# Study reveals how English idioms evolve across generations influenced by digital culture



A recent study by the British Council has shed light on the evolving nature of English idioms and phrases as they transition across generations, revealing distinctive preferences between older generations, millennials, and Generation Z. The research highlights how language adapts over time, especially under the influence of digital communication and social media.

The British Council’s report, which analysed 100 commonly used English expressions, shows a clear shift in popular idioms among generations. For example, while millennials often use the phrase “spill the beans” to mean revealing a secret, Generation Z prefers “spill the tea”, a term that gained traction from 2017 onwards largely due to social media platforms. The phrase “spill the beans” has been around since 1919 but saw a resurgence in the 1990s.

Older generations tend to favour traditional expressions such as “step up to the plate”, “bad-mouthing”, and “below the belt”. These idioms appear less frequently in the online commentary of younger people on platforms like YouTube and Twitch, suggesting a generational shift away from some established phrases.

Interestingly, some expressions, such as “red flag” and “green flag”, related to identifying negative and positive traits respectively—especially in the context of relationships—remain popular across all generations. According to the study, these terms rank within the top 20 used phrases by older generations, millennials, and Gen Z alike.

The report also details how certain idioms have experienced renewed popularity or been embraced by younger speakers after periods of lower use. For example, expressions such as “throw in the towel” and “joie de vivre” continue to be spoken by older and younger generations but are less common among millennials, indicating possible cycles in language usage.

Several modern phrases were identified as particularly characteristic of younger generations. “No cap”, meaning “no lie” or “I’m serious”, is notably the most popular phrase among Gen Z participants. Originating in African American English around 2011, the term “cap” refers to exaggeration or falsehood, with “no cap” used to assert honesty. This slang is present across different age groups but is most prominent among Gen Z.

Meanwhile, some traditional idioms such as “the powers that be” remain common among older generations and millennials but are seldom used by Gen Z. This highlights a trend of younger users phasing out some long-established phrases.

Dr Barbara McGillivray, a computational linguistics expert who led the research, explained the methodology: “Working on this collection, we had the chance to explore the deep historical roots of English expressions while applying modern computational techniques to trace their evolution. Analysing the frequency and emergence of idioms, proverbs, and phrases, we uncover not only the impact of historical events but also how the digital era shapes the language we use today.”

The study involved the analysis of millions of online documents and comments from diverse platforms targeting different demographic groups. It included expressions sourced from reputable references such as the Oxford English Dictionary, academic literature, newspapers, and internet platforms. Among the idioms examined were well-known examples like “breaking the ice” and newer phrases such as “ate and left no crumbs”, which means performing something perfectly.

Mark Walker, director of English and exams at the British Council, commented on the significance of the findings: “This latest study into the evolution of English explores the phrases we use to express shared ideas and experiences – it shows how much English is shaped by people around the world and how it continues to grow and adapt. By celebrating the richness of our language, we’re not just looking at its past, but also at the future of English. Whether for work, study, travel, relationships, or lifelong learning, as the global lingua franca, English is one of the key ways that people connect and engage across cultures.”

Furthermore, the report notes the rise in popularity of certain idioms linked to cultural moments. For instance, “bucket list” became widely used only after 2007 following the release of the film The Bucket List. The phrase refers to a list of goals or experiences one wishes to complete before death. Similarly, “it is what it is” showed increased usage after the Covid-19 pandemic began, despite having been around since 1949.

Overall, the British Council’s study offers a comprehensive insight into how English idiomatic expressions continue to evolve, influenced both by historical developments and the dynamic nature of online communication among different age groups.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/british-council-gen-z-english-british-youtube-b1224096.html> - This article supports the claim that Gen Z prefers phrases like 'spill the tea' over traditional idioms, while also highlighting how older expressions like 'step up to the plate' are falling out of favor among younger generations.
2. <https://www.britishcouncil.org/about/press/spilling-beans-spilling-tea-british-council-unveils-history-and-evolution-100-english> - This article discusses the British Council's collection of 100 English idioms and how phrases evolve across generations, with 'spill the beans' experiencing a resurgence in the 1990s and 'spill the tea' gaining popularity from 2017.
3. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/1304515-british-council-study-explores-evolution-of-english-phrases> - This report corroborates the study's methodology by highlighting its analysis of millions of online texts and notes how expressions such as 'glow up', 'no cap', and 'vibe check' are characteristic of Gen Z's language usage.
4. <https://www.britishcouncil.org/world-english-day> - This webpage supports the idea that English reflects cultural and generational changes, as it celebrates World English Day by exploring the evolution of phrases like 'main character energy', highlighting English's role as a global language.
5. <https://tribune.net.ph/2025/04/23/british-council-unpacks-history-behind-100-english-phrases> - This article details the British Council's categorization of phrases into various themes and discusses how the study captures the historical roots and modern adaptations of English expressions.
6. <https://www.noahwire.com> - This source provides a broader context for the British Council's study, highlighting how English idioms evolve over time and influence cross-cultural communication, although specific details would require direct access to the original article.
7. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/uk/millennials-spill-the-beans-while-gen-z-spills-the-tea-study-says-Z6IONE3AYJLVNEOSSVUDMIQFXE/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data