Expressions of bad memory and hearing as a social action among the multilingual elderly people

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This paper discusses questions of language and aging in multilingual context, an elderly people’s home. Changes in cognitive-communicative abilities are normal while aging; however, they become especially visible, when participants mention the deficits explicitly. Talk about physical changes can be seen as a typical feature in the discourse of the aged. I will show in detail how expressions of bad memory and other age-related deficits are used as a means of interaction among the elderly and what these utterances do in interaction as part of the discursive construction of identity.

The data have been collected using ethnographic method in a retirement home in Russia, where bilingual Ingrian-Finns live with Russian elderly people. The informants are over 80 years old and have learned Finnish as their first language. The data are analysed qualitatively keeping the socio-historical context in mind. The framework used is interactional sociolinguistics.

The paper studies how aged multilingual people refer to the bad memory or hearing problems; they may have difficulties in remembering a word in Finnish or remembering certain events. Participants talk about both their own memory or hearing as well as pay attention of the others’ abilities as well. Phrases are constructed differently (i.e. I cannot remember anything; I have a bad head) but the focus of the paper is on the action: what is the interactional goal when the cognitive-communicative deficit is mentioned explicitly?

References

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