

OUP research reveals children's imaginative language use

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The OUP research shows that children are extremely inventive in their storytelling and language use.

Innovative use of language, a firm grasp of technology, and a thirst for unusual words are just some of the findings revealed about how children use language according to new Oxford University Press (OUP) research.

The research was compiled by lexicographers in OUP's Children's Dictionaries team based on an analysis of thousands of short stories sent into a BBC radio competition for children in the UK.

A summary of the report has been released, revealing a wealth of information about children's patterns in [language](#), grammatical structures, and vocabulary use.

The results show that children are extremely inventive in their storytelling and language use, with many stories focusing on genetic experiments, espionage, and futuristic gadgets. Favorites of the researchers included the 'fingerlaser,' a planet-shrinking 'zaporator' and the 'electrostone', a device that can disable electrical circuits. Robotic hybrids such as the 'dog-bot', 'robo-dog', and 'teacherbot' grabbed adults' attention in equal measure.

Technology was also a theme in many stories. The terms 'google' and 'app' occur many times: 'googling' is a way to follow clues in a mystery; and 'apps' can be downloaded for use as a prop, avatar, or weapon.

Contrary to concerns that increasing use and popularity of 'txtspk' will ruin children's vocabularies, youngsters demonstrated that they know when it is not appropriate, only including it in their stories when transcribing an imagined text message.

The research also found that many of the words contained in children's stories are repeated from celebrated writers – suggesting a continued love of reading. Words included creatures such as J.K. Rowling's basilisk and hippogriff, J.R.R. Tolkien's orcs, and Lewis Carroll's bandersnatch.

Some children have some difficulties using punctuation correctly, and the misuse of the apostrophe was found to be a common problem. One of the most popular pieces of punctuation was the exclamation mark, which was used 351,731 times.

The results were based on the analysis of 74,075 stories submitted to the 2012 Chris Evans Show BBC Radio 2 '500 Words' short story competition. Lexicographers at OUP analysed the entries using the Oxford Children's Corpus – a large electronic database of real and authentic children's language.

The findings provide never-before-seen insights into English use among young people, offering invaluable resources for both language researchers and OUP's ongoing dictionaries program.

Samantha Armstrong, Senior Project Editor for OUP's Children's Dictionaries, said: "OUP uses powerful technology to track and analyze children's language and the message we are getting from the BBC "500 Words" stories is a powerful one – language is evolving and children are real language innovators. Perhaps we are catching a glimpse of the language of the future."

OUP publishes more than 500 dictionaries, thesauruses, and language reference titles in more than 40 languages, and in a variety of print and electronic formats.

Provided by Oxford University

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