The Social Construction of Age in Adult Mexican English Language Learners: An Exploratory Study

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I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the social construction of age in the context of English foreign language learning in Mexico. Specifically, it looks at how adults of different ages experience learning a new language and how they enact their age identities as language learners. By approaching the topic from a social constructionist perspective and in light of recent work in sociolinguistics and cultural studies, this study broadens the current second language acquisition (SLA) focus on age as a fixed biological or chronological variable to encompass its social dimensions. What emerges is a more complex and nuanced understanding of age as it intersects with language learning in a way that links it fundamentally to other social phenomena, such as gender, ethnicity and social class.

The research design, a multiple case study, uses a combination of narrative inquiry, semi-structured interviews, audio-taped narrative accounts, and classroom observations to explore the construction of age by a group of adults studying English at a Mexican university. The analysis of the data reveals that (1) the enactment of age and the construction of a language learner identity, whether in the classroom or outside it, have greater salience in particular moments or interactions than in others, (2) the experience of learning a language varies according to each person's position in the lifespan and involves both linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions, and (3) the age identity of foreign language learners is closely interwoven with their other subject positions. The findings suggest that, while narratives of age in contemporary Mexican culture are drawn from the prevalent age discourses of Western society in the main, some important differences exist in the construction of adulthood in present-day urban Mexico.

As a conclusion, the thesis reflects on the repercussions that taking a social view of age has for classroom teaching practices as well as for research in the area of second language acquisition.

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A Antonio, por una vida compartida

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List of abbreviations and Spanish language terms

Abbreviations

AO   age of onset
CPH   Critical Period Hypothesis
EFL   English as a foreign language
ERP   event-related potential
L1   first/native language
L2   second/additional language
LOR   length of residence
SLA   second language acquisition
Ss   students
T   teacher
UG   Universal Grammar

Spanish language terms

adulto en plenitud	golden-ager
agrarista	landless peasant who supported agrarian reform in Mexico
anciano	very old or aged person
bonito(a)	pretty
bracero	unskilled Mexican laborer working in the US
chocho	doddering old person
Cristero	pro-Catholic Mexican peasant who participated in the uprising protesting anti-clerical government policies (1926 to 1929)
generación	student cohort, body of students graduating the same year
grande (grandecito)	old (rather old)
güero(a)	fair-skinned, white-skinned
mestizo	person of mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage
mi gente	my people, my family
persona de la tercera edad	senior citizen
preparatoria	equivalent to US high school
prieto	dark-skinned
ruco	old fogy
secundaria	equivalent to US middle school
tú	you (familiar)
Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México	National University of Mexico
usted	you (formal)
vejete	little old fellow, silly old fellow
viejito	little old man

Chapter 1

A First Glimpse of Age

1.1 Introduction

At the beginning of the new millennium, I decided that I wanted to go back to school. I was excited at the prospect of spending the next few years of my life immersed in books and engaging with new ideas as I worked towards a doctoral degree. But I was also apprehensive, for I was nearly 60 years old and on the receiving end of discouraging messages from the society in which I lived about the deleterious effects of aging. So I wondered if I could succeed, if I could count on the same intellectual abilities that I had had as a younger student, and if I could muster the discipline and stamina needed for long hours of study. On the upside, I knew I was bringing many years of experience to the task, and I was convinced that this would count for something. I was curious about how others would view my return to the world of academia as an older student, and what impact the experience would have on me as a person, for I felt that it would surely change me irrevocably.

At the same time, I had been working for many years as an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teacher in Mexico, where I had adults of all ages in my classroom. From the beginning I was intrigued by the significance of the age differences of my students, not only in terms of possible effects on their learning, but also, and perhaps more importantly, on the social interaction that takes place in the classroom. I also suspected that age might figure substantially in what the learners bring to and take away from the experience. Yet second language pedagogy pays little heed to the diversity existing among adults of different ages, in essence adopting a generalized young-adult focus.[1] It has been mystifying to me that, in an era of learner-centeredness in education, and given the increasing importance of lifelong learning, such a narrow outlook should persist. I thought

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[1] This appraisal is based on my own analysis of the characters, topics, settings, and classroom activities in three English language textbooks used in Mexico at the time I undertook my research: *Look Ahead* (1994), *Interchange* (1991) and *American Headway* (2001b).

that perhaps it reflected the largely invisible status of older adults in cultures around the world which are increasingly youth-oriented. I hoped some day to discover answers to my concerns.

Once I decided to go back to school, I became doubly interested in the impact of age on the experience of being an adult learner. Having promised myself at the outset that I would choose a research topic that was meaningful to me both personally and professionally, the question of age and aging in adult learners emerged as an ideal subject to explore. My interest as an older learner in my own aging process dovetailed with my concern as a teacher with the undifferentiated treatment of adults in the language classroom. I wanted to find out what bearing age had on those of us who had added a learner identity to our other identities.

Accordingly, in this thesis I have set out to explore what it is like to be an adult language learner in Mexico. To accomplish this, I recruited eight students enrolled in English courses at the language center of the university where I work. Their ages, 23, 34, 36, 48, 59, 65, 68, and 69, spanned a broad range of adult years. Four were women and four were men; one was a university student and the others members of the neighboring community. During one semester term I attended their lessons, met with them periodically for interviews, and received weekly audio-taped narrations from each of them. The close contact with these participants enabled me to learn much about the significance the language learning experience had in their lives.

My interest was whether the experience coincided with the beliefs and expectations adults have about language learning, what different kinds of feelings it produced in them, and in what ways they considered themselves to be changed by it. Most importantly, I wanted to know how they construct their age identity and what part they think age plays in the learning process and in their lives beyond the classroom. My concern was less with the issue of linguistic attainment than with what the experience means in the larger context of their worlds. To this end, I endeavored to ascertain the significance the language learning experience

had for them at this precise moment of their lives in terms of their personal, academic or professional circumstances and aspirations. This connects importantly with the ways in which they constructed complex, new identities for themselves as a major non-linguistic dimension of their language learning experience.

As one of the outcomes of my research, I point to ways in which language teaching practices can be informed by an understanding of the social dimension of age in adults. An increased awareness of how language learners construct their age identity and how it comes to bear on their involvement in the learning process can enable teachers to take into account not only what learners share in common but also how they differ from one another in their experience both in and outside of the classroom. This can lead to more fruitful cooperation in building a classroom community that is dynamically connected and responsive to the real-world circumstances and aspirations of the learners.

At the same time, our understanding of the age factor in second language acquisition (SLA) has until now been informed principally by research undertaken in the prevailing biological and cognitive tradition. A social constructionist approach can round out our picture of age by providing a socially-focused counterpart to work carried out with a psycholinguistic orientation to SLA.

On a broader level, the research sheds light on the ways in which age is socially constructed by adults in Mexico. A great deal of overlap exists between present-day urban Mexico and what might be termed 'generalized Western culture,' yet there are some important differences in the construction of adulthood in Mexico that surface in the course of the study and that enhance our understanding of the social significance of age and aging in contemporary society elsewhere.

1.2 English language learning in Mexico

Although English was studied by the elite in 19th century Mexico, along with Latin, French and Italian, it was only in the post World War II era, when Mexico

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was catapulted from an agricultural to an industrialized nation, that the language took on special importance. By the 1960s, the National University (*Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México*) had become the university of the masses, and English was taught in many of its faculties. At the same time, bilingual schools, language institutes and private universities began to proliferate in urban Mexico, making the study of English even more widespread. For large sectors of the population, the customs, habits of consumption, and aspirations of the United States constituted a model to emulate (Flores 2002). In this sense, newly urbanized Mexico took on many of the values of the industrialized West.

A further upsurge in the learning of English in Mexico took place in the 1980s and 1990s as a result of the opening up of markets and the negotiation and signing of a free trade agreement with the US and Canada (García Landa and Terborg 2002). The desirability of knowing English was reflected in the increased demand for language courses both in educational institutions and in the work place. In addition, the proximity of the US and Canada made travel to these countries a genuine possibility for many Mexicans and an aspiration for many others.

Now in the 21st century, the importance of learning English goes relatively unquestioned; its status as a world language is universally acknowledged by all sectors of the population, as it is elsewhere in the world (Crystal 2003a). Characteristics of the current global context, such as the expansion of transportation and communication, the increase in international commerce and trade agreements, the internationalization of professional standards, training and accreditation, the need for intercultural communication at a personal level, the mushrooming of the internet, and the presence of a new international political order, are cited as the most salient causes of the growing demand for opportunities to study foreign languages, and particularly English (Brecht and Walton 1995; Hasman 2000; Crystal 2003b).

This is felt even more intensely in the case of Mexico, whose geographical proximity to the United States has had direct repercussions on trade relations and

demographic movements, bringing about a pressing need for effective means of communication between the two countries. At the same time, it has engendered an ambivalent attitude towards English that is fairly common among Mexicans (Francis and Ryan 1998). On the one hand, definite, though largely unacknowledged, prestige is associated with knowing English for it is imbued with the elevated status of the American and European worlds. On the other hand, an aversion to English and Anglophone culture is frequently found, even among students of the language, attributable to the asymmetrical relationship between Mexico and the United States. In my view, Mexicans are attracted by the technological and economic superiority of the US, yet at the same time wary of the power it wields, the encroachment of American culture in Mexico and, consequently, the perceived threat to their national identity. Precisely because of the power associated with the United States, knowledge of English carries with it an aura of privilege, accomplishment and refinement, furnishing an entree to both social and professional worlds in Mexico.

English is studied in Mexico as a foreign language rather than as a second language. This is because it is not a community language in Mexico. As such, learning takes place principally in a classroom setting as distinct from a naturalistic one. However, as David Block (2003) points out, making broad generalizations about foreign-language contexts can be misleading for there are differences in the conditions surrounding the learning of different languages. For example, English has a higher visibility in Mexico than languages such as Korean or Arabic. The presence of transnational companies, the media and foreign visitors provide greater opportunities for contact with English outside the classroom. Nevertheless, the classroom remains the principal venue for learning the language.

The university where I work, and subsequently carried out my research, is a branch campus of the National University. The language center at the university regularly enrolls a small population of older people (25-70) returning to the classroom, who study alongside the university age (18-22) students. The resulting amalgamation is an interesting one, for while the multi-age group is drawn

together by the shared goal of learning English, their reasons for wanting to learn the language are wide-ranging, as are the ways they go about it and participate in the process, and ultimately, what the experience means to them not only in terms of their learning but also of their broader life circumstances. While the tradition of lifelong learning is a relatively recent phenomenon in Mexico, the study of foreign languages has long been an acceptable activity for students of all ages. English courses are particularly popular among adults who, for personal, work-related or academic reasons, return to the classroom as older learners. In consequence, educators are facing issues about how best to fulfill the needs and expectations of such a varied population. Certainly, searching for methods to enable successful mastery of the language is an important goal, yet it is only part of the equation. Learning a new language, as I have observed, comprises vital experiences of a social nature that color this endeavor in significant ways. These, too, must be taken into account.

1.3 The study of age in second language acquisition

Interestingly, age has been a highly visible topic in second language acquisition research for many years. An important body of literature on the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) addresses the contentious issue of whether biological constraints operate on second language learning, that is, whether people are neurologically programmed for language at a pre-determined period of time in childhood ending at puberty, and after which time they can acquire new languages only with great difficulty (Long 1990; Singleton and Ryan 2004). Researchers who believe that age is a determining factor in successful language acquisition take up any of several positions that vary according to the degree of stringency of the biological argument, but all based on the conviction that 'younger is better' (see, for example, Johnson and Newport 1989; Marinova-Todd 2003). Those adopting the counter-position draw on evidence from reported cases of older learners who outperform younger ones (see, for example, Ioup et al. 1994; Birdsong 1999). Because researchers involved in this debate are primarily interested in determining whether facility in language learning stops at around puberty or earlier, they compare language attainment of children of different ages

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or of children and adults, but they do not look at possible differences existing among adult second language learners. Differences in current language policy, particularly regarding the best time to initiate second language programs in schools in order to achieve optimum results, mirror the inconsistent findings of these studies.

In consequence of this focus, virtually nothing in the CPH literature makes distinctions between, for example, 30-, 40-, and 50-year-old learners. Thus, while the CPH debate has proven interesting and informative in overall terms, it has not shed much light on adult second language learning. This is a concern to me as an English language teacher, for I have often wondered whether there are age-related differences among adult learners that I should be taking into account in my classroom teaching practice. One way I might have proceeded in my search for an answer is to have conducted a study of younger and older adults in the tradition of existing CPH research in order to determine whether age has an impact on success in adult language learning. Such an investigation would have filled a gap presently existing in the CPH literature. Nevertheless, I decided against approaching age as a biological factor because it cannot tell me about the experiential side of learning a language. In the course of my work with older students, I have on occasion observed the feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and frustration, and of the concomitant threat to their identities, that learning a new language can engender. It is clear to me that the experience encompasses a broad range of concerns involving the social dimensions of age that are present in the classroom and that extend far beyond it as well. That is what I set out to explore.

1.4 Two key concepts: Age and aging

The two central terms in this thesis are 'age' and 'aging.' Cognizant of the limitations inherent in any attempt to pin down such elusive concepts, I propose the following brief definitions that underscore the distinction between them. 'Aging' is a multi-dimensional process that is physiological, psychological, social and cultural (Nussbaum et al. 2000; Coupland 2001a). It entails movement through time and signifies change. 'Age,' on the other hand, is a place or position

a person has at a given moment in time. Age and aging are in reality two facets of the same phenomenon in that an understanding of one necessarily involves the other. The life course transpires as an ongoing process of change known as 'aging' and provides the backdrop for identifying any point along the way. 'Age' captures one of those fleeting moments; it is the point where we situate ourselves at a precise instant in the life course. It is important to clarify that at times 'age' is used as a superordinate term, encompassing the notions of age and aging, as in 'age theory' or 'age studies.' At other times, 'age' can refer to a stage in the life course, such as 'middle age.' I also recognize that in common parlance 'aging' is a euphemism for 'old age,' an expression closely associated with decline and mortality in Anglophone cultures, and one which I have tried to refrain from using.

1.5 Purpose and relevance of the study

The purpose of this research is to explore the ways in which age as socially constructed is experienced by adult EFL learners in Mexico. With regard to the significance of the findings, I see four places where this study leads. The first is the EFL context. I believe the research has implications for teaching foreign languages, in the sense that it can bring a necessary understanding of the impact of age as socially constructed to all those who participate in the language learning process. There is an almost universal lack of awareness on the part of teachers, students, and textbook designers of the social dimension of age and of the kinds of concerns raised in the research. This is a serious oversight, for age should be taken into consideration. People cannot fully understand each other without a sense of where they are in their lives—in the life course—relative to each other. Age is a core part of a person's identity. Nor can we comprehend what language learning means in students' lives both inside and outside the classroom without taking into account the way they construct their age identity.

The age discourses[2] that people draw on to enact their identities can be perceived in their beliefs and attitudes about age and about language learning, in the way they position themselves and others, in classroom practices, as well as in the interplay of age identity and their other identities. These issues are not raised by viewing age as a fixed biological or chronological factor, yet they are central in understanding learning as a complex social practice, and become particularly relevant where ageist discourses overshadow other discourses of age, resulting, for example, in prejudicial behavior, self-handicapping, or social marginalization in the classroom. The findings of this study, then, will have broad pedagogical implications.

The second place where I see the research findings having a bearing is in the area of second language acquisition research. The trend in the recent history of SLA research in the sociocultural tradition has been to view the social dimensions of identity, such as gender, social class and ethnicity, as socially constructed in discursive interaction, rather than as isolated variables. This has generated a more finely-grained understanding of them as they are implicated in the construction of identities. For whatever reason, age has not been included in studies working from this perspective in SLA, although it is beginning to occupy an important place in research carried out in other fields. This omission is a glaring one, in my opinion, because of the importance of age in the complex of a person's identities. In considering possible future directions of SLA research, Block makes exactly this point:

> Age has traditionally been dealt with strictly as a biological variable (e.g. Singleton and Lengyel 1995; Birdsong 1999), but the recent work of sociolinguists such as Nikolas Coupland (2001a) suggests that there may be a case for conceptualising age as socially constructed as well. In this sense age would join gender as a variable that at one time was treated as biological, but which is now considered by many researchers to be socially constructed. (Block 2003: 125)

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[2] The term 'discourse' is used in two separate, but related ways in this thesis. In the present context, 'discourses' refer to ways of thinking, feeling, believing, talking about, behaving, and valuing that are characteristic of specific communities. In short, they are "ways of being in the world" (Gee 1999: 7). At other times, I use 'discourse' to denote language in use, that is, language in interaction. The topic of discourse is treated more extensively in Chapter 3, section 3.3.2.

I would contend that understanding the whole person means understanding their temporal self, that is, where they position themselves and are positioned by others in the life course at a given moment in time. This makes greater sense when the life history of a person is taken into account —in essence, where they have been. Age identity is interwoven with gender, social class, and other identities, adding a temporal quality to a person's multiple positionalities. To overlook age is to miss an important aspect of who a person is. The findings of this study reveal many of these nuances.

Third, because age has traditionally been a concern in foreign language learning exclusively as circumscribed by the Critical Period Hypothesis, it has limited itself to the issue of linguistic attainment. The present study is particularly relevant in that it provides a vastly different perspective on age, a more socially informed one that adds breadth to the work being carried out from a biological standpoint by addressing the kinds of questions raised in this research. For example, it explores the significance that taking a language class may have for people of different ages in terms of non-linguistic aspects of the experience, such as working towards personal development, pursuing a fresh intellectual challenge, engaging in social encounters with other people, or acquiring cultural capital and shaping a new identity. To my knowledge, this has not been done to date.

The fourth area where the research findings take on significance is in the emerging field of age studies (Gullette 2004). While research on age as socially constructed has been carried out in a variety of different contexts, it has not been studied in the foreign language classroom. The present study brings fresh findings to this fledgling field and, by comparing and contrasting them with other research findings, it is hoped will contribute to moving it forward.

1.6 Research questions

With the issues outlined above in mind, I embarked on the study of age from a social constructionist perspective, in line with many contemporary sociolinguistic

approaches to social parameters, such as ethnicity and gender (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995; Cameron 1999; Wodak et al. 1999; Blackledge 2002). The first question I needed to answer is:

- How has age traditionally been looked at in SLA, and what has been learned?

Then, in order to consider the viability of approaching age in SLA from an alternative perspective, I next ask:

- Can age be seen as socially constructed?

Out of this discussion, the following question emerges:

- How is age socially constructed throughout the life course?

These three questions are addressed primarily through a review of the relevant literature.

Other questions necessitated my developing an empirical research design that would permit me to discover what the language learning experience is like for adults of different ages. The questions I set out to answer were:

- How is age co-constructed in the EFL classroom context and in the personal narratives of adult language learners?

I was particularly interested in finding out what can be observed about the ways that age is played out in the classroom activities and in the relations among the learners and with the teacher. I was also interested in discovering what perceptions the learners have of themselves and of others and what perceptions they believe others have of them.

- What beliefs and attitudes do adult language learners have about age and about language learning, and how do these beliefs and attitudes intersect with the way age is enacted?

This question covers three more detailed ones. First, I wanted to know in what ways adult learners believe that age constrains or enhances their language learning experience. I also wished to find out how prior life experiences can be seen to have impacted on their attitudes and beliefs regarding both age and language learning. Finally, I wanted to discover the ways in which their language learning experience carries over into their lives outside the classroom and varies according to where each person positions her/himself in the lifespan.

- How is age as a subject position interlinked with other subject positions in adult language learners?

This question arose because I was interested in finding out the ways in which age identity is seen to be nuanced by other identities, such as gender and ethnicity.

As a whole, the thesis offers a detailed description and analysis of the process I followed in carrying out bibliographic and empirical work in search of responses to the research questions. On the basis of the findings, I draw conclusions that address the following over-arching question:

- What does looking at age as socially constructed add to the discussion of age in SLA?

1.7 Organization of the study

The thesis is structured in the following way. After the present introduction, the next chapter (Chapter 2) examines the broad literature on the CPH as the primary source of information on age issues in SLA. After considering the current state of the debate, I argue that the CPH for second language acquisition has not focused on the age factor in adults in any important way, at best providing a limited account of linguistic outcomes from a biological perspective. The impact of age as a social dimension and the non-linguistic outcomes of adult language learning lie beyond the scope of the CPH and, I believe, are better understood in light of sociocultural perspectives on SLA and by taking a social constructionist approach to age.

In Chapter 3, I position the research as a contemporary discourse-oriented sociolinguistic study. I discuss the key features of social constructionism that are relevant to the study of age from an interactional perspective. By tracing the links between contemporary sociolinguistics and social constructionism, I contend that they provide a coherent framework for this study. A particular focus in this chapter is on sociolinguistic approaches to the study of the social construction of age, gender and ethnic identities in different contexts.

Following this, Chapter 4 takes up the question of how age is socially constructed in present-day Western society. I look at the principal discourses that frame the way people give meaning to the experience of aging and create their age identity. Additional consideration is given to the existence of competing discourses which contribute to the multiple, changing and potentially contradictory nature of these processes in themselves and in relation to the other life experiences and identities with which they intersect. The fundamental role of narrative in discursive interaction and identity construction is a recurring theme throughout this chapter, furnishing a valuable link to the discussion of the empirical work which follows in subsequent chapters.

Research methodology is the subject of Chapter 5, in which I describe and provide a rationale for the overall research design. I elected to adopt a broadly ethnographic approach to my research, consisting primarily of narrative inquiry, as developed through a series of periodic interviews with the participants during a language course. This was complemented by classroom observations, audio-taped narrative accounts made by the participants, and an interview with the classroom teachers at the end of the term. The data collection procedures and the plan developed for the data analysis emerged in part from a preliminary study conducted at an earlier stage of the research.

Chapters 6, 7 and 8 present a selection of the most relevant data coming out of the various collection procedures and discuss their significance in terms of the specific research questions set out initially for the empirical phase of this study.

The conclusions in Chapter 9 draw together the major findings of the study, assess what was achieved in advancing the theory and methodology, acknowledge limitations that had not been anticipated, and discuss the implications of what has been learned in the larger context of SLA and age research.

Chapter 2

Second Language Acquisition and the Age Factor

2.1 Introduction

To ascertain what part age and the age identity of language learners play in the process of acquiring and using English as a second language (L2), it is imperative to begin by considering how age has traditionally been treated in the field and what has been learned up to now. Given that questions regarding the importance of age in second language acquisition (SLA) have been restricted almost exclusively to the existence and nature of possible biological constraints on learning, I devote a substantial part of this chapter to a discussion of the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). Following that, I offer an assessment of the existing orientation to the issue of age and SLA and suggest an alternative direction to take in exploring this topic. This involves adopting a sociocultural approach to SLA at the outset, a theoretical perspective in greater accord with the focus of the present study. The sociocultural strand of SLA is the subject of the final part of the chapter and sets the tone for those that follow.

2.2 The Critical Period Hypothesis

Any discussion of the age factor in second language acquisition (SLA) must necessarily give major consideration to the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH). This is the most clearly articulated theory concerning age constraints on first language acquisition, and reflection on its applicability by extension to SLA logically precedes the exploration of alternate explanations of the relationship of age to the acquisition process. Questions of whether we are neurologically programmed for language acquisition at a defined period of time during our childhood, whether it is possible to acquire a second language (L2) after this critical period has ended, what kinds of limitations might be entailed, and what the ramifications are for teaching and learning languages, comprise some of the issues of crucial importance in understanding the role that age plays in SLA.

The controversy surrounding this theory has been an animated one among SLA researchers in the 40 years since Eric H. Lenneberg (1967) posited the existence of a critical period for language acquisition in *Biological Foundations of Language*.[3] According to the CPH, children have a special capacity for language development that is supported by an innate language learning mechanism. The critical period ends around puberty, after which time the innate mechanism is no longer available and language development is virtually halted. This phenomenon is ascribed to the loss of neural plasticity of the brain and the establishment of hemispheric lateralization (White and Genesee 1996; Bongaerts et al. 1997). At this point, "the ability for self-organization and adjustment to the physiological demands of verbal behavior quickly declines" (Lenneberg 1967: 158). Central to Lenneberg's notion of an "age-limited potential for language acquisition" (ibid.: 175) are its biological bases, alluded to in the title of his book, namely, aspects of the child's neural structure involved in a fundamental way in the development of language. These are the key elements of the hypothesis as set forth by Lenneberg.

2.2.1 The CPH and first language acquisition

Evidence of the existence of a critical period begins with the commonplace observation that all normal children become fully competent in their first language, following a similar timetable through analogous developmental stages (Long 1990). Comparable critical periods are characteristic of different kinds of behavioral development in nonhuman species as well.

Studies of language recovery in adults and children who have suffered brain lesions indicate that children are clearly advantaged over adults. In addition, research into delayed first language acquisition has tended to give substantial support to the concept of a critical period, in the sense that the linguistic competence ultimately attained by the subjects under study has proven to be deficient. Studies of feral children and others deprived of language input in early childhood as a result of abuse or neglect have offered valuable examples of the

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[3] According to Lydia White and Fred Genesee (1996), the hypothesis was first proposed by Wilder Penfield and Lamar Roberts (1959). It was then developed more fully by Lenneberg (1967).

defective language that results (Curtiss 1977, 1982, 1988). Another source of information has come from studies of congenitally deaf subjects whose first contact with American Sign Language, a fully functional language, occurred at different ages (Harley and Wang 1997). Language development of Down's syndrome children has also proven a useful way to look at delay in first language (L1) acquisition. However, possibilities for carrying out this type of empirical work have necessarily been limited by ethical considerations and by the fact that incidences of delayed L1 acquisition are relatively rare (Harley and Wang 1997; Eubank and Gregg 1999).

While the neurobiological basis of first language acquisition is largely accepted, the CPH as originally set forth has come under closer scrutiny as more is learned about the structure and working of the brain. The ensuing debate on issues such as the age at which the critical period begins and ends, or when hemispheric lateralization occurs and whether this is significant, has given rise to alternate versions of the CPH. Some researchers suggest that, given the complex nature of language:

> one cannot exclude the possibility that there may be multiple critical periods for linguistic competence, perhaps with different timings, or that some components (modules) of linguistic competence may be subject to critical periods whereas others are not. (Eubank and Gregg 1999: 74)

Furthermore, in view of research findings with delayed first language learners, the strong version of the CPH, which holds that no learning "would be possible if a child was not exposed to language before a certain age, usually given as puberty," has tended to give way to a weak version in which:

> some learning would be possible beginning after that age, but that native-like abilities would be unattainable, and that the course of development would become more irregular and would fall further short of native levels the later the age of onset. (Long 1990: 256-257)

The acceptance of the CPH for first language acquisition, in either its strong or weak form, of necessity precedes any discussion of the more contentious issue of a neurobiologically based critical period for second language acquisition, for it is

unlikely that the latter could exist if the former did not (Bialystok 1997). The foregoing considerations provide the necessary contextualization for looking at the CPH as applied to SLA, a task of more immediate concern to this research.

2.2.2 The CPH and second language acquisition

Whereas first language acquisition normally leads to full proficiency, second language acquisition rarely does, and instead is characterized by a broad variation in outcomes (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991; Towell and Hawkins 1994; Ellis 2008). Divergent views regarding the potential of the CPH to explain this latter phenomenon have given rise to multiple ways of addressing a wide gamut of concerns about very specific aspects of language proficiency. This situation complicates a straightforward treatment of the CPH since there is only a minor area of overlap in their studies. Consequently, the present discussion will proceed along very general lines, with an attempt to tie in the various contributions where they seem pertinent.

The issues

Two broad claims about SLA furnish a point of departure.
- Second language learners rarely attain overall native-like language proficiency.
- Younger second language learners are generally more successful than older ones.

On the whole, both these beliefs have a certain limited acceptance. Points of divergence derive primarily from considerations of what role the CPH plays, and whether it can be applied to all aspects of language proficiency and in all SLA contexts.

The fundamental questions to be addressed, then, are:
- Can the CPH account for the typically unsuccessful results of most second language learners in achieving full mastery of the language?
- Does the CPH explain the better long-term achievement of younger learners in a second language with respect to that of older learners?

A negative answer to either of the foregoing leads to the following question:

- What alternate theories are offered to account for these phenomena?

An affirmative response, albeit a qualified one, generates further questions, such as:

- How does the CPH explain the variability in SLA outcomes?
- To what extent can the CPH provide the sole explanation for this?
- Do distinct critical periods exist for different aspects of the second language acquisition process?
- What other factors interact with the neurobiological ones in SLA, and to what extent?

These questions, in turn, will produce additional ones.

The viewpoints

The strong version of the CPH, that language acquisition can take place exclusively during the period of human development from infancy through puberty, maintains that once this period has ended, it is no longer possible, or exceptionally difficult, to learn a language. With regard to SLA, there is less support now for this extreme position, namely, that there exists an abrupt moment which ends any further language development. Were this true, post-critical period learners should not be able to learn a second language, patently not the case. Instead, supporters of a strong version of the CPH hold that after the close of the critical period, as a consequence of the loss of neural plasticity in the brain and because the biologically endowed faculty for language is no longer available, second languages are learned only with great difficulty (Lenneberg 1967; Birdsong 1999). They point to findings that demonstrate a general tendency for younger learners to do better than older learners in SLA, claiming that these results are attributable precisely to the accessibility of the innate language learning mechanism to younger learners but not to older ones (Oyama 1976; 1978; Patkowski 1980; Johnson and Newport 1989; Long 1990).

However, a number of research studies have reported findings at variance with these in specific language domains, thereby casting doubt on the soundness of the

strong version of the CPH. Studies reporting incidences of highly successful late-starting learners have raised serious questions about the existence of maturational constraints on SLA (Ioup et al. 1994; Bongaerts 1999; Abu-Rabia and Kehat 2004; Bongaerts 2005; Van Boxtel, Bongaerts, and Coppen 2005). In view of a growing body of counter-evidence and as a consequence of an increasing awareness of the inherent complexity of the SLA process and the impossibility of tracing the variation in outcomes to a single origin, a weak version of the CPH now has considerable credence among SLA researchers. In this version of the hypothesis, the term 'sensitive period' is often used in preference to the more rigidly deterministic 'critical period' (Harley and Wang 1997; Birdsong 1999), denoting an optimal interval of time in which circumstances are favorable for developing a particular type of behavior, and after which efficiency gradually declines.

While few researchers completely reject any biological basis of observed age-related differences in SLA outcomes, the contention that "mastery of a second language is determined wholly, or even primarily, by maturational factors" (Bialystok 1997: 116) implies causality, for which evidence must be provided of:

> a consensus of empirical support in which second language proficiency levels are unambiguously linked to the age at which learning began, and the acquisition age leading to a decline in attained proficiency is consistent across studies. (Bialystok 1997: 118)

This standpoint, in essence, is that the burden of proof is on those affirming the validity of the CPH, and not the other way around.

The evidence
Age-related effects on SLA are generally studied in terms of either the rate of acquisition or ultimate attainment, a distinction with critical implications for interpretation. In the first case, the underlying assumption is that a faster rate of acquisition demonstrates a greater facility for learning languages. In the second, the supposition is that a higher degree of achievement in the final outcome corresponds to a greater fulfillment of the potential for language learning. Both

types of focus have been used to look at age of onset (AO)[4] or, less frequently, length of residence (LOR), as they relate to some measure of language proficiency. Interestingly, rate-of-acquisition studies, most of which were carried out in the 1970s and 1980s, found that older learners performed better than younger ones on measures of morphology, syntax and pronunciation. Michael H. Long (1990) discusses this research in his survey of second language investigation on age, and concludes that the initial advantage for adults is a transitory one. The consensus is that, in the long run, children outperform adults (Singleton 1989; Long 1990; Singleton and Lengyel 1995). Only one major study of the rate of acquisition (Slavoff and Johnson 1995) has been reported since the 1980s, perhaps because "rate differences are not central to arguments for the critical period hypothesis" (Marinova-Todd, Marshall, and Snow 2001: 171).

Ultimate attainment studies are considered more important in investigating maturational constraints on second language development because of their long-term nature (Long 1990). Most of the earlier studies concluded that ultimate attainment declines as AO increases. These findings are interpreted as corroborating the strong version of the CPH. The most frequently cited are those of Susan Oyama (1976; 1978), Mark Patkowski (1980), and Jacqueline S. Johnson and Elissa L. Newport (1989). These studies found an earlier AO to be a strong predictor of greater proficiency in different aspects of second language development.

Investigation that has attempted to disprove the broader claims of these earlier studies focuses on cases of highly successful older learners, adults who have achieved near-native proficiency in one or more language domains, despite a later AO. Studies carried out by David Birdsong (1999), White and Genesee (1996), and Georgette Ioup et al. (1994) found subjects who performed at the same level as near native-speakers or native speakers of French, English and Egyptian Arabic, respectively. These studies have primarily explored the grammatical

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[4] The terms 'age on arrival' (AA or AOA), 'age of immersion,' 'age of exposure' and 'age of initial acquisition' have also been employed to refer to the moment when contact with the L2 begins. For the sake of consistency, 'age of onset' (AO) is used in the present study.

features of language. Several recent studies of age looked at English as a third language in bilingual communities in the Basque Country and in Catalonia (García Mayo and García Lecumberri 2003). Older learners were found to have an advantage over younger ones in formal instruction contexts in different language domains, including pronunciation. Another study reported attainment of native-like proficiency in Dutch by post-puberty learners, even those with a typologically distant L1 (Van Boxtel, Bongaerts, and Coppen 2005).

The question of phonetics and phonology is perhaps even more important to the discussion of adult learner success than morphosyntax, for the reason that pronunciation is generally believed to be more susceptible to age constraints than other aspects of language, presumably because it involves neuromuscular skills. The widely held view is that late learners will have a more marked foreign accent than their younger counterparts (Lengyel 1995). In separate studies that corroborate this standpoint, both James E. Flege (1999) and Alene Moyer (1999) showed that age correlates negatively with phonological performance. Their research is representative of other studies that have found an age-related decline in end-state attainment in pronunciation, although not necessarily in other language domains. David Singleton points out that "the earlier an immigrant arrives in the host country and begins to be exposed to its language the more likely he/she is to end up sounding like a native" (1995: 8-9).

Nonetheless, some studies, such as those carried out in Spain, have demonstrated that older learners are not disadvantaged with respect to younger ones in pronunciation skills (García Lecumberri and Gallardo 2003). Of particular relevance are cases reporting late starters who achieve a native-like accent (Birdsong 1999). In an early study, Gerald Neufeld (1978) trained 20 adult English speakers in the pronunciation of a set of utterances in two non-Indo-European languages, without giving them any corresponding syntactic or semantic information. The results led him to conclude that adults retain the potential for native-speaker proficiency in pronunciation. In the cases of the two adult learners of Egyptian Arabic studied by Ioup et al. (1994), both were judged to have accents

indistinguishable from those of native speakers. Likewise, a number of older learners were reported to have attained native-like pronunciation of French and of English in studies undertaken with Dutch speakers (Bongaerts et al. 1997; Bongaerts 1999). Salim Abu-Rabia and Simona Kehat (2004) found similar cases of late starters, having different L1s, who were judged to have a native-like accent in Hebrew. The body of research findings describing instances of highly successful second language learners in the areas of morphosyntax and phonology constitutes the principal counter-evidence used to challenge the theory that maturational constraints produce an age-related decline in proficiency (Bongaerts 2005).

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that, at present, evidence in support of the CPH is still forthcoming, principally from neuroscience research. Neurobiological findings have, for the most part, remained consistent with the earliest principles of the CPH, yet more is now known about the brain since the theory was first set forth. A study by Christine M. Weber-Fox and Helen J. Neville (1999) used neural imaging techniques to reveal that linguistic processing is subject to maturational constraints, older second language learners exhibiting slower processing than younger ones. In addition, the processing of grammatical aspects of the language was discovered to be quite distinct from that of semantic aspects. Laurie A. Stowe and Laura Sabourin (2005) found evidence that the same areas of the brain are used in general for both L1 and L2, although not necessarily as efficiently in L2. They indicate that this may reflect an overuse of one part of the L1 processing system and an underuse of another. Jutta L. Meuller (2005) also compared L1 and L2 processing mechanisms in a variety of linguistic domains by looking at event-related potential (ERP) patterns. She found some similarities and some differences between L1 and L2 speakers, depending on the sub-processes involved, and suggested that the processing differences are attributable to age of acquisition and the level of proficiency. These findings are consistent with those of Hahne (2001), who studied ERPs of native Russians with differing levels of L2 proficiency in German. Because studies have tended to focus on how and where brain activity affects specific areas and sub-areas of linguistic competence,

neurobiological research is especially compatible with the multiple critical period hypothesis (Slabakova 2006). While it is evident that a great deal still needs to be explored, these examples show the vast potential of modern neuroscience to help clarify our understanding of the inner workings of the brain and its role in SLA.

The interpretation

Interpretation of the evidence concerning age-related effects on SLA has proven as interesting as the outcomes themselves. As might be expected, where the evidence has been at variance with the notion of a critical period, alternate theories have emerged. On other hand, where the data have been consistent with the CPH, this has traditionally been the preferred reading. However, increasingly, even when a later AO has been found to correlate with declining proficiency, this has not always been interpreted as a confirmation of the CPH, and other explanations have been tendered (Singleton 1995).

- The role of L1

Ellen Bialystok maintains that L1 similarities and differences are more important for second language attainment than AO, in the sense that "the linguistic structure of our first language sets important boundaries around subsequent linguistic structures that we attempt to learn" (1997: 130). This was corroborated by David Birdsong and Michelle Molis (2001) who, in their replication of Johnson and Newport's (1989) study, found evidence suggesting that the outcome of L2 acquisition may depend on L1-L2 pairings. Their study also pointed to a possible link between the amount of target language use and the level of proficiency. This is consistent with Abu-Rabia and Kehat's (2004) findings regarding L2 foreign accent. Nor does Flege (1999) consider the CPH to be the best explanation for the better pronunciation observed in younger learners. Instead, he claims that "the L1 and L2 influence one another, and that this interaction constrains performance accuracy in both languages" (ibid.: 108).

- The Universal Grammar perspective

Others have addressed CPH issues from the standpoint of Universal Grammar (UG) theory (Cook 1995; Martohardjono and Flynn 1995; White and Genesee 1996). The central question is whether the innate domain-specific faculty for language acquisition is still operative in the case of post-puberty second language acquisition and, if so, whether parameters can be reset for the L2. The basic positions on the availability of UG for adult second language learners are generally defined in terms of *full access*, *no access*, and *partial access* (for example, Skehan 1998). Although this classification has been faulted for being overly simplistic (Eubank and Gregg 1999), it illustrates the key UG approaches to the issue of age in SLA.

The position that full access to UG is not limited by age has obliged its supporters to provide an explanation for diminished attainment by older learners. Sascha W. Felix (1985) maintains that older learners have full access to UG, but suggests, in his 'competition model,'[5] that the general problem-solving system available to post-puberty learners works in competition with UG, resulting in comparatively less success in SLA (Long 1990; Harley and Wang 1997; Birdsong 1999). This, he claims, is because "problem-solving is a fundamentally inadequate tool to process structures beyond a certain elementary level" (Felix 1985: 51).

Those who hold the contrary position contend that poor achievement in SLA, as compared to first language acquisition, can be explained by the fact that older learners no longer have access to UG, a view largely consistent with the CPH. Instead, according to Robert Bley-Vroman (1989), these learners must resort to their L1 knowledge, as an indirect source of knowledge about UG, as well as to general learning principles. This is known as the 'fundamental difference hypothesis' precisely because it illustrates the essential distinction between L1 and L2 learning (Eubank 1991; Ioup et al. 1994).

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[5] This is not to be confused with the Competition Model proposed by Brian MacWhinney (1998).

Among those who adopt a partial access position, some claim that the difficulty for older learners resides in resetting to L2 parameters, for which they must rely on their L1 settings (Flynn 1989; White 1989). Others believe that UG is accessible to older second language learners through their experience with L1, and that those principles not instantiated in the L1 remain available to them (Martohardjono and Flynn 1995).

- The role of cognitive, social and affective factors

The lack of any evidence demonstrating a discontinuity or sudden drop in language learning ability at the end of the putative critical period is cited as a major flaw in the CPH by those who reject it (Bucuvalas 2002; Hakuta, Bialystok, and Wiley 2003; Singleton 2003; Bongaerts 2005). This has led to research that looks at non-critical period variables for an explanation of age-related effects in SLA (Marinova-Todd 2003). For example, lower end-state proficiency associated with a later AO has been attributed to declining cognitive abilities linked to the aging process (Birdsong; Bialystok and Hakuta 1999; Singleton 2003). Others claim that distinct cognitive processes and styles are used to approach learning at different ages (Flynn and Manuel 1991; Bialystok 1997). Kenji Hakuta et al. (2003) found a significant connection between the level of education and ultimate attainment in L2.

A different interpretation of the age-related disparity in achievement in SLA is framed in terms of language aptitude components. Based on a study of L2 learners with different AOs, Birgit Harley and Doug Hart (1997) found that verbal analytical ability is a predictor of success in adults whereas memory ability is in children. This is consistent with the view of Robert M. DeKeyser (2000), who predicted that only those adults with a high level of verbal analytical ability would reach near-native competence, but that this would not be true of children. Findings in a recent study of near-native L2 speakers of Swedish led Niclas Abrahamsson and Kenneth Hyltenstam (2008) to conclude that a high degree of language aptitude is an invariable component of native-like L2 proficiency, enabling exceptional adult learners to offset maturational constraints. For this reason, the

authors contend that cases of near-native competence do not in themselves constitute compelling counter-evidence to the CPH.

In the matter of accent, Moyer (1999; 2004) suggests that the CPH alone cannot account for age-related differences found in pronunciation, and that further study of this problem should be expanded to include motivation and other socio-psychological factors as well as instructional variables, such as the type and extent of exposure to the L2. In a similar vein, Jonathan Leather (2003) points out that, because accent is a defining factor in social identity, phonological acquisition must be understood as both a social and a linguistic undertaking.

Discussions of social and affective contributions to SLA, such as motivation and anxiety, abound in the literature. Their connection to the neurolinguistic aspects of SLA has been affirmed by John H. Schumann (1997). Whether these social and psychological factors are believed to supplant the CPH or to work in tandem with maturational constraints as an explanation of varying learner outcomes, is part of the ongoing debate.

- Methodological issues

Other interpretations of the evidence revolve around the methods used in the research studies themselves. White and Genesee (1996) consider that the subject selection procedures and task types they employed in their study influenced the outcome. The artificiality of some types of tasks used to assess performance in other studies is questioned by Georgian R. Slavoff and Jacqueline S. Johnson (1995). They also point to the fact that age differences in test-taking ability are not controlled for in research studies, and that test training favors older learners. Stefka H. Marinova-Todd et al. criticize much of the existing research on the age factor in SLA because "age differences reflect differences in the situation of learning rather than in capacity to learn" (2000: 9). Long (2005) identifies several design flaws in studies purporting to provide counter-evidence to the CPH, such as the instructions given to raters, the size of the language samples collected, and the statistical interpretation of the data.

Both Vivian Cook (1995) and Harley et al. (1995) suggest that current research places undue emphasis on success, or product, rather than on possible differences in language processing mechanisms, thereby omitting an excellent source of valuable information. In the same vein, Birdsong (2005) questions the restricted focus of researchers on native-likeness as the principle criterion for judging L2 learner competence. He makes the point that "the use of the monolingual native standard for falsification of the CPH is undermined by departures from monolingual nativelikeness that are artifacts of the nature of bilingualism" (Birdsong 2005: 319).

Finally, among supporters of the concept of a critical period, there is a general lack of agreement concerning the exact age at which it concludes. The commonly held belief among them is that puberty marks the end of the critical period, yet different researchers have set this as young as age 12 (Singleton 1995), around 15 (Patkowski 1980), over 16 (Weber-Fox and Neville 1999), or 16 to17 (DeKeyser 2000), certainly too large an age span to be reliable in comparing the findings of different studies. For those who link the close of the critical period to cerebral lateralization, the evidence is also inconclusive, for it is now considered by some to occur much earlier in childhood than previously thought (Martohardjono and Flynn 1995). Furthermore, there seem to be "no known neurological correlates for a sudden decline in language ability at puberty" (Harley and Wang 1997: 23). This has led to some researchers to reject the notion that the critical period ends at puberty and to suggest instead that it is characterized by a gradual decline beginning as early as 6 or 7 for some language domains (Martohardjono and Flynn 1995).

- Multiple critical periods

In light of the complexity of the issues and the diversity of research findings, some researchers have adopted the multiple critical period hypothesis proposed by Herbert W. Seliger (1978) and Long (1990). This theory maintains that there are distinct critical periods for different language domains, thereby providing an

explanation of "what seemed to be a discrepancy between the upper age limit in the acquisition of phonology on the one hand and that of syntax and the lexicon on the other" (Martohardjono and Flynn 1995: 146). A study by André Scherag et al. (2004), for example, found that age constraints operate on certain aspects of SLA but that others, such as semantic functions, remain intact. Other research findings consistent with this hypothesis are discussed by Singleton (1995; 1998; 2005) and Thomas Scovel (2000) in their critical overviews of the CPH. Lynn Eubank and Kevin R. Gregg (1999) suggest that 'language' is a cover term or an 'epiphenomenon' for a series of subcomponents, and that there may be one or more critical periods for the elements in it.

The state of the debate

It seems clear from the research findings to date concerning the age factor in SLA that a complete acceptance of the CPH is an untenable position. There is simply not enough neurobiological evidence to justify such a stance. Nor does the CPH provide a satisfactory explanation of how SLA does, in fact, occur after the critical period has ended. Yet it is plain that younger learners are generally better than older ones in the long run and in virtually all aspects of language performance, which lends some credence to the notion that maturational constraints are operating in some way. On the other hand, a total rejection of the CPH is equally unsustainable since no single factor or set of factors is able to completely account for these age-related differences in outcomes in non-biological terms (Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson 2001: 156). Moreover, the general lack of success that characterizes SLA cannot be explained convincingly without providing reasons for the evidence of its unmistakable association with age. No such explanation has been forthcoming. It would appear, then, that the ramifications of the CPH for SLA are too complex to admit either such unembellished point of view.

Most recent research findings support a midway position in which age and biological factors are seen to have some degree of relationship to SLA, but not necessarily a causal one. In other words, a neurobiological program for human

development is thought to exist, consisting of different stages that facilitate or constrain, but do not predetermine, the outcome of SLA. Ample evidence of this has been given in the studies of highly successful older learners. Yet the exact nature of the neurobiological component of the brain and how it exerts influence on human learning at different ages is far from being understood. A common viewpoint of SLA researchers advocating a weak version of the CPH is that the biological age factor operates in an attenuated way in conjunction with other factors, both internal and external to the learner. Harley suggests that "a reasonable assumption on which to proceed is that second language acquisition involves a complex interplay of maturational and environmental factors of various kinds" (2001: 635). Language aptitude, motivation, the relationship of the learner's L1 to the L2, and socio-psychological factors are among some that are considered in the studies described here, and have been seen to play a role in SLA (Singleton 2005). More than age, they are believed to be responsible for the variability in learner outcomes. However, not enough evidence exists at present to determine which of them are the crucial factors, what their relative importance is, nor how they interact with each other.

> One of main reasons for the non-resolution of the debate is the fact that it is very difficult to isolate the age factor from the numerous variables (sociological, emotional, etc.) which interact with it. (Lasagabaster and Doiz 2003: 137)

To the extent that these issues continue to occupy the SLA research agenda, we can expect that more refined versions of the CPH will be generated in the coming years that add to what is known about the age factor in SLA, as seen from a cognitive perspective.

2.3 Critique

As interesting as new developments in the CPH controversy may prove to be, the question remains whether this approach to the problem covers what can be learned about age and SLA, particularly adult language learning. I believe that it does not, that instead it offers only a limited perspective on the subject of age. I say this on

the basis of the analysis carried out in the preceding section (2.2), which demonstrates that the issues circumscribed by the CPH are concerned almost exclusively with child-adult differences in ability to acquire a second language. Such a binary distinction does not allow shades of difference to be sufficiently tapped. As a consequence, virtually no consideration is given to variations among adults of different ages, an area of obvious relevance to adult second language learning, and to this study in particular, yet one that remains largely unexplored.

Certainly there is no incontrovertible evidence that a biologically determined critical period exists for adult second language learners. If anything, maturational constraints operate in conjunction with a number of other affective, psychological and social factors. Moreover, to the extent that the issue of age differences among adult language learners receives any attention at all, the underlying assumption seems to be that aging is decremental, a supposition that reflects the discourse of decline[6] prevalent in contemporary Western culture, but one that thus far is not sustained by solid evidence.

A larger problem with the CPH studies, in my view, is that age is invariably treated in chronological terms. Even those researchers who do not fully accept the biological determinism of the CPH and ascribe age-related differences to other factors, connect them with chronological age. Such an essentialist notion of age leads to a simplistic and unquestioned mode of categorizing of people into groups by age-in-years or, more broadly, by life stages, that does not always dovetail with lived experience. Chronological age is not a reliable indicator of where a person is in the life course for, as Penelope Eckert points out, "social and biological development do not move in lock step with chronological age, or with each other" (1997a: 154-155). Moreover, life stages, such as childhood, adolescence, and middle age, are identified and defined differently from one culture to the next and from one moment in history to another (Ariès 1962). This explains in part why age can never be fully isolated from other social factors, such as gender, social class and ethnicity.

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[6] The issue of decline discourses is addressed more comprehensively in Chapter 4.

This stance is also consistent with the sociocultural perspective on SLA, one which gives greater prominence to social reality, in contrast to the mainstream cognitive strand of SLA, which has tended to downplay the social aspects of learning by focusing primarily on decontextualized cognitive processes. The principal thrust of research in the cognitive tradition has been on determining how individual learner factors, such as age, account for differential success among learners. The emphasis for the most part has been on universal properties of language and acquisition, on the formal aspects of language, and on mental processes in the individual. The social side of language learning has largely been skirted by researchers adopting a psycholinguistic orientation to SLA. This is evident in the body of CPH research reviewed here, which of necessity is grounded in cognitive-based theories of SLA. As a consequence, the contribution of the CPH and cognitive approaches is minimal at best in elucidating the social dimensions of second language learning. While recognizing the advances made in the field of SLA by research undertaken in the cognitive tradition, on balance I find that its limited scope has rendered it incapable of satisfactorily clarifying the social, dynamic and context-bound nature of second language acquisition. In contrast, for SLA researchers working within a sociocultural framework, language learners are primarily social beings who engage in interaction and in the construction of their identities within the particular contexts of their social world (Larsen-Freeman and Long 1991; Hall 1995; Larsen-Freeman 2000; Norton 2000; Toohey 2000; Maguire and Graves 2001). The concerns of these researchers encompass both the linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes of the language learning experience.

In sum, and given the aims of the present study, I find a social constructionist view of age and a sociocultural perspective on SLA more adequate to the task. Furthermore, in so far as language is an active determinant of social identity (Coupland 1997), a study of narratives and social interaction can shed light on how people construct their age identity and experience the aging process. Accordingly, I propose this alternative path as a better way to explore the age

factor and SLA, one which is able to reveal aspects about the interplay of age and the SLA experience not contemplated up to now.

In the following section, I examine the sociocultural perspective on SLA and consider how it can broaden our understanding of the language acquisition process.

2.4 The sociocultural perspective on SLA

A parallel approach to cognitive-based SLA research, having as its source Dell Hymes's pioneering work in sociolinguistics and anthropology, has taken up the analysis of the social and contextual aspects of language acquisition and use (Firth and Wagner 1997, 2007). It is to this tradition that I now wish to turn my attention. In essence, the social or sociolinguistic orientation to SLA regards the social context as assuming a key position in the language acquisition process, in view of the fact that acquisition invariably occurs in a social context (Kasper 1997; Collentine and Freed 2004). It focuses on language as a social and cultural phenomenon acquired and learned through social interaction. Since the early 1980s, an ever-growing number of SLA studies of an ethnographic nature have probed the interactional dimensions of language in an attempt to account for the processes underlying both second language acquisition and use (Firth and Wagner 1997, 2007). Language learners are seen as social beings who actively participate in interactions with others in socially constituted communicative practices. Sociocultural theory:

> moves individuals out of the Chomskian world of the idealized speaker-hearer and the experimental laboratory, and redeploys them in the world of their everyday existence, including real classrooms. (Lantolf and Pavlenko 1995: 116).

In this sense, the sociocultural perspective is markedly different from mainstream cognitive approaches to SLA, in that the acquisition process is seen as originating in social interaction rather than in the individual mind (Lantolf and Pavlenko 1995). Consequently, the process of psychological development is considered to

be embedded in and constructed through social interaction, impelling SLA researchers in the sociocultural tradition to seek possible links between social and cognitive concerns (Hall 1997; Liddicoat 1997).

2.4.1 Approaches and characteristics

In this section, I describe some of the key theories and ideas that have contributed in different ways to the sociocultural perspective on SLA.

Activity theory

Because of its interest in a more socially situated and linguistically mediated theory of cognition, the sociocultural tradition in SLA finds itself in harmony with much of 20th century Soviet psychology (Hall 1997; Kramsch 2000; Lantolf and Thorne 2006). In Lev S. Vygotsky's view, the mind is socially constituted, and higher forms of human mental activity are always mediated by symbolic means, the most important of these being language (Lantolf and Thorne 2006). Activity theory, inspired by the work of Vygotsky and articulated by his followers A. N. Leontiev and A. S. Luria, has been of particular importance in sociocultural explanations of the SLA process (Kramsch 2000). From this perspective, the acquisition of language is believed to occur in much the same way as that of other higher mental functions, that is, "formerly externalized/social knowledge is substantially reconfigured as internalized/cognitive knowledge" (Atkinson 2002: 532). The following description of the development of second language competence is based on Vygotskyan theory:

> Individual development begins in the social relationships both framing and framed by extended participation in our communicative practices, and proceeds from these to the psychological, that is, from intermental to intramental activity [Vygotsky, 1981]. This movement from the social to the psychological is guided by assisted participation with other, more experienced participants. (Hall 1997: 302)

Such assistance can take the form of scaffolding, modeling, or training, and generally implies the presence of an expert (Hall 1997). However, as James P. Lantolf and Aneta Pavlenko (1995) point out, this can be obviated when

individuals, none of whom is an expert, come together and collaborate, each person contributing something to, and taking something away from, the interaction. This is the idea behind peer-group work in the foreign language classroom. Ultimately, behaviors that were formerly executed conjointly become the psychological tools that mold the individuals' cognitive development (Hall 1997).

Sociocognitive approaches

Taking a somewhat divergent position, Dwight Atkinson (2002) argues that, in fact, language can never take on a completely internal mental function. He insists that:

> although language may perhaps be seen from some points of view as more or less internalized and self-regulated—as the property of an individual, cognitive self—in actuality it always and everywhere exists in an integrated sociocognitive space. (Atkinson 2002: 538)

In his opinion and that of his colleagues, the social and cognitive aspects of language have developed concurrently and they operate interdependently and, very likely, inseparably (Atkinson 2002; Atkinson et al. 2007).

Atkinson adopts a connectionist position on cognition, yet one that is fundamentally linked to the social world, in what he calls "a social interpretation of connectionism as bridging the gap between cognition and social action" (2002: 525). From this point of view, meaning and knowledge exist only potentially in the human mind and rely for their formation on the activation of networks of neural associations, coming from past experience and embedded in a larger world of social significance (ibid.). In any specific interaction, social products, practices and tools contribute to the realization of the speech event (Atkinson 2002; Atkinson et al. 2007). "We seek to view mind, body, and world relationally and integratively, as constituting a continuous ecological circuit" (Atkinson et al. 2007: 170); for this reason, Atkinson et al. believe that language acquisition, language use, or even cognized linguistic knowledge, cannot be properly

understood unless their fundamental integration into a socially-mediated world is taken into account.

Language socialization research reveals similar interlocking ties between the social and cognitive aspects of language development. Traditionally investigating "the interconnected processes of linguistic and cultural learning in discourse practices, interactional routines, and participation structures and roles" (Zuengler and Miller 2006: 40) of children in different cultures, language socialization researchers are now looking at second language learners. Their findings indicate that:

> Whether at home, in the classroom, at work, or in any number of other environments, language learners are embedded in and learn to become competent participants in culturally, socially, and politically shaped communicative contexts. The linguistic forms used in these contexts and their social significance affect how learners come to understand and use language. (Zuengler and Miller 2006: 40)

The melding of language acquisition and use

Atkinson's (2002) notion of language and language acquisition as being constructed at the same time both 'in the head' and 'in the world' through interaction effectively blurs the sharp distinction made in the cognitive tradition between acquisition and use (see, for example, Long 1997; Gass 1998). Most researchers adopting a sociocultural perspective tend to agree that the boundary between language learning and language use is disappearing (Lantolf and Pavlenko 1995; Firth and Wagner 2007). Similarly, Marysia Johnson (2004) contends that the Chomskyan notions of language competence and performance are not, in fact, divisible. In her model of SLA, based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and Mikhail M. Bakhtin's dialogic view of language:

> [T]he origin of language competence lies in social reality—in language use. This language does not take place in a vacuum but in a real and discernible social context. In short, there would not be any separation between language competence and language performance. (Lam 2005: 3)

By the same token, Joan Kelly Hall (1995) questions the very concept of 'second language acquisition,' claiming that, from a sociohistorical perspective, it is inadequate in explaining how language is used and learned. Instead, she believes that because the acquisition process originates in socially constituted practices, individual development can never be understood apart from these practices (Hall 1997). As she redefines it, the process of L2 development is "one of becoming acculturated into these socially constituted webs of communicative practices" (ibid.: 304). Concurring with Hall, Alan Firth and Johannes Wagner discuss the fallacy of the acquisition-use dichotomy in their initial treatment of central concepts in SLA research (1997) and then again in their more recent reflections on them (2007).

Such a stance on language acquisition and use leads logically to a further discussion of where then to set the boundaries of SLA as a discipline. Gabriele E. Kasper, who argues for preserving the distinction between language acquisition and use, expresses concern that an open-ended position will undermine a clear and explicit definition of the aims of the field.

> If the "A" of "SLA" is dropped, we are looking at a much wider field of second language studies, which spans as diverse endeavors as intercultural and cross-cultural communication, second language pedagogy, micro- and macrosociolinguistics with reference to second languages and dialects, societal and individual multilingualism, and SLA. (Kasper 1997: 310)

Yet an expanded agenda for SLA may be precisely what is needed, in the view of those who advocate a more socially informed approach to SLA (Block 2003).

> Thus, if we are to understand even partially the behaviour of learners in class, and appreciate their contributions, potential and actual, we need to explore a wider context, one which asks how the communicative practices in the crucial sites of classrooms relate to the practices in the crucial sites of the street, the workplace and the community. (Candlin 2001: xx)

Communities of practice

To this end, I find the notion of communities of practice to be particularly helpful in understanding how learning, as an activity situated in specific circumstances, enables people to participate "both in the contexts of their learning and in the broader social world within which these contexts are produced" (Lave and Wenger 1991: 24). The term 'community of practice' is defined as a group of "people who, in working toward a common goal, are bonded together in their endeavor by beliefs, values, and ways of talking and acting" (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995; Wodak and Benke 1997). Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger consider a community of practice to be "a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential communities of practice" (1991: 98). From the communities of practice perspective, rather than being given factual knowledge, learners themselves develop the necessary skills to perform by actually engaging in the process, that is, by participating with ever increasing mastery in the sociocultural practices of a given community. Through the process that Lave and Wenger (ibid.) call 'legitimate peripheral participation,' newcomers move progressively toward full participation as members of a community of practice.

Though not specifically concerned with language development, such a perspective is valuable for SLA in that it provides a broader view of learning as a complex social practice, a gradual process by which the learner becomes a member of a particular community of practice, learns to act accordingly and to communicate in the language of that community (Sfard 1998; Norton 2000; Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000; Candlin 2001), thereby adding the social dimension missing in mainstream cognitive approaches to SLA. Furthermore, because a multiplicity of relations operate within and between communities of practice, learning can best be understood in terms of the interconnections between persons, their actions and the larger world (Lave and Wenger 1991). It follows from this that issues of identity are accorded a central position in the sociocultural framework, for the learner is considered, in the broadest sense, to be a whole person participating in social interaction in the world (Lave and Wenger 1991; Norton 2000).

Learning thus implies becoming a different person with respect to the possibilities enabled by these systems of relations. To ignore this aspect of learning is to overlook the fact that learning involves the construction of identities. (Lave and Wenger 1991: 53)

In this wide-ranging conceptualization, learning always entails "participation in relationship and community and transformation of both the person and of the social world" (Packer and Goicoechea 2000: 239). Thus, it signifies an ontological change, not just an epistemological one, and because learner identities are multiple, they extend well beyond the classroom to other communities of practice (ibid.).

Overview

To sum up, I would argue that sociocultural theory offers a valuable alternative perception of second language development that, while still in a relatively preliminary stage, is a radical departure from current mainstream SLA theory. From this viewpoint, the second language learning process involves "the copresence of intra- and interpsychological activity, environments with histories, and an ongoing negotiation of social identity" (Thorne 2000: 224), and is grounded in a reinterpretation of the traditional notions of language, learning, interaction, and context. Table 2.1 highlights the key points of departure between sociocultural and cognitive approaches to SLA.

2.4.2 The age factor in the sociocultural perspective

In sociocultural approaches to SLA, age also appears as one of the individual learner attributes. However, in contrast to the traditional psycholinguistic stance, these individual characteristics take on significance only in so far as they are played out in social interaction within specific contexts (Breen 2001b; Pavlenko 2002b; Block 2003). Rather than being considered separate and fixed background variables, such learner attributes as age, gender, class and ethnicity are held to be socially constructed and "are all, in complex and interconnected ways, implicated in the construction of identity and the possibilities of speech" (Norton 2000: 13).

Sociocultural approaches to SLA	Cognitive approaches to SLA
• A foregrounding of the social over the individual	• An overriding interest in mental processes as an individual phenomenon
• A view of language as constructed socially and constructive of social reality	• A view of language largely focused on form
• A theory of communication as a co-constructed and negotiated social process	• A reliance on the transmission model of communication
• An understanding of cognition as relational, emerging from joint mediated activity and sociocultural practices that are historically and contextually situated within communities of practice	• A marked concern with universal properties of language and acquisition
• A conception of learning as change, a mutual transformation of the person and the social world, that brings about the construction of identities	• A static treatment and isolation of learner variables
• A dynamic view of context as integral to and constituted by human activity	• A relative lack of attention to social context
• An emphasis on the interdependence of language, interaction and context	

Table 2.1 Points of difference between sociocultural and cognitive approaches to SLA

Increasingly, issues of identity have come to occupy a prominent place in socially-oriented SLA research, as an outcome of:

a general push to open up SLA beyond its roots in linguistics and cognitive psychology. As a result of this pressure to open up SLA, it became easy for some applied linguists to see links between theorisations of identity in social theory and sociology and the learning of languages. The result has been the aforementioned boom in publications linking identity and SLA. (Block 2007a: 864)

Nevertheless, it is important to point out that age has not been the focus of SLA research undertaken thus far from the sociocultural perspective. However, other related learner characteristics, such as gender and ethnicity, have been the subject of studies carried out by competent scholars (see, for example, Norton 2000; Toohey 2000). By looking to this research as a source for the present project, it is hoped that the gap can be filled.

2.5. Conclusion

This chapter has focused on how the age factor figures in second language acquisition. As was seen, within mainstream cognitive-based SLA theory, age is treated as an individual learner attribute, largely a fixed, biological or chronological variable. The core issue for researchers in the cognitive tradition is whether or not a critical period for learning an L2 exists. The debate surrounding this issue has been a lively one over the years and has generated an important body of literature, yet as the discussion in the first part of the chapter indicates, no definitive or irrefutable conclusions have emerged. More importantly, the CPH has not been concerned with variations among adults of different ages. Neither the CPH, in particular, nor cognitive approaches to SLA, in general, address the social dimensions of age or second language learning.

Sociocultural approaches to SLA are more pertinent to the aims of the present research, for the reasons outlined in the last part of the chapter. Hall makes the following observation:

> Serious consideration of the premises of a sociocultural approach to SLA will lead us to contemplate new issues, and thus engage us in explorations of both theoretical and empirical regions that to date have gone largely

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unnoticed by a majority of us in the SLA field. Such pursuits, at the very least, should prove to be both stimulating and profitable. (Hall 1997: 306)

This challenge is one I wish to take up with respect to age. In the specific context of the study of the social dimension of age in L2 learners of English, it is hoped that such an approach will afford:

- a broad understanding of language learning as an experience that leads to both linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes, and
- an awareness of the learner as a complex person who lives in and participates in a world extending far beyond the classroom.

In the next chapter, I begin this undertaking by examining social constructionist approaches to the social dimensions of identity, within the framework of contemporary discourse-oriented sociolinguistics, to see how age as socially constructed has been studied in different contexts.

Chapter 3

Present-Day Approaches to the Study of Age and other Social Dimensions

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the disciplinary foundations for the exploration of age as a social construct in SLA. Framing age as social is consistent with recent trends in contemporary sociolinguistics that have brought more dynamic approaches to the study of language and the sociocultural context within which discursive interaction takes place. More precisely, discourse-oriented sociolinguistics has been at the vanguard of research addressing issues of social interaction, discourse and identity from a social constructionist perspective. I begin this chapter by giving a brief overview of recent work in sociolinguistics on the social dimensions of ethnicity, gender, and social class, and then draw attention to the treatment of age by sociolinguists. I argue that by shedding light on the way meaning is constructed through interaction, how people situate themselves in the context of their social relationships, and what the local and historical framework contributes to the process, contemporary sociolinguistic work on social parameters provides a meaningful precedent for exploring age as socially constructed. Because of its centrality to the discussion, in the final part of the chapter I examine some of the philosophical and historical underpinnings of social constructionism that have particular relevance for the present study.

3.2 Recent perspectives in sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is concerned with the relationship of language and society. As a discipline, it received its initial impulse in the 1960s from three principal sources, sociology, linguistics and anthropology, each of which spawned a clearly identifiable tradition within this new field. The subsequent development of these traditions has occurred in a parallel, yet largely independent manner. The anthropological tradition, often referred to as 'ethnography of communication,' harbors a number of loosely connected and overlapping research orientations,

including discourse analysis, ethnomethodology, conversational analysis, and interactional sociolinguistics (Moreno Fernández 1998; Mesthrie et al. 2000). The focus of ethnography of communication is on exploring the close, interlocking relationship between language and the sociocultural context as evidenced in social interaction (Rampton 1992). It relies to a large extent, although not exclusively, on qualitative research methods employed by its parent tradition, anthropology. Because it holds out the promise of a better means of understanding the complexities of social interaction, many researchers have been drawn to the ethnography of communication (ibid.). Of particular interest to the present study are discourse-oriented approaches to sociolinguistics, primarily those whose aim is to provide a "micro description of the lived texture of situated experience" (Rampton 2006).

3.2.1 Discourse-oriented and social constructionist approaches

Discourse-oriented sociolinguistics studies how meaning is constructed and negotiated in discursive interaction. In the last several years, this strand has assumed a position of considerable prominence in the field of sociolinguistics. This has come about, in part, because many sociolinguists have changed their focus to the study of small group interaction in order to see how "culture and social reality are both reproduced and created anew in the skilled activity of actors drawing on unevenly distributed resources in locally and historically specific circumstances" (Rampton 2001: 279). This has signified a modification in their view of language, which is now considered only one element that contributes to meaning in the larger framework of communication (Rampton 2000). In this sense, "speech is not clearly different from other aspects of social behavior" (Hudson 1996: 18). Moreover, the ongoing construction of meaning occurs through "a process of here-and-now inferencing" (Rampton 2000: 105). Thus the emphasis is on situated action and experience, in which the local and historical context are understood to play a constitutive role in communication (ibid.). The impact this change of focus has had on methodology has been a turning away from long-established correlational studies towards more bottom-up, ethnographic descriptions of situated activity. At the same time, the research focus on language

and social interaction located in specific contexts has given rise to a more relativist approach to theory, consistent with postmodern misgivings about grand theory currently prevalent in other social sciences (Coupland 1997).

Furthermore, the question of how people position themselves in the context of their social relationships has brought the issue of identity to the forefront in recent sociolinguistic work. Identity is no longer seen as static inclusion in a social group whose defining characteristics determine those of its members but rather as something more fluid and variable, shaped through social interaction, and the outcome of a process of social construction (Rampton 1999). The social constructionist approach to identity is a key theme in contemporary sociolinguistics. It starts from the premise that reality is extensively constructed through discourse and discursive interaction, and that "the world is not simply the way it is, but what we make of it through language" (Romaine 2000: 29). It is in communicative interaction, then, that people actively "construct and project desirable versions of their identities, in a succession of performances targeted at specific audiences" (Jaworski and Coupland 1999: 407). Social categories, such as social class, sex, age, and ethnicity or nationality, conventionally considered to constitute an individual's identity, are now being redefined in more dynamic and flexible terms. Deborah Cameron, in referring to gender, explains:

> Whereas sociolinguistics traditionally assumes that people talk the way they do because of who they (already) are, the postmodernist approach suggests that people are who they are because of (among other things) the way they talk. This shifts the focus away from a simple cataloguing of differences between men and women to a subtler and more complex inquiry into how people use linguistic resources to produce gender differentiation. (Cameron 1999: 444)

The emphasis is on the process, on the performative aspect of identity construction, as well as on its flexibility and variability (ibid.).

3.2.2 Studies of ethnicity, gender, and social class

Three areas that have been treated in sociolinguistics research on identity construction are ethnicity, gender, and, to a lesser extent, social class. Discourse-oriented and interactional sociolinguistics, particularly, have provided valuable ways to explore the intricacies of these social dimensions. The studies described below offer insights that can help clarify our understanding of the social construction of age identity (The question of identity in general and age identity in particular is taken up more comprehensively in Chapter 4, section 4.4).

Ethnicity

Ethnicity has rightly been called one "of the most vexed and complex issues in post-colonial theory" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1995: 213). Part of the reason that it is such a difficult concept to pin down is because of the interplay of the many characteristics associated with it. In different contexts and at different historical moments, factors such as shared heritage, language, language use, nationality, geographical boundaries, race, and religion are used to characterize ethnicity. Yet no single or universal factor is present in all ethnic groups. At best we can venture to say that ethnicity refers to "a sense of peoplehood and of group belonging" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1998: 82) that is defined and negotiated by both self and others, and by those both inside and outside the group. Precisely because of the changing sociohistorical context, the flexible and constructed nature of the traits which characterize a person's ethnicity, and the salience it may have in a given situation or interaction, ethnicity is more usefully considered in processual terms, as socially constructed.

The work of a number of prominent sociolinguists provides examples of different approaches to the construction of ethnic identity. Adrian Blackledge and Pavlenko, for instance, have both done extensive research on the negotiation of ethnic or national identities in multilingual settings by linguistic minority speakers (see, for example, Blackledge and Pavlenko 2001; Pavlenko 2001b; Blackledge 2002). They argue that sociopsychological approaches, which regard identities as stable and unchangeable and view language users as members of homogeneous

groups, no longer have credibility in the complex multiethnic world of today (Blackledge and Pavlenko 2001). In cases where the dominant group in a heterogeneous society considers monolingualism or monoethnicity to be the ideal model for that society, questions of social justice are raised "as such an ideology potentially excludes and discriminates against those who are either unable or unwilling to fit the norm" (ibid.: 243).

In an analysis of a single newspaper article published in Great Britain, Blackledge makes exactly this point, demonstrating how "homogenization of news media contributes to the legitimation of the established order" (2002: 68). In a different study, Pavlenko (2001b) explored the way in which contemporary American writers, for whom English is a second language, negotiate their identities in autobiographical narratives. The work of Blackledge and Pavlenko has helped corroborate their contention that "the ideological assertion that one language equals one culture or one nation ignores the complexity of multilingual societies" (Blackledge and Pavlenko 2001: 253).

In a study of Austrian national identity, Ruth Wodak et al. found that a diversity of discursive identity constructs were used to establish either "intra-national sameness and/or differences with other nations" (1999: 188). The emphasis on either sameness or difference as identity options varied according to the political and ideological orientations of the discourse, ranging from fully public to quasi-private contexts.

Natalie Schilling-Estes (2004) carried out research in a rural tri-ethnic (Native American, African American, and southern White) community in southern United States, in which she incorporated localized practice, in the form of a sociolinguistic interview, into a large-scale quantitative investigation on language use. Her in-depth analysis of the dialogue between the interviewer and interviewee reveals how ethnic identity is jointly constructed in ongoing discursive interaction. Moreover, ethnic identity is shown to be multifaceted, dynamic, and not easily separable from an individual's other identities.

The diversity and flexibility of ethnic identity is also a central topic of Rampton's (1995; 2001; 2006) work in England. In a pioneering study of language 'crossing'[7] among adolescents of Indian, Pakistani, African Caribbean and Anglo descent in a working-class neighborhood, he examined the "ways in which people use language and dialect in discursive practice to appropriate, explore, reproduce or challenge influential images and stereotypes of groups to which they *don't* themselves (straightforwardly) belong to" (Rampton 1999: 421, emphasis in original). This study and other recent work on ethnicity highlight the complex and often unpredictable ways in which people use language to enact their ethnic, racial and other identities.

> All in all, belonging to a group now seems a great deal less clear, less permanent and less omni-relevant than it did 25 years ago, and this makes it much harder to produce an account of 'the language of such-and-such a social group' than it used to be. (Rampton 2006: 4).

Rampton describes the direction the exploration of identity construction is taking:

> Instead of focusing on the core features of any social group or institution, there is a surge of interest in the flows of people, knowledge, texts and objects across social and geographical space, in boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and in fragmentation, indeterminacy and ambivalence. (Rampton 1999: 424-425)

Gender

The study of the social construction of gender has also generated an impressive body of work, echoing many of the same themes that appear in research on ethnicity. Central to these studies is the distinction between 'sex' and 'gender,' the former understood as a biological determinant denoting anatomical or physiological differences between men and women, and the latter referring to the socio-cultural dimensions of human male and female persons, that is, the psychological, social and cultural differences between them (Wodak and Benke

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[7] 'Crossing' is a particular kind of code-switching, in which speakers use apparently outgroup linguistic styles, that is to say, they move outside the language varieties they normally employ and briefly use the codes of other groups to which they do not belong (Rampton 1997, 1999).

1997; Romaine 2000). Femininity and masculinity are not seen as polar opposites, but rather as separate dimensions existing in the same person (Wodak and Benke 1997). Nor is there a single set of traits that epitomize masculinity or femininity; they are not monolithic constructs (Cameron 1999). Instead, a great diversity is to be found among men and women (Mesthrie et al. 2000).

Because information about a person's sex is normally readily observable, whereas analyzing the social construction of gender is infinitely more complex, the biological category of sex has conventionally been used in sociolinguistic studies in place of the more comprehensive, multi-faceted one of gender (Eckert 1997b; Holmes 1997). However, some researchers, who consider that working with fixed, a priori categories, such as sex, often leads to a superficial understanding of sociolinguistic phenomena, have opted to explore the nuances of gendered identity by looking at how it is constructed in social interaction, and how this construction is interconnected with speakers' other identities. Interest in the social construction of gender "parallels current interests in other areas of (particularly) interactional sociolinguistics, which focus on the moment-by-moment construction of speakers' identities" (Mesthrie et al. 2000: 246).

As with ethnicity, the construction of gender identity is seen as performance rather than a state of being (Butler 1990). We perform gender identity by "repeatedly performing particular acts in accordance with the cultural norms (themselves historically and socially constructed, and consequently variable) which define 'masculinity' and 'femininity'" (Cameron 1999: 444). Gender construction, or 'doing gender,' will vary broadly according to the social contexts in which women and men find themselves (Holmes 1997). Hence, people perform gender differently, availing themselves of different strategies, depending on whether they are with people of the same or different sex, in a formal or informal situation, in a public or private setting, and on the nature of the social relationships they have with the other persons involved, among other possibilities (Cameron 1999).

A brief look at some gender studies may illustrate the way in which a social constructionist approach "explores how people use language to create, construct and reinforce particular social identities" (Holmes 1997: 203). In the 1980s, Eckert (1988) carried out an ethnographic study of student culture in a Detroit high school, with a view to correlating instances of phonological variation with differences in social category. She singled out two principal peer groups, the 'jocks,' middle-class students who identify with the institutional life of the school, and the 'burnouts,' working-class students oriented toward local values. Although the original study did not focus on gender issues, as such, the extensive amount of information that was generated regarding gender construction allowed Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet (1995) to re-examine the data at a later date in order to look at gender, class, and power relations and how they are mutually constructed. They concluded that gender identity is constructed differently for each group, and that the relationship between gender and language variation is not a simple one, nor is that between social class and gender (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995; Eckert 1997b).

The social construction of gender identity in fraternity men was the subject of a study by Scott Fabius Kiesling (1998), who investigated the use of the vernacular (ING) variant to local identity construction, against the backdrop of larger cultural and community ideologies. Like Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995), Keisling acknowledges the centrality of power to masculine identity, pinpointing two cultural models as the source of male identity construction: the physically powerful, or working-class, cultural role and the structurally, or socio-economically, powerful cultural role. His analysis revealed higher rates of the vernacular variant use among men having the working-class model and confrontational stances as part of their identity displays. He concluded:

> Hegemonic masculinity pushes men to have a powerful identity, to construct identities that appear to dominate in some way, either actually or symbolically. . . . Because working-class men to do not have access to economic or structural power, physical power may take its place, especially since their livelihoods often rely on this kind of power. . . . Physical power and vernacular language therefore become connected through the stereotype

of working-class men's identity roles, deeply embedded in the American culture. (Kiesling 1998: 94-95)

Janet Holmes (1997) looked at the construction of women and men's identities in a different context, that of New Zealand. One of her studies provides an illustration of how people use language not only to symbolize and construct their social identities but also to convey their "conformity with or rejection of mainstream norms and values" (ibid.: 195). She emphasizes that the process of identity construction involves making choices based on an understanding of what these choices signify in a particular social context. In the first case, a woman constructs a very conventional gender identity in an everyday conversation with a friend. On one level, it is an unremarkable narrative description of her day's events. But on another level, through the narrative she presents herself as a good mother and a good daughter, constructing a predominantly conservative identity that conforms to the society's notions about the way women should behave. In this particular instance, the woman is "talking to a 'straight,' somewhat judgmental friend" (ibid.: 217) so she highlights a conservative aspect of her gender identity. However, in other contexts and with other participants, she may construct a very different identity. In a more recent study, Holmes and Stephanie Schnurr examined the various ways in which women perform femininity in the workplace, "not only for indexing normative femininity . . . but also for parodying, contesting, and troubling gendered workplace expectations and assumptions" (Holmes and Schnurr 2006: 31).

An ethnographic study of British high school students' classroom talk was carried out by Judith Baxter (2003) to determine the extent to which institutional assessment of 'effective' talk was based on criteria associated with stereotypically masculine speech. Her feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis of the data indicated that a wide range of masculinities and femininities are constructed both by the students and by their teachers, based on prevalent local and global gender discourses. She found that the type of speaker likely to be judged as effective by peers, teachers and evaluators is "one who is male, popular, and articulate, equally versatile in their use of the approved model of collaborative talk and the more

'commanding' talk defined by the examination syllabus" (Baxter 2003: 123). She also noted that the range of subject positions available to girls is limited because:

> they are construed as *female* speakers in public settings. . . . [and are] subject to a powerful web of institutionised discourses that constitute boys more readily as speakers in public setting and girls more readily as an appreciative and supportive audience. (Baxter 2003: 126, emphasis in original)

Several recurrent themes appear in these and other gender studies. To highlight only three: first, gender is diverse; there are significant differences not only between male and female identities but also between members of the same sex in the manner in which these identities are constructed (Wodak and Benke 1997; Freed 2003; Cameron 2005; Holmes and Schnurr 2006). Indeed, the same person may display a variety of gender identities, depending on the contextual and interactional exigencies (Wodak 2003; Cameron 2005; Holmes and Schnurr 2006). Second, gender is interconnected with an individual's other identities (Wodak and Benke 1997). As with other social parameters, such as ethnicity or social class, it is infinitely complex in its interaction with all the other variables (Preisler 1998). Nor is it always salient in every interaction; it fluctuates in accordance with the specific conversational context (Weatherall and Gallois 2003; Wodak 2003). Finally, in viewing gender as performance, it is important to emphasize that people construct their identities within the constraints of social and cultural norms, that is to say, individuals are not predetermined to act in a set, gender-specific manner, but rather are able to take into consideration the social significance linked to particular ways of speaking and acting and to choose among them according to their purpose (Cameron 1999).

Social class

If ethnicity is a knotty concept to contend with, then grappling with that of social class is equally problematic. Labels, such as working class, middle class and upper class, have been used in distinct contexts to assess the 'worth' or position of people or groups relative to each other. Inherently "a general principle of inequality" (Collins and La Santa 2006: 9), social class involves positioning

people or groups on a higher-to-lower 'prestige' continuum. The factors that serve as a basis for determining social class may include wealth, occupation, educational background, place of residence, language use, and habits of consumption, among others (Block 2007b). Again, like ethnicity, people rank themselves and others on the basis of a particular combination of these factors, and their relative weight, all of which are highly sensitive to the values and beliefs prevailing in local contexts.

Bourdieu's (1977) concept of symbolic capital is useful in comprehending the socially constructed and variable nature of social class. For Bourdieu, symbolic capital encompasses three different forms of capital: economic capital (wealth, economic resources), cultural capital (knowledge, skills, education) and social capital (connections to others in social networks). The degree to which these capitals are valued is contingent on the social field[8] in which they are found. The symbolic capital that an individual has as a resource is understood as the prestige or status that comes from having acquired capital that is recognized or legitimized by others, be it economic, cultural or social, or a combination of these. People are positioned as superior or inferior to each other in a given field or context according to their relative symbolic capital. This idea works well with a view of social class as situated, flexible and constructed.

Social class as an identity inscription has received little direct attention in identity research, which has centered on the social dimensions of race, gender and ethnicity (Block Forthcoming). Certainly, work focusing solely on social class is exceptional in contemporary sociolinguistics. Yet social class is contemplated in many studies as "part of the texture of a background, part of an immense taken-for-granted. . . . the proverbial elephant in the room . . . omnipresent, but not spoken of" (Collins 2006: 4).

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[8] Bourdieu (2002; Bourdieu and Wacquant 2005) uses the term 'field' to refer to a site or network of social interaction in which individuals strive for more favored positions on the basis of possessing capital that is valued in that setting.

In the research described above, the close connection between social class and the enactment of both ethnic and gender identities manifests itself most plainly in the studies of urban youth (Rampton 1995; 2001; 2006), 'jocks' and 'burnouts,' (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995), and fraternity men (Kiesling 1998). Rampton's work on language crossing pointed up the ways in which working-class adolescents switched into exaggerated posh and Cockney accents to accomplish a variety of social functions that reproduced their own social class and ethnic identities. He concluded that "taking their routine style-shifting and their performative stylisations together, the speech of these kids seemed to be very profoundly tuned to British class structure" (Rampton 2006). In their study, Eckert and McConnell (1995) found that the 'jocks' and 'burnouts,' two peer groups attending the same high school, operated in distinct social fields. Both social class and gender had a bearing on the types of cultural and social capital that were prized in each field. Kiesling's study (1998) of fraternity men revealed the way in which power, as symbolic capital, took two different forms along social class lines, one physical and the other socioeconomic.

In a recent study, Siân Preece (2009) looked at the enactment of social class and gender identities in multilingual university students from working-class black and minority backgrounds in London. Speaking about the construction of masculine identities, Preece noted that for many of the male students "laddish practices seemed to bestow status, expertise, sociability and a sense of well-being" (ibid.: 130). These practices included resisting any overt identification with the norms of the academic community. In a different way, the female students chose to dissociate themselves from scholarly performance by striving to appear unexceptional and inconspicuous or by adopting a flippant 'ladette' femininity. The reinforcement of social class identity was clearly a factor in the establishment of important peer group networks among this population, although it was enacted differently by the female and the male students. For both genders, the accumulation of social capital took precedence over the cultural capital to be derived from academic performance.

Social class, and its associated symbolic capital, proved to be an important dimension in the identities of the adult Mexicans who participated in the present study. The data (see Chapters 6, 7 and 8) lend support to my contention that learning English signifies, above all else, acquiring cultural capital for this population. Social capital also emerged as a significant factor in the identity construction of both younger and older participants. In the course of the research, it became evident that social class is inextricably tied to gender, ethnicity and age. This is not surprising when considered in light of the studies discussed in this section.

James Collins advocates taking a closer look at social class as an ongoing, dynamic construction:

> [W]e need an ethnographic orientation, exploring class as a process, rather than simply treating it as a position in social structure, in part because social orders are mutating, in part because like identities, inequalities are not 'single source', they are composite. (Collins 2006: 5)

Discourse-oriented sociolinguistic studies of gender, ethnicity, and social class help illustrate how social constructionist approaches have enabled researchers to explore identity issues in greater depth than before. This leads me to conclude that age identity could also be considered more meaningfully as a social construct.

3.2.3 Social constructionist approaches to age

Age as a sociolinguistic dimension has generated only mild interest over the years. Although age has routinely been included along with social class and sex as one of the three principal demographic categories used in studies of linguistic variation, it has seldom been accorded a central place in sociolinguistic research, unlike ethnicity, social class and gender. It appears in sociolinguistic studies chiefly because it may reveal "patterns of dialectal variation within speech communities, arguably reflecting dialectal changes over apparent-time"(Giles 1992: 365). In these studies, age is invariably expressed in chronological terms, measured as an accumulation of years since birth, a trademark of our industrial

society in which a societal dating system determines a person's place in the society (Eckert 1997a). "Indeed to the Western social scientist, chronological age *is* age" (ibid.: 154, emphasis in original). The fact that social and biological development do not always coincide with chronological age is acknowledged in the main, yet it is chronological age that counts as valid in Western industrialized society, although not necessarily in others. In an era where gender roles are more fluid, and it is possible for people to move from one social class to another in the course of their lifetime, age remains essentially a fixed, inflexible category (Chambers 1995).

Eckert (1997a; 1997b) was among the first to recognize the limitations of using chronological age in sociolinguistic studies, and to explore alternatives for defining age categories and grouping age cohorts. "The age continuum is commonly divided into equal chunks with no particular attention to the relation between these chunks and the life stages that make age socially significant" (Eckert 1997b: 213). She noted that while a number of landmarks, such as certain birthdays or attaining legal majority, are associated with the passage of calendar time, they are endowed with special significance by a particular society (Eckert 1997a). Other markers are less directly linked to chronological age and more to life events, such as graduation, marriage, or retirement. These life events are connected with more general life stages that are relevant for each culture, for example, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age (ibid.). They may also be associated with major historical events that occur during the age span of a population and are perceived as shared experiences, such as the Vietnam War or the Great Depression (ibid.). Eckert observed:

> Because of the complexity of the social factors to which it corresponds, chronological age, like other major social variables such as social class and gender, is only a rough indicator of a composite of heterogeneous factors. The challenge for sociolinguistics, particularly for the study of variation, is to tease apart these various—and sometimes conflicting—factors. This requires directing our focus away from chronological age and towards the life experiences that give age meaning. (Eckert 1997a: 167)

Eckert (1997a) also recognized that age interacts with other social variables such as gender, class and ethnicity, though undoubtedly in ways that vary from culture to culture. Although her primary interest remains the study of variation, her analysis of age as a socially constructed category has added depth to and focused attention on a relatively neglected topic, yet one that should be given due consideration in sociolinguistic research of many kinds.

Coupland calls age "sociolinguistics' under-developed social dimension" (2001a: 185). He regards the present involvement of sociolinguists with age as too narrowly circumscribed, too limited to the study of linguistic change and overly reliant on the apparent-time method (for example, Labov 1972; Chambers 1995). Instead he believes that "contemporary social theorising of the lifespan is far less deterministic—less bound to chronological age as a criterion and more open to appreciating self-definitional possibilities in later life in late modernity" (Coupland 2001b: 21). Thus, he would extend the restricted scope of sociolinguists' treatment of age to cover a much broader range of concerns (Coupland 2001a).

In work spanning nearly two decades, Coupland and his colleagues, principally among them Justine Coupland, Howard Giles, and Jon F. Nussbaum, have addressed many of these issues in some of the most thought-provoking studies of age and aging in sociolinguistics to date (see, for example, Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991; Giles, Coupland, and Coupland 1991; Coupland and Nussbaum 1993; Coupland 1997, 2001a).[9] Their research has focused on old age as a significant life stage, an area previously overlooked by sociolinguistics, and has led them to study the discursive construction of age by the elderly in one-on-one conversations, group discussions, interviews, and long-term interactions, as well as in a variety of contexts, including day centers, nursing homes, geriatric medical outpatient consultations, and home visits.

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[9] It should be noted that these studies have been undertaken only in industrialized countries.

In general terms, their findings indicate that the expectation of decline or decremental change is "built in to [*sic*] the mythology of ageing" (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991: 4) in our culture. 'Decrement' is understood in this context to be progressive decline in health or competence (ibid.). The overwhelming presence of ageist discourses is evident both in the ways people talk about the old, either disparagingly or using simplistic and romantic images, and in the ways people talk to the old, for example, using secondary baby-talk, over-accommodation or patronizing talk. Coupland (2001a) also delved into questions of age appropriateness, the legitimacy of old age, and what he calls the 'inverted U' stereotype of the life course, one that infantilizes both the old and the young as physically small, incompetent, dependent and socially marginalized individuals.

Coupland (2001a) has identified four main reasons for the neglect of old age by other sociolinguists. First, he points to a reluctance to study old age based on the fear of aging ('gerontophobia') and its implications, prevalent in contemporary Western society. A second reason he cites is that research issues dealing with aging have been taken over to a large extent by social policy makers, social welfare institutions, and the like, as an 'applied' concern. This has had the double disadvantage of excluding relevant theoretical aspects and of implying that old age is inherently problematic. Third, the social environments of old age in our society are widely divergent, that is, the old may find themselves being either powerful or powerless, and living either a time of fulfillment or one of penury. Old age defies simple generalizations. Finally, Coupland (ibid.) contends that sociolinguistics does not have a satisfactory social theory of aging, and has worked up to now in the framework of a limited and somewhat makeshift one.

The view of late life as a problem is only one indicator of the ageism common in present-day Western culture. Because of its importance, the topic of age discourses is treated more extensively in the following chapter (section 4.3). However, I would like to single out here two key points in the work of Coupland and his colleagues that have a fundamental relevance for the present research. The

first is their rejection of the notion of age as "a *determinant* of language competence and language behaviour" (Coupland, Nussbaum, and Grossman 1993: xi, emphasis in original). This supposition underlies most research on children's 'developing' language as well as on linguistic 'decrement' in the elderly (ibid.). Yet the findings of studies of older subjects are inconclusive, some reporting diminished performance and others, contrary to predicted outcomes, comparable or superior performance (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991). It would appear, then, that at best only a tenuous association can be made between biological age and communicative competence, and certainly not a causal one (ibid.).

The second point they make, closely related to the first, is that the assumption that aging follows a 'normal' and unwavering path of decline is unfounded (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991). Again, research evidence does not demonstrate that decrement is the 'natural' and inexorable outcome of aging, but instead suggests that the experience of aging is characterized by considerable variability (ibid.). Furthermore, people of the same age cohort do not necessarily age in the same way (Coupland 2001a). Although their research focuses primarily on language and communication in later life, it has contributed significantly to elucidating the theoretical and methodological issues surrounding age and aging throughout the life course, as seen from the perspective of contemporary sociolinguistics.

Finally, Coupland has done major work on the discursive negotiation of life course identities, analyzing how people construct their own and other people's age identities in interaction.

> Sociolinguistics can explore the extent to which, and ways in which, age is (re)negotiated in different settings, under what constraints and with what consequences. This dynamic perspective on identity and age-identity in particular has an established pedigree. It can be found very explicitly in Mead's (1932) process model of identity, which assumed that the self emerges through interactional experience. (Coupland 2001a: 195)

Recent work on the social construction of identity in discursive interaction has changed the way many sociolinguists view ethnicity, social class, and gender.

There is every reason to believe that this same approach can and should be extended to age, an area of vital importance to contemporary sociolinguistics.

3.2.4 Some final thoughts

In my view, discourse-oriented and interactional approaches to sociolinguistics are moving forward at a brisk pace and leading the way into unexplored territories in the field. They seem particularly well suited to do so. For one thing, if language is considered part of a larger communication system, then it is the study of social interaction that holds the key to unlocking the complex, interwoven relationship between language and the sociocultural context within which communication occurs. This puts the spotlight on the way meaning is constructed through interaction, how people situate themselves in the context of their social relationships, and what the local and historical framework contributes to the process. Such a process is necessarily a dynamic and ongoing one. In this sense, social parameters such as age, social class, gender, and ethnicity, are best regarded as being socially constructed through discursive interaction in specific communicative contexts, rather than as broad, static categories.

Social constructionism has been at the forefront of work exploring the social dimensions of social class, gender and ethnicity in sociolinguistics. To a lesser degree, it has also taken on the question of age. Coupland foresees that "ageing is, with little doubt, a future priority for sociolinguistics" (Coupland 2001a: 201). If he is correct, it would appear that much more research is forthcoming in this direction. For the specific aims of this research project, and in light of the foregoing, I have adopted the social constructionist perspective as the most promising way to pursue the issue of age. The next section of this chapter examines those aspects of social constructionism that have a particular bearing on the study of age.

3.3 Social constructionism

In the final section of this chapter I take a closer look at social constructionism in order to clarify the philosophical approach underlying the present study and at the same time to suggest why many contemporary sociolinguists have found this perspective appealing. Nevertheless, it is important to state at the outset that the terrain covered by social constructionism is far too vast to be dealt with adequately here, nor is it my intention to provide a full treatment of the topic, fascinating though it is.[10] For that reason, the discussion is selective, focusing on certain salient aspects of social constructionism, and glossing over the attendant ontological and epistemological disputes. After first giving a concise overview of social constructionism, I then touch on specific key features pertinent to sociolinguistic research undertaken from this standpoint. Lastly, I address some of the criticism that has surrounded the social constructionist orientation.

3.3.1 A panoramic view

Social constructionism is a perspective on reality, a way of looking at ourselves and at the world. Simply put, reality is seen as constructed through discursive interaction. Social constructionism is situated in counter-position to the traditional 'picture theory of language' or 'mirror' metaphor, whereby the mind is presumed to reflect the world as it is (Potter 1996; Gergen 1999). For the constructionist, the world is not simply something that is found 'out there,' but is what we make of it through language. In other words, language is the key to shaping and creating our social world rather than a means for merely describing phenomena thought to exist independently of us (Figueroa 1991; Potter 1996; Jaworski and Coupland 1999). The centrality of language and social interaction to the constructionist framework means that knowledge and understanding are grounded historically and culturally (Maguire and Graves 2001). Hence, no historical situation can be understood except in its own terms (Berger and Luckmann 1966), and "no single

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[10] For more extensive discussions of different aspects of social constructionism, see, for example, Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), Bruno Latour (1987), Jonathan Potter and Margaret Wetherell (1987), John Shotter (1993), Kenneth J. Gergen (1991; 1994; 1999), Theodore R. Sarbin and John I. Kitsuse (1994), and Ian Hacking (1999).

point of view is more valid than another, because all points of view are embedded in a social context which gives them meaning" (Rowan 1997: 1).

Social constructionists challenge many long-held assumptions about reality, such as Enlightenment beliefs in the individual mind, rationality, objectivity and truth (Gergen 1999). They contest the modern Western idea that knowledge of the world 'as it really exists' can be achieved through objective, scientific, and empirical methods (ibid.). Likewise, they reject the grand narratives of the past in favor of local narratives, in which claims to truth are more cautious and restrained. At the same time, social constructionists object to the focus on the individual as knowing, rational and autonomous, as well as to the sharp distinction made between the social and the natural, which they contend "has become increasingly porous" (Potter 1996: 89) as a result of the growth of techno-science. Such viewpoints position present-day social constructionism within the postmodern movement (Burr 2003).

However, the philosophical roots of social constructionism can be traced back to earlier thinkers. Among its immediate forerunners, I would draw particular attention to Vygotsky (1962; 1978; 1981), George Herbert Mead (1934), John L. Austin (1962), and Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966). The first of these, Russian psychologist Vygotsky, believed that development of higher mental functions is uniquely human and comes about as the result of "social learning, the interiorization of social signs, and the internalization of culture and of social relationships" (Blanck 1990: 44). Because of the centrality of social activity and cultural practice to human psychological functioning, the individual and the social are viewed as inseparable (Moll 1990). Conceiving of human learning as "relational action" (Gergen 1999: 127) resonates with positions subsequently taken up by social contructionists regarding the construction of knowledge and reality.

The theme of the interconnection of the individual and the social appeared at about the same time, though independently, in the work of Mead in the 1930s.

Mead's (1934) ideas are associated with the rise of symbolic interactionism, a movement which highlights human interdependency (Burr 2003). He believed that there can be no mind or thought, or even any sense of self, that is independent of social process.

Thirty years later, Austin's speech act philosophy, set forth in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962), heralded a change in the focus on language from a primarily referential one to a performative one. As Austin saw it, "language is used to do things; it is a medium of action" (Potter 1996: 11). Meaningful utterances, or speech acts, can describe, request, command, or accomplish any number of the functions required for successfully engaging in interpersonal relations (Potter 1996; Gergen 1999).

Shortly after the appearance of Austin's work, came the publication of Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), the acknowledged classic on the topic of social constructionism. According to Jonathan Potter:

> it provided a systematic argument to the effect that the worlds in which we all live are not just there, not just natural objective phenomena, but are constructed by a whole range of different social arrangements and practices. (Potter 1996: 12)

Berger and Luckmann accorded great importance to language as the principal means by which people not only understand each other's definitions of shared reality, but also reciprocally define it. Their work paved the way for the subsequent evolution of social constructionist thinking in the both the natural sciences and the social sciences (Potter 1996).

Not surprisingly, different currents have developed out of the multiplicity of focuses on the social construction of reality. The idea that knowledge is socially constructed is the commonly shared theme, yet how this actually occurs is viewed in wide-ranging ways by different thinkers. Nor is there consensus about the meaning or relative importance of such fundamental notions as reality, objectivity, truth, the mind, and the individual. One way of describing the varieties of social

constructionism is by making the distinction between 'strong' and 'weak' versions. In its strong form, social constructionism maintains nothing exists outside of text, that is, our linguistic construction of it. Weak social constructionism, on the other hand, holds that a material world exists, but has no meaning outside of that which we give it in social interaction. Thus, multiple versions of reality are constructed, but necessarily from the specific perspective of those engaged in discourse (Burr 2003). It is this latter version of social constructionism that provides the orientation taken in the present research, namely, that we give meaning to our world through discursive interaction.

3.3.2 Key themes

The following themes—the relational focus, language and discourse, dialogue, identity, and narration—have special relevance to the social constructionist perspective in sociolinguistic research and specifically to the present study on age. For that reason, I have singled them out for further discussion, albeit brief.

The relational focus

Social constructionism downplays individualism, in sharp contrast to the contemporary Western stance that places primacy on the individual (Gergen 1999). While recognizing that human beings live and behave in social contexts, the individualist tradition has focused initially on the self-contained individual in order to understand the human mind and its workings, and then, in consequence, the social world (Burr 1997; Gergen 1999). Constructionism rejects the dichotomy between the individual and society that has permeated such traditional thinking (Burr 1997). Social constructionists deny that the individual can be artificially dissociated from the social, instead contending that "human beings are 'the social.' They are individual and society at one and the same time" (Burr 1997: 1).

The movements and their chief proponents that initially turned toward the world of social relations in order to comprehend the psychological aspects of human beings, were symbolic interactionism (Mead), cultural psychology (Vygotsky and

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Jerome Bruner), and social phenomenology (Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz) (Gergen 1999). Yet, for Kenneth J. Gergen, they all fall somewhat short of the mark by remaining ultimately individualist in their outlooks, for they each propose that once "the social world has made its mark on the psychological, the self exists independently of society" (Gergen 1999: 129). Instead, Gergen (1996; 1999) puts forward the notion of relational being, that is, a view of the person as 'a relational integer' in a more collaborative vision of human life, one in which each of us is both constituted by, and constituting, the other. As he explains:

> If we are to locate a successor to individualism, it seems, we must achieve a more radical departure. We must undermine the binaries in which we find ourselves subject to others' influence but fundamentally separated. We must locate a way of understanding ourselves as constituents of a process that eclipses any individual within it, but is simultaneously constituted by its individual elements. (Gergen 1999: 129)

From this perspective, society is essentially relational in character in that it does not consist either of collectivities of individuals or of individuals, but is concerned with the relations between people (Roy Bhaskar Interviewed (questions by Christopher Norris) 1999). Moreover, the idea of relation can be extended to the non-social world as well, in particular to the natural environment, to which, according to Gergen (1999), people are inextricably bound. In the final analysis, the relational focus is an attempt to reduce "the debilitating gap between self and other" (ibid.: 137). I have adopted this focus in the present study because it gives greater prominence to persons as social beings, participating in dynamic and mutually constituting relationships with each other and actively collaborating in building their social world.

Language and discourse

The social constructionist movement is sustained by the belief that human social life is produced through discursive interaction. Discourse, the principal instrument of the social construction of reality, is generally conceived of as language in use, that is, language linked to situated action (see, for example, Austin 1962; McCarthy and Carter 1994; Schiffrin 1994; 2001; Blommaert 2005; Gee 2005).

As Potter (1996) explains it, languages are used to categorize or classify our experience of the world; however, the world is not previously categorized for us. Instead it is constituted by people as they are involved in the process of performing actions through language in interaction with each other (ibid.). This view, as has been pointed out, contrasts markedly with the notion of realist discourse, in which language is thought to mirror nature, and categorization is understood to be "a rather banal naming process; the right word is assigned to the thing that has the appropriate properties" (Potter 1996: 177). Vivien Burr clarifies the foregoing ideas:

> Social constructionism holds that our experience and knowledge of the world is constantly being produced or constructed by people in everyday interaction with each other, and it places a special emphasis upon the role of language in this interaction. Through our linguistic exchanges with each other in our routine daily lives we construct and re-construct the concepts, categories and objects with which we are familiar. They form a kind of common currency with which we can meaningfully deal with other people who share the same culture. Our concepts feel as though they reflect natural categories only because they precede our entry into the social, linguistic world as individuals. To psychologists, language has often been assumed to be a simple vehicle for expressing our thoughts, our beliefs and our attitudes. To the social constructionist, for whom the status of such mental structures is at least very questionable, language actively produces, constructs and shapes our experience. (Burr 1997: 4)

Discourse, then, provides a framework that enables people to construct the phenomena of their world and to make sense of their lives and their personal experience (Burr 2003). Different discourses do this in different ways (ibid.). Alternatively called interpretive repertoires, they are available to speakers as resources, but are 'transindividual,' in that they exist in a linguistic community rather than in particular people (Parker 1992; Burr 2003).

James Paul Gee (2001; 2005; 2008) takes a broader approach to the notion of discourse, seeing it not only as connecting language to embodied experience and to situated action, but also as ultimately linked to the enactment of identity.

A Discourse[11] integrates ways of talking, listening, writing, reading, acting, interacting, believing, valuing (and using various objects, symbols, images, tools, and technologies) in the service of enacting meaningful socially situated identities and activities. (Gee 2001: 719)

In this sense, Gee (2001) suggests that the term 'Discourse'[12] closely parallels 'community of practice,' 'actor-actant network,' and 'activity system,' in that, with minor differences, all refer to a set of relations among a group of people and the various ways in which they are bonded together through shared goals, values, beliefs, practices and activities.

The notion of discourse, in both its narrow and broad interpretations, is pertinent to the consideration of age as a social dimension on two accounts. First, it is through language-in-action or discursive interaction that age is constructed and given meaning. Second, age identity is enacted by recurring to available cultural discourses in particular sociohistorical contexts. This idea is developed more fully in Chapter 4.

Dialogue

It is in dialogue that relational being and discourse are joined. "There is a sense in which dialogue serves as the key organizing metaphor for social constructionist theory" (Gergen 1999: 147). People construct understandings collaboratively through dialogue, and these understandings are shaped by the social and cultural context of the interaction (Maybin 1993). The work of Bakhtin (1981; 1986) has been indispensable in uncovering the intricacies of dialogue. For Bakhtin, people "are born into meaning through dialogue" (Gergen 1999: 130), a dialogue that takes place in a specific historical and cultural context. Each time people speak

[11] Gee makes a distinction between 'discourse' and 'Discourse.' Beverly Moser explains that, for Gee, "whereas 'discourse' refers to the linguistic forms and nuances treated in traditional studies of written or oral texts, these are used by speakers to navigate within a larger framework of 'Discourse,' in which speakers' roles and relationships are inextricably connected in a reciprocal relationship to their language and to the way it is perceived. Engaging in Discourse (big D) requires both using the discourse (little d) of a certain group and being recognized as an authentic user of this discourse by other members of the group" (2001: 141).

[12] The concept of Discourse, as Gee defines it, plays a fundamental role in this study. However, I have opted to use the lower-case spelling ('discourse'), now in common currency, henceforward.

they draw on the existing language of their culture, yet at the same time language is dynamic; consequently the meanings of words and utterances change each time they are used (Bakhtin 1981, 1986). In this sense, utterances are double-voiced, deriving their significance both from the past and from the present context. Of importance for the present study, dialogue is central to the way in which the construction of age is collaboratively accomplished against a particular sociocultural backdrop.

Identity

Some reflections on the social construction of identity have been made in the previous section on sociolinguistics (3.2), and this question is taken up again in Chapter 4. Therefore, in order not to be unduly repetitive, I will highlight only two key points important to the present research project that have grown out of the considerations made thus far in the discussion on social constructionism. The first is that identity is the outcome of social relations (Berger and Luckmann 1966). Burr suggests that our identity arises out of interactions with other people and is based on language, that is, "our identity is constructed out of the discourses culturally available to us, and which we draw upon in our communications with other people" (2003: 106). Identity, then, can only be constructed within relationships, and all relationships are constrained by the specific cultural, social, and linguistic conditions which obtain at any given moment (Burr 2003).

The second point is that socially constructed identity has a dynamic, changeable and multiple character (Blackledge and Pavlenko 2001). This outlook is in counter-position to essentialist views of identity as static, monolithic, and in great measure predetermined (Gergen 1999; Burr 2003). Gergen remarks:

> In the present context we concentrate on fluidity, the ways in which precisely who one is depends on the moment-to-moment movements in conversation. Here we understand identity as precariously situated, subject to subtle shifts of word, intonation, and gesture. There is no final fixing of this process, as pragmatic uses are continuously evolving in society. (Gergen 1999: 80)

Hence, people are involved in the ongoing, flexible and dynamic process of identity construction throughout their lifetimes. This view of identity, as dynamic, flexible, multiple, and negotiated in discursive interaction, encompasses the position I have taken on age identity in the present study.

Narration

Narration is a core theme in social constructionism and one that is closely tied to the shaping of identity (Potter 1996). Having found abstract, objectivist and empiricist approaches less than satisfactory in understanding the world, constructionists have turned to narrative approaches to elucidate human action and experience through storytelling. "Narrative knowing is a more traditional, or pre-scientific, form of knowing which is embedded within a culture" (Potter 1996: 91). People have used narratives to make sense of their lives and themselves throughout history, structuring their experience in terms of stories. They are "fundamentally story-tellers who experience themselves and their lives in narrative terms" (Burr 2003: 147). The role of narrative in identity construction is vital. As Gergen explains:

> Because we are treated by others as storied characters, we are often called upon to "tell our story," to recount our past, to identify where we have been and where we are going. In effect, we identify ourselves through narration. (Gergen 1999: 70)

Thus, the self is seen in a certain sense as an ongoing narrative project (Giddens 1991; Coupland, Nussbaum, and Grossman 1993). The ability of human beings to create stories or narratives about themselves and their world offers countless possibilities to researchers working in a variety of disciplines to learn about the social construction of reality and of identity. In this study, narratives play a fundamental role in the construction of age and age identity, as the participants recount events from their lives and share their experiences through stories.

3.3.3 Further reflections

In order to round out the picture of social constructionism that has been presented so far, it is important to refer to some of the questions raised by its critics and the responses offered by constructionists. Among the issues that are debated, truth, objectivity, and moral relativism figure prominently (Gergen 1999; Burr 2003). Perhaps the main issue of contention is whether constructionism is anti-realist, as has been alleged, in essence denying the existence of the physical world and real problems such as pain, poverty and death (Gergen 1999; Burr 2003). In its most radical form, social constructionism claims that nothing exists beyond language, that things are only 'real' to the extent that there are discourses which describe them. Accordingly, we can never remove ourselves from language or step outside of it in our perception of the world (Burr 2003). The consequence of such a position is that there are multiple, historically and culturally specific accounts of reality, all relative to each other, but no 'objective' basis for considering any one version to be more valid than any other (ibid.).

At the opposite end of the spectrum, critical realists contend that there is a real world which exists prior to our experience of it and independent of the language we use to describe it (Burr 1998, 2003). Roy Bhaskar (1993) makes a clear separation between ontology and epistemology, positing an 'intransitive,' ontological dimension existing independently of our perceptions or thoughts about it, and a 'transitive,' epistemological or historical dimension in which our socially constructed understanding and beliefs about the world continually undergo reformulation and change.

In actual fact, social constructionists are more likely to position themselves somewhere midway between the two extremes, in a place where the distinction between knowledge and reality is attenuated at best. Eschewing the discussion of the existence of a material world beyond thought and discourse, they argue that it cannot be directly perceived (Burr 2003). Rather, people come to know the world and understand their experiences through social practices, in effect agreeing on and constructing versions of what is 'real' or 'true' in their particular historical

and cultural situations (Potter 1996; Burr 2003). From this perspective, what people know is what is real for them. By focusing on how experiences of events such as sickness and death can only be understood through social practices, social constructionists avoid assuming an uncompromisingly relativist position with regard to the existence of objective reality.

Nevertheless, the issue of relativity versus realism remains a complex one, for while social constructionists would affirm that all versions of reality have equal validity, they do so from a personal stance, "from looking at the world from some perspective or other, and . . . in the service of some interests rather than others" (Burr 2003: 6). The seeming circularity of this problem has generated considerable discussion and remains an area that is far from being satisfactorily explained (ibid.).

Similar concerns revolve around the moral and political ramifications of a constructionist stance. The assertion that there can be no ultimate truth or universal good, and the consequent acceptance of all versions of the true and good as equally valid, have led critics to regard social constructionism as morally bankrupt, failing to address issues of power inequality (Gergen 1999; Burr 2003). The position of social constructionists in this regard is not uniform, and is closely tied to the question of human agency. While recognizing that discourses are embedded in power relations and have political repercussions, not all constructionist thinkers agree on the extent to which persons are agents capable of exercising choice and making decisions about their society's values (Burr 2003). Some see people as the product of the dominant discourses of their society, having little agency (ibid.). Others believe that people can bring about change because they are able to analyze critically the discourses which frame their lives, and to accept or reject them (ibid.). Burr cautions us not to get caught up in the misleading dichotomy between the individual and society, and instead to view them as part of an ecosystem, in which "individuals, the social practices in which they engage, the social structure within which they live and the discourses which

frame their thought and experience become aspects of a single phenomenon" (Burr 1995: 110-111).

With regard to the charge of moral bankruptcy, constructionists like Gergen (1999) make a distinction between relativism and the total absence of any values in the multiple views of the world. They urge people to take a critical stance with respect to moral and political issues, and to adopt a position of ongoing reflection not only of alternative traditions but also of their own orientation (ibid.). Such evaluations or reflections would necessarily be undertaken with reference to a particular way of understanding the real and the good, and that inevitably implies the presence of values (ibid.). Thus, "constructionism may invite a posture of continuing reflection, but each moment of reflection will inevitably be value-saturated" (Gergen 1999: 231).

The openness to alternative orientations and the questioning of one's own traditions, approached reflectively, may be one of the most important benefits obtained from adopting a social constructionist perspective. This is among the reasons that many sociolinguists, myself included, have found social constructionism to be particularly compatible with their current research interests. By looking at key social dimensions such as social class, gender, ethnicity, and now age, as social constructs, it has been possible to explore them in greater depth than that permitted by a descriptive perspective. Both social constructionists and discourse-oriented sociolinguists place substantial emphasis on the centrality of language, discursive interaction and the ongoing negotiation of meaning (Maguire and Graves 2001). Likewise, the social constructionist view of reality as historically and culturally situated is well suited to current trends in sociolinguistics that focus research on local, sociocultural contexts. Constructionist interest in the role of narration in the enactment of identity is another theme actively taken up by present-day sociolinguistics. Thus, the social constructionist perspective offers a basis from which to work that is clearly harmonious with the outlook and research interests of many contemporary

sociolinguists, and this explains why it has been embraced so wholeheartedly by them and why I have found it especially compatible with my own work on age.

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have set out to establish the disciplinary perspective used in the present research project. I consider that discourse-oriented sociolinguistics offers the most satisfactory approach to the research I am undertaking because of its focus on the ways in which people construct meaning through social interaction in specific sociocultural contexts. In particular, I regard the social constructionist perspective adopted by many contemporary sociolinguists as having the greatest potential for exploring the question of age and identity. I have endeavored to show in this chapter that discourse-oriented sociolinguistics and social constructionism are linked in such a way that they form a coherent disciplinary framework for the present study. In the next chapter I examine the principal cultural discourses used in the social construction of age and in the enactment of age identity, and consider the part that narration plays in these processes.

Chapter 4

Viewing Age through a Social Constructionist Lens

4.1 Introduction

The social construction of age is a discursive process whereby people give meaning to the experience of aging and create their age identity through their interaction with each other. This chapter highlights the principal features that are brought into play in the process. I begin by considering how cultural studies and contemporary sociolinguistics complement each other in their approach to age. I then devote a major portion of the chapter to singling out the principal age discourses in present-day Western culture, for these discourses furnish people with a framework for interpreting their experience and enacting their identities. Following this, I address the question of identity from a poststructuralist perspective, as multiple, fragmented, changeable and a site of struggle, drawing attention to the complexity of age identity. I then turn to the issue of narration, focusing on how people use stories to tell about their lives and to understand the experience of aging. Finally, I tie together the various themes of this chapter and link them to those of the preceding chapters in order to bring to a close the conceptual and theoretical part of this research study.

4.2 Approaches to the study of age

From the standpoint of social constructionists, aging is not simply a natural, pre-ordained process, but one that is to a large extent shaped by sociocultural factors. The first prominent exposition of the idea that different 'ages of life' vary over history and culture is generally attributed to Philippe Ariès, whose ground-breaking work, *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), outlines the social construction of childhood (Gubrium, Holstein, and Buckholdt 1994). The view of aging as a socially constructed event has since been taken up in a variety of fields, each operating within its own conceptual and methodological framework. For example, political economy and critical gerontology consider how social, political and

economic structures are linked to social inequalities in the experience of aging (Minkler 1996; Phillipson 1998; Blaikie 1999; Hatch 2000). The humanities and communication sciences research ways in which people understand and express the meaning age has for them (Zeilig 1997; Deats and Lenker 1999; Cole, Kastenbaum, and Ray 2000). At present, no fully integrated theory of age or overarching discipline has emerged to underpin the work being undertaken in these fields, yet it is likely that the coming years will see advances in this direction because of the amount of interest being generated by a host of age-related issues, such as intergenerational relations, adult education, employment practices, and health care for the elderly.

In the absence, then, of a wholly developed age theory, the present study draws extensively on two main sources for its foundational support: cultural studies, for a broad conceptual base, and discourse-oriented sociolinguistics (treated in Chapter 3, section 3.2.3), for a more focused approach to age and identity. Until recently, language and communication research has glossed over culture, while cultural perspectives have lacked "the integrative and practical advantages of a communicative orientation" (Hill, Long, and Cupach 1997: 8). By availing myself of these complementary approaches, I hope to establish a solid basis for framing the discussion of age.

The two principal components in the discussion, 'age' and 'aging,' defined in the first chapter (section 1.4), are linked to two other important concepts: time and change. Whereas some societies in Africa and in other non-industrialized parts of the world have little notion of age as measured in years from the date of one's birth, Western industrial society has invariably placed primacy on chronological age (Ariès 1962; Makoni 1997). This view, harking back to the first of the two schools of thought that are identified with Western conceptions of time, is the 'objective,' mechanistic notion of time, coming from the writings of Aristotle and Newton (Gubrium 1976; Hendricks and Hendricks 1976). It was adopted by the sciences and is characterized by being quantifiable and ontologically prior to our consciousness of it (Hendricks and Hendricks 1976). Most research on aging

equates the aging process with the linear flow of objective time (ibid.). A second, more subjective and existential idea of time, flowing from Augustine through Einstein and Bergson to present-day phenomenologists, treats time as multifaceted, qualitative, and based on subjective perception (ibid.). This latter orientation is more closely aligned with a social constructionist perspective on age.

The theoretical and research concerns of a number of different disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, working from a culturalist perspective, have begun to converge in a single field called age studies (Gullette 2004). While retaining their own particular objects of study and goals, they engage in age research with the same shared conviction that human beings are aged more by culture than by biology and that the 'natural' process of aging has been overemphasized at the expense of the cultural (ibid.). This new field is endeavoring to denaturalize the construct of age much as feminist theory and critical race theory did for other body-based categories (ibid.). Yet, at this juncture, age continues to be an impoverished concept and age studies theory is as underdeveloped as gender theory and critical race theory were a few decades ago (ibid.).

Discourse-oriented sociolinguistics blends well with age studies, highlighting the dynamic process in which the meanings attached to age and aging emerge from the ongoing construction of social reality, primarily through discursive interaction (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991; Nussbaum and Coupland 1995). Age is located in our discourse because, as Bryan S. Green remarks, "it follows from the principle that social reality is made in and of language that there is no such extralinguistic thing as aging or the aged (or any other sociological category)" (1993: 15). From a discourse perspective, then, aging is considered to be an interactive process rather than an individual one, and can be analyzed by looking at how it is constructed through communicative practices, both verbal and non-verbal (Nussbaum and Coupland 1995). Likewise, the study of communicative

practices reveals the underlying cultural narratives or discourses through which people make sense of their experience of aging.

A common backdrop to age research is the life course perspective (Arber and Attias-Donfut 2000). The work of Margaret Morganroth Gullette (see, for example, 1997; 2004) in age studies and that of N. Coupland, J. Coupland, Giles and Nussbaum (see, for example, Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991; Giles, Coupland, and Coupland 1991; Coupland, Coupland, and Nussbaum 1993; Nussbaum and Coupland 1995) in the area of discourse and age, assume a life course perspective. This approach views the entire life course as a whole with the idea that, in order to understand an individual's present position in the lifespan, it is imperative to take into consideration their past life history and, if possible, their future aspirations (Nussbaum 1989). It also locates them in a particular cultural and historical context (Hutchison 2005). It is to be distinguished from the lifespan development model, in which a series of predictable life stages are thought to follow one other in a 'natural' fashion (Giddens 1991). Instead, in a more flexible manner, specific moments or life stages are experienced and shaped through language and participation in social interaction within the frame of the life course. This is the way Coupland et al. have focused their research on the elderly and Gullette on the 'middle years,'[13] in what she calls "slice-of-life studies" (2004: 192). In her opinion, such work is valuable when "those specializing in particular stages . . . work with a sense of the problematics of the whole" (ibid.). In an echoing voice, Coupland et al. point out that "the appropriate starting point for an improved understanding of miscommunication and older people will be studies of life-span communication not merely of the elderly themselves" (Coupland, Nussbaum, and Coupland 1991: 102).

I have adopted a life course perspective for my research on two accounts. First, my use of narrative inquiry was intended to encourage the participants in the study to talk about their lives as a seamless whole. Their narratives about present events

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[13] In a recent publication Gullette (2008) comments that her interest in midlife studies is waning and that she is currently more drawn to studies that include the whole life course rather than dividing it into bits.

were interspersed with stories of the past and shared hopes for the future, and these connections enabled me to come to a better understanding of where they positioned themselves in the life course. Second, I have not followed the lead of Gullette or Coupland et al., who concentrate on a single life stage in their work. Instead I chose to include persons from different age groups in the present study. My use of a comparative perspective, I believe, offers the advantage of being able to distinguish the similarities, differences and ambiguities that characterize the experience of the life course with greater clarity. Putting people of diverse ages side by side also casts light on the fluidity of the life course, and circumvents the lack of precision inherent in using global designations for diverse groups of people (Baltes and Carstensen 1996).

4.3 Age discourses

The meanings with which we imbue age and aging come to us initially through the prevailing discourses or narratives in our culture. The way a specific culture envisions age and the passing of time permeates every aspect of life, including attitudes, beliefs, feelings, values, social practices, ways of talking, as well as social institutions, and these discourses are internalized by the members of a given society from an early age. In most of the industrialized West the dominant discourse is one of decline, yet this is not necessarily the case in other parts of the world. China, Japan, India, certain African societies, and Islamic cultures have traditionally placed a high value on aging, associating it with increased wisdom, authority, status and freedom (Ritts 2000). Older people are esteemed and considered "custodians of the traditions and history of their people" (Nelson 2005: 208). Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that many of these same societies are currently experiencing changes in attitudes toward age as a consequence of increasing urbanization and industrialization. This is what I am observing in Mexico, a country that has only been industrialized for the past 50 years. The kinds of discourses available, then, depend crucially on how age is represented at a given historical moment in the specific context of each culture. In what follows, I take a look at the prevailing discourse in present-day Western culture, that of decline.

4.3.1 The discourse of decline

The discourse of aging is one of inevitable and irreversible decline. In *Aged by Culture* (2004), Gullette claims that we accept and internalize an age-as-decline discourse to such an extent that it colors "our expectations of the future, our view of others, our explanatory systems, and then our retrospective judgments" (ibid.: 11).[14] She goes on to say that what began as the decline narrative of old age has now moved steadily backwards to younger and younger ages, so that it is now the predominant discourse of people below forty, thirty, or even twenty years of age (ibid.). The decline discourse is strongly supported by institutions and commercial interests and is manifested overtly and covertly in societal ageism.

The decline narrative must be understood with respect to its counterpart, the progress narrative, which depicts aging in terms of growth and progress, occurring before the onset of decline. It is the fitting narrative for childhood, in that children are seen as moving through the life course in progressive stages of physical, psychological, and social development that prepare them for the adult world (Gullette 2004). The progress narrative accounts for their increased status, based primarily on age, as they advance through the school system and other organizations or institutions. The basic theme of the progress narrative is one that envisions aging as positive and leading inexorably to a propitious future.

This narrative has also been used, inconsistently, for adults. It used to be part of what was called 'the American Dream,' associated with continuing upward advancement in the workplace (Gullette 2004). However, Gullette (ibid.) argues that the progress narrative is disappearing from the narrative of adulthood because, despite increasing longevity, decline is believed to take place at ever younger ages in the industrialized West. Thus, the narrative begins as a story of

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[14] Although her book specifically addresses decline ideology in present-day American culture, by and large her reflections are applicable to most other Western industrial societies, including Mexico. Therefore, I do not make the distinction in my treatment of her ideas except where it is relevant.

progress, reaches a peak, and is then transformed into a decline story. The result is a progress-versus-decline binary that has effectively covered most of the available narrative possibilities, thereby limiting the emergence of alternative discourses for understanding or explaining age. Although there is general agreement about the prevalence of the decline discourse in contemporary Western culture, not everyone would share Gullette's dark view of a midlife now being removed to an early stage of old age. Both the general populace and the academic research community have tended to fix the culminating point of the life course somewhere in middle age (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989; Eckert 1997a). This is also the case for urban Mexico.

4.3.2 Other discourses and their manifestations

To bring the discussion of age ideology into the more familiar arena of everyday experience, I next look at some of the prevalent discourses in contemporary Western culture that are offshoots of the decline narrative, along with their overt and covert manifestations. Some topics are broader than others, and, as might be anticipated, a certain amount of overlapping is unavoidable.

Ageist discourses

The decline discourse is closely associated with societal ageism. 'Ageism,' a term first used by Robert N. Butler (1969), is commonly understood as a set of prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory practices that target the elderly as an age group and which endorse their subordinate and marginal positions in society (Coupland 2001a). In my view, however, 'ageism' can be expanded to include any age group that is discriminated against on the basis of age and deprived of access to material and social resources, such as education, medical services, or employment opportunities. Ageism may be explicit, as in the case of laws that establish upper or lower age limits, for example, for obtaining employment. It can also take more subtle forms, as, for instance, in the way physical illness in midlife may be understood to signal the onset of the 'natural' biological aging process. Such an interpretation is shot through with tacit ageist discourses.

Behind societal ageism lie stereotypic beliefs that attribute selected, and generally unfavorable, characteristics to individuals on the sole basis of their belonging to a particular age cohort (Hewstone and Giles 1997). Ageist myths, attitudes and practices are part of the age lore of Western culture and are rationalized by problematizing a targeted age group on the basis of negative stereotypes. The most prevalent ones are those referring to old people.[15] As a case in point, I report in my research that one of the teachers made ageist jokes on more than 25 occasions during the 20 lessons I observed, frequently singling out the 70-year-old member of the group as the target of his humorous remarks.

One belief, built on the notion that later adulthood brings with it the end of change, is that the elderly are inflexible and set in their ways (Hazan 1994; Coupland 2001a). Another is that they are long-winded and rambling, displaying an "off-target verbosity unrelated to present contextual stimuli" (Cicirelli 1993: 221). They are also characterized at times as egocentric and cantankerous. The vision of old age as a 'second childhood' is another popular stereotype in which the 'declining' competence, increased dependency, lack of productivity, social marginality and physical smallness of the elderly are likened to similar characteristics in young children, in what is aptly described as the 'inverted-U' model of the life course (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991; Coupland 2001a).

Among the most damaging is the discourse or narrative of disengagement, in which older people are seen as alienated from mainstream society, to a large extent detached from a world in which they no longer have an active role (Coupland 2001a). This idea has clearly identifiable roots in the establishment, following World War II, of voluntary or mandatory retirement from the workforce at a predetermined age (Phillipson 1998). Retirement is thought to signal the end of an individual's economic productivity, a key value in industrialized societies, and to entail a concomitant 'retirement' from the community and a loss of status.

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[15] I refer to people in this age group as 'old people' or 'older people' throughout the chapter in an effort to use the most neutral terms available. However, I am aware that, precisely because of societal ageism, all terms are offensive to some degree.

In the ensuing years, the system of retirement has placed increasingly heavy burdens on society and the economic, political and social consequences have been serious. Not surprisingly, older people are both affected by and blamed for the critical situation that has resulted (ibid.). In all fairness, it must be pointed out that, when analyzed on a case-by-case basis, retirement can be seen in a positive light as affording freedom, leisure, and new opportunities to individuals in some sectors of the population. However, to numerous others retirement signifies economic constraints and marginalization from society (Coupland 2001a). This is particularly true in the case of Mexico, where only about 20% of the retired population receives a pension, one which for most retirees is meager at best (Ham Chande 1999; Zúñiga Herrera 2004).

Closely bound to the issue of productivity is a depreciation of the accumulated experience of aging (Featherstone and Wernick 1995; Cruikshank 2003; Gullette 2004). This is especially evident in the workplace, where the value formerly accorded to seniority and the rewards that accompanied it have been eroded in modern times. Gullette (2004) reports that it is increasingly commonplace in the US for experienced workers to be edged out of their jobs to make room for younger untried replacements. Older persons are often unceremoniously moved into retirement, and midlifers are encouraged to follow them, or are locked into their current positions, or even relegated to inferior ones before they have developed a sense of professional accomplishment (ibid.).

It must be noted, however, that the phenomenon of forced early retirement pertains to developed countries, where it can serve various purposes, such as keeping salaries from escalating by the replacement of experienced workers with younger, cheaper ones or, in those nations where the private sector assumes a large responsibility for pension funds. Government policy in some countries may also promote early retirement as a way to combat unemployment by opening up positions in the job market to younger workers.

This situation does not hold true for developing nations such as Mexico, where the unemployment rate in the formal sector is so high that the large number of people competing for the limited number of jobs guarantees that salaries will remain low. Pension systems, as mentioned before, cover only a small percentage of the population. Consequently, there is little incentive for employees to retire early in Mexico. Nevertheless, the devaluation of experience is as prevalent in Mexico as it is elsewhere in the industrialized world. The consequences go far beyond the economic, for there is psychological and social damage as well (Gullette 2004). Thus, aging is no longer seen in terms of gains, a building up of experience or cultural capital, but primarily as loss and decline.

Ageist discourses concerning other age groups can be perceived in stereotypes about the midlife crisis, loss of physical attractiveness, depression, and the empty-nest syndrome (Waxman; Shweder 1998; Clay 2003). Interestingly, not all of these stereotypes have relevance in Mexico, where notions of 'middle age' do not form part of the narratives of age at the present time (see the section 'Age-category discourses' below for further discussion of this point).

Different stereotypes of adolescents portray them as violent, rebellious, criminal, reckless, complaining, lazy and valueless (*Youth Stereotypes: What are the Stereotypes?* ; *Ageism and Age Discrimination*). Stereotypes of children represent them variably as helpless and vulnerable or as devilish and dangerous (*Ageism and Age Discrimination*; O'Sullivan 1998).

It is not only popular or folk beliefs, such as these, that are ageist. Ageism has found its way into academic discourse as well. The research agenda in age and communication studies has a decidedly ageist slant (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991). A clear example is the debate surrounding the Critical Period Hypothesis for SLA, discussed in Chapter 2, in which participating researchers have commonly launched their studies from the initial supposition that children will perform better than adults because increased age brings with it a loss of ability to learn a new language. In view of the considerable counter-evidence

reporting better performance by older SLA learners, such a presupposition seems unnecessarily precipitate. In addition, relatively few studies focus on differences among adults of distinct ages, yet an underlying assumption exists that adult second-language learning ability continues to diminish throughout the life course, a position that cannot, in any case, be explained by the CPH (Singleton and Ryan 2004). Furthermore, the research evidence to date has identified comparatively few areas in which increasing age may be accompanied by the loss of capacities considered critical for successful language learning, such as auditory acuity and efficiency of memory processing (ibid.). Singleton and Ryan (ibid.) point out that training and teaching procedures can compensate for many of these difficulties, which are, moreover, frequently offset by favorable motivational and experiential factors characteristic of older learners. In view of the fact that research findings on older vs. younger SLA learners are inconclusive and the CPH debate is no closer to being resolved today than it was 30 years ago, one is hard put to account for the ageist tack taken by ostensibly neutral academicians.

Yet not all stereotypes are negative. Positive stereotypes also form part of societal ageism by making simplistic generalizations that do not take into account real variations among people in an age group (Cruikshank 2003). Favorable images of older people portray them as warm, nurturing grandparents or as singularly wise or dignified (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989; Hazan 1994; Gubrium and Holstein 2000). Young people are represented as possessing physical attractiveness and sexuality, and children are stereotyped as cute and angelic (O'Sullivan 1998; Shweder 1998; Gullette 2004). In fact, experience tells us that we draw on multiple, and often conflicting, discourses to categorize people of different age groups. The use of "sanitised one-dimensional benign stereotypes" is "an ageist trap," for it locks people indiscriminately into roles such as 'granny' and 'grandpa' "which do not do justice to the richness of their individual experiences and multi-facets of their personalities" (Featherstone and Hepworth 1991: 382).

Furthermore, ageist discourses are commonly interwoven with gender, ethnic and racial differences. For instance, old women in medieval times were believed to be witches and often appear in fairy tales as crones, shrews or nags, an image that has persisted to our times (Jacobs; Cruikshank 2003). Midlife women are portrayed as spiteful mothers-in-law, yet no corresponding images exist for men (ibid.).

All these stereotypes have been discredited by evidence from research, despite the fact that elements of truth may be found in some of them. However, the issue is not to determine the extent to which they present an accurate portrayal of particular age groups. That misses the point, which is that people age in far different ways, a fact that stereotypes, both positive and negative, overlook (Williams and Giles 1996; Cruikshank 2003). As a result, ageist discourses engender prejudicial beliefs and practices that have potentially detrimental effects on every age group. Perhaps the most serious consequence is that people tend to internalize negative discourses and to adopt the very traits they believe to be prototypical of the age group to which they belong (Hazan 1994; Levy 2001; Cruikshank 2003).

Age behavior and talk

Discourses of aging have a strong effect on the way people act. The norms for acceptable behavior for each age group are clearly understood by the members of a society, yet rarely explicit. These unwritten rules of age-appropriate behavior govern the manner of looking, sounding, and dressing, as well as of making choices (Hazan 1994). Those who violate the norms by acting either 'older' or 'younger' are sanctioned. Although there have been efforts to break through certain age barriers, for example, in the case of people returning to school after retirement, the stereotypes of age-appropriate appearance and behavior in most cultures remain very powerful.

The marketers of consumer goods rely on such accepted age-related images for targeting different segments of the population, such as teenagers or 'yuppies.' With the affluent older adult markets, this has required treading a fine line

between recognizing their needs and interests and at the same time skirting the more negative stereotypes and images of bodily aging which produce anxiety (Sawchuk 1995; Katz 2001). Age anxiety also stems from what Gullette (2004) calls the 'speed-up' of the life course, that is, the feeling of urgency that arises out of the pressure of time to get things done. It is the sensation of being perpetually behind schedule that drives people to work harder and longer hours, to neglect family and friends, and to skip leisure-time activities in a futile effort to catch up (ibid.). Nor are adolescents and children immune to 'speed-up.' Young people worry years ahead of time about getting a job or accomplishing enough before it is 'too late.' Children are pushed at ever earlier ages into acquiring skills considered 'essential' for their future success in the adult world. The feeling of being 'too late' is readily transformed into the feeling of being 'too old.' The irony, then, is that, in an era of unprecedented longevity, premature decline is making inroads in the life course at earlier stages (ibid.).

Ageist attitudes are evident in the way people talk about age and aging. The words and expressions they use reflect conventional cultural stereotypes. For example, pejorative terms, such as 'over the hill,' 'geezer,' 'old-timer,' 'old bag,' *'anciano'* (aged person), *'vejete'* (silly old fellow), *'chocho'* (doddering old person) or *'ruco'* (old fogy), form part of the popular discourse referring to older people in English and Spanish. The lexicon also contains euphemisms for this age group, like 'golden-ager' (*adulto en plenitud*) or 'mature person' (*persona de la tercera edad*'), which attempt to cover up the negative overtones of the 'taboo' subject of old age. Countless examples of ageist verbal expressions are also found in clichés, adages, humor, popular fiction, and the media (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991; Palmore 2005). While the use of disparaging language is clearly offensive to members of the targeted age group, interestingly enough, the use of flattering terms and complimentary expressions, such as 'You look wonderful,' may be equally demeaning to an older person if what is implied is that it is somehow a surprise, given the circumstances of age, health, or fortune (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991; Cruikshank 2003).

Ageist attitudes can also be revealed by the way people adjust their speech to facilitate or hinder comprehension when talking to others. In the context of intergenerational talk, 'overaccommodation,' exemplified by the use of simplified languages such as baby talk or elder speech, can be patronizing (Cruikshank 2003). 'Underaccommodation,' resulting from some style or quality of talk being underplayed such as the use of 'ingroup' language, can be exclusionary (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991; Giles and Coupland 1991; Giles, Coupland, and Coupland 1991; Williams and Giles 1996; Nussbaum et al. 2000; Nussbaum et al. 2005).

Age-category discourses

The discussion of 'ingroups' and 'outgroups' and intergenerational talk makes sense only in the context of a life course that is divided into different stages. Historically, every society separates the life course into the stages it believes correspond to progressive 'natural' sequences of development. However, age categories, such as 'childhood,' 'adolescence,' and 'old age,' are in fact arbitrary divisions, varying between as well as within cultures (Gubrium, Holstein, and Buckholdt 1994; Blaikie 1999). This is illustrated by the fact that in some cultures there are as few as two classifications, old and young, and in others as many as ten or more (Keith 1984; Cutler 2005). The idea, then, that lifespan development can be seen "as a 'natural' process, and/or a series of universal stages" (Buchanan and Middleton 1993: 58) is faulty and obscures the socially constructed and historically specific nature of age categories. Moreover, age grading is potentially ageist "in that it segregates younger and older people into 'us and them'" (Nelson 2005: 217).

'Childhood,' as a distinct age group, emerged in American and Western European culture in the early part of the nineteenth century as a result of historical changes that shifted the focus from kinship groups or lineage to the modern conjugal family (Ariès 1962; Hareven 1995). At the same time, a decline in infant and child mortality and a greater proliferation of conscious birth-control practices contributed to the increased interest in the child-centered family (ibid.).

Childhood and adolescence, as we now know them, were undifferentiated until the latter part of the nineteenth century, when 'adolescence' became a recognized age category in industrialized Western cultures (Hareven 1995; Eckert 1997a). Factors that contributed to its emergence were the exclusion of adolescents from entry into the adult world, the lengthening of formal education through secondary school, and the extension of age limits for child labor (ibid.). This led to the custom of young people banding together and adopting styles of peer-group behavior that were felt to pose a threat to society (Hareven 1995).

Adolescence has now been extended at both ends of the spectrum. On the one hand, the media and peer pressure propel 10- to 12-year-olds into a world in which body image, sexual behavior and the adoption of older role models mark an early entrance into adolescence (Levinson 2003; Day 2004). On the other hand, adolescence is not considered to have ended until a person has finished school, gotten a job and started a family, events much more likely to occur nearer to 30 than to 20 (Lackovic-Grgin et al. 1996; *Extended Adolescence* 2003). "Both stages of life [childhood and adolescence] emerged into public consciousness as a result of the social crises associated with those age groups in a manner similar to the emergence of old age later on" (Hareven 1995: 124).

Adulthood remained a relatively amorphous category, bounded only by adolescence at one end of the continuum, until early in the twentieth century when 'old age' became a distinct new stage of life at the other end (Hareven 1995). Whereas in pre-industrialized societies, the latter part of adulthood was associated with the survival of the fittest, in the urban industrialized world old age soon became identified with physical and mental decline, dependence and obsolescence (ibid.). In addition, the proportion of older people in the population grew as a result of a decline in fertility and an increase in life expectancy attributable to advances in medicine. Furthermore, older people were fazed out of productive roles in the economy to a much greater extent because of retirement practices (Hareven 1995; Phillipson 1998).

The term 'middle age' or 'midlife,' the newest addition to the list of age categories in English, draws a distinction between the social problems of midlife and those of late life (Hareven 1995). The problems of forced early retirement and the empty-nest syndrome have given rise to the adoption of the middle age category, yet at present this does not have a counterpart in much of the developing world, including Mexico, where people falling in the vast range between adolescence and old age are subsumed under the broad indeterminate category of 'adults' (Shweder 1998).[16] As mentioned previously, forced early retirement is not an issue in Mexico. Likewise, the empty-nest syndrome has not appeared to any great extent in Mexico, where the family structure is based on close economic and affective ties across generations. The trigenerational family, which includes a couple, their children and their grandchildren, is the prototype for all social levels (Adler Lomnitz 1999; Leñero Otero 1999). Furthermore, as more women have entered the work force in recent years, it is grandparents, and primarily grandmothers, who have come to aid working mothers in the care of their children (González de la Rocha 2005; Zermeño 2005; Malacara 2006). There is no empty nest.

Tamara K. Hareven observes that there is "an increasing segregation of different stages of life—and of their corresponding age groups—in modern American society" (1995: 132). As a case in point, in recent years the 'old age' category has been further segmented to distinguish the 'young old' from the 'old old' (Hazan 1994; Hareven 1995; Gullette 2004). Other newly-minted terms reflect the subdivision of an expanded adolescence into 'tweenies' (7 – 12-year-olds), 'teens' (13 – 19), and 'middlescents' (20 – 30) (Cutler 2005).

When viewing aging as a diachronic process, we expect that a person will belong to each of the age groups, from childhood to old age, at different moments over the course of a normal lifetime. Yet by looking at age from a synchronic perspective, it is possible to see another kind of age division, one that is brought

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[16] I confirmed this by examining a sample of about 15 studies on age in Mexico.

about by naming age cohorts or by making an allusion to a shared historical moment or experience, such as 'Baby Boomers' or 'Generation X-ers' (Gullette 2004). People typically are members of both a cohort and an age group. However, belonging to an age group is always temporary whereas membership in a cohort is lifelong. Cohorts are generally characterized in terms of popular stereotypes. The rise of named age cohorts has hardened these stereotypes and put emphasis on age divisions (ibid.). While the construction of age categories and cohorts has provided people with a framework for interpreting their experiences and for understanding life change, it has also been a means of power and social control (Bourdieu 2003; Cruikshank 2003).

Invoking age categories or cohort membership in talk, everyday conversation or in humor, is a practice tinged with ageism for it reproduces age stereotypes (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991; Gullette 2004). Even the simple mention of chronological age calls up age images, as is evident in the journalistic convention of 'age-tagging' in character descriptions (Coupland, Coupland, and Nussbaum 1993). Age salience is a pervasive feature of the contemporary Western world.

> From birth to death we all age, and from womb to tomb our chronological progress is obsessively and meticulously recorded: on our driver's licenses, on our passports, in the newspapers (if we are unfortunate enough to be celebrities), on the end papers of our books, and at our birthday parties. (Deats and Lenker 1999: 9)

The body and biomedical discourses
Culturally endorsed images of physical attractiveness and age-appropriate behavior highlight the centrality of the human body to the discussion of age, for it is the body that makes us part of the physical and temporal world, enabling us to be social beings and to create a social world (Ainlay and Redfoot 1982; Featherstone and Hepworth 1989). This does not imply that the biological, psychological and social dimensions are discrete segments that add up to the whole person; we are at the same time fully physical and fully social beings (Ainlay and Redfoot 1982). Aging is our passage through time, and it is an

embodied social process inseparable from its social context (ibid.). As Mike
Featherstone and Mike Hepworth point out:

> Aging and old age 'are certainly real, but they do not exist in some natural
> realm, independently of the ideals, images and social practices that
> conceptualise and represent them' (Cole, 1992: xxii). Whilst the biological
> processes of aging, old age, and death cannot in the last resort be avoided,
> the meanings which we give to these processes and the evaluations we make
> of people as they grow physically older are social constructions which
> reflect the beliefs and values found in a specific culture at a particular period
> of history. (Featherstone and Hepworth 1995: 30-31)

Our embodiment is fundamental to understanding not only the experience of
aging, but also the process of identity (Turner 1995). The body is a signifier; it
makes a statement about who a person is (Hockey and James 1995). We both
'have' a body and 'perform' our body, that is, our bodies are simultaneously real
and constructed (Harper 1997; Gullette 2004). People may consciously choose to
rework bodily appearance and behavior through, for example, adornment or
cosmetic surgery, or by adopting postures or facial expressions. In today's
Western world, the young body is the norm, "bolstered by a consumer culture
with its images of youth, fitness and beauty lifestyles" (Featherstone and Wernick
1995: 7) and romanticized through advertising and the visual imagery of the
media (Powell and Longino 2001).

While many changes in appearance may be brought about intentionally, others can
be attributed to involuntary biochemical processes or to outside factors, such as
illness, accident or stress (Gullette 2004). Powerful links are made between aging,
sickness and death (Tulle-Winton 1999). Yet this seemingly natural connection is
in reality a historical phenomenon. Up until the end of the nineteenth century,
death was associated with newborns and young children, and old age was seen as
a sign of physical strength rather than weakness (Hazan 1994). However, because
of the demographic changes brought on by industrialization and urbanization,
beginning around 1880 aging became a 'medical problem' for which science is
expected to provide a solution (Hareven 1995; Vincent 2003; Gullette 2004;
Vincent 2006). Since that time, the biomedical model has dominated the

understanding of aging in Western culture. It has assumed the task of preventing, hiding or halting the aging process via the biotechnological advancements that foster reconstruction of the body, such as plastic surgery, organ transplants, hip replacements, and other similar procedures (Powell and Longino 2001).

In general, the medical model focuses its attention on the pathology of aging, considering sickness to be the 'natural' consequence of biological decline (Cruikshank 2003). Yet the fact is that, even within the scientific-medical community, there is no universal agreement on how biological aging comes about (Vincent 2003, 2006). Moreover, the fear of aging and of death, so prevalent in contemporary Western culture, has augmented the significance of illness (Latimer 1997; Silver 2003). Here, two points must be made. First, although biological decline may predispose older people to illness, it does not in itself cause it. Indeed, many older people live in good health (Combe and Schmader 1999). The second point, one that has been stated before, is that biological aging cannot be artificially separated from the sociocultural framework within which it is experienced and given meaning.[17] Because the medical profession has taken upon itself the task of eradicating illness and prolonging life—indeed, its primary objective is seen as preventing death—some believe that a disproportionate amount of time and resources are channeled to preserving life and avoiding death (Cruikshank 2003; Vincent 2003; Nelson 2005; Vincent 2006). The effect is to divert attention from a consideration of possible ways to bring old age to a satisfactory close (ibid.).

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[17] An example is the medicalization of menopause, treated by the medical establishment as a 'deficiency disease,' purportedly accounting for sickness, depression, frigidity, osteoporosis, and other maladies affecting midlife women (Gullette 1997; Shweder 1998; Gullette 2004). Interestingly, it is reported that the Mayas of Yucatán, Mexico, do not experience hot flashes or other symptoms typically associated with menopause (Malacara 2006). Moreover, in Japan, India and some other cultures, no equivalent term for 'menopause' is found (Shweder 1998). It is not considered in and of itself a life-marking event, or even an 'event' at all (Gullette 1997; Shweder 1998). By biologizing menopause, the pharmaceutical industry succeeded in opening up a lucrative new market in hormone replacement 'therapy.' The widespread public menopause discourse shows "culture impinging on the midlife—a clear case of women being aged by culture" (Gullette 1997: 98-99).

Anti-ageist discourses

In a broad sense, the counter-position to the deficit model is the discourse or narrative of change, in which aging is seen as change, understood in terms of difference rather than decrement, and free of the pejorative values associated with the latter (Coupland 2001a). Challenge or resistance to decline ideology has emerged since the 1970s in the form of 'anti-ageist' discourses (Tulle-Winton 1999). The two main approaches, subsumed under the banner of 'positive' aging, stand in stark contrast to each other. One tendency is the quest for eternal youth or the pursuit of 'agelessness' (Vincent 2003). The other is the construction of aging as a meaningful process through a variety of alternative images and lifestyles that change throughout the life course.

The first approach, characterized by a search for ways to stave off the 'negative' manifestations of aging, has flourished in the present-day consumer culture, where the "aging industry" (Cole 1992: 222) provides a plethora of products and services for the affluent that promise to erase the signs of aging. What is more, methods to prevent aging altogether are offered in self-help courses and advice books, such as Deepak Chopra's best-selling *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind* (1993). Even the large segment of the population whose economic possibilities limit their participation in this consumer culture, defines their aspirations in terms of an affluent lifestyle and set of values (Gilleard and Higgs 2000).

Anti-aging products and surgical procedures are now routinely in demand by midlifers and even young people. In other words, the preferred method of successful aging is to curtail the internal and external signs of aging, or better yet, not to age at all (Andrews 1999). Trying to 'pass' as younger is a temptation throughout the adult life course "in a culture where youth itself appears to be for purchase" (ibid.: 307), but it is an endeavor ultimately destined to fail. A more serious consequence is that older people are held accountable for maintaining their health, active lifestyle and independence permanently, thereby relieving the social institutions and medical profession of much of their responsibility in this regard (Cole 1992; Latimer 1997; Cruikshank 2003; Vincent 2003; Calasanti 2005).

Thus, despite certain benefits, such as the promotion of fitness and health, this version of positive aging discourse does not, in the final analysis, resolve the 'problem' of aging (Vincent 2003). It only delays it.

A contrasting, more centered discourse of positive aging has emerged as a result of the growing economic power of older people and their ability to self-organize (Gergen and Gergen 2000). They have been joined by midlifers in assuming greater control of their lives and fashioning alternative narratives of aging. This approach to positive aging has begun to take hold in less developed countries, such as Mexico, as well (Brigeiro 2005). Rather than adopting images of the young or searching for means to prolong youth, people are finding value for every stage of life in its own right (Vincent 2003, 2006). Many older people have come to question the work ethic and the value of productivity, so endemic to Western culture, that have left them feeling devalued and marginalized (Gergen and Gergen 2000). Instead, new discourses and narratives have been shaped that discard these cultural values and place priority on personal happiness, self-fulfillment, and what Margaret Cruikshank calls "comfortable aging" (2003: 3). In addition, many older people are seeking to take charge of the circumstances of the final stage of their lives rather than relinquishing control of their bodies to the medical professionals (Vincent 2003). In short, positive aging from this perspective signifies that people of all ages, young and old, are relying on themselves to negotiate and define the issues of aging and to articulate new discourses and narratives. It entails adapting to ongoing change and then choosing to live well within the limits set out at any point in the life course (Tulle-Winton 1999).

Interlinking age with other discourses
The age discourses that come into play in the enactment of identity are invariably colored in particular ways by other discourses. For instance, expectations and opportunities affecting the life chances of young adults are drawn from discourses of social class, as Pierre Bourdieu (2003) observed in considering differences between young workers and students of the same age in France. The construction

of age identity is sensitive to discourses of ethnicity at every stage of the life course in Mexico (Fortes de Leff 2002). With regard to gender, discourses of bodily appearance are more salient in the case of midlife and older women than of their male counterparts (Cruikshank 2003; Gullette 2004; Calasanti 2005; Dumas, Laberge, and Straka 2005). Gender discourses have an impact on professional aspirations in the crucial adult years, during which women may interrupt their work history to have children or where the 'glass ceiling' hinders their career advancement (Arber and Ginn 1995). Unequal pay scales and employment opportunities bring about inequitable retirement situations for men and women in later adulthood, both in developed and developing nations (Arber and Ginn 1995; Cruikshank 2003). These few examples illustrate the dynamic interplay of discourses and point to ways in which the aging process can be "profoundly shaped by gender, class and ethnicity" (Cruikshank 2003: 132).

4.3.3 Final considerations

In this section, I have emphasized the lifelong character of aging and my belief that age theory must necessarily be a whole-life theory. Aging, as a process of continuing development, involves choices and opportunities at different moments throughout the life course (Andrews 1999). As people make choices, they construct their age socially, framing it within the discourses available to them. In present-day Western culture, ageist discourses in many guises, including a deceptive anti-ageist one, have been generated by the prevailing ideology of decline and are so pervasive that people generally adopt them unwittingly. Positive aging discourses attempt to counter ageism by calling attention to its inherent fallacies and by promoting the construction of "our own age stories from the choice of narratives that reflect a 'true age consciousness'" (Gullette 2004: 154).

Gullette (2004) asks if it is possible to feel at home in the life course at every age. In my view, this is the crux of the matter, and I concur with her that doing so depends on the ability "to conceive of aging at any age as an issue of consciousness and a relationship to personal change informed by age culture's

devices" (ibid.: 65). Ultimately, the particular ways in which people exercise their choice and agency across the life course will vary according to the cultural values they share and the age discourses they draw on or generate. I believe that an awareness of, and an acceptance of or resistance to, the prevailing age discourses make it possible to encounter a significance for each moment in the life course.

Discovering how the meaning and experience of age are constructed throughout the life course entails a better understanding of how age identity and age narratives are created. In order to pursue these issues more comprehensively, I discuss age identity in the following section and take up the topic of narration in the final part of the chapter.

4.4 Identity and age

The exponential growth of the literature on identity in recent years has occasioned a corresponding lack of precision in the discourse and terminology surrounding this topic. To avoid getting submerged in these murky waters, I wish to make clear at the outset that the position I am taking with respect to identity is a poststructuralist one. This is in consonance with the social constructionist perspective of the present research, in which identity is viewed as discursively constructed. The constructionist focus on identity has found strong theoretical support in different strands of poststructuralism, particularly in feminist poststructuralism (Weedon 1997). Poststructuralist approaches to the study of gender and power relations have served as an effective model for research not only on gender but also on other social dimensions, such as ethnicity (see, for example, Norton 2000; Blackledge and Pavlenko 2001). In this section I draw largely on Chris Weedon's (1997) work to argue that poststructuralism also provides a valuable way of understanding age identity or subjectivity.[18]

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[18] While I respect the feminist poststructuralist preference for the term 'subjectivity' and concur with the important distinctions that it conveys with regard to traditional essentialist notions of identity, I recognize that 'identity' is still the more commonly used term, even among many poststructuralists. Therefore, I have elected to use 'identity' and 'subjectivity' interchangeably, unless otherwise specified.

To this end, I sketch out the basic assumptions of social constructionist and poststructuralist approaches to identity, highlighting, in particular, the ways in which they differ from essentialist notions of identity, the centrality they give to language and discourse, and the cultural and historical specificity of identity construction. I next discuss the poststructuralist focus on the multiplicity and fragmentation of selfhood, its changeability and flexibility, and identity as a site of struggle. The discussion then moves to the socially constructed nature of experience. Finally, I look at how poststructuralism provides a viable explanation of subject positions and subjectivities that can enhance our understanding of age and the discourses of age seen in the previous section, as well as the intersection of age identity with other identities.

4.4.1 Subjectivity and subject positions

Poststructuralists define subjectivity as our sense of ourselves, our conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions, and our ways of understanding our relation to the world (Weedon 1997). Subjectivity is formed in our relationships with others through our identification with particular subject positions, or ways of being an individual, within discourses, in an ongoing process "constantly being reconstituted in discourse each time we think or speak" (ibid.: 32). The range of subject positions open to an individual is necessarily limited to those made available by the specific discourses operating in a particular historical and social context (ibid.).

The concepts of 'subject positions' and 'positioning' come from the theory developed extensively by Rom Harré and Luk van Langenhove (1999c). Positioning is the process by which people jointly construct their personal stories in such a way as to make their actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts, and in which the participants have specific locations (Tan and Moghaddam 1999). These locations are known as 'subject positions,' a term similar to, yet more dynamic than, that of 'role,' in that it allows for the fluid positioning of a diversity of selves in an individual's discursive interactions with

others (van Langenhove and Harré 1999). Positioning theory is comprised of three key elements: positions, actions-acts, and storylines.

> The core of positioning theory, summed up in the notion of the 'positioning triangle', pictures a dynamic stability between actors' positions, the social force of what they say and do, and the storylines that are instantiated in the sayings and doings of each episode. (Harré and van Langenhove 1999a: 10)

A distinction is sometimes made between interactive and reflexive positioning, the former referring to the way people position each other and the latter to the positioning of oneself (Davies and Harré 1999; Harré and van Langenhove 1999a). Yet in both cases positioning is discursively produced, embedded in the discursive practices of a particular culture, and people can actively take up a position, try out others, and accept, reject or challenge positions conferred on them by others (Harré and van Langenhove 1999a, 1999b; Moghaddam 1999).

Furthermore, because subject positions are often in conflict with each other, subjectivity is seen as a site of struggle between "competing yet interwoven discourses" (Baxter 2003: 1). It is precisely the greater attention given by feminist poststructuralists to "the unresolved tensions, competing perspectives, shifts of power, ambiguities and contradictions inherent within all texts" (ibid.: 2) which distinguishes their approach from the closely related social constructionist one to identity.

4.4.2 Poststructuralist vs. humanist perspectives on identity

Both social constructionism and poststructuralism underscore the multiple, fragmented nature of subjectivity, its changeability over time, its cultural and historical dependence, as well as the key role of language in its construction (Weedon 1997; Burr 2003). This perspective is diametrically opposed to the liberal-humanist or essentialist account of identity, which theorizes a unified, conscious, rational subject, possessing a unique essence that remains constant throughout all contexts. "Humanist discourses presuppose an essence at the heart of the individual which is unique, fixed and coherent and which makes her what

she *is*" (Weedon 1997: 32, emphasis in original). For poststructuralists, however, identity is not something people 'have' or 'are,' but rather something they 'perform' or 'do' (Butler 1990; Cameron 1999; Baxter 2003).

The appeal of the essentialist explanation of identity is that it purports to offer access to the truth, based on a 'common-sense' understanding of what is 'natural' and of language as a transparent medium expressing "already fixed 'truths' about the world, society and individuals" (Weedon 1997: 74). This viewpoint denies history and the possibility of future change because "language is assumed always to reflect changes which occur prior to it" (ibid.: 75). In addition, the essentialist notion of human nature as universal and unvarying lends support to biologically based theories in which certain meanings are considered the true ones because they are determined by natural forces outside of our control (ibid.). This position is most often seen as favoring the preservation of the status quo and regarding change as unnatural, although it must be noted, in contrast, that recourse to essentialist notions has also been used as a strategy to give a provisional 'biologized' identity to disempowered groups as a means of bringing about change (ibid.).

Yet, for poststructuralists, human nature is not essential nor do biological attributes "have inherent 'natural' or social meaning. Their meanings, which are far from uniform, are produced within a range of conflicting discourses" (Weedon 1997: 123). Because the social production of meaning and the construction of the self always occur in particular discursive contexts, language can never be value-free. Thus, a 'common-sense' or 'reasoned' pronouncement of what is 'natural' or 'good' invariably represents specific values and interests (ibid.). For poststructuralists, then, "language is not an abstract system, but is always socially and historically located in discourses" (Weedon 1997: 40), and meaning is not pre-given and fixed in language as it is for humanists.

4.4.3 Language and the discursive construction of identity

From the social constructionist and poststructuralist point of view, it is language, in the form of different discourses, which constructs our social reality and our subjectivity. In the process of acquiring language, we learn to understand and give meaning to our experience, in accordance with the particular discourses of the society and culture in which we live (Weedon 1997). We use language to negotiate our identities in interaction with others, drawing upon the array of modes of subjectivity offered by the discourses present in our culture (ibid.). Language is not only the site of the construction of our subjectivity but also, for feminist poststructuralists, one that is highly contested.

Issues of power are interlaced throughout language, subjectivity, and the social structures and practices that are located in particular discourses (or discursive fields, in Foucauldian terms), for the competing discourses in a given context represent values and interests of unequal political strength (Weedon 1997). In particular, individual access to culturally available subject positions or 'slots' is affected by questions of power, where 'power' and 'powerfulness' refer to:

> the way in which individual speakers are often *better placed* than others to benefit from the experiences, interests and goals of a particular context—by virtue of their more privileged positioning within a combination of dominant discourses. (Baxter 2003: 8, emphasis in original)

Judith Baxter (2003) also points out that because relations of power are constantly shifting, it is feasible for individuals to be powerfully positioned within a certain discourse yet relatively powerless within another, possibly competing discourse, in a given context.

4.4.4 Characteristics of subjectivity

Poststructuralists conceive of subjectivity as discursively produced in an ongoing social process in which the individual is multiply located in a number of different discourses rather than possessing a single, unitary identity (Baxter 2003).

Furthermore, subjectivity is considered to extend beyond the rational to the unconscious and subconscious dimensions of the self, as Weedon explains:

> While all language is structured by both the symbolic and semiotic aspects of discourse, rational language marginalizes the semiotic aspects, in an attempt to preserve the apparent stability of the unitary subject and thereby to fix the meanings of the symbolic order. (Weedon 1997: 85-86)

It is precisely the impossibility of maintaining a stable subject with a set identity that makes subjectivity an eminently changeable process. Because the self is constructed through language and social interaction, meaning is always specific to the particular historically and culturally located discourses in which it is produced; hence, it can only be temporarily fixed. Alluding to Jacques Derrida's principles of *différance* and deferral, Weedon explains that since meaning can never be fixed once and for all, "any absolute meaning or truth is constantly deferred. The important point is to recognize the political implications of particular ways of fixing identity and meaning" (1997: 168).

The notion of a self that is in constant flux, changing according to the specific circumstances in which a person is situated, would seem to imperil the sense of continuity and coherence we associate with identity. This is one of the most vexing issues emanating from poststructuralist accounts of subjectivity. Because poststructuralists deny the existence of an unvarying 'essence,' they have sought to provide an explanation of self-continuity in terms of discourse practices. Ann Weatherall and Cindy Gallois argue that "a sense of self emerges not from an inner core but out of a complex of historical, cultural, and political processes and practices" (2003: 496). The crux of the problem is to account for the fact that people sustain a sense of continued identity while at the same time recognizing the transitory nature of the multiple subject positions they occupy over the course of a lifetime (Davies and Harré 1999; Harré and van Langenhove 1999a). In part, this is explicable if we maintain that change can only be understood in terms of continuity, that is, the result of change is never something entirely new and different but rather a transformation of the old (Cilliers 1998). Continuity, then, is achieved by connecting our past and present selves or, more precisely, our

embodied selves in space and over time, through discursive processes (McKay 1993; Gullette 2004; Bamberg, De Fina, and Schiffrin 2007). For Anthony Giddens, such continuity is the outcome of the reflexive project of the self, which "consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continually revised, biographical narratives" (1991: 5). This means that:

> The sense of continuity that we have in relation to being a particular person is compounded out of continued embodiment and so of spatio-temporal continuity and shared interpretations of the subject positions and storylines available within them. (Davies and Harré 1999: 50)

Some contend that it is memory which gives us the feeling of self-consistency (Gullette 2004). Yet memory can be unreliable in so far as we are subject to selective recall, gap-filling, and reinterpretation of past events (Harré and van Langenhove 1999b). A better explanation, in my view, is provided by regarding identity construction, as Giddens proposes, as an ongoing 'narrative' project, in which the stories we tell about ourselves, jointly produced in our interaction with others, furnish our sense of continuity (Giddens 1991; Harré and van Langenhove 1999c). Bronwyn Davies and Rom Harré express it clearly:

> An individual emerges through the processes of social interaction, not as a relatively fixed end product but as one who is constituted and reconstituted through the various discursive practices in which they participate. Accordingly, who one is, that is, what sort of person one is, is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and others' discursive practices and within those practices, the stories through which we make sense of our own and others' lives. Stories are located within a number of different discourses, and thus vary dramatically in terms of the language used, the concepts, issues and moral judgements made relevant, and the subject positions made available within them. In this way poststructuralism shades into narratology. (Davies and Harré 1999: 35)

Because of its importance to the argument of this research, narration is explored in greater detail in the following section (4.5).

The multiple and changeable character of identity makes it open to contestation and therefore potentially a site of struggle. This is closely coupled with the notion

of agency for, if individuals can decide to accept or resist different subject positions, they have human agency (Norton 2000; Block 2007a, 2007b). As Weedon explains:

> Although the subject in poststructuralism is socially constructed in discursive practices, she none the less exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject practices. She is also a subject able to reflect upon the discursive relations which constitute her and the society in which she lives, and able to choose from the options available. (Weedon 1997: 121)

Subjectivity and agency do not exist prior to language, but are discursively produced in historically specific social contexts that are invariably structured by relations of power (Norton 2000; Block 2007b).

4.4.5 A poststructuralist view of age identity

Poststructuralism offers a number of constructive insights into language, discourse practices, and subjectivity that are directly relevant to the present research. In what follows, I single out three aspects of the theory that impinge most immediately on the issue of age in adult second language learners as I engage with it. First of all, the poststructuralist understanding of experience as having no meaning except that constituted in language is an important move away from the liberal-humanist supposition that experience is basically the same for all individuals, a way to know the world, and a guarantee of truth, as expressed in language (Weedon 1997). In contrast, poststructuralist views allow for varied and contradictory interpretations of experience that are sustained by social interests rather than by an elusive 'objective truth' (ibid.). In this sense, the meaning of age is contingent on the ways individuals interpret the world and on the discourses available to them at any given moment (ibid.). In other words, it is not the biological and material reality of aging as such that is the issue, but rather the ways in which it is understood or given meaning through the competing discourses existing in a particular culture. Consequently, the experience of aging

and the construction of an age identity can only occur through language and never outside it (Baxter 2003).

A second area of interest linked to the question of age is the poststructuralist notion of subjectivity, particularly as multiple, changing and a site of struggle. The idea that we have a multiplicity of potential selves that are not always consistent with each other, and which change as the context changes, is a far cry from the traditional concept of a single, unified and fixed self (Block 2007a, 2007b). At the same moment in time, a person may conceivably take up or be assigned a number of positions as part of their age identity, depending on the specific circumstances. For instance, an older student, returning to the classroom, may be positioned as 'old,' 'incompetent,' 'experienced,' 'inflexible,' and 'dignified' by university age students, and be positioned in still other ways by family members or friends. In addition, our multiple selves are diachronic as well as synchronic, in the sense that the ongoing process of constructing identity involves connecting our past and present selves (McKay 1993; Gullette 2004). The notion of subjectivity as changing and flexible is perhaps easier to appreciate in the case of age than for our other identities, such as gender, for the very definition of aging as 'change over time' is something that is generally acknowledged. It also makes it easier to see subjectivity as a site of potential conflict, given that the subject positions open to an individual at a particular historical moment will be those offered not only by the dominant discourses, but also by the alternative, oppositional ones, all of which have different political implications.

Furthermore, discourses of aging may not only be in conflict with each other, but they may also compete with other discourses at work in a given context, such as gender or social class (Baxter 2003). This leads to the final consideration I wish to make regarding the pertinence of poststructuralism to the present study, namely, that identities are so intricately intertwined that there can be no simple reading of any single variable (Pavlenko 2001c; Block 2007b). Bonny Norton affirmed this in her research on identity and language learning:

I take the position that ethnicity, gender and class are not experienced as a series of discrete background variables, but are all, in complex and interconnected ways, implicated in the construction of identity and the possibilities of speech. (Norton 2000: 13)

It is my contention that, in the same way, age, and its corresponding subject positions and power relations, cannot be experienced in isolation from other factors, such as gender, ethnicity, and social class. Moreover, discourses of age will likely intersect with other discourses in the language classroom, such as those comprising models of teaching and learning, peer relationships among students, or teacher-student interactions, among different possibilities (Baxter 2003). A complex, nuanced age identity is one of the outcomes of the intersection of identities.

Age identity, like other identities, manifests itself importantly in the stories people tell about themselves and use to make sense of their experiences. How the narratives of age and aging are discursively produced is the topic I explore in the following section.

4.5 Narration and age

The narrative form is "ubiquitous throughout human cultures . . . . fundamental to what it means to be human" (Burr 2003: 142). But, what exactly is narrative? A concise definition is that it is a discourse or way of using language to construct stories (Bruner 1990). Although the term 'narrative' is often utilized interchangeably with 'story,' in point of fact it is much broader in that it encompasses both the narrative structure and the manner and circumstances of the telling. In this section, I examine the components and characteristics of narrative in order to shed light on the part it plays in the study of age and aging. Because both the construction of age identity and the experience of aging occur through language, they are closely bound up with narrative. First, narrative is a means by which people define and recreate themselves in the social world through the discursive construction of identity (Martínez-Roldán 2003: 496). This point is

amply treated in the previous section (4.4). Second, we understand and interpret our human experience narratively, that is, we organize our experience in terms of stories (Burr 2003). Narrative is "the central means by which people endow their lives with meaning across time" (Gergen and Gergen 1993: 30). Given the fundamental import of these two functions of narrative to the investigation of the social dimension of age, I have included a separate, though brief, treatment of narration here.

4.5.1 Components

Narration must be viewed in terms of its structure, the 'what,' so to speak, as well as 'how' it is accomplished. A helpful description, based on the work of Genette, distinguishes three facets of narrative: the narrative content or story, the narrative statement or text, and the act of narrating (Crapanzano 1996; Conle 2003).

The narrative content

At its most basic, a narrative requires at least two events that are temporally connected (Burr 2003). The features of a well-formed narrative (by Western standards) include a valued endpoint, events relevant to the endpoint, the ordering of these events, and causal linkages (Bruner 1990; Gergen 1999; Conle 2003). From this perspective, a narrative entails a tension that creates a drive toward a goal or equilibrium (Andrew 1984). According to Donald E. Polkinghorne:

> Narrative involves the gathering together of events into a plot in which signification is given to the events as they relate to the theme of the story. The plot configures the events into a whole, and the events are transformed from merely serial, independent happenings into meaningful happenings that contribute to the whole theme. (Polkinghorne 1988: 142-143)

In a narrative, "people present themselves, and others, as actors in a drama" (Harré and van Langenhove 1999a: 8) in which they take up certain subject positions. The plot relates not only the development of a story but also the development of a character or set of characters who can both act and be acted upon.

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The narrative statement

The full significance of narration is not to be found in the narrative structure alone. Narration is purposeful, socially situated human action and consequently must be considered in its totality, as part of our human world (Brunner 1994; Mishler 1999). Because narration has a performative function, Paul Ricoeur, in his extensive work on the subject (see, for example, 1995a; 2002), emphasizes the event of discourse rather than its structure. He "would go beyond the structural approach to a functionalism which seeks to show the place of narrative texts in human life" (Andrew 1984: 94). Of the traits of discourse that make it an event, as distinct from language as a system, the principal one for Ricoeur (2002) is that discourse invariably occurs at a specific moment of time whereas the language system is virtual and timeless. The event of discourse is a temporal phenomenon of communication among interlocutors and is always oriented toward a purpose. We communicate our experience to others and create new ways to be in the world. "We have something to say, we have experience to bring to language, experience to share"[19] (Ricoeur 1995a: 149).

The act of narrating

The third facet of narration considered here is the performance itself, the process of how the story is narrated. It involves the narrator, the audience and the situation or circumstances in which the actual telling takes place. The interaction among these elements ensures that every performance is unique and points up the dynamic nature of narration (Martínez-Roldán 2003). The narration must have a narrator, the voice that recounts the story, or at the least a narrator's perspective; it cannot be 'voiceless' (Bruner 1990; Scaggs 2005). Narrators who are conscious of the expectations, interests and makeup of the audience shape their narratives accordingly. Thus, different audiences and situations will occasion a story being told differently (Conle 2003). What is more, the narrator may understand a particular story in new ways after retelling it, and a new, even larger story may

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[19] All translations are mine.

emerge as details are recalled (ibid.). Pavlenko highlights the interactive character of narrative construction:

> Recent research convincingly demonstrates that narratives are not purely individual productions—they a powerfully shaped by social, cultural, and historical conventions as well as by the relationship between the storyteller and the interlocutor (whether an interviewer, a researcher, a friend, or an imaginary reader). (Pavlenko 2002a: 214)

There is, then, the sense that the construction of a narrative is "an 'achievement' of our joint production and understanding of stories through our dialogue with each other" (Mishler 1999: 18).

4.5.2 Characteristics

Several important features of narration emerge from the discussion of content. Among them, I consider temporality, coherence and truth to be the most crucial to a better understanding of narration as it relates to the study of age and aging.

Temporality

First of all, temporality is fundamentally linked to narration for narrative discourse gives expression to the human experience of time by determining, articulating and clarifying it (Ricoeur 1995a). Ricoeur (1995a; 1995b; 1996) distinguishes two different ways in which we experience time. Cosmological time corresponds to the linear progression or flow of undifferentiated moments from birth to death. The other time is phenomenological, lived time which we experience as past, present and future. In lived time, some moments are more significant than others. Ricoeur integrates these apparently contradictory senses of time into a third kind, which he calls historical or human time. For example, people merge special moments of lived time with undistinguished instants of cosmic time through mechanisms such as calendars. The past, the present and the future are then understood in terms of the succession of lived experiences. Moreover, the temporality of human experience not only points up significant

moments in the course of our own lives, but also places us within a larger, historical context (Polkinghorne 1988).

Narrative has a central role in shaping the human experience of time (Ricoeur 1995a). Its function is not so much to remember the past but to retrieve it and reenact it in the present (Cilliers 1998). As Elliot G. Mishler points out, "The past is not set in stone, but the meaning of events and experiences is constantly being reframed within the contexts of our current and ongoing lives" (Mishler 2006: 36). Narrative also provides a link to the future:

> Temporal existence draws the past and its possibilities into the present through tales and histories, and it imaginatively anticipates the future consequences of activity by seeing them as reenactments of its repertoire of stories. (Polkinghorne 1988: 135)

Thus, the past is connected to the present, and both condition a person's expectations of the future. As a way to express human time, the narrative is unrivalled.

Coherence

A key feature of narration, coherence refers to the way a narrative is organized in order to be meaningful and understood (Mishler 1999). The term is commonly used to allude to the inner logic of a narrative. A narrative is coherent to the extent that the disparate elements that are united in the plot "take on the guise of necessity or at least of likelihood" (Atkins 2005). In other words, the sequencing of events leads the audience to understand the causal connections between them (Burr 2003). The plot "forges a causal continuity from a temporal succession, and so creates the intelligibility and credibility of the narrative" (Atkins 2005). Other authors extend the range of coherence to include the surrounding discourse of which the narrative is a part, that is, stories must fit in the conversational context of their telling, both with what has gone before and with what follows (Holstein and Gubrium 2000).

Charlotte Linde (1987) analyzes the properties of narrative texts that contribute to their coherence at three hierarchically arranged levels: a basic linguistic level, a level of implicit philosophical categories, such as causality and continuity, and a level of semi-explanatory systems. She claims that a text is coherent if, at each level of analysis, its parts "can seen as being in a proper relation to one another and to the text as a whole" (ibid.: 346). However, while people can generally recognize a narrative as being coherent or not, the term 'coherence' eludes formal and precise definition (Mishler 1999). It is understood conventionally as what 'makes sense' to people, a quality that is largely attributable to their shared linguistic and cultural traditions (ibid.). In fact, Mishler insists that coherence "is not 'in' the text, but is an interactional achievement, an 'artful' accomplishment" (1999: 110). He recommends that we set aside our preoccupation with finding a single defining trait of a 'good' narrative, such as coherence, and look instead at the complex and varied ways in which narratives are organized to make meaning (ibid.).

Although not everyone would agree to abandon the criterion of coherence, clearly it is especially difficult to achieve in the case of life-story narratives, for a life story is neither linear nor non-contradictory. Multiple storylines compete with varying, and often contradictory subject positions; inconsistencies are found; multiple participants and their individual stories intersect with the life story being told (Mishler 1999; Atkins 2005). Furthermore, the circumstances of the telling may give rise to multiple coherences, discontinuity, or non-linearity (Holstein and Gubrium 2000). For instance, non-linearity may be the outcome of the narrator's determination of the best way to tell the story in order to capture the interest of the audience, or it may emerge as a consequence of the co-construction of the narrative (Martínez-Roldán 2003). According to Jaber F. Gubrium et al., "much of the work of assembling a life story is the management of consistency and continuity, assuring that the past reasonably leads up to the present to form a lifeline" (1994: 155). Despite the difficulties, "we do struggle with the diversity of experience to produce a story of ourselves which is unitary and consistent" (Davies and Harré 1999: 49).

Truth

Another important characteristic of the narrative tradition, and one that is closely linked to coherence, is narrative truth. The concept of narrative truth is drawn from the coherence theory rather than the correspondence theory of truth. The latter considers a narrative to be true to the extent that it corresponds to the state of affairs in 'the real world,' whereas the coherence theory of truth holds that a narrative can never be a copy of events or historical facts, nor does it seek to be (Heikkinen, Huttunen, and Kakkori 2000; Gudmundsdóttir 2002). Instead:

> Narrative truth means that a story's different threads fit together, and make up a meaningful whole. Coherence between parts replaces the traditional idea of truth, which is about correspondence between statements and facts. (Karlsson 2000: electronic source)

From this perspective, the narrative is regarded as being constructed from recollections of the past, yet viewed from the standpoint of the present. Events are imbued with meaning by being selected, included or omitted in the narrative and by the way they are woven together to make a single story (Gudmundsdóttir 2001, 2002). As such, any narrative is necessarily incomplete for no one can tell the full story, or even the 'only' story (Maines 1993; Mishler 1999; Gudmundsdóttir 2002; Mishler 2006).

Narratives aim at life verisimilitude rather than historical truth (Maines 1993). Coherence, both internal and external, is the key to creating believable stories or accounts. Hence, narrative truth is seen as the consistency or likelihood of the elements within the story as well as the compatibility of the story with other accounts or narratives (Andrew 1984; Heikkinen, Huttunen, and Kakkori 2000). Most importantly, narrative truth is revealed or discovered, for the construction of a narrative is a hermeneutic process in which we come to understand and make sense of the world in new ways (Gudmundsdóttir 2002). As a result, nothing ever looks the same again. Through our stories, ordinary things appear in a new light. "Our 'world' undergoes a change, and we become changed as people along with it" (Heikkinen, Huttunen, and Kakkori 2000: electronic source).

4.5.3 Narrating age

The life-story narrative is inevitably a story of aging for it articulates and gives meaning to the human experience of change over time by highlighting and interpreting the significant happenings in our lives. As people construct their stories, they connect the past to the present to the future in their life course. Through culturally shared discourses, life stories are told, enabling people to move towards greater self-understanding and to make themselves intelligible to each other. H. L. T. Heikkinen et al. make this clear:

> Narrative is a fundamental means through which people experience their lives, or through which they actually live their lives. It is the narratives in which we situate our experience. Human experience is always narrated, and human knowledge and personal identities are constructed and revised through intersubjectively shared narratives. (Heikkinen, Huttunen, and Kakkori 2000)

In this sense, narration interconnects with age on two accounts: the construction of age identity and the experience of aging. With regard to the former, contemporary perspectives on identity view it as an ongoing narrative project, as aptly described by Giddens (1991), and one that is inherently a lifespan concern (Coupland, Nussbaum, and Grossman 1993). When people narrate their life story, something new emerges in the telling and affects their life; it becomes part of their identity (Heikkinen, Huttunen, and Kakkori 2000; Mishler 2006). Their sense of where they are in the life trajectory, or their age identity, emerges from the narratives they tell and listen to. As such, it can never be fully separated from the specific experiences that are given meaning by and integrated into the plot that constitutes their life story (Polkinghorne 1988; Pavlenko and Lantolf 2000). That story is first and foremost an account of the aging process because of the reciprocity existing between narration and temporality (Ricoeur 1995a). Moreover, both aging and narration are ongoing processes, for our life story is an open-ended and unfinished one (Polkinghorne 1988). "We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives" (Polkinghorne 1988: 150).

4.6 Conclusion

I believe that a social perspective on age provides a far richer framework for understanding how people give meaning to the aging process and construct their age identity through discursive interaction. A broader and more complex picture emerges when we look at age as socially constructed, for it reveals to us not only how people experience aging, but also how age plays into their other life experiences. At the same time, it illustrates the ways in which people create their age identity and, equally important, how this identity intersects with their other identities. When considering the lived experience of age, it is clear to me that a social approach is more valuable and far-reaching than the more limited, essentialist view of age.

The social construction of age is a dynamic enterprise, ongoing throughout the life course. It is accomplished by means of discursive interaction, primarily through narrative, in accordance with the particular discourses offered by a specific culture at a given historical moment. In present-day Western culture, these discourses are largely generated by the predominant age ideology of decline. The storylines and subject positions available for the narrative construction of aging and age identity are chiefly derived from decline discourses and their manifestations, including ageist stereotypes, attitudes, behavior and talk, as well as body and biomedical discourses. At the same time, counter-discourses of positive aging furnish alternatives to decline narratives. Because of the existence of competing discourses, the interpretation of the aging experience and the construction of age identity are multiple, changing, and potentially contradictory processes in themselves and in relation to the other life experiences and identities with which they are interwoven. This occurs both on a synchronic and a diachronic plane, for narratives bring to light our multiple selves at a precise moment in time and also link our past and present selves in the life course.

The overall approach to the social construction of age that is delineated in this chapter provides a firm foundation on which to structure a more focused

exploration of age. With respect to the present investigation of age in the context of English language learning in Mexico, such a perspective offers a prism through which to observe the specific ways in which different persons interpret the reality of aging. In addition, it supports the identification of the age discourses they draw on or generate and the cultural values that are revealed in their interaction. A socially constructed age focus also serves as a valuable framework for analyzing the choices people make as they appropriate or resist culturally established age discourses in the construction of their identities. It sounds an alert as well to signs of the multiple, changing, and contradictory interpretations of their experience and identities. This position raises awareness of the ways in which other factors, such as gender and ethnicity, interconnect with age on both the synchronic and diachronic levels in their lives. Moreover, a social approach to age affords a means of weighing the significance of discourses of aging that compete with each other or compete with other discourses in their experience as adults learning English in Mexico, including discourses regarding language ideology, teacher and student roles, and classroom dynamics. The particularities of the issue of age in adult second language learners can only be understood in terms of the broader social environment, life circumstances and goals of these individuals.

The remaining part of this thesis is devoted precisely to the task of exploring age in the particular context of language learning in Mexico and of fleshing out the skeletal frame of age discourses outlined in the present chapter, with the aim of providing a more complete picture of how age and second language learning interconnect.

Chapter 5

Research Methodology

5.1 Introduction

Having set out the conceptual framework for the study of age as a social construct in second language learning in the first part of the thesis, I now undertake a description of the methodology used in exploring the issues. This is followed in subsequent chapters by the presentation of the analysis and interpretation of the findings. The first part of the present chapter outlines the methodological perspective underpinning the research design, a qualitative one drawing on elements of Derek Layder's (1998: 3) adaptive theory to integrate theory and research. This is followed by the presentation of the research questions addressed in the empirical phase of the project. Next, I discuss the research strategy chosen for the study, consisting primarily of narrative inquiry as part of an ethnographically-oriented case study approach. I then describe the research design itself, tracing the steps taken in carrying out the study. These include the selection of participants, the data collection design, the organization and analysis of the data, and a critical assessment of the research.

5.2 Methodological framework

In order to explore how age is experienced and given meaning by EFL students in Mexico, I elected to do qualitative research and because it was evident that the exploratory nature of such an undertaking could not adhere to a strictly linear path, I turned to Layder's adaptive theory to emphasize the cyclical nature of the research process, in which theory and methodology undergo continuous refinement.

5.2.1 Qualitative methodology

The challenging task of investigating the lives, feelings and experiences of people, and of understanding the complexities of their identity construction, called for a

methodology that would provide the greatest insight and potential for a thorough and detailed probing. Because the research entailed working in-depth with a small number of cases in order to "investigate, explain and analyse visible and invisible phenomena which, by essence are not measurable" (Posner 2001a: 3), it was clear from the outset that a qualitative approach was the most appropriate.

Qualitative research methods are interpretive and naturalistic, that is, they "study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin 2000: 3). This approach underscores the socially constructed nature of reality, the close bonds between the researcher and those researched, the historical situatedness of the inquiry, and its value-laden nature (ibid.). Moreover, such an approach necessarily has a multi-method focus, for ongoing human experience is not susceptible to being understood or interpreted through a single method. According to Norman K. Denzin and Yvonne S. Lincoln, "qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected interpretive practices, hoping always to get a better understanding of the subject matter at hand" (2000: 3-4).

While qualitative research can achieve greater depth and specificity, the small size of the samples means that the representativeness of the findings is of necessity limited when compared to large-scale quantitative, or in-breadth, studies. However, this constraint is outweighed, I believe, by the possibilities it affords to tap into the complexities of social reality. For this reason, I found it well suited as a general approach to my research.

5.2.2 Adaptive theory

Within the varied world of qualitative research traditions, I selected a theoretical-methodological framework that most accurately reflected the cyclical nature of the research process, as I intended to carry it out. In this, I found Layder's (1998) adaptive theory to be closest in essence to my purposes. Adaptive theory is Layder's proposal for linking theory and social research. A complement to his theory of social domains, it works to interlace the systemic elements with the

micro-features of social life in the research process. It is adaptive in that theory and data mutually influence each other in a continuous back-and-forth process throughout the course of the research.

> Specifically, adaptive theory attempts to combine an emphasis on prior theoretical ideas and models which feed into and guide research while at the same time attending to the generation of theory from the ongoing analysis of data. (Layder 1998: 19)

While I do not subscribe to all of the ideas encompassed in Layder's domain theory, I find that adaptive theory offers a convincing explanation of how theory develops through the integration of theory and research as they simultaneously shape each other. This part of his model fits the work I am doing for two reasons. First, it establishes the importance of working from conceptual models prior to data collection, in combination with emergent theory, in developing a theory. This differentiates it in important ways from grounded theory, which begins with little pre-formed theory and depends almost exclusively upon the data to generate theoretical concepts. In this respect I concur with Layder (1998), who contends that, in reality, all research initially grows out of pre-existing theoretical assumptions, concepts and categories, which are provisional in character. The advantage of such an approach is that it gives focus to the research process at the outset. In the second place, adaptive theory makes theorizing or theory development a continuous aspect of the research process, involving what has been called reciprocal or double fitting, that is, the ongoing modification of theory in the light of data and data collection in the light of modified theory (Posner 2001a).

This pattern held true in the case of the present research, where my point of departure was a combination of intuitions coming from my own experience, research reported by others, theoretical ideas about age and aging, and a repertoire of age discourses, all of which drove the empirical work in the initial phase. The first findings led me back to my preliminary assumptions, which I then adjusted taking into account the research evidence. I followed, in similar fashion, an ongoing process of working from theory back to data and back again for the duration of the project.

5.3 Research questions

Bearing in mind the theoretical assumptions I had formed on the basis of my review of age theory, age studies, second language acquisition research, as well as of my own intuition and experience, I defined certain key issues surrounding adult language learners and age as a social construct that I wanted to explore in the specific context of the EFL classroom in Mexico. I posed the following set of questions to guide me throughout the research process:

- How is age co-constructed in the EFL classroom context and in the personal narratives of adult language learners?

- What beliefs and attitudes do adult language learners have about age and language learning, and how do these beliefs and attitudes intersect with the way age is enacted?

- How is age as a subject position interlinked with other subject positions in adult language learners?

5.4 Research strategy

To address the research questions, I decided on a case study approach, working within a broadly ethnographic orientation to research, and focusing a large part of the design on narrative inquiry.

5.4.1 Case study

> Case study is a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence. (Robson 2002: 178)

Colin Robson's definition points up the inherently multi-method character of a case study approach to research. In this, it seems better suited than other research strategies for exploring complex issues in their real-world contexts. A case study can provide rich detail about a person, group or situation through a process of

exploration and discovery of a variety of factors, determinants, perceptions, attitudes, experiences, and so on, that contribute to our understanding of it (Robson 2002). A case is selected on the basis of its intrinsic interest; it is not merely a sample from a population (Stake 1985). Its value lies in its uniqueness (Flyvbjerg 2004). Multiple case studies, such as I have undertaken, link together a small number of individual case studies in which some shared features are studied (Robson 2002).

The case study proved eminently suitable as a general approach to the present research primarily because of the complex and contextualized nature of the phenomenon I wished to explore, and also because a multi-method focus was necessary for unraveling its highly interconnected components.

5.4.2 Ethnographic orientation

The research has an ethnographic orientation, in the sense that I sought to understand and interpret the experience of the participants from their perspective and in light of the broader sociocultural context in which they were immersed. While I had no pretensions of conducting a full-fledged ethnographic study, I attempted to follow some of the guiding principles of the ethnographic tradition. To the extent that I could, I became a fixed part of the participants' language learning world as a permanent observer in the classroom, as well as by sharing their weekly audio-taped narrative reflections, and through our regular encounters in the interviews. I assembled field notes and transcriptions of these events, working with as few preconceptions as possible. My emphasis was on exploring a novel situation, discovering how the diverse parts are interrelated, and providing a comprehensive description of it.

This was not a task I could accomplish alone. Although I brought to the research context long experience working in the language learning environment as well as a first-hand understanding of the culture I had been immersed in for over four decades, it was imperative for me as a researcher to step back and get a fresh insight into what was happening by attempting to share the perspective of the

participants and by shedding myself of ready-made notions that might color my viewpoint. As I worked in conjunction with the participants, an understanding of their experiences and sense of identity emerged as together we teased out the meanings not only of what I had noted in my fieldwork but also of other phenomena I had been unaware of and which came to light in our ongoing dialogue. This co-constructed effort produced a richer interpretation and thicker description of each participant's world.

5.4.3 Narrative inquiry

I adopted narrative inquiry for the main part of my research. This strand of ethnographically-oriented research involves drawing on people's personal stories or narratives in order to learn about their lives and to understand how they make sense of their experiences. Narrative research forms part of the 'biographical turn' in the social sciences (Chamberlayne, Bornat, and Wengraf 2000). Its legitimacy as a research genre has been recognized increasingly over the past 20 years (Mishler 1999; Nunan and Benson 2004). One reason for this is that stories not only paint a vivid picture of the narrator's life, but they also reveal the underlying insights, values and assumptions that the tellers themselves may be unaware of (Bell 2002). What people decide to include or leave out of their accounts can furnish important insights into their lives (Belcher and Connor 2001; Shoaib and Dörnyei 2004). Moreover, stories are identity performances in that "we express, display, make claims for who we are—and who we would like to be—in the stories we tell and how we tell them" (Mishler 1999: 19).

As an approach to research, narrative inquiry is "best considered an umbrella term for a mosaic of research efforts, with diverse theoretical musings, methods, empirical groundings, and/or significance all revolving around an interest in narrative" (Smith 2007: 392). While much has been written about the philosophical underpinnings of narratives, comparatively little is to be found about the methods used in narrative research. In the broadest sense, narrative-based research involves the collection, transcription, interpretation and representation of stories, whether these be life histories, diaries, letters, anecdotes

or some other narrative form (Benson and Nunan 2004; Atkinson and Delamont 2006). Additionally, because human experience is always situated in a particular time and place and involves specific people, it is generally acknowledged that context—temporal, spatial and relational—is a core feature of narrative approaches to research (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Atkinson and Delamont 2006).

Beyond that, the way in which narrative research is carried out is characterized by a "multiplicity of approaches and clash of different perspectives" (Mishler 1999: 17). This is reflected in the wide array of methods adopted by different researchers in the pursuit of their aims, methods that focus variously on the form, on the content or on the manner of telling the story. These methods are sometimes grouped under two major headings: the 'narrative tradition' or 'naturalist' approach and the 'ethnomethodological' approach (Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Bamberg, De Fina, and Schiffrin 2007). The former centers on the lives and stories of individuals as recounted in interviews and interpreted by the researchers. The latter focuses on the manner in which the stories are told and analyzes the language used. Although the two approaches can be seen as divergent, in that they start from very different assumptions, there is an increasing tendency among narrative researchers to seek ways to bring them together, utilizing each to complement the other in an analysis of narrative data (Bamberg, De Fina, and Schiffrin 2007; Block 2008).

A key aspect of narrative research is that it is quintessentially interpretive, as Ruth Josselson very cogently argues:

> The practice of narrative research, rooted in postmodernism, is always interpretive, at every stage. From framing the conceptual question through choosing the participants, deciding what to ask them, with what phrasing, transcribing from spoken language to text, understanding the verbal locutions, making sense of the meanings thus encoded, to deciding what to attend to and to highlight—the work is interpretive at every point.
> (Josselson 2006: 3-4)

Furthermore, narrative inquiry is both dynamic and dialogic (Clandinin and Connelly 2000). Although the stories are recounted in the first person, the narrative is ultimately a collaboration between the researcher and the participant, occurring in a particular time and place. In addressing the specific case of narrative interviews, Block claims that they should be seen "as conversations and co-constructed discourse events . . . not as direct windows on the minds of interviewees" (2000: 758). He goes on to state that "the conceptualization of interviews as co-constructions means that interview data are seen not as reflections of underlying memory but as *voices* adopted by research participants in response to the researcher's prompts and questions" (ibid.: 759, emphasis in original). This viewpoint has evident repercussions for the analysis and interpretation of the findings and would be applicable to other narrative-based research as well.

With regard to the relevance of narrative approaches to SLA research, Pavlenko remarks:

> It is possible that only personal narratives can provide a glimpse into areas so private, personal, and intimate that they are rarely—if ever—broached in the study of SLA, and they are at the same time, at the heart and soul of the second language socialization process. (Pavlenko 2001a: 167)

Sara Cotterall (2004) demonstrated this in her study of the way a series of narrative interviews aided her research participant in fitting language learning into the broader perspective of his life.

Narrative inquiry proved to be a rich source of data for the present study, enabling me to build a complex picture of the situation I chose to investigate. I found this type of research an excellent way to work with a small number of learners over the course of one semester, as I sought to discover how they made sense of their language learning experiences and the lived experience of aging. In the following section, I describe how I tailored the collection, analysis and interpretation processes to the particular requirements of my research design.

5.5 Research design

As the aim of my research was exploratory, that is, to explore how age plays out in the context of English language learning in Mexico, I needed to choose the tactics or methods that would best allow me accomplish this. Rather than searching for definitive conclusions, my intention was to look for ways to gain access to data that would illuminate the complexities, raise new questions for further exploration, and contribute valuable insights to the problem under study (Holliday 2002). The following sections describe the research methods I employed and the process I followed.

5.5.1 Methods of investigation

The principal method I elected was the interview or, more precisely, a series of semi-structured interviews to take place over the course of the semester. These, I hoped, would provide me with detailed and pertinent information about the participants' language learning experiences and the social construction of age. I planned to complement the interviews with audio-taped narrative accounts, containing the participants' weekly reflections, and my own classroom observations of the lessons. Because the research design was ongoing, all three methods fed into each other and permitted me to evaluate and modify my tactics during the four months in which the fieldwork was carried out. Although not initially contemplated, at the end of the course I decided to interview the teachers to get their perspective on the issues, as a further way to round out the data I had collected.

5.5.2 Participants and context

The first step in carrying out the research was to select the participants and define the context of the study.

Selection strategy

In order to recruit English-language students for the study, I made an announcement to approximately 270 students in over 90 groups on the first day of

the term, explaining that I was undertaking research to see how the policy of having mixed-age groups from both the inside (university students) and outside (extension students) communities was working. This was part of my research interest, although not the only purpose of the study. I then described the procedures the study entailed and asked those interested in participating to fill out a short questionnaire (Appendix A). On this form, volunteers indicated their age, sex, profession, course level, prior language learning experience, and willingness to carry out the specific tasks involved in the study.

I had hoped initially to assemble a population of 15-20 participants for the research. However, this proved to be overly optimistic, as I received only a small response to my request for volunteers. I had not considered the logistical difficulties that participation in the study would entail for potential participants, namely, finding extra time in their already busy schedules to come for interviews and to make audio-taped narrative accounts over a four-month period of time. This was compounded by the fact that, in a city the size of Mexico City, transportation from home to work to the university and back again typically requires three to four hours a day. Thus, I had to adjust my expectations.

After reviewing the questionnaires and course schedules, I selected eight participants on the basis of what Robson refers to as purposive sampling, that is, "the researcher's judgement as to typicality or interest" (2002: 265). In this, the researcher addresses the specific needs of the project rather than seeking representativeness. My considerations were the following: I wanted to include adults of different ages, course levels and both genders, yet I also needed to work within the limitations of my possibilities to carry out the study, which involved observing each participant during four hours of lessons each week, listening to their weekly audio-recorded reflections, and conducting regular individual interview sessions with them. In order to optimize the data collection process, I determined that I would observe a maximum of three different groups, each meeting for four hours weekly. I then selected those groups which had at least two volunteers whose characteristics provided the variability I desired, enabling me to

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initiate the study with eight participants. Because of the ongoing development of the methodology, I also required a substantial amount of time to process the data concurrently.

The participants (Table 5.1) included four women and four men, ranging in age from 23 to 69, and registered in three different courses.

Name	Age	Gender	Course level	Profession	Academic background
Adela	48	F	6	Middle-school teacher	Some university studies
Berta	59	F	3	Physician	University graduate
Claudio	65	M	6	Accountant (retired)	University graduate
David	23	M	6	University student	Some university studies
Elsa	34	F	2	Salesperson	Some university studies
Felix	68	M	2	Accountant (retired)	University graduate
Gilda	36	F	6	Actuary	University graduate
Hector	69	M	3	Physician	University graduate

Table 5.1 Profile of the participants

Ethical considerations

I addressed a series of ethical concerns in order to make certain that all participants would be treated fairly and with respect, and that the research would be conducted and reported in a straightforward manner, in accordance with the *Revised Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (2004), as set out by the British Educational Research Association. Among the issues of particular pertinence to the present research were gaining voluntary informed consent and offering guarantees of confidentiality and anonymity to the participants. With regard to the former matter, ethical approval was obtained with verbal consent from participants, teachers and the department head to observe the lessons and to record semi-structured interviews. This was considered sufficient and is culturally acceptable in Mexico, where the use of written consent forms would have unnecessarily raised an alarm. As to the latter concern, pseudonyms were utilized

throughout to protect identity. In addition, the participants were invited to review the interview transcripts at any time, although none chose to do so. My overall concern was to ensure that the research was conducted and reported in a straightforward manner at every stage.

Moreover, because close relationships between the researcher and the participants typically develop in the case of narrative inquiries, the effects—both positive and negative—are potentially greater, and in consequence so is researcher responsibility. Uppermost in my mind during the interviews was the need to respect the privacy of my informants while at the same time opening up a space for them to share their personal stories. This entailed, among other things, being candid and genuine in my relations with them, both as a researcher and as a person (Holliday 2002). While I hoped to have avoided major pitfalls in my work with the participants that might negatively impact the research, on the positive side I was pleased when some of the participants commented informally to me that our interview conversations had caused them to reflect on their lives and had given them new insights.

Attrition

Two of the eight participants withdrew from the course at different points in the term for either personal or professional reasons. Although this is not unusual in the language center, where the desertion rate is typically between 30% and 35%, it was a disappointment. A third participant stopped attending class toward the end of the course when she accepted a new job. She was permitted to take the final examination, but was not able to complete the concluding phases of the study with me. Despite these setbacks, I found the data that I received from the participants useful and enlightening, and rich enough for the purposes of analysis.

Researcher

My own position as the researcher brought with it both advantages and disadvantages. In this type of research, it is neither possible nor desirable to attempt a neutral role. I was clearly a participant in every facet of the data

collection process. In the first place, my role as a university professor and, in this case, the researcher, accorded me a certain privileged status in my relationship with the participants. Moreover, my presence as a woman, an American, a 61-year-old (at the time of the fieldwork), displaying certain personality characteristics, undoubtedly affected each of the participants in different ways. Vincent and Warren (2001) point out that the development of a relationship between the researcher and participant involves disjunctions and connections stemming from similarities and differences of age, race, social class, language and gender, the implications of which must be considered at every point in the research process.

My approach to the empirical phase of the study was from the outset based on my view of age as socially constructed in discursive interaction through the various cultural discourses prevalent in contemporary urban Mexico. Because I was specifically interested in discovering the meaning foreign language learners give to the experience of aging and how they create their age identity, my choice of data collection methods reflects this focus. My intention was to cull the data for instances in the texts and field notes that would illuminate the complexities of the issues I had initially deemed important. Nevertheless, I strove to remain open to other possible 'nuggets' that the data might contain and to allow for unanticipated findings to present themselves. In other words, I sought a convergence between my own concerns as a researcher and what the research setting was, in effect, revealing.

The interviews afforded me the opportunity to take an active role in the way they were carried out. The questions I formulated for the sequence of five interviews were designed to explore topics of interest with the participants in a loosely-structured, open-ended way that would allow their beliefs, attitudes, and experiences to emerge without an inordinate amount of direction on my part. The issues I raised in the interviews were based on my particular concerns, intuitions, personal history, theories, and experiences, both professional and personal. They

were intended to address the research questions which I had defined (see section 5.3 above).

Because this was an ongoing and cyclical process, I initially drew up a set of questions for the first interview (see Table 5.4) that would give me some biographical background on each of the participants, including their interest in and prior experience learning English. This enabled me to ask them to comment on their beliefs about age and language learning. Other topics cropped up in a relatively spontaneous or unplanned fashion with each participant in the course of our conversation. At the same time, in this first interview I concentrated on establishing rapport with the participants, finding ways to make them feel at ease and comfortable sharing their ideas and experiences with me.

It was only after reviewing the transcripts from this interview and reflecting on the significance of what I had learned that I decided on the format of the second interview. My interest was in hearing what the participants had to say about the English courses they were taking at that moment, difficulties they might be experiencing, and how they viewed relations between themselves, their classmates and the teachers. More specific questions for each participant arose as a result of what I was observing in the classroom and learning from their audio-taped narratives.

It was not until the third and fourth interviews that I felt I could broach the sensitive issue of age and aging more directly. The use of graphic representations of the life course permitted me to sound out the participants on their ideas about different stages in the life course, where they placed themselves, significant moments in their lives, their perceptions of how others viewed them, and how they assess their lives. All of these were points that I had identified as pertinent as a researcher, yet while I knew what questions I wanted to ask, I did not know how they would be answered. Not only did the conversations take unexpected and interesting turns, I was led to reconsider some of the issues that had impelled the research.

The design of the fifth and final interview was intended to give the participants the opportunity to reflect on the experience both of the language course and the research experience. It was also an opportunity for me to ponder on the significance of what had come to light in the course of the fieldwork and on how this had moved me in different directions from the place where I had originally set out.

In analyzing the data generated by the interviews, classroom observations and audio-taped narrative accounts, I was acutely aware that my perception of what was significant was unquestionably colored by my own preconceptions, ways of thinking and research goals. I found that I constantly needed to step back in order to look at the data from different perspectives and with an increased awareness of phenomena whose meaning I had previously taken for granted. In many ways, I had already acquired this kind of consciousness during many years spent as a foreigner in Mexico. I have also had the experience of undertaking academic research, an exercise that has aided me in developing analytical abilities. At the same time, my first-hand knowledge of the country and of the context of English language learning in Mexico gave me a privileged vantage point from which to understand the complexities of the situation I was exploring. Thus, I had the advantage of working from a dual position: first, as an insider, someone who has lived and worked in Mexico for nearly 40 years and, second, as an outsider, a foreigner and an academic.

Finally, my choice of what parts of the data to report and how best to present my findings responded to my research interests and goals but it was also sensitive to the perspectives of the participants, as they told their stories and went about the process of learning English. The narrative that I created from their stories is ultimately my own construction and responsibility, yet the process of assembling it was shared with them through the interviews, class observations and narrative accounts. In another sense the narrative was co-constructed in that the content I selected and the manner in which I related the findings took into account the

(imaginary) readers I was addressing, namely, an academic audience for whom certain conventions must be respected.

How, then, is the question of 'researcher bias' addressed in qualitative research? Simply put, qualitative researchers do not profess to be objective or independent, although they bring certain analytic capabilities and outside experience to the interpretation of the events (Holliday 2002). This means that in ethnographically-oriented research, researchers "can be cultural and behavioural *insiders* even though their research goals require them to be analytic outsiders" (Coupland and Jaworski 1997: 73, emphasis in original). Thus, they are able to provide explanations precisely because they can operate in both worlds. This has tended to blur the clear-cut distinction between the researcher and those being researched that exists in the quantitative research paradigm.

Some of the ways Robson (2002) recommends for diminishing possible researcher bias and for strengthening the credibility of the research are:

1. *prolonged involvement* – investing sufficient time to build trust in the participants.
2. *persistent observation* – working over time to attain an in-depth understanding of the context and the participants.
3. *triangulation* – using multiple data sources and collection techniques.
4. *peer debriefing* – cross-checking data interpretations with colleagues.

Other authors include prior experience as an observer or interviewer as an additional way to reduce researcher bias. Viewed from a more positive angle, qualitative researchers are encouraged to use their imagination, insight, and experience in important ways to achieve the research goals (McCracken 1988; Holliday 2002).

In the case of the present research, the first three recommendations were followed fully, and the fourth to a lesser extent. More importantly, I endeavored to maintain throughout an awareness of any possible effects I might have had on the research process.

Context

In straightforward terms, the broad context of the study is contemporary Mexico and, more narrowly, the English language classroom in a public university, including the prevailing age discourses found there. While an overview of the situation of English language learning in Mexico is given in the introductory chapter, in what follows I offer a more detailed picture of the classroom context in the language center where I carried out my research.

- The courses

The general English courses meet twice weekly for two-hour sessions during a semester, totaling approximately 56 hours of classroom contact. The semester is, in reality, composed of two weeks of registration, 14 weeks of classes, and two weeks of final examinations. There are two semester periods per year. Table 5.2 gives basic information about the three courses in which the participants were enrolled at the time I carried out the fieldwork.

Course level	Textbook	Participants	Teacher
2 (basic)	*American Headway 1* (2001a), (units 8-14)	Elsa Felix	Nidia – head teacher Simon – practice teacher Tomas – practice teacher
3 (lower intermediate)	*American Headway 2* (2001b), (units 1-7)	Berta Hector	Ramon – head teacher
6 (intermediate)	*American Headway 3* (2003), (units 7-12)	Adela Claudio Gilda David	Martin – team teacher Ramon – team teacher

Table 5.2 Description of the courses

- The physical setup

The classrooms in the language center are simply furnished. There are 30 desks, a teacher's desk, and a whiteboard in each room. Audiovisual equipment, including

a small number of CD players, one portable DVD player and monitor, and one video-projector, is available in the main office and can be reserved for a class period. Many teachers bring their own CD players to class.

- The students

Class size varies between 20 and 30 students. Most are university students; others, as noted previously, are adults from the surrounding neighborhood. It is important to mention that the student body at this campus of the university, approximately 17,000 students, shares the same socioeconomic configuration in general terms as that of the entire National University population of over 300,000 students.[20] The majority of students come from low-income urban families in which their parents are typically employed as salaried workers. About 75% of the students are the first in their families to receive a university education. This pattern represents a contrast to the middle and upper-middle class community of largely professional adults from the neighborhood surrounding the campus who study languages at the university.

University students have a certain motivation for learning English given that nearly all the majors at the university have a language requirement for graduation, either reading comprehension or general proficiency. Moreover, the standards for satisfying the language requirement are demanding, particularly in view of the fact that English is a foreign language in Mexico and opportunities to use the language outside the classroom are limited. On the other hand, no college credits are awarded for language courses and therefore the students do not always give them the same attention they do their academic courses.

- The teachers

In order to give classes in the language center, a teacher must have a university degree in the field. Those who do not have a degree, or have one in another field, are exempt from this requirement if they pass a qualifying test in which they demonstrate proficiency in the foreign language and a theoretical and practical

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[20] The statistical information reported here is provided by the National University and is available at: http://www.estadistica.unam.mx/numeralia/.

knowledge of language teaching methodology. At the time of my fieldwork, approximately 35% of the teachers in the English department held a degree in English language teaching, 10% had degrees in other fields, and 55% had no degree. The average teaching load was 13 hours of class weekly.

The three teachers and two practice teachers (Table 5.3) who taught the courses in which the participants were enrolled had agreed beforehand to my observing their lessons. Although I initially informed them which students would be taking part in the study, there seemed to be little awareness on their part during the weeks that followed that these students were the subject of my particular focus.

Name	Age	Gender	Course level	Responsibility	Academic background
Martin	35	M	6	Team teacher with Ramon	Undergraduate coursework in English language teaching completed.
Nidia	43	F	2	Head teacher and supervising teacher	University graduate in communication. Master's studies in education in process.
Ramon	46	M	3 6	Team teacher with Martin Head teacher	University graduate in education. Master's studies completed in applied linguistics.
Simon	25	M	2	Practice teacher	Completing undergraduate coursework in English language teaching.
Tomas	26	M	2	Practice teacher	Completing undergraduate coursework in English language teaching.

Table 5.3 Profile of the teachers

- The textbook

The textbook has traditionally been the mainstay of the English courses in the language center. Teachers occasionally supplement this with exercises from the accompanying workbook or with their own materials. At the time of the research study, the *American Headway* series (Soars and Soars 2001b, 2001a, 2003) was used in all the general English courses. This series is typical of global coursebooks in that its content and scope are intended to appeal to a world-wide consumer market (Gray 2002). Settings are international, "deterritorialized" in John Gray's words (2002: 157), in order to reflect the growing stature of English as a global language. Content, carefully monitored so as not to offend local sensibilities, is largely limited to safe topics, such as foreign travel, leisure-time activities and holidays, depicting "an idealised world where no-one is ever unhappy, sick or poor" (Wallace 2006: 79). Although relatively few EFL students using global coursebooks like *American Headway* in Mexico are likely to have access to the lifestyles they portray, the publishers consider such content to be aspirational (Gray 2002). An effort has also been made by the publishers to give nonsexist treatment to men and women in the newer global textbooks. Nevertheless, this attempt at inclusivity does not extend to the disabled, the poor, the gay and lesbian population, or to the old (ibid.). This is a specific point of interest to me in the present study, for older adults, such as those who form part of the student population in the language center, do not figure prominently in the *American Headway* series which, according to its promotional material, is designed for young adults and adults (*Oxford University Press USA* 2005).

- Age in context

As for age, the prevailing age discourses in the context of this urban Mexican university setting would, on the face of it, appear to be similar to those found in most of the Western industrialized world (described in Chapter 4). However, some differences in the particular cases under study arose during the course of the investigation, and are discussed in the following chapters.

- A dynamic view of context

While the foregoing provides background information that sets the stage, the lived context of the study cannot be summed up by a flat reference to the historical moment and spatial location of the research. Social contexts, such as classrooms, are dynamic and variable, largely because people make up the context and are not just inserted into it. Moreover, social, historical, and political contexts overlap in interesting and complex ways, producing a set of conditions unique to the moment, in which some are more salient than others. Jan Blommaert defines context as "the totality of conditions in which discourse is being produced, circulated, and interpreted" (2005: 251). He goes still further to argue that contextualization must begin "long before discourse emerges as a linguistically articulated object, and it needs to continue long after the act of production" (ibid.: 234). This broader notion works well for the present research in that it highlights the inherent complexities of context. In the following three chapters, I attempt to tease apart the intricacies of the discursive field where age as socially constructed meets English language learning in Mexico.

5.5.3 Data collection design

Overview

The procedures used for data collection grew out of a pilot study I carried out at an earlier stage of the investigation. That study consisted of a one-time individual audio-taped interview with four English students from the outside community, in which I touched on a number of topics related to age and language learning to find out if indeed they struck a responsive chord in the students. I wanted to know if the issues I had identified were focused properly, whether some topics stirred no interest or if other areas needed to be pursued. I also wished to put my interviewing skills to the test and find ways to improve them. On the basis of these interviews, I decided to employ a combination of qualitative methods in the definitive study reported here.

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The principal source of data was provided by the series of semi-structured interviews which took place throughout the length of the course. These interviews were complemented by classroom observations and by audio-recorded narrative reflections made by the participants. Both the ongoing observations and the weekly audio-taped narrative accounts gave me other perspectives on the classroom experience of the participants, affording me the opportunity to learn about the issues that concerned them, to compare them with those I observed as salient in the classroom lessons, and to take these into account in subsequent interviews. Conversely, the interviews gave me a new appreciation of what I was observing in the classroom and what I was listening to in the audio-taped narrative accounts.

At the end of the term, I conducted an interview with each of the teachers and teaching assistants. This was to gain still a further perspective on each of the participants and to sound out the teachers on their own beliefs about age and language learning as a way of squaring this information with what I had observed.

Interviews

The semi-structured in-depth interviews furnished the most valuable data for the study. The number and content of the interviews was not established beforehand, but responded to my need as a researcher for ever greater understanding of the participants' beliefs, attitudes and experiences, as they came to light over the course of the term. Table 5.4 contains the interview guide on which I based the series of five interviews. Following the first interview, each of the subsequent interviews was planned after the previous one and was adhered to in general terms. The interviews addressed the basic issues identified in the research questions, including the participants' prior and present experience studying English, their language ideology, their beliefs about age and aging, and the significance of age in learning a new language. However, the conversational nature of the interviews often led to interesting digressions. Through the series of five interviews, I was able to explore the issues more deeply and comprehensively. I also had the possibility of going back and asking the

Interview 1
  1. Why are you studying English?
  2. What prior experience do you have studying foreign languages?
  3. What is your educational or professional experience?
  4. What difficulties do you have with English?
  5. What observations do you have about the presence of insiders and outsiders in the classroom?
  6. What are your ideas about age and language learning?
  7. When is the ideal time to learn a foreign language?
  8. What kinds of experiences have you had using English outside the classroom?

Interview 2
  1. What specific problems are you having with English?
  2. What observations do you have about your classmates?
  3. What concerns do you have about the class, the teacher and the activities?

Interview 3
  1. How are you progressing with the language?
  2. What is your graphic representation of the life course?
  3. What is significant in your professional and/or personal life?

Interview 4
  1. What are the stages of the life course? How would you describe or label them?
  2. What is the best moment in the life course?
  3. Are life stages different for a woman and for a man?
  4. Where are you right now?
  5. What is it that you most like about this moment in your life?
  6. Which was the best moment/stage of your life?
  7. What past regrets do you have?
  8. How do others see you?

Interview 5
  1. What has helped you most to learn English?
  2. In what way has the group helped or hindered you?
  3. Would it be the same to be the only student?
  4. Do you feel you are more able to participate in a community of English speakers?

Table 5.4 Interview guide – participants

participants to expand on topics touched on in previous interviews, in their audio-taped narratives, or in my own observations of events occurring in the classroom. Lastly, the cordial and non-threatening atmosphere of the interviews helped foster rapport between the interviewer and the participants over the four-month period of the language course. This was also bolstered by my decision to conduct the interviews in Spanish.

An interesting departure from the conventional question-and-answer pattern of the interviews occurred in Interviews 3 and 4, when I decided to ask the participants to make a graphic representation of the life course. This type of technique has been employed in medical, legal and other fields, including gerontology, as a visual aid for mapping the life course along a chronological axis (see, for example, a discussion of the Lifeline Interview Method in Birren et al. 2004). I adapted the lifeline technique to suit my own purposes, using the participants' drawings as a springboard to ask them about the divisions they had made in the life course, the events or moments they had marked as crucial, and the meaning of the peaks and dips in their visualization of their personal life histories.

The interviews were highly interactive co-constructions in which the participants often took control of the conversation and moved it in unforeseen directions. Because of the shared construction of the interview, the relationship between the interviewees and myself assumed paramount importance. Thus, rather than being a reflection of the participant's particular version of events and presentation of identity, these conversations generated data as a joint product of our interaction. As Denzin explains:

> The interview is not a mirror of the so-called external world, nor is it a window into the inner life of the person. . . . the interview functions as a narrative device which allows persons who are so inclined to tell stories about themselves. In the moment of story-telling, teller and listener, performer and audience, share the goal of participating in a [*sic*] experience which reveals their shared same-ness. (Denzin 2001: 25)

I conducted 31 interviews totaling 11 hours with the participants (see Table 5.5).

TIME PARTICIPANTS	1	2	3	4	5	TOTAL
Adela	18:24	23:38	31:13	22:22	10:20	
Berta	22:39	13:35	—	—	—	
Claudio	42:15	—	—	—	—	
David	19:40	19:14	23:49	30:28	11:29	
Elsa	14:28	12:33	15:55	15:04	5:45	
Felix	38:10	15:38	27:35	39:23	8:25	
Gilda	17:16	15:16	18:41	—	—	
Hector	30:17	24:31	23:37	26:56	19:24	
TOTAL	203:15	124:25	140:50	134:13	55:23	658:06
AVERAGE	25:24	17:46	23:28	26:51	11:05	21:00

31 interviews
length 5:45 to 42:15 minutes/seconds
total: 10 hours 58 minutes 6 seconds
average: 21 minutes

Table 5.5 Record of interviews with the participants

The average length of each interview was approximately 21 minutes. The purpose of the in-depth interviews, such as those I carried out, was not so much to discover how many and what kinds of people share a certain characteristic, but instead to gain access to the cultural categories and assumptions that provide the basis for their construction of the world (McCracken 1988). Consequently, uncovering the underlying logic, rather than generalizability, became the central issue.

Classroom observations

I attended virtually every session of the three courses in which the participants were enrolled, a total of 132 classroom hours (Appendix B). Having introduced myself at the time of recruitment, my presence was readily accepted by the class

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members and the teachers. My interest was in observing the language learning environment, how participants went about learning languages, how they related to the other students and to the teacher, the extent of their participation, and how age surfaced in this setting. In this, I was somewhat disappointed, for I found the lessons to be highly teacher-centered, which meant that the interaction I had hoped to witness among students of different ages was relatively sparse. Whenever small-group or pair work was incorporated into the lessons, it was generally as a mechanical way to practice grammatical structures. Despite these setbacks, the attitudes and styles of the teachers and the different ways in which they interacted with the students, including the participants, proved to be enlightening. An unexpected bonus was the opportunity to chat informally with some of the participants before the teacher arrived for the lesson. This, plus my regular presence in the classroom, helped build a relationship of confidence and openness with the participants that I believe carried over into the interviews.

Narrative accounts

I provided each of the participants with a small tape recorder and instructed them to make an informal reflection on each week's lessons in Spanish. During the course of the semester, a total of 69 audio-taped accounts were made (Appendix C). I asked the participants to talk about their feelings regarding the activities, their difficulties and achievements with respect to specific language points, their participation, their relationship with the other members of the group, and any critical moments which arose in the classroom, but I also emphasized that they were free to talk about whatever they considered important and wanted to share. In general terms, the participants were less spontaneous and more cautious in their audio-taped accounts than they were in the interviews, more formal in their speech, and perhaps overly concerned with 'doing it right.' Often they gave a summary of the week's classroom activities without including their own reflections, despite my encouragement to talk more openly about their own experiences. However, the narrative accounts proved useful in allowing me to pick up topics of concern and, by cross-checking them with my own classroom observations, to pursue them in subsequent interviews.

Interviews with teachers

I took advantage of the cordial relationship that had developed with the classroom teachers during the semester to request an interview with each of them at the end of the term. I asked them to speak generally about their own beliefs and attitudes regarding language learning and age, and specifically about the students who had participated in the study (Table 5.6).

1. Discuss the performance, achievements and difficulties of "X" (each participant).
2. How did "X" fit into the group?
3. How would you classify "X" in terms of the life course?
4. Is age a factor in your experience? Is it an issue for you?
5. What is the ideal age to learn a language in your opinion?
6. Which age group do you feel most comfortable with and that you work most effectively with?

Table 5.6 Interview guide – teachers

The interviews with the three head teachers and the two practice teachers ranged in length from 14 to 33 minutes, averaging 22 minutes each (Table 5.7). They were especially useful to me in providing a type of comparison with peers that increased the credibility of my findings.

5.5.4 Data organization and analysis

The method of processing and analyzing the data, rather than being determined beforehand, was developed in response to the characteristics of the data and the core issues that were addressed in the research questions. Once the collection process began, certain steps for handling the data were tried, and discarded or adopted.

TEACHERS	TIME
Martin	33:00
Nidia	22:17
Ramon	21:48
Simon*	18:59
Tomas*	14:04
TOTAL	110:08
AVERAGE	22:02

5 interviews
length: 14:04 to 33:00 minutes
total: 1 hour 50 minutes 8 seconds
average: 22:02 minutes

*Practice teacher

Table 5.7 Record of interviews with the teachers

Processing the data

- Interviews

All the interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed in their entirety, using a simplified transcription style (Appendix D) in the interest of comprehensibility. A native Spanish speaker listened to the audio-taped material and reviewed all the transcripts to check for accuracy. Translations to English were made only of pertinent sections during the course of the analysis.

- Classroom observations

I recorded field notes both during and immediately after each class session, compiling 89 pages of notes. I used an uncomplicated format in which I noted down the series of classroom activities, their duration, the involvement of the participants with the teacher and with their classmates, and any noteworthy 'incidents' that occurred.

- Narrative accounts

In the case of the audio-taped narrative reflections, I made summaries of them, compiling about 19 pages of notes in all. I transcribed and translated only pertinent sections.

- Interviews with teachers

The interviews with the teachers were processed in the same manner as the interviews with the participants, namely, audio-taped, transcribed, reviewed by a Spanish speaker, and translated to English where necessary.

Analyzing the data

I conducted a content analysis, specifically a qualitative content analysis, to allow the underlying themes to emerge out of the data. Qualitative content analysis emphasizes the role of the researcher in the process of constructing the meaning of a text, and of the context surrounding the text in order to understand its meaning (Bryman, as cited in Kohlbacher 2006). On occasions I found it useful to examine the language in particular segments of the data from an ethnomethodological perspective. As I mentioned earlier, this kind of merging of naturalistic and ethnomethodological perspectives is being done progressively more by narrative researchers.

I developed an eight-step procedure for the analysis (see Figure 5.1). The fundamental principle which guided me in this task was that the data were of necessity a product of interaction, either between the participants and me or between the participants and their teachers or classmates. That is to say, I endeavored to keep in mind that the utterances, stories, or events recorded in the transcripts and field notes, while spotlighting the participants, were always co-produced with others in a specific temporal and spatial context that must be taken into account when unraveling their meaning.
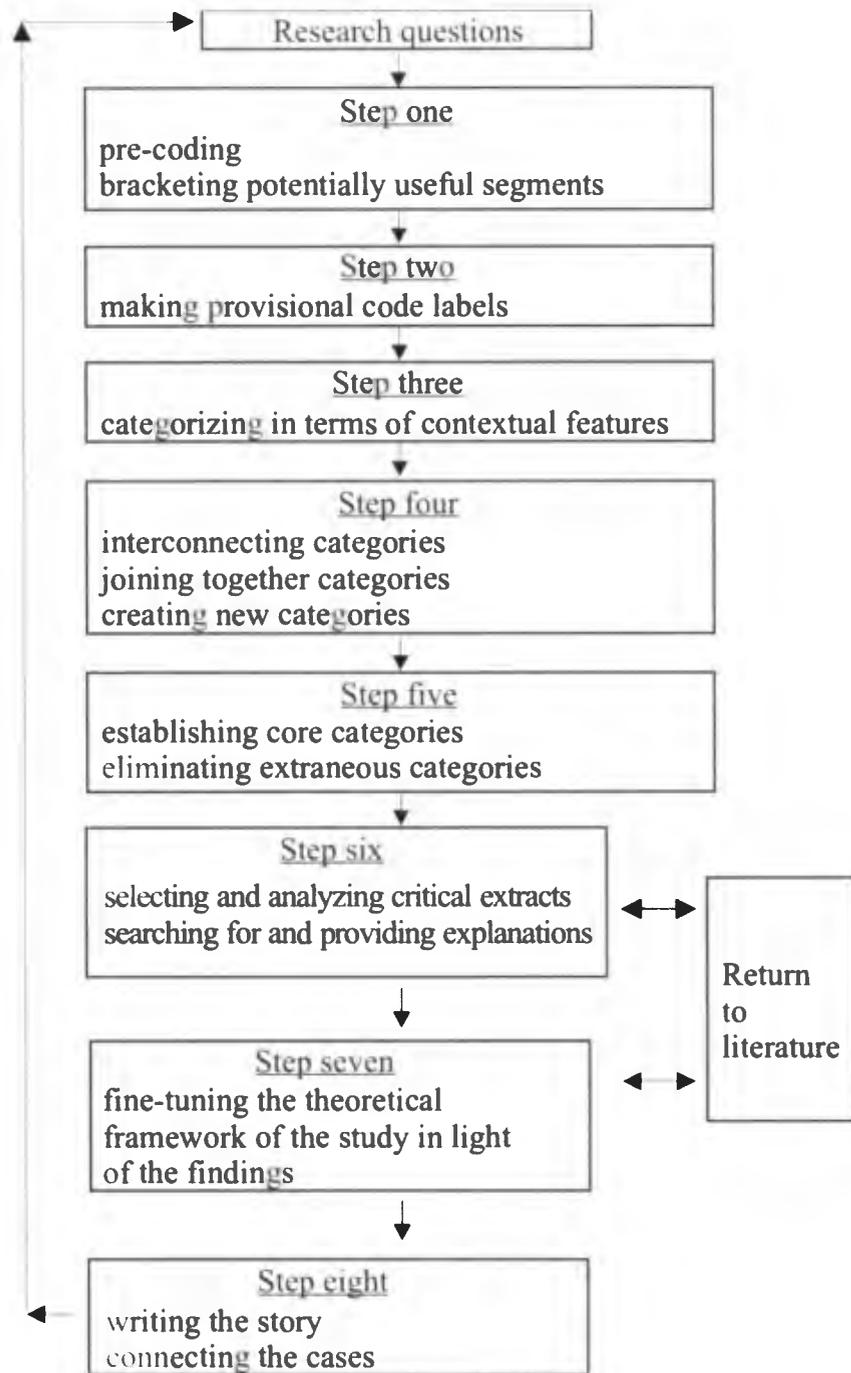
Figure 5.1 Eight-step model of data analysis procedure

- Step one

After processing the data from the interviews, classroom observations, and narrative accounts, I immediately bracketed parts of the text and my field notes

that struck me as significant. Layder (1998) recommends using this kind of pre-coding device as a way to target segments of the data as potentially useful without being concerned at that moment with the reasons why.

- Step two

Once the complete body of data had been processed, I read it again thoroughly and reconsidered the sections of the transcripts and field notes that I had previously identified as relevant, adding or eliminating where required. I then attached provisional code labels or names to the marked sections that linked them to key concepts in my research, for example, 'language learning beliefs,' 'ageism,' 'positive aging,' and 'other identities.' To a large extent, these ideas stemmed from the research questions and prior work in the area which had provided orientation in the research design; as Layder (1998) has pointed out, our observations and interpretations are invariably theory-laden. However, this did not preclude my happening upon and coding unexpected and interesting findings in the data, in view of the fact that provisional coding is inherently open-ended and subject to revision or confirmation at any stage of the analysis (ibid.). For example, I used the label 'friendships' for some of the material that was later either incorporated into other categories, such as 'peer relationships' or 'social identity,' or eliminated from the final selection of extracts included in the study.

- Step three

Having labeled the significant parts of the data, I next categorized them in terms of the contextual features that gave them meaning. "Categorizing is a process whereby previously unitized data are organized into categories that provide descriptive or inferential information about the context or setting from which the units were derived" (Lincoln and Guba 1985: 203). This step requires a careful consideration of the bearing that the situation, interactants, and underlying assumptions have on what is said and what transpires. I formulated several categories for the data at this stage, including 'younger is better,' 'prestige,' and 'self-handicapping.'

- Step four

At this point, I examined the data with the object of finding interconnections and patterns among the categories, joining together those that seemed to cover the same content (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Robson 2002). 'Age-appropriacy' covered texts categorized as 'appearance,' 'aspirations,' and 'behavior.' Where the data were not entirely consistent, or where differences or contradictions appeared, I sometimes created a new category. For instance, I used 'adultism' to refer to manifestations of a particular kind of ageism targeting younger rather than older people.

- Step five

I next searched for relationships among the categories, establishing major or core categories and relating the other categories and sub-categories to them. 'Ageist discourses' became a core category that included categories such as 'self-handicapping,' 'adultism,' and 'the inverted-U model.' Extraneous categories that could not be linked to the core were discarded, for example '[their] children's accomplishments.'

- Step six

Following this, I selected critical extracts from the data and analyzed them, searching for explanations in the literature I had reviewed or seeking out new sources to help me to interpret the data. I found that the individual stories of the participants took on significance when seen as embedded in the particular context of present-day urban Mexico, and this in turn set in the socio-historical framework of that country, and then the even broader international world context. This type of embedding, or layering, with its differences, is evocative of Layder's (1998) domain theory.[21] By moving back and forth between the immediate and more

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[21] In Layder's (1998) social theory, of which adaptive theory is a part, social reality is seen as based on a four-tiered 'domain theory' of human action and social organization that contemplates macro and micro elements, objective and subjective aspects, and agency and structure relations, as separate but interlocking and mutually interdependent characteristics. The four domains, psychobiography, situated activity, social settings and contextual resources, are organized in a hierarchical and embedded fashion from the most individual and micro level to the most general and macro one.

remote contexts, I was able to comprehend the micro and macro characteristics of the key points I had identified with greater clarity. As a case in point, I mention the significant absence of 'middle age' as a constructed age category in the data. This finding necessitated my returning to the literature to understand how family structure and retirement practices in Mexico differ from those of other countries who have constructed 'middle age.'

- Step seven

Although reviewing and adjusting my theoretical ideas was an ongoing process throughout the analysis, I made a final assessment at this time in order to fine-tune the theoretical framework of the study in light of the findings.

- Step eight

The final step was to compose a consistent and compelling story based on the patterns, themes and theoretical insights that had emerged in the analysis, as well as on the interconnections between the cases.

It is important to note that the data analysis, as it was carried out, did not always adhere to a strictly linear path. The above description of the step-by-step procedure is my attempt to capture the essential segments of the overall process I followed, as I look at it in retrospect.

5.5.5 Criteria for assessing the research

On what grounds is the value of the present study to be determined? Traditionally, research has been judged in terms of its validity and reliability. In the positivist paradigm, validity refers to the degree to which the account of research findings corresponds to objective reality, and reliability to the consistency and repeatability of the results (Kirk and Miller 1986, among others; Posner 2001b, 2001a). The underlying assumption is that a universal, tangible reality exists that is independently observable. However, this viewpoint is not generally considered appropriate for interpretive or qualitative research, where reality is regarded as socially constructed and a single one-to-one correspondence between reality and

observation is neither achievable nor necessarily sought (Holliday 2002; Cho and Trent 2006).

Various attempts have been made over the years to find criteria that would be pertinent to qualitative research, and the ongoing discussion has generated a range of opinions on the subject. Early on, Yvonne S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba (1985) proposed a parallel set of criteria for establishing the trustworthiness of qualitative research, which included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as counterparts to internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity. While some qualitative researchers have adopted these criteria, others have continued to search for methods of assessment less contingent on traditional quantitative research designs (Sparkes 2001).

Jeasik Cho and Allen Trent (2006) identify two poles in the way validity is envisioned in qualitative research. At one end is 'transactional' validity, which they characterize as follows:

> We define transactional validity in qualitative research as an interactive process between the researcher, the researched, and the collected data that is aimed at achieving a relatively higher level of accuracy and consensus . . . . In other words, techniques are seen as a medium to insure an accurate reflection of reality (or at least, participants' constructions of reality). (Cho and Trent 2006: 322)

Notions of validity, such as Lincoln and Guba (1985) advocate, are based on this type of approach.

At the other end of the spectrum, 'transformational' validity is concerned with the pragmatic uses of qualitative research, assessed in terms of its success in bringing about social change or reaching some other intended objective (Aguinaldo 2004). To this end, the "the researcher(s) must explicitly consider the degree to which the research purpose, question, and actual acts intertwine with an embedded, process view of validity" (Cho and Trent 2006: 327), making it imperative to include validity considerations throughout the research inquiry.

Along the continuum between the transactional and transformational approaches are multiple versions of validity, for instance, negotiated, ecological, pragmatic, or reflexive, to name but a few, each having specific criteria for assessing research (Sparkes 2001). They serve different purposes, such as truth seeking, thick description, and praxis or social change and, moreover, may be flexibly and usefully combined to obtain holistically 'valid' results (Cho and Trent 2006).

At the heart of the issue of validity lies the question of truth. In the case of the present research, I have taken up a midway position on validity, one that reflects a reconceptualization of the notion of truth in line with social constructionist thinking. From this perspective, truth is invariably partial, contextually situated, and emergent, in the sense that there are always possibilities not yet included (Cho and Trent 2006). For this reason, accounts of research findings are modifiable, as more is learned about the particular circumstances under study (Seale 2004). Layder concurs with this viewpoint:

> Adaptive theory proposes that greater adequacy and validity should be understood as the best approximation to truth given the present state of knowledge and understanding. It is not a once-and-for-all notion, and in this respect a theory, fully formed, simply represents the 'latest stage' in the elaboration of the theory . . . . adaptive theory has to be viewed as an interim way-station which is potentially revisable and reformulable. (Layder 1998: 9)

If, then, my research claims are openly acknowledged to be partial, tied to a particular historical and cultural situation, value-laden, and revisable, on what basis can their validity be assessed? And, if multiple and equally valid versions of reality exist, as social constructionists affirm, then why should my account of reality be considered better than any other? There are, of course, no simple answers to these questions.

I consider that three broad criteria or categories, authenticity, plausibility and resonance quality, provide a suitable basis for assessing the particular research I have carried out because they allow for its context-dependent nature. Authenticity,

as I define it, concerns the openness, accuracy and genuineness of the research process as it is conducted and reported. Plausibility refers to the believability or apparent reasonableness of the research claims. Resonance quality, I suggest, involves the forging of a connection with the audience at the level of their "own experiences of similar, parallel, or analogous situations," although this does not imply that they must "derive the same meaning" (Blumenfeld-Jones 1995: 31) as the researcher. The three categories tend to overlap with each other and with the following, more concrete criteria that are useful in establishing validity:

- Availability of detailed records of each step of the research
- Straightforward and honest presentation of the data
- Completeness of the descriptions
- Consistency between the researcher's interpretation of the data and the theories and data themselves
- Openness to contrary evidence or refutation

(based on Blumenfeld-Jones 1995; Edge and Richards 1998; Seale et al. 2004, among others)

To the extent that I maintained a long-term involvement with the participants during the study, applied methodological triangulation through the use of a multi-method data collection design, discussed the data with peers, provided a clear, systematic and well-documented account of the research process and, most importantly, argued my case effectively, I believe that the authenticity, plausibility and resonance quality of the research has been adequately demonstrated.

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have described the methodology used in the present investigation, tracing a route from the theoretical-methodological groundwork of the research design, through the particular focus given by the research questions, to the selection of narrative inquiry and an ethnographically-oriented case study approach as the research strategy, and finally to a discussion of the various features of the research design itself. Although the description adheres to a

sequential path as I have told it here, the research process was never linear, but instead followed a spiraling course throughout its development. This had favorable results, I believe, in connecting the philosophical foundations to the practical framework in such a way that together they form a coherent methodology. What follows in the next three chapters is an account of what was learned in my exploration of the construction of age in adult English language learners.

Chapter 6

Constructing Age in Later Adulthood

6.1 Introduction

Two principal sources furnished me with access to the participants' construction of age: the language lessons I observed and the stories they told me in the interviews and narrative accounts. Because of the ongoing nature of the data collection process, I was able to combine both sources advantageously, either corroborating in interviews what had been observed in the classroom or confirming in the observations something expressed earlier in the interviews or narrative accounts. In this and the two chapters that follow, I present the most significant findings to emerge from the work I did with the language learners who participated in the study, highlighting what was unique and what was shared in their experience of age and language learning.

It is important to mention that the length of the three chapters varies significantly. This first data chapter is nearly twice as long as the one which follows, and the final data chapter is much briefer by comparison. There are several reasons for this. The two older participants, whose stories are the subject of the present chapter, proved to be the most interesting of the participants. They had a great deal to say and, as retirees, they also had the time to spend sharing their stories. They clearly seemed to enjoy talking about themselves and, as a result, I was able to take a more detailed look at each of them. The next chapter, concerning the four midlife women, is substantially shorter because I decided to weave together their stories rather than recounting them separately. In part, this was due to the fact that I did not have a full data set for two of the participants (see 'Attrition' in Chapter 5, section 5.5.2). More to the point, they were busy with jobs and families and, although willing and cooperative as participants, were hard pressed at times to fit the interviews and audio-taped narrative accounts into their demanding schedules. Nevertheless, I found enough richness in their stories to be able to fashion a convincing account of the construction of midlife by combining elements from the

material they provided me with. The final data chapter is the briefest in that it discusses the story of a single participant.

In the present chapter, I set out to tell first Hector's story and then Felix's, as I understood each of them, describing noteworthy occurrences in the classroom and salient parts of the interviews and narrative accounts that bring to light their enactment of age, that is, their performance of age through discursive practices. I have divided each of their stories into four parts, beginning with a panoramic view of their lives to date, followed by a picture of what learning English has meant to them. I then present some scenes from the classroom language lessons in which Hector and Felix participated, and end with other scenes depicting their lives in the world beyond the classroom that illustrate the construction of their age identity. My concluding remarks point out how these two stories, at times remarkably parallel and at other times vastly divergent, contribute to our understanding of the construction of age in later adulthood and to the formulation of responses to the questions guiding this research.

6.2 Hector's story: A tale of progress

I have entitled Hector's story "A tale of progress" because the main thread that ties his story together is that of success or progress. Hector sees his life as a series of conquests that have enabled him to move upwards in the world. This is a part of a progress-decline narrative, in that life is envisioned as having a binary mode, progress or decline (Gullette 2004. For a more complete discussion, see Chapter 4, section 4.3.1.). Implicit in the idea of progress is that the alternative is decline; one is either progressing or declining. There is a drive in Hector's case to keep the progress narrative going as long as possible.

6.2.1 A thumbnail sketch of Hector's life

At the time of the fieldwork Hector was 70 years old, a physician specializing in occupational medicine. He had retired from his job in a teaching hospital in the Mexican public health sector five years previously, but still maintains his private

practice. He is married and has four adult children. Hector's description of his upbringing in a family of shopkeepers referred as much to the paucity of culture in the home as it did to the economic limitations to which he was subject. Although he grew up in straitened circumstances, he now enjoys a comfortable and privileged life style that includes frequent trips to the US. He attributed this change in socioeconomic status to his triumphs in the academic and professional worlds. Academic success represents the highest value for him; the interviews abound with stories of his educational and career achievements and the corresponding social prestige these brought him. In extract 1, he credited this success to his mental capacities and to 'destiny,' claiming:

Extract 1[22]

1   I was born under a good star. ... Under this good star were ... my[23]
2   capabilities ... mental capacities, obviously ... that enabled me to
3   advance ... because it is very difficult to move from one social station
4   to another ... another one. (Hector, Interview 3)

Repeated allusions to his academic background and his status as a professional permeate all the interviews, and carried over to his comments about his children. Hector emphasized that all four are university-educated, taking credit for this and for the fact that they speak several languages. He mentioned their academic and professional accomplishments more than once with evident pride, but did not refer to any other aspects of their lives.

Hector also spoke at great length about the famous and influential people he has known over the years, many of whom have served as 'connections' for advancement at different points in his life.

6.2.2 The goal of learning English

At the time I interviewed him, Hector explained that retirement had brought the academic and professional aspects of his life course to a virtual halt. Learning

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[22] The original Spanish version of all interview extracts appears in Appendix E.

[23] The lines of the extracts appearing in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 are numbered for easy reference.

English then has become part of his desire to reach new educational and social goals. When I asked him to tell me more about this, he made the comments that appear in the following extract.

Extract 2

H = Hector; P = Patricia

1	H:	Yes, I'm interested in … in learning the language … as fast as
2		possible. But not because I am in a rush for institutional reasons.
3		If … if I don't hurry up, I won't have time to learn the language.
4	P:	What do you mean?!
5	H:	Yes, it's not … it's not a drama … but now at … at this age …at
6		my age … you have to do things more quickly.
7	P:	OK … OK.
8	H:	No … no … no … I'm doing it and enjoying it … and moreover,
9		I feel 'alive' … doing it … because at this point in time, what
10		for? If I've lived my whole life without the language … I can
11		keep living whatever time I have left … no, no, no … it's a
12		personal ambition … but, yes, I have to hurry up to keep
13		progressing. (Hector, Interview 2)

Hector brought up the issue of age himself when we first talked about his reasons for wanting to learn English. In lines 1 and 2 he explained that he is "interested in learning the language as fast as possible," and that if he doesn't hurry up, he won't have time to learn it. He added that at his age "you have to do things more quickly" (lines 5-6). I see this as an enactment of an old age identity and an expression of age anxiety (Gullette 2004). He went on to say in line 9 that studying English makes him "feel alive," an interesting choice of words, which I understand to mean that he is moving forward, advancing and, by remaining 'productive,' staving off decline. It is important to note that retirement in industrialized societies is a life-marking event, understood by many to signal the end of advancement and productivity (Phillipson 1998). For Hector, then, studying English would seem to signify a way to continue his progress narrative.

The fact of the matter is he does not really need to learn the language for any practical purpose. As he pointed out, he has managed to live his whole life without knowing English (lines 10-11). Rather, it is a personal ambition of his and

allows him to remain active now that he has retired. He recognized that there is a prestige factor as well; knowing English signifies an increase in cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977). In extract 3, he gives voice to this idea.

Extract 3

H = Hector; P = Patricia

1	H:	I'm Mexican and … and … and proud to be Mexican. So, I am
2		someone who speaks another language besides Spanish, OK?
3		Yes, it makes you feel that … that there is a cultural value that is
4		more … that is higher … because I speak …
5	P:	So, you … you feel you have … prestige, let's say?
6	H:	It increases my self-esteem … my status. (Hector, Interview 1)

Besides the 'cultural value' (line 3) and greater self-worth and status (line 6) that knowing English affords, Hector viewed it as "another step upwards" and "added value" for himself on a personal level (Hector, Interview 3). This has provided him with ample motives for studying the language.

6.2.3 The construction of age: in the classroom

Hector maintained that the best time to start learning another language is in childhood, expressing, in the next extract, the commonly-held notion that 'younger is better.'

Extract 4

H = Hector; P = Patricia

1	P:	What is the ideal age to begin learning a language … in your
2		opinion?
3	H:	There is a very 'Mexican' expression that says "sooner than
4		soon" … that's correctly expressed, eh … it's old Spanish … in
5		other words, as soon as possible.
6	P:	Uh huh. At what age?
7	H:	Learning to speak it as a second language? Immediately …
8		because … because you learn … faster and you can see it in the
9		bilingual communities near the United States that use two
10		[languages].
11	P:	And why is that? Why do they learn so quickly?
12	H:	Because they do it naturally. There are no inhibitions … there are

13   no prejudices ... there are no ... besides there are no rules.
(Hector, Interview 1)

Given that Hector received only minimal exposure to English in *secundaria* (equivalent to US middle school), he now feels that as an older learner, "a handicap exists with respect to the younger students" (Hector, Interview 2). He claimed that this is because most of them have studied English in bilingual kindergartens and primary schools; however, on the basis of my own knowledge of this population, I believe this is unlikely to be the case. Hector argued that their early contact with the language has put them ahead of the older members of the class. In his opinion, the younger students, whom he calls 'children,' are also sharper, less inhibited and more self-confident, whereas older students become blocked more easily and lack self-assurance (Hector, Interview 1).

Later, in an about-face, he questioned whether success in learning a new language is a matter of age-related learning ability, for he said that, "if it were, I wouldn't be here. ... What you need is motivation ...and that is internal" (Hector, Interview 1). He pointed out that learning a language is not a priority for the younger students because they are focused on their academic studies. Older students, on the other hand, have more experience and resources to fall back on, and also more time to dedicate to language learning (Hector, Interview 1).

In assessing his own progress over the course of the semester in his narrative accounts, Hector cited listening as his principal problem, maintaining that his auditory memory is not as good as his visual memory. Interestingly, he did not attribute this to any age-related decline, but rather to the limited number of opportunities he has had to practice the language in conversation, compared to those he has had to read it.

Some of these beliefs and attitudes underscored Hector's enactment of age in the classroom activities, and in his relationship with his fellow students and with the teacher. It is necessary to clarify that the lessons were generally teacher-fronted, with virtually no small-group work taking place. The teacher talked a great deal of

the time and the interaction was principally between the teacher and individual students. Notwithstanding the rather constrained communicative environment, Hector proved to be a highly vocal participant; I recorded numerous occasions on which he volunteered responses, asked questions or requested clarification from the teacher. He made frequent humorous remarks and displayed an upbeat attitude, despite the fact that he often failed to provide the correct answer or to respond with the facility he desired. Even so, in my estimation his proficiency in English at this stage was comparable to that of the other students in the group.

Enactment of age: examining classroom activities

The classroom activities followed the textbook, *American Headway 2* (Soars and Soars 2001a), very closely (for a more detailed discussion of the *American Headway* series, see Chapter 5, section 5.5.2.). As an affluent professional and a frequent international traveler, Hector could undoubtedly relate to the global perspective of *American Headway 2* more easily than the younger students in the group, few of whom have had the opportunity to travel abroad. Yet he would not have encountered much in the textbook that engaged him as an older adult. Consequently, in those classroom activities having an explicit orientation to the world of young people, Hector generally modified the exercises to fit his circumstances as an older person. For example, Hector made the substitutions that I recorded in the following classroom observation notes:

Class 8, March 18, 2004

Time	Activity	Hector
10'	Exercise 1 from textbook: "My mother / father drives me crazy when..."; "I hate it when my boyfriend / girlfriend..."; and "It really annoys me when..." (*American Headway 2*, Unit 2, 16) Teacher [T] – Whole group	Hector [H] changes the structures to "My children drive me crazy when..." and "I hate it when my wife...", then makes a joke.

When the occasion arose, Hector was positioned as or actively took up the part of an older person. For instance, in a class discussion about teenagers (*American Headway 2*, Unit 5, 38-39), Hector talked about raising children, giving the viewpoint of a parent. He also recounted how he had had to wear short pants as a young child, as was the custom years ago, and then how he was finally allowed to wear long pants, a symbol of his transition to maturity (Class observation notes, May 11, 2004). Volunteering this story suggests that Hector wished to serve as a historical witness (Gergen and Gergen 2000), sharing the perspective of an older person who has had the benefit of living in other times. Clearly, he places a value on his accumulated life experience (Featherstone and Hepworth 1995). At another level, the routine practice whereby Hector took up or was assigned the subject position 'older person,' illustrates the extent to which age salience is a defining feature of our culture (Coupland, Coupland, and Nussbaum 1993; Deats and Lenker 1999).

At the same time, Hector evinced a desire to maintain a vital connection with the contemporary world of young people. He commented that the teacher's references to current movies and songs compel him to stay abreast of the times. In addition to listening to young people's music in class, he goes to the movies often, although he confessed that he does not always enjoy the films he sees. However, in his opinion, this enables him to keep up with the interests of young people. He remarked:

Extract 5

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1    And given … my … my personal circumstance of age … the teacher
2    is up-to-date and he is talking to young people … well, I … I
3    personally must be ready to talk about a movie. If they ask me what
4    movie … and I say "Casablanca" … that's ancient history. (Hector,
     Interview 2)
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Nonetheless, on the various occasions in which songs were used as a classroom exercise, Hector either did not participate or made only token attempts to sing along with the other students. I sensed in Hector an internal tension between a glorification of youth culture, on the one hand (Hareven 1995; Gullette 2004), and

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a satisfaction with the place where he finds himself in the life course, on the other (Andrews 1999; Tulle-Winton 1999).

Enactment of age: in relations with fellow students

In my observations, I noted that while Hector got along well with his classmates, it was he who invariably took it upon himself to develop a cordial relationship with them, and not the other way around. Hector admitted this, pointing out, in extract 6, that because he is 'different' from the other students, a clear reference to his age, he must be the one to adapt to the present environment and to bridge the gap between himself and the younger members of the class.

Extract 6

1	There is a … a … a biological maxim … "Animals that don't adapt
2	perish." So, in this case I am the one who is different. Maybe it is a
3	manifestation of vanity but, well, the others … are in their … in their
4	own environment … in their situation. I am the one who comes in …
5	so, I definitely have been the one who has made the effort to … to
6	understand everyone else. (Hector, Interview 5)

One of the ways Hector endeavored to fit into the group was by positioning himself as the classroom 'expert' in vocabulary, a place he carved out for himself in which he could establish himself as a person worthy of respect. He brought his electronic dictionary to every class and was pleased when his classmates asked him for help with the meaning of unknown words. He told me:

Extract 7

1	They ask me about words … maybe I know more vocabulary …
2	which I do … and they ask me and then they treat me like a … like a
3	classmate … the same … the same … no … no, I would put it more
4	simply … just like any other classmate. (Hector, Interview 2)

Even so, on most occasions in which the activities were carried out in pairs or small teams, Hector chose to work with the two students who normally sat next to him, both from the outside community and slightly older than the other members of the group. He explained to me that he had formed his own small group of the

oldest students in the class. This act of self-segregation (Hazan 1994) suggests that, despite his claims to be well-accepted by the group, there is a perceptible defensiveness in Hector's manner. In fact, he used that very expression, remarking, "I defend myself by showing [the younger students] that I am here to learn" (Hector, Interview 5).

Yet at other moments he adopted a more accommodating posture. In the same interview, he imagined that he was being positioned by his fellow students as "a little old man taking a class and not doing too badly" (Hector, Interview 5). His use of the ageist term *viejito* (little old man) in a self-deprecating display of humor seems to imply that a good performance in language learning is not expected from an older person (Coupland 2001a).

Enactment of age: in relations with the teacher

Hector's attitude of accommodation extended to his relationship with the teacher as well. In my classroom observation notes, I registered a series of episodes which took place over the length of the course in which Ramon, the teacher, made disparaging references to age and joked about age and aging, most often singling out Hector as his target. For example, he made humorous remarks about Alzheimer's, about the 'older generation' and their incapacity to use the internet, about Hector, saying, "Hector is just a little older than me!" (Class observation notes, March 23, 2004), and to Hector himself, joking, "You're a little old for that" (Class observation notes, March 23, 2004). The following excerpt from my classroom observation notes illustrates this kind of ageist humor:

Class 18, May 4, 2004

Time	Activity	Hector
30'	Exercise "Talking about you" from textbook. Q & A about hopes and ambitions. Informal conversation. (*American Headway 2*, Unit	When called on, H explains that while he is officially retired, he still works at home and has his private

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	5, 35)	practice.
	T – whole group	T asks if he still does surgery. H answers that he doesn't because (1) he finds it difficult to stand on his feet for so many hours, and (2) the new technology requires learning how to operate a great deal of equipment that he is not familiar with. T comments that he thought maybe it was because he [H] had a shaky hand.

In the fifth and final interview, I asked Hector how he felt about the teacher's remarks. He started out by claiming that instead of being bothered, he felt it was "a compliment" and was flattered because it meant that he is "a unique person" (Hector, Interview 5). When I asked him to explain this further, he made the lengthy commentary that follows:

Extract 8

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1     What I'm saying is, no … no … age has never been a … problem …
2     for me … starting with the fact that I have always looked much
3     younger than I am. When I began to practice, people said to me, "You
4     are very young, Doctor" … and for a long time after that, I looked
5     younger than I was. What's more, my voice, by some quirk of fate …
6     people still confuse mine with my son's and I just take it as a joke.
7     "Hey, son." "Yes, mom, what do you want." … And my wife's
8     friends begin to talk, until they realize that they're not talking to my
9     son … they're talking to me. But, no, not in the least. Even more, it's
10    … it's a motivation for me because I think the teacher is very
11    motivating. He may have, like any human being, a lot of … repressed
12    or unrepressed psychological issues … because in that case he can
13    show them, right? … the … the … source … attitudes … of … very
14    deep-seated … very difficult to appreciate. I'm not … not a
15    psychologist … because I'm a doctor … and at any given moment he
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16   can show them [attitudes]. He has a pony tail. He's not a typical
17   teacher. Moreover ... he's up-to-date because just like me he wears
18   jeans. No ... he doesn't come dressed with the formality of other
19   times. This man ... it seems that he is has an inclination towards
20   motorcycle culture. Maybe he is a ... a rebel in another personality
21   ... because he likes motorcycles, but as a teacher he is a good English
22   teacher. He brings a lot of enthusiasm ... he takes his role seriously. ...
23   No ... because you can't ... you can't ... and you shouldn't deny your
24   age, OK? A person should be more or less satisfied. (Hector,
       Interview 5)

Although Hector insisted that age has never been a problem for him (lines 1-2), he gave this reason, "I have always looked much younger than I am" (lines 2-3). He then related how people have always perceived him to be younger than he is, switching to their voices to show how he is seen by others. "You are very young, Doctor" (lines 3-4). He added that, to this day, he is mistaken on the telephone for his son, using a constructed dialogue to illustrate his point (line 7). He clearly likes 'passing' – being considered younger than he is (Andrews 1999). This would seem to contradict his initial statement that he has no problem about his age. He then went back to his original claim, saying that he was not in the least disturbed by the teacher's comments (line 9).

At that point, the conversation took an interesting turn. Hector launched into a commentary about the teacher that, while not overtly critical, indicates that he felt the teacher might have some unresolved psychological issues, perhaps even concerning his own aging process (lines 11-14). He also questioned the teacher's appearance and behavior in terms of age-appropriacy (Coupland, Coupland, and Nussbaum 1993; Hazan 1994), mentioning the teacher's hairstyle, a pony tail, and his informal and modern way of dressing, which Hector associates with motorcyclists and rebels (lines 16-20). He then counteracted these negative remarks by praising Ramon as a good and enthusiastic English teacher who takes his role seriously (lines 21-22). Finally, he returned to his starting point and commented that we should accept our age (and aging), saying, "you can't ... and you shouldn't deny your age, OK? A person should be more or less satisfied" (lines 23-24).

The contradictions in this extract are interesting. First, it is clear that Hector places great value on looking young, or 'passing' as young. In this, I see him as manifesting his own ageist attitudes by distancing himself from who he really is (Andrews 1999). At the same time, he shows some ambivalence about the norms of age-appropriacy (Coupland, Coupland, and Nussbaum 1993; Hazan 1994), both with regard to the teacher's appearance and behavior, and his own choice to wear jeans. In the end, his remarks advocate accepting aging as a fact of life and finding a sense of life satisfaction. These are discourses of positive aging, in that a value is placed on continued development over a lifetime, and "age is [seen as] an accomplishment, something one has worked long and hard at" (Andrews 1999: 310).

But more to the point, at the end of the day it is hard to know to what extent Hector resented the teacher's constant ageist jokes and either chose not to or did not feel free to express his feelings. It may also have been Hector's personal way of handling being positioned as the target of 'good-natured' ridicule because of his age. Whatever the reason, he seemed to be accommodating to or colluding with the blatantly ageist behavior of the teacher.

6.2.4 The construction of age: beyond the classroom

To come to a better understanding of how Hector constructed his age as a language learner, it is helpful to explore the wider context of his life, for the significance of learning English at this precise moment in his life course is part of a much larger story. In it, Hector's age identity connects with his other identities, and together they flow in and out of the classroom, shaping his experiences. The interviews, and to a lesser extent the narrative accounts, allowed me to share in the construction of Hector's personal narrative and to focus on the interplay of his multiple identities.

In this section, I draw attention to some of the more illustrative moments in the complex, and often conflicting, construction of Hector's age identity. It is important to mention that part of the social setting of the interviews included the

particular positions we took up in relation to each other. Hector and I ostensibly belong to the same age group of older adults, and share similar academic qualifications and socioeconomic status. Significant differences are our gender, nationality, and particular areas of expertise. For example, many of Hector's digressions during our interviews seemed intended to position himself as a well respected academic and professional. Because I observed no similar incidents in his interaction with his classmates or with the teacher, I sensed he was attempting to put himself on an equal footing with me, as a fellow academic. Also, on various occasions Hector spoke favorably of the United States, never once criticizing American culture. In view of the complexities of the relationship between the two countries, it is possible that things would have played out differently had the interviewer been a Mexican rather than an American like myself. An awareness of these circumstances operated at some level during the interviews, and I have tried to take them into consideration in my discussion and interpretation of the data.

Competing discourses of age

When asked for a description of the life course, Hector separated it into four stages: birth, growth, reproduction, and death, a view that owes much to his medical training. He went on to state that the biological, psychological, familial, social and academic aspects of these events exist concurrently, beginning at birth and first peaking at 35 to 40 years of age (see Figure 6.1). The life course then moves upwards more gradually during maturity until, at around 60, a biological and psychosocial decline commences that continues until one dies (Hector, Interviews 3 and 4). Although Hector referred very dispassionately to aging after 60 as a process of degeneration and involution, on a personal level he denied that he himself is at a point of decline, despite his being 70-years-old (Hector, Interview 4).
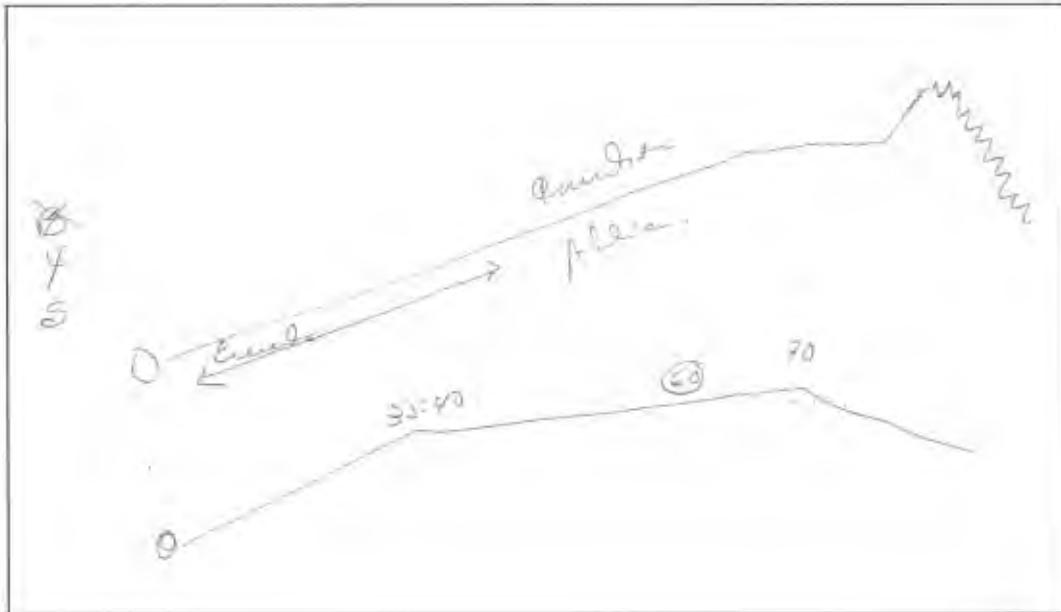
Figure 6.1 Hector's life course

What is more, Hector referred explicitly to his chronological age on various occasions during the interviews. According to Coupland, Coupland and Giles (1991), age-telling is a means of identity-marking that may reveal a person's positive or negative self-appraisal of their contextual aging, as well as the extent to which they perceive their chronological and contextual life positions to be in or out of phase. In Hector's case, and considering the pride he took in passing as younger, it is likely that the disclosure of his age was a stratagem to elicit confirmation from me of his 'youthfulness' and to underscore his favorable life position when weighed against the circumstances of other 70-year-olds. This type of interplay between discourses of decline and of positive aging is woven throughout Hector's narrative.

Living in the past and living in the present

A case in point is the ambivalence Hector shows about the past and present. Coupland et al. (1991) indicate that references to past times, or temporal framing processes, provide an indirect way of constructing an elderly age identity, to the extent that they locate a person in a particular life-span position. Hector recounted stories of his past experiences in every interview that generally worked to build

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the image of a successful person and that displayed a largely positive aging attitude. He insisted that all stages of life are good, although they invariably have ups and downs, and he could not identify any particular moment as the best in his own life. He emphasized the pointlessness of having regrets and stated that he has none. When considering how his life might have been different had he made other decisions, he declared that he is satisfied with the choices he has made.

At the same time, his tales are often tinged with a measure of nostalgia, as can be perceived, for example, in his accounts of having worked with close relatives of three different Mexican presidents in the past (Hector, Interview 3), and in allusions to his university years such as those found in the following extract.

Extract 9

H = Hector; P = Patricia

1	H:	I'm a graduate of the University.
2	P:	Of the National University?
3	H:	Of the National University.
4	P:	Right.
5	H:	I am … and I always point this out … a founder of the
6		University City … a member of the very first class to study in
7		the University City. (Hector, Interview 1)

With regard to his present life, Hector told me that since his retirement from the public sector, he has endeavored to remain productive by maintaining his private practice, doing occasional consulting, and studying English. He emphasized how important it is to keep up-to-date on changes in the world, to be flexible and willing to try new things. For him, learning English has been a therapy of sorts "because you need to feel you are progressing in life" (Hector, Interview 1). Certainly, such pursuits appear to be a recipe for successful aging and psychological well-being. Yet at the same time they are indicative of the burden that is placed on older adults to preserve their health, active lifestyle and independence indefinitely by a society that puts a premium on production and deplores decay and dependency (Cole 1992; Tulle-Winton 1999; Cruikshank 2003). In other words, older people are expected to conserve their youthful

qualities and to remain forever "healthy, sexually active, engaged, productive, and self-reliant" (Cole 1992: 229).

Engagement and disengagement

Although he talked about seeking new challenges, Hector also stated that he finds himself more alone and less attached to his friends and family, a situation he considers typical at this time of life. According to disengagement theory, decreased interaction between the older individual and others belonging to the same social system results in mutual distancing (Gubrium, Holstein, and Buckholdt 1994). Hector described it this way:

Extract 10

1   ... you begin losing contact with others because from the
2   psychological point of view there occurs a flattening of affect. ... In ...
3   the French say, *"la belle indifférence"* and in Mexico they say, "I
4   don't give a damn." (Hector, Interview 4)

The loss of affect (line 2) is particularly evident in several remarks Hector made about his relationship with his wife during the course of the interviews. In extract 11, he stressed how they now have different interests and lead fairly independent lives.

Extract 11

1   Well, it's a question of interests ... even in young people. You need to
2   be a newlywed like Fox[24] to go around holding hands with your wife.
3   ... So, with a married couple that is one way ... and that is the way I
4   experience it ... no, no, no ... whether it's right or not ... it is my
5   situation. It is ... I call it ... recovering the individuality of the person.
6   My wife is very religious ... and I'm not. She believes ... she has her
7   beliefs ... and I have mine. (Hector, Interview 3)

Hector provided further confirmation of his own disengagement or withdrawal from a social world in which he had formerly enjoyed an active role when he observed that the social aspect of his life began to decline once his children

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[24] Hector is referring to Vicente Fox, who at that time was President of Mexico and who had recently remarried.

finished their schooling. He remarked, "I think it's no longer mine [my moment]" (Hector, Interview 3).

Dependence and independence

Hector acknowledged a change in his status that has come about over the years. He spoke with humor about his role reversal, from being a teacher to being a student in the classroom (Hector, Interview 1). In extract 12, he recounted an incident which illustrates how his position in relation to his former medical students has reversed itself.

Extract 12

```
1    I was head of the teaching program at the Centro Medico … and, well,
2    my [former] students logically, and because of their connections, were
3    moving up professionally. So when I retired, many of them were in
4    important positions … . So you … you … you keep on … and later we
5    would go out for lunch … with my former students … especially the
6    female students … and it seemed very funny to me because at the
7    corner of Doctor Marquez and Cuauhtemoc Avenue, when we were
8    about to cross the street … they would take my hand like a little boy
9    … and I thought, right, because they are going to look really bad if the
10   old man is left there in the street because they didn't take good care of
11   him. So now … things have changed. It used to be me that would take
12   them by the arm in other times. Times have changed and now they
13   take me … but by the hand like a little boy … so that … they say, "At
14   least I am pulling him along, right?" So, no, all this has made me
15   come to accept my … my age … and the jokes I make … I myself
16   make them at the expense of age. (Hector, Interview 5)
```

In this narration, Hector described how his former students have come to occupy the positions of stature he and his colleagues had formerly held, in a kind of changing of the guard (lines 1-3). Moreover, he recounted how they have traded places in social situations as well, giving the example of how his students took charge and looked after him as if he were a child (lines 7-8). His remark that "it seemed very funny to me" (line 6) and the references to himself in the third-person, in "they are going to look really bad if the old man is left there in the street because they didn't take good care of him" (lines 9-11), suggest that the situation was both humorous and odd for him, in the sense that he seemed to feel

he should expect to be regarded as an older person and yet is not quite comfortable with this change of identity. He again made the comparison of his treatment to that appropriate for "a little boy" (line 13). The recurrent image of age as a second childhood in contemporary Western culture, or the inverted-U model, is part of ageist discourses because of the implications of declining competence and increased dependency (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991; Coupland 2001a). As Coupland et al. explain:

> A more elaborate conceptualisation of decrement in later life is the *inverted-U* model, which implies that elderly linguistic and other behaviours are in some specific respects not only moving towards lower levels of competence but moving *back* to the levels and types of behaviour associated with the early years of life. The model feeds off the more general mythological association of the old with children in our society – old age as a 'second childhood.' (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991: 12, emphasis in original)

In lines 14 to 16, Hector voiced his increasing acceptance of his age in a jocular tone, as here and elsewhere he made himself the target of his own humor. Humor can have both an upside and a downside, and making self-deprecating jokes is a common ageist practice among older people themselves (Giles 2006). As such, it reveals "the 'buy-in' by older people themselves about the intrinsic devaluation of old age by society at large" (Cohen 2001: 576). According to Becca R. Levy, "after a lifetime of exposure to a culture's age stereotypes, older individuals direct these age stereotypes inward" (Levy 2001: 579). Perhaps this also explains why Hector shared the story with me, an older person like himself, whereas he might not have done so with a younger interviewer.

Age and other identities

Hector's age identity is intertwined with other subject positions, the prime one being his professional identity. The interviews are permeated with repeated allusions to his academic background and, more importantly, to his continued status as a professional. He remarked, "I boast about it … I show it off and I affirm it, OK? I am … I am up-to-date … and I have taken courses and everything" (Hector, Interview 2). Over the course of the interviews, a strong connection emerged between Hector's lifelong preoccupation with productivity as

a professional and his gendered identity. He positioned himself as what is popularly considered to be a 'prototypical Mexican male,' the breadwinner and head of the household, heterosexual, and viewing with disdain his wife's religious beliefs and political aspirations. His enactment of a heteronormative gender identity was further manifested in the following commentary about the life cycle, in which he voiced intolerance for other sexual practices.

Extract 13

H = Hector; P = Patricia

1	H:	That's why I said to you 'the classic model': birth, growth,
2		reproduction and death ... and right now reproduction is in ... in
3		quotes. Young people don't want to reproduce.
4	P:	Not necessarily, right?
5	H:	Homosexuality, transvestitism, and the whole list of things
6		people talk about ... and ... and ... even though it is more
7		elegant to call it ... yet it amounts to the same thing ... sexual
8		preference ... but, what it means is that ... homosexuals are
9		never ever going to have children.
10	P:	Uh huh.
11	H:	So then they adopt them ... and that is a very thorny subject.
12		What do they want to adopt them for? Because maybe what they
13		want is someone to live with them, right? Who knows? That can
14		lead to another ... another issue. (Hector, Interview 4)

A further link can be made with Hector's ethnic identity, about which he displayed negative feelings throughout the interviews. While Hector was able to achieve professional and economic success and the corresponding social status, the question of his ethnicity[25] raised an obstacle he felt was not entirely possible to overcome through academic merit. Short of stature, moderately dark-skinned, and possessing many of the facial features characteristic of the pre-colonial indigenous populations, Hector's *mestizo*[26] appearance is one that is not highly valued in Mexico. Hector manifested a disparaging attitude toward his ethnicity in

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[25] Ethnicity is a highly complex concept and has been defined in a variety of ways. In the context of Mexico, it would certainly include racial or physical traits along with cultural criteria, such as ancestry, tradition, and language, among others.

[26] *Mestizo* refers here to the racial and cultural mix of Spanish and indigenous peoples (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 1998: 136-137). The Indian part of that identity became "the symbol of the uncultured, the savage, the 'other'" (Fortes de Leff 2002: 620).

self-deprecating humorous remarks about being "an Indian" (Hector, Interviews 1 and 3). In post-colonial Mexico, the term 'Indian' is an extremely offensive one, blending "the diverse cultures of the natives into one deprecating name that became a symbol for vanquished, uneducated, and stupid" (Fortes de Leff 2002: 620). Concern about his ethnicity carried great weight for Hector throughout his life, as can be appreciated in the following extract:

Extract 14

```
1    I married a pretty woman because I wanted my children to have
2    another ... another biotype ... because that, yes, can count a lot, even
3    though ... even though people don't say it. ... But ... but that ...those
4    matters are ... and in Mexico, yes, they are very ... very much to be
5    taken into account. That ... that perhaps, yes, has been one of the
6    [main] issues ... how can I say it? ... of social impact for me ...
7    because, well, for other people ... because some people maybe didn't
8    think I would achieve anything. I see it that way ... and when I did get
9    ahead they outdid themselves trying to do the same thing. "If this guy
10   can, then why shouldn't I?" But, that was ... that was like saying that I
11   had fewer ... fewer resources, something that ... that no ... definitely
12   is not the case, OK ... because if ... if they had had the resources, they
13   would ... they would have achieved something on their own ... but if
14   ... or ... or wanted to take away what ... what I had gotten. They
15   never ... never took away what I had. (Hector, Interview 4)
```

In lines 1-2, Hector openly disclosed to me that he made a conscious decision to marry a pretty woman so that his children would look different. The word 'pretty' (*bonita*) in Spanish is clearly understood to mean 'fair-skinned' (*güera*) in this context. He himself pointed out that, while not normally acknowledged, prejudice exists in Mexico against people of darker skin color (lines 2-5). This is confirmed by Jacqueline Fortes de Leff:

> Skin color remains important in social and political relationships today. It has been a principal symbolic organizer and identity model since the Conquest. Being "white" or "blonde," as Mexicans call white-skinned people, is associated with the people in power, belonging to a higher social class, deserving privileges. Being "dark" relates to an Indian origin, denoting an inferior social class and implying submission. (Fortes de Leff 2002: 620-621)

Frantz Fanon has written how the visible signs of racial difference exert a powerful psychological force on the construction of the self, saying: "I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave not of the 'idea' that others have of me but of my own appearance" (1995: 325). Hector admitted that his physical appearance has given rise to a lifelong struggle on his part to succeed (lines 5-8). His perception that other people viewed him as less capable and less worthy is made forceful by his use of their voices to claim, "If this guy can, then why shouldn't I?" (lines 9-10). Although this extract shows that Hector derived satisfaction in having gotten ahead while his detractors did not, it also suggests that he felt his triumph was earned despite his ethnicity.

Of all the participants in the study, Hector seemed the most concerned with his social identity. In his interactions with the teacher, his classmates, and with me as the researcher, I observed how he took advantage of every opportunity to position himself as a success, a man of learning, professional stature, and affluence. Access to the English language and to Anglophone culture have played an important part in the construction of his identity, for he attaches great prestige to British and 'Bostonian' English, and to European and American cultures (Hector, Interviews 1 and 2). He explained that he learned to speak 'Bostonian' English, "the English spoken by cultured people in the United States" (Hector, Interview 1), and believes that he is treated better than most Mexicans in the US precisely because he speaks a 'cultured' variety of English.

6.2.5 Connecting the pieces

While Hector's is largely a tale of progress, his story is a complex one. Decline discourses form an undercurrent that is never far from the surface, competing with positive aging discourses. Hector's narrative traces the unbroken upward movement of his life from his early academic accomplishments through a series of professional and economic triumphs that secured him a highly prized social position. Now that he is retired, he has both the satisfaction of having achieved many of his life goals and the self-imposed challenge of keeping his level of productivity up so that the progress narrative will be sustained.

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Learning English is one way Hector has found to remain active and to continue to advance professionally. Being able to speak English is also an added bonus on his frequent trips to the US. More importantly, it is a major source of prestige for him in view of all that English signifies in terms of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977). This constitutes his primary incentive for taking up the study of English again at this moment of his life. While he enjoys the academic challenge of learning, this undertaking has much more to do with his life in the world beyond the classroom. Thus, it is an integral part of the ongoing construction of his identity and of his life story.

Hector does not consider learning a language as an older adult to be a simple task. He espouses the popular belief that younger people have 'natural' advantages that enable them to learn more easily than older ones. Nevertheless, he feels that older learners can compensate for this by being more motivated and more dedicated to the task. The notion that 'younger is better' carries over into Hector's beliefs about age and aging in general. In general terms, he appears to be working under the assumption that aging is inherently a process of progressive mental and physical decrement. Yet there were various instances in the course of the fieldwork where he challenged the dominant age discourse of decline.

These beliefs and attitudes were played out in the classroom, where age was frequently a salient factor in Hector's relations with the other students and particularly with the teacher. He positioned himself, and perceived himself as being positioned by others, as an outsider because of his age, often choosing to self-segregate in the class activities. This suggests that perhaps he felt less entitled than the younger students, for example, to make demands in the class or complain about the way the lessons were conducted directly to the teacher. It may also explain in part his tendency to accommodate or collude with the teacher's overt ageism and to resort to self-deprecating humor. Such beliefs and attitudes were also evident during the interviews, where his narrations of incidents involving his life outside the classroom brought a wide repertoire of ageist discourses into play.

Although Hector described the life course as taking a downward turn at around 60, he was adamant that this did not apply to him. His satisfaction in passing as younger and in having as yet no signs of the physical or mental deterioration he associates with old age, suggests that he resists aging. Such an 'anti-aging' discourse is in reality an ageist one, for little value is placed on growing old. This "internalized ageism" (Cruikshank 2003: 153) was reinforced by his frequently expressed admiration of youth culture and his desire to maintain a connection with it.

At the same time, Hector also displayed a positive aging attitude in different ways. He expressed an overall life satisfaction and a favorable view of the place where he now finds himself in the life course. The internal tension between an idolization of youth culture and satisfaction with his position as an older adult is palpable. The same contrasting discourses appear throughout Hector's story, where the sense of living in the present seems to collide at different moments with that of living in the past, as does that of being engaged with being disengaged, and being dependent with being independent. The interplay between decline discourses and positive aging discourses underscores the inconsistent and often contradictory ways in which Hector enacted age.

Hector's age identity is tightly interwoven with his professional, academic and social identities, for together they enable him to position himself as person who has been successful on many fronts over his lifetime. Moreover, they explain his continued endeavors to remain economically, professionally and academically active at this time of his life. In turn, Hector's lifelong concern with productivity seems to be closely tied to his gendered identity as a 'traditional Mexican male,' while his perception of having once occupied an inferior social position, along with the persistent devaluation of his ethnicity, may account for the need to achieve that has characterized his life story. As a story of the construction of later adulthood, it offers an interesting example of a tale of progress, yet as I have sought to show, it is a highly complex and nuanced one.

6.3 Felix's story: A tale of discontent

The story Felix tells is laced with disappointment and frustration. His life right now is not what he would have chosen. Forced to retire at the age of 56, he is overcome at times by a sense of powerlessness that has colored his present outlook on the world. His resentment about the current circumstances of his life is at times shrouded in self-pity, and at others manifests itself as barely contained anger. It seems that he was not prepared for the changes that have occurred at this moment of his life.

6.3.1 A thumbnail sketch of Felix's life

Felix began his first audio-taped narrative account with this very formal third-person introduction:

Extract 15

```
1    Felix Rodriguez, retired, with 43 years of work experience, and at
2    present 68 years old, considers it necessary, as occupational therapy,
3    to continue acquiring knowledge that will allow him to keep mentally
4    and physically active, by undertaking something he has always wanted
5    to do: learn English. (Felix, Narrative account 1)
```

It is no coincidence that the first thing Felix mentions, after giving his name, is that he is retired (line 1). Felix worked his entire professional life as a public accountant in different government agencies, until he was compelled to retire because of his age, an event that precipitated a major downturn in his life. Up to that point, the years had elapsed under generally favorable circumstances for Felix. He was born in Sinaloa, in northern Mexico, where his grandparents had owned large extensions of land before losing most of their property during the *Cristero* and agrarian uprisings of the 1920s and 1930s.[27] Felix's family then settled in a rural part of nearby Sonora where he spent most of his childhood. Subsequently, his parents took his nine brothers and sisters to California to work

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[27] The *Cristeros* were pro-Catholic peasants rebelling against the anti-clerical measures of the Mexican Constitution of 1917. The *agraristas*, on the other hand, were landless peasants and supporters of agrarian reform, many of whom struggled to obtain land by forcibly seizing it.

as *braceros*.[28] Felix stayed behind because his godmother sent him to school; he became the only member of his family to receive a university education. After graduating, he was awarded a scholarship by the American Friends Service Committee and spent nearly a year in Europe before embarking on his long career in the public sector.

Much as in Hector's case, education provided Felix with the means to move from the limited conditions of his childhood, with its unpromising future prospects, to a more privileged socioeconomic position and professional solidity. Felix is married and has three adult children, university educated, all of whom he has sent abroad to learn English. At the present moment, Felix's greatest desire is to keep working, but he has been frustrated in his attempt to do so because he cannot find employment (Felix, Interview 1).

6.3.2 The goal of learning English

Like Hector, Felix has no pressing need to learn English. At this point in his life, he is taking English classes because he wants to keep active now that he is retired (lines 2-4 of extract 15). He also travels frequently to visit his relatives in California, where he has the opportunity to speak English. In addition, he stated that he would like to recover the skills in English he formerly had when he learned the language as a university student (Felix, Interview 1).

6.3.3 The construction of age: in the classroom

Felix declared that childhood is the ideal time to learn a foreign language because a child's capacity for absorption is at its peak at around seven years old. He went on to say:

Extract 16

F = Felix; P = Patricia

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[28] The term *braceros*, as used in this context, refers to the unskilled laborers allowed to work in the US as part of a temporary contract labor program begun in 1942.

```
1   F:   It's just that ... I regret not having begun to study a long time
2        ago.
3   P:   Why?
4   F:   Well, because of that ... eh? Because I think that ... now ... it is
5        more difficult to learn ... because to make progress at my age ...
6        well, I am losing my faculties, OK?
7   P:   Such as?
8   F:   Well, maybe to ... to ... grasp things ... to ... eh? But, if you
9        bring enthusiasm [to the task]... you can overcome this kind of
10       quote unquote disability. (Felix, Interview 1)
```

In this extract, it is clear that Felix sees age as a major impediment to learning a foreign language. His assumption that age brings with it the loss of mental abilities is expressed, in lines 4-6, in much stronger terms than Hector chose to use. He then tempered this assertion by conceding that enthusiasm can offset the loss of mental agility (lines 8-10).

Felix identified his principal problem with English as listening comprehension. Although he tries to understand what is going on through the context, he has a hearing problem which complicates things. He also has difficulties with pronunciation that he attributes to the fact that he wears dentures, which "hinder the mobility of my tongue" (Felix, Interview 3). In extract 17, he linked these deficiencies to the aging process.

Extract 17

F = Felix; P = Patricia

```
1    F:   Well ... but also when you are old you lose capacities.
2    P:   Which ones?
3    F:   Well, all kinds ... auditory and motor ... and whatever else you
4         can think of, eh? Yeah?
5    P:   OK.
6    F:   I ... personally I feel ... I ... that is ... I remember when I was
7         'less old' ... I ... that is, I was ... I was ... very restless.
8    P:   Right.
9    F:   Eh?
10   P:   Right. Aside from motor capacity and ... what was the other one
11        you mentioned? ... auditory [functions], ... with respect to
12        reasoning capacity, do you feel any difference?
13   F:   Yes ... yes, I do.
```

14	P:	In what sense?
15	F:	Look ... that is, of course, when I was working and when I was
16		studying, well, I had to reason ... because if I didn't, XXX. Now
17		that I am retired ... OK ... it's always ... it's like it is harder for
18		me to reason.
19	P:	Uh huh.
20	F:	But I try ... to make the effort, OK?
21	P:	Yes ... yes. (Felix, Interview 3)

After stating plainly in that old age brings generalized deficits (lines 1, 3 and 4), Felix recalled that things were different when he was, as he put it rather jokingly, "less old" (line 7). He admitted that it has been more difficult for him to reason since his retirement (lines 13 and 15-18). Again, his belief that age has a direct impact on language learning seems straightforward and unequivocal when compared to Hector's more tenuous view.

The classroom dynamics, in Felix's case, proved to be significantly different from Hector's experience, in that two practice teachers were assigned to work with the regular teacher for the duration of the course. This meant that the person who gave explanations and directed the activities changed frequently. From the beginning of the course it was clear that Felix's preconceived ideas of how a language class should be conducted clashed with the way things actually transpired. From his remarks in the audio-taped narrative accounts and interviews, it was evident that his expectations involved a traditional, teacher-fronted language lesson. In elaborating on his ideas, he spoke almost exclusively in terms of the teacher as the "authority," "expositor," and "presenter," "responsible" for "defining" her or his "technique", and for the "exposition of the topics," particularly for attaining "uniformity in the exposition" as well as an "orderly and logical sequence" (Narrative accounts 2-12). He extended the teacher's obligations to the "application of the corresponding dynamics," "covering the program," and maintaining "discipline" and "control." He also indicated that the teacher's "performance" and "productivity" should be "tracked" and "evaluated" by the appropriate authorities (Felix, Narrative accounts 2-12). Interestingly, he never referred to the role of the students or of the materials. Extract 18 contains an

example of the dissatisfaction Felix externalized regarding the presence of the practice teachers.

Extract 18

1   The intervention of three people, with distinct ways of presenting, I
2   think confuses us more than what we already are. Changing from one
3   expositor to another I think distracts and interrupts our attention more
4   than it already is. ... Who should we pay attention to? (Felix, Narrative
     account 7)

According to Felix, the participation of three teachers, rather than providing a variety of complementary resources, simply disrupted the order of the lessons.

Perhaps Felix's choice of profession as a public accountant can offer some insight into his penchant for a highly structured, systematic and predictable world, both inside and outside the classroom, an idea which I consider again as it comes up in other parts of his story. This, and his conviction that age inevitably brings losses that affect language learning, are the principal beliefs and attitudes which had a bearing on his enactment of age.

Enactment of age: examining classroom activities

The second half of the textbook *American Headway 1* (2001b)[29] formed the basis of the course, although small-group and pair work were routine features of the lessons and more supplementary material was used than in Hector's class. Felix was an active participant in the class and the teachers called on him frequently. In my observations, I noted that he had more difficulties in understanding and responding than most of his classmates. In fact, he was repeating the second-level course, and had passed the first-level course only after failing it the first time.

Like Hector, Felix was assigned or took up the position of an older person in the group. The following are two examples of occurrences in which this was evident:

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[29] This textbook is part of the same series used in Hector's course. See comments on the *American Headway* series in Chapter 5, section 5.5.2.

Class 11, March 29, 2004

Time	Activity	Felix
10'	comparison of adjectives Simon [S] claims that women use certain adjectives more than men and make more comparisons.	volunteers (4X)
	Simon calls some Ss to front of classroom to make comparisons. He calls Felix to the front and says: S: "I'm younger than he is." Then he turns to Felix and asks: S: "How old are you?" F: "69."	Felix [F] participates willingly in this activity and states his age plainly.

Class 12, March 31, 2004

Time	Activity	Felix
10'	Simon gives more explanation about how superlatives are formed.	volunteers (2X)
	Simon asks Ss to give examples.	F: "I am the oldest in the class." S: "Felix is the wisest classmate in the class."

As my classroom observation notes indicate, Felix readily revealed his age and adopted the position of an older person. I find two things particularly interesting in these exchanges. First, in Class 11, the teacher appeared to have no qualms about asking Felix how old he was. While disclosure of chronological age is frequent among older people, Coupland et al. (1991) found that it is customarily older people themselves who initially introduce it into the conversation. In fact, complex norms of etiquette determine when it is acceptable to ask a person's age

in Anglophone cultures (Peterson 1984). In my experience, these norms are virtually identical in Mexico. It would seem then, in this case, that Simon considered the particular topic of the lesson, comparative adjectives, to be sufficient grounds for waiving the rules normally prohibiting younger persons from asking older ones their age and, moreover, for doing so in a public setting.

The second incident took place in Class 12, in which Felix volunteered, "I am the oldest in the class," as an example of a superlative adjective. Simon responded by saying, "Felix is the wisest classmate in the class," recurring to a conventional positive stereotype about old people. This would hardly have been necessary were the subject of old age not surrounded by negative overtones. The case in point illustrates what Featherstone and Hepworth referred to as a "sanitised one-dimensional benign stereotype[s]" (1991: 382) (see Chapter 4, section 4.3.2).

Enactment of age: in relations with fellow students

Felix claimed that he liked finding himself "surrounded by young people who are pursuing the same goal as I" (Felix, Narrative account 1). He told me that having people of mixed ages in language classes works well, that he enjoys being with young people and is happy to take his place as the old person in the group, where "I've always been accepted as the 'old fellow' there" (Felix, Interview 1). He also took on the responsibility for establishing relations with his classmates, much as Hector did. For instance, when it was time for small-group work, he invariably selected his partners. I also noted that, while he frequently took part in friendly conversations with other members of the group, it was he who generally sought them out and not the other way around. However, unlike Hector, he did not appear to feel that his age put him in a disadvantaged or lesser position in relation to his classmates. On the contrary, I observed occasional manifestations of a strong urge to be in control, perhaps attributable to a belief that greater age entitled him to assume a position of authority, by virtue of the traditional role of the adult male in a patriarchal society (Beauvoir 1972).

The following incident lends credence to that interpretation. For the oral production section of the midterm examination, the students were asked to work in groups of three to prepare a script for a role-play exercise, either in a restaurant or a store, and to present it in the next lesson (Class observation notes, April 26, 2004). Felix first commented on the outcome in his weekly audio-taped narrative, in which he told me that he had made up a dialogue himself and his two partners refused to pay attention to him (Felix, Narrative account 7). I was intrigued, on the one hand, by Felix's attempt to orchestrate the situation himself, and, on the other, by the fact that his teammates, for all intents and purposes, ignored him. When we met for an interview subsequently, I asked Felix to expand on his version of this episode. Extract 19 includes part of our conversation.

Extract 19

F = Felix; P = Patricia

1	F:	Well, the teacher told us to make up a conversation in groups of
2		three so she could grade our oral work.
3	P:	Right.
4	F:	Now, I had prepared something ... but my teammates wouldn't
5		pay attention to me.
6	P:	What did they say ... when ... ?
7	F:	No, they said ... they did ... there was ... one of them, a heavy-
8		set girl ... she is very stubborn ... well, "No, we're going to do it
9		the way I said last time." So, OK, well ... there were two of them
10		... Elsa and her ... against me. We didn't sit down to study, no,
11		no, no. No ... they didn't want ... what do I say? ... what I had
12		done ... the ... the dialogue that I had made up ... how the waiter
13		greets you, how he takes you ... *Please, this way* ... he takes you
14		over there to your table, and things like that. I had done it that
15		way, OK?
16	P:	But you made it up together?
17	F:	No ... well, I had done it and I was going to propose it to them.
18	P:	Oh, I see. And they didn't like it.
19	F:	They didn't like it. She said, "No, we're going to do it the way I
20		... the way I say." OK? Well, I gave in and went along with what
21		they wanted, see? So, well ... it was very ... no ... no ... there
22		wasn't any dialogue ... and I felt really frustrated. (Felix, Interview 4)

In this extract, Felix's annoyance and frustration with his teammates, both of whom refused to go along with his ideas, is palpable. Moreover, his comment that

"there were two of them ... Elsa and her ... against me" (lines 9-10) suggests that he felt victimized. Felix's reference to one of the girls as "heavy-set," in lines 7-8, points up a flaw she has (in the eyes of modern-day society) that has nothing to do with the power struggle taking place, but which may constitute a kind of retaliation for his not being taken into account, evening the playing field in his telling of the incident. Although the assignment had been to make up a conversation in teams of three, Felix took it upon himself to work alone, apparently expecting that his teammates would agree to perform the role-play script he had written (line 17). When one of the partners defied him directly, saying that they were going to do things her way, he conceded defeat and stopped trying to impose his own plan on them (lines 19-22). Nevertheless, he was unhappy with the results and clearly felt that things would have been more satisfactory had he been in control.

This episode, as Felix described it, turned into one of confrontation in which his authority as the senior member of the group was undermined. It illustrates the change that is taking place in contemporary Mexican society, where men have traditionally been considered to exercise undisputed power within the context of a patriarchal culture. According to some scholars, as the family structure has moved towards greater individualization and personal autonomy, relations between the younger and older generations are increasingly based on more democratic and less authoritarian dynamics (Ariza and Oliveira 2001; Salguero Velásquez 2006). The belief that "men have the last word" (Salles and Tuirán 1996: 127-128) is now being challenged and reshaped, as the incident with Felix and his teammates demonstrates.

Other instances arose in which Felix attempted to exercise control over the group. From his comments to me, I surmised that he tried to persuade several of his classmates to support his point of view regarding the deleterious effect the involvement of practice teachers was having on their learning. This can be perceived in the following extract in which he described the upshot of informal conversations he had with some of his classmates before and after the lessons.

Extract 20

       1   Reflection of March 10, 2004. I have talked to my classmates about
       2   this [SOUND OF PAPERS RUSTLING].[30] "What do you think about
       3   the way the course is being given?" Answer. They tell me that they are
       4   not happy with things. That the teacher does not teach the class. And
       5   that at times they don't understand and are confused by the way the
       6   practice teachers work. We decided that four or five of us would talk to
       7   the teacher in order to express our concerns because we feel that we
       8   are not learning or making progress in the course as we should be, and
       9   the midterm exam is coming up soon. (Felix, Narrative account 2)

Here, Felix initiated the conversation with his classmates by calling attention to
the 'problem' of the practice teachers, directly asking them how they felt about
the class (lines 2-3). The responses, as Felix reported them (lines 3-6), enumerate
the very complaints that he listed in his audio-taped narratives (Felix, Narrative
accounts 2-12), leading me to believe that Felix may have aired his grievances to
his classmates and then sought endorsement from them. In lines 6-8, his repeated
use of the plural "we" gives the impression that a general feeling of dissatisfaction
was shared by others in the group, as was the decision to take up the issue with the
teacher. While I never directly observed any signs of discontent in other members
of the group, it is possible that they felt it to some degree.

In order to pursue the matter, I took the opportunity to sound out the situation with
Elsa, another participant in this study, and a member of the group. In contrast to
Felix, she told me that she found the teachers very dynamic and the lessons never
boring (Elsa, Interview 2). When I asked her specifically about the participation of
the practice teachers, she said that both were very knowledgeable, but that Simon
was better than Tomas. She found that Simon's explanations helped her a great
deal, and she indicated that she would like to have practice teachers in future
courses if they were like Simon (Elsa, Interviews 4 and 5).

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[30] In several of his narrative accounts, papers could be heard rustling. Felix evidently prepared his
narrative accounts in writing before audio-taping them. Moreover, he used a formal register, quite
different from the conversational tone of our interviews.

I also found support for my construal of Felix's relationship with his classmates when I interviewed Simon, the practice teacher to whom Elsa referred in the conversation mentioned above, at the end of the course. He had this to say about Felix:

Extract 21

S = Simon; P = Patricia

1	S:	When he worked in a group, Felix made the team work his way.
2	P:	Uh huh.
3	S:	His ... with his ... with his ...maybe his method. I don't know.
4		While the other teams, yes, had some very ... unusual ideas, not
5		Felix. His way was ... he followed very traditional steps (Simon, Interview)

My sense, then, is that very likely Felix put pressure on his companions to see and do things his way. His relationship with them seems to be based on the patriarchal or gerontocratic notion of authority that is thought to have held sway for generations in traditional Mexican society and that only now is giving way to alternate patterns of social control (Salles and Tuirán 1996). Alejandro Salguero Velásquez observes:

> Authority continues to play a central role in the subjectivity of many men, although some changes can be noted that contemplate relations which are more egalitarian, closer and more affective. (Salguero Velásquez 2006: 171)

Such changes, where they exist, signify more democratic relations among the generations and a greater participation of both young and old in decision-making processes.

Enactment of age: in relations with the teachers

Felix devoted virtually all of the twelve audio-taped narrative accounts to giving vent to his escalating feelings of resentment toward Nidia, the assigned teacher. As lines 1-3 in the following extract show, it piqued him that she generally arrived late, rarely intervened in the lessons, and only stayed for a short while, leaving the brunt of the teaching responsibilities to the two practice teachers.

Extract 22

1   Pat, as you could see in the class on Monday March 22, the teacher
2   arrives late, she leaves early, she doesn't intervene at all. The practice
3   teachers begin and end the class. I ask myself, "Is that by chance the
4   behavior and attitude that the designated teacher of a subject should
5   take with her students? Don't we deserve that ... a little of her
6   attention? Or is it that the school administration demands or orders her
7   to allow ... [SOUND OF PAPERS RUSTLING] to allow the practice
8   teachers to give the class the entire time?" Who could answer this for
9   us? (Felix, Narrative account 3)

Felix believed that Nidia should give some personal attention to the group, and that by not doing so she was shirking her responsibilities as the assigned teacher (lines 1-3). His question "Don't we deserve that ... a little of her attention?" (lines 5-6) reflects his perception of being slighted. He went on to ask whether it was the school's policy to let practice teachers take over the classes entirely (lines 6-8). Although these questions seem to be rhetorical, I suspect that they were directed to me in the hope that I, as a senior member of the English department, would take some action to remedy the situation.

On the few occasions when Nidia took a more active part in the class, Felix claimed that is was because she felt guilty (Felix, Narrative account 6). This seems to be entirely his interpretation, as nothing of the kind was mentioned in my interview with Nidia at the end of the course. Moreover, when Felix confronted her, saying that a lot of people wanted her to give the class, she responded that "you have to give the practice teachers ... the new teachers ... an opportunity" (Felix, Interview 2).

I asked Felix at several points in our interviews to reflect on the specific ways in which having practice teachers was affecting his learning. His comments were vague at best and centered on his feelings of not being given his due. When I repeated the question in our second interview, Felix once again redirected his response to the matter of Nidia's lack of dedication and sense of responsibility. He remarked that "she already has a lot of experience" (Felix, Interview 2). This is

important because it pinpoints the core issue for Felix, namely, that the practice teachers are inexperienced. I then insisted that was I was interested in knowing the degree to which Felix felt this situation was impeding his learning. He responded, "No … it's not obstructing me. …I'm growing accustomed to having the practice teachers give the class" (Felix, Interview 2). However, this does not seem to be the case for Felix continued to protest to me about having practice teachers to the very end of the course.

The question of experience is essentially an age issue. While Felix recognized that Simon was dynamic and dedicated, saying that he "gives the class well," "has more spark [than Tomas]," and "is concerned, because he tries to teach us and to explain things well" (Felix, Interview 2), all qualities that he had hoped to find in Nidia, he never overcame his sense of being defrauded by having what he perceived as two inexperienced and unproven teachers for this course. He spoke of Nidia as "a good teacher, with some ups and downs in her teaching technique, but definitely an experienced teacher" (Felix, Narrative account 9). I consider that his unrelenting opposition to the presence of the novice practice teachers shows Felix practicing a kind of ageism called 'adultism,' which targets young people and discriminates against them for their lack of experience (Horsch et al. 2002). It is based on paternalistic suppositions that "adults are more knowledgeable, rational, responsible, experienced, selfless, and intelligent" (Neustadter 2002: 724) than children or young people. When such stereotypes are reinforced, young people are disenfranchised and often left out of decision-making processes (Horsch et al. 2002). Their positive input is easily overlooked, as happened in this case. Felix either willingly or inadvertently disregarded any constructive contributions made by the two young teachers.

6.3.4 The construction of age: beyond the classroom

As with Hector, Felix's enactment of age as a language learner overlaps with his other identities and fits into the broader context of his life. This is particularly evident in his patriarchal assumption of authority and desire to be in control of those younger than he. Even so, his story is also interspersed with moments of

confusion and doubt about his position as an older adult in a world that is changing.

Competing discourses of age

Felix, too, vacillates between accepting and resisting discourses of decline. Yet the issues that surfaced in the course of the fieldwork are distinct from those in Hector's case. Felix did not manifest any tendencies to yearn for the past, disengage socially or acknowledge a growing dependence on others. He did, however, struggle with concerns about the loss of his physical and mental capacities.

Competence and incompetence

Felix and I had an extensive discussion about the question of age and loss of competence. Because of the length of this part of our interview, I have divided it into the four extracts which follow (extracts 23-26).

Extract 23

F = Felix; P = Patricia

```
1    F:   No matter what, age … is going to win out, I think, no? …
2         because just the fact that you are an older person means that it is
3         inevitable that you will lose your capacities.
4    P:   In everything?
5    F:   In everything. In every area.
6    P:   Really?
7    F:   Yes. And it's a constant battle. You have to go to the doctor so
8         he can give you something, OK. But … but the doctor … the
9         doctor charges you money, and you can do a lot of things for
10        yourself without having to go to the doctor. You can use … how
11        to say it? … psychological therapy on yourself. I look for
12        whatever … whatever it is that I have to do … so that … I won't
13        die. (Felix, Interview 3)
```

In this part of the interview, Felix stated categorically that growing old and the associated loss of capacities are, in the final analysis, unavoidable (lines 1-3). He reinforced this standard discourse of decline in line 5, and then went on to say that he is doing his best to stave off the inevitable, using whatever means he can, so

that he "won't die" (lines 7-13). His directness in referring to the taboo subject of dying is surprising, yet his orientation to it reflects Western culture's current preoccupation with averting death (Vincent 2003). As I pointed out in Chapter 4 (section 4.3.2), trying to escape mortality rather than seeking meaning and value in the present moment of one's life is a manifestation of an anti-aging discourse that arises from the deficit model of aging (Andrews 1999; Vincent 2003).

I then asked Felix to be more specific about his own loss of competence. Extract 24 contains his account of the process he experienced.

Extract 24

F = Felix; P = Patricia

1	P:	So … when exactly did that process of losing your capacities
2		begin?
3	F:	Well, see … ever since I was 56.
4	P:	Really? Just in your case … or do you think that's a general rule?
5	F:	No … in my case.
6	P:	Uh huh.
7	F:	Because we are all different. ….
8	P:	But you were already feeling the effects of … ?
9	F:	I was already feeling the effects of age. What's more … the
10		company I worked for … made me retire because of my age.
11	P:	Uh huh … uh huh.
12	F:	Not because of years of service.
13	P:	Uh huh. But you said that you were feeling something from the
14		time you were 56?
15	F:	Well … I felt that my capacity was decreasing. I worried a lot
16		about it. I worried a lot … and when the company retired me
17		because of my age, I went into a depression.
18	P:	Well, of course.
19	F:	You have no idea.
20	P:	I can imagine.
21	F:	Because it was like … and I have looked for a job.
22	P:	OK.
23	F:	I'm still looking for a job.
24	P:	Right.
25	F:	But since I am very old, even though I have 43 years of
26		experience in my field … but because of my age, they …
27	P:	You mean they don't value experience?
28	F:	No, they don't value experience.
29	P:	Why not, do you think?
30	F:	I think … maybe because … perhaps the company has certain

31   parameters for measuring your capacity. Maybe they apply some
32   parameter … some psychological test … or that type of thing … I
33   don't know. But for people who are old …. (Felix, Interview 3)

In this extract, Felix pinpointed the beginning of his own downturn at age 56 (line 3). His perception that his "capacity was decreasing" brought him considerable distress (lines 15-16). This was compounded when he was forced to retire because of his age, an event which precipitated a severe depression (lines 9-10 and 16-17). No longer permitted to have a productive role in society because of formal retirement policies based on institutionalized age restrictions (Vincent 2003; Nelson 2005), Felix also seemed to doubt whether he still measured up to the criteria of the current labor market (lines 30-33). Thus, despite his long years of experience, he found himself summarily relegated to the sidelines, in consequence of the fact that "it has been occupational activity and 'productivity' that has come to define a boundary between the core and periphery of society" (Coupland 2001a: 192). Felix resisted being positioned as a marginalized and nonproductive member of the community by seeking employment (lines 21 and 23). However, he has had little success in this endeavor because of societal attitudes toward age (lines 25-28).

In the next part of the interview, Felix described his experience working for a short time in a low-status position at Home Mart, a local building supply store.

Extract 25

F = Felix; P = Patricia

1   F: I'm 68 now … OK. Look … I tried. I found a job … I … I …
2   they hired me there at Home Mart.
3   P: Oh, yes, you told me.
4   F: They hired me at Home Mart. The guy said, "Well, what you are
5   going to do here is … you are … you are going to keep records
6   of the merchandise that comes in and goes out, and of the stock
7   in the warehouse.
8   P: Uh huh … OK … OK.
9   F: So … records of incoming and outgoing merchandise … and a
10   control of that sort of thing. I know how to do that because I am a
11   public accountant, OK.
12   P: Right.

13	F:	So, I started to work … but there in the warehouse, I also had to
14		lift things … and I had to sweep and mop and operate machines
15		and … and … keep their records and … and take the rubbish
16		from the warehouse out to the trash container and then …
17		compact the cardboard in a machine they had there … and I …
18		and I didn't mind doing all that. The only thing that was difficult
19		for me … you know what it was? That I had to lift things.
20	P:	Well, yeah.
21	F:	And they were heavy things.
22	P:	Uh huh … well, yes.
23	F:	So I said to my boss, "Hey!" And I asked myself "Why are you
24		… ?" They had me … I was doing everything. I swept, I mopped,
25		I cleaned the bathroom … because they had me doing that. I put
26		everything in … in the trash containers and I carried everything
27		back XXX. So, he said, "Don't quit." "No," I told him, "because
28		I've found another job more in line with my age." But he didn't
29		want me to leave. Why? Well, because I was …
30	P:	You were doing everything.
31	F:	I was doing everything … everything. Everything they asked me
32		to … I did. Of course … lifting and moving things, especially …
33		that was my problem.
34	P:	Sure … sure … right.
35	F:	My biggest problem. Everything else was easy for me.
36	P:	So, you hadn't lost … that kind of capacity.
37	F:	Exactly. Everything else … believe me … I got to work and got
38		everything done quickly.
39	P:	Good.
40	F:	But, well … and that was just a short time ago, OK. It was last
41		year … and I lasted three months working there … but my
42		children said, "That's enough, Papa. Leave that place. You don't
43		need to work." But, I tell you, the only thing I lost the capacity
44		for was lifting things. In other words, I showed myself that I
45		could do it. I can do anything. (Felix, Interview 3)

In this job, Felix had to perform a number of menial tasks in the warehouse, including cleaning and emptying the trash as well as keeping records of the merchandise (lines 4-19). Even though this was a far cry from his former, more prestigious position as a public accountant, Felix declared that he willingly did whatever he was told to do (lines 17-18 and 31-32). In lines 37-38, he expressed pride in being able to get everything done quickly and easily. In this respect, he shows himself to be less concerned than Hector about maintaining a high social profile, and more interested in simply remaining active. The principal problem he encountered was his difficulty in lifting heavy objects (lines 18-21 and 32-33). In

the end, this prompted his decision to leave after only three months on the job (lines 23-29). His children also urged him to quit, arguing that he has no financial need to work, but perhaps missing the point that their father needs to feel useful (lines 41-45). However, the fact that Felix mentioned their viewpoint suggests that it may have been a factor in his decision as well. On the other hand, it could have been that he was demonstrating to them that he is still capable of working and of being a productive member of society. By far, the most interesting occurrence in this segment of the interview takes place in lines 35-45 when Felix made a complete turnabout from his earlier insistence that he was losing all his capacities (extract 24) and asserted that, aside from the physical task of moving heavy merchandise, "I showed myself that I could do it. I can do anything" (lines 44-45).

I used this affirmation to turn back to the issue of studying English, and asked Felix if that same outlook fit into the question of his language learning competence. Here, in extract 26, is what he responded:

Extract 26

1   Yes ... yes. ... I always wanted to learn English. ... Another language.
2   It's important. That was it ... by taking that job ... I'm glad you
3   reminded me ... I was able to demonstrate to myself that I could do
4   things ... to get out of my depression. (Felix, Interview 3)

The abrupt reversal of Felix's earlier bleak outlook on his capacities and his 'rediscovery' of the possibilities still open to him give an indication of how opposing discourses of aging compete with each other in his case. Moreover, his remark "I'm glad you reminded me" (lines 2-3) is particularly noteworthy in that it demonstrates how, when the researcher and those researched interact closely and the agenda is set more flexibly by both parties, the research process itself can be empowering (Cameron et al. 1993).

The fluctuations in Felix's self-appraisal were also evident when I asked him to sketch the life course. He first thought that a straight line would best represent his own life course. However, as he began to talk about the ups and downs of his life,

he decided that a better picture would be a line which showed the high and low points (see Figure 6.2).
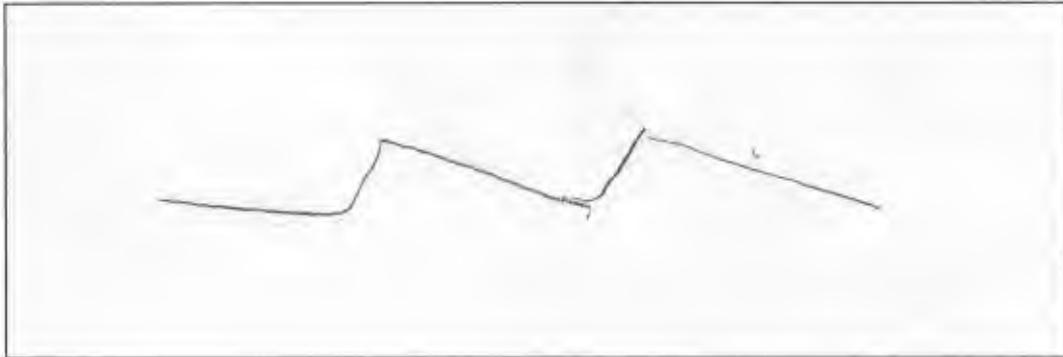
Figure 6.2 Felix's life course

Age and other identities

Felix's age identity is closely interlocked with his professional identity and with his subject position in his family. Like Hector, being identified as a productive member of society, primarily through professional activity, was uppermost in his mind when I encountered him at this particular moment of his life. Unlike Hector, however, he spoke only once about his professional accomplishments, expressing less ambition and more satisfaction in simply having carried out his work well over the years.

Extract 27

F = Felix; P = Patricia

1	F:	I continued to work my way upwards … taking on more
2		demanding positions.
3	P:	Ah, that's what I wanted to know. Uh huh.
4	F:	Yes, but … yes, I held positions of greater responsibility … until
5		I had to turn [them] down … imagine that.
6	P:	Really?
7	F:	Sometimes people … that is, my boss … would make me an
8		offer, "Say, can you do this [job]?" "No, leave me here." I told
9		him. "I like it here. I like what I am doing. I am producing."
		(Felix, Interview 3)

As Felix described it, his professional life was characterized by continual progression and, in general terms, seems to have been smooth, free of conflict and overall a rewarding experience (lines 1-2). The gratification he received from carrying out the functions of his profession, working with accounting, taxes, and audits, suggests that perhaps he is most comfortable in a world that is predictable, consistent, and exact. The crisis came, as has been noted, when he was asked to retire very abruptly because of his age. He clearly was not prepared for such an eventuality. The following extract reveals the depth of his unhappiness:

Extract 28

```
1    When you are working ... when you are developing professionally ...
2    and they say to you, "Look, well, you are very old now. Just leave,
3    OK." ... even though you are a productive person and you have ideas
4    and ... and you can still make important decisions in life. I mean, it
5    cuts you short. But why does that happen, I say ... why is it that those
6    of us who can continue to be productive ... these very same people
7    bring ... our career, OK ... your life ... to a standstill at a given
8    moment? So, you, as a human being ... at least in my case, for
9    example, they cut me short. "You are no longer of any use to us. We
10   are going to retire you. We are going to pension you off" ... and things
11   like that. It is really horrible, OK ... really horrible ... really horrible.
12   It is terrible. It demoralizes you. You ... I ... when they told me that
13   ... you can't imagine. (Felix, Interview 4)
```

This commentary is all the more poignant because of the way Felix used voicing in a constructed dialogue to show how other people no longer considered him to be of value professionally (lines 2-3 and 9-10). So important is his professional identity to him that this occurrence left him feeling that his very life "as a human being" (line 8) had been "cut short" (line 9).

While the role of sole wage earner is central to the position of the 'archetypal Mexican male,' of equal importance is that of head of the family (Salles and Tuirán 1996). Both Hector and Felix took up these subject positions. However, Felix gave the impression of being more family-oriented than Hector. For example, when asked to identify the best moment of his life, he responded without

hesitation that is was the birth of his first child (Felix, Interview 4). He remarked that he has worked to give his own children opportunities, saying that they are the "beginning and end" of his life (Felix, Interviews 3 and 4). He has also positioned himself as a kind of patriarch in his extended family network, where he is the oldest surviving member (Felix, Interviews 1 and 4). He referred to his two sisters and more than 40 nieces, nephews, great-nieces and great nephews as *mi gente* (my people), and expressed regret that he has not had the means to help them out in times of difficulty, a role he clearly would have enjoyed (Felix, Interview 4). However, when I asked how his family and friends see him, he responded that they consider him to be an old man because he is retired now. He added that it doesn't matter what they think because he is "young inside" (Felix, Interview 4). Once again, I perceive a contradiction in the way Felix positions himself and the way he is positioned by others.

The subject position of head of the family is strongly coupled with Felix's gendered identity. He claimed that the life cycle is different for women because "they have another kind of mission in life ... to have children ... and ours [men's] to make them" (Felix, Interview 4). When I asked him what his wife did, he replied that she makes the meals and takes care of the house (Felix, Interview 1). He added that she has lately become very religious, and has a group of friends who "are active in the church, read the Bible, do social work and that kind of thing" (Felix, Interview 1). The similarity with Hector's wife is striking, as is the position of the traditional Mexican male adopted by both Hector and Felix.

6.3.5 Connecting the pieces

Felix's story is characterized by the dissatisfaction he feels with his present life position. Up to the point of his compulsory retirement, his life as he described it had been generally rewarding, both personally and professionally. However, he is currently undergoing a period of frustration, disappointment, and frequently futile efforts to recover the sense of fulfillment he formerly had. He defines this primarily in terms of the socially-prized value of productivity.

His tale is, like Hector's, a complex one for there is a wide divergence between the way he is positioned by society, family and friends as old and less capable, and the way he often positions himself as still fully competent. Yet at other times he, too, accepts prevalent decremental narratives and claims to be losing his physical and mental faculties. An additional age discourse he espouses is adultism, whereby he positions himself as entitled to exercise authority over and to receive deference from those younger than he. The resulting interplay of the adultist discourse with the decline discourses he alternately embraces and rejects makes his enactment of age a compelling, yet difficult phenomenon to understand.

For Felix, studying English has provided a way to remain active and to keep mental decline at bay. He is also cognizant of the fact that there are added advantages to knowing English, yet learning the language is an interim measure for him. While he is filling up his life with this and other similar activities, his real desire is to be working again. In the meantime, studying English is a challenge that is largely about proving himself.

Felix, like Hector, maintains that 'younger is better' when it comes to learning a foreign language. However, in explaining this, he focuses on the deleterious effects of aging on mental abilities rather than on the superior qualities children purportedly possess. Even so, he believes that enthusiasm and dedication can allow older people to be successful in this enterprise. On a personal level, Felix experienced serious difficulties with English during the months I observed him. Perhaps for this reason, he was seldom willing to talk to me about his own progress with the language and preferred instead to concentrate on the deficiencies he found in the teachers' methods.

His beliefs about language learning, along with his manifest need for a highly structured and systematic environment, underscored the way in which he experienced the English course at this moment of his life. He expressed dissatisfaction throughout the term with what he judged to be the disorganized and faulty manner in which the lessons were given. He was particularly adamant about

the adverse effects of the participation of the two practice teachers and the lack of involvement of the regularly assigned teacher. His repeated criticism of the practice teachers centered on his perception that they were too young and inexperienced to perform their job adequately.

In his relations with his fellow students, he positioned himself and was positioned by them as an older person, yet this clearly meant different things in each case. The behavior of the students suggests that, for them, Felix was simply an old man, no longer a presence to be reckoned with, an outsider in the group, and someone they could disregard for the most part. On the other hand, Felix believed that being an older adult in the group entitled him to assume a position of authority and to exercise a certain control over the younger students in his interactions with them. He expected them to defer to his decisions, yet this did not happen and caused him considerable frustration.

Such a paternalistic attitude on Felix's part carried over into his life beyond the classroom, where he continues to position himself as the 'traditional patriarch' in both his immediate and extended families. The self-confidence deriving from this subject position had always been linked to his strong gendered and professional identities. However, the forced retirement that edged him out of the work force occasioned a crisis in his sense of self-worth, which he calculates primarily in terms of productivity and accumulated experience. As a consequence of his retirement, his family and friends now consider him an old man. At times, Felix rejects being so positioned and adopts a more positive age identity, constructing himself as young, still interested in life, and fully competent.

As in Hector's case, competing discourses of aging vie with one another and make the ongoing task of reconstructing his multiple identities a complex one. This is further complicated by the fact that Felix is loath to accept change, a circumstance which, I have suggested, may be closely related to his choice of a profession that is systematic and predictable. Given that the very meaning of aging is change, it follows that Felix's enactment of age is necessarily fraught with discord.

6.4 Conclusion

The tales that Hector and Felix tell are two compelling examples of the construction of age in later adulthood. Their stories attest to the fact that age is an integral part of the identity of language learners and show how the experience of learning a language is closely intertwined with a world that extends far beyond the classroom. The close examination of Hector's and Felix's stories undertaken in this chapter highlights some of the specific ways in which age is enacted by older adults and contributes to our overall understanding of the impact of age on adult language learners of different ages. Among the most noteworthy findings to emerge are the following:

The impact of age on the language learning experience varies according to where each person positions her/himself in the lifespan.

In the case of Hector and Felix, taking up the study of English in later adulthood has responded principally to a need to remain active after retirement. Although they are not oblivious to the utilitarian benefits to be found in knowing the language, its chief attraction for them has been that it constitutes a challenging, socially acceptable and prestigious leisure-time activity.

The beliefs and attitudes EFL learners have about age and second language acquisition have an effect on their language learning experience.

Both Hector and Felix contended that, as older adults, they are disadvantaged in relation to the younger university students in their efforts to learn English. However, they believe that dedication and discipline can make up for their age-related cognitive deficits. While it is not possible to determine, on the basis of this study, the extent to which such ageist beliefs had a direct impact on the linguistic outcomes of the course, they evinced themselves in different respects in the enactment of age in the classroom.

The co-construction of age in the classroom context is rooted in the prevailing cultural discourses of age.

The language learning experience proved to be different in significant ways for Hector and Felix in the months during which I undertook the study. Both Hector and Felix positioned themselves, and accepted being positioned by their fellow students and teachers, as older adults. In Hector's case, this meant not only being an outsider in the group but also the target of ageist remarks by the teacher. For the most part, he chose to accommodate to or collude with the ageist attitudes he found in the class. At the end of the course, he declared that he was quite satisfied with the experience. Felix, on the other hand, resisted the construal of old age that put him in a subordinate position and struggled to establish himself as an authority figure in the group by reason of his age. He expressed considerable resentment about the participation of the young and inexperienced practice teachers, demonstrating his own ageist attitudes. His overall assessment of the course was unfavorable. In evaluating their experience, neither Hector nor Felix gave more than minimal attention to their personal progress, leading me to conclude that studying English at this moment of their lives meant much more than mastering the language.

Both present and prior life circumstances have an impact on the language learning experience.

The single most defining event that has shaped Hector and Felix's construction of later adulthood is retirement from the workforce. As I pointed out in Chapter 4 (section 4.3.2), retirement generally brings about the end of a person's economic activity and often, with it, social disengagement, marginalization and a diminished status in many productivity-oriented Western cultures. In addition, because most older people become recipients of institutional services rather than contributors to the economy, later life may be viewed as an economic, political, and social problem (Coupland 2001a). To a certain extent, both Hector and Felix have internalized this powerful ageist discourse. However, major differences can be found in their experience of retirement. Whereas Hector opted to retire from his main job in a hospital but to remain economically active in his private practice

and as a consultant, Felix was compelled to retire and has been unable to find comparable work ever since. It is important to mention that in neither case have the economic constraints, often resulting from retirement, constituted an issue for them.

The construction of the age identity of language learners occurs both within the classroom and in the world beyond it, moving back and forth between the two.
Far more onerous have been the social consequences of retirement, for Hector and Felix have had to contend with having a series of negative traits associated with old age attributed to them by an ageist society. Hector has resisted such negative positioning by drawing attention to his past achievements in order to establish himself as a person of stature, whereas Felix has chosen to adopt the traditional position of 'patriarch' or elder in his social world. Yet, along with such demonstrations of resistance, we find other instances in which acceptance of ageist discourses plays an important role in the construction of their identities. Felix's diagnosis of his own presumed age-related cognitive deficits is a telling example of the internalization of ageist discourses, in which "the myth of mental decline becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy—and one that brings active harm to the aged" (Combe and Schmader 1999: 97).

Age as a subject position is interlinked with other subject positions in adult language learners.
Hector's and Felix's enactment of age as language learners is not separable from their professional, social and gendered identities, either in or out of the classroom. For both of them, professional success and social prestige interact with the strong gendered position of the traditional Mexican male in the ongoing construction of their complex new identities as older adults. These new identities constitute a crucial non-linguistic outcome of their language learning experience.

All told, a remarkable number of similarities can be found in Hector's and Felix's life stories. Their early life experiences, professional achievements, socioeconomic status, and family situations run parallel to one another over the

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years. This has taken place against the backdrop of an era in Mexican history which has witnessed the emergence and consolidation of a significant middle class (Selby and Browning 1992; Schettino Yáñez 2002; Zúñiga Herrera 2005). Now, in later adulthood, competing discourses of aging vie with one another in the construction of their identities. Yet significant differences in their present experience of age can be appreciated in Hector's overall satisfaction and Felix's considerable dissatisfaction with their respective life positions. As Coupland aptly points out:

> [A]ge-identities ... are the products of the evaluative component of our own life narratives ... the cumulative assessment of where we stand, developmentally—as individuals and in relation to our social environments. ... [I]dentity in ageing ultimately connects to morale and wellbeing. (Coupland 2001a: 203)

Life-position appraisal may offer the most important key to understanding Hector's and Felix's stories and their construction of later adulthood. In the next chapter, the combined stories of four women furnish helpful insights into the construction of the middle years.

Chapter 7

Constructing Age in 'Middle' Adulthood

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter I interweave the stories of four women whose ages fluctuate between 34 and 59 years old. In Mexico, people in this age range, between young adulthood and old age, are rather loosely designated as 'adults.' No named category exists in Spanish equivalent to the English term 'middle-aged.'[31] This difference constitutes an important contrast between contemporary Mexican and Anglophone cultures, one that is central to understanding the construction of age identity by these participants. The present chapter is organized along similar lines to the previous one, beginning with brief biographical sketches of the four women, followed by a discussion of their reasons for studying English. After that comes a description of their enactment of age both in and out of the classroom. The chapter concludes with some reflections on the construction of 'middle' adulthood and how what has been learned in the course of the fieldwork addresses the issues posed by the research questions.

7.2 The women tell their stories

7.2.1 Introducing the participants

Elsa, Gilda, Adela and Berta, the 'midlife' participants in the study, work in distinct professions and have different family situations, competence levels in English, and chronological ages. Table 7.1 gives some basic information about each of them.

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[31] To emphasize this point, I use single quotation marks to refer to 'middle' adulthood or 'midlife' adults throughout the chapter.

Elsa	Gilda	Adela	Berta
• English level 2[32]	• English level 6	• English level 6	• English level 3
• 34 years old	• 36 years old	• 48 years old	• 59 years old
• Marital status not specified	• Engaged	• Married	• Married
• 2 children	• No children	• 2 children	• 3 children
• Sales clerk – department store	• Actuary – insurance company	• Spanish teacher – *secundaria* (equivalent to US middle school)	• Physician – public health clinic

Table 7.1 The 'midlife' adult participants

Elsa, 34, is the youngest of the group of participants who identified themselves as 'adults.' She has worked for several years as a clerk in the silver department of a large and prestigious department store in Mexico City. At the time of the fieldwork her daughter was 17 and her son 7 years old. She never mentioned a husband or partner, even when given express opportunities to do so in the interviews. In fact, she shared little information about her own childhood or personal life. When I asked directly about her leisure-time activities, she indicated that she occasionally has lunch with women friends, but that she is normally too busy working, studying and caring for her family to be involved in other pursuits. She had begun doing her undergraduate studies a short time before through a distance education program offered to the department store employees. She had only been studying English for a year at the time I initiated contact with her, and was repeating the second-level course.

Although only two years older than Elsa, Gilda finds herself in a very different place in her life. Whereas Elsa has been a mother since the age of 17, Gilda, 36 at the time of the fieldwork, was only then planning for marriage and possible motherhood. She has worked as an actuary in various insurance companies ever

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[32] The general English program at the university language center consists of six semester-long courses or levels.

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since her graduation from university. She was still living with her parents, as is the custom in Mexico, and she described her relationship with her family as a close one. She has traveled extensively and, in general, enjoyed a privileged life style. Gilda began studying English in primary school and her level of mastery was notably better than that of the other students in the sixth-level course. That course, the final one in the general English program, leads to a certificate of proficiency necessary for registering in the special advanced courses that Gilda hopes to take in the future. Prior to enrollment in the course, she had completed one semester of a year-long English teacher training course at another campus of the university.

Adela, 48, also a student in the sixth-level course of general English, teaches Spanish language and literature in a public *secundaria* (equivalent to US middle school). She had studied English in *preparatoria* (equivalent to US high school) and then later at a private language institute when she was in her early twenties. At the time of this study, her son was living at home and studying at a local university. Her daughter was attending a university in a nearby city and came home only on weekends. Adela reads for enjoyment and signs up for many of the short courses that are offered to teachers by the Ministry of Education. She began to take English classes at the university the semester before I asked her to participate in this study and, despite not having studied the language for over 20 years, placed in the fifth-level course. She is also studying Italian.

Berta has worked for many years as a physician in a public health clinic. She was 59 at the time of the fieldwork and planned to retire within the year. She has three adult daughters, some of whom were still living at home. In the afternoons, Berta spends her free time doing a variety of crafts. She had never studied English before and began with the basic courses three years previously. She has had to repeat some of the courses and, in fact, was repeating the third-level course at the time I made contact with her.

7.2.2 The goal of learning English

All of the women were employed at the time of the study except Gilda, who was planning her August wedding.[33] In addition, they had obligations at home, such as preparing meals, running the household, spending time with both immediate and extended family members and providing for their affective needs, in line with prevailing norms for women in Mexico (Sandoval Ávila 2002; Salguero Velásquez 2006). Thus, taking English classes implied forfeiting part of their free time. For that reason, both motivation and expectations regarding the courses were high. Elsa and Berta indicated that they wanted to learn English because they had not had the opportunity to do so in their student years, whereas Adela had studied the language with some reluctance as a young student, but is now interested in becoming a fluent speaker of English at this point in her life. Gilda, already proficient in the language, was taking the course as a way of maintaining her fluency.

All harbor some vague notions of using English in the future. For example, Elsa hopes to move up from her job as a clerk to that of a buyer in the department store where she is employed. The store sends buyers to other countries, but they must speak English. She also mused about the possibility of giving private English classes at some future date, once she has mastered the language herself. Adela is also considering becoming an English teacher after she retires.[34] Now that her children are older and more independent, she finds herself with the freedom to study. Much as in the case of Hector and Felix, learning English would seem to signify the acquisition of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977) for these women rather than serving an immediate pragmatic need.

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[33] Gilda accepted a job one month before the course ended and was unable to attend after that. She was allowed to present the final exam, which she passed easily, and to receive her certificate of proficiency.

[34] As a public school teacher, Adela is a federal employee and therefore entitled to retire after 28 years of service and to receive a small pension. Because the salary scale is low, most teachers retire as soon as they are eligible, collect their monthly pension and supplement it with other types of remunerative activity if their wages are vital to the family economy.

7.2.3 The construction of age: in the classroom

When asked, the four 'midlife' participants concurred with the widely held belief that childhood is the best time to learn a language, and the younger the better. Elsa maintained that this is so because children "do not have everyday worries or the responsibilities of a job ... they retain things more quickly" (Elsa, Interview 1). Similarly, Gilda pointed out that young people still have their minds uncluttered whereas older ones have theirs saturated, in a sense. She also mentioned that adults experience difficulty learning anything new, not just languages. Adela emphasized that children do not have to concern themselves with rules, that they simply absorb the language like sponges. Berta also likened young learners to sponges, an image that appears frequently in the interviews. Even so, the four women were hopeful of succeeding in the task of learning English, by spending time outside of class studying, by reading books and magazines, and by bringing greater effort and dedication to the task. In addition, Elsa and Adela both stressed the importance of liking the language in achieving success.

Enactment of age: examining classroom activities

Student Books 1 (2001b), 2 (2001a) and 3 (2003) of the *American Headway* series were used in the courses in which the four women were enrolled. As pointed out in Chapter 5, this series targets the adult and young adult market (Oxford University Press USA 2005). Hence, the situations, topics, characters and exercises in these textbooks are likely to have been more suited to the interests of the group of 'midlifers' than to those of the older students. The global perspective of the materials would also have resonated more with these participants, as moderately well-traveled and experienced professionals, than with the younger students. Nevertheless, the related class activities devised by the teachers in the lessons I observed were generally geared to the younger university-age students and often involved sharing personal information.

The latter practice made Elsa particularly uncomfortable. Two occasions on which this was evident are recorded in my classroom observation notes.

Class 9, March 22, 2004

Time	Activity	Elsa
10'	Tomas gives an explanation of "how much" and "how many."	T asks her how much money she spends on the weekend with her boyfriend. Elsa [E] is ill at ease and doesn't respond.

Class 20, May 5, 2004

Time	Activity	Elsa
35'	Simon checks workbook exercises – present continuous used for near future.	S asks E where she is going with her boyfriend tonight. She doesn't answer.
	Some confusion arises. Nidia [N] clarifies how the structure is used.	Then S gets distracted and he does not return to her.

Earlier in the term, I had asked Elsa about an activity in which the students talked in small groups about how they had met their first girlfriend/boyfriend, how long the relationship had lasted and why it had ended. She told me that the students seemed enthusiastic about the exercise but that she herself prefers not to talk about personal matters. She went on to say:

Extract 29

1   At times I even … at times I make up things, OK … in other words …
2   so … they ask me something and I make something up, OK. … It's
3   not … it's not necessary to say what really was or what …. it's only to
4   practice. (Elsa, Interview 2)

Here Elsa presents the view that the class activities are designed for practice and do not constitute genuine communication. This contrasts strikingly with the

interaction she reported having in English with a Pakistani colleague at work who does not speak any Spanish. She said that he would sometimes go and talk to her "like he wanted to make friends ... because he didn't ... like he didn't know anybody" (Elsa, Interview 1). In the next interview, when I asked her how talking to him was different from talking to her classmates, she responded:

Extract 30

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1    Well, what happens is that with this man I can talk about any topic,
2    OK, about what countries he has been to ... where he works ... or
3    sometimes I ask him if what I am saying is correct ... or how to say
4    something. ... It isn't difficult for me. Well, at least what we have
5    talked about ... the topics we have talked about ... anything from, for
6    example, his family ... where he lives ... why he came to Mexico ...
7    things that I know a little about. (Elsa, Interview 2)
```

In fact, the topics of conversation she mentioned in this extract are substantially the same as those that typically come up in English classroom activities. However, her remarks suggest that, because her Pakistani interlocutor knows no Spanish, this is an authentic communicative situation, a 'real' conversation, and one that necessarily has to take place in English. For her, it is apparently distinct from contrived conversations among Spanish-speaking students in an English classroom. In this, her appreciation diverges from Michael P. Breen's (1985; 2001a) notion of the classroom as an authentic learning community. Nor is she likely to agree with David Taylor's contention that "classroom language is a real use of language, and we cannot just dismiss the classroom setting and all that takes place in it as being by definition 'artificial'" (1994: 6). Taylor (ibid.) explains that learners generally understand and accept the conventions of classroom discourse and create their own authenticity. However, as in the case of Elsa, this does not always happen.

Enactment of age: in relations with fellow students
All four women positioned themselves as distinct from both the young students and those they identified as old. When referring to the younger members of the group, they used terms like "children" or "adolescents" and very often punctuated

their remarks with "we" and "they," thereby constructing a clear partition between the inside (university) and outside communities. Elsa claimed that the essential difference is that the younger students' motivation is related to the language requirements in their fields of study whereas hers is more directly involved with her present job (Elsa, Interview 2). Berta also cited the students' motivation, or rather the lack of it, lamenting the fact that they do not appreciate the language courses, which are cost-free for them, with schedules compatible with their studies, and classes conveniently located on the same campus (Berta, Narrative account 1).

When I asked Adela how she perceived her relations with the other students, she maintained that they all work well together. Nevertheless, she recounted how at first she felt out of place in the group because of her age, particularly when she failed to understand some of the comments and jokes of the younger students. As she explained it:

Extract 31

     1   Personally, I feel fine. I feel quite fine. At first, well, you have already
     2   been through adolescence, right? ... so ... like I said ... it's like I feel
     3   that you miss ... some comments, some jokes ... but now I fit in. Now
     4   I feel fine with the young people. (Adela, Interview 1)

The interplay between the first person "I" (lines 1-3), which Adela used to express her current positive feelings about her relationship with the younger students, and the impersonal, generalized "you" (lines 1 and 3), which serves to mark a distance from the initial problems she encountered, is perhaps indicative of a situation not fully resolved.

The extract also reinforces what I noted in Hector and Felix's stories, namely, that it is the older members of the group who take on the responsibility for initiating and maintaining relations with the younger students. As Gilda observed, adolescents "don't see anything beyond their own world," being, by definition, rather self-absorbed; consequently, it is older people who adapt to younger ones

because they "have already been there [through adolescence]" (Gilda, Interview 1).

While it is evident that the women participants do not consider themselves to be young adults, neither do they position themselves as older ones. For example, Gilda made a definite distinction between herself and one of the older adults, calculating that she was "exactly in the middle" in the group, between "Claudio who is in his 60s" and the "very young adolescents who are around 18 or 19" (Gilda, Interview 1). Again, it is important to note that in Mexico people in the vast age range between adolescence, or young adulthood, and old age are incorporated into the broad undetermined category of 'adults' (see 'Age-category discourses' in Chapter 4, section 4.3.2, for a discussion of this point).

Enactment of age: in relations with the teachers
As with Hector's group, ageist humor surfaced in the group where Adela and Gilda were students. For example, on one occasion Ramon, the teacher, pointedly asked Adela if she knew how to use a computer, to which she responded that although she uses one for work, she is 'old' and prefers to write her letters by hand (Class observation notes, April 26, 2004). In another group, the same teacher made a comment to Berta about the 'older generation's' inability to use the internet (Class observation notes, March 2, 2004). This was one of a number of instances in which ageist and other humorous remarks were directed at Berta by the teacher, causing her visible embarrassment. Easily flustered, she also reported having considerable difficulty understanding the teacher's fast-paced speech as well as the lyrics to the songs he often used in the lessons (Berta, Interview 2). She commented:

Extract 32

```
1    I don't hear music in English. I don't hear it. And he [the teacher] puts
2    on a song in English … and I say, "My God, who is that?" I mean …
3    to begin with I also feel out of date … out of place … because there
4    are youngsters who are in … like that with the music … with the
5    singers and everything. (Berta, Interview 2)
```

This extract also brings to light Berta's perception of belonging to a world very different from that of young people. By disqualifying herself as "out of date" and "out of place" (line 3), she echoes the rhetoric that glorifies youth culture (Hareven 1995; Gullette 2004). In addition, the teacher's propensity to target her for humorous remarks and his somewhat derisive attitude toward her when she asked questions or responded in class confused and upset her. Although she admitted having a slight hearing deficiency, she claimed that this did not account for the whole problem (Berta, Interview 2). She told me she felt so discouraged that she had stayed home and missed a class. In particular, she talked about her fear of being ridiculed, saying, "I am very self-conscious … and I get embarrassed when I make a mistake and am afraid that everyone will laugh at me" (Berta, Interview 1). At times she expressed the desire to drop out of the course and at others she believed she should persevere (Berta, Interview 2 and Narrative account 2). Finally, after six weeks she stopped attending the class altogether.

Gilda, on the other hand, was not in the least abashed by Ramon's ageist and sexist remarks. When he made allusions of questionable taste to her upcoming wedding and honeymoon plans, she counterattacked with humorous rejoinders and found other occasions to make fun of him (Class observation notes, March 1 and March 22, 2004). Like the other three women in the study, she positioned herself as an adult, distinct from both the younger and the older persons in the group.

Elsa's interaction with her teacher, Nidia, and the two practice teachers, Simon and Tomas, was impersonal, largely limited to responding when called on during the lessons. Occasionally, she volunteered a response and only twice did she ask the teachers a question during the course. In my classroom observations, I noted that her participation was minimal in comparison with her classmates. When I later interviewed the teachers, they described her as shy (Tomas, Interview), quiet and seldom participative (Nidia, Interview). Tomas believed that Elsa suffered from a lack of confidence and needed the teacher's approval whenever she participated (Tomas, Interview). Simon remarked that Elsa was accepted by the

group, but rather neutrally or indifferently (Simon, Interview). The picture that emerges, then, is of a highly reserved person who remained guarded and aloof in her relationship with the teachers and fellow students. This coincides with my own perception of Elsa, formed in the course of our work together.

Adela went through important changes in her feelings about the two teachers in charge of her group, Martin and Ramon, who gave lessons on alternate days. Early in the term, she commented that Ramon made her nervous and that she became blocked when he called on her in class (Adela, Narrative account 1). In an interview, she pointed out that felt less anxiety in Martin's class.

Extract 33

A = Adela; P = Patricia

1	A:	It seems to me a very good idea to have two teachers. Yes … I
2		… I liked the idea because I feel more … more confident with
3		Martin.
4	P:	Yes, you mentioned that.
5	A:	Yes … and … maybe because Martin goes more into grammar
6		… and that gives me a structure. So, I can handle it mentally and
7		I can build on it.
8	P:	And can you understand Martin's English?
9	A:	Yes. Yes, I understand his English. So, I feel more at ease … I
10		come [to class] more relaxed, OK, and with … with Ramon I
11		feel a bit tenser.
12	P:	Right. (Adela, Interview 2)

In her next narrative account she again mentioned that she felt less fearful and discomfited in Martin's class, although she thought it was interesting to have two teachers (Adela, Narrative account 2). She went on to say that Martin reinforced her knowledge of grammar, but that with Ramon she had more opportunity to speak. By the middle of the term she began commenting how much she liked Ramon's lessons, especially the kind of literary analysis he made of the reading texts (Adela, Interview 3). She remarked that she had approached him after class one day to ask if he had studied literature and that after they had talked, he suggested she take an advanced reading and writing course he gives on Saturdays at the university (Adela, Narrative account 8). In our final interview, Adela made

the point that Ramon challenged her and made her wish she had more vocabulary at her command so she could participate actively in the class. She commented, "There came a moment in which ... I was eager to express myself and ... and ... I had so many ideas that I couldn't communicate. So, I felt sort of bad." (Adela, Interview 5). It seems that once Adela overcame her initial fears and acquired some self-confidence, she preferred Ramon's more demanding teaching style.

The question of age did not appear significant in any obvious way in the relations of any of the four women participants with their teachers. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that, with the exception of the two young practice teachers in Elsa's group, the teachers all fell into the same broad age-range category of 'adults' as these women, putting them on a par, so to speak.

7.2.4 The construction of age: beyond the classroom

As noted in Hector and Felix's stories, a consideration of the age identity of language learners cannot be limited to the language classroom, for age is a part of every aspect of a person's life. It links up with other identities and gives special meaning to the language learning experience, just as learning English at a certain moment in a person's life course becomes significant for them in the world they inhabit outside the classroom.

The interview setting provided the principal window from which I could contemplate the larger world of the participants. Their tales were co-constructions, a cooperative venture, to the extent that I tended to direct the course of the interview, although not rigidly, and the women decided what they wanted to share and how they would tell their stories. In this, our relative positions became crucial, and some notable differences arose in the way this took form with each of the women. Most striking was their choice of either the familiar or the formal 'you' in Spanish (*tú* or *usted*) when speaking to me. Whereas both Hector and Felix had easily addressed me using the familiar form, among the women participants only Berta and Gilda did so without prompting. I had suggested to Adela at the beginning of the course that we use the familiar '*tú*' with each other,

yet it was not until the final interview that she switched from the formal '*usted*' to '*tú*.' Interestingly, Elsa never addressed me directly in any of the five interviews. Her participation was limited to cautious and concise responses to the questions I put to her. Although it is impossible to state categorically which combination of personal and social factors governed each participants' election of a form of address, it seems probable that my position as an older woman had some bearing on their decision.

The most significant discovery I made with this group of participants came to light when they were asked to describe the life course. All the women unhesitatingly identified childhood and adolescence as life stages, and some spoke of young adulthood as following adolescence. They also pinpointed old age as a life stage beginning around 60 or 65. The period in between adolescence or young adulthood and old age they simply denominated 'adulthood,' where they all positioned themselves. No one made any distinctions within the 'adult' category. When I asked Elsa directly if adulthood were subdivided, our exchange went as follows:

Extract 34

E = Elsa; P = Patricia

1	P:	OK ... then from 20, more or less, which you say is where
2		adulthood begins ... until the 60s, you don't distinguish any ...
3		any other stages?
4	E:	Not that I recall, no. (Elsa, Interview 3)

To verify her response, I asked her again in the following interview.

Extract 35

E = Elsa; P = Patricia

1	P:	OK. Then between what is adulthood, for example, where you
2		are right now in your life ... and old age, you don't distinguish
3		any transitional stage?
4	E:	Between adult[hood] and old age? Well, what would it be? Well,
5		maybe because I still haven't gotten there yet. (Elsa, Interview

4)

When Adela described the life course, she indicated that adulthood has different moments, depending on what is happening in a person's life and how this changes them. However, she clarified that these stages do not have any special names in Mexico except for old age, which has now become part of the lexicon. According to her, old age begins at 60 but is not separated into other subdivisions. I then asked her specifically about middle age. Extract 36 contains that part of our conversation.

Extract 36

A = Adela; P = Patricia

1	P:	So, there is nothing in Spanish that refers to that point between
2		adulthood and old age?
3	A:	No, no ... no, not that I know of ... no.
4	P:	OK. When a woman begins menopause, for example, that is a ...
5		like a sign that a kind of change is going on, right?
6	A:	Of course, but that would belong to ... I don't know ... there is
7		no stage like that ... or a specific name ...
8	P:	... especially for that?
9	A:	There is nothing like that. (Adela, Interview 4)

The fact that none of the participants distinguishes any subdivisions within the adult category confirms my own findings (see Chapter 4, section 4.3.2) that the concept of 'middle age' is not part of the view of the life course in Mexico. As suggested previously, named age categories come into a language when social issues make it necessary to differentiate one age group from another (Hareven 1995). In the case of the term 'midlife,' the problems of forced early retirement and the empty-nest syndrome, which gave rise to its adoption into the English language, seem to be either incipient or missing entirely in Mexican culture (see Chapter 4, section 4.3.2, for a more detailed discussion of this point).

Competing discourses of age

The construction of age plays out differently with the four women who position themselves as 'adults' from they way it does with the two older adults, Hector and

Felix. The discourses the women draw upon are more subtly contested in their case. In this section, I look at two features of their enactment of age which are particularly noteworthy, the decline and progress narratives they tell and the presence of an unwritten, yet powerful, timetable that regulates their lives as adults.

Decline narratives and progress narratives

I find the interplay between decline and progress narratives, while very much a part of the construction of later adulthood, and in Gullette's (2004) view also of middle adulthood in the US, to be much more attenuated in the case of the four Mexican women participants in the study. Certainly, decline discourses are palpable in their comments about the difficulty of learning a new language at this point in their lives. To a person, they voiced the opinion that childhood would be the best moment for such an undertaking and that, among adults of different ages, the university students have the advantage of youth in their favor. A clear illustration of this is Adela's assertion that she enjoys being in class with the younger students because she believes they are in close contact with English on a daily basis, whereas she has the impression that her own vocabulary contains many words that are no long in use (Adela, Interview 5).

Outside the question of language learning, ageist remarks and humor on the part of the 'midlifers' surfaced only occasionally in the lessons and in their conversations with me. The following typical example, taken from my classroom observation notes, involves Gilda:

Class 17, April 26, 2004

| Time	Activity	Gilda
30'	Reading text: "Finally He Passes!" (*American Headway* 3, Unit 10, 74) discussion of learning how to drive	Gilda [G] participates in

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		discussion
	T reads text out loud	(It starts to rain hard at this point and G makes a comment that she doesn't want to get wet because she is "old" and needs to take care of her health.)

I see two things happening here. First, Gilda interjects a humorous comment based on conventionally accepted ideas about old age that render it a frequent source of amusement. In this, there is nothing especially notable in her quip other than that it reflects the society-wide decremental view of aging (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991; Gullette 2004). Second, her joke may well have been a subtle rebuke aimed at Ramon, the teacher who regularly made ageist and sexist remarks. Gilda's participation in the lessons often included humorous remarks directly or indirectly targeting the teacher. What is important is that the incidence of explicitly ageist comments in this group of participants proved to be considerably less than in that of the older adults.

I believe this can be attributed to the fact that their construction of 'middle' adulthood differs fundamentally from Hector and Felix's construction of later adulthood. In the interviews, the four women enacted an age firmly rooted in the present moment. Although they spoke about the past and acknowledged that there have been high and low moments in their lives, the meaning the past has for them is derived from its connection to the present, a point in their lives where they all find themselves satisfactorily situated. At the same time, they shared their short-term and long-term plans with me as they look optimistically towards the future. In other words, their vision of the life course is based on a progress narrative (Gullette 2004).

This is also evident in the drawings each participant made of the life course, invariably depicted as linear and ascendant. Gilda described her life as "always

moving upwards," saying "I have always been interested in ... continuing to grow" (Gilda, Interview 3) (see Figure 7.1).
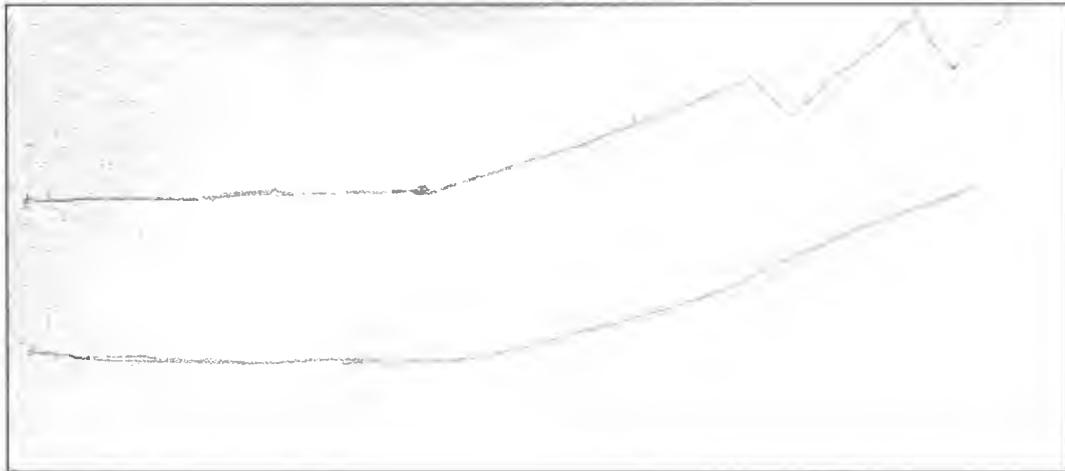
Figure 7.1 Gilda's life course

Adela stated that her life is getting better because now her children are grown and she has more free time and fewer economic pressures. This has allowed her to take on new projects and finish old ones (Adela, Interview 3) (see Figure 7.2).
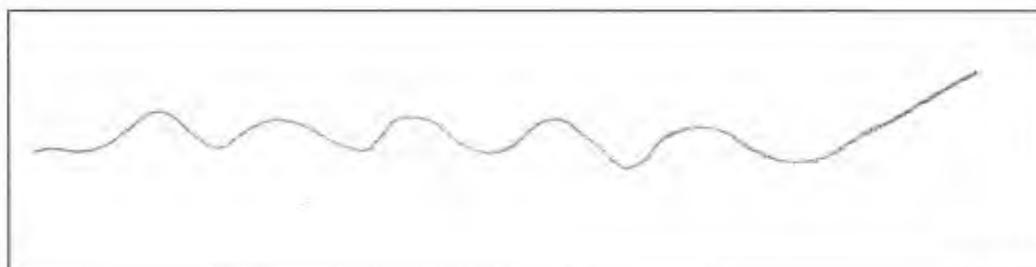
Figure 7.2 Adela's life course

Elsa remarked, "ever since I began to work in *preparatoria* (equivalent to US high school) ... and now that I have had the opportunity to study a profession as well as English ... well ... I have been going up a little" (Elsa, Interview 3) (see Figure 7.3).
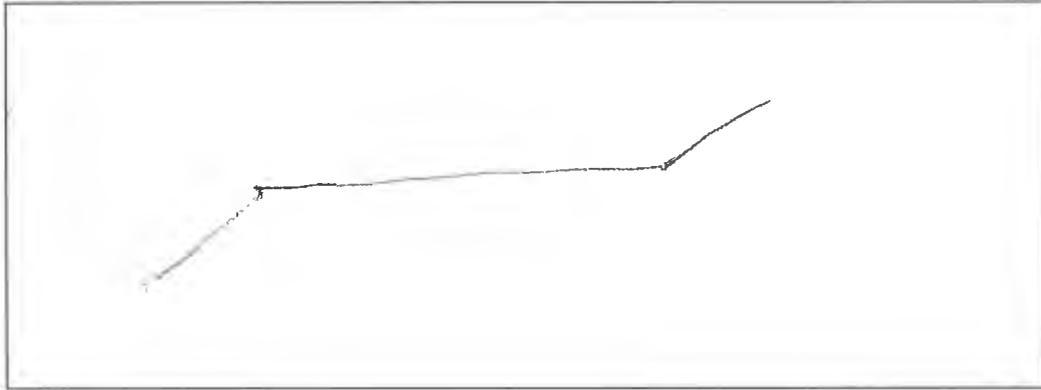
Figure 7.3 Elsa's life course

When I asked the women what they envision happening after retirement, the signpost separating adulthood from old age for them, they spoke in terms of continued progress, of new activities and careers, of grandchildren, and of travel. Only Gilda addressed the issue of decline, although largely in terms of something she hopes to avoid. Extract 37 contains her remarks on the subject:

Extract 37

G = Gilda; P = Patricia

1	P:	And how do you picture your old age?
2	G:	Together. … But not so very old.
3	P:	What do you mean?
4	G:	I mean … the truth is … well, I, yes, I'd like to get to be … to be
5		old, a little old lady … but only if I can take care of myself. …
6		not have health problems or not be able to move or need to
7		depend on someone … and, I mean, the truth is … I'd like to be
8		together with him [her future husband] but not like that … but
9		rather … that is … that you have to deal with someone in that
10		sense and someone also old like you … I mean, it's difficult.
11		Yes, I want to grow old … old together with him … but always
12		in good health … or always where we can take care of … first,
13		our own selves and then take care of each other. (Gilda, Interview 3)

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In this extract, Gilda conveys her abhorrence of the physical deterioration and loss of independence associated with old age in the prevalent discourses of contemporary Western society (Vincent 2003; Gullette 2004). As I pointed out in Chapter 4, such discourses can be misleading for three reasons: first, not everyone experiences aging into old age in the same way (Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991; Coupland 2001a); second, the meanings and values given to physical change are social constructions (Featherstone and Hepworth 1995), and lastly, the exclusive focus on decremental biological processes disregards other equally significant aspects of aging that do not necessarily involve decline (Vincent 2003).

Unlike Hector and Felix, none of the women expressed an immediate concern with anything but their progress narrative. I would suggest that the reason for this is that none of them has yet retired and, with the exception of Berta, they still see retirement as a remote event in their lives. At 59, Berta had plans to retire within the year, yet her construction of age differs markedly from that of Hector and Felix in that she does not manifest any conflict about questions of productivity, social status or marginalization up to now. This reinforces the observation I made previously (Chapter 6, section 6.4) that retirement defines the crucial moment dividing the construction of later adulthood from earlier stages in the lives of the participants.

Keeping to the schedule

Although the narratives of these participants are not overtly ageist in the usual sense of devaluing age, they reflect an evident concern with age-appropriacy. In reality, this too is a manifestation of ageism for, as discussed earlier (Chapter 4, section 4.3.2), prevailing discourses of aging have a direct impact on norms of behavior. In essence, tacit rules determine what is considered suitable or appropriate behavior for persons of a given age in each society (Hazan 1994). The question of age-appropriacy cropped up again and again in my interviews with the women participants, where I observed that a major preoccupation for them was whether they were 'on schedule' or not. An unwritten, but very definite, timetable

that guides one through the adult years, indeed through the entire life course, appears to have governed their assessment of their own accomplishments. Not keeping to the schedule would seem to require an explanation, as both Gilda and Berta's stories illustrate in the following extracts.

At the time the course began in the winter, Gilda had stopped working in order to plan her August wedding. She commented on the fact that she and her fiancé, at 37 and 39 respectively, are both older than is customary in Mexican society to begin married life and start a family. She told me:

Extract 38

1   So, I think that ... I mean ... [our] age ... maybe it's not the best ...
2   because we are old ... especially when you think about having
3   children. ... That is if I can ... because the truth is, I mean, at this
4   point my age doesn't help me very much to ... to wait for too long ...
5   to get pregnant. (Gilda, Interview 3).

Gilda's concerns about having passed the appropriate time to get married and have children were among those Berta also shared. Berta related some of her experiences to me, tracing the long route she took to becoming a physician.

Extract 39

B = Berta; P = Patricia

1 B: Well, my ... my luck is like ... like very funny because I am one
2   of the oldest ones ... and well, in those times, in a family of
3   twelve ... there were twelve of us ... I, as the oldest of the girls,
4   had to work. So, after leaving *secundaria* ...
5 P: ... off to work.
6 B: Nobody asked me, "Do you want to work or not?" Off to work. I
7   was ready for it. So I stopped studying ... just imagine, it was
8   like ... it took me nine years to return to school to start
9   *preparatoria* ... because I told myself ... well, all my brothers
10   and sisters are studying ... and what about me?
11 P: In other words, you didn't go to *preparatoria* until nine years
12   later?
13 B: Nine years later.
14 P: You worked during that period?
15 B: Yes ... and after that I went to *preparatoria* ... I met my

16		husband there … but, at the same time I worked. I got married
17		after finishing *preparatoria* … I was already 28 by then. I said
18		to myself, no, well I am going to study a profession. So that's
19		how I started studying medicine and my husband law.
20	P:	Where?
21	B:	In the National University.
22	P:	Good.
23	B:	Yes, … and then, well … we finished our university studies
24		when we were rather old … and, well, I never had the chance to
25		study English.
26	P:	Right … of course … and do you like your profession?
27	B:	I like it a lot although I also went into it because that's where I
28		was put. Just imagine … I finished *secundaria* and my father got
29		me a job … he got me a scholarship to study nursing … but
30		more practical … practical-theoretical … while I was working at
31		the same time. So it was a … a … a really short course … but
32		they taught me how to be a nurse. And so every day riding the
33		bus … I saw a *preparatoria* there … near the Toreo [a familiar
34		landmark in Mexico City] … and I said, "I want to study, I want
35		to study" and I got off … and I asked … how much they charged
36		… etcetera. I registered … and there … how do you say it? … I
37		said, "Well, if I am already in medicine, well I am going to keep
38		on with that" … and I like it. (Berta, Interview 1)

In lines 1-4 of this extract, Berta narrated how she had to leave school at a young age to begin working to help support the large family of which she was a member. The fact that all her brothers and sisters obtained a university education suggests that academic achievement had a certain importance for her family. So, although not entirely unheard of in urban Mexican society, the case of a young woman beginning her work life at the age of 14 would seem to constitute being 'ahead of schedule' rather than 'behind schedule.' However, because of her determination to study both *preparatoria* (equivalent to US high school) and then university (lines 6-10 and 15-19), Berta found herself spending the subsequent years trailing behind her contemporaries in terms of the 'proper' or accepted age for accomplishing such undertakings. Her awareness that she was not adhering to the timetable of age-appropriate behavior manifests itself throughout her narration. For instance, she mentioned that she was "already 28" when she and her husband got married (line 17), and that they were "rather old" (*grandecitos*) by the time they graduated from university (line 24).

Berta went on to comment in the same interview that perhaps she did not learn things as easily as the younger students studying medicine, first, because of her age, but also because she was busy with a job, a husband and a young family. Because she felt that she was getting old and it might be too late if she waited, she decided to have children immediately, giving birth to her three daughters while still in medical school (Berta, Interview 1). Thus, Berta's accomplishments occurred at ages not typical of the general population at that time, a fact that appears to have troubled her to some extent throughout her life. Nevertheless, she is now set on learning English, despite her belief that it is no longer the best moment to do so. She told me, "I am going to keep on persisting here and see what happens" (Berta, Interview 1).

Age and other identities

As with the older adults, I find age identity to be intertwined with various other subject positions in the case of the 'midlife' adult participants in the study. Professional identity is particularly salient, for all of the women have careers that provide them with considerable satisfaction. Except for Berta, whose retirement was imminent, the women spoke of their hopes of advancing in their careers. An important connection between their subject positions as professionals and their gendered identities was evident throughout the interviews. When Gilda talked to me about her professional aspirations, she made it very clear that a 'glass ceiling' exists in the corporate world in Mexico. Extract 40 contains her description of the possibilities she feels are open to her.

Extract 40

1	P:	And what are your hopes in regard to your professional life?
2	G:	Actually what I am looking for is a position at … at … at a high
3		level … which here in Mexico, be it good or bad … although
4		they say there is no discrimination … that everything is
5		equitable … the same for men and for women … it isn't true.
6	P:	Uh huh.
7	G:	So, as a woman, I mean, well … it is difficult … to reach certain
8		levels. So, at least as far as I am concerned … that is … I am
9		looking for something like that. To show that just because you

10		are a woman doesn't mean that you are worth less ... I mean ...
11		more stupid ... but that you have the skills and the capability of
12		doing it [the job].
13	P:	And when would this happen ... if everything goes well for you?
14	G:	I hope it would be within a short to medium term.
15	P:	OK. Talk to me in years.
16	G:	In years? I don't know ... about four ... five years at the most.
17	P:	You would only be forty.
18	G:	Uh huh.
19	P:	And then what? What happens after that ... in your professional
20		life?
21	G:	I think, well, you reach a certain point and you can't advance
22		any further. I mean, and more so as a woman. I mean, to strive
23		for a position as general director ... I mean, only if I had my
24		own company ... and I were the general director of my own
25		company. But in the job market ... that is ... as an employee ...
26		I think it can't happen. I think that only up to a certain level ...
27		as an assistant director or director of an area ... that's as far as
28		...
29	P:	And that is where you stay?
30	G:	That is where I would stay. (Gilda, Interview 3)

In this extract, Gilda makes no secret of her ambition to reach the top of the corporate ladder in her field. At the same time, she is completely realistic about the unlikelihood of this ever occurring in present-day Mexico. Despite claims to the contrary, that "there is no discrimination ... that everything is equitable ... the same for men and for women," Gilda contends that it is simply not true (lines 3-5). She explained that, at a certain point, women are simply not promoted to higher level positions in the private sector (lines 7-8 and 21-22). It is not a matter of their relative merits. In fact, Gilda herself wants to demonstrate "that just because you are a woman doesn't mean that you are worth less" or even "more stupid" but that women "have the skills and the capability" of performing the job well (lines 9-12). The only way she sees that a woman can aspire to be a chief executive is to be the owner of her own company (lines 23-26). Her plans are to go as far as she can in the next few years and then to remain in that position until she retires (line 30). The dissatisfied tone of the extract conveys to me the sense that Gilda's identity as a successful professional is irrevocably bound to, and in conflict with her gendered identity. In line with Baxter's (2003) thinking, it would seem that being assigned the less powerful subject position of a woman in

Mexican society generates a clash between discourses that explains in part Gilda's discontent.

A similar conflict is played out on a more personal level in the case of Adela. Extract 41 describes how she struggled to have a teaching career.

Extract 41

A = Adela; P = Patricia

1	P:	And ... and your whole life ... let's say ... when you are ... you
2		were raising your children, you've worked?
3	A:	Yes.
4	P:	And that was your decision?
5	A:	It was a question of battling against several things. Maybe also
6		against the idea that they have of women in Mexico ... a little
7		difficult ... for me. When I got married my husband didn't want
8		me to work and ...
9	P:	Oh, that was the ... the mentality, right?
10	A:	Yes, yes ... yes, despite the fact that my husband ... that is ... is
11		a graduate of the National University ... he has a doctorate ...
12		yes, he didn't want me to [work]. So, I told myself ... this just
13		can't be. Did I study all these years just to be here? It's not
14		possible. So I engineered things ... yes ... I arranged my
15		schedule ... yes ... so that when he went to work, I left for work.
16		When he got back ... I was there at home.
17	P:	Right.
18	A:	So, it was ... it was a [constant] struggle. After my children were
19		born, well ... "All the more reason," said my husband, "No,
20		well, you have to be here." [Adela:] "No, no, but I can do it."
		(Adela, Interview 2)

Adela narrated, in this extract, the difficulties involved in standing her ground against her husband after she made the decision to work. It became a persistent source of conflict, first arising after she got married, and then again after her children were born (lines 10-16 and 18-20). Even though by the 1980s it had become more common for women in Mexico to work outside the home, particularly after the economic downturns brought on by a series of currency devaluations, many people resisted the change of customs (Oliveira and Ariza 1999). In lines 10-11, Adela pointed out that her husband is a well-educated man, suggesting that she believes he should have understood her own professional

aspirations. Nonetheless, patriarchal traditions in Mexico are deep-rooted and cross all social classes. Adela's solution was to devise ways to comply with her husband's expectations regarding the behavior of a stay-at-home wife, such as being at home when he left for or returned from work, preparing meals, and so on, while assuming the responsibilities of a job in her own time, a practice adopted by many working women in Mexico (Blanco 2001). This functioned well until she gave birth to her first child, when her husband again voiced strong objections to her working outside the home, based this time on the 'incontestable' obligations of motherhood (lines 19-20) (Blanco 2001; López Hernández 2007).

Not giving up, Adela sought support from her mother-in-law who offered to care for her infant daughter. As she explained, "My husband realized that my mother-in-law … his [own] mother … was supporting me … and so I … I got to work" (Adela, Interview 2). One further crisis arose when her school-aged son went through a period of asthma attacks and her husband told her she should stop working to take care of him. However, Adela decided that it would be worse if she were at home because she might actually cause her son to be sick by worrying excessively about him. This time, the vice-principal of the school came to her support by giving Adela a schedule that allowed her to spend more time with her children when she needed to (Adela, Interview 2). After that, the situation seems to have ended in an undeclared truce. Adela's experience is typical of that of many professional women in Mexico. To this day, the subject positions of wife and mother are expected to take precedence over all others (Blanco 2001; López Hernández 2007).

The association of adulthood with responsibility is another recurring theme, and one that is very closely connected with both age and gendered identities. If retirement marks the onset of later adulthood, then I would suggest that responsibility separates young adulthood from 'middle' adulthood for these participants. Elsa described it this way:

Extract 42

1   I think that from ... from adolescence until you reach the stage of ...
2   of adulthood, is the most enjoyable [time]. After that ... when you
3   become an adult is when responsibilities begin. (Elsa, Interview 4)

Elsa claimed that she is happy as an adult, even though adulthood has brought many more responsibilities with it (Elsa, Interview 4). Adela also spoke of the responsibilities that come with adulthood, particularly obligations that women have as mothers. She referred to "certain burdens that Mexican society itself makes us feel," adding that "as a mother you have to be there at every moment" (Adela, Interview 3). In the traditional breakdown of gender roles in Mexico, such as we saw in the cases of Hector and Felix, men are thought to have the obligation to provide for the family economically and women the responsibility for running the household, raising the children, and waiting on their husbands (Blanco 2001; López Hernández 2007). However, since many women have become economically active in order to contribute to the family economy or for motives of personal growth, they can no longer attend to all the needs of every member of the family in the multiple activities they had formerly undertaken (Sandoval Ávila 2002). And, in view of the fact that men seem to have largely remained reluctant to share household chores and childcare, it is the grandmothers who often step in to offer support to their daughters in carrying out these responsibilities (Guijarro Morales 2001; Partida 2004; Zermeño 2005).

7.2.5 Connecting the pieces

The four 'midlife' women, Elsa, Gilda, Adela and Berta, all convey a sense of satisfaction with their present life positions, seeming neither to yearn for the past nor to be more than usually preoccupied about the future (Andrews 1999; Tulle-Winton 1999). Their stories are tales of progress, in which they envision their lives as moving steadily in an upward direction.

They are studying English for similar reasons, either finishing a task begun earlier in their lives, in the case of Gilda and Adela, or initiating one they had hoped to

accomplish before now, in the case of Elsa and Berta. While they each cite the obvious advantages of being able to speak English, such benefits tend to be removed from the practicalities of their present-day lives. From my perspective, it seems that learning English constitutes a means for them to acquire cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977) and, as such, is part of their enactment of age and the construction of their identity as 'midlife' adults.

The women share the belief that languages are best learned early on in life because younger people are better able to absorb new knowledge and their lives are less complicated. Nevertheless, they point out that adults are often more focused, more motivated and more serious than adolescents or young adults when it comes to the task of studying a foreign language. Such 'adultist' attitudes may well have contributed to a sense of separateness from the younger students (Neustadter 2002). This division is also evident in the use of "we" and "they" in their descriptions of classroom relations. At the same time, the 'midlife' women positioned themselves as different from the older adults in their groups. In general, decline discourses appeared less often among this group of participants, whose focus is primarily on the present and for whom the future is largely a promising one.

In the larger worlds in which they live, the 'midlife' adult women have taken up or been assigned a number of subject positions. Foremost among them are their professional and gendered identities, which frequently compete with each other in a society where, until recently, tradition has tended to discourage Mexican women from assuming these dual positions (Zermeño 2005). When women have insisted on doing so, they have been compelled to demonstrate both in the workplace and at home that they can fulfill all the corresponding obligations. This has engendered different kinds of conflict.

In addition to accepting the responsibility they equate with adulthood, the 'midlife' women displayed a concern with keeping to the tacit timetable that indicates what conduct is appropriate at different moments in the life course. This

often occasioned a measure of anxiety, for the timetable is still more rigid in Mexico than in the US or the UK, despite changes that are recently taking place.

The participants all constructed an age identity as 'midlife' adults that was clearly distinct from that of both younger and older adults, despite the fact that, in chronological terms, the age range among them spanned 25 years. Based on what I have learned from my fieldwork, I am led to reaffirm my contention that it is the assumption of responsibility that constitutes the onset, and retirement the end, of what these participants call 'adulthood.' Of particular interest for this thesis is the fact that the women do not recognize any division within the adult category that corresponds to 'middle age.'

7.3 Conclusion

The overall findings to emerge in the stories Elsa, Gilda, Adela and Berta tell coincide with those that came to light in the stories of the older adults, in the sense that they respond to the same basic research questions posed initially. Nevertheless, the specific ways in which the construction of age plays out for the 'midlifers' distinguish them from both the older and younger adults. Their tales reveal how they enact their age identity and enhance our understanding of the bearing age has on adult language learners. The following observations adhere to the outline of general findings appearing in the preceding chapter; however, the focus is on the particularities relevant to 'middle' adulthood.

The impact of age on the language learning experience varies according to where each person positions her/himself in the lifespan.
For the 'midlife' women, learning English at this moment of their lives satisfies the desire to accomplish something that is particularly meaningful to each of them. They are not, like the older adults in this study, looking for leisure-time activities for, with the exception of Gilda, they are busy working and caring for their families. However, they have decided to use whatever extra time they have at the moment either to work towards a new goal or one they have had since childhood. While they suggest that career opportunities might open up for them in

the future if they know English, the 'here-and-now' benefits appear to be tied more closely to the prestige associated with the language and to the identities they wish to construct for themselves as 'adults.' Again, I find the key concern is the acquisition of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977).

The beliefs and attitudes EFL learners have about age and second language acquisition have an effect on their language learning experience.

The 'midlife' participants, like the older adults, are convinced that the younger university students possess a greater ability to learn new languages. Nonetheless, they contend that their own motivation, resolution and dedication to the task can offset any cognitive advantages the students may have. Although the design of this study does not allow for conclusions to be drawn regarding the effects of such factors on the linguistic outcomes of the course, certainly the more serious attitude to language learning of the 'midlife' adults was in evidence in their enactment of age in the classroom, distinguishing them from their young adult companions.

The co-construction of age in the classroom context is rooted in the prevailing cultural discourses of age.

Elsa, Gilda, Adela and Berta all positioned themselves and were positioned by their classmates and teachers as 'adults,' a vague, rather imprecise category that hovers between 'young adulthood' and 'old age.' Gullette remarked, "Once those in the years between young and old had no name because they were the most powerful and unclassifiable; the norm, unseen" (2004: 95-96). I would contend that this still describes the situation in Mexico, where 'middle' adulthood has only recently begun to take on the ageist tint of present-day Anglophone cultural discourses. While occasional signs of decline ideology surfaced in the behavior of the women participants, it was their manifestation of adultism that provided a clearer indication of the presence of ageist attitudes in the classroom.

Like the other participants in the study, the issue of age-appropriacy weighed heavily on the 'midlifers.' Yet part of what has been learned in this study is that what comprises age-appropriacy varies for each age group. In the case of the

'midlife' women, it manifested itself as a concern with accomplishing particular things or reaching certain goals within a determined time frame. Such reliance on chronological age as the sole reference for judging proper behavior can lead to the generation of ageist stereotypes (Hazan 1994).

Both present and prior life circumstances have an impact on the language learning experience.

Learning English is part of the identity construction of the 'midlife' women and of their ongoing progress narratives. As such, its significance goes beyond acquiring expertise in the language. Having overcome obstacles in the past in order to reach the place where they currently find themselves, they are perhaps the most comfortable of all the participants in the study with their present life circumstances.

The construction of the age identity of language learners occurs both within the classroom and in the world beyond it, moving back and forth between the two.

Part of the enactment of their 'midlife' age identity is evident in the way the women demonstrated a sense of responsibility both in and out of the classroom. They approached the language learning experience much as they approach the other obligations they have taken on in their personal and professional lives, with the maturity and seriousness that for them constitutes being an adult, as opposed to being a young person. It also distinguishes them from older adults, whom they perceive as having shed the burden of professional activities and some, but not all (as we have seen), of their family responsibilities.

Age as a subject position is interlinked with other subject positions in adult language learners.

As the women have aged into 'middle' adulthood, their professional and gendered identities have come increasingly into conflict. The roles of family members in Mexico follow strict gender lines. Because the father is responsible for providing economically for his family, his professional and gendered identities do not normally clash. He exercises the power and his position is supreme. The mother,

on the other hand, is expected to provide absolute love and willingly sacrifice herself for her family. Herein lie the seeds of conflict, for any needs and desires of her own are necessarily subordinate to those of other family members. In the case of the women in this study, learning English fell under the category of a personal desire or ambition and hence had to be carefully juggled with their 'primary' responsibilities to their families. To the extent that this was successfully done, the language learning experience furnished them with a sense of satisfaction and contributed to their construction of new identities.

The four women each positioned themselves as an adult, an amorphous category that is basically defined by what it is not, that is, neither 'young ' nor 'old.' Perhaps because of the broad and somewhat nebulous character of 'middle' adulthood in Mexico, the stories of these participants contain more similarities than differences with respect to their experience of age. For each of them, it is the assumption of responsibility that signaled the beginning of their adulthood and it will be retirement that denotes its end. Despite finding themselves at different points along the trajectory towards old age, their assessment of where they currently are coincided in an overall satisfaction with their present life positions (Coupland 2001a). In the following chapter, the construction of young adulthood comes to life in the story of a university student. His narrative leads to some final reflections about later, 'middle' and young adulthood.

Chapter 8

Constructing Age in Young Adulthood

8.1 Introduction

The present chapter is about David. As the only young person to participate in the study, his story provides a single, but telling example of the construction of young adulthood in Mexico. After first giving a short biographical sketch of David's life, I turn to focal points in his audio-taped narrative accounts, our interviews, and my classroom observation notes to illustrate his enactment of age both in and out of the classroom setting. I end with reflections on David's construction of his identity as a young adult, and then connect his story to those of the 'middle' and older adults as a way of drawing the three data chapters to a close.

8.2 David's story

8.2.1 Sketch of David's life

At the time of the study, David was a 23-year-old university student majoring in applied mathematics and computer science. Although he had finished the regular course of studies, he still had to pass the final examinations in two subjects he had failed, fulfill the language requirement, and write a thesis in order to graduate. Thus, he was slightly older than the other university students in the sixth-level English class where I observed him. He lives with his mother, who has been widowed since David was 4 years old. An older sister is married and lives nearby. His mother acquired a new partner four years after being widowed but, although this person lives with them, he did not assume the role of stepfather and, in fact, has always had a strained relationship with David, according to David's own account (David, Interview 3). David's mother has worked hard over the years to provide her children with a home and to satisfy their basic needs. She was employed in a low-level administrative job in a public school from the age of 16

until her retirement at 49. She now supplements her small pension by selling candy and sweets at a nearby school and by selling sweaters and baby clothes that she knits. The straitened circumstances of David's home life are reminiscent of Hector and Felix's own early years.

David's mother obtained a scholarship for him to study in a private primary school through her connections in the Ministry of Education. He then attended public schools for both *secundaria* (equivalent to US middle school) and *preparatoria* (equivalent to US high school). Starting the university proved to be a watershed moment in his life. David put it this way: "Actually, I feel that it was like a big leap to go to the university ... not just in the academic sense but also from a personal standpoint" (David, Interview 3). He spoke often in the interviews of the close friends he has made in his years at the university.

David's plans for the future are rather nebulous. Although he talked about getting a job after completing his undergraduate degree, he does not seem to have any specific professional goals. He also mentioned the possibility of going abroad for graduate school, yet it is not clear that he has the required academic standing or the means to finance such a venture, for he has never worked. Considering his mother's limited economic resources, it is unlikely that she can continue to support him unless he lives at home.

8.2.2 The goal of learning English

David claimed to be taking English classes because he hopes to study or work abroad after graduation. He also talked about wanting to read a novel in English some time. Yet when I asked him whether he consulted literature in the field of computer science in English, he told me that, having finished the course of studies, he no longer has any need to read. What proved most interesting in our conversation is what David did not mention, namely, that he must pass the final examination of the sixth-level course in order to receive a certificate of proficiency in English that is a requirement for graduation for computer science majors. Thus, David appears to value English for its worth as symbolic or cultural

capital (Bourdieu 1977) rather than for its immediate utility to him in obtaining his college degree. This omission intrigued me, for it gave David's story a certain quixotic tenor that I encountered subsequently in other parts of his narrative.

8.2.3 The construction of age: in the classroom

Although he claimed it is never too late to learn a new language, David considers early childhood to be the best time to begin learning one (David, Interview 1). He remarked that if very young children are exposed to two languages, they may mix them up for a time but will eventually sort them out. He added that once they get to primary school, they will necessarily become more proficient in Spanish, but will have a head start in acquiring the second language.

Referring to his own case, he stated that because he started studying English in primary school, he has had an advantage over those classmates who only began to learn the language in the university. He also commented that, in his view, the older members of the group probably have even greater difficulties learning a language "because they may have stopped studying for a long time" and "it's like starting to use something again that you haven't used in a long while" (David, Interview 1).

While David considered his English to be above average in the group, he acknowledged that he has a problem with speaking (David, Interviews 1 and 2). He told me he thinks he just needs more practice. Nevertheless, he chose to participate minimally in the lessons, thus missing many opportunities to practice speaking. When he did respond in class, he made frequent mistakes, and I judged his proficiency to be slightly lower than that of the other students in the group.[35] David insisted that when the time comes and he needs to speak English, for example in a job interview, he is sure that he will be able to because he "won't have any choice" (David, Interview 2). Again, this comment led me to wonder if perhaps David's appraisal of his real-life situation did not border on the fanciful.

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[35] This assessment proved to be a valid one, as David did not pass the sixth-level course.

Enactment of age: examining classroom activities

David was a student in the same sixth-level course as Adela and Gilda (see Chapter 7). Two teachers, Martin and Ramon, gave lessons on alternate days, using Student Book 3 (2003) of the *American Headway* series. As mentioned in Chapter 5, this textbook series attempts to capture the interest of the adult and young adult market. However, the content and activities of *American Headway* are only marginally successful in appealing to university-age students such as David, for the global focus of the series targets persons with a wider experience of the world than that generally found in the student population of this public Mexican university. David, for example, has never traveled out of the country nor has he ever held a job. I recorded the following incident in my classroom observation notes:

Class 21, May 12, 2004

Time	Activity	David
10'	Exercise 1: "The First Day of Vacation" (*American Headway 3*, Unit 11, 82) discussion of hotels	David [D] says that he has never stayed in a hotel. He either camps out or stays with relatives when he goes on vacation.
	Exercise 2: listening (tape) comprehension exercises T - Whole group check	D volunteers response

According to the publishers of *American Headway*, this type of content is intended to touch on the aspirations, rather than the experience, of young adults in developing countries like Mexico (Gray 2002). On the other hand, the classroom activities developed by the teachers, in particular Ramon, were as a rule directed specifically to university-age students in the lessons I observed.

Although David attended the English course regularly, he participated very little in the ongoing activities in comparison with his classmates. In the lessons taught by Ramon, he responded when called on but only occasionally volunteered to answer. Because Martin generally had the students self-select when he asked questions, David's participation was even more limited in those lessons. He seldom took part in role-play or singing activities. In our interviews, David explained to me that he prefers to observe rather than call attention to himself and that he tries not to stand out in a group (David, Interviews 2 and 4). In the following extract from one of his narrative accounts, he expanded on this idea:

Extract 43

```
1    And it's also kind of funny … or interesting … to observe how all of
2    us sit way in the back right up against the wall. Sometimes we students
3    have the idea that only show-offs or nerds sit up front … that is, those
4    who participate and raise their hand all the time and are always talking
5    … and the 'brains' … and, I don't know, we put them down, OK …
6    we label them … and in a way we even treat them badly because it's
7    like they want to stand out a lot … or … I don't know, but it's typical
8    of 'good little children' that they sit up front and … and everybody
9    else, well, [they sit] wherever they want, OK? Personally, I mean, I sit
10   in the back because I like to observe. … I don't … I don't like to feel
11   that someone is behind me … or … I don't know, it's like you have a
12   different perspective … broader … from my point of view, in the back.
13   So, it's just because of that I almost always sit way in the back and in a
14   corner right next to the window. (David, Narrative account 9)
```

In lines 1-8 of this extract, David gave voice to a deeply entrenched norm of student culture, namely, that it is not socially acceptable to show off in class. The corollary of this is that it is not 'cool' to perform well academically, at least not publicly, for that is tantamount to being a nerd (Bishop et al. 2004). This coincides with Bethan Benwell and Elizabeth H. Stokoe's (2002; 2005) findings in a study of students in a post-compulsory university setting in the UK. They noted a resistance to or distancing from academic identity, that is, "students co-construct the discursive limits in which being 'too clever' is problematic: being a student seems to necessitate being 'average' and not standing out" (Benwell and Stokoe 2005: 138). Challenging the teacher, joking and doing the minimum amount of work are connected with popularity. Siân Preece (2009) encountered

similar identity constructions in multilingual university students from working-class black and minority ethnic backgrounds in London. While these students also resisted identification with the academic community, she observed that gender accounted for some interesting differences in the enactment of 'laddish' masculinities and 'ladette' femininities. Thus, it is perhaps no surprise to find that this norm, generally associated with high school adolescents, still has currency among young university students in Mexico. It helps shed light on David's stated preference for sitting unobtrusively in the back of the classroom, and observing rather than taking an active part in the activities (lines 9-14).

The significance of peer culture and its corresponding peer pressure is a theme that runs throughout David's narrative and is a determining factor in his enactment of age. He revealed that he is afraid of making mistakes in front of other people, commenting, "I don't know … it's hard for me to speak, and 'God, I messed up.' In other words … 'Why did I bother to open my mouth?' … like, oh, no." (David, Interview 2). He also stressed that the fact that some students participate more in the lessons does not necessarily mean they are better (David, Narrative account 1).

Enactment of age: in relations with fellow students

David invariably sat with students of his own age group. He remarked that he was acquainted with many of them from previous English courses. When asked to work in pairs or small groups, he always chose teammates sitting nearby. Although there were only about 12 students in the class, David never interacted with any of the older members of the group. He made the following comments in one of our interviews:

Extract 44

D = David; P = Patricia

1	P:	OK, I wanted to ask you about your classmates.
2	D:	Uh huh.
3	P:	Because I see that there are several who are very young …
4		around 18 …

5	D:	Yeah … most of them.
6	P:	And then there are older people.
7	D:	Uh huh.
8	P:	What about you? How … where do you fit … in … in … among
9		them?
10	D:	Well, I feel I … I hang out more with the young people.
11	P:	Uh huh.
12	D:	Because maybe … I don't know … with Adela … well, I do say
13		hello to her … but, I mean … I don't … I don't know … I don't
14		talk to her … I don't … I don't get together [with her].
15	P:	Right. And what about Gilda … Gilda, for example?
16	D:	Yes, she strikes me as interesting … for example, because she
17		has traveled … because of her comments in class … she is a
18		person … I don't know … the way she is … catches my
19		attention … but, no, I haven't had the opportunity to … to talk
20		… to go up to her [to talk]. But, well, I mean, yes, I … I hang
21		out more with the young people. (David, Interview 3)

In this extract, David positioned himself unequivocally as a young person, even though he is slightly older than the majority of the university students in the group (lines 10 and 20-21). There is a clear division for him between the younger and older English students, although he made no distinction between the 'midlife' adults and older adults. From his remarks, it would seem that he has no particular interest in talking to Adela (lines 12-14). However, he indicated that he is intrigued by Gilda, although he has not made any overtures to strike up a conversation with her (lines 16-20). His comments tend to confirm the 'midlife' and older adults' appreciation that they must take the initiative in establishing relations with the younger students (see Chapters 6 and 7).

In another interview, David speculated on what it might be like to be an older student in an English class.

Extract 45

1	I feel that within the atmosphere of the classroom, yes, they probably
2	feel like "My gosh, Here I am and everyone else is young. I am the old
3	person …the oldest here, right?" So, I feel that it can work two ways,
4	OK. It either motivates them … or it gets to them … or when they slip
5	up … well, they feel worse, OK. Well "My gosh, I messed up badly …
6	and here I am the old person. What am I doing here? I should be
7	resting, right … I don't know … I shouldn't be here." But the other

8   way, OK, is that it pushes them ... yes, no, that is, "I can do it and I
9   know I can do it." Let's say that I've found both things here in
10   Acatlán. (David, Interview 1)

In David's view, being older in a classroom of young people can have two possible effects, either motivating them or discouraging them (lines 3-5). He imagined what older students might say and used their voices to express either the embarrassment they experience at making mistakes (lines 5-7) or the impetus they feel to succeed (lines 8-9). The picture he gave of older students would seem to be the product of his own reflections rather than of personal contact with these people.

Both extracts (44 and 45) demonstrate the kind of insularity that the older participants in the study perceived in their younger classmates (see Chapter 6, sections 6.2.3 and 6.3.3, and Chapter 7, section 7.2.3). This may be attributed to what some authors have observed to be the increasing tendency in contemporary society for young people to spend less time interacting with adults and more time interacting with their peers (Eckert 1997a; Reguillo 2001; Feixa 2003; Dayrell 2005). In fact, avoidance has been identified as one of the signal characteristics of younger-to-older adult communication in many parts of the world.

> There is an underlying ambivalence or tension among young people when interacting with older interlocutors in that they are prone to keep their distance and also avoid such interactions. (McCann et al. 2005: 304)

Enactment of age: in relations with the teachers
Of all the participants in the study, David had the least amount of personal interaction with his teachers. This is likely a consequence of his limited participation in classroom activities as well as his desire to remain inconspicuous. Nevertheless, his audio-taped narrative accounts contained extensive comments on the two teachers, their styles, and their strengths and weaknesses (David, Narrative accounts 1, 2, 3, 8, 10, 11). His opinion of them oscillated from good to bad and back again as the course progressed. At times he praised one teacher and found fault with the other. A few weeks later he would recognize new qualities in the teacher he had criticized and find defects in the other. Although his comments

were often incisive, they never referred to any personal contact with either teacher.

When I asked the teachers to give their appraisal of David at the end of the course, they coincided in their view of him as quiet and reserved (Martin, Interview and Ramon, Interview). Martin complained about David's apathy and lack of interest in the class (Martin, Interview). Ramon took a more tolerant view, finding David responsible and interested in his own progress in English. However, he mentioned that he was often distant, not always joining the group in the classroom activities (Ramon, Interview).

David's reluctance to connect with either of the teachers on a personal level likely reflects the same tendency to avoid involvement with the older students in the group. In his case, it is a clearly identifiable facet of his enactment of age as a young adult.

8.2.4 The construction of age: beyond the classroom

To understand how David constructed his age as a language learner, and what meaning learning English had for him at the time of this study, it is valuable to explore the broader context of his life. In this section, I describe some characteristic displays of David's construction of his age identity that occurred during the course of our interviews, and I focus on the interconnections between David's subject position as a young adult and his other identities.

Competing discourses of age

In his enactment of age, David appears to hover between his new-found autonomy as a young adult and his continuing dependence on his mother for economic support. His present contentment with the life of a university student is occasionally at variance with his desire to press forward to a future in which he expects to achieve full independence. These competing discourses are set against David's view of the life course as a progress-decline narrative, making that a good place to begin this section.

Decline narratives and progress narratives

David first sketched the life course horizontally as a series of curves reflecting the ups and downs of his life. He then decided that the drawing needed to be rotated so that the spiral moved vertically in an upward direction starting with his birth, suggesting that he sees his life as having followed a path of continued progress to date (see Figure 8.1). Like the 'midlife' women in this study, David did not extend his representation of the life course beyond the moment in which we had our interviews. However, when asked, he identified different life stages, beginning with childhood, from birth to 10 or 12, followed by adolescence, ending at around 18 or 20. He classified a relatively long period lasting from the age of 20 to 35 as young adulthood. The next stage he called adulthood or maturity, from 35 to 45, followed by old age, from 45 to 60. David referred to those over 60 as *ancianos* ('aged persons') (David, Interview 4).

Figure 8.1 David's life course

David's perception of the life course differed in significant ways from the division of the life stages made by the older and 'middle' adult participants. Not only does he envisage young adulthood as spanning a lengthy 15-year period, but he also situates the onset of old age at a much earlier moment in the lifespan, at 45. In the

following brief extracts, David talked about how he imagines himself at the age of 45 or 50.

Extract 46

```
1    So, well … I suppose that, like everything, right, you need to know …
2    when to retire … in time. So, I imagine that after … between 40 and
3    50 … I … well … I'd better go … if I've been working such a long
4    time. (David, Interview 3)
```

Extract 47

D = David; P = Patricia

```
1    D:    Maybe when I'm 50, I won't be able to work. So …
2    P:    Why wouldn't you be able to work?
3    D:    Because, well, maybe I'll be tired. (David, Interview 4)
```

David envisions young adulthood as a period of personal and professional progress. He spoke of it as the time in his life when he expects to get married, have children, embark on his career and achieve economic stability. Perhaps that is why he sees it as such a prolonged period of time, for the progress narrative ends here for him. In effect, for David, life declines early on. At the moment, however, his life has been one of unbroken progress. The only decline he mentioned is the ability to learn a foreign language, which he believes diminishes after childhood (David, Interview 1).

Dependence and independence

Bourdieu (2003) remarked that it is erroneous to speak of young people as if they formed a single social unit or group in view of the fact that major differences exist among them. To illustrate this, he called attention to same-age young adult workers and students, emphasizing that these two subgroups have few interests or characteristics in common. According to Bourdieu (ibid.), students, for example, are characterized by a kind of provisional irresponsibility; for some things they are adults and for others they are children. This apparent contradiction is reflected in the way adult society positions students and the way students position themselves. Bourdieu (ibid.) noted that, even among the popular or working

classes in France, young people are given a 'margin' as long as they are studying, after which time they are expected to assume full adult responsibilities. The same, I believe, holds true in contemporary Latin America where young urban workers, peasants and members of indigenous communities move almost seamlessly from childhood to adulthood (Flores 2002). For students, however, this transition is delayed as long as possible. I have observed that even in homes with less than favorable economic conditions, young adult students in Mexico often expect their parents to provide them not only with basic necessities but also with leisure time goods and luxuries, and the parents comply as a matter of course (Zermeño 2005). At the same time, my experience is that these students typically turn down part-time jobs, considering them too poorly paid to be worth their while (ibid.).

David's situation fits this pattern to a large extent for he is entirely dependent on his mother for economic support. Interestingly, while he never mentioned feeling any concern about the burden this might represent, he criticized his sister for continuing to receive help from their mother after her marriage and the completion of her university education (David, Interview 4). In this, he is acknowledging what Julia Isabel Flores (2002) has indicated, namely, that at the end of their student years, young people are expected to assume their responsibilities as adults. That David envisions achieving his own financial independence after graduation is made clear in his description of the life course, as was seen in the previous section.

While still economically dependent on his mother, David exercises a great deal of autonomy in his personal life. He is no longer accountable to his family for his conduct or decisions, and instead looks to his circle of friends for guidance and approval. Like most of his contemporaries, David's subject position as a university student is characterized by the rather curious interplay of emotional independence and economic dependence (Dayrell 2005; Zermeño 2005).

Living in the present and living in the future

David lives very much in the present moment, as is typical of most young adults. According to Néstor García Canclini (2004), young people have little or no sense of history or connection with the past. The sensation that everyone is living in the same moment and that everything is occurring in real time is fortified by the technological advances of the day. Television, telephones, videoconferences and chats, along with video and virtual reality games, simulators, and other digital pastimes, create a digital experience of (artificially) simultaneous times in which there is no past or future (Feixa 2003). Moreover, the experience of constant social change has contributed to the difficulty young people have in visualizing where they come from, what they bring with them from the past, and at the same time of projecting future horizons and imagining alternative lives (Lechner 2004). As a consequence, young people are firmly anchored in the present.

This would seem to apply to David, for whom being a university student largely defines the moment he is living and how he constructs his identity as a young adult. He spoke at some length in our interviews of his group of friends, of their interests and solidarity, and of how these years in the university have signified personal as well as academic growth for him. At the same time, David had little to say about his childhood, with the exception of remarking on the impact of his father's death when he was four-years-old. And with regard to the future, David painted a positive, although still remote, scenario for himself.

Extract 48

```
1    I'd like to see myself married ... well ... that is, I don't know, right
2    now I am 23. By 33 I'd like to be ... already married ... and to have at
3    least one child ... probably have a ... a stable job ... let's say, have
4    experience by then ... and ... small children ... I don't know ...
5    maybe two, three, four years old. In fact my ... my idea is to get
6    married ... at 28 ... more or less ... after having traveled, after have
7    worked in different places ... after having known ... I don't know ...
8    people, places. That is, getting married right now is not my priority ...
9    and within ten years, for example, I don't know, to have a house and
10   be paying it off ... to have, I don't know, the possibility of having a
11   car ... and maybe it won't be mine either ... but to be paying for it ...
12   to be seeing to my children's education ... to my family's needs, in
```

13   other words, to be making a home and family. (David, Interview 3)

The aspirations David has are common to the group of young men Salguero Velásquez (2006) interviewed in the metropolitan area of Mexico City. He found that they all harbor hopes of achieving a better life, both economically and socially, for themselves and for their children, despite the economic realities of a country where such expectations are met with ever increasing difficulty. He commented that the style of life they aspire to includes owning their own home, sending their children to private schools, and other visible signs that they are 'successful,' even when the tradeoff is often a life of constant tension, sacrifices, and frequent confrontation with the impossibility of meeting many of their goals. Salguero Velásquez (ibid.) called theirs a world of mystification, illusions and dreams.

Although David mentioned needing to complete the requirements for graduation, he never pinpointed a time when he expected this to occur. He still was not clear on whether he would look for a job or go to graduate school after finishing his studies. Both options appealed to him in a vague way, but he had no concrete plans for his immediate future at the time of our interviews, confirming my impression that his connection to the future is at best a tenuous one.

Age and other identities

As with the other participants in the study, David's age identity as a language learner is interlinked with his other identities and tied to the larger world in which he lives. This is particularly evident in the way David's position as a young adult overlaps in nearly every aspect with his subject position as a university student. He belongs to a kind of school subculture and shares a "student style" (Bourdieu 2003: 148) with a select group of friends. They have similar attitudes and behavior and a need to establish some distance from their families at this moment of their lives, all characteristics typically found in student peer groups in many parts of the world (Bishop et al. 2004). For David, the friendships he has made during his years at the university comprise the most important and gratifying part of his present life. He told me this about his group of friends:

Extract 49

D = David; P = Patricia

1   D: We all started hanging around together and we have become
2   very ... very close, very tight. In fact, now almost everybody in
3   our class[36] at the university knows our group ... well, everybody
4   knows that we are always together, the same people ... that we
5   get along and that, in a certain way ... the group is made [so
6   that] ... when an outsider comes along...it's very difficult for
7   him to fit in. Maybe he'll be there for a while, but just as likely
8   he ... we ourselves will make him feel uncomfortable and he'll
9   end up leaving.
10   P: So you are all in the same major?
11   D: Yes, we're from the same class. Obviously we each have our
12   different beliefs ... different points of view, but, I mean, we get
13   along quite well. ...
14   P: And when you think about the future, do you imagine that you
15   are going to stay in touch?
16   D: I will try to ... that is ... we are so ... I feel ... so close in a way.
17   ... yes, we would remain in contact. ... So, that is what I value
18   right now. (David, Interview 4)

The importance of social connections in David's life as a university student is
made clear in this description of his peer group. "Hanging around together" (line
1) is the way David and his friends, and young people in general, respond to their
need for communication, solidarity, autonomy, affective relations, and above all,
identity (Dayrell 2005). Close friendships make up a fundamental part of the
social life of young adults, and are nurtured by a kind of communication whose
function is "not primarily to exchange information, but to establish or maintain
social identity by sharing experiences and negotiating or affirming the values and
norms of the group" (Corbett 2003: 119). In the case of David's group, this also
involves closing ranks and excluding outsiders, as is seen in lines 5-9. So
important to him are these friendships that David feels certain they will stand the
test of time (lines 16-17). In an earlier interview he told me, "The fact is that I
wouldn't allow [myself] to lose track of my friends" (David, Interview 3).

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[36] The term 'class' (*generación*), as used in this extract, refers to the entire group of students
entering a particular school of the university in the same year.

Although David's subject position as a student was the primary one at the time of this study, it did not carry over into the academic world that provided the setting for the enactment of this identity. During the course of our interviews and in his narrative accounts, David talked about his formal studies only in the most general terms. He did not evince much enthusiasm for his career choice other than mentioning that it should lead to his obtaining a job after graduation. This impassiveness extended to his English classes as well, where his participation, as noted earlier, was minimal. According to Norbert Lechner (2004), it is outside the classroom where young people most often acquire the knowledge, skills and emotional resources they need to get along well in the world of today. This would certainly appear to be true in David's case, for the construction of his identity as a student was achieved primarily through interaction with his peer group whereas the opportunities afforded by the university as an academic institution did not seem to hold much interest for him.

Despite his desire to exercise his new-found autonomy as a young adult, David's subject position in his family remains a deeply-rooted, if discordant part of his identity. The preeminence of the family in Mexican life, alluded to in Chapters 6 and 7, does not preclude the presence of internal strife. David spoke of experiencing friction with every member of his immediate family except his mother. He related a long history of difficulties with his mother's partner, notwithstanding the 15 years he has lived in their home. When talking to me about him, David did not refer to him by name or as his stepfather, but instead said "he" or "my mother's new partner" (David, Interview 3). Although it seems unlikely that David could remember much about his own father, he stressed that his mother's partner "is nothing like my father" (David, Interview 3), making it clear that he has never entertained the notion that this person could occupy a role in the family. After years of conflict, David has now opted to keep his distance, a solution consistent with the desire of young adults for freedom from family ties (Bishop et al. 2004).

Establishing distance has also been the pattern for dealing with his strained relations with his sister and her husband. David commented that his brother-in-law "comes from a different background" (David, Interview 4), tantamount, in this context, to saying that he is socially inferior. Moreover, he added that his brother-in-law is "dark-skinned" (*prieto*), a term that, for Mexicans, encompasses more than mere physical appearance (David, Interview 4). It is an oblique reference to a series of associated, and negatively-viewed, ethnic and cultural characteristics, whose importance as a dimension of social identity in Mexico came to light very vividly in Hector's story (see Chapter 6, section 6.2.4). The remark is also a rather circuitous way of pointing out that David himself is fair-skinned, and thereby positioned as socially advantaged in a culture where the question of ethnicity remains a deeply-ingrained and complex phenomenon (Fortes de Leff 2002). The undertones in David's allusion to ethnicity become evident when considered in the context of present-day Mexico and against the larger backdrop of the social history of the country; this is an example of the 'embedding' I referred to earlier (Chapter 5, section 5.5.4).

With regard to his gender identity, David is grooming himself to take up of the position of head of the household in the future. Salguero Velásquez (2006) comments that, for the young generation of Mexican men, 'being a man' means taking the initiative, setting goals, solving problems, and assuming responsibility for the family, even when the role of economic provider is shared with one's partner. David's comments in all our conversations adhered to this updated version of traditional masculinity. For example, he displayed a greater awareness than either Hector or Felix of the dilemma faced by women of whether to start a career or a family because it is often difficult to do both. He also said that, although 'machismo' has supposedly been eradicated in Mexico, the fact is that women are still subject to physical and psychological abuse in the home, sexual harassment in the workplace and, when applying for a job, often refused access to certain positions and still commonly asked for a pregnancy test. He remarked that although the situation of inequality used to be "more pronounced," there is "still a long way for us to go" (David, Interview 4).

8.2.5 Connecting the pieces

David positioned himself and was positioned by others as a young adult, a category quite separate from childhood and adulthood. He expressed great satisfaction with his life at this stage and, although he expected that he would continue to find fulfillment in the future, he seemed in no hurry to move on. This was also evident in the lack of urgency he manifested with respect to finishing his university studies.

At the time of the study, David's principal interests were his social involvement with his group of friends at the university and, to a lesser extent, completing the coursework in his major needed for graduation. Learning English did not seem to be high on his list of priorities, despite the fact that he must fulfill a language requirement in order to graduate. Taking language classes is, for many university students like David, simply one of several activities they engage in on campus. Although he mentioned the possibility of doing graduate work abroad in the future, for which he would need English, and clearly saw the value of knowing the language as an entrée into the job market, he acknowledged that English was of little practical use for him at the present time. Thus, learning the language for David seems to signify the acquisition of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977), a resource to be called upon in the future. In my view, studying English is a part of his construction of young adulthood only to the extent that it is an activity associated with his identity as a university student and a means of participating in student culture.

David believes early childhood to be the ideal time to learn a new language, but he also emphasized the value of continued practice in developing language skills. In this, he feels advantaged because he began to study English in primary school whereas many of his classmates were studying it for the first time as university students. He is also of the opinion that having been in school virtually all his life puts him in a privileged position with respect to the older members of the class, who may have lost the discipline of study once they stopped going to school. In

general, he sees the trajectory of the life course as progressing upward from infancy through adulthood and then heading into decline around the age of 45.

David's age identity is interlinked with other subject positions, most obviously with that of a student, and more subtly with his gendered and ethnic identities. In the classroom David preferred to be surrounded by other university students, purposely segregating himself from the adults in the group. To a large extent, this was also true of his life beyond the classroom, where his social involvement is primarily with his friends and interaction with family members is often troubled and so kept to a minimum. Still, his desire to be independent of his family is at variance with his current economic dependence on them.

As with the constructions of age as an 'adult' or an 'older adult' that have been explored in this study, young adulthood is a category that must be attenuated, for young people construct particular ways of being young (Dayrell 2005). The temptation that exists to speak of 'young people' as if they constituted a single, unvarying group needs to be resisted, for what it means to be young varies according to the particular sociocultural and historical context, and indeed even within the subgroups sharing that context (Reguillo 2001; Lechner 2004). Moreover, Juarez Dayrell (2005) points out that young adulthood should not be understood as a stage having a predetermined end and much less as a period of preparation which will be surmounted when adult life begins. It is a particular moment in the life course having a value in its own right.

8.3 Conclusion

In this section, I take another look at David's tale, as an instance of the enactment of young adulthood, and link it where applicable to the stories of the 'middle' and older adult participants in an endeavor to formulate a single, comprehensive account of how the age identity of language learners is constructed and what bearing it has on their life experience both in the classroom and beyond it. In this way, the findings of the three data chapters are drawn together, bringing this section of the thesis to a close. The arrangement used to present the general

findings in the preceding two chapters is similarly applicable in David's case, so once again I have availed myself of this format to make the observations that follow.

The impact of age on the language learning experience varies according to where each person positions her/himself in the lifespan.

David positions himself and is positioned by others as a young adult. While he believes that knowing English may be of potential help to him at some point in the future, taking language classes at this moment of his life is basically a part of the way he enacts his identity as a university student. It is what students do. Therefore, his main motivation for studying English is that of acquiring cultural capital (Bourdieu 1977), as is true in a broad sense for every participant in the study. They all showed themselves to be fully cognizant of the prestige that comes with knowing English in Mexico. Yet, as has been seen, this wide-ranging designation plays out differently for each of the age groups.

The beliefs and attitudes EFL learners have about age and second language acquisition have an effect on their language learning experience.

Not surprisingly, David agreed with all the other participants that childhood is the best time to learn a language. With respect to differences among adult learners, he also shared their opinion that the older one becomes, the more difficult it is to acquire a new language. Nevertheless, like the other participants, David recognized that other factors come into play, such as motivation, discipline and dedication, which may cancel out what are perceived to be the detrimental effects of aging.

The co-construction of age in the classroom context is rooted in the prevailing cultural discourses of age.

David positioned himself and was positioned by his teachers and fellow classmates as a 'young adult,' just as the women participants positioned themselves and were positioned by others as 'adults,' and the two other men as 'older adults.' These three constructed age categories, with their variations,

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emerged unequivocally during the course of the study out of the cultural discourses surrounding age that are currently prevalent in Mexico. The basic and most widespread age discourse is that of decline. David, like the other participants, described the life course in terms of a progress-decline narrative, yet compared to the older and 'middle' adults, ageist narratives were almost imperceptible in his case.

Competing discourses of dependence and independence characterize young adulthood in Mexico, particularly as it is constructed by university students like David. Although students struggle to be emotionally independent of their families, they nevertheless expect to be supported financially by them. Both strong family traditions and the precarious economic climate of the country have impeded the development of the kind of autonomy enjoyed by many young adults in the United States and Europe.

Both present and prior life circumstances have an impact on the language learning experience.
David's experience as a young adult learning English is colored by the fact that he is presently a student. Studying languages is part of university student culture yet, because it is seen as an extra activity having no immediate utility, most students do not bring the same drive to the task that they do to their regular courses. David's earlier contact with English in primary school gave him self-confidence and the sense that he had an edge over classmates who were initiating their language studies at a later age.

The construction of the age identity of language learners occurs both within the classroom and in the world beyond it, moving back and forth between the two.
David's enactment of young adulthood revolves almost entirely around his identity as a student. His social interaction with the particular group of friends he has made at the university constitutes the single most important facet of his life at present. Through shared attitudes, interests, and values, David and his friends have constructed an identity as a group that distinguishes them from other groups

at the university. At the same time, they participate in the broader student culture that connects them with the community of university students. The norms of peer culture exercise pressure on David, who found it difficult to take part in the English lessons for fear of standing out or of making a mistake in front of others. His relationship with older people both in and out of the classroom was also affected by his identity as a young adult, for he tended to amplify the differences and to distance himself.

Age as a subject position is interlinked with other subject positions in adult language learners.

David's position as a young adult is tightly interwoven with his identity as a university student. These two subject positions impact his gendered identity, and we see a different kind of masculinity being enacted in David's case from either Hector or Felix's performance of gender. As pointed out earlier, the traditional 'patriarchal model of masculinity' in Mexico is giving way to a more egalitarian one in the young university-educated generation (Salguero Velásquez 2006). 'Maleness,' in this modified version of the Mexican family structure, still entails assuming the primary responsibility for the well-being of one's family, but now incorporates the possibility of sharing the economic and domestic burdens with a partner. David envisions taking up this position in the future.

In the following, concluding chapter, I discuss the findings of the empirical work in light of the conceptual and methodological framework of the thesis and reflect on the significance of what has been learned.

Chapter 9

Final Reflections

9.1 Introduction

The purpose of the research I have reported in this thesis was to explore the ways in which age as socially constructed is experienced by adult EFL learners in Mexico. The investigation began with a review of the literature on the Critical Period Hypothesis in order to find out what has been learned about age in SLA to date that could be useful to me in my study of adult students. I discovered that CPH research does not take into consideration distinctions among adults of different ages nor does it address the social or experiential side of language learning as contemplated in a sociocultural approach to SLA, both of which were precisely the points I wanted to learn about. I then turned to the identity work of discourse-oriented sociolinguists, as informed by social constructionism, to guide me in the study of the enactment of age in social interaction. The empirical phase of the research involved a multi-method in-depth study of a small group of adult Mexican English language learners.

In this final chapter I draw together the main findings that emerged in the course of the research. As an exploratory study, the aim was not so much to arrive at definitive conclusions about the construction of age in adult language learners as to determine what the issues were, to question basic assumptions, to ponder the significance of what emerged, and to point to further directions that might be taken in the search for answers. I first return to the research questions that provided the initial impulse for this study and discuss what I learned. I then reflect on the strengths and limitations of the methodology I developed to explore these issues. The third section of the chapter discusses the implications the findings have for teaching foreign languages, for SLA research and for the field of age studies. The chapter closes with a short reflection on the significance of what was discovered.

9.2 Revisiting the research questions

In this section I review the six questions that delineate the principal issues I wished to explore in the course of the research, followed by a brief description of what was learned.

1. How has age traditionally been looked at in SLA, and what has been learned? I began this study by considering what the extensive debate on the CPH has offered to our understanding of the impact of age on second language development. The question of the applicability of the CPH to second language learning has generated considerable controversy for, although new studies add more and more to what is known about the effects of age on specific aspects of the acquisition process, research to date has not produced conclusive results. While I find the CPH research a valuable source of information on age, I have argued here that it cannot provide clarification of the issues which have occupied me in the present study. I offer the following reasons:

- CPH research concerns child-adult differences and does not take into account distinctions among adults of different ages.
- Evidence to date does not support the existence of a biologically determined critical period for adult language learners. It is more likely that maturational constraints work in tandem with a series of affective, psychological and social factors.
- An underlying assumption exists that the ability to learn a second language declines with age in adults, although no indisputable evidence has been provided to sustain this position.
- CPH studies invariably treat age as a one-dimensional chronological or biological factor, an essentialist view of age that overlooks many of its more complex aspects.
- The age factor is isolated from other social dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, and social class.
- The psycholinguistic perspective underlying CPH research tends to discount the social aspects of language learning.

Because the richness furnished by a more social view of age could not be tapped by pursuing research in the CPH tradition, I adopted an alternative approach.

2. Can age be seen as socially constructed?

In order to explore the social side of age, I found social constructionism the most valuable perspective from which to do so because the philosophical underpinnings of this approach enabled me to move away from essentialist notions of age and to view it as constructed through discursive interaction in a specific cultural context and a particular historical moment. Because of its focus on the collaborative construction of reality, social constructionism provides a framework for understanding more clearly how people give meaning to age and make sense of their experience through discourse and in their relationships with others.

Moreover, many studies carried out by contemporary discourse-oriented sociolinguists of other social dimensions, such as ethnicity and gender, have been based on a social constructionist perspective on reality. The results have brought greater depth to our understanding of these phenomena. I contend that, similarly, viewing age as socially constructed enhances our comprehension and appreciation of its many complexities.

3. How is age socially constructed throughout the life course?

People construct age in discursive interaction, drawing on the cultural discourses available to them to position themselves and to position others. The prevalent age discourse in contemporary Western society, including urban Mexico, is that of decline. This translates into ageist discourses in many forms that provide the principal framework people utilize to interpret the experience of aging and to enact their age identity. The narratives or stories people tell play a key role in this process. Age identity cannot easily be separated from a person's other identities; age is often interwoven with gender, ethnicity, and social class. The resulting complex is multiple, fragmented, changeable and often a site of struggle.

What I learned in my search for answers to this and the previous two questions formed the conceptual basis of the empirical work that followed. It is important to note that throughout the empirical phase of the study I found myself returning again and again to the literature to refine specific points that needed clarification.

4. How is age co-constructed in the EFL classroom context and in the personal narratives of adult language learners?

The data generated by interviews, classroom observations and the audio-taped narrative accounts of the participants in the study, contributed to a better understanding of how age is constructed by English language learners in Mexico. It became clear in their narratives and in their interaction with the teacher and classmates that these language students positioned themselves and were positioned by others in the three general categories of older, 'middle' (or merely 'adult') and young adults. This is noteworthy because there were no disputed cases, suggesting that many tacit cultural discourses are at play. Not surprisingly, these three age categories bear only a tenuous relationship to chronological age. Other factors were seen to carry more weight. For instance, Berta is closer in chronological age to both Hector and Felix than to any of the 'middle' adult participants, yet she is unequivocally positioned as a 'middle' adult. This is likely to change once she stops working, for what emerged in the study is that one of the significant factors in determining the boundary between 'middle' and later adulthood among these participants is retirement from the work force. At the other end of the spectrum, the divide between young and 'middle' adulthood seems to revolve around the issue of responsibility. Young adults, specifically university students such as David, are perceived as being largely free of the economic and emotional responsibilities that family and work entail.

An unexpected finding for me was the discovery that 'middle' adulthood is at present an undefined category in Mexico, distinguishable only by the frontiers that separate it at one end from young adulthood and at the other from later adulthood. In other words, 'midlife' adults are positioned simply as 'not old' and 'not young.' In this, they do not share the decline discourses associated with 'middle

age' in Anglophone cultures (Gullette 2004). The four women participants in the study, as 'midlifers' in Mexico, have assumed the responsibilities of jobs and families, and are chiefly concerned with issues of age-appropriacy that are closely linked to a tacit timetable which shapes their progress narratives. Because of the sense of urgency this engenders, they approached their English classes with a seriousness they found wanting in their classmates. This brought about occasional manifestations of 'adultist' attitudes toward the younger students and ageist, dismissive attitudes toward the older ones.

Ageism in its various manifestations, including adultism, ageist humor, and age segregation, surfaced in the classroom context in the manner in which the older and younger participants positioned others and were positioned by them as well. David's membership in a peer group of other young students was the most salient identity he enacted during the course of the fieldwork. As a young adult, he distanced himself physically and avoided interaction with the 'middle' and older adults, including the teachers. By his own account, David's self-segregation extends to the world outside the classroom as well.

The older adults' construction of their age identity also reflected the societal ageism that is deeply ingrained in Mexican culture. While at times Hector and Felix displayed a vigorous resistance to ageist discourses, at others they appeared to have internalized them by accepting the negative construals of later adulthood. In their English classes, they positioned themselves and were positioned as 'outsiders.' This carried over into their lives beyond the classroom, where as older adults they were often marginalized, no longer considered major players in mainstream society.

5. What beliefs and attitudes do adult language learners have about age and about language learning, and how do these beliefs and attitudes intersect with the way age is enacted?

I found that the participants in all age categories share similar beliefs about the difficulties involved in learning a language in adulthood. They indicated that as

adult learners they are disadvantaged when compared to children. Moreover, they maintained that the ability to learn a language diminishes with age, moving in a downward spiral throughout adulthood. Despite this, they all believed that any age-related cognitive shortcomings could be counterbalanced by dedication, motivation and hard work. That they are convinced they can succeed is evidenced by the fact that they are enrolled in English classes. I am aware that another population undoubtedly exists of people who are not taking language classes because they do not believe it possible to be successful as adult learners. It might be interesting to investigate this population in order to add to the knowledge available about the beliefs and attitudes of adults regarding age and language learning.

Although the particular motivation of each of the participants for studying English at this moment of their lives was largely contingent on the age group in which they positioned themselves, and generally linked to their prior life experiences, in the final analysis it came down to a question of acquiring cultural capital. The experience of learning English, in every case, meant more than mastering the language for them, for being language students was part of the construction of their complex identities both in the classroom and beyond it. The way in which the language learning experience carried over into other facets of their lives varied according to where each person positioned her/himself in the lifespan and was colored by their prior life circumstances. This was one of the outcomes of the empirical phase of the study.

Having said that, I wish to clarify that, while determining the degree to which prevalent ageist ideas and attitudes directly affect the linguistic outcomes of a language course was beyond the scope of this particular investigation, the issue of success in language learning is one that should not be entirely discounted. Further research correlating course results and the age of the students would be a valuable complement to the current study, provided that the interpretation took into account the limitations highlighted here of chronological age as a reliable indicator of a person's position in the life course.

6. How is age as a subject position interlinked with other subject positions in adult language learners?

Teasing out the age identity of the people who took part in the study from their other identities proved to be a challenge. Gender, for example, played a more decisive role in shaping the construction of later, 'middle' and young adulthood of the participants than I had anticipated. Cultural discourses surrounding masculinity and femininity exert considerable power over people of all ages in Mexico, dictating acceptable behavior both in the family and in the work place. By the same token, professional identity turned out to be a key factor for the 'middle' and older adults in this study, and identity as a university student a comparable one for David. Ethnicity and social status were also important considerations in some of the cases. The interplay of these multiple subject positions with that of language learner provided the basis for the ongoing construction of the participants' age identities.

As older adult men, Hector and Felix provide good examples of traditional Mexican masculinity. Their professional and gendered identities afforded them the social prestige they enjoyed up until their retirement from the work force. However, since that time they have experienced difficulty commanding recognition from others, often finding themselves positioned on the periphery of mainstream society. Their enactment of age reflects the conflict that this situation has generated both in the language classroom and beyond it.

As women, the 'midlife' participants have not benefited from recent changes in the family structure in Mexico for they have all had to struggle against entrenched male-oriented traditions in order to combine their professional lives with their subject positions as women. The difficulties escalated in the cases where the women were expected to subordinate their positions as professionals to those of wife and mother. This extended to their desire to satisfy personal ambitions by taking English classes.

Out of the interplay of these various subject positions emerges a more complex and nuanced picture of age as it intersects with language learning. This constitutes a major outcome of the present study. Needless to say, a vast number of themes remain to be explored in the study of age identity as it links up with other subject positions.

9.3 Reflections on the methodology

As a whole, the research methodology developed for this study proved an effective way to explore the questions that I had posed. Cycling back and forth between theory and empirical data, in line with Layder's (1998) adaptive theory (see Chapter 5, section 5.2.2), allowed me to adjust my thinking as the study progressed. Similarly, moving back and forth between the various contextual layers, one embedded in another from micro to macro, helped make the data comprehensible. In this way the participants' stories took on meaning when placed in the context of contemporary urban Mexico, embedded in the sociology and history of the country, and set in the larger context of the Anglophone world.

The choice of narrative inquiry as the principal research strategy in an ethnographically-oriented case study approach responded well to my desire to investigate the lives and experiences of a small number of language learners in the greatest possible depth and to tease out the complexities of their identity construction. The use of narrative permitted the enactment of age to come alive through the personal stories the participants told. Their narratives revealed an image of the language learner as a complex individual with multiple interests and identities that extend well beyond the classroom context. These facets of the learner, as Pavlenko (2001a) has pointed out, are seldom explored in SLA research and yet are central to understanding her/him as a social being whose learning depends on social interaction with others.

Nevertheless, it is important to state again that the stories the participants told were co-constructions, that is, my involvement as the researcher was a key factor in how the stories were constructed. This means that their stories were certain to

have been different from others they might have told to someone else. The participants selected what they wanted to include, depending on what they deemed suitable and on the direction the interviews took. The result, of course, is only one version of their life stories, and a partial one at that.

Similarly, my construction of their stories in this thesis is also selective. I have taken from the narratives and classroom observations what I consider pertinent to my research goals and what contributes to the telling of a coherent story. Ultimately, it is my interpretation of what I believed I have learned. I do not see this so much as a liability as I do something to be acknowledged.

In reflecting on the fieldwork itself, it is clear that certain things worked better than others. With regard to the participants, I felt very fortunate to have had the cooperation of the eight people who originally agreed to be part of the study. I recognize that their participation involved taking time from their work schedules to make audio-taped narrative accounts each week and to stay after class for the interviews. With the possible exception of Elsa, all showed a willingness to share their life stories with me and seemed to enjoy being the center of (my) attention during the months that I undertook the fieldwork. In Elsa's case, I was not as successful as I had hoped in breaking through her reserve, and I often wondered what had motivated her to volunteer for the study. Nevertheless, I remain confident that the experience was satisfactory for her in ways that were not apparent to me at the time. I learned a great deal from every one of the participants.

Each story was unique, yet there were many points of convergence. Had it been possible, I would have liked to have had a larger number of participants in this study in order to have discovered more about how age as socially constructed is experienced by language learners in Mexico. Although I was careful to include someone from each 'decade' in the selection of participants, the way they positioned themselves in the three general categories as young, 'middle' and older adults fell, coincidentally, along gender lines. The older participants were both

men and the midlife adults were all women. The only young adult was male. Thus I am left wondering how later and young adulthood might be constructed by women and how 'middle' adulthood might be constructed by men. Furthermore, all the middle and older adults held jobs or had been employed during most of their lifetime. I can only speculate about the enactment of age by people who are not working in salaried positions. For example, I try to imagine what determines the move into later adulthood for women who are housewives that would be comparable to retirement from the work force. With regard to the opposite end of the spectrum, I ask myself how young adults who are not students construct their age. These are only some of the questions I posed after carrying out the research and which would lend themselves to further investigation.

The interviews furnished the main wellspring of data for this study. My aim was to collect stories and identify critical moments or events that would enable me to understand the meaning the participants gave to their language learning experiences and how age factored into their lives. On the whole, I believe the interviews were satisfactorily conducted. At a minimum, I learned what I set out to discover in each set of interviews; most often I learned a great deal more. While my interviewing technique undoubtedly could benefit from some useful pointers, the comfortable atmosphere and the open attitude of the participants, Elsa excepted, was an indicator to me that things were 'working.'

On the other hand, the classroom observations, while adding a necessary piece to the overall picture I formed of the language learning experience of the people who took part in the study, proved less satisfactory. The lack of much meaningful interaction taking place among the students in the language lessons was a disappointment. Even so, the observations were useful in that issues arose in the lessons that I later took up in the interviews. Moreover, my regular presence in the classroom was particularly helpful in building rapport with the participants.

The audio-taped narrative accounts constituted another source of data that helped build a more complete picture of the participants as language learners. While the

comments they made about each week's lessons were interesting, they centered on the activities and the teacher's performance, but rarely included reflections on their own learning process. That, of course, would have been more useful to me in understanding the meaning the language learning experience had for them. I attempted to remedy this situation by asking them each week, when I returned their tapes to them, to focus more on their own learning process and on their personal feelings about the lessons in the coming week. Despite my recommendations, this did not happen to any great extent. In retrospect, I have wondered if perhaps the participants could have been 'trained' beforehand, that is, provided a hands-on experience in making this type of reflection. I have also considered that some kind of cultural conflict may have been in play, for instance, that the formality of making audio-recordings triggered a defensive mechanism preventing the kind of frankness I found so readily in the less formal interviews. If I were to use this procedure again, I would want to explore both possibilities.

The multi-method focus of this study enabled me to explore the topic of age and language learning in a manner that revealed its intricacies. The nature of the research problem was such that it required a more circuitous route to uncover its complexities. In the end, I believe that the overall methodological approach I took was the best one available to me.

9.4 Implications of the research

What has been learned in the course of this investigation has certain ramifications for foreign language teaching and learning, for SLA research, and for the field of age studies.

9.4.1 Implications for teaching foreign languages

With regard to the pedagogical implications of taking a social constructionist position on age, this only make sense when second language acquisition is viewed from a sociocultural perspective. This is because the cognitive tradition in SLA gives scant attention to the social aspects of language learning and places more

emphasis on psycholinguistic factors, whereas the sociocultural orientation to SLA addresses the social dimensions of the language learning experience. Consequently, the following observations presuppose a sociocultural approach to language teaching and learning, considered as a complex social practice.

- People age in a variety of ways and at different moments in the lifespan. This means that adult learners cannot be treated as a single undifferentiated population. There are age-related differences that distinguish students from one another. However, chronological age is not a reliable indicator of where a person is in the life course. This means that adult students should not be 'classified' by age-in-years. This is especially pertinent in the case of foreign language classes, where the students are assigned by level of proficiency, with the result that a teacher will typically encounter a mixed-age group of adults.

What has been come to light in this investigation is that age, as socially constructed, is a complex and nuanced identity. It is enacted in interaction and is dynamic rather than fixed or static. Age cannot be isolated from other factors, such as gender, ethnicity, and social class. Adult students may adopt or be assigned a number of subject positions as part of their age identity, depending on the particular situation in which they find themselves and the cultural discourses available to them. These discourses of age will potentially intersect with other discourses in the language classroom, so that teaching methods, learning styles, student-student relations, and teacher-student interactions, may color the particular way age is enacted. Both differences and affinities will surface among the language learners. The challenge for the teacher, then, is to face a group of students whose age is an important part of a complexity of identities that make it difficult to establish a set course of action for treating them.

- The extent to which biological limitations have an impact on adult second language learners is not fully understood. If anything, maturational constraints operate in conjunction with a number of other affective, psychological and social

factors. Therefore, the teaching of foreign languages should not be based on preconceptions about possible shortcomings in adult learners.

Aging can affect certain physiological and cognitive components yet not others. For example, older learners may be more inclined to suffer hearing impairments than younger learners. This could have an effect on L2 listening and speaking skills. However, such deficits are often compensated for by the judicious use of other strategies, such as giving greater attention to facial gestures, body language and contextual clues.

- Age is socially constructed in our interaction with other people, and according to the culturally specific discourses and narratives that are available. The dominant age discourse in Western culture is that of decline. This has given rise to many manifestations of societal ageism. Textbooks, teaching materials, and class activities often inadvertently reinforce ageist discourses by infantilizing young adults or demeaning older ones. Careful selection and planning on the part of the teacher can counteract this. Textbook authors and publishers also need to show a heightened sensitivity in this regard.

Ageist discourses operate both overtly and covertly, and the students may have internalized them. For instance, older students often believe they are less capable language learners than younger ones. They may self-handicap or be marginalized by fellow students in the classroom. Teachers can work to demythologize some of the ageist beliefs that underscore this type of conduct.

The teacher's own attitudes and behavior may unwittingly reflect ageism. An increased awareness of what is said and done in the classroom can offset this tendency. For example, the use of ageist humor, while still socially acceptable in many sectors of society, is potentially offensive. In the same way, treating younger adult students as children or adopting a patronizing attitude toward older students can be degrading.

- Learning a new language involves fundamental experiences of a social nature that shape this undertaking in significant ways. The formal language class can be seen more broadly as an experience that leads to both linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes for adults of all ages. Thus, a teaching focus that is exclusively aimed at mastery of the language overlooks opportunities for the lessons to provide a rewarding and meaningful experience for the learner, seen as a complex person who lives in and participates in a world extending far beyond the classroom. What takes place in the classroom often spills over into their students' lives outside it, and vice versa. Ideally, the language class satisfies the real-world concerns and aspirations of the learners, including, but not limited to, linguistic attainment. An awareness of this signifies a taking a different pedagogic approach to the lessons, activities, classroom dynamics, and relations with the students.

9.4.2 Implications for SLA research

Looking at age as social also has repercussions for the field of SLA research, which has traditionally focused on age only as an isolated biological factor that could account for differential success in language learning. A social constructionist approach offers a more nuanced understanding of age, one that contemplates the experiential side of language learning and extends to both linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes. While a growing body of SLA work in the sociocultural tradition has undertaken studies of socially constructed dimensions of identity, including gender, social class and ethnicity, age has not been included. I see this as major oversight. Age, as I have argued, is an important part of the complex of a person's identities. Understanding the language learner as a whole person means taking into account their temporality—where they position themselves and are positioned by others at a specific moment in time, as well as where they have been. One of the purposes of the present study has been to rectify this gap.

Another is to add a different perspective on age to what has been learned in psycholinguistically-oriented SLA research. Because of the CPH debate, age has been a central topic in discussions surrounding language learning. The social

constructionist focus on age I have taken in the present research will hopefully provide an interesting complement to work carried out in the cognitive tradition of SLA.

9.4.3 Implications for age studies

Lastly, the research has relevance for the growing interdisciplinary field of age studies, whose "founding proposition [is] the priority of culture in constructing age" (Gullette 2004: 106). Age studies groups together a number of different theoretical and methodological approaches that all point up the cultural, in contrast to the biological, aspects of age and aging. For that reason, the present study can be added to the body of work available in this new field. Built on age research carried out in a variety of contexts, it is novel in that it investigates age as socially constructed in the previously unexplored context of the foreign language classroom and in the uncharted territory of present-day urban Mexico.

9.5 Conclusion

The stories the participants told and the enactment of their age identity augments what is known about the bearing age has on adult language learners. I maintain that people cannot understand each other without a sense of where they are in the life course relative to each other. Their temporality is always a part of their complex identity. Nor can we comprehend what language learning means in students' lives both inside and outside the classroom without taking into account the way they construct their age identity. While I fully recognize that I have explored only one context, that of English as a foreign language in Mexico, I believe that what has come to light in this study may resonate with researchers looking at other related contexts. I hope to have added a very small piece to a very large picture.

Three main points stand out in my mind as I look back at the research I undertook. First, age is a core part of a person's identity, but it has greater salience in some moments than in others. Although I have tried to present some telling examples of

the enactment of age both in the classroom and outside it, it is important to clarify that other subject positions, such as gender or professional identity, may be more prominent in a given moment.

The second point is that the experience of learning a language varies according to each person's position in the lifespan and involves both linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions. This ratifies the notion that, although some commonalities exist, people age in very different ways. Caution, then, is required in making assumptions about age and language learning.

Lastly, the age identity of foreign language learners is closely interconnected with their other subject positions. This point cannot be emphasized too much for it is this interplay of positions that constitutes a person's complex identity. As the present research has demonstrated, age identity is invariably nuanced by other social dimensions, such as gender and ethnicity. Moreover, a person's enactment of age changes in different contexts and over time. Hence, what can be said about age is best stated in terms of a specific sociocultural and historical context.

I end this thesis where I began—by reflecting on the significance of the research for my life. In the first place, what I have learned in the process of this investigation has indelibly changed the way I work as an EFL teacher and professional. I no longer see adults as predetermined by chronological age or age categories, but rather as individuals whose age identity is socially constructed in a variety of ways in interaction with others. I am conscious that the beliefs and attitudes many of my adult students have about age are based on prevailing decline discourses that can be a hindrance to their learning and negatively affect other aspects of the language learning experience. When I am able, I try to counteract self-handicapping, self-marginalization, and other manifestations of ageism in the classroom by raising awareness of the fallacies inherent in ageist discourses. I am more careful to avoid materials, activities and textbook content that reinforce ageist stereotypes. I now recognize that the language learning experience touches the lives of the students as persons who inhabit a much larger

world than the classroom and, for this reason, their interests and aspirations are of paramount importance.

The way in which I understand my own aging process has also undergone fundamental changes as I have learned more about it during the course of this research. I find myself resisting being positioned in pre-established slots that society has designated based on a longstanding view of aging as decline. I am more comfortable with the ongoing changes I am experiencing and have a greater appreciation of the possibilities open to me at every point in the life course.

Appendices

Appendix A. Questionnaire for volunteers

ENEP ACATLÁN
CENTRO DE ENSEÑANZA DE IDIOMAS
PROYECTO DE INVESTIGACIÓN
Responsable: Patricia Andrew Zurlinden

HOJA DE DATOS PARA PARTICIPANTES

Nombre: _____

Dirección: _____

_____

Teléfono: _____

Fecha de nacimiento: _____

Ocupación: _____

Grupo: _____

¿Ha estudiado inglés en la ENEP Acatlán antes? _____

¿Ha estudiado otros idiomas? _____

¿Estaría de acuerdo en realizar las siguientes actividades? _____

- participar en una entrevista (30 minutos aproximadamente) al inicio del semestre

- participar en entrevistas (10 minutos aproximadamente) cada semana

- grabar una narración breve de alguna de sus experiencias en la clase cada semana

Patricia Andrew 2004

Appendix B. Class observation schedule – semester 2004-2

WEEK	MONDAY GP 209/GP 617	TUESDAY GP 315	WEDNESDAY GP 209/GP 617	THURSDAY GP 315	FRIDAY
1	**February 23**	24	25	26	27
2	March 1	2	3	4	5
3	8*	9*	10*	11*	12
4	15*	16*	17	18	19
5	22	23	24	25	26
6	29	30	31	April 1	2
	5	6	7	8	9
7	12	13	14	15	16
8	19	20	21*	22*	23
9	26	27	28	29	30
10	**May 3**	4	5	6*	7
11	10	11	12	13	14
12	17	18	19	20*	21
13	24	25	26	27	28
14	31	June 1	2	3	4
	7**				

* No observation: March 8-16 (conference in Tijuana)
April 21-22 (mid-term test)
May 6 (tenure committee meeting)
May 20 (UL seminar)

– No class: April 5-9 (Holy Week)
April 29 (teacher cancelled class)
May 10 (Mother's Day)

= Fridays   No classes programmed in the selected groups

**Extra class   Extra class given in PG209C

Appendix C. Narrative accounts – schedule

PARTICIPANT	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Adela	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Berta	✓	✓										
Claudio	✓	✓										
David	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Elsa	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Félix	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Gilda	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓						
Héctor	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Tape 1   =   Weeks 1 and 2 (February 23 to March 4, 2004)

Tape 2   =   Weeks 3 and 4 (March 8 to March 18, 2004)

Tape 3   =   Week 5 (March 22 to March 25, 2004)

Tape 4   =   Week 6 (March 29 to April 1, 2004)

Tape 5   =   Week 7 (April 12 to April 15, 2004)

Tape 6   =   Week 8 (April 19 to April 22, 2004)

Tape 7   =   Week 9 (April 26 to April 29, 2004)

Tape 8   =   Week 10 (May 3 to May 6, 2004)

Tape 9   =   Week 11 (May 10 to May 13, 2004)

Tape 10   =   Week 12 (May 17 to May 20, 2004)

Tape 11   =   Week 13 (May 24 to May 27, 2004)

Tape 12   =   Week 14 (May 31 to June 3, 2004)

Appendix D. Transcription conventions

1, 2, …	line number (used for reference)
. . .	brief pause in the rhythm of the conversation
. . . .	part of the excerpt has been omitted to aid readability
. or ? or !	full stop
" "	direct speech within the narration
[ ]	explanatory comment
italics	word or segment in English or French
XXX	inaudible word or sequence

Appendix E. Original Spanish version of extracts from Chapters 6, 7 and 8

Chapter 6, Extract 1(Hector)

Hector: *Yo nací con buena estrella. ... Dentro de mi buena estrella fue ésa ... mis capacidades ... una ... una capacidad obviamente mental ... que me permitió avanzar ... porque socialmente es muy difícil salir de un medio para ir a otra ... a otra área.* (Hector, Interview 3)

Chapter 6, Extract 2 (Hector)

H = Hector; P = Patricia

H: *Sí, yo tengo interés en ... en aprender el idioma ...lo más rápido posible. Pero no porque tenga una prisa de ... tipo institucional. ...Si ... si no me apuro, no me alcanzo a aprender el idioma.*
P: *¡¿Cómo?!*
H: *Sí, no es ... no es un drama ... pero ya a ... a esta edad ... la edad que tengo ... las cosas tienes que hacer más rápido.*
P: *Bien ... bien.*
H: *No ...no ... no ... lo estoy haciendo y con mucho gusto ... y además me siento vivo ... con esto ... porque en última instancia, ¿ya para qué? Si he vivido toda mi vida sin el idioma ... puedo seguir viviendo lo que me resta ... no, no, no ... es un afán personal ... pero sí hay que apurarse para ir avanzando.* (Hector, Interview 2)

Chapter 6, Extract 3 (Hector)

H = Hector; P = Patricia

H: *Yo soy mexicano y ... y ... y orgullosamente mexicano. Entonces, soy alguien que hablo un idioma más que el español, ¿sí? Sí, hace sentir de que ... que hay un valor cultural más ... más alto ... porque estoy hablando ...*
P: *Entonces, ¿te ... te sientes con ... un prestigio, digamos?*
H: *Aumenta mi auto-estima ... mi estatus, sí.* (Hector, Interview 1)

Chapter 6, Extract 4 (Hector)

H = Hector; P = Patricia

P: *¿Cuál es la edad ideal para empezar a estudiar un idioma ... en tu opinión?*
H: *Hay una palabra muy 'mexicana' que dice "desde denantes" ... está bien dicho, eh ... es español antiguo ... o sea, que lo más pronto posible.*
P: *Uh huh. ¿A qué edad?*

H: *¿Aprendiendo hablar como segundo idioma? De inmediato ... porque ... porque se aprende más ... más rápido y uno lo ve en las poblaciones bilingües cerca de los Estados Unidos que llevan los dos [idiomas].*

P: *¿Y a qué se debe? ¿Por qué lo aprenden más rápido?*

H: *Porque es en forma natural. No hay inhibiciones ... no hay prejuicios ... no hay ... además no hay reglas.* (Hector, Interview 1)

Chapter 6, Extract 5 (Hector)

Hector: *Y dada ... mi ... mi circunstancia personal de edad ... está al día el maestro y está hablando con gente joven ... entonces, yo ... yo en lo personal tengo que estar listo al hablar de una película. Si me preguntan qué película ... y yo digo "Casablanca" ... es la prehistoria.* (Hector, Interview 2)

Chapter 6, Extract 6 (Hector)

Hector: *Hay un ... un ... un aforismo biológico ... "Animal que no se adapta perece." Entonces, en este caso yo soy el singular. A lo mejor es una manifestación de vanidad pero, pues, los demás ... están en su ... en su ecología ... en su circunstancia. Soy el que entra ...entonces, definitivamente he hecho esfuerzos por ... por entender a los demás.* (Hector, Interview 5)

Chapter 6, Extract 7 (Hector)

Hector: *Luego me preguntan sobre palabras ... tal vez yo tengo más vocabulario ... eso sí ... y me preguntan y entonces me toman como un ... como un compañero ... igual ... igual ...no ... no diría más ...sencillamente como un compañero más.* (Hector, Interview 2)

Chapter 6, Extract 8 (Hector)

Hector: *O sea no ... no ... la ... la ... la edad para mí no ha sido ... problema ... empezando porque yo he sido traga años. Cuando empecé a ejercer, me decían, "Está usted muy niño, doctor" ... y después, por mucho tiempo, fui representando menos edad. Es más, todavía mi voz por coincidencias de la vida ... me confunden con la de mi hijo y luego me lo tomo a broma. "Oye, hijo." "Sí, mamá, dime" ... y empiezan a hablar las amigas de mi esposa y hasta que se dan cuenta que no están hablando conmigo ... están hablando con mi hijo. Pero, no, en lo más mínimo. Es más, a mí me parece ... me parece una motivación porque pienso que el profesor es muy motivante. Él puede tener, como cualquier ser humano, mucha ... factores psicológicos reprimidos o no reprimidos porque en ese caso puede manifestarlos, ¿no? ... el ... el origen ... actitudes ...de ... muy intrínsecas ... muy difíciles de valorar. Yo no ... no soy psicólogo ... porque soy médico ... y en un momento dado las puede manifestar. De hecho, usa una trencita. Es un profesor*

fuera de serie. Además ... actualizado porque igual que yo usa mezclilla. No ... no viene con ya la formalidad de otras épocas. Este hombre ... parece que tiene tendencia al motociclismo. A lo mejor es un ... un rebeco en otra personalidad ... porque le gustan las motocicletas, pero como maestro es un buen maestro de inglés. Le echa mucho entusiasmo ... agarra en serio su papel. ... No ... porque no se puede ... ni se puede ... ni se debe negar la edad, ¿eh? Uno debe estar más o menos satisfecho. (Hector, Interview 5)

Chapter 6, Extract 9 (Hector)

H = Hector; P = Patricia

H: *Yo soy egresado de la Universidad.*
P: *¿De la UNAM?*
H: *De la UNAM.*
P: *Muy bien.*
H: *Soy el ... eso lo siempre lo distinciono ... fundador de la Ciudad Universitaria ... pero desde la primera generación que entraba a Ciudad Universitaria.*
   (Hector, Interview 1)

Chapter 6, Extract 10 (Hector)

Hector: *... se van perdiendo contactos porque desde el punto de vista psicológico viene el aplanamiento afectivo. ... En ... los franceses dicen, "la bella indiferencia" y en México dicen, "me importa madre."* (Hector, Interview 4)

Chapter 6, Extract 11 (Hector)

Hector: *Entonces, son intereses ... aún en personas jóvenes. Necesitas estar recién casado como Fox para andar de la manita con la esposa. ... Entonces, en la pareja ésa es una forma ... y ésa yo así la vivo ... no, no, no ... esté bien o no esté bien ... es mi circunstancia. Es la ... yo le llamo ... la ... el recobrar la individualidad de la persona. Mi esposa es muy dada a ir a la iglesia ... y yo no. Ella crea ... ella cree a su manera ... y yo creo a la mía.* (Hector, Interview 3)

Chapter 6, Extract 12 (Hector)

Hector: *Yo fui ... jefe de enseñanza del Centro Médico ... y, entonces, mis alumnos por lógica y por razones políticas fueron ascendiendo. Entonces, cuando yo me despedí ya muchos ocupaban puestos importantes ... . Entonces va ... va ... vas haciendo ... y después nos íbamos a comer ... con las que fueron mis alumnas ... sobre todo con las mujeres ... y se me hacía muy chistoso porque en la calle de Doctor Márquez y Avenida Cuauhtémoc, ya que íbamos a pasar ... me tomaban de la mano como niño ... y decía, sí, porque van a quedar muy mal de que el*

viejito se les haya quedado allí en la calle porque no lo cuidaron bien. Entonces ya ... cambiaron las cosas. Era yo quien les tomaba del brazo en otro tiempo. Cambian los tiempos y ellas me to ... pero de la mano, así como niño ... para que ... dicen, "Cuando menos lo subo arrastrando, ¿no?" Entonces, no, todo eso me hizo ir aceptando mi ... mi edad ... y bromas que yo hago y yo ... yo mismo las hago a costilla de la edad. (Hector, Interview 5)

Chapter 6, Extract 13 (Hector)

H = Hector; P = Patricia

H: *Por eso te decía 'el esquema clásico': nacer, crecer, reproducirse y morir ... y que en este momento la reproducción está en ... entre comillas. Los jóvenes no se quieren reproducir.*

P: *No necesariamente, ¿verdad?*

H: *La ... la homosexualidad, el transvestismo, y toda esa serie de cosas que se hablan ... y ... y la ... aunque es más elegante decirlo ... pero el caso es la misma ... preferencia sexual ... pero, eso hace que no ... el homosexual no va tener hijos nunca.*

P: *Uh huh.*

H: *Luego los va a adoptar ... y ése es un tema muy escabroso. ¿Para qué los quiere adoptar? Porque a lo mejor lo que quiere es alguien con quién convivir, ¿no? ¿Quién sabe? Eso puede irse a otro ... otro punto.* (Hector, Interview 4)

Chapter 6, Extract 14 (Hector)

Hector: *Me casé con una mujer bonita porque quería que mis hijos tuvieran otro ... otro biotipo ... porque eso, sí, puede pesar aunque ... aunque no se diga. ...Pero ... pero eso ... esos temas son ... y en México, sí, son muy ... muy de tomarse en cuenta. Ése ... ése tal vez, sí, haya sido una de las puntos de ... ¿cómo se llama? ... de impacto social para mí ... pero, bueno, para otros ... porque algunos tal vez no pensaron que yo lograra algo. Yo así lo percibo ... y cuando yo lo lograba ellos se tiraban en hacerlo. "Si éste puede, ¿por qué yo no?" Pero, eso era ... querer decir que yo tenía menos ...menos recursos, cosa que ... que no ... definitivamente no es cierto, ¿verdad? ... porque si los ... si los hubieran tenido, hubieran ... la hubieran hecho por su cuenta ... pero si ... o ... o quererme quitar lo que ... lo que yo ya obtuve. Nunca ... nunca me lo quitaron.* (Hector, Interview 4)

Chapter 6, Extract 15 (Felix)

Felix: *Felix Rodriguez, persona jubilada, con 43 años de ejercicio laboral, y a la fecha con 68 años de edad, considera necesario como terapia ocupacional, continuar adquiriendo conocimientos que le permitan mantenerse mental y*

físicamente activo, realizando algo que siempre había querido hacer: aprender el idioma inglés. (Felix, Narrative account 1)

Chapter 6, Extract 16 (Felix)

F = Felix; P = Patricia

F: *Es que me ... me arrepiento de no haber empezado a estudiar desde hace mucho tiempo.*
P: *¿Por qué?*
F: *Pues, por eso ... ¿eh? Porque creo yo que ... ahora ... es más difícil aprender ...porque ... avanzar a mi edad ... voy perdiendo facultades, ¿eh?*
P: *¿Como cuáles?*
F: *Pues a lo mejor el ... el ... de captación ...de ... ¿eh? Pero, si tú le pones entusiasmo ... puedes superar ese tipo de incapacidades, entre comillas.* (Felix, Interview 1)

Chapter 6, Extract 17 (Felix)

F = Felix; P = Patricia

F: *Bueno ... pero cuando uno ya está grande también pierde capacidades.*
P: *¿Cuáles?*
F: *Pues de todo ...auditivas y motoras ... y todo lo que tú quieres, ¿eh? ¿Eh?*
P: *OK.*
F: *Yo ... yo en lo personal me siento ... me ... digo ... me acuerdo de cuando estaba yo 'menos viejo' ... yo ... digo, yo tenía ... era ... muy inquieto.*
P: *Claro.*
F: *¿Eh?*
P: *Claro. Fuera de lo motora y lo ... ¿cuál era el otro que me dijiste? ... lo auditivo, ... en la parte de ... razonar, ¿sientes alguna diferencia?*
F: *Sí ... sí, la siento.*
P: *¿En qué?*
F: *Fíjate ... digo ... claro, cuando trabajaba y cuando estudiaba pues yo tenía que razonar ... porque si no, XXX. Ahora que estoy jubilado ... ¿no? ... siempre ... como que me cuesta más trabajo razonar.*
P: *¿Uh huh?*
F: *Pero hago el intento ... el esfuerzo, ¿eh?*
P: *Sí ... sí.* (Felix, Interview 3)

Chapter 6, Extract 18 (Felix)

Felix: *Al intervenir tres personas, con distintas formas de exponer, creo que nos confunden más de lo que ya estamos. El cambiar de un expositor a otro, creo que*

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distrae o cuartea nuestra atención más de lo que ya estamos. .... ¿A quién le hacemos caso? (Felix, Narrative account 7)

Chapter 6, Extract 19 (Felix)

F = Felix; P = Patricia

F: *Bueno, nos dijo la maestra que hiciéramos una conversación entre tres para calificarnos oralmente.*
P: *Exacto.*
F: *Entonces, yo había preparado algo ... pero no me hicieron caso mis compañeras.*
P: *¿Qué dijeron ... cuando ... ?*
F: *No, me dijeron ... ellas hicieron ... había ... una de ellas, una gordita ... es muy tesonera ... entonces, "No, lo vamos a hacer como dije desde la otra vez." Bueno, OK, pues ... eran dos ... era Elsa y ella ... contra mí. No nos pusimos a estudiar, no, no, no. No ... no quisieron ... ¿cómo te diré? ... lo que había hecho yo ... el ... el diálogo que había establecido ... cómo te recibe el mesero, cómo te lleva ... "Please, this way" ... que te lleva allá a la mesa y todo ese tipo de cosas. Lo había hecho yo así, ¿no?*
P: *¿Pero no lo hicieron en conjunto?*
F: *No ... bueno, lo había hecho yo y se los iba a proponer.*
P: *Ah, ya. Y no les pareció.*
F: *No les pareció. Dijo, "No, vamos a hacerlo como yo ... como yo digo," ¿no? ... Bueno, yo me sometí a las de ésas, sí, ¿no? Entonces, pues ... tenía mucha ... no ... no ... no tenían diálogo ... y a mí me desesperaba.* (Felix, Interview 4)

Chapter 6, Extract 20 (Felix)

Felix: *Reflexión del 10 de marzo 2004. He comentando con mis compañeros de clase al respecto [SONIDO DE PAPELES]. "¿Qué te parece la forma en que se está desarrollando el curso?" Respuesta. Me comentan que no les está gustando. Que la maestra no expone en la clase. Y que la dinámica de los practicantes a veces no les entienden y los confunden. Decidimos hablar con la maestra cuatro o cinco compañeros para exponerle nuestras inquietudes porque sentimos que no estamos aprendiendo o avanzando en el curso como debiéramos y el examen intermedio ya está sobre nosotros.* (Narrative account 2)

Chapter 6, Extract 21 (Simon)

S = Simon; P = Patricia

S: *Cuando trabajaba en el equipo, Félix hacía que el equipo trabajara a su manera de ser.*

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P: *Uh huh.*

S: *A su ... con sus ... con su ... tal vez su método. No sé. Mientras que los otros equipos, sí, tenían unas ideas muy ... medio raras, Félix no. Eran ... seguían pasos muy tradicionalistas.* (Simon, Interview)

Chapter 6, Extract 22 (Felix)

Felix: *Pat, como pudistes [sic] observar en la clase de lunes 22 de marzo pasado, la maestra llega tarde, se va temprano, no interviene para nada. Los practicantes empiezan y terminan la clase. Me pregunto yo, "¿acaso es ése el comportamiento o la actitud que debe tomar una maestra titular de una materia ante sus alumnos? ¿No merecemos que...un poquito de atención de parte de ella? ¿O es que la dirección de la escuela le exige o le ordena que permite...[SONIDO DE PAPELES] que permita a los practicantes estar todo el tiempo que dura la clase?" ¿Quién podría contestarnos esto?* (Felix, Narrative account 3)

Chapter 6, Extract 23 (Felix)

F = Felix; P = Patricia

F: *De cualquier manera como que me ... me gana el ... la edad, yo creo,¿no? ... porque el hecho de ser una persona mayor es irremediablemente una perd ... pierdes capacidad.*

P: *¿Sí ... en todo?*

F: *En todo. En todos los campos.*

P: *¿Sí?*

F: *Sí. Y es una lucha constante. Tienes que estar con el médico para que te dé ... ¿eh? Pero ... pero el médico ... el médico te cobra y tú puedes hacer muchas cosas por ti mismo sin necesidad de ir al médico ... ¿eh? Aplicarte ... ¿cómo te diré? ... terapias psicológicas. Digo, yo busco ... qué ... qué es lo que tengo que hacer ...para que ... que no me muera yo.* (Felix, Interview 3)

Chapter 6, Extract 24 (Felix)

F = Felix; P = Patricia

P: *Bueno ... ¿en qué momento de tu vida empezó ese proceso de pérdida de facultades?*

F: *Pues, fíjate que ... de los 56 años para acá.*

P: *¿Sí? ¿En tu caso ... o crees que es una generalidad?*

F: *No ... en mi caso.*

P: *Uh huh.*

F: *Porque todos somos distintos. ....*

P: *¿Pero ya sentías el peso de ... ?*

F: *Ya sentía yo el peso de la edad. Es más ... la empresa donde yo trabajé me ...*

me jubiló por edad.

P: *Uh huh ... uh huh.*

F: *No por servicio.*

P: *Uh huh. ¿Pero tú mismo sentías algo a partir de los 56? ... dices.*

F: *Bueno ... sentí que iba bajando mis ... mi capacidad. Me preocupé mucho, ¿eh? Me preocupé mucho ... y cuando me ... me ... la empresa me ... me jubiló por edad, me vino una depresión ...*

P: *Pues, claro.*

F: *... como tú no tienes idea.*

P: *Sí, puedo imaginar.*

F: *Porque me dijo ... como que, digo ... y he buscado trabajo.*

P: *Sí.*

F: *Sigo buscando trabajo.*

P: *Sí.*

F: *Pero como tengo mucha edad, aunque tengo una experiencia de 43 años trabajando ejerciendo mi carrera, pero la edad no les ...*

P: *¿O sea, no valoran la experiencia?*

F: *No valoran la experiencia.*

P: *¿Por qué crees eso, eh?*

F: *Digo ... porque quizás ... a lo mejor la empresa tiene algunos parámetros para medir tu capacidad. ¿No? A lo mejor aplica algún parámetro ... algún examen psicológico ... o ese tipo de cosa ... no sé ... ¿no? Pero a la gente ya mayor ...* (Felix, Interview 3)

Chapter 6, Extract 25 (Felix)

F = Felix; P = Patricia

F: *Yo ya tengo 68 ... ya ... ¿eh? Fíjate que yo intenté. Me puse a trabajar ... me ... me ... me aceptaron allí en Home Mart.*

P: *Ah, sí, me platicaste.*

F: *Allí en Home Mart ... me ... me ... me aceptaron. Dice él, "Bueno, lo que va a llevar usted aquí ... va ... va a llevar ciertos registros de entradas y salidas de ... de mercancía y de la almacén.*

P: *Uh huh ... sí ... sí.*

F: *Entonces ... de entradas y salidas y de control y ese tipo de cosas. Yo lo sé porque soy contador público, ¿no?*

P: *Sí.*

F: *Entonces, me metí a trabajar ... pero también allí en el almacén tenía que cargar ... y tenía que barrer y trapear y manejar las máquinas y ... y ... y ... y llevar sus controles y ... y meter la basura que salía del almacén a un contenedor y luego ... el cartón prensarlo en una máquina que tienen allí ... y que yo ... y ... no me pesaba todo eso, digo. Lo único que me pesaba ... ¿sabes qué? ... que tenía que cargar.*

P: *Pues, sí.*

F: *Y eran cosas pesadas.*

P: *Uh huh ... pues sí.*

F: *Entonces, le dije yo a mi jefe, "¡Oye!" Yo me pregunté, "Why are you ... ?" Ya me tenían ... yo hacía de todo, ¿no? Barría, trapeaba, lavaba el baño porque luego tienen XXX. Metía todo al ... al contenedor la basura y que traían todo lo demás hasta XXX ¿no? Entonces, dijo, "No te vayas." "No," le dije yo, "porque es que ya conseguí un trabajo más ad hoc a mi edad." ¿Sí? ¿No? Pero no quería que me fuera. ¿Por qué? Pues ya ... ya yo ...*

P: *Hacías de todo.*

F: *Hacía de todo ... todo. Todo lo que me hací ... todo lo que me decían ... lo hacía. Claro ... sobre todo cargar y mover las cosas ... ése era mi problema.*

P: *Claro ... claro ... bueno.*

F: *Mi mayor problema. Lo demás era fácil para mí.*

P: *Entonces, no habías perdido ... facultades de ese tipo.*

F: *Exactamente. Lo demás ... n'ombre ... llegaba a trabajar y en un ratito me hacía todo.*

P: *Muy bien.*

F: *Pero, digo ... y hace poquito que lo hice eso, ¿eh? Era el año pasado ... y duré tres meses trabajando ... pero decían mis hijos, "Ya, Papá. Salte de allí." ¿Eh? "No tienes necesidad." ¿No? Pero, te digo, lo único que perdí facultades es para cargar. O sea ... a mí me demostré a mí mismo que podía hacerlo. Todo lo puedo hacer.* (Felix, Interview 3)

Chapter 6, Extract 26 (Felix)

Felix: *Sí ... sí. ...Siempre quise aprender el inglés. ...Otro idioma. Es importante. Eso fue ... el hecho de ... de ... de meterme a trabajar allí ... qué bueno que me lo acordaste ... fue para demostrarme que yo podía hacer las cosas ... para salir de mi depresión.* (Felix, Interview 3)

Chapter 6, Extract 27 (Felix)

F = Felix; P = Patricia

F: *Siempre fui para arriba ... ocupando puestos de mayor envergadura.*

P: *Ah, eso es lo que quería saber. Uh huh.*

F: *Sí, pero ... si, he ocupado puestos de mayor responsabilidad ... hasta tuve que rechazar ... fíjate ... fíjate.*

P: *¿Cómo?*

F: *A veces la gente ... o sea, mi jefe ... me ofreció, "Oye, tú puedes hacer esto?" "No, déjame aquí," le decía. "Aquí me gusta. Me gusta lo que hago. Produzco."* (Felix, Interview 3)

Chapter 6, Extract 28 (Felix)

Felix: *Cuando tú estás trabajando ... cuando tú estás en el desarrollo profesional ... y te dicen, "Oye, pues ya estás muy viejo. Ya vete, ¿no?" ... no obstante que*

eres una persona productiva y que tienes ideas y que ... y que puedes tomar decisiones importantes en la vida. Digo, se te corta. ¿Pero a qué se deberá eso, digo yo ... a qué se deberá que la gente que podemos seguir siendo productivas ... la misma gente nos corta esa ... tu carrera, ¿no? ... tu vida ... en un momento dado? Entonces, tú, como ser humano ... cuando menos en el caso mío, por ejemplo, sí me cortaron. "Tú ya no sirves. Te vamos a jubilar. Te vamos a pensionar" ... y ese tipo de cosas. Es muy feo eso, ¿eh? ... muy feo ... muy feo. Es terrible. Te deprime. Te ... yo ...cuando me dijeron eso ... no tienes tú idea.
(Felix, Interview 4)

Chapter 7, Extract 29 (Elsa)

Elsa: *A veces incluso ... a veces le invento, ¿no? ... o sea ... para ... me preguntan alguna cosa y allí le invento, ¿no? .... No ... no es necesario decir lo que fue o lo que .... nada más es para practicar.* (Elsa, Interview 2)

Chapter 7, Extract 30 (Elsa)

Elsa: *Pues lo que pasa es con este señor pues platico de cualquier tema, ¿no?, de qué países conoce ... dónde trabaja y ... o a veces le pregunto si lo que le estoy diciendo está correcto ... o cómo se dice XXX. ... No se me hace difícil. Bueno, al menos de lo que hemos platicado ... de los temas que hemos platicado ... desde, por ejemplo, de su familia ... de dónde vive ... por qué vino a México ... cosas que ya conozco un poco.* (Elsa, Interview 2)

Chapter 7, Extract 31 (Adela)

Adela: *Yo en lo personal me siento bien, ¿no? Me siento bastante bien. Al principio, bueno, ya uno ya pasó la adolescencia, ¿no?, entonces ... como que yo decía ... es como que siento que pierde ... por algunos comentarios, algunos chistes ... pero ya me acoplé, ¿no? Ya me siento bien con los muchachos.* (Adela, Interview 1)

Chapter 7, Extract 32 (Berta)

Berta: *Yo no oigo música en inglés. No la oigo. Y pone una canción en inglés ... y yo digo, "Dios mío, ¿quién es?" O sea ... para empezar también me siento fuera de época ... fuera de lugar ... porque hay jovencitos que están en ... así con la música ... con los cantantes y todo.* (Berta, Interview 2)

Chapter 7, Extract 33 (Adela)

A = Adela; P = Patricia

A: *Me parece muy buena idea de llevar dos maestros. Sí...me...me gustó la idea porque me siento más...con más confianza con Martín.*
P: *Sí, esto lo mencionaste.*
A: *Sí...y...porque a lo mejor Martín se mete más a gramática...y me da una estructura. Entonces, yo la manejo mentalmente y puedo construir.*
P: *¿Y puedes entender su inglés...a Martín?*
A: *Sí. Sí, le entiendo su inglés. Entonces, me siento más tranquila...me vengo más relajada, ¿sí?, y con...con Ramón siento un poquito más tensa.*
P: *Sí, claro.* (Adela, Interview 2)

Chapter 7, Extract 34 (Elsa)

E = Elsa; P = Patricia

P: *OK ... y entonces, de los más o menos 20, que dices que empieza la adultez ... hasta los 60, ¿no distingues ningunas ... ningunas etapas?*
E: *Que recuerde, no.* (Elsa, Interview 3)

Chapter 7, Extract 35 (Elsa)

E = Elsa; P = Patricia

P: *OK. Entre lo que es adulto, por ejemplo, donde estás tú ahorita en tu vida ... y la vejez, ¿tú no distingues ninguna etapa de transición?*
E: *¿De adulto y vejez? Pues, ¿qué sería? Pues, tal vez como todavía no llego a esa edad ...* (Elsa, Interview 4)

Chapter 7, Extract 36 (Adela)

A = Adela; P = Patricia

P: *Entonces, ¿no hay nada en español que se refiere a ese punto entre adulto y vejez?*
A: *No, no ... no, que yo sepa no ... no.*
P: *OK. Cuando la mujer entra en menopausia, por ejemplo, que es una ... como que un señal de que ya hay un cambió allí, ¿no?*
A: *Claro, pero ya entraría dentro de la ... no sé ... no hay una etapa así ... o un nombre en específico ...*
P: *... ¿en especial para eso?*
A: *No hay eso.* (Adela, Interview 4)

Chapter 7, Extract 37 (Gilda)

G = Gilda; P = Patricia

P: *¿Y cómo imaginas tu vejez?*
G: *Juntos. ... Pero no tan viejitos.*
P: *¿Cómo?*
G: *Digo ... la verdad ... pues, yo, sí, me gustaría llegar a ... a ser viejita, viejita ... pero siempre y cuando me pueda valer por mí misma. ... que no tenga problemas de salud o que no me pueda mover o que necesite depender de alguien ... y, digo, la verdad ... a mí me gusta estar junto con él pero no en ese aspecto ... sino ... o sea ... que tengas que lidiar con alguien así y también alguien grande como tú ... digo, es difícil. Yo, sí, quiero llegar a viejito ... viejita junto con él ... pero siempre sanos ... o siempre que nos podamos cuidar un ... primeramente, por si nosotros mismos y después cuidar a la pareja.* (Gilda, Interview 3)

Chapter 7, Extract 38 (Gilda)

Gilda: *Entonces, yo creo que ... o sea ... la edad ... a lo mejor no es la mejor ... porque estamos grandes ... sobre todo por la parte de los hijos. ... Si es que se puede ... porque en realidad, digo, ya mi edad ya no me ayuda mucho a ... a aguantarme tanto tiempo ... para embarazarme.* (Gilda, Interview 3)

Chapter 7, Extract 39 (Berta)

B = Berta; P = Patricia

B: *Bueno, a mi ... mi suerte es así como que ... que bien chistosa porque yo soy de las mayores ... y entonces, en aquella época, en una familia de doce ... éramos doce ... yo, la mayor de las mujeres, tenía que trabajar. Entonces, saliendo de secundaria ...*
P: *... a trabajar.*
B: *No me preguntaron, "¿Quieres trabajar, o no?" A trabajar. Ya lo tenía yo listo. Entonces dejé de estudiar ... hazte cuenta como ... fueron nueve años para reiniciar la prepa ... porque yo me decía ... bueno, todos mis hermanos están estudiando ... ¿y yo?*
P: *O sea, ¿hiciste prepa hasta nueve años después?*
B: *Nueve años después.*
P: *¿Trabajaste en ese ínterin?*
B: *Si ... y después hice la prepa ... allí conocí a mi esposo ... pero, al mismo tiempo trabajaba. Me casé saliendo de la prepa ... que ya tenía 28 años yo. Yo dije, no, pues yo voy a hacer una carrera. Entonces fue que me metí a estudiar medicina y mi esposo leyes.*
P: *¿En dónde?*

B: *En la UNAM.*

P: *Excelente.*

B: *Sí ... y entonces, bueno ... ya terminamos la carrera grandecitos ... y pues yo no tuve oportunidad de estudiar inglés.*

P: *Claro ... claro ... ¿y te gusta tu profesión?*

B: *Me gusta mucho aunque también entré allí porque allí me colocaron. Hazte cuenta ... yo salí de la secundaria y mi papá me consiguió trabajo ... me consiguió una beca para estudiar enfermería ... pero más bien práctica ... práctica-teórica ... trabajando yo al mismo tiempo. Entonces fue un ... un ... un curso bien pequeñito ... pero ya me prepararon para trabajar como enfermera. Y entonces ya pasando todos los días en el camión ... veía yo la prepa allí ... por aquí en el Toreo ... y decía, "Yo quiero estudiar, quiero estudiar" y yo me bajé ... pregunté ... cuánto cobraban ... etcétera. Me inscribí ... y allí ... ¿cómo se llama? ... dije, bueno, si estoy ya en medicina, pues voy a seguir en eso ... y me gusta.* (Berta, Interview 1)

Chapter 7, Extract 40 (Gilda)

G = Gilda; P = Patricia

P: *¿Y cuáles son tus expectativas en cuanto a tu vida profesional?*

G: *En realidad lo que busco es una posición a ... a ... a alto nivel ... que aquí en México, digo, bien o mal ... aunque dicen que ya no hay discriminación ... que todo es equitativo ... igualitario para hombre y para mujer ... no es cierto.*

P: *Uh huh.*

G: *Entonces, como mujer, digo, o sea ... es difícil ... llegar a ciertos niveles. Entonces, yo por lo menos ... o sea ... busco algo así. El demostrar que por ser mujer no significa que sea uno menos ... o sea ... más tonta ... sino que tienen las herramientas y la capacidad para hacerlo.*

P: *¿Y eso, cuándo sería ... si bien te va?*

G: *Yo espero que sea entre corto y mediano plazo.*

P: *Ah, sí. Háblame en años.*

G: *¿En años? No sé ... unos cuatro ... cinco años a lo mucho.*

P: *Apenas tendrías cuarenta.*

G: *Uh huh.*

P: *¿Y entonces? ¿Qué sigue ... en tu vida profesional?*

G: *Yo creo, digo, ya llegas a cierto punto en que ya no creces más. Digo, y más como mujer. Digo, el buscar un puesto como director general ... digo, sólo que yo tenga mi empresa ... y yo sea la directora general de mi empresa. Pero trabajando en un mercado ... o sea ... tú como empleada ... yo creo que no. Yo creo que hasta cierto nivel ... de subdirección o dirección de un área ... es hasta donde ...*

P: *¿Y te quedas?*

G: *Allí me quedaría.* (Gilda, Interview 3)

Chapter 7, Extract 41 (Adela)

A = Adela; P = Patricia

P: *¿Y ... y toda la vida que ... vamos a decir ... cuando estás ... estabas criando a tus hijos, has trabajado?*

A: *Sí.*

P: *¿Eso fue tu decisión?*

A: *Fue luchar con varias cosas. A lo mejor también con la idea que se tiene de la mujer en México ... un poco difícil ... para mí. Cuando yo me casé mi esposo no quería que trabajara y ...*

P: *Ay, eso era la ... la mentalidad, ¿no?*

A: *Sí, sí ... sí, a pesar de que mi esposo ... digo ... es egresado de la UNAM ...tiene un doctorado ... sí, él no quería. Entonces, yo dije ... es que no es posible. Yo estudié tantos años como para estar aquí ... no es posible. Entonces yo me las ingenié ... buscaba yo horarios ... sí ... cuando él se iba a trabajar, yo salía a trabajar. Cuando él llegaba, yo estaba en casa.*

P: *Ándale.*

A: *Entonces era ... era estar luchando. Cuando nacieron mis hijos ... pues "Con más razón" mi esposo decía, "No ... pues, hay que XXX."* [Adela:] *"No, no, pero es que yo puedo."* (Adela, Interview 2)

Chapter 7, Extract 42 (Elsa)

Elsa: *Yo creo que de ... de adolescente hasta que llega a la etapa de ... de adulto es lo más divertido. Ya después de ... cuando se convierte en adulto ya empiezan las responsabilidades.* (Elsa, Interview 4)

Chapter 8, Extract 43 (David)

David: *Y es también gracioso ... o interesante ... el observar que todos nos sentamos hasta atrás pegados a la pared. A veces como estudiantes tenemos esa idea, no, de que solamente los ñoños o los 'nerds' se sientan hasta adelante ... o sea, los que participan y levantan la mano a cada rato y están hable y hable ... y los 'cerebritos' ... y no sé, los tachamos, ¿no? ... los etiquetamos ... y en cierta forma hasta los tratamos mal porque como que quieren sobresalir mucho ... o ... no sé, pero lo típico es que 'los niños buenos' se sientan hasta adelante y ... y los demás, pues, en donde quiera, ¿no? Personalmente, digo, me siento hasta atrás porque me gusta observar. ... No ... no me gusta sentir que alguien está atrás de mí ... o ... no sé, como que tienes un campo de visión diferente ... más amplio ... para mi punto de vista, desde atrás. Entonces, por eso solamente casi sí siempre me siento hasta atrás y en un rincón pegado a la ventana.* (David, Narrative account 9)

Chapter 8, Extract 44 (David)

D = David; P = Patricia

P: *Bueno, yo te quería preguntar acerca de tus compañeros en el grupo.*
D: *Uh huh.*
P: *Porque veo que hay varios que son muy jóvenes ... como de 18 ...*
D: *Sí ... la mayoría.*
P: *Y luego hay personas mayores.*
D: *Uh huh.*
P: *Tú ... ¿cómo ... dónde te ubicas ... en ... en ... entre ellos?*
D: *Pues yo siento que me ... me junto más con los jóvenes.*
P: *Uh huh.*
D: *Porque a lo mejor ... no sé ... con esta Adela ... ya, sí la saludo ... pero, digamos ... que no ... no sé ...no hablo con ella ...no ...no me junto.*
P: *Claro. ¿Y Gilda ... Gilda, por ejemplo?*
D: *Sí, se me hace interesante ... por ejemplo, porque ha viajado ... por lo que comenta en clase ... es una persona ... no sé ... me llama la atención ... su forma de ser ... pero, no, no he tenido la oportunidad de ... de platicar ... de acercarme a ella. Pero, bueno, digamos, que sí, me ... me junto más con los jóvenes.* (David, Interview 3)

Chapter 8, Extract 45 (David)

David: *Yo siento que dentro de la atmósfera que se crea en el salón, ellos probablemente sí se sienten así como que "Híjoles, estoy entre puro joven. Yo soy aquí el ... el grande ... el mayor, ¿no?" Entonces, yo siento que puede funcionar de dos formas, ¿no? O los motiva ... o los contagia ... o cuando llegan a tener un tropiezo ... pues se decaen más, ¿no? Pues "Híjoles, la regué bien feo ... y esto de que yo ya estoy grande. Yo, ¿qué hago aquí? Debo estar descansando ... no sé ... no debo estar aquí." Pero lo otro, ¿no?, que les impulsa ... sí, no, o sea, "yo puedo y sé que puedo." Digamos que he encontrado aquí en Acatlán de las dos cosas.* (David, Interview 1)

Chapter 8, Extract 46 (David)

David: *Entonces, pues ... supongo que, como todo, ¿no?, habría que saber a ... cuándo retirarse ... a tiempo. Entonces, me imagino que después de los ... entre los 40 y los 50 años ... yo ... entonces ... mejor me voy ... si estuve trabajando tanto tiempo.* (David, Interview 3)

Chapter 8, Extract 47 (David)

D = David; P = Patricia

D: *Yo a lo mejor a mis 50 años ya no puedo trabajar. Entonces ...*
P: *¿Por qué no puedes trabajar?*
D: *Porque, bueno, a lo mejor ya estoy cansado.* (David, Interview 4)

Chapter 8, Extract 48 (David)

David: *A mí me gustaría verme casado ... bueno ... es que, no sé, ahorita tengo 23 años. A los 33 años sí me gustaría ya ver ... ya estar casado ... ya tener al menos un hijo ... probablemente tenga ya un ... un trabajo estable ... digamos, ya ... ya hice la experiencia ... ya ... hijos pequeños ... no sé ... a lo mejor dos, tres, cuatro años. De hecho mi ... mi idea de casarme es ... es a los 28 ... más o menos ... después de haber viajado, después de haber trabajado en diferentes lados ... después de haber conocido ... no sé ... a personas, lugares. Digamos, que casarme ahorita no es mi prioridad ... y dentro de diez años, por ejemplo, no sé, tener ya una casa y estarla pagando ... tener, no sé, la posibilidad de un carro ... y también quizá que no sea mío ... pero ya estarlo pagando ... viendo por la educación de mis hijos ... los puntos de mi familia, vaya, construyendo un hogar.* (David, Interview 3)

Chapter 8, Extract 49 (David)

D = David; P = Patricia

D: *Empezamos a jalar ahora entre nosotros y nos fuimos haciendo muy ... muy juntos, muy unidos. De hecho, ya es común que en la generación de la escuela que nos conocen ... pues, ya saben que siempre estamos juntos los mismos de siempre ... que nos llevamos y que, en cierta forma, formar nuestro grupo ... cuando llega alguien ajeno ... es muy difícil que se integre. A lo mejor está un rato, pero igual y él ... nosotros mismos hacemos que se sienta incómodo y termina yéndose.*
P: *Entonces, ¿son de la misma carrera todos?*
D: *Sí, de la misma generación. Obviamente cada quien tiene sus diferentes ideologías ... sus diferentes puntos de vista, pero, digamos, que nos llevamos bastante bien. ...*
P: *¿Y tú, cuando visualizas el futuro, imaginas que vas a quedar en contacto?*
D: *Yo procuraré ... o sea ... somos tan ... yo siento que ... unidos en cierta forma. ... sí, seguiríamos en contacto. ... Entonces, eso es lo que ahorita valoro.* (David, Interview 4)

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