

Linguistics study reveals our growing obsession with education

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As children around the country go back to school, a new comparative study of spoken English reveals that we talk about education nearly twice as much as we did twenty years ago.

The study, which compares spoken English today with recordings from the 1990s, allows researchers at Cambridge University Press and Lancaster University to examine how the [language](#) we use indicates our

changing attitudes to education.

They found that the topic of education is far more salient in conversations now, with the word cropping up 42 times per million words, compared with only 26 times per million in the 1990s dataset.

As well as talking about education more, there has also been a noticeable shift in the terms we use to describe it. Twenty years ago, the public used fact-based terms to talk about education, most often describing it as either full-time, or part-time.

Today, however, we're more likely to use evaluative language about the standards of education and say that it's good, bad or great. This could be due to the rise in the formal assessments of schools, for example, with the establishment of the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) in 1992. Indeed, Ofsted itself has made its debut as a verb in recent times, with the arrival of discussions on what it means for a school to be Ofsteded.

Dr Claire Dembry, Senior Language Research Manager at Cambridge University Press said: "It's fascinating to find out that, not only do we talk about education twice as much as we used to, but also that we are more concerned about the quality. It's great that we have these data sets to be able to find out these insights; without them we wouldn't be able to research how the language we use is changing, nor the topics we talk about most."

The research findings also indicate that we're now expecting to get more out of our education than we used to. We've started talking about qualifications twice as much as we did in the 1990s, GCSEs five times as much and A levels 1.4 times as much.

Meanwhile, use of the word university has tripled. This is perhaps not

surprising, as the proportion of young people going to university doubled between 1995 and 2008, going from 20 per cent to almost 40 per cent.

When the original data was collected in the 1990s, university fees had yet to be introduced, and so it is unsurprising that the terms university fees and tuition fees did not appear in the findings. However the recent data shows these terms to each occur roughly once per million words, as we've begun to talk about university in more commercialised terms.

However, while teachers may be happy to hear that [education](#) is of growing concern to the British public, it won't come as good news to them that the adjective underpaid is most closely associated with their job.

These are only the initial findings from the first two million words of the project, named the 'Spoken British National Corpus 2014,' which is still seeking recorded submissions.

Professor Tony McEnery, from the ESRC Centre for Corpus Approaches to Social Sciences (CASS) at Lancaster University, said: "We need to gather hundreds, if not thousands, of conversations to create a full spoken corpus so we can continue to analyse the way language has changed over the last 20 years.

"This is an ambitious project and we are calling for people to send us MP3 files of their everyday, informal conversations in exchange for a small payment to help me and my team to delve deeper into spoken language and to shed more light on the way our spoken language changes over time."

More information: People who wish to submit recordings to the research team should visit: [languageresearch.cambridge.org ... tish-national-corpus](http://languageresearch.cambridge.org...tish-national-corpus)

Provided by University of Cambridge

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