

The Young and the Old: (t) Release in Elderspeak

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Elderspeak is the name given to what many researchers consider to be a speech style or register used when talking to the elderly. Features of elderspeak have been shown to exist on the full spectrum of linguistic levels, from the phonetic to the pragmatic; however, while various phonetic studies have been undertaken on elderspeak, none so far seem to have looked at the phonetics of elderspeak on the segmental level.

In this presentation, I will show the results of my research based on the following hypothesis: that the speech of an adult speaker towards the elderly will contain more released word-final (t) consonants than equivalent speech towards addressees of a similar age to the speaker. This research question was prompted by the fact that elderspeak appears to share many similarities with child-directed speech, which does show this pattern, and the fact that various researchers have mentioned the subjective experience of elderspeak having exaggerated articulation and pronunciation, suggesting that elderspeak uses stylistic features associated with hyperspeech.

The hypothesis was investigated by looking at the rate of released (t) in the speech of Kirsty Young (host of the radio programme Desert Island Discs) to guests of different ages, with the data showing a significant correlation between an elderly addressee and increased rate of (t) release. The implications of this results are then explored, both in terms of elderspeak and wider theoretical frameworks in sociolinguistics.