

Elderly or Old, the Words to be Used

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Abstract

This paper is a part of an *IRP* research project on the Italian older people, their life arrangements, their working life, their attitudes towards retirement, and their experience with the new technologies. The main goal of the survey carried out by the *IRP* was to focus elderly behaviour on those topics, and to trace an outline of the "contemporary" elderly: their aspirations, expectations, hopes and fears concerning their mature life. Particular attention has been paid to attitudes concerning retirement, leisure time, relationships with children, partner and friends and society in general. The telephone survey involved 4,300 women and men aged 60-74.

The aspects related to the ageing process - including the psychological implications - were highlighted in two focus groups. The groups involved eight people for each sex. Interviews were conducted on the issues of the survey.

By applying lexical analysis techniques on the texts of the interviews conducted during the focus groups, we synthesised text contents without any coding, to maintain all information available. The results of this application represent an integration and completion of the quantitative analysis on the survey. The purpose of this step was to understand and outline the deep and hidden perception of old age, and of the other topics of the research displayed by the language. With the lexical analysis, we intended to apply a statistical methodology to 'subjective' matters as contained in the interviewee texts, in order to obtain 'objective' information on attitudes, expectations and satisfaction. The analysis consisted in the following steps: frequency analysis on single forms and repeated segments, specific and banal forms, modal phrases.

Keywords: Focus Group, Attitudes and Expectations, The Elderly, Lexical Analysis, Repeated Segments, Specific Forms and Banal Forms, Modal Phrases.

1. Introduction

In the context of research on the changes regarding new equilibriums and relationships to be established between generations, on the emerging brackets of the population and their behaviour, the National Institute for Population Research (IRP) has studied the topic of the elderly, still active and "young", present in unprecedented numbers and able to enjoy the last period of their life freed from work. It would be interesting to focus on some aspects of the behaviour of the older generations, to define an outline of the "contemporary" elderly, their aspirations, expectations, hopes and fears regarding the last part of their life and in particular regarding their retirement, leisure time, the new relationships with children, partner and friends.

The survey, conducted by giving a questionnaire to a sample of individuals aged between 60 and 74, was preceded by a focus group, in order to investigate the psychological aspects and implications of feeling elderly or old, by two focus groups, one with elderly men and the other with elderly women.

A special feature of the focus group is that it enables the collection of specific information on the required topic, since this information derives from the interaction between the participants; this information would not otherwise be accessible. The interaction with other individuals, as well as with the interviewer, leads to a greater propensity among the interviewees to express their points of view, compared to what happens in classical interviews.

Through the lexical analysis of the texts of the interviews, we tried to highlight the profound

structure, expressed through language, of the perception of the interviewees of the second adult age and of the other topics covered in the survey, while the analysis of the specific forms and modal phrases of men and women was used to attempt to identify the differences in expectations and attitudes on a gender basis.

2. Research Methodology

The material for analysis was collected in two meetings of the focus group; the participants were chosen from persons aged between 60 and 74, and each group was composed by eight persons of the same sex. The interviews lasted about two hours and thirty minutes each, and were conducted by two separate interviewers of the same sex as the participants in the group.

The topics towards which the interviewers directed the conversation regarded the evaluation of the perception of 'old age' and its social meaning, relationships with the family, with work and with the new technologies available (personal computer, mobile phone, internet, cash card).

It was not considered necessary to submit to the text any particular pre-treatment: no ambiguous forms, either grammatical or semantic were observed, probably because the text is medium-to-small in size, and the words used do not have very high frequency rates. There was a combination of forms identifying some important topics in the analysis, which would otherwise have been neglected due to the low frequency with which they occur in the vocabulary of the text.

The interviews proved to be very rich in response to the interviewer stimulus, with little tendency to use brief answers or to follow the language framework of the question. For these reasons, the text of what the interviewer said was excluded from the analysis.

3. The Characteristics of the text

The text analysed consists of 25,574 occurrences, with 3,690 graphic forms; the lexical wealth, i.e. the proportion of different words on the total occurrences, is 14.4%, while the number of hapax elements, i.e. the words present in the vocabulary with a frequency of 1, is 2,069.

Distinguishing the text on the basis of the gender of the interviewees, men show a greater lexical wealth than women. The lexical wealth is calculated by means of G coefficient of Guiraud (Guiraud, 1960), to consider the different size of the two sub-texts (Table 1).

Table 1 - Characteristics of the Text

	Occurrences	Graphic Forms	$G = \frac{V}{\sqrt{N}}$
Females	12126	2115	19,2
Males	13448	2562	22,1
Total	25574	3690	23,1

4. Lexical Analysis: the Words to Say it

Starting from the preliminary stage of combining the various inflections of the verbs in the three main tenses (past, present and future), an interesting fact emerged: most of the verbs are used in the present, somehow indicating a desire to 'exorcise' the future; there are fewer verbs used in the past tense. This shows that the elderly live mainly in the present, maintaining contacts with the past, their experience. Their identity is in the past, in what has already been achieved, in the present, in the activities and projects they undertake, but they do not seek new achievements in the future.

We can now illustrate the most important results of the various phases of lexical analysis,

conducted on the single forms and repeated segments. With regard to the words, we have considered the non-grammatical forms as significant, without considering the non-grammatical forms which, though performing an operational function have, however, little meaning, while we have made a selection among the sequences of text which are most significant from the contents and the contextual point of view. In this phase, the *IS* index (Morrone 1993), which allows for the selection of segments according to the degree of absorption of the forms composing the segment, proved helpful.

The most frequent words and segments emerging from the reading of the vocabulary reflect the topics discussed during the interview (Table 2 and Table 3).

Table 2 - Most Frequent Forms in the Vocabulary

Rank	Graphic Form	Occur.	Rank	Graphic Form	Occur.	Rank	Graphic Form	Occur.
24	anni	186	138	dopo	32	344	capelli	9
38	però	116	144	nipot#	29	345	compagnia	9
39	adesso	112	149	marito	28	395	entusiasmo	8
45	figli#	101	154	famiglia#	27	405	morte	8
52	sempre	78	169	salute	23	457	spaventa	7
60	anzian#	67	177	moglie	21	458	specchio	7
64	vita	65	185	computer	20	538	bancomat	5
68	casa	61	236	amore#	14	597	solitudine	5
70	prima	61	237	esperienza	14	599	spirito	5
76	invece	55	275	purtroppo	12	663	frigorifero	4
85	oggi	50	277	società	12	679	internet	4
87	vecch#	49	283	comunque	11	682	limiti	4
93	età	46	288	fisico	11	699	novità	4
94	piace	46	290	futuro	11	718	progresso	4
104	posso	41	303	uscire	11	746	telefonino	4
107	lavoro	40	307	attività	10	759	vestito	4
108	magari	40	308	ballare	10	888	ingrassata	3
120	amic#	37	322	nonn#	10	1321	macchinetta	2
122	pensione	37	329	soldi	10	2648	lavastoviglie	1
124	mai	36	330	televisione	10	2649	lavatrice	1

Table 3 - Most Frequent Sequences of Text

Segment	Freq	IS	Segment	Freq	IS	Segment	Freq	IS
anni fa	27	1,1341	di casa	7	0,1283	fare le scale	4	1,4514
in pensione	25	0,7821	una certa età	6	1,2263	l'amicizia	4	1,0226
mio marito	23	2,1905	più giovane	6	0,4651	non devi fare	4	0,9205
a casa	21	0,3987	mentre prima	6	0,4513	tipo di vita	4	0,7540
mia moglie	18	2,1643	non si può	6	0,3745	io purtroppo	4	0,6815
in casa	13	0,2684	gli anziani	6	0,3179	mi interessa	4	0,6777
ad un certo punto	10	1,9476	non mi sento	6	0,3072	bella vita	4	0,5231
nella vita	10	0,6300	la pensione	6	0,1759	stare bene	4	0,5078
persone anziane	9	1,8346	io adesso	6	0,1294	il mondo	4	0,3754
la macchina	9	0,6206	persona matura	5	2,2703	a questa età	4	0,3401
a ballare	8	0,8207	ho vissuto	5	1,0350	più tempo	4	0,3305
l'anziano	8	0,4262	con mia moglie	5	0,6618	ero più	4	0,2628
non c'è più	8	0,3488	mi ricordo	5	0,6388	la mia vita	4	0,2414
voglio fare	7	0,7853	mi dicono	5	0,2638	invece adesso	4	0,2169
in televisione	7	0,7298	degrado fisico	4	2,0606	io prima	4	0,1460
l'esperienza	7	0,5395	non riesco	4	2,0126	con i giovani	4	0,1227

4.1. Time and Relationships

First in frequency are the adverbial terms defining the temporal function: *years* <anni>, *now* <adesso>, *always* <sempre>, *before* <prima>, *today* <oggi>, *after* <dopo>, *never* <mai> and, with lowest frequency *future* <futuro>. Then, there is the topic of relationships, in the family context: *children* <figli>, *home* <casa>, *grandchildren* <nipoti>, *family* <famiglia>, *grandparents* <nonni>; then those regarding the couple: *husband* <marito> and *wife* <moglie>, *love* <amore>, and finally *friends* <amici>.

Among the segments we find, with high frequency rates, the forms *my husband* <mio marito> and *my wife* <mia moglie>, and in this case the adjective recalls the couple. In particular, the sequence *with my wife* <con mia moglie> indicates company, undertaking activities together, and these are the activities that man undertakes in his new leisure time, the *more time* <più tempo>, freed from work.

The term *home* <casa> is used in the compound forms *at home* <a casa> and *in the house* <in casa>, which indicate the physical space, the domestic environment, and *at home* <di casa>, that which is known and familiar.

Something important is *experience* <l'esperienza>, acquired over time, *at a certain age* <ad una certa età>, with numerous mentions that *I remember* <mi ricordo>, something that happened *years ago* <anni fa>, that *I have lived* <ho vissuto> *in life* <nella vita>, which is *no longer* <non c'è più>.

4.2. The Second Adult Age

Old age is explained as *life* <vita>, defined with *age* <età>, using with increasing frequency the term 'elderly' rather than 'old', considered somehow mortifying, evoking negative meanings. Another important aspect is the attention for one's *physical* <fisico> condition, in terms of *health* <salute>, but since for today's over-60s health is generally good, what worries most is *physical decline* <degrado fisico>: the new *limits* <limiti> occurring later: *I before* <io prima> and *I now* <io adesso>, *I can't manage* <non riesco> to *climb the stairs* <fare le scale>, and the imposed limits, maybe from affectionate children when *they tell me* <mi dicono> *you have not to do* <non devi fare>, *you can't* <non si può>, and finally changes the appearance of one's body and looking in the *mirror* <specchio>, *clothes* <vestito> which no longer fit because the interviewees *have gained weight* (f.) <ingrassata>, the *hair* <capelli>.

There is the thought of *death* <morte>, but what *frightens* <spaventa> more and makes them *afraid* <paura> is perhaps *loneliness* <solitudine>. It is important for them not to let themselves go, since people become truly elderly when they feel old; what counts is the *spirit* <spirito>, and today's elderly people have *enthusiasm* <entusiasmo>, a desire to *go out* <uscire>, the wish to go out and I wish ... *dance* <ballare>, and undertake various *activities* <attività>. In any case, there is no lack of memories, which form the true wealth and identity of the persons interviewed.

The interviewees, in any case, talk about *the elderly* <gli anziani> like some entity other than themselves, saying *I don't feel* <non mi sento> elderly. The forms used to indicate the category are *elderly people* <persone anziane> and *mature person* <persona matura>.

With regard to the perception of their situation, the changes caused by the shift to a new phase of life can be seen in the expressions *at a certain point* <ad un certo punto>, indicating the time of change, *instead now* <invece adesso>, *I was more* <ero più>, *while before* <mentre prima>, *I unfortunately* <io purtroppo>.

The concern, the secret for feeling *younger* <più giovane>, lies in the *type of life*, <tipo di vita>, the *good life* <bella vita>, which is in any case *my life* <la mia vita>, to be filled by

activities that *I want to do* <*voglio fare*> and that *I'm interested in* <*mi interessa*>, to pass happily, going to *dance* <*a ballare*>, or, for the less active, watching programmes *on television* <*in televisione*>, seeking new stimuli that can come from being *with the young* <*con i giovani*>, cultivating *friendship* <*l'amicizia*>.

4.3. *Work and After*

With regard to work activity, in most cases *work* <*lavoro*> has already been replaced by *retirement* <*pensione*>. This change is definitely traumatic, because the role in the productive system determines their role in *society* <*società*>, from which they are suddenly marginalised in terms of power and relationships, despite the *experience* <*esperienza*> acquired.

The sequence *retirement* <*la pensione*> indicates a concept with a meaning different from *retired* <*in pensione*>, which implies a new organisation of living; the second segment has a higher frequency compared to the first, because it indicates a new and concrete situation.

4.4. *New Technologies*

The relationship with new technologies is not excellent: the *computer* is the most frequently mentioned instrument, and thus probably the best known, but none of the interviewees uses it; then, there is the *cash card* <*bancomat*> towards which there are still many doubts, to which, they prefer *money* <*soldi*>, the *mobile phone* <*telefonino*> and *internet*, even less mentioned. The elderly are aware of *innovations* <*novità*> and *progress* <*progresso*>, but their attitude with respect to them is passive, and they prefer the 'technologies of the past', with which they are already familiar, among which there is especially *television* <*televisione*>, followed by the various appliances.

Thus, a contrast emerges between what *I like* <*piace*> and what *I can* <*posso*>, with a tone of resignation perceived in the terms *instead* <*invece*>, *I wish...* <*magari*>, *anyway* <*comunque*>, *habit* <*abitudine*>.

There are more references to easier-to-use items that people are already familiar with, and which can make life easier, as *the car* <*la macchina*>.

Despite the difficulty of adaptation to a condition that people do not feel they are in and marginalisation with respect to an overly hectic lifestyle, today's elderly people do not let themselves become isolated, and while not using them are familiar with the new instruments produced by progress, pay attention to the future, and are interested in the contemporary world and society.

5. *Specific and Banal Forms: the Different Vocabularies of Men and Women*

After the analysis of the text as a whole, it is interesting to compare the texts of the two focus groups, in order to observe the differences in expectations and attitudes of men and women. We selected specific forms, words and sequences of text from each sub-text. These forms, defined 'key forms', by their over- or under-use in one text with respect to the other, provide information on their specificity or diffusion in the different parts of the text. Application of the technique enables us to identify the *banal forms*. i.e. the words used with the same proportion by both men and women, and the *specific forms* i.e. those either very used or little used by men or women.

Both the typical and the rare occurrence of a word provide elements to know the contents of the texts: positive specificity indicates contents peculiar to the text, and rarity indicates the absence of that topic.

In this survey, the text is divided into two sub-texts, so that the specific elements of one are the rarities of the other; the analysis is thus concentrated on the specific and banal words.

Among the original forms used in an exclusive manner, the highest frequencies for the women were recorded for *husband* <marito> and *my husband* <mio marito>, and for the men *my wife* <mia moglie> and *wife* <moglie> (Table 4). Both categories of persons refer frequently to the person nearest to them and central to their life.

Table 4 - Original and Specific Textual Forms in the Sub-Texts

Textual Forms	WOMEN			MEN			
	Occ. in the Sub-Text	Tot. Occ.	Spec.	Textual Forms	Occ. in the Sub-Text	Tot. Occ.	Spec.
ORIGINAL TEXTUAL FORMS							
mio marito	23	23	+E8	mia moglie	18	18	+E6
possibilità	6	6	+E2	devo dire	17	17	+E5
a 30 anni	5	5	+E2	direi	13	13	+E4
spirito	5	5	+E2	spaventa	7	7	+E2
rifiuto	5	5	+E2	degrado fisico	4	4	+E2
cadente	5	5	+E2	ricordi	6	6	+E2
cinema	5	5	+E2	memoria	5	5	+E2
SPECIFIC TEXTUAL FORMS							
mi piace	25	30	+E5	vecchio	22	24	+E5
anziani	22	25	+E5	moglie	20	21	+E5
casa	43	61	+E4	oggi	39	50	+E4
vorrei	15	17	+E4	società	11	12	+E3
uscire	10	11	+E3	futuro	10	11	+E3
sola	10	11	+E3	i giovani	19	25	+E2
bella	15	20	+E2	amici	13	17	+E2
meno	29	47	+E2	ho sempre	9	11	+E2
non so	21	30	+E2	mondo	9	11	+E2
giovane	19	29	+E2	capire	9	10	+E2
anziane	10	13	+E2	secondo me	8	9	+E2
paura	8	10	+E2	io penso che	7	8	+E2
non posso	7	8	+E2	io dico	7	8	+E2
i capelli	7	8	+E2	passato	7	8	+E2

The forms used specifically by the women are *I like* <mi piace>, *spirit* <spirito>, *cinema* <cinema>, *I would like* <vorrei>, *go out* <uscire>, forms that suggest the wish to continue to undertake activities they like and to feel active. There is also a sense of *refusal* <rifiuto>, being *afraid* <paura>, being *less* <meno> *beautiful* <bella> and *young* <giovane>; they are concerned with their appearance, in particular their *hair* <capelli>, so as not to look *feeble* <cadente>, as the characteristic appearance of the elderly is perceived. The comparison is with the *possibility* <possibilità> people have when *aged 30* <a 30 anni>.

The *home* <casa>, in all the various compound forms is the central place for the women's interest and the organisation of their life.

The men appear to be more determined to explain their own points of view: *I must say* <devo dire>, *I would say* <direi>, *according to me* <secondo me>, *I think that* <io penso che>, *I say* <io dico>. What they say regards the *past* <passato>, *memories* <ricordi>, *memory* <memoria>, but definite opinions are expressed on the nature of the *world* <mondo> of *today* <oggi> and *society* <società>. There is also an interest to *understand* <capire>, and towards the *future* <futuro>. What *frightens* <spaventa> them is the *physical decline* <degrado fisico>. While the women prefer the word 'elderly', the men, with a harder approach, use in an almost original way the term 'old'. The women express uncertainty: *I don't know* <non so>, *I can't* <non posso>, they feel *alone* <sola>; the men seem more confident: *I always have* <ho sempre>, and seek *friends* <amici>, also among *the young* <i giovani>.

The topics common to the two categories of persons can be seen in the banal terms, the widely used forms: the *family* <famiglia>, composed by *the children* <i figli> and *the grandchildren* <i nipoti>, *health* <la salute>, the *physical condition* <stato fisico>. All the interviewees speak of how *I feel* <mi sento>, which in some cases is *I'm fine* <sto bene>, in others *I am bothered* <mi dà fastidio> and *sad* <triste>. Also quite frequent is *enthusiasm* <entusiasmo>. Activities shared between the two categories are *dancing* <ballare>, watching *television* <televisione>, although the latter is slightly more frequent among the men.

The women mention *appearance* <aspetto>, the *mirror* <specchio>, *death* <morte>, and *loneliness* <solitudine> more than men. The women would like to be *younger* <più giovane>, while the men, showing a less direct involvement, more often use impersonal expressions like *old age* <vecchiaia> and *youth* <gionemtu>, which indicate categories.

The terms referring to technological instrument, *computer*, *cash card* <bancomat>, *machines* <macchine>, are widely used, as are those regarding work and retirement.

There is a particular non-specific use of the form *shopping* <la spesa>: men also undertake activities generally considered as female, since they spend with their wife (*with my wife* <con mia moglie>) the time left free by retirement.

Table 5 - Banal Textual Forms

Textual Forms	Occ. Sub-Text F	Occ. Sub-Text M	Tot. Occ.	Textual Forms	Occ. Sub-Text F	Occ. Sub-Text M	Tot. Occ.
mi sento	16	19	35	entusiasmo	4	4	8
i figli	13	14	27	il lavoro	5	3	8
in pensione	11	14	25	morte	6	2	8
famiglia	8	13	21	specchio	5	2	7
computer	9	11	20	vecchiaia	1	6	7
nipoti	10	9	19	la pensione	3	3	6
la salute	8	8	16	mi dà fastidio	2	4	6
gioventù	4	8	12	più giovane	5	1	6
fisico	6	5	11	sto bene	3	3	6
ballare	5	5	10	il bancomat	4	1	5
televisione	3	7	10	la spesa	2	3	5
persone anziane	6	3	9	solitudine	4	1	5
aspetto	6	2	8	triste	3	2	5

6. The Modal Phrases: Said by the Protagonists

In order to insert the specific forms identified in the contexts in which they are used, and thus reaching a deeper understanding of the contents of the conversation, some significant phrases of the two sub-texts, the modal phrases, were extracted and selected.

6.1. On Old Age

First of all, both the men and the women interviewees consider it is preferable to use the form 'elderly' rather than 'old', an expression not considered to be very pleasant:

F: "Old, the word old is unpleasant, you say elderly"

M: "Anyway it's better to say elderly than old"

Furthermore, they don't feel that they belong to the category of the old, and some even think that this category is so different from them that they have nothing in common with it. Old age is, in fact, associated with sickness and the loss of self-sufficiency, and it is this situation of dependence that they consider far from them.

M: "No, I think that you feel elderly or old, as we say, when you start not to understand"

F: "No, it's not impossible, sooner or later we all die, but it's important to die well, that is with

your brain, and not be dependent on others"

Time implacably changes the body and the physical capacities. For the women, the change in physical appearance is the most traumatic aspect, and they try to confirm their unchanged capacity to seduce:

F: *"He says" but see how you have gained weight, you are in front of the mirror for three hours but you still look all right" instead I wish he would say "you look nice in these clothes" but he no longer says this"*

F: *"If a man wanted me the same as 20 years ago, 10 years ago, I'd be happier"*

6.2. Work and Retirement

Work is important since it defines the role of the individual in society, but also because it organises time in life; everything suddenly changes with retirement. This change is difficult above all for men, who still feel they are useful and holders of irreplaceable experience:

M: *"I like to remember the very young official who told me "when you go our historical memory will also go" "*

Those who already have other interests outside work face retirement with a more positive attitude:

M: *"I am free and thus I can do everything I want to do"*

but in general they have difficulty in reorganising their life, and in this definitely seek support from their wife:

M: *"I retired long before she did, and this was a drama"*

From this point of view, the women react better, since in any case they have always done housework:

F: *"Now I haven't worked for so many years and so I stay at home because I still have two children at home"*

6.3. About the Couple

The life of the couple is strengthened by the new organisation of time together, although sometimes paradoxically:

M: *"Well, if it's cold and he puts a sweater on and I feel warm but I put on one too because he has"*

6.4. On Children and Grandchildren

Within the family, the interviewees report a reversal of roles: the children take care of the parents, while the grandparents provide support for the care of the grandchildren:

F: *"The children, I wish... I want to do some things but they block me, "*

M: *"The child, Saturday and Sunday with my wife, also often all together"*

6.5. On New Technologies

The instruments provided by new technologies are known, but do not form part of the daily life of the interviewees, since there are no real reasons to learn how to use them, given the awareness of a limited time in life. They only accept contact with technology concerning health or those that are helpful in daily life.

F: *"I've never wanted to work on a computer and I don't want to now, there is a refusal, perhaps if 10 or 20 years ago..."*

F: *"Well, first there is that key, that mobile phone that older people call health"*

F: *"I always use it (the cash card) because I don't keep cash in the house, so when I need money I go and get it"*

The men are, in any case, better informed on the state of technological development, which

they assess positively, and on the possible future developments:

M: "Also because what we have now, wasn't around ten years ago"

M: "The future is Internet, however it still has to come in Italy"

M: "Now let's remember one thing, that the computer will be useful, it already is but in time will be even more so, as the refrigerator, the washing machine are useful, and every family will have to have a computer in the house".

7. Conclusions

Using the lexical analysis techniques, we synthesised the contents of the text, the topics discussed by the focus-group participants, without any coding of the text itself, thus avoiding the consequent loss of information. The results of this analysis are therefore a tool, integrating and completing the information derived from the interviews conducted by giving the questionnaire. Lexical analysis was used with the application of a statistical methodology to the texts of the interviews, by 'subjective' definition, in order to obtain 'objective' information on attitudes, expectations and satisfaction.

The information collected by analysing the text of the interviews leads us to conclude that the life arrangement of today's over-60s contains elements of frustration: the psycho-physical conditions are good, but the people live on the margins of social and productive life.

The past is thus the longest part of their life, but also the richest, in which they find their identity. The present is in any case experienced by the interviewees completely and with enthusiasm, because they don't feel elderly, and above all they do not want to be considered old. In general, the women deal with matters related to the personal and relational sphere, and daily life, while the men discuss topics that are more impersonal and concrete, related to past and present events.

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