***Discourses of Ageing and Gender: The Impact of Public
and Private Voices on the Identity of Ageing Women***

Clare Anderson (2019)

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Reviewed by Yanli Jia

Gender and age are among the very salient markers that indicate social difference. In contrast to the wide discussions on gender, age(ing) as a socio-cultural phenomenon has not received adequate academic attention. Additionally, ageing women are quite under-represented in public and private contexts, in contrast to young women who are highly prominent for their youthfulness and attractiveness. Clare Anderson, the author of *Discourses of Ageing and Gender*, uses datasets from public and private discourses to look into the linguistic and cultural representations of ageing women, the complex relationship between gender, age and femininity, as well as the powerful role that public discourses play in mid-life women's self-evaluation.

In this nine-chapter monograph, Anderson provides readers with both theoretical thinking and empirical studies. The purpose of the book is made clear in the opening chapter: to reveal the dominant cultural attitudes towards age, ageing and gender, as well as to uncover the linguistic resources used on and by women to construct gender and age identity. Anderson also briefly introduces the methodological approaches and analytical tools she uses in the study together with the main content of the book.

In order to offer an overview of literature on gender and age, Anderson brings together theoretical perspectives from different domains: socio-linguistics, sociology, cultural theory, gender studies, social gerontology, identity theory, media studies and feminist analysis. Her review of the theo-

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retical and cultural contexts in Chapter 2 reveals that the ageing female body remains problematic in the current cultural context where a beautiful body should be youthful. With the multi-disciplinary nature of this study comes a combination of different methodological approaches and analytical tools. Not surprisingly, the demonstration of analytic frameworks is the focus of Chapter 3. Critical discourse analysis serves the principal purpose of the book to reveal the ideological representations of reality through analysing the complex relationship between private voices and public discourses (p. 63). The use of evaluation and appraisal theory is built on Michael Stubbs's claim 'whenever speakers or writers say anything, they encode their point of view towards it' (Stubbs 1996:202). Finally, the application of the multi-modal analysis allows Anderson to offer a precise analysis of the different role each semiotic mode performs.

The next five chapters provide in-depth empirical studies of ageing women's identity construction in public discourses and private voices. Using advertising texts from anti-ageing skincare, Chapter 4 suggests that ageing women are still under the pressure to conform to stereotypes of female beauty. The discourses of science to pathologise ageing are used as the authoritative voice of science to suggest that ageing (female) appearance is problematic and can only be solved by scientific solutions. In Chapter 5, with selected texts from lifestyle media and the works of two influential writers on menopause, Anderson reveals that public discourses play a powerful role in influencing the way women construct their own feminine identities. The (post)menopause period is linked in language with a diseased body and deranged emotions, so much so that women feel uncertain and uneasy about how to perform their femininity as they age. The analysis of textual and visual resources from four women's magazines implies that older women are generally denied the opportunity to appear in the fashion pages of magazines with a younger orientation, where an ideal female should be youthful, based on sexualised glamour and overt display. Both chapters, through the male-targeted advertisements and an article about the male mid-life respectively, compare the social attitudes towards ageing men and women, and highlight the female domain. It is revealed that ageing remains a fundamentally gendered phenomenon which evaluates the ageing male appearance as sexy.

Chapters 6 and 7 shift the focus to private spoken data, exploring in depth the language used by women in the everyday talk. Using 19 face-to-face interviews with participants ranging in age from 21 to 80, Chapter 6 uncovers that public discourses which define female ageing as unacceptable encourage women to evaluate ageing as a troublesome and unwelcome experience. Chapter 7 focuses on the centrality of the mirror moment to

reveal the relationship between ageing, femininity and appearance. As the current culture is still preoccupied with the appearance, women become the objects of their own as well as the cultural gaze (p. 228). Through the narratives of their mirror moments, we can see there is a lack of a culturally approved outlet for women as they age, and older women still feel uncertain about their identity.

Chapter 8 turns back to the public domain where highly visible older women transgress cultural rules in different ways and choose to perform their ageing femininity. Despite some positive response, Anderson argues that cultural attitudes towards ageing are fundamentally gendered in our society which remains structured by the polarities of youth and age (Woodward 1991). Older women are still regarded as deprived of youthfulness and have little to do with attractiveness.

The concluding chapter recaps the major findings of the study and points out that there is a lack of ideological suppleness to accept that an ageing female body can continue to be a site of femininity and desirability (p. 254). This, in turn, highlights the importance of continuing research in this area.

Theoretically and practically, the book makes an important contribution to the study on gender and age(ing) as well as the complex relationship between them. First, despite an increasing interest in women's ageing, scanty attention has been given from the feminist perspective. This book, from a feminist (or more specifically, post-feminist) view, adds to the literature on ageing women. It further highlights the ambivalent and paradoxical identity of older women constructed in public discourses and private voices. Second, the reciprocal impact of gender and age(ing) is abundantly represented in language use; however, a linguistic perspective is rarely seen which addresses both (older) age and gender. To justify the role of language in revealing how the society and women themselves evaluate ageing females, the book draws in critical linguistics and Halliday's (1978) systemic-functional linguistics as well as Matheson's (2005) work on transitivity in the textual analysis, providing a more meticulous analysis of the linguistic strategies such as the use of imperative verb forms and inclusive pronouns. The investigation of linguistic features of evaluation is conducive for readers to gain a better understanding of ageing from both private voices and public discourses. Third, the book adds to the methodological literature on gender and age. The multimodal analytical approach conforms to the multimodal texts represented in public discourses, which produces a precise analysis of the different role each semiotic mode plays in the identity construction of women. Fourth, the findings of the study provide practical implications for advertising business, raising awareness among brand owners and advertisers about the language used about and by

ageing women. The insights gained from the investigation of the linguistic impact of gender and age(ing) can also be extended to the study on mid-life men since male menopause and male-targeted anti-ageing products become increasingly available. This would offer a more meaningful comparison of attitudes towards female and male ageing.

Insightful as it is, the book is not free of limitations. First, since Anderson refers to mid-life men discourses to highlight the female domain, the resources she provides are certainly too few to match the abundant materials about women. This, of course, should not be a fault on the part of the author, because discourses concerning ageing men are not as available as those of women. This is a best manifestation of the fact that ageing remains much more problematised for women than for men. Although the modern feminist movements have led to some profound changes to people's stereotypical evaluations about females and femininity, femininity (based on youth, beauty and sexual attractiveness) has been culturally associated with young females. Second, the book is not free of linguistic problems such as syntactic inaccuracies. This may be a slip of the pen during the writing or editing.

That said, the book opens a new dimension to the research on gender and age as well as their complex relationship. It will appeal to researchers and students of gender studies, gender and language, and gender and age.

References

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