When Two Basic Principles Clash: About the Validity of Written Chat Language as a Research Tool for Spoken Language Variation. Flemish Chatspeak as a Test Case

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## Sample

Chat conversations produced by Flemish teenagers from two subgroups: younger teenagers aged 13 to 16 and older adolescents aged 17–20. Most of the data (i.e. 63.74% of the 1,990,172 words) were from the Instant Messaging (im) services of (mainly) msn and Facebook The rest of the data (36.26%) were provided by the (until recently) popular social network site Netlog. Apart from synchronous chat conversations the Netlog corpora also contain short profile texts (in which members present themselves), blog-entries and comments on pictures.

The teenagers were from the three main dialect regions in Flanders: the central Brabantic area is represented by the province of Antwerp, the western and eastern periphery are represented by informants from respectively the provinces of
West-Flanders and Limburg The linguistic variables are typical markers of Flemish colloquial substandard speech, so-called Flemish ‘tussentaal’,3 and seem to be endogenous in most Flemish dialects. While the Brabant-Antwerp region is assumed to be trendsetting in present-day Flemish supraregional (sub)standardisation processes, the West-Flemish dialect region is known to be marked by strong dialect vitality and the Limburg region is subject to radical dialect loss.

# Abstract

Written chatspeak is said to be marked by two basic principles: (1) write like you speak and (2) write as fast as possible. As for Flemish chat language, the first principle seems to result in a multilayered mixed code, in which dialectical, substandard Flemish and standard Dutch features interact in an eclectic way. In addition, most of the chatters insert English words in their chat discourse as well. This intensive code mixing is assumed to be – at least to a considerable extent – a reflection of the daily speech of these Flemish chatters. But what about the validity of this assumption? Can chatspeak function as an alternative dataset for the study of (spoken) language variation and change and thus as a research tool for e.g. the study of Flemish teenage talk and the representation of non-standard speech in spoken interaction? The dependent variables for the present test case are two substandard Flemish (or ‘tussentaal’) features that urge the chatters to violate the second principle, since their use implies an extension of the utterance. The central question is whether the second principle prevents the use of these substandard forms in Flemish chatspeak. In other words, do the analyses undermine the validity of using written chat corpora as a graduator for speech variation? We finish with a small excursion on the use of English by the Flemish chatters: can we separate English insertions that are triggered by the chat medium from English insertions that are not?

# Outcome

"English is firmly embedded in the linguistic repertoire of the Flemish teenagers, but it certainly makes no sense to assume that Flemish teenagers pepper their spoken Dutch with English to the same extent. Several factors may encourage or discourage the use of English in chat language. Generally speaking, chat language seems to be receptive to international conventions and trends to such an extent that the use of English gets a strong boost. The stimulating factors thus certainly seem to prevail over the inhibiting factors, but the impactshould certainly not be overestimated.
It does stay a fact that adolescents are confronted with English continuously via online games, social network sites, Google searches, video streaming via YouTube, etc. Consequently, quotes are ‘copy-pasted’ and specific computer, Internet and game terminology are used which offers gamers and other chatters the opportunity for online information and exchange on their internet experiences. Most clearly linked to the chat medium are all kinds of English acronyms and abbreviations such as btw ‘by the way’, cu ‘see you’, omg ‘oh my god’, lol ‘laughing out loud’. They make up a quarter of the deliberate insertions since the English acronyms are eagerly and easily adopted
and integrated into Flemish chat language." (De Decker et al., 2016, pp. 120-123)