

How Dutch and German youth use English online to gain insight into their national ideologies

August 18 2014, by Janet Harvey



Jennifer Dailey-O'Cain

When Jennifer Dailey-O'Cain wanted to perfect her Dutch skills a few years ago, she took to the Internet in search of online communities to practise with. What she found on a social media site populated by young Dutch speakers piqued her professional interest as a sociolinguist—someone who studies the intersection of language and

society.

"One of the things I noticed was that they were using a lot of English," says the professor of German applied linguistics in the University of Alberta's Department of Modern Languages and Cultural Studies. "But in a really, really different way than what I was accustomed to with young people in Germany."

She found a similar online community of German youth for comparison and began examining the differences in earnest after receiving permission from both groups. What had begun as a personal endeavour to develop her Dutch soon turned into an entire [research project](#).

Dailey-O'Cain found that the Dutch speakers not only used more English, but also used it more creatively and with greater proficiency than the Germans, employing entire phrases in English and even digital-specific acronyms like "OMG." In contrast, German speakers were much more likely to use only an occasional English word for which there is no German equivalent, such as "geocaching."

How does Dailey-O'Cain explain the differences? She thinks that part of it has to do with the amount of English to which each group has been exposed. Dutch media, for example, are subtitled in English, while German media are only dubbed in English. But she also sees it as something much bigger.

"I think it has to do with the way young German people and young Dutch people feel about the idea of English as an international [language](#)," she explains. "They have different ideologies, part of which comes from the way the two different cultures look at nationalism."

She suspects that the Dutch see English as an international language—which, in their minds, makes it everybody's possession and

gives them permission to use the language in much more creative ways. Germans, on the other hand, tend to see English as an important language and want to learn it for practical reasons such as helping them get jobs or communicating with friends in English-speaking countries.

The research is a departure from Dailey-O'Cain's previous work, which has focused entirely on spoken language. Her previous projects include a study of the use of stereotypical accents in Disney films and the use of the word "like" in speech. But she explains that although online communication is written, it contains many elements of spoken discourse, making it very conversational and spontaneous.

The second half of her project involves interviews with members of both the Dutch and German communities that she hopes will reveal more about their attitudes toward English. She's also interested in perhaps designing similar research projects involving other European languages.

"I really think that this research, as trivial as it sounds on the face of things, will end up saying something useful about English as an international language and the way [young people](#) are being socialized toward it," says Dailey-O'Cain. "I'm a social scientist. Language is the lens that I use to explain society."

Provided by University of Alberta

Citation: How Dutch and German youth use English online to gain insight into their national ideologies (2014, August 18) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-08-dutch-german-youth-english-online.html>

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