Accommodation in WhatsApp communication

Currently, WhatsApp is the most popular instant messaging application for smartphones. The huge amount of messages that are exchanged via WhatsApp on a daily basis opens the possibility for linguists to analyse a very dynamic form of written language. In order to do so, a corpus of WhatsApp chats was collected in Switzerland in summer 2014 (Ueberwasser/Stark 2017) and in Germany in winter 2014/15, containing a total number of about 1.2 million speech bubbles, some dating back to 2010. For this presentation, this dataset is used to answer questions about how individuals interact with communication partners and how they (non-)accommodate to their partners. On the one hand, I will look at emojis, which are of special interest for linguistic analysis because, even though they are broadly used in mobile communication, they are not yet part of a written standard. On the other hand, I will look at non-standard writing that is of a very different quality in the Swiss and the German data. Qualitative analyses of the data shed light on the functions in which individuals use different emojis and spellings in interaction, possibly being influenced by how their chat partners use these forms (cf. Functions of adjustments in the Communication Accommodation Theory, Dragojevic, Gasiorek & Giles 2016). How large this influence is depends on the degree to which the individuals have developed habits in their use of spelling and emojis. Where individuals change their communicative patterns in the direction of their chat partners, this can be seen as instances of microsynchronisation in the sense of the linguistic dynamics approach (cf. Schmidt 2009). With quantitative approaches to specific chats I will show how in a process of mesosynchronisation sequences of microsynchronisations can result in a stabilisation on the level of two individuals. A further look at the use within the whole corpus may even point to a stabilisation in the communication community that could be a new orientation point for macrosynchronisation that retroacts on the individual use. With this focus on the use of individuals it will be possible to investigate how norms emerge in interaction and to analyse language dynamics and change. Moreover, in comparing these norms in the Swiss and in the German data it will be clear that despite of the globalisation processes fostered by CMC these norms show clear cultural borders within the German linguistic area.


Ueberwasser, Simone and Elisabeth Stark (2017): "What’s up, Switzerland? A corpus-based research project in a multilingual country". Linguistik online 84: 105–126.