


Laura Tommaso. 2023. *Ageing Discourse in the News: A Corpus-Assisted Study*. (Lingua, Discorso e Società) Roma: Aracne, 200 p. ISBN: 979-12-218-0510-0

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Abstract. Discourse shapes the way we perceive and interact with the world around us, and the representation of complex social concepts such as aging in the media plays a crucial role in the construction of cultural attitudes and norms, especially in societies where these representations are slowly becoming discursive tools to establish generational dichotomies and disparities. Therefore, Laura Tommaso's monograph, *Ageing Discourse in the News: A Corpus-Assisted Study*, provides a comprehensive analysis of how the notion of *aging* is discursively constructed and construed in the UK press, combining techniques from corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis. Grounded in the understanding that the way aging is portrayed in the media reflects a society's world views and value systems, Laura Tommaso's study underlines the rules and standards of conduct that are at the very basis of the conceptualization of age in discourse (Gamliel 2004; Bytheway 2005).

Keywords. news discourse; ageing; critical discourse studies; corpus linguistics; book review

An original contribution to the *Journal of Language and Aging Research* (JLAR).

Submitted: 2024-10-08

Accepted: 2025-01-17

Published: 2025-06-09

DOI: 10.15460/jlar.2025.3.1.1546

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1 Introduction

Discourse shapes the way we perceive and interact with the world around us, and the representation of complex social concepts such as aging in the media plays a crucial role in the construction of cultural attitudes and norms, especially in societies where these representations are slowly becoming discursive tools to establish generational dichotomies and disparities. Therefore, Laura Tommaso's monograph, *Ageing Discourse in the News: A Corpus-Assisted Study*, provides a comprehensive analysis of how the notion of "aging" is discursively constructed and construed in the UK press, combining techniques from corpus linguistics and critical discourse analysis. Grounded

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Please cite as Fruttaldo, Antonio. 2025. "Book announcement of Laura Tommaso. 2023. *Ageing Discourse in the News: A Corpus-Assisted Study*. Roma: Aracne." *Journal of Language and Aging Research* 3(1): 91–97. 10.15460/JLAR.2025.3.1.1546.

in the understanding that the way aging is portrayed in the media reflects a society's world views and value systems, Laura Tommaso's study underlines the rules and standards of conduct that are at the very basis of the conceptualization of age in discourse (Gamliel 2004; Bytheway 2005). Through the examination of an extensive corpus of newspaper articles spanning a decade, the study reveals predominant representations of aging and older-age identities, which shape public perceptions and understandings of this complex social phenomenon, starting from the assumption that social gerontologists have long argued that chronological age is an "empty" variable, despite its centrality in the construction of social identities (Bytheway 2005). This view is echoed in the findings of Tommaso's study, which demonstrate how the revelation of chronological age can be unproblematic in specific contexts while, in others, it becomes associated with more nebulous statuses (Bytheway 2005).

Chapter 1 (pp. 23–40) sets the stage for the linguistic analysis of the discourse surrounding aging, conceptualized as a form of social practice following Fairclough (1995)'s framework. This involves exploring both discursive representations and non-discursive factors that shape identities, norms, values, and institutions within a culture. The chapter thus provides an overview of the dichotomous and shifting perceptions of aging in contemporary Western societies, particularly in the UK, reviewing existing research on aging in the media. In this way, aging is presented as a significant and contentious issue in public and scientific domains (Latour 2004; Slattery 2022), and historical perspectives show a shift from venerating old age as a symbol of wisdom to viewing it with fear and hostility (De Beauvoir 1970; Pachana 2016). Indeed, contemporary Western cultures often frame aging as an undesirable prospect marked by illness and loss (Tinker 2014), but there is also a push towards a more active and healthier lifestyle for older adults, aligned with neoliberal health policies. Chapter 1 additionally reviews significant research on the portrayal of aging and older people in various media forms. For instance, studies by Harwood and Anderson (2002) and Ylänné, Williams, and Wadleigh (2009) reveal a stereotypical representation of later life, with older adults often depicted as frail and dependent or, conversely, as active and healthy. Thus, the chapter effectively sets the context for the study by highlighting the sociocultural constructs of aging and the influential role of media in shaping public discourse, underscoring the complexities of aging as both a social concern and a personal experience influenced by historical, cultural and political factors.

Chapter 2 (pp. 41–58) lays the theoretical and methodological foundations for the study of aging discourse in the news media, emphasizing the importance of discourse analysis and corpus linguistics approaches to understand how language shapes social identities, relations, and knowledge systems. The chapter begins by defining discourse as both language above the sentence level and as rule-governed sets of verbal and non-verbal practices, as conceptualized by (Foucault 1972), discussing, in particular, how discourses construct social reality and shape power relations, thus grounding the study in the moderate form of social constructivism developed by Fairclough (2003). In this way, the chapter highlights the role of language in constructing aging-related issues and identities, drawing on works by Mautner (2007), Vicentini and

Grego (2019), and others. The study employs Hunston and Thompson (2000)'s concept of evaluation, which encompasses the expression of attitudes and values in language. Evaluation is crucial in news reporting, reflecting whether news stories present aging positively or negatively. The chapter also references Bednarek and Caple (2012)'s framework for understanding how news values and evaluation are constructed in news texts, thus situating the study within the broader context of media discourse analysis, drawing on works by Fowler (1991), Dijk (1988), and Fairclough (1995), among others. Corpus linguistics, defined as using computer-aided methods to study considerable collections of texts, is also central to the study. The chapter outlines the recent developments of corpus linguistics methodologies, highlighting its applications in various linguistic fields, discussing the benefits of using corpora (e. g., identifying regularities and patterns in language use) and addressing criticisms and limitations, including concerns about representativeness and context. Chapter 2 additionally describes the structure of the UK newspaper industry, noting the differences between broadsheets and tabloids, as well as the political and social influences on news reporting. It highlights the role of newspapers in shaping public opinion and policy, emphasizing their importance as data sources for examining the construction of aging and age identities. Therefore, Chapter 2 provides a robust theoretical and methodological framework for the study, combining insights from discourse analysis and corpus linguistics.

While the previous chapter provided a more general theoretical and methodological background to the study, Chapter 3 (pp. 59–78) of the book can be defined as more technical as it outlines the methodological steps involved in designing and collecting the corpus used to analyze aging discourse in the British press. The chapter emphasizes the importance of corpus construction, detailing the processes and decisions made to ensure the representativeness of the data. The corpus investigated by the author comprises articles from ten major British newspapers, including tabloids and broadsheets, collected via Nexis from January 2012 to December 2021. The selection includes a variety of article types and genres, ensuring a broad view of aging-related discourse and resulting in a corpus of approximately 30 million words and 52 099 articles. Chapter 3 additionally describes the tools and techniques used for corpus processing and analysis. SketchEngine (Kilgarrriff et al. 2014) was the primary software used, offering functionalities such as concordance, collocations, clusters, wordlists, and keyword lists. The chapter also discusses the concepts of semantic preference and prosody, which are essential for understanding the connotations and evaluative meanings in the corpus.

Chapter 4 (pp. 79–104) focuses on analyzing how aging is represented in the British press, using corpus linguistics combined with qualitative discourse analysis. The chapter adopts the "shared keywords" approach, as outlined by Brookes and Baker (2021), to identify key themes and semantic categories across different subcorpora. In particular, the chapter begins by explaining the methodology, which involves dividing the data into four subcorpora based on publication format (broadsheet vs. tabloid) and political leaning (left vs. right). This categorization helps to ensure that the analysis captures a balanced representation of aging discourse across different types of newspa-

pers. The subcorpora are compared against the English Web 2020 corpus (SketchEngine 2022) elected as a reference corpus to identify statistically significant keywords. The analysis reveals 28 shared keywords across all subcorpora, indicative of the main themes and issues discussed in relation to aging in the news. The shared keywords are grouped into six semantic categories to highlight recurring themes. Identifying shared keywords and their grouping into semantic categories provides a clear overview of the main themes related to aging, highlighting the various ways aging is framed in the media, from health and social care to stereotypes and discrimination.

Chapter 5 (pp. 105–124) turns the attention of the readers to another fascinating aspect emerging from the corpus under investigation, thus taking into consideration the representation of aging within the context of health discourse in the British press, emphasizing the dominant conceptualization of aging as a biomedical issue, often framed in terms of risks that can be quantified and controlled. The chapter begins with a detailed analysis of the keyword *aging* and its lexical collocates. Using the concordance feature in Sketch Engine, the top 100 collocates of *aging* are identified across different subcorpora, highlighting how it is predominantly discussed concerning health risks and biomedical processes. Also, the discourse surrounding aging is often framed in deeply moralistic terms, with an emphasis on individual responsibility for health. In this sense, articles frequently exhort older individuals to engage in healthy behaviors to avoid becoming a burden on the healthcare system. This aligns with (Lupton 1995)'s notion that good health is often considered a signifier of moral virtue. Hence, the chapter criticizes this perspective, noting that it overlooks the social determinants of health and the systemic issues within the healthcare system. Additionally, the media often popularize scientific research on aging, framing it as a problem to be solved through medical intervention. The notion of “aging well” is also frequently discussed regarding risk reduction and personal responsibility, often emphasizing lifestyle changes as key to maintaining health in old age. This framing reinforces neoliberal values, positioning health as an individual responsibility rather than a collective one. Given these discursive aspects, Chapter 5 provides an engaging analysis of the representation of aging from a health discourse perspective, highlighting the dominance of biomedical perspectives and the moralistic framing of health behaviors. Moreover, the combination of corpus linguistics and discourse analysis reveals how language shapes public perceptions of aging, often emphasizing control, prevention, and individual responsibility.

Chapter 6 (pp. 125–166) focuses on another aspect of the aging discourse: the representation of older-age identities in the British press, examining how language constructs and reinforces certain perceptions and stereotypes about older adults. The chapter employs shared keywords from previous analyses and explores naming strategies, adjectives, and verbs associated with older adults, drawing on van Leeuwen's Van Leeuwen (2008) framework for analyzing social actors. In particular, the chapter discusses how text producers often portray groups and individuals in ways that suit their interests. The chapter also explores how gender influences the representation of older adults. Indeed, female-related terms are prevalent in the corpus, contributing to the so-called

“feminization of old age.” The analysis indicates that these references often carry connotations of vulnerability and dependency. Another aspect worth mentioning in the analysis is the media coverage of housing and social care issues, often portraying older adults as a homogeneous group facing similar challenges. Articles frequently discuss the need for suitable housing and social care policies, emphasizing the dependency and vulnerability of older adults. The debate on housing often frames older adults as occupying valuable resources and contributing to a housing crisis. In this sense, the economic impact of an aging population is a recurrent theme. The press often frames older adults as a financial burden on social and healthcare systems, with older adults depicted as consuming resources disproportionately.

Chapter 7 (pp. 167–170) summarizes the findings and observations from the study on the representation of aging in the British press, highlighting the significance of aging and longevity in political, media, and public discourses and stressing the socio-economic and healthcare implications of an aging population. The chapter underscores two dominant discourses in media representations of aging: vulnerability and development. Vulnerability is depicted both biomedically (i. e., frailty, incapability) and socio-economically (i. e., poverty, dependency), the latter emphasizing the increasing costs of social and healthcare services for older generations and the need to reduce these demands. On the other hand, the development discourse, linked to healthy aging rhetoric, highlights older people’s economic contributions and social value, focusing on maintaining physical, mental and social abilities. The chapter acknowledges its limitations, such as the primary focus on verbal language and the lack of engagement with other semiotic modes. For future research, incorporating non-linguistic data through Corpus-Assisted Multimodal Discourse Analysis (CAMDA, Bednarek and Caple 2014) is suggested to provide a fuller picture of media texts. Additionally, more detailed diachronic analyses and comparisons between different types of newspapers and publication times are recommended.

In conclusion, the study carried out and presented in Laura Tommaso’s book highlights the role of media in shaping public perceptions and ideologies about aging. The representation of older-age identities in the press can thus influence societal responses to aging, making the analysis of language crucial for understanding these dynamics and suggesting that a fairer and more balanced representation of aging could lead to better societal responses.

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