



Language, Aging and Society

What Can Linguistics Do for the Aging
World?

Edited by
Lihe Huang · Boyd Davis

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1

Introduction: What Can Linguistics Do for the Aging World?

Lihe Huang and Boyd Davis

With the worldwide increase of aging, studies on language in aging have offered an essential perspective for exploring physical, psychological, and behavioral changes in older adults. The previous and substantial development of these studies focuses on linguistic change in individuals' typical and atypical aging processes. Growing attention has been paid to communicative issues from multidisciplinary approaches, including sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, corpus linguistics, and gerontology-based aging studies. As a result, language studies in aging have developed from looking at one or another linguistic level of language in particular to a broader range of language use in different social contexts. These contexts include the linguistic decline or disorders in aging or age-related diseases

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and their psycholinguistic explanation, the socio-pragmatic exploration of older adults' communication, and language as resources for clinical intervention or successful aging (Huang, 2023: 267). In this updated research scope, we see a socio-pragmatic turn, which aims to discover greater possibilities and opportunities in aging service from the language perspective.

To reach such a goal, we must first clarify the relationships between language and aging and those current achievements that can contribute to future studies and applications. By emphasizing recent Chinese research and combining it with Western scholarship in this collection, we underscore our commitment to the international study of language and aging.

1 Language and Aging

Based on current studies, we find that interconnections between language and aging may establish three potential relationships: language *revealing* the health status in aging, language *reflecting* reviews on aging, and language *prompting* aging society development. The scope of language and aging has been expanded as the phrase has gone beyond a descriptive label and has been shaped into a name for a theoretical, interpretive, and applied research field, called simply language and aging.

1.1 Language *Revealing* the Health Status While Aging

Since physiologist Pierre Paul Broca first discovered the language area in the left hemisphere, certifying the biological foundation of language, the relationship between language and health has been proven vital. Neurologists, physiologists, and linguists have devoted themselves to investigating issues regarding language and health. At the very beginning, research has been conducted from a pathological perspective. In other words, researchers in this area try to locate language problems and impairments in the presence of the brain from a physiological perspective. Thus,

the principal methodologies of these studies are clinical-based, using behavioral experimental methods and electrophysiological experiment methods.

The language used by individuals while aging can provide valuable insights into their health states. As people age, their language patterns may change, reflecting physical and cognitive changes due to aging. For example, individuals may use more pronouns, such as “I” or “we,” which can indicate a sense of isolation or increased social engagement, respectively. Language changes can also reflect cognitive decline, such as decreased vocabulary or more frequent word-finding difficulties. Therefore, analyzing language patterns can provide valuable insights into the health status of individuals while aging. This information can assist healthcare professionals in identifying individuals who may require additional support or monitoring, enabling them to provide more personalized care that meets the unique needs of each individual.

In recent years, many scholars have paid more attention to the application of the relationship between language and health, especially in the early detection of cognitive impairment via linguistic indicators. Thus, methodologies have been expanded accordingly. For instance, conversation analysis focuses on the micro-interaction during communicative discourses. Ethnographic methods can further improve qualitative study from an individual perspective. Among all language study methods, the corpus research method is currently the frontier. With the development of artificial intelligence, a cross- and multidisciplinary research tendency has already been raised in language and aging studies to achieve the goal of early detection of cognitive risks and the corresponding early interventions.

1.2 Language *Reflecting* Individuals’ Reviews of Aging

Language is the primary outcome of human beings’ inner worlds. It plays a significant role in reflecting older adult’s experiences, challenges, and insights. As people age, their use of language becomes a way to share their life stories and offer insight into the complexities of aging. Language in

these reviews serves as a medium for self-expression, delving into themes such as loss, resilience, and wisdom, while exploring the emotional and psychological changes associated with aging.

The power of reviews of language in aging lies in their ability to evoke empathy and connection. Through poignant descriptions and narrative techniques, language creates a sense of closeness between the reader and the older individual, allowing for a shared understanding and appreciation of the aging experience. This connection can be precious for younger generations, allowing them to understand and respect the aging process.

In addition to personal reflections, language in aging can promote societal discussions on aging. By highlighting common challenges and prejudices older adults face, reviews using language can spark dialogue and encourage change within society. Through language, these reviews can raise awareness about issues such as age discrimination, social isolation, and inadequate support for older adults, prompting action and advocacy on behalf of this often marginalized population.

Therefore, reviews of language in aging serve as a mirror of personal experience, a bridge between inner and outer realities, and a catalyst for societal change. Its reflective power allows for a deeper understanding and appreciation of the aging process, promoting empathy towards the experiences of older adults.

1.3 Language *Prompting* Development of an Aging Society

Language is critical in promoting social and economic development in an increasingly aging society. It goes beyond communication to shape attitudes, influence policies, to create inclusive environments that support the well-being of older adults.

Language can help foster a positive attitude towards aging through education and public awareness campaigns. By shaping societal perspectives on aging, it can move away from negative stereotypes and towards a more inclusive and age-friendly society. It can also encourage a culture of respect and appreciation for the experiences and wisdom of older adults, further enhancing their social status and participation.

Language facilitates communication between generations and promotes intergenerational understanding and cooperation. As people age, it can serve as a tool for bridging generational divides, enabling younger and older adults to share knowledge, perspectives, and experiences. This intergenerational exchange can foster a sense of unity and belonging within society, strengthening social bonds across age groups.

Language is pivotal in shaping policies and services for older adults. Using language in policy documents and public discourse can influence the development of age-friendly communities and the delivery of services for older adults. It can promote inclusivity by ensuring that the voices and needs of older adults are reflected in policy decisions, leading to more responsive and inclusive systems.

Finally, language is integral to the personal development of aging individuals. It enables them to maintain their cognitive function, engage in lifelong learning, and continue to grow throughout their later years. The use of language in education, recreation, and personal growth opportunities can support the development of older adults' skills, interests, and capabilities.

In conclusion, language plays a fundamental role in promoting the development of aging societies. It has the power to shape attitudes, facilitate communication, influence policies, and support the personal development of older adults. By harnessing the power of language, we can create more inclusive and age-friendly societies that promote older adults' well-being and active participation.

2 Current Contributions of Language Research to the Development of an Aging Society

In the face of global aging, language research is playing an increasingly important role in promoting the development of an aging society. Language is not only a tool for communication but also a portal through which to discover older adults' health and to provide appropriate services, based on their health status and according to their actual needs.

2.1 Language Studies and Aging Brain Mechanisms

As our society ages, there is an increasing interest in understanding how cognitive aging works. Language studies combined with neuroscience have been instrumental in advancing our understanding of how the aging brain functions.

These language studies have explored the intricate workings of linguistic processing and cognitive decline in older adults. By analyzing how age-related changes, such as memory, comprehension, and production, function in language, and manifest themselves in different linguistic domains, researchers have gained valuable insights into the mechanisms that underlie cognitive aging and how these mechanisms are affected by language use and context.

A critical discovery from language studies is that language use and its stimulation can positively affect cognitive aging. Regular participation in activities involving language use, such as reading, writing, and conversation, has been proven to improve cognitive function and slow the rate of cognitive decline in older adults. This suggests that maintaining a high linguistic activity level can be a protective factor against cognitive aging.

2.2 Language Studies and Social Services

As the global population ages, language studies and social services intertwine much tighter. It is crucial to understand the role of language in the lives of older adults and the provision of social services that cater to their needs. Effective communication between service providers and older adults is critical, and language studies can provide valuable insights into strategies to help with this. Additionally, cultural norms and beliefs that shape older adults' lives must be considered when designing social services. Language studies can contribute to developing innovative and tailored social services that meet the specific needs of older adults. Ultimately, by bridging language studies and social services, we can promote inclusivity and support the valuable contributions of older adults in society.

Research has been conducted based on clinical contexts and mundane contexts using a range of methodologies. China has been experiencing a profound demographic change as its population rapidly ages. To respond to this trend, many universities and institutions in China have made great efforts to convert academic achievements in the field of language and aging to social services based on social needs. For example, the Research Center for Aging, Language and Care at Tongji University was created to address the important issues of language aging and cognitive preservation in the context of global aging, with a particular focus on China's aging population and the frontiers in aging studies. The Center is among the first independent institutions of its kind in China to adopt multimodal approaches and conduct academic research, personnel training and social services. As an important research outcome of the center, the first systematic academic book in China regarding language and aging—*Introduction to Aging and Gerontolinguistics* (Huang, 2022)—introduces language in the aging world, which has filled the earlier gap of gerontolinguistics. Language aging presents significant challenges for individuals and society, among which the socio-pragmatic study of language aging is valuable in providing a deeper understanding of its nature, characteristics, and effects on communication, social, cultural, and cognitive aspects. This knowledge can help us improve the quality of life for older adults, promote social harmony and progress, and address the challenges of population aging. Eventually, with progressive development, China can provide feasible plans to the world since it has one of the fastest-growing aging populations in the world. This is why the volume includes many studies originating in China.

3 The Arrangement of This Collection

To better demonstrate and discuss current studies of language's contributions to aging issues, and to attract future investigations, the collection has three perspectives, composing three sections: Representing Aging Images from Social Media, Sketching Diverse Interactions in Public Settings, and Promoting Healthy Aging through Language Interventions.

3.1 Section 1: Representing Aging Images from Social Media

The socio-pragmatic turn in language and aging refers to the perspective of pragmatic and discourse exploration of how older adults experience aging, seen through a linguistic lens. To investigate more deeply their realities, we need to identify who older adults are and what they look like. In this section, we collect three articles that focus on older adults' images based on social media, as images originating from those resources may reflect a shared sense of older adults and even of aging and aging issues.

The portrayal of older adults in the media is a complex and multi-faceted topic in the age of social media. As a significant channel of modern information dissemination, social media has a profound impact on the image of older adults. However, this image transmission is often unidirectional and lacks the true reflection of older adults' diversity and rich life experiences.

On the one hand, the use of social media may sometimes limit the interactive needs of older persons. For example, social media designs may not be conducive to effective interaction for older adults with vascular or dementia of other types. Therefore, it's crucial to communicate the needs and experiences of older persons comprehensively and accurately on social media.

On the other hand, traditional news media plays a vital role in shaping the image of older adults. Unfortunately, news reports often over-emphasize harmful aspects of older persons, such as health problems and social isolation, at the expense of their positive contributions and rich life experiences. This one-sided image transmission may lead to misunderstandings or prejudices against older adults.

Addressing this issue requires a deeper understanding of and respect for the diversity and complexity of older persons. Studies in different cultural settings have shown that the internal differences and diversity of the older population far exceed the stereotypes presented by traditional media. Besides age, other social factors such as gender, race, and class also affect the image-building of older adults in social media.

A more inclusive and diverse approach is needed to convey the image of older persons comprehensively and accurately. This includes promoting a positive aging narrative on social media platforms, breaking existing stereotypes, and encouraging more active participation and voice of older persons. Through these efforts, we can make the images of older persons on social media more authentic, diverse, and meaningful, thereby promoting greater understanding and respect for older persons' groups.

In this section, three scholars' works illustrate the current studies regarding these issues. **Boyd DAVIS** and her colleagues contextualize mechanisms of language in *vascular dementia* as presented by Stephen Tamblin, from the U.K., in his over 200 short personal videos about having vascular dementia on YouTube. His goal has been to provide language examples of vascular dementia, which have not been as available as discussions of other dementias such as Alzheimer's Disease. By using social media, her videos support clinical significance and call for social benefits to handle problems in aging and language across the world. **Lihe HUANG** and his team use NVivo 12 to analyze 527 age-related reports from two Chinese national media and two local ones. They determine the appraisal resources and meaning conveyed by age image and identity and examines how they are constructed from the perspective of discourse identity. **Weiwei GUO** makes a comparative analysis of the responses obtained in identifying the definition of old age among average citizens (the word of any non-specialist speaker): objective criterion (age), perception (signs, activities, places, differences with young people), and influence of designations in Chinese and French.

3.2 Section 2: Sketching Diverse Interactions in Public Settings

As our population ages, public spaces become more exciting places where people from different generations interact. Observing how older adults interact with others in public spaces can provide a unique insight into

the dynamics of aging in our society. However, documenting these interactions is not just about capturing everyday moments but exploring the complexities of human experiences across generations.

Older adults bring their needs, experiences, and perspectives to public spaces, which can influence how they interact with others. They might engage in activities different from those of younger people, such as taking walks, attending community events, or socializing over a cup of tea.

To document these interactions, it's essential to pay attention to the subtle nuances of aging, such as changes in body language, facial expressions, and how older adults interact with their surroundings. Each interaction tells a story of resilience, wisdom, and humanity, from simple gestures of kindness to heartfelt conversations between family members. Documenting these interactions can also help to bridge the gap between generations by providing a platform to understand intergenerational relationships. In an aging society, it is becoming increasingly essential to appreciate the shared experiences across different age groups. By documenting these interactions, we can gain insights into older adults' needs, expectations, and challenges.

In conclusion, documenting diverse interactions in public spaces in an aging society is about more than visually recording events. It's about exploring the deeper meanings behind aging, understanding the relationships between generations, and celebrating the richness of diversity in our communities. By documenting these interactions, we can better understand older adults' experiences and become more attuned to their stories, perspectives, and contributions to society.

In this section, four articles are collected to sketch diverse interactions. First, **Dongyi ZHU**'s work examines how repetition of story topics maintains older adult patients' identity in medical interactions. Second, **Hui CHEN**, **Yiru XU**, and **Lin GUAN** explore the patients' interactional characteristics in case of communicative breakdown and the verbal or non-verbal strategies adopted by patients with A.D. in response to conversational difficulties, applying conversation analysis methodology. Then, **Ping HUANG** and **Yongqin WANG** explores the linguistic features of older adults' remedy-seeking narration and identifies reasons for the challenges and obstacles blocking older adults from interacting with others efficiently and effectively. Lastly, **Lu SONG**

extensively reviews and visualizes the knowledge domain of linguistic studies on individuals experiencing dementia between 1993 and 2023, using scientometric analysis.

3.3 Section 3: Promoting Healthy Aging through Language Interventions

Promoting healthy aging has become a critical focus within public health. As people age, language and communication play an even more crucial role in maintaining a fulfilling life. Language interventions can be a powerful tool in this pursuit, promoting cognitive and social engagement while addressing common challenges associated with aging.

Language interventions for healthy aging can take different forms. One approach involves language-based activities that promote cognitive stimulation, such as reading, writing, and conversation clubs. These activities can enhance cognitive function, reduce the risk of dementia, and promote overall well-being.

Another aspect of language interventions is using language as a medium for social engagement. Social isolation can become a common challenge as people age, and language interventions can help overcome this by promoting social interactions through shared interests or casual conversations. To achieve this, community events, language exchange programs, or online platforms can connect people with shared language interests.

In addition, language interventions can help address language barriers in healthcare settings. As the population ages, more people face health issues requiring complex medical communication. Language interventions can bridge this gap by providing culturally sensitive healthcare interpreting services or promoting the use of plain language in medical documentation.

By leveraging language interventions, we can create a more inclusive and understanding society where aging individuals feel valued and access resources that support their cognitive and social well-being. Language is not just a tool for communication but also a key to maintaining a fulfilling life well into our later years.

In this section, we choose five articles to further discuss the above issues. **Jacqueline GUENDOUZI** and **Kassidy MEREDITH** raise the attention that studying interactions with people with dementia can aid in creating training programs for care partners that support communication. **Trini STICKLE**'s research bridges linguistic observations with practical applications made accessible to our lonely elders and stakeholders caring for our world's older adult population. **Ralf THIEDE** focuses on and reviews current works of language nutrition and shows that, for humans, language acts as a nutrient in the formation and life-long maintenance of cortical structures that interact through various forms of storage. **Rining WEI** and his team use synthetic techniques to examine empirical research published between 1992 and 2022 in the Web of Science (WoS), in international journals indexed in the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI), and in the Science Citation Index (SCI) to identify potential outcomes of learning a language by older adults.

4 Conclusion

The main emphasis of this collection is on the application of studies on language and aging in constructing an aging-friendly society, in line with the subtitle of the book "What Can Linguistics Do for the Aging World?"

The studies of the interaction of both older patients and caregivers or medical staff provoke a series of socio-pragmatic explorations, including older patients' inquiries and need for information; ageism and older adults' identity in social interactions; how intergenerational interactions coordinate the relationships in conversation; how older adults' identities are constructed through discourse; how social and medical framings of talk are established and blended; and the development, interaction, and execution of social services for older adults, among others. Current research on the pragmatic discourse level has concluded that, compared with healthy groups of older adults, cognitively impaired older persons show more evident and severe obstructive discourse characteristics and insufficient discourse coherence. Both groups of older persons encounter

problems in social interaction, although these problems differ or increase with cognitive impairment or other conditions.

Research on the phenomenon and mechanisms of language in aging can provide older adults with language training, increase their active aging, and offer improved information communication channels for an aging society, bringing clinical and social benefits to handle problems in aging and language worldwide. To echo the beginning of this preface, researchers can conduct a socio-pragmatic exploration of older adults' communication and well use language as resources for clinical intervention and more successful aging. This is what linguistics can do for this aging world.

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Part I

Representing Aging Images from Social Media



2

Expanding Social Interaction Through Online Technology: Using Social Media in Vascular Dementia

Boyd H. Davis, Stephen Paul Tamblin,
and Meredith Troutman-Jordan

1 Brief Overview of Vascular Dementia

This discussion reviews language change in social media created by Stephen Paul Tamblin, who intended his postings to inform and encourage others with VD. As suggested by its name, vascular dementia (VD) is a cognitive impairment devolving from a range of problems within the cardiovascular system, including coronary artery disease, heart attack, or stroke, which the Cleveland Clinic calls the “brain’s equivalent to a heart attack” (<https://my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/5601-stroke>) caused when the blood flow to the brain is blocked. Multi-infarct dementia, a type of vascular dementia, results from multiple small strokes or TIAs (transient ischemic attacks), some of which may have no symptoms. VD is hard to diagnose, may last for many years, often combines with Alzheimer’s disease (AD) in its later stages, and has no cure although medication may be used to prevent strokes.

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As Cummings notes in 2014 (p. 166), vascular dementia, which is the second most common of the dementias, “accounts for 15.8% of dementia cases in 11 European cohorts ... and 29.5% of cases in a population of Japanese elderly.” Problems with sleeping, getting lost, trouble with learning new information, and using incorrect or inappropriate words are listed by the National Institute on Aging (<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/vascular-dementia>) as typical occurrences in vascular dementia. A recent discussion of vascular cognitive impairment and language impairment in VD by Macoir (2023) cites key studies, such as Gorelick et al. (2016) to clarify VD analysis by dividing VD into three forms: VDmi (multiple infarcts), post-stroke VD, and sub-cortical VD, adding that impaired language “results from cognitive deficits” (2023: 2), although VD patients often suffer from AD which makes diagnosis more difficult.

Looking primarily at the impact of VD on language abilities, Macoir notes that VDmi warrants further study in and for itself, as opposed to comparison with AD, because the infarcts may well predict “cognitive decline in pathological aging” affecting cognitive functions such as “executive functions, speed of information processing, episodic memory, and semantic memory” (2023: 3). As displayed in Table 2 (2023: 4), *Main Characteristics of Cognitive and Language Disorders in the Different Forms of Vascular Dementia*, VDmi impairs the following language abilities: “Word finding, understanding of instructions, possible typical aphasia profile according to brain areas affected, impact of executive disorders.” Macoir then summarizes the impact of infarcts on the right or left thalamus as having potential to affect ability to control speech and draws on Klosterman et al. (2013) to review their discussion of thalamo-cortical interaction, showing how the “left thalamus has impact on lexical-semantic, syntactic, and morphological language processes” (Macoir, 2023: 4). We will see each of these impaired abilities accepted, ignored, and overcome to some extent in the 238 YouTube postings by Tamblin, who lives with vascular dementia and consented online to let me use his online postings.

2 Internet Resources: Blogs, “Lifeloggging,” Social Media, and Dementia

The Internet is filled with enough websites furnishing information from individuals as well as companies directed primarily to caregivers of persons living with dementia, that it can now annually list the best 20, 50, or 80: https://blog.feedspot.com/dementia_blogs (*80 Best Dementia Blogs and Websites 2023* and see Isaacson et al. (2018) on *Alzheimer’s Universe*). While most blogs are intended as basic information for caregivers, academics are now using different techniques to look at what else blogs can contribute, such as exploring dignity for persons living with dementia (PLWD) (Anderson et al., 2021). Online written blogs by PLWD themselves vary in length of time online and typically have titles signaling the blog’s focus, such as <https://whichmeamitoday.wordpress.com/blog/> or <https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/blog/debbies-early-onset-dementia-story>.

Academics have more recently focused on early-onset Alzheimer’s and how they “construct community” (Rodriguez, 2013) or reveal in interviews (Brooks & Savage, 2022: 2402) how PLWD see online blogs as reviewing “the personal (as a journal, and as a ‘room of one’s own’); community (as solidarity for other people with dementia, and as comfort for families and friends) and society (as an educational and campaigning tool).” Castaño (2022) reviews metaphors in 622 blog posts by people with early-onset dementia, which can illustrate “emotional disclosure, self-empowerment and reframing” (119) and realigns mainstream commentary about dementia. Though blogs are not mentioned as part of retaining narrative identity by Heersmink (2022: 1), he does include features requiring helpful supports: “lifeloggging technologies such as *SenseCams*, life story books, multimedia biographies, memory boxes, ambient intelligence systems, and virtual reality applications” as ways to furnish specific contexts and artifacts from which memory can be resurrected.

As a microblogging platform attractive to people without cognitive impairments, Twitter is also used by persons living with dementia; Talbot et al. (2020) found these six themes in their analysis of tweets by twelve persons: nothing about us without us; collective action; experts