1   What's all the fuss about teen language?

> There's always going to be a generation gap because you're never going to change teenagers. Even in the fifties they were like being rebellious and going against them by wearing poodle skirts and burning their bras in the sixties. So teenagers aren't ever – are never gonna change.
>
> (Mindy Chow, 17)[1]

This book is about the way teenagers talk. It is not about the way adults think teenagers should talk. It is about the way they *do* talk. What you will read about in this book is based on what I have learned from listening and questioning and from doing what sociolinguists do – analyzing everyday talk. In this chapter I bring together the prevailing ideas about teen language.

The rise of teen power

As a backdrop for the investigation of teen language, it is important to contextualize the historical and cultural context. Consider the events and developments that have typified the twentieth century. There have been two world wars. The United States has risen as a world power. Public broadcasting has developed, including talking movies in the 1920s and, after 1950, television. There have been colossal, widespread technological developments, including the World Wide Web in the 1990s. English has become a global language (Crystal, 2003).

These developments have innumerable implications for language change, and for the English language in particular. Class structure, a vital concomitant of language variation and change (e.g. Chambers, 2003a) has flattened and literacy has risen (Chambers, 2003b: 100–101), rural dialects have declined and urbanization has increased. There have been unprecedented changes in communication and media, and popular youth culture has developed. Many of these changes converge in grandstanding the very youngest sectors of the speech community. The notion of the teenage years as a discrete stage in life did not even exist before the twentieth century, let alone tweens (the 8–12-year-olds) who are now becoming a major advertising market. Moreover, the focus on youth is strengthening with pervasive geographic, social, and

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occupational mobility, as well as the increasing tendency towards new types of communication (i.e. text messaging, email, instant messaging, etc.), which are fundamentally changing the types of contacts young people have on a daily basis. As we shall see, all these sociocultural changes may have added to the influence of teenagers as the drivers of language change.

Language, is changing, but not for a good reason. It's because a bunch of self-centered, self-focused new generation people are saying, "I don't need to learn how to speak correctly!" You understand what I'm saying? (Loreen Kowalski, 50)

The problem of teen language

An influential view of teen language is that it is "fast becoming dreadful in the hands of young people."[2] A common conclusion is that teen language is filled with "slang." What is slang? Slang is informal language, but in addition to its casual nature, it also has a particular set of characteristics. Slang is associated with a relatively local and confined age group of speakers considered less responsible than the adult members of society. Who would that be – teenagers of course! Slang is also the label typically given to words associated with social groups outside of the mainstream or with local peer group identity. This is the reason why teenagers, in particular, with their emphasis on peer group relationships, are often blamed for the origin and cultivation of slang. Slang items are characteristically synonyms for everyday words. To put it another way, the individual who uses the slang word knows darn well there's a mundane alternate word but chooses not to use it. The slang term is an intentional, deliberate replacement of a neutral conventional term, a flaunting of an antithesis of the mundane. You can probably remember a time when you purposely used slang to shock someone. Teenagers love to flaunt the newest trendiest words when they are talking to their elders. For example, when I told my kids I was writing this book, one said "Mum, that's sick!" and another said simply, "Dope," perhaps because they wanted to shock me. But I knew they meant it positively. Listen out for the latest new word in your neighborhood. Finally, slang items are usually perceived as having a short life span. Some, in fact, do, especially those associated with local peer groups; however, many others have staying power. Think of the word *cool* for example, to mean something positive, compared to *wicked*, which is fast becoming stale compared to *groovy*, a word that I don't think anyone (at least that I know) uses anymore. I do not know how long *sick* or *dope* might last as a synonym for *good* either, but they are two of the trendier terms at the moment. According to Mencken (1971: 365), "slang originates in an effort, always by ingenious individuals, to make the language more vivid and expressive." Keep this in mind.

Language is a dynamic function. It must grow or die, right? (Loreen Kowalski, 50)

Why are teenagers distinctive?

The teenage years are well known to be the most turbulent phase in human life, a veritable "social hothouse" (Eckert, 2000: 16). Physically, physiologically, socially, intellectually, teenagers are in a constant state of flux. The social forces that dominate adolescent life, including increased independence, wider contacts, the imperative to separate from parents, and solidarity with peers have a corresponding impact on language (e.g. Eckert, 1988: 205–206; Kerswill, 1996: 198). How does teen language reflect this? Teenagers specifically set out to use words that their parents do not. Sometimes this is a conscious selection of one word over another (in one generation the use of *groovy* instead of *good*, in another the use of *sick* instead of *great*). Sometimes, however, it is much more subtle, and teenagers themselves do not know just how marked their difference from the older generations really is.

[046] do u argue w ur parents [8] YES JOKE!!! (Andre Luc, 18)

In-group vs. out-group

Teenagers are cliquish to the nth degree. Group identity and membership is where it's at. Much of the literature about teenagers comes from the study of their social networks, groups, and gangs (e.g. Bucholtz, 1999, 2011; Eckert, 1989, 2000, 2003; Kiesling, 2001). Language is one of the primary means of marking group norms. Teenagers use language to include other teens and to exclude out-group members, such as parents and teachers and even other teenagers. Acceptance by one's peers is crucial and isolation is not simply undesirable, but literally terrifying. This is why use of language becomes a powerful tool. It signals to others what group you belong to (Fortman, 2003).

Teenagers and language change

Most sociolinguists agree that adolescence is the "focal point for linguistic innovation and change" (e.g. Chambers, 2003a; Eckert, 1997, 2000; Kerswill, 1996; Roberts, 2002). This means that children and adolescents, in particular, are the key individuals to look to when it comes to trying to find out what is changing in language and where language is headed.

Let's explore this broad statement in more detail. First, it is necessary to understand how language changes from birth to adulthood. Labov (2001) proposed that language changes according to a model of Incrementation.

First, I need to explain Incrementation. The model of linguistic change represented in Figure 1.1 is taken from Labov (2001: 448, figure 14.1). An individual acquires language from their primary caregiver, usually the

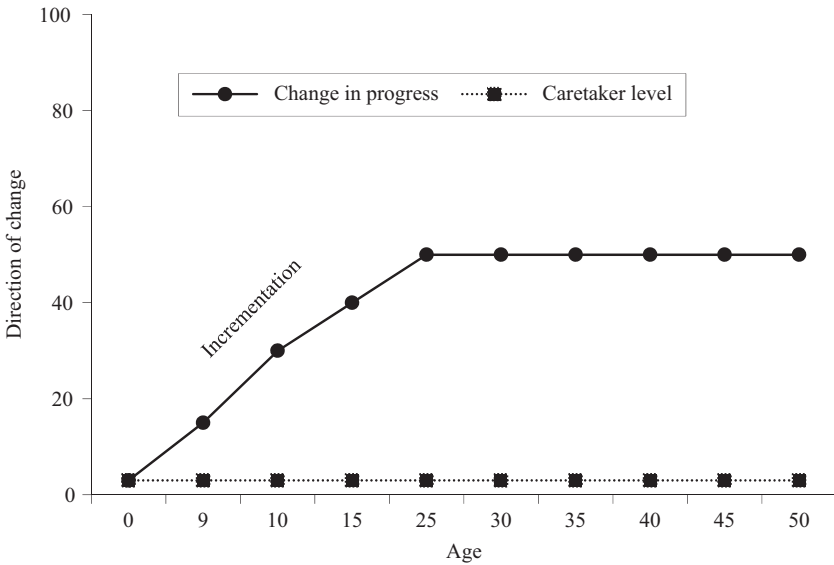4   What's all the fuss about teen language?

Figure 1.1 Labov's (2001: 448) model of Incrementation

mother. A form undergoing change will be acquired at the same frequency as used by the model. This level is represented by the dotted line labeled "Caretaker level." As an individual goes to school and becomes part of the community, the frequency of innovating forms increases, or increments, until late adolescence represented by the diagonal line labeled "Incrementation." In late adolescence, the grammar stabilizes. Individuals stop incrementing (i.e. increasing their use of incoming forms). The hypothesis is that their grammar remains constant for the rest of their lives, represented by the level line across the adulthood years.

Let's make this practical by imagining this process with the alternation between *have got* and *have* (e.g. Kroch, 1989; Tagliamonte et al., 2010). For example, my mother used *have got*, as in "*I've got a cat*" most of the time, with a few *have* tokens here and there. So, I acquired this ratio of *have got* to *have* as well. However, when I entered school and extended my social networks my use of *have* increased, e.g. I started saying "*I have a cat, I have a car, I have a headache.*" This continued until I was in late adolescence or early adulthood. By the time I settled into adult life, my frequency of *have* stabilized at a frequency much higher than my mother's. At a certain point, the use of *have got* probably started to seem old-fashioned. When I became a parent, my children acquired my frequency of *have*. Their grandmother was much older and she used a lot of *have got*, but by then this sounded old-fashioned. When

my grandchildren acquire language they will acquire their parents' frequency of *have*, not mine (which still has the occasional *have got*). And the cycle will continue.

All three of these mechanisms – (i) acquisition of variation from the language of caretakers, (ii) incrementation of incoming variants in adolescence, and (iii) stabilization – are critical to understanding how language changes. Adolescence is a key phase. It is the time of rapid development. The teenage years are a period of instability for many reasons, especially for language change. If there are changes going on in language, this is when they take off. By early adulthood the grammar is set. Individuals are expected to keep the same frequencies and patterns for the remainder of their lives.

What's a variant?
I will use the term "variant" to refer to different forms of words and phrases that alternate with each other in language use. For example, a quotative verb in English comprises several different variants, *say, tell, go, think*, etc. Another variant is *like* which is an innovation in contemporary English, as in *I'm like, "oh no!"*

Let's go into some detail about how the model of acquisition, incrementation, and stabilization in Figure 1.1. maps from individual life spans onto the life span of change in the community over generations.[3] Figure 1.2 is reproduced from Labov (2001: 453, figure 14.5) and Tagliamonte and D'Arcy
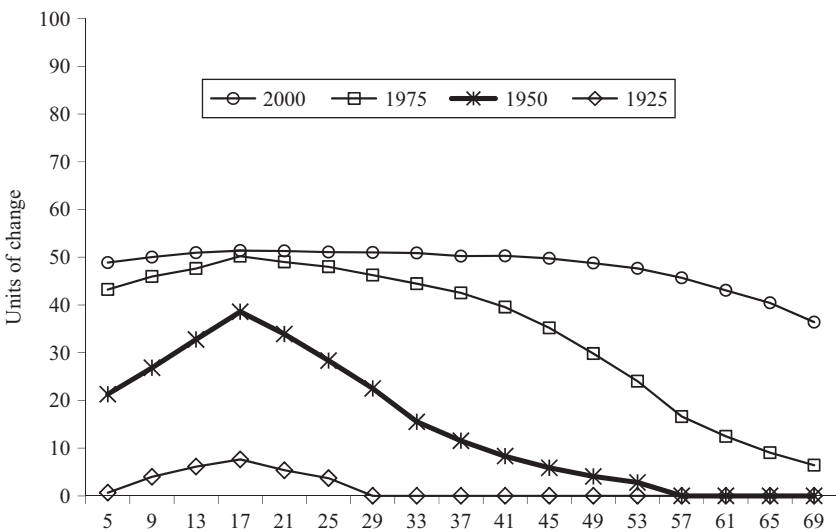

Figure 1.2 Hypothetical linguistic change over four generations

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(2009: 68, figure 5). First, I will describe what the figure shows. Then, I'll
demonstrate how it works step-by-step.

Figure 1.2 represents a hypothetical language change over four generations,
fixed at 25 years each: 1925, 1950, 1975, and 2000. It is important to highlight
that Labov's model makes a distinct contrast between female and male
speakers. Figure 1.2 shows the profile for females who increment changes in
adolescence as shown by peaks at certain stages of the change. Males are
thought to have no incrementation component and so are predicted to have
smooth trajectories and few, if any, peaks (Labov, 2001: 457). As we will see,
this opposition is not so clear cut in practice.

By the last period, the circle line, the innovating form has leveled out at
approximately 50 percent of the system of which it is a part and appears
to have stabilized across the age span (with a slight downturn among the
individuals that are 60+). The figure is based on the "apparent time
construct" (Bailey et al., 1991). In an apparent time study, generational
differences are compared at a single point and are used to make inferences
about how a change may have taken place in the (recent) past. The speech of
individuals of different ages is taken "to reflect the language as it existed at the
time when that generation learned the language" (Bailey et al., 1991: 242).
Apparent time offers language scientists a surrogate for chronological (or real)
time, enabling the history of a linguistic change to be studied with data from
the existing population.

Let's track a hypothetical change moving through time. It begins in 1925 (the
diamond line at the bottom of the figure). The change is incipient, so low in
frequency probably no one notices it. Community members over the age of
25 are not affected by it, and neither are the 5-year-olds (at the far left) because
their 29-year-old mothers do not have it. The 5-year-olds are at level zero and
so are all the adults from age 29 onwards. But older children have started
acquiring the change from peers and they are increasing the frequency of use of
the new form in adolescence. Observe that 9-year-olds use the new form a little,
13-year-olds use it more, and 17-year-olds are producing the most advanced
realization of the change. A peak in apparent time is just visible here. This peak
is an important indication that a linguistic change is beginning to take off.

Now, let's move to 1950, 25 years into the future (the starred line). At this
point, the 17-year-olds in the 1925 line have aged 25 years and are 42. Based
on the model of linguistic change, they stabilized after age 17, and so their use
of the new form remains at the same level as they had in 1925. In contrast, the
former 13-year-olds, 9-year-olds, and 5-year-olds have all increased their use
of the new form in adolescence. They too have stabilized, but due to the fact
that they increased the frequency of the new form through their adolescence,
they have reached a higher frequency of the incoming form. The 13-year-olds
had four more years in which to increment before stabilizing at 17, so they

have advanced only a little since 1925. The 5-year-olds had 12 years of incrementation, so they have advanced more – past their slightly older peers. Language change is moving along.

This same process continues every year, so the 17-year-old peak is very high. Again, those 17-year-olds will now stabilize, so that in 1975 they exhibit the same frequencies as they did in adolescence. However, as before, their younger peers continue to increment past their rates before they, themselves, stabilize. In 1975, a peak is barely visible. Between 1975 and 2000 the rate of change slows down as language change evolves. This results in a lessening of the increment between childhood and adolescence. By the year 2000 the change has slowed to the point where no peak is visible. The patterning of linguistic change in apparent time is therefore a critical diagnostic of its nature. The slope of incrementation in adolescence will depend on how far the change has progressed in the community.

From Cedergren's study in Panama in 1973 and 1984 (Cedergren, 1973, 1984) to research in North America (Bailey et al., 1991; Tagliamonte, 2006b), this model has been shown to match well with community changes in apparent time (e.g. Cedergren, 1988; Sankoff and Blondeau, 2007; Sankoff and Evans Wagner, 2006; Tagliamonte and D'Arcy, 2009). When a linguistic change is at mid-pace, you will find a peak in apparent time among adolescents, likely at around 17 years of age.

A correlation between patterns of linguistic features and speaker age can also identify other types of change in the speech community. Sometimes there is change in progress in the underlying grammatical system (language change). In this type of change the whole community is involved and the language itself is changing (as in Figure 1.2). Sometimes speakers change the way they speak but this is a product of their age. This is called "age grading." In this case, the language itself is not changing. Instead speakers change the way they speak at different phases in their life. Sometimes both types of change happen at the same time. The only way to tell which phenomenon is in evidence is to tap into language patterns and interpret them.

This is my departure point into teen language. The processes of Acquisition, Incrementation, and Stabilization and their timing in the life span are intimately tied to how language change works. Keep this model in mind as I explore the analyses of linguistic features among teenagers in the coming chapters.

[Interviewer] Yeah, I mean then the influence of how your kids say "like" all the time? [077] It's a terrible habit I have. I hate to think how many times I've said it on this tape. It's a dreadful habit that I try to break myself . . . (June Watson, 49)

2   Teens talking

> I think the natural inclination of anybody is to get lazy and sloppy and not think. So there's more and more slang and people dropping their G's and things like that that frankly grates on me. I hate it! Then again, I find myself doing it sometimes.
>
> <div align="right">(Sara Kempt, 49)</div>

In this chapter I introduce the data from which the book will draw its information. I will also describe the data collection methods and procedures, the fieldwork experiences, and corpus compilation procedures. Who are the teenagers and young adults who make up the animated conversations I cite? Readers will get to know them through the many examples of their conversations in this chapter and sprinkled throughout the book.

When people talk about teen language, they often have based their views on anecdotal observation and/or extrapolation from small samples. In this book, I rely on an immense collection of conversations that were collected under unique circumstances – teenagers talking to first-year university students who were familiar to them.

The data come from a research program that I have been conducting for many years. The earliest data I will discuss come from 1995; the latest from 2010. The corpora span many different projects, most of them conducted within the auspices of the undergraduate curriculum of universities where I have taught over this period (the University of Ottawa, the University of York, UK, and the University of Toronto). In order to study teen language, it is important to be able to situate it more broadly. How can you say that a word or an expression is a "teen" thing if you do not know what everyone else in the community is doing? How do you know it's a "new" thing if you haven't checked the historical record? A researcher must have a solid comparative perspective from people of other ages and other times and places. Without the comparative perspective from across the age span, something that seems exclusive to teenagers may actually be a development that began a long time ago among people much older than contemporary teens. For example, everyone thinks that *like* is a teenage thing, or at least a young person's thing. However, when I started studying *like* I discovered that

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researchers have been complaining about *like* for a very long time. Consider this quote from Jespersen:

Like is very much used in colloquial and vulgar language to modify the whole of one's statement, a word or phrase modestly indicating that one's choice of words was not, perhaps, quite felicitous. It is generally used by inferiors addressing superiors. (Jespersen, 1933: 417–418)

Given the time Jespersen was writing, *c.*1933, it is likely that many parents reading this book had grandparents who used *like*. Moreover, the American Heritage Dictionary[1] cites the non-standard use of *like* as an "expletive to provide emphasis or pause." Observations such as these provide us with great insights into the use of forms beyond simply claiming that a certain sector of the population uses them. It also highlights how important it is to study the whole population when attempting to analyze teen language.

Collecting authentic data from teenagers

How does a middle-aged academic gain access to the world of teen language? A critical goal is to record individuals when they are not concerned about how they sound or what they say. Casual conversations are required. However, when teenagers talk to adults, they do not use the typical interactional characteristics that they would normally use with each other. There are unavoidable sociocultural reasons for this. Teenagers often are at odds with adult members of society, especially those in positions of authority, teachers and parents. In example (1) one of my students interviewed her younger sister.

1. a. [Interviewer] Do you talk different, like when you're around people?
   b. [019] I guess teachers.
   c. [Interviewer] Really?
   d. [019] Really. I'm talking to a teacher, I'm not like consciously but like, not 'cause I want to. But just, I don't know, I feel weird talking to teachers. I don't know why. I've always felt that way. (Rahim Vasanji, 19)

Moreover, there is an irrepressible clash of generations and opinions across people of different ages. Consider (2), where Clara talks about her father's reactions to the difference between herself and her sister

2. Daddy doesn't think that I get high enough marks to like his standards. Because you came along and got all these nineties! But like, I don't know like I understand that it's hard for me because like I'm different from you. And like I'm just not – my learning strategies and stuff, the way I learn is just totally different from you. And like I don't know it's just we do our own thing. But like Daddy just wants me to be like exactly like you! (Clara Felipe, 16)

These social and psychological barriers make it almost impossible for adults to hear what teenagers are talking about among themselves, and by extension

their "real" language. To obviate these problems, my projects were designed so that young people themselves were participant observers in the data collection and I (as the scientist behind the scenes) was nowhere near the interview situation. This method resolves many of the issues and problems surrounding fieldwork among teenagers and opens unprecedented doors into the word of teen language. Of course my eavesdropping on my own tweens and teenagers notwithstanding!

Sociolinguists typically enter the speech community they are interested in in such a way as to optimize observation of the "vernacular," the style of language people use in everyday talk (e.g. Labov et al., 1968; Milroy, 1987; Trudgill, 1974). This is crucial in the study of teen language, which to an outsider's ear is non-standard. In order to tap this type of language, the fieldworker must either be an in-group member, or have some affiliation with the community so that he or she can be perceived as a legitimate presence in the local milieu. In this case, I have employed a specific and, I think, unique strategy. My students – all in their late teens or early 20s – were the fieldworkers: by their age and many other social factors, they were inherent insiders.

In this way, all the teenage materials described in this book come from face-to-face conversations among peers. This is a very important fact. It means that the data were not collected by people who would have influenced the nature of the language, i.e. middle-aged people, "old" people, adults, etc. Due to this fact, the materials contain rich grassroots language comprising a wealth of rarely recorded discourse typical of spoken English language in the first decade of the twenty-first century. There are innumerable "slang" words and expressions. There are unusual sounds. There are unexpected twists in the arrangement of sentences and in the way sentences begin and end. There are little-known and rarely described conversational rituals. There are many things that are strange and exotic; there are some things that are unheard of and yet others that are hauntingly familiar. In many cases, features alien to adult language are present – the voices in the written and audio record echo with both the sanguine sophistication of thoughtful individuals and the crazy expressions of youth. All the examples in this book are orthographically transcribed verbatim from the written or audio records.[2]

All the teen language materials are young people talking to other young people. This makes these corpora among the few data sets collected by in-group members of youth culture.[3] Each of the interviewers was trained in sociolinguistic interviewing techniques and charged with engaging in friendly banter with a young person for about an hour. In each case a small, unobtrusive tape-recorder was employed, with a lavalier (tie-clip) microphone, clipped within 20 cm of the mouth. The interactions focus on informal topics such as school activities, hobbies, sports, friends, and lots of commiseration about problems with parents, boyfriends and girlfriends, etc.