

CONTROVERSIAL DEBATABLE SPECIAL INTEREST TOPICS

Is Language the key to maintaining Cognition for the Elderly?



~ Maureen Archer ~

The Elderly accept the normal decline of mind and body as we age but, as so aptly expressed by Drs. Kalula and Hoffman, we do agonise about sliding into dementia (*Kalula & Hoffman, 2015*). Dignity and independence of decision making grow more important as our strength and confidence wane. Yet too many of us, faced with the recognition of repeated “senior moments” just accept the inevitability of regression and dependency.

The first public exposure of our fading competence is probably our declining expressive language, The “Nominal Aphasia of the Aged”: there are those sudden pauses in a conversation, our embarrassed apology as we strive to remember a name, a title, a specific word; an inability to introduce a lifelong friend because we can’t retrieve her name; too frequent use of “that... thing / the dingis / whatcher-ma-call-it...”; the sudden jump into another language to substitute the word that escapes us in our mother tongue. Written (and read) language can be personally paced to suit the Elderly but the immediacy of spoken and heard language shows up our declining faculties.

Amongst intimate groups of older people, our fears and examples are discussed. A frequently repeated frustration is how the forgotten word pops into consciousness a few minutes too late: “Of course I knew his name but I just couldn’t remember it at that moment.”

Many describe their dismay at struggling to explain quite simple concepts, circling round the topic but seemingly unable to come to the point. Examples varied from helping grandchildren with homework tasks to giving precise directions to their home for would-be visitors. (These difficulties were not ascribed to language loss but rather to a confusion of vocabulary, forgotten jargon and sentence formulation. One speaker did admit that she was finding it increasingly difficult to marshal her thoughts if she felt under any pressure because then she “forgot” what she wanted to say.)

A frequent source of wry amusement is the listing of malapropisms, their own or those of relatives: “ She’s always using the wrong word. The other day she said that the movers would ‘convert’ the furniture. Then she looked confused and said that she meant ‘convey’.”

An interesting observation by two people was that they 'forgot' words if they were directly challenged. " When he asked me where I was born I simply couldn't remember the name of my home town. I felt such a fool." The other contributed his frustration about "being struck dumb as soon as I read the (crossword) clue. I used to be such a whiz at them now it takes me forever to finish them."

One of the worrying aspects that emerged was the sense of "feeling a fool" and an unexpressed feeling of loss of confidence amongst that privileged group. One said that she no longer cared to attend gatherings because she would "...prefer to watch TV on my own at home...". This seemed to be a majority consensus. Were they tacitly avoiding social situations which demanded conversations with a wider group and the possibility of exposing their hesitant language? Whatever the reason, they appeared to be deliberately withdrawing from opportunities for verbal interaction and its cognitive stimulation.

Even though that group of Elders described loss of words, poor sentence formulation, no lucid directions and other examples of linguistic decline, they never ascribed any of their difficulties to a language base. Instead, they constantly referred to memory and its inevitable loss. They seemed quite resigned to being on the ageist downward slope. Yet researchers at the University of Tubingen (Ramscar and his colleagues, 2014) urge us to "Forget about forgetting: Elderly know more, use it better". Their computer simulations comparing the language skills of young to old indicated that elderly adults had to process a far lengthier vocabulary list and, like an overloaded computer, they were much slower than the young people on tests of linked words. However, the research team concluded that the Elderly had a better understanding of language and, despite slower processing, used it more meaningfully. How should the Elderly capitalize on these findings?

We know that expressive language draws on all memory systems so it cannot be separated from cognitive issues. This fusion should then offer the opportunity of using language to stimulate and maintain cognition in the Aged beyond a mere passive acceptance of ageist decline. To be marshalled as a key for sustained cognitive activity, language needs to be consciously nurtured and Elders will have to persist with listening and speaking. But then, spoken language, good conversations, friendly 'chats' are going out of fashion. We no longer telephone each other, we send text messages, we no longer write newsy letters, we send crisp e-mails, we meet to go to movies, families watch T.V., Bridge players repeat bids. When was the last time we really had an interesting discussion? No wonder we are slow to process our memory store and make meaningful contributions in social situations - and enjoy them.

Listening and speaking are the proven stimuli for child development. The myriad programmes developed for learning and thinking in the childhood years are largely dependent on linguistic presentation and children's levels of development are assessed via their verbalisations. If this is the case for child development, then surely it is also relevant to the Aged in order to support the expression of lifetime experience. The Aged may need to be convinced that a focus on unrelentingly maintaining language skills is also their direct link to personal control. They need to practice constant "neural recruitment" beyond those initial signs of ageing.

Kalula and Hoffman warn that Elder research still has a long way to go and that "brain training" has not been proved to slow down the ageist cognitive decline. However, many of the elderly still

observe and live mindfully, they think critically, they can manipulate numbers and compose persuasive arguments and interesting conversations. All these may only be happening in the quiet of their minds. Perhaps Elder groups should meet in order to practise and enhance their spoken language amongst themselves. The young are too busy, too impatient, and too fearful to confront their own futures. They have little interest in, or energy to, nurture the past generation. Many of the latter still have the aptitude for further learning and intellectual functioning, together with a wealth of experience to offset too-early cognitive decline. We should not be so easily sent into our rocking chairs.

Some Elders are probably unaware of the Tubingen research findings and do not know of any programmes formulated for the stimulation and promotion of their cognitive maintenance. Indeed, interested experts and/or maintenance programmes for the Elderly are difficult to locate. Where are the Gerontolinguists, where are those who understand the difficulties of Elderspeak, where the speech therapists to devise maintenance programmes, the “Gerontopsychologists” to point out the cognitive links with language and the possibilities of self-regulation?

One is made aware of a substantial body of research literature *about* the Aged but not *for* the Aged. Yet this is a fruitful field for professional work and commitment on a practical level. The Aged population is fast ballooning and living longer and the spectre of ageist dependency is to be feared in all sections of every community. How can large numbers of old and mentally and physically frail persons be afforded, accommodated and cared for? What is badly needed are vocal experts who can convince and assist the Aged to purposefully use every tool for their own physical and cognitive maintenance. Intellectual self-reliance will encourage the Aged to live independently as long as possible. Language is one of those tools.

References:

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