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Vol 5, No 1 (2018)

Research Perspectives on Bioethically-relevant Discourse / Il discorso di rilevanza bioetica: prospettive di ricerca

Edited by / A cura di Kim Grego, Priscilla Heynderickx

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Ethical Aspects in Web Marketing for Seniors: A Grid for Linguistic Analysis*

Kim Grego

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ABSTRACT

People aged 65 and over make up an increasing share of the population of both the US and Europe as well as of other developed countries. Similarly to the elderly from the past, as social actors they are prone to vulnerability and risk due to their age. However, today's seniors are different from seniors from past decades as regards education, finances and IT skills, as well as in their motivations, expectations and needs. They also increasingly negotiate their own age discursively, making it no longer a factual datum but a flexible one. This makes it difficult for public and private institutions alike to understand them as consumers. Drawing from previous research in sociolinguistics, marketing and social studies, this study aims to propose a grid for the linguistic analysis of the opportunities and risks inherent in (web-)marketing texts aimed at seniors, with particular attention to the ethical repercussions that these may have for them. The potential strengths and possible limits of the proposed grid are then evaluated, and suggestions for future developments are put forward.

Keywords: ageing discourse; Critical Discourse Analysis; domain-specific English; seniors; sociolinguistics.

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1. BACKGROUND

1.1. *Senior scams in the US*

This study builds on and develops a 2014-2015 Fulbright Research Scholar project led by the author, titled “eLder.Care: communicating public health-care to the elderly through the web”. One of the outputs of eLder.Care was an interview with Maurice Padula (2015), Senior Consumer Frauds Representative at the Regional Office of the New York State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman, on the subject of online senior scams. Some of the questions that Mr Padula answered during the interview are as follows.

- What are the most common senior scams?
- What communicative strategies do scammers adopt?
- What about the Internet?
- What do seniors say when they report scams?
- What communicative strategies and language do you use when you talk to seniors about frauds?

In particular, as regards the use of the Internet, the Representative reported that, while

[m]ost scams to seniors are still carried out by phone. The telephone is still the seniors’ – and thus the scammers’ – favourite means. [...], since most of these scams are perpetrated from abroad, the Internet is an excellent way of getting round the problem of calling from abroad. (Padula 2015)

In terms of communicative strategies used by scammers,

[t]hey would call *at night*, say at 11.55 p.m., knowing that people *that age* might be *in bed* by 10.30 p.m., and using the *surprise* factor to their advantage. They count on the *fear* factor to make seniors do things they would not *usually* do under *normal* circumstances”. (*Ibidem*; emphasis added)

Interestingly, the people who perpetrate these scams, being anonymous voices over the telephone or Internet users, would be described, when reported, in linguistic terms, especially regarding the words they use (see emphasised words in the following citation):

[t]hey are very *insistent* and their *language* is particularly *emphatic*, while seniors, taken aback, are usually *hesitant*. Then the criminals go straight for their objective, which is to *instil fear*. They use the *right words*, and give *credible information* with a lot of details. So, once the victims start to *panic*, they will not notice other *strange sounding* factors like the *accent*, and will concentrate on the news and not on other aspects. (*Ibidem*; emphasis added)

Although, as seen, most of these crimes would occur by phone, many are perpetrated through the Internet, via both emails and websites but orally too, considering that the Internet also offers the possibility to place untraceable calls. What is similar, in both phone- and web-based senior scams, are the language and the communicative strategies used to carry them out, based on instilling fear, and the material and emotional risk they pose for the victims.

1.2. *The seniors' market in Europe*

Eurostat (2018, 7) reports that “[t]he share of the population aged 65 years and over is increasing in every EU Member State, EFTA country and candidate country”. Specifically, “[t]he share of those aged 80 years or above in the EU-28’s population is projected to more than double between 2016 and 2080, from 5.4 % to 12.7 %” (Eurostat 2018, 8), while “those aged 65 years or over will account for 29.1 % of the EU-28’s population by 2080, compared with 19.2 % in 2016” (Eurostat 2018, 9). In addition to their longevity, European seniors “are often healthier and wealthier than in previous generations” (European Commission 2014, 5). Furthermore, their level of education (Alén, Losada, and Domínguez 2016), IT literacy and access to technology are greater (Kim and Preis 2015). All these factors, added to their later age of retirement (Komp 2017), make them an increasingly large share of the market, with greater purchasing power than younger groups (Alén, Losada, and Domínguez 2016) but different, at the same time, from seniors from past decades, in terms of motivations, expectations and needs, and difficult to understand by companies as consumers (Alén, Losada, and Domínguez 2016).

1.3. *Consumer vulnerability*

The European Commission, in its final report on *Consumer Vulnerability across Key Markets in the European Union* (2016, 383), defines a vulnerable consumer as

[a] consumer, who, as a result of socio-demographic characteristics, behavioural characteristics, personal situation, or market environment:

1. Is at higher risk of experiencing negative outcomes in the market;
2. Has limited ability to maximise his/her well-being;
3. Has difficulty in obtaining or assimilating information;

4. Is less able to buy, choose or access suitable products; or
5. Is more susceptible to certain marketing practices.

Consumers tend to become vulnerable as they age. Indeed, according to the report, “the literature identifies a number of reasons why old age could increase the risk of negative outcomes or impacts on well-being and so contribute to this dimension of vulnerability” (European Commission 2016, 178). For example, Lunn and Lyons (2010) found evidence that older people may be more inclined to presenting with certain behavioural biases. It is also more probable for older consumers to experience limitations at the cognitive, sensory or mobile level (Griffiths and Harmon-Kizer 2011; Stearn 2012), while the financial situation of citizens might furthermore change or evolve with age (Griffiths and Harmon-Kizer 2011). As a result, the financial products that seniors get offered later in their life (e.g. annuities or reverse mortgages) have been changing into more complex entities (Stearn 2012).

The report goes on to identify “several reasons why old age may cause consumers to have difficulty obtaining or assimilating information” (European Commission 2016, 182). One of these is that a smaller percentage of older consumers use the Internet regularly (Eurostat 2017). Therefore, they are consequently less informed about markets and assisted in navigating them (Lunn and Lyons 2010; Stearn 2012). Another aspect contributing to vulnerability is that, as people age and their cognitive and sensory skills decline, they may find themselves signing consent documents without fully understanding them or even realising it (Griffiths and Harmon-Kizer 2011). “Indeed, the consumer survey found that, across the EU28+2, 10% of those aged 65-74 and 13% of those aged 75+ *feel* vulnerable to a great extent because of their age, compared to 5% across all age groups” (European Commission 2016, 182; emphasis added).

2. AIMS

Scams obviously differ from legitimate marketing – just like the US context differs from the EU context – and, while mentioning scams as a background issue that can serve to set the context for the challenges this target group presents, this study focuses on legitimate communication, that which companies such as tourist operators, (health) insurances, providers of financial and other services, etc. use to lawfully target senior consumers. The information reported in the Background section, nonetheless, points

to seniors in developed countries as being targeted by both scammers and companies using communication strategies and language that share common features, based on the same notions of identity and vulnerability, and creating similar feelings of risk. This article therefore focuses on the discourse of (web)-marketing aimed at seniors in developed societies and, as such, proposes a grid to employ in the linguistic analysis of texts marketing products or services to older consumers that moves from the ethical needs inherent in this socially weak group.

3. METHODS

3.1. *Old age identity in sociolinguistics*

Research has long been addressing issues of ageism from various perspectives, such as gerontology (e.g. Butler 1969, introducing the definition of ageism, and Clark-Cotton *et al.* 2007, summing up the state of the art almost forty years later) and social psychology (e.g. Nussbaum *et al.* 2005, presenting a thorough review of linguistic ageism in private and public settings and in intimate and non-intimate relationships).

In sociolinguistics, the issue of how seniors express themselves about their own age has been researched since the late 1980s and early 1990s, especially by scholars such as Nikolas Coupland and Justine Coupland, then working at Cardiff University's Centre for Language and Communication Research. Starting from the observation that elderly discourse had thus far been greatly overlooked, both due and contributing to ageism, their earlier investigations focused on seniors' self-disclosure of personal (age-related) information, studied in conversations with younger people (Coupland *et al.* 1988), developing a model for this type of spoken, usually audio or video recorded interactions (*ibidem*).

Coupland, Coupland, and Giles (1989) went further, describing cross-generational (elderly-young) dialogues centred on disclosing the senior person's age, in what Brown and Levinson (1987) defined a negative face threat. Interestingly and importantly, they make reference to the then "recent, more global 'life-position indicator' [...] Rubin and Rubin's (1982; 1986) index of 'contextual age', a questionnaire-based measure aggregating objective and subjective dimensions of elderly people's health, mobility, finances, social networks, and other variables" (Coupland, Coupland, and

Giles 1989, 131). One self-acknowledged limit of this study, which videotaped 40 such encounters, is that the situations considered were created *ad hoc* and, as such, were protected. This means that age-disclosers “presumably experienced far less significant risks in this regard than in day-to-day encounters” (*ibid.*, 147), in which they would usually feel to be subjected to judgements and evaluations based on their healthy or unhealthy aspect. The notions of ‘face threat’ and ‘risk’ clearly point to the more general issue of vulnerability described before. Coupland and Coupland (1993, 1994) and Coupland and Ylänne-McEwen (1993) examined the discourse of age(ism) in professional-institutional settings, e.g. in doctor-patient interactions. Discussing the mainly anti-ageist positions of the medical practitioners observed in these studies, Coupland and Coupland (1993, 297) highlighted that “ideologies need to be articulated as social actions (and most obviously as conversational acts)”, ultimately commenting that “[t]he issues that underlie this debate, opportunities and responsibilities for good health, have been central to medical ethics from Hypocrates onwards” (*ibidem*).

The closely knitted relationship between ethics and vulnerability, ideology, risk and protection in senior discourse is summed up by Coupland (2004). Three main points emerge. As a first thing, similarly to what he noticed in the late 1980s, he opens his chapter still arguing that “[a]ge is sociolinguistics’ underdeveloped social dimension” (*ibid.*, 69) and closes it remarking that “a more ambitious agenda would see sociolinguistics operating in the middle of social theoretic concerns, examining the voices that express the conflicting meanings of ageing and that will determine our individual experiences of age in the future” (*ibid.*, 87). Secondly, he notices that there is some ongoing antagonism between an institutionalized and a de-institutionalized view of old age: while

[c]urrent sociological theory stresses how the emergence of a retirement norm was part of a wider process of institutionalizing the life course [...], [w]e reflexively manage our social identities, including our identities in age terms, updating them progressively and particularly at salient life-transitional points [...]. This implies a process of deinstitutionalization of ageing and of old age, and at least potential access to greater self-definition and social opportunities. (*Ibid.*, 76-77)

As a consequence, “age is not a truly social dimension at all, if by this we mean one that is socially negotiable” (*ibid.*, 71). This negotiability, and the subjectivity it implies, is a key notion in senior (self) representation. Thirdly, he reviews the ideologies connected to old age, from ageism to

antiageism, from those applied to the elderly to those that they also share with their disparagers, observed in settings that go from informal elderly-young conversations, to professional settings, to the representation of the ageing in and by the media. He concludes by suggesting that (socio)linguists researching senior discourse “need to read the ideological contexts in which age politics are transacted with some sophistication” (*ibid.*, 81).

In more recent years, several other linguists also addressed the issue of age-related vulnerability in senior discourse. Taylor (1992) analysed conversations between elderly homeowners and their young student lodgers, introducing a definition of elderly identity based on the vulnerability-related notion of ‘frailty’. This was seen to occur “when energy and intensity of the experiencing self exceed the capacity of the body as an expressive medium. [And is] [m]anifest in physical and cognitive changes” (*ibid.*, 495), and was therefore used as a discursive “frame through which the experience and identities of aging persons may be defined” (*ibid.*, 512) – again, subjectively. Giles *et al.* (2010) produced an impressively large study of 570 US cross-generational respondents, who indicated communicative events that made them *feel* their age, older or younger, irrespective of their chronological age. What emerged were so called “age salience trigger events” (*ibid.*, 79), linguistic or non-linguistic (e.g. medical contacts, age related events, work related events), that contributed to the definition of age in non-chronological terms. Davis and Maclagan (2016) brought together inputs from communication studies and gerontology, analysing recordings of US and NZ seniors’ spoken interactions for extenders such as ‘and things/stuff (like that)’, making hypotheses not only on individual sociopragmatic changes but also within entire varieties of English. Very recently, Gendron *et al.* (2017) produced a discourse analysis (interestingly published in a gerontology journal) of video recordings of the sixth White House Conference on Aging, i.e. of ageing meta-discourse. They identified several instances of relational ageism, understood “as the dynamic process whereby an ageist statement is reinforced through encouraging individual or group behaviour” (*ibid.*, 1), consequently stressing the idea that anyone working “in the aging services network has an ethical obligation to address the unintentional communication and perpetuation of ageism” (*ibid.*, 8), by promoting “the use of age-neutral language or age-inclusive language to address the unintentional communication and perpetuation of ageism” (*ibidem*).

With the advent of the Internet for mass use, research has been focusing on online genres and communication. Particularly interesting is a study by Lin, Hummert and Harwood (2004) who, at the advent of the Web 2.0

as a mass medium of peer-communication, investigated the same subject in an on-line, non-institutional setting such as a discussion forum. They found that older adults employ strategies to (re)-negotiate their age identity, so that “[p]ositive age identity themes were more frequently presented in these on-line messages than negative themes” (*ibid.*, 261). The relevance of this research is manifold. Firstly, while the investigations reviewed above mix elderly self and not others’ representation, this one focused on the former, which type is definitely under-studied. Secondly, it analysed posts in an online forum, a natural and non-institutional online setting that well represents the evolution of today’s seniors. Thirdly, age self-construction and negotiation were already taken for granted as a starting point, and the focus was directly on how “age identities are constructed, negotiated, reinforced, or confronted in on-line language use” (*ibid.*, 264) specifically attempting to “uncover the strategies that older adults employ to present age identity” (*ibid.*, 262). Lastly, the authors carried out their analysis according to the notion of ‘theme’, defined as an age-identity topic that appeared across several messages. In detail,

[t]he validity of the age identity themes was established using the traditional approaches in discourse analytic research: (1) an age identity theme was recognized based on instances across multiple messages; and (2) themes were compared and contrasted to those of previous studies on aging-related discourse. (*Ibid.*, 265)

Themes were thus used to code (according to Coupland *et al.* 1991 and Giles *et al.* 1992), the messages in the corpus, which could then be analysed both in quantitative and in qualitative terms. While this type of corpus coding (or ‘tagging’) may not seem dramatically innovative today, its application at the time to online texts from an emerging genre (forum posts), along with the very specific group of older adults on SeniorNet¹, who were among the first generations of IT literate seniors, is quite significant both in general sociolinguistic terms and for the purposes of this study. Finally, the most recent works on ageing include visual as well as textual and discursive representation, with a focus on the media, for example in the contributions by Ylänne, Williams and Wadleigh (2010), Ylänne (2012) and Ylänne (2016).

¹ “SeniorNet’s mission is to provide older adults (the underserved) education for and access to computer technologies to enhance their lives and enable them to share their knowledge and wisdom” (SeniorNet 2018).

3.2. *Old age identity in marketing and sociology*

The question of seniors' self-representation is not just the interest of linguists but also, naturally, of social scientists and even marketing experts. Marketing, in particular, started researching the different social groups making up the shares of a market more or less in the same years as sociolinguistics did. Barak and Gould (1985), for instance, listed and illustrated five alternative age measures apart from chronological age, coming up in particular with the interesting concept of 'discrepancy age'. This would be the result of subtracting one's ideal age from one's cognitive age, and "therefore probably indicates the way someone feels about his/her subjective age (i.e., attitude towards age-self)" (*ibidem*):

$$\text{Discrepancy Age} = \text{Cognitive Age (I feel)} - \text{Ideal Age (I wish)}.$$

One's *ideal* age would be the age one wishes s/he were, while one's *cognitive* age would be the age one feels s/he is. The value resulting from the subtraction corresponds to one's discrepancy age, i.e. the difference or gap between the perceived self (*I feel I am*) and the ideal self (*I wish I were*). The higher this value, the larger the distance between one's self-perception and one's ideal self, resulting in a negative self-concept. By contrast, a low value indicates a positive attitude toward one's own age and, consequently, toward one's own self. The formulation of the notion of discrepancy age was backed up in the study by the analysis of 430 questionnaires on chronological vs perceived age, with questions on various topics, such as:

- (1) morale (e.g., agreement with "I am just as happy as when I was younger"),
- (2) self-confidence (e.g., agreement with "I think I have a lot of personal ability"),
- (3) homebody (e.g., agreement with "I am a homebody"),
- (4) old-fashioned (e.g., "a house should be dusted and polished three times a week"),
- (5) traditionality (e.g., agreement with "what young people need most of all is strict discipline by their parents"), and
- (6) price sensitivity (e.g., agreement with "I often deny myself something I want if I feel it costs too much"). (*Ibid.*, NA)

Interestingly, all the respondents were female and aged between 30 and 69, thus partly intersecting the two weaker social groups of older and female adults. Of course, such an equation can barely be taken to perfectly represent a human dimension so complex as age, just as arithmetical values can never accurately explain human complexity in general. This is even truer when the description of these values is made in terms of *feelings* and *desires*, hardly quantifiable and therefore measurable. The vagueness embedded in

these terms and in any definition employing them is, however, also one of its pluses, since defining age is often a hard task, and definitely the hardest whenever working from a linguistic perspective, which always moves from definitions, in which words are necessarily weighed very carefully.

When governmental institutions rule, they must set clear limits; often these limits revolve around chronological age, which is taken to represent a factual criterion. Concepts such as ‘legal age (to do something)’, e.g. driving age, drinking age, marriageable age, may vary from country to country and even within countries themselves, but they are always inevitably linked to chronological age. Debating driving age and debating retirement age, though, usually occupy different places in the hierarchy of a government’s agenda, and one discursive way of looking at the reasons behind it is that taking a driving license usually regards young adults, while retiring involves a social group that is much more sensitive age-wise, because it comprises people on the verge of moving from making up the socially strongest one (working citizens with a job) to being one of the weakest. Socio-economic factors, as seen, determine the state of a retiring person’s health, finances, and other material and immaterial resources accumulated in the course of one’s life, making them more or less vulnerable (European Commission 2016). Today’s changing European society has set the retirement age, on average, at 66 (Finnish Centre for Pensions 2017), but there is no need to say that the variations in the health and socio-economic conditions of 66-year-olds across Europe might be as many as their number. When asked what age they are, senior persons are very likely to reply saying or adding how old they perceive themselves to be – an idealised vision of themselves (see e.g. Coupland, Coupland, and Giles 1989 mentioned above) – which leads back to the subjective notion of age as understood in marketing, as seen before.

When it comes to a field like marketing, indeed, demographics bend under the pressure of market rules. An ageing consumer who feels young, healthy and has spending power would definitely meet the target requirements of younger people, and might even enjoy the precious factor of having more leisure time at his/her disposal, if retired. Chronological age, in developed economies, is thus no longer an issue or even less so a limit – suffice it to consider the flourishing industry of anti-ageing products and services. More recent studies in marketing even highlighted how the older consumers’ ideal age, of late, tends to be lower than their self-perceived age (Le Serre and Chevalier 2012), i.e. that their discrepancy age is increasing. For this reason, a representation of age such as the one proposed by Barak and Gould back in 1985 which, intentionally and poignantly, never in fact

mentions one's chronological age, seems to be perfectly fitting for contemporary seniors, whose relationship with their age is increasingly variable and subjective.

To this view, further relevant concepts may be added that are drawn from various works by sociologist Graham Dann. Starting from the late 1970s, he has been researching tourist marketing, concentrating on senior tourists in particular since his earliest publications (Dann 1977, 2000, 2001a, 2001b). Using content analysis as well as sociological methodology, he investigated what motivates people, especially the elderly, to travel. His interest in the language used to speak to the ageing for marketing purposes from a sociological perspective makes some of his findings pertinent to marketing in many different fields, not just tourism, and the combination of his methods applicable including to our aims. One such interesting concept, that of 'push and pull factors', may be traced back to his well known study from 1977 on tourist motivation. Dann (1977) defines push factors as those that come from within the potential consumer, i.e. those that s/he shares and believes in. Pull factors, on the other hand, would come from without the consumer him/herself, and would thus be those trying to convince him/her of reasons to buy a product or a service (a travel package, in the study) that s/he does not necessarily share.

More recent studies on the sociology and communication of tourism re-elaborate these concepts in terms of risk. Le Serre, Legohérel and Weber (2013) propose a division into internal vs external risks: motivations one shares and does not consider risky, as opposed to motivations one does not share and must thus be convinced of. They too start from assuming subjective age variables as main indicators, "initially introduced in Marketing in order to mitigate the limits of the chronological age as a segmentation criterion for the senior market" (*ibid.*, 264), which was considered too strict or just not successful in marketing terms. In turn, Le Serre, Legohérel and Weber's (2013) internal/external risks make use of Roehl and Fesenmaier's (1992) consumer behaviour classification of perceived (travel) risk in its physical and psychological dimensions. After presenting a rich array of variables determining both internal and external risks, the authors conclude that (a) the segmentation tools they developed are appropriate to both tourism consumption and the senior market, outlining the more accurate segment of senior tourism market, and (b) that the analysis of the variables of subjective ages revealed that "the ideal dimension of the subjective age plays a major role in the study of the older consumers' tourism consumption behaviors" (Le Serre, Legohérel, and Weber 2013, 265) and thus of senior consumers in general.

4. A GRID FOR ANALYSING THE DISCOURSE OF (WEB)-MARKETING TO SENIORS

By combining the notions of self-representation from linguistics and self-perception and self-idealization from marketing, it is possible to outline a potential way to represent and analyse the discourse of seniors' (web-) marketing. A mixed method based grid for the qualitative analysis of web-marketing to seniors, which employs marketing-derived age identity indicators, can thus be proposed, for use, e.g., in Discourse Analysis (Table 1).

Table 1. – A proposed grid for analysing the discourse of (web)-marketing to seniors.

POSITIVE AGE IDENTITY THEMES (Lin, Hummert, and Harwood 2004)		NEGATIVE AGE IDENTITY THEMES (Lin, Hummert, and Harwood 2004)	
Internal (push) factors (Dann 1977)	External (pull) factors (Dann 1977)	Internal (psychological) perceived risks (Roehl and Fesenmaier 1992; Le Serre, Legohérel, and Weber 2013)	External (physical) perceived risks (Roehl and Fesenmaier 1992; Le Serre, Legohérel, and Weber 2013)

In this grid, age identity indicators would be based on self-perception, not 'real' (chronological) age, and divided into positive and negative age identity themes (Lin, Hummert, and Harwood 2004). Positive age identity themes, in turn, could be divided into internal or push factors (Dann 1977), or those acting from within, pushing a consumer to purchase, and external (pull) factors (Dann 1977), or those acting from without, pulling a consumer to purchase. Negative age identity themes (Lin, Hummert, and Harwood 2004), instead, can be differentiated into internal (psychological) and external (physical) perceived risks (adapted from Le Serre, Legohérel, and Weber 2013, in turn drawing from Roehl and Fesenmaier 1992). Internal or psychological risks would be those coming from within the potential consumer; external or physical risks would be those risks coming from without him/her. Noticeably, both 'real' age and 'real' risk as objective factors are avoided as indicators. The choice to consider subjective perception instead is thought to best suit the 'flexible' notion of age that emerged both in linguistics (self-representation) and in marketing (self-perception and self-idealization) research over the past 40-50 years.

The above described grid obviously does not represent any rigid guideline, but only provides a suggestion as to how to orientate linguistic analysis when dealing with a target group that often escapes clear definitions and presents with blurred disciplinary boundaries. A discussion of its potential strengths, with applied examples, limits and how it could further be developed follows in the concluding section.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. *Potential strengths*

As hinted, the grid proposed could be used, for instance, in Critical Discourse Analysis. From a CDA perspective, consumer vulnerability – implying a risk of unethical communication – could be said to be present in discourse whenever there is an imbalance in positive vs negative age identity themes, in turn resulting from an imbalance in internal vs external factors and/or risks, in both quantitative and qualitative terms. When such an imbalance occurs, the consumer-provider power relation also proves uneven, with one party possessing greater negotiation power than the other, with clear ethical risks. This could be highlighted, as usual, at various verbal levels, from lexicon to syntax, to prosodic and suprasegmental traits such as hesitancy, emphasis and accent (see section 1.1 about the relevance of hesitancy, emphasis and accent in telephone communication) are relevant discursive features to highlight consumer-provider power relations, and even in non-verbal language, e.g. in the graphic text. Considering social actors, positive and negative identity themes could for instance be employed to highlight instances of inclusion or exclusion, with the latter giving rise to linguistic phenomena of suppression and backgrounding (Fairclough 2003, 145), obviously connected to the notions of vulnerability and risk. They could also be associated to situations of activation and passivisation (*ibidem*), which respectively relate to making processes happen or being affected by them. Moreover, in addition to language that includes or excludes, that activates or passivises, there are also cases in which things are not explicitly said but are ideologically assumed. Fairclough's CDA distinguishes between existential, propositional and value assumptions; value assumptions are about what is good or desirable (Fairclough 2003, 55) and seem especially applicable to the discourse of (web-)marketing.

One of the potential strengths of such a grid is that it can be applied to the analysis of both age representation and age perception (i.e. to the discourse of the actors involved in marketing), and of that of age *self*-representation and age *self*-perception (consumers' narratives). In other words, it could be useful in studying how companies and other institutions (including governmental ones) talk to seniors about them, as well as how seniors talk about themselves in relation to products and services offered by such companies and institutions that are specifically targeted at them. The web as a medium, furthermore, offers even more chances for investigation, in that some recent online genres offer great space for self-expression in informal settings (e.g. forums, chats, social media posts and comments) and, while seniors are not traditionally expert users of cutting edge technology, 'new' generations of retired citizens will have increased IT literacy, which they will have used until recently in their previous work settings (cf. section 1.2).

A first example of such an application is a study conducted on senior tourism (Grego 2016), the field that produced the marketing studies described before and that contributed to building this grid. It was applied not to senior self-discourse, though, but to senior discourse as produced by public and private institutions. Specifically, Grego (2016) analysed texts related to the 2013 EU Senior Tourism Call, a European project awarding funds to promote social tourism aimed at seniors. In addition to the text of the call itself, the analysis included other material by a consortium that won the call, SENTour Connect, led by a Belgian non-profit organization and Happy Age, an Italian for-profit partner company. The study applied an early version of the proposed grid and returned different results for the different actors involved. The EU call seemed to be pointing to a move from negative to positive age identity themes, in search of promoting an improvement in the conditions of European seniors. The non-profit organization's discourse focused on a move from positive to even more positive age identity themes. Lastly, in the material produced by the for-profit company, "The distribution of age identity themes between positive and negative [was] not as clear-cut", indicating "a very positive picture of older age associated to the description of the company's services", but also "considering less positive aspects of it, ending in a mixed, if realistic, final representation" (Grego 2016, 12). The study was successful in identifying specific age identity themes according to the proposed grid, which make potential examples to use not just in tourism but in other fields too, and are listed by way of illustration in *Table 2*.

Table 2. – Model applied to the EU SENTour initiative (Grego 2016).

POSITIVE AGE IDENTITY THEMES	
• Internal (push) factors	• External (pull) factors
• Better health, longer life	• Health care / insurance / services
• Active lifestyle	• Active life / Sports
• Personal enhancement (knowledge, culture)	• Culture / knowledge rich destinations
• Spending power	• Shopping / Exclusive experiences
• Socializing	• Entertainment / Social programme

NEGATIVE AGE IDENTITY THEMES	
• Internal (psychological) risks	• External (physical) risks
• Own opinion of one's holiday (discrepancy age)	• Amenities / Facilities problems
• Others' opinion of one's holiday (chronological age)	• Health problems
	• Safety / Security problems
	• Economic problems (arising while away or preventing / affecting holiday)

5.2. *Limits and future developments*

As indicated, Grego (2016) deals with discourse *about* and not *by* seniors: one limit of the study coincides with a common issue in research on seniors' discourse, i.e. the inadequate space left to the voices of seniors themselves. Of course, the proposed grid could also be employed in analysing discourse produced by seniors, for example in the self-expression genres mentioned before (e.g. forums, chats, social media posts and comments, etc.). Qualitative analyses of senior consumers' self-representation and self-perception require self-reported narratives and research tools such as questionnaires, interviews, surveys, etc. should be employed. These tools should be designed, administered and their results processed according to quantitative and qualitative methods drawn from disciplines like sociology and anthropology, though the usual limits of these tools include, for instance, those posed by participant observation in ethnography (e.g. the influence of the interviewer on the participants, issues of trust, consent, etc.).

A specificity of this grid is that chronological age is never actually taken into consideration. While this provides a more flexible tool, based on self-representation and self-perception, and also meeting some of the suggestions by Coupland (2004), that have been long utilized in marketing, it eliminates a factual datum (age). This can be considered both an asset and a liability, depending on the field of application. If, for instance, the analysis involves the discourse of governmental institutions, it may be difficult to ignore real age, especially where legal age limits are concerned. On the other hand, the grid could prove useful in comparisons between institutional and corporate organizations, as in Grego (2016).

On the whole, the applications of the proposed grid for analysis are potentially numerous. The grid may also of course be adapted to suit various specific studies, which are not only strictly linguistic ones but also any that require a (self-)definition of age and age-related values in general. More investigation into seniors' self-expression, especially into online texts authored by seniors about products and services specifically marketed to them such as online reviews, is considered an interesting development to be pursued in the future. It could potentially provide relevant insights into issues combining age identity, self-representation, self-perception and vulnerability, and particularly into the now pervading interactive web genres, which are still evolving and need monitoring and studying, and require specific attention to the ethical risk inherent in dealing with a socially weak group.

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