

He was a wicked teacher. It's bare addictive. This is me: 'Go home innit'.

Teenagers as Linguistic Innovators. An Overview of British Teen Talk.

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It is generally assumed that a language should not be regarded as something permanent and fixed but as an evolving and continuously changing system. Several internal and external factors are responsible for this state of perpetual change; there are also certain groups of speakers that exert a particularly strong influence on the development of language, who introduce the kind of innovations that gradually may be incorporated into what is generally considered to be the standard variety. Such is the case with adolescents and teenagers, who can be regarded as real linguistic innovators. In this paper I will try to justify this claim, outlining some of the most distinctive features of the verbal expression of this group of speakers.

Before dealing with this issue in detail, we should address the question of what exactly is meant by teenagers' language, since this will be the starting-point of our discussion. By teen talk we mean the language used by individuals between 13 and 20 years old in their interactions with their peers. This last point is important, because teens often revert to standard language forms when speaking to parents, teachers and adults in general. Over recent decades the characteristic speech patterns of teenagers have received scholarly attention, with publications such as Eckert (1988), Andersen (2001), Rodríguez (2002), Stenström et al. (2002), Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou (2003), Tagliamonte (2005), Stenström and Jørgensen (2009), Palacios (2011a), Spiegel and Gysin (2016), to mention just a few. However, broadly speaking, there is still a shortage of studies in this area and there is lot of scope for further research. Apart from the fact that teen talk influences the development of language in general, it should be borne in mind that teenagers are an extremely important part of society, and that by studying their language we can arrive at a better understanding of teens within their social groups. Furthermore, youth represents a crucial time in the life of an individual, since it is at this stage of human development that the adult personality begins to be shaped and consolidated. Linguistically speaking, teen talk is particularly rich and interesting at all levels of linguistic analysis, especially at the lexical level; it is influenced by a rich combination of cognitive factors and other more socially bound variables, such as gender, social class, cultural level and ethnic group. It has also been observed that there are some general trends that can be identified across languages; that is, some traits in verbal behaviour may be generally common among younger speakers, independent of their mother tongue.

To study teen talk in detail, we need data that can be regarded as representative of this group's forms of speaking and interacting. In my analysis I have examined information extracted from comics and magazines (*Bliss, Sugar, The Beano, The Dandy, Shout, Pop Star!, Mizz, BBC Girl Talk*), books, brochures and advertising for young people. I have also consulted Internet forums and other websites, as well as emails and SMS. Furthermore, glossaries and dictionaries are available which also provide interesting information, such as the *Urban Dictionary* and the *Teenspeak Dictionary for 'Rents'*. Finally, linguistic corpora of teen talk also offer fascinating data, most notably: COLT (*The Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language*), LEC (*London English*

Corpus), and SCoSE (*Saarbrücken Corpus of Spoken English*). The first of these, COLT, contains approximately 500,000 words of spoken language, a total of 100 tapes equivalent to 50 hours of conversation. This corpus was collected in London during the early 1990s by a group of researchers from the University of Bergen (Stenström et al. 2002). It consists mainly of spoken interactions by 31 male and female adolescents who self-recorded themselves in their everyday interactions. The second corpus used, LEC, consists of transcripts of informal conversation-like interviews with one or two speakers and a fieldworker, and some self-recordings. The transcripts are from two Economic and Research Council funded projects: *Linguistic Innovators* and *Multicultural London English*. It was compiled by Cheshire and her associates between 2004 and 2010 in inner (Hackney) and outer London (Havering). It is quite a large corpus, containing over 2,391,000 words in total. To a certain extent it can be compared to COLT, in that both were compiled with data provided by young speakers from the same areas in London and following similar criteria for their sampling and collection. The final corpus, SCoSE, consists of seven parts, one of which contains London teenage talk dating from 2008. Compared to the other two corpora it is rather small, composed of only 12,000 words, which were elicited by means of interviews conducted with a group of boys and girls whilst at school.

I will organise the following account of teen talk according to three levels of analysis: conversational structure; lexis and vocabulary; and grammar.

As regards the conversational structure of verbal interactions, we can identify certain phenomena that are typical of spoken language in general, not only of teen talk. This is the case with the prevalence of very short turns with a high frequency of overlapping and interruptions. However, in addition to the former trait, adolescent speech is also particularly crowded with forms such as invariant tags, which serve to keep the interlocutors' attention while not necessarily counting on or demanding their participation. The following are the most characteristic invariant tags found in the expression of London teen talk: *yeah*, *innit*, *OK*, *right*, *you get me*, *you know what I mean*. Consider the following extracts:

(1) *I have a plan **right**. I plan my homework this year start of the week I plan my homework, **okay**? See I'm gonna be able to say, **right** do that Saturday night. Homework's got to be such and such a thing [to do] **right**? So I had it all planned out.* (COLT)

(2) ***Yeah yeah** I d= do I mean I do that, **yeah**. I dunno.* (COLT)

(3) *but skateboarders is not all that in Hackney yeah? if you think about it skateboard no you will never see anybody in Hackney skateboarding **you get me** they'll probably look at them and say "you freak" **you get me** so why have they got why they think but the skateboarding is like not all that **you get me**?* (LEC)

In fact, it is at the lexical level where teenagers' most distinctive language traits are found. Notable here is the large number of expressions with an indeterminate or vague meaning. These include **placeholders**, that is, nouns with a general reference (*thing(s)*, *thingie/y*, *thingybob*, *thingummy*, *thingamajig*, *whatsit*, *whatshisname*, *whatsername*), **quantifiers** (*sort of*, *kind of*, *loads of*) and **general extenders** or **final tags** (*and like*, *and stuff*, *and things*, *and this/that*, *and everything*, *or something*, *or whatever*). Underlying this use of vague language is a specific discourse strategy, in the sense that all these

expressions serve to reinforce the sentiments of the peer group, also functioning as a kind of identity marker:

- (4) *How do you reckon you did in that French **thingie** today?* (COLT)
- (5) *They just dance **and that**.* (COLT)
- (6) *we're just wanna work **and stuff** and actually do something with our lives.* (LEC)
- (7) *I always spend my money on **loads of shit**.* (COLT)

Teen talk is also well known for its large quantity of taboo and swear words, many of which are related to sex. This is motivated by the tendency of youths to go against the norm, and also functions as a means of provocation and self-assertiveness. Stenström et al. (2002: 71) list the following items according to their frequency, from the most to the least common: *crap*, *arse(hole)*, *dick(head)*, *bastard*, *bitch*, *take the piss*, *fuck(ing)*, *wanker*, *suck*, *cunt*, *bollocks*. Here are some examples of their use:

- (8) *It's a load of **crap**.* (LEC)
- (9) *I'm not like that you **dickhead**.* (LEC)
- (10) *I don't understand why you always **take the piss** out of me for my voice.* (COLT)
- (11) *Oh what an **arsehole!*** (COLT)
- (12) *They're just **wankers** that's all.* (LEC)

Stenström et al (2002: 80) also show how male and female teens use swear and abusive words differently. Firstly, male speakers tend to use such terms more frequently; and secondly, boys opt for more offensive items such as *fucking* or *shit*. In contrast, teenage girls prefer to resort to less abusive words such as *god* or *bloody*.

Although insults and abusive terms are also very common, on many occasions these are not employed with offensive intent but with the aim of creating solidarity among the members of the peer group. The following have been recorded as the most frequent: *stupid/clumsy/snobby/dirty cow*, *peanut head*, *fat/fucking cunt*, *dickhead*, *bloody chieffer*, *fucking/stupid/fat/lazy/sad/bent/thick/crafty/little/old/rotten slag/bastard* and *little wanker*.

- (13) *What you doing? **Peanut head**.* (COLT)
- (14) *She's a bit of a clumsy **cow**.* (LEC)
- (15) *My dad is black you **cunt** so is my grandad.* (LEC)
- (16) *They were going **fucking wanker, fucking wanker, you cunt, you cunt**.* (COLT)

The use of old-fashioned words with new meanings is also significant. This is the case with adjectives such as *massive*, *sad*, *wicked*, *bad*, *mental*, which, on many occasions, are used to express something positive, as in the following:

- (17) *Her hair look **wicked!***

Thus, *wicked* in (17) does not convey any negative connotations, but quite the opposite: the speaker means that the hair looked great.

With regards to grammar, due to space limitations, I will just mention three main features: negation, intensifiers and quotatives. Teenagers use far more negatives than their adult counterparts because they are more spontaneous in their speech and do not

feel the need to mitigate their language so much (Palacios 2011b). Furthermore, they are very fond of double negative constructions (also known as negative concord) and vernacular negative forms such as *ain't*, standing for *am/is/are/has/have plus not*, *Nap* and *Nope*, instead of the short reply form *No*, and *don't* for the third person singular present instead of *doesn't*. Witness the following:

- (18) *I ain't got no headphones.* (COLT)
- (19) *So you didn't play any sports at the week-end? Nope.* (LEC)
- (20) *She don't wanna come in here.* (LEC)

Intensifiers have also been the focus of study, as young speakers tend to overuse a number of adjective and adverb intensifiers i.e. *really*, *so*, *pretty* instead of *very*, which is more closely associated with adults. Some swear words, for example *bloody* and *fucking*, are also used with an intensifying function and this also applies to the adverbs *well*, *just* and *right* which very rarely occur with this function in the language of adults.

- (21) *I was well drunk.* (COLT)
- (22) *They've been right bastards to you.* (COLT)
- (23) *fucking sad you are!* (COLT)
- (25) *That wasn't really good this year.* (LEC)

Moreover, we find two emerging intensifiers, *proper* and *bare*, with some particular uses, as in the following:

- (26) *It's bare addictive.* (LEC)
- (27) *we's shovelling down the chips down and coke, proper coke they were drinking.* (COLT)

Finally, teenagers also tend to make more frequent use of alternative quotatives (verbs introducing direct speech) rather than those that are more typical of adults, such as *ask*, *tell* or *ask*. Thus, *like*, *be like* and *this is + pronoun*.

- (28) *I was like, "I didn't say anything".* (COLT)
- (29) *But I was to say it's different. Like, Linsey goes to me, "cos I've got a black kitten", he goes, "what are you gonna call it?" I goes, "dunno".* (COLT)
- (30) *This is me, "I flipped and swore at him".* (LEC)

Although this is just an overview of the main traits of teenagers' language, I hope I have at least piqued the reader's interest in this speaker group. In my view, as teachers of English, we should try to keep up with the evolution and changes in the language: this applies in particular to the code used by speakers who in many cases most resemble the age profile of the learners in our own classrooms. It is true that at primary and secondary levels it is necessary to establish priorities, and these may demand a focus on standard forms, but without doubt there are certain features of teen talk that might usefully be introduced into our language teaching at these levels.

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