Does age affect how people talk about emotions?

Emotions play an important role in our lives, influencing how we think and behave. For example, they may motivate us to pursue activities that we associate with positive emotions such as joy and happiness. On the other hand, we may tend to avoid those activities that make us experience negative emotions such as anxiety, guilt or embarrassment. As people progress through their lives, the way they perceive the world around them changes gradually, which in turn has an impact on how they experience, interpret and express their emotions. Many of these changes will also be reflected in how people talk about emotions and what language they use to express their feelings. This worksheet explores how people express emotions through language and whether this is affected by their age. To discuss these topics, we will use findings and data from the British National Corpus and from the British National Corpus 2014.

Key terms emotions | age | affective experience | spoken language

Task 1

There are different ways in which people can express their emotions in spoken communication and some of these do not necessarily involve words but may, for example, use body language. How many different emotions can you think of? List as many as you can in the space below.

Now consider which words can be used to refer to or express different emotions. Pick three of the emotions that you have noted down above and list different words that can be used to express them.

E.g. ANGER: angry – irritated – frustrated – pissed off – furious – seething – mad at someone …

Task 2

In this task, we will look at whether people's age influences how often they use emotive words. In BNClab, type in EMOTION (using capital letters) and go to the Age button to see whether older and younger people use these words with the same or different frequency. To see the trend in the data more clearly, tick the 'Line' box; this will place a line in the graph, showing the overall tendency in the data and helping with interpreting the results. This task uses a method called *semantic tagging* in which all words related to a particular semantic field, in this case, emotions, have been identified in the corpus.

- What trend have you discovered in the data? Do younger and older people use words expressing emotions with a similar frequency?
- Can you think of some reasons explaining the patterns in the data?

Task 3

Interjections and exclamations serve to convey a broad range of emotions, such as joy, surprise, pain and excitement. Look at the set of exclamations below – do you think some of them are more typical for younger or for older people? First note down your hypothesis and then check your intuition in BNClab by typing the expressions in and using the Age button. You can also try searching for exclamations of your own choice. Before checking the corpus, briefly discuss the factors that you have considered when forming your hypothesis.

	Hypothesis:	*Findings:*
Bloody hell		
Oh dear		
Oh man		
Oh my god		
Oh shit		

Looking at the patterns, can you think of the reasons why some of the expressions may be more or less common for speakers from different age groups?

Task 4

From a linguistics perspective, swearwords serve to conveying strong emotions through language. Although swearing is often associated with expression of negative emotions such as anger and frustration, they can equally express strong positive feelings such as joy and excitement. In this task, we will look at the relationship between age and swearing in order to find out whether the use of this linguistic resource for expressing emotions is affected by the age of the speaker. In particular, we will focus on the swearwords that serve as intensifiers, adding emphasis or force to the words that follow them as in *fucking awful, bloody insane* or *fucking awesome.*

In BNClab, first search for the following swearwords that act as intensifiers: *bloody, fucking* and *blasted.* Then use the Age button to see whether they tend to be used by younger or older people. You can either type the words in one by one, or search for several words simultaneously using OR (you can also add additional words): **fucking OR bloody OR blasted** [OR your own word…]

After you've done the searching, discuss with your partner or group:

- Which words did you search for?
- What pattern related to the age of speakers have you discovered?
- What factors can explain the pattern that you have found in the data?

Research bite

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Researchers in psychology and cognitive development have long observed the relationship between people's age and the way they experience and express emotions. Major theories in these fields suggest that "as individuals grow older, they become increasingly motivated and able to regulate their emotions, which could result in reduced negativity and enhanced positivity" (Kunzmann et al, 2014, p.1). In other words, with increasing age, the combination of psychological and social factors may contribute to people experiencing positive rather than negative emotions. Can you think of different ways in which these emotions could be reflected in people's language? How could you test this hypothesis using corpus analysis and BNClab?

Kunzmann, U., Kappes, C., & Wrosch, C. (2014). Emotional aging: a discrete emotions perspective. *Frontiers in psychology*, *5*, 1-5.