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Teen Talk

How do today's teenagers talk? What are the distinguishing features of their style of language, and what do they tell us about the English language more generally? Drawing on a huge corpus of examples collected over a fifteen-year period, Sali A. Tagliamonte undertakes a detailed study of adolescents' language and argues that it acts as a "bellwether" for the future of the English language.

Teenagers are often accused of "lowering the standards" of the English language by the way they talk and text. From spoken words – "like," "so," "just," and "stuff" – to abbreviated expressions used online, this fascinating book puts young people's language under the microscope, examining and demystifying the origins of new words, and tracking how they vary according to gender, geographical location, and social circumstances.

Highly topical and full of new insights, the book is essential reading for anyone interested in how teenagers talk.

SALI A. TAGLIAMONTE is Professor of Linguistics at the University of Toronto, and a member of the Royal Society of Canada. She has published five books on varieties of English, dialects, variation, and how to observe, analyze, and understand language.

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For Duncan
Father of our children:
Adrian, Freya, Dazzian, Shaman, Tara
I love you,
Sali

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Preface

My husband, Duncan, and I have five children, currently between the ages of 12 and 31. We have a busy household! Kids are always coming and going. Family suppers on Sunday evening can comprise what we call our “mini family” – us and one or two of our children – or we might have up to 16 attendees at the table, including the kids, their partners, and friends. Life with children – no matter what their age – is fraught with complexity and challenge. Among the best pieces of advice I ever received about children was the following: embrace the little opportunities in your day to spend time with your children, even if it’s simply driving them and their friends all over the place or standing outside the front door for a brief chat as they wait for the bus. The next part of the advice is the difficult part: parents are advised not to talk, but listen. Up until the time I was a mother I had spent my career studying the language of older people, senior citizens/old age pensioners. Often these people inhabited small communities in remote locales. Their linguistic features were strange and wonderful. I thought I was studying the most interesting dialects in the world. But when my children reached pre-adolescence the kitchen table became an unexpected laboratory. As I listened to them talk I realized something even more interesting was going on. A whole new type of creativity and innovation in language erupted into my life in the most varied of words and phrases. I had entered a new frontier – one infrequently studied using natural unmonitored data – the language of teenagers.

This book comprises linguistic analyses of some of the most frequent, innovative, but also intensely ill-reputed, features of teen language circa late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The studies are based on extensive corpora I have collected over 20 years of my academic career. The book is generously peppered with examples from these informal conversations with teenagers so that readers will virtually enter into the world of this sector of the population. In fact, taken together the examples throughout the book provide a mini-corpus that readers can use to observe and explore the many facets of teen language. Sprinkled throughout the book are quips and comments from individuals that my research team and I have interviewed over the years. Their words corroborate and sometimes contrast with the results of linguistic

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analysis in colorful ways. You will also find mention of the many students that worked with me in this research. I have profited immensely from their input and collaboration because, in this case, they are often precisely the teenagers and twenty-somethings that are the population of study. I am particularly indebted to my (current) Ph.D. student Marisa Brook, who read through the completed manuscript with her eagle editing eyes and the inherent savvy of the very generation that promulgated many of the innovations you will read about. At one point, her comment in the margin was: *“I suddenly feel like I’m being stared at . . . : P.”*

Each chapter ends with a linguistic puzzle based on data from the corpora and focuses on the feature under discussion. Readers will gain firsthand experience of teen language using the examples in the book and companion materials on the CUP website. Any one of the phenomena I discuss could be studied wherever readers are located. Although most of my data come from a large city in North America (Toronto, Canada), the individuals come from a wide range of ethnicities and social backgrounds. Moreover, the features that I focus on are typical of teen language wherever English was spoken or written natively during the same time frame. But if English is not the local vernacular, simply look out for the same features or their ilk in the varieties at hand!

One of the overarching goals of this work is to show readers how fascinating teen language is and where it fits in with the rest of the population – in fact teenage language is critical to the advancement of language evolution and society itself. When I hear people disparage youth and their language, I am always defensive. Teenagers are the innovators and the movers and shakers of language change and they are the hope for the future. Let’s hear what they have to say.