

In support of researching later-life language variation and change

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Abstract. Variationist sociolinguists must commit to developing age-comprehensive theories of sociolinguistic variation and lifespan change. They must extend analyses of patterns of language variation and change to include the oft-neglected later life-course, and must embrace cross-disciplinary knowledge exchange to identify and explore those ageing-associated biological, psychological and social changes that may impact language use in later life. Improved understanding of later-life linguistic diversity and instability will enhance current sociolinguistic theorizing and potentially also provide hypotheses about factors impacting language use in the early life-course. It will promote a richer understanding of the extent and interconnectedness of behaviour changes in later life. And it will also benefit the community of older adult language users by celebrating them as competent and agentive language users.

Keywords. variationist sociolinguistics, language variation, language change, linguistic stability, lifespan change

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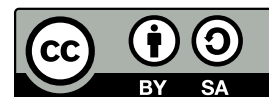
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The creation of the *Journal of Language and Aging Research* (JLAR) is a most-welcome and much-needed development. It supports endeavours to centre aging across sub-disciplines of linguistics and facilitates cross-(sub-)disciplinary knowledge exchange. Crucially, from my variationist perspective, JLAR provides a forum for promoting and enhancing the study of language variation and change in later life.

Variationist sociolinguists analyze vernacular language use to expound the social meaning of language variation and formulate principles of language change (see Eckert 2000;

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Eckert 2008; Labov 1994; Labov 2001; Labov 2010). This research has tended to focus on the socially turbulent early life-course. The later life-course remains comparatively under-researched – even at a time when increasing life expectancy and widening health and social inequalities are diversifying experiences of being and growing old (e.g., Hamilton 2001; Hunt 2005; Smith and Gerstorf 2004), and amid growing indications that the biological, psychological and social changes experienced by older adults may impact their language use (e.g., Harrington and Reubold 2021; Hesson and Pichler 2016; Shapp, LaFave, and Singler 2014). To develop age-comprehensive theories of sociolinguistic variation and lifespan change, we urgently need synchronic and longitudinal studies of later-life language use that examine: (i) how older adults' non-linguistic diversity impacts their linguistic diversity, and (ii) how their diverse and multi-faceted experiences of aging affect their language use over time (see further Pichler, Wagner, and Hesson 2018).

Advancement towards an age-comprehensive variationist sociolinguistics requires that we fully integrate aging-associated biological and psychological changes into analyses of later-life language use (but see Bowie 2015; Labov 1994). Hejná and Jespersen compellingly argue that we must consider biological changes, such as laryngeal muscle atrophy or tooth loss, to correctly interpret cross-sectional patterns of phonetic variation as evidence of biological age-grading or generational change (Hejná and Jespersen 2022). They also suggest that sensory changes may indirectly impact older adults' capability to participate in change in progress: those experiencing decline or loss in auditory acuity may not be able to perceive certain vowel changes, meaning their non-participation in ongoing change is an involuntary practice rather than a conscious choice. Asp, Song, and Rockwood's (2006) and Elsey et al.'s (2015) findings that psychological changes, such as cognitive decline, impact the use of question tags in late adulthood demonstrate that the impact of individual non-social changes extends to other levels of language use too, *viz* discourse-pragmatics. Far from presenting obstacles, aging-associated biological and psychological changes must therefore be viewed as being key requirements for developing accurate models of (later-life) language variation and change.

The above-cited studies show that it is through knowledge exchange and collaboration with clinical linguists, speech and hearing specialists, developmental psychologists, neuroscientists and geriatricians that we can identify biological and psychological factors that may impact later-life language use. That the editors of JLAR actively encourage disciplinary diversity in submissions is therefore to be commended. I hope that the journal will also attract interest from social and behavioural scientists who specialize in non-linguistic aging. These scholars, too, have a lot to offer to variationist sociolinguists. They have, for example, identified social and individual factors that diversify older adults and that may be especially relevant for explaining inter- and intra-speaker language variation in later life, such as social isolation and lack of communication with others (e.g., Jong Gierveld 1998) or extraversion and openness (e.g., Smith and Baltes 1999); and they have developed instruments for operationalizing predictors such as social participation and social networks for quantitative modelling (e.g., Graney 1982; Lubben and Gironde 2004). Crucially, though, variationist sociolinguists have something to offer in return (see Coupland

2004). Findings about older adults' language use – regardless of whether they confirm individual linguistic stability or instability – will help develop a richer understanding of the extent and limitations of behaviour changes in later life. Moreover, they will invite future cross-disciplinary collaborations that explore the inter-connectedness between (un-)stable linguistic and non-linguistic behaviours exhibited by older adults.

Analyses of later-life language variation and change will also benefit variationist analyses of the early life-course, especially the pre-adolescent years. Children experience some of the same or similar biological changes as older adults, such as laryngeal changes (in their case: descent) and tooth loss (in their case: of deciduous teeth). Analyses of how these or other biological changes impact phonetic variation in later life may provide testable hypotheses about their sociolinguistic effect in early life. Importantly, the tools that will need to be developed for measuring biological predictors among older adults may be applied to children and adolescents. Hejná and Jespersen, for example, suggest measuring individuals' body height as a proxy for gauging their vocal tract length and volume (Hejná and Jespersen 2022). (The value of cross-pollination between variationist research of the later life-course and research of the early life-course is why I am reluctant to adopt labels such as 'sociolinguistic gerontology' (see Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1991) to refer to the former. Of course, scholars working on aging and later life must situate their research within a broader multi-disciplinary perspective and increase efforts to communicate their findings beyond the narrow confines of their disciplines (see above). But labels such as 'sociolinguistic gerontology' risk implying that variationist research is best conducted within potentially ill-defined life-stage silos.)

Finally, studies of later-life language variation and change of the type described above have the potential to benefit the community of older adult language users. They complement research in developmental psychology of older adults with communication difficulties due to stroke or dementia (e.g., Caplan and Waters 2006; Kemper and Lyons 1994). Although important for diagnosis and treatment, this narrowly focused research encourages views of later-life linguistic decline and deficit. Variationist studies that include older adults with preserved physical and cognitive functioning associate later-life language use with proficiency and choice; evidence of these adults' participation in community-wide language change will challenge harmful ageist stereotypes of older adults being unadaptable and out of touch with current practices (see Coupland 2004). The research agenda advocated here thus promotes a more positive and inclusive description of older adult language users that will – if shared beyond the academy – enhance these speakers' self-esteem and their listeners' respect for them.

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