Intergenerational Discourse: Its Essence and Features

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Abstract

Generations, their values and preferences, generational gap, generational conflicts are among the most urgent topics in modern society. They are studied by marketers, sociologists, philosophers, and psychologists as generational differences affect the purchasing ability and consumer behaviour, communication in the workplace, involve the issues of ageism and appropriate and fair treatment of various age groups. However, the phenomenon of verbal interaction of representatives of different generations as represented in written texts has not deserved proper attention and, therefore, has not been studied thoroughly. The study of intergenerational discourse may serve this purpose and fill in the existing gaps determining the scope of this research.

Keywords: generation, intergenerational, verbal interaction, discourse, communication

Introduction

Methodology

Intergenerational discourse relates to the verbal exchange of communicants belonging to different generations so the pool of examples for the analysis should represent intergenerational interaction. Illustrative contexts are frequently supplied by different corpora and literary works so the COCA – the Corpus of Contemporary American English – will be used as the database and source of material for analysis and illustrations along with examples from contemporary American literature.

Along with the texts produced by the representatives of different generations during their communication process which have not been given proper attention the concept of intergenerational discourse requires study and clarification So the methods of comparison (of dictionary definitions), deductive analysis, discourse analysis as well as content analysis will be applied.

Results and discussion

The generational component permeates all spheres of life; so, such matters as the adoption of social media by different generational groups, the use of slang by youth, transmission of values have undergone scrutiny within the framework of intergenerational communication. The phenomenon is complex as "people from different age groups vary not only in their life experiences, but also in their communication goals, needs, and behaviors at different points in the lifespan. Likewise, age stereotypes and societal expectations, which may vary across cultures, can influence intergenerational communication. The discipline of intergenerational communication is interested in describing, explaining, and predicting these phenomena." (Intergenerational Communication, n.d.)

Generation related issues have been described with the results presented, among others, in *Handbook of communication and aging research* by J. F. Nussbaum and J. Coupland (2004), *Understanding communication and aging* by J. Harwood (2007), the chapter *Challenges and opportunities for communication between age groups* by M. L. Hummert in *Handbook of intergroup communication* (2012), *Intergenerational communication across the life span* by A. Williams and J. F. Nussbaum (2013), *Generation, Discourse, and Social Change* by K. R. Foster (2013), etc. The book *Mezhpokolencheskaja kommunikacija* (*Intergenerational Communication*) by A. Romanov and PhD research titled *Mezhpokolennoje vzaimodejstvie v rasshirennyh semyah (Intergenerational Interaction in Expanded Families)* by S. Dudina published in Russia 2018 and 2015 respectively address similar issues.

The above-mentioned works place emphasis on such issues as age determined problems and differences (health, lifestyle), age segregated conversations, online literacy, patterns of behaviour typical of a specific age, distinct generational needs and wants along with some other communication peculiarities of specific generation groups. However, they neither analyse the conversations between the communicants belonging to different generational groups nor make a distinction between intergenerational communication and intergenerational discourse. The term *intergenerational communication* is not clearly defined while the term *intergenerational discourse* is hardly mentioned. This research has uncovered three considerations for that (as described below); it has also identified the features which allow to distinguish between generational, intergenerational, and intragenerational.

The first issue that arises when one turns to the verbal interaction of different generations is the choice of the proper term for the naming of the phenomenon. The choice depends on various factors, Firstly, the two widely used terms *intergenerational communication* and *intergenerational discourse* differ in their length of life. Search for the start of the usage of the term *intergenerational communication* uncovered that it came into use in 1905. The term *intergenerational discourse* was introduced half a century later, in 1960. Thus, the discrepancy in the

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length of the usage of the two terms determines the wide-spread and bigger popularity of the term *intergenerational communication*.

Secondly, the choice of the term can be determined by the terminological tradition and spheres of the application of the term. The search on Google demonstrates that the term *intergenerational communication* is frequently used, as the first five pages of the search already offer an abundance of plenty of works (books, articles, YouTube videos) dealing with different aspects of the interactions of different generation groups. The Google search for *intergenerational discourse* is limited and finds fewer than 10 titles two of which are the papers published by the author of the present paper (*Intergenerational Discourse in Modern Classroom* and *Use of Stylistic Devices in American Intergenerational Discourse)* respectively*.* So, the use of the term *intergenerational discourse* is currently quite limited while *intergenerational communication* can be the preferred choice among scholars.

Thirdly, it seems justified to look at the essence of the terms *communication* and *discourse.* The comparison of definitions from a variety of dictionaries from different historical periods allows to see similarities in the treatment of the two terms. For instance, *Webster's New World Dictionary* treats *discourse* as *communication* (compare: *discourse "1. Communication of ideas, information, etc., esp. by talking; conversation 2. A formal treatment of a subject, in speech or writing* (Webster, 1975, p.215) vs communication "1. a transmitting 2. A) a giving or exchanging of information, etc. by talk, writing, etc. b) the information so given 3. close, sympathetic relationship 4. A means of communicating…5. … a) the art of expressing ideas." (Webster, 1975, p.152)) Another renowned dictionary *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* differentiates the two terms by giving more weight to discourse as a serious study (compare: *discourse* "1 … a long and serious treatment or discussion of a subject in speech or writing … 2 … the use of language in speech and writing in order to produce meaning; language that is studied, usually in order to see how the different parts of a text are connected" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, p.434) vs. *communication* "the activity or process of expressing ideas and feelings or of giving people information." (p.304 Oxford Advanced Learner's, p.304))

Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary follows the definition offered by *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* as it treats discourse as "a serious talk or piece of writing which is intended to teach or explain something…" (Collins COBUILD English language dictionary, 1987, p.400) while providing the second definition similar to that from *Merriam-Webster's New World Dictionary*, "Discourse is spoken or written communication between people, especially serious conversation about a particular subject… If someone discourses on a subject, they talk in an authoritative way about it." (Collins COBUILD English language dictionary, 1987, p.400) The definition of communication, on the other hand, coincides with the definition from *Merriam Wester's New World Dictionary,* "Communication is the

activity or process of giving information to other people or other living things, using signals, such as speech, body movements, or radio signals." (Collins COBUILD English language dictionary, 1987, p.279) So the above provided definitions from dictionaries demonstrate that communication aims at providing and exchanging information while discourse is seen as the language, the use of it in the process of meaning production and is connected to the authority of the speaker.

When choosing the term, one should also be aware of two more considerations. Firstly, the wide-spread use and popularity of the term *communication* in different spheres has drawn certain criticism over the years, "Communicate, communication 1. Terms of considerable popularity, especially when they are much used in educational institutions… the words are said to be overused or pretentious or unnecessary … Copperud 1980 is disturbed by their invasion of schools of journalism, and Edmund Wilsop, in *The Bit Between My Teeth* (1965), expresses nearly the same concern in a wider perspective … Janis 1984 objects to *communication* when it does not imply reciprocity (Merriam-Webster, 1989, p.265) so this to a certain degree discourages the use of this term. Secondly, this research looks at the dictionary definitions of the two terms but does not delve into the study of the discourse seen as power by M. Foucault (The Order of Things, 1970), for example.

The use and application of the term *discourse,* on the other hand, has not drawn such criticism yet and its treatment depends on the school of thought the scholars represent. However, one of the most authoritative in the field is the definition of discourse offered by M. Foucault, "discourse … is the matrix of texts, the specialized languages and the networks of power relations operating in and defining a given field." (The Icon Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Though, 1998, p.245) Thus, if one is involved in the study of the corpora of specific texts (e.g., related by topic) and into account that the interest of the researcher lies specifically in the study of the texts produced within the frame of the interaction of different generational groups and the language used in the interaction of generations *discourse* seems to be a more precise term for the naming of the verbal interaction of communicants belonging to different generations.

The definitions of *intergenerational discourse* and *intergenerational communication* simultaneously applied to interactions between individuals from different age cohorts may also refer to different notions. For instance, "many family interactions, including those between a parent and child or a grandparent and grandchild, can be classified as intergenerational communication. Intergenerational communication also occurs outside of the family. Indeed, any communicative interaction between a child and a middle-aged or older adult, a young adult and a middle-aged or older adult, and a middle-aged adult and an older adult is classified as intergenerational communication. Thus, many interactions that occur in daily life, including those at home, school, the workplace, and other social settings, involve intergenerational

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communication." (Intergenerational Communication, n.d.) The definition specifies only that this type of communication is based on the involvement of communicants belonging to specific groups. However, other specifics of this type of interaction have been omitted so it makes it possible to say that *intergenerational communication* is treated in a simple manner as an activity or process that involves the giving/exchanging of information (along with the characteristics of the sender and the receiver, the message, the feedback, the communication barriers, etc.).

Some scholars concentrate on discourse only identifying specific discourse features. K. Foster (2013) makes a connection between discourse and generation as the scholar believes that generation should be interpreted as the shaper and a marker for discourses (which are generational) as well as common sense. Secondly, she finds that generation can be treated as a discourse itself as it represents the experiences of generations,

 "Okay," Paul replied, "but what's the problem? As I see it, more generations mean more available workers."

"That's a good point," David responded. "But what most people overlook is that each generation brings its own set of values, beliefs, life experiences, and attitudes to the workplace, and that can be the problem. Take **your generation, the Traditionalists**. You grew up under the shadow of the Great Depression and felt lucky to have jobs. If we have learned one thing in the research, it is just how strong Traditionalists' beliefs are when it comes to patriotism, hard work, and respect for leaders, among other values they bring to the workplace."

Paul nodded.

"Now, compare that to my generation, "David continued.

Paul eyed David's T-shirt and parachute pants "travel ensemble." "Hmm, and exactly what generational would that be?" he queried with a raised eyebrow.

"**Generation X**," David responded proudly. "We grew up seeing too many businesses downsize or merge, and we learned that the last thing we could trust was the permanence of the workplace. Let's face it, by the time we hit the job market, the employer-employee contract was already out the window and Social Security was headed down the toilet. And it sure didn't help that we've always been told we would never do as well as our parents had. As a result, we need to be recruited, rewarded, and managed differently from your generation if you have to make us a contributing, loyal part of your workforce."   (Lancaster, & Stillman, 2005, p.4)

The example is an illustration of the verbal interaction of individuals as determined by their belonging to a specific social group (generational cohorts in this particular case). The generational belonging is specifically (the Traditionalists, Generation X, your generation) identified. The dialogue involves the sender and the receiver from two different generations representing the generational experiences of the

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communicants, making sense of generations' life accounts (K. Foster, 2013), and coming to respective conclusions. However, this context is not just an exchange of opinions (presented by a collection of sentences). Rather, it is a whole text produced in the process of verbal intergenerational interaction. The communicants' opinions are determined by their generational experiences, differences, and stereotypes so the text is seen together with the social and cultural milieu and background. Thus, it can be treated as the example of intergenerational discourse. The main identifier for this type of interaction is the belonging of the communicants to different generation groups, for instance,

"This is the difference between **your generation** and **mine**: we have no fight. When someone tells us there's no hope, we believe it, we adjust to it, we just try to make something tender out of whatever's left to us." (Corpus of Contemporary American English, n.d.)

The speaker addresses the receiver emphasizing that they belong to different generations by separating their respective generations into 'your' and 'mine'. The interaction is enriched with the opinion provided by the speaker regarding the specific generational experience.

Intergenerational discourse co-exists with a number of other discourses determined by the belonging of the communicants to specific social groups which, among others, consist of people from different generations. These groups may include families, age cohorts, groups of individuals at educational establishments, such as teachers and students, etc. So intergenerational discourse should be separated from such discourses which, accordingly, may include age discourse, family discourse, as well as generational, and intragenerational discourses. The distinction is based on the identities of the communicants they choose to refer to when communicating with others.

Generational and intragenerational discourses are most similar to intergenerational discourse since they both contain a generational component (the generation of at least one participant of the interaction is identified). However, the other participant's identity as that of a member of a specific generation group is not revealed; the recipient is not identified either,

"The problem is **my generation** doesn't know where to start. We lack the imagination of a world without capitalism and a truly democratic form of government so many retreat to video games, partying, shopping, fantasy football and reality TV." (Corpus of Contemporary American English, n.d.)

The dividing line between intergenerational and intragenerational discourses is the involvement of communicants from the same generation, addressing each other as the representatives of the same group,

"I kind of think those who dwell on the past are condemned to, you know - 4th TEEN GIRL: Relive it. TONY FRASSRAND, Correspondent: Why are people prejudiced, do you think? 3rd TEEN BOY: It's pretty much fear of the unknown I think, ignorance. 1st TEEN GIRL: I think as minorities **we** shouldn't be afraid to say what we feel. Because fear to communicate is just so stagnating. 4th TEEN BOY: **Everyone of us here**, **we're** friends and **we**'re tight and **we** can talk and **we** feel comfortable talking to one another. But I think the main problem that **we** have, especially as teenagers, whether it be white, black, Chinese or anything, is just talking about, like stuff like this. If **we, our generation**, could learn to talk, you know, about what has happened in the past, how things are now, ideas that we could, **we** see or **we** think could help and change and everything, things'll be better. But it won't be until **we** learn how to talk to one another, communicate to one another, when things really will be better and really change and stuff like that. 4th TEEN GIRL: Yeah, it's kind of like the fear of the unknown. The more you don't know about something, the more you're scared of it. 4th TEEN BOY: Exactly. 4th TEEN GIRL: And so, once we can learn how to like communicate and just like learn about other cultures because it's really interesting and I mean, it helps a lot to understand where they're coming from. 4th TEEN BOY:…" (Corpus of Contemporary American English, n.d.)

The nature of the discourse is revealed through the emphasis on the inclusive "we", "our", "everyone of us here," and "our generation."

Identification of the belonging to a specific generational stratum can be done in several ways. The most common is the use of markers. Generations can be addressed with the help of collocations which include possessive pronouns as their constituent parts, for instance, *my generation, our generation*, or *your generation* (the structure of the collocation is: possessive pronoun + noun),

"Please. Find me a poll that shows **your generation** voting more liberal than **mine**, I dare you. I've got empirical data showing " most " of **your generation** to be self-centered, self-indulgent and irresponsible to the point of threatening the country's financial and military security." (Corpus of Contemporary American English, n.d.)

Another way of showing the involvement of two or more different generations is the use of the specific names of generational groups (with or without the earlier identified markers),

"Paul turned back to Lynne. "I assume you're **an Xer**, too?"

"I must admit to actually being **a Baby Boomer**," she responded blushing.

David rolled his eyes and wanted to grab an airsickness bag. "So, **Boomer**, what's your story?" Paul demanded.

"Well," answered Lynne, "**My generation** is different from **yours and David's**. When you've had to vie with eighty million peers every step of your career, you're bound to be competitive. We were raised by parents who convinced us we could

make the world a better place; as a result, we tend to be idealists. We came to the workplace with a strong desire to put our own stamp on things."

"Yeah, I've definitely locked horns with a few of you in my workplace," Paul confirmed with a nod of his head." (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, p.5)

Other possible indicators of the intergenerational nature of the interaction may involve collocations containing demonstrative pronouns (the structure is: demonstrative pronoun + noun), implicit referrals, etc.

Conclusion

Thus, two terms, *intergenerational communication* and *intergenerational discourse*, are applied to identify the interaction of representatives of different generational cohorts. Intergenerational communication is a more popular and widely spread term. Scholarly texts and research into intergenerational communication deal with various generation-related issues such as differing life experiences, communication goals, and behaviour but do not dive into the analysis of the peculiarities of the messages and texts produced by the representatives of different age cohorts within the communication process. This is the goal of intergenerational discourse. The identity of the communicants representing different generations must be made evident in the process of communication. The revealed differing generational identity of the communicants involved in the verbal interaction allows to determine the nature of the interaction as intergenerational. Intergenerational discourse takes place both within and outside the family. The scope of the discourse is determined by the borders of the relations between the representatives of different generations. Intergenerational discourse should be separated from generational and intragenerational discourses. The distinguishing feature is the involvement of two or more generations as participants of the communication process. Such features of intergenerational discourse as the strategies and tactics used by the communicants, stylistic devices, and means of rhetoric have not received much attention yet and require further study.

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