

FEATURES

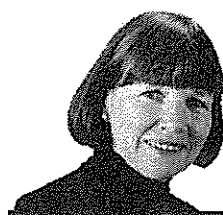
New words provide degrees of separation

THE words we use have the power to both unite and divide us and there is no doubt that in language, age, like other social differences, is a factor which divides us.

There are words that Granny has never heard, never used, and never will use. Similarly there are words that some adolescents have never heard, have never used, and never will use.

And there are many words that we know and hear that can make us squirm. Many older New Zealanders use terms like frock, slacks and pinny. They use grog, plonk and infra dig. Adolescents find these infra dig — they make them squirm.

Similarly there are words that young people don't want those of other generations to know or use. *The Guardian* published a list of "The words that kids don't want you to know". Some of



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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

these are newly coined terms, others are recycled. "404" is an adjective meaning stupid, or idiotic. (From the Internet message 404: file not found. "He's got the 404" means "he's got no idea".) Definitely a new one for Granny. "Butters" means extremely ugly, from "butt ugly". Other new adjectives for disgusting or ugly? We have "fugly", "minging", and "skank-

aroo". Grandfather might have been blotto some Friday nights, and hungover next day, but today's youths are "bladder-d" and suffer from "carnage" next morning. Where Granny was pretty, today's good-lookers are "peng" or "tonk".

New synonyms for cool? There are "caj" (from casual), "dizzy", "dope", "lush", "nang", and "quality".

Many of these terms, of course, relate to group identity and belonging, and they are often strongly negative or positive. Today, strangely enough, you are not "with it" if you are part of the "in" group, you're "out there". If you're a "fudge", or a "huffer", you won't notice — you're an idiot. And you might suffer from "fomo" (fear of missing out).

"Cool" is an interesting adjective — it's had its ups and downs. In the eighties, adolescents squirmed at its use by their

elders. But it's alive and well and crosses most walls and boundaries today, even the age barrier.

Another aspect of language use that marks out social territory is swearing or what is considered as "bad" language. Some people would think that a Toyota SUV with a rear spare tyre sporting "Bugger!" is rather fun to follow in a motorway queue, others would find it offensive, while others would simply wonder what the point was.

For others, it would be an additional sign of general moral decay. It's possible that younger people would find it more amusing than older people would, and perhaps males would be more amused than females.

Popularist conservative Lynn Truss would definitely take offence. In her book, *Talk to the Hand: The Utter Bloody Rudeness of Everyday Life or Six Good Reasons*

to Stay at Home and Bolt the Door, she abhors the lack of manners and politeness in today's Britain. For her, politeness is a signal of readiness to meet someone halfway. Without it, we become offensive, offended, and divided.

Truss overstates her case, with claims like "the only context in which you can expect to hear a 'please' or 'thank you' nowadays is in recorded messages". But her pages on road rage and what she calls the "eff-off reflex" are worth a read.

One group within society that has linguistic distinction markers crossing age and gender barriers is the criminal "fraternity". Criminals require a vocabulary that excludes others, and they show remarkable creativity in generating new terms.

Covert code names must be found for accomplices, for drugs, for booty, for police and prison officers, for different

amounts of money, and for anything that can be smuggled in or out of prison.

Puns and word play of all types are features. While rhyming slang is not as commonly used in New Zealand English as in other varieties of English, it is found among other features in the language of the New Zealand underworld, examples being "dizzy" or "dizzy lizzie" (a \$20 note showing the head of Lizzie/the Queen), and "hollow log" (sniffer dog).

But argot or criminal slang, in all its richness, should survive several degrees of separation from most of us.

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■ Send your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz