etc.), whose attitudes may be apparent in the very titles of the publications. For a start, they show euphemisms involving ellipsis and comparison (*Ageing and old(er) age*), metonymy and metaphor (*Counter clockwise*), circumlocution (*The second half of life*), substitution (*Ageing gracefully*), and many others.

Understandably, they often address the reader more or less directly, thus making the implied aim of the genre (i.e. to advise, to assist) spelled out. Therefore, authors relate to the reader not only through the use of the imperative, but also by drawing a picture of their lives. For example, Jill Shaw Ruddock, philanthropist, author and former investment banker, put a series of recommendations, in the context of the reader's progressing life, all crammed onto the cover of her book:

> *The Second Half of Your Life. Go to school. Get a job. Find a guy. Get married. Have kids. They leave. Then what?* (Ruddock, 2011)

Similarly, psychologist Ellen J. Langer relied on a pronoun to address the reader directly as well as using a metaphor to represent their life as developing anti-chronologically and to exploit the fact that western culture endorses youth:

> *Counter clockwise:* A Proven Way *to Think Yourself Younger and Healthier* (Langer, 2009).

Another author, Angeles Arrien, a cultural anthropologist and educator, explicitly represents life as (potentially) leading to wisdom:

> *The second half of life: Opening the Eight Gates of Wisdom* (Arrien, 2007)

It is possible to claim that such popular publications take a constructive and non-excluding attitude: while asserting a positive value of life through the lifespan, they aim at providing readers with assistance about their personal dealing with the passing of (life)time. They may attain this by the use of euphemisms.

On the other hand, numerous academic publications in age studies have been published, referring to different aspects of ageing in a range of perspectives: biological, social, socio-political (see ageism), media-related, etc. Books and research articles represent work done in a range of disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, linguistics, and literary studies. The following is a selection from among many relevant titles:

---

[19] They are available from booksellers under the category of "Health and personal development", "Health, fitness and dieting" or "Health issues".

Becoming and being old. Sociological approaches to later life (Bytheway et al., 1989)
Stories of ageing (Hepworth, 2000)
Safe at last in the middle years (Gullette, 2000)
Understanding ageing (Biggs, 2003)
Aged by culture (Gullette, 2004)
Language development: The lifespan perspective (Gerstenberg & Voeste, 2005)
Understanding the life course (Green, 2010)
Representing ageing: Images and identities (Ylänne, 2010)
Agewise (Gullette, 2011)
Unmasking age. The significance of age for social research (Bytheway, 2011)

While laying the groundwork for an investigation of how some of their authors name the process of ageing and the scholarly area devoted to age issues we would like to report on a prominent age studies scholar's *linguistic* reflection on the processes of dealing with the decline message carried by the word 'ageing', irrespective of its age/life stage reference. We believe that this extended and relatively comprehensive account of Gullette's argument gives an insight into how a non-linguist asserts the significance of linguistic practices for social reality.

6. 'AGEING'—A LINGUISTIC CRITIQUE BY MARGARET MORGANROTH GULLETTE (2018)

This section is devoted specifically to Margaget Morganroth Gullette's (2018) critique of the term 'ageing', mainly as used in the premodifying function. Gullette considers as problematic the use of 'aging' in those linguistic contexts where it is used as an adjective. For one thing, she argues, "*[a]ging* as an adjective for objects invariably has a pejorative smell" (2018, p. 259). A contrast might be pointed to between 'ageing studies' and 'age studies' (the latter being, in fact, Gullette's special area of expertise).

Gullette relates the word 'aging' to 'ageism'. While 'ageism' embodies a critical stance ("makes a complex, critical, cultural argument"), 'ageing' carries negative connotations and (just) implies a socially divisive attitude ("[is] saturated with ageist associations"). Although ageism causes grave social harm, the term 'ageing' is not perceived as inherently ageist and has been used, perhaps without consideration, by many people of authority and prestige ("used without explicit questioning even by progressive writers, scholars and theorists, by journals, and in conferences") (2018, p. 252). Gullette finds just one voice of explicit critique of the euphemistic use of

'ageing' from Erdman Palmore, professor in medical sociology, giving this advice: "I suggest a moratorium on the use of *aging* as a euphemism for deterioration, because it gives aging a 'bad name.' … [I]f one means decline or deterioration, it would be more honest and clearer to say so, and instead of aging use deterioration or debilitation" (Palmore, 2000, as quoted in Gullette, 2018, p. 267). Admittedly, a major trend through the last few decades has been to ameliorate the negative connotations of 'ageing' by adding a premodifying adjective 'successful'. This attitude has lately been critiqued as "a contemporary obsession" of culture (Lamb, 2017, as quoted by Gullette, 2018, p. 252). Gullette also comments on the chronology and dynamics of social awareness that challenges language practices: what begins with small "unease about experiences and terminology" develops, as awareness grows, into "irritation, anger, outrage, and resistance" (Gullette, 2018, p. 252).

Gullette's essay might be claimed to give us an insight into the anatomy of euphemising 'ageing' in the context of academic research. First, she admits the benefit of "training [herself] to interrogate the term 'aging' and try to replace it", leading to "an expanded and more precise age vocabulary". She hopes that this mental experiment will ultimately work toward "to clearer thinking and writing, in many disciplines and interdisciplines, on embodiment and other theoretical issues, and to changes in related verbal practices, further research on ageism, greater well-being, and radical anti-ageism" (2018, p. 255).

Strikingly, she exposes to criticism the name of "a flagship journal" in the discipline, the *Journal of Aging Studies*, where the word 'old' is avoided. She writes: "You may like the forthrightness of *old*, as I do, but 'Old-Age Studies' might have an alarming ring. Like 'Growing-Older Studies', it is unlikely to be welcomed in the universities…" (2018, p. 255). Gullette refers to the term 'aging' as "politely signaling" an age class without using the "supposedly alienating adjective" ('old'). Since the 1990s, Gullette observes, scholars have used an alternative, the term 'age', as in, for example, name of a scholarly approach or book series (Age Studies), book titles (e.g. K. Woodward's *Figuring age*), names of projects (e.g. "Social Innovation for Age"), or conference topics ("Theorizing Age"). Gullette has further explored the names of organisations, networks, conferences, journals, etc. It turns out that many naming decisions stick to the traditional conventions or to earlier paradigms. For example, the relatively recently picked names of organisations, The European Network on Aging Studies (2010) and the North American Network in Aging Studies (2013), opted for retaining the earlier usage.

Based on the above and many other naming decisions, Gullette seems rather sceptical about whether the change she proposes may happen quickly, suggesting it might require time and effort: "Institutionalized nomenclature has inertial power. (Dislodging is not fracking; it's unearthing, bringing to light.)" (2018, p. 256). However, she

would still believe in the power of words in hoping for the changed terminology to "expanding our concerns beyond one age class" and bringing teaching about old age and ageism closer to the undergraduate and graduate students, by offering interdisciplinary age studies courses. She asks: "may we anticipate teachers integrating age, intersectionally, in courses across the entire curriculum?" (2018, p. 257).

Gullette's argument and proposal is appealing. Yet, it is significant that the scholar does not propose "life-course studies", to evade the biologically-based term altogether, especially as she (and many other scholars) contest the (mainly bio-medical) understanding of old age as (body-related) decline, and instead propose the investigation of "the embodied psyche in culture over time" (2018, p. 258). This would recognize "subjectivity — growth, resilience, spirituality, and wisdom, as well as the sufferings caused by ageism — as significant potential experiences of aging-into-adulthood and toward old age" (2018, p. 258). Gullette also points out that the term 'anti-aging' was in fact invented by those industries which, having identified their potential customers' "pain point" (i.e. exploiting their helplessness vis-à-vis the decline ideology), offer them goods that ease the pain of bodily ageing. It seems, then, that 'anti-ageing' should itself be euphemised in order not to offend those who cannot help physical ageing and the ideology of ageing-as-disease-and-decline. All in all, Gullette finds a problem with the fact that the word 'aging' has negative connotations, perpetuated by its use to describe dilapidated objects (as in 'ageing infrastructure' or 'ageing architecture'), but in fact borrowed from the understanding of the human body as unavoidably deteriorating with age/time. Paradoxically, 'ageing' first functioned as a euphemism in contexts where it helped to avoid labelling people as 'old'.

Gullette's argument is against a *unifying* understanding of ageing ("we all age"): "my view is that this cannot reasonably be asserted until many unlikely conditions are met: (1) inequalities in health and wealth over the life course are weakened or eliminated, (2) decline ideology and intergenerational hostility wither, and (3) there comes to be considerably more agreement about the fundamental concepts of *age* and the facts of *ageism*" (Gullette, 2018, p. 262). In her appeal to avoid the use of ageing as an unqualified gerund, she suggests it should be replaced by alternatives which make the process more specific: "aging past youth", "ageing into middle years", "aging into old age", "aging into frailty", "ageing toward retirement", ageing beyond midlife". Importantly, Gullette claims that such "neologisms" should replace what she considers reification of life stages in social sciences, whereby they are defined in terms of age ranges (e.g. midlife is between 40 and 70), which she calls "phony chronology".

Finally, Gullette frames her critique in the political context: "In this essay I limit myself to vocabulary changes, but they can be liberating.… In more political language, a liberating language can move from margin to center. Here and now, wording

that replaces *aging* and explicates *ageism* undoes our submission to the ideology of life-course decline, with everything that follows" (Gullette, 2018, p. 266). Thus, she convincingly asserts the power of language over the shaping of human experience.

7. NAME OF THE RESEARCH AREA ACROSS DISCIPLINES

As discerningly discussed by Gullette (2018), the very name of the research area devoted to growing old is controversial. Yet, the decisions and choices made by the scholars working in the area are consequential for the general public's understanding of the academic inquiry and its conclusions. Popular publications have amply referred to scholarly work done on human lifespan development, to substantiate the factual information they include and to support their recommendations and advice with scholarly expertise. Thus these publications play the knowledge dissemination role, but also influence attitudes, if only by naming relevant phenomena.

In view of Gullette's critique (above), referring to the time of life in the names of research fields may be problematic in that a name may imply a biased attitude, and possibly influence the way research is conducted and the results approached by the general public. One of the labels criticised is 'ageing studies', a name which implies just interest in the later part of life, rather than the whole life course. If the term 'ageing studies' is controversial, then proposals for reformed usage similarly suggest euphemisms, so as to avoid a "dispreferred" formulation. An alternative has been 'age studies'. Gullette first called for 'age studies' (a.k.a. 'cultural studies of age') in the 1990s, and has since referred to the field in the singular, as in "[age studies] arises out of a commitment to all the ages of life", or "age studies analyses representations…, follows trends", or "age studies monitors oppressors" (Gullette, 2011, p. 16). It is an interdisciplinary critical study, guided by a political agenda to fight ageism and to promote understanding across generations. One of its central concerns is the ideology of decline, "demonising" ageing past youth, imposed by the decline narrative.[20] 'Age studies' might be a convenient umbrella term subsuming, or at least related to, various critical approaches to age performed in areas called 'ageing studies', but also 'social gerontology', 'cultural gerontology', 'critical gerontology', as well as 'discursive gerontology' (Nikander, 2009).

The disciplines of sociology and psychology have their ways to refer to the time under investigation as spanning across the whole of human life. There are similar

[20] The title of Susan Pickard's book (2016) actually provides a definition of the discipline: *Age Studies: A sociological examination of how we age and are aged through the life course*. Lynne Segal's (2014) article, "The coming of age studies", suggests that this is a new area — or perhaps just a new name.

yet rather distinct disciplinary traditions of conceptualising and referring to human development, for example 'life course' in sociology or 'lifespan' in psychology. Karl Ulrich Mayer (2003) expresses the hope that these would grow in parallel to create a transdisciplinary paradigm, and — at the same time — disappointment that they have not mutually enriched and broadened each other. Life span psychology, he explains, questions the overemphasis of life course sociology on socio-structural and institutional perspective in accounting for the life course. On the other hand, "the sociology of the life course … views life span psychology as needing to include the complexities of institutions for more precise accounts of contexts" (Mayer, 2003, p. 469). Accordingly, in linguistic research reference would be made to 'lifespan' when emphasis is on the neurobiological basis of language, but to 'life course' when language is conceptualized and studied as an essentially social phenomenon. However, these two perspectives may be reconciled and inform each other, and their names do not signal any openly evaluative way of referring to the experience of ageing. This is how they may mark a shift toward orthophemy.

8. CONSTITUTIVE POWER OF LANGUAGE: ARE WORDS CONSEQUENTIAL?

Bill Bytheway is a gerontologist notable for his concern for language issues, which many other age studies scholars do not address. In his book, aptly entitled *Unmasking age* (2011), he draws attention to the conflating of old age and terminal illness in public discussions prompted by the "moral panic over the rising number of very old and frail people" (Bytheway, 2011, p. 212). Paradoxically, this way of linking concepts may result in speakers' ability to distance themselves from both old age and disease. For example, if arthritis is represented as "the disease of the elderly", "it is the elderly who have arthritis, we are led to believe, not 'us'" (Bytheway, 2011, p. 212). On the other hand, when a person is old, they would — devastatingly — expect the symptoms of arthritis as unavoidable in older age.

In Bytheway's book there is a chapter on representations of age, where constitutive power is attributed to two types of symbolic signs. "Words and images underpin models of age. In particular, they create structured understandings of the characteristics of older people" (2011, p. 75). To demonstrate how vocabulary and grammar play "a part in constructing ideas about age" (2011, p. 78), Bytheway explored dictionary definitions of 'age' (as noun and verb), comparing how they changed over time, and concluded that in newer editions ageing is less explicitly associated with old age. In another part of his analysis he looked closely at the grammatical aspects of language use about age. In a 1988 government White Paper *Growing Older* he noticed that the

use of the inclusive first person pronoun (as in "We are all growing older") gradually became dominated by the use of the third person reference as the publication moved to more specific aspects of ageing (as in "many people … as they grow older, find themselves generally slowing down") (Bytheway, 2011, p. 78). The use of the past tense in describing the activities of older people is another way to impose a past-time outlook ("the active life of an older person is over"), while researchers' inquiries with a future orientation tend to be reserved for schoolchildren and students (Bytheway, 2011, pp. 78–79). This again seems to imply the socio-cognitive consequences of linguistic representation.

Another pattern identified and commented on is the co-occurrence of nominal labels with the topics discussed: the White Paper under analysis "associated 'pensioners' with income issues and entering retirement, 'older people'—with retirement opportunities, and 'elderly people' with accommodation and care concerns" (Bytheway, 2011, p. 78). Assuming that the socio-economic problems addressed involve evaluative meaning, this sort of association marks the names of certain social groups in more or less positive or negative terms.

Gullette is very explicit in saying that language impacts thought: "our choices of vocabulary—'only words'—represent our thinking to ourselves and influence the thinking of others" (2018, p. 251). In her critique of the use of 'ageing' as an adjective, she also worked on the assumption about the negative impact of such phrasing on its users. Gullette's proposal that the "wording that replaces 'aging' and explicates ageism helps undo submission to the ideology of life-course decline, liberating observation, potentially undoing internalized ageism and lessening the widespread fear of growing older" (2018, p. 251) exactly spells out her belief in the power of language. Gullette also demonstrates that the ways words are made to co-occur shape the constructive role of language. For instance, the common phrases with 'aging', such as 'aging nations' or 'population aging' are powerful in suggesting that older members of societies are somehow responsible for the global demographic problem. Importantly, Gullette seems very aware of scholars' responsibility in this respect: "The ways such words are used, even by scholars, may promote an ideology, or disguise one" (2018, p. 251) and, ultimately, there is no doubt that "[l]anguage shapes thought, and ageist language invisibly spreads ageist thinking" (2018, p. 251).

The assumption of the social constructionist role of language is at the basis of Pirjo Nikander's (2009) contribution on the discursive means of making age and life stage positioning relevant in linguistic interaction. In viewing age as a socially constructive category, Nikander points out that research should not fail to explore its significance to individuals, particularly their active meaning making in interaction, where positive or negative meanings are attributed to age and ageing. Nikander thus stresses speaker agency:

> the central importance of individual's own active meaning-making and language use. They have also failed to detail the interactional processes whereby positive and negative cultural meanings of age are mobilised in the multitude of immediate local contexts that make up the everyday. (Nikander, 2009, p. 865)

The processes present in everyday discourse are revealed by a close, qualitative analysis of interaction, to pinpoint how language constructs age and the lifespan. Nikander observed specifically the way aspects of (life)time perception are discursively captured by a certain generation of speakers: "personal change and continuity in the talk of Finnish baby-boomers" (Nikander, 2009, p. 864).

As explicated by Helena Halmari, the name changes proposed by the "people first" approach for state organisations and the academic world "are laudable and altruistic, yet they are also prescriptive and based on the potentially naive Whorfian notion that if we can fix the language, we can fix the world. The first question, therefore, that needs to be asked is whether we can fix the language" (Halmari, 2011, p. 830). In order to consider the question, she examined a non-academic newspaper language corpus. She found "the continued presence of the non-PC patterns in news media — despite loudly articulated objections to these forms" (Halmari, 2011, p. 837). Interestingly, Halmari hypothesizes three reasons why a daily newspaper might prefer an apparently insensitive (or even dysphemistic) pattern: headlines must be brief, stories with "catchy" and shocking words sell better, and for variation in expression (2011, p. 837). Halmari ultimately concludes that the proposal is semantically naïve, as it ignores the semantic change, which with time moves any euphemism towards a dysphemism. She points out that "the issue is the continuous need for new circumlocutions." And thus the idea of the euphemism treadmill appears again.

9. SUMMARY AND FINAL REMARKS

This paper has discussed the use of different references to age-related concepts (such as "ageing"), life stage categories (such as "old"), as well as areas of doing research (such as "age studies"). In view of ageing being a social taboo domain and a "dispreferred" term, it was assumed by the present author that age-related terminology would undergo euphemisation. In recent years, much research attention has been given to euphemisms for age and ageing (for example, Burridge, 2012; Benczes and Burridge, 2015; Benczes et al., 2018).

In this paper we laid the foundation for an investigation of how life course scholars choose to apply the generally known euphemisms, as well as innovative means of naming concepts in "agreeable" and non-evaluative ways. In this preliminary study it has been important to find out whether these scholars recognise the problem of

naming socially sensitive problems and identities, and how they explicitly reflect upon it. Their insights were drawn from, and the discussion inspired by, the texts of academic prose written about age-related topics. An overview of expert (academic) writing on ageing and old(er) age suggests that the authors participate in the ever-changing practices of euphemistic references to the sensitive topics in question. Some examples of euphemisms have been given representing three mechanisms as proposed by Burridge (2012). It has been suggested above that one's preference for euphemisms, dysphemisms or orthophemisms is dependent on the discursive context, and in academic diction the latter choice is the preferred one. Age studies scholars seem to aim at orthophemistic usage, to balance out the evaluative connotations involved and their variable dependence on context.[21] Unsurprisingly, deeply aware of the complexities of the social embedding of linguistic practices, authors are often explicit in saying that language influences social reality, if only by potentially affecting the vulnerable populations, but also society at large.

To conclude, in the academic publications consulted, there is some explicit recognition of the significance of language use for the social attitudes and behaviour related to age(ing). Besides their personal choice of euphemisms, authors have used other discursive means to write about ageing, as well as making informed comments about strategies present in the public sphere, which they perceived as having a euphemising function. The question is to be addressed in future research whether specialist academic texts in general, in an attempt to reduce highly evaluative language, indeed lean toward orthophemism rather than euphemism.

This qualitative insight into usage and awareness, and possibly the link between the two, is potentially a starting point for further, more systematic research. It would be interesting to consider the lexical replacements discussed above with reference to the life cycle of euphemisms. A quantitative analysis of the usage over time might show the authors' changing preference for X-phemistic patterns, as "generated" by the euphemistic treadmill.

All in all, the perspectives of multiple disciplines need to be considered, before a systematic study may be undertaken of euphemising ageing and its dependence on numerous factors, prioritised by different research areas and disciplines.

[21] "Word meanings and their associations vary continuously in response to the relationship between speaker and audience, the setting, and the subject matter; change any one factor, and the language may also have to change" (Allan & Burridge, 2006, p. 98).

REFERENCES

Allan, K. (2001). *Natural language semantics*. Blackwell.

Allan, K. (2012). X-phemism and creativity. *Lexis 7*. http://journals.openedition.org/lexis/340.

Allan, K., & Burridge, K. (1991). *Euphemism and dysphemism: Language used as shield and weapon*. Oxford University Press.

Allan, K., & Burridge, K. (2006). *Forbidden words: Taboo and the censoring of language*. Cambridge University Press.

The American heritage guide to contemporary usage and style. (2005). Houghton Mifflin.

Arrien, A. (2007). *The second half of life: Opening the eight gates of wisdom*. Sounds True.

Ariès, P. (1974). *Western attitudes toward death: From the Middle Ages to the present*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Benczes, R., & Burridge, K. (2015). Current attitudes to ageing as reflected in the names of Australian aged care facilities names. *NAMES: A Journal of Onomastics*, *63*(3), 127–145.

Benczes, R., Burridge, K., Allan, K., & Sharifian, F. (2018). Old age revolution in Australian English: rethinking a taboo concept. In A. Pizarro Pedraza (Ed.), *Linguistic taboo revisited: Novel insights from cognitive perspectives* (pp. 99–116). Mouton.

Baltes, P. B., Reese, H. W., & Lipsitt, L. P. (1980). Lifespan Developmental Psychology. *Annual Review of Psychology*, *31*, 65–110.

Bengtson, V. L., Elder Jr, G. H., & Putney, N. M. (2005). The life course perspective on ageing. In M. L. Johnson (Ed.), *The Cambridge handbook of age and ageing* (pp. 493–509). Cambridge University Press.

Biggs, S. (2003). *Understanding ageing: images, attitudes and professional practice*. Open University Press.

Burridge, K. (2012). Euphemism and language change: The sixth and seventh ages. *Journal in English Lexicology Lexis*, *7*, 65–92. https://doi.org/10.4000/lexis.355

Burridge, K., & Benczes, R. (2019). Taboo as a driver of language change. In K. Allan (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of taboo words and language* (pp. 180–198). Oxford University Press.

Bytheway, B. (2011). *Unmasking age: The significance of age for social research*. Policy Press.

Bytheway, B., Keil, T., & Allat, P. (Eds.). (1989). *Becoming and being old: Sociological approaches to later life*. Sage Publications.

Calasanti, T. (2015). Combating ageism: How successful is successful aging? *The Gerontologist*, *56*(6), 1093–1101.

Coupland, N., Coupland, J., & Giles, H. (1989). Telling age in later life: Identity and face implications. *Text*, *9*, 129–151.

Coupland, N., Coupland, J., & Giles, H. (1991). *Language, society, and the elderly: Discourse, identity, and ageing*. Blackwell.

Coupland, N., & Coupland, J. (1999). Ageing, ageism and anti-ageism: Moral stance in geriatric medical discourse. In H. E. Hamilton (Ed.), *Language and communication in old age: Multidisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 177–208). Routledge.

Eckert, P. (1997). Age as a sociolinguistic variable. In F. Coulmas (Ed.), *The handbook of sociolinguistics* (pp. 151–167). Blackwell Publishing.

Erber, J. T. (2010). *Aging and older adulthood* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

Franssen, T., Stijnen, M., Hamers, F., & Schneider, F. (2020). Age differences in demographic, social and health-related factors associated with loneliness across the adult life span (19–65 years): A cross-sectional study in the Netherlands. *BMC Public Health*, *20*(1), 1118. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-09208-0

Gerstenberg, A., & Voeste, A. (Eds.). (2005). *Language development: The lifespan perspective*. John Benjamins.

Graham-Wisener, L., Nelson, A., Byrne, A., Islam, I., Harrison, C., Geddis, J., & Berry, E. (2022). Understanding public attitudes to death talk and advance care planning in Northern Ireland using health behaviour change theory: A qualitative study. *BMC Public Health*, *22*(1), 906. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-13319-1

Green, L. (2010). *Understanding the life course: sociological and psychological perspectives*. Polity Press.

Gullette, M. M. (2000). *Safe at last in the middle years: The invention of the midlife progress novel*. University of California Press.

Gullette, M. M. (2004). *Aged by culture*. University of Chicago Press.

Gullette, M. M. (2011). *Agewise: Fighting the new ageism in America*. University of Chicago Press.

Gullette, M. M. (2018). Against "aging": How to talk about growing older. *Theory, Culture & Society*, *35*(7–8), 251–270.

Guth, L. J., & Murphy, L. (1998). People first language in middle and high schools: Usability and readability. *The Clearing House*, *72*(2), 115–117.

Halmari, H. (2011). Political correctness, euphemism, and language change: The case of "people first". *Journal of Pragmatics*, *43*, 28–840.

Hamilton, H. E. (1999). *Language and communication in old age: Multidisciplinary perspectives*. Routledge.

Harris, L. A., & Dollinger, S. (2001). Participation in a course on aging: Knowledge, attitudes, and anxiety about aging in oneself and others. *Educational Gerontology*, *27*, 657–667.

Hendricks, J. (2012). Considering life course concepts. *The Journals of Gerontology, Series B: Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, *67*(2), 226–231.

Hepworth, M. (2000). *Stories of ageing*. Open University Press.

Johnson, J., & Slater, R. (1993). *Ageing and later life*. Sage Publications.

Kellehear, A. (1984). Are we a "death-denying" society? A sociological review. *Social Science and Medicine*, *18*, 713–723.

Lamb, S. (Ed.). (2017). *Successful aging as a contemporary obsession: Global perspectives*. Rutgers University Press.

Langer, E. J. (2009). *Counter clockwise: A proven way to think yourself younger and healthier*. Hodder.

Lasher, K. P., & Faulkender, P. J. (1993). Measurement of aging anxiety: Development of the anxiety about aging scale. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, *37*(4), 247–259.

Loe, M. (2017). Comfortable aging: Lessons for living from eighty-five and beyond. In S. Lamb (Ed.), *Successful aging as a contemporary obsession: Global perspectives* (pp. 218–229). Rutgers University Press.

Martinson, M., & Berridge, C. (2015). Successful aging and its discontents: A systematic review of the social gerontology literature. *The Gerontologist*, *55*(1), 58–69.

Mayer, K. U. (2003). The sociology of the life course and lifespan psychology: Diverging or converging pathways? In U. M. Staudinger & U. Lindenberger (Eds.), *Understanding human development: Dialogues with lifespan psychology* (pp. 463–482). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4615-0357-6_23

Nikander, P. (2002). *Age in action: Membership work and stage of life categories in talk*. Finnish Academy of Science and Letters.

Nikander, P. (2009). Doing change and continuity: Age identity and the micro-macro divide. *Ageing & Society*, *29*(5), 863–881.

Palmore, E. (2000). Guest editorial: Ageism in gerontological language. *The Gerontologist*, *40*(6), 645. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/40.6.645

Paulus, T., & Lester, J. (2016). ATLAS.ti for conversation and discourse analysis. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *19*(4), 405–428.

Pickard, S. (2016). *Age studies: A sociological examination of how we age and are aged through the life course*. SAGE.
Pinsker, J. (2020). When does someone become "old"? It's surprisingly hard to find a good term for people in late life. *The Atlantic*, January 27. https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2020/01/old-people-older-elderly-middle-age/605590
Pinker, S. (1994). The game of the name. *The New York Times*, April 5.
Pinker, S. (2002). *The blank slate: Denying human nature in modern life*. Penguin Publishing Group.
Pinker, S. (2008). *The stuff of thought: Language as a window into human nature*. Penguin Books.
Ruddock, J. S. (2022). *The second half of your life*. Vermillion.
Rotas, A. (2014). *Growing old competitively: photographs of Masters athletes*. Alex Rotas Publishing.
Rowe, J. W., & Kahn, R. L. (1997). Successful aging. *The Gerontologist*, *37*, 433–440.
Saake, I. (2008). Moderne Todessemantiken. In I. Saake & W. Vogd (Eds.), *Moderne Mythen der Medizin* (pp. 237–262). VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
Schilling, N. (2013). *Sociolinguistic fieldwork*. Cambridge University Press.
Segal, L. (2014). The coming of age studies. *Age, Culture, Humanities*, *1*(1), 31–34.
Terry, A. (2020). Euphemistic dysphemisms and dysphemistic euphemisms as means to convey irony and banter. *Language and Literature*, *29*(1), 57–75.
Trucil, D. E., Lundebjerg, N. E., & Busso, D. S. (2021). When it comes to older adults, language matters and is changing: American Geriatrics Society update on reframing aging style changes. *Journal of American Geriatrics Society*, *69*, 265–267. https://doi.org/10.1111/jgs.16848
Woodward, K. M. (1991). *Aging and its discontents: Freud and other fictions*. Indiana University Press.
Ylänne, V. (Ed.). (2012). *Representing ageing: Images and identities*. Palgrave Macmillan.

EUPHEMISING AGEING IN POPULAR AND ACADEMIC PUBLICATIONS ON THE LIFE COURSE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Summary

According to age studies expert Margaret Morganroth Gullette (2004) the social ideology of ageing as decline — and the concomitant anxiety — is affecting people increasingly early on in their lives. A linguistic way of coping is through minimising the threatening impact of words. This paper focuses on how life course scholars apply euphemisms to refer to age-related identities and issues. Additionally, in the background of our inquiry are two questions: (1) whether and how these authors engage in metalinguistic comment, and (2) whether they explicitly acknowledge the constitutive role of language and discourse. The conclusions suggest that there is some explicit recognition of the significance of language use for the social attitudes and behaviour related to ageing. Besides their personal choice of euphemisms, authors have used other discursive means to write non-evaluatively about ageing, as well as make informed comments about strategies present in the public sphere, perceived as euphemistic. Most importantly, this exploratory paper is to probe the interdisciplinary context of the ways scholars refer sensitively to ageing.

Keywords: age studies; ageing; euphemism; academic discourse.

EUFEMIZOWANIE STARZENIA SIĘ W POPULARNONAUKOWYCH I NAUKOWYCH PUBLIKACJACH NA TEMAT PRZEBIEGU ŻYCIA. BADANIE ROZPOZNAWCZE

Streszczenie

Według ekspertki w dziedzinie badań nad procesem starzenia się, Margaret Morganroth Gullette (2004), społeczna ideologia starzenia się postrzeganego jako degradacja (*decline*) — wraz z towarzyszącym mu lękiem — dotyka ludzi na coraz wcześniejszych etapach życia. Językowym sposobem radzenia sobie z tym lękiem jest minimalizowanie negatywnego wpływu leksyki odnoszącej się do starości. Niniejszy artykuł skupia się na tym, w jaki sposób badacze zagadnienia przebiegu życia stosują eufemizmy w odniesieniu do tożsamości i innych kwestii związanych z wiekiem i starzeniem się. Dodatkowo w tle dociekań stawiamy dwa pytania: (1) czy i w jaki sposób autorzy ci angażują się w budowanie odnośnych komentarzy metajęzykowych oraz (2) czy w sposób bezpośredni przyznają oni kluczową rolę językowi i dyskursowi. Wyniki badań wskazują na uznanie znaczenia świadomego używania form językowych dla kształtowania postaw społecznych i zachowań związanych ze starzeniem się. Poza osobistym wyborem eufemizmów, odnośni autorzy używali innych środków dyskursywnych, aby pisać w sposób nieoceniający o procesie starzenia się, a także po to, by komentować strategie dyskursywne obecne w sferze publicznej i postrzegane jako eufemistyczne. Podstawowym celem niniejszego artykułu jest eksploracja interdyscyplinarnego kontekstu sposobów wrażliwego odnoszenia się przez badaczy do procesu starzenia się.

Słowa kluczowe: badania nad wiekiem; proces starzenia się; eufemizm; dyskurs akademicki.

Agnieszka Kiełkiewicz-Janowiak is Associate Professor at the Faculty of English, Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland. She has done research and lectured internationally on social dialectology, historical sociolinguistics, discourse analysis as well as language and gender issues. She has published chapters in Wiley-Blackwell handbooks and recently co-edited (with M. Wrembel and P. Gąsiorowski) *Approaches to the Study of Sound Structure and Speech* (2020). Her current research interests focus on life-span sociolinguistics, the discourse of ageing and intergenerational communication. In 2021, she co-designed and is now supervising an MA studies teaching programme *Language and Communication in Healthcare*.