

## WHAT'S UP, SWITZERLAND? LANGUAGE, INDIVIDUALS AND IDEOLOGIES IN MOBILE MESSAGING

In dem SNF-finanzierten Sinergia-Projekt *What's up, Switzerland?* (2016-2018) untersuchen vier Doktorierende und zwei Postdocs erstmals anhand einer grossen Datensammlung den Sprachgebrauch in *WhatsApp* Nachrichten und den Mediendiskurs darüber in allen vier Landessprachen. Die Forschung basiert auf einer Sammlung von 617 authentischen Chats (ca. 5.5 Mio Wörter), die von der Schweizer Bevölkerung 2014 zur Verfügung gestellt wurden. Die untersuchten Aspekte reichen von grammatischen Phänomenen bis zum Metadiskurs über *WhatsApp* in den schweizerischen Medien, um die sprachlichen und diskursiven Eigenschaften einer omnipräsenten Kommunikationsform zu erfassen und besser zu verstehen.

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Simone Ueberwasser ist Linguistin und im Projekt *What's up, Switzerland?* verantwortlich für die Gesamtkoordination und die Korpuslinguistik.



Elisabeth Stark (Lehrstuhl für Romanische Sprachwissenschaft) ist hauptverantwortliche Leiterin des Projekts. Ihr Forschungsinteresse liegt bei morphosyntaktischen Phänomenen in den romanischen Sprachen, z.B. Nominaldetermination, Kongruenz und differentielle Objektmarkierung, aus varietätenlinguistischer und formaler Perspektive. Beide sind an der Universität Zürich tätig.

With the advent of mobile phones, the way in which people communicate has drastically changed over the past decades and given rise to new forms of informal written communication, not least due to the option of sending text based messages. At the beginning of the century, SMS was the only technology available. It was also the focus of previous research in the *sms4science* project (the corresponding database is now available for any type of research - [www.sms4science.ch](http://www.sms4science.ch)), but nowadays, the availability of smartphones and apps has resulted in uncountable new options and features. The best known and most used application is *WhatsApp*, which allows for much more than simply exchanging text-based messages, which is in the focus of our current SNSF-funded research project (CRSII1\_160714). However, almost nothing is known on a large-scale level about the features of *WhatsApp* communication and the media discourse about its use, thus we, as linguists and discourse analysts, have systematically started to describe linguistic features, graphic variation and (meta)discursive aspects of

this new form of communication, with a focus on the Swiss national languages.

#### Research questions

Given that the media discourse at times tends to be quite alarmist about language change and language decay stemming from electronically written texts (SMS, *WhatsApp* etc.) and that people tend to overestimate the influence of language-external factors on language use (such as technological affordances of mobile phones etc.), we established a sufficiently large corpus in order to answer two main questions:

1. What are defining characteristics of current *WhatsApp* messages (in each of the four Swiss national languages)? What has changed between traditional Swiss text messages and Swiss *WhatsApp* messages, what has been maintained, and why (concerning linguistic structures, use of emojis/emoticons, spelling, register-specific style, individualization vs. accommodation)?
2. How do individual users apply these features and how does the press cover them?

**We do not expect to find actual evidence for the decline of writing skills or language change in the messages, but instead raised awareness for language use appropriate to the respective situation. If informality is allowed, texts are drafted more quickly and with more focus on creativity.**

Our first team picks out specific grammatical structures and investigates them on WhatsApp messages in different languages. Rossella Maraffino (Bern) studies progressive forms (*sto facendo, ich bin am Laufen, je suis en train de parler*), and Franziska Stuntebeck (Zürich) looks at argument drop, i.e. missing subjects or objects (*Ø komm gleich, tu Ø as vue*). By looking at these structures in different languages and different contexts, they want to find out whether these are register-specific features, i.e. typical for written electronic communication in general, or mainly technologically induced structures (e.g. more omissions in order to save time in quasi-synchronous communication). Etienne Morel (Neuchâtel) and Christina Siever (Zürich) investigate graphical elements in WhatsApp messages. They are interested in changes to graphic strategies in relationship to new correction software, virtual keyboards, and especially new sets of iconographic signs (emojis). For their research, they look at these features across linguistic communities and focus on the specific function of these features in shaping communicative identity. The data they work on is mainly in German (both dialectal and non-dialectal) or French.

Doctoral student Samuel Felder (Leipzig) studies the linguistic behaviour of individuals in WhatsApp chats by investigating the frequency of the features analysed in the other sub-projects as well as patterns of code-switching in chats. He wants to find out whether – and if so – how people adapt their language use to the way their counterparts communicate. The focus of this research is on Swiss-German dialectal messages.

The fourth team is the only one that does not use the WhatsApp database, but rather created their own web-based database comprising press articles in French, German, English and Italian, as their interest is on how the press covers language as it is used in written mobile communication. More precisely, Vanessa Jaroski (Bern) tries to pin down the way Switzerland (and Europe) interpret the revolutionary developments in our communicative behaviour.

### **The linguistic corpus as a common database**

All but the fourth sub-projects are based on a citizen science project in which authentic WhatsApp chats were sent in by the Swiss public in 2014. The corpus that was created from these chats consists of approximately 750,000 messages (“speech bubbles”) and 5.5mio tokens (words, emojis, punctuation etc.) that can be used for linguistic research, i.e. messages that contain written text (as opposed to text generated by WhatsApp like “joined the group”, internet links etc.) and were authorized by the authors. In order to maintain the texters’ privacy, messages for which we did not get consent are disguised. In the texts used for research, names and other private data were anonymized.

Along with the WhatsApp messages, we also have demographic information such as age, educational level or geographical origin of the texters available for most of our data. These pieces of information, collected in an online survey, allow for a more detailed investigation into sociolinguistic factors such as age, gender or education that influence language use.

Due to massive code-switching in our data, it is not an easy task to group chats into language-specific subcorpora. We thus decided to identify the ‘main language’ as the one used in more than 100 messages in a specific chat, which gives us the following count: French: 55 chats; Swiss German dialect: 128 chats; non-dialectal German: 21 chats; Italian: 44 chats; Romansh: 16 chats. Other languages (e.g. from the Slavic language family or Spanish) as well as chats shorter than 100 messages can be found in the corpus, too. For the time being, the corpus is avail-

able for the research project team, but temporary access can be given to other researchers, including students, upon request. After the end of the project (2019), the corpus will be made openly available for non-commercial use.

### **Expected results**

Based on pilot studies and initial results, we expect, on the one hand, to find an abundance of press reports blaming the (young generation’s) frequent texting on mobile phones for a decline in writing skills and a bashing of overabundant use of English tokens in texts written in national languages (contrary to fact). On the other hand, we do not expect to find actual evidence for the decline of writing skills or language change in the messages, but instead raised awareness for language use appropriate to the situation. If informality is allowed (e.g. when texting within a peer group), texts are drafted more quickly and with more focus on creativity. If, on the other hand, people send texts to authorities (e.g. teachers), they write more carefully and in a more norm-oriented way. As for grammatical structures, we are sure that nothing is altered with respect to everyday informal language use as the alarmist media discourse stemming from the still rather novel impression of deviant forms in informal writing implies. Finally, we can also see accommodation phenomena taking place between the participants of a chat, e.g. in the frequency of emoji use or spelling conventions. Code-switching and emojis are frequent, of course, but the latter are mostly used to emphasise or mitigate statements, i.e. not very frequently in a word-replacing function.