

**Grammatical Complexity and Information Structure in the Narratives of Older
Mandarin-Speaking Adults**

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The language of older adults has been characterized by the use of shorter sentences and simpler syntax in their discourse production (Shadden 1997, Kemper 2015, Kreuz and Roberts 2019), phenomena attributed to limitations of working memory capacity and executive functions (Cheung and Kemper 1992; Kemper 2009). Older adults show lower rates in clause complexity and left-branch embedding (Kemper et al 1989, 1990; Kemper and Sumner 2001; Kemper, Thompson and Marquis 2001). Earlier studies have also produced conflicting findings, with some failing to confirm a clear decrement in syntactic complexity or a vocabulary advantage in older adults (Cooper 1990; Nippold, Cramond and Hayward-Mayhew 2014; Capilouto, Wright and Maddy 2015). The issue whether older and younger adults differ in how information structure is expressed has hitherto been investigated in the context of pronouns (Hendriks et al 2008).

In this exploratory study of language and aging, we examine the narrative production of two groups of Mandarin-speaking adults: a group of older adults (N=33, age range=59-81, mean age=66.7) and a group of university students (N=32, age range=17-26, mean age=19), using the Pear Stories task (Chafe 1980). The following research questions are addressed: (1) Do older adults show a reduced linguistic complexity when compared to younger adults in their use of modals, quantifiers, classifiers, clause embedding structures, and non-canonical word order? (2) Do older adults differ from younger adults in their use of NP form and word order with respect to information status? The narrative production of each subject was examined with respect to use of words (type/token), verbs, quantifiers, modals, and classifiers; use of sentential adjuncts, relative clauses, clausal complements, BA-construction, and passives. The distributions of bare noun phrases and numeral phrases were analyzed with reference to information status (first mention vs. prior mention) and word order (preverbal vs. postverbal).

It was found that older adults differed significantly from younger adults in producing shorter sentences and showing lower rates in their use of quantifiers, classifiers, relative clauses, clausal complements, and non-canonical word orders, reflecting a generally reduced grammatical complexity. The two age groups show similar patterns in how they use bare NPs for anaphoric reference and numeral phrases for referent introduction. However, they show

Workshop on Linguistic Theory and Language Acquisition 2024

理論語言學與語言獲得研討會



notable differences in how they use bare nouns for referent introduction and numeral phrases for anaphoric reference.