Orthographic Principles in Written CMC:
The SUPER-functions of Textisms in Informal Online Writing and Their Interaction with Age and Medium

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Online messages often diverge from the standard language orthography: so-called textisms have become an indispensable part of youths' written computer-mediated communication (CMC). It is often believed that youths' spelling in computer-mediated messages is chaotic and messy. To determine whether there is any truth in this, an in-depth corpus study was conducted of about 400,000 tokens of digital texts produced by Dutch youths of two age groups – adolescents (12–17 years old) and young adults (18–23 years old), in four social media – SMS text messages, MSN chats, tweets, and WhatsApp messages.

It is demonstrated that Dutch informal written CMC, as in other languages, is implicitly governed by orthographic principles. Relative frequencies of textism types in the corpus show how textisms are effectively used by Dutch youths. Textism types are classified here in terms of forms (letters, diacritics, punctuation, spacing, capitalisation), operations (omission, substitution, addition), and, crucially, functions – the 'SUPER-functions': textisms can make orthography more Speechlike, Understandable, Playful, Expressive, or Reduced. Since three of these functions have also been recognized in research on non-Dutch CMC, by Thurlow and Brown (2003, 'sociolinguistic maxims' of SMS texting), Androutsopoulos (2011, 'themes' of digital writing), Thurlow and Poff (2013, 'maxims' of text message style), and De Decker (2015, 'principles' of chatspeak), similar orthographic principles appear to be cross-linguistically widespread in informal written computer-mediated communication.

Moreover, the present study proves that variability in the use of textism types in (Dutch) youths' online writing greatly depends on the variables of age group and medium. New media have their own combination of characteristics and constraints, while adolescents and young adults appear to have different perceptions on language use and spelling. While MSN is a near-synchronous, private, one-to-one or some-to-some, computer-based medium, Twitter is a public, one-to-many, asynchronous medium. Adolescents are quite creative and non-conformist in their language use in CMC, whereas young adults write somewhat more conventional in comparison. The analysis of textisms in this new media corpus thus makes clear that the orthographic deviations in Dutch youths' CMC, similar to those in CMC in other languages, are principled rather than random 'violations' of the standard orthography.

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