



## 研究計畫

### 老年社會語言學研究：

### 樂齡學習情境下的老齡談話及與老人之溝通策略探討

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#### 摘要

隨著台灣老化速度的增快，語言學的研究值得思考如何逐漸發展與老年相關的議題或與西方語言學界在語言、社會與老年研究思維角度的接軌。然而，如今台灣在老人社會語言學的研究，仍屬鳳毛麟角。本研究因此以此方向，做為主要研究標的。值得一提的是，儘管傳統的社會語言學者，偏好將「老年」視為老人在語言使用所展現的語言變異（多半反應退化的概念）的重要解釋因素，本研究將以不同的角度與跨領域的理論架構，檢視語言（使用）與老年之間的關聯。

接續二十多年前英國社會語言學家 Nik Coupland 和 Justine Coupland 結合社會心理學與人際語言與傳播學所延伸出的語言、社會與老年之研究取向，此研究將利用多種質量兼具之研究方法（半結構式面談、問卷調查、自然對話語料收集、相關性統計分析、社會心理之言談分析）進行資料收集與分析。並且專注於特定的語言使用情境（樂齡學習），以該情境下的相關參與者（教師與老人學員）為研究對象，分別於第一階段探討教師對於老年與老化的認知，如何影響他們與老人學員的語言溝通行為。第二階段則以老年學員為對象，探討他們於自然對話情境或面談引導情境下，提及老年時的各種語言策略與情境特徵（包含其展現的社會或互動功能）。

本研究的目的是與應用性，可分為三個層次：(1)樂齡學習情境中，與老人互動的各種語言溝通行為的適切性探討；(2)檢視語言與對話情境外之社會文化的關聯性，觀察老年歧視意識形態或刻板印象的強化與否；(3)將語言學研究與跨領域的社會功能相互連結，如何透過語言研究促進老人友善的環境以及如何透過語言研究加強樂齡學習的效益。本研究將是第一份在此相關議題上著墨的台灣文獻，得出的結果將有助於學術界進行東西差異之比較。

關鍵字：老人社會語言學、語言與老化、高齡教育、溝通策略、老人、年齡身分

## 1. Ageing world

Due to the decreased birth rate and the significantly increased life expectancy, Taiwan is, for sure, becoming a dramatically ageing country. According to the statistics reported by the National Statistics R.O.C. (2014), by the end of June in, 2013, the 65 plus age group in Taiwan constituted 11% of the overall population and the growing rate is expected to accelerate to a greater extent in the future. This trend perhaps partially justifies why the Ministry of Science and Technology, Taiwan has promoted “language and ageing” as a worth-developing research theme in the field of linguistics. Interestingly, given the above-mentioned demographic change in Taiwan, ageing is still rarely treated as an issue discussed in the discipline of sociolinguistics in Taiwan (however, c.f. studies about language and communication with the elderly in medical contexts in Tsai, 2003, 2005, 2007 and, 2010; elderly speakers’ communication abilities in Tai’s NSC project, 2013), though in the West, ageing as an issue in applied sociolinguistic was established more than two decades ago. Therefore, my research project will be dedicated to fill in this research gap, however, with a focus on one specific context in which discourses of ageing and older age are investigated. The context is regarding senior education. Nevertheless, before justifying why I would like to focus on discourses of ageing and older age as produced in senior learning contexts, I will briefly present a discussion on gerontological sociolinguistics.

## 2. Gerontological or lifespan sociolinguistics: invoking diachrony and decrement

Language, ageing and ageism have been long discussed as worth-explored topics in the field of applied linguistics (Coupland, N., 1997; Coupland, N. & Coupland, J., 1990; Coupland, N. & Coupland, J., 1993). However, as opposed to ethnicity and gender which are two of the commonly perceived social class parameters in sociolinguistics, sociolinguists still relatively rarely “overlay issues of ageing on their designs and questions....ageing is still, in a general sense, the unwritten chapter of sociolinguistics” (Coupland, J., 2009).

In terms of the research focus, sociolinguistic-proper (Trudgill, 1978) studies of ageing tend to be statistically-based, treating age as an explanatory factor for linguistic variations (see a review in Coupland, 1997), instead of exploring language realisation of social ageing processes or contextually rich meaning construction of later life (which will be turned to later). More traditional sociolinguistic approaches to language and older age are, for instance, age-difference linguistic features across age-groups or of various generations (e.g. Labov, 1972), or linguistic and communicative impairment (see a review in Coupland & Coupland, 1990). In studies of linguistic and communicative impairment, specific pathologies and ailments associated with older age are often referred to, such as Alzheimer’s (e.g. Emery & Emery, 1983; Hamilton, 1994) and Parkinson’s disease (e.g. Illes et al., 1988; Illes, 1989). Such studies are criticized to invoke diachrony and decrement and consequently, progressive and predicable decline in health and communication becomes normal ageing conditions (Coupland & Coupland, 1990; Coupland, 1997). Ageism could hence be reinforced even in academic discourses. The ideological effect is the constant enhancement of certain ways to categorize older adults in the discipline of linguistics and therefore, generating a social group defined in line with a rather fixed and homogeneous set of attributes.

That above arguments justifies why an alternative perspective to examine language and ageing seems to be necessary. In section 3 and 4, there will be literature reviews regarding the alternative ways of conducting language studies in relation to ageing, the elderly and society.

### 3. Older people, older age identity and discourses of later life

Apart from the above-mentioned studies, a group of British sociolinguists with their colleagues (e.g. Coupland et al., 1991; Coupland & Nussbaum, 1993; Nussbaum & Coupland, 2004; Robinson & Giles, 2001; Yläne, 2012) alternatively take on a perspective regarding older age and ageing as subjects mutually constructed and negotiated by participants (including older people) in talks with older people. For them, older age and ageing are not notions which are static but socially sensitive and changeable and also contextually rich. They are particularly concerned about how language and communication involving older people reproduce ageist attitudes. Hence, they investigated forms of language use and the construction of older age identity in discourses derived from various social contexts. Their use of qualitative discourse analysis enabled them to identify the various natures of later life and older age identity in discourses (Coupland et al., 1991; Coupland & Nussbaum, 1993; Coupland, 2009).

Their research targets include verbal interactions with older people, such as cross (or within)-generational talks (e.g. Coupland et al., 1988; Coupland et al., 1989, 1991; Coupland, et al., 1991), medical consultation in geriatrics (e.g. Coupland et al., 1994), and service encounters in travel agencies (Yläne-McEwen, 1999). Ageing, therefore, is regarded as a social notion, rather than simply a biological factor which could be used to justify language changes or variations in apparent or real time. Section 3.1 is a review of their studies I consider them relevant to the second phase of my research, that is, older people's self narratives of older age (identities).

#### 3.1 Discourse analysis and processes of age talks

Discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) has shown its merits for the examination of interactional dynamics in the construction of older age identities in cross-generational and within-generational talks. Coupland et al. in their ground-breaking book "language, society & the elderly" (1991) have managed to arrive at various discourse processes explaining age categorisation in natural conversations and older peoples' conversational managements of chronological age disclosure.

##### Formulating age

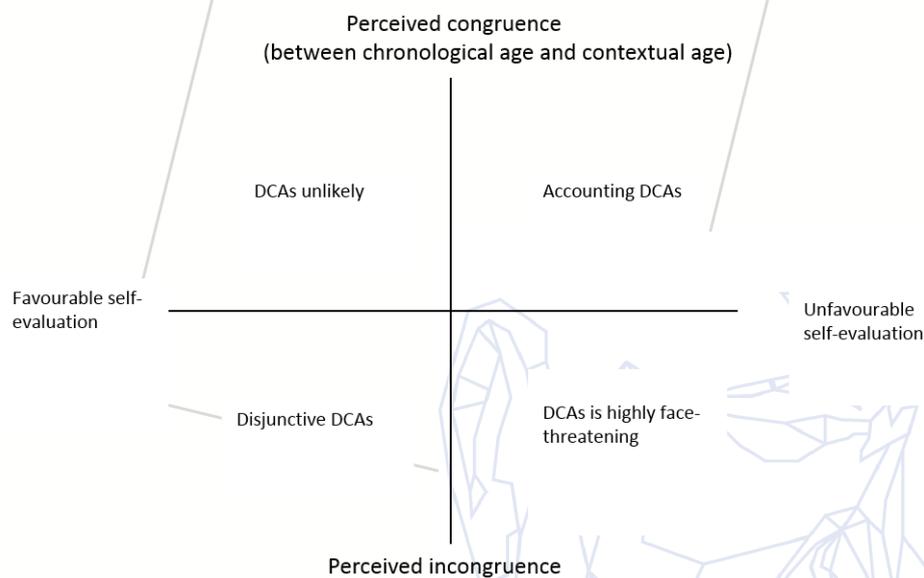
Based on a corpus of natural conversational data involving younger (30-40 years old) and older interactants (70-80 years old) who met for the first time and were required to get to know each other in (young-old or old-old) pairs, Coupland et al. (1991) were dedicated to show how dimensions of older age identity surfaced and were managed discursively and conversationally by the participants. They intended to claim that elderly identity can be an unstable phenomenon and highly dependent on the local circumstances. The results showed that older speakers could be viewed as inhibiting the elderly age category through a number of age categorization processes, such as revealing age in years (disclosure of chronological age), referring to older age-related labels (e.g. 'old', 'elderly', 'pensioner', and geriatric')

or generational roles. Moreover, older age formulation could be observed in people's associating later life with declining health, decrement and death.

In addition to direct and indirect invocation of elderly categories in talk, Coupland et al. (1991) also found that age identity can be formulated by means of certain temporal framing processes, realised as recalling the past (especially in peer-elderly pairs), disassociating the present by commenting on how certain aspects of the past no longer exist, and lastly, recognizing historical, cultural or social changes.

### Telling age in later life: a strategic analysis

As argued by Coupland et al. (1991:133), "at different points in the life span, taboos and normative prescriptions are associated with both seeking and providing information about age". Therefore, they extended the study of disclosing chronological age (DCA) amongst the elderly by turning to the underlying social functions of different age disclosing strategies. They conduct a series of interviews with 40 elderly people (34 women and 6 men, aged 68-87) by asking them questions about experiences of health care with an initial phatic opening question "how are you", followed by other scripted questions, including, "how is your health generally", "do you see your GP often", "do you think doctors generally provide good health care for elderly people" and some additional unscripted follow-up questions. Whether DCAs (disclosing chronological ages) were made in response to the interview questions or not was of interest and they arrived at a simple schematization, as indicated in Figure 1 below, to explain why DCA management could be language behaviors with negotiative nature.



**Figure 1. Subjective correlates of DCA management (duplication from Coupland et al., 1991:141)**

As shown in Figure 1, DCA management is influenced by two dimensions. One is the degree of congruity or incongruity between elderly interviewees' chronological ages and their perceived contextual ages. The second dimension is the degree of favourability in elderly interviewees' self-evaluation. In their data, the elderly interviewees' discourse patterns of DCA management only exemplify the upper right and the lower left quadrants. The accounting pattern suggests that elderly interviewees' self-projection of their age is consistent with decrement which is age-related and age stereotypical. As to the disjunctive formats

of DCAs, elderly interviewees incline to claim discrepancy between chronological age and the positive contextual age, because they are more socially active and healthy than normatively anticipated. As to negative incongruent configurations, elderly interviewees would recognize their contextual age to be worse than expected at the chronological age and they usually make such a statement, for instance, “I’m bad for my age”. This kind of self-presentation, with no appeal to age in years, would be highly face-threatening (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

Coupland, et al. (1991) also argued that the positive congruent context (the left-upper quadrant) could be a very unlikely correlate of DCA. This argument implies that it is unlikely for an elderly individual to be content with a predictable pattern of life development. It is most likely because the predictable pattern tends to be associated with norms of decremental ageing. However, if the same configuration is examined in a different culture where positive expectation towards age-marked development can be possible (e.g. in the traditional Confucian prescription of ageing and lifecourse development, greater maturity and better harmony with the world can be anticipated), could the above argument still hold true?

### **3.2 Research questions: Telling age in Taiwan and in senior adult learning contexts**

The analyses reviewed so far about telling age in later life can show how disclosing chronological age (DCA) as a speech act can reinforce ageist ideology, or can be interactionally negotiated and strategic. Examining DCAs can also serve as a source through which researchers can understand how older age is a concept co-constructed by participations in conversations. Furthermore, qualitative discourse analysis into the interview corpus also enables the researchers to observe whether elderly individuals tend to associate with certain themes (e.g. health and well-being) in age-talks and accordingly infer the qualities of older age identities as projected by the elderly.

The sociolinguistic studies I’ve reviewed by Coupland et al. (1991) have never been scrutinized in terms of the generalizability and validity in a different cultural context. The findings and their strategic model established more than 20 years ago are ground-breaking but as advised by Coupland et al. (1991), it is also necessary to “research similar sociolinguistic questions in culturally more diverse settings” and “certainly, there is an important dimension of cross-cultural and cross-situational variability to expose.” The research project I am proposing here is an academic response to their call for such a future research so as to fill in the gap in relation to cross-cultural variability in age-telling management by the elderly.

Hence, as for cross-cultural variability, the following research questions are posed, that is, “how is older age strategically disclosed by the elderly in first-acquaintance conversations in Taiwan?” and “in the self-narratives about later life, how do Taiwanese elderly people manage the disclosure of older age and what contextual dimensions could be identified in the emerging DCA patterns?”.

As to situational variability, as mentioned earlier, my main interest is on discourses of ageing in senior educational contexts. The rationale behind the selection of this target context is the expectation to obtain discourses of ageing in which older people might project their older age identity in a diverse (or counter-stereotypical) way from that identified in Coupland et al.’s study (1991).

Older people's participation in senior education could have some positive effects on ageing. For instance, their ageing experiences are no longer limited to the stereotypical association of decremental health and loss of competence but, instead, developmental perception of older age. Furthermore, older people involved in senior adult learning activities could be perceived more positively (Wei & Wang, 2010). That is why the Ministry of Education, Taiwan proposed a policy to promote senior education in Taiwan since 2006 (Wei & Wang, 2010). In the western countries, such as France, the UK, Germany, Australia, and New Zealand, there are universities of the third age (Huang, 2004:11). The third age is a concept introduced by Laslett (1989) to refer to a life stage which begins from retirement and ends at the point of entering the constant decline of physical and mental abilities. Because of the increased longevity, people have time to explore themselves, develop new interest, and fulfil themselves without concerning too much about family responsibilities. The third agers enjoy active life, health and social engagement in a care-free manner. I assume that elderly people seeking out additional educational opportunities at their later life stage tend to be third agers. In Taiwan, there are various educational institutions, such as universities and community-based learning centers, offering degree programs or short-term educational opportunities to the elderly. Older learners' experiences of ageing as derived from seeking out learning activities aimed at the elderly could serve as sources feeding their self-narratives of ageing and conversational construction of older age identities. Therefore, the association with decline in health and competence in their age talk presumably will be less salient if the participants are third agers. However, this argument needs to be verified.

Given the above arguments, I would like to ask the following questions so as to draw a comparative analysis to Coupland et al.'s study:

- In what ways elderly learners disclose their age in the first-acquaintance conversations with their peer classmates in senior educational contexts in Taiwan? How is older age contextualised in the conversations?

Similar to Coupland et al.'s (1991) research design, narratives about later life experiences will also be elicited in my research by means of interviews to observe how strategically elderly people project their older age identity. However, the narratives are not produced in a health-in-ageing conversational context (Coupland et al.'s interview questions began by asking whether the elderly interviewees go to see doctors regularly) but, alternatively, in relation to topics about learning at older age. The contextual variation should render different findings. Hence, the following questions are proposed:

- In elderly people's self-narratives about learning experiences at later life, how do they manage the disclosure of older age and what contextual dimensions could be identified in the emerging DCA patterns?

The following review will turn to the language and communication studies integrating socio-psychological perspectives with a focus on stereotypes and the impact on ways people talk to older people. The implications of stereotypes, language and communication with the elderly will be connected with the exploration of teachers' communication strategies with elderly learners in senior educational contexts.

## 4. Stereotypes, language and communication with the elderly

### 4.1 The role of age stereotypes in interpersonal communication

Literature on the nature of older age stereotypes has been mainly developed in America and approached from the cognitive perspective (Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981; Hamilton & Troler, 1986). Researchers (Brewer et al., 1984; Schmidt & Boland, 1986; Hummert, 1990; Hummert et al., 1994) have commonly claimed that older age stereotypes, as person perception schemas of older adults, encompass both positive and negative subcategories. Hummert et al.'s (1994) even pointed out that the complexity of the older stereotype schemas, as perceived by older persons, appeared to be greater than that by young and middle-aged persons. However, similarities of perceived older age stereotypes across age groups could also be observed, for instance, 3 positive (Golden Ager, Perfect Grandparent, John Wayne Conservative) and 4 negative (Severely Impaired, Dependent, Recluse, Shrew/Curmudgeon) stereotypes.

The cognitive perspective on older age stereotypes also proved its merits for exploring communication behaviours in relation to ageing (Hummert, 1999), that is, to examine how people's cognitive perceptions about older adults influence or become salient in interactions or talk with them. First of all, I would like to refer to one particular communication model to illustrate how age stereotyping processes are related to communicative behaviours towards older people, namely, Communication Accommodation Theory (Giles et al., 1987, 1991).

### 4.2 Communication accommodation theory

The original aim of developing communication accommodation theory (Giles, 1973, 1984; Giles & Powesland, 1975) is to understand the ways in which speakers change their language styles to reduce or on the other hand increase differences between them. Therefore, the goal is to specify the strategies of convergence and divergence in intergroup or interpersonal verbal interactions. As put by Williams and Harwood (2004), communication accommodation theory (CAT) "explores the ways in which individuals attune their speech to others based on a variety of interpersonal and intergroup factors".

That is, if one wishes to show identification with and solidarity towards the interlocutor's social identity, they cooperate in conversations by accommodating the communication or speech styles into the interlocutor's. Nevertheless, over-accommodation could occur when one speaker adapts to a sociolinguistic style which might be judged by the hearer to be unnecessary for attuned talk.

On the other hand, if one wishes to reinforce his/her outer-group social identity, linguistic and communicative characteristics that define the intergroup differences would be particularly highlighted. In this case, under-accommodation becomes possible when certain sociolinguistic styles need to be adopted by the speakers for attuned talk but are underplayed.

As claimed by Coupland et al. (1991:26), "the sociolinguistic heart of CAT is ...on the processes of communicative attuning, adaptive and strategic moves made by interactants to increase and decrease social and sociolinguistic distance". By blending the communication accommodation theory into applied

sociolinguistic studies, they established an extended model of sociolinguistic processes in communication accommodation theory, as shown in Figure 2 (reproduced from Coupland et al., 1998:28; also cited in Coupland, et al., 1991:29).

Figure 2 indicates a number of attuning strategies (e.g. approximation, interpretability, discourse management, and interpersonal control strategies) in relation to four different addressee foci, namely, attending to addressees' productive performance, interpretive competence, conversational needs and role-relations. In approximation strategies, speakers observe hearers' speech output to design their convergence or divergence of communication styles. As to interpretability strategies, accommodation is designed in relation to hearers' receptive competence as perceived by speakers. Conversational accommodation could also be the consequence of attending to hearer's needs (which could be stereotypical) and the social linguistic strategies realising such an attuning motive could include different forms of discourse management, such as the selection of topics to talk about, the maintenance or threat of face or turn-taking structures in a conversational interaction. Finally, when a speaker's role endows him/her power and control over the hearer, interpersonal control strategies could be observed in conversations, for instance, interruption, or limiting the hearer's opportunities to start or develop a conversational topic.

CAT has been regarded as a useful conceptual framework to study intergenerational talks in terms of the communication strategies (Ryan et al., 1986) or evaluations of patronizing communication with the elderly (Ryan, 1994; Ryan et al., 1994). For instance, Ryan, et al. (1986) took into account CAT to develop a typology of four young-to-elderly communication strategies (sensory over-accommodation, dependency overaccommodation, intergroup divergence, and intergroup overaccommodation). First of all, sensory overaccommodation is triggered by social/sociopsychological assumption of elderly people being physically or sensory handicapped. Secondly, when talking to elderly people perceived to be dependent, dependency accommodation strategy is used and realised in directive or disciplinary communication styles. As to age-related divergence, younger people might deliberately differentiate their speech style from that of their older interlocutors in order to promote the difference of their age identities (younger versus older). Ryan et al. (1986) argued that the fourth young-old communication strategy, intergroup overaccommodation, is the most pervasive. Younger speakers perceive older interlocutors as belonging to a social group, the elderly, bearing certain stereotypical qualities in term of decrement and frailty and therefore change their speech styles to help older interlocutors understand but the accommodation can be unnecessary and patronising. Interestingly, as further explored by Ryan, Hamilton and See (1994), in the context of health care, care givers' use of communication styles resembling baby talk or with apparent nurturing quality is not appreciated by elderly residents in a nursing home. Such verbal interactions are evaluated to be less satisfying and the caregivers with patronizing tones are perceived to be less professional.

#### **4.3 Research questions and instructional communication with the elderly**

The review made so far about Ryan and the colleagues' studies leads to a point to pose some corresponding questions in my research, that is,

- By applying CAT, what typology of communication strategies can be identified in teacher-elderly learner classroom interactions in Taiwan?
- In what ways teachers’ perceptions of the elderly learners influence their decisions on using language to communicate with elderly learners?
- How salient are the identified communication strategies?

The contribution of asking the above questions is to test the generalizability of CAT and perhaps also Ryan et al.’s (1986) findings in a cultural and situational diverse context in my research. Teachers could be very likely much younger than elderly learners in senior educational contexts. In a sense, the above questions could direct to discussions on relational-specific language and communication patterns as well as cross-age (cross-generational) verbal interactions.

In terms of practicability, understanding how teachers come to communicate with the elderly in senior educational context could shed some light on delivering successful teaching to elderly learners. Apart from pedagogical researchers, the focus in my research is on the language rather than how courses should be designed to meet elderly learners’ needs. Language is the channel through which various kinds of social practices are completed and made possible. However, in existing literature, there is little discussion on the language aspect of teaching elderly learners to enhance the efficiency of senior education (but see John, 1988 on language changes over time and the careful selection of language when instructing older adults). There is also little research interest in critically examining whether teachers’ communication with elderly learners reinforce ageist stereotypes implicitly. These research topics shall be examined in my research.

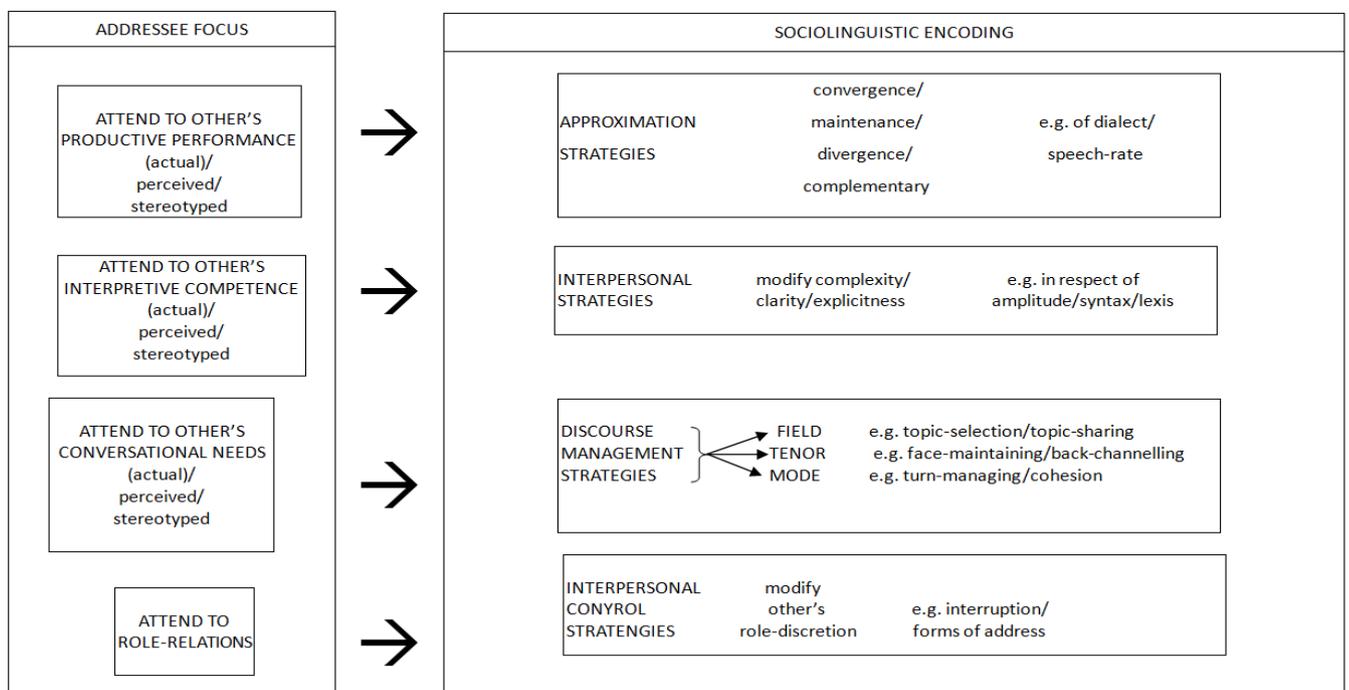


Figure 2. An extended model of sociolinguistic processes in CAT (Source: Coupland et al., 1988:28, also cited in Coupland et al., 1991:29)

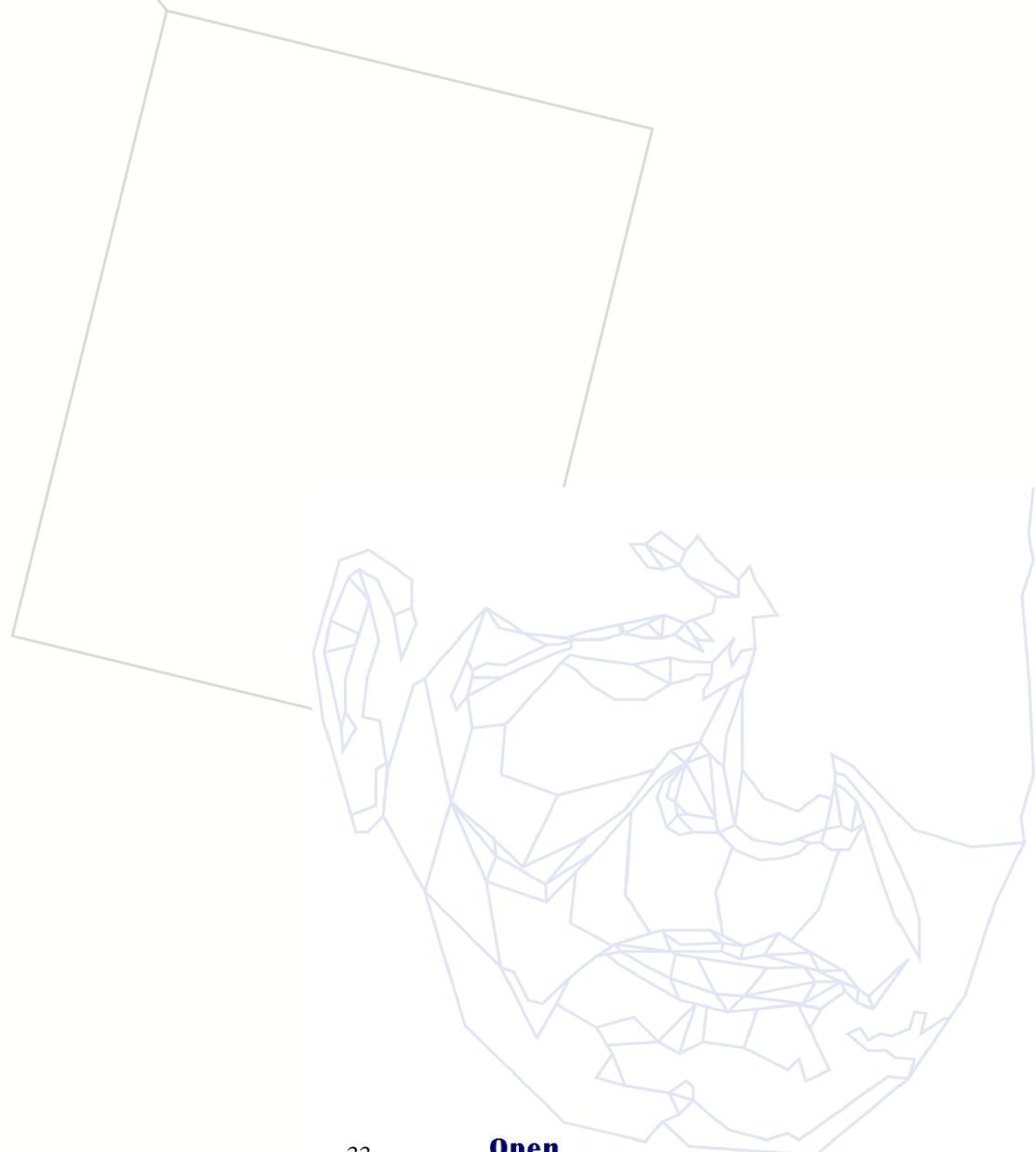
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# **Exploring gerontological sociolinguistics in senior educational contexts: age telling strategies and communication with elderly learners**

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## **Abstract**

As a response to the dramatically ageing population in Taiwan, it is advised that Taiwanese linguists should consider conducting language studies in relation to ageing and older age. However, in existing literature, such studies are rather rare. Hence, the aim of my research is to make a contribution to fill in this research gap. Traditional sociolinguistic studies tend to treat older age as an explanatory factor to predict language variations that reflect a decremental tendency in communication competence as a consequence of ageing. My research, however, takes on a different (but constructionist) research orientation to investigate discourses of ageing and older age.

Following the sociolinguistic trajectory established more than 20 years ago by British sociolinguists, Nik Coupland and Justine Coupland, blending social psychological and interpersonal communication analytic perspectives, this current study adopts multiple qualitative as well as quantitative data-collection and analytic methods (e.g. semi-structured interviews, questionnaire survey, natural conversations, statistic analysis, discourse analysis ) to approach questions regarding language and communication with the elderly and age disclosure behaviors in a specific context, that is, senior education or engaging in learning activities at later life.

In conclusion, the research purposes can be unfolded into the three different layers: (1) to monitor the appropriateness in the language and communication with elderly learners in senior educational contexts (2) to associate language and communication studies with the wider social and cultural contexts from which the examined narratives and natural conversations are produced with a special interest on whether they reproduce, challenge or reinforce ageism or age stereotypes (3) ultimately to enhance the awareness of the role our daily use of language with the elderly plays so as to create an elder-friendly society as well as to increase the communication gratification elderly learners receive in the learning processes.

**Keywords:** Gerontological sociolinguistics, discourse and ageing, senior education, communication strategies, the elderly, older age identity