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Book of Abstracts



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Thursday 27th June 2024, 13:50-15:30, Aula Magna San Faustino

PANEL 5

Coordinator: Kim Grego

University of Milan

Pushing the boundaries of life.

Synchronic and diachronic observations on *pre-* and *post-mortem* body preservation

Panel synopsis

Background and aims: There already is a significant literature highlighting the relevance of the connection between language and ageing, and language and death (see Bibliography). This panel intends to join and expand on these topics by 1) concentrating on extreme practices and by 2) looking at life and death as a continuum, as some of those involved in life prolonging practices do. The specific papers thus intend to explore the language used to communicate the ethical aspects surrounding those practices that insist on prolonging and preserving life as much as possible. The focus may be on achieving natural longevity, in terms of retaining both good health and a younger physical aspect. It could also be on extending the mere duration of life to its limits with unusual and yet-unproven methods. When such limits are eventually reached, it may even regard the indefinite preservation of a life-like appearance of the corpse, pushing the boundaries of life further than death.

Methods: The methods employed belong to the tradition of applied linguistics and include corpus-based discourse analysis, conceptual history, lexicology and terminology. Analyses are carried out on both synchronic and diachronic texts.

Expected results and relevance: The research behind this panel intends to contribute insights into the discourse of novel practices of people in Western societies. The ethical debatability of the topics under investigation may make this research relevant from various perspectives and across disciplines, all of which are expressed and communicated through language and which, as such, can benefit from linguistic analysis.

Keywords: longevity, radical life extension (RLE), embalming, discourse analysis, conceptual history, corpus linguistics

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Bionotes

Kim Grego (PhD) is Full Professor of English Language and Translation at the University of Milan, where she teaches English Language and Linguistics. Her interests include Translation Studies, ESP (scientific, medical and political discourse), Critical Genre Analysis and Critical Discourse Studies applied to ethically debatable issues. Recent research projects she has been involved in focus on ageism, end-of-life issues and the discourse surrounding the great resignation.

Laura Tommaso is Associate Professor of English Linguistics at University of Eastern Piedmont. Her research interests include Critical Discourse Studies, corpus linguistics, media discourse and language by and about older adults. She has recently published a book, *Ageing Discourse in the News. A Corpus-Assisted Study* (Aracne, 2023).

Simone C. Bacchini is a subject specialist in Arts & Humanities at the British Library. His interests include Discourse Analysis, Systemic Functional Grammar, and Health Communication. He is the author of: *An Introduction to Language and Communication for Allied Health and Social Care Professions* (Routledge, 2023).

Francesca Cappellini is PhD student at the University of Milan, and is specialising in Corpus Linguistics and Lexicography with a special interest in medical linguistics, especially as it pertains to infectious diseases and the study of different aspects related to Radical Life Extension technologies.

Anna Anselmo is Research Fellow in English at the University of Ferrara. Her main research interests are historical lexicography, medical terminology, and political discourse in the long eighteenth century. She has published on fashion terminology at the turn of the nineteenth century (2014); on political discourse in the English press (2021; 2022); on the conceptualization of somnambulism (1769-1815) (2023).

The discursive construction of longevity by UK and US biotech companies.

A corpus-based study

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Background: Growing interest in the scientific exploration of ageing and longevity research has been on the rise, encompassing both professional (Grego, 2019a, 2019b; Vicentini and Grego, 2019; Grego *et al.*, 2023) and public contexts (Brookes *et al.*, 2018; Tommaso, 2023).

Aim: This study intends to discursively analyse the textual strategies adopted by leading UK and US longevity biotech companies to gain an understanding about the ways language is used to shape perceptions of corporate activity and credibility in this emerging and controversial industry (Schweda *et al.*, 2017; Solomon, 2017) and to investigate how scientific knowledge and technology behind longevity are disseminated, and for what purpose(s).

Methodology: To achieve these aims, the analysis focuses on the textual components of “About Us” webpages by employing a corpus-based discourse analysis methodology (Baker, 2023; Partington *et al.*, 2013).

Findings: Within the corpus, the imperative to cure ageing emerges as a prominent research aim, positioned as a means to prolong and save lives and alleviate human suffering. To engage diverse audiences as well as to build trust and credibility, companies employ not only scientific content but also incorporate emotional and metaphorical language in a way that emphasises the potential benefits, societal contributions, and positive outcomes associated with their endeavours.

Conclusions: Treating ageing as a disease in the context of biotech longevity companies raises ethical concerns by potentially medicalising a natural process and exacerbating societal health disparities. These ethical challenges underscore the need for careful consideration and open dialogue within both scientific and societal spheres.

Keywords: About Us page; Longevity; Corpus-Based Discourse Studies; Corporate Discourse; Self Presentation.

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Ethical immortality: corpus-based analysis of questions on radical life extension practices

Francesca Cappellini

University of Milan

Background: There is a number of signs that lead to the idea that in the XXI Century humans will more than strive to become immortal. By many modern scientists, death is seen as a “technical problem” we should and could solve. In this field, life extensionists have become a fervent and increasingly vocal group, who consider death as undesirable (Keep 2017, Moshakis 2019). The recent introduction of radical life extension (RLE) measures poses, however, a series of ethical issues. Some might argue that life and death are fundamental human rights, and as such not only is radical health extension good for preserving life, it can also be seen as the foundation upon which any other human right is based (Green 2017).

Aim: The purpose of this research is to shed some light on the ethical issues posed by the promotion of radical life extension (RLE) on providers’ websites compared with the direct information that come to us via the scientific publications on the matter.

Methods: Two corpora were collected, one containing selected pages from such websites and the other containing all the article available on the scientific advancement of RLE (n=45) and were analysed through the means of Corpus Linguistics (McEnery and Wilson 2019),

Results: This research was carried out in order to find out whether the promoted services are in line with what is being suggested by scientific research.

Keywords: Radical life extension, promotional discourse, ethics, Corpus Linguistics.

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Conceptualising embalming.

Terms surrounding the embalming of Mrs. Van Butchell

Anna Anselmo

University of Ferrara

Background: Modern embalming is considered to have begun in England in the eighteenth century. Scottish anatomists William and John Hunter (1718-1783) are the first to have reported on arterial and cavity embalming, and they were responsible for embalming a Mrs. Van Butchell (Finney et al. 2022). The circumstances leading to the embalming and those surrounding its aftermath raise questions about ethics in medical practice, the handling of human remains, and their potential exhibition.

Aims: This paper explores the writings of John and William Hunter with the aim of classifying terminology describing the embalming process and identifying references to the ethical issues it raises. Additionally, it explores the scandal surrounding the exhibition of Mrs. Van Butchell's embalmed remains.

Methodology: The Hunter brothers' writings are pitted against newspaper and periodical reports of Mrs. Van Butchell's embalming (Dobson 1953; Friedlaender and Friedlaender 2019) to assess its lexical and conceptual resonance in the coeval press. This paper avails itself of the theoretical framework of conceptual history (Koselleck 2011) and terminology theory (Cabr e 1999).

Expected Results: The analysis is expected to look at the linguistic description of past practices, at the rift between medical practices, the way they are communicated across multiple genres and media, and the way they are received by non-medical practitioners. It further intends to shed light on the ethics of embalming, the exhibition of embalmed remains and their study, which remain ethically debatable to this day.

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