

Language and Aging Research in Open Science platforms

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Abstract. Open Science is not just a rewarding endeavor for those involved in Language and Aging Research (LAR), but an important pursuit in its own right. The editorial presents two Open Science platforms and asks whether and how LAR topics are addressed. The transmission of academic knowledge to a wider public of practitioners, older adults and their environment could potentially improve the daily challenges of family life and care settings. Beyond this unidirectional transmission, the presence of a wider public and the awareness of channels to spread the knowledge can also inspire research and help to focus on relevant topics suitable for applications in real world scenarios.

Keywords. Open Science, outreach, dissemination, linguistic aging, language learning

Submitted: 2024-03-01

Accepted: 2024-04-01

Published: 2024-04-05

DOI: [10.15460/jlar.2024.2.1.1424](https://doi.org/10.15460/jlar.2024.2.1.1424)

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The dissemination of language and aging research

The *Journal of Language and Aging Research* was founded as an open access journal to allow scientific findings to be freely accessed, in the spirit of Open Science. However, while anyone with an internet connection can access the articles that are published in it, as with any peer reviewed journal, given its aims and scope the findings contained in it may assume background knowledge that not everyone shares, or the connection between the research reported on and topics in public discourse may not be explicitly clear, or there may be any number of other possible disconnects. This is, though, not a failing, but rather simply a reflection of the fact that no one venue can provide access in every way to every individual in every circumstance.

However, aging is omnipresent—everyone who is alive is, of course, also simultaneously undergoing aging—and so there is a need for good information about aging

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Please cite as Bowie, David and Annette Gerstenberg. 2024. “Language and Aging Research in Open Science platforms.” *Journal of Language and Aging Research* 2(1): 1–4. [10.15460/jlar.2024.2.1.1424](https://doi.org/10.15460/jlar.2024.2.1.1424).

to make its way to a wide audience. Decisions about aging are, after all, being made every day, many of them irrevocably lifechanging for affected individuals, and these decisions should be informed by research rather than being made on an ad hoc basis, or even on the basis of incorrect assumptions. Therefore, it is important to reach not just other researchers but also (among others) practitioners, caregivers, policymakers, and those undergoing aging themselves.

In light of this, we wish to take a moment to highlight the important role that Language and Aging Research (LAR) can play in the dissemination of research findings beyond the audience that this journal can reach. There are many venues available for this, and we present two very different ones here not to promote them specifically, but rather as examples of the ways that a difference can be made more broadly.

1 *The Conversation*

The Conversation bills itself as a site that “inform[s] public debate with knowledge-based journalism that is responsible, ethical and supported by evidence” by “provid[ing] a platform where experts around the world can share knowledge, discuss problems, and identify sustainable solutions” that “provide the public with clarity and insight into society’s biggest problems” (The Conversation 2011–2024). Several localized editions² constitute a network. Every local edition is a nonprofit company, funded by a number of different foundations plus individual donors and lists a large number of partnerships with academic institutions. The authors of the articles on the site are (at least mostly) drawn from researchers based at those places, supported by professional journalists, and the articles are written to be brief, accessible capsule summaries of research. The editors of the Australian edition (the oldest, founded in 2011) state that the articles averaged 13.9 million page views per month in 2023 (Ketchel and Watts 2023, 2).

The platform’s topical sections are similar, but not identical in the individual localized editions.³ Searches, which are limited to simple keywords, seem to result in similar (though not always identical) responses across localizations, but they are ordered differently.⁴ A search for aging-related topics results in a notable but not huge number of results. For example, a search for “aging” returns 211 items for English-language localizations, reflecting that there is some coverage of research on aging on this site, but there is certainly room for more. Similarly, “language” returns 707 articles and “linguistics” returns 359, with some overlap between those, of course.

It is worth a mention that search results also provide a set of three “related topics,” which appear to be based on what keywords frequently co-occur. For aging, these are COVID-19, the coronavirus, and health, reflecting the widely-acknowledged relationship between health and aging generally, and more specifically the outsized

2. As of this writing, editions for Australia (34), Brazil (NA), Canada (12), France (17), Indonesia (12), New Zealand (included in Australia), Spain (12), the United Kingdom (28), and the United States (26), plus regional editions covering Africa and Europe and a “global” version. The numbers in parentheses indicate the editors in full-time equivalents, according to Ketchel and Watts 2023.

3. The US edition covers Arts and Culture, Economy, Education, Environment and Energy, Ethics and Religion, Health, Politics and Society, and Science and Tech.

4. For example, at the moment this is being written the top result for aging on the United States and global localizations is an article about the presumptive nominees in the upcoming United States presidential election (who are 77 and 81 years old), while the top result on the Canadian edition deals with age-associated changes in the gut microbiome.

effects that COVID-19 has had on older adults. However, the coverage of aging is not limited to health alone, since the database also includes issues related to age such as public policy (e.g., ways to address shortages in the number of caregivers) and ethics (e.g., issues surrounding governments using medical exams to determine individuals' ages).⁵ Further, while most articles on the site tagged "aging" focus on measuring age and features associated with old age, there is a lot of information available on aging across other stages of the lifespan, from childhood and adolescence through emerging adulthood and middle age.

The site's design makes it difficult to search for multiple keywords at once,⁶ but there is some information there about LAR findings, ranging from a discussion of ways in which creative writing abilities persist into old age, to the interaction between age-related government policies around immigration and immigrants' resulting linguistic choices, to the social effects of words used for age and aging in popular media. There is, however, a clear opening to make public more of our research on the topic.

2 The OASIS database

The focus of the OASIS database is on language learning. The initiative is dedicated to "make research on language learning, use, and education available and accessible to a wide audience" (OASIS project team 2024). It collects and publishes one-page descriptions of research articles published in journals listed on relevant indices, written in nontechnical language.⁷ A number of these journals have all their authors send in summaries, and others strongly encourage their authors to do so. The platform offers additional materials for academic teaching, either on writing or using summaries.

The queries can be filtered for the facets "Area of research," "Language," "Participant type," "Age of learners," "Features being learned," "Author," as well as for some subcategories such as "Of likely interest to," e.g., teachers, policy-makers, or parents.

The main focus being on language learning, older adults are represented only in a small number of summarized papers. The facet "Age of learners" is divided into three classes, i.e., young, adolescent, and adult learners, without any further subdivisions. While older adults may be occasionally included in the summarized research articles, aging is not an important topic in this database. A search for "aging" returns two summaries, but the referred research articles deal with student cohorts in their early twenties. Only one paper naming relevant topics in the summary's title could be retrieved, on language learning in retirement.

We could conclude that aging is not an important topic in language learning. Alternatively, we could consider aging a topic not yet featured in language learning research to the extent that it could be. We opt for the second.

5. There are, of course, also a handful of amusing cases where keyword searches result in false positives—e.g., one of the results for aging is a discussion of how astronomers know how old planets and stars are.

6. One workaround for this is to use a site-limited search in a search engine (e.g., language "old age" site:theconversation.com, which provides 724 results). This isn't perfect, especially given that there are so many different phrases one could search for, but it does allow for more precisely targeted searching than is available on the website itself.

7. The Social Science Citation Index, the Arts and Humanities Citation Index, or the Science Citation Index Expanded.

3 The importance of open science for all

There are, of course, more examples of open science platforms directed at the general public, but these serve as useful examples. The important thing is for researchers in language and aging to find ways to make sure that evidence-backed research findings get into the public discourse, so that widely held but incorrect assumptions about aging generally and aging's interactions with language specifically can be replaced.

We recognize that each individual researcher's ability to do this will vary. Some, after all, conduct research that translates more readily into brief descriptions than others' does, and even simple luck might play a role if one particular research program suddenly links in obvious ways to a significant news event, thus making it easier to get attention. In addition, those who conduct research under contingent contracts may well have less opportunity to devote time to outreach, since many institutions do not consider such efforts part of a researcher's "core" responsibilities.

However, it is ultimately in the best interests of our field (and, really, academia more generally) to identify public-facing outlets, and to spread the word about what we are doing. It is an unfortunate reality that we exist in an era in which scientific findings are regularly ignored in the name of sociopolitical expedience. We can, of course, never guarantee that simply entering into the public sphere as researchers will counter that tendency, but by making what we do accessible to the public, we can certainly make it less likely.

And so, in the end, we would suggest that LAR researchers participating in Open Science provides a greater good than just making our findings more visible (though that certainly is a positive all by itself). It may sound a bit grandiose to say that reaching out to the public with good information about good research will make the world a better place, but it seems to be a way to possibly achieve such a result. Disseminating our findings to the wider public can help push back against the too-frequent narrative of aging as inexorable decline, and by raising awareness of the *actual* processes involved in the intersection of language and aging and their effects on individuals and communities, we can also raise patience and understanding, and a wider recognition of the multifaceted experiences of linguistic aging.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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