How does technology affect spoken English today?

LESSON GOAL

To teach students about factors affecting language change, with focus on lexical change in the English language.

OBJECTIVES
- Guide students to discover how societal change (i.e. technological developments) drive change in language
- Discover the extent to which technology is talked about in current British English
- Understand the influence of social factors such as age and social class on the use of language
- Compare different patterns of language use and draw conclusions, report findings

Task 1

The first part of the task should serve as a warm-up activity to activate students' existing knowledge of and experience with the area of language use. Some possible areas that students can think of are: social communication, security, travel, banking, entertainment, etc.

The second part of the task: Typing TECHNOLOGY (using capital letters) into BNClab will search for all words related to technology in language (e.g. computer, software, online, etc). In other words, students will search for the semantic family of expressions related to technology and the task can be also used to introduce/practice the term 'semantic family'. The results of the search show over 6,000 occurrences of the words linked to technology*.

The findings from the Usage button show that the presence of words related to technology has increased dramatically in our communication over the last twenty years. Hovering over the bars showing the results for 1990s and 2010s will reveal that people in the 1990s used, on average, 3.4 words related to technology per every 10,000 words they said while people in the 2010s produced 10.7 words, almost three times the number from 1990s. This shows the extent to which technology has made its way into everyday conversation.

*Note: If you look at the words that have been found and linked to technology in the transcripts in the corpus (which can be done by looking under the Usage button), you will see that there is a small group of words that have been identified as related to technology by mistake. This is due to the fact that the identification is done automatically by the computer and will thus result in a very small percentage of errors in identifying the relevant words.

🕐 **Suggested time: 5 – 10 minutes**

Task 2

The aim of the task is to demonstrate how the developments in the field of technology, in this case the Internet, have revolutionalised our everyday lives and the types of activities that can be now done *online*. These types of changes in our lifestyles are naturally reflected in the use of language. The results from the corpus show the incredibly broad range of activities that can and are now done online and, as a result, how the word *online* permeates our daily conversations.

Some of the examples that students will find in the corpus are: online shopping, online library, businesses, looking up information of all kinds, communication ('chatting online'), online games, online dating, meeting people online, online newspapers, buying plane/train tickets online, signing a petition, etc.

Practical tips: The activity can be organized as a friendly competition with either groups of students or individual students trying to list the highest number of examples of online activities mentioned in the corpus.

🕐 **Suggested time : 10-15 minutes**

First part of the task: The answers are based on the first mention of the word reported by the Oxford English Dictionary (OED):

email – 1979 ; laptop – 1983 ; iPod - 2001; website - 1993; smartphone - 1983 ; Internet – 1974

Here is an example of the OED entry for *email* as a noun:

email, *n.₂* **View full entry**1979
...A system for sending textual messages (with or without attached files) to one or more recipients via a computer network (esp. the internet); a message or messages sent using this system. Also:...

Second part of the task: Looking for different words related to computer technology in the corpus, students will discover the same pattern repeating itself, that is, no occurrence of the words in 1990s while the words are quite frequent in 2010s (as demonstrated by two examples below).
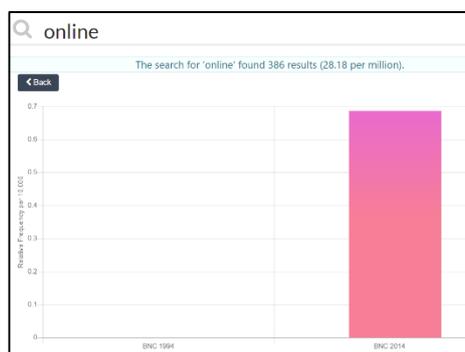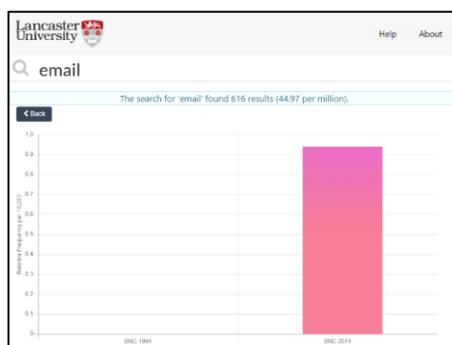
Seeing this pattern repeatedly should demonstrate to students how powerful changes in society (in this case the rise in the use of technology) can be as a source of new words and the impact of these changes on daily communication.

Students may find it surprising that the words were not used widely in 1990s despite the fact that some of them first entered the English language as early as 1970s and 1980s as documented by the Oxford English Dictionary. Moreover, students may be further surprised to see this pattern given how deeply integrated these tools and words are in their daily lives today (e.g. the Internet) - they may not have been aware that these words entered common use only a relatively (from a language development perspective) short time ago.

With regard to the difference between when the words entered the English language and when they became more widely picked up by people, the task can be used to introduce a more advanced point related to lexical change in language. The pattern demonstrates that lexical change can take different forms. Sometimes, lexical change is demonstrated when a new words appears and enters the English lexicon (e.g. 'Obamacare' and 'Brexit'). However, lexical change can be also demonstrated by the change in the pattern of use of existing words. In other words, a word can suddenly become much more popular (as indicated by the frequency with which it is used) or it can start to be used by a new group of people/in new areas of communication. This is the case of the words we looked at in this task. The lexical change in language observed with respect to these words was not related to the fact that they entered the English language; rather it was demonstrated a) by the fact that the frequency with which these words are used today increased dramatically and b) by the fact that they are now used by people of all social groups in informal conversations rather than just by a group of specialists in the technical domain.

Practical tips: In the second part of the task, students can be divided into groups and each member of the group can search for one of the words and report back to the group so that they can discover the pattern together.

🕐 **Suggested time: 20 minutes**

Task 4

Task 4 aims to further explore the patterns of lexical change related to technological development. It focuses on an area that should be of particular interest and relevance to students given their personal experience with social media. The task further explores the idea that lexical development in language can sometimes be observed in specific social groups (e.g. the social groups defined by age, social class or gender) rather than in the whole population. In this task, we focus especially on the effect of social class and age on the use of words related to technology.

When students explore the suggested words, they will discover the following patterns (ordered according to how frequently each word was used):

1. Email: 616 uses found. The word seems to be used equally by people from different age groups, it is used quite frequently by speakers from early teens to people in mid-70s and drops after that. The use of the word is also relatively equally distributed across speakers from different social classes, although it is used most frequently by speakers from the middle class, followed by retired and working class people.

2. Facebook: 438 uses found. Most of the words occurred in conversations of people from early teens to people in their mid-50s. Mostly used by people from the middle class, followed by students and working class people. Less used among retired people.

3. YouTube: 181 uses found. The majority of these uses come from people from their early teens to people in mid-50s. In terms of social class, the word is most often used by students, followed by speakers from the middle class with considerably fewer people from the working class using it. Very few retired people used the word.

4. Twitter: 162 uses found. With respect to age, the majority of uses come from teenagers through to people in their early 30s. The word it is used prevalently by people from the middle class and by students.

5. Instagram: 74 uses found. The majority of the uses come from people in their early teens to people in their late 20s. According to the social background, the biggest social group to use the word are students, the use of the word in all other groups is very low.

Some of the patterns that students could discover and comment on:

- **How frequently** each of the word occurs in conversation: It seems that some of the oldest (in terms of when the technology became widely available and adopted by people) tools and words are used more often than the newer ones. In terms of lexical development, this could suggest a certain connection between how long the tool has been around and how much the tool has been adopted by the users in society overall (in other words, how widespread the use of the tool has become). Also, it could be related to how general the application and use of the tool is – for example, email is a medium of communication used across different age groups, domains of communication (e.g. for both formal and informal communication) and by different social groups. The less frequently occurring words (e.g. Instagram and Twitter) could be considered to be a bit more 'specialized' in their appeal (they often have younger speakers associated with their use) as well as in terms of what they can be used for (e.g. unlike email, people usually do not use Twitter for formal messages).

- **Social class.** Students can discuss how the lifestyles and communication preferences of people from different social groups can be linked to how often the words come up in conversations by people in these groups. For example, it is interesting to see that *email* is used very often by speakers from all social groups with the exception of students for whom it is less common. On the other hand, students are the social group that most frequently mentions the 'newer' media such as Twitter and YouTube. Likewise, for Instagram, the majority of the mentions occurred in speech produced by students. Patterns such as these can, to some extent, reflect the communication preferences of different social groups. It would be interesting to ask students working on this activity to reflect on their own ways of communicating online and also to reflect on whether these would be similar/different to the ways their parents use online media of communication.

- **Age of speakers**. It seems that most of these words are very common in the speech of young speakers, beginning in early teens. What is different, then, is how older speakers use the words. While some of the words are very common in the conversations of older speakers (e.g. email, Facebook), others are not mentioned at all by people over the age of 30 (e.g. Instagram). This may reflect how people of different age engage with social media and also be related to the role each type of social media plays in people's lives and what needs it fulfills. Students can discuss what role can Instagram vs Email have in the way people connect to each other and the type of information they wish to share.

  Practical tips: Similar to Task 3, students can be divided into groups and each member of the group can explore one of the words. They can then work together on producing a short report summarizing the trends related to the words. Alternatively, each group of students can be asked to look at the words with respect to one social attribute, i.e. one group of students would be exploring the words with respect to the age of people that use them, another would be looking at the social class or gender. The groups would then prepare a short report for the rest of the class on the social factor they investigated.

Suggested time: 25 minutes