OK, Boomer: The Impact of Age Based Language Ideologies

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Abstract

In 2019, memes containing the phrase *Ok, boomer* flooded social media as conflict between generations became more prevalent. Terms with similar connotations, like *snowflake*, already maintained a stronghold in mainstream discourse, creating a niche for additional age related terms. Examining memes, tweets, and podcasts, I work to examine the impact terms like *Ok, boomer* have on online discussions. While it can be argued this type of communication reflects ritualized insults similar to that found in Labov’s writings or Delfino’s examination of joning. However, when compared to samples found in social media and a *National Public Radio* podcast, this research indicates a larger age based language ideological issue, reflecting presumption and negative stereotypes related to age. These ideologies echo the tension between generations online, demonstrating issues similar to that discussed by Crystal Kadakia in her book discussing the difficulties millennials encounter in the workplace. This project examines the usage of age related insults in modern discourse and the language ideologies it reflects using a digital discourse analysis.
Introduction

2019 saw the rise of the TikTok meme *Ok, boomer* which quickly circulated into other social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. While terms with similar connotations, like *snowflake*, already maintained a stronghold in online discourse, this meme adjusted the niche to include new insults in a similar formula. Phrases like *Ok, noob* and *Ok, millennial* have added to the phrase’s spread and demonstrate certain language ideologies reflected in the term. The *Applied Linguistics Journal* refers to language ideologies as “sets of beliefs about language articulated by users as a rationalization or justification of perceived language structure and use” (Vessey 2017). Most notably relevant in this context are presumption and ageism, that is negative stereotypes related to age.

Defining some terms

Before diving further into the discussion of online discourse and the ideologies reflected there, I would like to define a few key terms. This allows for better understanding of the ideologies reflected. The word *generation* refers to a unit in a system of nomenclature which groups people together with certain time periods (OED). These are typically done within a prescribed range of birth years, although they can be impacted by key events commonly associated with an age bracket.

The Pew Research Center defines the term *Baby Boomers*, or *boomers* as those born between 1946 and 1964, immediately after World War Two when families were being established from returning veterans. Those in Generation X, sometimes called *Gen x-ers*, were born from 1965-1980. *Millennials* are seen as the age group born between 1981 and 1996 (Fry). A key feature generally tied to this age bracket is that they were either adolescents or children.
during the switch from the twentieth to twenty-first centuries. Those born after this era are frequently defined as Generation Z, with an end time usually described at 2010 (Fry).

None of these terms are categorized by the individuals they describe. Rather, they can be thrust upon a person regardless of identity. They can also be used as an insult. For example, a person who is not a classically defined as a *Boomer* can still be called one if the interlocutor believes they are matching traits of such a person.

**Literature Review**

At first glance, this level of age based insult could be seen as light hearted attempts to establish a social hierarchy online. This could be interpreted as falling in line with the work of William Labov’s studies into the ritualized insults or jonin used in inner city Black English and how this works less to insult than to establish dominance (Labov). Ritualized insults certainly hold their place in discourse, as was supported by Jennifer Delfino in examining how school aged children in Baltimore use jonin to maintain their roles in society. However, the usage of *Ok boomer* is more precise and less interchangeable. A person might refer to another’s mother as a duck and be seen as jonin (Labov). But the usage of *OK boomer*, while it has many permutations, relies on communicating the same message of distaste from one generation to another.

Age based ideologies online work both ways, with groups on either side of a divide using discourse about the other. When looking to understand these markers better, I read Crystal Kadakia’s book *The Millennial Myth* which discussed the impact of millennials in the workplace and negative stereotypes they frequently encounter. It worked to debunk some of the more common misconceptions about this generation, and, by doing so, it provided insights into age based ideologies like presumption. Kadakia explores the stereotypes that “millennials are lazy,
entitled, job-hopping, need to be hand held, and have issues with authority” (Kadakia). Naturally, this caused me to consider the impact from other directions, such as the negative stereotypes that boomers are stuck in their ways or at fault for economic crises. Whether these ideologies share any truth or not is outside the purview of this study. Rather, I examined the impact of the markers and the ideologies they reflect.

Data Collection

Throughout the research process I spent considerable time on social media using digital discourse analysis to better understand the usage of this marker. This largely involved the collection of memes and threads from a variety of sites and with a plethora of mediums, from text to images, and from gifs to videos. My primary source of information came from TikTok itself as well as Twitter. I only used memes published in a public forum to avoid conflicts of interest or invasion of privacy.

In November 2019, NPR published an episode of their podcast 1a, a news round robin program. This episode discussed the impact of Ok, boomer both online and the real world perceptions the term represents. Using samples from this episode, I transcribed several comments which demonstrate the language ideologies presumption and ageism.

Presumption

The Journal of Pragmatics and Cognition regards presumption as a key part of discourse analysis which “reveals the differences in interlocutor’s interpretations of an utterance” (Macagno). Examining the presumptions behind a speaker’s statement allows for better understanding of the opinions expressed. For example, in the episode of 1a, one of the interviewees, a millennial, said “I think it’s based on a lot of older people just thinking you could bootstrap our way to success and not realizing the job market has actually changed and it’s now
The speaker’s statement about the attitudes of other generations has some faulty assumptions. They refer to others without regard for the struggles each generation has faced. Each new generation encounters its own triumphs and tragedies. The Greatest Generation saw two world wars and the Great Depression. Baby Boomers had recessions and the Vietnam war as well as the Civil rights movement. While some of the speaker’s comments were undoubtedly justified, their statement as a whole suggests a presumption revealed as language ideology.

Similarly, my examinations of online conversation revealed presumption being used in discourse regarding millennials. The appearance of this term on TikTok, a social media platform designed for, and primarily used by those characterized in Generation Z, exemplifies the presumption commonly occurring on internet platforms. Many of the memes and social responses to this term associate its origins with Millennials, yet all evidence shows that it likely originated with Generation Z. The connection of this term to the age bracket puts an unwarranted assumption upon the user based on generation, rather than actual age and identity.

Ageism

Not only do terms like Ok boomer demonstrate assumption on behalf of the speakers and those who comment on them in future discourse, they can demonstrate a clear ageist based ideology. These negative stereotypes are often reflected in speech and generally have little to do with the speaker’s actual identity as presumption continues to play a key role (Bouson). In the previously mentioned podcast, one of the interviewees mentioned: “I think the ok boomer is, it’s a backlash to that if anything because the first thing we heard was snowflake...as a response to that you hear people just saying ok boomer” (1a). When examined through an ideological
analysis, this shows a potential underlying ageism by explaining the justification for the *OK boomer* response.

These thoughts and others used language to show the ideologies that those of a different age are other and should be marked with their own insult. They are often played off as humor, such as when paired comedic images. Insults like *Ok Boomer* and *snowflake* show the distance between baby boomers and millennials. This type of marker shows the negative stereotype associated with certain age groups that are unconsciously considered when speaking.

**Conclusion**

The internet, like most mediums of communication, is full of discourse of all types. The usage of the internet does not restrict or limit the variety of conversation happening. Public conversations have allowed for a breeding ground for language ideologies. This is especially true when major events in the outside world are discussed in the virtual realm. In recent months, this was most commonly demonstrated with age variation based ideologies in the meme *Ok, Boomer.* The language ideologies represented in *Ok, boomer* echo the tension between generations online as Baby Boomers, Millennials, and Generation Z work to find a balance in relations. Linguistic features like *OK Boomer* change from generation to generation, and they demonstrate ideologies toward specific age groups.

Terms like *Ok Boomer* and other similar age based insults have clear impacts on online discourse by emphasizing the schism already drawn and working to create greater distance between the two groups. In my research for this project, I noted cases of justification which defend the usages of the term, yet the act of using it demonstrated ideologies and stereotypes placed upon specific age groups. Although other age based variations and insults already exist in
online discourse, such as *snowflake*, the ideologies of presumption and ageism are clearly expressed in this meme.
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