

# ENGLISH LANGUAGE

## Individual and Group Identity

**Our age, gender and education are the most powerful dictators of the language we use. Do you agree?**

As linguist David Crystal maintains, 'language has no independent existence apart from the people who use it'. Language is largely shaped by our various identities, and in turn influences the language we use. Generational differences greatly determine our use of language, which can be observed in the use of teen slang, both online and face-to-face. Furthermore, gender differences, along with our level of education, both play an important role in our linguistic choices, which can be seen through the use of profanity and jargon. Therefore, ....

**There are considerable differences between the generations, which are an influential force in determining our use of language.** In the present age, young people are enthusiastic users of a continual flow of innovative lexical slang terms, which helps them create a unique identity that separates them from the older generation. Some of the most recent expressions used in spoken discourse include examples such as "I'm *shook*", as a way of expressing surprise or shock, and 'that's so *extra*' to describe something that is unnecessarily over the top. Semantically speaking, teenagers may also use idiomatic expressions to achieve a similar effect, such as 'shit bricks' to show a scared reaction, and 'off their face' to describe someone who is heavily intoxicated, which reinforces their identity as an in-group member. This non-standard usage can be further seen in written form online, as younger people are more open and likely to utilise new features of netspeak. For instance, a teenager may type "I probs won't go, it was so awks with him last time" on instant chat, to which a friend may reply with "coolios, JOMO all the way", where the lexemes 'probably' and 'awkward' have been shortened to 'probs' and 'awks' to enhance the efficiency and casual tone of voice, and 'coolios' has been used in place of 'cool' as a diminutive, as well as the acronym 'JOMO' for the phrase 'joy of missing out'. This informal yet novel use of language is prevalent among teenagers due to their 'desire to keep in with their peers and keep secrets from others' (Philippa Law, BBC 2007, Stimulus E). This notion can be supported by David Crystal's assertion that slang is 'not just a way for young'uns to separate themselves from elders, [but] it's also a way for them to show unity with their peers'. It may sound ingenuine or 'phoney' (Burridge and Allen) when used by the older generation, but when used by the those who willingly adopt them, they act as a potent marker of social identity and badge of membership, while playing a key part in dictating their language use.

**Moreover, a significant part of our linguistic choices is based on our gender differences (which are reflective of social norms and values), especially in terms of discourse and semantics.** This is particularly evident in the distinct swearing patterns between males and females due to the different perceived values associated with each gender. There is strong evidence that 'males swear three times more frequently than females and use stronger obscenities' (Timothy Jay), and that males 'were found to use the word 'fuck' much more frequently than females' (McEneaney and Xiao). Therefore, it is

generally much more common to hear dysphemistic expletives such as 'shit', 'bloody retard' and 'son of a bitch' from males than females. This occurrence is frequently seen in the sporting domain, for example when the elite international Australian cricketer Mitchell Marsh was known for explicitly saying "fuck off cunt" to South African cricketer Kagiso Rabada, after losing during the 2018 Port Elizabeth match. This tendency to use more profane terms are due to societal expectations that males should be strong instead of effeminate and weak, and allows them to demonstrate their masculine values of dominance and toughness. In contrast, women are more likely to use euphemisms such as 'shivers' and 'sugar' for 'shit', and 'frick', 'frigging' and 'fudge' for 'fuck' as a way of mitigating the impact of their utterance. They also use more intensifiers such as 'really' and 'extremely' before adjectives for description and emphasis, and interrogative tags on the end of declaratives, such as in the sentence 'She's so gorgeous, isn't she?', which are 'associated with a desire for confirmation' and 'signals a lack of self-confidence in the speaker' (Robin Lakoff). This is due to the perceived value of femininity, which includes traits such as gentleness, sensitivity and empathy. Therefore, using language in line with one's own gender and social norms allows one to identify themselves with others of the same gender through a common linguistic ground.

**In addition, our use of language can be a powerful reflection of our level of education, demonstrated through a wide range of lexical choices.** In particular, jargon can act as a powerful tool to signal an individual's educational level. For example, year 12 students in Victoria may use terms related to the semantic field of VCE, such as 'SAC', 'study score', 'raw 50' and 'ATAR', which signals their level of education and allows them to express their identity of a high school student. This is contrasted with medical students, who are more likely to use jargon such as 'allopathic', 'cardiomyopathy', 'mucous membranes', and lexemes such as 'anterior', 'distal', 'lateral' and 'posterior' when describing exact body locations, which are more technical and specific than 'front', 'further', 'side' and 'back'. This not only 'facilitates communication' (Kate Burridge) within their medical group, but also expresses their educational expertise in this specific area. This is further seen when people belonging to different professions distinguish themselves by their subject-specific lexis. For example, in his address to the Higgins 200 Budget Breakfast Melbourne earlier in 2018, Scott Morrison uses an extensive range of economic jargon, including 'Debt growth', 'long-run average', 'fiscal consolidation', 'taxation', and initialisms such as 'GFC' (Global Financial Crisis), 'GDP' (Gross Domestic Product), 'GST' (Goods and Services Tax). This reinforces his public authority and societal status, which promotes his identity as a well-educated and respected Australian figure knowledgeable in his field (economics and politics). Therefore, an individual's use of language is very much reflective of their educational level, as demonstrated through one's use of technical jargon in different groups in professions, which assists in promoting one's identity and how they wish to be perceived by others in society.

Age, gender and education are three of the most powerful dictators of our linguistic choices. Through the use of a variety of linguistic features, these factors are not only inextricably related to the language we use, but they also act as an important marker of identity, both socially and individually. Therefore, the language we use will always be a mirror to our character and identity, as it is 'a road map of where its people came from and where they are going' (Rita Mae Brown).

Mitchell Marsh (international Australian cricketer) fined for swearing.

Australia's most informed (competent/elite) player was charged by the ICC (International Cricket Council) for saying "fuck off cunt" to South African cricketer Kagiso Rabada, after losing in Port Elizabeth earlier in 2018.

Marsh was later hit with a code-of-conduct charge for "using language or gesture that is obscene, offensive or insulting", and was fined 20 percent of his match fee and given one demerit point.

<https://www.foxsports.com.au/cricket/australia/watch-mitch-marsh-appears-to-swear-at-kagiso-rabada-after-losing-wicket-in-second-test/news-story/fbc03c4a0ad2245f17041a28f2db38cb>

<https://www.news.com.au/sport/cricket/mitch-marsh-fined-for-swearing-but-injury-is-far-bigger-concern/news-story/583a24e2bb53cf74a274905ce8218f65>

<http://www.afl.com.au/news/2018-09-11/caddy-apologises-for-offensive-hawk-sledges>  
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