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THE INTEGRATION OF ENGLISH IN FLEMISH VERSUS AFRICAN ONLINE PEER GROUP LANGUAGE: A COMPARATIVE APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The present paper deals with the integration of English in informal written computer-mediated communication (CMC) by teenagers and young adults who are not native or first language speakers of English. Data from an extensive Flemish chat corpus are compared to South African, Kenyan, Nigerian, Ghanaian and Sierra Leonean chat and texting data. While the general (socio) linguistic context of the respective speech communities varies considerably, the younger generations appear to share an orientation towards global CMC English. Moreover they apply similar strategies when integrating English in their online discourse and demonstrate both cosmopolitan and local chat linguistic

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dexterity. The approach of the present study is mainly qualitative. It focuses on spelling adaptations and on the presence of 'universal' English chatspeak features. While the parallelisms between the Flemish and African data are most significant, the discrepancies point to the potential impact of factors related to the local context and the CMC medium.

Keywords: African online languages, appropriation of English, chatspeak, computer-mediated communication (CMC), Dutch, Flemish, peer group talk, texting.

1. INTRODUCTION¹

The impact of the only 'hypercentral'² language in the world (De Swaan 2001, 17) on (informal) computer-mediated communication (CMC) is generally taken for granted, but seldom systematically documented for speech communities where English either does not function as the mother tongue or first language for (hardly) any part of the population or where many speakers are not first language speakers of English. The first criterion applies to Flanders, i.e. Dutch-speaking Belgium. De Decker and Vandekerckhove (2012) discuss the integration of English in informal written chat language produced by Flemish teenagers whose native language is a (variety of) Dutch. It deals with the relative presence of several lexemes and word categories, with the effect on the target language and with the way the loans and English CMC features are integrated into adolescent chatspeak, i.e. with all kinds of appropriation and localisation processes. Since the analyses are based on a large corpus (nearly one million words) and include several aspects of loan word integration, they offer a suitable reference point for comparative research on the impact of English on young people's linguistic repertoires elsewhere, and more specifically on informal CMC produced by teenagers and young adults who are not native or first language speakers of English. In the present study we want to check to what extent the findings for Flemish informal chat practice are reflected in the online discourse of youngsters living in completely different linguistic conditions. More in particular, we want to find out whether comparable processes of integration and appropriation of English are to be found in varieties of African CMC.

While the data for the (Flemish) reference point are extracted from a corpus composed by the authors of the present paper, for the African data we rely on a number of publications that discuss linguistic features of online communication by youngsters from Kenya (Nekesa Barasa 2010), Nigeria (Chiluwa 2008, 2010, 2013; Deumert and Lexander 2013), Ghana (Deumert and Lexander 2013; Chiluwa 2013), Sierra Leone (Chiluwa 2013), and South Africa (Bock 2013; Deumert and Lexander 2013; Jansen van Vuuren 2007; Olivier 2013; Van Gass 2006, 2008; Verhoef 2001). Both the general linguistic setting and the position of English within these countries are divergent from those of northern Belgium. While they also differ considerably

from each other with respect to their linguistic composition, these countries do have something in common when it comes to the position of English: first of all, they all inherited English from British colonial rule and, secondly, up until the present day English is one of the official languages (South Africa, Kenya) or the only national language (Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone). English functions as *the* or *a* lingua franca in public life, as the main medium or one of the media of instruction in primary and secondary education (see e.g. Ememe and Egu 2009; Heugh 2009; Nabea 2009; Nishimuko 2007; Sellers 2007) and for some (minor) parts of the population also as a home language. For most inhabitants of these countries, however, an African language is the first language or mother tongue. These home languages, some of which also have a lingua franca status, constitute a wide array of different languages or language varieties, since all of the countries are marked by a striking linguistic diversity.

An important issue with respect to the writing practices in African context is that many people ‘receive their schooling in the former colonial language(s)’ (Deumert and Lexander 2013, 527). As a consequence, in many cases ‘the norms for local languages are generally not known because these languages are not part of the school curriculum (or if they are, class time is extremely limited’ (Deumert and Lexander 2013, 528). This explains why for instance in the texting data of Deumert and Lexander (2013) for Ghana, Nigeria and South Africa, on the one hand, and Côte d’Ivoire and Senegal, on the other hand, respectively English and French are the dominant languages, whereas ‘text messages written solely in an African language are a minority’ (Deumert and Lexander 2013, 536). In the Flemish data, however, Dutch always remains the base language. So, while we are not going to focus on the sociolinguistic set-up of these speech communities, we have to stress that the embedding of English in the African countries included in the present study is of a different order than its embedding in Flanders, where Dutch is the only official language, where public life is dominated by Dutch and where the primary socialisation of most people actually occurs in Dutch, although many immigrant languages are spoken in the cities. While English is acquired in school context as a second or third language, English is not a medium of instruction in primary and secondary education in Flanders and only to a minor extent in higher education. Moreover, it is underrepresented in public life and street life as a direct and face to face medium of communication. Yet people are confronted with it continuously via ICT, social media, advertising, music, films and soaps, etc. Consequently, the younger generations are well acquainted with English and especially adolescents are quite eager to integrate English loans in their peer group language (see De Decker and Vandekerckhove 2012).

In view of the largely incompatible (socio) linguistic contexts, a general comparison of the impact of English on the online discourse of young people from these different countries and continents cannot be the objective of the

present paper. Rather we want to focus on qualitative aspects of the integration of English in written computer-mediated communication. Though Flanders and the African countries included in the present study may not have a common history with respect to English, today young people from these countries or regions might actually share an orientation on global CMC English and apply similar strategies when integrating English in their written online discourse. Therefore, unlike De Decker and Vandekerckhove (2012), morpho-syntactic or semantic appropriation processes are not included in the analyses, since these have since long been part of the ‘indigenisation’ or ‘nativisation’ (cf. Adamo 2007) of English in the African speech communities. The objects of our analysis are CMC spelling adaptations or appropriations (in some cases linked to phonetic appropriation) on the one hand, and the presence of typical chatspeak features or global chatspeak English on the other hand.

Section 2 focuses on processes of spelling appropriation, whether or not linked to phonetic appropriation. The presence of universal chatspeak and CMC English is discussed in section 3. Section 4 presents the conclusion.

2. SPELLING AND PHONETIC APPROPRIATION

When dealing with spelling adaptations applied to English loans in CMC, the model of Winter-Froemel (2008, 165) for loanword integration serves as a useful reference point (see also De Decker and Vandekerckhove 2012). In table 1, TL stands for target language, i.e. the language that borrows from another language, the source language (SL).

Table 1: Winter-Froemel (2008, 165): A model for loanword integration

	Conformity to SL	Non-conformity to SL
Conformity to TL	Correspondence	Loanword integration
Non-conformity to TL	Transference	Hyper-foreignisms

For the present analysis we reduce the four categories distinguished by Winter-Froemel to three types: for all English loans that are copied from the source language without any graphemic adaptations, we adopt the label *transference*. Within the category of source language conformity, Winter-Froemel (2008) distinguishes between transference and correspondence. Correspondence includes loans that correspond both to the source language and to the target language, while loans within the transference category correspond to the source language but deviate from target language phonology, morphology, syntax or semantics. E.g.: The English loan word *link* fits in the Dutch phonological system and therefore can be considered a case of correspondence, but *brother* would be a case of transference if Flemish adolescents pronounce the interdental fricative, since the latter is not part of the

Dutch consonantal system. However, we are dealing with written language here and correspondence is quite hard to operationalise and rather rare on the level of spelling when source language and target language belong to different language families. Therefore, we include all loans presented in their original spelling form in the category *transference*. When the written forms of the English loans deviate from the standard spelling in English and converge (at least partially) towards the spelling system of the target language, they are considered instances of *loanword integration*. Finally, loans that get spelling forms that deviate both from source and target language spelling conventions are labelled *hyper-foreignisms* (see examples below).

For the present paper, the main focus is on the appropriation of English in online CMC. So transference will not be dealt with systematically. While transference appears to be the most frequent strategy in Flemish CMC and the same seems to hold for e.g. the Afrikaans chat data presented by Jansen van Vuuren (2007), this cannot be generalised to many/most varieties of African CMC. Deumert and Lexander (2013, 531 – 532) point to high frequencies of non-standard spellings for ‘digital varieties of English (and French)’ in their South African, Nigerian and Ghanaian texting data compared to low frequencies in UK and US data. The Kenyan study of Nekesa Barasa (2010) confirms the ‘African findings’, since it presents chat and texting utterances with an abundance of English loanword integration. But, once again, in view of the highly divergent linguistic contexts and available databases, such quantitative comparisons are beyond the scope of the present analysis.

2.1 Loanword integration

The Flemish data presented in De Decker and Vandekerckhove (2012, 338) show a complex relation between spelling and pronunciation with respect to the integration of English loans:

In some cases the dutchified spelling renders the English pronunciation of the lexeme. This implies that the graphemic appropriation of the word reduces the gap between spelling and pronunciation for the Dutch chatters: e.g. *klien* ‘clean’, *meejt* ‘mate’, *olraajt* ‘alright’. In other cases, however, the dutchified spelling renders a dutchified pronunciation of the lexeme. In other words, the English loan is appropriated both on a graphemic and a phonological level: e.g. *leem* ‘lame’, *meel* ‘mail’, *webspees* ‘webpace’. For Flemish speakers of Dutch, the grapheme <ee> renders the monophthong /e:/, which implies that a written form like *leem* will certainly not be pronounced with the English diphthong when read aloud by the Flemish chatters.

In other words, the instances of loanword integration on the level of spelling may or may not imply phonetic divergence from the source language.

Nekesa Barasa (2010) studies language use in SMS texting, e-mail and online chat in Kenya. While English is never the base or matrix language in the conversations

of the Flemish adolescents represented in De Decker and Vandekerckhove (2012), English does actually function as the base language in much of the Kenyan CMC discourse studied by Nekesa Barasa (2010). Nekesa Barasa (2010, 284) states that ‘English, Kiswahili, Sheng and vernacular languages are all utilised in CMC’, but ‘English is the most popular’ and links the latter observation to the level of education of the informants. Many utterances manifest code switching patterns, e.g. between English and Kiswahili, but even utterances that are nearly consistently produced in English contain many spelling appropriations, quite often combined with phonetic appropriation. Nekesa Barasa (2010, 103) labels them as ‘phonological spellings’ and presents numerous examples, some of which are listed below. We put the non-English words or utterances between square brackets:

- (1) *wen wil we [enda] to that ples? tel mi so tht i pripea ali* (p. 81)
 ‘When will [go] to that place? Tell me so that I prepare early.’ (enda = Swahili)
- (2) *M orait [niko ofisi tu]. iv oredi gt enuf [jobo]!!* (p. 107)
 ‘Im alright [and just in the office], I’ve already got enough [work]’ (niko ofisi tu = Swahili / jobo = Sheng)

Spelling forms like *ples* ‘place’, *pripea* ‘prepare’, *ali* ‘early’, *orait* ‘allright’ and *oredi* ‘already’ in the above examples present both spelling and phonetic appropriation, in most cases to Kiswahili. The same holds for many other adaptations like *pas* ‘purse’ (p. 107), *hom* ‘home’ (p. 107), *saspekt* ‘suspect’ (p. 109), *kliaring* ‘clearing’ (p. 109) and the widely applied replacement of <th> by <d>, resulting in forms like *dis* ‘this’ and *dey* ‘they’ (p. 110) (but see Nekesa Barasa 2010 for many more examples). Other forms, like *wen* ‘when’ and *enuf* ‘enough’, only manifest integration on the level of spelling. With respect to the latter form, Nekesa Barasa (2010, 108) points out that *inaf* would be expected, if the sender were to render his localised version of the lexeme. Instead he ‘retains some of the original letters in the word’ which results in a spelling form that is incongruent with his Kiswahili spelling and phonetic system. The same lack of systematicity and a certain capriciousness can be found in many spelling adaptations in the Flemish Dutch corpus: e.g., while some chatters render the lexeme ‘nice’ in a completely dutchified version as *naais*, others write *naaice*, thus preserving the final letters of the English lexeme (De Decker and Vandekerckhove 2012, 339).

Chiluwa (2008) analyses Nigerian text-messages in English. Informal e-mail messages are dealt with in Chiluwa (2010). Chiluwa (2008, 42) also points to the presence of ‘phonetic spellings’ which correspond to ‘the pronunciations of uneducated Nigerian English’, most probably generally produced by people for whom English is a lingua franca but not the first language or home language. The replacement of <th> by <d>, which had a high frequency in the Kenyan data of Nekesa Barasa (2010), appears to be a typical feature of Nigerian spelling integration too.

Chiluwa (2008) presents examples like *dat* ‘that’, *dose* ‘those’, *oda* ‘other’ (p. 42), *dem* ‘them’, *dey* ‘they’ (p. 43), Chiluwa (2010, 59) adds *broda* ‘brother’. Chiluwa (2013), who includes digital discourse from Ghana and Sierra Leone as well, points to the general absence of the dental fricative in West-African English, and so do Deumert and Lexander (2013, 532). The latter add some Nigerian examples in which the voiceless fricative is replaced by <t> (e.g. *tins* ‘things’) and stress that the use of these stops ‘carries a dual indexicality in Nigeria and Ghana’, because it does not only evoke the local West African pidgin but also global styles of speaking associated with international hip hop culture (Deumert and Lexander 2013, 533). This explains the omnipresence of these alternative spelling forms in some African CMC-varieties.

Another typical aspect of spelling integration that reflects the Nigerian English pronunciation of the lexemes is the spelling <a> for word final <er>: apart from *broda* and *oda* (see above), Chiluwa (2008, 43) also includes *numba* ‘number’. This spelling adaptation is reflected in the Kenyan examples presented by Nekesa Barasa (2010) as well, e.g. *aftanun* ‘afternoon’ (p. 105), *fangaz* ‘fingers’ (p. 113). Finally, another parallel between some of the Kenyan renderings of English lexemes and the Nigerian ones relates to the replacement of <ee> by <i>, e.g. *grit* ‘greet’ (Chiluwa 2008, 43) and *miting* ‘meeting’ (Nekesa Barasa 2010, 105).

Interestingly, some of these features are attested by Deumert and Lexander (2013, 535) in their South African texting data too, although, contrary to the West African cases, they cannot (always) be linked to spoken language use. A South African SMS utterance like *love u ova da moon* ‘love you over the moon’ (p. 534) does not only contain *ova* instead of ‘over’ but also *da* instead of ‘the’, with the *a* stop instead of a dental fricative and <a> instead of <e>. Bock (2013, 85) also presents examples like *eva* ‘ever’ in Cape Afrikaans chat. While this may not correspond to prevalent pronunciation patterns in South African English, these alternative spellings have become popular because they mark the genre and are appreciated as such (see Deumert and Lexander 2013, 535). In the case of *da*, once again there might be a link with hip-hop culture (Sebba 2007, 53, fn. 14).

Bock (2013, 68) deals with chat data collected by South African students at the University of the Western Cape. She presents several examples of intensive Afrikaans-English code switching, e.g. (Afrikaans and its translation in English between square brackets):

- (3) *Hello [engel hoe gaanit?] Didn c u in lyk eva n u on mxit! Whas up? [Ek mis jo vreeslik!]*
 ‘Hello [angel, how are you] Didn’t see you in like ever and you on MXit. What’s up? [I miss you a lot]’

Another variety of Afrikaans is represented in Jansen van Vuuren (2007), who focuses on the internet as a platform for the Afrikaans speech community. Part of her data base consists of chat conversations collected by Afrikaans students from the

University of Potchefstroom (see Jansen van Vuuren 2007, 144). Since the researcher got access to their chat rooms, we can assume that the data primarily represent north-western white Afrikaans. Although the Cape Afrikaans variety that is represented in several text fragments of Bock (2013) appears to be a mixed variety to a much greater extent than the north-western Afrikaans in Jansen van Vuuren, the latter (2007, 215) points to the large proportion of English in the chat conversations in her corpus: 19.14% of the lexemes in her Afrikaans chat data are English. Following Webb (1989), she states that the integration of English in Afrikaans chat is a marker of solidarity (Jansen van Vuuren 2007, 214-215, 223). While she does not define this indexicality, she adds that code switching confirms the informal character of the interaction. Though not presented as such in the dissertation, symptomatic of the solidarity marking function of English seems to be the use of English forms of address in informal chat conversations. In the north-western Afrikaans chat conversations we find address forms like *buddy* and *girl* (Jansen van Vuuren 2007, 243), which presents an interesting parallel with the Flemish chat data, since Flemish adolescents appear to adopt all kinds of English loans for addressing their peers. While some of them may seem quite rude and offensive (e.g.: *bitch*, *motherfucker*), they are meant to tease friends and strengthen friendship ties rather than harm them (De Decker and Vandekerckhove 2012, 330).

Generally the integration of English is not or hardly discussed in Jansen van Vuuren (2007). However, the dissertation contains many examples of Afrikaans online discourse that contain English, thus (indirectly) providing quite a lot of useful data for the present paper. A typical instance of spelling adaptation which is attested frequently in the Afrikaans examples is the replacement of English <i>/<y> by <aai>: e.g. *brasaaiz* ‘bra size’ (p. 93), *next taaim* ‘next time’ (p. 93), *baai* ‘bye’ (p. 205-206), *oraait* ‘allright’ (p. 219), *saaiber* ‘cyber’ (p. 235) (all from Jansen van Vuuren 2007), and in Van Gass (2006, 79) also *raaaaaaaaaaaait* ‘right’ with expressive lengthening (see below). Though transference of English loans without any graphemic adaptation appears to be much more frequent both in the north-western Afrikaans and in the Flemish Dutch data, we find parallel forms for this particular feature. The forms *naais* and *naaice* have been presented above, but *baai* and *baaaaj* for instance (with or without expressive lengthening) can be found in Flemish data too. In example (2) from the Kenyan data (see above) the same feature is present in *orait*. The greeting formula *haaiiyaa!!!* ‘hi you’ (Nekesa Barasa 2010, 107) presents another example from the Kenyan data.

Some of these African examples contain further adaptations according to the pronunciation of the words: in *taaим* and *brasaaiz*, the final inaudible <e> is dropped, in *saaiber* the initial <c> is replaced by <s>. However, in all of these cases the loanword integration on the level of spelling does not imply phonetic integration: while the spelling renders the pronunciation of the word in such a way that the word form corresponds to Afrikaans writing conventions (see <aai> in Afrikaans words

such as *saai* ‘sow’, *haai* ‘shark’), the pronunciation triggered by the spelling form need not deviate from the standard English pronunciation.

A final example of spelling appropriation which appears to have a high frequency in both the Dutch and the north-western Afrikaans corpus is *fok* ‘fuck’ (Jansen van Vuuren 2007, 208) and all kinds of derivations like *fokking* ‘fucking’ in the Flemish corpus data and *fokken* ‘fucking’ in the Afrikaans examples. This spelling form might have a wider distribution in international chat, since Urban Dictionary (www.urbandictionary.com) presents *fock* as ‘another way of saying fuck without being bleeped out on message boards’. However, the Urban Dictionary does not include *fok* as a lemma, with reduction of the final cluster <ck>. Final <ck> is not consistent with Afrikaans and Dutch spelling rules. By rendering *fuck* or *fock* as *fok*, the form is localised by Afrikaans and Dutch chatters.

2.2 Hyper-foreignisms

The category of hyper-foreignisms contains English words the spelling of which deviates both from the original spelling in the source language and from conventional spelling forms in the target language. In other words, the appropriation does not result in convergence towards the target language. The available data hardly present any examples, although some partial adaptations like the Kenyan example *enuf* (see above) instead of *inaf* for ‘enough’ represent a good case. Much more interesting representatives of this category, however, are more fancy and creative new formations. Nekesa Barasa (2010, 108) interprets the notation *baq* for ‘back’ as ‘creative show off’. She stresses that one would expect Kiswahili chatters to note *bak*, if they wanted to appropriate the spelling form. The notation *baq* with <q> as the word final grapheme is unusual both from a Kiswahili and an English perspective, but it might point to Arabic influence.³

A very interesting case in point is so-called *z*-spelling, all the more so since we find striking parallels between the Kenyan, the Western Cape and Flemish chat data for this feature. *z*-spelling implies that the letter <z> is added to all kinds of words in word final position. Since word final <z> is excluded by both Dutch and English spelling conventions, this is a typical hyper-foreignism, at least in Flemish chat. The Flemish chat corpus produced by teenagers from the central Brabant-Antwerp area contains numerous examples: e.g. *grtz* ‘greet’, *stylezz* ‘styles’, *parentzz* ‘parents’, *probz* ‘problems’, *djeez* ‘jesus’, *naaiz* ‘nice’, *yez* ‘yes’, *haqjz* ‘hi’, *yupz* ‘yep’, *afterz* ‘after’, *chillz* ‘chill’, *jeeuuupppz* ‘yep’, *sentensz* ‘sentence’, *lolz* ‘lol’ (= laughing out loud, see section 3). In forms like *grtz*, *parentzz* etc. the <z> has a plural marking function. This application is present in the Western Cape data from Bock (2013, 78) too: e.g. *cznz* ‘cousins’. In *yez* and *naaiz*, the <z> has no morphological function but still replaces the final dental fricative /s/. In lexemes like *afterz*, *chillz*, *sentensz*, *haqjz*, however, and the chat abbreviation *lolz*, its addition merely seems to be intended as

a playful writing trick. Some of these forms are chat conventions that appear to have a wide international distribution: Urban Dictionary lists *greetz* (but not the abbreviation *grtz*) and *lolz* and ascribes – for what it’s worth – the former to people with a low command of English and the latter to teenage girls. From the Flemish data we can conclude that *z*-spelling is a typical (young and cool) adolescent peer group feature, which is applied to Dutch lexemes too, e.g. *dasz* ‘that is’ (< Dutch ‘dat is’), *kermisz* ‘fairground’ (< Dutch: kermis), *andersz* ‘different’ (< Dutch ‘anders’).

While it is not hard to find instances of *z*-spelling in the Flemish data, much more abundant is its application in the Kenyan data studied by Nekesa Barasa (2010). She attributes the omnipresence of <*z*>, in many cases as an alternative for the grapheme <*s*>, to the influence of the creole urban (Nairobi) sociolects Sheng and Engsh. In those cases in which the *z*-spelling reflects *z*-pronunciation and even local *z*-spelling conventions, we are not dealing with hyper-foreignisms, but with typical loanword integration phenomena. Nekesa Barasa (2010) presents numerous examples, e.g. for English *kidz* ‘kids’, *prayerz* ‘prayerz’, *gyz* ‘guys’, *frenz* ‘friends’, *buddyz* ‘buddies’ (p. 113), and for Sheng *storoz* ‘stories’, *kidoz* ‘kids’, *estoz* ‘estates’ (p. 114). She also points to the fact that in many cases the <*z*> does not have any linguistic function (p. 112). These instances of *z*-application, which do not reflect local speech habits and the use of which is restricted to CMC, can be considered hyper-foreignisms: they are un-English and they do not conform to the source language(s) either. They primarily seem to function as creative CMC stylisations. Examples are *anywayz* ‘anyway’ and *laterz* ‘later’ for English (Nekesa Barasa 2010, 112, 115), and *hukoz* (huko) ‘there’ (p. 112) for Kiswahili.

It looks as if *z*-spelling is popular in adolescent or young adult CMC in large or at least diverse parts of the world. It might be considered as a kind of stylisation of a typical English shibboleth, i.e. the production of word final voiced sibilants, which is exogenous for the chatters.

3. UNIVERSAL CHATSPEAK AND CMC ENGLISH

Online texting and chatting practices are largely determined by three main maxims, which could be formulated as follows: (1) write like you speak; (2) write as fast as possible or minimise your typing effort; (3) try to compensate for the lack of some of the paralinguistic and non-verbal cues that are inherent to spoken interaction (see: Androutsopoulos 2011; Vandekerckhove and Nobels 2010). The first maxim explains much of the integration processes dealt with in section 2 and results in locally bound ways of writing. The second and third maxim, however, trigger writing strategies that are applied worldwide and thus may give rise to various features with a wide geographic distribution. However, it is not always clear how universal some of these chatspeak features really are. This is the topic of the present section, as far as it is linked to the integration of English: what kind of English chatspeak features do we attest in the Flemish and African data? Are there any similarities?

3.1 Abbreviating strategies

Maxim 2 stimulates the use of abbreviated forms, more in particular the use of all kinds of acronyms and other economical spelling choices. Starting with the acronyms, which compress a phrase or an utterance into one word by combining the initial letters of the words, we have to rely on the Flemish data, the data from Nekesa Barasa for Kenya and from Jansen van Vuuren for South Africa. The analysis of a large corpus of Flemish adolescent chat data (955 935 words produced between 2007 and 2010) yielded a top 10 for chat abbreviations (De Decker and Vandekerckhove 2012, 331), which is presented in table 2 alongside the top 6 of acronyms in Kenyan CMC reported by Nekesa Barasa (2010, 161).

Table 2: Most popular chat acronyms (and other abbreviations) in Flemish and Kenyan chat

De Decker and Vandekerckhove 2012: FLEMISH chat abbreviations		Nekesa Barasa 2010: KENYAN chat acronyms	
1. <i>lol(z)</i>	'laughing out loud'	1. <i>lol</i>	'laughing out loud'
2. <i>btw</i>	'by the way'	2. <i>omg</i>	'oh my god'
3. <i>aight</i>	'alright'	3. <i>btw</i>	'by the way'
4. <i>wtf</i>	'what the fuck'	4. <i>asap</i>	'as soon as possible'
5. <i>brb</i>	'be right back'	5. <i>imho</i>	'in my humble opinion'
6. <i>imo</i>	'in my opinion'	6. <i>brb</i>	'be right back'
7. <i>omg (omfg, zomg)</i>	'oh my god'		
8. <i>bk</i>	'(I'm) back'		
9. <i>ofc</i>	'of course'		
10. <i>atm</i>	'at the moment'		

First of all, in the Flemish data, 3, 8 and 9 are no acronyms, but other types of word compressions. The others are classical acronyms. *Zomg* is an exceptional, but for this acronym quite popular, case of *z*-spelling, since <*z*> is added in word initial instead of word final position, without changing the acronym's meaning. Most striking however is the large amount of overlap between the Flemish and Kenyan list: on top of both lists is *lol*, and, what is more, 5 of the 6 acronyms in the Kenyan list are included in the Flemish top 10, be it in slightly different variants with slightly different meanings (or connotations) for the numbers 6 of the Flemish list and 5 of the Kenyan one, respectively *imo* versus *imho*, *asap* is the only acronym in the Kenyan top 6 that has no equivalent in the Flemish top 10.

Jansen van Vuuren (2007, 161) includes a table with seven English acronyms used in Afrikaans CMC, but it does not allow for juxtaposition with the Flemish or Kenyan data, since four of the seven acronyms are variants of *lol*: the variant *lol*

appears to be the most popular one, followed by *lolol*, *lololol* and *lolololol* on places 2 to 4. Moreover, two other forms included in the list (*pls* ‘please’ and *tx* ‘thanks’) are no real acronyms, the seventh one is *wb* ‘welcome back’. Quite strikingly, *wtf* is included in a list of Afrikaans acronyms (p. 160) and annotated as ‘wat te fok’. It seems like this acronym could at least be considered ambiguous in terms of its Afrikaans or English interpretation and could have been included in both lists (if not exclusively in the English list). *Lol* and its three variants represent 971 of the 1188 acronym tokens or 81,73 per cent. Not included in the acronym lists presented by Jansen van Vuuren (2007, 160-161), but extracted from examples presented in her dissertation is *brb* ‘be right back’ (p. 86, 289), which is also included both in the Kenyan and Flemish list in table 2. Unfortunately, Chiluba (2008, 2010, 2013) does not mention any acronyms, but it may be clear from the above survey that a limited set of English acronyms seems to enjoy wide popularity in CMC produced by non-native speakers of English from both continents. Apart from these ‘global acronyms’, user groups may develop their own abbreviations, which can be used within the peer group ‘as shorthand without explanation’, e.g. *lib* ‘lying in bed’ as response to the question *wud* ‘what are you doing’ in texting fragments analysed by Bock (2013, 78 – 79).

However, acronyms represent just one type of economical writing in CMC. Another strategy implies the compression of individual words (instead of phrases) in order to save typing energy and space, though space has become less important even for texting nowadays. In many cases only (part of) the ‘consonantal skeleton’ is left (Androutsopoulos 2011), except when the word begins with a vowel. In that case, that vowel is generally preserved since the initial letter is essential for word recognition (Johnson and Eisler 2012; Nekesa Barasa 2010, 160). This explains why *of course* is compressed to *ofc*, while *back* is converted into *bk* in the Flemish chat data (see table 2). Nekesa Barasa (2010, 159) states that ‘consonant writing has currently become a general CMC culture and is now used in all genres’.

For the Flemish data, contrary to acronym production, which is generally restricted to English lexemes, the compression of individual words into a consonantal skeleton is quite popular for some Dutch lexemes, but hardly applied to the English loans. For the following Dutch high frequency words for instance, the abbreviated forms appear to be even more common in Flemish chat than their full equivalents (see De Decker and Vandekerckhove forthcoming): *idd* (inderdaad) ‘indeed’, *mss* (misschien) ‘maybe’, *wrs/wsl/wsch/wrsch* (waarschijnlijk) ‘probably’ and *ff* (even, ‘effe’ in Flemish slang) ‘for a short moment’. But for English, apart from *bk*, *thx* ‘thanks’ is one of the other rare English-rooted and conventional consonantal skeletons with a high frequency in the Flemish chat corpora. Other compressions are only occasionally used by individual chatters, e.g. *srsly* for ‘seriously’ and *bzzrs* for ‘buzzers’, found in the chat discourse of two young Antwerp chatters.

In the Kenyan data, however, we find much more examples of what Nekesa Barasa (2010, 159-160) describes as ‘exclusive consonant spelling’, e.g.:

(4) *m hvn m lst cls*
 ‘I’m having my last class’

(5) *wd b grt*
 ‘would be great’

Chiluwa presents quite a lot of examples of consonant skeletons for West-African texting and chatting, e.g. for Nigerian texting (Chiluwa 2008, 43) *hm* ‘him’, *hr* ‘her’, *hv* ‘have’, *wd* ‘would’, *bn* ‘been’, *mt* ‘month’, *nxt* ‘next’, *wnt* ‘want’, *wknd* ‘weekend’, *btw/btwn* ‘between’. Typically *arnd* ‘around’ and *exhstd* ‘exhausted’ have preserved the initial vowel. Bock (2013, 77) includes several examples produced by texters that are mixing Western Cape Afrikaans with English: *nw* ‘now’, *drnk* ‘drunk’, *thnk* ‘think’.

Finally a popular shortening that can be found in all of the African and in the Flemish chat data is the form *u* for ‘you’, which also corresponds to the speech maxim (cf. maxim 1 presented above). It is a well-known instance of homophone spelling that has been attested in varieties of CMC world-wide (see Deumert and Lexander 2013, 512). Nekesa Barasa adds four more single graphemes which function as homophone spellings and tend to replace lexemes with a high frequency in Kenyan CMC: *r* for ‘are’, *m* for ‘I am’, *x* for ‘ex’ and *y* for ‘why’. The first one is also included in Chiluwa’s (2008, 43) survey for Nigerian texting and in Deumert and Lexander’s (2013, 512) data for Nigerian and Ghanaian texting.

A special type of abbreviation belongs to the category of so-called *leetspeak*, which refers to the use of all kinds of characters and symbols in order to replace letters within a word unit. Leetspeak may serve various expressive functions (see next section), but one type of leetspeak seems to have a primary shortening function: the integration of numbers in a word unit or a phrase, which, due to the homophony, has a rebus-like effect: e.g. *w8* for ‘wait’. Popular media often present this and other types of leetspeak or rebus-like spellings as one of the prominent features of online chat or texting. However, De Decker and Vandekerckhove (forthcoming) demonstrate that the frequency of these spelling adaptations is extremely low. In a Flemish chat corpus of two million words hardly one in two thousand words appears to be affected by leetspeak transformations. Examples like *4ever* ‘forever’ and *I love you 2* ‘I love you too’ are quite rare. Yet, in spite of their low frequency, they seem to be highly appreciated, even in Flanders. Moreover, there might be considerable differences worldwide with respect to the frequency of this application and there might be medium-related discrepancies. Deumert and Lexander (2013, 512) reveal a low frequency score for the number 2 replacing *to/too* in UK texting versus considerably higher frequencies for the same variant in South African, Nigerian and Ghanaian

texting. The relative absence of leetspeak in Flemish data might be a consequence of the medium. As a matter of fact, the Flemish data consist of chat messages only. They do not include any text messages. The potential impact of medium for this variable seems to receive some support from the Kenyan data. Nekesa Barasa (2010, 131) suggests that the integration of numbers is very popular in Kenyan CMC, but the integration of numerals does not attain high frequency scores in all media. It appears to be a typical SMS texting phenomenon. This might be interpreted in terms of space and typing comfort. First of all, until recently, i.e. before the general spread of smartphones which gradually blur the distinction between texting and online chatting, space was an issue, as texters were given a limited number of characters per message (mostly 160). Typing comfort remains an issue even today: typing on a laptop or computer may be much more comfortable than typing on a mobile phone. By consequence, the urge to minimise typing efforts may be considerably higher for mobile texting.

Also, the frequency scores presented by Nekesa Barasa raise some confusion, since instances where the numbers actually refer to a number in the given context, appear to have been included too (e.g.: *it was at 6* ‘it was at 6 o’clock’, p. 133). However, Nekesa Barasa’s data do contain many unambiguous examples of letter-number-leetspeak in her Kenyan CMC data, e.g.:

(6) *evry1 is talking bout it* (p. 135)
‘Everyone is talking about it.’

(7) *I’l go 2nyt* (p. 137)
‘I’ll go tonight’

Chiluwa (2008, 42) also points to the presence of ‘alphanumeric conventions’ in Nigerian text messages and presents the following examples: *be4* ‘before’, *2morrow/2mrw* ‘tomorrow’, *4ever/4evr* ‘forever’, *2night/2nite* ‘tonight’ and *2* for the preposition ‘to’ versus *4* for ‘for’ (2008, 43), and in West-African CMC varieties in general: e.g. *need2* (need to), *go4* (go for) (2013, 58). In Deumert and Lexander (2013, 540) we find a Ghanaian text message saying: *don’t 4get 2 say a prayer b4 u lick ur bed* ‘don’t forget to say a prayer before you lick your bed’.

Verhoef (2001), in her early study on Afrikaans CMC, presents two examples: *gr8* ‘great’, and *fanx 4 ur elp* ‘thanks for your help’. Jansen van Vuuren (2007), however, makes no mention of these alphanumeric word forms in the Afrikaans chat conversations of the Potchefstroom students, but Bock (2013, 85-86) contains several examples for Western Cape chat: e.g. *w8* ‘wait’, *4 lyk 10yrs* ‘for like 10 years’, *tld hm 2 mak* ‘told him to make’, *im sorry2hear d 2 of u wre gr8 2gda* ‘I’m sorry to hear, the 2 of you were great together’.

As to abbreviating strategies, some of them appear to be commonly applied to the (non-English) native languages of the chatters, while other strategies are largely

limited to English. The latter certainly holds for acronyms. The extensive Flemish chat corpus for instance hardly contains any Dutch acronyms. *iig* (in ieder geval) ‘anyway’ and *hvj* (hou van je) ‘love you’ are two exceptions, both with an extremely low frequency, which is in sharp contrast with the abundance of English acronyms. Nekesa Barasa (2010, 164) concludes that ‘most of the recurrent acronyms are universal’ and that only ‘few are uniquely formed or adopted from the Kenyan context’. She presents *ttk* (toa kitu kidogo) ‘remove something small’ as an ‘unconventional Kiswahili acronym’ to support the argument. At first sight, the Afrikaans data seem to contradict the privileged position of English with respect to acronym formation, since Jansen van Vuuren (2007, 260 – 261) presents six Afrikaans acronyms (e.g. *wt* (welkom terug) ‘welcome back’). However, the sum of the tokens for these six acronyms is 189, which, in view of the 971 tokens of *lol* and its variants, is absolutely minimal. Moreover, *wtf* might be interpreted as an English instead of an Afrikaans acronym (see above). While in the texting samples presented in Bock (2013) most acronyms are English-based too, there are some counterexamples, like Afrikaans *wmj* ‘wat maak jy’ (what are you doing, p. 78). Finally, Deumert and Masinyana (2008, 135) add an interesting observation: they studied bilingual English-IsiXhosa texting messages produced by young adults whose native language is IsiXhosa, and concluded that ‘abbreviations (as well as paralinguistic restitutions) are generally absent from the isiXhosa data’ while they are part of the English utterances produced by the same informants. In other words, for some of these typical CMC features English is the privileged or at least preferred field of application.

3.2 Expressive strategies

The most prototypical compensational expressive features are a wide range of emoticons, but other features like the (excessive) use of capital letters, the repetition or *flooding* of letters and punctuation marks fulfil all kinds of pragmatic functions too. We will not elaborate on these features here, although it must be pointed out that they are well represented in both the English and native language utterances in all of the available data, e.g. some examples of flooding: *naaaaiz* ‘nice’ (Flemish chat corpus), *had sooooooooooooo much fun* (Kenyan CMC, Nekesa Barasa 2010, 177), *My people, ooooo!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!* (Ghanaian CMC, Chilwa 2013, 58), *raaaaaaaaaaaait* ‘right’ (Afrikaans CMC, Van Gass 2006, 79).

A typical strategy that deserves special mention in this context is a specific form of leetspeak which is marked by the inclusion of all kinds of non-alphabetic characters and symbols in English words in order to express (strong) emotions or, in some cases, in order to simply add a playful twist to the conversation. While mistyping cannot always be excluded, an example like *g00gl3-sk1llz* ‘google-skills’, in which all letters for the vowels have been replaced by numbers, is clearly produced deliberately by a Flemish adolescent. Chatters often play with the visual

rendering of the words and replace letters by figures or other symbols on the basis of typographic resemblances. Quite often, however, leetspeak has a more forceful expressive function. These forms are rare in the Flemish corpora, but the African data show that such forms are well-established in CMC from all over the continent. Nekesa Barasa (2010, 212-213) explicitly comments on their emotive function in Kenyan CMC and presents examples like sh**%#t!!! 'shit' and *****s 'asses'. Chilwa (2013, 58) states that non-alphabetic symbols are integrated into words or simply concatenated to express anger in West-African CMC varieties: e.g. fu#c#k 'fuck' and %\$#\$\$@#@# these idiots. The latter form was included in 'angry reaction to the report that the Ghanaian president did not receive adequate medical attention before he died'. Quite interestingly, Jansen van Vuuren (2007, 213 – 214) states that these symbols might also have a reverse, i.e. mitigating, effect, for example when fucking is presented as f@ken or f@kn in Afrikaans CMC. Moreover, she observes that chatters often switch from Afrikaans to English for strong language, for example for the use of curse or swear-words such as damn, bitch, barse, asshole and the already mentioned fuck. In this respect we see a parallel with some of the practices of the Flemish chatters: the top 10 of the most frequently used English lexemes (chat acronyms and abbreviations excluded) in Flemish CMC contains three swear-words or words that are used in a distinctly negative way, i.e. sucken 'to suck', lame and gay (De Decker and Vandekerckhove 2012, 329). Furthermore, as indicated above, curse-words like bitch and motherfucker are frequently used as forms of address by Flemish adolescents. Both the Afrikaans and the Flemish CMC practice seem to suggest that the switch to English mitigates the sharply negative connotation of these words.

4. DISCUSSION

The target of our research was to identify the common core and the divergences between the ways that Flemish (European) and African youngsters incorporate English in their CMC communication. The background of the question is more general: do widely societal differences exert an influence on the way English, with its hypercentral status, is being appropriated. Commonalities would then reflect the impact of universal features. Differences would reflect the impact of local factors. The level and type of impact would reveal the dynamics of language use and language development in cases where language contact is at stake.

The data indeed show a number of universal categories (which can actually be explained in terms of the three maxims, mentioned in section 3, viz. phenomena linked to writing 'as you speak', 'minimising typing efforts' and 'making up for missing paralinguistic and non-verbal cues'). But the way these maxims are realised appears to differ to some extent, and so does the intensity of certain processes. So the question may arise in what respect the latter differences need to be attributed

to contextual factors. While the focus of the present study was not on the social and linguistic context but on the qualitative analysis of appropriation processes, contextual elements actually have to be taken into account when interpreting the data. E.g.: Rendering stops instead of dental fricatives in West African English chat corresponds to the ‘speech maxim’ but at the same time it can be linked to hip hop repertoires (Deumert and Lexander 2013, 533) which might be less prominent for e.g. the Flemish adolescents. But then again, some of these processes got so firmly embedded in international chat culture that they may have found their way in international chat discourse even without this contextual support.

One common observation for all of the data seems to be that English offers the chatters an opportunity to demonstrate ‘textual linguistic dexterity’ (Deumert and Lexander 2013, 535), which could be reformulated as chat linguistic dexterity. ‘It is all about linguistic virtuosity’ (p. 534). By integrating English chat conventions and by localising and appropriating the English language in general, i.e. by producing non-standard English writing, the adolescents and young adults demonstrate they are skilful chatters or texters. At the same time, they index ‘global sophistication’ (Bock 2013, 89): they do not only confirm that English is part of the peer group repertoire, they project a cosmopolitan identity too. Furthermore, appropriating English adds an element of playfulness to the online discourse. The widely attested z-spelling offers an interesting case in this respect. Quite strikingly, Deumert and Lexander (2013, 540-541) find that ‘practices of non-standard writing and heavy abbreviations apply only to the former colonial languages’ (i.e. English in their data for Nigeria, Ghana and South Africa), not to the African languages. ‘The use of African languages indexes sincerity and seriousness’. The data of Nekesa Barasa (2010) for Kenya appear to confirm this tendency in that abbreviatory forms are the privilege of English and rare for e.g. Kiswahili. The Flemish chat data, however, reveal intensive non-standard writing of Dutch. So the Flemish adolescents demonstrate chat linguistic dexterity for their home language too: while acronyms are nearly exclusively English-based, consonantal skeletons, for instance, are much more prominent for some high frequency Dutch lexemes than for English lexemes. These differences between African and European chat seem to be related to different education and writing traditions (see introduction), with a relatively weak position of the African languages in education in many African countries and regions.

While creating a cosmopolitan profile is part of the identity construction, so is indexing ‘local situatedness’ (Bock 2013, 89). The chatters connect to local peer group conventions and seem to be rewarded for creating new ones. Quite a lot of acronyms appear to be used world-wide (e.g. *omg* ‘oh my god’) and the same holds for some other abbreviations (e.g. the homophone spelling *u* for you), leetspeak forms (*4ever* ‘forever’) and all kinds of expressive strategies, but local forms or localised

applications of global chat conventions are an essential part of the discourse too. In some of the chat fragments analysed by Bock (2013, 78), for instance, the chatters do not only add local ingredients by inserting IsiXhosa words, but also by producing unusual but definitely in-group English acronyms like *lib* for 'lying in bed'. As a matter of fact, 'glocalisation' appears to be an issue for all of the chat practices under discussion.

With respect to leetspeak we see a potential side effect of the medium that was used: computers and laptops in the Flemish data and smartphones in many of the African cases dealt with. E.g.: Both in the Kenyan texting data of Nekesa Barasa (2010) and in the South African data of Bock (2013) – the latter were produced within a mobile-phone based instant messaging application – we see an abundance of leetspeak forms (e.g.: *g2g* 'got to go'). In the Flemish data these forms are extremely rare. The preference for these forms in the African data might be related to restrictions in terms of space and typing comfort for mobile phone communication. However, Deumert and Lexander (2013, 512) mention low frequencies for number/letter substitution in UK texting as opposed to South African, Nigerian and Ghanaian texting. As a whole this is a significant caveat: we have to take into account the contextual factors that might explain differences between, for instance, European/Flemish and African data and at present cannot jump to uncorroborated conclusions with respect to these variables.

Expressive strategies can be found in all the data sources. Their occurrence is indeed to a certain extent 'strategic', as a way to transmit message parts that require extra textual support: to mitigate or strengthen the message or sometimes hide words and word parts. The form of the strategies shows correspondences across Africa and Europe. These strategies resemble the techniques that are used in comic books. Obviously, both comic books and CMC messages use the same source, viz. the signs and characters that are on keyboards everywhere, and procedures (e.g. repetition, capital letters) that are also available when using the standard keyboard.

Finally, the adoption of English as medium of communication in CMC appears to be a matter of convenience, just as much as it is a matter of style. Young people use English for its status as a marker, as a means to demonstrate linguistic chat dexterity and as a medium for identity construction, but also as a handy tool for swift and easy communication in a specific environment. Obviously a comparison with CMC in countries with another 'international' language (French, Portuguese...) would provide further evidence for the attested tendencies. As a starting point we focused on differences between the European (Flemish) data and the African data as we assumed that the different context could cause major differences. We cannot but conclude that differences do occur, but overall the correspondences are much more striking.

NOTES

1. We sincerely thank Innocent Chiluba and Jako Olivier for supplying some of the publications, Adri Breed for connecting us with the latter, and the reviewers for their pertinent remarks on the previous version of this article.
2. De Swaan distinguishes between peripheral (or minority), central, supercentral and hypercentral languages. The latter (i.c. English) connects speakers of the supercentral languages (e.g. French, Arabic, Spanish).
3. We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this suggestion, which seems plausible in view of the intense contact between Swahili and Arabic.

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