

## Lexical Variation in British English

### Introduction

The purpose of this assignment is to explore lexical variation within British English. This has been done via a brief survey, which primarily focuses upon a combination of BBC voices, themes, and concepts, and primary research. This piece of work firstly presents a summary of the BBC voices upon which the survey was based. This is followed by a short description of how the survey was designed. Then follows a summary of the research findings, which are presented as a graph. The main part of this assignment takes the form of a discussion, which critically examines the results in relation to the BBC voice findings. A conclusion then summarises the main findings.

### BBC Voices

English is a dynamic and progressive language (Crystal, 2010). The advent of the printing press in 1476 marked the beginning of the formalisation of written English, and this meant that lexis and syntax became more fixed than had previously been known (Lass, 2000). However, the printing press did little to eliminate regional dialectic and accent variations, particularly from speech (Lass, 2000). In the Anglo-Saxon and Medieval eras, regional variations were often political and were sometimes ethnic. For instance, the Dane Law in the previously Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Mercia saw Danish speaking Vikings becoming rulers of the majority of the geographical landmass, and thereby imprinting their lexical codes; whilst the political emphasis of the court of Wessex meant that certain language codes were preserved for legislative and legal purposes (Crystal, 2010). Examples of the

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influence of the former include, for instance, words such as 'sky' and 'window,' although the most striking variations exist in regional dialects now found in Northern England and Southern Scotland.

Such regional differences have persisted well into the twenty-first century, and one of the primary databases for recording lexical variation was the BBC Voices (BBC, 2005). Although it is now left in archive form only, the BBC Voices represents a record of local lexical and pronunciation variations within the UK as recorded by service users. This particular tool has many potential capabilities. One of these is a local focus. For this research assignment, the university city of Oxford was selected, and an article entitled 'Slang, Posh, or Formal?' was chosen to form the starting point of the research. This quickly led to the selection of the concept 'feel' and the theme 'cold'.

In purely etymological terms, 'cold' in its adjectival form is one of the oldest known words. There was some lexical variation between Anglian Old English (*ca/d*) and West Saxon Old English (*ceald*), although both share the same proto-germanic ancestor (*\*kaldaz*), from the proto-Indo-European root *\*gel-* / *\*gol* (Harper, 2012). The age of a lexical item or concept is important to its semantic density. Bakhtin (1986) describes how two particular phenomena occur: firstly, a word that exists prior to the fixing of a language in textual form may appear in many different variations within a geographically defined space; secondly, a lexical item may gather numerous semantic meanings over time. This can certainly be seen with 'cold', which is given four different adjectival definitions in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED). These can be summarised as:

- Of or at a relatively low temperature

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- Lacking affection or emotional warmth
- (of the scent of a trail) no longer fresh and easy to follow
- Without any preparation or rehearsal

What this means in terms of this research project is that the lexical item 'cold' is potentially subject to a myriad of interpretations, and may therefore have a wide variety of synonyms. The BBC Voices database gives the following findings:

Lexical Item	Age: 0-25	Age: 25-30	Age: 30-45	Age: 45-60	Age: Over 60	Male	Female
Freezing	38%	15%	30%	14%	2%	41%	59%
Chilly	34%	18%	33%	13%	2%	38%	62%
Blatic	44%	30%	21%	5%	0%	49%	51%
Nesh	13%	10%	45%	28%	4%	35%	65%
Brass Monkeys	14%	19%	42%	22%	3%	62%	38%
Nithered	8%	9%	37%	39%	8%	46%	54%
Starved	2%	4%	23%	58%	13%	45%	55%
Taters	1%	15%	35%	43%	5%	61%	39%
Bitter	21%	14%	48%	15%	1%	51%	49%
Perishing	9%	9%	29%	43%	9%	28%	72%

Figure One: Tablature Representation of BBC Voice Findings (adapted from BBC, 2005).

What this shows is that there is significant national variance in the ways in which the lexical item 'cold' is used and substituted. 'Freezing' is the most common synonym found within Britain, as is illustrated in Appendix One. Its distribution is relatively uniform, and is found throughout England, Wales, Northern Ireland, and Scotland. The major concentration is in London and the South East, which is unsurprising, as that geographical area has traditionally led lexical development due to its political and media connections (Crystal, 2010). 'Freezing' is an Old English word that means 'turn to ice', although it also has etymological links with 'to burn', which has the same proto-Indo-European root (\*preus) (Harper, 2012). It is therefore part of the primary English lexicon, and might be expected to be widely found.

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In contrast to this, 'perishing' is found in relatively few areas (BBC, 2005). Perish is etymologically interesting, in that it is of Old French origin and entered the English Language in the middle of the thirteenth century, nearly two centuries after the Norman Invasion (Harper, 2012). Its original meanings include 'to be lost or shipwrecked.' In a semantic sense it is not hard to imagine why something associated with shipwrecks could come to be used to mean 'cold', and it is also unsurprising that its use might be clustered in areas near a coast (Nerbonne, 2010), as Appendix Two shows. That 'perish' might be less widespread than a term such as 'freeze' is therefore explained, at least in part, by its age within the English language (see for instance Sagi et al, 2009).

It is clear, however, that sociolinguistic variables are perhaps more relevant for these terms than geographical ones. The findings from the BBC survey to show usage amongst the 0-25 age group have been reproduced in the graph below:

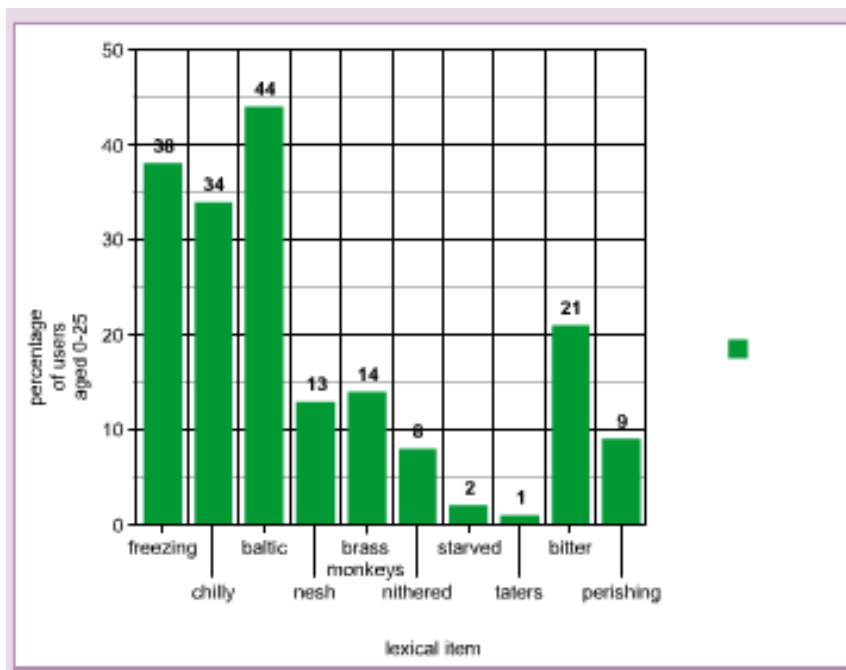


Figure Two: Graphical Representation of Different Terms for 'Cold' amongst the 0-25 Age Group (adapted from BBC, 2005).

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This can be compared to the over sixty age group, which produces the following results:

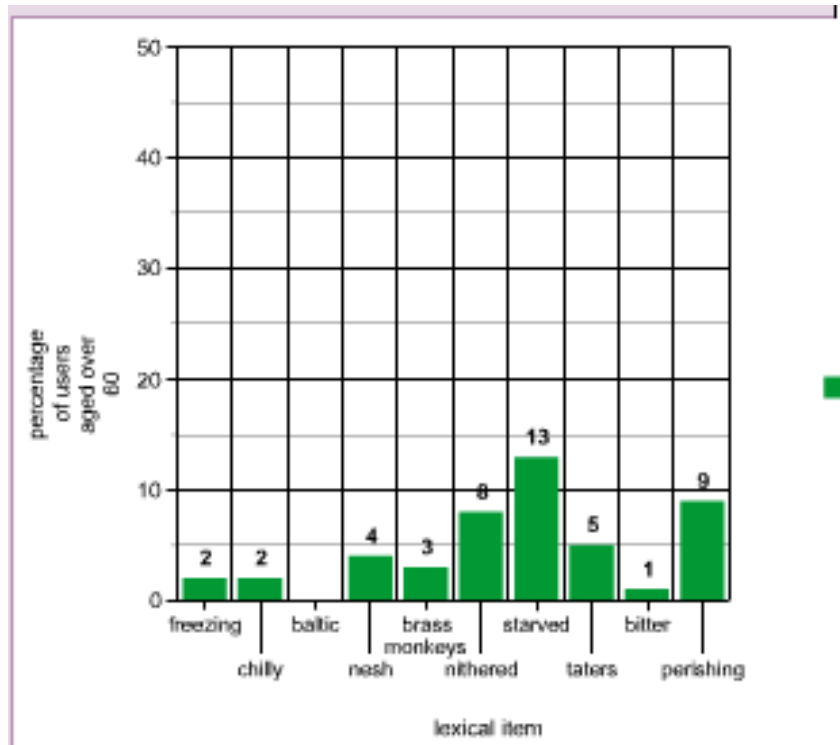


Figure Three: Graphical Representation of Different Terms for 'Cold' amongst the over 60 Age Group (adapted from BBC, 2005).

There may be several explanations for these results. For instance, it may be that fewer individuals in the over-sixty age group chose to participate in the survey. From the BBC website, the exact methodology of the study is not clear, but it does seem to have been carried out on a voluntary participation basis. This means that the results may be reflective of participation rather than reality. As the BBC carried out this survey on a predominantly internet-based capacity, it is possible that there was less participation from the over sixty age group than was found in younger age groups.

However, regardless of survey participation, it does seem clear that some lexical items are subject to variation based on age. For instance, 'baltic' is one of the most nationally popular lexical items to express the theme 'cold' amongst 0-25 year-olds,

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but is almost non-existent amongst the over sixty group. Such variance is unsurprising. That language is both progressive and age-specific is a well-documented fact (McArthur, 1998; Crystal, 2010).

### **Methodology**

The findings from the BBC Voices survey enabled the construction of a methodology for a small survey project on a similar theme. It was noted that there was considerable variance in the lexical items used to express the concept of 'cold,' and this new survey sought to confirm that finding. The BBC Voices project found that the term 'baltic' appeared to be significantly concentrated amongst the 0-25 age demographic, but was not found amongst older language users. Therefore, this survey aimed to determine whether this could be confirmed. The new methodology followed a design in which individuals were asked to place a tick next to words that they regularly used to describe the concept of 'cold'. In order to be statistically valid, this survey would have had to have had a minimum of 150 respondents, and would have had to have had a control group (McBurney and White, 2007). However, the purpose of this assignment was not to produce authoritative fact, but was rather to explore a concept. Therefore, the largest possible sample was found, and this amounted to 30 individuals. Of these, 15 were aged between 0-25 and 15 were aged over 60. A quantitative questionnaire was designed, which is attached here as Appendix Three. The sample was located in the UK city of London, and is therefore not representative of the language as a whole.

### **Findings**

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The findings, which are shown in the graph below, show that there is considerable variance between lexical use between the two age groups. The younger group (0-25) in particular shows sociolinguistic conformity. That is, almost 100% of individuals in London between the ages of birth and twenty-five use the terms 'freezing', 'chilly', and 'baltic', based on this survey. In comparison to this, no single word is uniformly adopted by the over sixty-year-olds.

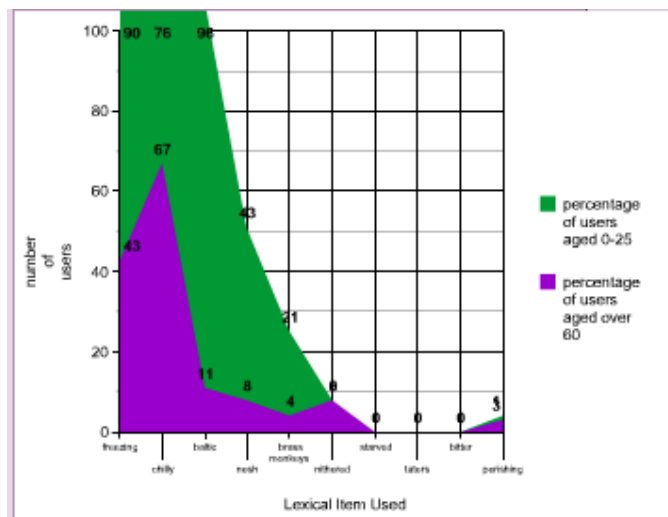


Figure Four: Graphical Representation of Lexical Usage amongst 0-25 and over 60 year olds in the Research Sample

It is not clear from this survey exactly why this variance may exist. However, based on a review of the literature some ideas can be hypothesised. In particular, it is thought that lexical sharing is a powerful tool for encouraging social cohesion (Gee and Handford, 2012), which it is suggested is particularly important amongst the young adult age groups. There are numerous theories to explain this. For instance, Foucault argued that sociocultural systems are built upon a structure of discipline and punishment, wherein any deviation from the norm is actively rejected by the majority (Kul-Want, 2010). Therefore, conformity is a primary tool for determining belonging and group adhesion, and in order to 'belong' an individual may need to

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develop a particular idiolect that reflects the desired sociocultural group (Gee and Handford, 2012). This may help to explain local lexical forms.

In institutional terms, 'cold' is a concept that transcends most institutional boundaries. That is, it exists within both private institutional languages and public institutional languages (Lass, 2000). Of these, the former is the less regulated, and is therefore more liable to change. Amongst the 0-25 age group, this is most likely to occur in the form of slang. 'Baltic' has a very straightforward meaning, as it comes from the Scandinavian for 'straight', and describes the narrow entrance to the Baltic Sea (Harper, 2012). The Urban Dictionary, which is a user based online lexical reference tool, gives several different semantic values to the word. For example, it would seem that the original usage of 'cold' has been extended to include 'cool' and therefore also 'awesome' and other semantically related terms. In this way, slang usage can perpetuate and extend the use of a lexical item; and using that lexical item can become a necessary signifier of belonging to a sociodemographic group.

As 'cold' is both a private institutional concept and a public institutional concept, it would be expected that both formal and informal varieties would exist simultaneously. Indeed, it has been hypothesised that there is significantly more variation found within private institutional languages when there is a public institutional equivalent (Lass, 2000). This survey would appear to confirm that hypothesis.



### **Conclusion**

This assignment has shown that there is a considerable amount of variance between the ways in which individuals within the United Kingdom express the theme of 'cold'. As one of the older words in the English lexicon, it is to be expected that there is not only semantic density, but also dialectic variance to be associated with this lexical item. However, this variance appears to be at least partially sociolinguistic. In particular, it would seem that younger language users have a greater variety of terms to express the concept than their elders. This may be due to inaccurate survey results; however, it may also be the case that the progressive nature of language combined with the desire amongst young people to experiment with the lexicon means that there is a greater variation within the lexis of younger age groups. Arguably the strongest evidence for this within the context of this assignment is the use of the word 'Baltic', which is found almost exclusively amongst younger language users. Indeed, an internet search has found that the semantic density of this lexical item is expanding amongst this age group. The major conclusion that can therefore be drawn is that language is a complex and progressive phenomenon, and geography is not the unique determiner of lexical use.

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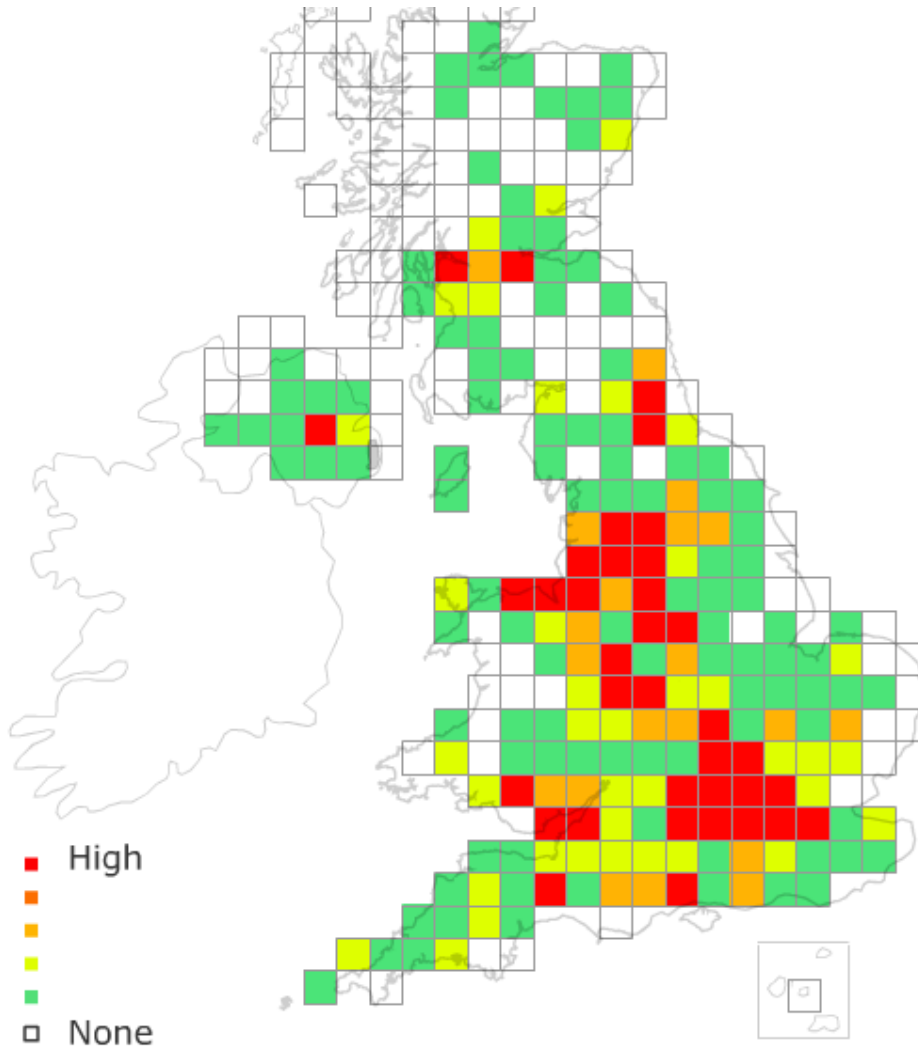
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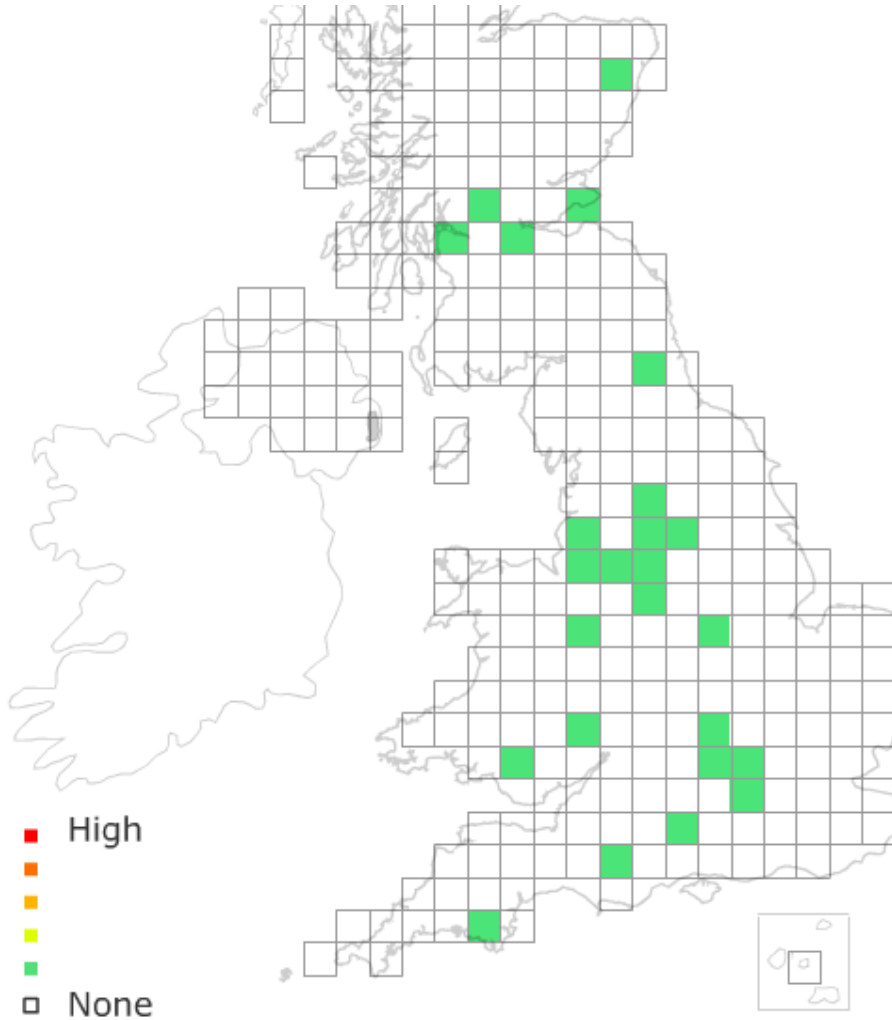
## Appendix One: The Frequency of 'Freezing' used to mean 'Cold' across the UK



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## Appendix Two: The Frequency of 'Perishing' used to mean 'Cold' across the UK



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### **Appendix Three: Sample Questionnaire**

This questionnaire has been designed to determine different types of language use in your area. The theme of this questionnaire is 'cold'. Please put a tick next to any words that you *regularly* use to describe the idea of 'cold'.

Freezing	
Chilly	
Baltic	
Nesh	
Brass Monkeys	
Nithered	
Starved	
Taters	
Bitter	
Perishing	