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## Ageing with the corpus

This paper reports on a corpus study of stereotypes of age and ageing, including gender-based stereotypes. Data was drawn from a large reference corpus, and, in order to identify stereotypes, we started by examining collocates of central items: age indicators such as *young* and *old*, and primary gender-marked words such as *man* and *woman*. Our study and findings are in keeping with other discourse-oriented corpus research in these areas: relevant studies include those of *elderly* (Baker 2006, Mautner 2007), *man/woman* (Pearce 2008), *boy/girl* (Holmes and Sigley 2001, Sigley and Holmes 2002), *man/woman/girl/boy* (Caldas-Coulthard and Moon 2010), and *bachelor/spinster* (Baker 2006, Stubbs 2001).

In our paper, we will focus mainly on what we learned from adjective collocates of central items: these seemed particularly revealing in terms of institutionalized evaluations. It was unsurprising that, for example, items clustering with the young were mainly positive (e.g. *beautiful, fresh, attractive, pretty, fit, talented, dynamic*) and those clustering with the old mainly negative (e.g. *sick, tired, infirm, frail, grey, fat, decrepit*, but the extent to which this happened was nonetheless dismaying.  Factoring in gender produced a more nuanced picture: here we examined combinations such as *young man*, *middle-aged women*, *old lady* – all classifying people according to stage of life – to see what kinds of attribute are associated with men and women at each stage. What emerged were stereotypes that reflected rather traditional social roles/personas and social expectations: "fine young men", suitable as husbands/employees; attractive young women, suitable as mates; predatory older men and sad middle-aged men; old women as gossips or witches; the stubborn old. This is specific linguistic evidence for the age stereotypes referred to widely in the media and in the sociological literature, and it has provided us with benchmarks to use in analysing discourses beyond the confines of a reference corpus.

In the final part of our paper, we look at sets of adjectives which function as signifiers of age and evaluate accordingly. Some are obvious (*fresh, nubile, wrinkled, grey-haired*), but others perhaps less so: for example, *tall, slim, talented* are strongly associated with younger people; *tired, smelly, kindly* with old and older people. Deviant usage ("young" adjectives applied to the old, and vice versa) is likely to be signalled with *still, but, for one's age, prematurely*, etc.  Also interesting are contexts where stereotypes are contested or resisted – for example, in dating ads placed by older people, or magazine features aimed at older readers – and here again corpus data provides some useful insights into the lexical strategies adopted. We conclude by discussing wider implications for studies of gender and age, sexism and ageism, in language.

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