

## The specificity of teen talk: myth or fact?

Teen talk is often seen as very different from more general, adult language use. Data on Dutch teen talk collected in Antwerp, Belgium, however, suggest that differences may be far smaller than generally believed. Data were obtained from fourteen-year-olds through self- and other-reports of language use, interviews, and audio-recordings.

While a few lexical forms seem to be used only among teenagers, most of the terms that Antwerp youngsters themselves identify as typical of teen talk are also used by older speakers. Only a few of these are used with a slight change in meaning. For most of the so-called typical teen words, it is mainly the frequency of usage that differs from adult usage (e.g., the use of very strong evaluative words). Teen talk also seems to have a disproportionate amount of borrowings. These borrowings, however, follow general borrowing patterns.

Results of the study thus clearly show that structural differences from the language generally used around teens are fairly uncommon. In this sense, Antwerp teen talk does not appear to be particularly innovative. Actual patterns of language use, though, are quite divergent from those of older speakers and function as a strong and specific marker of identity.

The apparent lack of significant structural differences between teen talk and the language of the environment questions the general validity of the claim that language change is strongly influenced by how teenagers talk.

Authors: Annick De Houwer and An Kuppens

Annick De Houwer, PhD.  
Director, Research Group Language, Media and Socialization  
Dept. of Communication Studies  
University of Antwerpen  
Campus Drie Eiken  
Universiteitsplein 1  
B2610 Antwerpen  
Belgium

tel. +32-3-8202863  
fax +32-3-8202882  
[annick.dehouwer@ua.ac.be](mailto:annick.dehouwer@ua.ac.be)

An Kuppens  
Research Group Language, Media and Socialization  
Dept. of Communication Studies  
University of Antwerpen  
Campus Drie Eiken  
Universiteitsplein 1  
B2610 Antwerpen  
Belgium

tel. +32-3-8202889  
fax +32-3-8202882  
[an.kuppens@ua.ac.be](mailto:an.kuppens@ua.ac.be)

