

How Gen Z and TikTok are changing the way we speak | The Global Story Podcast, BBC World Service

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Speakers:

Lucy Hockings - 38.49%

Sophia Smith Gayler - 35.06%

Neil Edgela - 26.45%

Notes:

Insights Summary: How Gen Z and TikTok are Reshaping Language

1. Accelerated Language Evolution

Social Media as a Catalyst: Platforms like TikTok have drastically shortened the timeline for language change, with words like “riz” rising to prominence and falling out of favor within months.

Generational Exclusivity: Youth-driven slang evolves to reinforce group identity, often discarding words once adopted by older generations.

2. Algorithmic Influence on Communication

TikTok's "Uptalk" Trend: Content creators use rising intonations at sentence ends to maintain engagement, showcasing how algorithms are shaping speech patterns.

Performance-Driven Language: Social media not only spreads language but dictates how it is delivered for maximum audience retention.

3. Global Homogenization vs. Local Identity

Shared Slang Worldwide: Social media breaks down regional barriers, leading to global adoption of terms, which risks diminishing linguistic diversity.

Cultural Crossroads: Words from subcultures (e.g., Black, Latino, LGBTQ+) become mainstream, raising questions about appropriation and the loss of origin context.

4. Language Preservation and Revitalization

Endangered Languages at Risk: The dominance of English and globalized slang threatens smaller languages, contributing to linguistic diversity.

Technology as a Solution: AI and transcription tools like Aliceapp.ai can document and support efforts to preserve endangered languages, ensuring linguistic diversity persists.

5. The Future of Communication

Unstoppable Change: With the constant influx of media and technological innovation, language evolution is expected to become even more hyperactive.

Opportunities and Challenges: While rapid shifts create excitement, they also call for intentional documentation to avoid losing linguistic and cultural treasures.

Lucy Hockings

00:00:00

Hello, I'm Lucy Hockings from the BBC World Service. This is the global story. For many thousands of years, language has been changing here in the UK. The gradual departure from what became known as the Queen's English is a trend which has often been characterised as a threat to cultural identity. But with the advent of social media, the pace of change may be running away from us.

Lucy Hockings

00:00:30

Phrases like, it's giving ris, no cap. These are all terms which we attribute to Internet culture and specifically to younger, millennial and Gen Z demographics. Today, we're considering how the mass migration to living our lives online is having an impact on the spoken word and the real world. It's even made its mark on the Oxford English Dictionary.

Lucy Hockings

00:01:01

Well, with me here in the studio today is former BBC journalist, author and linguist Sophia Smith Gayler and Neil Edgela, who is from BBC Learning English. Sophia, Neil, lovely to

have you with us on the pod. Hi.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:01:15

Hi.

Neil Edgela

00:01:15

Hello, Lucy.

Lucy Hockings

00:01:16

Neil, last night I sat with my teenage kids, as I now know you did as well, and said, I'm discussing language tomorrow. Things have changed. I'm hearing these words from you all the time. Can we talk about it? And they were straight away like, mum, don't do it. Don't use the words. Don't embarrass yourself.

Lucy Hockings

00:01:32

You will never come back from this at all. You know, like, this is. Just steer clear, play it straight. What did you say to your teenage kids?

Neil Edgela

00:01:40

Pretty much exactly the same conversation. I've become aware of this whole range of vocabulary used by this generation that seems completely and utterly exclusive. And they find it funny when I try and use those expressions because I use them bad.

Lucy Hockings

00:01:56

Like, if you. Basically, you start using these words, you're tainted and it's a no go. And, Sophia, you don't have kids, but, I mean, you're so aware of how language is changing and you're even writing a book at the moment about linguicide. What actually is linguicide?

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:02:12

So linguicide is the phenomenon of a language disappearing and perhaps even dying or becoming extinct. And this is happening around the world at an alarming rate. So a language disappearing because it's been criminalized, war, genocide, other obvious examples. But linguicide equally can be more covert. So linguists also described a language becoming associated with shame and speakers being so ashamed of speaking that language, they begin to speak another.

Lucy Hockings

00:02:38

And tell us about your job, Neil. You're creating content to help people learn English.

We make videos and podcasts and web pages to help learners of English around the world, at whatever level they are to teach them English, but also to help them to enjoy themselves in English.

Lucy Hockings

00:02:58

Well, language is obviously the social tool that we all use to communicate, but as we've already discussed, it's so different depending on the generation that's talking. And we alter our language depending on who we're talking to when it comes to our kids and what we're seeing, particularly with the younger generations. Neil, what sort of words are you seeing emerge at the moment?

Neil Edgela

00:03:18

Now we're going to mention some of the words that we're not supposed to mention.

Lucy Hockings

00:03:21

Okay, I'm going to let you do it.

Neil Edgela

00:03:23

So I think of all of the things I've heard recently, the most fascinating is this word skibidi.

Lucy Hockings

00:03:28

That was the first one that came up at my dinner table as well. Can you use it in a sentence?

Neil Edgela

00:03:33

Well, I don't think I can effectively. I can try. And I get laughed at, but it's very, very fluid grammatically. So, for example, I have heard the expression the skibidi Rizzler. Rizzler is connected to this word riz, which we may come on to talk about as well. But skibidi seems to be able to be thrown in almost anywhere, and nobody, including my kids, can tell me what it really means.

Neil Edgela

00:03:57

And I think that's part of the whole sort of exclusivity of each generation's.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:04:02

Use of language, to the point about exclusivity and saying, mom, please don't say this word. We should think of language speaking also as identity making. So if you are in a subgroup and you use particular phrases to signify, I am part of this group, the minute

you start hearing these phrases adopted outside of the group, it's not the in group language anymore.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:04:25

So it stops being the in group language of teenagers, for example, because Mom's using it, and then they'll just start using another one.

Lucy Hockings

00:04:33

But Sophia, what Neil and I are finding challenging is this is changing so quickly all the time. Neil's already mentioned Riz. I remember doing quite a kind of academic interview around the world when it was the Oxford Word of the Year. The Oxford Word of the Year has been revealed, and this year it's riz.

Lucy Hockings

00:04:52

Now, if you've no idea what that means, don't worry. You might just be over 30. I'm lucky. I've got teenagers. I know this one. The kids are not using riz anymore. They might use it in a slightly patronizing, ironic way, but Neil's now saying they're using Riz Le. What's Rizzler?

Neil Edgela

00:05:08

A Rizzler is a Person who has Riz.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:05:11

Duh.

Lucy Hockings

00:05:13

See, I'm getting myself into all sorts of trouble here and all sorts of traps, but it is so. It's evolving so quickly.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:05:20

It's evolving really quickly. And if you think about in the past how languages developed and changed. A language will always change because our needs as people change and different and new things happen. And in the past, you may have lived in a remote village and the only language contact or, or contact you had with any kind of linguistic innovation would have been some trader rolling into town and then, and then moving forward.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:05:43

Or maybe perhaps you would move. Today, if you're consuming mass media, in social

media, you're actually seeing a very diverse array of different voices from around the world.

Lucy Hockings

00:05:54

I can be speaking to my nephews at home in New Zealand, a world away, it seems to me, and yet they're using the same words as my teenage kids here in London. That wasn't the case when we were younger.

Neil Edgela

00:06:05

No, it wasn't. And that's part of this homogenization that social media brings, that the kids are using the same slang globally. When I was at school, the words that we would use to describe a really bright person or a less bright person might be different from the words used by someone who was brought up in a different part of the same country.

Lucy Hockings

00:06:24

Neil, is it just video based social media or is there influence here around text sites and micro blogging and things as well?

Neil Edgela

00:06:31

Absolutely, yes. And a lot of the new vocabulary that we've seen emerging over the last few years comes from blogging and from online communities communicating through text. People are walking around and saying LOL and FOMO and YOLO to each other. That's an interesting development.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:06:48

And we're saying lol. We're not saying lol, we're not saying F O M O. We have, we've adopted them into the sort of existing lexical structure that we have so that they sound like normal words.

Lucy Hockings

00:06:59

And that didn't take long.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:07:00

Didn't take long at all. No.

Lucy Hockings

00:07:02

And with some of these words, the skibidi, the Riz, Rizzler, no cat. Where do they come from? Is it just, is it from different cultural groups? Is it from different sectors of society?

Where are they actually emerging from?

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:07:15

A lot of the words are being innovated within ingroups and then they get introduced to the mainstream. We're seeing a lot of vocabulary coming from black and Latino LGBT culture in the us we're seeing loads of expressions coming from that, like it's giving slay. All come from those spaces. We're also seeing language emerging from what actually were incel.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:07:40

Subculture words from even the 2000s. Some of these expressions don't even come from the 2000s. They're a little older than we think. When it comes to social media and language change, we think a term is new, but in reality it's likely been in circulation for some time before a sort of more influential person perhaps uses the term.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:08:02

And then we see the words leave these peripheries and leave these subgroups. They become mainstream and it's these words that then become more widely adopted.

Lucy Hockings

00:08:12

And Neil, do you think it's also like with our kids? And I'm trying to think back to when I was young as well. It's a bit of an act of rebellion.

Neil Edgela

00:08:18

Yeah, absolutely, yes. And I think the interesting thing about the language change we're seeing at the moment is the. Just the pace in comparison to pre Internet discourse. You know, the words are there all around the world immediately. Some get picked up, some don't. And that happened before, but it was just much slower.

Lucy Hockings

00:08:40

I mean, I think we need to cast our mind back before 1989. What was happening with language before then?

Neil Edgela

00:08:46

Well, I remember when I was at school back in the day, the reinvention of the word wicked, meaning great or cool or whatever. I think I am just by about a year too old to use that and feel comfortable using it, even though it's been in circulation for about 30 years now. So these, these words have always come about and reinvented this what they call semantic shift, where a word has an original meaning and then suddenly has a new meaning.

And it's all tied up with the exclusivity and stuff. But it's the pace with which it happens these days which is really astounding.

Lucy Hockings

00:09:23

Sophia, you speak many languages?

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:09:25

A couple.

Lucy Hockings

00:09:28

Italian, Arabic.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:09:30

I studied Spanish and Arabic at university and my family speaks Italian. I grew up hearing it but not speaking it.

Lucy Hockings

00:09:36

So what about these other languages in the world? Is it the same? I mean, are they experiencing the same kind of changes in these words that we are seeing in English?

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:09:44

Oh, certainly. All languages are experiencing the phenomena we've described, such as linguistic innovation, adopting new words. The obvious difference that we may observe in other languages is the influence of English and the fact that English as a language, it holds prestige in so many global domains.

Lucy Hockings

00:10:05

And there are moves right around the world to try and protect language. I mean, I know I spend some time in French speaking Canada, and there's real moves to stop the creep of English into French that spoken there. Giorgio Meloni, the leader in Italy right now. Very protective of the Italian language.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:10:22

Countries have different attitudes towards how much they try and control linguistic change, which defies control. Languages are even speaking to linguicide that I'm writing about. The idea that a language can die must. Must therefore mean a language can live. So as living things, they're really difficult to control. And if you say. If you say to people, you can't use this word that we're now hearing, lots of people say, you must use the

French version.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:10:51

It's kind of coming a little bit too late because the French version didn't immediately dominate or resonate with speakers. So it can actually be quite challenging. You're trying to reverse time almost in something like that.

Lucy Hockings

00:11:04

Neil, I wonder if words as well and phrases that we use can sometimes just be fashionable. I mean, I'm not talking about riz only lasting 18 months or whatever, but other words and phrases that grab hold and are trendy but then kind of die away again, almost like fashion or clothing or music.

Neil Edgela

00:11:22

Yeah, I think that's right. You can look at expressions which are used by many people over a short period of time that then kind of vanish. So we have at BBC Learning English, a podcast called the English We Speak. We look at idiomatic expressions that are sort of trending at the time. A couple of years ago, we were talking about blended working.

Neil Edgela

00:11:47

Blended working, working at home and in the office.

Lucy Hockings

00:11:49

Yeah, I haven't heard that one for a while.

Neil Edgela

00:11:50

People don't use it anymore. And we all say hybrid working now. So, yes, there is a fashion for these words. They come and go.

Lucy Hockings

00:11:57

And Sophia, you've not just been looking at how our vocabulary has changed, but it's the way we say things as well. And this notion of up talk, particularly sort of rising at the end of sentence. I'm from New Zealand. I mean, we all speak like that at home and in the antipodes. I also wondered if it's not just social media that's influencing the way that we speak.

Lucy Hockings

00:12:17

It's maybe years of everyone watching Neighbours.

We have always used uptalk. I mean, it's most characteristic, I think, for asking questions. I just did it there. Asking questions. That would be uptalk with this rising intonation at the end of the phrase. When it comes to social media and using uptalk, something that I've written about in the past is how asking, is there a TikTok voice or accent?

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:12:40

Is there a way that I speak that I adopt when I'm making a TikTok Video. The idea is that when we make video content, we use a lot of rising intonation, possibly to relate to our audience.

Lucy Hockings

00:12:52

It's more engaging.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:12:53

It's more engaging. Another theory is that I'm keeping you listening. The rising intonation suggests there's more to come.

Lucy Hockings

00:13:00

You're hooking people.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:13:01

Hooking people in. When it comes to social media video of if I can complete a video retaining someone's attention, it's more likely to perform better on the algorithm. So actually, what's possibly happening is creators are furthering linguistic innovation based on algorithmic direction, which is fascinating.

Lucy Hockings

00:13:20

Neil, speaking of intonation, what about the change to pronunciation? Are we seeing some British words change and they're now said in a much more American way?

Neil Edgela

00:13:30

There used to be a much greater distinction between the way Americans would say or pronounce a word and the way that British people would, and now that's more fluid and we're not able to say with such certainty that that's American English and that's British English. So let's have an example of the word which I say as schedule.

Neil Edgela

00:13:50

Younger members of BBC learning English say schedule. And schedule is what we used to

say was the American pronunciation.

Lucy Hockings

00:13:58

What about grammar then, Neil? Are we seeing those changes? And they must surely be slower.

Neil Edgela

00:14:03

Grammar really does change slowly. You can look at, for example, you could pick up a copy of Frankenstein, which was written 200 years ago, and absolutely understand it completely. But there's nothing in the grammatical structures which will confuse you. But something that has happened and has happened more quickly recently because probably of social media is something known as verbing, which is turning nouns into verbs.

Neil Edgela

00:14:27

And the most obvious.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:14:28

I love doing this.

Neil Edgela

00:14:29

The most obvious one is Google. To Google or to friend.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:14:36

We are podcasting, and so that is.

Neil Edgela

00:14:38

Actually a grammatical change which we have seen accelerate recently.

Lucy Hockings

00:14:42

Sophia, is language change picking up momentum? Is it getting faster?

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:14:48

As media will change, linguistic innovation will change. So it's already so hyper fast and powerful in the current vertical video climate that we're in and the amount of language we are exposed to, it's hard to imagine how that can get even sort of more hyperactive, but I'm quite confident it will.

00:15:06

And, Neil, in terms of your job, do you love all these changes to the language or are you slightly horrified sometimes?

Neil Edgela

00:15:12

I'm not horrified in the slightest. I know lots of people are and they think that it's wrong and that mistakes are being made, but language is dynamic. No one here is sitting talking like Chaucer. You know, language changes, and I think it's exciting and we need to embrace it. And at BBC learning English, we try to describe language as it is rather than prescribe the way it ought to be.

Lucy Hockings

00:15:36

What about the future of language? If we could look ahead, Sophia, what do you think is going to happen in the next 20, 30 years?

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:15:43

I think a lot of the future is predictable in that when I AM in my 40s, 50s, 60s, I'm probably going to start thinking, why are my kids or the kids around me saying all these bizarre words that I've sort of never heard of?

Lucy Hockings

00:15:58

And what do you think, Neil? Do you think the other thing that might happen is that we'll see some language sadly die out, some languages because of the prevalence of English, the prevalence of what people are consuming online is going to really influence what's spoken in the home?

Neil Edgela

00:16:14

Yeah, unfortunately, that is a reality. I mean, languages are dying all the time. And one of the features of language in the social media age is homogenization.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:16:26

Linguicide is such an urgent and pressing issue because it's believed by the end of the century that we are in half of the world's languages will disappear.

Lucy Hockings

00:16:34

I have a positive story to tell from New Zealand about that, about how much more mori is spoken in New Zealand than when I was young. And when we talk about how quickly things change when I go back home, I can't believe how much more mori is just spoken in everyday life among people, just casually.

It's not a big thing at all.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:16:51

They are an example to the world. They are used all the time in language revitalization work as examples of how a language that appears to be dying, becoming extinct, whatever phrase you prefer, can revitalize and acquire new speakers.

Lucy Hockings

00:17:06

I can't have any conversation about anything that looks at the future anymore without mentioning AI. Oh yeah, Is there an influence there as well? Is that going to change language?

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:17:16

Interestingly, AI is being used again, if we look at linguistic in endangered language languages. I've done reporting looking at how AI is helping people revive their languages or create resources very quickly that are able to support speakers who want to reclaim or revitalize a language. But again, we're seeing examples where perhaps the AI tools being made especially out of endangered languages, where accuracy is so important because there aren't lots of sources necessary for them.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:17:47

And the AI hallucinating, making up words or expressions or grammars for these languages we described as being of low resource, like there's not loads of training data to train an AI. I would say AI isn't all bad. It brings lots of very useful tools for communities, but it kind of has to be observed and watched.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:18:08

And if it's misbehaving, it has to be told off.

Lucy Hockings

00:18:10

Well, it's been wicked to have you both on the podcast. Sophia, thank you.

Sophia Smith Gayler

00:18:15

Thank you.

Lucy Hockings

00:18:16

Neil. Good to see you. Thanks.

Thank you.

Lucy Hockings

00:18:18

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