

“We” Before “Me”: Differences in Usage of Collectivistic and Individualistic Language
Influence Judgments of Electability and Performance

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Abstract

Objectives: Older adults are often judged to be warm, but not competent, which contradicts their representation in positions of authority. This study sought to extend evidence of age differences in more individualistic (e.g., “I”) and collectivistic (e.g., “we”) language and explore their impact on judgments of performance and electability.

Method: Speeches from young and older adults who campaigned for a fictitious position were analyzed using Linguistic and Inquiry Word Count Software. Words fitting specified categories (e.g., pronouns, affect) were compared to outcome judgments obtained from trained coders on the dimensions of performance and electability.

Results: Older adults used significantly more “we”-language. Young adults used more “I”-language, and more positive affect, achievement, and power language. Language choices and coder judgments were associated such that the more “I”-language that was used during the speech, the less electable the candidate was judged. This relationship was not found for “we”-language.

Discussion: This study found no evidence for collectivistic language enhancing ratings of electability or performance; however an age-invariable, negative relationship was obtained between increased individualistic language and reduced coder judgments of electability. This suggests that speakers should minimize “I”-statements to promote electability; a characteristic that is reflected more in older adults’ speeches than young.

Keywords: Stereotypes, Language, Social Cognition

Leadership and Electability with Age

Older adults are perceived as low in competence but high in warmth. This is consistent with the Stereotype Content Model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), where older adults fall into a stereotyped group based on these two dimensions. This model of social cognition posits that stereotypes arise based on competition for resources and to gauge levels of threat to status. Being warm in this model signifies harmlessness while being competent is associated with threat (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007). For older adults, a “*paternalistic stereotype*” emerges wherein older adults draw the desire for protection and care, but not respect, as they are not viewed to be in direct competition with the in-group for resources such as money and jobs (Fiske et al., 2002).

Contrasting with the Stereotype Content Model and its assertion that older adults are judged as lacking competence, late midlife adults are disproportionately represented in the upper echelons of organizations, clubs, and business, while older adults are more frequently represented in politics (Manning, 2016; Nanji, 2017) compared to young adults. This is likely due to age-related increases in experience and familiarity within business and organizations (Krampe & Charness, 2006), as well as increased age being associated with increased time in a position and loyalty to an organization (Ng & Feldman, 2010). An additional factor influencing leadership decisions may be the language used by young versus older adults. For example, differences in language choices can influence likeability and foster perceptions of competence.

Age Differences in Language Use

Recent research has found that language and grammar choices utilized during an election or leadership campaign may further influence the electability and likeability of a candidate beyond the objective content of the political messages (Fausey & Matlock, 2011). Specifically, candidates who use greater amounts of affiliative and group-based language (i.e., “we” and “us”)

are preferred and more likely to be elected compared to candidates who use more directive and first-person language (i.e., “I”; Steffens & Haslam, 2013). Indeed, in 80% of elections for Prime Minister of Australia, candidates who spoke more collectively were more likely to be victorious.

In line with this research, a recent study assessed differences in language choices between young and older adults in the content of their online dating profiles (Davis & Fingerman, 2016). Using the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker, Booth, Boyd & Francis, 2015) software, the researchers assessed whether there were age differences in the use of pronouns, emotional valence, and references to others. Age differences emerged on “I” versus “we” language: increasing age led to more use of the first-person plural, perhaps reflecting a greater desire for affiliation and a heightened importance placed on social partners (Charles & Carstensen, 2010). Significant differences also emerged on the proportion of positive emotions included in the dating profiles: older adults used more language with positive emotions when describing themselves compared to young adults. The authors suggested that this result likely reflected the well-documented finding of the Positivity Effect, wherein older adults tend to highlight positive information and reduce focus on negative information (Reed, Chan, & Mikels, 2014); however, an alternative possibility is that older adults with their acquired social expertise are more effective at managing first impressions and fostering social bonds (Luong, Charles, & Fingerman, 2011).

The Present Study

The current study is an extension of the literature pertaining to language choices in the content of spoken language between young and older adults and how those choices may relate to the perceived electability of the speakers. The previous analysis of language content using online dating profiles did not provide an opportunity to collect outcome measures regarding the content.

Specifically, while older adults tended to use more collectivistic language compared to young, the researchers were unable to assess whether this influenced their dating success or page viewership (Davis & Fingerman, 2016). In the present study, we analyzed both participant speeches and outcome measures of electability and performance provided by trained coders. Additionally, because both young and older adults produced speeches on the same topic category (i.e., an elected position important to the speaker), the design of this study permitted us to examine whether the same substantive material produced from different-aged speakers would influence perceptions. Thus, the current study provides a novel contribution to the literature on language pattern differences with age and information regarding which cues influence perceiver opinions and enhance electability.

Using the LIWC software, which calculates the proportion of words that fit different linguistic categories, we compared the content of young and older adult speeches on several key domains of interest and examined which features enhanced judgments of candidacy for a hypothetical position in a club or organization. We included seven language categories in our analyses. We were primarily interested in first person (singular, plural), affective (positive, negative), and affiliative language categories. Additionally, because the speech topic was campaign-related, we explored potential differences in power and achievement language (e.g., awards) as we believed this could influence perceiver judgments. The present study had three main hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Older adults would use higher proportions of affiliative (i.e., group) language, positive affect, and first-person plural language (e.g., “we”) compared to young.

Hypothesis 2: Greater usage of collective language would be positively associated with electability and performance judgments and individualistic language negatively related with these outcomes.

Hypothesis 3: The relationships between age and electability and performance will be mediated by language use. Specifically, increased age will be positively related to electability and performance because of greater collective language and lesser individualistic language use.

Methods

Source of Speech Transcripts

The speeches analyzed in the present study were collected as part of a larger study. Young and older adult participants gave an impromptu 5-minute speech that was video-recorded (following the design of the Trier Social Stress Test; Kirschbaum, Pirke, & Hellhammer, 1993). The speech topic was campaigning for an important position in a club or organization. Participants chose the role they wanted to campaign for (e.g., promotion within an organization; U.S. Senator; head coach of a sports team; etc.) to ensure a self-relevant topic. All participants were recorded for five minutes, however the quantity of words in each speech varied (range 162 – 1141 words; $M = 669.93$, $SD = 167.82$). Importantly, there were no age group, gender, or age by gender interaction differences in the amount of spoken words ($F(2, 172) = 1.243$, $p = .291$, $\eta^2_p = .014$). The speeches were transcribed and stripped of age and gender identifiers. Given that the Stereotype Content Model posits that women are recipients of negative stereotyping (e.g., “cold and competent” or “warm and weak”; Fiske et al., 2002), older women may experience the double jeopardy of ageism and sexism. Therefore, we controlled for gender in all analyses.

Participants

Ninety young (18-34 years) and ninety older (61-82 years) adults living in the Midwestern United States participated and provided consent to use their videos for future research. Young adults were recruited from undergraduate courses and compensated with course credit; older adults were recruited from the community and compensated \$10 (see Table 1 for demographics of participants). While older adults were much more likely to have obtained college degrees than young (71.1% compared to 3.3%), in many ways our participants were comparable in experiences with higher education (78.9% had some college experience). A power analysis conducted using G*Power 3.1.9.2 software (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009) with an estimated medium effect size for between-group analysis and multiple comparisons including interactions revealed that a total sample size of 128 participants was adequate to achieve power of .80 to detect statistically significant effects with alpha set to .05. Thus, the present study, with 180 transcribed speeches was adequately powered for the expected effect size.

To assess the outcome measures of speech performance and electability, two trained coders working independently (1 male, 24 years old; 1 female, 20 years old) viewed the video recordings and evaluated the performance of each participant using a 7-point Likert-type scale (adapted from Cuddy et al., 2015). The observers rated the participant's performance from 1 (*awful*) to 7 (*amazing*) using verbal (e.g., *how straightforward was the speech?*) and non-verbal (e.g., *how expansive was the speaker's body?*) content (see Table 2 for descriptive information of performance dimensions). The verbal and non-verbal scales were highly correlated ($r = .76, p < .001$), so an average composite "performance" variable was created from the 10 items ($\alpha = .88$).

Finally, coders rated the participant's likelihood of being elected to the position (1 = *no*, 2 = *maybe*, 3 = *yes*; see Table 2). An intraclass correlation (Two-Way Random ICC) on all items between both raters suggested high coder reliability (ICC (2,2) = .94, $p < .001$).

LIWC & Speech Content

The LIWC software calculates the proportion of words in a text document that match specific pre-determined categories of word content, such as affiliative language or pronouns (Pennebaker et al., 2015). The current study analyzed the speech transcripts for the following established LIWC categories to assess our hypotheses: first-person singular pronouns (e.g., “I”, “me”), first-person plural pronouns (e.g., “our”, “us”), positive affect, negative affect, affiliative language, achievement, and power (see Table 3 for example words and LIWC proportions by age category).

Results

For Hypothesis 1, we expected older adults would use higher proportions of affiliative, positive affect, and first-person plural language compared to young adults. To examine this hypothesis we conducted three one-way MANCOVAs examining age differences in language use, controlling for speaker gender: (1) plural (“we”) and singular (“I”) pronouns, (2) positive and negative language, and (3) affiliative, achievement, and power language. There were statistically significant differences between age groups on the dependent variables of plural and singular pronouns, $F(2, 176) = 5.226, p = .006$, Wilks' $\Lambda = .944, \eta^2_p = .056$. In line with our hypothesis, older adults used more collectivistic (“we”) language compared to young ($F(1, 177) = 6.480, p = .012, \eta^2_p = .035$), while young adults used significantly more individualistic language (“I”; $F(1, 177) = 8.478, p = .004, \eta^2_p = .046$). For the second one-way MANCOVA examining differences in usage of positive and negative affect language, there were again

significant age differences: $F(2, 176) = 5.912, p = .003, \text{Wilks' } \Lambda = .937, \eta^2_p = .063$. Contrasting with our hypothesis, young adults used more positive affect language ($F(1, 177) = 11.816, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .063$), and no differences emerged on negative affect language ($p = .622$). Finally, there were significant age group differences on the use of achievement, power, and affiliative language ($F(3, 175) = 6.179, p < .001, \text{Wilks' } \Lambda = .904, \eta^2_p = .096$). Further exploring this effect, we found significant age differences in achievement ($F(1, 177) = 8.518, p = .004, \eta^2_p = .046$) and power language ($F(1, 177) = 10.781, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .057$). However, we did not find support for the hypothesis that older adults use more affiliative language; no age difference emerged in usage of affiliative language ($F(1, 177) = .632, p = .428, \eta^2_p = .004$). Finally, the differences in achievement and power language favored young adults ($t(178) = 3.09, p < .01, d = .46$ and $t(178) = 3.39, p < .01, d = .42$, respectively).¹

Our second hypothesis was that collective language would be more highly related to electability and performance, while a negative relationship would be found for individualistic language. This hypothesis was partially supported: collective language was not related to electability, but individualistic language *was* moderately and negatively associated with electability ($r = -.27, p < .001$). Mirroring this relationship, performance was judged worse with increased individualistic language ($r = -.31, p < .001$; see Supplementary Table 1 for all correlations).

For our final hypothesis, we expected age to be positively related to electability and performance because of greater collectivistic language and lesser individualistic language with increasing age. To address this hypothesis, we ran four mediation models (Model 4; PROCESS 3.2; Hayes, 2018), with gender as a covariate: two models with performance as the dependent variable and two models with electability as the dependent variable, while varying the mediators

of collectivistic or individualistic language usage. We found partial support for Hypothesis 3. The direct effects of age on the variable of electability when accounting for “I”-Language and “We”-Language were still significant (95% CIs [.23, .65] and [.29, .71], respectively), as were the direct effects of age on performance (95% CIs [.36, .98] and [.46, 1.11], respectively). However, the indirect effects of age through the mediating variable of collectivistic language on the outcome variables of performance ($ab = -.002$, $SE = .046$, 95% CIs [-.10, .08]) and electability ($ab = .001$, $SE = .024$, 95% CIs [-.05, .05]) were non-significant ($ps = .95$).

Following the results of Hypothesis 2, a significant negative relationship emerged between age and the mediator of individualistic language for both electability ($a = -5.51$, $SE = 1.86$, $p = .004$) and performance ($a = -10.01$, $SE = 2.79$, $p < .001$). Importantly, the indirect effects of age through individualistic language on the variables of performance ($ab = .116$, $SE = .062$, 95% CIs [.02, .26]) and electability ($ab = .064$, $SE = .033$, 95% CIs [.01, .14]) were also significant and positive, suggesting that part of the reason young adults were rated less electable than older adults is because they used greater proportions of “I”-language,; however, this indirect effect did not reduce the direct relationship between age and electability/performance to non-significance ($c' = .59$, 95% CIs [.23, .65] and $c' = .59$, 95% CIs [.36, .98], respectively).

Discussion

Older adults may be the targets of age-based discrimination; however, the degree to which this is related to language choices during interview situations is not clear. The current study assessed whether age differences in language usage could predict electability and performance ratings. Using the LIWC software, we replicated previous research showing age differences in the usage of first-person singular and first-person plural language with age, specifically that older adults use more collectivistic language than young adults.

Interestingly, young adults used more language fitting the categories selected for analysis than older adults: first-person singular, positive affect, achievement, and power language. Younger adults' greater usage of almost all language categories, including positive affect, was unexpected based on previous findings suggesting greater attention to and engagement with positivity for older adults (Reed et al., 2014). We believe that a probable explanation for these age differences stems from experience or lack thereof. Specifically, young adults may have felt the need to highlight their personal accomplishments (i.e., achievement language) and control over the situation (i.e., power language) as a method of enhancing their electability. Perhaps as young adults were video-recorded during their speeches, they realized that with the combination of their age and possible lack of experience they needed to bolster their credentials and thus adopted a stance of "fake it until you make it" (Harris, Kacmar, Zivnuska, & Shaw, 2007). Some research has demonstrated that certain language choices may smooth the discrepancy between real and idealized selves (Gunder, 2011), a technique that might be reflected in young adults' greater usage of achievement and power language. In comparison, older adults may not have needed to promote themselves to the same extent as young being as they could instead rely on a lifetime of social experience in impression management or interacting with social partners, thereby creating more persuasive speeches (Hess, 2006; Hess, Rosenberg, & Waters, 2001; Luong et al., 2011). Additionally, in the present study, our measure of education (i.e., number of years of education) was highly correlated with the relationship between language choices and our outcome measures, but it was also confounded with age because the young adult participants were all college students, still in the process of obtaining their education. Although this study was not designed to test for education as a mediating variable in the relationship between age,

language use, and electability/performance, it seems likely that the acquired social expertise and experience found with age is highly related to education.

The most interesting finding is the relationship between first-person singular language and perceptions of electability and performance. Contrasting with our hypothesized relationship that collectivistic language would promote electability; we instead found that across age no relationship existed. Instead, the moderate negative relationship between individualistic, first-person singular language and electability was found to be age-invariable. Thus, it seems that the amount of “I”-language used within a speech, or when promoting oneself, reduces positive perceptions of performance and electability and this is found regardless of age. This form of impression management seems especially salient in light of the recent 2018 election in the United States that saw the greatest increase of women, young people, and people of color added to the House of Representatives and Senate. While this is likely due to a multitude of factors, one possible contributor could pertain to reduced focus on individualistic language within this cycle (e.g., one campaign slogan from this election was “*For the people*”). Implications stemming from this result suggest that when campaigning for a position or during an interview for a desired job, minimizing first-person language may increase ratings of likeability or enhance perceptions of capability.

Limitations & Future Directions

This study has several limitations. First, we analyzed transcribed speeches that removed cues of bodily context, prosody, and emotion, which arguably convey more information than just spoken word (De Gelder & Vrooman, 2000). For the LIWC software it was necessary to use written transcripts to allow for the collection of proportional data that fit certain categories; however, an important next step is to examine whether perceivers are aware of these language

cues in spoken word and if their perceptions are altered. Another limitation was the use of a fictional position or campaign and its possible influence on the performance of our participants. For this study, participants were asked to pretend they were campaigning for a position that meant a lot to them, however the somewhat artificial nature of a laboratory study compared to a real position or job interview may have influenced their motivation to perform the speech. As a future direction, researchers may wish to examine participants' language usage during a job interview and the outcome of job attainment.

Two final limitations pertain to our exclusive use of young adult coders and issues of representation. First, both coders who assessed the outcome variables of electability and performance were young adults, which introduces a potential bias in their judgments about young and older adult speech performance. Future research should use both young and older adult coders to mitigate the possibility of age-biased impressions. Second, our measure of educational attainment was confounded with age and limited the representativeness of our sample. While most participants had experience with higher education, the majority of our older adults had Baccalaureate degrees and beyond, which does not reflect the general population of adults and may have influenced the obtained differences in language use.

Conclusions

The present study assessed age differences in language and their effects upon the variables of electability and performance. Compared to previous research, we did not find evidence of preference for first-person plural language influencing judgments of performance and electability; however, the moderate negative relationship between first-person singular language and the resulting judgments indicates that speakers should minimize "I"-statements when intending to enhance ratings. We also replicated research demonstrating age differences in

language preference between young and old, which suggests that when presenting themselves in varied settings—either online or in a campaign speech—older adults use more collectivistic language whereas young adults use more individualistic language. Together, these results suggest that using more collectivistic language does not seem to contribute to perceiving older adults as lower in competence. Instead, older adults are rated more favorably because they use less “I”-language than young adults do when campaigning for a position.

Footnote

¹To verify that amount of spoken words did not unduly influence the proportion of words fitting the specified categories of analysis, we additionally reanalyzed all data after truncating the transcripts to the first 500 spoken words. The pattern of results was the same.

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Table 1

Participant (Speaker) Demographic Information: Means (SDs) and Significance Values for Age Differences

| | Young Adults <i>(n = 90)</i> | Older Adults <i>(n = 90)</i> | <i>p-</i> value |
|---|--|--|---------------------------|
| Age (years) | 20.64 (2.92) | 68.81 (4.59) | – |
| Ancestry | | | .008 ^a |
| European | 69.7 % | 90.0 % | – |
| African | 20.2 % | 8.9 % | – |
| East Asian | 5.6 % | 0.0 % | – |
| Native American | 2.2 % | 1.1 % | – |
| Other | 2.2 % | 0.0% | – |
| Gender | | | – |
| Female | 38.9 % | 48.9 % | .002 ^a |
| Education (years) | 13.58 (1.39) | 16.30 (2.42) | < .001 ^b |
| Health (5-point scale; 5 is excellent) | 3.79 (.86) | 3.61 (.84) | .16 ^b |

Mini-Mental State Exam

29.18 (1.04)

29.11 (.98)

.65^b

Note: The outcome of a χ^2 test is indicated by *a*. The outcome of a *t*-test is indicated by *b*.

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Table 2

Coder Ratings of Performance and Electability by Age Category with T-Test Results for Age Differences

| | Young Adults (<i>n</i> = 90) | Older Adults (<i>n</i> = 90) | <i>p</i> -value |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|
| Performance Composite | 4.57 (1.17) | 5.35 (.94) | .001 |
| (10 items; 7-point scale) | | | |
| Expansive | 3.57 (1.48) | 3.62 (1.67) | |
| Quality of Speech | 4.59 (1.42) | 5.43 (1.23) | |
| Enthusiasm | 4.62 (1.84) | 5.20 (1.42) | |
| Captured Attention | 4.46 (1.43) | 5.17 (1.39) | |
| Confidence | 4.74 (1.86) | 5.74 (1.26) | |
| Awkward (Reverse-Scored) | 2.84 (1.91) | 1.61 (1.12) | |
| Structured/Organized | 4.07 (1.53) | 5.24 (1.45) | |
| Straightforward | 4.50 (1.43) | 5.57 (1.38) | |
| Smart/Intelligent | 5.16 (1.27) | 5.85 (1.12) | |
| Impressive/Qualifications | 4.53 (1.76) | 5.28 (1.48) | |

Electability (1 item; 3-point)

2.11 (.79)

2.57 (.64)

.001

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Table 3

Word Category Proportions Overall and by Age Group

| Word Category | Total Sample | Young Adults | Older Adults |
|------------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| | (N = 180) | (n = 90) | (n = 90) |
| First-Person Singular | .0697 | .0755 | .0638 |
| (I, me, my) | | | |
| First-Person Plural | .0163 | .0134 | .0193 |
| (we, us, our) | | | |
| Positive Affect | .0351 | .0384 | .0318 |
| (happy, pretty, nice) | | | |
| Negative Affect | .0061 | .0057 | .0064 |
| (hate, afraid, cry) | | | |
| Affiliative | .0362 | .0348 | .0376 |
| (together, group, friend) | | | |
| Achievement | .0239 | .0274 | .0205 |
| (award, goal, win) | | | |
| Power | .0312 | .0343 | .0280 |

(strong, control, chief)

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