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C Essay

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Language and Identity in Teenage Chatrooms

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1. Introduction

This essay is about the ways teenagers show their identity by language use in certain chatrooms on the Internet. It also includes a general overview of the fields 'language and the Internet' and 'identity construction'.

Internet chatrooms constitute a big and growing part of young people's lives, where they chat and virtually meet and interact in ways that were not to be imagined just one generation ago. In these kinds of interaction, language use and language competence are crucial tools. As I will work as a language teacher for teenagers, I find it very important to gain insight in teenagers' worlds of language.

2. Background

Some words to describe the feature 'chatroom' might be relevant here. Chatrooms are found at particular Internet sites, where each room is confined to a computer-mediated discussion on a particular topic. The discussion is continuous, and computer users interested in the topic can join the group for as long as they wish. Basically described by Crystal (1993, p 392), this interaction can take place in postponed time (asynchronous) or in real time (synchronous). In the first case, messages are left in an electronic mailbox for later reading, but in real time communication both sender and receiver are simultaneously logged on to their computers. It is the latter form that is in focus for this essay.

It is a well-known fact that the language of the Internet differs in various ways from ordinary written language, and this is the case whatever language computer users write in, and in any of the Internet communication ways: e-mail,

chatgroups and virtual worlds. In short, the differences are mostly found within spelling, grammar, punctuation, lexicon, length of texts, and use of capitals and signs in the text. This new kind or variety of written communication has been called 'Netspeak', as Crystal points out (Crystal, 2002 , p 17).

People search the Internet for information and facts, but they enter chat sites mainly for recreation. Chatting could also be said to have a social value, even in chatgroups discussing apparently serious topics, since associations, diversions, and digressions so easily happen when a large group speak together. The chat often resembles gossip, known since ancient times, and the forum of chatgroups was right from the start named after the real life behaviour 'chat', meaning 'small talk', which is of immense social value to all people, including identity-creating teenagers.

The chat environment has an intrinsic requirement that you compose the identity you choose to project. The electronic medium both obliges and tempts people to display or put forward their personalities in another way than was the case in the time of pen pals, with its physical letter, which was to be composed according to well-established writing traditions. A physical letter also has a permanent quality, in that it continues to exist as long as the recipient pen pal wants it to, which imposes on the sending pen pal a necessity of text clarity and carefulness, because the text will be read and reread. In chat, what you write will quite quickly disappear because the screen is continuously filled with what others write; then the collected text body incessantly renews itself from the top, scrolls down and is wiped out at the bottom. This means that you cannot describe yourself with well-chosen words in well-considered sentences, but rather by what you say and how you choose to say it in the rapid and linguistically condensed, everybody-talk-at-the-same-time conversation. This conversational setting is just cut out for experimentation with identity. It is

possible to change screen name at any time, and it is also possible to take part in a number of chat groups, showing different identities in each. There is thus a great possibility to experiment with alternative chat identities, for anyone who wishes to.

Generally, identity construction cannot take place without language, and the first and most central part of constructing somebody's identity, is the giving of a name. The name helps to define us and distinguish us as individuals (Thornborrow, 2002, p 138-149). Our name is central to our perception of ourselves as individuals, and most people react strongly to all forms of misuse of their name. All people hate being called names, because we do not like having our identity being treated in a derogatory way.

Not so few teenagers are discontented with their names, and some even choose another name for a while, e.g. a nickname they come up with themselves. Adolescence is usually a period of seeking for one's own strengths, for a self one would like to be, in short, for an identity of one's own. The seeking is shown by a lot of trying on the part of the teenager; everybody tries things according to their interests and preferences, and sometimes out of defiance. Today countless teenagers use the Internet not only to check out the world, but also as a tool for checking out themselves. "Who am I in relation to the world?", might be the underlying principal question in many adolescent minds. One of the means they use in this is chatting.

However, we all live within the human society of this world, although with local cultural varieties, and it is probably a mistake to assume a total freedom when it comes to the factual space people possess for creating identities. As Paasonen (2002, p 37) puts it: "There are limits to one's imagination with regard to gender, race, sexuality, identity, and these limits are conditioned, and reproduced by the ways that

one has become, and constantly becomes, situated as a subject". Another way of expressing how structures of power in society obstruct the shaping of identity, is the following: "we enter the virtual world laden with the psychological baggage of a lifetime and certainly don't abandon our suitcases in the entrance lobby" (Wallace, 1999, p 88, quoted by Paasonen, 2002, p 37). We are all individuals, but not of any kind, just of those kinds that society permits. We have bodies, we live, we act and interact, but we are all gendered, raced, and classed, and it is indeed hard for any identity-seeking teenager to evade these limitations.

2.1 Opinion overview

Some people hold the opinion that the Internet, as a means of communication, is still so new to us that we are still struggling to find a form to this language that we can agree upon. It is as if people try to acquire the rules of a game, to which there are no rules, at least not in the sense of the rules there are to written language, which could be defined as "universally agreed modes of behaviour established by generations of usage" (Crystal, 2002, p 15). This makes the learning situation rather special. Crystal notes, though, that there is a clear tendency toward playfulness and inventiveness in the language of the Internet. (Ibid, 2002, p 75)

Other people do not focus on the issue of language form, but rather on the goal. Whatever language is used, the purpose of communication is to expand the identity, and to try out self-created personal images. Turkle formulates it: "The Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life. In its virtual reality, we self-fashion and self-create" (Turkle, 1997, p 180).

Turning back to language, there is a notion of 'linguistic identity', which should be seen as part of our total identity, and as one of the means we have to display, confirm, communicate, and create our personality in interaction with others. The building and negotiating of identity is an all-life process, and most people switch between roles depending on situations and circumstances. "One of the ways in which we accomplish and display this shift is through the language we use. [...] Linguistic identity is [...] a matter of [...] how we communicate and interact with others through talk" (Thornborrow, 2002, p 136, 137).

Research has also been done on the relationship between language and group identity, including the notion of linguistic norms. Group identities and individual identities in relation to a group are partly constructed through language use, explains Thornborrow, who furthermore describes how the ability to use linguistic terms appropriately according to the norms of a certain group, is what establishes somebody's membership of that group, both to those in it, the 'ingroup', and those outside it, the 'outgroup'. (Thornborrow, 2002, p 142, 143)

Finally, it could be debateable whether or not teenagers are completely free to build their real and chat identities. Paasonen puts it this way: "Cyberdiscourse, in its emphasis on freedom and play, helps to render invisible the constitutive role of power [...] Identities are not only what we 'decide' or desire them to be; they are, to a high degree, decided for us" (Paasonen, 2002, p.38).

Regarding this collection of opinions, the conclusion is that there is a certain range in attitude concerning how the authors perceive Internet language use, and identity construction by this language use. Beside this range, there is the general theory of linguistic identity, expressed by Thornborrow (2002), covering all that concerns how we interact with others through talk; thereby switching roles, or parts of

our identity. Thornborrow then narrows down to how identity as a member of a certain group is often constructed by language use. This leads us back to the range of attitudes towards language use in relation to Internet chat groups, where Crystal (2002) makes a general statement about the absence of universal rules for the 'Netspeak', but otherwise notes that language play is very common in chat. Turkle (1997) stresses not the form but the goal of communication, which is said to be an expansion of the identity. Paasonen (2002), in contrast, holds the restrictive view that underlying societal structures of power to a large extent decide the web identities for us, and that it is difficult to build an identity independent of this phenomenon.

When investigating some teenage chatrooms with these opinions forming a background, the results will likely show chatting teenagers who, by their Netspeak language use, switch roles or identity. Further, their language use will probably indicate that they identify themselves as members of groups; defined by age, national language, language register, social class, etc. The chat language will probably tend to be rather non-standard in form, but playful. Presumably, the results will show how teenagers experiment with the construction of their identities, in the socially coloured Internet communication they are involved in. Finally, assuming the invisible presence of societal power structures also in chatrooms, the identities the teenagers hold up for the world to see, will probably be found to lie within a predictable area.

2.2 Aim

The aim of this essay is to study the ways teenagers project their identity in different chatroom environments. The two chatroom environments examined in the study are; one homework chatroom with its focus on school matters, and one ordinary chatroom with a more social approach. The language by which the teenagers present

themselves in the two chatrooms is examined with regard to formality vs. informality. Six language variables are examined in this study, and they are: screen names, spelling, pictures, and frequency of texting, i.e. abbreviated words and phrases. The last variables are choice of words and ways of introducing themselves.

2.3 Hypothesis

As Turkle (1997, p 180) points out, there is a wide range of ways people present themselves in the Internet environments. The hypothesis of this essay is, that: markers of identity are conceived by teenagers as much less important at homework chatrooms than they are at ordinary socially coloured chatrooms.

2.4 Method

Data was collected in an Internet homework chatroom, <http://www.eslcafe.com/>, and in an ordinary chatroom, <http://www.scopie.com/>, by entering those chatrooms, some hours in each, thereby taking notes of individuals' ways of presenting themselves.

The data from the two different chatrooms was then compared with regards to differences in screen names, spelling, use of pictures and texting, together with choice of words and ways of introducing themselves. A general evaluation was made as to what extent identity markers were used in the two different chatroom environments, and how they were used.

The findings were then related to prevalent theories on the fields of Internet language and identity construction.

3 Result presentation with examples

3.1 Screen names or nicknames (nicks)

In the ordinary chatroom, where the teenagers discuss a lot of things, it is clear that the norm is to come up with a 'cool' screen name. Hardly anyone use their usual name, but perhaps parts of it, or initials or abbreviations. Some of the screen names that were encountered in the study are listed here:

“AnGeL_Of_SaTaN[Elle’s muffin]”, “babybooo”, “biachnigga”,
 “bored2deaf”, “BOREDASHELL”, “XxBootiful_BabexX”, “=BradenTM=†Pro-SaNtA†”,
 “ChicA_LaTiNa”, “Heaven Sent”, “joelinlove”, “jogger”, “LONDON_LAD_16”,
 “No More Man Breasts”, “pink_angel”, “Pussy_Master”, “sexy_italian_guy”,
 “shake_dat_ass”, “SuGaLiPz”, “sweetchick”, and “Universal Soldier”.

All in all twenty-one names.

Some of these names are written with an alternate use of small and capital letters, e.g. “SuGaLiPz” and “ChicA_LaTiNa”, and some of them have other signs included, e.g. “XxBootiful_BabexX” and “=BradenTM=†Pro-SaNtA†”. Presumably, the reason for this is that these screen names were taken, wholly or partly, when these four users tried to log in with them, and so they had to come up with a variety of the names that the software would accept as unique, and which they could keep as their own from then on. Nevertheless, chatters sometimes replace one screen name with a new one, thereby adding on to the confusion of the conversational situation.

Most of the nicknames are comparatively long, and consist of a number of capitals, which means that they demand quite a lot of space on the screen, which in turn means that they more easily attract the glance of other chatters. It seems like

many of these nicks are composed to signal: “look at me, rather than at the other ones”.

In the homework chatroom, where study matters are discussed, although along with other subjects, there is a tendency toward real names as screen names, and the made-up ones usually show no intentions to appear cool, but rather, they express relatively mild personal preferences, or combinations of letters which probably only the user understands. Some of the screen names that were noted in this chatroom read as follows:

“68sergio”, “Danielle M”, “Evachan”, “Henriëlle”, “Just Dream”, “Karen green”, “Leverkusen”, “lovguru”, “mr mouse”, “neo85”, “ohiggins”, “Pearl7”, “purple_emperor”, “qierman”, “syganm”, “tandar”, “taz412”, and “Tinat”.

Altogether eighteen names.

Here, no odd signs are used, apart from one underscore and some numerals, both of which are allowed and normally found in screen names. Almost all these names are short ones; they demand less space on the screen than most of the names in the other group, and when capitals are used here, they are only used where they normally are used, at the beginning of a word. These nicks seem to show an intention of merely announcing the presence of their users, and not of outshining other names.

3.2 Spelling

When it comes to spelling, the messages in the ordinary chatroom probably would give most teachers of English grey hair. But these messages are not written to be used in class, or to be shown to a teacher, so it is somewhat unfair to judge them in ordinary spelling terms. For example, take the line: “he made 1 an he cumd in”. There

is no initial capital letter, “one” is not written with letters, there is a “d” missing in “and”, and “cumd” is a very freely composed substitute for the correct form “came”. Any teacher of English would comment along these lines, presented with such a sentence. But the purpose of writing this way in web chat is to communicate as quickly as possible. All my samples from this chatroom are written without initial capital letters. When a word or part of a word sounds like a digit, then it is replaced by the digit. Many one-syllable words are reduced to one or two letters, and many longer words are recomposed or written as they are pronounced. All these methods aim for a quick and smooth chat communication. Seen in this light, the above example might be considered less inappropriate than before. Others are “hey evry1” (=hey everyone), “n u all tlk crap” (=and you all talk crap), and “i try to b nice an he dont talk to me, he leaves da rm” (=I try to be nice and he does not talk to me, he leaves the room). The non-standard spellings reflect the pronunciation of casual speech. The standard way of spelling “every” is by writing a three-syllable word, but here they write it with just two syllables, to make it closer to the speech form. The same can be said about “n”, “u”, “b”, and “rm”, all speech-like written forms of “and”, “you”, “be”, and “room”. There is even an agreement error, severe enough to fail students of English as a foreign language, namely “dont” instead of “does not”. But here it just reflects the way these teenagers talk in their everyday speech.

There is a certain reason behind this eagerness to condense messages and words, Crystal (2002) argues, namely the technical limits there are to this way of communication. He explains that there is always a delay between a chat message and its reply, due to a number of factors, such as traffic density, processing problems, or constant or temporary problems in the sender’s or receiver’s equipment. This time delay is usually called ‘lag’. The longer you write, or the larger amounts of

information you try to send by chat, the longer is the delay, and the heavier the burden on the system. To minimize the lag, and the risks that go with it, e.g. possible breakdown of the connection between servers, chatters adapt their messages in order not to experience that. (Crystal, 2002, pp 31, 156)

Probably teenagers worldwide, who chat in countless chatrooms, and are very aware of lag problems, have happily combined the condensation requirement of the net medium, with their own preference to use a chat language that resembles spoken language, and the result is a comfortably quick way of typing.

Turning to the homework chatroom, spelling is found to be done mostly along ordinary rules. There are a few messages composed along the smooth model even here, such as “hi peeps” (=hi people), “where r u from?” (=where are you from?), and “cya later” (=see you later). But the great majority of the words in these messages are written as they are supposed to, or as they would have been spelled in any correct English text. Some examples are: “Evachan, are you male or female?”, “do any one want to visit a new chat room?” and “The question is to choose one learner or a group of learners...” The messages in this chatroom are in fact a little bit longer than the ones in the ordinary chatroom, but not long enough to cause any lag problems. They are only rarely longer than one line.

In this chatroom, though, some words are spelled wrongly, but in another sense than is the case in the ordinary chatroom. Here it is clear that some of the visitors, or perhaps most of them, are not native speakers of English, but apparently more or less into the process of acquiring it. Examples of misspelled words are “grettings” (=greetings), ‘an “anther” room’ (=another), and ‘from “excautly” from’ (=exactly). The first one might be a slip of the finger, but judging from the contexts, hardly the two other ones.

3.3 Pictures

Pictures, or personal icons, are popular identity markers in the ordinary chatroom. Almost everybody uses them, beside their screen name, in each of their messages. These icons are already there to choose from when you enter the chatroom, and they are replaceable any time you want. In this particular chatroom, they take the shape of heads of different styles. There is a cool white cat's head with earphones, together with many kinds of male- and female-sketched heads, in appearance spanning from diminutive to bold. The icon usually matches the screen name regarding the style. For example, the signature "Heaven Sent" has a girl's head with a smiling face and long hair with a flower in it. "Pussy_Master" uses a man's head, and is wearing a hat, with a feather, hanging on one side, covering half the face. What is seen of the face shows a light smile and a small beard.

Such icons are not used at all in the homework chatroom. This site probably does not provide such features, but has another profile.

3.4 Texting

The frequency of texting is quite high in the messages of the ordinary chatroom. This could already be seen in the text samples in the spelling section above, e.g. "hey evry1" and "n u all tlk crap". As mentioned, the writing code of ordinary teen chatrooms is smoothness. In this chatroom, hardly any messages are seen with all words written out fully, but the vast majority of them consist of a mix of ordinary words, words spelled as they are pronounced, and texted words. The abbreviation "lol" (=laughing out loud, possibly also = lots of love) is very frequently used, as is "cya" (see you). Other examples of texting as part of the writing are: "r u a red head cuz i like red heads" and "like up all nite tlkin".

In the homework chatroom, texting is not part of the writing code. Apart from a few “lol”-s and “cya”-s, texting is not used at all.

3.5 Choice of words

In the ordinary chatroom, many chatters choose words that they probably also use when they talk. Slang words, swearing, and taboo words are natural parts of the conversation, as is seen in “fine ill come to aussie an make ur life hell”, “its fanfkntastic” and “hes as fake as my mommas tits”. The most evident example of this is “ill slit ur throat u ltl cunt”. Sometimes the choice of words is conducted by a little more humorous attitude, like in “lier lier pants on fire”, and sometimes some comforting “hugz” are seen on the screen.

The choice of words in the homework chatroom is not coloured by any preference for swearing or taboo words. No such words are found here, but instead all the messages are built up with words belonging to areas of the English language that are seen as decent. Typical examples of this are “I love skiing, so I am hoping for lots of snow in the ski areas”, “So you are here only to work and not to enjoy yourself...” and “...don’t you like our little but hot chat room here?” Also regarding choice of words, it is obvious, here in the homework chatroom, that some of the chatters are not native speakers of English. Some sentences are built up with the words in a strange order, or some words are treated as if the writer does not understand them, like in: “I’ll pay back you with ...”, “...what is an anther room?”, and “...where r from excautly from llaty?”.

3.6 Ways of introduction

In both chat rooms, the software provides the service of presenting all entering chatters on the screen, in a short note like: "Universal Soldier joined the room". Everybody involved in chatting at the moment then knows that someone else has entered. It is not customary that everyone says 'hello' to the newcomer. If they did, the 'hello'-s would flood the screen and destroy the ongoing talk. The pattern is rather that the newcomer says "hi" or "hey evry1", or sits back for a while, finding out of what is being said, and then addresses one of the other chatters, like in: "Hi Just Dream". No one thus introduces him- or herself in ordinary terms, but rather just pops into the ongoing 'garden party' communication. When I entered the ordinary chatroom, it was possible for me to just watch and take my notes, because many people were there, busy with chatting, and they did not take any interest in me nor in my presence.

In the homework chatroom, though, newcomers are more often addressed by some of those already there, and so to speak get dragged into the conversation. When I entered there, I was noticed at once by the five people chatting there, and got addressed directly, so staying incognito was impossible at that moment.

One could rather say that chatters introduce themselves by the image of their screen names; in some rooms combined with a picture that enhances the style they have chosen to present.

4. Discussion

The hypothesis was that “markers of identity are conceived by teenagers as much less important at homework chatrooms than they are at ordinary socially coloured chatrooms”. After having done this investigation, all the results point at the hypothesis being supported. One should bear in mind, though, that this is based on simply a brief look at two randomly picked chatrooms, one of each kind. The web provides thousands of chatrooms, and there might well be homework chatrooms with a colloquial style of language, and ordinary chatrooms with a more traditional linguistic style. A reasonable guess, though, is that the general chat maxims include an emphasis on identity markers in ‘chat’ chatrooms, and less emphasis on them in homework chatrooms.

The name is doubtlessly the most central part of the identity people show, whether they show it by ordinary names in real life, or by screen names in chatrooms.

There is no doubt that many, by their nicknames in the ordinary chatroom, try to tell the world how sexy, cool, bored, or whatever, they are. At least, these names seem to aim for presenting an image that other teenagers might, or might not, believe matches the real personality behind the screen name. Clearly, many compose names that are meant to be offensive, to be contrasted to the normality of ordinary names. A large part of the nicks allude to sexuality, either the typically tempting but not very forward feminine approach, e.g. “sweetchick” and “SuGaLiPz”, or the likewise typically forward male image, such as “Pussy_Master” and “sexy_italian_guy”. Some provoke in other ways, like “biachnigga”, who perhaps holds out this ugly name with pride, as if driving away anyone who would dare to look down on coloured people. “AnGel_Of_SaTan[Elle’s muffin]” is another provoking

name, where the first part defies religious belief, and the second part tries to shock sexually. As Crystal points out, “weird and wonderful nicks are very much the norm” (Crystal, 2002, p 160 – 162), but not only for the reason that they are harder to duplicate, but very likely also because many teenagers like to try on new and daring name-costumes. Svenningsson puts it: “The nickname can work as a “face”, [...] As such, the nickname is one of the most effective ways of attracting attention” (Svenningsson, 2002, p 56).

The screen names of the homework chatroom, with their ‘normal’ look, and comparatively more cautious attitude, hint at older teenagers as composers. There is of course this “mr mouse”, which possibly could be interpreted as a synonymous name to “Pussy_Master” in the other chatroom, but the intentions behind the name “mr mouse” are not at all as clear as is the case with the other one. Perhaps he is just a fan of Mickey Mouse. Otherwise, these ‘faces’, without offensive signs, point at rather mature identities behind them. They have probably already found the base of their identities, and do not feel a need to try on any extreme name costumes.

Even if many screen names in both chatrooms seem to be clearly male and female, there is no way to know if the person behind the name have the same sex as the name they choose to present. It is the same thing with all the names that do not indicate gender, e.g. “neo85”, “tandar”, “syganm”, and “shake_dat_ass”; nobody can decide the sex of the real persons from these screen names. A reason for somebody to pretend being of the opposite sex might be sheer curiosity, but other reasons might lie behind. “Gender-swapping and gender-bending are not necessarily about fun and play; they are also tactics of preserving one’s integrity” (Paasonen, 2002, p 37). Girls might experience intimidation and harassment when they chat using female screen names. In order to avoid this, they might well prefer to use male

names or names without clear gender specification, and thus experience the privileges of a 'neutral' user.

As is observed by Crystal, many chatrooms expose a written language, which quite resembles spoken language: "non-standard spelling which reflect pronunciation [...] is used without sanction in conversational settings" (Crystal, 2002, p 88). The two chatrooms in this investigation show two positions regarding spelling, the one being rather conservative and the other liberal. In the homework chatroom, people spell their messages according to traditional spelling rules, but in the ordinary chatroom such rules have long been abandoned. One could say that they appear at the two ends of the spelling scale; the latter mirroring spoken language, as Turkle also observes: "the new writing is somewhere in between traditional written and oral communication" (Turkle, 1997, p 183).

The taking on of daring or provocative names, discussed above, is often accompanied by a suitable personal icon, completing the image. The usage of pictures can be interpreted as an extra way of expressing the chat face. Not all chatrooms provide this possibility, but it is very popular when it is the case. The homework chatroom does not provide personal icons, but the chatting teenagers manage well to present whatever chat face they choose, without pictures.

As the results show, texting is used frequently in the ordinary chatroom, where it is part of the writing code. Texting suits perfectly the software requirement to write briefly, but texting might also be a part of the cool image many like to present. The abbreviations from the SMS-technique (SMS = short message service, practicable on mobile phones) have spread to chat writing, and teenagers feel quite free to shorten down almost any words to just a few letters, since they are used to interpreting such linguistic features. In this chatroom, there is nothing cool about

writing as one normally 'should' do, but the group language norm states that the writing should be rather close to spoken and SMS language. From this follows that somebody, who enters a chatroom like this, and is not used to this way of writing, most likely runs into problems when trying to understand some of the messages. The linguistic group norm then has the function of a watershed, in that it lets some people in the group, and makes some others stay outside.

In the homework chatroom, the norm of that group language does not include texting at all, even if a few persons suggest it a few times. The responses they get are written in the normal way, without texting. The texting results, as well as the results concerning other variables, do indicate that there is a wide range in chat language, from formal to colloquial.

Also regarding choice of words, the results point at the two chatrooms do expose language ranging from formal to colloquial. Decent words and phrases are shown in the homework chatroom, while taboo language is part of the code in the ordinary chatroom. Again, the wide range of possible ways to express oneself guarantee that there is a chatroom for any linguistic style people choose to act. There are probably even more formal, and even more colloquial chatrooms on the Internet, that have not been visited in this study.

Ways of introduction is the only variable where the results are quite similar in both chatrooms, and this is due to the software always presenting newcomers in a short note. There is a small difference, in that homework chatters tend to address newcomers, but that ceases together with an increasing number of chatters entering the room.

The study shows that there is no ordinary self-presentation as in physical letters, nor is there any introduction made by others, as when a number of persons

meet physically, all knowing some but no one knowing all. In line with this, 'ways of introduction' must be seen to consist of the five other variables, with the screen name as the most central, and the other ones adding on to the image, although with more or less emphasis.

5. Conclusion

Having concluded that the teenagers introduce themselves by different usage of the variables screen names, spelling, pictures, texting, and choice of words, I would like to say that these variables constitute identity markers. As such, they are equally important in both chatrooms, because no one can enter a chatroom without a screen name, and no one can participate in the discussion without exposing a certain linguistic behaviour, including choice of words, texting, and spelling. Picture usage is just a bonus at some chat sites, but when they are there, the teenagers are fully aware that they are efficient markers of identity.

The matter of how identity markers are used in different ways, is probably governed by the purpose or the focus of the particular chatroom. It is what is supposed to be done in the chatroom that governs how important the identity markers are to the teenagers. In the chat chatroom, the purpose is to chat, to be seen and to check others out. In the homework chatroom, the main focus is on discussing school topics. Then there is no doubt that it is far more important how you present yourself in ordinary chat, than when you want to discuss a school matter.

In the '2.1. opinion overview' paragraph, p 6, it is expressed what could be expected as results from the chatroom investigation, based on the views expressed

in previous studies. The expectations are repeated here as a reminder: the results will likely show that:

- teenagers, by chat talk, switch roles or identity parts,
- they identify themselves as members of groups, by language use,
- chat language is disobedient in form, but playful,
- teenagers experiment with the construction of their identities,
- their chat identities lay within a predictable area.

The study supports the fact that the teenagers do shift between different roles at different times, and that they do it by changes in their chat talk. It is also evident that chatters do take different roles in the conversation, depending on their point of view, the grade of their engagement in the topic, and on what position they take in relation to other chatters. In the study were seen acts of verbal aggression as well as phrases expressing a comforting attitude toward somebody else.

It can be concluded that the chatting teenagers by their language use identify themselves as members of groups. It is also clear that there are numerous chatrooms on the web, with linguistic styles of all kinds, to provide people with linguistic space, where they can find groups to join, according to their preferences.

The results of the study do not completely meet the expectation on chat language being disobedient in form, but playful. Truly, many chatrooms do contain such a language, but certainly not all. There is also chat language that follows the rules of written language.

This study supports the point about teenagers experimenting with the construction of their identities, but it could be added that the experimentation sometimes fades out, probably due to the fact that some of the chatters are older. The results of this study give an impression of younger teenagers' eagerness to

experiment with daring and provoking chat identities, and of older teenagers' more moderate attitude to experimentation.

Regarding chat identities lying within a predictable area, governed by invisible but strong structures of power in the society, the results of the study strongly support this point. If the chatters choose not to use their real name as a screen name, what else than very female and very male images would teenagers come up with, when that is the norm of the society? Media, magazines, TV, and commercials of all kind present self-confident, forward men, and enticing, beautiful women. The structure of power between the male and female gender is firm, and breaking through is not done just like that. None of the chat identities seen in this study show anything radically different. No one has constructed a third sex, out of the hope of becoming untouchable by the power structure. The only way the teenagers, probably mostly girls, have, to evade unpleasant or derogatory chat experiences, is to take on a male or unclear screen gender, which in itself is evidence for which gender is perceived as the most powerful.

6. Summary

The focus of this essay is on the ways teenagers project their identity in two different chatroom environments, namely homework chatrooms and ordinary chatrooms with a more social context. Variables compared in the study are: screen names, spelling, pictures, and frequency of texting, as well as choice of words and ways of introduction.

It was hypothesised that markers of identity are conceived by teenagers as much less important at homework chatrooms than they are at ordinary socially coloured chatrooms.

The results of the study show a difference in linguistic style of the two different chatrooms; the homework chatroom exposing a traditional linguistic style, the ordinary chatroom breaking new grounds linguistically. The five variables: screen name, spelling, pictures, texting, and choice of words, all converge into the sixth; ways of introduction, because the results show that the way teenagers use the five first variables, is what constitutes their way of introduction.

The most important part of the chat identity someone chooses to present, is the screen name, which functions as a 'face' in the chat environment, and the face or chat identity gets more distinct by the usage of spelling, pictures, texting, and choice of words. This is the case in both chatrooms, though there is a tendency of teenagers presenting themselves rather provokingly or with extreme identity costumes in the ordinary chatroom, while the teenagers in the homework chatroom tend to present themselves more moderately, probably due to maturity combined with age.

There is supporting evidence for the hypothesis: markers of identity are perceived by teenagers as very important in the ordinary chatroom, and as less important in the homework chatroom. Extensive explanation is found in the fact that chatrooms have clear and different purposes, which makes it logical to emphasize one's identity when chatting, and to emphasize it less when discussing school matters. Teenagers most likely go where they know they can present themselves the way they want.

Noticeably, there are four major groups of chat identities, those using their real name or part of it as a screen name, those using a very male nickname, those using a very female nickname, and those using a nickname without clear gender. Usage of real names is only seen in the homework chatroom, where the focus is not on the identity. It is probably the fixed gender and power positions of society that lie behind many teenagers' choice of typically male and female chat identities, although they might not have made this clear to themselves. Negative chat experiences among girls might lead many of them into a tactical choice of picking up a male or unclear chat identity.

This study and essay have added to my knowledge something that I did not know, or had very vague ideas about, before. It is of course satisfactory to accomplish a task in line with the preceding motivation, but I am happy, too, if some other students might find some grains of knowledge, or clues to understanding in it.

An interesting continuation might be a deepened study of how girls experience power structures in chatrooms, if they have encountered harassment or silencing, and how they deal with that. Do they have certain strategies, and which are they? Such a study might be widened to include boys' awareness of and attitudes to such structures of power. And finally, if they are made aware of it, is there a possibility to rapprochement between boys' and girls' points of view, regarding how societal structures of power conduct their lives ?

7. References

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