

This is an Open Access document downloaded from ORCA, Cardiff University's institutional repository: <https://orca.cardiff.ac.uk/id/eprint/102194/>

This is the author's version of a work that was submitted to / accepted for publication.

Citation for final published version:

Durham, Mercedes 2017. Teen Talk: the language of adolescents. by Tagliamonte Sali A. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. xiv + 298. ISBN: 9781107676176. [Book Review]. *Journal of English Linguistics* 45 (3) , pp. 291-294. 10.1177/0075424217717590

Publishers page: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0075424217717590>

Please note:

Changes made as a result of publishing processes such as copy-editing, formatting and page numbers may not be reflected in this version. For the definitive version of this publication, please refer to the published source. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite this paper.

This version is being made available in accordance with publisher policies. See <http://orca.cf.ac.uk/policies.html> for usage policies. Copyright and moral rights for publications made available in ORCA are retained by the copyright holders.



Post peer review version.

Mercedes Durham. (to appear). [Book Review of Sali A. Tagliamonte. *Teen Talk: The Language of Adolescents*. *Journal of English Linguistics*. DOI: 10.1177/0075424217717590

Sali A. Tagliamonte. 2016. *Teen Talk: The Language of Adolescents*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. xiv + 298. ISBN: 9781107676176

Reviewed by: Mercedes Durham, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

Books catering to diverse audiences rarely hit the right note, but from the outset it is clear that Sali Tagliamonte's *Teen Talk* is successful in this respect. It is a volume that will be genuinely useful for academics, students and the public. Its focus is the language of adolescents, but because it examines teen language in a range of different contexts (in speech, online, in formal writing) and compares teenagers with older (and in some cases younger) speakers, what it in fact provides is an exploration of how age may (and may not) affect language and bring about language change. Its primary focus is variationist sociolinguistics, but its analysis, its insights and its lucid methodology will have implications beyond its immediate field; its findings will be of interest to corpus linguists, specialists in language change, and researchers into adolescence more generally.

*Teen Talk* is a thoroughly researched academic book, but its engaging style and the sense of excitement that accompanies the analyses make it far more accessible than most monographs: non-experts will find as much of value in it as seasoned researchers. This balance is achieved by presenting and explaining sociolinguistic terminology and methodologies in such a way that those unfamiliar with the field will not feel out of their depth, while keeping these sections succinct so that experts will not feel talked down to.

The clear and well organized way in which the analyses are presented will also provide a model for students embarking on their own projects, which makes it a volume that is very likely to feature heavily in sociolinguistics classes that have a research component. It is ideal as a how-to manual for student projects, as it contains a wealth of features, most of which could be extracted relatively easily by students once they have collected a dataset, and enough detail is given in each instance of what to do next. Each chapter is followed by a 'language puzzle' section: a set of exercises and data. These will be useful not only for undergraduates but also for school teachers wanting to challenge their English Language students. Throughout the book, the results for each analysis are presented accurately and clearly, using total numbers and percentages. This provides enough information for readers to see what is going on, but not so much as to lose any potential number-phobes.

Besides the introductory chapters (1-3) and the conclusion, the book is broken down into short, pithy chapters, each focusing on a single feature or group of features. This makes it particularly suitable for classroom use, but also means that, as well as being a book that can be read from start to finish, it is also one that readers can dip into to see what is happening with a specific feature. The breadth of the features is impressive and each is considered with respect to a host of social and internal factors (e.g. gender, age, medium, discourse function). Since part of the focus is on e-mail, texts and instant messaging, the features examined are primarily those found in both speech and in writing: morphosyntactic features (e.g. *will* vs.

*going to*, the alternation between *have to*, *must* and *got to* for deontic modality), but also ones related to discourse and pragmatics (e.g. *you know*, *dunno*, *just*).

While a short review cannot fully do justice to the wealth of features examined in the book, the chapter breakdown below attempts to give a flavor of what features are covered in each chapter and some of the key points made.

Chapter 1 introduces the volume and discusses stereotypes related to teen language. From a linguist's perspective, it goes without saying that no one is "ruining language," as is often claimed of teenagers, but the refutation of this myth is presented in a way that will resonate with broader audiences. This may help other linguists break down further misconceptions held by non-linguists. Chapter 2 presents the various corpora used in the book. The amount of data is wide-ranging. There are six different corpora, four which contain primarily oral data (two focusing on younger speakers, one containing longitudinal data from one speaker and one, the Toronto English Corpus, comprising data from 267 individuals aged between 19 and 97) and two which contain computer-mediated data (one focusing on instant messages and one containing e-mails, instant messages, texts and formal writing from the participants). This chapter also introduces some of the key methods of analysis and the features to be studied. The wealth of data and the use of both sociolinguistic and corpus linguistic methods are a real strength. Chapter 3 expands on the methods and on its own could serve as an excellent introduction for sociolinguistics students of a how to conduct a rigorous feature analysis. It also introduces key sociolinguistic concepts such as the variable, the principle of accountability, distributional analysis and the basic principles of language change.

The next nine chapters each present a feature or set of features. Most of these are ones which teenagers are often "blamed" for. These sections are where the multiple corpora come into their own as some analyses include older speakers. This allows Tagliamonte to establish whether these features are genuinely new or whether they are simply undergoing change.

Chapter 4 examines the forms that we use to quote speech, focusing particularly on *be like*. The analysis explains in what generation this quotative gained currency (people born in the late 70s and early 80s) and how it is being used by teenagers today. Chapter 5 focuses on intensifiers and compares the use of new(er) ones such as *totally* and *so* with older ones such as *very* and *really*. To make its case, this chapter presents one of the most eclectic sets of linguistic examples I have ever seen on the same page (89), with sources as diverse as *Beowulf*, Dickens and the television series *Friends* all used to illustrate intensifiers. Chapters 6 and 7 look at how we start and finish sentences. From a variationist perspective these features are particularly interesting as they are not often studied and so offer new avenues for research into other corpora. Chapter 6 deals particularly with the elements such as *so*, *oh*, *well* that we use at the start of sentences when speaking, while Chapter 7 includes general extenders (e.g. *and stuff* and *or something*) and elements such as *you know*, *whatever* and *right* that we often end sentences with.

Chapter 8 is about generics such as *stuff* and *things*. While *stuff* seems to have increased in younger speakers, it is not the case that they are being less specific than older speakers. Rather, Tagliamonte shows that it is simply that older speakers are using the equally unspecific *things* more frequently instead. Chapter 9 considers *just*. Tagliamonte notes that, in contrast to *like* and *so*, this feature has received less attention from the haters of teen language and shows that it is the functions and the grammatical position of *just* that are

shifting rather than the overall rates of use. Chapter 10 moves onto adjectives: not just any adjectives but “weird” ones, i.e. the subset of adjectives that focus on strangeness.

Tagliamonte finds that in some cases one meaning is used more than others now (e.g. *funny*), whereas in others there is a change in frequency of overall use. Chapter 11 examines ‘funky teenage features’: *you know what, I dunno* and *whatever*. Tagliamonte focuses on the function of these discourse markers for the most part as this is where the most change is happening.

Chapter 12 covers what many researchers might consider to be the key interest of teen language – how it is used on the internet. Tagliamonte approaches this in various ways: by looking at typical IM characteristics (*haha, lol, hehe, omg*), but also at how everyday features are used in a different medium. If in ordinary speech we are likely to say we have *got to* do something rather than we *must* do something, what happens when we are typing? What computer-mediated communication forms are there? As Tagliamonte has demonstrated in a number of previous studies, she shows here that young speakers are not ruining language and although there are some differences on the whole they are very similar to other speakers and there is much less “deviation” than one might think. This chapter also looks at how intensifiers vary by register. The comparison between different media (spoken, but also email, instant messages, texts and more formal writing) makes this a particularly valuable chapter.

Chapter 13, the conclusion, sums everything up, but also considers what will happen next. Will teenagers always speak this way? Tagliamonte underlines again that teen talk is not that different from adult speech, and that often teenagers are not the instigators of change at all, even if, through incrementation (that is to say the process by which young speakers increase their rates of new features beyond the input provided by their caregivers), they move linguistic changes forward. It also combines many of the features together to chart change in a broader way. Many of the features discussed in the volume have been studied by Tagliamonte elsewhere, albeit with different data sets. This means that, while some insights are not completely new, these findings can confirm and complement earlier conclusions. The inclusion of exercises at the end of the book and the chatty tone means that in parts it seems pitched mainly towards students, but the analyses and interpretations will be valuable to researchers no matter their level. Though a few of the figures are hard to interpret (e.g., insufficient distinction between two line types in figure 10.6), but on the whole the presentation is clear.

Overall, Tagliamonte’s enthusiasm for linguistic research is evident in every example and each analysis: there is so much to uncover in our language that every feature can unlock new secrets in our wider understanding of how language as a whole works. Tagliamonte notes at one point that “[p]eople have a tendency to see the things that are unusual but they miss the ordinary” (p. 216) and the strength of the book is its focus on the everyday. By studying those little bits of language that we almost do not notice, but which surround us, the book allows us to see the linguistic magic which exists everywhere, be it in teenagers or in adults.