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Paper 1

Lessons in textspeak from Sexy Chick: Supervernacular literacy in South African Instant and Text Messaging

by

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LESSONS IN TEXTSPEAK FROM SEXY CHICK : SUPERVERNACULAR LITERACY IN SOUTH AFRICAN INSTANT AND TEXT MESSAGING

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Abstract

The uptake of mobile phones has created new communicative environments which in turn create new possibilities and opportunities for identity making and the making of (super)communities. Those (super)communities develop new supervernaculars and challenge the standard rules of 'established' language practices through the emergence of normativity within the supervernacular and its local and translocal dialects. Just as in formal learning practices of standard language practices, one has to become a literate participant of the new communicative environments, by learning or being taught the norms, modes and codes of the supervernacular and its localized varieties in an often very informal way.

Looking at the emergent normativity of textspeak in instant messaging messages and text messages between the author and Lisa, an inhabitant of a post-apartheid township in South Africa, this article illustrates the emergent norms, modes and codes of those new resources and the social and cultural repertoires that go along with them. Finally, looking at the transportation of supervernacular literacy from Lisa to the author, this article explores the role of the ethnographer-as-pupil, as finding out is learning.

Keywords: supervernacular, emergent normativity, MXIT, textspeak, language learning

Introductionⁱ

Mobile phones have become a necessity and a fixed value in the daily life of people all over the world. The recent uptake of ICT's – and of mobile phones in particular – has been especially remarkable in the developing world. According to ITU, the developing world is increasing its share from 53% of total mobile subscriptions at the end of 2005 to 73% at the end of 2010 (ITU 2010). Until the arrival and uptake of mobile phones, people in the global south only had minimal access to telecommunication technologies since the uptake of landline networks has always been very limited, compared to the developed world.ⁱⁱ Nowadays even the people at the bottom of the income pyramid have a mobile phone; for the first time in history they can take part in the telecommunication society.

New communicative environments create 'new channels of communication, new linguistic and cultural forms, new ways of forming and maintaining contacts, networks, groups and new opportunities for identity making' (Wang and Varis 2011). Living in Wesbank, the South African township from which the data for this article originate, the adoption of a mobile phone made it possible to transgress one's immediate life-world and participate in local and translocal activities, something that was very difficult before the uptake of the mobile phone, due to the physical and mental seclusion and exclusion of the community. Short- and long-distance mobile - and often online - networks create new identity repertoires and large-scale (mobile) communities, communities that develop new vernaculars; *supervernaculars* (Wang and Varis 2011) so to speak. Those new communicative environments - created by the mobile phone in this case - are enabling a constant 'diversification of diversity' (Vertovec 2006) and are challenging the established rules of 'standard' language practices. A new supervernacular - textspeak or instant messaging language

for instanceⁱⁱⁱ - is, however, not merely characterized by happy heterogeneity but is constantly controlled, ordered and curtailed (Wang and Varis 2011). Not anything 'goes' and is allowed in texting, and instead of looking at textspeak as a corruption of language and a degradation of standard spelling, it is interesting to look at the norms and modes that go hand in hand with the development of such a new global vernacular. To avoid miscommunication, freedom and creativity - in the conformation of superdiversity - is controlled by an *emergent normativity*. 'Gr8, C U@8' will be regarded 'correct', according to the norms and rules of the 'global medialect' (McIntosh 2010) supervernacular. Gr8, S U@8 on the other hand would be 'wrong' and could even be ridiculed and dismissed. What looks new, chaotic, creative and experimental is a strictly ordered and conventional language in practice.

In Wesbank, a community characterized by multilingualism^{iv} and superdiversity, texting and chatting is predominantly done in the global 'code' or medialect based on English and its orthography but often mixed with other (inter)national languages such as Afrikaans and isiXhosa (see also Deumert and Masinyana 2008). The *emergent normativity* characterizing the global supervernacular is thus influenced and controlled by local and translocal systems, which instigates a process of localization. Supervernaculars are brought into a strictly local economy of meaning. Norms of the global are not just merely copied, but are coloured by an original 'local' accent, in this case the South African accent, or a predominantly Western Cape Afrikaans accent to be more precise. We will see examples of this localization, or the emergence of 'dialects of the supervernacular', later in this article.

As it is possible to write things 'wrong' or 'correctly' in textspeak, the norms, modes and codes characterizing and controlling the supervernacular have to be learned and made one's own. According to Blommaert and Backus (2011) 'language learning' is 'a broad range of tactics, technologies and mechanisms by means of which specific language resources become part of someone's repertoire'. Not learned in formal schooling, alternative literacies, such as textspeak, are learned through often very informal, more democratically organized learning trajectories and by a usage-based approach (Blommaert and Backus 2011). As repertoires are indexical biographies of the person using them (idem 2011), it is important to 'speak or write *right*', as repertoires - constantly fluid and moving - and the possibility of applying or not being able to apply them at the right time and place and in the right context shelter much more than mere linguistic resources. They produce social and cultural meanings of the self and 'contribute to the potential to perform certain social roles, inhabit certain identities and be seen in a particular way by others' (idem 2011). So being able to 'chat *right*' or 'text *right*' in this case says more than just something about the linguistic repertoire and literacies of the person chatting or texting. It also says something about one's place and role and involvement in the new communicative environment, one's social and economic possibilities to participate in it and one's social, cultural and economic capabilities to learn, appropriate and play with the global supervernacular.

In this article we will look at the case of one inhabitant of Wesbank, chatting on an instant messaging programme called MXIT under the pseudonym 'Sexy Chick' in a global (English) medialect (textspeak) with a local (Afrikaans) accent and her interaction with me, the ethnographer coming from abroad - with neither English nor Afrikaans as her mother language - who is not at all familiar with this locally 'coloured' supervernacular nor with a cell phone-based instant messaging programme like MXIT. We will look at my first steps in the instant messaging world, and see how Sexy Chick is teaching me modes and norms, unconsciously creating an - informal - tutor-pupil dynamic, in which she is teaching, defying and correcting me and in which I seek for challenges and ask for explanation, gradually expanding the resources entering my repertoire. Moreover, we will look at the new identity repertoires and the social and cultural meanings of the self that are being created and maintained through the new communication environment and how, next to an emergent *linguistic* normativity there is an emergent *social* normativity, characterized by expectations surrounding chat programmes and the responses to those expectations.

In what follows, we will start by describing the context of the field, giving an explanation of the origins of the data and by introducing 'Sexy Chick'. Then we will look at some examples of chat sessions, having a closer look at *emergent normativity* and the tutor-pupil dynamic, followed by developing the *social* normativity assumption. We will conclude by reflecting on the methodology of ethnographic fieldwork and on how I became an 'informal' pupil. Finding out is learning, and as doing ethnographic fieldwork is much about 'finding out' – how people live, function, think, communicate, ... - through an empirical approach, the ethnographer often becomes a pupil, curiously taking shaky steps into a reality that is partly or totally unknown and new.

The field

Wesbank was built in 1998 as part of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), a South African socio-economic policy framework which the first democratic government in South Africa designed and implemented after the abolishment of Apartheid in 1994 to tackle the economic, spatial and racial legacy of the Apartheid era and to improve government services and basic living conditions for the poor. The housing project that was part of the RDP aimed to provide 1 million subsidized houses before the year 2000. The building of the Wesbank community was the first post-Apartheid housing project in the area of Cape Town that was not segregated along racial lines but was intended to give home to deprived people, irrespective of colour and descent. This first so-called 'rainbow community' had to give home to 25 000 residents in 5149 fully subsidized houses, reallocating people who had never owned a house before or who had been living in informal settlements for most of their lives. The actual number of residents in Wesbank is estimated to be double the official figures, as extended families live together on one plot, and people have been building shacks in the backyards of the houses.

Wesbank is situated on the Cape Flats, the so-called 'dumping grounds of Apartheid', 27 kilometres out of the centre of Cape Town and surrounded by many other apartheid townships such as Khayelitsha, Nyanga, Crossroads and Delft. It is a very secluded and excluded community, bordered by a highway, two very busy municipal roads and a wetland nature reserve and is located 12 kilometres away from the closest job opportunities. Basic service delivery is very limited. The houses have an average size of 25 square meters, are built in bricks and have a roof made out of corrugated metal. Although officially recognized and named as 'Wesbank', the name of the community is nowhere to be found, either in local roadmaps or on traffic signs.

Data and Methods

The data for this paper has been collected during four months of ethnographic fieldwork in the community of Wesbank, research focusing on cell phone use and cell phone literacies amongst middle-aged women.

During this fieldwork period in 2011 and a previous one in 2005^v, the researcher has been assisted and accompanied by Lisa, a 43-year-old female inhabitant of Wesbank, who had always been very active in the community as a member of different community organisations and as an enterprising person who started up different informal businesses and projects.^{vi} Because of her active involvement in the community Lisa knows a lot of residents and is known by many. As walking alone in the community as an outsider is rather unsafe due to the high crime rates and as a way to get introduced to possible interviewees and residents willing to participate in the research, Lisa has become the eminent companion, contact person, translator and informant during the fieldwork.

Data for this article are instant chat messages, text messages, letters and e-mails from Lisa addressed to me, gathered during the fieldwork period in Cape Town between January and April

2011 and computer-to-cell phone instant chat sessions from later on in 2011. Informal talks, observations of her behaviour and the long-lasting personal relationship between the author and Lisa also form - a more indirect - part of the data.

Lisa a.k.a Sexy Chick – a short life history

Born and grown up in Oudshoorn, a predominantly Afrikaans speaking area^{vii} and the main town in the Little Karoo area of the Western Cape province of South Africa more than 400km away from Cape Town, Lisa only moved to the Cape Town area after she gave birth to her two sons, seeking shelter and protection against her violent husband. She found accommodation in a safe house in the city centre of Cape Town where she spent a couple of years. In 1998 she applied for a full-subsidy house in Wesbank and as a single mother of 3 children - she gave birth to a daughter in the meantime - without a fixed job and a formal dwelling she fulfilled all the necessary conditions to qualify for a full-subsidy house. Since 1999 she has been living in Wesbank in her lately extended house of 5 by 5 meters, together with her youngest daughter of 11 years old. One of her sons got married and moved to a community close to Wesbank. He has given her three grandchildren. Her other son, 21 years of age, is working in Transkei, more than thousand kilometres away from home. She often shelters other people as well, such as her cousin who was staying with her during the last fieldwork period and a foster child who was staying with her 3 years ago.

During the first acquaintance in 2005, it was immediately clear that Lisa was a very emancipated and enterprising lady. She was a very dedicated mother, had several informal businesses in order to gain enough money to support her family, was loved and known by many people in the community and, as a member of the New-Born Christians, was a very devoted Christian, attending church meetings and Bible studies several times a week.

At the moment she has a formal job in the community with a monthly salary for the first time in her life. Consequently, she's financially more comfortable and secure than ever before, although her salary is still very low. Her son who's working in Transkei is sending her money every now and then, which has helped her - among other things - to finance the extension of her house.

Lisa already had a mobile phone during our first acquaintance in 2005 although she was using it rarely, as she had a landline connection as well that time and as the uptake of mobile phones in South Africa in general and the area of Wesbank particularly was still very limited at the time. In 2010 she cancelled her landline connection and has since then only been reachable on her mobile phone. In February 2011 she bought herself her first laptop. She had been working with a computer in the past, but had forgotten most of it, so I assisted her in her first steps in the new world of text editing and surfing on the internet. Both the mobile phone as well as the laptop she was using for personal as well as job-related reasons. She often received phone calls for her job, and she needed to send e-mails and design letters that were work-related.

Lisa gradually expanded her cell phone use and the adoption of the phone, closely assisted by her 11-year-old daughter and her son, who taught her the most basic steps of using the mobile phone. Lisa gave her daughter a cell phone when she was 10 years old, but the cell phone got stolen in a taxi during my fieldwork visit. As there is not enough money to immediately buy a new phone, the daughter is using Lisa's phone every now and then in the evening, especially to play music and games, to call her father and to go on MXIT, a very popular cell phone-based instant messaging service in South Africa.

Instigated by the enthusiasm about the instant messaging programme of her daughter, Lisa decided to get herself a MXIT account as well. Her daughter downloaded the software on her cell phone, and soon Lisa became a daily MXIT chatter, using the nickname 'Sexy Chick' and mainly chatting with men. Highly enthusiastic about the cheap costs^{viii} and the new - virtual and real - encounters she had thanks to the instant messaging service, she informed me about her new cell

phone activity over the phone, repeatedly trying to convince me to install the software too. As MXIT only exists in South Africa, the UK, Namibia, Kenya and Indonesia this wasn't possible until the last fieldwork visit in January 2011. Sitting in between Lisa and her daughter, MXIT finally got installed on my mobile phone. Since then, communicating with Lisa was predominantly done over MXIT. Chat sessions with Lisa from mobile phone to mobile phone as well as chat sessions from portable computer to cell phone after the fieldwork period are the main data used in this article.

Emergent normativity: Sexy Chick's textspeak

im in pain-felld ystrday in my frnds showr -I went 2 sumrset hospi bt must do x-rays 2moro. My hand is swollen n my toe joh it pain man -im suffrng a lot-bt u know dat im a survivor ☺ -love u sweet dreams-I left a msage on mxit bt mayb u didn't get it- c u 2moro (text message Lisa 2011)

The text above is a transcription of one of the many text messages of Lisa addressed to me. In this message it's immediately clear that Lisa feels quite comfortable with the textspeak or the repertoire she's writing in and that there are stable patterns in her use of abbreviations, number homophones, contractions, etc. Within one and the same message, she's omitting apostrophes (three times she is using *im* instead of *I'm*), applying the same contractions (twice *bt* instead of *but*) and using number homophones (twice *2moro*) in exactly the same way. If we count the encoded words, the emoticons and the code switching - between Afrikaans and English - we see that out of the 61 words used, 27 are encoded, which is more than 44% of the total amount of words used.

Looking at 30 text messages and chat messages from Lisa (with a total of 343 words), we see that an average of 56% of the words and signs used are encoded, code switched or emoticons^{ix}, which correlates with the research of Plester, Wood and Sushi (2009) who, in their research on text message language of British teenagers, concluded that 58% of the words used were textspeak instead of standard English.

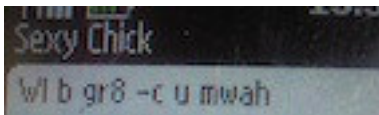


Figure 1: Text Message from Sexy Chick to author, March 2011.

Emergent normativity is detectable in Sexy Chick's stable patterns of use of the global medialect - words such as *2moro*, *g2g*, *u*, *y*, *wuu2*, *pls*, *@1*, *cu*, *thnx*, *gr8*, *LOL*, *nite* instead of *tomorrow*, *got to go*, *you*, *why*, *what are you up to*, *please*, *at 1*, *see you*, *thanks*, *great*, *laughing out loud* and *night* respectively - used in her text and chat messages (Figure 1) are non-standard but nonetheless normative orthographic forms that are to be found in textspeak all over the world (see for example Thurlow 2003; Plester *et al* 2009).

At the same time, there is a clear localization of the supervernacular or, in other words, Lisa is clearly speaking with 'an accent', in her case an Afrikaans South African accent.

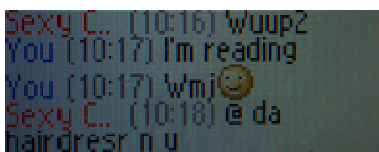


Figure 2: Mxit conversation between Sexy Chick and the author, February 2011.

In figure 2 one can see me playing with this 'dialectization', as I'm replacing her global 'wuup2' ('*what are you up to*') with a local 'wmj' ('*wat maak jy*'- 'what are you doing' in Afrikaans), an abbreviation Lisa taught me previously. Another example can be found in figure 3, in

which a chat message, predominantly written in the global medialect, gets a local accent through the use of the expression '*ja neh*', a typical Afrikaans expression meaning something as '*shame*'.

Figure 3: MXIT conversation between Sexy Chick and the author, February 2011.

Figure 4: MXIT conversation between Sexy Chick and the author, February 2011.

Without this '*ja neh*' in the text message, this message could be from anywhere in the world. The use of this specific 'local' expression makes this message a very localized text, not totally understandable for people who are not familiar with Afrikaans. The same happens with figure 4, in which the '*leka*' (textspeak for '*lekker*', Afrikaans for nice, sweet, pleasant) localizes the supervernacular and makes it a South African, local medialect. In another message, Lisa wrote me 'I mis ju man'. The 'ju' in this case is an abbreviation for the English 'you', but is written according to 'jou' (*you*) in Afrikaans, with a j instead of a y or instead of 'u', the common global textspeak for 'you' (for examples in isiXhosa, see Deumert and Masinyana 2008).

Figure 5: Mxit conversation between Sexy Chick and the author, March 2011.

The last example (figure 5) shows once more how, in a South African multilingual context, code-switching 'colours' the supervernacular. Preceding this snapshot, Sexy Chick and I are having a MXIT conversation in the global supervernacular English. Suddenly it takes a very long time before she answers my question, upon which I ask her whether she is talking to her boyfriends again on MXIT, bringing up a totally different topic than the one we were dealing with. She first laughs, and then answers '*ha a glad ni*', textspeak for '*glad nie*' (Afrikaans for 'totally not'). I continue the conversation in Afrikaans, asking her whether her sun is coming today. Sexy Chick answers in an abbreviated Afrikaans ('*mre*' instead of '*môre*' which means 'tomorrow'), on which I react with a '*supaaa*', an imitation of a playful dialect in spoken English. The next line, which is an answer to the question I asked Lisa before she didn't answer for a while, switches the language back to English textspeak ('*Maitlnd*' instead of '*Maitland*' and '*close 2*' instead of '*close to*') and the rest of the conversation continues in English. The switch to Afrikaans in this case indicates a shift in subject, and the shift back to English demarcates the end of the sidetrack in the conversation and brings us back to the main theme - Sexy Chick asking me for a favour to drive her to Maitland. In this example, code-switching is thus used as a demarcation tool and indicates a change of subject here.

Repertoires: Lisa's register or Sexy Chick's Register?

Lisa's use of the new supervernacular of textspeak in the above-mentioned examples of chat and text messages is a well-considered choice of register. Standard English - often with some grammatical or spelling mistakes, as English is not her mother tongue - and English textspeak, as well as standard Afrikaans and Afrikaans textspeak are all part of her language repertoire, and it seems that Lisa attaches different values to different language registers, and makes clear choices about when to use which register, depending on the addressee of the text, the format of the text or the context in which or for which the text is written. This becomes clear when we look at different examples of texts. The first example is a letter by Lisa addressed to me written in a Word document with a letterhead of her job. As a way of practicing her computer skills, I asked her to write me a letter with this letterhead, save it on her computer and send it to me in an attachment in an e-mail. What I received was what a real letter should look like; it had a title ('Hi Fieke'), an official greeting as closure ('with great respect') and was signed with her name (I replaced her real name here by 'LISA').

"Hi Fieke

Wow, what a privilage. By the way it took me almost ten minutes to get here. Not too bad. Let me see if I can do this.

Well so far so good-struggle a bid to found the letters.

Im almost finish- the difficult part still ahead -how to save this.

Hope I can do it.

With great respect.

LISA"

Compared to her English used in chat and text messages - the format we have been using the most to communicate - Lisa is using standard English here. Besides the stylistic characteristics of a letter, the use of standard English seems to be a linguistic characteristic attached to her opinion on how an official letter should look like. Only at one point textspeak - with which she's so familiar, as she is daily chatting and sending text messages on her cell phone - slips into her official letter, when she omits the apostrophe in 'Im'. In total, she makes four mistakes against standard English; 2 spelling mistakes ('privilage', 'bid') and two grammatical mistakes ('finish' and 'found'). Making less mistakes in the textspeak supervernacular, this example shows that Lisa is much more comfortable using the register of textspeak instead of standard English, a register she's hardly using or encountering in its written form.

The second example is the first email that Lisa ever wrote and sent. The email is addressed to my former research partner in Wesbank in 2005. Lisa wrote this email in standard Afrikaans and formulated the email as a letter (title, text, closure and signature). No textspeak is used in this letter, which again clearly shows that Lisa is literate enough to make well-considered choices of appropriate registers, according to context, value and format.

"Dag Hannelujah!

Dit is my eerste boodskap wat ek stuur. Dit is nou my emailadres. Jy kan my nou baie boodskappe stuur.

Fieke het my gewys. Ek mis jou baie. Die volgende kleinkind van my se naam is Hannelore!

Ek geniet vir Fieke hier.

Sien uit om jou weer te sien en om jou nou te lees!

Lisaaaaaaa"

(Translation: 'Dear Hannelujah! This is my first message that I send. This is my email address. You can send me many messages now. Fieke showed me. I miss you a lot. The name of my next grandchild is Hannelore! I enjoy Fieke here. I look forward to see you again and to read you! Lisaaaaaaa'.)

The last example is a text message addressed to my parents. Wanting to thank Lisa for being there for me during my fieldwork and guiding me through Wesbank, my parents sent her a text message. As my parents are not familiar with written standard English, let alone with the textspeak variant of it, I can imagine that my parents sent her a very simple text message in limited standard English. Figure 6 is the answer they received from Lisa.

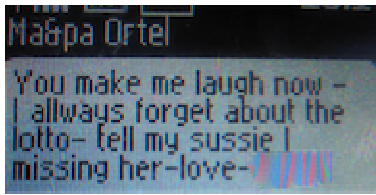


Figure 6: Text message from Sexy Chick to the parents of the author, June 2011.

Written in a format Lisa normally associates with textspeak, she is now clearly and very consciously using Standard English, firstly as a way of showing respect to my parents as elder people, secondly because she correctly assumes that my parents would not be able to decode her textspeak. The use of the Afrikaans word ‘sussie’ is as well a deliberate choice, as Lisa knows through me that the Dutch word for sister is very similar (‘zus’ instead of ‘sus’).

In the examples above, one can also say that Lisa is writing as ‘Lisa’ here, a middle-aged woman living in Wesbank with Afrikaans as her mother language and English as a second, especially oral, language, and not as ‘Sexy Chick’, the MXIT lady talking in a global supervernacular with people from outside her local and daily reality.

Learning and teaching norms and modes – the ethnographer as a pupil

English is not my mother tongue, but next to French the main second language I can express myself in. First of all learned and taught in formal patterns of learning from the age of 14 in secondary school and through academic reading and writing at university, but also through very informal learning trajectories from a very young age (movies, songs, youth slang and standardized English loanwords) and during later stages in my life (international friendships, youth camps, travels in South Africa and elsewhere), I can say I am familiar and comfortable in some specialized, specific registers, genres and styles in this second language. In other words, in specific registers, genres and styles of English I have a ‘voice’, a capacity to make myself understood by others in line with my own intensions, desires and ambitions, and this in a wide range of social arenas (Hymes 1996). These specific registers, genres and styles entered my repertoire through different stages in my life (academic English for instance during my studies at university) and were learned in specific social arenas (amongst friends when I was a teenager for example) with specific tasks, needs and objectives defined, and with specific interlocutors (Blommaert and Backus, 2011).

According to the same authors, the ‘language’ we know is never finished and learning language as a linguistic *and* a sociolinguistic system is not a cumulative process but rather a process of growth, of sequential learning of certain registers, styles and genres and linguistic varieties while shedding or altering previously existing ones. Consequently, there is no point in life in which *anyone* can claim to know *all* the resources of one language.

I might have a voice in certain registers, styles and genres and linguistic varieties of English, a distinct voice in English and Afrikaans textspeak is lacking. As I have owned a mobile phone for only 9 years, and as until some years ago, text messages and instant messaging on the computer were predominantly written in my mother tongue, I only got extensively immersed and exposed to the English, global medialect once I started to build international friendships after my first fieldwork visit in South Africa in 2005, after some other travels abroad and since I have some

international friends in Belgium. There have been encounters with the global medialect previous to that, as the supervernacular slips into text and chat messages I have with my Dutch-speaking friends. Expressions such as LOL, 2morrow, the use of emoticons and the general practice of using abbreviations and misspellings are commonly used in Dutch textspeak as well.

My resources were however very limited, and as I might be more literate in the reception and production of written standard English - and especially academic English - than Lisa, she is - mostly due to her daily activity on MXIT - much more literate than me in the reception and production of the written supervernacular of textspeak, a genre in which my literacy was – and still is - very limited. Expanding my chat and text message communication with Lisa and other South Africans elaborately during my last fieldwork trip to South Africa in 2011, I did not only have to extend my literacy of the supervernacular, but immediately had to learn the dialect of the supervernacular, or the localized supervernacular, characterized by typical South African words, orthography and Afrikaans textspeak. As repertoires are biographically organized complexes of resources, they follow the rhythms of human lives, not developing along a linear path of ever-increasing size, but developing explosively in some phases of life and gradually in others (Blommaert and Backus, 2011). During my last fieldwork visit in 2011 and thanks to the new communicative environment that MXIT offered me, my literacy resources expanded and broadened my repertoire significantly. Back home, this development slowed down, as I am only occasionally chatting with Lisa and the immersion into the supervernacular is not that omnipresent anymore.

Still in Cape Town, Lisa became my informal teacher, introducing me to the code language or the to me very alien localized supervernacular, not saving me from the challenges and the confusion the decoding of her writings were causing. In a very subtle and practical way, Lisa became my instructor and I became the pupil, learning the supervernacular and its dialect by trial and error.

The teaching started from the first instant chat session on MXIT. Sitting in between Lisa and her daughter, I was chatting with Lisa, to become familiar with the functioning of MXIT. As one can see in figure 7, Lisa immediately sends me an image and an emoticon, teaching me which applications I have to use in order to do this. I answer her with 'Thnx', showing her I know how to abbreviate properly and correctly. In the next line, however, I lose all my 'textspeak credibility' by writing 'have to go' in its complete spelling. Lisa's daughter starts to giggle, tells to her mom what I just did, takes her mom's phone and sends me back 'G2g', the 'correct' supervernacular spelling of what I was trying to say.

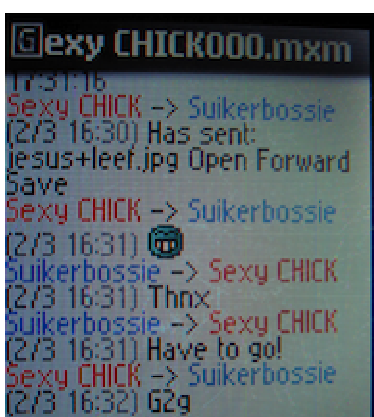


Figure 7: First MXIT chat between Sexy Chick and the author, January 2011.

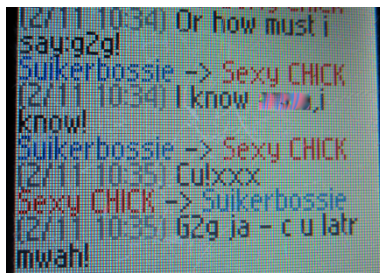


Figure 8: MXIT conversation between Sexy Chick and the author, January 2011.

As in figure 1, in which I show Lisa I remember what she had taught me before by replacing her global 'wuup2' with 'wmj', the local dialect of the supervernacular, in figure 8 one can see that I do exactly the same by using 'g2g', instead of 'I go now', which I wrote in the line previous to the first line in picture 8. Lisa, in her role as a teacher, encourages me and confirms that I spoke the 'right' language, by confirming 'G2g ja', immersing me again in the localized supervernacular, by using the Afrikaans confirmation instead of the English 'yes'.

This teacher-pupil dynamic is to be found throughout most of our chat and text message conversations, most of the time in a more implicit way than in the 'G2g' example. Lisa constantly immerses me in new words, styles and registers followed by an explanation when I ask for it. Playing with '*the continuum of enregistering*' (Blommaert personal communication), Lisa is moving smoothly between different registers on a continuum between 'maximum impure language' (code-switching, textspeak or encoded language, use of emoticons, etc.) and 'maximum pure and unmixed language' and all the gradations in between. Looking at the chat and text messages between Lisa and me, one can clearly see that Lisa's implicit language of instruction tends to the maximum impure register more than to the pure or unmixed one, with the idea that I will pick the supervernacular up as I go along. In this regard, one can also say that the continuum leaning towards the 'maximum impure register' is the 'maximum teaching genre'. The 'maximum talking genre' then leans more towards the 'maximum pure register'. In other words, the choice of genre is dependent of the practice of talking or teaching. Let me elaborate this with some examples.

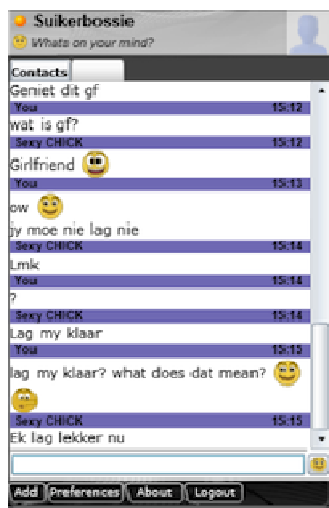


Figure 9: Cell phone to pc MXIT conversation between Sexy Chick and the author, June 2011.

In figure 9 one can see an example of a part of an instant chat session from computer (me) to cell phone (Lisa). Lisa starts with an abbreviation 'gf' I do not understand and for which I ask an explanation. Immediately after explaining the first abbreviation (girlfriend) she overwhelms me with another one I do not understand ('lmk'). Again I ask for an explanation by posting a question mark. However, the explanation she gives me in standard Afrikaans is again not sufficient, as I am not familiar with the expression, so again I ask for an explanation. 'Lmk' turns out to be a local dialect of the supervernacular, the variant of 'Lol' (laughing out loud) in Afrikaans. In total, nine

lines of the conversation are dedicated to teaching and explaining. Lisa, using the expression 'lmk' and the smiley, seems to gloat over my ignorance. I, on my turn, express my feeling of shame by saying 'ow' and 'jy moe nie lag nie' ('you do not have to laugh') and by using three emoticons in an attempt to turn my ignorance into something funny.



Figure 10: Cell phone to pc MXIT conversation between Sexy Chick and the author, June 2011.

Twenty minutes later in the chat session, Lisa uses 'Lol', immediately followed by 'lmk' (figure 10), and thus repeats what she has been teaching me earlier. By putting 'lol' and 'lmk' next to each other, she is implicitly showing me that these two expressions mean the same, in case I didn't realize this by myself during the first teaching. This short teaching episode is followed by a talk about what she is doing at the moment of chatting. For this catch-up talk, she is using a register that situates itself somewhere in the middle on the continuum between 'maximum impure' and 'maximum pure language', using textspeak that is 'global' and not new to me, characterized by accent stylisation ('da' instead of 'the'), clippings ('giv' instead of 'give'), number homophones ('4' instead of for), non-conventional spellings ('u' instead of 'you') and contractions ('bt' instead of 'but') (Thurlow 2003). Lisa also uses the word 'gf' again, 35 minutes after she first taught me the word and uses it again three minutes later.

After implicitly repeating and practicing all the new words she taught me, Lisa introduces the new word 'lmimchops' (figure 11) to my vocabulary, a word so complicated she must have known that I would not understand it immediately. She first gives me a clue of what it might mean by writing 'j laat my lag nou' ('y make me laugh now') and then explains it more broadly after the question for more explanation.

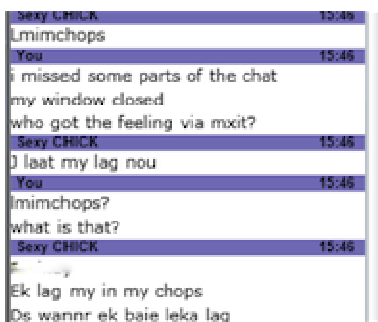


Figure 11: cell phone to pc MXIT conversation between Sexy Chick and the author, June 2011.

First she gives me the full written version of the expression ('ek lag my in my chops' - 'I laugh in my chops') and then explains what this expression means ('Ds wannr ek baie leka lag' - 'Ths is whn I laugh very hard'), only using abbreviations and contractions which she knows I understand.

This educational turn is followed by some more catch-up talk, in which only 22% of the words are textspeak and in which the focus is on the talking instead of on the teaching. This talking-teaching thread is to be found throughout all the conversations between Lisa and me. The movement on the *continuum of enregistering* is often very subtle and small, but nonetheless often indicates a shift from teaching to talking - the two extreme ends of the continuum with many registers in between - and from talking to teaching.

MXIT, Sexy Chick and new identity repertoires: emergent social normativity

As mentioned above in the introduction, the constantly fluid and moving repertoires and the possibility to apply or not being able to apply specific registers at the right time and place and in the right context give shelter to much more than mere linguistic resources. Applying specific

registers, genres and styles within the new communication environment produces social and cultural meanings of the self and makes it possible to perform certain social roles and inhabit (new) identity repertoires. In this context it is thus important to 'write *right*', as this ability to do so says much more than merely something about the linguistic repertoire and literacies of the person writing chat or text messages. The fact that Lisa is so comfortable with and experienced in the use of the supervernacular and its dialect, says something about her participation and involvement in the new communicative environment. One can infer from her '*correct* writing' that she must have had a mobile phone already for a while, that she is used to sending text or chat messages and that she chats with both Afrikaans- as well as English-speaking people. It also says something about her economic possibilities to participate in the new communicative environment, as it means that she's financially comfortable enough to own a phone and to have enough airtime on it to chat and send text messages.

My ignorance of the supervernacular and especially its dialect was a barometer for my ignorance of instant chat messages like MXIT and with mistakes such as 'have to go' instead of 'G2g' I ran the risk of being ridiculed and exposed as a greenhorn in the new environment. Just as there has been a transportation of literacy from Lisa's daughter and other MXIT friends to Lisa, Lisa in her role as a patient teacher instigated a transportation of supervernacular literacy from her to me and introduced me step by step to the new communicative environment.

That this new environment goes hand in hand with certain social roles and new identity repertoires became soon very clear to me. When I wanted to register a MXIT account on my real name, Lisa alias 'Sexy Chick' gently advised me to take a more 'attractive' name, and together we decided to register under 'Suikerbossie', an Afrikaans word for a national flower, but at the same time a term of endearment known from a traditional South African folk song. As another acquaintance of me in Wesbank had 'Love Guru' as his MXIT name, and the best friend of Lisa gave herself the MXIT name 'Love Queen', it appeared to me from the beginning that the chat programme was loaded with social (and sexual) expectations and stigmatized by others for exactly those expectations. Especially due to negative press coverage over the years and due to city legends, MXIT has a bad connotation in many people's minds. People stigmatizing MXIT connect the instant messaging programme with potential addiction, abuse, adultery, exuberant sexual behaviour, flirting and regard it as a free zone for unsafe behaviour, rudeness and pornography. As it is also connected to the social environment of the youth, Lisa and her other middle-aged MXIT friends are condemned by many of their peers. When Lisa confessed her MXIT activity to her priest, his next day's sermon dealt with the dangers of 'contamination' of instant messaging programmes and the unsafe behaviour of people using it.

Generally known in the community of Wesbank as a very devoted and religious single mother, Lisa's MXIT activities are creating new identity repertoires which she feels she has to hide from people who are of the opinion that chatting and being a good Christian are not combinable. Giving free rein to the new identity repertoires within the safe environment of her house and outside of the community when meeting (different) men she got to know on MXIT, she is only sharing her 'Sexy Chick's' repertoires and experiences with me, the men she is engaging with and with one single friend of hers who she introduced to MXIT as well and who is similarly expanding her identity and language repertoires.

By instigating me to choose 'Suikerbossie' as my chat name and by involving me in her and her friend's experiences in the dating scene and tacitly expecting me to do the same, I was not only Lisa's pupil with regards to the learning of the emergent *linguistic* normativity, but I also have been taught the *social* normativity emerging around MXIT and chat relationships. By living a 'loose' sexual life since she is chatting on MXIT, Lisa is exactly living up to the *social* expectations one has about middle-aged people on chat programmes like MXIT and is thus supporting an emergent - imagined, exaggerated or not - normativity attached to the existing ideas about the social consequences of chatting.

Conclusion

Less than a decade ago, mobile phone ownership in the global south generally and in South Africa specifically was only for the privileged few. Nowadays, because of different reasons among which the growing offer of very basic but cheap mobile phone devices, even the poorest of the poorest have access to this telecommunication technology. The new communicative environment that the mobile phone has created, has instigated new channels of communication and the possibility of creating new or strengthen old long- and short distance networks that cross immediate physical and mental frontiers. This, on its turn, incited the creation of new identity repertoires and often very fluid and mobile supercommunities that have developed new vernaculars that cross local and translocal borders.

Text and chat messages over the mobile phone have to be economically advantageous by being short, fast and easy to write. This soon has created a global written mobile phone *lingua franca* that has become so pervasive that it has become a language register in its own right. What at first glance looks like a chaotic, creative and experimental language in which everyone just writes as one wants, is in fact practically ordered and strictly norm-governed. The fact that one can make 'mistakes' when one abbreviates a word for example proves that textspeak, or the supervernacular, is a real, conventional language, that behaves as such. Moral panics and public anxiety have been blaming texting and chatting for the corruption of standard language and the degradation in spelling of especially youth writing (Vosloo 2009). In the new communicative environment developed through the growing uptake of ICT's, people are writing more than ever before (in text messages, on chats, on blogs, on Facebook, etc.), but research has shown that amongst teenagers for example, most do not think of their electronic or digital communications as 'real' writing (Lenhart, Arafeh, Smith and Macgill 2008).

Instead of looking at textspeak as an impure and chaotic language, it is very interesting to look at the norms and modes that lay the foundation of the development of the new global vernacular. While a lot of textspeak words are spelled 'incorrectly' in a conventional sense, most of the words used in textspeak are phonologically 'acceptable' forms of written 'standard' English. Producing and reading abbreviations for example thus requires a level of phonological and orthographic knowledge (Plester *et al* 2009). In other words, one has to be as literate to read or write textspeak as to read or write 'standard' English and one entering this new communicative environment has to become 'literate' in this new repertoire if one wants to be regarded as a participant.

This emergent normativity characterizing the supervernacular became very clear when I entered the new communicative environment during my fieldwork in Wesbank, when I got introduced to the very popular instant messaging programme MXIT. As a greenhorn in this environment, and with neither Afrikaans nor English as my mother tongue, the production and reception of the supervernacular and its localized norms, modes and codes was practically unknown to me, except for some very fluid and limited encounters with the (localized) supervernacular due to previous visits in South Africa and international friendships. How this ignorance of producing and receiving 'correct' textspeak made me a pupil of Lisa and many others can be regarded as the destiny of the ethnographer. As finding out is learning, the methodology of fieldwork is often characterized by this often very informal teacher-pupil dynamic, in which the 'subjects' take the ethnographer by the hand and lead him/her into a partly or totally new reality and community. Robert E. Moore, in an attempt to discuss a printed record of an oral narrative of American Indian people written down by Dell Hymes and his followers, ends up in exactly the same position (Moore 2009). The Kiksht lady he is interviewing tacitly guides him on her walk through the printed record and 'teaches' him where corrections have to be made, mistakes were made and translations were inaccurate. Just as Lisa empirically learned the supervernacular and the new identity repertoires that emerge out of the new communicative environment of MXIT and made them her own, closely assisted by her children and her first acquaintances on MXIT, I as well became a learner, in my attempt to find out

something more about mobile phone use in the community. Through a very empirical and informal learning trajectory, Lisa alias Sexy Chick introduced me to the supervernacular and its local accents. By moving between different registers on a continuum between 'maximum impure language' and 'maximum pure language' Lisa is constantly shifting between a teaching and a talking repertoire by using a very 'impure' language with a lot of textspeak (encoded words, local dialect code switching, use of emoticons) during her educational turns and less localized textspeak on the moments she is just casually talking to me. In this way, Lisa defies me to find out and learn as I go along, teaching me the global supervernacular and the localized supervernacular but also introducing me to the new identity repertoires that the new communicative environment creates.

Living up to the expectations and the often very negative prejudices especially middle-aged people have about MXIT, one can say that Lisa's life totally changed since she started chatting on MXIT and that she feels comfortable with the new identity repertoires that this new communicative environment has brought along. Making no secret of her 'loose' (sexual) behaviour with me or her best friends, she introduced me to an emergent *social* normativity surrounding chat programmes, also 'teaching' and explaining me how she approaches and deals with men on the instant messaging programme. Doing this, she was often assisted by her best friend who she introduced to MXIT as well and with whom she shares the adventures and enthusiasm that the new identity repertoires bring along.

As an ethnographer approaching the field, empirically wanting to find out as much as possible about mobile phone use and mobile phone literacy of middle-aged women in a post-apartheid township in Cape Town, South Africa, I myself turned out to be illiterate and my resources inadequate to be a full member of the new communicative environment that the uptake of mobile phones, the introduction of instant chat messaging and other ICT's has created. The often very implicit processes of informal teaching I underwent, says a lot about the methodology of fieldwork. The ethnographer, in a new environment with new norms, modes and styles, will always be a greenhorn and a pupil taking insecure and shaky steps into a new and informal learning environment, as finding out in an empirical way is always a process of learning.

ⁱ This paper has been written in the context of the research project Transformations of the Public Sphere (TRAPS) at the Department of Culture Studies, Tilburg University.

ⁱⁱ In 2010 only 1,6 per 100 inhabitants had access to fixed phonelines in Africa compared to 40,3 per 100 inhabitants in Europe. ITU Statistics, Fixed Telephone lines per 100 inhabitants 2010, <http://www.itu.int/ict/statistics>.

ⁱⁱⁱ Textspeak is the most commonly used term for SMS language, characterized by abbreviations (sis, bro), contractions (plz), g-clippings (go in, see in), emoticons, initialisms (lol), 'poor' punctuation, omitted apostrophes (cant, wont), symbols (@), letter/number homophones (2nite, L8r), misspellings, non-conventional spellings, etc. It is often called textism, txtspk, textese, text language and text talk as well.

^{iv} Afrikaans, English and isiXhosa are the three main languages spoken in Wesbank, accompanied by many other official South African languages and immigrant languages.

^v From January 2011 until the end of April 2011 fieldwork was conducted in Wesbank, focusing on cell phone use and cell phone literacy amongst middle-aged women. Ethnographic fieldwork in the same area, conducted in 2005, was part of the master thesis research of the author and Hannelore Depypere.

Depypere Hannelore and Velghe Fie. 2006. *Past and passed in the present: persistence of history in Wesbank, a post-apartheid township in Cape Town*. Master thesis Ghent University

^{vi} Lisa is a fictional name.

^{vii} Lisa has been raised in Afrikaans and speaks and writes predominantly in Afrikaans. She is quite fluent in English as well, but her English writing skills are limited.

^{viii} To chat on MXIT for a whole evening, it suffices to have some cents airtime left on the mobile phone. Chatting on MXIT is significantly cheaper than SMS messaging, respectively 0,01 or 0,02 ZAR and 0,80 ZAR.

^{ix} 106 out of the 188 words in the text messages (56,4%) and 85 out of the 152 in the chat messages (56%) are not 'standard'.

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