Let’s talk it over: Colloquial language and women’s print media cultures in Australia, 1950–1966

Catherine Horne Fisher

This article examines how postwar Australian women’s magazines promoted a modern ideal of Australian femininity through the use of colloquial language. The postwar years saw a shift in media representations of femininity which enabled colloquial language to become associated with ideal Australian womanhood. Although women, especially working-class women, had been using slang in their day-to-day lives for a long time, a new ideal of postwar womanhood represented in middle-class women’s magazines brought this language into the public sphere and gave it respectability. Through an analysis of readers’ letters to New Idea this article shows that women’s magazines became a space within which readers could formulate a distinctive identity as modern middle-class women through their use of informalities and colloquialisms. The centrality of colloquial language to postwar women’s magazines was a significant shift from the interwar years, when slang use was actively discouraged and therefore absent from the content of women’s media, except as a trend to be denounced. This change demonstrates that language played a central role in media representations of Australian femininity in the 1950s and 1960s.

In May 1954, just months after the Royal Tour of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip, Zara Holt unwittingly began a controversy in the pages of the Argus. In a report of her comments to a meeting of the Australian Women’s National League, Holt was quoted as saying that the Queen exclaimed ‘this must have cost a packet’ after being presented with a gift of a diamond and sapphire brooch at a state dinner in Canberra (Argus, May 25, 1954). Several days later, a letter was published in the newspaper questioning whether the Queen had really uttered the expression, as its colloquial overtones meant that it was ‘inconceivable that Her Majesty would use such a phrase’ (Argus, May 28, 1954). The Argus, however, assured the reader that she had said it, and further
noted that ‘she is a young woman, modern in her outlook, and, naturally enough, given to using the phrases and expressions of the times’ (May 28, 1954). Further letters continued to pour in over the issue, including one from a young mother ‘the same age as the Queen’, who argued that the phrase was a normal one for a young woman to use (Argus, June 1, 1954). After several more days of letters – supposedly the ‘biggest mail on a single subject’ they had ever received – the Argus published their editorial opinion on the issue, strongly arguing that the Queen was ‘a contemporary of our young people, not afraid to speak her mind and not afraid to use the language of her day’ and that the use of slang should therefore not be forbidden to her (June 2, 1954). This incident indicates that colloquial language was an important factor in performing modern womanhood in this era, which made it appropriate, and even desirable, for the Queen to use ‘phrases and expressions of the times’ and the ‘language of her day’.¹

This article examines how postwar Australian women’s magazines, particularly New Idea, promoted a modern ideal of Australian femininity through the use of colloquial language. I argue that the postwar years saw a shift in media representations of femininity that enabled colloquial language to become associated with ideal Australian womanhood. Although women, especially working-class women, had been using slang in their day-to-day lives for a long time, a new ideal of postwar womanhood represented in middle-class women’s magazines brought this language into the public sphere and gave it respectability. The 1950s and 1960s has often been characterised as a regressive period for gender relations, however, there has been recognition that many women negotiated the complex boundaries between their professional identities and family life in this period (Mackinnon and Gregory 2006, 64-66). Many women’s organisations also continued to campaign for a range of issues related to women’s social and political equality (Martin 1999, 204-06). The experiences and work of these women lay crucial groundwork for the development of the women’s liberation movement of the late 1960s and 1970s, thus dispelling the myth of the postwar era as one solely characterised by conservative domesticity (Martin 1999, 204-06; Mackinnon and Gregory 2006, 64-66). Taking this understanding of the period as its basis, this article demonstrates that Australian femininity in this era was often characterised as relaxed and modern in women’s print

¹ For more on the Queen as a modern woman see Lesley Johnson, The Modern Girl: Girlhood and Growing Up (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993), 44; also Ruth Feingold, “Marketing the Modern Empire: Elizabeth II and the 1953-1954 World Tour,” Antipodes 23 (2009), 147-54.
media, which led to the phrases and expressions of the times becoming a distinctive feature of the representation of middle-class femininity in women’s magazines during their mid-century heyday.

**Language, nation, gender**

Language is a key aspect of the construction of national identity, and the development of a uniquely Australian version of English has received substantial scholarly attention. In much of this work, however, it becomes apparent that the national language is in fact profoundly gendered; the Australian English so closely tied to Australian identity is also a performance of Australian masculinity. From the 1940s there was an increased interest in Australian slang, best demonstrated by the popularity of the work of Sidney Baker, who researched the topic during the 1940s and published several popular books including *The Australian Language* in 1945. This book listed a myriad of ‘Austral English’ terms such as *mate, digger, drongo* and a wealth of others, including terms in common use but not necessarily of Australian origin. Baker traced their etymology largely by reference to male experiences of grazing, the gold rush, bush life, sport, gambling and the military, amongst others. References to women’s use of these ostensibly masculine terms, let alone terms used predominantly by women, were few and far between. For example, Baker mentioned a handful of women writers such as Miles Franklin and Katherine Susannah Pritchard in his section on Australian colloquialisms in literature, however, these authors were cited as using examples of the same masculinised slang (310-12). He also noted that *The Australian Woman’s Mirror* had coined some new colloquial phrases, but then stated that ‘its original contributions have been few’, particularly when compared with other magazines such as *The Bulletin* and *Truth* (300). Indeed, Baker was somewhat aware of the masculine image of Australianisms he put forward. In his chapter on ‘National Characteristics’, he noted that the Australian trend to add a ‘-y or –ie suffix’ to the end of words was almost exclusively masculine, thereby acknowledging the exclusion of women from one of the most recognisably Australian speech traits (265-66).

This image of the masculinity of Australian English has had a significant impact, and indeed many recent publications dealing with the history of Australian English have tended to focus on a masculinised history of the national lexicon (Fritz 2007; Blair and Collins 2001). Graham Seal, for example, dedicated less than three pages to discussing women’s language
use in his 1999 book *The Lingo*, much of which is taken up by a discussion of ‘familyspeak’ used by both mothers and children. By contrast, men’s use of slang provides the focus for the majority of the book in chapters that deal with Larrikins, Diggers, ‘Blokes, Booze and Bad Language’, and Sport. The chapter which looks at slang in the workplace deals almost exclusively with male-dominated industries such as mining, tow-truck driving, squatting, stockbroking and the defence forces. More recently, Bruce Moore’s *Speaking Our Language*, published in 2008, aimed to tell the story of Australian English and its relationship with Australian history, identity and culture, yet no specific attention was given to women’s use of this language.

One important exception to this masculinised historiography is Nancy Keesing’s *Lily on the Dustbin*, published in 1982, which compiled a list of domestic slang, which she termed ‘Sheilaspeak’ and ‘Familyspeak’. Based on interviews and correspondence with ‘several hundred living Australians of all ages, from people in their nineties to children’, Keesing compiled a list of slang terms in current use, as well as many that had long been abandoned (4). Notably, Keesing also argued that ‘expressions used solely or chiefly by women have been overlooked completely’ in literature on Australian colloquialisms – something that continues over thirty years later (4). She also suggested that women’s slang use was not represented in media sources, the use of which has led to a male bias in the reporting of slang (4).

While these histories of Australian English have focused largely on men’s language use, there is a growing scholarship that considers the connections between speech and femininity both in Australia and internationally. This work also emphasises the centrality of language to class identity. In her work on Victorian Britain, Lynda Mugglestone has argued that in this era colloquialisms were constructed as markers of ‘lower, and less refined, levels of sensitivity’ than those expected of ideal middle-class ladies (2003, 144). Similarly, in her work on the history of Australian English, Joy Damousi has argued that etiquette guides and advice literature for middle-class women from the mid-nineteenth century until the 1940s exhorted them to avoid the use of colloquial language at all costs, as did speech training in schools, as it was perceived as too uneducated and vulgar (2010, 111 & 137). As Damousi has shown, language was a major aspect of the British Empire’s civilising mission, and the construction of an ideal form of women’s speech was part of the wider promotion of an imagined British community. Elocution material published in Britain was circulated in the colonies, and until the mid-twentieth
Horne Fisher

century Received Pronunciation was considered the ideal in Australia (Damousi 2010). Thus, it is apparent that slang usage was cast as the antithesis of middle-class young womanhood in the British world, an offence that undermined ideal feminine gentility.

Moreover, middle-class women were also expected to be the guardians of correct speech, and this responsibility included steadfastly eschewing the use of slang lest it infect the speech of their children. The importance of modelling correct speech was linked with morality, and middle-class women were expected to ensure both their own virtue and that of their children partly through the use of proper language (Damousi 2010, 140). For example Dame Enid Lyons, writing of her childhood in early-twentieth-century Tasmania, recalled that her mother ‘detested slang’, and considered it to be a sign of ‘slovenliness’ that ‘represented the forces of indiscipline, which in the young led easily to moral disintegration’ (1965, 32-33). Lyons contrasted her mother’s propriety with her father’s colourful use of slang, thereby demonstrating the different expectations of language use for men and women in this era (1965, 32-33).

All of this paints a picture of the Australian man defined by his use of slang, and the ideal Australian woman using ‘civilised’ British English. The increased acceptability of informal language use by women in the postwar years therefore presents an interesting challenge for understanding the gendered history of English in Australia. The relaxation of language formality for women was not accompanied by an attendant acceptability of women using the national ‘slanguage’, which remained steadfastly masculinised. Instead, women were exhorted to use new, feminine forms of colloquial language, thereby reinforcing their exclusion from a key expression of Australian identity, but also creating an alternative expression of femininity. Furthermore, this shift occurred in tandem with a growing influence of Americanisms on Australian English in the wake of the influx of American servicemen during the Second World War, the ever increasing popularity of American popular culture, and the birth of the teenager.

As Pam Peters has argued, concerns about the Americanisation of Australian English have been more or less consistently raised throughout the twentieth century (1998). The influence of media, especially the perceived presence of Americanisms in film, radio and television, was central to fears of Americanisation; as Damousi has demonstrated, there was a significant backlash over the cultural dominance of American talking pictures in the 1930s, as many argued that American speech was
vulgar and prone to corrupt young people (2007, 411). From its introduction in 1923, radio had also provided ‘a new benchmark of correct Australian English’ and sparked a rejuvenation of an Australian obsession with speech, as the medium required sustained and concentrated listening (Damousi 2010, 240-44), but the creeping Americanisation of popular culture and resentments over the influence of visiting American troops during the Second World War caused anxieties over the decline of radio speech in the 1940s and 1950s (Coleman 2012, 32-44). Listeners often wrote to radio magazines in this period to decry the use of faux-American accents on the air and to criticise perceived Americanisms such as putting an ‘r’ sound on the end of words (ABC Weekly, 20 January 1945, 8). The introduction of television in 1956 caused further concern about the influence of American culture and speech, and the early dominance of American programming on the new medium eventually caused the government to intervene with Australian content quotas in the 1960s (Herd 2012, 97 & 112).

The impact of Americanisation on Australian speech patterns in the immediate postwar era saw a decreasing use of British slang. Julie Coleman has argued that British terms became gradually outnumbered by a combination of distinctively Australian terms and American slang, as Australia shifted its affinities away from Britain and towards the United States (2012, 218). By the postwar era, therefore, the use of American slang reflected changing ideas about Australia’s identity and place in the world, and this shift was particularly apparent in use of American slang by Australian teenagers.

As noted earlier, women were discouraged from slang usage prior to the Second World War, as colloquial language was perceived as unfeminine and morally dangerous. However, from the late 1940s the emergent teenage culture provided a new space for girls to use slang terms along with boys, as a form of generational speech. Coleman has argued that slang in the English-speaking world became particularly associated with young people in the postwar era. Before 1945, slang was connected to specific, and usually male, subgroups of youth, most notably larrikins and young men in the military in both world wars (Coleman 2012, 19). The use of slang by these groups, while youthful, was not considered to be representative of young people as a whole. The postwar years, however, saw slang become associated with all young people under the rubric of the ‘teenager’, including girls and young women (Coleman 2012, 19). These slang terms were largely American in origin, and magazines aimed at teenage audiences demonstrated that this form of slang became
commonly used to address teenage readers and was also used by them in their letters to the publications.

Teenage magazines were central to the construction of teenage girlhood in the 1950s, as titles such as *Teens Today* and *Teenagers’ Weekly* promoted middle-class standards of behaviour that were intended to guard against working-class delinquency and sexual immorality (Horne 2011, 41). In the early 1950s American slang was associated with working-class subcultures, especially bodgies and widgies, and was therefore seen as an aberrant trait (Stratton 1992, 3). But by the late-1950s more respectable publications aimed at middle-class youth were using American slang, which indicated that teenage culture had become mainstream and that the use of colloquial language was seen as a normal part of adolescence, rather than an immoral threat.

For example, the letters pages of *Teenagers’ Weekly*, the teenagers’ supplement of *The Australian Women’s Weekly* published from 1959, regularly included terms such as *square* and *going steady*. In August 1959 nine letters were published that debated whether teenagers should *go steady* and, if so, when the appropriate age might be (*Teenagers’ Weekly*, August 19, 1959). *Square* became another commonly used term in the letters pages, particularly in relation to parents (*Teenagers’ Weekly*, August 10, 1965; May 11, 1966; June 16, 1965; November 4, 1959). Alongside publication of letters that used this type of language, *The Australian Women’s Weekly* even published lists of American slang terms from time to time, which aimed to provide teenagers with the most up-to-date terminology (*The Australian Women’s Weekly*, November 17, 1954; July 3, 1957). American forms of slang therefore came to index the modern, youthful and transnational femininity of the teenage girl, an identity that required the use of American terms in order to express modern concepts of dating and style. It is apparent that by the late 1950s and 1960s slang had become a defining feature of modern teenage girlhood in Australia. Terms such as *going steady* and *square* were used amongst teenagers to create a sense of shared identity and culture, which also excluded others who were not part of the same generation—and especially their parents. Teenage femininity was constructed against maternal womanhood, and the use of colloquialisms was a crucial way in which this demarcation was made apparent (Arrow 2009, 46).
Colloquial language and the counterpublic sphere of women’s magazines

The increasing acceptance of the use of American slang terms by teenagers during the 1950s was linked with a new acceptance of the use of colloquial language by middle-class women more generally. This represented a significant change in the role of language as a means of delineating class—using slang was no longer considered a vulgar working-class trait, but became part of modern middle-class femininity. In a notable shift from the prewar years, *The Australian Women’s Weekly* published an advice article in 1957 that argued that slang was no longer ‘distinctly common’ and that ‘even the best people use slang’, although the use of particular terms was generational. This article further noted that the acceptance of slang was a postwar phenomenon, and lampooned ‘out of date’ interwar etiquette experts who ‘thundered’ that the use of slang was in bad taste (*The Australian Women’s Weekly*, February 20, 1957). Other articles published at this time espoused the importance of women finding a middle way between using too much colloquial language and none at all (*Courier Mail*, April 25, 1953; *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 5, 1956). These articles presented a conundrum for women, as the use of formal English could result in an affected or stiff manner of speech, but slang use could conversely be perceived as unfeminine due to its particularly masculine associations. One article, published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1956, argued that the ideal solution was for women to create their own terms: ‘women must use their own brands of today’s English, not copy the ones men have developed for themselves’ (July 5). This middle way was therefore defined by the use of different terms to the masculinised Australianisms found in Baker’s work, as well as the youthful American terms used by teenagers. These different terms also represented a mixture of origins, including British and American, but some were also new terms made up by media outlets or even the readers themselves. Colloquial language therefore came to be considered an important part of speech which, when used appropriately, was a significant aspect of performing modern middle-class femininity. The use of colloquial language was promoted and reinforced by women’s magazines, which were primarily aimed at middle-class housewives.

The concept of the counterpublic sphere is a useful tool for understanding the connections between colloquial language, femininity and print media in the 1950s and 1960s. This concept has been explored in feminist media studies, including in Michelle Hilmes’ work on golden age American daytime radio and Miyako Inoue’s work on Japanese women’s magazines.
in the Meiji and Taishō eras (Hilmes 1997, 159-60; Inoue 2006, 110-12). These scholars have demonstrated the importance of both print and broadcast media for enabling middle-class women, in particular, to challenge their exclusion from the public sphere by delineating their own alternative public spaces. Inoue has argued that in late Meiji and Taishō era Japan, magazines aimed at young women used a specific type of ‘chatty’ language, which she has called schoolgirl speech, to construct a counterpublic community amongst readers (2006, 110-11). Inoue has shown that these magazines used this form of language to make it appear that girls were speaking to their friends, a style that readers also adopted when writing in to the magazines’ letters pages. She argues that the counterpublic developed in the readers’ letters column and the magazines more generally was grounded in the ‘public display of the private or the public communication of particularised interests and experiences specific to, or considered by the market to be specific to, “women”’ (Inoue 2006, 127-28).

As Nancy Fraser has argued, the Habermasean public sphere is a ‘designated theatre in modern societies in which political participation is enacted through the medium of talk’ (1993, 73). However, this sphere is exclusionary; despite an assumption that all subjects can function as if they are equal, or to somehow put aside their experiences of inequality, this is not possible in practice. Thus, according to Fraser, the hegemonic public sphere is a bourgeois, masculine and white ideal that masquerades as a space for all. This understanding of the public sphere does not mean that other groups have not constructed alternative public spheres; Fraser has posited the existence of a plurality of publics, or ‘counterpublics’, which can allow subordinated groups to create and disseminate alternative discourses ‘to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs’, as seen in the examples above (1997, 81). As indicated in the definition of the Habermasean public sphere, language is the key medium through which a public operates, and this remains true of the counterpublics found in women’s media. Indeed, Fraser has further argued that counterpublics use ‘alternative norms of public speech’, which hegemonic publics attempt to eradicate from their discursive rules (1997, 75).

I suggest that Australian women’s magazines represented a feminine counterpublic sphere that was constructed around the notion of women talking with each other. Sections of many magazines had titles that positioned them as talk, such as Woman’s Day’s ‘Let’s Talk About People’, The Australian Women’s Weekly’s ‘Let’s Talk of Interesting People’ and, in
particular, *New Idea*’s letters page, titled ‘Let’s Talk it Over’. Except for a brief change in 1945, in *New Idea* this section retained the title from 1928 and was usually illustrated with images of women, and sometimes men, talking together (*New Idea*, May 3, 1935, 19; May 3, 1940, 36; May 2, 1945, 22; May 3, 1950 4-5; May 5, 1965, 2-3). The visual accompaniment worked to further position the texts as a form of discussion.

The letters pages of women’s magazines were a space within which readers could formulate a distinctive identity as modern middle-class women through their use of informalities and colloquialisms. An analysis of the letters pages of *New Idea*, Australia’s longest running women’s magazine, reveals a distinct increase in the use of colloquial terms by women letter-writers over this period. Letters pages are useful sources in this regard as they can provide evidence of public language use by ordinary women, as well as of how language was used to construct a community amongst magazine audiences. Although it is important to be mindful that these letters were mediated by editorial policy and their status as public correspondences—and thus their ability to reveal the private language use of women is limited—in a history of media representation, letters pages have provided a rare opportunity for audiences to express themselves (Scott 1998). Furthermore, as Inoue has argued, it is ‘important to recognize the textuality of the readers’ column as a genre, which simulates face-to-face communication and produces real effects on readers’ participation—imagined though it may be—in the magazine community’ (2006, 128-29). The language used in these letters therefore worked to create an imagined community amongst readers, which evoked the kinds of conversations women could have over their fences or in their living rooms.

This postwar shift to an increasing acceptance of women’s use of colloquial language is evident in comparisons between issues of *New Idea* published between the 1930s and 1950s. I have sampled a total of ninety-six letters pages, made up of twelve from each of the years 1930, 1935, 1940, 1945, 1950, 1955, 1960, and 1965. After having identified a distinct change in the language used in the letters between 1950 and 1960, I also sampled letters from the surrounding years in order to gain a fuller picture of the tone and content of reader correspondence in this period.

Originally started as a monthly in 1902 by Melbourne publisher Thomas Shaw Fitchett, *New Idea* was renamed *Everylady’s Journal* in 1911.
However, *New Idea* was brought back as a weekly in 1928 to supplement the monthly *Everylady’s Journal*, which eventually ceased publication in 1938. Fitchett Brothers Publishing, the publisher of *New Idea*, was purchased by Southdown Press in 1945, and Southdown Press was in turn purchased by News Limited in 1951. In 1954, News Limited reported that it had improved the magazine’s circulation, which in 1956 was estimated at over 200,000 readers. E. M. Webb, the editor of *New Idea* during this period, introduced new features including the popular ‘Mere Male’ section, in which women wrote humorous stories about their supposedly clueless husbands (Hutchings 2014). The new direction taken by the magazine after News Limited’s ownership, and particularly during Webb’s editorship, is reflected in the significant increase in slang use in its pages over this period. This distinctive shift can be read as an attempt to make the magazine of greater relevance to the daily experience of its readers, and particularly to ingratiate the magazine with women as a space in which they could freely discuss their lives without pretence, and in turn have a more realistic representation presented to them within its pages.

Prior to the Second World War, the letters pages of *New Idea* published well-worded paragraphs that demonstrated wit, intelligence, cultural knowledge or domestic expertise. These letters would include interesting facts about history, foreign cultures, snippets from other publications, or handy hints and tips of various kinds (*New Idea*, July 4, 1930 10-11; May 3, 1935, 19-21; May 3, 1940, 36-37). Some readers also sent in poetry they had written (*New Idea*, May 3, 1935, 19; *New Idea*, March 1, 1940, 47). However, they usually did not reference everyday life or social interactions, and used a formal tone and language. Readers’ contributions were also paid for, and prospective contributors were encouraged to ‘earn extra pocket money by writing interesting paragraphs for these pages’ and to ‘study the character of the pars accepted and printed hereunder and have a try yourself’ (*New Idea*, March 7, 1930, 8). These instructions resulted in paragraphs that aimed to be interesting journalistic content, rather than personal opinions and grievances. The issue published on 2 May 1930, for example, contained paragraphs on birds, the history of jewels, and the confusion over whether Thomas Edison or Alexander Graham Bell had invented the telephone (10-11). This tone appears to have continued throughout the decade. The 1 November 1935 issue contained paragraphs that listed the meanings of American state names, marriage advice given to men and women from a psychologist, the number of clocks installed on the Queen Mary, and the affectionate nature of elephants (19-21).
By 1945, the title of ‘Let’s Talk it Over’ changed briefly to ‘Let’s Talk About the Things that Interest Women’, and the letters began to reflect day-to-day interactions and domestic life to a greater extent. One letter published on 7 November argued that Australian housewives were well-off, while another argued that Australian women were ‘natural’ and not ‘homely’, as English sailors had apparently described them (New Idea, November 7, 1945, 22). The letters were also shorter than previously, as they were no longer extensively quoting from other sources. By 1950 there was an even greater focus on everyday life. The issue published on 6 September 1950, for example, contained discussions of a frustratingly casual ice delivery man, a friend who would not use her floor polisher until she had finished paying it off, inconsiderate guests, and annoying door slammers (4-5). Some colloquialisms also began to be used in the letters at this time, such as *wifey*, *coz* (cousin), and *Mr Turkey Gobbler* (as one reader referred to her aggressive turkey). The letters published on 5 July 1950 referenced good and absentminded neighbours, the fitful sleep of husbands and children, rude acquaintances and the contrasts between poor and rich friends (4-5). The terms used by these contributors included *girlie* (daughter), *only* (only child), *hubby*, *sonny*, and *Miss Pious*.

By 1955, the letters pages came to be dominated by stories from everyday life, and the use of slang served to give these stories greater authenticity and humour. The letters page had significantly changed from the musings on high culture or interesting vignettes that dominated in the 1930s, to now largely consist of complaints or humorous stories about neighbours, friends, husbands and children. This trend increased through the remainder of the decade, and informal language seems to have increasingly been used as a way of signalling this shift. The most common colloquial phrases used were those related to neighbours, such as *nabe*, *Mrs Nextdoor*, *Mrs Down-a-bit*, and a variety of others in this vein (New Idea, September 23, 1959, 8-9; January 6, 1960, 8-9; May 4, 1960, 8-9). These were also sometimes varied to describe personalities or characteristics, such as *Mrs Tall Poppy* or *Mrs Haughty* (New Idea, September 30, 1959, 8; October 7, 1959, 8). Children also received this treatment, with terms such as *Miss Ten* or *Master Eleven* standing in for *daughter or son* (New Idea, October 7, 1959, 9; October 28, 1959, 8; July 6, 1960, 8). The term *sis* also gained heavy usage, as did *hub* and *M.M.* in reference to husband (New Idea, September 7, 1955, 11; September 30, 1959, 8; October 21, 1959, 9). *M.M.* was particular to *New Idea* and based on its popular ‘Mere Male’ section (Hutchings 2014). The following
letter published in December 1959 provides an example of how these kinds of terms were casually used in reader correspondence:

Nabe confided in me that she and her M.M. usually took it in turns to get up to her four littlies in the night. She was extra tired one night, so each time there was a wail she just nudged her M.M. and said, “Your turn this time. I was up last time.” It worked, too. No hope of me trying it out, though, as my M.M. is a very light sleeper (New Idea, December 16, 1959, 8).

This author used colloquial language to position herself as a woman casually chatting with other women, in this case the readers of New Idea. The terms she used specifically worked to target a specific audience of similar women and, crucially, to exclude men. If we consider the definition of slang as informal and confined to a specific context or group, this example demonstrates the use of a particular colloquial vocabulary, confined to ‘Let’s Talk It Over’ and the women in that extended community.

Another letter published in September 1960 focused on the social life of the local community, and the crucial place of conversation between neighbours:

Mrs. New Nabe has already got a bad name with Ma Gossip. “She must have come to this suburb, to hide away from something. Why she hasn’t tried to make friends with a soul in this street yet!” On the other hand, seeing the lovely curtains that have gone up, and the change in the front garden, it could be that Mrs. New Nabe is a worker and not a gossiper! (New Idea, September 14, 1960, 8).

This writer used the term nabe to signal both a spatial closeness, but also an attendant meaning of friendship usually implied in the use of the term. From my sampling of this magazine, it is clear that nabe refers to a friendship, or at least a frequent social relationship, fostered by shared circumstances. Mrs. New Nabe’s refusal to engage with the other women in her street subverts the expectations of the suburban community, although the author does not necessarily see her behaviour as a negative thing as she is attending to her home. Indeed, the use of Ma Gossip signals a negative side to the close neighbour relationship, and again this is a theme that recurs frequently in the pages of ‘Let’s Talk it Over’. Nabes could prove to be a severe annoyance through being too talkative, selfish or behaving in bizarre ways (New Idea, January 5, 1955, 9; May 4, 1960, 8). This letter therefore drew on discourses frequently articulated in
New Idea, and the use of colloquial language easily worked to reference those broader themes.

The ‘Let’s Talk it Over’ section of New Idea had a somewhat different culture to the letters pages of other leading women’s magazines such as The Australian Women’s Weekly and Woman’s Day. New Idea positioned its letters page as a conversation amongst readers, just like visiting a friend’s house, a café, or a party, and the use of slang became an important part of constructing this virtual community. The other magazines, however, positioned their letters pages using a ‘letter to the editor’ format, which encouraged a different style of writing, with considerably less usage of colloquialisms (see Woman’s Day, May 2, 1955, 6; The Australian Women’s Weekly, May 4, 1955, 10). However, although the letters pages of The Australian Women’s Weekly and Woman’s Day differed to New Idea in their tone, purpose and content, these magazines also increased their use of informal language throughout the 1950s and 1960s. For these magazines, particular colloquial terms were used throughout feature articles and regular segments, and these selected terms were subsequently also used in published letters from readers. Overall, this trend reflected an increasing use of a ‘chatty’ style of writing, which was an important development in the construction of the counterpublic spheres of women’s media; thus, slang was used by magazines such as Woman’s Day and The Australian Women’s Weekly to obscure the authorial or editorial voice and make it appear as if women were speaking to each other (Inoue 2006, 111-12). For example, an analysis of the Weekly reveals that the usage of cuppa increased in the 1950s, with articles referring to ‘The dearer “cuppa”’ or ‘A nice (much cheaper) cuppa tea’ (The Australian Women’s Weekly, September 8, 1954, 2; May 29, 1957, 13). A series of letters also debated whether it was appropriate to make a ‘friendly cuppa’ for calling tradesmen, thus linking the editorial and journalistic content of the magazine with reader correspondence (The Australian Women’s Weekly, October 18, 1961, 32).

The 1950s and 1960s was a period of change in Australian domestic life, with increasing suburbanisation and the rise of a consumer society leading to the ‘organisation and regulation of family consumption’ becoming a central aspect of women’s domestic role (Sheridan et al. 2001, 19; Mackinnon and Gregory 2006, 78). The use of colloquial language reflected these shifts as the terms used in women’s magazines represented a particular discourse of modern, middle-class, domestic femininity rooted in postwar Australian suburban life. The terms related to neighbours situated the writer in a suburban context; the terms referring
to children, siblings and husbands highlighted the writer’s place within a nuclear family; and *cuppa* was linked to home entertaining as well as to home-based pleasures. These terms all straddled the line between adding colour to women’s correspondence, while also ensuring that they were not perceived as unfeminine. Furthermore, by using feminine terms and not the ones men had supposedly developed for themselves, both the editors of women’s magazines and their readers were involved in the construction of a counterpublic space within the letters pages in which women’s language could be used to express thoughts and experiences particular to that group of readers. Although Sidney Baker may have considered that the contributions of the *Australian Woman’s Mirror* to the Australian language had been few, it is apparent that women’s magazines played an important role in redefining modern middle-class femininity to include the use of colloquial language.

**Conclusion**

The history of Australian language has focused on men’s language use and has consistently ignored women’s use of colloquialisms. To challenge this omission, I have revealed a rich archive of women’s colloquial language in postwar print media, which reveals how language was connected with femininity and publicly used by women. American slang came to be connected to teenagehood, and girls and young women could use these terms as a form of generational speech. This teenage slang worked to position girls within a teenage culture that also included boys, but also against the types of speech used by their parents and older siblings. An analysis of newspapers and women’s magazines from this era also reveals that the importance of women striking a balance between excessive and too little colloquial language began to be emphasised in the 1950s, and this ideal was reflected in women’s letters to magazines as well as the general content of the publications. The centrality of colloquial language to postwar women’s magazines was a significant shift from the interwar years, when slang use was actively discouraged and therefore absent from the content of women’s media, except as a trend to be denounced. This change demonstrates that language played a central role in print media representations of Australian femininity in the 1950s and 1960s. The new spirit of the postwar era called for a relaxation of stringent language rules, and colloquial language became both an important part of feminine popular culture and crucial to a new ideal of modern womanhood, which could even enable the Queen to exclaim ‘this must have cost a packet’ and be praised for it.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Karen Fox, Amanda Laugesen and Simon Fisher for commenting on previous versions of this article, and the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions.

This research is supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship.

Bibliography

Periodicals

Argus
The Australian Women’s Weekly
New Idea
Teenagers’ Weekly: Supplement to The Australian Women’s Weekly
Woman’s Day

Secondary Sources


Author Biography

Catherine Horne Fisher is a PhD candidate in the School of History at the Australian National University. Her thesis examines radio speech and Australian women’s citizenship in the mid-twentieth century. She was awarded a National Archives of Australia/Australian Historical Association postgraduate scholarship in 2016. She is currently a member of the editorial collective of Lilith: A Feminist History Journal, and the editorial assistant for the National Centre of Biography’s journal Using Lives: Essays in Australian Biography and History.

Email: catherine.horne@anu.edu.au