Word Search and Its Results in Oral Speech of Elderly People

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The author studies the markers of searching for a word in spontaneous oral speech of Russian-speaking elderly women. The paper puts a question about age-related features of searching strategies of elderly people. While searching the informants, as a rule, recollect the only word (a noun, including their own name), they do not choose the most suitable nominations from the available options. They often refuse to search and realize an alternative speech strategy.

Keywords: oral speech, elderly people, speech hesitations, the searching strategy

Introduction

The research of spontaneous oral speech in different languages and different genres show the stable character of speech hesitations, when the speaker looks for a word, or expression, or even the whole utterance (Khurshudyan, 2004). The markers of this situation are pauses-hesitations (delays in speech), verbal hesitatives filling them in, such as *er, this, whatever* and many others. In modern linguistics these verbal doubts are not considered to be a drawback. The term “parasite words” is not widely used nowadays, only sometimes, probably in a traditional way.

The social aspect of this issue is only at the beginning of its development. It is preliminarily established that gender, age, social and cultural status have insignificant influence on the pause verbalization. It turned out that only the speech of young people is marked; they prefer “their own” hesitatives, e.g. “leave it” in Russian (Bogdanova-Beglaryan, 2016).

It seems important to study the speech of elderly people, whose age is also called “old old age”, this research is at its first stage for the Russian language material. It is a long time since the age differences in the speech of the young and the elderly which are not turned into generation differences were recognized (Krysin, 1989, pp. 76-79). Monographic research on this topic have appeared only recently (Kasatkina, 2007). The famous hypothesis of the old age as a repeated childhood proposed by L.R. Caporael (1983) was not neither proved nor disproved.

The main questions which are discussed in the paper are the following: Is the searching strategy of elderly people specific? What is the role of a personality and their speech manner in this situation? In addition, we hope to answer the question about the alternative speech strategy (in relation to the search one) in the given age group. In other words, are there any signs of the fact that the person was going to mark a thing in the speech, but in the end he didn’t do it, and how he acts in this case?

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The Dictaphone records of the interviews with Russian women aged 78-94 were assumed as a basis of research: Z.M.—78 years old, T.A.—80, N.F.—84, M.Y.—87, V.M.—94. None of the women were diagnosed with cognitive disorders. Everybody, except for M.Y., has got children and grandchildren. Z.M. lives in the country, she used to work as a cattle breeder. All the others live in the city of Omsk with the population of more than 1 million people (according to the official statistics the population of Omsk is 1,172,000 people). T. A. is a former engineer, she is the only woman who uses the internet and travels around the country. N. F. is a former teacher, who can go around the city, is able to support herself, she used to read a lot before she had eye problems. M.Y.’s and V.M.’s health condition does not allow them to go outside, they can hardly see anything. V. M. is looked after by her daughter, M.Y.—by her relatives. V. M. used to work as a seamstress before she became a housewife. M.Y. used to be a seamstress. Younger relatives and good friends aged 18-58 acted as interviewers for the informants. Due to friendly relations between the informants and the interviewers, free and easy communication was possible. The total length of records is 2 hours 49 minutes 10 seconds. If it was necessary to obtain quantitative data, the material was limited by 20 minutes of communication with every woman, then the initial parts of the recording were compared.

We consider both pauses of hesitation, verbal hesitatives and cases of self-correction with meta-indicators and without them as markers of speech search.

Age Characteristics Problem Concerning the Searching Function of Senior People

Slower speech at the expense of lengthening stressed vowels, reduction the length of syntagmas and a bigger number of pauses not connected with speech hesitations should be considered age-related characteristics. All the interlocutors of our informants spoke much faster than them. The analysis of monologues on the recording showed that V. M. pronounced 39 phonetic words a minute, M. Y.—81 words, N. F.—93 words, T. A.—114, Z. M.—81 (the data are given in the sequence from the oldest woman to the youngest).

As for the frequency of search situations, our material did not reveal the direct correlation between the age and the number of speech hesitations. We fixed 18 similar cases during 20 minutes of recording in V. M.’s speech, 17—in M. Y.’s, 11—in N. F.’s, 19—in T. A.’s, 21—in Z. M.’s speech. In the speech of 94-year-old V. M., the connection between a lower tempo of speech and relatively small number of speech hesitations is possible: in slow speech the words are selected without being noticed, many pauses are considered to be the markers of syntagmas, but not as indicators of hesitation. It is impossible to make more definite conclusions as there are no quantitative data about other age groups in the Russian language material.

We did not find out any age characteristics connected with grammatical nature of the search object. According to N. V. Bogdanova-Beglaryan, who did the research into the searching function of verbal hesitatives irrespectively to the informants’ age, the speaker’s search is directed to all the sentence members and the whole predicative units. In our material the informants also searched for object nominations (Example (1)), predicate verbs (Example (2)), attributive adjectives (Example (3)), adverbial modifiers (Example (4)), the whole

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1 The interview was conducted to reveal communicative situations the participants of which are modern elderly Russians (who they communicate with, who they prefer to communicate, what media channel they use to get information, etc.). If the informants got distracted from the question they were asked, they were not interrupted. Hence, there is noncoincidence in records length (from 21 min 17 sec to 63 min 45 sec). The informants interlocutors are marked with the initial letter of the word ‘interviewer’ (I).
predicative units (Example (5)) and their parts (Example (6)):

Example (1) T.A.: [about cleaning the flat] This work without [pause] is a rut.
Example (2) T.A.: Because some of us like what’re they doing ... keeping the fast / so we’re meeting / when the fast is over.
Example (3) M.Y.: Do take it! See / I’ve got this / from aluminum I don’t need many.
Example (4) T.A.: And of course / at 11 o’clock / oh at 11 / at 9 / we’ve got dances; V.M. At this time cars / if there were / very few / we / walked / afoot /
Example (5) N.F.: [about the cat] I’ve come / she’s rubbing against my legs / and leads me to the cupboard / where there was fodder (laughing). And this / it was sleeping with me.

Example (6) I was given let me see / an injection in the bottom.

We can find some age-related indicators in lexical and grammatical meanings of the word found or not found after hesitation. There are examples with nouns (nominations of the object world), for which the informants turned out to look for most often than other parts of speech. The full lists of these nouns with the examples look like this:

In V.M.’s speech—building, unit [military], place, TV programs, election. Nominations of home appliances were not found:

Example (7) V.M.: There’s a plant here and they produce washing machines \ things like that (pause).
I.: I see.

In M.Y.’s speech: -cardiologist, prescriptions, woman doctor, bits of paper, rolls, Alexander Ivanovich, Reznik (in both cases a doctor in hospital), sister, roll [of cloth], mould, soap. The term clarifying the informant’s expression the doctor who treats legs was not found:

Example (8) M.Y.: He (pause) let me see / is seeing a cardiologist, urologist / who else .... A! who treats legs / how should I call him?

In N.F.’s speech: Grudinin, Suraikin (surnames of the candidates for the President’s post in Russia), Myasnikova (the author of the book about the woman’s health and long life), radio set:

Example (9) N.F.: We listened to the radio thingy / with the radio set.
In T.A.:’s speech—cruise, voucher, yoga specialist (Example (10)), routine, type (of activity), son et lumière, riverside stations. She did not remember the author of the book “Three Dumas”:

Example (10) T.A.: No, he is / what’s-his-name / yoga specialist.
In Z.M.’s speech—oncology, parking, Surkov Valerichka, Krasnikova, Malakhov Zhenya, Panov Sasha, Yelena Sergeyevna, Ignatievna (all these are her friends’ proper names), boots, papirossas, sister-in-law.

She did not find nominations for computer, mortgage.


As we can see, four out of five informants had difficulty remembering proper names. This is the situation when the word should be remembered, but not chosen from the variants “open” to the mind. This way, it can be suggested that hesitation before names and surnames reveals memory weakening typical for the old age. The oldest informant V.M. used names only for her immediate family (daughter, grandchildren), she did not hesitate at this moment.
Three informants (M.Y., Z.M., N.F.) hesitated when searching for the word relevant to the topics of health/illness/medicine, important for the old age. Therefore, common nouns which caused a problem did not appear to be accidental from the point of view of their lexical meaning.

It is interesting that there is indirect evidence of elderly people’s participation in dialogues given by their interlocutors (interviewers), who usually prompt the informants a word or a whole expression, finish the phrase for them, do not wait for the end of hesitation.

Example (12) V.M.: And I used to like baking and (pause) //
   Daughter: You used to be able to and used to like it.

**Individual Manifestations of a Searching Strategies**

The language means which the informants prefer to include in the searching mechanism are referred to individual manifestations of the searching strategy.

The eldest informant V.M. has the biggest number of self-corrections and pauses of hesitation, which are used separately (Example (12)) or as a part of a searching means complex (Example (13)):

Example (13) V. M.: We don’t let it [the dog] .... / Galya doesn’t let it in; They used to ... She used to come; I didn’t use to have / well, we didn’t use to have cars at that time (self-correction).

Example (14) V. M.: Let’s just say [pause] there were / was theirs [a long pause] this part / I mean the place (meta-indication + hesitation pause + self-correction + hesitation pause + meta-indication).

All the other informants actively use “classical” verbal hesitatives this, that, these (Examples (15)-(18)). At the same time, there are some differences between them. M.Y. and Z.M. include the markers of active recollection in their speech: what’s-it-called? She called it… let me see; how should I call it? (Examples 19, 20), and N.F. and T.A. often use self-correction (Examples (21), (22)):

Example (15) Z.M.: This used to bring us milk / Malakhov Zhenya / and that / Panov Sasha.

Example (16) N.F.: And they start Omsk news / and well / thingy/ at half past eight \ at nine half past eight/ and in the evening.

Example (17) T.A.: I’m meeting those [pause] with Neftyaniki dwellers [“Neftyaniki” is a district in the city]/

Example (18) M.Y.: They roll out this/ roll of cl... cloth / Valya puts over these/moulds.

Example (19) M.Y.: Uh / I was whatever for a long time / remember it / in the resuscitation department itself; How did she call this week [pause] gorgeous.

Example (20) Z.M.: It was at Tokareva’s // Remember her [pause]? Yelena / Yelena Sergeevna.

Example (21) T.A.: The only bad thing / is that aero... uh I mean riverside stations / never work.

Example (22) N.F.: I learn the news from Russia 1 / because they show domestic Russian news or rather / our Omsk news.

If we speak about the use of self-correction, N.F. and T.A. use it without any special effort, it is not followed by pauses or slower tempo. In case of active recollection the indicators of search are extensive, relatively long, grammatically they are predicative constructions. The searching activity in the case is a rather difficult process, which M.Y. and Z.M. successfully finish in the recorded material.
It should be added that during the searching process the informants act as representatives of different social groups. To illustrate this idea we can return to the search of nouns, which we talked about in the previous section. The women’s status in the past, their past and present lifestyle, their interests determine the personal names they remember (but not immediately). N.F. and T.A. named politicians, writers, public figures, M.Y. and Z.M. named the “inner circle”. In this context proper names correlate with other substantives. It is especially typical for T.A. and Z.M. T.A. remembers rather rare nouns (*cruise, voucher*) and abstract nouns (*routine, type of activity*), and Z.M. uses more common and specific nouns (see *papirossas* and others).

The Alternative to the Searching Strategy in the Speech of Elderly People

Now it is necessary to answer a small question connected with the topic of the article. In the analysed material almost all the informants had the situations when they refused to look for a word or expression. For instance, V.M. did not pronounce the word *a walker* replacing it with the word *this thing* (Example (23)), but this did not lead to a communication failure, because the subject of the talk is evident for the interlocutor who is in the room. T.A. pronounced the phrase (Example (24)) with a falling tone and the stress on the word *this* and it did not cause misunderstanding:

Example (23) V.M.: *Because I can’t walk / without this thing.*

Example (24) T.A.: *Well, they gave us a discount there / as retired people // We sent them these* [she talks about the documents proving the retired age].

I.: *I remember scanning them.*

In the situation of a small talk such nominations are usual for people of all ages (Zemskaya, 1989). It is necessary to pay attention to the phenomenon of a firm refusal to use a searching strategy, which is especially typical for Z.M. and N.F. Z.M. marks it with special means such as *I can’t say now, I’ve forgotten already, I don’t remember* and others. In Example (25) she uses a question and answer set *what’s it called? I can’t say now.* The following conversation shows that Z.M. relies on her interlocutor’s prompt and her hope comes true:

Example (25) Z.M.: *Her mum bought it for her / what’s it called? I can’t say now.*

I.: *A computer?*

Z.M.: *Yes.*

In another case she uses a construction with the disjunctive conjunctions *or, either... or,* which makes the speaker continue the phrase, but instead there turns out to be a hollow word without any signification, and the intonation shows the end of the phrase. For example, in Example (26) the informative end could be the name of a body part, in Example (27)—telling the time:

Example (26) Z.M.: *I hit either the left hip / or what have you.*

Example (27) Z.M.: *They were either after Yura / or whatever.*

Cases similar to (26, 27) are numerous in N.F.’s speech:

Example (28) I.: *What can you talk about with your neighbours? Did you discuss what happened in the entrance hall?* [there was an incident before the talk]

N.F. *Yes, we did. Either in the entrance hall / or what have you.*
Conclusion

The study of searching strategies in spontaneous speech of elderly people is a part of a more general and little-investigated problem of old age speech. Relying on the studied material, it is possible to speak definitely about a low tempo of speech of all the elderly informants. We do not know anything about the tempo of spontaneous speech of V.M., M. Y., N.F., T.A. and Z.M. in the past, but it is evident that all their present interlocutors were speaking much faster. We recorded a communicative norm, according to which younger interlocutors do not wait for the end of hesitation of the elderly, prompt the “correct” word in their opinion. In friendly talks such communicative behavior looks like a speech support.

We have some other preliminary observations. Firstly, there is no direct correlation between the age and speech hesitations. To characterize speech ability it is necessary to take qualitative, not quantitative characteristics of hesitations into consideration. It is typical for our informants (to different degrees) to remember a particular lexical unit, not to choose the most exact means of expression. As for the nouns they were searching, they were mostly looking for people’s names. Memory mechanisms are involved in this process (not the mechanisms of comparison, or imagination, or categorization, etc.). It is extremely significant that T.A. demonstrates a different situation in Example (1), she shows a better preservation of verbal and non-verbal indicators, typical for younger people.

Secondly, the material proved that the most stable Russian hesitative is this (and its forms), it is used by the informants with different individual speech manners. There are individual differences in choosing other searching means. Observation of the required words (in the article they are found and not found nouns) gives indirect evidence of the informants’ life needs, their quality of life, level of speaking ability.

The chosen aspect did not allow to discuss seriously the hypothesis of the old age as a repeated childhood. In this case children and elderly people are in different situations: the former do not know yet the nomination and are confident at inventing it or “legally” ask the older members of the family about it, the latter have to use a well-known personal sign system. People in their old age have difficulties more often than people in the middle age. In this case they refuse the searching strategy, look for and find the alternatives.

References


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