

# Afrikaans teenagers as agents of Afrikaans language change

Opinion piece - "Issues of language and youth"

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Teenagers' language use is often associated with language decay and sloppiness (cf. Aitchison 1991:4; Leech 2012:127). Strong claims are made in this regards, for example that teenagers cannot spell or write proper sentences in Afrikaans. Teenagers are also often accused of mixing their language, especially using English words in their Afrikaans utterances and expressions.

However, young people are agents of language change. There is enough evidence and indications in the linguistic literature that young people are on the forefront of language developments and innovation. Holmes (1992:221) indicates that young people accept new language forms faster and use it more frequently than adult speakers. Young people often engage with each other in a digital space, which provides the opportunity to connect with a large number of other young members from the speech community. This digital space also creates an opportunity for creative, playful and innovative language use. Afrikaans is no exception, and a number new Afrikaans words found their way into the lexicon. Often these Afrikaans language innovations influence the general language variety of Afrikaans. Examples of such language influences from the digital space, are new Afrikaans lemmas such as *woke*, *app* and *emotikon*.

Institutions such as the Afrikaans media has started to recognize the value of the language of the youth. It is a common occurrence nowadays to find this variety in formalized spaces, such as Afrikaans marketing material and literature. Several studies point to the persuasive power of the Afrikaans youth's language variety (cf. Saal & Bignaut 2011). For this reason, the language of the youth is often employed in Afrikaans marketing strategies because of its commercial value.

Similarly, the language of the Afrikaans youth can be employed very successfully in health communication interventions. One way of attracting the attention of the youth, for example to convey important health messages, is to present the message in an Afrikaans register that the youth can easily identify with. This is of particular importance in a time of a pandemic where the entire community needs to be convinced of the importance of social distancing protocols and good hygiene.

There is clearly more to youth language than has generally been acknowledged thus far. It is our opinion that the language of the Afrikaans youth should become an important discourse in topics relating to Afrikaans language matters. It should, to name a few instances, be a subject of Afrikaans linguistic research, be accounted for in the Afrikaans school curriculum and be regarded as a powerful tool in persuasive Afrikaans communication contexts.

Language is dynamic and ever changing. While the youth language variety can be a valuable resource for language applications and contributions to language change, it is important to note that it is a characteristic of youth language to be time bound and indicative of a specific context and a specific part of the language community. As the young Afrikaans speakers progress into adulthood, elements of the youth language remain part of their linguistic repertoire and this contributes to the general Afrikaans language variety. A new youth variety is developed by the new younger cohort of speakers. It is therefore important for Afrikaans linguists to continuously investigate changes in the youth variety as new speakers enter the youth language community.

## **Resources**

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