

Meiju Jauhiainen

‘COOL, COOL COOL COOL’
A diachronic corpus study on adjectives of positive
evaluation in spoken British English

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ABSTRACT

Meiju Jauhiainen: 'Cool, cool cool cool': A diachronic corpus study on adjectives of positive evaluation in spoken British English
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This thesis examines adjectives of positive evaluation in spoken British English in the 1990s and 2010s. Though adjectives occupy a fundamental role in verbal communication, there is little existing literature on variation in adjective use – not to mention on adjectives of positive evaluation in particular. With this research gap in mind, I hope to contribute to the field of sociolinguistic research on adjectival variation with my analysis of the use of *amazing*, *awesome*, *brilliant*, *cool*, *excellent*, *fantastic*, *great*, *lovely*, *terrific* and *wonderful*.

The material for the study comes from the spoken sections of the two British National Corpora: the Spoken BNC1994 and the Spoken BNC2014. All relevant tokens were retrieved from the data and categorised according to syntactic position, speaker gender and speaker age. Both relative and normalised frequencies were used to discover and contrast distributional patterns in adjective use that were then compared to earlier studies and analysed for evidence of language change.

The results of the study both corroborate and contradict findings of previous research. Though women were found to use more adjectives of positive evaluation overall, not all the forms were evenly represented. Women in both corpora showed a strong preference for *lovely*, whereas male use of the studied adjectives was more evenly distributed. Men were also found to lead in the use of certain adjectives in both corpora, most notably in the use of *great*. The two forms originating in American English, *cool* and *awesome*, are spreading through male and female use respectively. On the whole, both female and male speakers significantly increased their use of adjectives of positive evaluation in the 2014 corpus. Age-specific preferences were also discovered: the increased frequency of *lovely* with age in both data sets was especially distinct when contrasted with the age-bound decreasing popularity of *cool* in the 2014 data. Variation in overall adjective use was shown to be linked to both age and gender, highlighting the interconnected nature of these variables. Syntactic preferences did not exhibit major variation, as almost all forms were most frequent in the predicative position.

The study shows that the semantic field of positive evaluation in spoken British English has undergone changes in the past two decades. A new primary form, *cool*, has entered the lexicon and established itself among younger speakers in particular. Meanwhile, the use of older forms is mostly shifting to older speakers. Qualitative research on the context-dependent use of these adjectives is recommended to obtain a more comprehensive account of variation in the field.

Keywords: corpus linguistics, sociolinguistics, adjectives, positive evaluation, language variation and change, British English

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TIIVISTELMÄ

Meiju Jauhiainen: 'Cool, cool cool cool': A diachronic corpus study on adjectives of positive evaluation in spoken British English

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Tämä pro gradu -tutkielma käsittelee positiivisten adjektiivien ("adjectives of positive evaluation") esiintymistä puhutussa brittienglannissa 1990- sekä 2010-luvuilla. Huolimatta siitä, että adjektiiveilla on keskeinen rooli verbaalisessa vuorovaikutuksessa, variaatiota englanninkielisten adjektiivien käytössä ei ole juurikaan tutkittu, kuten ei myöskään positiivisia adjektiiveja ylipäätään. Tässä tutkielmassa tarkastelen sanoja *amazing*, *awesome*, *brilliant*, *cool*, *excellent*, *fantastic*, *great*, *lovely*, *terrific* ja *wonderful*. Analyysin tavoitteena on havainnoida kielen käyttöä ja muutosta kahden vuosikymmenen aikana sekä pohtia siihen vaikuttavia tekijöitä.

Tutkimuksen aineistona toimivat kahden *British National Corpus* -korpuksen puhutun kielen osiot (*Spoken BNC1994* ja *Spoken BNC2014*), joista analysoitiin kaikki relevantit hakutulokset. Koska korpuksiin kuuluva keskustelumateriaali on nauhoitettu noin 20 vuoden välein, toimii korpuksen vertailu oivana katsauksena positiivisten adjektiivien diakroniseen vaihteluun brittienglannissa. Vaihtelun osa-alueisiin kuuluvat valittujen adjektiivien syntaktinen asemoituminen lauseessa sekä puhujan iän ja sukupuolen vaikutus tutkittujen adjektiiveihin valikoitumiseen sekä niiden käyttöihyteen. Tarkastelussa käytettiin apuna sekä suhteellisia että normalisoituja frekvenssejä.

Analyysin tulokset sekä tukevat että kyseenalaistavat aikaisempia tutkimustuloksia. Naisten todettiin käyttävän enemmän positiivisia adjektiiveja, mutta määrät eivät jakautuneet tasaisesti kaikkien adjektiivien kesken. Naiset suosivat vahvasti *lovely*:a, kun taas miesten adjektiivien käyttö jakautui tasaisemmin. Miehet käyttivät joitakin muotoja enemmän kuin naiset, eritoten *great*:ia. Amerikanenglannista lähtöisin olevat adjektiivit *cool* ja *awesome* leviävät brittienglannissa miesten ja naisten välityksellä. Kummankin sukupuolen edustajat käyttivät vuoden 2014 korpuksessa huomattavasti enemmän positiivisia adjektiiveja kuin parikymmentä vuotta aikaisemmin. Myös iällä huomattiin olevan merkitystä: *lovely*:n suosio kasvoi molemmissa aineistoissa iän myötä, kun taas uudemmassa aineistossa *cool*:in käyttö väheni selkeästi iän mukana. Vaihtelu adjektiivien kokonaiskäytössä liittyi selkeästi sekä ikään että sukupuoleen, korostaen näiden muuttujien yhteen kytkeytyvää luonnetta. Syntaktinen vaihtelu oli kaikkein vähäisintä, sillä suurin osa adjektiiveista esiintyi pääosin predikatiivisesti.

Tutkimuksessa ilmenee, että näiden adjektiivien asuttama merkityskenttä puhutussa brittienglannissa on muuttanut muotoaan kahden viime vuosikymmenen aikana. Samalla kun uusi ensisijainen muoto *cool* on vakiinnuttanut asemansa etenkin nuorempien puhujien sanavarastossa, vanhempien adjektiivien käytön painopiste siirtyy vanhempiin puhujiin. Tulevaisuudessa tarvitaan kvalitatiivista tutkimusta positiivisten adjektiivien kontekstuaalisesta käytöstä, jotta merkityskentän sisäisestä vaihtelusta saadaan kattavampi käsitys.

Avainsanat: korpuslingvistiikka, sociolingvistiikka, adjektiivit, kielen vaihtelu, brittienglanti

Tämän julkaisun alkuperäisyys on tarkastettu Turnitin OriginalityCheck –ohjelmalla.

Table of Contents

1 INTRODUCTION	1
2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND	5
2.1 <i>Adjectives</i>	5
2.1.1 <i>Criteria for central adjectives</i>	5
2.1.2 <i>Further syntactic roles</i>	7
2.1.3 <i>Ellipsis</i>	9
2.1.4 <i>Adjectives of positive evaluation in previous research</i>	12
2.2 <i>Language and sociolinguistic variables</i>	13
2.2.1 <i>Language and gender</i>	15
2.2.2 <i>Language and age</i>	21
3 DATA AND METHODS	29
3.1 <i>The Spoken BNC1994 and the Spoken BNC2014</i>	29
3.2 <i>Obtaining corpus data</i>	35
3.3 <i>Issues with data and methods</i>	39
4 RESULTS	44
4.1 <i>Overall adjective frequencies</i>	44
4.2 <i>Syntactic positions</i>	47
4.3 <i>Speaker gender</i>	50
4.4 <i>Speaker age</i>	52
4.5 <i>Speaker age and gender</i>	57
5 DISCUSSION	62
6 CONCLUSION	71
REFERENCES	74

1 INTRODUCTION

Verbs and nouns can be considered the skeleton of the English language. They form the basic clause structure, which is then fleshed out with the help of other lexical categories. In order to describe and classify members of other word classes (Biber et al. 1999: 508), to ‘alter, clarify and adjust the meaning contributions’ of nouns and verbs (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 526), we need adjectives and adverbs.

Considering that language has an ‘intrinsically evaluative and communicative function’ (Schindler et al. 2014: 1), I argue that some of the most important adjectives for interpersonal relationships are the evaluative or emotive ones. Words like *good*, *great*, *awful* and *poor* denote judgements, affect and emphasis (Biber et al. 1999: 509) and are crucial for the communication of our opinions and impressions. We constantly evaluate objects, ideas, phenomena and even other people (Saucier, Ostendorf & Peabody 2001: 538). According to Landau (2007: 3), evaluative adjectives (or adjectives of evaluation) ‘typically characterize a person’s behavior or attitude in terms of the speaker’s subjective judgment’. The key phrase here is *subjective judgement*: the meaning of evaluative adjectives is not bound to real-life circumstances or any actual state of affairs. Rather, the use and interpretation of these adjectives is subjective and determined by context.

Though evaluation is a heavily context-dependent phenomenon, there are many lexical items that we typically think of as evaluative even out of context (Hunston 2010: 13). Evaluative adjectives, both positive and negative, belong to this category. This thesis focusses on adjectives of positive evaluation: adjectives used to convey positive evaluations of somebody or something, e.g. *fabulous*, *superb*, *wonderful*. Despite the integral role of adjectives in interpersonal communication, variation in adjective usage has not received much attention in the literature (Tagliamonte & Pabst 2020: 5). Even

less tested and tried information is available on evaluative adjectives in particular. In fact, the recent article ‘A *cool* comparison: Adjectives of positive evaluation in Toronto, Canada and York, England’ by Tagliamonte & Pabst (2020) is to date the only piece of research I have found that covers variation in the use of adjectives of positive evaluation. Tagliamonte & Pabst (2020: 7) establish that English has had an abundant supply of adjectives of positive evaluation for centuries, offering speakers a large set of choices. Yet these forms have been neglected in linguistic analysis. Lack of research on the topic suggests a rather prominent research gap – one that this study aims to bridge.

Figure 1 depicts the earliest written instances of 10 adjectives of positive evaluation according to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*. The adjectives originate at different times, with older forms persisting as part of the English vocabulary despite the emergence of newer, eventually more frequent forms. This co-existence of older and newer adjectives resembles the phenomenon of LAYERING in grammatical change: multiple techniques are available to serve the same function (Hopper 1991: 23).

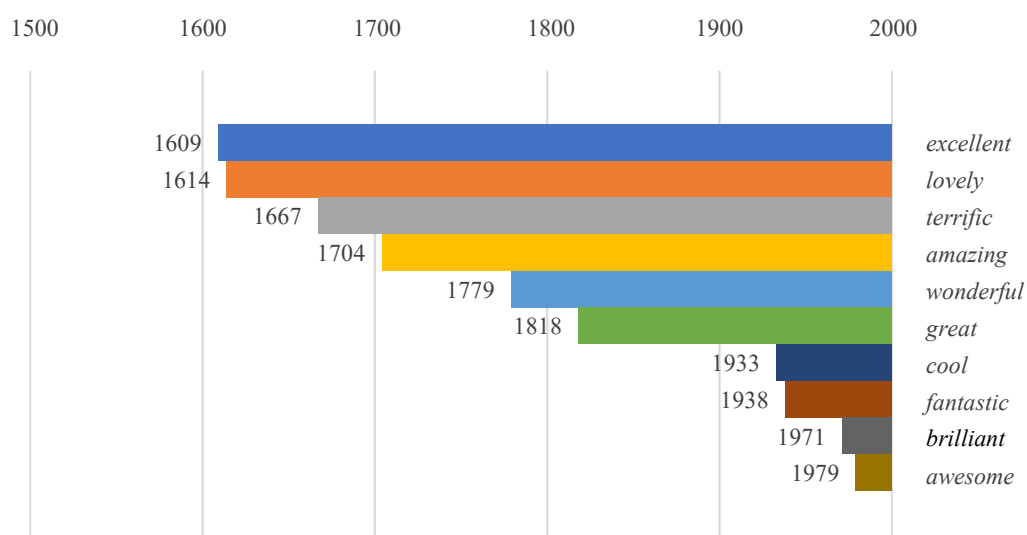


Figure 1
Timeline of earliest attestation of adjectives of positive evaluation according to the OED (adapted from Tagliamonte & Pabst 2020)

In this case, the wide inventory of English adjectives available for expressing positive evaluation, together with findings from previous research (see section 2), give rise to the hypothesis that there is significant variation in the use of these forms. In the following chapters, I examine the use of adjectives of positive evaluation in spoken language; more specifically, in spoken British English. All suitable instances of the 10 adjectives featured in figure 1, also included in Tagliamonte & Pabst (2020), (*amazing, awesome, cool, brilliant, excellent, fantastic, great, lovely, terrific and wonderful*) will be collected from the data and analysed.

As it is necessary to analyse large quantities of data in order to make relevant assumptions about the use of linguistic items, this study turns to corpus linguistics for its methodology. The material for the analysis comes from the spoken sections of the two British National Corpora (BNC): the original BNC from 1994 and the newer BNC from 2014. These corpora are especially well-suited for sociolinguistic analysis, since they include information on speaker age, gender, social class and region. With the help of the corpus data I aim to answer the following research questions:

1. How do the selected adjectives rank in frequency?
2. Which syntactic positions do the selected adjectives prefer?
3. How do the sociolinguistic variables of speaker age and gender correlate with the use of these adjectives?
4. What are the most prominent differences in adjective usage between the two corpora and how are they indicative of language change in general?

In short, I will be conducting a quantitative corpus study and exploring synchronic and diachronic variation in adjective use, along with social and syntactic variation. In Tognini-Bonelli's (2001) terms, this study takes a CORPUS-DRIVEN, rather than a CORPUS-

BASED approach. Instead of using corpus data to exemplify any pre-existing theories, I look to patterns and frequency distributions for evidence and to answer my research questions (Tognini-Bonelli 2001: 65, 84).

As mentioned previously, the meaning and use of evaluative adjectives is highly context-dependent and cannot be reliably inferred from transcribed speech alone. Nevertheless, analysing large quantities of authentic data makes it possible to discover patterns in adjective usage, which in turn can provide new information about language use amongst different kinds of speakers. Until science provides us with a way of accessing speakers' intuitions directly in order to better understand their lexical choices and the meanings behind them (Sankoff et al. 1978: 25), formulating theories based on distributional observations (Tagliamonte & Pabst 2020: 6) remains an accessible and widespread method for sociolinguistic studies.

The structure of the study is as follows: chapter 2 supplies the theoretical background for the study by providing adjective- and speech-related grammatical theory. It also discusses the influence of speaker gender and age on linguistic patterns. Chapter 3 introduces the data and methods used in this thesis, also acknowledging issues related to the corpus data and its processing. Chapter 4 presents the results of the corpus study, which are then discussed in chapter 5. Finally, chapter 6 concludes the study by reflecting on language change and offering recommendations for future research.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

This chapter presents the academic framework for this study. Section 2.1 provides a general survey of ADJECTIVES as a word class, including criteria for central adjectives and possible syntactic positions. It also discusses ELLIPSIS, a grammatical phenomenon especially relevant to spoken language. The section ends with a review of the treatment of adjectives of positive evaluation in the literature so far. Section 2.2 introduces the traditional sociolinguistic variables of AGE and GENDER and, with the help of previous research, comments on the challenges associated with representing them accurately.

2.1 *Adjectives*

Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 527) define ADJECTIVES as ‘a syntactically distinct class of words whose most characteristic function is to modify nouns’. In a sentence, adjectives can usually be identified by their function rather than their form (Carter & McCarthy 2006: 438). Adjectives describe (*lovely, little, old, serious, blue*) and classify (*different, entire, German, Australian, Christian, commercial, political*) (Biber et al. 1999: 508–9), thus providing us with more information about the word or phrase they modify. Since adjectives are an OPEN WORD CLASS, new adjectives are frequently added to the language by means of different word formation techniques (Leech 2006: 77).

2.1.1 *Criteria for central adjectives*

As regards fundamental morphological/syntactic criteria of adjectives, many grammars distinguish between CENTRAL and PERIPHERAL adjectives (e.g. Quirk et al. 1985, Biber et al. 1999). In order to be considered a central member of the adjective category, an adjective must have certain properties. Grammars differ slightly in their presentation of

these properties, but they typically include the following characteristics. Firstly, central adjectives can appear in both ATTRIBUTIVE (1a) and PREDICATIVE (1b) position (e.g. Quirk et al. 1985: 402–3). Secondly, they are gradable, and thus accept degree modifiers such as *very* (2a) (e.g. Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 528). They also take COMPARATIVE and SUPERLATIVE forms, either by means of inflections (2b) or by the addition of *more* and *most* (2c) (ibid.). Central adjectives typically also take other adverbs as modifiers (3) (ibid.):

- (1) (a) I like **good** dogs.
 (b) Dogs are **good**.
- (2) (a) Lassie was a **very brave** dog.
 (b) She was the **bravest** dog there ever was.
 (c) I cannot imagine a **more beautiful** puppy.
- (3) Our new puppy is **pretty clever**.

Adjectives that lack one or more of these properties are considered peripheral. For example, adjectives such as *asleep* (4a, b) and *lone* (4c, d) cannot occur both attributively and predicatively and are therefore regarded as peripheral adjectives (cf. Biber et al. 1999: 507; see also section 2.1.2):

- (4) (a) The dog is **asleep**.
 (b) *The **asleep** dog grunted.
 (c) The **lone** wolf howled in the night.
 (d) *The wolf howling in the night was **lone**.

2.1.2 Further syntactic roles

In addition to the two main positions of attributive and predicative, adjectives may also occur in other syntactic roles (Biber et al. 1999: 518). The most common of these minor roles is the POSTPOSITIVE function (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 528; these grammarians even consider the postpositive the third main adjectival function). Postposed adjectives follow the head of a noun phrase, as opposed to premodifying attributive adjectives (Biber et al. 1999: 519). They are especially common with indefinite pronoun heads, such as *something, anyone, nobody* etc. (5a, b) (ibid.), and in some fixed expressions (6) (Quirk et al. 1985: 418):

(5) (a) Something **funny** is going on here.

(b) Nobody **important** showed up.

(6) attorney **general**, heir **apparent**, devil **incarnate**, all things **English**

Still, postpositive adjectives are considerably less frequent than attributive and predicative ones and are more constrained by syntactic rules (Huddleston & Pullum 2002: 529).

As mentioned in section 2.1.1, certain adjectives tend to favour or are restricted to either attributive or predicative position. For example, most adjectives beginning with the prefix *-a* (e.g. *ablaze, asleep, afraid*) are practically non-existent in attributive position (7) (Biber et al. 1999: 508). Premodified adjectives are an exception ([8a, b]; examples from Quirk et al. 1985: 409):

(7) ?the **asleep** child

(8) (a) the **fast asleep** children

(b) a **somewhat afraid** soldier

As for adjectives that favour attributive position, Biber et al. (1999: 508) observe that adjectives ending in *-al* (e.g. *political, general, local, social*) ‘show a very strong preference for attributive position’. Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 529) mention *mere, former* and *main* as examples of adjectives that are restricted to attributive position ‘either absolutely or with a certain meaning’. Indeed, some adjectives carry different meanings depending on their syntactic position (examples adapted from Carter & McCarthy 2006: 448):

(9) (a) It was **sheer** chaos at work today.

(b) Be careful up there: the cliffs are **sheer**!

(10) (a) The film stars the **late** actor Heath Ledger.

(b) My boss is always **late** for meetings.

In (9a) *sheer* functions as an attributive-only intensifier, whereas in (9b) it carries the lexical meaning of ‘very steep/vertical’ and may be used in both attributive and predicative functions (Carter & McCarthy 2006: 448). When *late* means ‘deceased/dead’ (10a), it can only be used attributively, while *late* as in ‘behind schedule’ (10b) can be used both attributively and predicatively (ibid.).

In addition to the three syntactic positions discussed here, there is another position pertinent to spoken language and the study at hand: the STAND-ALONE position. This position does not receive much attention in the grammars compared to predicative and attributive uses. In fact, the term ‘stand-alone’ does not appear at all in the works cited here, and the form itself also receives only minimal treatment. Quirk et al. (1985: 428) briefly refer to ‘exclamatory adjective clauses’, such as *Excellent!* and *How wonderful!*. Huddleston & Pullum (2002: 921) include the latter type of utterance in their section on verbless exclamation, but do not mention stand-alone adjectives in the purest

sense of the term, i.e. when they occur without any accompanying words. Biber et al. (1999: 520), on the other hand, recognise that adjectives often function as exclamations (*Great! Good!*), particularly in conversation. The examples mentioned here are all adjectives of positive evaluation which indicates that the stand-alone position is characteristic of, if not solely limited to, such adjectives. It is certainly less commonplace, though not unheard of, to say something like (*How/so necessary/spacious/historical/Brazilian!*) than it is to use an evaluative adjective on its own or with *how* or an intensifier.

For Tagliamonte & Pabst (2020), stand-alone adjectives seem to be the kind mentioned by e.g. Biber et al. (1999). It ought to be noted that Tagliamonte & Pabst do not discuss the parameters of the stand-alone position, including the question of ELLIPSIS. Ellipsis is a particularly prominent phenomenon in spoken language and consequently affects the choices made in this study. Section 2.1.3 approaches ellipsis from the perspective of the syntactic categorisation of adjectives.

2.1.3 *Ellipsis*

Consider the following examples of ordinary language use:

(11) (Is there) Any pizza left?

(12) Finnish saunas are said to be the hottest (saunas) in the world.

(13) A: Would you care to join me?

B: I would love to (join you).

Examples (11–13) are instances of ellipsis. Strictly speaking, they require the additional linguistic material in brackets in order to be fully-fledged, grammatically correct and complete sentences. However, as language users we are accustomed to being economical

with our words (Quirk et al. 1985: 860). Instead of saying *Is there any pizza left?*, we can exclude the predicate and the subject and yet manage to convey the same message¹. Similarly, omitting a noun phrase (12) or an infinitive clause (13) does not hinder our understanding of the utterance.

Ellipsis is a regular component of language that speakers and writers make constant use of. Simply put, it is ‘the omission of elements which are precisely recoverable from the linguistic or situational context’ (Biber et al. 1999: 1099). English exhibits a wide range of elliptical phenomena concerning different parts of the sentence or phrase (Aelbrecht 2015: 562). There are also many different ways of categorising these phenomena. Most of them are not relevant to this study and hence will not be discussed in detail here (for a more detailed discussion of ellipsis see e.g. Quirk et al. 1985, Lappin & Benmamoun 1999, Johnson 2008, Aelbrecht 2015).

Nevertheless, ellipsis is particularly important in spoken discourse, as avoiding unnecessary repetition facilitates the flow of conversation and saves energy. Biber et al. (1999: 1099) call ellipsis a ‘pervasive feature of conversational dialogue’ – yet the boundaries of the phenomenon are unclear. This leads Quirk et al. (1985: 884) to advocate for a distinction between various degrees of ellipsis. Their criteria for ellipsis are as follows:

- (a) The ellipped words are precisely recoverable
- (b) The elliptical construction is grammatically ‘defective’
- (c) The insertion of the missing words results in a grammatical sentence (with the same meaning as the original sentence)

¹ Of course, one could argue that in certain contexts the omission of subject+operator alters the pragmatic meaning of the utterance which in turn may influence the interaction. Take, for instance, an upper-class old lady who is very particular about the speech of her grandchildren. In such cases *Is there any pizza left?* might ensure a smoother exchange than the more casual *Any pizza left?*

(d) The missing word(s) are textually recoverable and

(e) are present in the text in exactly the same form. (Quirk et al. 1985: 884–7)

These criteria produce an ellipsis gradient (Quirk et al. 1985: 889) with sentences such as (14) at one end and phrases like (15) at the other:

(14) We're ready when you are (ready).

(15) Cupcakes (that/which are) meant for immediate consumption...

Example (14) satisfies all the aforementioned criteria for ellipsis, whereas (15) only meets criterion (c). The ellipited words are not precisely recoverable, since there is a choice of two relative pronouns. Whether the clause is grammatically 'defective' is debatable, but the full form is certainly structurally recoverable, i.e. accessible with the help of grammatical knowledge. It is not, on the other hand, textually recoverable; the missing words are not (or can be assumed not to be) present in the neighbouring text.

The kind of ellipsis most pertinent to the study at hand is SITUATIONAL ELLIPSIS. In such cases, the interpretation of an utterance usually depends on situational, i.e. extralinguistic, rather than linguistic context. It is therefore especially relevant to conversational dialogue. Quirk et al. (1985: 895) use the example of *Get it?*, which can mean both *Did you get it?* (e.g. the letter/shopping/etc.) or *Do you get it?* (i.e. 'do you understand'), depending on the context. This omission of words with 'contextually low information value' usually occurs at the beginning of a turn or clause (Biber et al. 1999: 1104):

(16) (a) (I) Saw your sister at school today.

(b) (Do you) Want some ice cream?

This type of initial ellipsis (for examples of medial and final ellipsis see (12), (15) and (13), (14) earlier in this section) also includes the omission of unstressed function

words such as subject pronouns (16a), even though they are often recoverable from linguistic context alone. Quirk et al. (1985: 896) observe that initial (situational) ellipsis may be partially phonologically motivated, since the ellipsed words generally have weak stress and low pitch. These cases are characteristic of familiar spoken English (ibid.), which leads to the hypothesis that they also occur in the data for this study. Since the omission of words has the potential to seemingly affect the structure of sentences, which in turn demands analysis of the underlying syntactic structures, an understanding of ellipsis is central to the syntactic analysis to be carried out in this thesis. Further effects of ellipsis on the categorisation process of the studied adjectives are presented in section 3.3.

2.1.4 *Adjectives of positive evaluation in previous research*

As mentioned in chapter 1, there is little existing literature on variation in adjective usage in general (Tagliamonte & Pabst 2020), not to mention literature focussing on variation in the use of specific types of adjectives. The dearth of research on the topic is not due to the rarity of the phenomenon: according to the research of Biber et al. (1999: 511, 516), evaluative and emotive adjectives are the most frequently occurring type of adjective in conversation in both attributive and predicative position. In her study of evaluative adjectives in native and learner speech, De Cock (2010) found that frequently recurring positive evaluative adjectives outweighed the negative ones. Similarly, Mauranen's (2002: 12²) corpus study of academic speech notes that positive evaluative items occur more often than negative items, leading to a 'dominance of explicit and emphatic positiveness' in academic speech. Barczewska & Andreasen (2018) conducted their study

² PDF pagination.

with material from the same corpus and confirm that both men and women prefer positive adjectives to negative ones.

Outside sociolinguistics and studies of language variation, adjectives are featured in many theoretical frameworks. For example, evaluative adjectives play a part in APPRAISAL THEORY via the concept of ATTITUDE. In fact, since adjectives are ‘the canonical grammatical realisation for attitude’ (Martin & White 2005: 58), they are central in all three main sub-categories of appraisal theory, i.e. in appreciation, affect and judgement (Young 2011: 629). Adjectives of positive evaluation are most closely linked to APPRECIATION, which is concerned with people’s evaluations of other people, ideas and things (ibid.). In addition, evaluative adjectives are key elements in SENTIMENT ANALYSIS (see e.g. Taboada et al. 2011; Goddard, Taboada & Trnavac 2019; Liu 2010) which has direct commercial value in today’s world and can be used for e.g. gauging customer satisfaction through social media (Dini et al. 2017). Adjectives of positive evaluation are therefore clearly not only interesting to linguists, but also of importance in other fields. Studying the correlation between adjective usage and sociolinguistic variables can eventually have commercial benefits in addition to the relevance that sociolinguistic research already has for people making language-related decisions, such as speech therapists and language planners (Llamas 2011: 501).

2.2 Language and sociolinguistic variables

In 1972, the esteemed linguist William Labov wrote that he had ‘resisted the term sociolinguistics for many years, since it implies that there can be a successful linguistic theory or practice which is not social’ (1972: xiii). Language is a social phenomenon, a social product, and its relationship with society is a complex affair that sociolinguists

have wrestled with for decades (Coulmas 2001: 563). While using language primarily to convey information, language users also reveal information about their social and personal background through their linguistic choices (Trudgill 2000: 2; Mesthrie et al. 2009: 5–6). Sociolinguistics analyses these choices in order to formulate theories about, among other things, the relationship between language and variables such as age, gender, class, status, region and ethnicity.

It is worth noting that in the same way a person's social identity is multi-faceted and not defined solely in terms of e.g. gender, ethnicity or nationality (Taylor & Spencer 2004: 4), one's linguistic identity is rarely determined by belonging to a single group. Instead, an individual's language use draws on their membership of multiple speech communities (Edwards 2009: 21). Social categories do not impose certain variants on language users (Eckert 2008: 472); rather, they provide a variety of options for language users to construct a unique idiolect. The language of an individual is the product of the interaction of multiple social variables and how they manifest in different contexts (Llamas 2011: 509–10). Studying sociolinguistic variables in complete isolation from each other can thus be misleading (Murphy 2010: 24).

The sociolinguistic variables highlighted in this study are age and gender. Both variables have been featured in countless sociolinguistic studies in the last 70 years (though according to Coupland [2004: 69] gender has received more attention of the two). Though these variables alone, or even combined, fail to account for a speaker's every language-related decision – Eckert (1997: 167) calls them 'only . . . rough indicator[s] of a composite of heterogeneous factors – they have nonetheless been shown to affect linguistic choices to varying degrees. Sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2. comment on the nature of

gender and age as sociolinguistic variables and present some of the most relevant findings in previous research on the correlation between these variables and language use.

2.2.1 *Language and gender*

The earliest systematic research on sociolinguistic variation did not focus specifically on the relationship between language and gender; rather, its goal was to provide insight into the ties between language and social structure in general (Romaine 2003: 98). This has since changed. The topic of language and gender has developed into the subject of great interest in recent decades and continues to fascinate researchers and the public alike (Baxter 2011: 337; Schilling 2011: 518).

Sociolinguistic research on the relationship between language and gender began in the early 1970s. ‘Innovative since its inception’, language and gender research combines theory and methods from a variety of disciplines (Holmes & Marra 2010: 1). Academic discourse on the topic has certainly not restricted itself to the field of sociolinguistics: instead, gender has become a pervasive theme in multiple language-related domains, including – but not limited to – discourse analysis, linguistic anthropology, language teaching and literary analysis (Holmes & Meyerhoff 2003). Though modern language and gender research is mainly concerned with identity construction, it is still possible to make a distinction between the study of how men and women talk or write and the study of how they are represented in language (Baxter 2011: 331). As a corpus-driven study on spoken language, this thesis focusses on the former.

When discussing language and gender, it is necessary to begin with an account of the relationship between SEX and GENDER. These terms are often used interchangeably in everyday language (sometimes even in academia [e.g. Biber & Burges 2000]), but

nowadays many researchers distinguish between the two (e.g. Wodak & Benke 1997; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2003: 10; Edwards 2009: 127; Schilling 2011: 218). Contemporary scientific discourse provides a variety of nuanced descriptions of the differences between sex and gender. Essentially, most of these accounts build on the understanding that sex is a biological and physiological category that may influence, but does not define, one's gender. Gender, in turn, is perceived as a 'complex sociocultural and socio-psychological construct' (Schilling 2011: 218). However, even the quality of this distinction has been disputed: e.g. Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (2003: 10) see no clear-cut boundary between sex and gender, while Romaine (2001: 104) remarks that currently, we cannot satisfactorily distinguish between biological and societal factors in making this distinction.

Judith Butler's oft-cited work *Gender Trouble* has played a successful part in popularising the view of gender as something people perform and enact: there is 'no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (1999: 33). This view has influenced subsequent work in many fields, including sociolinguistics. The traditional view of 'sex' as a universal variable, comparable in its fixed nature to class, age and ethnicity (Baxter 2011: 332), is giving way to an understanding of gender as something routinely produced and reproduced in social interaction (West & Zimmerman 1987: 126). Indeed, given the present-day prevalence of gender in academia, the concept of sex may seem somewhat outdated. Yet observing this division in quantitative corpus studies proves to be a challenge.

Most corpora categorise speakers or writers according to the traditional binary division of male–female, or, in cases of self-classification, only provide these two options.

In addition, large-scale quantitative analysis often lacks the resources to pay sufficient attention to context. Since variety in both language and performing gender is context-dependant (Connell 1987: 179; Wodak & Benke 1997: 130), excluding the context of the data may lead to simplified notions of the links between language and gender. Analysing older corpora in particular, compiled before the emergence of a general awareness of the differences between sex and gender, leaves the researcher with no choice but to continue to adhere to the biology-based, sometimes inconvenient male–female dichotomy in their research.

Despite the problems associated with automatically equating one’s gender with one’s biological sex in all contexts, it ought to be kept in mind that in most cases these two categories correspond. Since the binary distinction of male/female continues to be a ‘fundamental organizing principle’ in most societies, it is only to be expected that it also causes social and stylistic variation (Cheshire 2002: 424). What is more, adhering to previous categorisations ensures replicability between studies while facilitating comparison to previous and future research (*ibid.*).

As it is not possible to retrospectively assess the participants’ genders as diverging from or conforming to the category value assigned for sex, I have chosen to adopt the more approachable term. Hence, this study uses ‘gender’ to refer to the categories that the BNC corpus data and most of previous research label ‘man/male’ or ‘woman/female’, i.e. those that many might argue are concerned with sex rather than gender. However, since it is ultimately the socially constructed and performed notion of gender, rather than any physiological trait, that influences our linguistic choices (Eckert 1989: 245), I consider it justified to use the term ‘gender’ to denote this property of a language user. Recent literature differs in its choice of terminology and research focus,

but despite major inconsistencies and vague definitions in many fields there seems to be a general trend in academia away from ‘sex’ and towards ‘gender’ (Muehlenhard & Peterson 2011). As far as sociolinguistic studies are concerned, using speaker sex to analyse the role of gender in linguistic behaviour is currently still the prevailing method.

Now that we have established the foundation for a discussion on language and gender, it is possible to address the existing body of literature on what is considered female or male language. Much of this research centres on spoken language: more specifically, on phonological variation, from which the findings have then been generalised to other areas of language use. As it has been established that there is very little work on adjective variation and variation among adjectives of positive evaluation in particular, I will first report some general findings or observations on gender and language that are pertinent to this study before touching on adjective usage and gender.

Wodak & Benke (1997: 127–28) remark that a wide range of claims have been made about gender-specific variation in language; some of them are contradictory, and all of them are products of different methodologies, used in different circumstances at different times, building on different implicit gender ideologies. This attitude is not present or this caveat included in many, especially older, studies. For example, Labov (1990: 205) states that findings on linguistic differences between men and women are ‘among the clearest and most consistent results of sociolinguistic research in the speech community’. He then goes on to summarise these results as the following principles (Labov 1990: 205–6):

- (I) In stable sociolinguistic stratification, men use a higher frequency of nonstandard forms than women.
- (II) In the majority of linguistic changes, women use a higher frequency of the incoming forms than men.

Despite being based mainly on early studies on phonological variation, such as the well-known cases of sound change among the inhabitants of Martha's Vineyard and social stratification of /r/ in New York City conducted by Labov in the 1960s, these principles have since become somewhat of a given in the field of sociolinguistics. Later studies have continued to disclose perceived differences in language use between male and female participants. The following quote from Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1992a: 90) illustrates the array of qualities ascribed to women and men as a result of sociolinguistic findings:

Women's language has been said to reflect their (our) conservatism, prestige consciousness, upward mobility, insecurity, deference, nurturance, emotional expressivity, connectedness, sensitivity to others, solidarity. And men's language is heard as evincing their toughness, lack of affect, competitiveness, independence, competence, hierarchy, control.

Many of these qualities have been attributed to men and women on the basis of findings that support the two principles outlined above. For example, the more frequent use of standard forms by women has been attributed to their prestige consciousness and upward mobility (e.g. Trudgill 1972; Trudgill 2000), whereas men are said to use more non-standard forms because they are associated with 'toughness' and other cultural norms of masculinity (Labov 1966: 349; Trudgill 1972). Other explanations concerning biological and/or social factors that may cause these perceived differences include (1) biologically oriented theories (2) explanations relying on the different social contexts that men and women operate in and (3) approaches related to power and dominance, where women in a patriarchal society express deference through the use of standard language, thus aiming to improve their position (Wodak & Benke 1997: 140).

None of these explanations, not to mention the findings that called for them, have been shown to be accurate in all contexts and are constantly being questioned by

language and gender scholars. In fact, many sociolinguistic studies on gender ignore context or reduce it to the variables of age, ethnicity and social class (Wodak & Benke 1997: 148). Understandably, quantitative studies, such as the one at hand, that deal with large amounts of data, are based on statistics and generalisations and derive their significance from exposing correlations with or between these traditional variables. While acknowledging the necessity of a certain level of abstraction, Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (1992a: 89, 93) caution against too much generalisation: the behaviour of some women or men in certain speech communities cannot be declared to be characteristic of all women or men everywhere. Such claims, when lacking indicators of the fact that they are merely generalisations, imply that individuals who differ from this 'norm' are somehow atypical as women or men (*ibid.*). What is more, much of sociolinguistic research focusses on gender conformity, ignoring intragender differences though they, too, are important aspects of gender (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992a: 93; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992b: 486). Such oversimplification is typical of quantitative research (Wodak & Benke 1997: 148), and to a certain degree also inevitable, but does not do the complexity of gender justice.

While still bearing in mind the perils of overgeneralisation, -simplification and -abstractification, some background on previous studies relating to adjective usage is necessary. Women have not only been found to use more adjectives than men (e.g. Entwisle & Garvey 1969), but the use of evaluative adjectives has also been strongly linked to women (e.g. Lakoff 1975, published in Lakoff 2004; Hartmann 1976; Haas 1979). Meanwhile, Kramer (1973: 15) reports finding many sources indicating that men and women use different adjectives, or at least in different contexts and to different degrees. She does not, however, list these sources (but see e.g. Jespersen 1922 and Lakoff

2004 [1975] for some 20th-century notions on ‘women’s adjectives’), which further perpetuates the sense of gender differences as a sort of universal truth.

Indeed, these differences seem to have become sociolinguistic axioms, ones that are not easily challenged even when conflicting findings are presented (e.g. Tagliamonte & Brooke [2014] observed no gender differences in the use of *weird*; nor did Tagliamonte & Brooke [2020] for *cool* and *awesome*). Barczewska & Andreasen (2018), on the other hand, also conducted a corpus study and found that while women did use more of the studied adjectives than men, men used *lovely* and *marvelous* more often – even though *lovely* has traditionally been considered a ‘feminine’ adjective (Hartman 1976: 10; Lakoff 2004: 45). Support for this view can be found e.g. in the Spoken BNC1994, where the female speakers do, in fact, use *lovely* more than the male speakers (Aston & Burnard 1997: 123; Schmid 2003: 21³; cf. Tagliamonte & Pabst 2020: 23).

Finally, it ought to be noted that many early remarks and theories about ‘male’ and ‘female’ speech were derived from researcher intuition and anecdotal evidence rather than from authentic spoken language data (Schmid 2003: 2; Barczewska & Andreasen 2018: 194). With the rise of corpus linguistics and the advanced technology available to modern linguists, it is no longer necessary nor desirable to make sweeping generalisations about the relationship between language and gender without solid factual evidence.

2.2.2 *Language and age*

After contemplating gender in all its complexity, AGE may initially seem like a more straightforward variable. Hamilton & Hamaguchi (2015: 706), though, are quick to state that age is not just ‘a simple biological category’. Still, most modern societies organise

³ PDF pagination.

themselves around CHRONOLOGICAL AGE, ignoring BIOLOGICAL and SOCIAL AGE (Eckert 1997: 157). However, research on age and ageing shows that chronological age can be misleading (Hamilton & Hamaguchi 2015: 706) since one's perceived age may differ considerably from one's actual age (Boden & Bielby 1986: 73). As ageing is the result of biological, psychological and social change (de Bot & Makoni 2005: 1), there are a number of factors that may result in a discrepancy between how old an individual is and how old they perceive themselves to be. This mindset of 'one is only as old as one feels' is commonly acknowledged among researchers studying ageing (Boden & Bielby 1986: 73.). As far as linguistic choices are concerned, it can be argued that perceived age is more influential than chronological age.

Hamilton & Hamaguchi (2015: 707) note that people in the same stages of life may feel closer to each other in terms of age than their chronological ages would suggest. For example, a childless 35-year-old university student may feel more like their 20-year-old fellow students than like their 35-year-old cousin who has three children and a full-time job. This echoes Eckert's (1997: 155) sentiment of chronological age as merely an 'approximate measure of the speaker's age-related place in society'. Focussing on perceived or social age instead of chronological age, however, is more easily achieved in small-scale qualitative research than in quantitative research that deals with large amounts of data. Be that as it may, more detailed, complete corpus speaker metadata records than we are currently used to (e.g. always including occupation in addition to age, gender and region, as well as adding more information on the speaker's social networks) might help future researchers better account for the role of life stages in linguistic choices.

Since the correlation between age and linguistic variation is ultimately a social issue and not a biological one, Eckert (1997: 152, 167) urges researchers to focus on the

social status of age, ‘the life experiences that give age meaning’, instead of chronological age. These experiences, as well as attitudes towards age and ageing, vary across time and space (Eckert 1997: 156; Duszak & Okulska 2010: 7). Individual attitudes towards ageing reflect cultural values: cultures differ in their valuation of different life stages (e.g. whether old age commands respect or justifies neglect) as well as in how age interacts with other social factors such as gender and class (Eckert 1997: 156–7).

The amount of research conducted on linguistic patterns in different life stages varies. The field of child language acquisition is well-studied, featuring competing theoretical approaches regarding the exact nature of native language acquisition (Ambridge & Lieven 2011). Roberts (2002: 333) states that the speech of young children was not the focus of early variationist research. Nevertheless, there is plenty of research to prove that the first instances of variation are visible early on in child language (e.g. Labov 1989; Roberts 1997; Smith, Durham & Fortune 2007); in fact, it is presumed that acquisition of variation co-occurs with language acquisition.

Eckert (1997: 158–59) observes that fine age differences in language patterns of the early years are far better documented than variation later on in life. On the other hand, stylistic variation and gender differences, though present in child language data, increase as children approach adolescence (ibid.: 161). In childhood, the language of the caregiver has been proven to influence child patterns (Starks & Bayard 2002; Huttenlocher et al. 2010). Nevertheless, adults cannot be considered children’s leading linguistic models (Eckert 1997: 162). Instead, children’s language is strongly influenced by their peers, particularly by older children (ibid.). This influence is heightened once they enter the next life stage, adolescence.

The most common linguistic finding pertaining to adolescents, especially to teenagers, is the extensive use of vernacular forms (Eckert 1997: 163; Roberts 2002: 334). Eckert (2003: 382) regards adolescence as an ‘age- and generation-based location in the political economy’ specific to modern industrial society (1997: 162). Due to the nature of education in western countries, adolescents spend most of their time in close quarters with each other; this is where identity construction, including linguistic innovation, takes place (Eckert 1997: 163). Creating (linguistic) distance between themselves and adults and children, the adjacent life stages, is a way for adolescents to shape their own existence (ibid.). The social turbulence associated with finding one’s place in multiple communities – indeed, one’s place in the world – serves as a catalyst for social change in the individual and their social circles. As linguistic change is a part of this process, adolescents are innovators in introducing new linguistic forms and patterns (Eckert 2003: 391). The ongoing social changes among a given age cohort do not result in identical speech patterns: identity construction processes among adolescents also lead to intragroup differentiation, which is one of the important linguistic markers of adolescence (Eckert 2003: 391; Eckert 2004: 373–4).

In stark contrast to adolescence, adulthood has traditionally been thought of as a conservative life stage (Eckert 1997: 164). The prevailing beliefs are that adults use more standard variables, perhaps because of pressure to use standard language in work environments (ibid.; Bailey 2002: 324), and that socially motivated post-adolescent linguistic change is limited and non-systematic (Bowie 2009: 56). Naturally, evidence to the contrary has also been found (Eckert 1997: 164; Tagliamonte 2012: 53; cf. Sankoff & Blondeau 2007; Bowie 2010).

In spite of the alleged lack of variation in adult language, variation studies usually have a strong adult focus (Eckert 1997: 157). Interestingly enough, linguistic research often reduces adulthood to middle age, ignoring young adults as well as the elderly (Murphy 2010: 10). Adult (i.e. middle-aged) patterns are seen as the target of development: they are considered the universal norm that other stages of life ought to aspire to (Eckert 1997: 157). Children and the elderly are thought of as either learning or losing language, whereas sociolinguistic research on adult populations tends to treat adulthood as an unmarked demographic category (ibid.; Coupland 2004: 69). Despite the tendency to focus on adult language, adults have been viewed as a ‘more or less homogenous age mass’ in contrast to children and adolescents (ibid.: 165).

Though the term ‘ageing’ is often used in the context of old age, it is worth remembering that ageing occurs throughout an individual’s lifespan (Kertzer & Keith 1984: 8). What is more, studies indicate that ‘ageing’ is not merely the passing of time, but the combined result of time and change, both social and contextual (Bowie 2010: 47). Studies on ageing have also established that the heterogeneity of the population increases with age (Bowie 2010: 30). Due to ‘increasing differentiation over the life course’, there is significant diversity to be found among the elderly (Nelson & Dannefer 1992: 17). This diversity is evident in both psychological and physiological characteristics, as well as in lifestyle and finances (ibid.). Though such variety certainly gives reason to expect similar divergence in language use (Bowie 2009: 65), the language of the elderly has been neglected as a research topic (Murphy 2010: 10). Some claims have been made that linguistic conservatism lessens after retirement (Eckert 1997: 165; Buchstaller 2006: 15),

but most studies have had a clinical and psycholinguistic focus (Davis & Maclagan 2016: 223), with an emphasis on ‘age-related cognitive and physical abilities’ that is absent in early and middle adulthood research (Eckert 1997: 157).

Despite a lack of interest in sociolinguistic research on ageing (see Coupland 2004 for a critique of ageism in sociolinguistics), the elderly are regularly included in certain types of studies: those investigating language change. The construct of APPARENT TIME is an established technique in variationist sociolinguistics that makes inferences about language change based on generational differences at a certain point in time (Tagliamonte 2012: 43). In short, older people’s use of a language feature is thought to correspond to the typical use of that feature in the community when they were young (Wagner 2012: 272). Differences between age groups are assumed to reflect diachronic developments in the language (Bailey 2002: 313). The apparent time construct is used to study language change where real time data is not available.

Of course, variation in the use of a particular feature during the lifespan of an individual does not necessarily correspond to language change on a communal level. Rather, it may be attributed to a phenomenon known as AGE GRADING (Wagner 2012). For example, teenagers may use higher frequencies of stigmatised features than their parents but reduce the usage of these features as they grow older, resulting in stable patterns on the community level (Rickford & Price 2013: 146). Tagliamonte (2012: 247) calls distinguishing age grading from actual language change ‘one of the major issues in contemporary sociolinguistics’. Indeed, the apparent time construct relies on the assumption that an individual’s linguistic repertoire remains stable throughout adulthood (Bailey 2002: 323; Wagner 2012: 373). In apparent time studies involving children and/or

adolescents, then, differentiating between age grading and linguistic change may prove to be an issue (cf. Bailey 2002: 329–30).

Though REAL TIME evidence seems like the best way to examine language change, it is not always obtainable. For one, appropriate pre-existing data for comparison with a current study may not be available (Bailey 2002: 325). The other option for a real time study is a choice between PANEL and TREND STUDIES. Panel studies rely on recording the same individuals at different points in time, whereas trend studies resample different but comparable individuals from the same community multiple times over the years (Wagner 2012: 376). Both approaches have their own weaknesses. It is difficult to keep track of a large number of people for a long time, and some of the informants may move away or die, creating gaps in the sample (Tillery & Bailey 2003: 362; Bowie 2010: 31). Even if the same people are sampled, methodological or contextual differences may affect the comparability of the data (ibid., ibid.). Effective trend studies, on the other hand, require the demographic of the surveyed community to have stayed the same between the two (or more) surveys (Tillery & Bailey 2003: 358). What is more, they need to precisely replicate the methods of the earlier survey (ibid.). Considering the time, resources and knowledge necessitated by these two types of resurveys (Tillery & Bailey 2003: 357), it is not surprising that the relatively simple apparent time construct remains the more popular choice for studies on language change in progress (Bailey 2002: 329).

The final age-related concept introduced in this section regards the grouping of people according to age in sociolinguistic research. Eckert (1984: 230) states that the boundaries of both life stages and age cohorts are fluid, with individuals entering each stage of life gradually instead of at a certain predetermined age. Most studies, though, require clearly defined boundaries in order to satisfactorily expose linguistic patterns.

Grouping together people born in the span of 10–20 years obscures fine-grained age differences but ensures that researchers have enough data to draw statistically significant conclusions about that cohort (Eckert 1997: 155). Sociolinguistic studies have defined cohorts ETICALLY and EMICALLY. That is, speakers have been grouped either in equal age spans (e.g. decades) with no regard to life stages or according to ‘some shared experience of time’ (ibid.). As social, political and economic changes caused by major historical events have been shown to influence linguistic behaviour (Eckert 1997: 166), it stands to reason that this should also affect the grouping of people into age cohorts. Nevertheless, the impact of age on language patterns cannot be isolated from other social factors, such as gender, ethnicity and class (Eckert 1997: 156). It is only by analysing these factors in conjunction with age that we can detect meaningful variation across the lifespan.

3 DATA AND METHODS

The first section of this chapter provides background information on the two corpora used in this study. I then outline the process of obtaining the data and describe the finished datasets. The final section addresses the methodological and data-related issues encountered during the data collection process.

3.1 *The Spoken BNC1994 and the Spoken BNC2014*

The spoken section of the BNC1994 (hereafter the Spoken BNC1994) comprises approximately 10% of the entire corpus, amounting to around 10 million transcribed words (Burnard 2007: sec. 1.3) of (at the time) modern British English gathered between 1991 and 1994 (Burnard 2009). However, the CQPweb interface used in this study assesses the total number of words differently from the original BNC corpus software, reporting the Spoken BNC1994 word count as approximately 12 million. This study uses the word counts of CQPweb in calculating normalised frequencies.

The Spoken BNC1994 consists of the demographically sampled part (ca. 40%: hereafter the Spoken BNC1994DS) and the context-governed part (ca. 60%) (Love et al. 2017: 321). The demographically sampled part of the Spoken BNC1994 aimed to achieve representativeness of age, gender, region and social class by having speakers of British English from all over the United Kingdom record their conversations (Burnard 2007: sec. 1.5). The context-governed part was added to ensure that the corpus include the ‘full range of linguistic variation found in spoken language’ instead of only conversational English (ibid.).

Compiled twenty years later, the spoken section of the BNC2014 (hereafter the Spoken BNC2014) consists of approximately 11 million words of spoken British English

words gathered between 2012 and 2016 (Love et al. 2017: corpus manual sec. 1). The language data consists solely of daily conversations recorded by participants: consequently, the Spoken BNC2014 is closer to the demographically sampled part of the Spoken BNC1994 than to the context-governed part. In order to make more credible comparisons between the older and newer data, I will focus on the Spoken BNC1994DS in my analysis. Unfortunately, the demographically sampled section is only 4–5 million words (depending on how it is calculated; CQPweb reports almost one million more words than the BNC User Reference Guide), which makes it less than half the size of the Spoken BNC2014. This is not an ideal basis for the comparison of any two data sets, but it does ensure that the data to be compared is the same type of language (i.e. informal and produced in familiar settings), thus yielding more reliable results.

As both corpora offer a synchronic overview of spoken British English, in the early to mid-1990s and 2010s respectively, comparing the two corpora provides researchers with valuable information on diachronic variation in British English. Moreover, the BNC corpora provide speaker metadata, such as age, gender, social class and dialect, which makes sociolinguistic analysis feasible. The compilers of both corpora also strove for maximum representativeness in their selection of speakers (Burnard 2007: sec. 1.5; Love et al. 2017: corpus manual sec. 4), though this is unfortunately partially offset by shortcomings in the documentation of speaker metadata.

The world has yet to see a corpus with complete and accurate speaker information. As regards available corpus metadata, BNC1994 performs poorly. To illustrate, 499 (39%) out of 1280 instances of *great* in Spoken BNC1994 lack data on speaker age. Speaker gender is also inadequately recorded: 253 speakers (19.8%) are

missing this information. Data is likewise missing for all the other selected adjectives, though the percentages vary.

After the compilation of the Spoken BNC1994, speaker metadata documentation procedures were slightly modified for the Spoken BNC2014. For gender, the ‘M or F’ prompt was replaced with a free-text box (Love et al. 2017: corpus manual sec. 4.2.5). Perhaps rather unexpectedly, all participants self-reported as either male or female (Love et al. 2017: 330). More importantly, the Spoken BNC2014 made significant improvements in documentation of gender compared to its predecessor– all utterances in the corpus were assigned a gender category (Table 1).

Demographic category	Group: ‘unknown’/ ‘info missing’	Spoken BNC1994DS	Spoken BNC2014
Age	Frequency	698,045	84,978
	% of corpus	13.92	0.74
Gender	Frequency	624,857	0
	% of corpus	12.46	0.00

Table 1

Number of words categorised as ‘unknown’ or ‘info missing’ for the three main demographic categories in the Spoken BNC1994DS and the Spoken BNC2014 (adapted from Love et al. 2017, corpus manual)

Though table 1 proves that age of the speaker, too, is better accounted for in the Spoken BNC2014, it fails to mention something important. The BNC1994 age groups (an etic approach) were reformed into age range categories (an emic approach) for the compilation of Spoken BNC2014, but since respondents were asked to provide their exact age, it was possible to additionally classify the speakers according to the BNC1994 age groups. This was to preserve comparability with the older corpus:

BNC1994 age groups: 0–14, 15–24, 25–34, 35–44, 45–59, 60+

Age range: 0–10, 11–18, 19–29, 30–39, 40–49, 50–59, 60–69, 70–79, 80–89, 90–99

However, during the initial phase of data collection speaker age was recorded according to the latter brackets instead of as exact age (Love et al. 2017: corpus manual sec. 4.2.5). Once the collection of exact ages began, it was no longer possible to reclassify the first-phase data according to the BNC1994 scheme. As a result, over one million words of data were excluded from age comparison with the Spoken BNC1994 (*ibid.*; see table 2). This is also visible in the results of the current study, as BNC1994 age groups had to be used to compare the two corpora.

Table 2 reveals that the numbers of speakers in each age group in the Spoken BNC2014 are not balanced. Speakers aged 15–24 are clearly overrepresented at the expense of other age groups, especially speakers aged 0–14.

Age (BNC1994 groups)	No. of speakers	No. of words
0–14	15 (2.2%)	309,177 (2.7%)
15–24	159 (23.7%)	2,777,761 (24.3%)
25–34	92 (13.7%)	1,622,317 (14.2%)
35–44	50 (7.5%)	1,379,783 (12%)
45–59	117 (17.4%)	2,194,465 (19.2%)
60+	121 (18%)	1,845,576 (16.2%)
Unknown	117 (17.4%)	1,293,527 (11.3%)
Total	671⁴	11,422,606⁴

Table 2
Age distribution among speakers in the Spoken BNC2014
(adapted from Love et al. 2017, corpus manual)

Naturally, it is unclear how much of an impact the aforementioned oversight in the data collection phase had on the apparent distribution of speakers. Nevertheless, it

⁴ N.B.: The BNC2014 corpus manual (Love et al.) gives slightly different total speaker and word counts, despite using the numbers provided here.

seems improbable that all the speakers now categorised as unknown actually belong to the age groups with fewer speakers, thus eliminating the imbalance. Rather, it is likely that speakers of certain ages were easier to reach and also more eager to participate in data collection. There are, admittedly, better-suited methods for those wishing to focus on e.g. child language in particular, but in the compilation of a representative corpus every effort should be made to represent at least the adult population equally.

Unfortunately, the BNC1994 does not provide data comparable to that displayed in table 2. Instead, the corpus manual (Burnard 2007: sec. 1.5) gives figures for the amount of transcribed material collected by each respondent. This is insufficient information for commenting on representativeness regarding the age of the speakers, as individual respondents obviously recorded multiple conversations with various participants, not all of whom were from the same age group. The word counts in table 3, then, have been obtained from CQPweb and may differ slightly from BNC's own figures.

Age (BNC1994 groups)	No. of words
0–14	435,286 (8.7%)
15–24	596,113 (11.9%)
25–34	816,024 (16.3%)
35–44	825,857 (16.5%)
45–59	859,736 (17.1%)
60+	783,594 (15.6%)
Unknown	698,045 (13.9%)
Total	5,014,655

Table 3
Age distribution according to word count in the Spoken BNC1994DS

Unsurprisingly, the youngest age group is the smallest also in the Spoken BNC1994DS. Children were excluded as respondents and therefore only included in older

respondents' conversations (Rayson, Leech & Hodges 1997: 14⁵). Interestingly, though, table 3 discloses that 15–24-year-olds, the best-represented group in the Spoken BNC2014, is the second-smallest category in the Spoken BNC1994DS. Again, it is impossible to estimate the extent to which poor metadata documentation affects the apparent proportions of speakers from different age groups. Even so, tables 2 and 3 suggest that the 1994 corpus yields the best results when investigating the speech of (middle-aged) adults, whereas the 2014 corpus offers ample material on teenagers and young adults.

Finally, tables 4 and 5 display evidence of a gender disparity in the corpus data. Both corpora feature more female than male speakers. The difference is particularly striking in the Spoken BNC1994DS: even if all the 'unknown' data in table 4 were to be assigned to the male category, the majority of the material would still be uttered by women.

Gender	No. of words
Female	2,662,805 (53.1%)
Male	1,726,993 (34.4%)
Unknown	624,857 (12.5%)

Table 4
Gender distribution according to word count in the Spoken BNC1994DS

Gender	No. of speakers	No. of words
Female	365 (54.4%)	7,072,249 (61.9%)
Male	305 (45.5%)	4,348,982 (38.1%)
N/A (multiple)⁶	1 (0.06%)	1,375 (0.01%)

Table 5
Gender distribution in the Spoken BNC2014

⁵ PDF pagination.

⁶ Used only for groups of multiple speakers, e.g. when multiple people laugh at once.

Though the difference between respondents enlisted for data collection in the Spoken BNC1994 was small (73 men versus 75 women), the overall number of female speakers was markedly higher than that of male speakers (Rayson et al. 1997: 3). What is more, the female speakers generally took more turns and longer turns than the male speakers (ibid.). The same phenomenon is visible in table 5: the gender imbalance caused by the higher number of female speakers results in an even greater gap between the amount of speech produced by female and male speakers.

For studies investigating gender similarities and differences in language, the gender of the addressee is also important. Biber & Burges (2000: 23) state that ‘same-sex conversations differ in important ways from cross-sex conversations’ (see e.g. Mulac et al. 1988; Smith-Lovin & Brody 1989; McCloskey & Coleman 1992 for corroborative findings). As the BNC corpora do not currently include an option for delimiting searches according to the gender of the conversationalists (not to mention that this would not acquit us from contemplating the complexity of gender – quite the contrary), the effect of gender on language use in this study is limited to the gender of the speaker.

3.2 *Obtaining corpus data*

In their article on adjectives of positive evaluation, Tagliamonte & Pabst (2020) aim to identify the full inventory of forms in two varieties of English. As a result, their study includes 34 adjectives. Given the limitations of my methodological competence, I restricted the number of adjectives for my analysis to 10: *amazing, awesome, cool, brilliant, excellent, fantastic, great, lovely, terrific* and *wonderful*. A valuable observation is that though in theory these adjectives all denote (highly) positive evaluation, their meaning in everyday usage may have been somewhat diluted. *Great* and *wonderful*, for

instance, are considered ‘mundane and standard’ by Tagliamonte & Pabst (2020: 6), and I would also add *lovely* to the list of adjectives that have lost some of their positively evaluative strength through inflation.

The selection of adjectives is mostly based on my (albeit non-native speaker’s) intuition regarding the hypothesised frequency of the adjectives in the corpora. Some adjectives were likely to be fairly common in both the Spoken BNC1994 and the Spoken BNC2014 (e.g. *lovely*, *great*), which would provide me with ample data to work with, whereas others would presumably appear mostly in the 2014 corpus, reducing the overall number of tokens I would have to process. *Cool* and *awesome*, for instance, were hypothesised to occur mainly in the 2014 corpus due to their origin in American English (Ayto 1999: 199, 389). Still, a total of over 21,000 tokens had to be sorted, pruned and categorised in order to extract the final data sets presented in chapter 4. Hence, I consider 10 adjectives a suitable number of items for the scope of this study.

As mentioned in section 3.1, the Spoken BNC1994 and the Spoken BNC2014 were accessed through the CQPweb interface (Hardie 2012). Searches for all 10 items were run with the appropriate part-of-speech (POS) tags so as to exclude e.g. instances of *cool* as a verb. The search strings in the Spoken BNC1994 took the form of *adjective_AJ0*, whereas *adjective_JJ* was used for the Spoken BNC2014. The results of these searches served as the starting point for further pruning of the data.

The use of POS tags did not suffice to exclude all irrelevant tokens. For example, *lovely*, though tagged as an adjective, was actually used as an adverb on multiple occasions, particularly in the BNC1994 data (17):

(17) My portable aerial works **lovely**. (BNC1994: KCT;4092)

Lovely had also frequently been misidentified as an adjective by the parsing software when it was, in fact, being used as a term of endearment. Instances of incorrect tagging were present with all the adjectives to a varying degree: the most common error was mistaking an adverb for an adjective.

Since *cool* and *great* have multiple adjectival meanings, it was necessary to manually sort through all the data to exclude instances where *cool* did not mean one of the following: 1) ‘attractively shrewd or clever; sophisticated, stylish, classy; fashionable, up to date; sexually attractive’ 2) ‘admirable, excellent’ or even 3) ‘all right, “OK”; satisfactory, acceptable; unproblematic, safe’ (*OED Online*, s.v. *cool* (*adj.*, *adv.*, *and int.*), senses A. 8a–c and C). In the case of *great* the focus is on the senses ‘as a general term of approval: excellent, admirable, very pleasing, first-rate’ and ‘expressing approval or satisfaction’ (*OED Online*, s.v. *great* (*adj.*, *n.*, *adv.*, *and int.*), senses A. 22, D). Due to the proximity in meaning of the first sense mentioned here to the sense ‘of considerable importance, significance, or distinction; important, weighty; distinguished, prominent; famous, renowned; impressive. Also in weakened sense: highly commendable, praiseworthy’ (*OED Online*, s.v. *great* (*adj.*, *n.*, *adv.*, *and int.*), sense A. 13a), adhering strictly to the first two senses was not always possible. Consider, for instance, the following examples:

(18) she used to have in the north, the **great** friend Sylvia from school days

(BNC1994: KBF;9799)

(19) [S0619:] and there’s like that town

[S0618:] --ANONplace (.) there’s a bloody **great** church thing there (.) that

describes most of the towns in Poland but (BNC2014: SLNV;447)

In (18), it is not overtly evident that Sylvia was an excellent, admirable or first-rate friend instead of a very important friend. It is likely that the speaker considered her both, since these meanings tend to overlap. Similarly, the speaker in (19) may have wished to express her approval of the Polish ‘church thing’, or she may have meant to indicate that it is rather well-known, impressive or even simply large in size – possibly all of the above. It is worth noting that this categorisation issue arose almost exclusively with attributive adjectives. In other positions, *great* was generally used unambiguously to express approval.

In addition to the irrelevant senses of *great* and *cool*, negative contexts, such as (20a) were omitted from the analysis, together with comparative and superlative forms (20b–c), since these are ‘only marginally acceptable in stand-alone position’ (Tagliamonte & Pabst 2020: 12) as in (20d):

- (20) (a) er well his personal situation **wasn’t great** (BNC2014: SDJ9;289)
 (b) my friends are so much **cooler** than I am (BNC2014: S8K6;1397)
 (c) but at the same time it was like the **loveliest** thing (BNC2014: SMC2;409)
 (d) ?**Not/more/most terrific!**

Lastly, irrelevant items such as proper nouns, names and fixed phrases (e.g. *Great Britain, It’s a Wonderful Life, Amazing Grace, cool beans*) were excluded from the data. All remaining items ought to be grammatical in all three syntactic positions relevant to this study – attributive (A), predicative (P) and stand-alone (S) – thus allowing comparison of syntactic preferences for each adjective. Tokens not included in the three main categories were classified as post-positive (PP), other (O) and unclear (U).

3.3 *Issues with data and methods*

No data set is perfect. Aston & Burnard (1997: 37ff.) urge the corpus user to allow for what they call ‘potentially deceptive features’ of the BNC1994. These include, but are not limited to, variation in transcription practice, non-standard usage and tagging errors. Love et al. (2017: 337) acknowledge the additional issue of speaker identification: transcribers are not always fully confident in their choice of speaker ID code. As a recurring error, this inaccuracy can influence results based on speaker metadata classifications.

The nature of spoken language adds an additional level of difficulty to corpus analysis. Spoken language, spontaneous speech in particular, is very different from written language: it includes false starts and self-repairs (Biber et al. 1999: 1062), relies heavily on intonation and makes use of contextual clues. Written discourse, on the other hand, allows for more planning and as a result tends to be more polished while simultaneously lacking the immediate verbal and/or nonverbal feedback of spoken discourse (Redeker 1984: 44). The corpus analyst does not have access to any nonverbal communication, not to mention intonation, that could potentially change the meaning of an utterance or clarify how it is received by others. Irony and sarcasm, for instance, are not apparent from the uttered words alone. In the case of the study at hand, this means that it was not always possible to discern between the sarcastic use and genuine positively evaluative use of e.g. *great* or *amazing*. Similarly, differentiating between *lovely* (n.) and *lovely* (adj.) proved to be a challenge without information on intonation. Punctuation used to indicate pauses was sometimes useful, but most decisions had to be made based on surrounding linguistic information – if any was available.

Another issue in processing corpus data that is related to the nature of spoken language is determining the syntactic position of adjectives. In many instances the underlying syntactic structure of the utterance is different from the one expressed by the speaker. The most common disparity between surface structure and underlying structure in the BNC corpus data can be accounted for with ellipsis (section 2.1.3). Almost all instances of ellipsis were similar to (21) where the underlying structure puts the adjective in predicative position, though at first glance it may seem to fall somewhere between the categories of stand-alone and other:

(21) that's amazing isn't it? Er **amazing** what they can do

(BNC1994: KCS;130)

In examples like (21) the underlying structure was interpreted as *it is amazing what they can do* instead of an independent *amazing* followed by a relative clause. It is likely that the clause has simply undergone omission of unstressed subject and operator as discussed in section 2.1.3. Since it was sometimes difficult to establish a clear-cut boundary between stand-alone adjectives and predicative adjectives subject to ellipsis, I chose to exclude adjectives followed by some sort of complement from the stand-alone category. Consequently, the likes of (22) were assigned to the predicative category (via ellipsis) due to the prepositional complement, whereas cases similar to (23) were classified as stand-alone adjectives:

(22) [PS0GT:] Have we all gone? That's a nice little card though that.

[PS0GM:] Good! **Terrific** for me! (BNC1994: KCP;9436)

(23) [PS57N:] Food was delicious as well.

[PS57M:] Oh well **terrific**. (BNC1994: KPR;498)

Drawing such a distinction, of course, raises the question of why stand-alone adjectives are considered a class of their own instead of merely elliptical forms of constructions such as *That/this is/was brilliant!*. On the other hand, with adjectives such as *cool* and *great*, the pragmatic function of the stand-alone form is very different from the hypothetical non-elliptical form. In the corpus data, stand-alone adjectives often function as acknowledgements where a full sentence would be too emphatic:

(24) [S0543:] **cool** thank you (.) where am I supposed to be going --ANONnameM?

[S0560:] --UNCLEARWORD er just shoot the aliens that are in this room

[S0543:] oh like that one okay **cool** ah (BNC2014: STH;2659)

In the conversation taking place in example (24), saying *oh like that one okay **that's cool** ah* might sound over-enthusiastic and out of place. Again, intonation usually plays an important part in communicating such nuances, but the subtle difference in meaning between the two is also discernible from text alone. Likewise, *great* in (25) functions as a general term of approval: *it's great* would be the less felicitous choice in this context.

(25) [S0179:] are we in the High Street? [S0058:] Scarborough A170

[S0179:] right so left here? [S0058:] >>get to the left here yep (.) **great** and

we're now on that road heading due east (BNC2014: SL76;612)

Though most cases of ellipsis in the data were connected to the predicative position, there were also instances such as (26) where the latter adjective was classified as attributive, due to its being a repetition of the prenominal adjective:

(26) [S0565:] mm yeah lovely [S0543:] mm [S0564:] **lovely** atmosphere **lovely**

(BNC2014: S9YC;1332)

Some further remarks regarding the syntactic classification of the adjectives involve the groups ‘other’ and ‘unclear’. Instances such as (27) and (28) were categorised as the former:

(27) Do you know what I find **amazing**? (BNC1994: KPB;563)

(28) so if I want to know which word (.) statistically is the most commonly used
with **wonderful** I would type in **wonderful** into the corpus
(BNC2014: S6MQ;392)

Most members of the ‘other’ category were indeed object complements (27) or instances of speakers consciously discussing the adjective in question (28). Despite some detectable intra-category patterns, further differentiating between the sub-types of the already small ‘other’ category was deemed unnecessary for the purposes of this study. Finally, some tokens could not be classified as belonging to any other category due to e.g. insufficient or unclear linguistic context caused by missing words (29) or otherwise incomplete utterances (30), whereas in many cases the utterance was simply ambiguous (31):

(29) [PS052:] So she’s quite pleased that she’s put them on to it, it is difficult
[PS051:] [unclear] **brilliant!** (BNC1994: KBG;98)

(30) probably those masks or something like that’s a pretty cool thing to have (.) I
don't know anyone that’s got that shit (.) you know (.) bird **cool**
(BNC2014: SAHB;357)

(31) [S0416:] I think --ANONnameM kind of tries to keep a straight face even
though sometimes he doesn't keep a straight face
[S0475:] mm **lovely** lemon (BNC2014: S7BR;158)

In (29) the speaker may have said any number of things, including but not limited to *oh/that's/it's/how brilliant!*. Example (30) is a case of insufficient context: *cool* is likely

a stand-alone interjection, but since there is no reliable information available concerning the *bird* occurring before it, it was classified as unclear. Ambiguous utterances such as (31) also rely heavily on extra-linguistic context and paralinguistic cues. The transcript does not make it clear whether the speaker in (31) means *(how) lovely, lemon!* or *(this is some) lovely lemon (taste/scent)*. Neither of these interpretations seem to be relevant to the ongoing conversation about teachers, so context provides no explanation here.

4 RESULTS

This chapter presents the results of the corpus analysis, which are then discussed in depth in chapter 5. Since the two corpora differ considerably in size, normalised frequencies per million words (pmw) and percentage values are used in the comparison of the data sets.

As mentioned in chapter 3, metadata documentation for speaker age and gender is incomplete in both the Spoken BNC1994DS and the Spoken BNC2014. As a result, the ‘unknown’ categories in many of the graphs and tables included are sizeable. They have been included to highlight the effect of shortcomings in the data collection phase but will not play a central role in the analysis.

4.1 Overall adjective frequencies

The first and simplest task of the corpus analysis was to determine the frequencies of the ten selected adjectives of positive evaluation in the Spoken BNC1994DS and the Spoken BNC2014. Figures 2 and 3 display these frequencies. As the total number of words in the 2014 corpus, and hence also the number of adjectives, is significantly higher than in the 1994 corpus, it is necessary to look at normalised frequencies in order to achieve comparability and percentage values to determine changes in distribution.

Figure 2 demonstrates the overwhelming popularity of *lovely* in the 1994 corpus data compared to the other selected adjectives: none of the other adjectives reach even a 20% share. The second most frequent adjective in the 1994 corpus is the versatile but consequently often rather mild *great*, followed by *brilliant*. The other adjectives of stronger positive evaluation are used less frequently and can be considered minor forms.

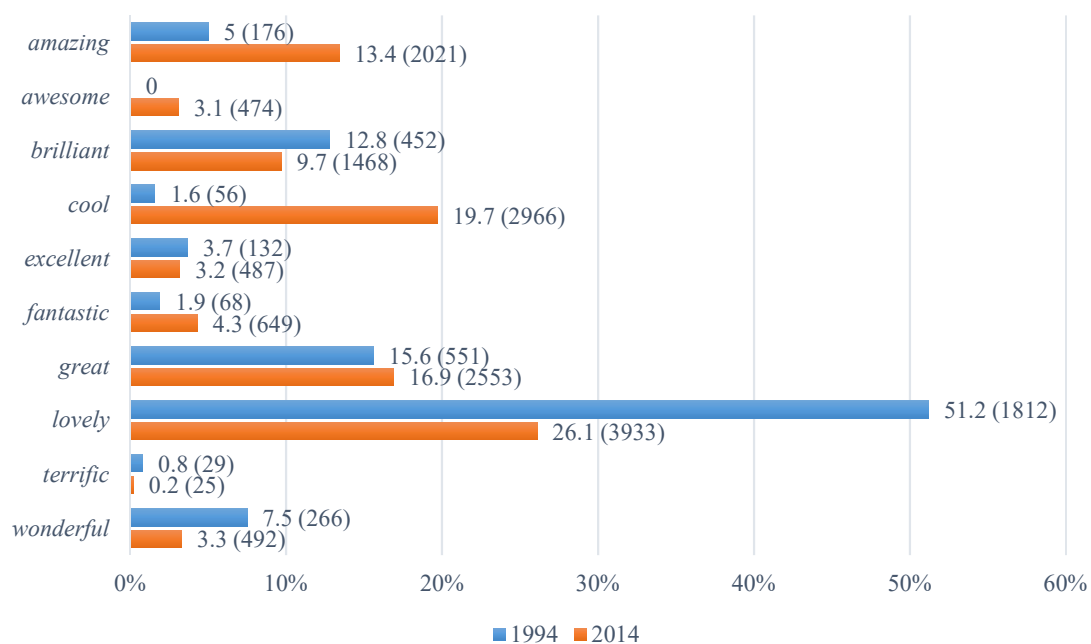


Figure 2
Distribution (%) of adjectives of positive evaluation in the Spoken BNC1994DS and the Spoken BNC2014

At the time the data for the 1994 corpus was collected, *awesome* and *cool* were non-existent or rare phenomena in British English. In 2014, the situation is somewhat different. Figure 2 presents *cool* as the second most popular adjective in the Spoken BNC2014, while *awesome* has garnered some, albeit relatively few, hits. In general, the percentages for the 2014 corpus are much more evenly distributed between the ten adjectives, though *lovely* still constitutes around a quarter of all tokens. What is more, the gap between the two most frequent adjectives in the Spoken BNC2014 is decidedly smaller than in the Spoken BNC1994DS.

Interestingly, figure 2 shows that *great* saw a slight increase in frequency measured by relative proportion from 1994 to 2014, despite being pushed back to third most popular adjective by *cool* in the 2014 corpus. The proportional increase of *amazing* was even greater, bringing it up to fourth place. The 2014 corpus thus has four adjectives

that can be considered primary forms: *lovely*, *cool*, *great* and *amazing*. While the use of *fantastic* also increased, improving its ranking, this increase was less substantial. *Brilliant*, *wonderful*, *excellent* and *terrific*, on the contrary, all experienced a decline in relative popularity between 1994 and 2014. The occurrences of *terrific*, though, are merely symbolic in both data sets.

Having established the most important changes in proportions of adjective use, i.e. how often the selected adjectives were used in relation to each other, we now turn to normalised frequencies to expose any changes in real, not proportional, frequencies. A look at table 6 reveals that the speakers in the 2014 data use adjectives of positive evaluation far more often than the 1994 speakers. The most significant increases occurred in the use of *amazing*, *cool* and *great* – something not directly reflected in the proportional increases mentioned above. *Lovely*, *terrific* and *wonderful* are exceptions to the general trend in that their use declines slightly in the Spoken BNC2014.

Adjective	1994	2014
<i>amazing</i>	35.10	176.93
<i>awesome</i>	0	41.50
<i>brilliant</i>	90.14	128.52
<i>cool</i>	11.17	259.66
<i>excellent</i>	26.32	42.63
<i>fantastic</i>	13.56	56.82
<i>great</i>	109.88	223.50
<i>lovely</i>	361.34	344.32
<i>terrific</i>	5.78	4.61
<i>wonderful</i>	53.05	43.07
Total	706.34	1,319.14

Table 6
Normalised adjective frequencies (pmw) in the Spoken BNC1994DS and the Spoken BNC2014

4.2 Syntactic positions

As expected, a syntactic analysis of the data proves that there is very little room for positions outside the top three categories. Figure 3 shows that almost half of all the tokens in the 1994 data occur in the predicative position, while the three largest categories comprise 98% of all the adjectives⁷.

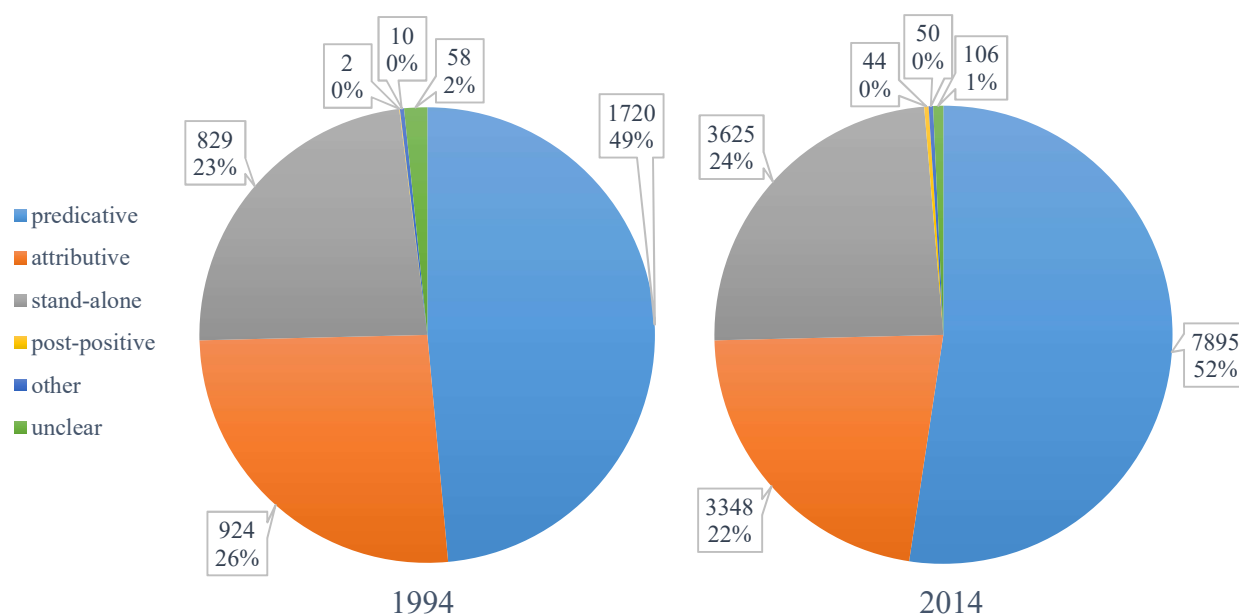


Figure 3
Syntactic distribution (%) of adjectives in the Spoken BNC1994DS and the Spoken BNC2014

The percentages remain roughly the same in the Spoken BNC2014, though the newer data displays a small increase in the share of predicative adjectives at the expense of attributive ones.

When examining the percentages for individual adjectives in the 1994 data (figure 4), the predicative position continues to dominate. For 5 out of 9 adjectives –

⁷ The percentages in the upcoming sections have been rounded to the nearest whole number, which may result in slight inaccuracies when dealing with very small numbers.

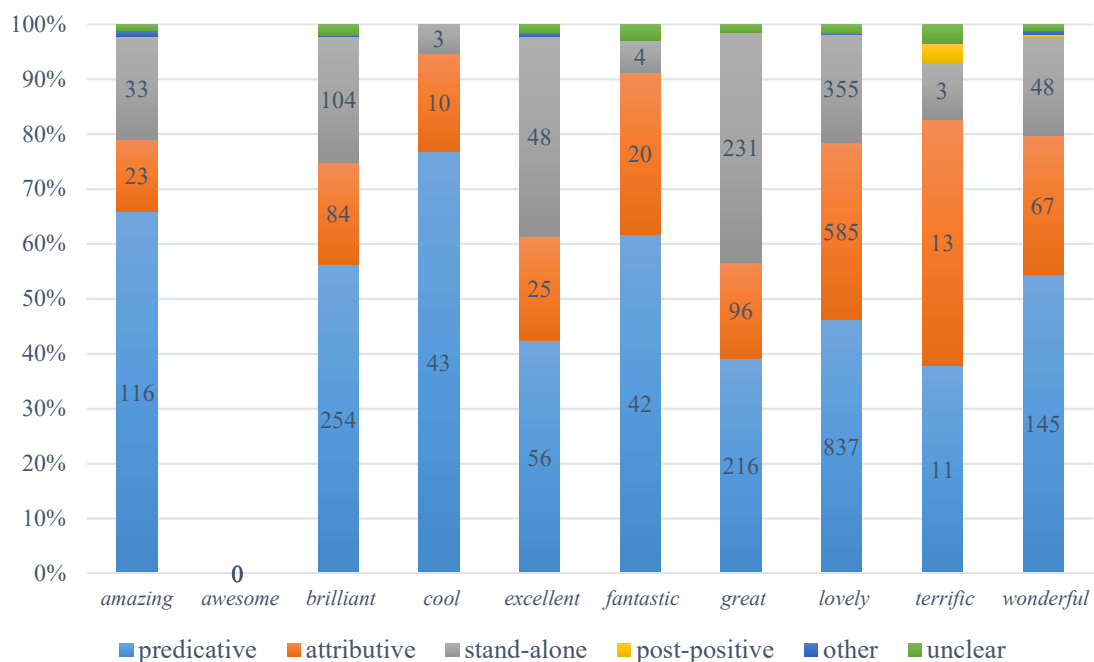


Figure 4⁸
Distribution (%) of syntactic positions according to adjective in the Spoken BNC1994DS

amazing, brilliant, cool, fantastic and *wonderful* – over 50% of the tokens are predicative. Of the remaining four adjectives that returned hits in the corpus, predicative is still the most common position for *lovely* and *excellent*. *Great* favours the stand-alone position by a few percentage points, whereas for *terrific* the difference between attributive and predicative is barely significant due to the low total number of tokens.

In 2014, the syntactic proportions are slightly different, albeit still in favour of the predicative position. As is apparent in figure 5, more than 50% of *amazing, brilliant* and *cool* continue to appear predicatively. *Awesome* and *great* have also reached the 50% mark in this aspect, whereas the predicative use of *fantastic* and *wonderful* has

⁸ For the sake of visual clarity, only the numbers for the three largest, i.e. most significant groups have been included in figures 4 and 5. The frequencies and relative proportions of all categories are visible in Appendices A–B.

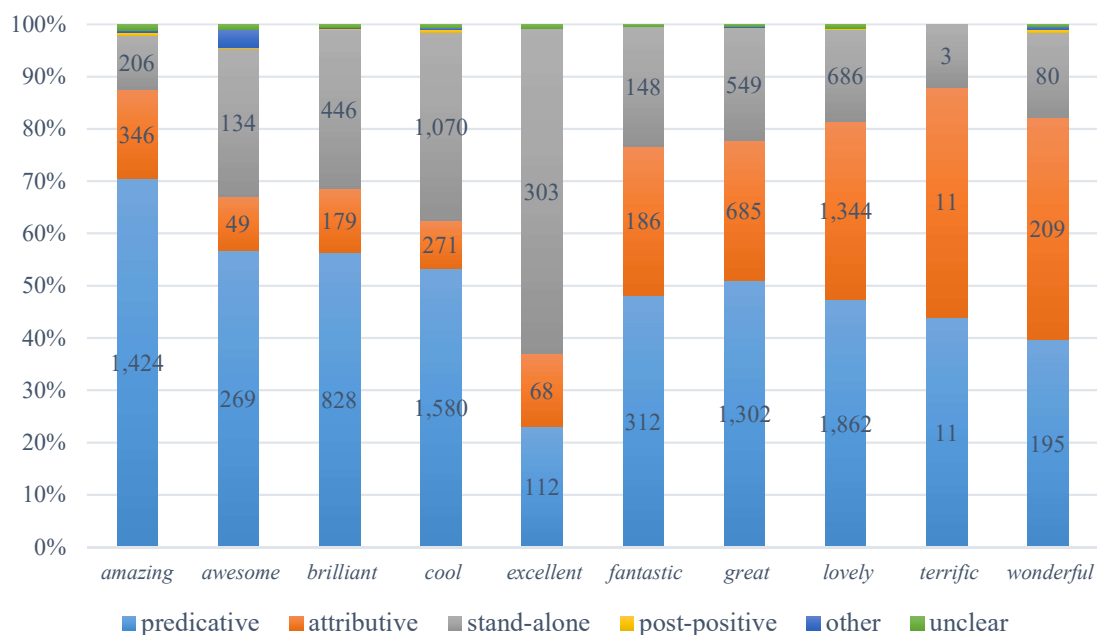


Figure 5

Distribution (%) of syntactic positions according to adjective in the Spoken BNC2014

experienced a decline of over 10 percentage points in comparison to the 1994 data (figure 4). Similarly, in 2014 the use of *excellent* in the predicative position has been reduced to almost half of its 1994 proportion of 42%, while the stand-alone position now claims ca. 60% of the tokens instead of less than 40%. The opposite is true for *great*: the proportional share occupied by stand-alone adjectives has been approximately reduced by half in the 2014 corpus.

In both the 1994 and 2014 data the numbers of tokens in syntactic positions other than predicative, attributive and stand-alone are too low to be of real significance. At any rate, ‘unclear’ and ‘other’ both encompass more tokens than the post-positive group.

4.3 Speaker gender

Table 7 summarises the results of adjective distribution according to gender in the Spoken BNC1994DS. The most frequently occurring adjective in the corpus, *lovely*, justifiably takes first place in both female and male speech, comprising 59.8% and 36.6% of the tokens respectively. There is also a striking difference in normalised frequency: it appears that female speakers use *lovely* over 90% more often than male speakers. The difference between the use of *lovely* and the second most frequent adjective is substantial for both men and women, but considerably more so for the latter. The second and third most frequent adjectives, *great* and *brilliant*, are the same for both genders but are used more frequently by men. In fact, all the remaining adjectives, with the exception of *wonderful*, are more frequent in male than in female speech.

Adjective	Female		Adjective	Male		Adjective	Unknown	
	No. of hits (%)	Frequency pmw		No. of hits (%)	Frequency pmw		No. of hits (%)	Frequency pmw
<i>lovely</i>	1,195 (59.8)	449.15	<i>lovely</i>	400 (36.6)	231.62	<i>lovely</i>	217 (48.1)	347.31
<i>great</i>	251 (12.6)	94.26	<i>great</i>	226 (20.7)	130.86	<i>great</i>	74 (16.4)	118.44
<i>brilliant</i>	205 (10.3)	76.99	<i>brilliant</i>	174 (15.9)	100.75	<i>brilliant</i>	73 (16.2)	116.84
<i>wonderful</i>	150 (7.5)	56.33	<i>amazing</i>	89 (8.2)	51.53	<i>wonderful</i>	35 (7.8)	56.02
<i>amazing</i>	72 (3.6)	27.04	<i>wonderful</i>	81 (7.4)	46.90	<i>excellent</i>	20 (4.4)	32.01
<i>excellent</i>	60 (3.0)	22.53	<i>excellent</i>	52 (4.8)	30.11	<i>amazing</i>	15 (3.3)	24.00
<i>fantastic</i>	37 (1.9)	13.90	<i>cool</i>	29 (2.7)	16.79	<i>cool</i>	11 (2.4)	17.61
<i>cool</i>	16 (0.8)	6.01	<i>fantastic</i>	25 (2.3)	14.48	<i>fantastic</i>	6 (1.3)	9.60
<i>terrific</i>	13 (0.7)	4.88	<i>terrific</i>	16 (1.5)	9.26	<i>terrific</i>	0	0
<i>awesome</i>	0	0	<i>awesome</i>	0	0	<i>awesome</i>	0	0
Total	1,999	750.71	Total	1,092	632.31	Total	451	721.83

Table 7
Adjective distribution according to speaker gender in the Spoken BNC1994DS

Adjective	Female		Adjective	Male	
	No. of hits (%)	Frequency pmw		No. of hits (%)	Frequency pmw
<i>lovely</i>	2,849 (29.2)	402.84	<i>cool</i>	1,231 (23.1)	283.05
<i>cool</i>	1,735 (17.8)	245.33	<i>lovely</i>	1,084 (20.4)	249.25
<i>great</i>	1,504 (15.4)	212.66	<i>great</i>	1,049 (19.7)	241.21
<i>amazing</i>	1,410 (14.5)	199.37	<i>brilliant</i>	641 (12.0)	147.39
<i>brilliant</i>	827 (8.5)	116.94	<i>amazing</i>	611 (11.5)	140.49
<i>fantastic</i>	386 (4.0)	54.58	<i>fantastic</i>	263 (4.9)	60.47
<i>excellent</i>	362 (3.7)	51.19	<i>awesome</i>	158 (3.0)	36.33
<i>wonderful</i>	339 (3.5)	47.93	<i>wonderful</i>	153 (2.9)	35.18
<i>awesome</i>	316 (3.2)	44.68	<i>excellent</i>	125 (2.3)	28.74
<i>terrific</i>	15 (0.2)	2.12	<i>terrific</i>	10 (0.2)	2.30
Total	9,743	1,377.64	Total	5,325	1,224.41

Table 8
Adjective distribution according to speaker gender in the Spoken BNC2014

As evident in table 8, women in the 2014 corpus still have a strong preference for *lovely* over other adjectives of positive evaluation. However, its proportional share has sunk to 29.2%, which is much closer to the share of *lovely* in male speech than in the 1994 corpus. *Brilliant* has been replaced by *cool* in the top 3 most popular adjectives for both genders. *Cool* has also supplanted *lovely* and is now the male speakers' adjective of choice. Men in 2014 generally exhibit higher normalised frequencies for adjectives than 20 years ago – with the exception of *excellent*, *terrific* and *wonderful*. Women, too, make less frequent use of *terrific* and *wonderful* than in 1994. In addition, *lovely* has lost ground to *cool* in female speech while the frequencies for all other adjectives have increased. Both genders use adjectives of positive evaluation more frequently in the 2014 corpus, but the surge is greater for male speakers (83.5% vs. 93.6% increase), which also serves to diminish the relative difference between total male and female adjective frequencies (17.1% → 11.8%).

In a similar fashion to the 1994 data, the gap between the first and second most frequent adjective in the 2014 data is far more noticeable for women than it is for men.

However, the differences between *lovely* and *cool* for women and *cool* and *lovely* for men are not as drastic as in the older data. What is more, table 8 reveals that in the Spoken BNC2014 the use of individual adjectives is more equally divided between men and women than in the Spoken BNC1994DS. Women lead in the use of *lovely*, *amazing*, *excellent*, *wonderful* and *awesome*, while men use *cool*, *great*, *brilliant*, *fantastic* and *terrific* more frequently.

4.4 *Speaker age*

The relative distributions of the adjectives in the two corpora according to speaker age are presented in figures 6 and 7. A comparison of the two figures depicts the change in the role of *lovely*: where in 1994 *lovely* makes up at least 35% of the use of the studied adjectives for speakers aged 15+, the same proportions are reached only at the age of 45 in 2014. Though speakers aged 60+ in the 2014 corpus continue to use *lovely* with the highest relative frequency, its proportional share decreases from over 60% to less than 45%. Nevertheless, both corpora display the same general trend: the older the speaker, the larger the role of *lovely* is in their use of adjectives of positive evaluation.

In the Spoken BNC2014, speakers under 35 prefer *cool* to *lovely* (see figure 7). Starting from the age group 35–44, the use of *lovely* begins to increase again while *cool* becomes less frequent. For the youngest age group, *cool* comprises over 50% of the adjectives. Regardless of its increased relative frequency among younger speakers, *cool* in 2014 has not reached the superior status that *lovely* has in the 1994 data.

The increased popularity of *cool* alone is not enough to explain the decline in the relative frequencies of *lovely*. Rather, the proportions of multiple adjectives have changed in different age groups. For instance, *amazing* also occupies larger shares of

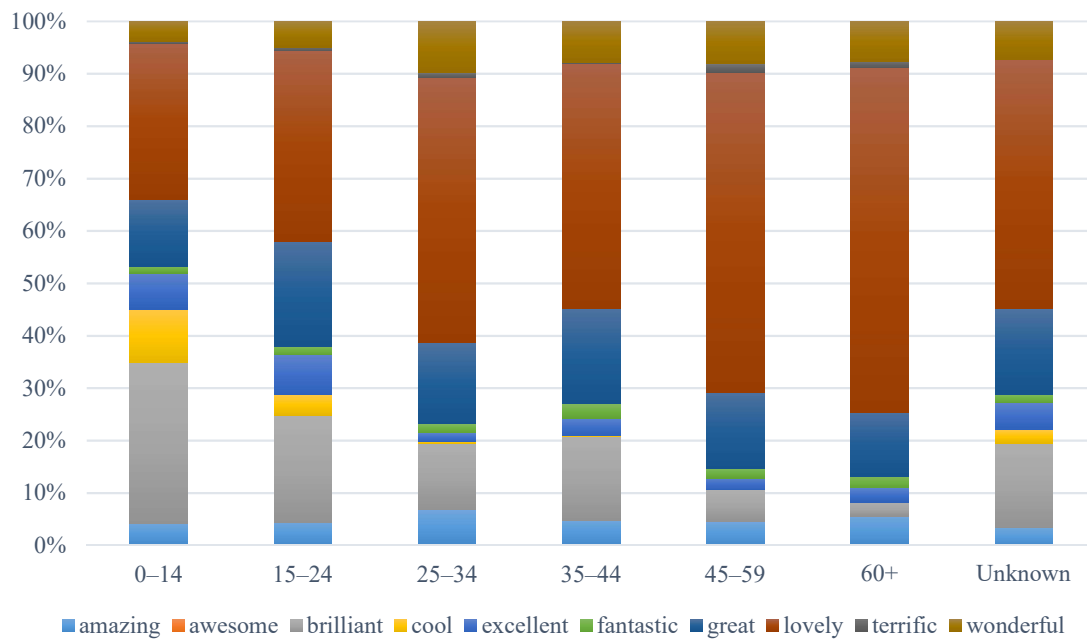


Figure 6
Adjective distribution (%) according to speaker age in the Spoken BNC1994DS

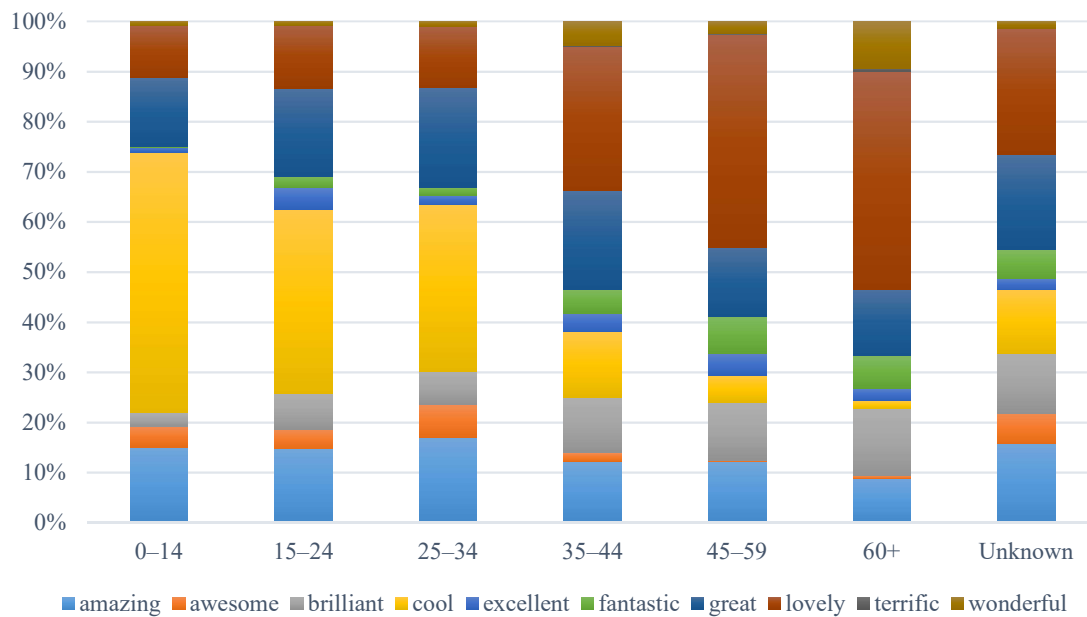


Figure 7
Adjective distribution (%) according to speaker age in the Spoken BNC2014

overall adjective use in all age groups in 2014 than in 1994. Other noteworthy observations to be made from comparing figures 6 and 7 concern the patterns of *great* and *brilliant*. The former seems to be somewhat of a constant in that it composes 10–20%

of the selected adjectives in all age groups and in both data sets. The latter has a less established presence. In the 1994 data, *brilliant* is proportionally most typical of speakers under 24 with a share of almost 25%. In 2014, its highest relative frequency is less than 15% (speakers aged 60+) and it is barely used among speakers under the age of 35. Similarly, in the course of twenty years the usage of *fantastic* has undergone a proportional increase among speakers aged 35+ while *excellent* has lost ground, especially among speakers under 25.

Tables 9 and 10 also display the distribution of adjectives according to speaker age, but in more detail. The most common adjective in each age group as well as the age group using the most adjectives have been highlighted. Inspecting normalised frequencies provides us with information not visible in figures 6 and 7. For instance, it is evident from tables 8 and 9 the most avid users of adjectives of positive evaluation are quite different in 1994 and 2014. Speakers in the oldest age group lead adjective usage in the Spoken BNC1994DS, whereas in the Spoken BNC2014 it is speakers aged 25–34 who use the selected adjectives the most. In the newer data the 60+ group are only the third most frequent users of the selected adjectives, since speakers aged 35–44 have increased their adjective usage per million words from second to last in the 1994 corpus to second place in the 2014 corpus. Likewise, the group of least frequent adjective users has changed from 0–14 to 45–59.

Despite the variation in the order of most frequent adjective users, all age groups have significantly increased their usage of the selected adjectives of positive evaluation between 1994 and 2014 (frequency pmw). The age group differences range from 44% (speakers aged 45–59) to 126% (speakers aged 0–14) with a total corpus-wide increase of 87%.

	Age						Unknown	Total
	0–14	15–24	25–34	35–44	45–59	60+		
<i>amazing</i>	10 22.97	19 31.87	44 53.92	23 27.85	27 31.40	37 47.22	16 22.92	176 35.10
<i>awesome</i>	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
<i>brilliant</i>	72 165.41	88 147.62	83 101.71	76 92.03	37 43.04	18 22.97	78 111.75	452 90.14
<i>cool</i>	24 55.14	17 24.06	2 2.45	1 1.21	—	—	12 17.19	56 11.17
<i>excellent</i>	16 36.76	33 28.52	11 13.48	16 19.37	13 15.12	18 22.97	25 35.82	132 26.32
<i>fantastic</i>	3 6.89	7 11.74	11 13.48	13 15.74	11 12.79	15 19.14	8 11.46	68 13.56
<i>great</i>	30 68.92	86 144.27	101 123.77	87 105.35	88 102.36	81 103.37	78 111.75	551 109.88
<i>lovely</i>	70 160.81	157 263.37	329 403.17	223 270.02	366 425.71	438 558.96	229 328.03	1,812 361.34
<i>terrific</i>	1 2.30	3 5.03	6 7.36	1 1.21	10 11.63	8 10.21	—	29 5.78
<i>wonderful</i>	9 20.68	21 35.23	64 78.43	37 44.80	49 56.99	51 65.08	35 50.14	266 53.05
Total	235 539.87	431 723.02	651 797.77	477 577.58	601 699.05	666 849.93	481 689.12	3,542 706.34

Table 9

Adjective distribution according to speaker age in the Spoken BNC1994DS (frequency per million words)

	Age							Total
	0–14	15–24	25–34	35–44	45–59	60+	Unknown	
<i>amazing</i>	57 184.36	504 181.44	450 277.38	258 186.99	269 122.58	246 133.29	237 183.22	2021 176.93
<i>awesome</i>	16 51.75	130 46.80	175 107.87	37 26.82	8 3.65	15 8.13	93 71.90	474 41.50
<i>brilliant</i>	10 32.24	243 87.48	178 109.72	233 168.87	254 115.75	372 201.56	178 137.61	1,468 128.52
<i>cool</i>	196 633.94	1254 451.44	880 542.43	278 201.48	120 54.68	45 24.38	193 149.20	2,966 259.66
<i>excellent</i>	4 12.94	154 55.44	52 32.05	79 57.26	95 43.29	69 37.39	34 26.28	487 42.63
<i>fantastic</i>	1 3.23	76 27.36	42 25.89	100 72.48	165 75.19	180 97.53	85 65.71	649 56.82
<i>great</i>	52 168.19	598 215.28	525 323.61	418 302.95	305 138.99	368 199.40	287 221.87	2,553 223.50
<i>lovely</i>	39 126.14	429 154.44	324 199.71	610 442.10	938 427.44	1,213 657.25	380 293.77	3,933 344.32
<i>terrific</i>	—	—	—	4 2.90	4 1.82	17 9.21	—	25 4.61
<i>wonderful</i>	3 9.70	27 9.72	28 17.26	100 72.48	55 25.06	259 140.34	20 15.46	492 43.07
Total	378 1,222.60	3,415 1,229.41	2,654 1,635.93	2,117 1,534.30	2,213 1,008.446	2,784 1,508.47	1,507 1,165.03	15,068 1,319.14

Table 10
Adjective distribution according to speaker age in the Spoken BNC2014 (frequency per million wor

4.5 *Speaker age and gender*

We now have data on the correlation between adjective use and speaker age as well as adjective use and speaker gender. Since it has been established that these two variables contribute to language patterns as interacting dimensions instead of as independent characteristics (see section 2.2), it is important to acknowledge this also in the current study. Combining the data on these two variables provides us with more accurate, albeit generalised, knowledge on even more specific speaker categories. The results for this section are visible in tables 11 and 12, where the most frequent users of each adjective are highlighted.

The normalised frequencies of adjective use according to speaker age and gender displayed in tables 11 and 12 reveal patterns otherwise masked by the combining of categories. For instance, table 9 portrays *lovely* as the most popular adjective in speakers over the age of 15 in the Spoken BNC1994DS, yet in reality male speakers aged 15–24 prefer both *brilliant* and *great* over *lovely* (table 11). In the 2014 data, the most popular adjectives largely follow the same pattern already visible in table 10: speakers under 35 use *cool*, while speakers over 35 favour *lovely*. Again, male speakers, this time aged 35–44, deviate from this pattern, since they distinctly prefer *great* to *lovely*.

	0-14		15-24		25-34		35-44		45-59		60+		Unknown		
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	U
<i>amazing</i>	4 21.31	6 24.24	11 28.71	8 37.56	24 45.45	20 69.45	9 17.70	14 44.11	8 14.86	19 59.12	15 31.24	22 72.49	1 27.06	—	15 24.01
<i>awesome</i>	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
<i>brilliant</i>	32 170.46	40 161.58	48 125.28	40 187.81	37 70.07	46 159.73	46 90.46	30 94.53	28 52.01	9 28.00	14 29.16	4 13.18	—	5 138.01	73 116.83
<i>cool</i>	4 21.31	20 80.79	11 28.71	6 28.17	—	2 6.94	1 1.97	—	—	—	—	—	—	1 27.60	11 17.60
<i>excellent</i>	5 26.63	11 44.43	19 49.59	14 65.73	4 7.58	7 24.31	12 23.60	4 12.60	7 13.00	6 18.67	12 25.00	6 19.77	1 27.06	4 110.41	20 32.01
<i>fantastic</i>	—	3 12.12	2 5.22	5 23.48	8 15.15	3 10.42	10 19.67	3 9.45	5 9.29	6 18.67	12 25.00	3 9.88	—	2 55.20	6 9.60
<i>great</i>	10 53.27	20 80.79	46 120.06	40 187.81	48 90.90	53 184.04	48 94.40	39 122.89	41 76.16	47 146.24	56 116.65	25 82.37	2 54.12	2 55.20	74 118.43
<i>lovely</i>	40 213.08	30 121.18	125 326.25	32 150.25	238 450.72	91 315.99	170 334.32	53 167.00	262 486.67	104 323.61	355 739.45	83 273.47	5 135.29	7 193.21	217 347.28
<i>terrific</i>	—	1 4.04	1 2.61	2 9.39	3 5.68	3 10.42	—	1 3.15	7 13.00	3 9.33	2 4.17	6 19.77	—	—	—
<i>wonderful</i>	2 10.65	7 28.28	13 33.93	8 37.56	34 64.39	30 104.17	24 47.20	13 40.96	33 61.30	16 49.79	44 91.65	7 23.06	—	—	35 56.01
Total	97 516.71	138 557.44	276 720.37	155 727.78	396 749.94	255 885.47	320 629.30	157 494.71	391 726.28	210 653.43	510 1,062.31	156 513.99	9 243.52	21 579.63	451 721.77

Table 11

Adjective distribution according to speaker age and gender in the Spoken BNC1994DS (frequency per million words)

	0-14		15-24		25-34		35-44		45-59		60+		Unknown	
	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M
<i>amazing</i>	22 129.66	35 250.90	373 200.38	131 142.96	318 396.80	132 160.80	237 237.60	21 54.93	201 124.06	68 118.40	93 134.73	153 132.43	166 178.14	71 197.06
<i>awesome</i>	2 11.79	14 100.36	86 46.20	44 48.02	119 148.49	56 68.22	33 33.08	4 10.46	5 3.09	3 5.22	5 7.24	10 8.66	66 70.83	27 74.94
<i>brilliant</i>	5 29.47	5 35.84	117 62.85	126 137.51	99 123.53	79 96.23	177 177.45	56 146.47	183 112.95	71 123.63	114 165.16	258 223.31	132 141.65	46 127.67
<i>cool</i>	115 677.75	81 580.65	803 431.38	451 492.19	365 455.45	515 627.35	234 234.60	44 115.08	97 59.87	23 40.05	7 10.14	38 32.89	114 122.34	79 219.27
<i>excellent</i>	3 17.68	1 7.20	131 70.38	23 25.10	34 42.43	18 21.93	72 72.18	7 18.31	74 45.67	21 36.57	30 43.46	39 33.76	18 19.32	16 44.41
<i>fantastic</i>	1 5.90	—	36 19.34	40 43.65	18 22.46	24 29.24	91 91.23	9 23.54	120 74.07	45 78.35	52 75.33	128 110.79	68 72.97	17 47.18
<i>great</i>	20 117.87	32 229.39	377 202.53	221 241.18	250 311.95	275 334.99	319 319.81	99 258.94	211 130.23	94 163.67	135 195.58	233 201.68	192 206.04	95 263.67
<i>lovely</i>	14 82.51	25 179.21	347 186.41	82 89.49	194 242.07	130 158.36	548 549.40	62 162.16	835 515.38	103 179.34	594 860.55	619 535.78	317 340.18	63 174.86
<i>terrific</i>	—	—	—	—	—	—	1 1.00	3 7.85	4 2.47	—	10 14.49	7 6.06	—	—
<i>wonderful</i>	1 5.90	2 14.34	17 9.13	10 10.91	14 17.47	14 17.05	92 92.23	8 20.92	49 30.24	6 10.45	155 224.55	104 90.02	11 11.80	9 24.98
Total	183 1,078.51	195 1,397.86	2287 1,228.61	1128 1,231.02	1411 1,760.66	1243 1,514.17	1804 1,808.60	313 818.67	1779 1,098.05	434 755.68	1195 1,731.24	1589 1,375.38	1084 1,163.27	423 1,174.04

Table 12
Adjective distribution according to speaker age and gender in the Spoken BNC2014 (frequency per million words)

When considering the most frequent users of each adjective in the 1994 data (table 11), it seems that these are limited to speakers under 25 and over 59. In other words, speakers aged 25–59 are not the most frequent users of any of the studied adjectives – with the exception of *wonderful*, used most by men aged 25–34. No such pattern is detectable in the 2014 data (table 12). The age-gender combination that boasts the highest frequency of adjective use has, however, shifted from women aged 60+ in 1994 to women aged 35–44 in 2014. This development is not apparent when inspecting only the correlation between the use of adjectives and speaker gender (section 4.4), as the difference between male and female speakers in this age group is rather prominent, thus reducing the total adjective frequency for speakers aged 35–44 (table 12). Consequently, 25–34-year-olds, who exhibit more equal high frequencies for both men and women, emerge as the age group with the overall highest frequency of adjectives in the 2014 data (see section 4.4).

Figure 8 depicts the age- and gender-related developments in overall adjective use based on the normalised frequencies presented in tables 11 and 12. Several trends are visible here. Firstly, in the 1994 data, men lead in adjective use until the age of 35 when women take over. In the 2014 data, the switch happens earlier: women begin to use more adjectives of positive evaluation than their male peers at 25, though the male lead is really only noticeable in the youngest age group. Secondly, 25–34, i.e. young adulthood, is a turning point for most speakers after which the use of the studied adjectives of positive evaluation declines. Female speakers in the 2014 corpus are an exception, as the decline occurs one age group later, i.e. around middle age.

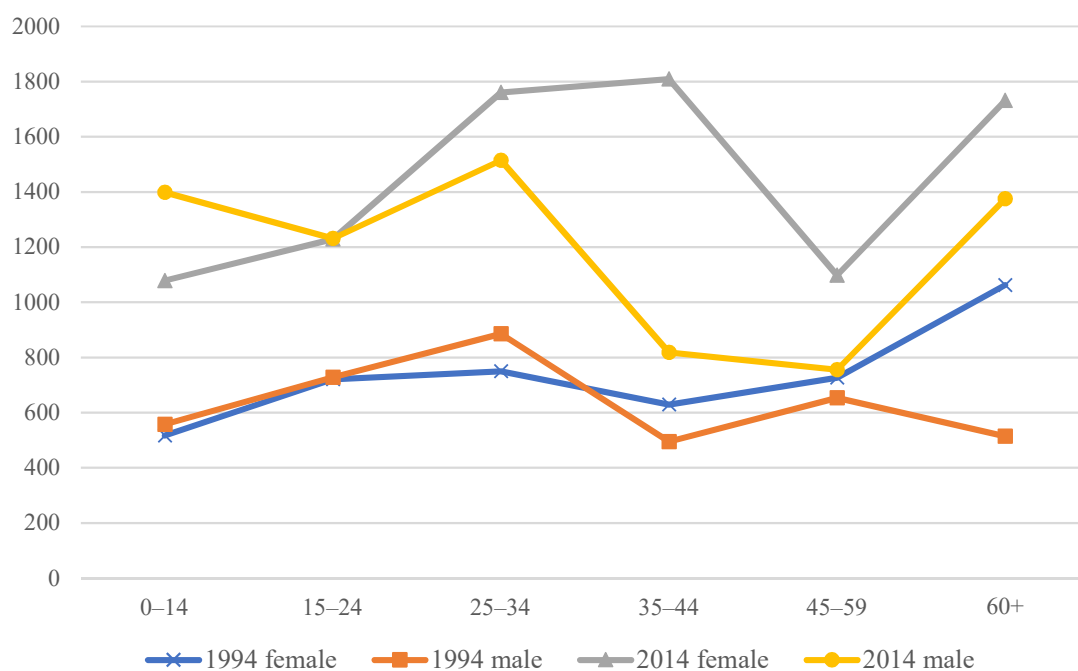


Figure 8

Normalised frequencies of total adjective use (pmw) according to gender and age in the Spoken BNC1994DS and the SpokenBNC2014⁹

Thirdly, adjective use then increases again among speakers aged 60+, with the exception of men in the 1994 corpus. Lastly, according to the results displayed in figure 8, the differences between female and male speakers are more pronounced in the Spoken BNC2014 than in the Spoken BNC1994DS. The 2014 corpus also features greater variation in frequency between different age groups within both genders – the most notable instance of this being the severe but temporary dip in adjective frequency among women aged 45–59.

⁹ The ‘unknown’ categories have been omitted as irrelevant.

5 DISCUSSION

This chapter summarises the results of the analysis presented in chapter 4 by answering the research questions presented in chapter 1. These findings are then connected to the existing larger sociolinguistic framework.

The first research question, ‘how do the selected adjectives rank in frequency’, was addressed in section 4.1. Both percentage shares and normalised frequencies were used to depict the distribution of the set of adjectives of positive evaluation in the Spoken BNC1994DS and the Spoken BNC2014. In accordance with previous studies (e.g. Precht 2003, Tagliamonte & Pabst 2020), the corpus analysis confirmed that *lovely* is and remains a firm favourite among speakers of British English in both the 1990s and 2010s. *Great* also has an established position in the British lexicon of positive evaluation, displaying little change in proportional use between the two corpora. *Brilliant* is the third most popular form in the 1994 corpus, supporting Tagliamonte & Brooke’s (2014: 9) observation about its popularity in York in 1997.

In a similar fashion to *great*, *excellent*, *fantastic* and *wonderful* seem to be well-settled, if not in an outstanding role, in British English: despite their low to moderate relative frequencies they are distinctly present in speech in both 1994 and 2014. This phenomenon of layering mentioned in chapter 1 (Hopper 1991) was to be expected based on the findings of Tagliamonte & Pabst (2020). Likewise, *terrific*, one of the oldest adjectives of positive evaluation in this study (see figure 1), yields very few tokens in both the 1994 and 2014 corpus. Nevertheless, it has not yet completely disappeared and continues to exist alongside newer forms.

The most significant difference in the ranking of adjective frequencies concerns *cool*: the U.S.-originating adjective is barely present in the 1994 data but is the

second most popular adjective of positive evaluation in the 2014 corpus. Tagliamonte & Pabst (2020) also report the scarcity of *cool* in the British English of the 1990s. Though *cool* was used increasingly often in American mainstream teen culture as early as in the 1960s and 1970s (Moore 2004: 75–6), it had apparently not yet permeated British English at the end of the 20th century (Tagliamonte & Pabst 2020: 24). By the 2010s, globalisation and thereby presumably the pervasiveness of *cool* in the (American) media had worked its magic and *cool* had assimilated into British speech.

The other ‘Americanism’ included in both Tagliamonte & Pabst (2020) and this study is *awesome*, which is completely absent in the demographic section of the Spoken BNC1994. Tagliamonte & Pabst (2020: 24) suggest that speakers in the UK may resist words so strongly associated with the US or feel disinclined to express attitudes and values embodied by *awesome* and *cool*. Yet attitudes change. Two decades later, *cool* is a staple in the speech of speakers under 45, but *awesome* still only accounts for 3% of the ca. 15 000 adjectives included in this study. Tagliamonte & Pabst (2020: 23) note that it may take ‘take some time before [new adjectives] successfully encroach on a large share of the system, if they ever do so’. Considering that *awesome* as a colloquial general term of approval is newer than *cool* (see figure 1), it may be that the use of *awesome* in British English is still on the rise, even if its trajectory is not set to match that of *cool*. The status of *awesome* as an incoming form is reinforced by the fact that the most enthusiastic users of *awesome* in the Spoken BNC2014 are 25–34-year-old female speakers. This is consistent with Labov’s (1990) theory about linguistic change mentioned in section 2.2.1: women tend to use more incoming forms than men. If young speakers in the UK are sufficiently exposed to *awesome* and do not continue to resist it, the form may spread in

the speech community. Alternatively, it may remain a vernacular form associated with young adults prone to American influence.

In addition to the increased normalised frequencies for 7 out of 10 adjectives in the 2014 data (*lovely*, *terrific* and *wonderful* experienced a slight decline in this aspect), the total normalised frequencies for each corpus indicate a considerable rise (86.8%) in overall use of adjectives of positive evaluation during the twenty or so years between the compilation of the two corpora. Now, in theory this could be attributed to the adjectives selected for this study: if one or more forms more prevalent than the ones examined here were to exist in the 1994 data, excluding these forms from the analysis in favour of less popular ones would influence the results. This option is easily eliminated: some quick searches in the Spoken BNC1994DS inform us that the existence of an incredibly popular, excluded form is highly unlikely (with the potential exception of INTENSIFIER+*good* included in Tagliamonte & Pabst, but this is a more complex construction and therefore not comparable). What is more, if one meaning can only ever be ‘healthily encoded’ with about three main forms at a time as Tagliamonte & Pabst (2020: 25) and the results of this study suggest, there is no room for more primary adjectives in either corpus. Hence, it is possible that speakers of British English in the 21st century simply express positive evaluation more freely than their peers two decades earlier. Whether this is caused by societal circumstances (cf. Eckert 1997: 166) or is motivated by purely linguistic factors requires further research.

The second research question concerns the syntactic distribution of the 10 adjectives. The relatively stable proportions for the two corpora were presented in section 4.2: roughly half of the adjectives appeared in predicative position in both the Spoken BNC1994DS and the Spoken BNC2014. Attributive and stand-alone adjectives each

comprise approximately a little less than a quarter of the tokens, leaving around 2% of the adjectives to be categorised as postpositive, ‘other’ or ‘unknown’. When comparing the 1994 and 2014 data on an overall level, then, the syntactic distributions are quite similar in the two corpora. A closer look at individual adjectives was required to reveal more detailed distributional patterns.

Firstly, the predicative position is the most common position for all adjectives except for *great* and *terrific* in the 1994 corpus and *excellent*, *terrific* and *wonderful* in the 2014 corpus. Due to the low frequency of *terrific* in both corpora, we cannot draw conclusions about any preferences regarding attributive or predicative position; we can merely remark that *terrific* seems to avoid the stand-alone position. *Great*, on the other hand, stands out in the 1994 corpus as the only adjective preferring the stand-alone position. *Excellent* is also comparatively frequent as a stand-alone adjective in 1994 but considerably more so in 2014, where it is the only adjective used in a single position other than predicative over 50% of the time.

Secondly, *great* in 2014 has joined the majority in favouring the predicative position. This development is in line with the ‘general systemic evolution’ predicted by Tagliamonte & Pabst (2020: 22) where new adjectives are first introduced in the stand-alone position before spreading to predicative and finally to attributive position. Such a considerable shift in syntactic preference also suggests that other forms have at least partially taken over the slot previously filled by the stand-alone use of *great*, i.e. expressing approval or admiration (*OED Online*) swiftly and simply. The most obvious contender is *cool*, especially since the new form, like *great* in the Spoken BNC1994DS, is especially popular among younger speakers.

Wonderful is the only adjective of positive evaluation in the study that went from favouring the predicative position in the 1994 data to preferring the attributive position in the 2014 data. This also aligns with the trajectory predicted by Tagliamonte & Pabst (2020), as *wonderful* is an older adjective, the use of which was found to be declining in both Tagliamonte & Pabst (2020) and this study. The other older forms, however, do not conform to this pattern; predicative use always trumps attributive use (the insignificant *terrific* excluded).

The third and most extensive research question asked how gender and age correlate with the use of the selected adjectives of positive evaluation. As discussed in section 2.2.1, the notion of ‘men and women’s language’ is a deep-rooted one that also extends to adjective usage. When making broad generalisations, some of the findings of previous research were confirmed by the analysis in section 4.3: e.g. that women use more adjectives (of positive evaluation) than men and that women use *lovely* more than men. There is also evidence of women leading in the use of the new form *awesome*. Yet upon examining frequencies for individual adjectives in the Spoken BNC1994DS, it was found that women actually only lead in the use of *lovely* and *wonderful*. While the most popular adjectives for both genders in the 1994 corpus are *lovely*, *great* and *brilliant*, female speakers use *lovely* over 90% more often than male speakers, which markedly raises their overall adjective frequency. Still, both genders exhibit a strong preference for *lovely* over the other adjectives.

In the Spoken BNC2014, the 10 adjectives were more evenly distributed between the genders, with women using *lovely*, *amazing*, *excellent*, *wonderful* and *awesome* more often and men leading in the use of *cool*, *great*, *brilliant*, *fantastic* and *terrific*. *Lovely* seems to be such a firm favourite with female speakers that not even the

rise of *cool* can sway its position. Contrary to the case of *awesome*, the fact that male speakers lead in the use of *cool* in both corpora does not provide support for Labov's principle regarding women as pioneers of linguistic change. The proportionally larger increase in male adjective use, though, could be taken as an indication that the relaxation of gender norms in the 21st century is affecting male speech patterns: using adjectives of positive evaluation entails expression of emotion. Traditionally, women have been thought of as more emotional than men (Feldman Barrett et al. 1998: 556) and this may have been a stronger restricting factor in the 1990s than in the 2010s. It remains to be seen whether this disparity in adjective use will dissolve in the coming decades as societies increasingly strive towards a culture that privileges individual expression over gender-prescribed behavioural norms.

The data on speaker age retrieved for this study serves to further illustrate the changing distributions of *lovely* and *cool*. As already stated by Tagliamonte & Pabst (2020: 17), *lovely* is an older form that is primarily associated with older speakers. In both corpora, its relative frequency increases with age. Correspondingly, the use of the incoming forms *cool* and *awesome* was found to decrease with age. Meanwhile, *brilliant* and *fantastic* saw a shift from decreasing frequency with age in the Spoken BNC1994DS (in which younger speakers had already been identified as the most frequent users of *brilliant* by Rayson et al. [1997: 9]) to increasing frequency with age in the Spoken BNC2014.

On the whole, it seems that *lovely*, *fantastic*, *brilliant*, *terrific* and *wonderful* are becoming more characteristic of speakers aged 35+, while *cool* and *awesome* are good indicators for recognising younger speakers (cf. Tagliamonte & Brooke 2014: 9). Considering that *lovely*, *terrific* and *wonderful* are older forms, it stands to reason that

they are used more frequently by older speakers. The positively evaluative senses of *fantastic* and *brilliant*, on the other hand, are not older than the recent connotations of *cool*. The words have nonetheless existed for centuries with other meanings that may enhance their more dated feel. What is more, by 2014 they had already been part of the British vocabulary for decades and, in contrast to *cool* and *awesome*, no longer retained any novelty value – nor is their use promoted by the globally influential American English. Nevertheless, *fantastic* and *brilliant* are nowhere near as close to becoming obsolete as *terrific*. In light of the very low total token count and the fact that it is not used at all by speakers under 35 in the 2014 corpus, *terrific* cannot be expected to linger much longer in spoken language without a serious revival lead by younger speakers.

In order to obtain more precise knowledge about different groups of speakers, section 4.5 analysed speaker age and gender together. It transpired that grouping speakers according to only age or gender had obscured the male preference for *great* over *lovely* in certain age groups, since the normalised frequencies for each age group were often mainly representative of the larger numbers of female-produced tokens. Furthermore, though 25–34-year-olds were the most frequent adjective users in the Spoken BNC2014, dividing the age groups by gender actually assigned this title to 35–44-year-old women. In the Spoken BNC1994DS the situation was different, since women aged 60+ made such enthusiastic use of the studied adjectives that it served as compensation for the considerably lower frequencies produced by male speakers.

Examining variation in normalised frequencies by gender and age group (figure 8) revealed fluctuating tendencies, not all of which align with previous research. For instance, the fact that young male speakers used adjectives of positive evaluation more frequently than their female peers in both corpora is further evidence for the fact that age

and gender ought to be studied as interactive variables. Based on the data used in this study, it would be misleading to simply state that women use more adjectives than men. The data from the two BNC corpora also provides compelling evidence that adult language patterns do, in fact, exhibit meaningful variation. The tendency to treat adults as a single homogenous age mass (Eckert 1997: 165) is, as established earlier, an approach detrimental to sociolinguistic research.

As is often the case, reasons for the variation occurring in the data of this study most likely lie in social circumstances. None of the trajectories in figure 8 neatly fit all the explanations proposed here; inferences must be made based on general trends. The first prevailing tendency is the increase in adjective use until young adulthood, i.e. ages 25–34. As the semantic field of positive evaluation encompasses a diverse range of forms and is ever welcoming new ones (Tagliamonte & Pabst 2020: 6–7), the choice of specific adjectives is one of the ways that younger speakers are able to signal their affiliation with a certain peer group (cf. Eckert 1997: 163). Admittedly, 25–34-year-olds have long since left adolescence behind and as legal and physiological adults are essentially thought by many researchers to be fixed in their speech patterns (see section 2.2.2). However, sociological research in recent decades has argued that young people in industrialised societies no longer transition straight to adulthood from adolescence: the lengthening of education, the instability of the job market and changes in the role and timing of marriage and childbirth, to mention a few compelling factors, have delayed the onset of the life phase traditionally perceived as adulthood (Arnett 2000; Brannen & Nilsen 2002; Plug, Zeijl & Du Bois-Raymond 2003). The stability conventionally associated with adulthood may be absent for most or all of one's twenties as young people explore possible directions in multiple domains of their lives (Arnett 2000: 469). It is therefore quite

possible that the heightened need to linguistically signal one's values, especially those related to youth and youthfulness, is still present in the late twenties and early thirties and reflected in the use of adjectives of positive evaluation.

According to this theory, the reduced frequencies of adjective use in middle age found in the BNC corpora are an indication of not only linguistic, but also a broader sense of stability. Be that as it may, this does not explain the final increase in adjective frequency among the oldest speakers, nor does it clarify why men in the 1994 corpus do not exhibit this increase and women in the 2014 data display an abrupt decline only after the age of 44. The claims that adults use more standard variables to conform to workplace pressure (Eckert 1997: 164; Bailey 2002: 324) and then potentially relax their linguistic behaviour after retirement (Eckert 1997: 165; Buchstaller 2006: 15) do not seem relevant here, as really only *cool* and *awesome*, which are not common among older speakers anyway, are less established forms.

It is possible that middle age is a life stage where evaluative language does not play as great a role as earlier and later in life: perhaps evaluation is expressed in other ways, evaluative adjectives are used more sparingly (e.g. not as fillers) or expression of affect is not deemed as acceptable as among the young and the old. More interdisciplinary research together with qualitative sociolinguistic research is needed to determine the nature of the socio-psychological relationship between the use of evaluative language and different stages of adulthood.

6 CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to expand the limited existing body of research on adjectival variation by studying ten adjectives of positive evaluation in spoken British English. Unlike the only other piece of similar research discovered so far (Tagliamonte & Pabst 2020), this study did not aim to provide a full inventory of adjectives in the semantic field of positive evaluation. It is therefore possible that the usage of other minor forms, especially incoming ones, adheres to different patterns. The corpus analysis carried out in chapters 4 and 5 has nonetheless been able to shed light on the distributional patterns of the 10 selected adjectives and their role in language variation. Both synchronic and diachronic variation was found in overall distribution, syntactic preferences and in relation to the sociolinguistic variables of gender and age. Not all the discovered patterns conform to previous research, confirming that there are no linguistic axioms – each speech community is unique, though they may exhibit some shared patterns.

As this thesis built on purely quantitative analysis, surveying the contexts in which the selected adjectives occurred fell outside the scope of this study. Even informal conversations such as those recorded for the two BNC corpora vary in their nature, depending, among other things, on the setting and participants. Identities and their linguistic manifestations are far from stable and easily categorised according to researcher-appointed labels (Mendoza-Denton 2002), meaning that the attitudes and actions of speakers can differ vastly from one situation to another. An individual may adopt different roles and thus display different language patterns when talking to their siblings, parents, friends, grandparents and elderly neighbours (Giles et al. 2003; see also Milroy 2002 on social networks and Schilling-Estes 2002 on stylistic variation), not to mention the effects of participant gender on conversational patterns (Mulac et al. 1988;

Biber & Burges 2000). Closer scrutiny of individual conversations in the Spoken BNC1994DS and Spoken BNC2014 could yield valuable information on the particularities of adjective use in e.g. peer-group and intrafamilial conversations.

To answer the fourth and final research question of this study, the most prominent differences between the two corpora can be found in the roles of *cool* and *lovely* as well as in the increased frequencies of adjective use in the Spoken BNC2014, especially among male speakers. As mentioned in chapter 5, more interdisciplinary research is required to connect language-external developments to the rise of adjectives of positive evaluation. Further research would also help to determine whether there have been changes in the use of evaluative language in general, including expressions of negative evaluation, in the past decades.

At any rate, the introduction of a new primary and minor form, *cool* and *awesome*, together with the shifting patterns in the use of other adjectives demonstrates the dynamic nature of the semantic field of positive valuation. In this field, two decades is clearly ample time even for primary forms to change. Still, this and the other observed lesser changes that occurred in the two decades between the compilation of the corpora do not amount to a complete transformation in the order of things, even from a retrospective point of view. Though changes occur faster in spoken than in written language (Biber & Gray 2016: 32ff.), abrupt changes are rare (Chambers 2002: 367). What is more, even rapidly progressing changes often go unnoticed in everyday life. Research on sound change has shown that people tend to mostly interact with, and consequently speak much the same as, other people their age, which leads to a diminished awareness of language change on the individual level (Chambers 2002: 366–7). In fact, it is likely that the vast majority of UK speakers are unaware of the changes, or even the

patterns, perceived in the previous chapters (with the possible exception of the rise of *cool*; the emergence of new lexical items is perhaps the most perceptible development to the non-linguist).

The complete disappearance of any individual adjective is not documented in the BNC corpus data. However, the eventual eradication of some older forms could be expected to eventually ensue if new forms continue to regularly enter the lexicon. The saturation point for primary forms in the field of positive evaluation is currently thought to be around three adjectives (Tagliamonte & Pabst 2020; this study), but, in accordance with the principle of layering, there seems to be as of yet no limit on the array of minor forms that can co-exist. On the other hand, the introduction of new forms only results in language change if they diffuse in the community to a certain extent. *Cool* seems to be firmly established enough in informal spoken British English to be considered an example of language change, but only time (and new data compilations) will tell whether even newer terms of positive evaluation such as *lit*, *snatched*, *fire* and *on point* (*Urban Dictionary*) will prevail.

Discerning the reasons behind the successful diffusion of one term and the limited spread of another (in the case of *cool* and *awesome*, it is unclear why *awesome* carries ‘more American’ connotations than *cool*, thus potentially hindering its initial spread in the 1990s [Tagliamonte & Pabst 2020: 24]) is a crucial component of understanding language change. Pinpointing these factors proves an intriguing, if challenging, task for future research in this field.

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APPENDIX A: Adjective frequencies according to syntactic position in the Spoken BNC1994DS

	Predicative (%)	Attributive (%)	Stand-alone (%)	Post-positive (%)	Other (%)	Unclear (%)	Total (100%)
<i>amazing</i>	116 (65.9%)	23 (13.1%)	33 (18.6%)	—	2 (1.1%)	2 (1.1%)	176
<i>awesome</i>	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
<i>brilliant</i>	254 (56.2%)	84 (18.6%)	104 (23.0%)	—	1 (0.2%)	9 (2.0%)	452
<i>cool</i>	43 (76.8%)	10 (17.9%)	3 (5.4%)	—	—	—	56
<i>excellent</i>	56 (42.4%)	25 (18.9%)	48 (36.3%)	—	1 (0.8%)	2 (1.5%)	132
<i>fantastic</i>	42 (61.7%)	20 (29.4%)	4 (5.9%)	—	—	2 (2.9%)	68
<i>great</i>	216 (39.2%)	96 (17.4%)	231 (41.9%)	—	—	8 (1.5%)	551
<i>lovely</i>	837 (46.2%)	585 (32.3%)	355 (19.6%)	—	4 (0.2%)	31 (1.7%)	1812
<i>terrific</i>	11 (37.9%)	13 (44.8%)	3 (10.3%)	1 (3.4%)	—	1 (3.4%)	29
<i>wonderful</i>	145 (54.5%)	67 (25.2%)	48 (18.0%)	1 (0.4%)	2 (0.8%)	3 (1.1%)	266
Total	1720 (48.6%)	924 (26.1%)	829 (23.4%)	2 (0.1%)	10 (0.3%)	58 (1.6%)	3542

APPENDIX B: Adjective frequencies according to syntactic position in the Spoken BNC2014

	Predicative (%)	Attributive (%)	Stand-alone (%)	Post-positive (%)	Other (%)	Unclear (%)	Total (100%)
<i>amazing</i>	1424 (70.5%)	346 (17.1%)	206 (10.2%)	15 (0.7%)	7 (0.3%)	23 (1.1%)	2021
<i>awesome</i>	269 (56.8%)	49 (10.3%)	134 (28.3%)	1 (0.2%)	16 (3.4%)	5 (1.1%)	474
<i>brilliant</i>	828 (56.4%)	179 (12.2%)	446 (30.4%)	2 (0.1%)	4 (0.3%)	9 (0.6%)	1468
<i>cool</i>	1580 (53.3%)	271 (9.1%)	1070 (36.1%)	15 (0.5%)	9 (0.3%)	21 (0.7%)	2966
<i>excellent</i>	112 (23.0%)	68 (14.0%)	303 (62.2%)	—	—	4 (0.8%)	487
<i>fantastic</i>	312 (48.1%)	186 (28.7%)	148 (22.8%)	—	—	3 (0.5%)	649
<i>great</i>	1302 (51.0%)	685 (26.8%)	549 (21.5%)	2 (0.1%)	5 (0.2%)	10 (0.4%)	2553
<i>lovely</i>	1862 (47.3%)	1344 (34.2%)	686 (17.4%)	6 (0.2%)	6 (0.2%)	29 (0.7%)	3933
<i>terrific</i>	11 (44.0%)	11 (44.0%)	3 (12.0%)	—	—	—	25
<i>wonderful</i>	195 (39.6%)	209 (42.5%)	80 (16.3%)	3 (0.6%)	3 (0.6%)	2 (0.4%)	492
Total	7895 (52.4%)	3348 (22.2%)	3625 (24.1%)	44 (0.3%)	50 (0.3%)	106 (0.7%)	15068