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Original article

Valence, arousal, and imagery ratings for 835 French attributes by young, middle-aged, and older adults: The French Emotional Evaluation List (FEEL)

Évaluation de la valence, du niveau d'excitation et de la valeur d'imagerie de 835 adjectifs français par des jeunes adultes, des adultes d'âge moyen et des adultes âgés : The French Emotional Evaluation List (FEEL)

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ABSTRACT

Introduction and objective. – Attributes are used by young, middle-aged, and older adults to describe persons in everyday life. The current study asks whether attributes are perceived similarly by different age groups: for example, some attributes could be perceived as more positive or more negative in old age than in young adulthood.
Method. – To address this question, we investigated age-related differences in emotional evaluations of French adjectives. Young, middle-aged, and older adults judged 835 French adjectives on valence, arousal, and imagery.
Results. – Age groups agreed highly on the relative rank order but showed mean differences for a substantial number of attributes, especially for arousal and imagery ratings. Associations between dimensions differed as well between age groups: valence and arousal were negatively correlated and this correlation was stronger in older than in younger age groups.
Conclusion. – The present study provided new evidence that the perception of emotionally toned material is affected by age. Several explanations to these age-related differences are discussed.
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RÉSUMÉ

Les attributs sont utilisés par les adultes jeunes ou âgés pour décrire les personnes rencontrées dans la vie quotidienne. La question est alors de savoir si ces attributs sont perçus de façon similaire par ces différents groupes d'âge : par exemple, certains attributs peuvent être perçus comme plus positifs ou plus négatifs chez les personnes âgées que chez les jeunes adultes. Pour répondre à cette question, nous avons étudié les différences liées à l'âge dans les évaluations émotionnelles d'adjectifs français. De jeunes adultes, des adultes d'âge moyen et des adultes âgés ont évalué la valence, le niveau d'excitation et la valeur d'imagerie de 835 adjectifs français. Les résultats indiquent que les groupes d'âge s'accordent sur le classement relatif, mais mettent aussi en évidence des différences pour un grand nombre d'attributs, en particulier pour les évaluations du niveau d'excitation et de la valeur d'imagerie. Les associations entre les dimensions diffèrent aussi entre les groupes d'âge : valence et niveau d'excitation sont négativement corrélés et cette corrélation est plus forte chez les âgés que chez les groupes d'âge plus jeunes. Les résultats de cette étude apportent donc de nouvelles preuves empiriques des différences liées à l'âge dans la perception de matériel émotionnel qui sont ensuite discutées.
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Attributes are often used to describe person's current states and long-term traits. For example, a person could be described as 'comical', 'arrogant', 'sad', or 'handsome'. Attributes also carry an emotional connotation: an 'arrogant' person is generally perceived as negative whereas a 'handsome' person is often perceived as positive. An open question is whether such emotional connotations of persons' attributes differ by age. Specifically, do older adults perceive an attribute as similar positive or negative as young adults do? For example, do older adults evaluate 'punctual' persons more positive than young adults? Is a 'comical' person perceived as more negative by older adults than by younger adults? Thus, the question is whether attributes change their emotional meaning across the adult lifespan.

Emotional connotation of words can be assessed according to two main dimensions, valence and arousal. Valence refers to the hedonic tone of a word, that is, to the extent to which a word elicit a pleasant or displeasant feeling. Arousal is defined using the dimension of tension-relaxation or in terms of activation. It refers to the extent to which a word elicits a feeling of excitation or whether it is calming, relaxing (Kensinger and Schacter, 2006; Russell, 1980). The influence of an emotional connotation of the material on cognitive processing was demonstrated in studies involving lexical decision task (Niedenthal and Setterlund, 1994) or memory tasks (Cahill and McGaugh, 1995; Kensinger et al., 2002; Kensinger and Corkin, 2003; Murphy and Isaacowitz, 2008).

The growing literature on social-emotional aging research suggests that older adults process emotional information differently than young adults. Older adults, in contrast to younger adults, tend to report similar or higher levels of positive affect (Lawton et al., 1992; Mroczek and Kolarz, 1998), and better emotion regulation (Gross et al., 1997; Lawton et al., 1992) than do young adults, and use emotions constructively in everyday problem solving (Blanchard-Fields, 1998). At the same time, research findings suggest that regulation capacities may be impaired in later life (Labouvie-Vief, 2008; Labouvie-Vief and Marquez, 2004). For instance, older adults, in contrast to younger adults, have more difficulties processing highly arousing information (Wurm et al., 2004) and coping with high arousing situations (Bäckman and Molander, 1986).

The present study was also influenced by inconsistent findings regarding age-related differences in remembering emotional material. Some studies found age-related differences (Charles et al., 2003; Grühn et al., 2007) and others not (Comblain et al., 2004; Grühn et al., 2005). The lack of consistent results may be partly due to age-related differences in the perception of the valence and the arousal levels of the to-be-remembered material. If age groups differ in how positive/negative or how arousing they evaluate the to-be-remembered material, age differences in remembering this material are likely.

Few studies have addressed age differences in evaluating emotional and non-emotional words with mixed findings. For instance, Grunwald et al. (1999) investigated young, middle-aged and older adults' perception of lexical emotional and non-emotional stimuli (e.g., words or sentences). Older adults perceived emotional material similarly intense as younger adults did. However, older participants evaluated non-emotional stimuli as more intense than young and middle-aged adults. Similarly, Messina et al. (1989) investigated age differences in evaluating 904 non-emotional and easy to imagine French words. Young adults rated words as more positive than middle-aged and older adults did. However, older adults gave slightly more extreme ratings than young and middle-aged adults.

Studies that focused primarily on emotional material have revealed substantial age differences. Grühn and Smith (2008) asked young and older adults to evaluate 200 German adjectives on six dimensions: valence, arousal, control, imagery, self-relevance, and age-relevance. These authors found for approximately half of the words significant age differences in at least one dimension. In particular, valence (32%) and arousal (21%) ratings revealed a substantial number of words with significant age differences. Grühn and Scheibe (2008) also investigated young and older adults' evaluations of 504 emotional pictures. They found age differences for a large number of pictures, i.e., the valence and arousal ratings for young and older adults differed for 30.0% and 18.7% of 504 pictures, respectively. Older adults rated pictures generally as more extreme than young adults did. Specifically, older adults rated negative pictures as more negative and arousing but they rated positive pictures as more positive and less arousing than young adults did. The association between valence and arousal was strong and linear: As valence went from the negative to the positive end, arousal level decreased. This linear association became stronger with age (young adults: $r = -0.85$, older adults: $r = -0.95$). These findings are consistent with previous results reported by Cuthbert et al. (1994) showing that pleasure and arousal ratings formed a more linear relationship in older women's perception of emotional pictures rather than a curvilinear relation. In sum, studies on emotional material, including attributes, revealed major age differences in the perception of the emotional material. Specifically, age differences seem to be more frequent at the extreme ends, that is, age differences were apparent for very negative or very positive material. These age-differences in the perception of emotional material may in turn influence further processing and remembering of such information. Consequently, making available emotional ratings of words for young and older adults could be of great interest for researchers interesting in age-related differences. For this purpose, we created the French Emotional Evaluation List (FEEL).

The goal of the present study was to investigate age differences in evaluating attributes. Specifically, young, middle-aged, and older adults were asked to evaluate 835 French adjectives. Adjectives were rated on three dimensions: valence (i.e., hedonic value, pleasantness), arousal (i.e., emotional activation), and imagery (i.e., propensity and facility to elicit a visual image). Extending past research on age differences in evaluating word material (Grühn and Smith, 2008), we (a) used a larger set of adjectives, (b) included a group of middle-aged adults, and (c) attempted to generalize the age pattern to a different language, namely French. Rating studies on French words are available for objective and subjective frequence, concreteness, word association, and age of acquisition (Bonin et al., 2003; Ferrand et al., 2008; Robert et al., in press). Likewise, studies have reported imagery ratings for French nouns (Bonin et al., 2003; Desrochers and Bergeron, 2000; Desrochers and Thompson, 2009; Flieller and Tournois, 1996; Gonthier et al., 2009). Regarding valence ratings, Niedenthal et al. (2004) asked 77 participants to rate 237 emotion words and 198 neutral abstract words on several dimensions including valence. Bonin et al. (2003) reported valence ratings for 866 French words given to 97 students. Bertels et al. (2009) asked 166 participants to give valence and arousal ratings for a small sample of 80 mono- or disyllabic positive, negative, neutral, or taboo words uttered in a neutral or an emotionally congruent tone of voice. The authors found an overall strong negative correlation between valence and arousal in the two conditions of voice tone. However, these studies were conducted on young participants. The present study provides French word ratings by three different age groups.

Based on the few past studies, we expected that a substantial portion of the word material would reveal age differences on the emotional dimensions, valence and arousal. We were especially interested in the association between valence and arousal for the different age groups. Consistent with past research (Grühn and Scheibe, 2008), we expected the linear association between valence and arousal to be stronger for older than for younger adults. In addition, in order to facilitate future research, we asked participants to

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