THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

Monkey Business Images/Shutterstock

Middle-class British people are talking more alike than ever

Published: August 28, 2024 5.21pm BST

Vittorio Tantucci

Senior lecturer in Linguistics and Chinese Linguistics, Lancaster University

We all imitate one another in conversation. We use similar gestures, our accents converge, our tones of voice align, and we mirror each other's facial expressions.

But, as my team's recent study showed, subtle differences in the way we mirror each other can reveal a lot about our identities and even divides between classes.

Specifically, our research found British people from the corporate world, higher education, and neighbouring fields adopt more similar speech patterns than they used to in the 1990s. And this might have something to do with the growing importance placed on inclusivity in corporate workplaces.

Unlike most other animals, we are hard wired to imitate each other. Some special neurons in our brain, called mirror neurons, make us simulate what others do.

We often imitate to conform socially and engage with others. This means that the more we are surrounded by certain people, the more likely we are to behave like them, dress like them, and – guess what – talk like them.

But we are not parrots. When we re-use words said by others, we often do it creatively to make them feel heard. This form of linguistic imitation is called resonance. When we resonate with others, we cite their speech in a conversation and show our involvement with them.

Think of someone telling you, “I have just been in Venice for a week,”. And you respond, “Great!” That would not be as engaging as saying “Really? I was also in Venice last year, but only for two days.”

In the latter case, you would be resonating. You would be repeating the phrase “in Venice”, re-formulating the auxiliary “was” as “have been” and the phrase “for a week” in the new form of “for two days”. You would show that what you heard is relevant and ‘rely’ on it to continue the conversation.

This social skill varies across cultures and between speakers. Chinese people tend to do it much more than the British, for instance.

When people don’t resonate much in conversation, they can appear more detached and less engaged with what others are saying. Research has shown this is particularly evident in autistic speech. But people with autism often simply have different ways of listening than neurotypical people.

How much do you think you resonate when you talk to people? Rawpixel.com/Shutterstock

My team and I looked at how resonance has changed over time, by analysing 1,600 spontaneous conversations among British speakers of different social grades, ages, genders, and regions in 1994 and 2014.

We looked at many factors, but what really makes people resonate more is the kind of job they do. But if you work in a corporate organisation, you probably resonate with others much more than if you worked in an independent cafe, for instance. But why?

Corporate communication has changed since the 2000s. In 2002, the UK government established the UK sustainable development commission, which called for greater transparency, internal engagement and accountability in business practices.

Companies started producing reports on corporate social responsibility and values like equality, diversity and inclusion. Inclusivity became more important in middle-class workplaces, at least on a surface level.

In our study, we showed people in these sectors started to use a more inclusive conversation style and resonate much more with what others say. But resonance in working-class conversation style doesn't seem to have changed much.

Do we resonate "enough"?

We all know that sounding different contributes to social bias. Linguistic expressions valued within lower income groups or different regions might be viewed negatively by others and lead to stereotyping.

Working-class speech patterns in Britain are often characterised by regional accents and colloquial language. This is in contrast with a much more standardised speech of the middle-class.

Some linguists have argued these differences reinforce class distinctions, as middle-class people are more likely to adopt language that aligns with mainstream societal norms and educational standards.

Similarly, the way people acknowledge and re-use each other's words can also widen class gaps and social biases. The extract from our data below is from a conversation among managers operating in logistics, Lynda and Chris, talking about a consignment:

Chris: We will probably have to prove that we have not been paid for the consignment. Lynda: **Interesting**. Chris: **Interesting possibility**. But it, it, **it's not covering from factory to airport** or anything of that sort. **It is definitely covering**... Lynda: Right, **covering part of the risk**. Chris: Yes.

In the exchange, both speakers actively resonate with the words and expressions that they just heard from each other (highlighted in bold), showing that those words are relevant and worth re-using for continuing the conversation.

Social class can also influence early language development and performance at school. A 1977 study of five year olds' speech showed working-class children made greater use of verbs and pronouns, whereas the middle-class children made greater use of subordinate clauses.

And a 2008 study found that in a task where parents had to describe a picture to their children, middle-class parents provided more detailed descriptions than parents who identified as working class. In the study, middle-class parents used more diverse vocabulary than working-class parents, exposing their children to more linguistic information.

There also seems to be a divide whether people think differences in the way social classes use language matter. A 2006 study of UK students found that although students from different classes tended to talk about social class in similar ways, working-class students thought they these differences were significant while upper middle-class students minimised its importance.

Our new research suggests conversation styles in British social sectors are becoming increasingly polarised. Conversing with a resonance style is today conventional among the middle class, but doesn't happen as much among other social grades.

This is something that may sharpen the divide across classes as it shows how certain ways of talking may be perceived as not "engaging" or "inclusive" enough in conversations across those communities, as if they didn't care.

But what these findings show is precisely that because someone doesn't talk like you, it doesn't mean they care less.