Adolescents’ perceptions of social media writing: Has non-standard become the new standard?

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168 Flemish teenagers between 15 and 20 years old attending the final three years of secondary education in four different secondary schools in the central province of Antwerp (Flanders, Bdlgium)

# Abstract

The present study examines adolescents’ attitudes and perceptions with respect to writing practices on social media. It reports the findings of a survey conducted among 168 Flemish high school students with various socio-demographic profiles. The survey examines linguistic attitudes and awareness of sociolinguistic patterns in computer-mediated communication, as well as relevant language skills. Moreover, the present paper uniquely combines the study of both adolescents’ perceptions and their production of informal online writing, as the participants’ responses to the survey are compared to their peers’ actual online writing practices.The respondents appear to have a fairly accurate intuition with respect to age and gender patterns in social media writing, but much less so with respect to education-related patterns. Furthermore, while typical chatspeak phenomena are easily identified as such, ordinary spelling mistakes often are not. Strikingly, the teenagers do not claim a high standard language proficiency, although they do state to care about standard language use in formal contexts. Finally, some significant differences were found between participants with distinct socio-demographic profiles, e. g. girls and highly educated teenagers appear to be more sensitive to the potential negative connotations of linguistic features and that sensitivity seems to increase with age.

# Outcome

"Particular features are enregistered as indexes of social group belonging and more specifically as male or female or as indexical
of early adolescence or late adolescence. However, there is no such enregisterment as far as educational background is concerned. This discrepancy could be related to the more sensitive nature of this topic involving hierarchization. An alternative explanation is that teenagers in different educational tracks truly live in different ‘worlds’. (Online) conversations among interlocutors with distinct educational backgrounds are much less common than conversations between boys and girls or between teenagers of a different age. Typical chatspeak markers were detected with high accuracy, whereas performance for classical spelling errors was much worse. This suggests that adolescents use typical chatspeak features intentionally, and that they are aware of the genre-specific (in)appropriateness of these linguistic markers. Additional questions on the importance of standard Dutch indeed revealed that the participants only
considered this register to be vital in formal (e.g. school-related) contexts. Many linguistic variants and varieties seem to be ‘accepted’ on social media, yet, they are not all appreciated to the same extent. The use of certain non-verbal elements in chat messages appeared to evoke negative connotations: for instance, ending a chat message with a full stop was often perceived as unfriendly. This points to the existence of alternative norms for online writing: such as moderate use of emoji for closing messages. Most Flemish teenagers share a common ground, regardless of their specific age, gender or educational track. However, some subtle but interesting differences could be noted: girls showed a significantly weaker awareness of or ‘belief’ in educational linguistic differences and older teenagers and teenagers in the theory-oriented General Education were more likely to detect and adequately convert the divergences from formal standard
writing." (Hilte et al., 2019, pp. 30-32)