

THE CHAT BOX REVELATION ON THE CHAT LANGUAGE OF FLEMISH ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS

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Abstract:

In his article ‘Tussentaal wordt omgangstaal in Vlaanderen’, De Caluwe (2009) states that interlanguage is becoming the common colloquial speech in Flanders. He uses the four features put forward by Lemahieu (2008) as his main arguments. Although Lemahieu focused on spoken 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 (West Flanders, East Flanders, Antwerp, Flemish Brabant with Brussels and Limburg). 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 analysed. 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.

Key Words: Written Interlanguage, chat language, change in progress, Flanders

Introduction:

De Caluwe (2009) states that interlanguage is becoming the common colloquial speech in Flanders. This contribution investigates this claim on the basis of the so-called ‘four variants of Lemahieu’ (2008). While Lemahieu investigated the spontaneous conversations between age1-speakers, this research takes a closer look at the written chat language of 60 male and female adolescents and young adults from the five Flemish provinces (West Flanders, East Flanders, Antwerp, Flemish Brabant with Brussels and Limburg).

Picture 1: The provinces in Flanders (DiscoverFlanders, 2013)



Contrary to the studies by Lemahieu (2008) and De Caluwe (2009), the subjects in this research were not obliged to use Standard Dutch. According to Vandekerckhove & Van Rooy (2005) this will result in the use of a kind of ‘common Flemish’ language with a strong Brabantian influence (also called ‘interlanguage’) instead of Standard Dutch or dialect. Next to gender and geographical divisions, age is also taken into account by dividing the subjects into three age groups: from \pm 15 to 20 years old (adolescents), from 21 to 25 years old and from 26 to 30 years old (young adults). The four variants of Lemahieu will be investigated per province, age group and gender. These variants are an interesting tool for this investigation, as will be shown and explained later on in this contribution.

Research:

Objective:

The objective of this research is to examine chat language of 60 male and female subjects from the above-mentioned five Flemish provinces on the basis of Lemahieu’s four variants. An example is given for each separate variant.

- First, the first variant is applied on the chat language of the above-mentioned subjects. I wondered whether the diminution of the Standard Dutch *-je* or the Flemish interlanguage *-ke* is used the most and where this happens.
 - Standard Dutch: *huisje* (little house), *boompje* (little tree)
 - Flemish interlanguage: *huiske*, *boomke*
- Next, I took a closer look at the use of the Standard Dutch *je*-system and the Flemish interlanguage *ge*-system. It can be compared to the Standard English use of ‘you’ in formal and informal situations, and the English interlanguage form ‘ya’ in informal situations.
 - Standard Dutch: *je*, *jij* and formal *u*
 - Flemish interlanguage: *ge*, *gij* and *u* in both formal and informal language use.
- Afterwards, the inflection of articles, possessive and demonstrative pronouns is looked at.
 - Standard Dutch: *een grote hond* (a big dog)
 - Flemish interlanguage: *ne groten (h)ond*
- Finally, there will be a focus on the use of a redundant ‘dat’ (*that*) with conjunctions and pronouns.
 - 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*

Material:

The research is based upon several online chat conversations, collected in 2010 and 2011, that were fragmented and analysed 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 participate actively to the conversation(s) (after a silence of twenty minutes the person gets ‘kicked out’ of the chat room), I decided to focus on ‘private chat conversations’. By doing so, I could easily chat with both male and female subjects and analyse their personal language use. My 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 I wrote in Standard Dutch or, in a later stage of the research, Flemish interlanguage. This means the subjects did not switch from Flemish inter- to Standard Dutch language or vice versa when I did so.

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 subjects 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 in this online world 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, age categories and among the different genders. 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 lead to the following results:

- The provinces Limburg and West Flanders 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*.
- The subjects using the official Standard Dutch *je*-system are all adolescents in Limburg and all subjects in West Flanders. Antwerp was the only province in which all subjects used the *ge*-system. No significant differences were found concerning the different genders.
- 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:
 - An inflection of articles was present in the provinces Antwerp and Flemish Brabant. In East Flanders an equal amount of inflections and Standard Dutch use of articles was noticed.
 - The possessive pronouns were inflected in Antwerp, Limburg and Flemish Brabant and with the oldest young adolescents in West Flanders. 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 East Flanders.
 - The demonstrative pronouns were inflected in Antwerp and Flemish Brabant and with the third age category in East Flanders. In Limburg only the third age category made the inflections and did this as much as they did not.
 - The adjectives were inflected in Flemish Brabant. This also occurred in Antwerp and East Flanders, but the amount of inflections and the Standard Dutch use of the adjectives were equal. Limburg and West Flanders did not inflect the adjectives at all.
- The redundant 'dat' (*that*) occurred in the provinces Antwerp and Flemish Brabant. In Limburg and West Flanders it did not. In East Flanders 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.

Conclusion:

The conclusion resulting from this research reveals that there are indeed regional variants and there is a high percentage of interlanguage, especially in Antwerp and Flemish Brabant, but Standard Dutch still prevails in all provinces. This supports 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.

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