Is Textese a Threat to Traditional Literacy?

Dutch Youths’ Language Use in Written Computer-Mediated Communication and Relations with their School Writing

Heeey wazzup?! Alles OK? hvj 4ever liefie <3 Such textese has become the new normal in youths’ written computer-mediated communication (CMC). Their social media messages appear to abound with deviations from the standard language norms. The past decades have also seen an explosive growth in digital communication technologies. Youths’ use of these new media has greatly increased due to the rise of smartphones and mobile internet access. These developments have raised concerns that this digital youth language may have detrimental effects on traditional literacy skills, specifically on writing and spelling performance at school.

This doctoral research presents corpus-linguistic studies into new media messages of Dutch adolescents and young adults in four media: MSN chat, SMS text messaging, Twitter, and WhatsApp. While the register of CMC indeed markedly differs from Standard Dutch, especially as regards to orthography, language use turns out to be tailored to the medium and largely pragmatically motivated.

The ultimate focus of this thesis is establishing the possible impact of Dutch youths’ informal digital writing on their school writing. Results of correlational and experimental studies suggest that if youths use CMC in an active and linguistically creative way, instead of passively consuming others’ messages or relying on word predictors and auto-correct, there is no need to worry about any interference of textese with writing or spelling in an educational context.

This dissertation may be of interest to scholars in the fields of (applied) sociolinguistics, literacy studies, communication studies, new media studies, and anyone interested in social media slang.