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EXPRESSIO
Linguistic perspectives on ageing issues,
ethics and ideology

Edited by Alessandra Vicentini & Kim Grego

 **MIMESIS**

EXPRESSIO. Rivista di Linguistica, Letteratura e Comunicazione

La rivista intende applicarsi agli ambiti specifici della Linguistica, della Letteratura e della Comunicazione, intersecando gli aspetti teorici al monitoraggio delle realtà esistenti, in prospettiva sincronica e diacronica. Saranno privilegiate le riflessioni su temi precisi e circoscritti, legati anche a valenze pragmatiche. Le intersezioni fra le tre componenti, considerate nella loro sfera d'azione più ampia, costituiscono un obiettivo prioritario del progetto.

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Sesto San Giovanni (MI)
Phone: +39 02 24861657 / 244163

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Ageing issues, ethics and ideology: discursive representations in the media and in the professions¹

Alessandra Vicentini, Kim Grego

1. *Research origins and developments*

The studies included in the third issue of *EXPRESSIO* are double-blind peer reviewed papers inspired by the panel “Ageing issues, ethics and ideology: discursive reflections and dissemination strategies”, which was hosted within the CLAVIER (Corpus and Language Variation in English Research) conference “Knowledge dissemination, ethics and ideology in specialised communication: linguistic and discursive perspectives” (University of Milan La Statale and IULM University, November 29th-December 1st, 2018).

We would like to give our special thanks to Professor Marina Bondi, the Director of the CLAVIER inter-university research centre, and Professors Giuliana Garzone (IULM) and Paola Catenaccio (La Statale), the Leaders of the Milan Unit of the National Research Project (PRIN) “Knowledge dissemination across media in English: continuity and change in discourse strategies, ideologies and epistemologies”, for including our panel in their conference.

We are also extremely indebted to Fondazione Cariplo for funding this volume as part of a major grant that our research project, “Age.Vol.A. – Ageing, Volunteers, Assistants. Multilingual tools for assisting the ageing”, was awarded for the 2018-2022 period.

¹ Alessandra Vicentini and Kim Grego authored, respectively, §1 and §2.

1.1 *The Age.Vol.A. research project*

Age.Vol.A. was devised by a team of researchers at the University of Insubria and the University of Milan. It starts from the assumption that, by 2030, Italy will be the oldest country in Europe and the second oldest country in the world, before Japan and after Germany (Euromonitor International 2018). Not only is the Italian population ageing, but also that of foreign carers, so much so that they themselves will need assistance in the future. All this is part of a more general sociological and cultural reflection that takes into account changes in the labour market, especially in places where care and assistance of the ageing are administered. The project's main aim is to facilitate (*agevolare* in Italian) the communication between the home-assisted elderly and foreign caregivers and, in so doing, to ultimately improve elderly care. It concentrates on ageing issues in northern Italy's Varese province, where 13% of the population is over 55 and foreigners are over 8%, a significant proportion of whom is employed as caregivers to assist non-autonomous seniors at home (Censis 2013; Provincia di Varese 2017; Urbistat 2017). It moves from the belief that,

between home-assisted Italian seniors and their non-Italian caregivers, there exists a linguistic and cultural barrier as well as a digital divide, which tends to increase the physical and social isolation of the elderly population, even reducing their personal space. Such barriers can be removed or at least reduced by creating and introducing multilingual tools (a web portal and a smart device application) aimed at providing the carers with terminology and practical information related to their assisted and the institutions (healthcare systems, health associations, etc.) they usually deal with in the carers' own language(s). (Vicentini, Grego & Russo 2018: 26)

Three main phases are therefore envisaged: 1) a study of the population of the elderly and foreign assistants, with a special focus placed on the languages spoken by the latter, usually Ukrainian/Russian and Hispanic-American; 2) the development of theoretical communication models; 3) the

design and implementation of multilingual communication tools. In order to create and populate the latter, needs analyses of the various social actors involved (seniors, caregivers, families, local government, public healthcare, pension and welfare services) are being carried out, by means of field research with interviews, questionnaires, statistical surveys, and active communication with public institutions, private associations and the local government.

The approach is multidisciplinary, involving an interaction between scholars in (English) applied linguistics (with a background in ESP, Critical Discourse Analysis, Translation Studies) and sociolinguistics, the social sciences (especially statistics for the quantitative analysis, sociology and anthropology for the qualitative aspect) and science communication and popularisation. Quantitative research approaches are employed for the survey/questionnaire design (Rasinger 2008; Harris 2013; Agresti & Finlay 2015) and inference making on the results of the survey (hypothesis testing and regression model, Gallucci & Leone 2012), while qualitative methods are used to interpret data from a sociolinguistic viewpoint, drawing on the social constructivist tradition, which highlights the importance of language in understanding society and social categories, hence promoting the study of attitudes, beliefs, and reactions about the use of language (Coupland & Jarowski 1997: 70-72), and a discourse identity perspective (Fairclough 1995, 2003; Irwin 2010: 100).

Though the technological output of the Age.Vol.A. project (an app and a web portal) is not a novelty in itself, it could result in several significant outcomes. Academically, it would enhance our understanding of the phenomena studied (i.e. the role of immigrant caregivers in providing assistance to older adult care recipients, with major barriers including lack of shared language and culture), particularly within the specific context under investigation. Practically, it would result in web-based tools that, in addition to helping remove or mitigate cultural and linguistic gaps between foreign caregivers and seniors, would contribute to addressing disparities in senior access to the Internet. That the theoretical genres and communication models and multilingual tools could be localised (translated)

into a number of selected foreign languages, and/or customisable and adaptable to other target groups further enhances the scope of its potential contributions. Moreover, possible good practices could be explored in the multidisciplinary cooperation between the fields of research involved and methods employed. Last, but not least, by possibly providing a practical (even small) contribution, it is hoped that it will improve people's lives, and so promote actual social change.

1.2 The Age.Vol.A. panel within CLAVIER: "Ageing issues, ethics and ideology: discursive reflections and dissemination strategies"

The Age.Vol.A. panel "Ageing issues, ethics and ideology: discursive representations in the media and in the professions" examines discursive issues related to ageing and the social impact of ageing in western society. It focuses on specific professional domains, among which the healthcare field, which has produced several interesting reflections, with repercussions at the social and philosophical levels due to the changes undergone by the doctor-patient and institution-patient roles within contemporary healthcare (e.g. Sarangi & Roberts 1999; Salager-Meyer & Gotti 2006). The hybridisation of seniors' discourse with healthcare discourse, particularly, is quite a novel and promising phenomenon (cf. e.g. Coupland & Coupland 1994 on the representation of old age in geriatric medicine); looking at its discursive representations and the language practices it produces can be revealing of deep societal changes, ideologies and ethical views regarding the elderly.

The panel also looked at how old age is represented in the media (cf. Ylänne 2012), and how (web)marketing texts (political, business, tourist, etc.) aimed at seniors are linguistically and discursively constructed, with particular attention to the ethical repercussions that this may have for them (cf. Grego 2018). Some of the aspects tackled by the papers are the challenge of population ageing, media and ageism, the ethical and ideological aspects of ageing discourse, the society's change in attitude towards ageing, the ethical implications of study-

ing older people, the relationship between ageing people and caregivers, ageing users and technologies, the ageing/aged and politics (Coupland & Nussbaum 1993; Coupland 1997; Nussbaum et al. 2005; Clark-Cotton et al. 2007). These are analysed through a methodological approach featuring a combination of corpus linguistics and (critical) discourse analytical tools, which makes them relevant for *CLAVIER* and its research.

Altogether, the contributions in this issue draw a picture of the growing ethical concerns of a fast-changing global society, in which the old are more numerous, healthier and wealthier than previous generations of seniors. Their new and ‘younger’ identity, however, struggles with and suffers from the frailties and vulnerabilities which have traditionally been attached to them. Applied linguists – and (critical) discourse analysts especially – are engaged in offering reflections on the uses and applications of language in society that can hopefully help us understand these social phenomena.

1.3 State-of-the art of Age.Vol.A. as presented at CLAVIER

The Age.Vol.A. project’s rationale, aims and expected results were presented and discussed at the conference. Firstly, a network of social actors (seniors, caregivers, families, local government, public healthcare, pension and welfare services) was established in the Varese province. Then, preliminary interviews were carried out to discuss the lack of social spaces and the communicative gaps from their own experience and point of view, representing the first output of the project. Results highlighted that seniors’ necessities revolve around health, hygiene, feeding, company, entertainment; their families’ regard safety, security, trust, reliability and affordability of the so-called “invisible welfare”. The various institutions involved need to have (foreign) carers enter the welfare system, employers pay contributions, carers take advantage of welfare (welfare, *INPS*), (foreign) carers enter and stay within the legal system (government, *Comune*), (foreign) carers enter, stay within and take advantage of the healthcare system (healthcare, *ATS*). Finally, care givers have legal (e.g. irregular work, job insecurity, psychological impact, exploitation and isolation,

fiscal assistance, family reunion), educational (e.g. professional training for better job opportunities, better working life and better wages), language (e.g. *ad hoc* courses not affecting working hours), cultural (e.g. cooking, healthcare, institutions, bureaucracy), and social needs (e.g. social spaces, also linked to job-related isolation, smartphones, social network for useful information and job opportunities, source reliability, communication issues with employers).

From this needs analysis, theoretical genres and models of communication were developed, as a second output, which will be used to design and create the multilingual technological products aimed to assist those who assist the elderly, as a third output (see §1.1). Among a number of communication models taken into account (Buhler 1933/2011; Jakobson 1960; Halliday 1973; Leech 1974; Newmark 1983), that resulting from the combination of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 2002), relational sociology (Donati 2011) and Critical Discourse Studies (Krzyżanowski 2018; Fairclough 2018) was deemed suitable for this multi-layered, complex and multidisciplinary research, involving a matrix of sociological dimensions related to identity, society and culture. The key elements/stages it envisages are: (A) Problem-Definition, Theorisation and Pre-Contextualisation, (B) Fieldwork including Contextualisation, and (C) Discourse-Historical Analysis (Krzyżanowski 2018: 179). Future developments and phases of the project will be illustrated in further publications and disseminated through public conferences and events.

In the following paragraph the papers presented in this volume will be briefly illustrated and commented on.

2. An integrated approach for a multi-layered view

The contributions to this volume, although linguistic in nature, represent a multi-layered project, a collection of views from different and not always predictable perspectives, which make up an integrated discursive approach both necessary and suitable to address the complex issue tackled here.

2.1 Representations in the media

Giulia Rovelli opens the volume with a short-term diachronic study of those we have been calling ‘the old’ in the past thirty years. Collecting a corpus of newspaper articles from the *Guardian* and the *New York Times*, she shows us how, in the quality press at least, the anglophone world has moved from having just ‘elderly’ and ‘old’ people, to dealing with ‘older people’, ‘seniors’ and the ‘ageing’. This lexical shift has been not only formal but also substantial, in that the connotations associated with these labels too have changed from purely negative to less undesirable and even positive, and Rovelli hypothesises why. Of particular interest is the rise of the phrases ‘young old’, ‘old old’ and ‘older people’. This follows a clear trend typical of specialised domains to spend more words on one concept, when the concept becomes too complex to be contained within just one word. Hence, the multi-word terms, which break the universal principle of linguistic economy (saying the most using the least words) for the need to expand on a concept that has grown out of its own name. In particular, the comparative inflectional morpheme ‘-er’ opens up a whole new and fascinating world of comparisons, competition and expectations that leave us wondering as to the further future developments of a social group that is evolving as we write.

Laura Tommaso already takes it for granted that the world has become “greyer” and that the greyer people in developed societies are healthier, more active and better off than they used to be in past decades. Thus, they represent not only a social group that is no longer as weak as it used to be but that, on the contrary, is even stronger in terms of spending power, consequently making it a precious target audience for marketing products. Grown up without having experienced world wars and, in fact, having enjoyed and exploited the possibilities of the post-war economic boom, a large share of these seniors have had a chance at better education and jobs, of working longer and earning more, of saving, of retiring when still healthy and active, of receiving substantial pensions or even just a pension, when most working adults nowadays struggle to

understand whether they will receive one. Tommaso, therefore, illustrates how the current ‘older adults’ are targeted by advertising, in particular by travel insurance companies. Once uninsurable at all, the old are now the golden addressees of insurance agents, as they travel, play sports, go cruising *while* they can pay for it all. That they remain more fragile than ‘younger adults’ is hushed or limited to a minimum in the analysed advertisements; illness, accidents or – God forbid – death are remote occurrences, yet... That ‘yet’ is precisely the catch in the advertising strategies employed: the remote possibility of a negative event is what seniors do not and need not think about, a nuisance that can be waved away by simply getting insured. This argument is not new or specific to the old; in fact, it is the same that is used for all other ‘younger’ adults. What is new is that seniors are treated *exactly* like all other adults. What is added is that maintaining their healthy and active lifestyle is no longer dictated by fate, but it is rather their own responsibility. The notion of (free) choice is thus put on the plate for seniors to take or leave, and old age becomes like cigarette-induced lung cancer: the consequence of one’s own responsible or irresponsible decisions. Old age is therefore subtly medicalised the way health campaigns are, and reduced or elevated to a personal choice – will they take the risk?

Barbara Berti follows in Tommaso’s (this volume) investigation of the young and active seniors, who are healthy and wealthy enough to travel the world and live their lives to the full. Perhaps they are a little less wealthy than the older people depicted in travel insurance ads since the target groups studied by Berti are part of the so-called ‘couchsurfing’ community, seeking and offering accommodation in private houses – but not necessarily. Indeed, this rising trend is not just linked to saving on accommodation but also to meeting new people and establishing social relations with them. This is the main reason for their couchsurfing, as emerges in Berti’s study, who analysed a large dataset of over 1500 profiles of English-speaking couchsurfers over 60 and up to 100, male (54.5%), female (37.9%) and other (7.6%), from different countries, having (had) different occupations, speaking different languages and

with different interests. The analysis of the older couchsurfers' profiles highlights a number of interesting aspects in terms of word frequency and collocations. These paint a colourful though consistent picture of the seniors involved who, no matter their provenance and occupations (the most variable factors), tend to speak only one language, show a common curiosity to see new places and the desire to socialise. The choice of researching older adults' profiles on the Couchsurfing.com networking and social platform is peculiar in that it provides an unusual and precious perspective: that of seniors themselves, and a selection of active ones at that, who live in the present, take advantage of the possibilities of social networking and technology and make themselves heard in both presenting themselves and reviewing their experiences. As such, Berti's corpus represents an invaluable collection of own narratives to mine for research on ageing issues, with a few caveats that the author herself is the first to highlight: the voices of the old are finally heard, true, but do their real (whatever 'real' means) profiles actually correspond to the ones they have constructed for themselves? That, of course, remains to be checked, if ever possible, but the innovative approach remains in that, although always as usual discursively constructed, old-age identity is for once *self*-constructed.

Stefania Maci reviews ageist discourse using the scripts of two films: *Going in style* from 1979 and its 2017 remake. This time, the outlook for seniors is gloomy: although almost thirty years have passed in between the two versions (see Rovelli in this volume), what emerges is that the existing differences between the two films do not include a positive evolution in the way they are perceived. The story goes that there are three old men involved in a bank robbery, ending badly for them in the 1979 version, and well in the 2017 one. Yet, the legitimate expectation of a more positive view of the three contemporary senior robbers is not met, as Maci shows in her study. The scripts return data that point to similar keywords being used in both scripts; that alone is a non-difference that bears significance in terms of immobility. However, the most relevant, interesting and upsetting results are those emerging from the

analysis of the semantic fields. The older film expectedly emphasises domains related, among others, to weapons, anatomy, masculinity and disease, pointing to a discourse constructed around being old, ill in various parts of one's body, with the robbery – weapons, beautiful, masculine – being the only positive distraction. The 2017 version, nonetheless, surprises for the fact that some of the semantic fields it includes are different but definitely not more positive than in 1979: money and pay (lack of pensions), health and disease, medicine and medical treatment, time and age, life aspects including death. In the three decades separating the two films, not all the seniors have prospered, saved and kept healthy and fit. This is the share of the old age group that has not enjoyed the benefits of the boom, or whom fate has hit hard, preventing them from choosing and excluding them from the gilded world of 'active ageing'. Not only, contrarily to the seniors depicted by Tommaso (this volume), these seem to have been stripped of their possibility to choose: in the late 1970s, the three old men become robbers out of boredom; in the late 2010s, they do so out of necessity. In 1979, the US were still deeply involved into a cold war with the Soviet block, Margaret Thatcher became the UK's Prime Minister and terrorism was associated to groups like the IRA, assassinating Lord Mountbatten. Between then and 2017, the world saw the fall of the Berlin wall, the economic rise of China, the 9/11 attacks to the USA, the subprime mortgages global crisis, the first black US President and the beginning of Brexit, to name but a few events. Those baby boomers who did not thrive through all this were left like the three protagonists of the 2017 *Going in style*: as fragile, vulnerable and ill as in 1979. In addition, they are blamed for being old men playing the young in a 'society for the young'. As Maci concludes, the stereotypes about old age may have changed in the two films, but they remain constructed negatively, with the aggravation that the contemporary senior robbers share in such stereotypes and thus go on to support their own discrimination: theirs is indeed a bleak old world.

Marianna Zummo also explored multimedia material, but of a different nature and with different purposes: namely, a col-

lection of six electoral commercials YouTube. One of them was part of the 2016 New Jersey's 5th congressional district campaign, four regard the 2018 US midterm election, the last was promoted online to encourage millennials to vote in 2018. Although differing somehow from each other, they all share, as well as their historical period and macro-genre, the presence of seniors, in various ways. Having older people as protagonists of ads, commercials, campaigns is not a thing that happens frequently so, in the cases considered, the focus on this social and age group is particularly relevant and, for this, worth discussing. Different purposes and different themes intertwine in the videos considered. The 2016 commercial and the four about the 2018 midterm electoral campaign are classic 'in favour of' vs 'against' this or that politician. As such, they do not present innovative elements as far as the genre's purpose is concerned. The novelty lies precisely in the *themes*. Several of the issues at stake in those campaigns regarded senior citizens directly: taxation of property, gas, retirement income, medications and nursing home stays. That was about the future, no matter how limited, of older people who, no matter how long for, were still voters, and active voters at that. There were, however, other themes connected with the past of older people: in the commercials, most spoke about their former occupations and how long and hard they had worked; this was compared against the accusation by politician Scott Wagner of their being a "greedy generation". The 2016 video, about or, better, against a different candidate, congressman Scott Garrett, raised yet another series of themes connected with the past: according to the senior lady speaking, he voted against equal pay for women, healthcare for 9/11 first responders and gay candidates for Congress. Significant human rights battles that marked the lives of the older generations are thus called into play, and made to weigh on their electoral decisions. In addition to the future and the past of the aged, their present is also discussed, in particular in the last video, the longest one (60" as opposed to the others' 30"), and the one with the slightly different purpose, not of making people vote for one candidate but of making the young vote, for *any* candidate. This commercial, sponsored by a progressive group and made by a professional communication agency,

was only distributed online and not aired on television, to reach their intended target. Using reverse psychology, a carousel of senior, active-looking people try to convince millennials not to vote, with the obvious aim of obtaining precisely the opposite result. The last of the interesting themes then emerges: inter-generational conflict and, while this was started by the young politician who called seniors ‘greedy’ in the other videos, in this one it is the ageing who retaliate and proudly state that they are a generation of doers and not whiners. Thus, future, past and present intermingle with a variety of themes relevant for the old but not only for them, and are used as arguments for a conflictual intergenerational debate. What emerges, according to Zummo, are topical discursive constructions of older people, differently portrayed as victimised, frail, vulnerable, but also active, threatening, powerful: in this way, although with the risk remaining of their being manipulated for political reasons, seniors’ voices are at least and at last heard and legitimised, entering the multimodal political arena as social actors in their own right.

2.2 Representations in the professions

Annalisa Zanola writes about the topic of informed consent. She first provides an interesting, detailed and solid summary of the history of doctor-patient interaction seen in terms of trust-building and information-exchange. Thus, reflections that were first made by the ancient Greek and Roman civilisations still effectively apply to this day, such as medical ethics and the notion of caretaking (on the part of doctors) and that of autonomy of choices (on the part of patients). Forms of informed or non-informed consent are thus found, according to Zanola, as far back as five centuries ago, and others emerge for instance from minutes of lawsuits by patients against doctors, something, we learn, is not just a fashion of these times. In contemporary research, we are reminded of the Nuremberg Code, stemming from the Nazi trials about their medical experiments on human subjects that were totally devoid of their basic rights, let alone of those as ‘patients’. The notion of a person’s voluntary consent to treatment of any kind was reasserted at many

later dates, in declarations by associations and institutions at national, supranational and global levels. Informed consent as we understand it today is thus clearly even more relevant when the patients considered are aged, and their physical and mental capacities may be impaired, making them unable to take fully informed decisions for themselves. This naturally raises ethical dilemmas, and calls into question the patient's literacy skills, education, values and beliefs, physical and cognitive abilities. Zanola concludes by pointing out that the issue may be helped, if not solved, by working on the responsibilities of those who compose such informed consent forms. Simplifying the language to avoid in- or mis-comprehension, improving the textual and visual aspects used to present the information, and even providing the subjective and necessary time to read and think through it would all contribute to sharing the responsibility of good communication with the undersigning patient.

Simone Bacchini and Peter Simcock report on field research on a social group with several concurring disadvantages: older deafblind people. The vulnerability of this minority is apparent, though not self-explanatory as it may at first seem to a non-specialised audience. Their limitations, Bacchini and Simcock argue, are quite unique but so are the opportunities that might stem from their condition. They go on to describe a project that addressed the challenges involved in deafblindness combined with old age, from both a social and a linguistic perspective. Firstly, they define the condition as being the result of several possible causes, from genetic to degenerative; in addition, old age tends to amplify all the difficulties of being just deaf *and* blind. Then they describe their mixed qualitative approach, with semi-structured interviews with deafblind seniors made, transcribed and approached through interpretative phenomenological analysis. Finding British Sign Language interpreters with additional skills in tactile communication proved particularly difficult, due to the scarce number of professionals available, which also at times affected the anonymity of the interviewees, as they belonged to very small circles where they and the interpreters might turn out to know each other. Thirdly, the authors provide an interpretation of their research, which highlights the

limits and challenges of working with this group of people. Methodologically, there were assumptions and expectations to be met or rejected about the feasibility itself of interviewing persons with such multi-layered impairments. The costs of hiring qualified interpreters that could carry out the job properly was also considered, as well as the responsibility, in case the interpreting did not go as expected, for losing or misinterpreting some of the information. Linguistically, the phenomenon of code-blending was highlighted, which only adds to the complexity of the interaction requiring, as it does, multiple codes and sometimes channels to be smoothly carried out. In the light of all this, Bacchini and Simcock call for more social attention and research to devote to older deafblind people, with the practical suggestion of investing, in terms of money, time and expertise, in training suitable interpreters.

We hope this collection can be of interest to the scholar, the practitioner and the layperson alike. The aim of both the Age. Vol.A. project and the authors who accepted to be involved in this dialogue on ageing issues, whom we would like to thank, is to bridge at least some of the gaps between societal needs and research outputs – in our case, from a linguistic perspective.

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