Language and aging research: contradictions and aspirations

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Abstract. With the *Journal of Language and Aging Research*, scholars in related fields are provided with a common venue. The newly founded journal continues and accompanies the *Corpora for Language and Aging Research* (CLARe) network's series of conferences started in 2014. Research in this field is confronted with major challenges, including: (1) to account for specific facets of *age* while not ignoring its inherent dynamics of *aging*; (2) to promote expertise in different related linguistic disciplines and at the same time develop its a coherent visibility; (3) to avoid stereotypes while addressing specific communicative issues in the society, as well as in families and in care institutions, covering an ever growing range of languages and varieties. The genuinely digital format is aimed at providing an open platform for innovations in the field.

Keywords. language; aging; terminology; lifespan; interdisciplinarity

Welcome to the first issue of the newly founded *Journal of Language and Aging Research*, on behalf of the editorial team and the advisory board.

1 From *Corpora for Language and Aging Research* to *Journal of Language and Aging Research*

In 2014, the first *Corpora for Language and Aging Research* (CLARe) conference and foundation of the eponymous network took place in Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium), bringing together

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a small circle of researchers, with a second and significantly more developed conference at the same place in 2015.[1]

The series of conferences continued with CLARe3 (Freie Universität Berlin), CLARe4 (University of Helsinki), and CLARe5 (University of Alaska Anchorage), and planning for the next CLARe6 meeting (University of Tübingen) is well underway. After a first publication of CLARe papers in a special issue of *Linguistics Vanguard* (Gerstenberg and Lindholm 2019), the foundation of a journal to safeguard and ensure stability and visibility of the growing community's output seemed to be the only logical next step. The shared need for a common platform resulted from the reality of working in a field where a lot of research addressing language and aging was scattered across numerous different venues.

The design of the CLARe conferences, taking the form of one-track events without parallel sessions, turned out to be instructive to experts from different disciplines, all working with language and aging but active in different fields such as interactional linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics (among others) and working with different languages, including signed languages. Hence, JLAR is the written extension of the intra-linguistic inter-disciplinary exchange that CLARe made possible.

Not only the spirit of Open Science, but also the particular global relevance of age-related topics motivates the decision to use the Open Access format for JLAR. This will allow wider dissemination of findings, and a continuation of the scholarly conversations engendered by the CLARe conferences.[2]

2 Contradictions

2.1 Age as a homogeneous measure – the heterogeneity of aging

If JLAR is to focus on age and aging, then it must begin with what may seem, on the surface, to be a silly question: *What is age?*

At a core level, of course, age is simply an objective measure of the constant passage of time – just a bit of arithmetic involving the current point in time and the point in time marking an individual's birth. That measure is, however, profoundly incomplete.

For just one aspect of this, consider the widely recognized case of individuals whose use of language makes them seem "older" or "younger" than one expects from their chronological age. This is a reflection of the fact that age is not merely a measure of the passage of time, but also a measure of expectations – that is, there are (socially-mediated) expectations about the ways that individuals at various ages use language, and those expectations encompass the entirety of linguistic expression, from phonetics (r.g., patterns of creak, production of /s/) to lexicon (e.g., use of slang associated with a particular time period) to processing (e.g., frequency of tip-of-the-tongue and related phenomena) and everything in between and beyond. This requires dealing with a fundamental question for the journal's

focus: When considering features that are associated with particular ages, what is actually being claimed about age and its association with language? The answers, ultimately, must involve more than pointing out correlations between chronological ages and linguistic features or communicative styles or cognitive processes or the like (though, to be fair, that is an important step along the way).

And that is just one complication that comes up when conducting research on age and language, but there are several others – and many of those bring us to problematizing the concept of *aging* alongside age, because aging, it turns out, is subject to all sorts of interesting complications. At the macro level, because aging is also a socially mediated feature – possibly even more so than age itself – it progresses at different rates and is associated with different social features in various social and cultural contexts (see, e.g., the literature on topics such as emerging adulthood and successful aging: (Baltes and Baltes 1993; Rowe and Kahn 1997; Arnett 2000; Eisenberg, Spry, and Patton 2015). At the micro level, aging is experienced differently by each individual, to the point that a cohort of (effectively) identically individuals will become progressively less and less similar to each other as time passes, even if only because their life experiences will not be identical, and even similar life experiences will not always occur at the same time, which means that individuals will react and respond to them within different historical contexts (Mannheim 1964 [1928]; Hultsch, MacDonald, and Dixon 2002).[3] As a result, researchers need to avoid the temptation to consider aging as a linear or even monotonic process, and also recognize that aging occurs at the level of both the individual and the group.

In short, both *age* and *aging* are concepts that appear straightforwardly simple at first glance, and that researchers often treat in very simple terms, but that actually need to be dealt with thoughtfully because of the implications involved with them. By focusing on the intersection of language and aging, the research published in this journal can provide insights not only into that specific part of human behavior, but also into age and aging more generally.

2.2 Interdisciplinarity – and coherence

Since the seminal works in the 1980s and 1990s on aging and discourse (Coupland and Nussbaum 1993), dementia and discourse (Hamilton 1994) and psycholinguistics (Kemper 1988), the research dynamics of language and aging have both consolidated key topics and compounded ever broader frameworks and areas. In bibliographic databases, we find today 1 193 hits for "language and aging" as author keywords in *Web of Science* (2016–2023, WoS); these were published in around 90 journals. None of these journals, however, were dedicated explicitly to aging.

The *MLA International Bibliography* (Modern Language Association 2023) offers an impressive list of nouns "aging or ageing or elderly or older adults or seniors or geriatrics" that can be automatically used in the search box "linguistics topics." A search for academic

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3. From Mannheim 1964 [1928], p. 555, as translated by the authors: The natural factors including the change of generations represent the most fundamental scope of sociohistorical events. But precisely because they are constants, that is, always present, the change in its respective specificity cannot be explained from them. However, their changing relevance (the way in which their presence is always processed differently) can only be clearly singled out if one takes a sufficiently sharp look at precisely this formative stratum of these social-intellectual forces.

journal papers on these topics published between 1990 and 2022 yielded 680 results. But only a few journals with one of these nouns in the title are recorded, and none of them are dedicated to language and/or communication. By contrast, a search for "children or adolescents or youth or child or teenager" as linguistics topics of academic journal papers published in the same period yielded 6 641 titles.[4]

A case study on the representation of aging topics between 2000 and 2018 in the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, Hekkel (2021, chapter 3) took stock of all articles in which at least one of the represented age groups was over 60 years, and an extralinguistic category of the research project based on age was included. Only 19 papers could be identified. In a follow-up analysis of articles since that time period, only 6 more papers falling in the same category could be identified, plus 5 more if a more general notion of *age* was applied (i.e., where the category was indirectly addressed). In the same period, in the *Journal of Pragmatics* only 12 papers with this orientation could be found and 8 in a more general sense.

These results complement the figures from the WoS and MLA databases. They paint a picture of the status of aging in language and communication research as a still-emerging phenomenon, often limited to its application as an immovable independent variable in apparent time, diachronic investigations of particular linguistic features, with age ranges only rarely exceeding 60 years.

Looked at another way, though, we see from this documentation of a widespread and highly specialized expertise in different areas more or less closely dedicated to language and communication, but one that seems to be fragmented and scattered, and thus is hard to keep track of. At one level this fragmentation makes sense, because the study of language and aging necessarily requires the application of expertise across multiple domains. However, as the study of language and aging has emerged, so has the need for a venue for inter- and – within linguistics – intradisciplinary exchange leading to the development of shared interests and approaches, ultimately providing coherence in the field of language and aging research.

2.3 Speaking correctly – but clearly

Language and aging research has become increasingly aware of ageism not only in society (dating back to Butler 1969) but also in (socio-)linguistic research (Pichler, Wagner, and Hesson 2018), and in some linguistic disciplines, *decline* is an explicit focus (for a critical viewpoint see Ramscar et al. 2014).

The challenge for future linguistic research is to account for the omnipresence of aging issues and the importance of inclusive and non-stigmatizing approaches. This requires a comprehensive approach, because research involving older speakers speakers facing difficult issues often associated with age (e.g., Dementia of the Alzheimer Type) can, just as much as research involving those who find themselves undergoing so-called "normal aging," make valuable contributions to our understanding of how aging, language and communication intersect and interact (e. g., Krause and Panagiotopoulos 2019). To speak clearly and correctly about the aging experience in JLAR is therefore a question of

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4. Results for WoS and MLA current as of 2023-07-27.

putting speakers and their priorities in the forefront, instead of imposing stigmatizing or euphemistic expectations.

This requires us to be careful in our use of language, and recognize that some of the language often used to refer to older speakers can be marginalizing (see, e.g., Mautner 2007). This is particularly the case since those working with a linguistic approach to aging should be expected to have a high level of awareness of terminology and its assumptions. Since JLAR's aim is make aging research findings accessible not only to linguistic experts but if possible also to a wider audience, researchers may recognize that specific marginalizing terminology has historically been used in some fields, but authors should provide a translation (so to speak) if the presuppositions of those terms seem exclusionary.

3   Aspirations

JLAR stands out to as the first journal explicitly dedicated to language and aging studies – this means not only that the wide and rich studies carried out in related fields are now provided with a common venue, but also that our invitation to more attentively focus on what is or could be related to aging topics can stimulate future research. JLAR's genuinely digital format also allows for the inclusion of additional materials and extended documentation.

As shown by the four *mission statements* included in this issue, JLAR is also open for new genres of discussion. The wider context of aging research can make new space for dialogue between disciplines, and this is also an invitation to contribute to the big picture of aging and to increase the impact of our discipline. Though the language of the journal is English, authors working with other languages are invited to provide an abstract in the language of the targeted community, and we hope that this will include an ever-growing number of languages.

The linguistic approach to aging is at an exciting juncture: in the field of language and aging, the very fundamental questions themselves are open. Since JLAR provides a venue in which aging is not just a condition but is the center of interest, it offers us the possibility to question our presuppositions and to innovate and create knowledge – in short, it provides a chance to do something truly meaningful.

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