

Daily Family Interaction and Intergenerational Synchrony: The Impact of Everyday Language Practices on Elderly Well-Being in Multigenerational Households in Spain

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Abstract

This study explores the role of everyday language practices in shaping emotional synchrony and well-being among elderly family members in multigenerational households in Spain. Drawing on sociolinguistic theory and qualitative insights, the research examines how routine conversations—through their tone, content, rhythm, and inclusion dynamics—construct intergenerational relationships that either foster connection or reinforce exclusion. The analysis highlights three core dimensions of intergenerational communication: emotional resonance, narrative agency, and discursive accessibility. It argues that the elderly voice, often overlooked in fast-paced household interactions, remains a vital medium for transmitting memory, identity, and care. In the context of an aging European society, the findings underscore the importance of language-aware family practices and policy frameworks that recognize communication as central to elder inclusion, dignity, and psychological well-being.

Keywords: intergenerational communication, elderly well-being, family discourse, sociolinguistics, narrative identity, inclusion and exclusion

1. Introduction

In recent decades, multigenerational living has become a significant and increasingly visible feature of household structures in Spain. This shift is shaped by intersecting demographic, economic, and cultural factors that have converged to make shared intergenerational living not only viable but, in many cases, necessary. Traditionally associated with extended kinship norms and family-centric values in Mediterranean societies,

multigenerational households in Spain now represent a space where economic survival strategies meet enduring social ties.

According to data from the Spanish National Statistics Institute (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, INE), as of 2022, approximately 9.5% of households in Spain include three or more generations under one roof. This figure has steadily risen over the past decade, driven by two parallel demographic trends: a rapidly aging population and prolonged youth

dependency. Spain ranks among the most aged societies in Europe, with over 20% of its population aged 65 and above, a figure projected to rise to 30% by 2050. At the same time, economic precarity among young adults—including high unemployment, rising housing costs, and delayed labor market integration—has encouraged prolonged co-residence with parents and grandparents.

While economic factors play a prominent role, cultural dimensions are equally critical. The Spanish concept of “*familismo*”, which emphasizes loyalty, reciprocity, and emotional closeness among kin, sustains a cultural preference for intergenerational proximity. Particularly in southern and rural regions, the expectation that younger generations will remain connected to, and care for, aging family members continues to guide household decision-making. In this context, multigenerational homes become more than financial arrangements; they are social institutions of care, continuity, and identity.

However, these living arrangements are not without tension. The overlapping needs, routines, and expectations of different generations may result in interpersonal strain, especially in settings where space is limited or caregiving roles are unevenly distributed. Older adults, while benefitting from proximity to family, may also experience challenges to autonomy and privacy, especially when embedded in households dominated by younger members’ schedules and digital habits. Conversely, adult children may find themselves simultaneously navigating caregiving responsibilities for aging parents while parenting their own children—a phenomenon often referred to as the “sandwich generation.”

Despite these challenges, multigenerational households have shown notable resilience during times of societal stress. During the COVID-19 pandemic, such households became critical units of emotional and logistical support, particularly when institutional care services were limited. Grandparents, in many cases, resumed or intensified caregiving roles, while younger adults provided digital mediation and healthcare navigation.

In Spain, this evolving household form raises important questions about the dynamics of daily interaction, especially in the linguistic realm. In homes where three generations co-exist,

everyday language becomes not only a tool of coordination but a medium of emotional regulation, socialization, and identity negotiation. As the rest of this study explores, these daily linguistic exchanges have deep implications for elderly well-being, intergenerational synchrony, and the emotional ecology of shared living.

2. Language as a Medium of Connection and Distance

Within multigenerational households, language operates not only as a tool of communication but as a relational medium—capable of forging closeness and empathy, while also delineating generational divides. In the Spanish familial context, where daily interaction is shaped by shared routines and emotional interdependence, everyday language practices often serve as social glue, structuring family intimacy and care. Yet these same practices can also reveal and reinforce asymmetries in understanding, authority, and inclusion, especially between older and younger generations.

One of the key features of Spanish domestic interaction is its relational intensity. Research on Southern European families has shown that emotional closeness is not only a product of physical proximity, but also sustained through high-frequency verbal exchanges, storytelling, jokes, and expressions of affection. In many multigenerational homes, these patterns are evident in ritualized mealtime conversations, casual kitchen talk, or bedtime dialogues. For elderly family members, such interactions are often a source of affirmation, allowing them to transmit values, recall shared history, and feel socially anchored.

However, language can also index generational distance. With the increasing influence of digital communication, globalized vocabulary, and shifting conversational norms, younger family members often adopt linguistic styles that differ sharply from those of their elders. This divergence can lead to mutual misinterpretation, discomfort, or perceived disrespect. For instance, informal expressions common among youth (e.g., abbreviations, memes, or rapid code-switching between Spanish and English) may be unintelligible or alienating to grandparents who were raised in a more formal or monolingual linguistic environment.

Moreover, intergenerational dynamics can shape who speaks, who listens, and who is heard. In

some households, elders may find their contributions subtly sidelined—through topic shifts, interruptions, or humor that positions them as out of touch. Conversely, they may use silence, repetition, or elevated tone to reassert conversational authority, invoking respect norms rooted in earlier generations. These exchanges reveal how language encodes power relations within the family and how verbal routines are embedded in broader cultural expectations of age and respect.

Gender and class can further complicate these dynamics. Older women, particularly those with less formal education, may use forms of speech oriented around caregiving and emotional scaffolding, while younger male members may dominate interactions involving decision-making or external affairs. These patterned uses of language reflect and reproduce social hierarchies even within seemingly affectionate family environments.

At the same time, language offers repair strategies when intergenerational tensions arise. The use of endearments (*cariño, mi vida*), empathetic paraphrasing, shared idioms, or inclusive storytelling can soften misunderstandings and restore emotional equilibrium. In households where grandparents and grandchildren co-construct narratives—for example, through bedtime stories, school-related discussions, or TV commentary—language becomes a bridge across time and experience, reinforcing belonging and emotional synchrony.

Ultimately, the everyday use of language in Spanish multigenerational households is both a reflective and constitutive force. It reflects existing relational patterns—of respect, care, divergence, or exclusion—and simultaneously constructs the emotional rhythms of family life. In exploring the next sections, we delve into how these practices unfold in the fabric of everyday talk, and how the structure of conversation itself becomes a site of intergenerational synchrony—or its breakdown.

3. Patterns of Everyday Talk Across Generations

3.1 Shared Routines and Repeated Phrases

In Spanish multigenerational households, linguistic regularity is deeply embedded in domestic routines, giving rise to repeated expressions that serve both functional and emotional purposes. Mealtimes, for instance, are not only nutritional events but key interactional

spaces where language performs relational labor. Elders, especially grandmothers (*abuelas*), often use ritualized speech to maintain emotional presence, uphold family roles, and reinforce norms of care.

Common repeated expressions include:

- “*Come un poco más, que estás muy flaco/flaca.*” (Eat a little more, you’re too thin.)
- “*¿Has hablado con tu madre sobre eso?*” (Have you spoken to your mother about that?)
- “*No salgas sin chaqueta, hace fresco.*” (Don’t go out without a jacket, it’s chilly.)

These phrases are often intergenerationally asymmetrical—used by elders to younger members, rarely in reverse. While such speech acts may appear mundane, they anchor a cultural framework where care is expressed through directives, and concern is linguistically encoded in habitual reminders. For the elderly, repeating these phrases becomes a means of maintaining symbolic relevance, especially as physical dependence may increase and decision-making influence wanes.

Interestingly, younger family members may respond to these expressions with ritual compliance or playful resistance. For example, a teenage grandson might mimic his grandmother’s tone — “*¡Sí, la chaqueta, abuela, lo sé!*”—turning ritual into meta-ritual, signaling affection through irony. Such exchanges reveal how repetition is negotiated, not merely endured, and how shared routines produce intergenerational intimacy, even when tinged with impatience.

3.2 Conversation Topics and Shifting Relevance

The thematic landscape of everyday talk in multigenerational homes often reveals misalignments in conversational relevance. Elders tend to initiate topics rooted in memory, health, or neighborhood life:

- “*Cuando yo era joven, todo era diferente.*” (When I was young, everything was different.)
- “*El médico me dijo que ya no coma sal.*” (The doctor told me not to eat salt anymore.)
- “*¿Te acuerdas del hijo de la vecina?*” (Do you remember the neighbor’s son?)

By contrast, grandchildren and adult children are more likely to introduce digital, global, or peer-related topics:

- “¿Has visto lo que pasó en Instagram con Shakira?”
- “Mi profe nos mandó un meme buenísimo.”
- “Estoy planeando ir al Erasmus en Alemania.”

When these topics collide, conversational flow can falter. Elders may appear disoriented or excluded, while younger members may perceive their elders as repetitive or out of sync. A 2021 ethnographic study in Barcelona found that grandparents often experienced “topic fatigue” during prolonged digital talk—opting for silence or exit from the interaction, especially when the conversation revolved around apps, influencers, or memes.

However, there are also bridging topics that facilitate intergenerational participation: cooking, family gossip, religion, and sports. A grandfather recalling FC Barcelona’s golden years may easily find common ground with a grandson discussing the latest match. Likewise, preparing *tortilla española* becomes a space for narrative exchange across generations “Yo la hacía con cebolla, como la hacía tu bisabuela.” (I used to make it with onion, like your great-grandmother did.)

These overlaps demonstrate that thematic synchrony is possible but contingent, shaped by shared interests, mutual recognition, and deliberate scaffolding of talk.

3.3 Silences, Interruptions, and Role Turn-Taking

Conversational rhythm in Spanish families is often marked by lively overlap and interjection, a trait common in Mediterranean discourse culture. However, in multigenerational contexts, the meaning of silence and interruption becomes more nuanced. An elder pausing mid-story, for example, may be seeking affirmation, breath, or composure. A younger member’s interruption — however habitual — can be interpreted as disrespect or dismissal.

Consider the following example:

- Grandmother: “Cuando tu abuelo y yo fuimos a Valencia en el setenta y...”
- Grandson: “¿Otra vez lo de Valencia? Ya me lo has contado mil veces.”
- Grandmother: (*visibly withdrawing*) “Bueno, perdona, era por hablar.”

This interaction reflects a breakdown in narrative alignment and conversational agency. The elder’s story, once a site of authority, becomes a trigger for marginalization. Such moments contribute to symbolic erosion of the elderly voice, especially if repeated across interactions.

Conversely, well-timed affirmations and respectful interruptions can build synchrony:

- “Sí, abuela, ¡qué bonito lo cuentas!”
- “Espera, ¿eso fue antes o después del casamiento?”

These responses help co-construct meaning, allowing the elder to remain narratively central while making the discourse more dialogic. In this sense, turn-taking is not just a structural feature of talk—it is an ethical act that determines whose voice matters in the shared linguistic space of family life.

4. Emotional Resonance and Synchrony in Intergenerational Communication

4.1 Tone, Tempo, and Empathic Alignment

In intergenerational communication within Spanish multigenerational households, emotional synchrony is often expressed through subtle features of speech: tone of voice, rhythm, pacing, and emotional attunement. These paralinguistic elements shape how words are interpreted and whether a message is experienced as affectionate, neutral, or dismissive. Grandparents, particularly those involved in daily caregiving, often adopt a soothing or deliberate tone when speaking to grandchildren—mirroring the nurturing registers of child-directed speech. Conversely, a rushed or clipped tone from younger family members, especially adolescents, may be perceived as cold, distracted, or impatient, even when the content is benign.

For example:

- Grandmother (softly): “¿Cómo te fue en el cole hoy, mi vida?”
- Teenager (without eye contact): “Bien. Nada.”
- Grandmother (quieter): “Ah, bueno...”

This brief exchange, while not overtly conflictual, highlights a failure in emotional attunement. The grandparent’s tone conveys care and curiosity, while the teen’s disengaged rhythm produces emotional disconnect. When such mismatches accumulate, they erode the

relational rhythm that underpins shared emotional space.

In contrast, empathic synchrony occurs when family members mirror tone and tempo in emotionally charged moments:

- Grandson: *“Estoy cansado, no me fue bien en el examen.”*
- Grandfather (lowered voice): *“Vaya... ¿Quieres hablar de eso un rato?”*

Here, pacing and vocal modulation communicate solidarity and containment, enabling emotional ventilation without judgment.

4.2 Humor, Teasing, and Affectional Language

Another key avenue of emotional exchange is humor—particularly affectionate teasing (*bromas cariñosas*) that blends emotional warmth with intergenerational recognition. In Spanish households, humor is not just a relief mechanism; it is a relational tool. Elders often use gentle teasing to assert familiarity and affection:

- *“¡Vaya pintas llevas hoy! ¿Eso es moda o accidente?”*
- *“Ya tienes novia, ¿verdad? ¡Te vi sonriendo al móvil!”*

When such humor is well-received, it reinforces emotional proximity, especially if the younger person responds in kind:

- *“¡Y tú tienes más memes que yo, abuela!”*

However, humor can also misfire when generational codes or sensitivities clash. A grandson joking about his grandmother’s memory—*“¡Otra vez lo olvidaste!”*—may unintentionally trigger feelings of inadequacy. Similarly, sarcasm or irony, often favored by youth, can be misunderstood or taken literally by older adults.

Affectional language—such as diminutives (*abuelita, mi niño*), endearments (*cariño, mi vida*), or touch-accompanied phrases—can also buffer emotional tensions, especially during minor disagreements or moments of stress. These emotionally marked expressions act as relational glue, reaffirming bonds beyond propositional content.

4.3 Moments of Disconnection and Emotional Misfire

Despite efforts to maintain warmth, emotional synchrony can break down—silences become

loaded, tones sharpen, and dialogue collapses into misalignment. These moments are often triggered not by content, but by a breakdown in emotional timing.

Consider this scene:

- Grandmother: *“Hoy me siento un poco sola, no salí en todo el día.”*
- Adult son (focused on phone): *“Ajá. Mañana vemos qué hacer.”*

Although the words acknowledge her concern, the emotional disengagement—marked by non-eye contact, lack of vocal warmth, and deflection—conveys indifference. For the grandmother, this may feel like symbolic abandonment, despite the son’s logistical intention to help “tomorrow.”

Emotional misfires like these can accumulate over time, especially in fast-paced households where attention is fragmented and affective labor is asymmetrical. Elders may begin to withdraw from conversations, adopt silence as defense, or express their distress through indirect complaints — *“Ya nadie me pregunta nada.”*

Repairing such ruptures often requires meta-communication: conscious re-engagement through language that reaffirms presence, such as:

- *“Perdón, abuela, no te escuché bien. Cuéntame otra vez.”*
- *“¿Estás bien? Me importas mucho, aunque a veces esté distraído.”*

These acts of intentional emotional retrieval are crucial in rebuilding synchrony, reminding all parties that language carries not only information but emotional presence.

5. Narrative Identity and the Elderly Voice in Family Discourse

The act of telling stories in a family context is never a neutral exchange of information—it is a performance of identity, a negotiation of voice, and often, for elderly family members, a form of existential participation in a domestic space increasingly shaped by younger generations. In multigenerational Spanish households, the elderly voice finds one of its most durable expressions in the telling of personal or familial narratives, whether through anecdotes, moral reflections, or generational comparisons. These stories, when heard and received, affirm the elder’s continued discursive presence within the

family; when ignored, they risk silencing not just the speaker but the social self they seek to maintain.

Narrative identity, as conceptualized by scholars such as Paul Ricoeur and Michael Bamberg, is the process by which individuals make sense of their lives by structuring events into coherent, tellable episodes. For older adults, this process often takes on a retrospective orientation, linking the past to the present, the self to the family, and memory to meaning. The domestic space provides fertile ground for these narratives—over dinner, during caregiving moments, or even in passing remarks in the hallway.

Yet, these moments are not always symmetrical. In households where the conversational pace is quick, and generational priorities are in flux, older speakers may find their stories interrupted, redirected, or simply passed over. The elderly voice, in such contexts, becomes increasingly conditional: granted space when convenient, but easily displaced by louder, faster, or more “current” voices. This dynamic is not necessarily intentional, but it reflects a broader cultural ambivalence toward aging and temporal depth in everyday discourse.

The position of the elderly as custodians of memory gives them a unique narrative authority—one that can either be revered or subtly undermined. Their recollections, while often rich in detail and affect, may be perceived by younger family members as repetitive or irrelevant. This tension becomes more pronounced when the narrative form itself no longer aligns with contemporary styles of storytelling—those marked by brevity, punchlines, or media references. In this sense, the very structure of generational discourse diverges, creating narrative gaps not just in content but in form.

Nonetheless, when narrative alignment occurs—when a grandparent’s story resonates with a family concern, or when a personal memory is used to console or advise—a temporary recalibration of agency is possible. The elder shifts from being a peripheral figure to a central narrator, someone whose voice not only carries but momentarily re-centers the affective atmosphere of the household. These moments can serve as quiet affirmations of belonging, as well as subtle reminders of the role memory plays in anchoring intergenerational

continuity.

What matters, ultimately, is not the volume or frequency of elderly storytelling, but the conditions under which their narratives are received: whether they are listened to with patience, whether follow-up questions are asked, whether pauses are allowed. These small interactional cues mark the difference between mere cohabitation and discursive co-presence—a form of familial respect enacted not through obligation but through sustained attention to the narrative life of the elder.

6. Sociolinguistic Markers of Inclusion and Exclusion

The social world of multigenerational households is not only built through actions, care routines, or material cohabitation—it is constructed just as powerfully through language. Words, pauses, naming practices, even who is addressed first at the dinner table, are all embedded with sociolinguistic signals that mark inclusion or exclusion. These markers, often subtle and routinized, signal who is heard, who is deferred to, and who exists at the conversational margins.

One of the most significant markers is form of address. In Spanish-speaking families, the use of *usted* versus *tú*, or the choice between formal titles (*abuelo*, *doña*) and diminutives (*abuelito*, *papito*), carries not just affection but a whole set of cultural assumptions about age, authority, and emotional proximity. A shift in formality over time—say, from *usted* to *tú*—may reflect evolving closeness; conversely, a persistent formality might indicate emotional distance or discomfort with aging itself. The use of affectionate nicknames, when mutual, signals warmth and group belonging. But when used asymmetrically—such as younger members using pet names while rarely receiving them in return—it may subtly reposition the elder as a dependent, infantilized figure.

Lexical framing also plays a powerful role. The ways family members refer to time (“*en tu época*”), ability (“*ya no puedes*”), or memory (“*si te acuerdas*”) often embed age-based presuppositions into casual speech. These presuppositions, if unchecked, accumulate into discursive patterns that may undermine elderly agency. The elder becomes someone whose past is always evoked, but whose present is under-recognized. Someone referred to, but not necessarily spoken with.

Equally important are non-verbal and structural markers: turn-taking delays, being last to be asked, or being ignored in shared laughter. In some families, elders speak less not out of cognitive decline or withdrawal, but because conversational floor access is unequally distributed. Discussions driven by media, digital references, or youth-focused humor can become “closed circuits,” leaving older members without relevant referents. These are not overt exclusions, but interactional driftings, where a person slowly fades from the center of linguistic life.

Yet inclusion can be rebuilt through simple cues: making eye contact when responding to elders, repeating their contributions for reinforcement, using phrases like “¿cómo lo ves tú?” (what do you think?) or “¿te acuerdas de algo parecido?” (do you remember something like this?). These discursive openings do more than solicit opinions—they re-establish the elder as an epistemic presence, someone whose voice still counts.

Ultimately, inclusion and exclusion in family discourse are not fixed positions, but moment-by-moment negotiations enacted through language. The challenge for multigenerational households is not only to live together physically, but to remain mutually reachable through talk—across generational, cognitive, and emotional divides.

7. Toward Language-Aware Family Support and Policy in Aging Societies

As European societies continue to age, with Spain among the leading countries in demographic transition, policy conversations around elder care have increasingly centered on structural concerns: pensions, healthcare access, housing adequacy. Yet what remains under-recognized is the communicative dimension of aging—the everyday linguistic conditions that shape how older adults participate in family life, experience inclusion, and sustain a sense of self-worth.

Language, in this context, is not merely a tool for transmitting information or coordinating care; it is a medium of visibility. The ability to tell stories, be consulted, or simply be spoken to with respect can significantly impact how elders perceive their role within a multigenerational household. Where speech is scarce, dismissive, or asymmetrical, feelings of social erasure may follow—even in homes where material needs are

met. As this study has shown, intergenerational synchrony is as much a linguistic practice as it is a structural arrangement.

Therefore, the path toward more inclusive aging policies must include language-aware frameworks. These might take the form of:

- Family-based communication workshops, integrated into elder support programs, which train caregivers and family members in empathetic turn-taking, narrative listening, and respectful forms of address.
- Public awareness campaigns that normalize and promote intergenerational dialogue—not only as nostalgic or sentimental, but as cognitively and emotionally enriching for all age groups.
- Community storytelling initiatives, in which older adults are invited to share their histories and perspectives in intergenerational settings, whether through schools, civic groups, or digital platforms. Such programs not only restore the discursive space of the elderly but also recalibrate their symbolic value within society.

In the domain of social work and gerontology, interventions should also account for language-related affective indicators. Withdrawal from conversation, changes in expressive habits, or recurring linguistic marginalization may serve as early signs of distress or depression, particularly among elders embedded in fast-paced, tech-saturated family environments. Language becomes not only a mode of assessment but a relational infrastructure through which care is mediated.

Moreover, policymakers must recognize that inclusion is not simply about services but about relational ecosystems. Families are among the most powerful sites of identity-making for the elderly, and language is the soil in which these identities grow or wither. A language-aware policy agenda thus moves beyond transactional care and toward a deeper, dignity-centered model of aging—one where being heard is not a privilege but a given.

As aging societies strive for sustainability, cohesion, and equity, recognizing the role of language in everyday intergenerational life is

not just a humanistic gesture—it is a structural imperative.

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