

# The Speech of Old Men: an unstable literary construction

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*Tutkimuksessani olen analysoinut Charles Dickensin romaanin Nicholas Nickleby (1838–9) keskuksen henkilön Arthur Griden käyttämää kieltä. Gride on eräs tarkimmin kuvattuja vanhuksia englantilaisessa kirjallisuudessa. Analyysi osoittaa, että Griden puheessa esiintyy paitsi hänelle ominaisia idiosynkraattisia piirteitä myös monia vanhusten puheeseen kirjallisuudessa liitettyjä stereotyyppioita, jotka ovat tunnusomaisia erityisesti julistavan melodraaman vanhuskuville. Tutkimukseni osoittaa myös, että Griden puheessa on kuitenkin myös stereotyyppiä poikkeavia piirteitä, jotka rikkovat perinteisen kuvauksen yhtenäisyyttä ja toimivat konventioista poikkeavalla tavalla.*

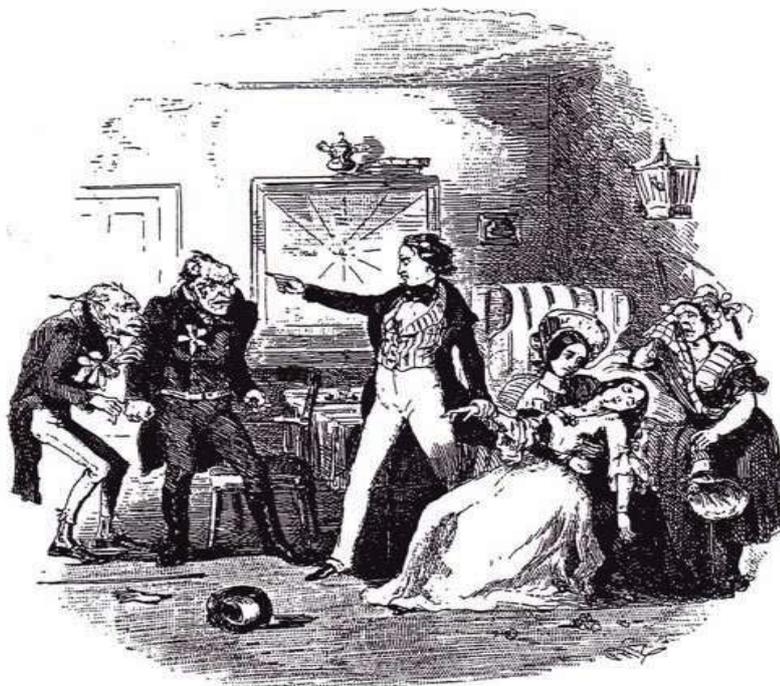
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## 1 Introduction

The language of older people was for a long time the absent other of studies of life stages. In an article on age as a sociolinguistic variable, Penelope Eckert (1997: 157) maintained that for linguists “only the middle-aged are seen as engaging in mature use, as “doing” language rather than learning it or losing it.” Such studies as there were focused on ageing in terms of decline. For example, in the same year as Eckert’s article, David Crystal characterized the language of the old in terms of “reductions in the efficiency of the vocal organs . . . The muscles of the chest weaken . . . The cartilages, joints, muscles and tissues of the larynx also deteriorate, especially in men”, etc. (Crystal 1997: 19). With the graying of the adult population, however, the language of older people, known as gerontolinguistics, has received more attention, and this has led to more nuanced and in many ways positive accounts (e.g. Giles et al. 2000) which take into account not only voice quality but also vocabulary, style and social function. This paper draws on the evidence of literature in an attempt to historicise the process. It studies the language of Arthur Gride, a 75-year-old man in Charles Dickens’s novel *Nicholas Nickleby*, published in monthly parts from 1838 to 1839. The question proposed is one of mimesis: to what extent is Dickens representing the ‘typical’ speech profile of an old man? Would his speech be represented differently in someone of a different age? The paper suggests that the complexity of Gride’s character arises from a

dialectical contradiction in his speech, which swings sharply between signs of terminal decline and of 'youthful' vigour.

Arthur Gride, a moneylender in his seventies, is a character central to the closing chapters of the novel. He is Nickleby's rival for the hand of Madeline Bray, with the advantage that Madeline's father owes him a large sum of money. From the illustrations by 'Phiz' that accompanied the novel (Fig. 1), it can be seen that he owes something to that traditional figure of the folk tale, *senex amans*, the miserly and incontinent Old Man who still believes he can play the part of the Young Lover. Examples of the general type are the tale of Ricciardo in Boccaccio's *Decamerone* (1963: 144–52) and Brian Merriman's Irish poem 'Cúirt an Mheán Oíche' [The Midnight Court] (Tuama & Kinsella 1981: 220–47). Today the phenomenon of a woman marrying a much older man who is wealthy and powerful is so common that the term 'trophy wife' has been coined to describe such a person. Gride is thus not only grotesque and comical but also a representation of a feature of the working of the power system in a western patriarchal society.



NICHOLAS CONGRATULATES ARTHUR GRIDE ON HIS WEDDING MORNING

**Figure 1.** Arthur Gride is on the extreme left (Dickens 1901: 833).

However, Gride is not the stereotypical *senex amans* or Aged Lover. His instrumental role in the plot negates Dickens's vivid physical description of him, and this paper suggests that his speech profile does the same. Dickens represents him as very far from the circumstances of solitude and deprivation which are often associated by sociologists with old age (Coupland 2000: 16). He is never seen alone. He initiates actions and takes a leading role in negotiations: in the four scenes in which he appears, he dominates the verbal exchanges. While a minor character in terms of the plot, he is 'on stage' for 63 of the novel's 959 pages (nearly 7% of the novel) and has 132 utterances, including some passages of monologue. This makes him, with Shakespeare's King Lear and Geoffrey Chaucer's character January in his 'Merchant's Tale,' one of the most fully worked-out portrayals of an old man in English literature.

Literary representations of the speech of old men, from Chaucer to Samuel Beckett's and Harold Pinter's many examples, are often intertextual: that is, they draw more on conventions set up within the literary sign system than on observed praxis. These include hesitation, repetition, and the use of quotations, proverbial sayings and archaisms (etymologically, 'old language'). Gride's speech certainly has some features of these literary conventions. His opening words are very repetitious: "Not at all, Mr. Nickleby, oh not at all. All places are alike to me, sir. Ah! Very nice indeed. Oh! Very nice" (Dickens 1901: 714). He also repeats what others have said to him, not only to fix it in his mind but also sometimes to add an inflection of his own, as when his housekeeper remarks of Madeline, "Don't let her make a fool of you": "A fool of me!" exclaimed Arthur. "Trust your old master not to be fooled by pretty faces" (Dickens 1901: 781).

## **2 Chronological and biological age**

In terms of the speech of old men, a distinction should be made between chronological and biological age. The latter, of course varies, particularly from country to country. What is old age? A subjective definition is, 'older than me.' An objective definition should be synchronic as well as diachronic. A broad linguistic survey of language and life stages in a large number of different countries in all parts of the world, including

developing countries, fixed the mean figure for the onset of middle age as 31, and old age as 52 (Giles et al. 2000). This would be considered still part of middle age in developed western societies today, although not a century ago. These differences, of course, are not only between societies but between individuals, and in this respect Gride is a complex figure. His chronological age, for example, is “about seventy or seventy-five years” ((Dickens 1901: 714), while his biological age is both older (in his physical appearance) and younger. He has faculties associated with youth, notably, of course, his aspiration to a young bride. He is well able to calculate in his head, and plot against his enemies (Dickens 1901: 815, 819). He remembers his childhood well, and has an excellent memory for detail: he is able to list the six different forms of security lock that protect his property without any difficulty (Dickens 1901: 821). He reveals to Madeline his almost childlike fascination for the “slippers . . . watch-guards, hair-chains and a thousand little dainty trifles that I couldn’t give you half the names of” (Dickens 1901: 781). Childlike, but not childish: Dickens always strongly protested against regarding old age as second childhood: Gride is a man who is sure of himself, contented with his lot and, however mistakenly, believes himself secure in his relation to those around him. The comedy derives from its relation to what Jean-Paul Sartre calls (in *L’Etre et le Néant*) ‘the unrealizable’ (De Beauvoir 1972: 291), the perceived gap between desire and performance, or, in terms of the subject of this paper, between youth and age.

Above all, he is youthful in his language. Gride both confirms and challenges the stereotypes of old age set up in the literary system. The same contradictions are found in his speech when compared with recent studies of the actual speech of old people. In terms of mimesis, the degree of fit between representation and praxis, there is no close relation between the features of Gride’s speech and David Crystal’s characterisation of the speech of the elderly. He states that, with age, “Speech rate slows, and fluency may be more erratic” (Crystal 1997: 19). This, however, is not a characteristic of the 75-year-old Arthur Gride, who, as we have seen, has more than 130 utterances totaling nearly two thousand words. His voice is described as having a high pitch, accentuated by a tendency to titter: many of his utterances are punctuated by ‘he-he’, which is one of his speech mannerisms (Dickens 1901: 779–80 etc.). Both his speech and appearance are affected by the fact that he has lost his teeth, causing his jaws to fall inwards (Dickens

1901: 714). Respiratory efficiency at age 75 is only about half that at age 30 (Crystal 1997: 19), so the voice is often rougher, quavering and with breathing more prominent. This feature is found in Gride. His delivery is said to be unsteady, with a “tremulous . . . shrill quavering tone” (1901: 779). However, Dickens is here describing his singing voice as he vigorously sings a wedding song. The squeakiness therefore signifies the lack of consonance between Gride’s chronological age and the social age at which marriage and reproduction are most common. The comic Old Man topos in both oral and written literature is a conservative feature that in practice polices life stages in terms of behaviour appropriate to each.

### 3 Old age and residual speech forms

The practice of acting as a repository of residual speech has been documented in several field studies of older speakers. Chambers (1995) found in Canada, for example, that only older people described a couch as a *chesterfield* any more. Threatened languages are often said to be spoken only by the old. Of 13 Google hits for ‘the language of old people,’ five related to the threat of extinction to languages with few remaining native speakers (Breton, Irish, Kaqchikel [Mexican-Maya], Maori and (inaccurately) Welsh)<sup>1</sup>. However, the correlation between language fixity and old age is not a stable one: many other factors than age account for linguistic conservatism. Gride does conform to this profile of an older person as someone who clings to traditional habits of speech. He frequently relies on proverbial sayings and catchphrases: “time is money,” “faint heart never won fair lady,” “practice makes perfect” (Dickens 1901: 718, 722, 815). In addition to the *démodé* ribbon in his hair, he enjoys “chattering over bygones”, and his language is often old-fashioned: he exclaims “well-a-day!” on three occasions (Dickens 1901: 714, 718, 814).

However, vocabulary may also increase with age, and verbal skills improve. Older people often feel less social constraints: the scandalous old man or woman who speaks plainly and flouts social norms is a comic stereotype in many languages, but this feature is also confirmed by empirical studies (Cheshire 2001: 1). Gride’s description of his bottle-green suit, which he believes brought him an unexpected windfall when one of

his creditors died, is a masterly piece of compressed comic narrative: “It was a lucky suit too, this bottle-green. The very day I put it on first, Lord Mallowford was burnt to death in his bed, and all the post-obits fell in” (Dickens 1901: 780). Gride’s sexual fantasies about Madeline, his coming bride, with “such a waist as might make a man clasp the air involuntarily thinking of twining his arm about it” (Dickens 1901: 719) shows no falling off of imaginative powers. He refers to her in a predatory way as “a tit-bit,” a “pretty chick” and a “dainty morsel” (Dickens 1901: 723, 724, 730). However, Dickens often accompanies Gride’s speech with kinetic movements that clearly signify age: at one point he rubs his hands together compulsively (also, of course, the conventional mark of the miser), and plucks and fumbles at his hat (Dickens 1901: 718, 728). It could be said that the whole topos of the lustful old man depends crucially on such a contradiction of signifiers.

Technically, the dynamic contradiction between the verbal and the kinetic is masked by the way Gride’s physical appearance is described. Dickens makes him the object of the gaze as much as a woman or an African child in the contemporary world media. Gride has many of the stereotypical marks of old age within the literary sign system, and specifically that of programmatic melodrama. He describes him as if he were an ancient tree, “much bent, and slightly twisted” (1901: 714). He is physically repulsive, like a goblin, “a dry, shrivelled, withered old chip.” In addition, he is extremely thin: his legs are described as “shrunken spindle-shanks in their full ugliness” (Dickens 1901: 714). Dickens took great care to see that the illustrator of the first volume reproduced these features accurately (Fig.1. Gride is the figure on the far left). He is also cunning, lecherous, sly and mean (Dickens 1901: 730, 717). The many personal details of his appearance, such as the black ribbon in his hair and the bottle-green suit he carefully chooses to get married in, make him grotesquely unattractive (Dickens 1901: 714, 780). Even his house has taken on the features of its owner, particularly in terms of its dryness and secretiveness: it seems to have “withered, like himself, and to have grown yellow and shrivelled in hoarding him from the light of day” (1901: 778). Such metaphors clearly signify chronological age and disrupt the many signs of youth in his speech. Cumulatively, they present an aporia in the narrative.

#### 4 Speech and social function

The subjects introduced by Gride are in conflict with the model of old people's speech topics suggested by Sacks (1987). Sacks (1987: 222) introduces the idea of the 'private calendar,' which gives a person a chance to share their idea of the world and its events with that of others. Someone with few social contacts will have only a limited number of items to introduce in conversation with others, and their turns will be correspondingly restricted both in number and scope. This uneventful private life and lack of engagement with the world is emphatically not true of Arthur Gride. He engineers his marriage, and plans the details of the wedding meticulously. He is very shrewd and active in business matters. He has the vigour of a much younger man, particularly in the fields of sex and money. He pursues those who owe him money remorselessly, and appropriately meets a violent death, murdered by others as fixated by money as he is (Dickens 1901: 956).

Another feature that makes comparisons between different age groups difficult is the presence of gender and social variables that interact with the age variable (Cheshire 2001: 1). For example, as often in the nineteenth century novel, the women in *Nicholas Nickleby* are described more conventionally than the men. Gride's equally aged housekeeper Peg Sliderskaw is, unlike him, largely seen in terms of stereotypes. In Jenny Cheshire's words, "The effects of gender are strongly conditioned by generation, and the generations are strongly conditioned by sociohistorical contexts" (Cheshire 2001: 11). As an old woman, she is inevitably described as ugly, with a "sour malignant look . . . twisting her under-jaw from side to side . . . half a witch" (Dickens 1901: 781–782). Unlike Gride, whose hearing remains excellent, she is nearly completely deaf. Also unlike Gride, she is associated with fragility rather than activity (a "delicate piece of antiquity," 822), linking her with the larger narrative of female subordination which particularly oppresses young women like Madeline Bray, regarded as a financial commodity to be passed between her father to Gride. As Ralph Nickleby puts it to him:

I tell you what, sir; there are a hundred fathers, within a circuit of five miles from this place; well off; good, rich, substantial men; who would gladly give their daughters, and their own ears with them, to that very man yonder [Gride], ape and mummy as he looks (Dickens 1901: 827).

## 5 Conclusions

The speech profile of Arthur Gride offers a mix of signifiers: those of the physical decline associated with old age, but also a kind of parodic mimicry of the speech of a much younger speaker. Dickens has been praised for the accuracy of his representations of speech, and specifically for the speech patterns of different life stages (for example, in Page 1973). This article has shown that, while many stereotypical features remain, Dickens also deconstructs them by using them ironically or combining them in counterpoint with the characteristic speech of much younger speakers.

There is thus an aporia in the conclusion of Dickens' novel, which firmly restores the social conventions: Nicholas, who is at the right age to be an accepted lover, gets his girl and the status quo is restored. Arthur Gride is rejected, humiliated and, as the last pages of the novel make clear, eventually murdered. This extreme form of closure restores the view of old age as an Other which is defined only in terms of its significations. It is a position specifically questioned by Gride's way of speaking, which suggests a man whose biological age is in denial of his chronological age. In destabilizing the stereotype, Dickens challenges not only the conventions of the mimetic system used to represent speech but also the narrative assumptions of the Victorian novel.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Irish: [www.cnag.ie/nuacht/2004/whatsthis.htm](http://www.cnag.ie/nuacht/2004/whatsthis.htm) [cited 31.1.2007]

Welsh: [www.britishcouncil.org/welsh-language-project-report-2003.doc](http://www.britishcouncil.org/welsh-language-project-report-2003.doc) [cited 31.1.2007]

Maori: [www.tpk.govt.nz/publications/paetae/docs/mar\\_02/kp38\\_pt2.pdf](http://www.tpk.govt.nz/publications/paetae/docs/mar_02/kp38_pt2.pdf) [cited 31.1.2007]

Kaqchikel: [studentorgs.utexas.edu/salsa/proceedings/2002/papers/french.pdf](http://studentorgs.utexas.edu/salsa/proceedings/2002/papers/french.pdf) [cited 31.1.2007]

Breton: [www.abo.fi/fak/hf/folklore/projekt/migration/SocietalBilingualism.pdf](http://www.abo.fi/fak/hf/folklore/projekt/migration/SocietalBilingualism.pdf) [cited 31.1.2007]

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