

Reviews

Comptes rendus

Sali A. Tagliamonte. 2016. *Teen talk. The language of adolescents.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. xiv + 298. CAN \$33.95 (softcover).

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Teen talk. The language of adolescents is a new addition to Sali A. Tagliamonte's broad-ranging work in variationist sociolinguistics. In it, she offers a comprehensive account of features associated with and found in teenage speech and situates them more generally within variationist models of language change. According to the author, "Teen language is one of the most creative forms of talk and a key source of what is coming in the future of English." (p. 40). Observations of and musings on teenage speech are common – at dinner tables, in the mainstream media, as well as in academic literature. This book addresses questions raised in all these contexts through careful, data-driven analyses, most of which come from four main corpora of Toronto English collected by Tagliamonte and her team of associates and students. These corpora span the late 1990s through 2010, although throughout, her analyses compare and contextualize results from other contemporary and historical studies. The author attends to variation in both vernacular speech and several written registers of language including computer-mediated communication such as texting (SMS), instant messaging and email. Through this work, she also addresses larger popular claims about the impact of technology on language as part of her treatment of the role of adolescents in language change at the turn of the 21st century.

Teen talk focuses on a number of frequent features, characteristic of the teenaged speakers in Tagliamonte's corpora, and her self-stated goal "is to explore the origin, pathways and impacts" of words and collocations in both teenage speech and English more generally (p. 40). The primary theoretical question of *Teen talk* is the extent to which its analyses support Labov's (2001) incrementation model of language change. In the book, speakers' rates of use of incoming forms increase through childhood and youth until they stabilize in early adulthood and remain constant (p. 4). What is the contribution of younger speakers to language change? As Tagliamonte and other scholars underscore, adolescence is a time for innovation and development. Youth distinguish themselves from previous generations, creating different styles of presenting themselves,

including, of course, their language. In fact, as the author notes, change cannot be attributable to teenagers' speech alone. She often quotes older speakers using the innovative forms they themselves disparage (see p. 34 and p. 256, for instance).

The first three chapters of *Teen talk* establish questions, and describe methods and corpora, integrating an introduction to the language of adolescents with a presentation of methods in language variation and change entirely suitable for non-experts. Analyses of external and internal constraints on variation are grounded in the standard methods, principles and perspectives of variationist sociolinguistics. These chapters also provide context for the study of teen language and compare previous work on this topic. Tagliamonte focuses on changes in grammatical, discourse-pragmatic and lexical variables in contemporary English. In order to ground this work, she outlines patterns and principles of grammatical and lexical change.

The seven chapters that follow offer high-resolution snapshots of these features, contextualizing their use historically, presenting their variable context and the linguistic and social factors contributing to their use in a variety of corpora (including data from contemporary television scripts). The author chooses features based in part on her driving "principle of curiosity" (p. 34), as well as their rise in frequency in her corpora. Some are well-documented features of contemporary English such as quotatives (chapter 4), intensifiers (chapter 5) and general extenders (chapter 7), while other lexical items and set collocations are heretofore less investigated but potentially relevant to language change: sentence starters (chapter 6), generic *stuff* (chapter 8) and *just* (chapter 9). Chapter 10 is devoted to a discussion of adjectives, focusing on the rise in prominence of *weird* at the expense of its synonyms. In each case, Tagliamonte shows the trajectory of the feature from its first appearances outlining changes in its meaning, use and frequency with distributional analyses of social (speaker sex and age) and variable-specific language-internal constraints. The contribution of adolescents is highlighted in the broader discussion of social patterns both in order to assess the role of teenagers in change and more generally to illustrate the rise of the feature in contemporary English. These chapters are informative, thorough and appropriate to the context of *Teen talk*.

Chapter 11 is a compendium of briefer analyses of other features frequent in teenaged speech in the corpora, such as *you know what, I don't know* and *whatever*. As in previous chapters, these include language-internal factors as well as the social factors age and speaker sex.

With its focus on computer-mediated communication (CMC), chapter 12 has, perhaps, the broadest popular appeal. It provides an explanation of different CMC media and the complexities of their diverse, systematic registers. The analyses of email, texting and now defunct but previously popular instant messaging (IM) both explore grammatical structures and lexical items particular to CMC and present the use of previously discussed features in these media. These include examinations of terms for laughter (*LOL, hehe, haha*), 'errors', absence of punctuation, abbreviations and acronyms, and chunking. Tagliamonte points out that some forms associated with CMC, such as *haha, hehe* and *OMG* have historical precedent in non-CMC texts (p. 207). Some features show social stratification (e.g., variants for laughter according to age). Ultimately, her analyses illustrate that the use of non-

standard forms associated with CMC represents only a fraction of total words used and does not threaten the integrity of written English.

Chapter 12 also provides an enlightening comparison of grammatical and lexical features in different registers of CMC (email, IM and texting), offering an account of their distribution as well as the language-internal factors that contribute to variation. Unsurprisingly, email proves to be the most formal CMC register, resembling other written styles most closely. These results are also contextualized with patterns in other written registers and data from speech. These analyses highlight different rates of use according to register, but also demonstrate that underlying grammar can remain constant, allaying common fears attributing the decline of English to CMC. According to Tagliamonte's research, adolescents recognize the norms of different registers and follow them adeptly. Fluency in these styles does not interfere with their ability to control more formal, non-computer mediated written registers. Since the collection of the data discussed in *Teen talk*, platforms for CMC have continued to evolve. Newer generations of adolescents consider then-incoming media such as Facebook passé, in favour of Instagram and Snapchat. Future work will no doubt investigate norms in these contexts.

The final chapter of *Teen talk* revisits its main questions, summarizing some of its findings and offering directions for further research. Overall, the analyses support models of incrementation and show the role of teens in change. Older speakers exhibit lower rates of incoming variants reflecting earlier stages of language. The author also points out some features that don't fit the model and are more influenced by style (p. 261). Tagliamonte achieves her goals: *Teen talk* is a strong contribution to our understanding of the language of adolescents and their role in changes to 21st century English. Any reservations are minor: for example, the Google Ngram data tracking the use of lexical items may not be a fully reliable source of data, but the author herself notes that it should "be taken with a grain of salt" (p. 261).

Teen talk's approachable and engaging style attracts a wide audience. Quotations from consultants peppered throughout the book bring their voices to the dialogue. It is accessible to the general public and valuable to students. The data and analyses are explained and situated for non-experts and chapters end with brief exercises, making *Teen talk* easy to use in the classroom. Scholars of language variation and change will find the thorough analyses of variation informative. This topic is personal for Tagliamonte, who uses data collected from her own children in her work. It resonates with all English speakers in contact with children, youth and young (-acting) adults. She engages directly with her readers, urging them to listen for the variables she studies and others appearing in contemporary English. Indeed, as I read *Teen talk*, many did jump out at me: from my (middle-aged) husband's use of generic *stuff* as a count noun (on WhatsApp) to my four-year-old daughter's ubiquitous use of the intensifier *really*. *Teen talk* is *very/so/really* interesting. *Just* read it!

REFERENCE

- Labov, William. 2001. *Principles of linguistic change, Volume 2: Social Factors*. Oxford: Blackwell.