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WPEL Research in Brief: The Relationship of Age to Address Forms in Public Service Encounters

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WPEL Research in Brief

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The Relationship of Age to Address Forms in Public Service Encounters

In this study, Myra M. Goldschmidt investigates the speech used by cashiers, clerks, salespersons, and other service personnel in service encounters with the public. Wolfson and Manes (1980: 79) point out that, in the United States, service personnel have three basic choices when addressing customers in a service encounter. They may:

- a) use a traditional form of respect—"Can I help you, ma'am (sir)?";
- b) use a term of endearment—"Can I help you, dear (pal)?";
- c) use no spoken form of address at all (zero address form) —"Can I help you?".

In an observational study, Goldschmidt investigates the forms of address used by service personnel in addressing customers. Goldschmidt's study was undertaken in southeastern Pennsylvania to determine whether terms of endearment and respect forms are directly

Research in Brief

related to the age and sex of the speaker and addressee. In all instances, only positive responses were noted. The first part of her study consists of two hundred service interactions between a thirty-seven-year-old white female and service personnel of both sexes and of all ages. The second part of her study consists of the observation of encounters between various speakers and addressees of both sexes and all ages.

Of the two hundred encounters between the thirty-seven-year-old female and the service personnel, some type of address form, either a term of endearment or a respect form, is used on twenty-seven occasions (13.5% of the total for the two hundred encounters). In these twenty-seven instances where some form of address is used, terms of endearment are used in 70% of the encounters, while "ma'am" is used in 30% of the encounters. Calculated for the total two hundred responses, terms of endearment represent 9.5% of the total responses and "ma'am" only 4%.

An analysis of the distribution by sex of the users of terms of endearment shows that in eight of nineteen instances (42%) the speaker is male, whereas in eleven of nineteen instances (58%), the speaker is female. Similarly, evaluation of usage of the term "ma'am" shows that three of eight speakers using that term (37.5%) are male and five of the eight (62.5%) female. Perhaps the most interesting finding is that on every occasion where an address form is used, the speaker is over the age of fifty (estimated).

The second part of Goldschmidt's study seeks to evaluate service encounters in which various speakers and addressees are involved. In order to determine whether age or sex have any influence on the major form of address used, the study was devised so that it would be possible to observe both males and females, and younger and older interlocutors, in the role of both speaker and addressee. ("Older" interlocutors are defined as being over fifty years of age.) The following table summarizes the results of the second half of the study:

		SPEAKER			
		Younger male	Younger female	Older male	Older female
A D	Younger male	0%*	0%	0%	60%
			0%*	60%	0%
D R	Younger female	0%	0%	75%	20%
			0%	0%	0%
E S	Older male	0%	0%	0%	25%
			0%	86%	25%
S E E	Older female	0%	0%	20%	25%
			0%	40%	0%

* % terms of
 endearment
 % respect
 form

The results of both these studies indicate that terms of endearment and respect are used primarily by individuals over fifty

Research in Brief

years of age. The highest incidence of terms of endearment occurs when the speakers are older men and the addressees are younger women. A similarly high percentage of terms of endearment is employed by older women when speaking with younger men. This implies that the age of the speaker is of greater consideration in the usage of terms of endearment and that sex is of secondary importance on every occasion. Similarly, the use of the respect form is greatest when older men address other older men. When older men address younger men, a decline in the usage of this respect form is observed. Even less usage of this respect form is noted when older men address older women, and there is a total absence of the respect form by older men when addressing younger women. The use of the respect form by older women is reserved solely for occasional usage when addressing older men. Furthermore, of considerable significance is the failure of both younger men and younger women to use the respect form or any term of endearment in their dealings with men and women of either age group.

Whereas Wolfson and Manes (1980) find that in one fourth of the service encounters "ma'am" is used and that in three fourths of these encounters terms of endearment are used, Goldschmidt finds that both types of address forms are used equally. Her study, however, does support Wolfson and Manes in their claim that the zero address form is used in approximately seventy-five per cent of the encounters in the southeastern Pennsylvania area, and that terms of endearment and the respect form are used in the other twenty-five per cent.

Although Wolfson and Manes (1980) have contended that the usage of terms of endearment is directly related to the sex of the addressee, Goldschmidt's study indicates that the age of the speaker is an equally important factor in determining the usage of terms of endearment and respect forms.

Wolfson, N. and J. Manes. (1980). Don't "dear" me. In Women and language in literature and society, S. McConnell-Ginet et al., (eds.). NY: Praeger. 79-92.