

# Street language

Visitors to some British cities might be surprised at the 'English' they hear spoken by young people on the streets. This is because it is quite different from the language taught in the classroom or spoken on the radio or television. It may be comforting to know that most British people over 25 would also have great trouble understanding it!

All languages change with time, but youth speak is developing particularly fast in some British cities, partly because of the growth of the internet. It has been said that five new words are coined every day. Several dictionaries are already available, including online ones, which are much easier to update.

The street language used by young people has different influences: urban black American and Caribbean, music (especially hip-hop and rap music), and also texting and local slangs. Street language *is* a type of English, but it has a very distinct accent, intonation and grammar, and it also contains many completely different words and expressions. It is popular today because it is seen as 'cool' by British young people, and so it has become widely used by both black and white teenagers in some parts of the country. Thankfully, most users are able to switch to standard English when necessary.

One writer, Martin Baum, has used this language to try to bring the writers Charles Dickens and Shakespeare to young people. His first book, *To Be Or Not To Be, Innit*, summarises 15 of Shakespeare plays and each story is about three pages long. His recently published second book, *Oi Mate, Gimme Some More*, is a selection of 16 of Charles' Dickens novels, again considerably shortened. What makes these books unusual is that these classics are written in modern-day street slang.

Lovers of the classics worry that Baum has destroyed the beauty of the originals. However, the author says he is passionate about literature and that he hopes to attract young people to great writing by making the stories relevant to them. Perhaps young people might then be prepared and interested to look at the originals.

Young people react differently to adults speaking or writing *their* language. For some, it makes it less 'cool'. After all, one purpose of street talk is to shut out 'non-members', which in this case means adults and others outside the teenage community. We will see if this particular street language starts to die out with time, or if it continues to grow.

1 Before you read the text try to match the standard English with street language.

Standard English	Street language
1 brother / friend	a heavy
2 nothing	b yard
3 area / neighbourhood	c blood
4 isn't it	d dat waz sick
5 do you understand me	e hood / endz
6 garden	f you feel me
7 good	g nuffin
8 that was great	h innit

2 Now read the text and decide on the best description below.

- a The text describes the influence of Dickens and Shakespeare on modern English.
- b The text describes how street language exists everywhere in the world.
- c The text describes street language in Britain: its growth and importance.

3 Read the text again to answer these questions.

- 1 Why might people coming to parts of Britain be shocked at the English that they hear?
- 2 Why is English street language changing so quickly?
- 3 Why do young people like to use it?
- 4 Why did Baum change the language of the original Shakespeare / Dickens texts?
- 5 Why are some people not happy with these new versions of the classics?
- 6 Why are street languages used by certain groups in a community?

4 Put the following comments into the three boxes in preparation for a discussion.

- a Schools should stop children using street language, even in school playgrounds.
- b Street language exists in most cities in most countries.
- c It's good to try to make old literary classics more interesting to young people, as Baum has done.
- d Parents need to be much stricter with their children when non-standard English is used.
- e Street language is fine, as long as young people know when they can and cannot use it.
- f Street language has always been used. We cannot stop it, and we should not try to.
- g Any great writer, such as Dickens or Shakespeare, would be very shocked and disappointed to hear their work modernised in this way.

I agree	I disagree	I'm not sure

5 Without reading the text again, complete the gaps with an appropriate word.

This text talks about why people might be (1) \_\_\_\_\_ at the English they hear spoken on the streets of London, for example. However, it is (2) \_\_\_\_\_ to know that most British people can't understand it either. Street language has a very (3) \_\_\_\_\_ accent and uses different words, and so on. It is (4) \_\_\_\_\_ today because it is seen as fashionable and (5) \_\_\_\_\_ by young people. The author Martin Baum has written two books based on Shakespeare and Dickens' stories in this language, although he says he says he is (6) \_\_\_\_\_ about literature and just wants to make the classics (7) \_\_\_\_\_ to young people.

### Glossary

- accent** (*noun*) - a way of saying words that shows what country, region or social class someone comes from: *Tom hasn't lost his Irish accent*
- coin (a word or phrase)** (*verb*) - to use a word or phrase that no one has used before
- comforting** (*adj*) - making you feel less sad, worried or disappointed
- distinct** (*adj*) - separate and different in a way that is very clear
- influence** (*noun*) - the effect that a person or thing has on something or someone (on their behaviour, decisions or opinions): *he has a very strong influence on both his sons*
- member** (*noun*) - someone who belongs to a group, organisation or club
- relevant** (*adj*) - directly connected and important: *the problem of global warming is relevant to everyone*
- slang** (*noun*) - words or expressions that are very informal and are not considered suitable for more formal situations
- urban** (*adj*) - relating to towns and cities: *people moved to urban areas for jobs*
- youth** (*noun*) - young people in general: *the youth of the country; youth culture*