Broadcasting Your Variety: Namibian English(es) on YouTube

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Outline

1) World Englishes & YouTube
2) Case Study: Namibian YouTubers
3) Making YouTube Accessible for Research
4) Conclusion & Outlook
World Englishes & YouTube

• Relatively little academic attention has been paid to YouTube – not just regarding World Englishes!

• When tapping into digital sources, the focus has lain predominantly on textual data (cf., e.g., Friedrich & Diniz de Figueiredo 2016; Kautzsch 2019; Moll 2015; Sand 2014; Squires 2016).

• Mair: “unfortunately, [the] wealth of audiovisual data tends to elude linguists who search the Internet for written forms.” (fc.: 3)
A notable exception to this is **Schneider (2016)**, who evaluates YouTube as a potential treasure trove with limitations and proposes a “basic typology of linguistically interesting YouTube clips” (262):

**a) Metalinguistic clips** – Characterized by creator’s awareness of certain linguistic variants / variety
  - e.g. ‘amateur’ pronunciation or dialect guides

**b) Natural clips** – Characterized by creator’s unconscious use of their own variety
  - e.g. news programs, documentaries, movies, TV serials, etc.
World Englishes & YouTube

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b) **Natural clips** – Characterized by creator’s unconscious use of their own variety
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There is, of course, little doubt that amateur YouTube videos do have a performative component (cf. also Androutsopoulos 2013; Frobenius 2011, 2014)

Lee (2017) conducted a study on style-shifting in different types of YouTube video formats produced by the same speaker (viz. solo vlogs, collaborative vlogs, gaming videos, live streams):

- The video formats involve varying degrees of spontaneity and, thus, varying degrees of attention being paid to speech, which leads to more instances of dialect leveling in the scripted contexts
World Englishes & YouTube

• Methodological issues of YouTube (Schneider 2016: 275f.):
  • Technically: retrieval limitations, e.g. through lack of useful search filters
  • Content-wise: insufficient (sociolinguistic) contextual information on videos / content creators

• Makeshift solution: Develop appropriate search terms and “click oneself through” suggestions (276)
  • Rather unsatisfactory as YouTube’s algorithm is a blackbox (cf. Rieder et al. 2018)
World Englishes & YouTube

• Thus, YouTube at this stage in World Englishes / variational linguistics research is uncharted territory, especially regarding:

  a) **Conceptual issues** – e.g. which type of YT data exists and how can it be classified?

  b) **Methodological difficulties** – e.g. how can data be reliably and transparently retrieved?

  c) **Ethical deliberations** – e.g. can I just compile the publicly available data and analyze it? (cf. Pihlaja 2015)
Case Study: Namibian YouTubers

- Namibia
  - Population of about 2.6 million
  - One of the least densely populated countries in the world
  - Since 1990, English has been the sole official language
  - Further Languages in contact:
    - Two Indo-European Languages (Afrikaans, German)
    - Bantu languages (e.g. Oshiwambo, Otjiherero)
    - Khoekhoe languages (e.g. Nama, Damara)
  - One might dare to say: Namibia has been living in South Africa’s shadow
Case Study: Namibian YouTubers

“If you’re a Namibian YouTuber [...] and if you are a creator [and] you think we are not as fortunate as all the other creators in other places like Europe or America or Australia, where we don’t think, like, we don’t get as much advantage or take much, uhm, out of the YouTube society, make sure to watch this video [...].”
(DewaldBlack, 26/01/2018)

https://youtu.be/OWLkrSgr0fY
Case Study: Namibian YouTubers

• General Internet penetration rate in Southern Africa: 51%  
  (according to https://www.slideshare.net/wearesocial/digital-in-2018-in-southern-africa-86865907)

• Namibia’s Internet penetration rate: 31%

• Small, but growing (urban) amateur YouTuber community/network
General Internet penetration rate in Southern Africa: 51%

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Small, but growing (urban) amateur YouTuber community/network (according to https://www.slideshare.net/wearesocial/digital-in-2018-in-southern-africa-86865907)

It’s hard to believe that the video sharing website YouTube has only been around for a decade, but it has grown to be one of the most popular in the world.

It has allowed users from all across the globe to upload and share video clips, and in the process, has given birth to a new generation of successful, everyday YouTubers. These include stars like Kourtney Kardashian, singer Justin Bieber, Bruno Mars, and, of course, pop superstar Ariana Grande. In Namibia, our very own talented duo StarDust started their career on YouTube, even before they had a significant following of fans who comment, like, and share their videos.

So with its billion users worldwide, over 100 hours of video being uploaded every minute, and over 5 billion video views per day, it’s quite clear to see that marketing yourself on YouTube could be just as easy as sending out a press release in years gone by.

Whether it’s to promote fitness and health like, Michael Gumbi, Project Gumbi Fashion channel Fashion Fand which showcases the local fashion scene by attracting fashion trends and more, YouTube has given those in Namibia a chance to expand their horizons. With all these local YouTube channels popping up, you might be tempted to jump on the bandwagon and start your own channel.
Case Study: Namibian YouTubers

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General

- Internet penetration rate in Southern Africa: 51%
- Namibia's Internet penetration rate: 31%
- Small, but growing (urban) amateur YouTuber community/network (according to https://www.slideshare.net/wearesocial/digital-in-2018-in-southern-africa-86865907)

It's hard to believe that the video sharing website YouTube has grown to be one of the most popular in the world!

It has allowed users from all across the globe to upload and share videos. Successful careers, such as Justin Bieber, Soulja Boy, and Burnaboy have even been generated. Our very own duo StarrDust started their channel with a following of fans who comment, like, and share their videos.

So with its billion users worldwide, over 300 hours of video being uploaded every minute, it's quite clear to see that marketing yourself on YouTube could be just as easy as a wider audience. Whether it is to promote fitness and health, like, Michael G, a fitness channel, or Fashion Fix which showcases the local fashion scene by and fashion trends and more, YouTube has given those in Namibia a chance to expand their horizons. With all these local YouTube channels popping up, you might be tempted to jump on the bandwagon and start your own channel.

Vlogging is free, it's a great way to show everyone what you're made of, and make friends from all over the world.

Monick Brendell

From smokey eyes to winged eyeliners, Monick Brendell has got the face beat recipe. She is a YouTube channel. Brendell is pretty skilled with a make-up brush as she does away at her face, transforming into a different look with every make-up tutorial.

The Weekend found Namibian content creators on YouTube and this is what they had to say about their journey in the vlogging sphere.
Case Study: Namibian YouTubers

- Availability of amateur “natural” clips
- Professional “natural” clips also available
  - e.g. Namibian Broadcasting Corporation
- A few “metalinguistic” clips can also be found with search queries like “Namibian accent tag”
Case Study: Namibian YouTubers

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Case Study: Namibian YouTubers

- Metadata (via YTDT) for search term “Namibian YouTuber” in 2018:
  - 292 results from 79 unique Namibian YouTubers (after clean-up)
  - (Already 240 results from 110 YouTubers for 2019 as of June 12)
  - 51 hours of audiovisual material; 10.5 mins average duration per video

- Used for digital ethnographic purposes, but also for acoustic analysis (Zähres fc.)
Case Study: Namibian YouTubers

- Professional “natural” clips: Namibian Broadcasting Corporation (NBC)
- Active YouTube channel since 2015
- Over 13,000 videos in total (as of June 12, 2019)
- ~5-15 videos uploaded daily
- Video content: usually news reports that are also broadcasted on national TV

➤ Thousands of videos in good quality representing reading style available
Case Study: Namibian YouTubers

- The amount of “natural” YouTube videos is a valuable resource for an under-researched variety like the English spoken in Namibia, especially regarding content created by amateurs:
  - Relatively homogenous group regarding factors like age and location
    - Age: predominantly free-borns (cf. also Buschfeld & Kautzsch 2014: 128; Schröder fc.)
  - Diverse regarding ethnic and linguistic background, but also video contents / potential styles
  - Except for rare instances of code-switching, English seems to be used exclusively
Case Study: Namibian YouTubers

• “Natural” Namibian YT clips:
  a) Professionally created (NBC):

  b) Amateur YouTuber (Manu Shapopi):

  ![Image of a plane](image1)

  ![Image of two performers](image2)
Making YouTube Accessible for Research

• YouTube videos and channels (potentially) contain a lot of metadata including:
  • Title, length, video description, video category, etc.
  • (Dis-)likes, view count, comments, etc.
  • More linguistically relevant: video language & location

• However, with YouTube’s regular interface/functionality (including both official app and website), efficient filtering of this type of information is not possible
  • YouTube’s API seems to offer more potential here
  • Still, some metadata is optional and YouTubers enter it manually when uploading videos…
Making YouTube Accessible for Research

• This self-reporting procedure for generating parts of YouTube’s metadata can lead to misidentification when consulting social media statistics & analytics platforms like socialblade.com.

• Thus, relying on metadata alone does not seem like a satisfying approach either
Making YouTube Accessible for Research

• An alternative that combines both approaches (i.e. manually searching & looking for metadata) is offered by *YouTube Data Tools (YTDT)* (cf. Rieder 2015)

• *YTDT* quickly scrapes and exports large amounts of metadata based on either:
  • Search terms,
  • Playlists,
  • Channel names,
  • or video suggestions.

• *YTDT* can also visualize networks of channels and video suggestions
## YTDT Results:

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Making YouTube Accessible for Research

• What is not included in YTDT results:
  • Audiovisual data,
  • Text from the comment section,
  • Subtitles / Captions

• However, using YTDT can save a considerable amount of time clicking oneself through a vast number of *randomly* suggested videos and assists in assembling relatively quick text-based corpora (containing video titles and descriptions)

Automated captions by YouTube / Google speech recognition = automated orthographic transcripts of the videos
Making YouTube Accessible for Research

• Suggested workflow:
  1) Developing relevant search terms for the desired type of data
     • e.g. “x accent tag” or “x English” for “metalinguistic” clips
  2) Entering the search query into YTDT to receive a list of results
  3) Narrowing down the first list of results by searching video titles and descriptions for false positives
  4) Extracting automatically generated captions (and revise them)
  5) Watching YouTube
  6) Conduct Analyses
Conclusion & Outlook

• The classification by Schneider (2016) should, at least, be extended by the following dimensions / gradual continua to achieve a more adequate categorization of contents found on YouTube:
  a) Professionally-created vs. amateur-created clips
  b) Spontaneous vs. scripted clips

• YouTube offers a broad variety of styles that could be used to complement already available data:
  • From styles known from conventional (professional) mass media (e.g. news reports) to potentially YouTube-exclusive styles (e.g. different types of vlogs, live streaming, etc.) uploaded by amateur content creators
Conclusion & Outlook

- Westphal: “Rather than rejecting media talk as inauthentic sociolinguists need to turn to the unique opportunities to study how and which existing linguistic resources (e.g. conversational styles or vernacular variants) are used in performances and how mediated stylistic variation connects to higher level variation.” (2017: 10)
Conclusion & Outlook

- **YouTube is a neglected, but valuable resource for variational linguistics!** (cf. also Schneider 2016: 278f.)
  - When taking into account amateur “natural” clips, the data might give insights into:
    - Multi-modal linguistic behavior and performance, especially pragmatics
    - Synchronic & diachronic variation on various descriptive levels
    - YouTube-exclusive (?) text types / styles & style shifting
  
- Combined expertise of digital ethnographers, media linguists, and sociolinguists required
Conclusion & Outlook

• YouTube is a neglected, but valuable resource for variational linguistics!
  • The voices for including further types of data (apart from e.g. lab data) are becoming louder, not just in variational linguistics (cf. e.g. Mair fc.; Wagner et al. 2015)

• Watching YouTube videos still takes time, but finding the desired contents is made easier through methodologies offered by external tools like YouTube Data Tools
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Thank you for your attention!

Any questions, comments, and other type of feedback are much appreciated.

Frederic Zähres

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