

# “Bloody + Emotions” – An Investigation into the Australian Exclamations and Expletives

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## Abstract

Australian variety of English is known as very informal, often associated and even synonymous with slang. Hunter (2004: 5) wrote that Australians tend to be informal in their speech and behaviour, and one aspect of this informality is the extensive usage of slang.

One of the most prominent indicators of this informality is the adjective *bloody* used as an element of an everyday speech as a component of various compounds to intensify the speaker’s message or in numerous exclamations.

The purpose of this paper is to present the partial results of a survey carried out among young Australian Speakers with a view to investigating the case of *bloody* used as an intensifier, expletive and a part of a compound as well as to present other expletives and exclamations in current use.

The study sheds light on the most typical compounds used in exclamations as well as on the current state of *bloody* in comparison with other expletives.

**Keywords:** Australian; bloody; expletive; emotions; context

## 1. Introduction

In the early beginnings of the convict settlement in Australia, Australian variety of English was perceived as a “corrupt” variety (Baker 1978: 3) in which “nasal twang” was a common feature of speech (Moore 2008: 73), speech that was contaminated with slang – a term that encapsulated any form that diverged from the Standard and was a threat to the “grand imperial English tongue” (Damousi 2014: 76).

Furthermore, early accounts of the English language in Australia point to another characteristic trait which was vulgarity. William Kelly – the author of *Life in Victoria* (1859), felt obliged to apologize for the use of the word *bloody*, explaining that “general conversation amongst the middle and lower classes at the antipodes is always highly seasoned with it” (Kelly 1859: 54). Similarly, H.W. Haygarth – the author of *Bush Life in Australia* (1848),

claimed that “profane swearing prevails throughout the interior of New South Wales to an extent hardly conceivable, but by those who have not actually witnessed [sic] it” (cited in Baker 1978: 195).

The features of Australian English that were distinguished in the beginning of English in Australia, namely slang, frequent swearing, the Great Australian Adjective, remained a significant part of Australian English and in time were presented as the key characteristics setting Australian English apart.

Moreover, Australian vernacular is often synonymous with slang. Baker (1941, cited by Moore 2014: 95) states that “[s]lang is too small a word to describe the evolution of a new way of speaking, of a national idiom”. Furthermore, Delbridge (2001: 314) states that slang and colloquialisms are the key and most characteristic elements “in the Australianness of AusE”. Lastly, Coleman (2012: 218) summarizes that “Australian English is, by its nature, so informal that it’s impossible to distinguish meaningfully between slang and colloquialisms, while popular writers often label all distinctively Australian words (and sometimes also pronunciations and grammatical features) as slang”.

The synonymity of slang and Australian English resulted in the abundance of dictionaries (e.g. Hunter 2004; Rowe 2005; Lambert 2008), presenting the most characteristic Australian English expressions. Unfortunately, they rarely remark on the actual frequency of use of these phrases.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to present the case of the Great Australian Adjective used as an intensifier, expletive and a part of a compound to voice different emotions as well as to present other expletives and exclamations in current use. The data presented are an excerpt of a larger study on various phrases and expressions perceived as typical or even stereotypical of the Australian variety of English. The paper is organized as follows: in Section 2 I substantiate the claim that swearing is an inherent feature of Australian English, in Section 3 the research methodology is presented and the results are given in Section 4. Section 5 gives the conclusions.

## 2. Swearing and the Australian variety of English

Swearing has been a significant feature of the Australian variety of English to such an extent that the first sentence describing *Australia* in Hughes’ *An Encyclopedia of Swearing* (2006: 13) states that “[o]f all the global varieties of English, the Australian is most noted for the liberal use of swearing and profane language”. Furthermore, Laugesen in her recent book entitled *Australia in 100 Words* states that swearing is common across all languages, but “Australians are renowned for being skilled in the art” (Laugesen 2024: 155).

The unparalleled proclivity towards swearing reflects the convict origins of the English settlement in Australia where the majority of convicts came from the London area (Fritz 2007: 20). Their dialect held prestige in the colony, forcing the newcomers to adapt and adopt the local speech. In the words of Rev. Polehampton:

[a]s swearing is an unusually common habit among the colonists new arrivals often endeavour, and must successfully, too, to become proficient in this early acquired art, and soon add the stock of oaths peculiar to the colony (and very peculiar some of them are) to the “home” vocabulary.

(Rev. A. Polehampton 1862 cited in Baker 1978: 194)

The oaths used by the convicts “commonly included curses such as damn, bloody, and bastard” (Laugesen 2024: 156). Since then the perception of taboo has changed and phrases that were considered blasphemous are devoid of that trait. Swearing has become more secular-oriented to subsequently relate more frequently to bodily functions (Allan and Burridge 2006: 106). The culminating point of modern foul language has been the *f-word*, which also began to appear on television in various collocations (Allan and Burridge 2006: 106).

Swearing involves the use of taboo “in insults, epithets, and expletives” to release in a cathartic manner the tension related with the feelings of anger, frustration or in a situation where the speaker is surprised by something (Hughes 2006: 7; Allan and Burridge 2009: 362).

Various scholars point to a particular inclination of Australians towards the use of the “four Bs”, namely *bloody*, *bugger*, *bastard* and *bullshit* (Baker 1978, Laugesen 2024). Although these words are not of Australian coinage and are used in other English-speaking countries, they have a particular resonance in Australia.

Wierzbicka (1997: 217) states that these words are “an important means of self-expression, self-identification, and effective communication with others” whereas Laugesen (2024: 156) mentions that the four Bs have “become closely identified with Australian ways of swearing, and often expressing Australian attitudes to life”.

The presence of *bloody* and the intensity of its use among the first English settlers in Australia have been commented on in the early recollections of English visitors coming to Australia. Although Wilkes (2008: 36) states that *bloody* is “by no means distinctively Australian, but has always been conspicuous enough in the colloquial language to be seen as such by overseas visitors”, it was noted in *Travels in New South Wales* by Alexander Marjoribanks that “the word bloody is the favourite oath in that country” (Marjoribanks 1847: 57-58). Marjoribanks even went as far as to count the number of times *bloody* would have been used in the course of life of a bullock driver the writer had the doubtful pleasure of meeting and the result was astonishing – the bullock driver would have used this “disgusting word” 18,200,000 times (Marjoribanks 1847: 58).

Burridge (2005: 126) claims that *bloody* was falsely derived from an oath *By our Lady* and, therefore, associated with taboo and bad language. Butler (2009: 29) supports this view and presents evidence indicating that in the beginning *bloody* served simply as an adjective. The negative connotations associated with the word were further fostered by the structure of the early Australian society and the frequent use of the word among the inferior and unwanted class – the convicts.

Regardless of the true origins of *bloody* as taboo, Burridge (2005: 126) points out that “linguistic truth isn’t an issue here – speakers’ perceptions are what matters. So *bloody* became unmentionable, often rendered invisible”.

Despite the fact that nowadays *bloody* is used mostly as an intensifier (Collins 2012: 77), Wierzbicka (1997: 220) believes that

[t]he “great Australian adjective” epitomizes some of the characteristic features of the traditional Australian ethos, and in particular, unwillingness to describe feelings and the tendency to say “bad things” and to use “bad words” – not only to express negative opinions and negative feelings but also to express “good feelings.” It epitomizes the traditional Australian cult of “toughness” and rebelliousness.

Lambert (2008: 9), on the other hand, strips *bloody* of all its glory ascribed by Wierzbicka by stating that it became a “weary, worn-out, ageing prize fighter, no longer packing a punch. Lost its championship belt to that vicious upstart, the F-word, back in the 1960s”.

Although the views on *bloody* may vary, it became the reason of a heated debate in 2006 when Australia Tourism decided to incorporate it in their tourism campaign commercial which relied heavily on stereotypes related to Australia. The commercial ended with a punchline “So where the bloody hell are you?”. Unfortunately, the commercial met with severe criticism in the United Kingdom and was banned as a result. The ban was subsequently lifted but the commercial was allowed to be aired only after watershed. However, the British Advertising Standards Authority decided the punchline was too offensive and required all the billboards along the motorways in the UK to be removed<sup>1</sup>.

### 3. Method

In 2018, a total of 1,017 respondents were surveyed in a sociolinguistic study entitled the “Aussie Slang Survey”, the aim of which was to verify whether phrases presented as prime examples of Australian slang are still in use among Australians. To that end, an online questionnaire composed of 41 questions was disseminated among Australian students gathered in university community social media groups<sup>2</sup>.

The choice of young adults as the target group of the research was dictated by the fact that despite taking up the responsibilities that come along with adulthood, they are the best ambassadors of Australian English due to their increased mobility. Young adults participate in student exchange programs that give them the opportunity to not only study at a different university in Australia but to continue their studies abroad. They travel and at the same time they promote Australian English simply by using it.

The majority of the respondents (70%) were females aged between 18 and 24 years old (66%). The respondents were predominantly high school graduates enrolled in their bachelor’s degree studies (37%) or students who had already obtained their bachelor’s degree (42%). Furthermore, 98% of the respondents confirmed to be domestic students whose primary language was English (97%)<sup>3</sup>.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of the participants came from those areas of Australia where the population density is the highest, i.e. Victoria (46.51%), New South Wales (29.3%), and

<sup>1</sup> Available at <https://web.archive.org/web/20160315091147/http://www.smh.com.au/news/travel/bloody-ad-ban-incredibly-ludicrous/2007/03/28/1174761533507.html>

<sup>2</sup> Research carried out for the purpose of my Doctoral Dissertation: Szymańska, M. 2022. G’day Mate! A Sociolinguistic Study of Australian Slang. Ph.D. diss., Wrocław, University of Wrocław.

<sup>3</sup> The aim of questions regarding student type (domestic or international) and primary language was to differentiate between Australians and foreign students participating in a student exchange programs.

Queensland (13.77%). The remaining states were represented by fewer participants, *i.e.* Western Australia (5.8%), South Australia and Australian Capital Territory 1.67% each, Tasmania (0.59%) and Northern Territory (0.39%).

The survey focused on 23 phrases that were divided into four categories representing features of everyday communication, namely greetings (e.g. *G'day* or *How're you going?*), forms of address (such as *cobber*, *digger*, *mate*, *etc.*), exclamations (e.g. *bloody oath*, *bugger*, *crikey*, *stone the crows*) and farewells (e.g. *hooray*, *hooroo*). The expressions and their definitions were taken from *Macquarie Best Aussie Slang* (Lambert 2008) with permission of the Macquarie Dictionary Publishers an imprint of Pan Macmillan Australia PTY LTD.

In order to allocate the phrases listed in *Macquarie Best Aussie Slang* (2008) to each category, the definitions and explanations of the phrases had to contain certain keywords, specifically: 'greetings', 'address' (and its derivative forms), 'exclamation' (including its derivative forms and/or an exclamation mark), and 'goodbye'.

In each part of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked whether they regarded the phrases in question as being in current use, if and with what frequency they used the phrases, and what were the connotations a phrase evoked. Furthermore, the participants were asked about the acceptability of the use of a phrase depending on the level of formality in a given context.

The structure of the questionnaire allowed the respondents to go back to the previous questions if need be or to proceed forward without forcing them to provide an answer, as this solution negates the rule of voluntariness and results in a higher dropout rate (Dillman et al. 1998: 11; Décieux et al. 2015: 311).

The respondents were able to navigate their progress on a progress bar visible throughout the entirety of the questionnaire. This is a common practice used in online questionnaires that allows for a further decrease in dropout rate (Dillman et al. 1998: 12). Furthermore, each section of the survey was preceded by a short introduction informing the respondents about their task and the time required to complete that section.

The survey design encouraged the participants to provide their comments on individual phrases.

### 3.1. *Bloody + emotions*

The question related to the use of *bloody* as an intensifier across a range of emotions was included in the section devoted to exclamations.

The respondents were asked to provide the second element of a compound containing *bloody* with regard to 13 emotional states (see Figure 1. below). There was no limit on the number of options one respondent could provide for each emotion.

24. From what I hear, **bloody** is a category in itself ;) What words do you usually use in combination with **bloody** to express:

	bloody + a word of your choice!
sadness	<input type="text"/>
anger	<input type="text"/>
fear	<input type="text"/>
exasperation	<input type="text"/>
annoyance	<input type="text"/>
condescension	<input type="text"/>
disapproval	<input type="text"/>
irony	<input type="text"/>
surprise	<input type="text"/>
amazement	<input type="text"/>
approval	<input type="text"/>
joy	<input type="text"/>
happiness	<input type="text"/>

Figure 1: Question 24

In addition, the respondents could refrain from providing answers to every emotion listed in the question and focus instead on contributing compounds for emotional states of their choice.

3.2. Insight into other common expletives

The participants were also asked to provide their own responses regarding phrases, exclamations used in an informal conversation to emphasise a statement. This open question encouraged the respondents to state their preferred options without any constraints and without placing *bloody* in the centre of attention. The aim of this question was to investigate which phrases are at present dominant in informal conversation among Australian young adults.

28. What phrases, exclamations do you and your friends use in an informal conversation to emphasise your statement?

Figure 2: Question 28

Furthermore, the participants were asked to provide their preferred alternatives to *damn*. This question served the purpose of verifying whether *damn* is indeed synonymous with *bugger* as it is indicated by Lambert (2008: 15): “4. as an exclamation, damn! blast! As in *Bugger him, I’m going home*. Or when you drop your Vegemite toast and it lands face down on the floor, *Bugger!*”

Although the question had a different purpose, the obtained results shed light on the current preferences regarding the choice of intensifiers and expletives.

#### 4. Results

The number of responses provided by the participants differed across the emotions listed; however, it is clearly visible from Table 1. that the respondents contributed significantly more options when expressing anger (723).

**Table 1:** Number of responses and compounds per emotion

	sadness	anger	fear	exasperation	annoyance	condescension	disapproval	irony	surprise	amazement	approval	joy	happiness
<b>responses</b>	495	723	490	569	647	401	481	342	516	514	453	411	438
<b>compounds</b>	51	51	42	59	59	65	68	58	47	51	48	47	49

Every answer given by the respondents was carefully analysed and the options provided were subsequently categorised. Therefore, the total number of compounds used when conveying, for example, anger was only 51 even though the number of responses was the highest for this emotion. The sum of compounds found to indicate annoyance and exasperation was 59 (each) and irony – 58. Surprisingly, the largest number of compounds was found with regard to voicing disapproval and condescension (68 and 65 respectively). The number of *bloody* compounds for the remaining emotions oscillated between 42 and 51.

As seen in Table 2. *bloody hell* is used to express every emotion. It is the most dominant and at the same time the most versatile exclamation. It is worth noting that the gap between *bloody hell* and a compound with the second highest score is incomparable. Nevertheless, *bloody oath* seems to be applicable to voice several emotions as well, as it received the second highest score.

Although the focus was placed on the three most numerous options of compounds, *bloody ripper* (22) is an interesting form that could be investigated further.

**Table 2:** The most common compounds and their count

	<b>bloody hell</b>		
sadness	310	sad (23)	awful (17)
anger	557	idiot (23)	pissed off (15)
fear	379	scared (25)	scary (16)
exasperation	473	oath (18)	idiot (7)
annoyance	506	idiot (24)	annoying (20)
condescension	204	idiot (63)	dickhead (11)
disapproval	284	idiot (54)	dickhead (14)
irony	181	oath (25)	great (12)
surprise	414	oath (28)	good (5)
amazement	344	oath (45)	amazing (24)
approval	143	oath (94)	great (19)
joy	147	oath (57)	good (34) ripper (22)
happiness	152	oath (56)	awesome (28)

There were a few instructive comments among the responses as well. The authors of these statements suggested that, if used to express anger, the phrases containing *bloody* could be directed at a person, to insult them (the orthography and punctuation are given in their original version):

- (27) a. *(insult - eg bloody poms. used semi jokingly) or hell*  
 b. *any sort of expletive if directed at someone, e.g. cunt, dickhead etc.*  
 c. *bloody is sometimes used in place of 'f\*cking'. It's used to emphasise something in anger, exasperation or annoyance - usually*

Furthermore, the respondents signalled that non-linguistic communication devices, *i.e.* facial expression, are important in conveying the intended meaning (2b). Moreover, they also provided the context in which a certain exclamation could be used while voicing their annoyance (2c).

- (28) a. *bloody hell! what is his problem?*  
 b. *Bloody hell! (With an angry facial expression.)*  
 c. *shit (as an adjective e.g it's so bloody shit that I have to go to work tomorrow*

The participants were asked to further provide those exclamations that they use among their friends to intensify their statement, to which 695 respondents decided to provide an answer. Subsequently, the phrases were classified into 370 variants that were further grouped into nine main categories. In categorising the variants the following factors were taken into account: a keyword in the phrase, *i.e.* the *f-word*; a reference to religious terms or name-calling. Items that were not otherwise allocated, were labelled as 'general'.

The first category concerns the word *bloody* and it included 16 phrases. The most frequently mentioned was *bloody* itself (111), followed by *bloody hell* (50) and *bloody oath* (14). The category of *f-word* phrases was nearly twice as large as the *bloody* category. Out of 30 variants, the most frequently mentioned exclamations were *fucking* (96) and *fuck* (81). Moreover, also popular in this category were euphemistic versions of the *f-word*, namely *freaking* (28) and *far out* (24).

The respondents were keen to provide additional information on the manner in which to emphasise a statement. A few respondents indicated that the level of formality is of importance when choosing a phrase for emphasis (3a and 3b) or that the use of a swear word is just the Australian way (3c and 3d).

- (29) a. *Well, depends on how well I know the person... Person I know well or is a friend: 'f\*cking' Person I don't know well or is a work colleague: 'freaking' or 'friggin'*  
 b. *Mostly swear words which are the most typical Aussie thing, fucking hell, or "that's fucked" are the most common ways of emphasising something, they're used in most informal situations and some people, including myself, tend to swear a lot even in more formal situations*  
 c. *Kind of a broad question.*  
*We swear a lot. Typically the choice to emphasis things is 'fuck' or 'fucking.' When we're being particularly forceful we might say, 'Don't be a dumbcunt' or 'Don't be a shitcunt.'*  
 d. *Australians love the word fuck.*  
*Fuck!*  
*Fits any situation*



Another group of phrases used to intensify a statement within the more informal context that centre around a single word, is the group consisting the word *shit*. This was also the most frequently indicated choice (33) by the respondents. The second most favoured exclamation was *holy shit* mentioned by 20 participants. Other phrases indicated by the respondents were *no shit* (8) and *I shit you not* (7).

Although the remaining exclamations in this category were mentioned only once or twice, a few of them were quite interesting, for example *shittin ducks*, *up shit creek without a paddle*, *shithouse* or *sure as shit*.

Several participants provided a more detailed response in which they indicated other common exclamations and their meaning (4a) or differentiated between conveying a positive or negative message (4b).

- (30) a. 'I shit you not...' Is commonly used. I don't personally say this but its very commonly used as an alternative to 'I'm not joking'
- b. Typically I rely more on tone or hand movement, it would depend on what I was emphasising, for example something negative would likely be emphasised with 'bloody hell' or 'shit' whereas something positive would more likely be emphasised with 'woah'.

The respondents confirmed the preference towards the *f-word* and *shit* as the chosen intensifiers and expletives when asked to provide an alternative to *damn*.

Although the purpose of this question was to investigate whether the respondents would indicate *bugger* as the favoured substitute, the results show that out of 953 comments, *bugger* appeared only 231 times. This number of instances is still significantly higher than the number of comments in which the respondents chose *bloody* (11) or *bloody hell* (106) as alternatives to *damn*.

Furthermore, out of 130 identified phrases, the one phrase that alone was mentioned 412 times was *shit*. The second most frequently suggested option was *fuck* (382). Interestingly, it is the *f-word* and its derivatives that comprise the largest group of phrases consisting of 22 variants mentioned in a total of 522 responses.

The participants provided also an insight into the use of swearwords that may be considered as alternatives to *damn* (5a) or even referred to celebrities using and promoting Aussie Lingo (5b).

- (31) a. *shit, damn, aw fuck, fuckin hell, bloody hell, aw piss off, aw fuck off, what the fuck, what the shit, fuckin shit*, (please note, there is no g in fuckin because we don't say it, a common thing in Australian English is we omit saying the g in 'ing' ending words)
- b. *Fuck!* Also you should look up Nick Cummins if you haven't already because he says the most outrageous Australian things
- c. *Bugger*. However aussies swear a lot so often they are used instead of damn.
- d. "Damn it, or a curse word like f it or f  
Most aussie will use a curse word"
- e. *Would rather not right on a survey hahaha*

The above results may indicate a shift towards less Australian-specific terms. However, this change should be studied further.

## 5. Conclusions

The Australian variety of English, like every language, evolves and undergoes constant changes, where new linguistic forms appear and others become obsolete. The results of the study carried out on more than a thousand respondents provide a novel and valuable insight into the correlation between the expression of emotions and the use of compounds containing the Great Australian Adjective. Moreover, the study cross-examined the status of *bloody* against other expletives indicated by the Australian young adults.

The study on Aussie slang shows that *bloody* – the hallmark of Australian English, remains in current use. Furthermore, the study found that *bloody hell* is the most favoured exclamation when expressing both positive or negative emotions. In addition, the respondents pointed out that they use insults as terms of endearment in the case of positive emotions, but when *bloody* is used to express a negative emotion with a word like *idiot* or *dickhead*, it is intended to offend or intimidate a person. Of course, the tone of voice is crucial in every case.

These findings seem to correlate with views presented by Burridge (2010: 131) who stated that *bloody* as an intensifier “may simply be a marker of excitement or exuberance”. Wierzbicka (1997: 219) also claims that *bloody* is not “restricted to negative feelings” – it can also serve to convey admiration or other positive feelings. According to other linguists (e.g. Hughes 2006: 34), the versatility of *bloody* is due to the “loss of intensity” as a result of its overuse. Nevertheless, the results indicate that, even if *bloody* has lost in its intensity, it is a well-established expression in the Australian everyday speech.

Although *bloody* is still present in the speech of young Australian adults, depending on the context and level of formality, it slightly gives way to other forms such as the *f-word* or *shit*, common in other English-speaking countries.

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