Title of the workshop:
Language features in healthy and pathological aging

Convenors:
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Description of the workshop topic and research questions

Aging, both healthy and pathological, conveys changes in the structural and functional aspects of language, that boil down to abnormal language processing by the brain. Normal aging results in problems for structuring and accessing the mental lexicon (including word-finding problems), forming and parsing complex syntactic structures, and retrieving implicit meanings via context checking (cf. Kemper, Thompson & Marquis 2001; Burke & Shafto 2004; Federmeier & Kutas 2005; Rizio & Diaz, 2016; Daniluk & Borkowska 2020; Gerstenberg 2020). These problems have been hypothesised to result from verbal working memory decline (Kemper & Kliegl 2002) or fluctuations in other cognitive functions, like executive function (Rizio & Diaz 2016).

Similarly, neurodegenerative processes unchain important language changes in speakers with dementia. Alzheimer’s disease, as the most common type of dementia caused by pathological aging, leads to articulatory and acoustic problems (Ivanova et al. 2018; García-Melán et al. 2020), difficulties to process, decode and produce morphosyntactic structures (Boschi et al. 2017, Orimaye et al. 2017) and, in a very apparent way, problems for accessing the mental lexicon (Rogalski et al. 2016), either in the access itself or in the proper lexicon.

Interestingly, both healthy and pathological aging are described as pragmatically agile: while elder people of any neurocognitive condition can ‘loose’ certain pragmatic abilities, as noted (see also Messer 2015, Melehin 2017, Ivanova, Fernández del Viso & Melán 2020), they also can and do recur to different pragmatic strategies, which partially compensate their problems on other language levels, like vocabulary, syntax or discourse construction, specifically in language production (Ivanova 2020a; Ivanova 2020b). Importantly, current perspective on what actually changes in the language processing and production of the elderly points out at that healthy and pathological aging processes may affect a series of similar language structures and functions in aged speakers whatever their condition is.

From an evolutionary perspective, an open question is why the same components of language (use) become affected by aging, and why language loss associated with decline, either pathological or neurotypical, in aging at some points seems to mirror language acquisition by the child (for controversial data on the likeliness of language retrogenesis in aging and dementia compare Moos 2011 against Simoes Loureiro & Lefebvre 2016 or Kim et al. 2011). One possible explanation is that recently evolved language mechanisms lack protective devices to damage, thus exhibiting a reduced resilience. Eventually, this would qualify language decline in aging as a sort of proxy of window to previous stages in the evolution of human language, similarly to language disorders, either developmental (Benitez-Burraco & Boeckx, 2014) or acquired (Code, 2011).

The aim of this workshop is to put together recent contributions on language features in healthy and pathological aging, in order to trace both common and uncommon patterns of language involution and/or impairment and loss in different aging conditions. Our general objective is to make a solid contribution to the scientific understanding of whether age-related and dementia-related language declines are different processes or the same process with different degree of affection. We are also interested in contributions delving into the psycholinguistic
and neurobiological mechanisms accounting for language decline in aging. Ultimately, considerations in the domains of evolutionary psychology and biolinguistics aimed to provide an evolutionary explanation of the observed patterns of language degeneration in aging will be particularly welcome.

Considering this, we invite scholars to propose presentations concerning the following questions:

- patterns of language change and/or loss in normal and/or pathological aging;
- common and divergent features of language change in normal and pathological aging on specific language levels;
- qualitative differences of language change in normal and pathological aging;
- qualitative differences (if any) of language decline in speakers of different languages, including bilingual and multilingual elders;
- contributions of language changes in normal and pathological aging to the understanding flexibility and hierarchical structure of human language and language as human faculty;
- psycholinguistic, cognitive, and neurobiological mechanisms accounting for language loss in normal and pathological aging;
- language decline in aging from an evolutionary perspective

References


**Keywords**: language impairment, language faculty, aging, dementia, evolution

**Instructions for participating and deadline**

If you are interested in contributing to this workshop, we kindly ask you to send a short abstract (up to 300 words), along with the name(s), affiliation(s) and contact information of all co-authors, to Antonio Benitez-Burraco (abenitez8@us.es) or to Olga Ivanova (olga.ivanova@usal.es) before November 19th 2020. If the workshop proposal is accepted, all the contributors will have to submit a full version of their abstracts to the SLE committee as specified in the conference guideline http://sle2018.eu/submission-guidelines