

**Sali A. Tagliamonte, *Teen Talk. The Language of Adolescents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, xiv + 298 pp.**

**Reviewed by Costin-Valentin Oancea\***

The book under review is published by Cambridge University Press and it includes a List of Figures (pp. viii-x), Tables (pp. xi-xii), Preface (xii-xiv), thirteen chapters (pp. 1-266), followed by Notes (pp. 267-272), References (pp. 273-288), Author index (pp. 289-291) and Keyword index (292-298).

Chapter 1, “What’s all the fuss about teen language?” (pp. 1-7), represents an introduction to the language of teenagers, which is “filled with slang” (p. 2). The author introduces the concept of slang as an influential characteristic of teen talk. Despite the fact that adolescent talk is filled with it, “slang originates in an effort, always by ingenious individuals, to make the language more vivid and more expressive” (Mencken 1971: 365). The “Model of Incrementation” (Labov 2001) is presented followed by a discussion of the mechanisms that lead to language changes ((i) acquisition of variation from the language of caretakers; (ii) incrementation of incoming variants in adolescence; (iii) stabilization), with adolescence being a key phase. The chapter concludes that adolescence is the “focal point for linguistic innovation and change” (Chambers 2003, Eckert 1997, 2000, Kerswill 1996, Roberts 2002).

Chapter 2, “Teens talking” (pp. 8-42), introduces the data used throughout the book – “The Toronto Corpus”. The author acknowledges in the first part of the chapter that the book relies “on an immense collection of conversations that were collected under unique circumstances” (p. 8). Different corpora are introduced and presented: “The Toronto Teen Corpus” (2002-2006), “The Toronto Instant Messaging Corpus” (2004-2006), “The Clara Corpus” (2002-2015), etc. The importance of speaker age/birth date is also highlighted alongside the importance of conducting studies in “apparent time” as well as “real time”. The last part of the chapter dwells on discourse markers and particles, which are used consistently by adolescents (*like, so, that, stuff, just*).

Chapter 3, “How to tap teen language?” (pp. 43-64), starts by presenting three basic facts about language: (i) language is always changing, (ii) no one can stop language change – not teachers, not parents, not the prime minister, (iii) age has a huge impact on how a person uses language (p. 43). The author then swiftly moves the discussion towards one of the pillars of variationist sociolinguistics: the linguistic variable. Another equally important concept is introduced and exemplified, i.e. frequency, which is then applied to the discourse marker *like*. The Principle of accountability (Labov 1972) is briefly mentioned, followed by a scrutiny of grammatical and lexical change including the factors involved.

Chapter 4, “Quotatives: I’m like, ‘Oh my God!’” (pp. 65-80), continues the discussion started in Chapter 3, namely the use of quotative verbs (e.g. *like, say, think*), with an emphasis on quotative *like*, as it seems to be a feature chiefly associated with teen language, with roots in California and the Valley Girls, in the 1980s. The author notes that in the 1990s girls were using more quotative *like* than boys, but this was confined to Canada, where it was considered to be a “girl thing” (p. 71). Also, people from the 30s on down were all using *like*. The chapter concludes that quoting *like* has eclipsed storytelling quotation, mainly in urban centres among middle-class speakers.

In Chapter 5, “Intensifiers: upping the ante – super cool!” (pp. 81-94), the focus is on adverbs that enhance the meaning of adjectives to the highest degree or to some unspecified

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extent. A diachronic analysis is included here. In Old English the intensifier preferred was *well*, and then this was replaced in turn by *full*, *right*, *very*, *pretty* and *really*. In present-day English, *very* is the most widely used intensifier. In North American English, the most frequent intensifier is *really*. A comparison is then drawn between the uses of intensifiers in the American TV series *Friends* and the data she collected in York. The results show that in the *Friends* data the intensifier *so* was in the lead representing almost 50% of all the intensifiers used. In the York data the most popular intensifiers were *very* and *really*.

Chapter 6, “How do you start a sentence?” (pp. 95-120), tackles the use of words that appear in front position, i.e. words which come before sentences, such as *so*, *well*, *you know*, *uh*, which the author refers to as *sentence starters*. In the literature they are also known as “discourse markers”, “pragmatic markers” or “discourse-pragmatic markers”, or even “mystery particles” (Longacre 1976). The discussion then swiftly moves to the examination of the left periphery of canonical English utterances in Ontario English. The author analyses the four main markers used in contemporary English – *so*, *like*, *you know*, *well*, and shows that they are used from pre-adolescents to octogenarians.

If chapter 6 focuses on how we start a sentence, Chapter 7, “Sentence enders: finish with a flourish” (pp. 121-139), is concerned with how people end their sentences. It appears that each generation of speakers has its favoured sentence ender. For example, *right* is used by those born in the 1960s, while *whatever* is more common in the speech of those born between 1980 and 1984. *So* is more salient among those born between 1985 and 1989. The chapter continues with an in-depth analysis of general extenders, starting with a historical perspective and ending with a contemporary one. In the literature, general extenders have been treated as being stable, correlated with social and linguistic factors, but also as undergoing grammatical change, particularly among adolescents. Starting from these two standpoints, the author sets out to investigate the true nature and function of general extenders, and reaches the conclusion that for the time being general extenders are stable. Teenagers, as well as senior citizens, end their sentences with a flourish.

Chapter 8, “Generics: stuffology” (pp. 140-151), builds closely on the previous chapter in that it tracks the use of the work *stuff*. Unlike chapter 7, which focused on general extenders, this chapter examines only the use of *stuff* when it is used as a pronoun that denominates a group or set of items. The author sets out to investigate whether the words *stuff* and *things* are variants of the same meaning. According to English grammar, *stuff* refers to items that are mass nouns, while *things* to items which are count nouns. Tagliamonte argues that “while the reference is to the standard of living or to gross national product revenues, intuitively *things* is vague” (p. 143). Quite intriguingly, there appears to be an increase in the use of *stuff* by people born in the twentieth century. For teenagers born in the 1990s, there seems to be an equal chance of using *stuff* or *things*. Even if the words *things* and *stuff* divided the system according to the nature of the referent, nowadays it appears that *stuff* is steadily taking over to become “an all-purpose generic” (p. 150).

Chapter 9, “Just: *just* what?” (pp. 152-165), delves into the uses and functions of the word *just*. In the literature, the meaning of *just* is difficult to establish and to describe (Aijmer 2002: 173, and more recently, Grant 2013: 176). This chapter offers an examination of all the instances of *just* in the “Toronto English Corpus” and “Toronto Teen Corpus”, in order to determine what semantic types are present in the data and the linguistic contexts in which *just* tends to occur as well as whether or not *just* is subject to change. The word *just* is examined from a diachronic, as well as from a synchronic perspective. It is revealed that *just* is associated with pre-verbal contexts and this use is increasing among youth. Even though *just* has a plethora of different functions, its main purpose in the data analysed is to modify a verb, particularly in the progressive aspect.

Adjectives are the topic of Chapter 10, “Adjectives: the good, bad, and lovely” (pp. 166-187). The chapter starts with a preliminary discussion concerning adjectives and their different facets.

Building on this discussion and on the studies presented, the author decides to focus on a specific semantic field, i.e. strangeness. A historical presentation of the word *weird* is tackled, followed by an inventory of the synonyms for the word *weird/strange* (the first attestation of the adjective *strange* was in the 1300s). Adjectives have several key characteristics which make them an interesting choice for the study of linguistic change, as pointed out by the author: (i) versatility and colour, (ii) capacity for rapid change, (iii) renewal of different forms, (iv) recycling of older forms (p. 172). It is confirmed that certain adjectives are changing in “apparent time” in the “Toronto English Corpus” and “Toronto Teen Corpus” and at least one member of the semantic field of adjectives of *strangeness* is greatly implicated, i.e. *weird*.

Chapter 11, “Other funky teenage features: You know what? I dunno. Whatever!” (pp. 188-204), offers some preliminary observations on the use of a group of unusual expressions: *you know what?*, *I don’t know*, and *whatever*. The first expression is often used to ask a question to the listener but no answer is expected, e.g. *You know what those black seats are better* (p. 189). The author argues that this expression has become a discourse marker. She goes on and shows that there is no difference between male and female speech with respect to the standard use of the expression *you know what*. It appears that female speakers use it as a general extender, while male speakers use it as a discourse marker. As far as *I don’t know/I dunno* is concerned, it seems that when teenagers use it, they don’t use it *stricto sensu*, i.e. that person does not know something, because this expression is then followed by a statement which shows that the speaker clearly does know. This is clearly a sign of change, as argued by Tagliamonte, who shows that the use of *I don’t know* to mean ‘I don’t know’ is greatest among pre-adolescents and youngest teenagers. Mid-adolescents (15-16) and young adults use the pragmatic function of this expression more. The last expression, *whatever*, started out as a pronoun, but then it started to be used colloquially to mean ‘whatever may be the case’. It has acquired this meaning around 1870. In the 1990s, *whatever* has also come to be used as a general “extender”. In the “Toronto Teen Corpus” data teenagers use it as a linguistic means of shrugging one’s shoulders, meaning ‘I don’t care’.

The language of the internet is under scrutiny in Chapter 11, “Internet language: everyone’s online” (pp. 205-255), and shows us what Internet language is like among the category of the population that uses it the most – teenagers. The chapter delves into (truncated) words and abbreviations used in the Instant Messaging Era, e.g. *lol*, *omg*, *haha*, *hehe*, and even emoticons and their functions. It also presents different bits of “conversations” on MSM Messenger, some of them between the author and her children, which are then briefly analysed. The argument then moves to the analysis of intensifiers, modals of necessity, among other things. Included here is also a presentation of the language used in text messages (SMS).

Chapter 12, “Are they always going to talk like that?” (pp. 256-266), serves as a concise summary of all overall premise of teen talk contextualising the questions and answers the author has discussed and elaborated on in this book. The analyses presented in this chapter have underlined, once again, that spoken and written registers are distinct on several levels with regard to the progression of linguistic change. Written language, even computer-mediated communication registers, is far more conformist than speech with regard to grammatical change than expected. The author ends the chapter with a prediction. She argues that teenagers will keep on using the same forms with almost the same frequency as they do now, and as they age this will be interpreted as “old people” talk. Don’t forget that language is a living organism and language change is part of language itself.

Sali A. Tagliamonte’s book set out to investigate the language of adolescents. This has been a very difficult undertaking, but the author managed to give a first-hand description of teen talk. The style is concise and easy to follow, the book being strewn with anecdotes and stories (including personal examples) which give it a more intriguing and personal touch. The chapters are also peppered with examples from informal conversations with teenagers (including the

author's children) and the analyses rely on different corpora compiled by the author herself (some of the collected together with her students) in different circumstances and different periods. Throughout the book we find different quips and comments made by individuals who were interviewed by the author and her research team over the years. These observations sometimes corroborate or contrast with the results the author reaches.

At the end of each chapter a linguistic puzzle is included, based on data from the corpora which follows the feature(s) discussed in that respective chapter. Each feature of language that was analysed was put into a more global perspective, to offer a more unified account and help the reader see "the big picture", which usually results in a better grasp of the phenomenon. As mentioned before, each chapter follows a particular aspect of language, from quotatives, intensifiers, sentence starters, sentence enders, to generics, adjectives and internet language. At the end of each chapter the author concludes by asking "What does this tell us about teen language". It is shown that teenagers are not the ones responsible for language variation and change. Labov's Model of Incrementation presented in chapter 1 provided the prototype for understanding language change.

As a suggestion, it would have also been interesting to dwell more on other varieties of English, as there have been many studies which focused on the language of adolescents in different English communities (see Eckert 2000, for Detroit, USA; Cheshire 1982, for Reading, UK; Eisikovits 2006, for Sydney, Australia, among others). These last two titles are not even present in the bibliography. The analysis drew mainly on data from "The Toronto Corpus" (also acknowledged by the author in the *Preface*), which offers a somewhat restricted view on adolescent talk in the English-speaking countries.

Sali A. Tagliamonte offers her readers a wonderful journey into one of the most unexpected and extremely difficult things to follow and understand, i.e. the language of teenagers. This language can sometimes be seen as a secret code, a place where innovation takes place. Readers only have to sit back and enjoy the ride. For achieving all of these, the author deserves ample credit and congratulations.

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