How do people talk about Christmas in spoken British English?

Christmas is one of important traditions in the United Kingdom and thus, naturally, it gets mentioned in informal conversations. In this worksheet, we are going to look at how people talk about Christmas and which topics they speak about. While talking about Christmas, we are going to explore the most common vocabulary and collocations related to the topic. In the worksheet, we will use corpus evidence from the British National Corpus to look at spoken communication by British English speakers from 1990s and the British National Corpus 2014 to look at the language from 2010s.

Task 1

In the first task, we are going to look at how frequent some of the common expressions related to Christmas are. Look at the following ten pairs of expressions and make a guess about which of the expressions is more frequent in current spoken British English. First, underline the expression that you believe is more frequent and then check the frequency of both expressions in BNClab. To find out how frequent the expression is in current use, go to the Changes button and look and hover with your mouse tip over the pink bar representing data from the British National Corpus 2014. Give yourself one point for each correct guess and add the points at the end to see how many of your guesses were correct.

			Freq.1	*Freq.2*	*Your score*
1.	**Christmas Eve** or **Christmas Day**		_____	_____	_____
2.	**Christmas cake** or **Christmas pudding**		_____	_____	_____
3.	**Christmas lights** or **Christmas decorations**		_____	_____	_____
4.	**Christmas meal** or **Christmas dinner**		_____	_____	_____
5.	**At Christmas** or **Over Christmas**		_____	_____	_____
6.	**Christmas** or **New Year**		_____	_____	_____
7.	**Christmas party** or **Christmas shopping**		_____	_____	_____
8.	**Santa Claus** or **Father Christmas**		_____	_____	_____
9.	**Christmas time** or **Christmas holidays**		_____	_____	_____
10.	**Christmas cards** or **Christmas tree**		_____	_____	_____

After you have finished with searching for the frequency information, discuss the following questions:
- How many answers did you get right?
- Were you surprised by some of the results?
- Looking at the frequencies, what is the most frequent word related to Christmas (other than *Christmas*?)
- What factors may affect the frequency of specific words or expressions in spoken communication?

Task 2

Has the way people talk about Christmas changed over the last twenty years? Type the following expressions into BNClab and use the Change button to see whether people use them more or less often today than in 1990s. After you have looked at the overall change in the use of these words, use the Social class and Gender buttons to see whether a particular social group is leading the change. Use the space below to make notes on your findings and once you are finished discuss them with your partner or your group.

Christmas   _____

Christmas Day   _____

Christmas jumper   _____

Christmas dinner   _____

Task 4

In this task, we are going to talk about Christmas, using some of the vocabulary we have looked at in the previous tasks. Consider the following questions and talk about them with your partner or a group:

- Is Christmas a tradition that is celebrated in your family and in your country?
- Do you have other traditions that are important to you and to your family?
- Think of some other important traditions – in what way they are similar or different from Christmas?
- As part of the Christmas tradition, people give and receive presents. What is the best present that you have given and the best present that you have got from someone? What made these presents special to you or the other person?

Exploring British culture: *A Christmas Carol*

Christmas is a tradition that has featured in numerous literary works. *A Christmas Carol,* a novel by Charles Dickens published in 1843, tells the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, an unkind and miserable man. In a series of three dreams, he is visited by three spirits, the spirit of Christmas Past, Christmas Present and Christmas Yet to Come. These spirits help him to reflect on his past and present actions and his likely future. In the light of this reflection, Scrooge decides to show greater kindness towards other people.

The novel has enjoyed great popularity in the UK as well as across the world; thus it has an important place in the British culture. You can explore this novel yourself by using the resources from the *CLiC Dickens* project (Mahlberg et al, 2016). *CLiC Dickens* is a collaborative project between the University of Nottingham and the University of Birmingham, which led to the creation of a corpus of all written work by Charles Dickens, including *A Christmas Carol* in this collection. This allows exploring the story with the help of corpus methods; for example, one such analysis looked at the use of the word 'fog' in this work. (Mahlberg & Wiegand, 2019). Using corpus methods, all instances of the word 'fog' and other related words such as 'foggy' were found in the text. The findings showed how the use of these words contributed to building the atmosphere in the story and to the development of the plot. You can try your hand at using corpus methods to analyse *A Christmas Carol* (and other novels) with the CLiC web app (https://clic.bham.ac.uk/).

Mahlberg, M., Stockwell, P., de Joode, J., Smith, C., & O'Donnell, M. B. (2016). CLiC Dickens: Novel uses of concordances for the integration of corpus stylistics and cognitive poetics. Corpora, 11(3), 433–463.

Mahlberg, M. & Wiegand, V. (2019) Finding links between the structure and themes of A Christmas Carol [Blog post]. CLiC Fiction Blog, University of Birmingham. Retrieved from https://blog.bham.ac.uk/clic-dickens/2019/05/17/finding-links-between-the-structure-andthemes-of-a-christmas-carol/

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