

# How does technology affect spoken English today?

There are many reasons why languages change. Some of the main reasons are related to the developments in our society. These changes can be related to political and social changes as well as to our changing lifestyle, values and attitudes. Another major area of life which affects our daily language use is technology. In this handout, we explore how technological developments have affected spoken English over the last twenty years.

language change

technology

lexical innovation

## Task 1

Let's first think about the role technology plays in our lives today and how this changed over the last twenty years. List some of the areas where, in your opinion, technological developments brought about most radical changes in our society.

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Let us now check whether the growing role of technology has been reflected in our use of language. We will search for all words related to technology in BNClab, you can do this by typing TECHNOLOGY in the search window. Now go to the Change button and compare whether people talk about technology more today than they used to in the 1990s.

## Task 2

In this task, we are going to explore how the existence of the Internet has affected people's lifestyles and how this can be observed through the use of language today.

Search for the word *online* in BNClab (you will see that while this is a relatively frequent word today with nearly 400 hits, *online* was not used in the 1990s at all!). Next, go to the Usage button and scan the concordance lines noting the context in which *online* appears. Note down the type of activities people talk about doing online and the words related to them.

e.g. Online banking: accounts, banking, ...

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## Research bite

The use of social media has increased dramatically in recent years. Language used on social media represents a specific type of communication – often sharing features typical of both, spoken and written language as well as features unique to online communication. One of the major challenges often noted by the users is related to conveying the subtleties of emotions and attitudes through the medium of typewritten communication. Associate Professor Graham Jones and his colleagues at Princeton University studied teenage online communication through media such as Facebook and Instant Messaging (Jones et al, 2011). Their research found that teenagers reported struggling with expressing meaning the way they wanted though these media especially when trying to express “subtle nuances of tone, particularly sarcasm” (p. 29). The teenagers in their research usually dealt with these problems by using emoticons, punctuations, abbreviations, capitalisations and expressions such as ‘meh’. Have you faced a similar problem when communicating with friends through online typewritten media?

### Task 3

Innovations in technology resulted in a considerable number of new words entering the English lexicon over the course of the last fifty years. Look at the words below and match them with a year when they were first recorded in the English language use [the dates in this task are based on the Oxford English Dictionary, an authoritative source on the history of English words].

1974      1979      1983      1983      1993      2001

email \_\_\_\_\_ iPod \_\_\_\_\_ smartphone \_\_\_\_\_  
laptop \_\_\_\_\_ website \_\_\_\_\_ Internet \_\_\_\_\_

Once you've checked the correct answers, have a look at which of these words were already used in spoken communication in the 1990s and which entered informal conversations only later. Put a tick  next to the words above which were already in use in the 1990s.

Discuss your findings with partner or a group:

- Did the findings surprise you or did you expect them?
- How can you explain the discrepancy between when the words first appeared in the English language and when they enter informal conversations?

### Task 4

Social media are one of major ways in which technology enters our daily lives. However, how we interact with social media may be affected by our social characteristics such as age and gender. Let us look at several words, used to refer to different ways of online communication and information-sharing, that appeared in spoken communication in the last twenty years.

Select three of the following words: email, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube (you can also include a word of your own choice). Search for each of the words in BNClab. Use the Age and Social class buttons to explore whether some social groups use the word more often than others or whether these words are used equally by speakers of different age and from different social groups.

Your Word	Age	Social group
• _____	_____	_____
• _____	_____	_____
• _____	_____	_____

Discuss the patterns that you have found with your neighbour or in your group.

- Are these words frequent in current spoken English?
- Can you explain the patterns that you have found?
- Does our age affect which means of online communication come up in our conversations?

#### References

Jones, G. M., Schieffelin, B. B., & Smith, R. E. (2011). When friends who talk together stalk together: Online gossip as metacommunication. In Thurlow, C., & Mroczek, K. (Eds.) *Digital discourse: Language in the new media* (pp. 26-47). Oxford University Press.