Anna-Brita Stenström,
Gisle Andersen and
Ingrid Kristine Hasund

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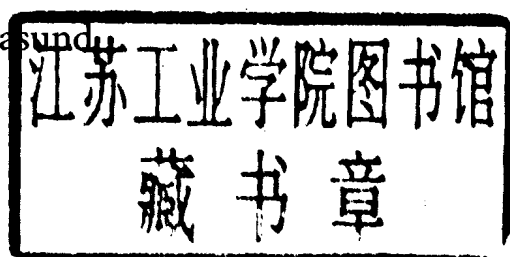and findings

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Anna-Brita Stenström
Gisle Andersen
Ingrid Kristine Hasund

University of Bergen

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Introduction

Why study teenage talk?

> They like wanna see how we talk and all that.
>
> *Tommy, 14*

In March 1996, Alex Spillius of *The Independent on Sunday* said of London teenage talk:

> It appears that a yawning linguistic gap is opening up to separate a younger generation — brought up on a mixture of US television, films and music, Australian soap operas and rave culture — from the rest of the population.

Of course, adults have always complained about teenage language, without necessarily being aware of what exactly it is that distinguishes the language of teenagers from their own, more standard, language. According to *The Independent on Sunday*, the intonation is different for a start: teenage sentences tend to end with a raised rather than a lowered tone. But it is vocabulary that is seen to most strikingly characterize their language. For instance, teenagers use *like* as a 'sentential link' where adults might use *you know*, and *go* instead of *say* as a reporting verb; they use old words such as *sad* and *wicked* with new meanings; and they use *innit*, 'the phrase that annoys parents most', as an invariable tag, as illustrated below:

Callum: It's not that good, cos it's either Final Fight Cody or you have to be Hagar or you can only pick out of Hagar and Cody or it's Final Fight Guy where you can only be Hagar or Guy.
Mamady: No, but you only like Cody or Hagar **innit**
Callum: Mm, I know but …it's so stupid though **innit?**
Mamady: You didn't like Guy ⟨unclear⟩
Callum: I know, but that is so stupid though **innit?**
Mamady: No, it depends on the game pl= player.
Callum: So what erm

Jacob: Erm Fatal Fury.
Callum: Mm that's okay.
(137803: 182–188)

So far, teenage language has not been given the attention in linguistic circles that it merits. Admittedly, there has been an awakening and gradually increasing interest in teenage talk in the last decade — and not only English teenage talk. However, compared to the amount of research devoted to child and adult language, the number of studies on teenage language is modest indeed. This is startling, considering the significance of this transition period between childhood and adulthood in terms of its effect, not only on physical and psychological development, but also on social and linguistic behaviour. As every parent knows, this is when the peer group becomes all-important, exerting pressure on the way youngsters dress, the music they listen to, and, of course, the way they speak.

Teenage talk is fascinating. It is the nearest we can get to 'the vernacular' (cf. Cheshire 1982:6f; Milroy 1987:58). Moreover, occupying an intermediary position between child and adult language, it has the potential to influence the way language develops. Some, at least, of the many innovations in teenage talk — which are found at all levels of speech — work their way into the standard language. In Hudson's words, 'it is the peer-oriented stage which lays the basis for the adult language...' (1980:16).

The dearth of investigations into teenage language is due in part to its under-representation in language corpora. It was to address this that the decision was taken to collect a reasonably large corpus of teenage language and make it available for research, thus giving rise to the Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language (COLT).

We found it natural to choose teenage talk from London and not, for instance, Newcastle or Cardiff or Manchester, since London is one of the world's most 'central' and trendiest cities. Its teenage vernacular, we assumed, must infiltrate the language of teenagers far beyond London's boundaries, and even those of Britain itself.

This book aims at laying at least a stone or two in bridging the gap referred to in *The Independent on Sunday*, by giving a comprehensive insight into the London teenage vernacular towards the end of the 20th century.

The book consists of two parts. In the first part (Chapters 1–3), we describe how the corpus was collected and processed until we arrived at the final output, the CD-ROM, which includes the orthographically transcribed and word-class tagged text, a sound file and a search program. We go on to present the speakers,

with special emphasis on the recruits (who wore the recording material and logged the conversations) and their various backgrounds. The first part ends colourfully, describing what the COLT teenagers talk about and how they do it. The second part of the book, the main part, is devoted to specific linguistic findings on the most prominent features of the teenagers' talk. Chapter 4 is devoted to 'slanguage', including proper and dirty slang alongside vogue words and the ever-present 'smallwords' of speech, such as *OK, like, sort of* and *yeah*. This is followed in Chapter 5 by an account of how reported speech is manifested in teenage talk. Chapter 6 starts by a survey of non-standard grammatical features and is followed by a description of the teenagers' use of intensifiers. 'Tags', such as *don't you* and *innit*, are discussed in Chapter 7. Chapter 8, finally, is a lively description of the teenagers' interactional behaviour in terms of conflict talk. Chapter 9, the summary, concludes the book.

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CHAPTER 1

From tape to CD-ROM

> Oh dear, I've got so much to do tonight, got
> so much to do tonight, gotta have a bath
> gotta record some tapes, gotta record these
> tapes gotta record some other tapes gotta do
> some homework.
>
> *Mandy, 15*

Leaving a tape recorder in the hands of a teenager is risky. For one thing, you never know if you will ever get the tape recorder back in one piece, and if you do, you never know what will be on the tape. The COLT teenagers really gave us a new understanding of what tape recorders can be used for, and not least how much a tape recorder can actually handle when it comes to physical abuse. Hitting the microphone or whistling into it while recording surely produces interesting sound effects:[1]

(1) ⟨nv⟩whistling sound⟨/nv⟩ When I go too close to it makes that noise. Look Lo= Listen to this. Listen to this, you won't believe it. Look. See that. ⟨nv⟩whistling⟨/nv⟩ out your ears. ⟨nv⟩whistling sound⟨/nv⟩ See ... you're not gonna like it Walkman. ⟨nv⟩whistling sound⟨/nv⟩ you can hardly hear it but when you get it against your ear it stings.
(138201: 39)

The teenagers who were recorded did not seem to be intimidated by the presence of a walkman, or the fact that the recordings were to be handed in to an adult research team from Norway. In fact, our status as Norwegians turned out to be an advantage; we were just a bunch of 'Norwegies' from a remote and insignificant viking land, where probably nobody understands English anyway:

(2) Gareth: Can you turn it off a minute? Can you turn it off a minute?
Robert: No. I'm recording everything. [Come with me.]
Brett: [I won't say] anything!

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1. For transcription conventions, see Appendix 1.

> Robert: Come on, in fact they'll be Norwegians and they won't be able
> to understand anything you say!
> (139809: 79)

Mitch and Ion think that the recordings are to be used by Norwegian pupils
learning English in school. But they are not quite sure how useful it will be for
Norwegian kids to learn their street language:

(3) Ion: so Norwegians they're learning English don't they though
     Mitch: oh yeah … oh, but, yeah but, this is gonna be done mostly on
             the streets innit, for us? so what they gonna learn about that?
     (136301: 24–28)

Mandy is of a different opinion: what could possibly be more interesting than
her language?

(4) Don: Are you getting paid for this?
     Mandy: No. ⟨nv⟩laugh⟨/nv⟩ I just did it for a laugh.
     Don: Tell them [to fuck off.]
     Alphie: [You're not getting] paid for it!
     Mandy: No I just did it for a laugh cos I want, I want everyone to know
             the most interesting language in the world which is part of my
             language isn't it?
     (133904: 26–30)

The launching of the COLT project was preceded by a workshop on corpus
building and corpus-based research organized at Bergen University in Novem-
ber 1992 by the Department of English in collaboration with the Norwegian
Computing Centre for the Humanities and with financial support from the
Faculty of Arts. Six well-known linguists with long experience of corpus-related
work were invited to introduce us to the art of corpus creation and corpus use,
notably Jan Arts (the TOSCA project), Paul Crowdy (the British National
Corpus (BNC)), Sidney Greenbaum (the International Corpus of English
(ICE)), Stig Johansson (the Lancaster-Oslo-Bergen Corpus (LOB)), John
Sinclair (COBUILD) and Jan Svartvik (the London-Lund Corpus (LLC)).

A grant from the Norwegian Research Council enabled us to launch the
project and employ a student research assistant on a half time basis. Additional
funding from various other sources[2] made it possible for us to employ a

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number of future MA and PhD students as research assistants during the project period. All in all, the COLT project has been kept alive by fairly small means, and we would definitely not have been able to complete the project in an acceptable way without assistance from outside, notably the Longman Group, Harlow (for transcription), the Department of Linguistics at Lancaster University (for word-class tagging) and the Norwegian Computing Centre for the Humanities[3] (for technical support).

1.1   Getting teenage talk on tape

The collection of COLT was largely modelled on the Longman design for collecting the BNC, and we used the same type of equipment (see Crowdy 1991 for details). The scope, of course, was different. Instead of recording conversations in different areas of Britain, we restricted ourselves to different London areas; instead of recording all age groups, we limited ourselves to teenagers; instead of trying to cover the full range of linguistic variation, we aimed at the London teenage vernacular; and instead of using the British Market Research Bureau for the selection of suitable volunteers to do the recording, we contacted the Department of Education in London. Altogether, our corpus design has been far less sophisticated than that of the BNC, and the size of the corpus is only a fraction of that of the BNC.

The Department of Education helped us pick five London school boroughs, each representing one rung of the social status ladder: Barnet, Camden, Chelsey/Kensington, Hackney and Tower Hamlets. The Education Directorates in these boroughs provided us with a list of schools to approach. The heads of the schools were then contacted and presented with a brief outline of the project and its aims and purposes and asked to help us find pupils who were willing to act as 'recruits', i.e. make the recordings. The reactions varied. Some headmasters and headmistresses showed great interest in the project, while others were less enthusiastic. Least willing to cooperate were the heads of schools with the highest prestige. We eventually ended up with the following school boroughs:

The Inner City Area
Barnet
Camden

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3. The present name is the HIT centre.

Hackney
Tower Hamlets

The Greater London Metropolitan Area
Hertfordshire

Figure 1.1, copied from the Internet,[4] gives an idea of where the boroughs are situated.
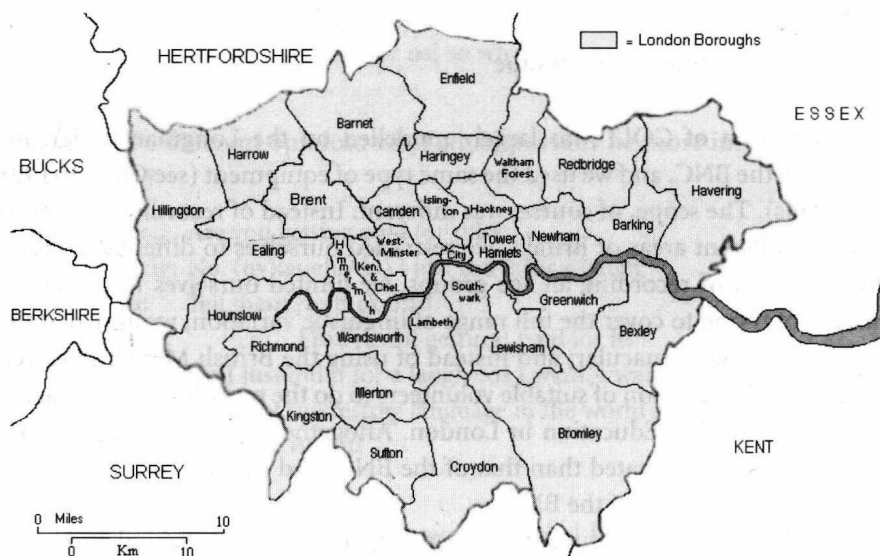
Figure 1.1. The London boroughs

The inner city schools are all state-run comprehensive schools, while the one in Hertfordshire is a (public) boarding-school. Altogether thirty-three pupils declared that they were willing to act as recruits, despite the fact that there was no payment involved. They all received a letter for their parents to sign, saying that they authorized their son/daughter to act as a recruit. It goes without saying that the students were promised full anonymity.

The recordings were made in the late spring and early autumn of 1993 and consist of approximately half a million words of spontaneous conversations between 13 to 17 year-old boys and girls from different parts of London and with varying socioeconomic backgrounds. Some of the conversations, however,

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4. The internet address is http://www.brent.gov.uk/brent/brent/brent/other/londonmap.htm

include the occasional parent, sibling or teacher (see Chapter 2).

The first research assistant employed by the COLT project visited each one of the schools, gave instructions and handed out the recording equipment to the recruits, a small Sony Walkman Professional combined with a lapel microphone, together with a set of empty tapes, and a 'conversation log'. The recruits were instructed to carry this equipment for three to five days and record all the conversations they were engaged in, in as many different situations as possible, preferably with friends of their own age and, if possible, without any of the co-speakers noticing that they were being recorded. The recruits were also asked to write down in the conversation log who they were talking to by indicating first name, occupation, age, sex and relationship, and where the conversation took place.

After the period of time allotted, the tapes were handed back, more or less filled with recorded speech and with speech of varying sound quality. Some recruits had done a very good job, especially Susie (recruit 2) and Jack (recruit 29), who managed to record roughly one tenth each of the entire corpus and whose recordings were of very good quality. Two other recruits had been less successful. One handed in a set of empty tapes, and the tapes of the other recruit were impossible to transcribe due to the bad sound quality. Thus, we were left with thirty sets of tapes, ready to be transcribed — and one missing Sony Walkman.

Surprisingly enough, most of the recruits noted down the information asked for in the conversation log, but some did not bother to give all the details and wrote something very general, such as 'all are school mates' for co-speakers, and one of the recruits contented himself with only filling in the names of the co-speakers, leaving out all other information. The majority of the recruits made their recordings in or outside the school building, for instance in the classroom, the common room, the canteen, or the school yard. Some took the easy way out and simply turned on the tape-recorder in class, which means that much of the talk was produced by the teacher. Others made all their recordings at home, which explains the broad age-range in some of the conversations. Many of the recordings are labelled 'walking home', 'outside flats', entrance to flats', and 'park', which indicates that the recruis spent a lot of time with their friends outdoors. Wyatt (recruit 9), recorded quite a few of his conversations in his father's pub, with co-speakers aged up to 45.

All in all, the sampling took no more than three weeks, two weeks in May and one week in September. The research assistant who administered the May recordings, made the observation that these recordings reflect the teenagers' life style just as much as their conversational style; the teenagers were simply too active to sit down and have a quiet talk. The September recordings were made

in a more stable environment, the recruits' respective studies at the boarding school, which is reflected in longer and more coherent conversations.

The number of speakers per recording varies from two to six, with twoparty conversations the least common type. The conversations where girls talk to girls and boys talk to boys dominate, but quite a few are mixed. The conversations recorded at home may include a parent and/or a sibling, while classroom recordings usually involve a teacher, as illustrated in (5), which shows that the teacher does not really appreciate the presence of a tape-recorder in the classroom:

(5) Teacher: No you're not allowed to have them in school.
     Carola: I am cos Mr Smith er said I could.
     Teacher: Why?
     Carola: Cos we're doing this project for the Norwegian thing.
     Teacher: But you're not allowed to walk around the school with a Walkman, do take it off now.
     Carola: We are, it said on the thing.
     Teacher: On what thing? The instructions I got is that no Walkmen are allowed in school.
     Carola: Have to fill up ten tapes.
     Teacher: Yeah but are you supposed to be wearing it around the school?
     Carola: Yeah you have to record as many conversations as you can. You have to fill up ten tapes.
     Teacher: Who is it for, Mr?
     Carola: Brown.
     Teacher: Alright well I'll check one out.
     (140804: 54–67)

The recordings represent various kinds of interaction, ranging from exchanges that can hardly be characterized as coherent conversations at all, such as some of the outside recordings, to what might be described as serious discussions. Although the co-speakers were not supposed to notice that they were being recorded, it is very obvious that they did more often that not. But this does not seem to have made them less spontaneous. On the contrary. Awareness of being recorded seems to have encouraged the male speakers in particular to be bolder than ever by telling dirty jokes or indulging in the use of taboo words.

The sound quality of the recordings varies a great deal, from excellent to rather poor. Some recordings were of such poor quality that they could not be transcribed. The main reason was of course that the recruits had switched on the tape recorder in very noisy places. Another reason is the teenagers' interactional

style, which abounds in shouting, swearing, overlaps and interruptions. As a result, the material still has a number of ⟨unclear⟩ instances, which, however, the attentive analyst may be able to disambiguate by careful listening.

Two thirds of the recruits were 13 and 14 years old, while the remaining third was distributed among the 15 and 16–17 year-olds. This points to a clear distributional imbalance as regards age. However, the fact that the 13 and 14 year-olds represent all three social classes (see Table 2.1) makes them a perfect target for sociolinguistic comparisons involving the entire socioeconomic range. This group handed in more recorded material than the other age groups together. All in all, two thirds of the recruits belong to social class 2 (middle), which seems to indicate that one can expect very little material from class 1 (high) and class 3 (low). This, however, is compensated by an overall better quality. The overall gender distribution, too, is unbalanced, since the male recruits were twice as many as the female. But this is not as bad as it seems either. The nine female recruits managed to record no less than 44 per cent of the entire corpus, compared to the male recruits' 56 per cent, and again, the quality is generally better than that of many of the conversations recorded by male recruits.

As we have shown, collecting a corpus of spontaneous conversation is a hazardous undertaking, and despite careful planning, it is impossible to foresee the outcome. In other words, we could not anticipate how many students would volunteer to help, how much each one of them would record, or the quality of the recordings. Some shortcomings could obviously have been avoided if we had had the resources to collect and process a larger body of material. This would have enabled us to select the most representative recordings, thus achieving the right balance. However, for practical reasons, including time and money restrictions, we set the limit to half a million words, which, incidentally, is the same size as the LLC.

1.2   Transcription

The transcription of the recorded material turned out to be a complicated and very time-consuming process. This was partly due to the poor quality of some of the recordings and partly to features characteristic of teenage talk. Lack of adequate funding and a consequent change of direction were additional factors. At the outset, we had fairly high ambitions. We aimed at a simple prosodic transcription reflecting the spoken language, roughly midway between the BNC model, according to which utterances are transcribed as sentences (cf. Crowdy