The Language of British Teenagers. A Preliminary Study of its Main Grammatical Features

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The language of teenagers has been the subject of extensive study in recent years due to its highly innovative nature and richness of expression. Most attention has been paid to the phonological and lexico-semantic levels of analysis; grammar and, more particularly, syntax have been addressed less frequently. In this study I focus on some of the most distinctive features of the lexico-grammar of this language, using data mainly from COLT (Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language) and from the SCOSE corpus (Saarbrücken Corpus of Spoken English) plus other supplementary materials. At times, comparisons are made with a comparable sample of adult language extracted from the DCPSE (Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English). The analysis here examines those lexico-grammatical properties which distinguish teenagers' language from the language of adults. Under discussion will be, among others, the following grammatical features: the verbal and pronoun systems, the use of non-canonical tags, the system of negation, quotatives, the expression of vague language, ways of intensifying language and the use of abuse and insult words as vocatives.

Keywords: teenagers' language; vague language; quotatives; intensification; negation; non-canonical tags

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El lenguaje de los jóvenes británicos. Estudio preliminar de los rasgos gramaticales de mayor relevancia

*El lenguaje de los jóvenes ha sido objeto de numerosos estudios en los últimos años debido a su carácter innovador y riqueza de expresión. La mayoría de estas investigaciones se han centrado en los niveles fonológico y léxico-semántico. Su gramática y, más en particular, su sintaxis han sido estudiadas en menor grado. Este artículo se centra en algunos de los rasgos más característicos de la léxico-gramática de este lenguaje. Para ello se utilizarán datos de los corpus COLT (*Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language*) y SCOSE (*Saarbrücken Corpus of Spoken English*), además de otro material complementario. En ocasiones se establecerán contrastes con el lenguaje adulto con datos seleccionados del DCPSE (*Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English*). Este análisis servirá para examinar aquellos aspectos gramaticales que distinguen al lenguaje de los adolescentes del propio de los adultos. Se estudiarán, entre otros, los siguientes: el sistema verbal y pronominal, las coletillas no canónicas, la polaridad negativa, los verbos citativos, la expresión de la vaguedad, modos de intensificación y el uso de insultos como vocativos.*

Palabras clave: lenguaje juvenil; vaguedad; citativos; intensificación; negación; coletillas no canónicas

1. Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that the language of teenagers is of particular interest because of the important innovations and changes in language use adolescent and young speakers make compared to the stability typical of adulthood (Labov 1972; Romaine 1984; Eckert 1988; Andersen 2001; Rodríguez 2002; Stenström, Andersen and Hasund 2002; Cheshire 2005, Breivik and Martínez Insua 2008).[1] Indeed, teenagers are frequently responsible for linguistic innovations and changes, some of which are incorporated into the general structure of the language over time. This applies especially to the lexical level as teenagers are generally creative in their use of the language and are fond of borrowing new items from other languages and even from other jargons. Moreover, teenagers constitute an important sector of society in their own right that certainly deserves attention; the study of their language, then, is a key component in understanding this social group.

When characterising teenagers' language, I am considering this variety as the product of a series of linguistic features typical of the written and oral productions of teenagers in informal and colloquial interactions. In this respect, we may assume that the language used does not differ entirely from other varieties in similar contexts. However, the age factor together with other sociological constraints (gender, social class, cultural level, ethnic background) do exert significant influence, conditioning the nature of language production here. Hence, teenagers' language should not be regarded as completely homogeneous but rather as evolving according to geographical and contextual factors, age being the most distinctive feature. If this is so, it follows that the variety of English used by London teenagers should be expected to have certain elements in common with that of young people in New York or Toronto, for example; however, important differences will also arise due to a wide range of personal, ethnic and social factors. From this, we can conclude that under the general umbrella term of *teenagers' language* can be found a large number of varieties, each one differing from the other according to personal, social, geographical and situational variables, the age factor being the common denominator.

Attention in the past has been focused mainly on phonological and lexico-semantic elements (Romaine 1984; Horvath 1985; Kerswill and Williams 1997; Stenström 1995); grammar and, particularly, syntax, however, have been discussed to a much lesser extent. This is perhaps due to the fact that external aspects of language are generally easier to characterise and describe than grammatical features, the latter being more abstract and internal and, consequently, more difficult to analyse (Herrero 2002). Chambers and Trudgill also refer to this phenomenon:

> Dialect grammar has been much less studied than phonology and vocabulary. The most common reason proffered by dialectologists to explain the discrepancy is the relative infrequency of syntactic and morphological variants as compared to phonological or vocabulary variants. In other words, it is harder to gather examples of the former for study. (1991: 291)

The literature on the grammar of English teenagers points to general trends typical of this variety: simplified language, avoidance of complex syntactic structures, such as passives, relatives and cleft constructions, incomplete sentences justified by speakers' shared knowledge. A number of studies have been concerned with specific features, such as the use of GO as a reporting verb (Butters 1980), *like* as a marker of reported speech (Romaine and Lange 1991; Tagliamonte and Hudson 1999; Tagliamonte and D'Arcy 2004), the omission of the primary verbs BE and HAVE (Andersen 1995), *was/were* variation (Cheshire and Fox 2009), *just* as emphasiser (Erman 1997, 1998), *well* and *enough* as intensifiers (Stenström 2000), *cos* as an invariant starting point for further talk (Stenström and Andersen 1996), *innit* as a non-canonical question tag (Erman 1998; Stenström, Andersen and Hasund 2002), and the function and meaning of the discourse markers *so who? like how? just what?* in conversations (Tagliamonte 2005). In spite of this, there is still room for further analysis and discussion of other elements that are idiosyncratic of this variety and which still require a more detailed account.

2. Aims

In this study I will focus on some of the most distinctive grammatical features of teenagers' language, using data extracted mainly from the COLT corpus (Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language) with additional material from the Saarbrücken Corpus of Spoken English (SCOSE) and from other written and oral sources. The language object of study will be that produced by adolescents and teenagers between the ages of 13 and 18. Analysis will focus on those lexico-grammatical properties that characterise this sociolect and identify it as different from other varieties of English. Specific elements considered will be: the syntactic structure of the clause, the verbal and the pronoun systems, the use of tags, the system of polarity with particular reference to negation, quotatives, the expression of vague language, the use of abuse and insult words as vocatives and ways to intensify language. Some of these features and tendencies could be regarded as common to other non-standard varieties of English although in the case of the language used by teenagers, these seem to be either much more frequent or they are directly or indirectly conditioned by the age factor. For reasons of time and space, I will deal relatively briefly with some of these elements, although most would justify more detailed, individual studies.

3. Materials

This study forms part of a broader study of the spoken language used by young people in Britain. In addition to data from the two corpora, I have also used written and oral materials related to British teenagers' culture and lifestyles: magazines (*Sugar*, *Bliss*, *Shout*, *Mizz*, *It's Hot*, *Alternative Press*, *Seventeen*, *Cosmo Girl*, *Oh Boy*, *Teen now*, etc.), web-based glossaries and dictionaries of teenagers' language (see reference section) and

materials selected from the British Library Archival sound recordings. The COLT corpus, which is part of the British National Corpus (BNC), was compiled in 1993 and consists of 431,528 words from a total of 377 spontaneous conversations produced by teenagers from 13 to 17 in the London area. These conversations together represent roughly 55 hours of recorded speech. Although most of the informants can be classified as middle adolescents, teachers and relatives of some of the informants also make some contributions, although their participation is very limited. During this study, I will draw a comparison between the teenagers' production with a comparable sample of adult language, composed of informal face-to-face conversations (403,844 words) and assorted spontaneous speech (21,675 words), extracted from the Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English (DCPSE). This will allow us to identify the features which are typical of the language of teenagers.

Although COLT was compiled in an attempt to represent language produced by British adolescents, all the speakers are from the London area, with its own geographical, social and ethnic variables. The London boroughs represented in the corpus also have substantial numbers of children from ethnic minorities and this itself could have a bearing on the type of English used. Such a corpus should not be regarded as fully representative of general adolescent British English, but rather of London teenager speech. Nevertheless, some of the tendencies observed in the analysis here, especially in the area of syntax and discourse, could be understood as characteristic of general teenage British English and even of adolescents' language. Several studies have shown common features in the expression of adolescents across different languages. Furthermore, features of London English, pronunciation in particular, seem to be spreading throughout the country (Williams and Kerswill 1999; Foulkes and Docherty 1999), so taking London as a starting-point might be a useful means of assessing aspects of teenagers' language in British English more generally. In addition to the COLT corpus, I have in particular, a subcorpus from SCOSE of about 12,000 words, compiled in the London area by researchers from the University of Saarbrücken (Germany) in 2008 and which contains data from London teenagers' speech. All the subjects were students and native speakers of English between the ages of fifteen and eighteen.This data has the advantage over COLT of being more recent, although its limitations are its small size, the low number of participants and the fact that the conversations were all recorded on school premises rather than in daily situations. All this conditions somewhat the spontaneity of the interactions, which is reflected in the language used. Finally, the DCPSE is sampled from both the London Lund corpus and the International Corpus of English. Great Britain (ICE-GB). In the case of the data selected for the present study, 75 percent is from ICE-GB, which was recorded in the early 1990s, that is, at a similar time as COLT. ICE-GB was designed primarily as a resource for syntactic studies, and it can be regarded as representative of the general English variety spoken and written in Britain. Although the component of this corpus selected does not contain data taken only from London speakers as is the case of COLT, it can be regarded as comparable to it in terms of its size, general design and the characteristics of the particular samples considered for the analysis: face-to-face and spontaneous conversations and verbal interactions.

4. Findings

4.1. Verbal system

Significant reduction and simplification of the verbal system is common. This might include: use of the base form instead of the present (1), auxiliary omission in questions (2) and (3), and replacement of one past form (the past tense *did*) by another (the past participle *done*) (4)

(1) My sister went to Cambridge. She *hate* the course (SCO2/491)[2]
(2) Hey, you feeling better? (COB1132503/1)
(3) Where you gonna go? (SCO1/465)
(4) I love the way he done that (COB132901/129)

The lack of agreement between subject and verb is particularly noticeable in the variation between *do/does* (5) and *was/were* (6) forms,[3] although it also applies to the regular third present form, as in (7).

(5) He *don't, don't* give it to you twice (COB132402/27)
(6) They *was* like "what's what's he doing with you then?"(SCO6/58-59)
(7) but he just *go* like – he's really *think* he was in love (SCO5/24-25)

It is also very common with existential *there* expressions. A total of 674 instances of these constructions were recorded in COLT and in 100 cases (almost 15%) there was lack of agreement. In the sample of SCOSE considered, only 12 cases of existentials were identified and in three of them lack of agreement was found. *There's* is used most of the times as an invariant form, that is, both for the singular and the plural. Looking at the data, there seem to be a number of elements within the NPs following *there*-constructions that favour this lack of agreement: the adverb *only* and the presence of demonstratives, possessives, numerals, quantifiers (*some, any, many, a lot*) and particular nouns (*men, people*).This feature, however, should not be regarded as completely characteristic of the language of teenagers as it is also frequent in adult speech.[4]

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[2] All the examples included in the study have been transcribed following the corpus conventions or the way they appear in the magazines and websites considered. Each example will be followed by an identification code indicating the corpus or source from which it was taken (CO for COLT, SCO for Saarbrücken Corpus of Spoken English), the code number from which it was extracted and the conversation turn reference given. Thus, for instance, in this particular case, the example provided was selected from the Saarbrücken Corpus of Spoken English (SCOSE), document number 2 and the corresponding conversation turn was 491. This system clearly facilitates the tracing and retrieving of the original, if necessary.

[3] For further information on the *was/were* variation in young speakers and in non-standard English, see Tagliamonte (1998), Anderwald (2001) and Cheshire and Fox (2009).

[4] For a close study of the lack of concord in existential-*there* sentences, see Martínez Insua and Palacios (2003) and Breivik and Martínez Insua (2008).

(8) I could but, *there's certain* problems (COB132503/163)
(9) *There's these* mad *people*, they don't indicate they just go brrrrrr (COB134103/76)
(10) *There's some* drums on it that just sound exactly the same (COB134103/267)

4.2. Negatives

A high frequency of negatives is observed in the production of teenagers, certainly higher than in spoken adult mainstream English. For the analysis, I considered as negative those grammatical items that are fully negative forms from both a syntactic and a semantic perspective such as the particle *not*, including forms of operators (*ain't, isn't, aren't, hasn't, haven't, don't, doesn't, didn't*), modal verbs (*can't, won't, shan't, shouldn't, wouldn't, mightn't*, etc) and the vernacular form *dunno,* which represents in writing the particular pronunciation of *don't know* by some of the speakers, *not* as a modifier to several determinatives (*much, many, enough*), *never, none, nobody, no* as a determiner in a NP structure or modifier in the structure of comparative ADjPs and AdvPs, *nowhere, neither, nor, nothing/nuffink* and *No* as a negative response to a previous sentence. Apart from all the previous items, I also included lexical words with an inherent negative meaning (*fail, refuse, deny*) and cases of incomplete negation (*few, barely, seldom, rarely*, etc.). A total of 1,322 examples were discarded from COLT and 1,392 from DCPSE. These included examples of subclause, local or constituent negation; unclear cases and cases difficult to classify for technical reasons (either because the corpus did not provide enough information or because the context was insufficient); and question tags and repetitions, the latter being mainly structures where *no* as a response word to a previous statement was repeated twice or more, a phenomenon that is typical of speech and which is part of the normal interaction between speakers. Table 1 summarises my findings.

As table 1 shows, the general count was 14,305 in COLT versus 9,722 in DCPSE. The frequency of negatives per 10,000 words is 331.49 in COLT versus 228.47 in DCPSE. The difference is statistically significant (x^2 = 788.72, df = 1, p<0.0001). This can be explained partly by the design of the corpus itself, but also in terms of cognitive and psychological features typical of teenagers. In their conversation, adolescents tend to make their points clearly, directly and categorically as a strategy for self-reinforcement. Furthermore, the data in both corpora suggest that spoken interaction is especially propitious for the expression of negation. Negatives with *ain't* are common in the everyday speech of teenagers, despite being long stigmatised (Palacios Martínez 2010). *Ain't* stands out for its multiple functions since it can be equivalent to forms of BE and HAVE. The results obtained show that in declarative and interrogative clauses *ain't* is more common as the equivalent of negativised forms of BE (11) than it is of HAVE (12), whereas in question tags the opposite tendency is true, and the proportion of *ain't* as the negative of HAVE is noticeably higher (13).

(11) There *ain't* no laws (COB132503/570)
(12) Considering you *ain't* got your glasses on (COB152601/94)
(13) Well you got a book *ain't* you? (COB132408/82)

Negative word	COLT/teenagers (431,528 words)		DCPSE sample/adults (425,519 words)	
	Number of tokens	Relative frequency per 10,000 words	Number of tokens	Relative frequency per 10,000 words
ain't	280	6.5	1	0.2
not	2,136	50.13	1,784	41.7
clitic *not*	6,864	159	4,982	117.08
no (as determiner or modifier)	343	7.9	334	7.8
no (as a response)	3,504	81.1	1,936	45.5
nothing/nuffink	254	5.8	150	3.5
nowhere	13	0.3	14	0.3
no one	85	1.9	19	0.4
none	30	0.69	24	0.5
never	340	7.8	358	8.4
nor	28	0.6	11	0.2
nobody	51	1.1	93	2.1
neither	12	0.27	16	0.37
dunno	365	8.4	0	–
Total	**14,305**	**331.49**	**9,722**	**228.47**

Table 1: Total number of full negatives in Bergen Corpus of London Teenage Language (COLT) and Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English (DCPSE, face-to-face conversations and assorted spontaneous speech)

Moreover, *ain't* is more commonly used as BE copular verb (14) than as an auxiliary (15).

(14) Are you sure it *ain't* a girl? (COB132803/72)
(15) But I *ain't* gonna be there long anyway (COB132612/111)

In the case of HAVE, it mainly occurs as auxiliary in collocation with *got* (12) while the number of occurrences recorded with HAVE expressing perfect aspect is much more limited (16).

(16) It hasn't, hey it's not, well I *ain't* even finished this side (COB132611/24)

Ain't is also very frequent in negative concord structures, that is, clauses in which we find two or more negatives, as in (17) and (18), which do not cancel each other out (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 845). *Ain't* occurs in over half of the negative concord structures identified in COLT. In all cases, *ain't* occupies first position and is found together with *no*, *nothing*, *no more*, *no one* and *nobody*. No instances are recorded of *ain't* together with *never*.

As regards the pragmatics of *ain't*, it can be observed that its occurrence is not always casual; at times there are some pragmatic motivations associated with it. Thus, some speakers of the COLT corpus opt for this negative when they intend to strengthen a negative statement (17) or they want to make a story they are telling more realistic and convincing (18).

(17) I know your mother *ain't* got no lips (COB135001/27)
(18) He goes up to the, he goes up to the bartender, he says excuse me, why is there a bear sitting over there? And he goes, this joke changes a little bit every time I tell you, I thought I'd warn you though. Right, he goes h= excuse me, why is there a bear sitting there? He goes well, you know, we erm, well, don't ask okay, but just don't touch him, okay, cos he's dangerous ......He goes if you don't touch that bear you're scared of it. He goes <shouting>I *ain't* scared of *no* bear! (COB132701/164-171)

Finally, extracts of the corpus are registered where some of the speakers use the *ain't* form to adapt to the discourse of other speakers who generally use this negative in their speech.

As far as negative types are concerned, affixal negation is observed to be little used in teenagers' conversations, since their speech is characterised by its informality and colloquial nature and affixal negation tends to be more closely associated with more formal registers. Also noted is the adolescents' strong tendency to intensify language. Negative intensification is achieved through the use of three main mechanisms: certain expressions of negative import, *no way* being the most common (especially as compared with the language of adults) (19); negative concord structures (20) and some negative polarity idioms (21), (22), (23). In addition to this, it is common to find certain swear words, such as *bloody* and *f***ing*, inserted close to the negatives for heightened effect (20) and (24).

(19) <unclear> No man there is *no way*. ... <unclear> (COB134202/463)

(20) The third man comes out like this ... he goes what's a matter with you? He goes You've got your cigarettes. <shouting>*I didn't get no f***ing matches,* did I?</>That was my little joke that ... (COB132701/6)

(21) I couldn't give a toss P.xxx. (COB133901/548)

(22) I haven't got a piss boy (COB134901/113)

(23) I don't give a f***! (COB132503/38)

(24) F***ing <unclear> you're *f***ing* so sad and I was just going right you're clearing the house f*** off I'm not *f***ing* clearing up the house (COB142105/229)

The abundance of negative concord constructions is also noteworthy since these were found in 23 percent of the cases where variation occurred between this type of negative and the single clausal negative.

In the case of adults, the number of negative concord constructions was restricted to only 14 percent. Geographical factors, social class and style may play a more important role here than the age of the speakers. Finally, the high frequency of *never* as a single negator in the past (25), and the non-existent variation between *never* and *not ... ever* structures in the data, are both notable findings.[5]

(25) V.xx. and <unclear>*never* called for me yesterday. (COB136903/164)

4.3. Quotatives

Constructed dialogue is common among teenagers in general, for whom telling stories, anecdotes and recounting personal experiences is highly characteristic (Tannen 1984). Furthermore, it has been attested that their range of quotative markers is much wider than that of other age groups and that they are rapidly changing and developing (Tagliamonte and Hudson 1999; Macaulay, 2001; Stenström, Andersen and Hasund 2002: 107; Winter 2002; Tagliamonte and D'Arcy 2004; Rickford *et al.* 2007; Hansen-Thomas 2008).

In the data analysed, GO under different forms (*he goes, I goes, they goes*, etc.) is often used as a verb form to introduce direct speech instead of SAY. It is also the preferred form for the historic present while SAY and TELL are more frequent in the past, as shown by (26). This general tendency applies similarly to the two corpora of adolescents' language studied.

(26) <laughing> and she looked at me like that .</> I *goes* don't you dare, you little cat! And I picked her up. I picked her up by her neck and I *said* you bitch and she *goes* ... (COB132707/40).

On many occasions, *like,* together with BE or GO or even on its own, is also used as a quotative (27), (28). The use of *like* as a form of reporting not only in the past but also in the present is found in the magazines addressed to teenagers (29). This means that this use is fully established in the language in both speech and writing.

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[5] For further information about the expression of negation by British teenagers, see Cheshire (1999) and Palacios Martínez (2011a).

(27) First there's Shelley, cos first of all I didn't want to talk in it, you know, I just *went like* yeah, yeah, yeah. Now it's sort of *like* yes! I wanna talk down it all the time, I want them to hear my voice! <nv>laugh</nv> And you know you get carried away you start swearing don't you? (COB132707/23)

(28) I *was like* "oh my god, I passed" (SCO2/56)

(29) *It's like* "Woah – girls over the place. I', say. Girls are scary – especially in groups (*Sugar Lad*, June 2010, p. 7)

The use of *this is* + subject has also been reported by Cheshire and Fox (2007) as a quotative in the area of London. They provide the following example:

(30) I walked over to him and *this is me,* "What are you doing?"

4.4. Pronominal system

The form *youse* is very frequently used for the second person plural in its subject (31) or object form (32). It sometimes collocates with *lot* (32) and *two* (33).

(31) Why didn't *youse* come out? (COB135306/110)

(32) I'll see *youse* lot later. (COB134602/977)

(33) Why don't *youse* two work together? (COB140701/52)

Moreover, *man* may function as an indefinite pronoun equivalent to *one* (34).

(34) ah *man*'s gonna starve. (COB135703/138)

It is also common to find possessives followed by *one*, as in the following:

(35) My Dad one was called Rhino and the other was called Elephant and *their* one died (COB132707/101)

(36) I told him she could have *my* one cos it only had that much ink in it (COB132803/225)

(37) *your*'s one is quite solid (COB136701/195)

Demonstratives are sometimes replaced by object personal pro-forms. This happens very often with *them*, instead of *those*.

(38) Cos she's got one of *them* voices (COB132701/177)

(39) Where'd you get *them* boots? (COB/134901/263)

4.5. Common use of abuse and insult words as vocatives

There are a large number of words used as vocatives, including certain insult and swear words generally placed after the pronoun *you*. The following are the most commonly found: *fool, bastard, c*nt, bitch, w**ker, chiefer, d*ck, d**khead, peanuthead, dirty cat, tosser, prat, idiot, (stupid) cow, plonker.*

(40) Shut up *you fool* (COB132614/179)
(41) She goes no it ain't <unclear> *you f***ing stink, you dirty cat* (COB132701/111)
(42) Shut up *you d**khead* (COB137804/46)

In general, boys' production shows a higher frequency of these terms than that of girls'.[6] Some of these terms, such as *d**k, chiefer, d**khead*, are favoured by boys whereas *cow, bitch, whore*, are more common in girls' language, which is explained by the fact that this use of verbal abusives is particularly frequent between members of the same sex, be it, boys to boys or girls to girls; very few cases are recorded of girls to boys and no single case of boys to girls. It is also interesting that some of these words have lost their original abusive and pejorative meaning, and are now used as indicators of familiarity and comradeship, hence functioning as solidarity in-group markers (Fraser 1996). Other common vocatives exist in the data which are not necessarily abusive. Such is the case with *man* and *boy*, for example.[7] Alternatively, *boy* may be an interjection in (44).

(43) look the pictures ain't clear *man*. (COB135004/180)
(44) the Indian place … it stinks, *man*, when you go in there, *boy*, it blow up your nostrils. (COB132705/7)

4.6. Vague language

Teenagers' talk is also characterised by the high frequency of a number of vague words and expressions, especially when compared with the language typical of adults. Existing studies have not demonstrated conclusively whether teenagers are, broadly speaking, more prone to using vague language than adults (Stenström, Andersen and Hasund 2002). However, it has been shown that teenagers express vagueness differently from adults by resorting very often to expressions which are far less common in the language of adults (Palacios Martínez 2011b).

Although the general term of *vague language* includes a wide variety of categories (Channell 1994), in this study I will consider only placeholders (*thingy*), quantifiers (*loads of, a bit of*) and general extenders or set marking tags (*and stuff, or something*).

Placeholders are used when speakers cannot remember the name of a person or thing and include words which replace names, item names or both. They can have different pragmatic values. They may be used when it is not considered appropriate to mention the person's name, when a suitable word the speaker intends to refer to does not exist in the language or even sometimes when the speaker does not want to sound too pretentious (Channell 1994: 157-59). By far the most common placeholder identified in COLT is

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[6] On a first analysis of COLA, a similar tendency is found in Spanish. Thus, Madrid teenagers refer to their peers as *cabrón/a, puta, hijo/a de puta, tío/a, colega, flipado/a, chaval, maricón/a, gilipollas, capullo, jodido, tronco/a, pibe/o/a, nena*, etc. From all these *tronco, gilipollas* and *pibe* seem to be the most common. Contrary to what is the case in COLT, in this corpus we do find the use of abuse terms between members of the different sex. Thus, boys refer quite often to girls as *putas*, for example.

[7] For more about this particular use of vocatives, as well as on appellatives, see Stenström and Jørgensen (2008).

thing(s), followed by *thingy/thingie*, *whatist* and *thingamajig*. The forms *thingummybob*, *thingybob* and *whatsisname* are only found once each in this corpus. However, *thingy/thingie* is recorded on 37 occasions to mean something indefinite and indeterminate. It is used as a noun modified by the article, whether definite or indefinite (45), or even a demonstrative or a possessive (46). Although it very often occurs with reference to an object, the speaker may also denote a person's name (47). Two cases were also found in which it appears to be used as an adjective (48).

> (45) There's a *thingy* on it (COB136301/10)
> (46) you know I told you that *thingy* (COB132503/32)
> (47) Go up to Miss *thingy* (COB132503/14)
> (48) how do you know? it's *thingy* how do you know? (COB136301/24)

In DCPSE *thing* is also the most frequent while only five cases of *thingie* are recorded. The language used by teenagers here also reveals a relatively large number of certain non-numerical vague approximators (Channel 1994: 95), that is, words and expressions that serve to quantify without providing any specific quantity; examples include *bags of, loads of, lots of, masses of, oodles of, a bit of, a load of, a lot of*. However, table 2 shows that adults resort to these expressions more than twice as more than teenagers, 723 versus 337 tokens: general normalised frequencies per 10,000 words are 16.99 versus 7.8, respectively. The differences are statistically significant (x^2= 145.11, df = 1, p<0.0001). Both among adults and teenagers, *a lot of* and *a bit of* are the most frequent, adults using them four and one and a half times more, respectively, than teenagers.

In COLT, the most common, as compared with adults' language, is *loads of,* recorded on 75 occasions. *Loads of* is frequent both in COLT and in teenagers' magazines (49). It can be used with both countable (50) and uncountable nouns (51) and often collocates with *people* (52), *sport, friends* and *work*.

> (49) Check out for the chance to win *loads* of cool prizes (*Mizz* website, accessed March 26, 2010)
> (50) I've been asked *loads* of questions (COB140504/113)
> (51) he goes inside gets a drink, eats some food cos there's *loads* of food cos you know... (COB132701/40)
> (52) Cos I used to look up to her cos she was older than me. So I don't think her Nan really knows that Kelly does it to *loads of people*, do you know, (COB B132707/193)

VAGUE APPROXIMATOR	DCPSE sample/adults (425,519 words)	Relative frequency	Frequency per 10,000 words	COLT/teenagers (431,528 words)	Relative frequency	Frequency per 10,000 words
loads of	19	2.7%	0.44	75	22.3%	1.7
lots of	113	15.7%	2.65	50	14.9%	1.2
bags of	1	0.1%	-	-	-	-
masses of	9	1.2%	0.21	-	-	-
a bit of	126	17.4%	2.9	84	24.9%	1.9
a load of	9	1.2%	0.21	20	5.9%	0.46
a lot of	446	61.7%	10.4	108	32%	2.5
Total	723	100%	16.99	337	100%	7.8

Table 2: Vague approximators in teenagers and adult language on the basis of the data provided by COLT and DCPSE (face-to-face conversations and assorted spontaneous speech)

GENERAL EXTENDER	DCPSE sample/adults (425,519 words)	Relative frequency	Frequency per 10,000 words	COLT/teenagers (431,528 words)	Relative frequency	Frequency per 10,000 words
and stuff (like that)	19	2.36%	0.44	53	9.3%	1.2
and that (sort of thing, sort of sh*t, type, kind)	32	4.2%	0.75	82	14.4%	1.9
and everything (like that, else)	41	5.08%	1	66	11.6%	1.5

Table 3: The general extenders *and everything*, *and stuff* and *and that* in the language of teenagers and adults on the basis of the data provided by COLT and DCPSE (face-to-face conversations and assorted spontaneous speech

The third group of words and expressions that serve to express vague language are the so-called *general extenders*.[8] These elements generally take the form of a conjunction (*and*, *or*) plus a noun phrase and occupy final position.[9] Members of this category are, to mention just a few, *and stuff, and things, and everything, and all, or something, or whatever, or so*, etc. They usually refer to the preceding item, which in most cases will be a noun phrase. Apart from functioning as set-marking or classifying tags, they may express other conversational values, such as summarising, creating rapport, establishing common ground and hedging (Aijmer 1985; Overstreet and Yule 1997; Overstreet 1999, 2005; Cheshire 2007; Tagliamonte and Denis 2010; Palacios Martinez 2011b). In the data analysed here, the general extenders *and stuff (like this/that), and everything (like that/else)* and *and that* (*sort of thing, sort of sh*t, type, kind, lot, sh*t*) are commonly used by teenagers, far more so than by adults. The first of these general extenders occurs in COLT on 53 occasions with a frequency per 10,000 words of 1.2 while 66 examples of the second are found with a frequency per 10,000 words of 1.5 and 82 of the third with a frequency per 10,000 words of 1.9.

(53) That stupid awards like biggest ( ) *and stuff like that* (SCO1/95)
(54) You can shut all the doors *and everything* (COB135602/255)
(55) I haven't learned my Highway Code *and all that sort of sh*t* (COB142504/118)

When compared with a sample of adult language of similar size and characteristics extracted from DCPSE (Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day Spoken English), the general frequencies obtained per 10,000 words for these three general extenders, once they were normalised, are 0.44 for *and stuff*, 1 for *and everything* and 0.75 for *and that*, respectively. The differences in use between adults and teenagers can be clearly seen in table 3.

In both corpora, *and that* is the most common of the three general extenders, followed by *and everything* and *and stuff*. The figures shown in the second and fifth columns of the table above indicate the percentage that corresponds to each of these three extenders with respect to the total number of general extenders recorded in the two samples of data analysed. This included, apart from the three here mentioned, others such as *and things, and all, or something, or whatever, or anything.*

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[8] The terminology used in the literature to define these items varies considerably from *set marking tags* (Dines 1980; Ward and Birner 1993; Stubbe and Holmes 1995; Winter and Norrby 2000), *discourse particle extensions* (Dubois 1992), *utterance final tags* (Aijmer 1985), *terminal tags* (Macaulay 1985), *generalised list completers* (Jefferson 1990), *post-noun hedges* (Meyerhoff 1992), *generalisers* (Simpson 2004) to *vague category identifiers* (Channell 1994), *final coordination tags* (Biber *et al.* 1999) and *general extenders* (Overstreet 1999, 2005; Overstreet and Yule 2002; Cheshire 2007; Carroll 2007, 2008; Tagliamonte and Denis 2010; Palacios Martínez 2011b). The latter is precisely the most neutral and the most widely-used in recent studies.

[9] The conjunctions *and* or *or* are mostly present in these constructions although we find more examples where this conjunction is missing. Thus in the SCOSE corpus we find examples like the following: (i) I might ask a few people who are working on the stock market *things like that.* (SCO1/190)

General extenders in the teenagers' language often have the purpose of expressing solidarity, self-connection and the assumption of a shared experience. For these subjects it is important to belong to a closed group and community in order to reaffirm themselves, and this use of language clearly helps them in that direction. Some of these general extenders become linguistic resources used by teenagers to construct their own personality and identity as individuals and as a group. Thus, these general extenders tend to lose their original set-marking and classifying function by assuming new pragmatic and discursive roles.

4.7. Non canonical tags (innit, yeah, right, eh, okay)

Non canonical tags here mean those items which differ completely from ordinary tags as in *John is a friend of yours, isn't he?* and which can perform functions which are typically attributed to tags, such as checking that the interlocutor is following the narrative or to keep the listener's attention, a subjective function to reduce the speaker's commitment to what is being said, and even a textual function to organise pieces of information in chunks and to contribute to the coherence and cohesion of the narrative (Stenström, Andersen and Hasund 2002: 166-67). All these tags are then used as discourse interactive markers. For reasons of space, I will focus here on the invariant tag *innit,* the most common of all and particularly characteristic in the language of British adolescents. All previous studies have drawn attention to the grammaticalised nature of this lexical item since it began as a standard tag to become later an invariant tag with multiple pragmatic values (Stenström and Andersen (1996), Andersen (1997), Stenström, Andersen and Hasund (2002), Stenström (2005), and in general English by Erman (1998), Algeo (1988) and Krug (1998)). Consider the following examples:

    (56) Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. She dropped over, *innit*? (COB134803/51)
    (57) He's gone home, *innit*? (COB13660173259
    (58) It's good, *innit*? (COB/132503/527)
    (59) Saira, you're in my class, *innit*? (COB132804/171)
    (60) Sam and Fern weren't there *innit*? (COB132708/21)
    (61) It's not too bad *innit*? (COB135201/67)
    (62) That was ages ago though, *wunnit*? (COB140602/45)
    (63) just shows your ignorance *dunnit* really? (COB142103/452)

From the examples above, it is clear that this tag may be used to represent any operator HAVE (57), BE (58, 59, 60, 61), or DO (56, 63) or even any modal auxiliary (*will, would, must, should, can, could, might*) (62). Furthermore, it does not necessarily agree with the subject of the main sentence in gender (56), person (57), or number (60), although it tends to agree with 3rd person singular *it*, followed by *you, he, they, she, I* and *we*. Apart from this, it does not necessarily agree with the tense of the verb of the main sentence (56) and it does not even follow the ordinary reversal of polarity pattern (60). In fact, in only 10 cases in COLT does this not happen. Finally, it normally occurs at the end of a speaker's turn, but may appear at the beginning or in the middle. The occurrence of *wunnit* (62) and *dunnit* (63) may also indicate that this tag has not become fully grammaticalised as the only form used in all syntactic environments.

these are recorded in the whole COLT corpus. As regards its pragmatic values, it may function as an empathiser, expecting a verbal response serving much the same function as *right*. Consider the following:

(64) That sounds like a bad move, *innit*? (COB133203/423)

In turn-initial position it may be used as a simple response or as a response expressing reinforcement, being equivalent to *certainly*, *definitely*, *absolutely* and even *sure*, as in the following:

(65) A: Doesn't he look spastic with that pencil behind his ear
      B: *Innit*? It looks so dumb. It looks like he's got cancer growing behind his ear
      (COB132911/8)

It can also have a intensifying effect as equivalent to *indeed* (66).

(66) A: Annie gets into fights with everybody though
      B: Mm. Pro= probably true *innit* (COB133704/270)

Finally, it can also express surprise as in (67).

(67) A: I've never, I've never ever heard Jim's voice before
      B: *Innit*?
      A: Never (COB132707/302)

4.8. Particular ways of intensifying language

Teenagers use intensifiers very differently from adults. Some linguists such as Stenström, Andersen and Hasund (2002: 140) have shown that adults use intensifiers twice as much as teenagers. This is explained by the fact that teenagers tend to use other forms of intensification such as taboo and swear words as, for instance, *bloody* and *f***ing* (Paradis 2000: 154).

This is partially confirmed in our analysis where the total number of intensifiers for adults is 2,124 versus 1,179 tokens in the case of teenagers. The general frequencies obtained per 10,000 words, once they were normalised, are 49.9 for adults and 27.32 for teenagers. The figures are statistically significant ($x^2 = 282.12$, df = 1, $p<0.0001$).

ADJECTIVE INTENSIFIER	DCPSE sample/adults (425,519 words)	Relative frequency	Frequency per 10,000 words	COLT/teenagers (431,528 words)	Relative frequency	Frequency per 10,000 words
Very	1,661	78.1%	39	406	34.3%	9.4
Absolutely	132	6.3%	3.1	55	4.7%	1.2
Well	3	0.1%	0.07	25	2.2%	0.5
Completely	49	2.4%	1.1	45	3.9%	1.1
Totally	37	1.7%	0.9	23	1.9%	0.5
Extremely	43	2%	1	12	1%	0.3
Enough	-	-	-	8	0.6%	0.18
Really	199	9.4%	4.6	605	51.4%	14
TOTAL	2,124	100%	49.9	1,179	100%	27.32

Table 4: Adjective intensifiers in COLT and DCPSE

As Table 4 above shows, *really* is the most frequent in the language of teenagers while *very* is the most popular for adults.[10] It is also curious to see how *right*[11] and *well* may have an intensifying function in teenagers' language and can be used to intensify any item in the language. It is also curious to see how some teenagers in COLT often place *enough* before the item it modifies (71). This means that in these cases *enough* has a premodifying position instead of the standard postmodifying one. In SCOSE, however, we do not find any examples of the kind. Note the following:

(68) I'll be nice and pleased, all my, all my parents' mates have a *right* good laugh (COB142106/36)
(69) they've been *right* bastards to you (COB140601/111)
(70) I think you be a *well* good mate and everything (SCO5/23)
(71) It's *enough* funny man I'm telling ya! (COB135602/38)
(72) it was *just* stupid really (SCO1/173)

According to Stenström, Andersen and Hasund (2002: 143), females tend to use these intensifying elements more often than males. Moreover, while girls opt for using *really*, boys prefer *absolutely*, *completely*, *bloody* and *f***ing*. Superlative forms are also very often intensified.

(73) She had the *f***ing funniest* voice ever (SCO1/393)

5. Conclusion

Some of the grammatical features listed above could also be regarded as typical of other types of spoken discourse, particularly of informal, spontaneous and non-standard varieties. This is the case, to mention just a few, of the simplification of the verbal paradigm, the lack of agreement between verb and subject, especially in the case of existential-*there* constructions, the avoidance of complex syntactic structures (passives, relatives, clefts), incoherent discourse with lack of cohesion and several other aspects of the pronominal system. However, our results clearly indicate that the language of British teenagers is characterised by a number of distinctive lexico-grammatical features which make it different from the language of adults and which are worth considering: a common use of abuse and insult words as vocatives (*silly cow*, *d*ck*, *peanuthead*, *prat*, *idiot*, *dirty cat*, etc.) that in most cases have lost their original pejorative meaning, being used as expressions of familiarity and comradeship; a particular quotative system in which the verb GO and the multifunctional form *like* play a prominent role together with new emerging markers of reported speech, such as *this is* plus subject; a characteristic way of conveying vague language through the use of placeholders (*thingie* in particular), approximators (*loads of* most often) and some general extenders (*and that*, *and stuff* and *and everything*); a tendency to intensify language which also includes a characteristic use of some adjectives and adverbs (*well*, *right*, *bloody*, *enough*, *really*,

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[10] For further information about the use of the adverb *really* in teenagers' language, see Paradis and Bergmark (2003).

[11] Macaulay (2005) has also recorded this frequent use of *right* as intensifier in the language of the Glasgow teenagers. The use by adults is also reported although not so often.

absolutely, *f***ing*), clearly in keeping with the personality and cognitive development of the individuals of this age group; the use of non-canonical tags, such as *right*, *yeah*, *eh*, *okay*, *innit*, which in most cases have grammaticalised, losing their original meaning and function by adopting new discursive roles, this applying very distinctively to *innit*; and, finally, a negative polarity system of its own, which is characterised by a high number of negatives, the use of *never* as a single negator in the past, the high occurrence of certain vernacular negative forms (*ain't*, *nope*, *dunno*, *nuffink*) and an elevated percentage of negative concord structures.

A more exhaustive study of these syntactic features would provide a more comprehensive view of the discourse used by British teenagers, thus contributing more deeply to the understanding of this age group and to forming a more complete picture of recent developments and innovations in the English language.

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