

**IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION THROUGH LINGUISTIC MEANS:
CASE STUDIES OF YOUNG ADULT FICTION**

**ZUR BEDEUTUNG DER SPRACHMITTEL BEI DER IDENTITÄTSFINDUNG:
UNTERSUCHUNG DER JUGENDLITERATUR**

Keywords: adolescent language, identity construction, young adult, linguistic means, fiction.

Schlüsselwörter: Jugendsprache, Identitätsfindung, Teenager, Sprachmittel, Literatur.

Zusammenfassung

In der modernen wissenschaftlichen Forschung herrscht die Meinung, dass die Pubertät ständig erforscht wurde. Doch wurden die Teenager benachteiligt: Sie wurden nicht als Individuen und Zugehörige einer Subkultur mit bestimmten Eigenschaften, welche die Teenager von Erwachsenen und Kindern unterscheiden, betrachtet. Erst in der Mitte des 20. Jh. erlangte die Pubertät mehr Aufmerksamkeit: die Phase der Pubertät wurde als eine besondere Phase mit zahlreichen komplizierten physiologischen und psychologischen Veränderungen bezeichnet. In Bezug darauf, dass die Pubertät einen Übergang von der Kindheit zur Erwachsenenwelt darstellt, ist es von Bedeutung diese Lebensetappe näher zu bestimmen, denn die Pubertät zeichnet sich durch Identitätsfindung, Persönlichkeitsentwicklung und komplizierte Beziehungen zu den Eltern und Freunden aus. Um das persönliche „Ich“ aufzubauen, bedienen sich die Teenager im Freundeskreis sehr häufig eines Verhaltensmodells. Zu den Besonderheiten des Teenagerverhaltens zählt unter anderem der Gebrauch bestimmter Sprachmittel.

Im Mittelpunkt des vorliegenden Beitrags stehen die wichtigsten Besonderheiten der Jugendsprache, die den Teenagern bei der Identitätssuche helfen und den sozialen Status des Sprechers offenbaren.

Zu den wichtigsten Besonderheiten der Jugendsprache zählen Slang, Tabuwörter, Diskursmarker, die so genannten allgemeinen Extender (engl. *general Extenders*), Konnotationen und Umgangssprache. Die Untersuchung hat ergeben, dass in der Jugendsprache lexikalische Einheiten aus der Nonstandard-Sprache dominieren (560 Belege aus 781). Der Gebrauch der Normsprache verleiht der Sprache Emotionalität, kommt aber viel seltener vor (221 Belege).

Summary

Current research in the field of adolescence studies supports the idea that adolescence has always existed as a special stage of human development, but that adolescents for a long time were not studied as belonging to a separate subculture with specific features, distinguishing them from older generations, as well as from their earlier childhood groups. It was only in the middle of the 20th century that adolescence started to be viewed as a distinct period involving complex physical, emotional, psychological and developmental changes. Bearing in mind that adolescence is a transition between childhood and adulthood, it is pertinent to analyse it as a period of alienation and self identification, accompanied by complex relationships with both parents and friends. In order to shape one's ego, adolescents, most often, create their ritual codes within peer groups, of which language is one of the most significant. The **aim** of this research is to determine the major linguistic means used by adolescents that are of great value in establishing teenagers' sense of selfhood as well as maintaining their status as members of a group.

The language of adolescents is a highly emotive code whose main features are the use of slang, taboo language, pragmatic markers, general extenders, connotative, and colloquial language. The analysis of teen speech in a literary discourse shows that a non-standard variety of

language is its dominant feature (560 examples of the total of 781 cases). 221 examples are instances of connotative and colloquial language, which also make the teen speech sound natural, colourful and humorous, as well as helping teens to distance themselves from their earlier childhood groups and adults.

Introduction

Sociolinguists and other researchers agree that adolescence is the life stage in which linguistic change and variation are most clearly visible. At least in Western industrialized societies, according to Eckert, teenagers are considered as the “linguistic movers and shakers”, and, as such, their way of speaking is “a prime source of information about linguistic change and the role of language in social practice” (Androutsopoulos 2010, 1496). Eckert adds that, in recent decades in Western countries, teen speech has started to shape the ways that adults speak, because of its greatly increased presence in many parts of cultural life, such as popular music, movies and television (Eckert in Andersen 2001, 9). Furthermore, as Androutsopoulos explains, adolescents’ profound engagement with pop and media culture means that the resources they draw on in their linguistic identity construction are not only local, but also global, especially on the level of vocabulary (Androutsopoulos 2010, 1502).

The issue of adolescent language has been widely discussed by such linguists as Adelman (1976), Danesi (2010), Eckert (1988), Eble (1996), Labov (1992), Romaine (1984), Andersson and Trudgill (1990), Andersen (2001) and Stenström et al. (2002). In Lithuania, however, although interest has been gradually increasing in the last decade, the amount of research devoted to the issues of adolescent language is still rather modest. Thus, the **primary aim** of this research is to determine the major linguistic means used by adolescents that are of great value in establishing teenagers’ sense of selfhood as well as maintaining their status as members of a group. The **scientific methods** applied in the analysis of this research are the analysis of theoretical material, contrastive, descriptive and statistical methods.

Adolescents and their Search for Identity

Adolescence has long been considered a very dynamic time of life. Rosenblum and Lewis sum up this idea: “For generations, Western culture has viewed adolescence as a period of emotional upheaval and turmoil” (Rosenblum, Lewis 2006, 276). They emphasize that the general public associate teenagers with “words like ‘alienated’, ‘desperate’, and ‘overwhelmed’” (Rosenblum, Lewis 2006, 277). Current scholarship on teenagers shows that these are not simply myths or stereotypes; studies indicate that, in comparison with both younger children and adults, “adolescents experience greater extremes of emotion” and more “negative moods” (Rosenblum, Lewis 2006, 277). The years of adolescence are often troubled by feelings of alienation and problems in self identification. Graham asserts that most adolescents experience doubts about who they are, why they have been born, what they are going to do in their lives, how they compare with others of their own age, and how physically attractive they are (Graham 2004,

17). According to Waller, this occurs in part because this is a period in a teenager's life when he or she has to stop being dependent on his/her family and, at the same time, start discovering his/her own way of life (Waller 2009, 59). While they develop an increasingly complex sense of self identity, as Brinthaupt and Lipka emphasize, the adolescent has to learn to live in these "new clothes". Therefore, this period is characterized by "increased self-consciousness, introspection, inner conflict, stress, uncertainty, and disorientation" (Brinthaupt, Lipka 2002, 7).

A strong impact on the formation of teenagers' self concept is made by their body image. As Archibald, Graber and Brooks-Gunn state, "as children's and adolescents' bodies develop, they not only have to adjust to their altered appearances and feeling around these changes, but they must also cope with other's responses to their maturing bodies" (Archibald et al. 2006, 25). In general, there is too little recognition by the adults around them like parents and teachers of how strong these anxieties are at this stage (Coleman, Hendry 1999, 26). It is natural, then, for adolescents to turn away from their families to friends of the same age in what is often a time of psychological crisis for them. Brown and Klute, in their review of recent work on friendship and peer relations among teenagers, assert that "peer relationships do become a major preoccupation for most adolescents" (Brown, Klute 2006, 330). In La Greca and Harrison's words, adolescence is a period of social development marked by an expansion of peer networks, the increased importance of close friendships, and the emergence of romantic relationships (La Greca, Harrison 2005, 49). Dekovic and her colleagues also argue for the strong effect that peers have on adolescents, claiming that peer bonds help teenagers develop autonomy and independence, as well as to build up a positive self-concept (Dekovic et al. 2002, 578). In addition to this, as Danesi observes, the importance of peers during adolescence coincides with changes in an individual's need for sexual intimacy (Danesi 2010, 97). Therefore, the peer group serves as a kind of shelter within which adolescents can blend in with others who have similar problems and interests (Danesi 2010, 23-24). Inevitably, belonging to a peer group brings in the so-called "ritual code", which informs members what to do, and how to behave (Danesi 2010, 109). Among the most discernable features of teenagers' "ritual codes" is their *special use of language* whose main linguistic features are slang, taboo language, pragmatic markers, vague words and expressions, connotative language, and colloquialisms.

Fiction for Young Adults in Anglo-American Countries

One of the ways to get closer to teen speech is through fiction aimed specifically at teenagers. Fiction for young adults is literature written for and chosen by adolescents to read between the ages of twelve and eighteen. However, as Nilsen and Donelson consider, there may be a major difference between twelve-year-old and eighteen-year-old teenagers, so that subcategories of literature aimed at adolescents in senior classes at secondary schools can be distinguished as well (Nilsen, Donelson 2009, 4).

Several stylistic features further the appeal of novels written specifically for young adults. First, as Mulhall states, young adult literature is often written from a first-person point of view. This gives teenagers the opportunity to enter the mind of a narrator-protagonist who is similar to them in age and, in this way, to become more involved in the story (Mulhall 2012, 12). Secondly, Mulhall, in agreement with Nilsen, notes that, along with this use of first-person narration goes a distinctive style of voice, which means that the conversational style is dominant in teen stories, making them sound as if one teenager is speaking to another. Moreover, characters in these novels often use slang or speak in a fragmented way (Mulhall 2012, 12; see also Nilsen 2005, 6). Another common aspect of teen novels mentioned by Mulhall is a rapid pace, which means that teen novels are plot-driven with more action than description. Finally, the themes are of great importance, too. According to Mulhall, most often they are about coming of age, self-discovery, and first love. In addition, plots touch upon typical teen aspects of being quick to fall in love or dislike someone. Moreover, typical adolescent insecurities relating to their body image and popularity, as well as immature behavior and a tendency towards over-dramatizing events appear in these novels (Mulhall 2012, 12). Similarly, Nilsen states that teen novels often feature “young adults and challenges they face when establishing their self identity and independence, discovering their sexuality, learning how to get along with cohorts and adults, and developing the moral codes they will rely on throughout life” (Nilsen 2005, 6).

Since the content of teen novels often includes such socially sensitive topics as drug and alcohol abuse, sexual activity, foul language, bullying and suicide, it is natural, as Dimavičienė indicates, that these books arouse debate among parents, teachers, psychologists and literary critics (Dimavičienė 2012, 12). According to Mulhall, some of them complain that teens should not be exposed to such topics because they are at too vulnerable age. However, others argue that these are the very topics and situations many adolescents may have to experience. The fact that teens can see the characters in novels go through the same problems that they encounter in their lives usually helps them deal with similar situations in their own lives (Mulhall 2012, 12). Similarly, Reynolds believes that one of the ways to prevent young adults from the undesirable consequences of risky behaviour is to give information about life in a way that young people may trust and enjoy. According to her, contemporary teen fiction provides this through teen characters so that teenagers, who can read such books in private, can get answers to many of their own concerns (Reynolds 2007, 117). Despite all the criticism, adolescents, as Dimavičienė states, are particularly interested in current fiction for young adults. Thus, one can safely predict that the production and marketing of teen novels in English-speaking countries will continue to surge (Dimavičienė 2012, 12).

Data and Methodology

This research focuses on the analysis of the most common linguistic items used by adolescents that help them establish their sense of selfhood as well as

maintaining their status as members of a group. The scope of the research is **781** instances of adolescent language. The instances of lexical items have been compiled from the following novels for young adults: John Green's *Looking for Alaska* (2005), Melvin Burgess's *Junk* (1996), Melvin Burgess's *Doing It* (2003), Ann Brashares's *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (2003), and Cecily von Ziegesar's *Gossip Girl* (2002). Several reasons account for the choice of this particular research material. First, these five novels, which were written in a 10-year period (the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st c.) have been chosen for the analysis because they have been especially popular among teenagers in Anglo-American countries and are included in many lists of recommended fiction for contemporary teenagers. Second, these novels for young adults include a great variety of lexical items characteristic of adolescent language.

On the Identity Construction through Linguistic Means in Young Adult Fiction

One of the major linguistic means used by adolescents in establishing their sense of selfhood is their frequent use of slang. According to González, of all social groups, young adults are the most inclined to use and alter slang and unconventional language. They exhibit great social dynamism and are receptive to changes in all spheres of life, as well as in speech (González 1994, 201). In addition to this, González points out that teenagers have little direct political power, but they may use slang as a counter-cultural tool to oppose established authority and conventions (González 1994, 201). Since teenagers have to go through new physical experiences and are especially troubled by changes in their bodies during puberty, their use of slang when talking about sex and other intimate physical experiences they have never faced before may be very helpful to them. Therefore, as Dimavičienė states, teenagers develop their own terms to express their feelings because they feel more comfortable expressing these new emotions in their own language (Dimavičienė 2012, 13).

The total number of slang words found in the novels is 167. 76 (45 %) are cases of general slang and 91 (55 %) are instances of peer-group slang. General slang refers to words indicated as slang in common dictionaries; they are not necessarily limited to any particular social group, while peer-group slang or specific slang is related to a particular group of people. In this research, the target group is teenagers.

Table 1

The Use of Slang in Young Adult Fiction

No.	Example	Linguistic Item
1.	Right, but he didn't need to be a jerk about it. (Green 2006, 52)	General slang
2.	All that crap – about Gemma leaving me, about Mum and Dad, about leaving home. (Burgess 2003, 184)	General slang
3.	She always used to do things like grab my packet when I was standing behind her and there were other people in the room – you know, shielding me with her body so no one could see. (Burgess 2004, 116)	Peer-group slang

4.	As always, Nate, Jeremy, Anthony and Charlie had smoked a big fatty before the party. (Ziegesar 2008, 179)	Peer-group slang
----	---	------------------

As can be seen in Table 1, the slang words “jerk” and “all that crap” are the cases of general slang. The slang word “jerk” in Example 1 is one of the most frequently used in the novels. It appears 52 times. Although this slang word is often used among teenagers to insult or offend each other, it is not limited to this particular group. The collocation “all that crap” also represents general slang. In the *Oxford English Reference Dictionary*, the word “crap” is described as coarse slang; literally, the word means excrement or, in popular terms, shit. Accordingly, the adjective slang word “crappy” or its collocations mean shitty, rubbishy, cheap or disgusting (OERD 1996, 333). Example 3 and Example 4 are cases of peer-group slang. Teenagers usually employ a great deal of peer-group slang when talking about sex or other intimate experiences they have during puberty. Since they are anxious and self-conscious about their physical changes as well as secret sexual wishes, adolescents either use the current slang that they hear or create their own terms of expression to speak about the way they feel. Among the most frequent slang words used by teenagers in the fiction for young adults in this analysis are words which describe the sexual organs: for instance, the slang word “packet” in Example 3 is used instead of a man’s sexual organs. The slang word “fatty” in Example 4, used to refer to various kinds of drugs, indicates that speaking about smoking is also one of the favourite pastimes for adolescents.

Other non-standard features of adolescent language that attract negative attention from adults are the frequent use of taboo language (240 examples), pragmatic markers (96 examples), and general extenders (57 examples).

Table 2

The Use of Taboo Language, Pragmatic Markers and General Extenders in Young Adult Fiction

No.	Example	Linguistic Item
1.	I was pissed off with her, she was being really nasty. (Burgess 2003, 311)	Swearing
2.	“We’re the fucking marines,” he said. (Green 2006, 126)	Swearing
3.	That was my present, see . Me. I wasn’t wearing a stitch. (Burgess 2003, 93)	Pragmatic marker
4.	Well , I don’t mean to brag or anything. (Brashares 2004, 166-167)	Pragmatic marker
5.	Is it sour or something ? (Green 2006, 48)	General extender
6.	We were pulling out bits of wood and stuff . (Burgess 2003, 163)	General extender

The swear word “pissed off” in Example 1, which is used to express negative emotions, falls into the category of idiomatic swearing (see Table 2). This means that it is understood in its non-literal meaning, and it is the largest category, accounting for 58 instances. Emphatic swearing manifests itself mainly in its use of adverbial and adjectival intensifiers. The word “fucking”, which is the most common in this category, is used as an intensifying adjective expressing a

higher degree of a following gradable noun as in “fucking marines” in Example 2. The pragmatics markers “see” in Example 3 and “well” in Example 4 do not add meaning to a statement. For this reason, they are considered as negative features of for teenagers speaking with friends and members of their peer groups; they appeal to listeners to agree with what the speaker is saying. General extenders whose meaning is very general and often meaningless in an utterance are in Example 5 and Example 6. The disjunctive form “or something” and the adjunctive form “and stuff” are used in fictional texts with the aim to imitate teen colloquial language, in which vagueness is one of its most frequent characteristic features. Although these general extenders can occur at almost any place in an utterance, their common position is final.

The linguistic items discussed earlier represent non-standard features of adolescent language. However, teen speech is not necessarily bad or vulgar. One of the favourite ways by teenagers to express themselves is the use of those linguistic items which are based on metaphor, idiom, as well as employing ordinary colloquialisms.

Table 3

The Use of Connotative and Colloquial Language in Young Adult Fiction

No.	Example	Linguistic Item
1.	“You look beautiful, bun! ” he said easily. (Brashares 2004, 53)	Metaphor
2.	Actually I felt quite like an old hand . (Burgess 2003, 47)	Idiomatic expression
3.	Mommy ain’t here, so buck up, big guy . (Green 2006, 37)	Colloquialism

The analysis of metaphoric expressions used by teen characters in fictional texts in this study shows that adolescents like employing a metaphor as a form of address as, for instance, “bun” in Example 1 (see Table 3). The idiomatic expression “to feel like an old hand” in Example 2 indicates that teenagers also use idiomatic expressions that are common in speech in general, and, finally, the colloquialism “big guy” in Example 3 proves that ordinary, informal speech is the popular style used by adolescents, especially in speaking to their friends and peers.

Conclusion

One of the major ways that adolescents express their solidarity within friendships and peer groups, as well as establishing their sense of selfhood is by teenagers’ specific use of language. The language of adolescents is a highly emotive code whose main features are the use of slang, taboo language, pragmatic markers, general extenders, connotative, and colloquial language. The analysis of teen speech in the five novels allows one to claim that a non-standard variety of language is its dominant feature (560 examples of the total of 781cases). This often leads to criticism by an older generation towards the teenage talk; they consider it substandard or bad. Linguistic items that represent a standard language variety account for 221 examples. They make the language of adolescents sound natural,

colourful and humorous, as well as helping teens to distance themselves from their earlier childhood groups and adults.

Primary sources

Brashares 2003 – Brashares, Ann. *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*. New York : Delacorte Press, 2nd edition, 2003 (2004).

Burgess 1996 – Burgess, Melvin. *Junk*. London : Puffin Modern Classics, 3rd edition, 1996 (2003).

Burgess 2003 – Burgess, Melvin. *Doing It*. London : Penguin Books, 2nd edition, 2003 (2004).

Green 2005 – Green, John. *Looking for Alaska*. London : HarperCollins Children's Books, 2nd edition, 2005 (2006).

Ziegesar 2002 – Ziegesar, Cecily. *Gossip Girl*. London : Bloomsbury Publishing, 7th edition, 2002 (2008).

List of References

Adelman 1976 – Adelman, Clem. The Language of Teenage Groups. In *They Don't Speak Our Language*. Ed. S. Rogers. London : Edward Arnold, 1976, pp. 80–105.

Andersen 2001 – Andersen, Gisle. *Pragmatic Markers and Sociolinguistic Variation*. Amsterdam : John Benjamins, 2001.

Andersson, Trudgill 1990 – Andersson, Lars Gunar, Trudgill, Peter. *Bad Language*. Oxford : Blackwell, 1990.

Androutsopoulos 2010 – Androutsopoulos, Janis. *Research on Youth-Language*. Available at <http://jannisandroutsopoulos.files.wordpress.com/2010/01/hsk-sociolinguistics-research-on-youth-language.pdf>

Archibald 2006 – Archibald, Andrea Bastiani et al. Pubertal Processes and Psychological Growth in Adolescence. In *Blackwell Handbook of Adolescence*. Ed. G. R. Adams and M. D. Berzonsky. Oxford : Blackwell, 2006, pp. 24–47.

Brinthaup and Lipka 2002 – Brinthaup, Thomas M. Lipka, Richard P. *Understanding Early Adolescent Self and Identity: Applications and Interventions*. New York : State University of New York Press, 2002.

Brown, Klute 2006 – Brown, B. Bradford. Klute, Christa. Friendships, Cliques and Crowds. In *Blackwell Handbook of Adolescence*. Ed. G. R. Adams and M. D. Berzonsky. Oxford : Blackwell, 2006, pp. 330–348.

Coleman, Hendry 1999 – Coleman, John C. Hendry, Leo B. *The Nature of Adolescence*. 3rd edition. London : Routledge, 1999.

Danesi 2010 – Danesi, Marcel. *Geeks, Goths and Gangstas*. Toronto : Canadian Scholars Press, 2010.

Dekovic 2002 – Dekovic, Maja et al. The Role of Peer Relations in Adolescent Development in Two Cultures: the Netherlands and Japan. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*. Vol. 33, No. 6, 2002, pp. 577–595.

Dimavičienė 2012 – Dimavičienė, Brigita. Taboo Subjects in Lithuanian Literature for Young People: the Effect of Translated Literature. *Jaunuųjų mokslininkų darbai*. Vol. 2, No. 35, 2012, pp. 11–16.

Eble 1996 – Eble, Connie C. *Slang and Sociability – In-Group Language among College Students*. Chapel Hill : The University of North Carolina Press, 1996.

Eckert 1988 – Eckert, Penelope. Adolescent Social Structure and the Spread of Linguistic Change. *Language in Society*. No. 17, 1988, pp. 183–207.

Gonzalez 1994 – Gonzales, Felix R. Youth and Student Slang in British and American English: an Annotated Bibliography. *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*. No.7, 1994, pp. 201–212.

- Graham 2004** – **Graham, Philip Jeremy.** *EOA: The End of Adolescence.* Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2004.
- La Greca, Harrison 2005** – **La Greca, Annette M. Harrison, Hannah Moore.** Adolescent Peer Relations, Friendships, and Romantic Relationships: Do they Predict Social Anxiety and Depression? *Journal of Clinical Child and Adolescent Psychology.* No. 34 (1), 2005, pp. 49–61.
- Labov 1992** – **Labov, Teresa.** Social Language Boundaries among Adolescents. *American Speech.* No.67, 1992, pp. 339–66.
- Mulhall 2012** – **Mulhall, MB.** *Young Adult Fiction: the Genre is more than just Teen Characters and Love Triangles.* Available at <http://www.novelpublicity.com/2012/03/young-adult-fiction-the-genre-is-more-than-just-teen-characters-and-love-triangles/>
- Nilsen 2005** – **Nilsen, Allen Pace.** Adolescent Narrative. In *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Narrative Theory.* Ed. D. Herman, M. Jahn and M.L. Ryan. London and New York : Routledge, 2005, pp. 5–7.
- Nilsen, Donelson 2009** – **Nilsen, Allen Pace. Donelson, Kenneth L.** *Literature for Today's Young Adults.* 8th edition. New York : Pearson Education, 2009.
- OERD 1996** – **Oxford English Reference Dictionary.** Editors Jude Pearsall and Bill Trumble. 2nd edition. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Reynolds 2007** – **Reynolds, Kimberly.** Baby, you're the Best: Sex and Sexuality in Contemporary Juvenile Fiction. In *Radical Children's Literature: Future Visions and Aesthetic Transformations in Juvenile Fiction.* Ed. K. Reynolds. New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, pp. 114-131.
- Romaine 1984** – **Romaine, Suzanne.** *The Language of Children and Adolescence.* Oxford : Blackwell, 1984.
- Rosenblum and Lewis 2006** – **Rosenblum, Gianine D. Lewis, Michael.** Emotional Development in Adolescence. In *Blackwell Handbook of Adolescence.* Ed. G. R. Adams and M. D. Berzonsky. Oxford : Blackwell, 2006, pp. 269–289.
- Stenström 2002** – **Stenström, Anna-Brita et al.** *Trends in Teenage Talk. Corpus Compilation, Analysis and Findings.* Amsterdam : John Benjamins, 2002.
- Waller 2009** – **Waller, Alison.** *Constructing Adolescence in Fantastic Realism.* New York : Routledge, 2009.