

Danesi, M. (1989, Summer). Adolescent Language as Affectively Coded Behavior: Findings of an Observational Research Project. Adolescence, 24(94).

OVERVIEW

It is known that adolescents develop their own particular nomenclature. It is from this background that they are able to communicate with one another within a particular culture. It appears that the specific nomenclature is not fixed, but rather evolves from one generation to another, often repeating itself. While other research has studied language in a variety of age groups, little study has been given to the dialects of adolescents.

PURPOSE

This study attempts to formulate some general working terms from which to do later research concerning adolescent language. It also shows that the adolescent structuring of speech is determined largely by affective rather than propositional coding categories.

DESIGN

Thirty-six adolescents (ages 13 to 18) from Toronto were recorded in both spontaneous conversations and formal interview sessions. Several teen acquaintances of the investigation team were given microcassette recorders and encouraged to record their casual conversations with their friends.

Over eight hours of spontaneous conversational data involving 22 adolescents were collected. After the tapes were made and permission was given by the teens, the tapes were used for the research objectives. As a control, there were also direct interviews with the adolescents. The final research group involved 22 girls and 14 boys.

FINDINGS

The analysis resulted in the postulation of three basic psychosocial categories that underlie the adolescent's programming of speech events: emotive, connotative, and socially coded language programming.

EMOTIVE LANGUAGE PROGRAMMING

Emotive language programming is the tendency for adolescents to speak with intensified language markers, revealing an impulse toward the outward expression of strong feelings. This is often accompanied by complex body reactions such as increased rates of speech, simplified clause structure, overwrought intonation contours, expressive voice modulations, and other such markers:

He's sooooo...cute! She's faaar out!

We went to the movies yesterday...(hesitation plus intonation like a question)...and we saw these two creepy-lookin' guys...(same contour features).

Yuck! (disgust) Hey!...What's happening? (surprise)

Emotive language programming also uses a lot of interjections, exclamations, and grunts. These reflect the need of adolescents to draw continual attention to their feelings, opinions, or attitudes. Swear words are also included. Yet another component is the use of the word "like":

Like, uhm, he had already eaten, and like, he didn't, like wanna get up...

CONNOTATIVE LANGUAGE PROGRAMMING

Connotative language programming is a second component. In this, adolescents frequently coin words and phrases—or extend the meanings of others—in highly connotative and suggestive ways:

Yeah, he is a real loser.

That...grosses me out, man!

Are you still talkin' to that airhead?

These connotative words are characteristically hard to define by the user.

SOCIALLY CODED LANGUAGE PROGRAMMING

This type of language is a means for peer group identification, and is also the motivation for the other two categories. Adolescent language performs

the crucial function of drawing together the members of a society's adolescent group and of barring others.

CONCLUSION

The emergence of this type of speech in the developmental timetable of children is an indicator that they have begun their transition to adolescence. It is also important to remind those working with adolescents that they should recognize this as a natural development in a transition toward adulthood.

IMPLICATIONS

- Adolescents will develop their own language to meet their various needs.
- Understanding this general framework of adolescent language can benefit anyone working with teens. Not only will it help us better understand them, but will also help us communicate with them.
- School teachers, church and para-church organizations, parents, and anyone involved with adolescents should contemplate this research and how it affects their interaction with teens.
- When loving kids, one must also respect their forms of communication. Appreciate their need for identity, individuality, and unity within their age group.
- Like music, teens are protective of their own language. One working with them can use it when appropriate, but never adopt it to sound like or be accepted by them.

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