

Chat Alert! Language in Danger?

On the Chat Language of Flemish Adolescents and Young Adults

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Is interlanguage becoming the common colloquial speech in Flanders? De Caluwe (2009) used the four features put forward by Lemahieu (2008) to state this argument. Although Lemahieu focused on Standard Dutch, these features can also be used for research of written interlanguage. This contribution examines chat language of 60 subjects, both male and female, within the five Flemish provinces (A (Antwerp), EF (East Flanders), FB (Flemish Brabant), L (Limburg), and WF (West Flanders)). Next to gender and geographical divisions age is also taken into account. The research is based upon several online chat conversations that were fragmented and analyzed. The analysis of the above-mentioned variants per participant, age, and province gives an idea of the presence of interlanguage. The variants of Lemahieu are therefore an interesting tool, because they provide data regarding how many times a representative selection of Flemish chatters with regard to a set of variants choose to use interlanguage in a situation in which they have the choice to use inter- or standard language. The conclusion resulting from this research reveals that there are indeed regional variants and there is a high percentage of interlanguage, but Standard Dutch still prevails. Therefore, it is claimed that chat language does not impoverish the standard written language, but enriches it and that it rather should be considered as change in progress.

Keywords: written interlanguage, chat language, change in progress, Flanders

Introduction

According to Watt (2010) digital computer technology “has become [...] an increasingly popular means of communication” (p. 141). Van de Craen (2005) agreed by stating that almost every youngster chats nowadays. Nevertheless, the English verb “to chat” is subject to a specific use. When writing a letter to someone, it normally takes a while before you get an answer. Nevertheless, people who chat with one another do not have to wait that long. Chatters, as the people who chat are called, select a preferred chat box or chat room on the Internet and leave several messages there, which appear immediately on the screen of the other chatters that are present, also called “logged in”, at that moment.

The second difference with writing or sending a letter has to do with the number of recipients. When writing a letter you normally have a specific person in mind you are writing to. This does not have to be the case when chatting. As mentioned above, chatters pick their preferred chat box and can easily talk with other online chatters without knowing them personally. Therefore, it is different from sending or writing a letter: The participants of

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the “chat meeting” are all present at the same time and respond to one another, using these chat messages, resembling a conversation in real time.

Table 1

The Differences Between Writing a Letter and Chatting

Writing a letter	Chatting
The answer takes a while	Immediate answer
Directed to a specific person	Directed to several persons
The participants are at different places	The participants are in the same “chat room”
Both written	

It is clear that when people “chat”, they are using their computer. The chatting happens through chat boxes and chat rooms on the Internet. These chatters are not at the same place but are present at several locations. Nevertheless, they are all logged in at the same place: the chat box. Besides, we are dealing with written language and not spoken language.

Each message in these chat rooms starts with the name of the chatter, or, better said, its nickname, because chatters will rarely use their own first or last name. They create a sort of “alias”, which contains all sorts of signs they can find on their keyboard, for example “J€\$\$1c4” (Jessica), “L1l M1\$\$ \$0m3th1ng” (Lil [Little] Miss Something), and “W84M3” (Wait for me). These names are called “usernames” and are often linked to a password.

But what makes this chat language so intriguing and why is it so interesting to examine? It all has to do with the written language and how it has gotten a different function through chatting and through other forms of informal Internet communication (Schlobinski, 2005). Until a few years ago, written language was not used for synchronous communication. That has changed. The online communication in chat boxes resembles “face-to-face” communication, although these conversations do not happen “face-to-face”, they are written and Internet-based. Vandekerckhove (2009) claimed that this results in two maxims, which chatters use consciously or automatically:

(1) Write as you speak. The purpose of writing something down is mainly to hold on to it for a while, to think about the content and write correctly, sometimes even re-write. Writing is therefore not an easy process. Nevertheless, speaking is much easier. When chatting, many elements that are also displayed in speaking are present.

(2) Write as fast as you can (or try to increase your typing speed). Sometimes people want to tell so many things, it has to happen fast. In chatting, the same happens: The writing happens fast and, as with speaking, the official spelling is often not taken into account and punctuation is omitted, leading to this so-called “interlanguage”.

In his article “Tussentaal Wordt Omgangstaal in Vlaanderen”, De Caluwe (2009) agreed with Vandekerckhove, by stating that interlanguage is becoming the common colloquial speech in Flanders. He used the following features, put forward by Lemahieu (2008) as his main arguments. Examples (1)-(4) given in the “Flemish interlanguage” part are not fixed and can differ from one another depending on the investigated province (cf. section “Research for This Specific Study”):

(1) The diminution on *-je* or *-ke*;

Example (1) Standard Dutch: *huisje* (little house), *boompje* (little tree), *tuintje* (little garden)

Flemish interlanguage: *huiske*, *boomke*, *tuineke*

(2) The use of the *je-* or *ge-*system;

Example (2) Standard Dutch: *je, jij*, and formal *u*

Flemish interlanguage: *ge, gij*, and *u* in both formal and informal language use

(3) The inflection of articles, possessive, and demonstrative pronouns and adjectives;

Example (3) Standard Dutch: *een grote hond* (a big dog)

Flemish interlanguage: *ne groten (h)ond*

(4) The use of a “redundant” *dat* (*that*) with conjunctions and pronouns.

Example (4) Standard Dutch: *ik weet niet of dat kan* (I do not know whether that is possible)

Flemish interlanguage: *ik weet niet of dat dat kan*

Research for This Specific Study

Objective

The objective of this research is to examine chat language of 60 male and female subjects from the five Flemish provinces A (Antwerp), EF (East Flanders), FB (Flemish Brabant) with Brussels, L (Limburg), and WF (West Flanders) (see Figure 1) on the basis of the above-mentioned features. By doing so a statement can be made on the manner these subjects apply the four variants of Lemahieu. Next to taking a look at significant similarities and differences between the different provinces and the gender of the subjects, age is also taken into consideration by dividing them into three age groups: from ± 15 to 20 years old (adolescents), from 21 to 25 years old, and from 26 to 30 years old (young adults).

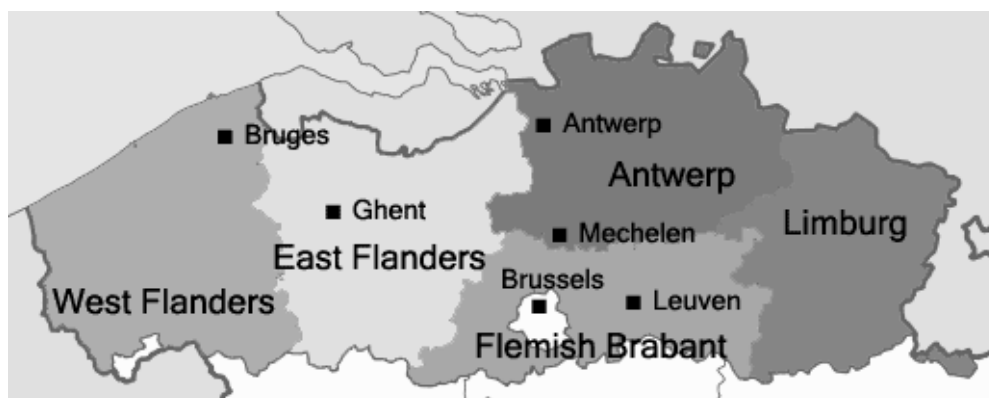


Figure 1. The provinces in Flanders. Source: Adapted from Vanhaleweyk (2014).

Material

The research is based upon several online chat conversations that were fragmented and analyzed. The material for this research was collected in 2010 and 2011 on the website <http://www.chat.to.be>. This “chat channel” was chosen because of the possibility to log in to a specific provincial chat room. Because the chat room “obliges” you to actively participate to the conversations (after a silence of 20 minutes the person gets “kicked out” of the chat room), the author decided to focus on “private chat conversations”. By doing so the author could easily chat with both male and female subjects and analyze their personal language use. The author’s utterances, which were written as faithfully as possible in Standard Dutch, were not taken into account in the final research. Remarkably, no significant differences in the subjects’ language were found when the

author wrote in Standard Dutch or Flemish interlanguage, as shown in the following tables (only two examples are given). This means the subjects did not switch from Flemish inter- to Standard Dutch language or vice versa when the author did so.

The conversations include the same investigated subjects (<T> and <V>) at a different time and the author using two different nicknames (here twice indicated as <E>) in order to maintain a certain amount of reliability (see Tables 2-3).

Table 2

Chat Conversations in Standard Dutch and Flemish Interlanguage (Same Subject) Between E and T

Conversation 1a (Standard Dutch) Subject <T> (FB, 30 years old, male) 09/02/2011	Conversation 1b (Flemish interlanguage) Subject <T> (FB, 30 years old, male) 13/02/2011
<T> hey <E> hallo, alles goed met je? <T> ja zenne en medu? <E> met mij is ook alles goed :) <T> was je as! <E> 22 v Vlaams-Brabant :) mag ik de jouwe ook? <T> tuurlijk <T> kben 30 vl-br <T> kzen mss een beetje te oud voor u? <E> ik ben niet op zoek naar een relatie hoor <E> een ontspannend praatje is al meer dan genoeg <T> ah <T> ja, dan zijnder geen probleemkes eh <T> kzen eigenlijk wel op zoek <T> ma kwil gerust me u gewoon babbele zenne <E> ok :) <T> zijde nog een studenteke?	<E> hallo, stoork ni? <T> nee zenne, was je as! <E> 22 v vl-br en den uwe? <T> kben 30 vl-br <T> kzen mss een beetje te oud voor u? <E> kzen ni op zoek hoor :) gwn een babbelke is voldoende :) <T> ah <T> ja dan hemme we geen probleemkes eh <T> kzen eigenlijk wel op zoek ma een gwn babbelke medu is ook goe zenne <E> ok :) wa doede zoal int leve? <T> werkende mens eh :) <T> en gij? <T> ook of nog een studenteke?

Table 3

Chat Conversations in Standard Dutch and Flemish Interlanguage (Same Subject) Between E and V

Conversation 1a (Standard Dutch) Subject <S> (EF, 22 years old, female) 10/05/2011	Conversation 1b (Flemish interlanguage) Subject <S> (EF, 22 years old, female) 24/05/2011
<V> hedde een vriendje? <E> ja :) en jij? <V> ok <V> ma kzen ni gelukkeg <E> dan moet je ervoor zorgen dat je terug gelukkig wordt <V> das ni makkelek <V> kzen vri zot van da gastje ze <V> ma hij zit bij een andere madammeke	<V> en hedde gij een vriendje? <E> ja :) en gij? <V> neeje, kware ni gelukkeg <E> ow, vertel? als ge wilt? <V> kware vri zot van me gastje <V> ma hij had nog andere madammekes <V> kware ni alleene <V> en da es nooit ni goe <V> dus kem em ne sjot gegove

To avoid the so-called “Observer’s Paradox” (cf. Labov, 1972), the objects were not informed on or about this research, because it might have influenced their spontaneous language use. Because all the objects used nicknames and no personal details were given no violations on privacy have occurred. Nevertheless, a remark needs to be made. The information for this research is based upon the information given by the subjects. It is fairly easy to fake an identity and pretend to be someone else in this specific environment. Therefore, this research is mainly based on the information given by registered members, trying to avoid the amount of fake information.

Methodology

The analysis of the above-mentioned variants per participant, age and province gives an idea of the presence of interlanguage in the different Flemish provinces and age categories. The variants of Lemahieu (2008) are therefore an interesting tool, because they provide data regarding how many times a representative selection of Flemish chatters (60 subjects) with regard to a set of variants (Lemahieu's variants) choose to use interlanguage in a situation in which they have the choice to use Flemish inter- or Standard Dutch language.

An example is given to illustrate: When looking at the following sentence in Flemish interlanguage, one can wonder whether all the words in this sentence are indeed written interlanguage: *Ge kan dat niet* instead of the Standard Dutch *Je kan dat niet* (*You cannot do that*). Only the *ge* in the first sentence can be categorized as being "interlanguage". The other words are written in the same way as in the Standard Dutch equivalent. Therefore, $\frac{3}{4}$ of the sentence is still considered to be Standard Dutch.

Results

In this research, the chat language of 60 subjects was investigated on the basis of four features, which leads to the following results:

(1) The provinces L and WF constantly use the diminution on *-je*. This applies to both genders and all age categories. The other provinces use a higher percentage of the diminution on *-ke*.

(2) The subjects using the official Standard Dutch *je-system* are all adolescents in L and all subjects in WF. A was the only province in which all subjects used the *ge-system*. No significant differences were found concerning the different genders.

(3) When looking at the inflections, different results were obtained, even within the provinces themselves. Nevertheless, as with the diminution and the *je-* or *ge-system*, no significant differences were found between the male and female subjects: (a) An inflection of articles was present in the provinces A and FB. In EF an equal amount of inflections and Standard Dutch use of articles was noticed; (b) The possessive pronouns were inflected in A, L, FB, and with the oldest young adolescents in WF. The adolescents and second age category in this last province equally inflected the possessive pronouns and used the Standard Dutch form. This was also the case for all subjects in EF; (c) The demonstrative pronouns were inflected in A and FB and with the third age category in EF. In L only the third category made the inflections and did this as much as they did not; and (d) The adjectives were inflected in FB. This also occurred in A and EF but the amount of inflections and the Standard Dutch use of the adjectives were equal. L and WF did not inflect the adjectives at all.

(4) The "redundant" *dat* (that) occurred in the provinces A and FB. In L and WF, it did not. In EF, only the adolescents made the inflection, while the young adults had an equal amount of inflections and Standard Dutch utterances. As with the other features, no significant differences occurred between the male and female participants.

Discussion

The conclusion resulting from this research revealed that there are indeed regional variants and there is a high percentage of interlanguage, especially in A and FB, but Standard Dutch still prevails in all provinces. This supported the idea that chat language does not necessarily diminish or violate the Standard Dutch

language. Given that the interlingual elements are rather added to the generally used Standard Dutch language, the language is in fact enriched rather than impoverished by this chat language and should therefore be seen as change in progress.

Education

To conclude, this research also focused on the fear of many Dutch teachers and linguistic purists who claim their pupils or even students cannot write properly anymore, because they are chatting. According to Van de Craen (2005), they talk about the degradation of our standard language and about cultural loss. Linguists, on the other hand, believe that chat language can be seen as an interesting influence on the way the Dutch standard language is evolving in both main countries where it is used (Belgium, Flanders, and the Netherlands).

The traditional written language has two constraints: It is not expressive and goes slowly. Expressivity and speed, through abbreviations, are nevertheless present in chat language. This “fast” language use certainly has an influence on Standard Dutch, but it is a slow evolution. We must not overreact, because chat language will not be the main reason for a fundamental change in our standard language. There are no unambiguous research results about the connection between chatting and writing skills. In the Netherlands, Spooren (2011) interviewed several pupils in the fifth grade about their use of several online media and made them do a writing task. He could not find any relationship between the use of these media and writing skills. Nevertheless, he added that his research was too small for big conclusions. In France, a positive link between chat-intensity and language skills was established, but this only accounted for young children of maximum 12 years old. In an English investigation of “The British Psychological Society”, it was claimed that chat and SMS (Short Message Service) language have a positive effect on children’s language development. The research stated that children who use a lot of chat language have a richer grammar and have less problems learning a language, the so-called “literacy achievement”.

Therefore, the entire Dutch language teaching system should also be taken into account. During this research, the author visited six different classes at several schools. None of them had a specific grammar or spelling program within their curriculum, which is an interesting note to the question on how children learn to write the correct standard language. The emphasis lies on reading and listening and grammar and spelling are not taught explicitly. Besides, teachers are often asked to make exercises on spelling and grammar themselves. Nevertheless, more research on this subject is needed for any conclusions to be made.

Conclusions

On the basis of the above-mentioned results and research it is stated that it is indeed true that youngsters use their own version of (a) language(s) nowadays. Nevertheless, this has always been the case. Youngsters have always used another language outside the school buildings than inside the school’s language rooms. Nevertheless, these “other languages” should not be considered as a threat to, but rather an enrichment of our Dutch standard language. In the past, these youngsters could not use a computer, now they can. That is the only difference.

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