

Idiolect

In this article Daniel Pearce, an A Level student at Peter Symond's College, responds to Michael Rosen's invitation to explore his idiolect - or language map.

I am proud to say that I am different from every other person living on this earth and the main reason for this is that my personal language map is unique. I am influenced, sometimes subconsciously, by different factors in the world around me: religion, political views, county or country of origin, family background, speech communities, education and the media are to name but a few. The easiest way of examining this fascinating subject is to look at the way I speak as an individual, compared with friends and family around me.

For most people, the one major factor influencing their way of speaking is their background. My grandparents on my mum's side come from Ireland and their accent is, although not prominent, still distinguishable on the phone or on recordings. Despite my two sets of grandparents coming from different areas of the country, I have grown up to call them both Grandpa and Granny. My parents address each of their respective parents differently however: my mother calls her parents Ma and Pa and my dad, the more traditional Mum and Dad. When I was younger my parents used to call each other Mum and Dad when around me, but in the last few years I have attempted to correct their language and they now call each other by their first names.

Up until a few years ago, I was sure I was using 'correct' English grammar when I came home from school and told my mum: me and my friend went to town. My parents and grandparents didn't hesitate to correct me on this and soon I wasn't sure whether it was me and my friend went to town, my friend and me went to town or my friend and I went to town! Far too confusing! Now however I understand the concepts of subject and object pronouns and when to use me and I, and if I ever make a mistake, I always correct myself straight away.

My grandparents living in Hampshire and my Irish grandparents (who now live near Bath) are extremely different in their way of speaking and both have influenced my idiolect in a different way. My maternal Irish grandpa does tend to swear quite a lot, and it not unusual to hear him talking about the bloody Tories, whilst my paternal grandparents are far more old fashioned in their speech, which means that they still call dresses frocks - my sister says this destroys her credibility! Even now in the twenty-first century they still like using titles, distinguishing between Mr and Master and Mrs and Miss, and even refer to my mum as Mrs C. J. Pearce (my dad's initials), much to her distaste!

The most interesting forms of spoken language can be found in general, everyday conversation however. For instance: a lot of families somehow seem to find different and obscure names for everyday objects such as the television remote control. I myself prefer to call it the remote, but my dad insists on it being the flipper, and I know people who call it anything from the dingalinger to the zapper to the whojamaflip. All weird, wonderful, and in the case of a couple of examples, absolutely nothing that clearly describes the function of that small hand-held object!

We have also named a way of cooking potatoes after our family name: Pomme Pearce, which are roughly chopped potatoes cooked without fat in an oven. The heel is the name we give to the end of a loaf of bread and this somewhat strange title has come from my family's Irish background. Indeed my family all use a lot of vocabulary which comes from Ireland: Slainte, the phrases ... so it is and sure ... (for emphasis) and the exclamation wisher.

I run a recording and design partnership with a friend and also used to do a lot of lighting at my secondary school with someone who has now gone on to Southampton City College to do a BTEC in Technical Theatre. I therefore use a lot of technical 'jargon' when I meet up with them, and because I use 'technical' phrases fairly often, occasionally this language creeps into my everyday way of speaking, when I just assume that everyone will understand me! One of my favourite sounding words is crossfade; one that I use regularly when I am mixing and editing tracks. Apron, Tabs, Chasers, Tallescope and Cans are words that I know the meaning of, but an outsider listening in would not have the faintest idea of what exactly was meant. Another example of lexis that I have picked up from this area of lighting is Intelligent lights - what exactly is 'intelligent' about them I have never really worked out! The same goes for ETC Source 4 lights - I still have no idea what happened to 'Source 1, 2 or 3'!

I use very few 'catchphrases' myself, although the ones I do use without thinking about probably come from the media. Certainly two phrases that I do say fairly frequently must have been taken from television and constantly annoy the rest of my family: I say who instead of what if I have misheard something (even if the subject is a concrete noun!) and anywhos instead of anyway, God knows why.

The language I use around different speech communities also varies a lot. Unusually perhaps, I would be happier to swear in front of my Irish grandparents than in front of my mum and dad and tend to use some slang, being careful not to drop consonants, around my friends.

Looking at your idiolect is fascinating and makes people think carefully about what they say and why they say it. So saloncha, standby on cans, Source 48s to upright, chasers to sequence 1, tabs up ... and crossfade.

Glossary

Slainte [sa_lnt_a]: 'Cheers' (Ireland)

Crossfade: decreasing the volume of one track whilst simultaneously increasing the volume of another (also can be used for lighting)

Apron: extended part of the stage in front of the proscenium

Tabs: house curtains

Chasers: lights set to automatically flash around a set pattern and direction

Tallescope: mobile scaffold tower with extendable ladder and upper platform

Cans: headsets with single earpiece and integrated boom microphone, used for communication.

ETC source 4 lights: powerful, multipurpose spotlight

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