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THE CONCEPT OF 'AGE' IN NATIONAL CULTURE: TRADITIONAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES.

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ABSTRACT: This study examines the concept of age as a multifaceted phenomenon within linguistic, cultural, and socio-anthropological contexts. Drawing on interdisciplinary perspectives, the research traces the evolution of age-related categories from traditional, institutionally fixed hierarchies to their modern, dynamic reconfigurations shaped by cultural, social, and technological determinants. The analysis highlights how linguistic expressions, idiomatic constructions, and terminological systems reflect societal perceptions of age, encompassing both chronological and socially constructed dimensions. Comparative observations from Russian, English, and Uzbek contexts reveal that age serves not only as a temporal measure but also as a marker of social status, cultural identity, and generational roles. Furthermore, globalization, digitalization, and demographic shifts have expanded the semantic field of age, generating new nominative units, transforming existing terms, and reshaping discursive practices. The findings underscore the importance of viewing the age phenomenon as a multilayered semiotic system, whose lexical-semantic and pragmatic components evolve in parallel with socio-cultural change.

Keywords: age; life cycle; chronological age; relative age; age hierarchy; linguistic conceptualization; cross-cultural analysis; globalization; digital age; idiomatic expressions; sociolinguistics; semiotic system; terminological evolution

INTRODUCTION:

Age has long been at the center of interdisciplinary research. In fields such as developmental psychology and social psychology, age differences among individuals are often regarded as a key factor determining their distinctiveness. At the same time, in social anthropology, cultural age norms in the early stages of social development are frequently reflected in oral tradition. The concept of age represents, for members of a given culture, the ideal trajectory of development. Normative age criteria are closely linked to the evolution of temporal perceptions and categories. Contemporary science recognizes both absolute (calendar or chronological) age and relative age, which correspond to the actual stage of human development. Age criteria possess a complex structure and vary across different cultures.

From a humanities perspective, the study and comprehension of the phenomenology of age necessitate the identification of concepts and categories that adequately reflect the complexity of this phenomenon. Moreover, it should be noted that, in general, age can be classified into two main types: absolute (or chronological) age and relative (or socially constructed) age.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Absolute age, also referred to as calendar or chronological age, denotes the number of temporal units (e.g., minutes, hours, or years) that have elapsed from the moment an object came into existence to the point of its measurement. Relative age, or developmental age, is determined by the object's position within a specific evolutionary and genetic framework or within the process

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of development. This type of age is defined on the basis of certain qualitative and quantitative characteristics. The determination of relative age involves periodization, which regulates the passage of time by highlighting chronological elements of particular significance.

As the prominent Russian scholar I.S. Kon observed, *"every culture possesses a system of ideas and representations that shapes the life course and the age hierarchy of society and the individual."* He referred to this system as "the symbolism of age," which encompasses normative age criteria, age-related stereotypes concerning anticipated developmental changes, age-specific rituals regulating interaction between different age groups, and the life cycle as a whole. Consequently, an age subculture is characterized by a distinctive set of features and values that enables individuals within a particular age group to define and affirm themselves within society. All of these components correspond to the specific features of the life cycle and the social stratification of age.

Ethnographers have noted that in ancient cultures, conceptions of cosmic and social cycles emerged long before human life was divided into stages such as childhood, adolescence, youth, adulthood, and old age. Since the late nineteenth century, the study of age groups—one of the oldest forms of social organization—has become an important focus in world ethnography. Age groups consist of individuals united not by kinship ties but by their age. Evidence of such associations can be found across diverse cultures worldwide, including in Australia, New Guinea, certain Native American tribes, and Africa. The study of age structures has a historical foundation, rooted in the scholarly works of such renowned ethnographers as L. Frobenius and G. Schurtz. Frobenius regarded age groups as characteristic of primitive societies and explained their emergence through herding instincts. Schurtz, on the other hand, was the first to raise the issue of age groups as a form of social organization.

According to Schurtz, the creation and maintenance of age groups were linked to psychological differences between genders and to tensions in relations between older and younger generations. The German ethnographer viewed age organization primarily as a male institution, contrasting it with female kinship structures. Schurtz maintained that *"the principal purpose of establishing stable age groups was to protect their members and to regulate marital relations."* However, as the noted Russian ethnographer K.P. Kalinovskaya has pointed out, *"Schurtz failed to demonstrate the significant role of age group systems in societal development; he merely acknowledged their ancient origins. He mischaracterized their social essence, disregarding the specific features of their emergence and evolution."*

Many researchers have observed that age categories for men and women differ across various cultures. For example, among the Maasai tribe of Africa, men are divided into six age stages, whereas women have only two: girls and elder women. In contrast, the Kotoko people divide the life cycle into eight stages, reflecting a universal approach to understanding the structure of the world and humanity.

In Russian culture, the concept of the "life cycle" holds significant importance. Life follows a certain pattern, the stages of which reflect the changing of the seasons and represent a continuous cycle. Many biological and social processes related to age manifest a cyclical nature.

An analysis of the term "age" reveals that it derives from a root meaning "to grow" and is closely associated with the notions of "giving birth," "nourishing," and "raising." Life proceeds according to a specific scheme, with its stages reflecting seasonal changes and embodying an uninterrupted cycle. Numerous biological and social processes connected with age display periodicity.

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The terms "elderly" and "old" denote maturity and experience. In Russian linguistics, terms describing the duration or progression of "life time" appeared later. Old Slavic terminology links the concept of time with meanings such as "eternity" and "everlasting."

In Russia, regardless of gender, the most common term for adolescents was *nedorosl'* ("minor"). Specific terms distinguished stages of girls' development: between the ages of 10 and 12, they were called *glupaya* ("foolish"); at 18–20, *nevesta* ("bride"). Terminology denoting a girl's age derived from words such as *deva* and *devitsa* ("maiden"). A girl who remained unmarried for a long time could be called *peregodnitsa* ("wanderer" or "party girl").

For boys, collective terms included *molodtsy*, *rebyata*, and *parni* ("young men," "lads," "boys"). Male terminology emphasized their adult social status, including roles in marriage, parenthood, labor activities, and military service.

It should be noted that in many languages, age categories initially reflected not chronological age but social position and status. For example, the Old Russian term *otrok* ("boy") literally means "one who has no right to speak," but in fact referred to a "servant, laborer, or the prince's warrior," illustrating the close relationship between a person's age and their social opportunities. Chronological age largely determined an individual's social role, the diversity of social functions, the division of labor by gender and age, the nature of their activities, as well as their self-awareness and aspirations.

In contemporary society, the determination of age boundaries has a flexible character. For instance, the "Foundations of State Youth Policy of the Russian Federation" define youth as individuals between the ages of 14 and 30, with certain provisions allowing the upper limit to be extended to 35 years or beyond. Moreover, age criteria may be extended for specific groups of young people; for example, a young scientist with a doctoral degree may qualify as such up to the age of 35, or up to 40 if participating in housing assistance programs, and in some cases, even up to 45 for employees of educational and scientific institutions.

In the United Kingdom, the definition of youth varies. The "Positive for Youth" (2011) program defines youth as individuals between the ages of 13 and 19. There is no single age limit for youth policy in England, as different ministries target different age groups. The youth strategies of Scotland and Wales apply to individuals aged 11–25. The UK's Youth Mobility Scheme allows young people aged 18–30 (or up to 35 for certain countries) to work for two years. The UK Youth Parliament consists of members aged 11–18.

In Uzbekistan, young people under the age of 30 constitute two-thirds of the population. A strong legal framework has been established to protect the rights and legitimate interests of youth. The Law "On the State Youth Policy of the Republic of Uzbekistan" provides a detailed description of youth rights and guarantees. In 2024, the needs, talents, and challenges of 8.3 million young people were identified, and 377,000 jobs were created for youth. The country's youth policy is being implemented in accordance with the Development Concept until 2025.

RESULTS

Analyses indicate that stability in a person's life—changes in family circumstances and the transition to parenthood or grandparenthood—over time heightens their awareness of aging. Conversely, a decrease in stability, such as the need to move or make a fresh start, tends to "rejuvenate" individuals, encouraging them to broaden their life prospects by feeling younger. These examples clearly demonstrate the existence and diversity of age gradations in many

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traditional societies. In cultures with a traditional foundation, this age hierarchy is often clearly defined and may take on an institutional form. As various human communities evolve, this gender- and age-based stratification is replaced by other forms of social differentiation; however, its remnants may persist in mythology, everyday beliefs, and moral values.

A linguistic analysis of the concept of "age" allows for a deeper understanding of cross-cultural differences. In English, the word *age* derives from the Latin *aetas*, which originally meant "period of life." In modern English, *age* is used to refer both to chronological age (*He is 25 years of age*) and to historical periods (*the Stone Age*). This dual meaning reflects the temporal and social dimensions of the concept of age. Idiomatic expressions in English also reveal cultural attitudes toward age: "Age before beauty," "Act your age," and "Age is just a number" each reflect Western perspectives on age.

In Uzbek, idiomatic expressions involving the word *yosh* ("age") also embody traditional values. Proverbs such as *Yoshlik yoshga qaramas*, *Qarilik – sochga*, *Yosh chog'im – oltin chog'im*, *Yoshlik – beboshlik*, and *Yoshlikda eksang, qarilikda o'rasan* point to the cyclical nature of age and allude to life experience.

Processes of globalization are significantly transforming traditional notions of age. Social media and digital technologies have introduced a new concept of "digital age." For example, in English, the term *digital native* refers to generations born after the 1980s who have grown up with technology. Similar phenomena can be observed in Uzbek society, where terms such as "technology generation" or "internet generation" supplement traditional age categories.

Research shows that most people perceive themselves as younger than their chronological age. In English, the phrase *you're only as old as you feel* expresses this idea. In Uzbek culture, the expression *yuragi yosh* ("young at heart") conveys a similar notion, attesting to the independence of psychological state from physical age.

Traditional age stereotypes are undergoing change in modern society. In English, the term *midlife crisis*, which emerged in the 1960s, describes life transitions typically experienced between the ages of 40 and 50. However, contemporary studies indicate that this "crisis" is not a universal phenomenon and varies across cultures. In Uzbek culture, the period of middle age is more often perceived as a time of "ripeness" and "wisdom," associated with notions of maturity and responsibility.

Modern demographic changes are reshaping the concept of age. In English, the term *sandwich generation* refers to middle-aged individuals who simultaneously care for their adult children and aging parents. In Uzbek society, this phenomenon is described as "double-sided care," reflecting the transformation of the traditional family structure.

The concept of age is closely linked to gender. In English, terms such as *cougar* (an older woman interested in younger men) and *sugar daddy* (an older man who provides financial support to younger women) highlight the gender dynamics of age. While such explicit terms do not exist in Uzbek, expressions like "yosh xotin – katta er" ("young wife – older husband") or "katta xotin – yosh er" ("older wife – younger husband") reflect prevailing social norms.

Modern education systems are breaking down traditional age boundaries. In English, the concept of *lifelong learning* emphasizes the possibility of learning at any age, thereby expanding the traditional notion of a "learning age." Similarly, in Uzbekistan, principles of *davomiy ta'lim*

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("continuing education") or *umr bo'yi o'rganish* ("lifelong learning") are being introduced, softening conventional age boundaries.

The English term *non-traditional students* refers to adult learners, while in Uzbek society, terms such as "katta yoshdagi talaba" ("mature student") or "tajribali talaba" ("experienced student") are emerging, indicating a diminishing link between education and age.

Digital technologies are creating new age categories. In English, the term *digital immigrants* describes people who have adopted technology later in life, reflecting the relationship between age and technology. In Uzbek society, similar terms such as "texnologiya o'rganuvchilar" ("technology learners") or "yangi texnologiya foydalanuvchilari" ("new technology users") are appearing.

The concept of *screen time* refers to the amount of time children and young people spend with technology. This concept is reshaping traditional notions of play and activity. In Uzbek society, expressions such as "ekran oldida vaqt" ("time in front of the screen") or "raqamli vaqt" ("digital time") capture this phenomenon.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the concept of age in contemporary discourse is subject to dynamic transformation, driven by emerging cultural, social, and technological factors. These ongoing changes not only expand the semantic scope of traditional age classifications but also give rise to new linguocultural constructs and enrich the terminology associated with age. From a linguistic standpoint, age functions as a complex semiotic system whose lexical-semantic and pragmatic layers evolve in tandem with shifts in socio-cultural contexts. This evolution is evident in the emergence of new nominative units, the semantic reconfiguration of existing terms, and the adaptation of age-related discursive practices to modern realities. Ultimately, such developments reflect the interplay between language, culture, and societal change, underscoring the necessity of viewing the age phenomenon through an interdisciplinary and dynamically adaptive lens.

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