

Assumptions and experiences in language and aging research

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Abstract. We begin with the fear of aging, which is pervasive in popular culture but, we suggest, also shapes the questions scholars ask and the assumptions we bring to language and aging research. The scholarly literature seems to associate the concept of aging with negatively valenced terms (e.g., *fear*, *decline*), suggesting that research may unintentionally reinforce negative narratives about aging. While understanding negative outcomes of aging is clearly important, focusing on them too much risks creating a feedback loop. We also draw attention to how “unmarked” norms in language research (e.g., who counts as the typical speaker) shift over time and reflect broader social assumptions. Inspired by Pierre Nora’s concept of *ego-histoire*, we argue that scholars working at the intersection of language and aging should explicitly acknowledge how personal experiences and expectations inform their research questions and interpretations. We encourage authors submitting to the *Journal of Language and Aging Research* to include such reflexive insights, which can enrich the scholarly record and support more nuanced, context-sensitive understandings of language and aging research.

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1 Senior moments and the (our?) fear of aging

The American comedian George Carlin, when he was in his early 50s, described his experience aging: “And fear of aging is natural. It’s universal. Isn’t it? We all have that . . . Soon as I was in my 40s, I’d look in the mirror and I’d say well, I guess I’m

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getting *older*. Older sounds a little better than old, doesn't it? Sounds like it might even last a little longer" (Carlin 1990, 8:01–8:27).

This was, of course, offered as a joke, but there is still a bit of seriousness behind it: The fear of aging is pervasive, and is deeply embedded within the cultural milieu. For one very concrete example, consider the sheer amount of money that is poured into advertising products designed to help us look and think and act younger—and the amount of money that we, in turn, spend on those products. It shows up in more pervasive ways, as well, such as momentary forgetfulness being laughed off as a "senior moment," even if the person doing so is still quite young.

All of this is widely known, of course, and has been widely critiqued in both popular media and scholarly discussion. We would, however, like to narrow the focus to the ways that such a view of aging affects our research—an important question indeed for a scholarly journal that focuses on aging as this one does.

Simple database searches aren't necessarily indicative of anything by themselves, but they can certainly act as a starting point for further discussion, so: As of the month this editorial is going to press, a search of EBSCO's Academic Search Premier database for articles with both of the terms *aging* and *fear* in their titles or abstracts gave 2 560 results. Contrast that with *aging* and *joy* with 844 hits, or *aging* and *peace* with 350. This sort of result holds up with more "scholarly" terms as well—*aging* and *decline* returns 31 623 hits, but *aging* and *improvement* returns only 17 404, *aging* and *enhancement* 4 555, and *aging* and *resilience* just 2 968.

These numbers are an extremely coarse measure, of course, and lack important nuances (e. g., a study that discusses aging in conjunction with fear could actually be reporting on a lack of fear), but they are unsurprising—and they underscore that a focus on aging as a negative experience is not limited to popular culture.

It is, of course, important to learn more about negative outcomes that correlate with age, and about conditions that aging individuals must deal with such as loneliness and the effects of age-associated diseases. And in some ways this is more important than learning about positive outcomes—finding ways to correct for negative outcomes is more urgent, because the positive ones can take care of themselves. However, there is a danger in focusing too strongly on the challenges associated with aging, because we may be creating a feedback loop, in which scholarly focus on negative outcomes of aging feeds into the cultural narrative that aging is something to fear, which then means that there is more pressure to focus our research on the negative outcomes of aging even if only to try to figure out how to avoid them. And this may even color the approaches taken when we look at the more positive side of aging—for example, the paradigm of "aging well" is often based in measures that are more of a judgment of performance (e. g., how well one scores on a test) than of enjoyment.

2 Acknowledging our assumptions

Fear of aging, though, is just one possible attitude potentially affecting the way we formulate research questions.

In United States dialectology of the early to mid twentieth century, non-mobile older rural males were the unmarked case, even to the extent that they were referred to by the backronym *NORMs* (Chambers and Trudgill 1998); by the time we got to the late twentieth century, though, the target was (largely white) urban women in their mid-20s (Labov, Ash, and Boberg 2006). It is always important to notice what we

consider the “unmarked” individual, and also to recognize that concepts such as the “linguistic marketplace” assume a particular “unmarked” norm, including norms of workplace behavior and what counts as appropriateness by age. So what counts as “normal” (i. e., unmarked), anyway? And how do we decide?

This question is particularly complex in language and aging research, because all of us are, in a very meaningful way, the subjects of our own study: We are all users of language, and we are all aging. This means that our own experiences and expectations are inevitably going to have an effect on our analyses of our object of study—and the fear of aging (and any associated age-related declines) may be an implicit factor in our decisions.

Four decades ago, Pierre Nora (who died just days before this editorial went to press, see Kandell 2025) coined the term *ego-histoire*, “egohistory, a new genre for a new period of historical consciousness” (Nora 2014, 1) in a collection of papers written by historians.

The exercise was to clearly set down ones own story [*histoire*] as one would write someone else’s; to try to apply to oneself, each with his or her own particular style and methods, the same cool, encompassing and explanatory gaze that one so often directs towards others. The idea was to explain, as an historian, the link between the history you have made and the history that has made you. (3)

There have been similar thoughts expressed about linguistics, such as those formulated by Renzi (2002, 330–331), observing that our own linguistic experience is part of a biologic and social experience shared with others (or, possibly, everyone), and that both despite and because of this, linguistics does not always question its own assumptions.

This raises a number of questions: First, and most directly, what are our assumptions that drive our research? How do they influence not just our analyses, but what we investigate to begin with? And some questions could even be asked more personally, “applied to ourselves,” in Nora’s phrasing: What links between our images of aging and the research we conduct, including things such as fear of aging, play a role in what research we conduct and how we conduct it?

Asking these questions of ourselves, and then, very importantly, making the answers explicit as we report on our findings, enriches our work by providing useful context for others as they read it.² It also makes it easier for researchers who follow after us to revisit our work and identify additional questions that arise from it.

Since this journal has a particular focus on the intersection of language and aging, and since there are so many personal experiences and, therefore, personal assumptions bound up in both language and aging, JLAR is a particularly good forum for these sorts of explanations and discussions to sharpen the focus of our work, and to make clear the nature of the links between those conducting, participating in, and reading our research. As the editors of the journal, we wish to state on the record that we appreciate the inclusion of such explicit acknowledgments of our assumptions and experiences. Whether this takes the form of an explanation of the premises

2. We do not claim, of course, that this is never done at present (see, for example, Hamilton 1994), nor that all of this is a completely novel observation (see not just Renzi 2002 as mentioned above, but also Gendron, Inker, and Welleford 2017), but it is nevertheless an observation that needs to be made, and to be made explicitly.

and experiences that led to certain types of linguistic data being gathered in the development of corpora, or an explicit discussion about the set of experiences that led to a particular line of research being followed, or if it appears in some other manner, it is welcome.

Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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