As "a unique new hybrid register" (Tagliamonte & Denis 2008: 3), chatspeak combines linguistic features of written and oral communication with genre-specific features. The use of the latter generally seems to be determined by three motivations: reducing the keystroke effort, rendering paralinguistic and non-verbal cues and displaying wittiness and creativity. Although these features have often been presented as prototypical markers of informal online written 'speech', some studies suggest that their presence tends to be overestimated (e.g. Baron 2004; Thurlow & Poff 2013).

The research we want to report on is based on an extensive written chat language corpus (more than two million words) produced by Flemish teenagers. Apart from discussing the relative presence of four typical chatspeak features (letter flooding, leetspeak, acronyms and abbreviations and other ‘reducing’ spelling deviations), the paper focuses on gender and age patterns. In view of some traditional sociolinguistic findings on gender patterns, we tested whether teenage girls could be considered the trendsetters, using particular innovative chatspeak features more frequently than male adolescents. Furthermore, we tried to determine whether the boys might be driven by considerations of brevity to a larger extent then their female counterparts. The third hypothesis was age-related and postulated that younger teenagers might be more creative and playful in their online language choices, whereas older teenagers might be more concerned about functionality. The data are discussed both from a quantitative and a qualitative perspective.


Keywords: chat language, age patterns, gender.