

Corpus, dictionary, discourse: 'age' adjectives in English

In this talk, I will focus on English adjectives which indicate age or life stage. Some do so directly (*young, old, middle-aged; octogenarian, teenage, thirty-something; N-years-old*). Others are more oblique, referring to age by referencing physical or behavioural qualities associated with younger and older people (*smooth-skinned, blonde, slim, gorgeous, ambitious, bright; wrinkled, silver-haired, bald, sprightly, frail, cantankerous*). Sets of such adjectives can be identified through corpus evidence, which also reveals much about their evaluations. This kind of data can then be used to explore gender and age stereotypes, and to unpack and critique the ways in which younger and older people are represented in media and other discourses.

In the first part of the talk, I will review what corpus evidence shows about the kinds of adjective applied to men and women in different age groups. I will also look at contexts where age stereotypes are contested or resisted, as well as deviant usages where 'young' adjectives are applied to older people, and vice versa (usages often signalled or foregrounded with *still, but, for one's age, prematurely*, etc.). I will then look at ways in which 'age' adjectives are treated in dictionaries: whether entries comment on ageist stereotypes, or instead maintain those stereotypes; and how far they say anything at all about age-related collocational restrictions (potentially important information for learners of English). In the final part of the talk, I will discuss applications in critical analysis, and then wider implications for studies of gender and age, sexism and ageism, in language.