

The multimodal CorpAGEst corpus: Keeping an eye on pragmatic competence in later life

Abstract

The CorpAGEst project aims to establish the verbal and gestural profile of very old people, looking at their pragmatic competence in real-world settings. To reach this goal, a multimodal corpus was created to carry out corpus-based analyses with the aim of testing several hypotheses: (i) (inter)subjective discourse markers (e.g., *tu sais/vous savez* ‘you know’) and pragmatic gestures (e.g., an exaggerated opening of the eyes) are relevant indicators of the overall pragmatic competence of the aging subject [transversal approach] ; (ii) a change in the concurrent use of these (non)verbal pragmatic cues (incl. speech, facial expression, eye gaze, hand gesture, and body gesture) could be an indicator of an adaptive strategy used, with advancing age, to reduce the cost of language production during interaction [longitudinal approach]. In response to European socio-economic concerns about the aging population, the project’s contribution is multiple: (i) enrichment of the discussion of the concrete strategies to be implemented to promote ‘aging well’ in later life (e.g., by improving care of older people); (ii) provision of a multimodal corpus and annotation interaction system that may serve as a basis for further studies on language competence in later life (e.g., as an aid to early detection of dementia).

1. Introduction

The main objective of the CorpAGEst¹ project ‘A corpus-based multimodal approach to the pragmatic competence of the elderly’ is to establish the profile of pragmatic competence of very old people in a naturalistic perspective (*i.e.*, in their everyday environment), focusing on their empathic ability, defined as the cognitive and affective ability to understand others’ emotions and point of view, as well as to be in-tune with their emotional states (Eisenberg *et al.*, 2014). The corpus-based approach aims to reflect the authentic language use of communicating subjects as closely as possible (see Chafe 1992). Such an approach implies the annotation of corpus data that are both representative of the target population (*viz.* very old healthy seniors aged 75 years and older) and the object of study (*viz.* pragmatic cues of emotional and attitudinal behavior in spoken French). The present paper first briefly presents some theoretical issues (section 2.), which are at the core of the project. We will next move towards the principles adopted in the corpus design (section 3.) and the description of the notation method (section 4.) with a special attention paid to the gestural annotation procedure.

2. Background: pragmatics and aging

To date, only very little attention has been paid to the study of pragmatic competence – that is, the ability to use language resources in a contextually appropriate manner (Kasper and Rose, 2002) – of healthy elderly subjects from the angle of language production in a natural environment (Hamilton, 2001; Bolly and Sandoz, 2012). Yet, the existence of pragmatic features specific to the communication mode in the healthy elderly people is recognized, which shows, among others, (i) change in the interlocutors’ behavior and (ii) increased (off-target) verbosity in the older speaker.

- (i) On the one hand, in line with the Accommodation Communication Theory (Coupland *et al.*, 1988) – according to which interacting people adjust their way of speaking and gesturing to accommodate to others –, it has been observed that

¹ <http://corpagest.org/>