ICYMI, English language is changing faster than ever, says expert

Parents’ fomo is justified as they are left behind by terms like fleek, bae and other neologisms their children are using online.

The English language is evolving at a faster rate now than at any other time in history because of social media and instant messaging, a language expert has said. John Sutherland, professor of English from University College London, who led a study into common social media and “text speak” terms, found most parents were baffled by the language used by their children.

According to the study, commissioned by Samsung for a phone launch, there was a “seismic generational gap” between the older and younger generations when it came to how modern informal language was used. Modern terms such as “fleek” and “bae” were found to be the most commonly confused by parents, with 10% of the 2,000 surveyed being able to identify the true meaning of “bae” – a term of affection; while 86% of parents who took part in the survey said they felt teenagers spoke an entirely different language on social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook.

“Fleek” – which means looking good – came top of the list of terms parents did not understand, with 43% selecting it as a term they did not know. This was ahead of fomo (fear of missing out) and bae (thought to have come from “before anyone else”, or to represent a shortened version of “babe”) – which 40% of parents said they didn’t know.

Popular social media acronyms ICYMI (in case you missed it), TBT (throwback Thursday) and NSFW (not safe for work) also made the list of terms parents failed to understand. Sutherland said: “The limitation of characters on old handsets were a key factor in the rise of acronyms in text messaging such as TXT, GR8 and M8.

However technological evolution has meant that these words are now effectively extinct from the text speak language and are seen as antique text speak.”

The rise of emojis could be the next phase in language and communication, and that the increasing use of icons had an historical link, Sutherland said.

“The use of audio and visual messaging has become more commonplace with the soaring popularity of social media and instant messaging apps such as Instagram, Vine and Snapchat,” he said.

“In fact we are moving to a more pictographic form of communication with the increasing popularity of emoticon.

“This harks back to a caveman form of communication where a single picture can convey a full range of messages and emotions.

“In the future less words and letters will be used in messaging as pictures and icons take over the text speak language.”

How do you interact with language? How do your online interactions affect your use of language in other written communications? What is the relationship between online text and spoken language?