

SLE Workshop

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Comparative research on youth language. New trends and challenges

The language of teenagers has received a great deal of attention over recent decades. Teens constitute an important sector of society, and their mode of communication often differs from that of adults, being seen as one of the primary sources of change and innovation in the language (Eckert 1997; Androutsopoulos 2005). “Teenagers are the innovators and the movers and shakers of language change and they are the hope for the future” (Tagliamonte 2016: xiv).

Youth language here denotes the linguistic expression of speakers from the age of twelve to their early twenties, especially in their interactions with members of their peer group, since when addressing older speakers, such as parents, caretakers and teachers, young speakers are likely to converge with the mainstream at least to some extent.

Common terms used in the literature to refer to this mode of expression include *teen talk* or *young speak* in English, *lenguaje* or *argot juvenil* in Spanish, *langue des jeunes* or *parler jeune* in French, *lingua dei giovani* in Italian, *Jugendsprache* in German, *ungdomsspråk* in Swedish, *linguagem juvenil* in Portuguese and *jeugdtaal* in Dutch. Beyond Romance and Germanic languages, notable studies have also been conducted on both African (Hurst-Harosh 2020) and Asian languages (Djenar 2018).

The emergence of new technologies and the advent of social media have also had a direct impact on youth language, not least because teens and young adults spend a great deal of their free time playing video games, using the web, and maintaining and developing social relationships via social networks, especially through their mobile phones (Williams and Thurlow 2005; Nortier 2016).

For quite some time youth language has been regarded as a kind of jargon or ‘bad language’, with its speakers exhibiting a fondness for vernaculars, slang and swear words, and a tendency to flaunt the norms and conventions of standard language (Rodríguez González 1989; Stenström et al. 2002; Tagliamonte 2016). More recently, though, youth language has come to be considered as a code in its own right, and a wide variety of approaches have been adopted in studies here: corpus-based (Stenström et al. 2002; Cheshire et al. 2011; Fox 2012), variationist (Eckert 2000), ethnographic and interactional (Ramptom 1995; Pujolar 1997), contrastive (Zimmermann 2009; Stenström 2014; Palacios 2016) and even a combination of some of the former (Kotsinas 1997; Tagliamonte 2016; Drummond 2018). Such a wide range of approaches also applies to research methods and instruments used: corpora (Stenström et al. 2002; Jørgensen 2008; Palacios 2011), word lists (Pooley 2000) and interviews (Cheshire et al. 2011; Tagliamonte 2016), ethnography (Eckert 2000; Drummond 2018) and self-productions (Stenström et al. 2002).

The topic areas addressed in studies of youth speak have also fluctuated widely over the years. Whereas vocabulary and lexical phenomena (semantic shift, word borrowing, special word-formation processes, vague language, i.e. general extenders and placeholders, taboo and slang words) were the main topics under consideration in early studies, new issues and questions have been explored more recently, these including the construction of identity (Androutsopoulos and Georgakopoulou 2003; Nortier and Svendsen 2015; Drummond 2018), the social stratification of adolescence (Eckert 2000; Stenström et al. 2002), the comparison of teen talk with the expression of other age groups (Kerswill 1996; Stenström et al. 2002; Cheshire et al. 2011; Palacios and Núñez 2015), a number of phonological features (vowel reduction and assimilation; cf. Cheshire et al. 2011), as well as grammar and discourse features, such as quotatives (Tagliamonte and Huson 1999; Tagliamonte and D’Arcy 2004; Fox 2012),

pragmatic markers (Andersen 1997; Torgersen et al. 2011; Stenström 2014; Palacios 2015), intensifiers (Paradis and Bergmark 2003; Tagliamonte 2008; Palacios and Núñez 2012), address terms (Palacios 2018), to mention just a few.

This SLE workshop aims to promote the exchange of ideas on youth language research from a crosslinguistic perspective by considering how recent social, geographical, environmental, semiotic and economic changes in modern societies have been reflected in teen talk. It also seeks to enrich participants' mutual understanding of the field towards extending the breadth and depth of research in this area of language study.

Among the questions that we might use as points of departure in the workshop are the following.

1. How do teenagers construct their identity through language? Do the linguistic strategies and mechanisms they use in the construction of their own identity vary from one language to another?
2. How can we deal with the difficulties of conducting research into youth language? What instruments and research methods are seen as the most suitable to explore youth language? How can we collect data under the current COVID situation and the various legal restrictions on personal contact when trying to gain access to adolescents and teenagers?
3. How do teenagers use language on social media and in other new forms of communication? To what extent is this different from their offline communication, and also how different from adult language use in these media? How can findings from such studies contribute to a better understanding of youth language?
4. Have the attitudes of society, social media and speakers in general towards youth language changed recently? What might be the practical implications and consequences of these attitudes in the education and labour market?
5. Which particular areas in youth language deserve further attention? Do these vary widely from one language to another? What roles are played by gender and social factors? Do boys use more vernacular than girls? How does the use of a vernacular reflect social-economic class, especially in the perception of 'lower-class' backgrounds?
6. Why and how do features distinctive of youth language fade away as speakers grow older? Are there any features which are retained, and if so, for how long?
7. What is the role of young speakers in multiethnolects or contemporary urban speech styles? What sort of changes and innovations do these young speakers introduce into the language?

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