

Do younger and older people still speak the same language?

The way we speak usually changes across our lifetime. This change is related to changes in people's personal lives, their role in society as well as to the larger changes in the life of the community (for example, changes in perception of gender or technological developments). This worksheet focuses on the differences in language use between younger and older speakers of English. A common stereotype is that older people cannot understand younger people because of the overabundance of slang and creative language features. Likewise, it is sometimes assumed that older people use language that is out of use and old fashioned for younger people. In these tasks, we will have a look at both sides and discuss why some forms of our language are more prone to aging than others.



Key terms

age

lifetime change

language change

Task 1

In the first task, think about the difference in language use by younger and older people that you have noticed in your life.

- Can you think of words that you or your friends have used that older people do not use? Make a list.

- Can you think of words older people around you have used that you do not use? Make a list.

Compare your lists with a partner – did you think of the same words or do your lists differ?

Task 2

Let us look at two examples of words whose use appears affected by the age of speakers. We will first investigate the use of the word *awesome*.

- Type the word in BNClab and go to the Age button. Who, in terms of age, uses this word most frequently?
- Can you think of a reason why words such as *awesome* (as well as the words that you noted down in Task 1) might fall out of use at a particular point in a person's lifetime?

Task 3

In Task 2, we saw that there are some words that are used more frequently at a particular point in a person's lifetime and then may disappear again. However, there are also words with multiple meanings and young speakers may use one of the meanings more frequently than older speakers. Have a look at the following concordance lines taken from BNC2014, which all include the word 'sick'. Can you identify different uses of the word?

1.	when it's crowded S: yeah S: awful absolutely awful S: yeah I've felt almost	sick	on a bus before now S: yeah S: and had to keep pressing my bare
2.	like pretty much me best mate he 's erm he's a s S:	sick	drummer as well not quite as good as he's very good at
3.	Now S: what for fourteen quid? S: thirty - eight ninety - nine return? yeah S: that 's	sick	S: how much have you paid for your holiday? okay so let 's
4.	ow that feeling S: so I do actually feel sick just not like bedridden	sick	S: yeah I think I had a bit of tonsillitis when I I was
5.	food isn't unhealthy at all S: mm some Roman people used to be	sick	on purpose so they could eat more food S: why were they sick on
6.	what S: for fourteen quid ? S: thirty - eight ninety - nine return ? yeah that's	sick	S: how much have you paid for your holiday? ok

- In your opinion, which of the word meanings are more typical for younger and which are more typical for older people today?
- Can you think of more words that have different meanings depending on the age of the speaker?

Task 4

Change in language use is often driven by how our community is changing. Technological developments provide a good example of how changes in the community spark new ways of speaking. Many of the terms that are natural to us now were not really used just 20 years ago.

- Select one of the following terms: *email, online, internet*
- Go to the Age button in BNClab to see whether the words were already used 20 years ago.
- See if you can think of more terms that were not used in 1994 but are used today. Check your hypothesis in BNClab.
- Can you think of words that were used in the 1990s but are not used as much now?

Research bite



Age grading describes a process of individual language change. That means that the way language is used is not changing over time across the community (in the sense that people don't use words such as 'swell' as much as they did 80 years ago), but that a speaker changes their language as they get older.

American linguist John Rickford is an expert on African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and raises awareness to sociolinguistic issues pertaining to marginalized communities. In 2013, he and his colleague Mackenzie Price looked into age grading and features of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) (Rick-ford and Price, 2013). They investigated interviews from the same speaker at two different points in time, about 20 years apart. In 1987, at the first interview, two teenage girls showed high rates of AAVE-typical features: habitual 'be' ('I be playing'), plural -s absence ('two dog'), and 3rd person singular -s absence ('he like that'). In 2006, when interviewed again, they showed much lower rates of these features and resembled their respective mothers from the late 80s (i.e. as they approach their mothers' age from that point, they start speaking similar to them).

We usually find examples of this type of change at particular points in a person's lifetime: as we leave school, the first job, parenthood, and retirement. Can you think of reasons why people tend to change their language use at these points in their lifetime?