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Metalinguistic comments in teenage personal blogs: Bringing youth voices to studies of youth, language and technology

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Abstract: The language that young people use in technologically mediated interactions has been sensationally exoticized by the mass media, constructed as a distinct form of communication barely comprehensible to adults, and presented as a threat to standard English, as well as to human relationships and the social order. The question of young people's actual role in linguistic and social change is one that runs through much of the existing research on the subject, but also one that remains limited to adult perspectives. In the present study, I aim to address this gap by investigating young people's own metalanguage in a genre where traditionally such metalinguistic awareness would be little expected – in teenage personal blogs. The material used is composed of 32 personal blogs written by American teenagers in the period between 2010 and 2013, collected from a popular dating website, Mylol.net. The teenage bloggers are shown to frequently orient to their peers' Internet language and to norms of orthography, perpetuating many aspects of standard-language ideology and linking them with adolescent concerns. I wish to use these examples in order to draw attention to the diversity of teenagers' attitudes to language and technologically mediated communication, which works to challenge particular dominant assumptions. More broadly, I will argue that a full understanding of young people's online practices and their potential impact on language and communication crucially requires more nuanced attention to youth voices and youth agency.

Keywords: youth, CMC, blogging, language ideology, language change

1 Introduction

In contemporary ideologies about language, both technology and youth occupy a prominent place. The language that young people use in technologically mediated interactions has been sensationally exoticized by the mass media,

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constructed as a distinct form of communication barely comprehensible to adults (Jones and Schieffelin 2009; Squires 2010); it has been widely presented as a threat to standard English (Squires 2007), as well as to human relationships and social order (Herring 2008). These language-ideological positions have now been addressed in an increasing number of scholarly studies, which critically explore adult constructions of youth as "cyberkids" and "wired whizzes" (Thurlow 2006, Thurlow 2007; Herring 2008) and offer empirical evidence that largely counters popular perceptions about technology and language change (Plester et al. 2011; Kemp and Bushnell 2011).

The question of young people's role in linguistic and social change is one that runs through much of the existing research on language and technology, but also one that remains limited to adult perspectives. In the present paper I aim to draw attention to this gap, while situating it in relation to existing literature and to the now well-documented language-ideological perspectives in the English-speaking world. Broadly, I follow Crispin Thurlow's arguments (Thurlow 2003, Thurlow 2006, Thurlow 2007, Thurlow 2009), not only in emphasizing that young people's (technologically mediated) communication is routinely misrepresented by adults, but also in acknowledging that such misrepresentation has an impact on social/power relations and ideologies of difference – thus becoming a responsibility for academics to address. However, while scholars like Thurlow (2006, 2007) contribute to this end by critically examining adults' metadiscourse about young people's computer-mediated language, I wish to argue for the need to complement these insights by examining young people's own metadiscourse. I illustrate these points with a look at metalinguistic comments in personal blogs written by American teenagers,[1] who are seen to reflexively and actively theorize their own online linguistic practices.

The paper is organized as follows. At the start, I synthesize some of the key research relevant to the topic, namely (i) the existing research on popular representations of young people's computer-mediated communication (CMC),[2] and (ii) the empirical findings on young people's computer-mediated communication (CMC) and its impact on language. This twofold interest is underpinned by the idea that challenging the media hype about young people's CMC as a

1 In this paper I use the term "metalanguage" to mean the instances where language is explicitly thematized in people's everyday language use (Thurlow 2006, Thurlow 2007); for many other understandings of language, see Jaworski et al. (2004).

2 A note on terminology – "CMC" is used to refer to all forms of technologically mediated interaction, including text messaging. I use the terms "CMC language" and "Internet language" for simplicity, and not to imply any distinct variety of language.

linguistic and social threat requires both a critical understanding of lay beliefs and sound empirical investigation. I then turn to young people's own perspectives, and discuss the need for giving voice to the youth in scholarly studies in this area. A brief analysis of teenage blogs from a dating website is used to illustrate this stance. Overall, the teenage bloggers are shown to frequently orient to Internet language and norms of orthography, perpetuating many aspects of standard-language ideology and linking them with adolescent concerns. Rather than suggesting that these youth attitudes are in any way typical or most authentic, I wish to use this example to draw attention to the diversity of young people's views of language and technology, which calls into question some existing assumptions. More broadly, I will argue that a full understanding of young people's online practices and their potential impact on language and communication crucially requires more nuanced attention to youth voices and youth agency.

2 Background

2.1 What the Internet is doing to language: Youth, technology and standard-language ideology

Popular beliefs about language, youth and technology, though still "often noted but rarely interrogated" (Squires 2010: 483), have recently attracted more scholarly attention. A growing body of work has specifically explored the representations of electronically mediated language in the public, nonspecialist discourse (e. g. Thurlow 2006, Thurlow 2007; Herring 2008; Squires 2010), sharing a concern with such language as a metalinguistic and metadiscursive phenomenon (cf. Jaworski et al. 2004). Much of this work uses mass media as a site for research, a choice well justified if we consider the common view of the media as major producers and sustainers of language ideologies (e. g. Lippi-Green 1997; Milroy and Milroy 1999; Blommaert 1999; Silverstein 1996; Androutsopoulos 2011).[3]

As a starting point, it is important to note that none of these scholars present the anxiety over language as an inherently modern phenomenon. Indeed, prescriptive stances toward language usage have featured in public discourse for centuries. Grounded in standard-language ideology and what has been termed

3 Though the broader influence of the media on language change has been subject to much debate (see e. g. Stuart-Smith 2007, Stuart-Smith 2012).

"the complaint tradition" (Milroy and Milroy 1999), beliefs that languages represent discrete entities with fixed rules have historically often led to fears of language innovation and change, along with convictions that the very state of language is on the decline (as especially widely discussed in UK and US English contexts, see e. g. Crystal 1984; Crowley 1991; Milroy and Milroy 1999; Lippi-Green 1997). Fears about technology and language change have typically been accompanied by fears for the moral and social fabric, repeated through history in similar forms. Polarizations between adults and youth, and adult anxieties about adolescents' use of language and their impact on language are similarly not new (cf. Milroy 1998). Finally, while researchers have noted that the current public commentary about new technologies has taken on a sense of "moral panic" (Cohen 2002) over youth and language (Bennet et al. 2008), the fact that language has brought such "extraordinary surge of passion" (Cameron 1995: 85) many times in history has rightly been acknowledged (Crystal 2001; Jones and Schieffelin 2009).

Though the contemporary concerns over language and technology are thus in no way unfamiliar, they do bring a novel extension of standard-language ideology, in what could be seen as a form of digital normative linguistics (to use a term by Heyd 2012). As observed by Thurlow (2003), what is most notable in this ideological framework is the coming together of popular discourses about youth *and* about new technologies, leading to rather homogenizing notions of young people as "cyberkids" or "the net generation," whose technology-linked practices represent a threat to conventional linguistic and communicative norms. Importantly, as with any such "verbal hygienist" (Cameron 1995) concerns, this anxiety is not just about language itself, but is symbolic of various moral, social and ideological matters. The particular complaints about young people's electronically mediated communication can thus essentially be seen as reflecting adults' own conflicted feelings about youth, technology and language, all merging into what Thurlow (2006: 671) calls a "triple-whammy" panic about social decay and declining morality standards.

Crispin Thurlow's work (Thurlow 2006, Thurlow 2007) provides a thorough and valuable insight into the most recurrent patterns in depictions of computer-mediated discourse. Using a corpus of international (though mostly British and US) print media, Thurlow's (2006) analysis highlights several interrelated themes by which CMC is characterized: CMC as a linguistic revolution, CMC as spreading out of proportion, and CMC as a threat to literacy and social order. What Thurlow sees as particularly troubling in his findings is the tendency for these metadiscursive representations to conform to the rising popular discourse about the communicative ineptitude of young people. This argument is further pursued in Thurlow's (2007) piece, which is the first study to give prominence

specifically to the (mis-)representations of youth in media accounts of CMC. One common tendency that Thurlow observes in media reports is the homogenization of youth, through depictions of young people as a generation defined uniformly in terms of its use of new technologies ("wired teens," "Generation Text," "the thumb generation," etc.). Also implicit in these depictions is the view of adolescents as "techno-slaves" (McKay et al. 2005) or technological dupes, who are unable to control their consumption of communication technologies.

Youth, adults and technology also feature prominently in Susan Herring's (2008) study. A significant part of Herring's paper focuses on mainstream media commentary, showing the tendency for commentators to construct young people's online behavior through the "lenses of adult values and adult fears" (Herring 2008: 75), and to "interpret new technologies and youth practices in normative, moral terms, a process that reinscribes youth as 'other'" (Herring 2008: 71). However, the major contribution of Herring's paper can be found in her call for shifting research attention away from a superficial fascination with new technologies, toward attending more closely to young people's use and experience of these technologies (cf. Androutsopoulos 2006). Her brief analysis of adolescents' perspectives (based on interview transcripts and youth comments available online) brings a valuable and very rare insight into how young people themselves see new media and technologically mediated communication, and serves to problematize some existing assumptions about youth and technology.

These insightful analyses, along with a host of studies that to some extent discusses popular beliefs about youth, language and technology (e. g. Shortis 2007; Baron 2008, Baron 2009; Tagliamonte and Denis 2008; Crystal 2001; Thurlow 2003; Strover 2012), reveal some further tendencies that merit a brief summary. One is a sense of technological determinism, evidenced in the view of technology as having an inevitable influence on society (Herring 2004; Thurlow et al. 2004). In the context of language and CMC, this notion is most visible in assumptions that the medium shapes the language used within it, and that the Internet itself gives rise to a new unified set of linguistic forms. This belief is closely related to another major ideological process – the enregisterment (Agha 2003) of Internet language as a uniform, distinct variety of language (see Squires 2010). Through the circulation of popular discourses, Internet language has, in Agha's (2003) terms, emerged as a variety that is "differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of forms" (Agha 2003: 231) and one that is ideologically linked to specific social personae, in this case youth. In understanding the popular descriptions linking *netspeak* and youth, one useful notion is that of iconization (Irvine and Gal 2009) – a semiotic process whereby characteristics of a language are seen as an iconic reflection of essential

characteristics of its users. In the context of language and technology, research has revealed a variety of iconic links between *netspeak* and its young users: just as Internet language is in popular metadiscourse characterized as "uncareful," "sloppy" or "irresponsible," so too are its users.

As a final note on this body of literature, one theoretical point deserves mention. An important premise underpinning the line of work exemplified by Thurlow's and Herring's is that metalanguage, or talk about talk, is in itself worthy of attention. This very acknowledgment is significant for CMC research, especially given that the metalinguistic construction of Internet language is still one of the least discussed dimensions of computer-mediated discourse (Thurlow 2006).[4] Starting from a more politicized desire to change popular stereotypes about youth's language and technology, the works mentioned above are important in recognizing that this misleading hype cannot be altered without a direct critical engagement with the beliefs that produce it (cf. Cameron 1995). What I will also argue later in this paper is that developing a critical understanding of young people's own metalanguage is another much needed, and so far much neglected, direction for CMC research. Before embarking on that argument, it is useful to briefly assess the described media hype in relation to actual empirical evidence.

2.2 What the Internet is really doing to language: Empirical findings?

While the popular representations outlined above are obviously exaggerated, no scholar would suggest that language and communication have been completely unimpacted by the new technologies. As evidenced by the sheer number of publications on the subject, the topic of young people's CMC and its influence on language has become popular in linguistic scholarship just as in public discourse (to mention only book-length treatments, see Herring 1996; Baron 2000, Baron 2008; Rowe and Wyss 2009; Crystal 2001, Crystal 2008; Barton and Lee 2013). The linguists' specific interest in youth is not surprising, as the technologically influenced youth culture is often anticipated to bring the richest influences on (English) language in the new millennium (Bucholtz 2000). Moreover, sounder empirical findings on adolescents' use of language and technology are relevant on educational and policy levels, especially given the growing preoccupation with young people's language skills evidenced in

4 This is the case despite the growing scholarly interest in metalanguage (e. g. see Jaworski et al. 2004).

institutional discourses, particularly in Britain and the United States (Thurlow and Bell 2009).

Overall, existing research on young people's CMC can be said to address two broad questions:

1. What is the effect of (young people's) computer-mediated communication on conventional literacy?
2. What is the effect of (young people's) computer-mediated communication on standard language as a whole (including offline speaking and writing practices)?

I put "young people" in brackets as the vast majority of these studies are actually concerned with youth practices, whether or not this focus is made explicit.

The first question, concerning the impact of CMC on young people's literacy,[5] has attracted growing attention among scholars. As noted by Plester and Wood (2009), young people's increased exposure to text and engagement with written language, as one product of new communication technologies, can be expected to affect youth literacy in different ways. On the one hand, it may provide enhanced literacy development, as text exposure is generally found to positively affect language skills (Ecalle and Magnan 2008); moreover, immersion in CMC language (abbreviations, homophone textisms, etc.) may lead to improved phonological awareness (Crystal 2008), which is known to positively affect reading and spelling skills (Lundberg et al. 1988). On the other hand, this increased exposure may also result in "sacrificing thoughtfulness for immediacy" (Baron 2008: 198), as quick writing and multitasking could lead people to pay less attention to the language they produce. In this view (see Baron 2008), the mere fact that young people are producing a lot of writing online does not in itself mean that their language skills must be improving.

Empirical evidence on the issue, however, is still sparse and inconclusive. Some support for the negative popular speculation about youth, technology and literacy can be found in the study by Rosen et al. (2010), where a negative correlation between one type of CMC and formal writing is reported. However, the vast majority of research does not give evidence of negative effects of CMC on youth literacy. In a study focusing on US young adults (Drouin and Davis 2009), no difference in literacy scores is found between frequent textspeak users

5 In defining literacy, some scholars argue for a broader definition that encompasses a wider range of communicative practices (digital literacy, multimedia, etc.), apart from reading/writing printed language (see Plester and Wood 2009); in the majority of the literature I cite in this review, literacy is understood in the more traditional sense.

and non-textspeak users. Particularly convincing results come from the work of Plester and colleagues (Plester et al. 2008, Plester et al. 2009, Plester et al. 2011) who identify a positive relationship between pre-teenagers' use of texting and their verbal skills. Indeed, there has been growing evidence for a positive relationship between texting proficiency and traditional literacy (Neville 2003; Kemp and Bushnell 2011), though studies in CMC modalities other that texting remain sparse. What can at this point be concluded, however, is that existing research offers very little support for the negative popular beliefs surrounding computer-mediated language and its effects on literacy.

The second question, that of the effects of CMC on language as a whole, is even more difficult to answer based on existing research. The relative novelty of the technology is certainly part of the problem, as even several decades of existence are a modest time span for investigations of language change (Heyd 2012). Moreover, contemporary scholarship has increasingly come to recognize that wide-sweeping conclusions about technology and language change are inherently problematic. Earlier ideas of Internet communication as one specific, bounded variety of language, though still present in notions like Crystal's (2008) "Netspeak," have been widely problematized (e. g. Androutsopoulos 2006; Georgakopoulou 2006; Baron 2004; Squires 2010). Scholars have stressed the heterogeneity of various CMC modalities, recognizing factors like granularity and multimodality (Herring 2001), users' social relationships (Squires 2010), and the connections between mediated and unmediated communication (Thimm 2008). Furthermore, many linguistic forms and abbreviations associated with CMC have existed in other written registers long before the spread of the Internet (cf. Janda [1985] on note-taking or Baron [2002] on telegraph writing).[6] The paucity of studies on vernacular writing makes it even more difficult to claim that a particular feature has spread directly from CMC. Indeed, work describing any stylistic diffusion of CMC features into offline language is still exceedingly rare (though see Baron 2002). Overall, thus, research does not as yet offer substantial evidence of influences that online language is exerting over offline linguistic practices, and it may still be early for definitive answers.

An alternative perspective on the matter has been offered by Naomi Baron (Baron 2003, Baron 2008). Baron claims that we should not look solely to technology for causes of any perceived changes in language and literacy. Her major argument is that technology simply reflects and enhances ongoing trends, rather than causing them directly. In this view, CMC is not the cause of language

6 It has also been noted that the number of such "Internet-specific" features takes up a much smaller proportion of computer-mediated writing than popularly believed (see Baron 2004; Tagliamonte and Denis 2008).

change, but like a "signal booster" (Baron 2008: 171) it may magnify linguistic tendencies already underway. For instance, we could conclude that some popularly mentioned properties of CMC, such as the preference for simplicity or incorporation of speech-like forms (Crystal 2001), are a reflection of an already present tendency sometimes referred to as the "colloquialisation of English" (e. g. Leech et al. 2012). Indeed, if we start from the premise that changes in communicative practice are seldom attributable to technology alone, and that new linguistic practices seldom come in on their own replacing the old ones (Thurlow 2007), Baron's argument brings a fresh and quite appropriate perspective into the discussion.

An important point emerging from Baron's (2010) work is that the "trends" potentially magnified by CMC include language attitudes. In fact, one of her major points is that what should be treated as new and significant in the present-day context is not so much the impact of technology as the change in attitudes toward language exhibited specifically by young people. In Baron's own words, "we are raising a generation of language users (who, in turn, impact the usage patterns of their elders) who genuinely don't care about a whole range of 'language rules'" (Baron 2010: 169). She dubs these new attitudes "linguistic whateverism" and links them primarily with youth, "the whatever generation" (Baron 2010: 169). The main manifestation of this attitude is the "whatever generation's" marked indifference toward the need for consistency in language usage. More broadly, for Baron this change is a natural reflex of changing educational politics, as well as the fast-paced life in Western societies; as for the impact of CMC, the "signal boosting" capacity of computer technology may simply make these attitudes more intensified and more widespread.

Baron's work is important in emphasizing the significance of youth attitudes for language change. However, evidence for such attitudes cited in existing literature is mostly anecdotal, especially when it comes to CMC. This gap is discussed in the following section.

3 Giving a voice to the youth

There is no denying that young people are in this century using technology for communication at unprecedented rates (Crystal 2001), and that their innovative linguistic styles have some general consequences to language. The problem, still, is that the popular and scholarly discussions on the subject tend to involve misleadingly homogenizing notions of youth, ignoring the multiplicity of youth identities and the multiplicity of ways in which youth may actually engage with

language and technology (online linguistic behavior of e. g. hip-hop youth, Bucholtz's (2008) "nerd girls" or Eckert's (1989) "jocks" and "burnouts" is likely to differ significantly). This homogenization is not surprising, as the loudest voices on matters of youth, technology and language change come from adults. But what do young people themselves have to say on the subject? The truth is, this is a point that remains obscure in the literature. The fact that they do have something to say has been made evident in a few notable studies (Jones and Schieffelin 2009; Herring 2008), where clear examples of youth's own metalinguistic practice within online discourse can be seen. Nevertheless, although the need to shift from "medium-related" to more ethnographically grounded "user-related" approaches has been rightly acknowledged (Thurlow and Mroczek 2011; Androutsopoulos 2011; Georgakopoulou 2006), youth perspectives on their own new-media language remain rarely addressed in CMC scholarship (though see Lee 2013; Barton and Lee 2013; Herring 2008).

This gap in the literature can be traced to a more general tendency in social sciences to homogenize youth and youth culture (Griffin 1993), and to a parallel reluctance to approach young people as fully formed social and political actors (Bucholtz 2002). However, abstracted conceptualizations of youth have now been increasingly challenged in favor of approaches that recognize the diversity of youth identities and the efficacy of young people's own agency (see Bucholtz and Skapoulli 2009). What this turn implies for sociolinguistics, crudely, is that young people are social actors who variously and creatively appropriate linguistic resources in constructing particular social identities; also, rather than being passive victims of social and cultural changes, they respond to external conditions as active social agents. Translated into the field of CMC, this entails acknowledging the diversity of youth responses to technology and rejecting technological determinism that frames young people as agentless "techno-slaves." Additionally, the turn implies a major theoretical and political move, as it calls for giving a more central role to young people's own voices, even to the point of collaborative theorizing by both the adult researcher and the youth researched (see Alim 2009; cf. Cameron 1993).

It is necessary to emphasize that such attentiveness to young people's own perspectives is much needed, though so far largely neglected, in studies of youth, technology and language change. To give the most obvious reason, an emic, group members' viewpoint can undoubtedly bring fresh insights into the matter, as young people's perspectives based on their own experiences are bound to differ from those of adult researchers and commentators (Herring 2008). Other reasons are largely ones of advocacy. With the rise of technology, as Thurlow (2007) notes, adolescents' communicative practices have come to be construed as more problematic than ever. The contemporary portrayals of youth,

through labels like "idiot students" or "fickle teenagers" speaking in "techno-babble," could, as Thurlow (2007) excellently observes, hardly be deemed acceptable in describing any other social group (for instance, one defined by race or sex). These negative characterizations show that, at least in some ways, youth can today be seen as a political minority (Thurlow 2003), with fewer rights and opportunities to get their voices heard (Herring 2008), and with widely disparaged communicative practices upheld as emblematic of social and moral ills (a "scapegoat generation," to cite Males 1996). Hence, I agree with Thurlow that it is a responsibility of linguists to challenge these harmful popular notions about technology, youth and linguistic/social decay. Importantly, however, I believe that such an enterprise requires paying closer attention to young people's own contextualized practices, viewpoints and ideologies.

Young CMC users' metalinguistic discourse, when available for study, is one particularly suitable source of insights into youth's perspectives on CMC language, as well as into how young people make sense of technology and its role in their lives. In what follows, I illustrate this point with a brief analysis of metalinguistic comments in a genre where traditionally such metalinguistic awareness would be little expected – in teenage personal blogs.

3.1 "Makes you look like a god damn retard": Young people's Internet comments about young people's Internet language

3.1.1 Context

While collecting data for a different study on gender identity representations in dating blogs on one teen website, what struck me as unusual was the frequency with which the bloggers directly assessed their peers' Internet language, voicing broader complaints about language in the blogs and engaging in metalinguistic characterizations of such language. When I conducted a specific site search using the blog segment of the website name with "proper English," "language" and "grammar" as search terms, hundreds of results were returned. A quick look at the blog examples confirmed that the majority of these blogs addressed properties of new media language. It also turned out that the vast majority of blogs came from teenagers living in the United States (the site itself is international, but uses the English language and most users come from Britain, the United States and Australia). Quantifying the frequency of metalinguistic commentary is beyond the scope of this work, but a crude quantification was

performed to make sure the finding was not a coincidence – surprisingly, out of 200 randomly selected blog posts, 81 contained a reference to language, with 28 short (<1 sentence) references and 53 long (>1 sentence) references. This may indicate that the practice of "language complaints" has become common and prominent on this website, but it is unlikely a feature of the blogs themselves; similar language ideological debates are mushrooming in many types of social media (a search for "bad grammar" Facebook groups, for instance, returns numerous pages).

For the purpose of analysis, however, I retained only the first 50 blogs returned in the initial search; the final sample included 32 blogs,[7] limited to those written by US youth, with writers aged 13–19 (based on self-reported age given in the profiles; though the possibility of false age information can never be ruled out in this type of data) and written in the period between 2010 and 2013.

The blogs were taken from Mylol.net, a popular social networking website aimed at teenagers. The site primarily functions as a teen dating site,[8] but offers a variety of other content, with a prominent place given to personal blogs. The blogs deal with everyday themes, and are often related to love problems and (un)fortunate searches for a partner on the site itself. Blogs contain links to user profiles; they are interactive, allowing viewers to post comments (as common in weblogs today; for more on the genre, see Herring et al. 2005), though this option often remains unused on the site. Thus, comments were not part of my main body of data, though their presence is mentioned a couple of times in the analysis. At the time of writing, the site had 249,760 users in total.

In the present illustration, analysis is informed by the discourse-analytic approach (Fairclough 1992; Schiffrin et al. 2008). The material used is undoubtedly partial and not taken to represent views of all teenagers, even in the United States; the aim here is to present adolescents' contextualized orientations to language, which challenge some prevailing views of youth, language and technology.

3.1.2 Illustration

As a starting point, the following examples offer a basic illustration of the metalinguistic comments in the blogs:

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7 Nineteen entries by female authors and 13 entries by male authors.

8 Though it allows profiles for users up to 29 years of age, users in their twenties are nevertheless rare.

(1) Laurie [15, 2013][9],[10]
A rant about anything and everything
Ok here we go, point 1) I hate it when people message me all "Hey I like you" or "Whad upppp gurl" (First off, use english but that's a later point) [...] Point number 2) Does anyone around here use proper english or grammar? I'm sick of people who say like every other word, and I'm sick of people who don't understand common spelling and don't know how to punctuate or capitalize. It's one small little button so don't give me that crap.

(2) Tina [17, 2012]
List Of Things That Bug Me. Agree?
Here comes a favorite rant of mine: those of you who talk like idiots. Oh my. I'm going to try and be quite calm on this, because it angers me so. I'm a lenient gal. I don't mind if you aren't the best speller. I don't mind if grammar and punctuation confuses you. Well, that's a lie. I do mind, but if you're a cool person, I can look over that. But. BUT. 'U' is a letter, and should not be used as a whole word. To my knowledge, in the English language, the only letters that can also be used as words are 'A' and 'I'. Notice that 'R' is also not on that list. That, not dat. The real word is nigger – actually, NEGRO- not nikka, or niqqa, and ANY WAY YOU SPELL IT, it's disrespectful. I don't care if you're black and you use it, it's STILL disrespectful. The letter g is NOT interchangeable with the letter q, go back to kindergarten. And it does NOT take as long as you think to type out the whole word instead of an abbreviation. Especially if you PRACTICE

The examples are typical of blog texts in the sample in that the authors take a critical and rather adversarial stance toward the language of their peers. Both examples illustrate the common use of 2nd person pronouns, which create the more immediate effect of addressing the readers. Central to Laurie's argument in (1) is the notion of *proper English or grammar*, seen as neglected by other users of the site. Indeed, terms like *proper English*, *correct English*, *good grammar* and *correct grammar* feature very prominently in the sample as a whole. Laurie's blog gives some evidence of the meaning of *proper English* for these teenagers, as her complaints are primarily targeted at spelling, punctuation and

9 Square brackets show user's self-reported age at the time of writing, and the year of posting.
10 For ethical considerations, user names have been anonymized. As the material is publicly available on the Web, it is deemed acceptable for use here (though the issue has been somewhat controversial; for further arguments see D'Arcy and Young [2012] and Zimmer [2010])

capitalization. Moreover, she presents a stylized version of Internet language (*Whad upppp gurl*) that is placed in direct opposition to *english*, or standard English (though the term "standard" is not used by any of the bloggers). Tina's entry in (2) similarly addresses problems with orthography, listing some common types of respelling and describing them as unacceptable according to the rules of the English language. Finally, the commentary on *nigga* and *niqqa* brings in a broader dimension of theorizing language, as Tina (a self-identified white American) highlights language choices as consequential to problems of race and discrimination. In her view, the use of Internet respellings of *nigger* should not be seen as playfully neutral, but as contributing to the pejorative and disrespectful connotation of the term. Overall, Tina is performing her moral standing here as a way to legitimize her opinions about grammar. This can be seen as a kind of fractal recursivity (Irvine and Gal 2009) whereby she maps bloggers' bad grammar onto their bad social attitudes.

The association between Internet-language features and personal properties or attitudes, such as disrespect to minorities, points to one major aspect of the metalinguistic comments in the blogs. Namely, the bloggers' criticisms rarely involve language alone. While social inequalities of the type above are less commonly referenced, the use of Internet language is consistently linked with the more personal (negative) characteristics of the writers, evoking specific social personae. Some particularly common associations are illustrated in (3) and (4):

(3) JasonS [17, 2010]
Learn to effin spell world!
The fuck is wrong with everyone today not knowing how to spell worth fucking shit? I mean, are you just THAT fucking lazy that you can't press 3 keys to spell out you? If so, then what the fuck is up with the people who add a fucking h into it? Then there's those people that think it's "cute" to spell like a fucking 4 year old. Guess what? It's NOT fucking cute it just pisses people off and makes you look like a god damn retard. [...] Don't think I forgot the lazy fucks who starting typing shit like "w/" for with ... How the fuck is that suppose to mean with?
[...] I hate to break it to you all, but even though you may think that spelling in these ways is "cool" or convenient, it will get you nowhere in life but a shitty fucking job paying minimum wage with no hours.

(4) Nathan [17, 2012]
Stains on the underpants of male society
[...] So lets start from the top 1. Grammar- "hey i c ur lookin for a friend if

> you want we can talk check out ma page then if you think im alright lets talk" = OK this was the first I found that annoyed me. Now I know that typing is tiresome and sometimes you slip up, but this guy is clearly copying and pasting to tens of girls, most likely with no response. Now I am very analytic, so when I read this this is what it says to me, "hey i c ur lookin for a friend (I can't be bothered to spell the first bit right, its just want to hear so I typed it in quickly) if you want we can talk check out ma (changing from my to ma is stupid, it completely defeats the point of text speak which is to speed up you writing, IT STILL HAS TWO LETTERS MORON) page (he sits there watching his profile cvisitors waiting to pounce) then if you think im(simple apostrophe makes you look like you write mature rather than a 5 year old) alright lets talk" you see guys, its not about what you write because you really can write whatever you want. Instead its the way you write it, if you take care with your words, girls will notice it and hope that you will take care of them as well.

In example (3), JasonS primarily associates the popular Internet spelling practices with laziness, through pejorative characterizations like *lazy fucks*. As in previous examples, the association can be understood through Irvine and Gal's (2009) concept of iconicity, whereby the properties of Internet language used by young blog writers are seen as iconic of some essential properties of the writers (their Internet language is sloppy, so they are sloppy as people). The criticism also involves links to immaturity and childishness, comparing Internet users' spelling to that of four-year-old children. Iconic associations with laziness and immaturity, common in the blogs, are evocative of adult criticisms of youth; age, however, reflects some more immediate concerns of teenagers, who need to locate their identity not only in relation to adults but also in relation to children (Bucholtz 2010). In aggressively voicing his dislike for the "childish" spelling that some people supposedly find *cute*, JasonS takes these associations further to include properties of a *god damn retard*. The text ends with a reference to youthful preoccupations with coolness (Bucholtz 2000), and a linking of spelling problems to common adult concerns with communication problems and employability (Cameron 2000; Thurlow and Bell 2009).

Example (4) similarly illustrates the iconic association of Internet language with people who are lazy (those *who can't be bothered* to spell correctly), and with little children (*5 year olds)*. However, this blog entry is interesting in that it approaches the problem of teenagers' Internet language from the perspective of dating and contacting potential love/sex partners, as one of the main aims mentioned in profiles and blogs on the site. Crudely, Nathan's major argument is that other young men on the website are reducing their chances of getting

replies from the girls they message because of their sloppy spelling. The view directly echoes popular associations between good writing and good conduct (taking *care with your words* can indicate being caring to partners), and between language and the wider ills of society, though in ways that are directly relevant to adolescent concerns. Indeed, Nathan's idea about the unattractiveness of "bad writing" is confirmed in several other blogs where both male and female writers describe the preferred properties in their potential partners (e. g. *Has to be smart to some point, I hate bad grammar and spelling; proper grammar and spelling is a definite plus; I would like to find someone that knows how to properly use grammar and punctuation)*. Obviously, for these teenagers at least, the "whateverist" attitudes to language or fascination with "Netspeak" can hardly be assumed to carry any of the positive value as presupposed in adult popular discourses.

Both Nathan's and Laurie's blogs contain examples of another strikingly common pattern – negative representations of Internet language through stylization. Almost half of the blogs in the sample contain some sort of stylization of the ideologized variety, which is subsequently submitted to critique and linked to particular social personae.

(5) SomeGirl [16, 2011]
I'm as bad as those shallow bimbos ... D:
You know, the ones that say "**txt me cute guy wit abz**".[...]

(6) LibbyDee [18, 2013]
WHAT IS THIS, I LITERALLY DON'T EVEN
C'mon, guys. Are you all really this oblivious? I realize sarcasm is poorly displayed on the internet. But there are just some instances were it should be just.. OBVIOUS."**Aye boiz hmu if u wnt a deep lovin women to exchnge dirty txts wit! We can Kik if thts cool #YOLOJESUSSWAG"** What kind of tit would actually read that bunch of jargon, process it, then think to themself 'Wow, **this babe is talking srs bsns**! [...]

(7) Fiona [14, 2012]
Answers!!!!!!!
Q: **Whatcha doin then?**
A: **Im sowwy**.. I only understand proper grammar(:
[...]

In many of the examples in the sample, the stylizations are attributed to negatively depicted female writers, just as in example (5) (*shallow bimbos*),

though male writers are also sometimes stylized (see e. g. [4] above). In Libby Dee's commentary in (6), these male visitors of the site are described as naively oblivious of her sarcastic use of stylization. Example (7), written in the form of questions and answers, begins precisely with a language reference. Fiona presents a stylized imaginary address from another site user (male or female), followed by her ironically stylized answer. In all of these examples, the "Netspeak" stylization entails a kind of double voicing (Bakhtin 1981), where a clear demarcation is placed between the voice of the blog writer and the voices of "others" who use stereotypical Internet-language features. Importantly, on the whole, stylizations and "mock texting" (Thurlow 2014) of this type point to great metalinguistic awareness, and the self-reflexive (e. g. example [5]) and ironic (e. g. example [6]) quality of the teenagers' Internet writing.

Finally, it should be noted that these viewpoints about Internet language are not entirely uncontested on the site. Certain blog entries are criticized in viewers' comments for focusing too heavily on language, though such interactive engagement seems quite infrequent on the blog pages. The sample also contains one example in which the blogger takes a radically different stance from the others:

(8) Damon [17, 2013]
Lets clearify this sht
Ok so BillN commented on my last blog called TRU CHAINZ and tried to come at the fact I fckd up the grammar bro YOLO get used to spelling and grammar being fckd up it's just how it is today if you would know anything about 2 Chainz or Rap in general you'd get why I messed the spelling and grammar up your young just enjoy life dont be sooo uptight about spelling mishaps their going to happen it's 2013 not the 1800's in England #realsht plus this isnt school nobody use's exact grammar and spelling on here so before you tell me get a dictionary hop off the sack and realize people come from all different area's back grounds and not everybody cares about perfection in these things

Posted in response to another user's criticism of his spelling and grammar,[11] Damon's entry creatively situates his own language in relation to youth culture, identity and modernity. For Damon, the type of spelling he uses in online writing is an important symbolic resource that indexes belonging in the rap subculture, from which his addressee is explicitly excluded. On one hand, thus, Damon presents his writing style as an inherent part of his identity of an authentic member of the rap community (note the playful *#realsht* hashtag).

11 The blog and comments referred to here were unavailable for access at the time of writing.

On the other hand, he also orients more broadly to this type of writing as a product of the modern times (*it's just how it is today; it's 2013 not the 1800's in England*), and evokes a well-informed comparison with the nineteenth-century England's prescriptivism. Further, by stressing the contrast between the language used in *school* and *on here* (on the website/Internet in general), Damon demonstrates metalinguistic competence and clear awareness of the context-specific nature of language use. The very style of the entry, characterized by ample usage of typical Internet-language features (respellings that mimic phonetic characteristics, vowel deletion, acronyms and hash tags), works to emphasize his points and position him in deliberate contrast to his addressee.[12] On the whole, this short entry could be seen as an excellent illustration of Alim's (2009: 103) idea of "youth as cultural theorists," showing how young people themselves engage in the agentive act of theorizing the contemporary world and locating their own place in it. More importantly for the purpose of this paper, the blog illustrates much reflexivity and metalinguistic awareness, which are typically overlooked in popular debates on youth and language.

4 Discussion and conclusions

Contrary to the dominant representations of young people and CMC, the metalinguistic comments of teenage bloggers on Mylol.net have been seen to reflect a notable concern with language. Overall, in negatively evaluating the language that some of their peers use on the site and/or in computer-mediated communication more generally, these teenagers perpetuate many aspects of existing ideologies about the value of Standard English. Nevertheless, adult discourses about employability, morality and social order are here linked with the more immediate concerns of the site's teenage users, such as attractiveness to potential partners, dating and romance. The material shows that most of the youth attribute stereotypical "Netspeak" features to sloppy, immature and overall "unattractive" adolescents. Possibly, as CMC is becoming more mundane (Herring 2004), these stances could reflect some changes in teenagers' views of CMC, or an emerging age differentiation (the majority of bloggers cited in this paper are aged 16–19), which is an interesting question for further studies to answer. Certainly, the limited material used here cannot be representative of all youth; the observed stances about language could be linked to particular youth

12 The entry provoked several very brief comments, mostly in agreement (*haha ok; so true lol),* with one comment challenging Damon's claims (*Text speak is not English*).

identities drawn to the site, such as those of a "nerd" (see Bucholtz 2000) that opts out of youth linguistic trends (indeed, a couple of bloggers self-identify as "geeks" in their profiles, though profiles on the whole show diversity of teenage interests and identities). Still, the present findings undoubtedly pose a challenge to uniform understandings of youth, language and technology that permeate the popular, and to some extent, scholarly discourse.

Thus, implications emerging from this material are not in line with the dominant representations of young people's use of technology. The blogs suggest that rather than being passive receptors of wider social and technological forces, networked youth often actively theorize their linguistic and communicative choices in CMC, as they strive to position themselves in this rapidly shifting communicative space. In the young bloggers' metalinguistic comments, adult norms and ideologies have a profound place, but these are co-constructed and reworked by the teenagers in line with teenage concerns. Even if we assumed that this concern with language on the Internet was for some reason limited to the Mylol.net blogging and otherwise rare among youth, the material analyzed here would clearly show that local youth communities build local values and norms, which are actively constructed and negotiated among youth themselves.

Without a doubt, communication technologies are bringing new opportunities for youth in particular to create new linguistic forms and rework existing norms of expression. The innovative styles created by teenagers on the Internet are increasingly free from adult regulation and control, and thanks to the multitude of technological innovations, they can spread through spatially disconnected adolescent groups faster than ever before. It is still important to bear in mind that, as seen in the present analysis, adult ideologies about "good communication" always hover around youth interactions, though different youth groups can adopt or challenge them in radically different ways. The impact that these varied youth practices and attitudes to CMC will have on the English language remains to be seen, though research as yet offers very little support to the moral panics regarding youth, technology and "the breakdown of language."

This paper has aimed to draw attention to one missing link in all these discussions, both popular and scholarly – the stances and experiences of teenagers as described by teenagers themselves. Judging by the present material, youth opinions on the matter should not be hard to find; after all, if young people are technology's "most enthusiastic users" (Bucholtz 2000: 281), they are likely to be its most enthusiastic commentators. Understanding the social meaning of technology and its potential impact on language and society critically depends upon giving these commentators a voice, and not ignoring the multiplicity of youth engagements with language and technology. Moreover,

representations of youth and youth language have material consequences in the social world, and researchers have the power and responsibility to address them without perpetuating the ideologies of difference.

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Bionote

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