

REVIEWS

#TEENAGERS, LIKE WHY WE SHOULD TOTALLY CARE ABOUT TEEN LANGUAGE

Teen Talk: The Language of Adolescents

By Sali A. Tagliamonte

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. Pp. xiv + 298.

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Sali Tagliamonte has a knack for making studies in linguistics fun. I have appreciated her previous works, which include a study on intensifiers in the television show *Friends* (Tagliamonte and Roberts 2005), a study on instant messaging (Tagliamonte and Denis 2008), and a study on variation in adjectives of STRANGENESS (Tagliamonte and Brooke 2014). Her previous works, often written with colleagues or students, at times exhibit a playful tone that is somewhat atypical in the “serious” discipline of linguistics, but it is a tone that I welcome. Tagliamonte’s recent book *Teen Talk: The Language of Adolescents* is no exception to this playful quality. Indeed, the author includes informal rhetorical questions and quips throughout this text and even lexical examples of teen talk in the explications of this linguistic group. For example, she ends the explanation of teen sentence starters in chapter 7 (in particular the infamous *like*) with this chapter summary statement: “Like that’s the whole reason for a sentence starter in the first place” (117). But make no mistake, Tagliamonte’s latest work is serious linguistic scholarship that uses voluminous data (mainly corpora) and extensive analysis to explore teen language variation and change and how it relates to the larger question of language change in the context of North American English.

Tagliamonte begins this exploration of the language of adolescents with some statements that set the stage for what follows in the text:

This book comprises linguistic analyses of some of the most frequent, innovative, but also intensely ill-reputed, features of teen language circa late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. [xiii]

[T]eenage language is critical to the advancement of language evolution and society itself. [xiv]

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This book is about the way teenagers talk. It is not about the way adults think teenagers should talk. [1]

With these statements, Tagliamonte lets readers know this is not a popular critique of the “ills” of English caused by slothful teenagers. Rather, this is an academic work by a language scientist who describes teen language and how it exemplifies and contributes to language variation and change. As such, the audience for the book could be both professional linguists and advanced students in linguistics. A popular audience or beginning linguistics students would find the conclusions accessible but might have difficulty with some of the methodological and statistical descriptions. But with a little outside reading (and with the help of the text’s accompanying definition boxes and chapter-ending “Language Puzzles”), popular audiences and beginning linguistics students will find this book most enlightening in regard to linguistic variation and change.

Chapter 1 explains why teenagers are unique in their language habits: their burgeoning desire for independence from parents and their yearning to be with the “in” group. Tagliamonte indicates in this chapter that she will rely heavily on Labov’s (2001) notion of INCREMENTATION throughout the text and will focus the research on the teen years as being “the focal point for linguistic innovation and change” (3). Scholars have long noted that teens are linguistic innovators (Eckert 1997) and that they often stabilize an emerging language variant. However, what makes this work unique is the author’s extensive use of various linguistic corpora to confirm, and at times to challenge, notions of how specific linguistic innovations have taken root in teenage language.

Chapters 2 and 3 describe the data sources and methodology. Tagliamonte acknowledges the OBSERVER’S PARADOX with this question: “How does a middle-aged academic gain access to the world of teen language?” (9). The author’s solution was to rely on young students as field-workers who could interact naturally (or as naturally as possible) and record conversations with the teen informants to build corpora, which include The Story Telling Corpora (1995–2004), Toronto Teen Corpus (2002–6), Toronto Instant Messaging Corpus (2004–6), and The Toronto Internet Corpus (2009–10). In addition to these four main corpora, Tagliamonte uses the Toronto English Corpus (which includes speakers between the ages of 19 and 97) as a control group for comparison. Data are also taken from The Clara Corpus, a corpus of a single speaker collected during her teen years and into her twenties. Throughout the text, Tagliamonte references classic studies (e.g., Labov 1963; Wolfram 1969), recent studies, and several electronic databases, such as Google N-grams (<https://books.google.com/ngrams>) and the Corpus of

Contemporary American English (Davies 2008–). Using various statistical and analytical processes, she examines language features that are unique to teens and mainstream lexical items that are used in distinctive ways by teens. As Tagliamonte notes, she typically analyzes variants and innovations in light of gender and age (relying heavily on apparent time) as these provide insight into social constraints on variant selection by teens.

Which features are chosen for the remaining chapters? Tagliamonte writes that she depends on the PRINCIPLE OF CURIOSITY: features that are relevant to language change in adolescents and that will remain interesting to the researcher through the extensive analytical process. Tagliamonte aptly describes how care must be taken when analyzing selected features. Relying again on Labov (1972) and his PRINCIPLE OF ACCOUNTABILITY, Tagliamonte notes that all instances of a token must be analyzed to avoid “cherry picking” tokens. Returning to the aforementioned *like*, its use as an “ordinary” verb must be distinguished from its use as a quotative. This is an example of Tagliamonte’s thoroughness in both the collection and analysis of data.

Chapters 4 through 11 examine features of teen language: quotatives, intensifiers, sentence starters, sentence enders, generics (e.g., *and stuff*), *just*, adjectives, and other “funky” teenage features. Chapter 4’s analysis of the quotative *like* is illustrative of Tagliamonte’s methodology and analysis. The conventional wisdom is that the quotative *like* began in the 1980s and its origin was the Frank Zappa song “Valley Girl” in 1982. However, by using Google N-grams and a study conducted by Alexandre D’Arcy (2005), Tagliamonte suggests that it actually originated in the 1970s and the Zappa song simply reflected a change already in progress. The analysis shows it tends to be used for personal quotatives (“I was like, ‘*This can’t be happening!*’”), especially for speakers under 40, and that its use spread among tweens, teens, and early 20-year-olds. She ends the analysis by observing that the use of this quotative has stabilized and has been included as a variation with more traditional quotatives: *say* and *think*. Of course, its stabilization might necessitate that the next generation of teens initiate new quotatives as *like* will become “old fashioned.” Tagliamonte notes that *all* (“I was all, ‘*This can’t be happening!*’”), *goes*, and *just* appear to be new competing quotative forms.

Chapter 11, in which Tagliamonte analyzes sentence enders, is also illustrative of her methodology. This is perhaps the book’s best chapter in part because sentence enders are ubiquitous in speech and vary considerably. Yet, Tagliamonte fittingly limits her analysis principally to well-known sentence enders (e.g., *whatever*, *you know*, *so*). Relying on historical records and a study conducted with one of her students (Tagliamonte and Denis 2010), Tagliamonte demonstrates that sentence enders in English are quite old and “perhaps a foundational component of human language” (126).

While common, these sentence enders appear in greater number among the young (particularly females), much to the consternation of language purists. Tagliamonte uses a figure (131) that plots the frequency of sentence enders (general extenders) from previous studies and compares these to her study using the Toronto English Corpus and the Toronto Teen Corpus. Combining such data could have resulted in an overly complex figure; however, the result is an admirable and intriguing figure showing consistency in how these sentence enders are used more by teens. The questions of age-grading and how social factors constrain their use remain somewhat open.

The most problematic (and longest) section is chapter 12, which analyzes the Internet and teen language. Its problematic nature comes not from any methodological flaw, but the rapidly changing world of the Internet makes it more difficult to study language variants within this medium. Despite persistent public outcries that teens and the Internet are “ruining” English (210), Tagliamonte counters these complaints by claiming such uproar is based on anecdotal evidence. Tagliamonte acknowledges that studies on the Internet and language are growing, but her unique addition is the “insider” perspective, obtained by analyzing “private” messaging that heretofore has been ignored by researchers. She uses the Toronto Instant Message Corpus to study “insider” language. Her basic conclusion is that teens are far more conservative linguistically than the media reports and that many of the defamed IM features (think acronyms) are abandoned quickly, which is not to deny many aspects of IM are innovative. The problematic nature of this chapter is that the data comes from 2004–6, and in many ways IM has been replaced by texting, which is somewhat different from IMing on a computer. Despite this, the chapter offers unique insight into teens’ use of language on the Internet.

One of the few weaknesses in the text is the use of a few generalized statements. Tagliamonte writes the following

The notion of the teenage years as a discrete stage in life did not even exist before the twentieth century [...]. [1]

This way of speaking [i.e., teen language] is unlike any variety of English that has ever existed before. [15]

When there is a lot of upheaval going on in a society, there also tends to be a lot of language change going on too. [56]

These statements, while generally accepted as reasonable, are not backed up with data, unlike by the rest of the book.

Despite this minor quibble, this a wonderful, insightful, and well-researched book. The entire text is a splendid example of linguistic analysis

of a notoriously unwieldy data set: teens. As a bonus, Cambridge University Press includes access in Word format to many of the corpora that Tagliamonte collected. These corpora are needed for several of “Language Puzzles” that end each chapter.

Since Tagliamonte includes anecdotes about her children, I will do the same to conclude. My three daughters (ages 18, 11, and 5) marvel at my self-deprecating attempts to use teen talk. I am always one step behind, or as my five-year-old says of my attempts, “So silly!” However, Tagliamonte’s book is far from silly. Its strength lies in the specific examples of teen language, data from corpora, and the in-depth analysis. Tagliamonte’s analysis and explanations reveal much of what is going on in language in the teen years. The examples may no longer be indicative of teen language in the coming years as some become less marked or disappear due to age-grading, but the documentation in the text offers valuable insight as we watch these innovations. In short, the book offers an insider’s perspective into a critical period in language change: the teen years.

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A BROAD APPEAL FOR LINGUISTIC INNOVATION
AND AGAINST PRESCRIPTION

Bad English: A History of Linguistic Aggravation

By Ammon Shea

New York: Penguin, 2014. Pp. xiv + 255.

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So many of the most popular grammar books on the market have been from self-identified language mavens and prescriptive grammarians. And there have been as many (or more) academic treatments emphasizing the linguistic and social consequences of such mavenism and promotion of prescriptive attitudes about grammar. Far fewer popular texts have aimed to convey a critical take on prescriptivism for audiences without linguistic expertise. In *Bad English*, Ammon Shea invites all language enthusiasts to become champions of language change and skeptics of prescriptive attempts to deny that change. Overall, his book is successful, engaging readers with a humorous range of examples (including a significant number from the history of American English). It works as both a casual read and as a supplemental text for introductory courses in English grammar, general linguistics, sociolinguistics, or the history of the language.

Sociolinguists (especially those with historical interests) will not encounter major revelations here, as Shea's primary topics have been academic canon for decades (e.g., the fact that language changes, that prescriptive pronouncements are arbitrary, that people have long thought that English is deteriorating). But many of these issues are unfamiliar to nonlinguists, and even specialists will have holes in their knowledge that will be filled by Shea's research. For example, while I was generally aware of occasional nineteenth-century squeamishness about women's bare legs, I was unaware

of evidence from writers in the 1800s and early 1900s discussing *leg* as a vulgarity needing to be replaced by purportedly euphemistic *limb* (145–48). Throughout the book, this sort of direct evidence is drawn from an impressive range of sources, including historical and contemporary style guides, dictionaries, fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, periodicals, and academic journals and books. At times Shea is quite novel in his research, a skill most evident when he cites examples of several current writing center websites enshrining the “Don’t end a sentence with a preposition” rule—one of the rare prescriptions now considered to be archaic in even the most conservative style guides (105). It is a smart demonstration of institutional practices within universities undermining the very lessons linguists are teaching their students. While Shea’s evidence is generally quite robust, it is a little surprising he doesn’t at least occasionally use publically available corpora (such as the Corpus of Historical American English) to provide more qualitative and quantitative data about usage patterns. Even so, instructors assigning this text could ask students to investigate Shea’s claims via corpora and look for further support for, or complications to, his data (e.g., “How often were uses of *limb* euphemistic in the 1800s?” “Did the writers/speakers using this euphemism tend to be male or female?”).

While the book has a consistent theme—the ridiculousness of prescriptive attitudes and the vitality of linguistic innovation—it is organized neither as one linearly plotted narrative nor as a formal argument with supporting claims and conclusions in each chapter. Instead, it is a series of vignettes. Underneath each subheading within each chapter appears a series of anecdotes, historical observations, and citations from dictionaries and primary sources about a particular word or point of usage (e.g., *irregardless* or the apostrophe). The subsections rarely add up to a fully cohesive or distinct point about each chapter title. Rather, each subsection has its own integrity and rhetorical effectiveness, one by one adding impressions about English-speaking societies’ conflicting allegiances to linguistic innovation and criticism of that innovation. Because of this structure, the book works best when digested in small bites, a few subsections here and there, rather than reading full chapters in one sitting. It is highly excerptable: it would work especially well for instructors wanting to provide students short readings to supplement dense textbook treatments of morphology, syntax, or semantics. And its Audible edition (narrated by Mike Chamberlain) would entertain (without frustration) those language enthusiasts who have only 10–15 minutes at a time to listen to a book.

Even though this loose grouping of subsections as chapters could allow a reader to study them out of sequence, it is most effective to review the book’s contents by following the organization chronologically. The very

brief introduction puts forth Shea's primary aim: "to examine a number of the issues commonly thought of as mistakes in English usage and to see how these mistaken forms have been used over the past five hundred years in ways both eloquent and awkward" (ix). He emphasizes a crucial point: prescriptive attitudes persevere only if there are continual authorities on the watch for errors and only if people continue to make those supposed errors (ix). Much of the book provides details about both prescriptions and actual usage, even noting those rules that have faded from current memory. He sees his audience as primarily falling into two camps: those who want "to annoy language purists," and purists who may want to learn more about the source of prescriptive rules and possibly "lessen [their] irritation" with violations of these rules (xiii). He provides an effective biographical motivation for addressing this issue (xi–xii)—a desire to understand the backlash he received from language purists criticizing him for not consistently following standard English conventions in his prior books, such as *Reading the OED* (2008).

The first chapter, "Arguing Semantics," focuses on some key examples of semantic change and resistance to it, with subsections on *hopefully*, *literally*, *disinterested/uninterested*, *decimate*, *enormity*, *enervate*, *aggravate*, and *unique*. Missing here (and throughout the book) is a more illuminating explanation of why these particular examples have been singled out among all sorts of words that have undergone semantic change and prescriptive critique. (Why not discuss changes in the use of *awesome*, *exactly*, or *nice*? Were the words in chapter 1 those that purists were most likely to attack within his own writing?) Even so, Shea provides interesting evidence and several strong critiques about prescriptive attitudes toward semantic change. His most effective technique is to put two etymologies side by side to illustrate how purists get inconsistently picky about a change in one word while issuing no complaints about a parallel development in another word. For example, he rightly notes that the uproar about *hopefully* being used as a transitional sentence adverb seems odd compared to the virtual silence about *surely* and *truly* having undergone similar developments many centuries ago (5–6). Similarly, prescriptive pushback against the broadening of *decimate* outside of military registers has strangely not been applied to *ovation*, which began in English as an award for a military commander who had an incomplete victory (16). At times, though, his critique of prescriptive arguments stops a bit short, as there is an occasional tendency to assert rather than argue. We are told translation-based arguments about *hopefully* are "inane," but not why they are inane (6); we are informed of the "Etymological Fallacy," but never told why it is a fallacy for writers or speakers to prefer older or original meanings over newer ones (15).

Chapter 2, "Words That Are Not Words," takes on the issue of neologisms

and resistance to them. After providing an effective opening narrative on word contests—focusing especially on the creation of *scofflaw* in the Prohibition era and failed attempts to create replacements for *jazz*—Shea turns to set pieces on *belittle*, *balding*, *stupider*, and *irregardless*. The section on *stupider* contains an effective, mostly jargonless explanation of the oddities of English inflectional marking on adjectives and adverbs. Throughout the chapter, he suggests that social conventions and actual usage, rather than the efforts of any one authority, dictate whether a particular construction will be considered a word or not. The very short third chapter, “Verbing Nouns,” seems to concentrate on a few examples of conversion/functional shift (*impact*, *contact*) and derivational change (*finalize*). The word *finalize* seems to be an ill-fitting subheading for this chapter, largely because it doesn’t clearly derive from a noun—though Shea provides several other examples that arguably show verbs deriving from nouns (*incentivize*, *obituarize*). His larger point is that formations with *-ize* have encountered resistance even in recent decades, perhaps because of their association with stereotyped business registers (67). With *contact*, he provides an excellent example of interdialectal squabbling: there were many British complaints that Americans were incorrectly using *contact* as a verb to mean ‘initiate communication with another individual’, with prescriptive resistance to this change only subsiding in recent decades (69–70).

Shea turns from a focus on semantics and morphology toward syntax in chapter 4, “Sins of Grammar.” This chapter could have been subtitled “The Greatest Hits of Prescriptivism,” as it covers well-known pet peeves regarding split infinitives; *different than* versus *different from*; sentence-initial coordinating conjunctions; *fun* as an adjective; *that* versus *which*; sentence-final prepositions; the use of *very*; pronoun use and hypercorrection; and the use of *good* after linking verbs. There is much to like in this chapter. Its opening frame on the use of the phrase *grammatical error* is a particular highlight: we learn that there was a brief period in which language purists debated the very purity of the phrase *grammatical error*, found to be oxymoronic by some. (Can an error be grammatical if *grammatical* means ‘correct’?) And the discussion of split infinitives is particularly rich in historical content, with Shea noting the mysterious drop in frequency of split infinitives during Early Modern English before an increase in their use, and an increase in prescriptions against their use, from the eighteenth century onward. There is some rare but notable imprecision in the chapter: at some points Shea seems to group coordinating conjunctions, subordinating conjunctions, and conjunctive adverbs together without differentiating the prescriptive rules attempting to govern their use (89–90). A more careful illustration that *but*, *although*, and *however* (for example) behave syntactically different and are thus punc-

tuated differently (according to most style guides) when they occur at the beginning of a clause would have been very helpful for readers. Even so, the overall chapter would work very well as a standalone reading in educational linguistics or history of the English language classes.

Chapters 5 (“The Continuing Deterioration of the Language”) and 6 (“Defending English”) feel the most miscellaneous in their internal organization, though many of the individual subsections are engaging and informative. The former presents a grab bag of issues, including the apostrophe, the spelling of *potato*, acronyms/initialisms in digital media, the use of *ain’t*, *leg* versus *limb*, back-formation, and *like* as a conjunction and discourse marker. Shea’s prose sometimes shifts into outright satire, best exemplified by his summary of (historically contradictory) rules for apostrophe use (129–30):

5. *It’s* should be used only to mean *it is* and should never be used to indicate the third-person neuter possessive pronoun, unless you are an idiot (such as Thomas Jefferson.)
6. It is widely acknowledged that apostrophes should never be used with verbs. Except when they should: Jeremiah Wharton, in his 1654 *English Grammar*, held that the third-person singular (as in “He write’s very poorly”) should use an apostrophe. [...]

The sixth chapter provides historical sketches of calls to Latinize and to resist the Latinization of English; attempts to establish a language academy; and claims about Shakespeare’s influence on English. All sections are well illustrated and elaborated, with the Shakespeare subsection presenting a fairly thorough review of studies of the bard’s lexical innovations (which are less vast, though still quite substantial, compared to the earliest estimations). Shea concludes the chapter with humor, marking up a section of *Hamlet* with prescriptive criticisms that present-day writers, and even Shakespeare himself, have often received (191). He ends with a quiz that asks readers to distinguish between Shakespeare quotations and hip-hop lyrics, a few of which are genuine puzzlers. The quiz answers appear after chapter 7, a glossed list of 221 words that have annoyed purists, and a very short section suggesting further reading.

This playful concluding quiz is fully in line with Shea’s overall tongue-in-cheek tone and engaging approach throughout the book: he often asks questions of readers, encouraging them to think about the rationale of all the various prescriptive arguments that have been offered. While this tone and approach are generally quite effective, there are tendencies in his prose that slightly lessen the book’s approachability. Early on he announces his intent to avoid “jargon and technical terms,” presumably to maximize clarity for a nonspecialist audience (xiii). He is mostly successful in keeping grammatical

terminology to a minimum or glossing it immediately when it's necessary. But due to his obvious and admirable love of rare words, there is little attempt to hold back on highfalutin language in his own prose—e.g., *stentorian* and *suppurating* (3–4)—a stylistic choice that obscures rather than clarifies his descriptions. Such diction also seems at odds with his criticism of linguists' writing, which he repeatedly portrays as opaque (50, 154).

Even though he does not draw it out explicitly, there is an important point implicit in this attitude: the opacity of much academic linguistic writing on prescriptivism has perhaps prevented the broader public from understanding the historical development and present-day consequences of prescriptive attitudes about language. And Shea's book serves as one (sorely needed) attempt to bridge the worlds of formal linguistic inquiry and nonspecialist reception. In his mostly successful catalogue and critique of linguistic pet peeves, Shea perhaps underemphasizes the import and influence of prescriptivism on the trajectory of language. He is right that prescription can seem foolish, arbitrary, and without logical foundation. Nevertheless, prescriptive inclinations may be as natural to us as language itself (Cameron 1995); and we continue to find increasing evidence of the effects of prescriptions on language use, especially in written registers in the last few centuries (Curzan 2014). We should be careful not to dismiss the real impacts of prescriptivism on language and people, despite its seeming inanity. With this caveat in mind, readers will find in Shea's text an effective demonstration of how to create a publicly accessible dialogue about the various ways we, as English speakers and writers, both support and thwart linguistic prescriptivism, all the while participating in quite innovative language changes.

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