We all tend to worry about our inability to come up with the right name or the right word when we need it, but according to Dr. Gitit Kavé, a specialist in neuropsychology and psycholinguistics, we shouldn't worry too much. A drastic decline in word retrieval occurs only after the age of 70 in healthy people – and even then, most of us find ways to get around it.

Dr. Kavé has studied the language of persons with Alzheimer's disease in an attempt to understand both language pathology and the normal cognitive processes involved in using language. "This line of research has a clinical as well as a theoretical application, since many people complain about losing their memory. They want to know if this is a symptom of a disease or just a sign of aging."

After studying the language skills of Hebrew-speaking persons with Alzheimer's disease, Dr. Kavé began working on the language of healthy people, in order to understand the effects of aging, rather than disease, on language. In a study with individuals ranging in age from 18 to 85, participants were asked to name pictures. According to Dr. Kavé, "The real problems in finding words started after the age of 70 or even 75."

Another interesting finding, says Dr. Kavé, was that "there was a connection between how well people did on the naming test and the age at which they had come to live in Israel. Although the sample consisted of individuals who went to school in Israel as children, those born in other countries found the task more difficult.

In another study, Dr. Kavé counted the number of words that individuals generated under time pressure. Participants in the age range of 18-85 were asked to say as many different words as possible that began with a certain letter or that belonged to a certain semantic category, such as tools, within a certain time frame. On this task the older the person, the fewer words produced, as was the case on the naming test.

According to Dr. Kavé, there are at least two explanations for these findings. It is possible that the slowing associated with aging affected the older participants, who performed more poorly due to the limitation in time. It is also possible that the ability to find words declines by itself, such that the finding is not a by-product of the limitation in time but rather reflects a real difficulty in retrieving words. These two explanations are not mutually exclusive and could both be true.

According to Dr. Kavé, "As we grow older, we acquire more words and our vocabulary grows larger. We are always learning new words. For instance, tsunami is a word that not many Israeli people knew before the disaster in December 2004, but which is now familiar to most of us. Paradoxically, the older you are, the richer your vocabulary, and yet the harder it is for you to produce a specific word on naming tests or to say as many words as possible in one minute. If older people find it more difficult to retrieve specific words, we can assume that they will use more common words. But because their passive vocabulary is larger and they know many infrequent words, they may use those rare ones instead. In our most recent study we found that the older you get, the more you tend to pick rare words, which is surprising," she notes.