

Language used in Internet Chatting and its Effect on Spelling

The use of language in communication technologies such as Internet chatting, has led to a number of significant linguistic developments (Crystal, 2001). Recently, the local linguistic scene has also witnessed the proliferation of written language produced in a medium where traditional conventions are not followed. Therefore, similarly to studies carried out in other contexts (for example, Hård af Segerstad (2002); Palfreyman & al Khalil (2007); Baron (2008); and Varnhagen et al (2009)), this study aims to investigate language used in Internet chatting by Maltese teenagers, and to provide a linguistic profile of features used in these conversations. Moreover, Thurlow (2006) and Tagliamonte & Denis (2008) describe how in response to the rise of technologically mediated language, there have been several articles in the popular press that have augured the threat that chatting might have on language in general. For this reason, this study also aims to investigate the relationship between chatting and spelling ability in the Maltese language.

The study was carried out among 205 students, aged between 14 and 15 years. Firstly, to investigate whether chatting is having a detrimental effect on Maltese spelling, a questionnaire was distributed among participants. The respondents also underwent a Maltese spelling test, which was created for the purpose of this study. The relationship between chatting and spelling was investigated using comparisons of test mean scores and one-way and two-way ANOVAs. To examine the linguistic resources that teenagers draw on to represent the Maltese language, a corpus of chat logs, amounting to 7,250 units, was provided by 20 Secondary school students who participated in the first part of the study. The linguistic analysis focussed on the use of logograms and syllabograms, the use of reductions and the use of phonetic and integrated spelling in this corpus.

With regard to the relationship between spelling ability and Internet chatting, the results illustrate a trend which disfavours those who chat everyday, as illustrated by the relatively low mean scores obtained by these participants. Notwithstanding this pattern, the results also indicate that a definite conclusion cannot be drawn, and that consequently, further studies investigating other variables, such as the relationship between the age when students are first exposed to chatting and spelling performance should ensue, to obtain a better understanding of the association between the use of technology and spelling.

The use of Maltese in Internet chatting is made up of elements associated with informal speech and is characterised mainly by the use of phonetic spelling, with the prime examples being the elimination of mutograms, for example reducing ‘ghax’ (meaning ‘because’) to ‘ax’ and writing ‘mux’ instead of ‘mhux’ (meaning ‘it isn’t’). Moreover, the use of integrated spelling, especially when eliminating the apostrophe to combine the negative participle to verbs, for example ‘m’ghandux’ is written as ‘madux’, is also widespread. Strategies used to create English syllabograms such as ‘l8’ (meaning ‘late’) are also adapted to the Maltese language, to create innovative features such as ‘4c’ (‘forsi’ meaning ‘maybe’) and ‘sten8’ (‘stennejt’ meaning ‘I waited’).

This study attempts to present a sketch of the language used in chatting by some teenagers and to shed further light on a relatively new sociolinguistic reality that is taking place in local and international contexts. Moreover, the quantitative data provides insight into the possible relationship between language used in Internet chatting and spelling in offline contexts, and can also be useful for future pedagogical issues related to the teaching and learning of Maltese.

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