

## Understanding corpus evidence: What do we talk about when we talk about Christmas?

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. We are also going to use the topic of Christmas to explore what evidence from language corpora can tell us about language use and in what way it goes beyond what we know about language from various other sources. In the worksheet, we will use corpus evidence from the British National Corpus to look at spoken communication from 1990s and the British National Corpus 2014 to look at the language from 2010s.



Key terms

corpus

linguistic intuition

Christmas season

### 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.

			<i>Freq.1</i>	<i>Freq.2</i>	<i>Your score</i>	
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 3

In this task, we are going to reflect on where the knowledge we have about language comes from and how corpora and corpus methods can contribute to what we know about language. Discuss the following questions:

- ✚ Have you come across the word 'language corpus' before? If yes, in what context? Discuss what a language corpus is and try to formulate a working definition of a corpus.
- ✚ In Task 1, how did you decide which of the pairs is more frequent? What type of knowledge played a role when you did the guessing? How is this knowledge different from the type of information and evidence that we can get from corpora?
- ✚ Reflecting on Task 2, what are some different ways in which we can find out about the change in language use? How can corpus evidence help us with understanding language change?

## Research bite



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 been the subject of many literary studies and it has been analysed using a variety of methods. The *CLiC Dickens* project (Mahlberg et al, 2016), a collaborative project between the University of Nottingham and the University of Birmingham, created 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-and-themes-of-a-christmas-carol/>