

A meta-analysis on PewDiePie, his Swearing and its development

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Abstract

This thesis discusses the swearing present in the videos of the Youtube content creator PewDiePie through meta-analysis of a research article on the subject. The thesis will approach the primary article from the points of view of the fields of language play, language policy, ecological language learning and linguistic superdiversities. The primary article is analysed from the point of view of each field in order to find reasoning for the swearing happening in the content creators videos, the evolution of this swearing and also to analyse the switches in code that are present in the videos.

Tiivistelmä

Tämä tutkielma käsittelee Youtuben sisällöntuottajan, PewDiePie'n, videoissa esiintyvää kiroilua meta-analyttisen menetelmän avulla. Tutkielma tarkastelee aiheeseen liittyvää, ensisijaista tutkimusartikkeliä kielellä leikkimisen, kieleen liittyvien sääntöjen, ekologisen kielen oppimisen ja kielen superdiversiteettien näkökulmista. Ensisijainen tutkimusartikkeli analysoidaan jokaisen muun näkökulman kautta sisällöntuottajan videoissa esiintyvän kiroilun, kiroilun kehittymisen ja kielellisen koodiston vaihdosten selvittämiseksi.

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1 Introduction

This thesis focuses on the analysis of the YouTube content creator PewDiePie's way of using language in his videos, more specifically swearing. The thesis will use Beers Fägersten's (2017) article on the subject of swearing in the popular content creator's videos as a basis for the analysis while taking articles from the fields of language play, language policy, ecological language learning and superdiversities in language as tools for analysing the content creator's language. This is done in order to explain some of the word choices the content creator uses in his videos, mainly the swearwords, and to offer alternative explanations for the swearing that is being done in the videos. A by-product of this analysis will be examples of the secondary articles in action, shedding further light on the theories and claims behind the articles. This thesis will use a meta-analytical approach (e.g., Levitt, 2018) for finding answers to these questions. This is done by taking one or two findings from the secondary articles and then finding proof for these findings in the primary article (Beers Fägersten, 2017), in relation to the way that PewDiePie uses or develops his language skills.

The thesis will begin with defining the methodological approach used in the study, followed by a short description of the material under research, going through the primary article and each of the secondary articles. The thesis will then provide an analysis of the primary article in the form of examining it through the point of view of each of the secondary articles, in other words one or two claims will be taken from each article and then examples of these claims will be explored in the primary article. Thus, the analysis will potentially strengthen these claims and also provide alternate explanations for the way that PewDiePie uses his language as discussed in the primary article (Beers Fägersten, 2017). The thesis will then conclude by summarising the findings that arose from the analysis part of the thesis, as well as suggest some conclusions and ideas for further research.

2 Theoretical and methodological framework

In the recent past, language learning has traditionally been studied through different types of methods that are based on quantitative data. One example of such a study is Jaekel et al. (2017,) which focuses on the effects that an earlier start in the learning a secondary language has in German students in the primary school. The researchers (Jaekel et. al, 2017) gathered material for the study through tests that were given to the observed students and then graded.

For this thesis, the approach of qualitative meta-analysis was chosen as the methodological approach. According to Levitt (2018), this approach focuses on combining multiple, complete articles into a single article in an easily accessible form. An example of this approach in practice would be a study that analysed the effects of using computer games as learning tools (Ke, 2009). In the examples (Ke, 2009) case, the data was gathered in the form of a list of studies, with each study having predetermined data points listed in the list. The author (Ke, 2009) then analysed these findings in relation to each other in order to draw conclusions and to spark discussion on his subjects (Ke, 2009).

For this thesis, similar methods will be used to analyse Beers Fägersten's (2017) article. However, in this case the analysis will be done qualitatively, by taking one or two claims from each secondary article in order to explain PewDiePie's actions by drawing from the theoretical background of the secondary articles. There is also an attempt on finding more examples of the theories in action in Beer Fägersten's (2017) article to shed more light on the secondary articles claims. The qualitative approach will be used firstly because of the smaller number of articles allowing this change in approach, and secondly to explain the points of interest in the primary article in a wider detail which would not be possible if the recording of the findings was done in a similar way as Ke (2009) has done his study. The modified approach should, in other words, allow this thesis to focus even more on the qualitative aspects of the qualitative meta-analysis instead of being forced to adhere into the space restrictions that are present in the chart format that Ke (2009) uses.

For the theoretical background, the first secondary article (Lantz-Andersson, 2017), henceforth referred to as article 1, deals with the concept of language play in Facebook among students learning their first foreign language. The method that Lantz-Andersson (2017) used for studying this language play placed the researcher in a Facebook group with his students as an observer. The observation was done through the logging of the discussions as they happened in the group and by recording the contents of links that students used in their discussion (Lantz-Andersson, 2017). These links contained videos, photos and links to other sites (Lantz-Andersson, 2017). The findings of the article (Lantz-Andersson, 2017) were that during the early stages of learning a language, the discussion mostly followed the rules of written English as taught in schools, except for the emoticon “☺” that appeared once in the discussion. The emoticon, however, wasn’t seen by the researchers (Lantz-Andersson, 2017) as language play because it did not actually change the meaning of the message. However, this emoticon then went on to be accepted as part of a conversation inside the studied community, with other participants adopting it into their online vocabulary (Lantz-Andersson, 2017). This was observed again with using an asterisk (*) to finish a sentence that was accidentally sent before it was ready, with the community also accepting this particular marking having this particular meaning. (Lantz-Andersson, 2017).

For this thesis, these findings (Lantz-Andersson, 2017) of use of playful language will be used to analyse the use of swearing happening in the videos submitted to Youtube by PewDiePie. The development in the amount of swearing in Swedish that is present in the primary study (Beers Fägersten, 2017) will also be examined, along with analysing the words replacing the Swedish words once the content creator’s fluency of English improves with use.

For the second secondary article (Leppänen & Piirainen-Marsh, 2009), henceforth referred to as article 2, the theoretical background focuses on the concept of changing language policies in bilingual gaming, in other words gaming that is done in a mixture of two languages. More specifically, the article (Leppänen & Piirainen-Marsh, 2009) highlights the rules and norms that govern language use in these bilingual gaming communities where the gamers themselves are Finnish and write in their communities in Finnish but the game itself, in this case a game from the

Japanese Final Fantasy series, is written in English. Even more specifically, the article (Leppänen & Piirainen-Marsh, 2009) focuses on the evolution and reimagining of the source material in order to make it comply with the language policies that are in place in Finnish that might not exist in the original text but are still necessary for discussing the media in the Finnish gaming communities centered around the series.

For this paper, the findings of the article (Leppänen & Piirainen-Marsh, 2009) will be used to examine the mixture of Swedish used by PewDiePie in his previous videos (Beers Fägersten, 2017), which still contained some Swedish mixed in with the English that the content creator uses as his primary language for the videos. The thesis also examines the choices for structure and wording for the discussion present in the videos.

The third secondary article (Lier 2010), henceforth referred to as article 3, deals with the concept of ecological language learning. The concept of ecological language learning (van Lier, 2010) is focused in learning language skills for use in practical ways instead of learning through theoretical means alone just for the sake of learning a language. This thesis uses this theory to examine PewDiePie's videos (Beers Fägersten, 2017) in order to find examples of ecological language learning in action.

3 Description of the research material

The primary study for this paper, henceforth referred to as the primary study, that will be analysed with the findings and methods of the other articles, will be a study on the online persona of PewDiePie conducted by Beers Fägersten (2017). Beers Fägersten's (2017) article focuses on the development of the language, more specifically swearing, used by the YouTube content creator PewDiePie in three of his uploaded Let's Play videos (Beers Fägersten, 2017). In other words, these videos depict their creator playing games and his recorded reactions to activities and actions happening in the game world (Beers Fägersten, 2017).

The study (Beers Fägersten, 2017) also takes a new perspective on the global role of English language, focusing both on English as a secondary language and English as the language of the internet and claiming that YouTube is just as much a public form of media as television and other more traditional medias. This allows Beers Fägersten (2017) to analyse PewDiePie's English both as a public example of an uncensored media, and as personal communication with the content creator's fans while also analysing the use of the swearwords in this context. The study (Beers Fägersten, 2017) suggests that swearwords are used not to "abuse, insult or derogate" the viewer but instead to achieve other goals the speaker might have (Beers Fägersten, 2017, p. 1). Beers Fägersten does not provide a clear answer to what the other goals might be for these swearwords, which gives the thesis another angle of analysis.

4 Presentation of the analysis and findings

This section of the thesis focuses on the analysis of the primary study from Beers Fägersten (2017) by going through it with the claims and theories presented in the secondary articles. The analysis will mostly focus on the direct quotations appearing in the primary study while also commenting on its theoretical sections through the approaches of the secondary articles where applicable.

Starting the analysis from article 1's (Lantz-Andersson, 2017) point of view, it is logical to focus on the possible language play present in the primary study and in the analysis of that language play. In a sense, the swearing done by PewDiePie in his videos can be interpreted as his way of language play, with him using these swearwords in order to highlight the message he is giving. As an example, in Beers Fägersten's (2017) first example of the language used in the videos, the following line is shown: "(more loudly) I can't see shit, by the way, in case you didn't know" (Beers Fägersten p. 3 example 1, 2017). In this case, the word "shit", which is easily recognisable globally, is used to highlight the fact that he is actually playing blind in the situation. The example (Beers Fägersten, 2017) also uses other swearwords like "fuck" to amplify the message the content creator is giving out while also establishing a code with his community for spotting the important parts of his videos, with these parts having the swearwords attached to them. This is in line with Lantz-Andersson's (2017) article that claims that language play evolves in the community through using repetition to establish the meaning of language play.

Moving on into the second example from Beers Fägersten's (2017) text, the content creator seems to include more swearing in his speech, with the first line of the example already reading as: "Alright, this is not as creepy as the last one, I don't know why. Um, what do we got here? (reading) "Security GateA. Warning." Oh god, nevermind, we're fucked" (Beers Fägersten p. 5 example 2, 2017). From language play's (Lantz-Andersson, 2017) point of view, it can be noticed that PewDiePie is now also swearing in Swedish at times, with the words "jävlar" and "fitta" being used (Beers Fägersten, 2017). Fortunately for the English viewers, these swearwords are also translated in

the video as “oh fuck” and “pussy”, respectively, through the use of subtitles (Beers Fägersten, 2017). According to Beers Fägersten’s (2017) analysis, these switches in language happen because of the situation being scarier than usual situations that are present in the videos. The translation of these language switches is, according to Beers Fägersten (2017), added into the video after the filming, with PewDiePie recognising that his audience needs to know the words’ meaning in order to recognise them as swearwords. This translation, from language play’s (Lantz-Andersson, 2017) point of view, is interesting because it also means that the meaning of swearing has at this point been assumed as being recognised by the audience as having a meaning. PewDiePie now uses swearing to highlight the especially scary parts in the video, while now also reinforcing this with a visual cue in the video in the form of subtitles appearing on the screen, along with the swearing itself being done in a code that is not English (Beers Fägersten, 2017). Later, in the third example of the primary study (Beers Fägersten, 2017), PewDiePie also starts using Swedish without using the language for swearing while also translating the change in language in the subtitles (Beers Fägersten, p. 7 example 3, 2017). This would, from language play’s (Lantz-Andersson, 2017) point of view, be another point of interest, with the previous rule for highlighting interesting content now having taken another step on its evolution and losing the original indicator, the swearing, in the process. The Swedish language is now the indicator that took the form of swearing in the previous version. This can then be examined as the repetition of the language play (Lantz-Andersson, 2017) spawning different variations of the language play. These variations themselves act as comparative forms for the emotional weight of the situation, with PewDiePie using English swearwords in a seemingly emotionally neutral situation in the video, switching into Swedish swearing and eventually into Swedish everyday words as the situation seems to worsen in the game.

Changing the point of view of analysis, article 2 (Leppänen & Piirainen-Marsh, 2009) deals with the matter of evolving language policy in the context of mixing of codes in languages. With this approach (Leppänen & Piirainen-Marsh, 2009) also dealing with language in use, it is again logical to focus on the examples of spoken language that are provided in Beers Fägersten’s (2017) article. The first example from Beers Fägersten (2017) has the following line that shows some elements that

can be analysed with language policy (Leppänen & Piirainen-Marsh, 2009) in mind: “(more loudly) I can’t see shit, by the way, in case you didn’t know” (Beers Fägersten, p. 3 example 1, 2017). The line (Beers Fägersten, 2017) has some repetition, with both the “by the way” and “in case you didn’t know” being commonly used figures of speech (Beers Fägersten, p. 3, example 1, 2017). Article 2 (Leppänen & Piirainen-Marsh, 2009) claims that repetition can be used in communities as a resource for creating meanings. This repetition could then be taken as a sign of nervousness with the English language from PewDiePie’s end, with him using two figures of speech to support each other to ensure that he is understood by his audience. The example (Beers Fägersten, 2017) has other cases of repetition present on it, although in those cases it happens more as the same word being said twice instead of only once or stuttering, both of which could just be signs of nervousness from the content creator’s end or as attempts to get the pronunciation correct on the words.

Moving on into the second example (Beers Fägersten, 2017), the following line gives another point of interest for analysis: “No, oh jävlar, fitta fitta fitta” (Beers Fägersten, p. 6, example 2, 2017). In this case (Beers Fägersten, p. 6, example 2, 2017), the adding of “oh” before the Swedish word “fitta” seems like a case of the content creator mixing his language policies (Leppänen & Piirainen-Marsh, 2009) during the progress of the videos, either reflexively or actively. This can then be interpreted as two language policies (Leppänen & Piirainen-Marsh, 2009) appearing at the same sentence, with the Swedish word “fitta” having the meaning of “fuck” in English. However, in this particular case (Beers Fägersten, p. 6, example 2, 2017) the utterance “oh” would be included if the speaker was using English, so the content creator seems to add the “oh” before the word to make it comply with the policies in place in the English code but not in the Swedish code. This seems to repeat multiple times in the example (Beers Fägersten, 2017), which would point towards the adding of “oh” not being an accident but an active decision by the content creator. Other than these situations, it would seem like the rest of the examples (Beers Fägersten, 2017) follow the English language policies (Leppänen & Piirainen-Marsh, 2009).

Article 3 (van Lier, 2010) takes the point of view of ecological language learning. For this theoretical approach (van Lier, 2010), the analysis of the article as a whole is more logical than

analysing just the examples in order to examine the development that takes place between the examples. Van Lier (2010) himself has divided ecological language learning into three characteristics, therefore the primary study (Beers Fägersten, 2017) will be analysed to find confirmation for each of these three characteristics being present: “relationship”, “quality” and “agency” (Lier, p.4, 2010).

As for relationship, van Lier (2010) defines it as the “relationship among elements in an environment or ecosystem, in particular the interactions among such elements” (van Lier, 2010, p. 4). In an interview, PewDiePie has acknowledged his fans mentioning that he feels that they share a “close friendship”, with PewDiePie also beginning each of his videos with a greeting to his “bros” (Beers Fägersten, 2017 p. 8). This means that van Lier’s (2010) depiction of relationship is, at least according to PewDiePie’s words, present in the videos from the content creators point of view. Van Lier (2010) then goes on to write that among humans, these relationships can be physical, social or symbolic. Beers Fägersten (2017) highlights PewDiePie’s way of talking about his fans as “bros (a clipping of brothers)” as a defining part of the content creator’s relationship with his viewers, with the content creator also mentioning that he dislikes the term “fans” because of the superiority he sees in the latter term (Beers Fägersten, 2010, p. 8,). This points towards the content creator sharing a social relationship with his fans, and he also talks directly to the viewers at times in his videos (Beers Fägersten, 2017, p. 6, example 2), clearly trying to make a lasting impression with them. In short, the social relationship necessary for ecological language (van Lier, 2010) learning to take place can be observed from the article, with the viewers giving their take into the discussion through the video’s comment section after it has been uploaded to YouTube.

For the quality part on the analysis, van Lier (2010) writes about shifting the normative system of standardised testing systems present in current teaching institutions towards relying on this normative testing into a “more direct appraisal system addressing, documenting and promoting the quality of the educational experience” (van Lier, 2010, p. 4). In PewDiePie’s (Beers Fägersten, 2017) case, this quality assurance can be linked to the relationship part, with dips in quality resulting in feedback coming to his videos’ comments section would the quality of the videos to drop at some point. PewDiePie seems to also actively work to keep his videos understandable by the English-speaking audience by providing subtitles when he switches to Swedish on his videos as seen in Beers

Fägersten's (2017) second example: "Oh jävlar! ('Oh fuck!' appears on the screen)" (Beers Fägersten, 2017, p. 6, example 2). It can then be argued that while there is not any official quality assurance being done on the videos uploaded to YouTube from PewDiePie, the content creator himself is interested in keeping their quality high and he also has a way of receiving feedback on the quality of the videos should the quality drop.

The third characteristic of ecological language learning, agency, is defined by van Lier (2010) as "movement, a change of state or direction, or even a lack of movement where movement is expected (van Lier, 2010, p. 4). He (van Lier, 2010) then goes on to define it more specifically as active movement, the desire to move in order to achieve something. As for Beers Fägersten's (2017) article, this agency can be observed as being present in the first example in the following line: "Sorry, whenever I'm so focused and scared shitless I tend to forget to s-talk (.) and (.) ramble (.) or whatever (..) and (.) I am sorry about it but (.) (quietly) oh!oh!" (Beers Fägersten, 2017, p. 3, example 1). The line (Beers Fägersten, 2017) clearly describes PewDiePie apologising to his viewers about his shortcomings in the swearing department, which points towards him having some agency behind his actions. In other words, he wants to develop the amount of swearing happening on his videos. This should be enough to fill the agency part from van Lier's (2010) definition and to conclude that, ecological language learning can be seen to be present in the videos, in this case towards increasing the amount of swearing present in the videos.

Article 4 (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011) is used to analyse Beers Fägersten's (2017) study from the point of view of the concept of superdiversities in a language (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011). The primary study (Beers Fägersten, 2017) is analysed through two different concepts that are linked to superdiversities (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011). The first of these concepts is related to treating one's language proficiency as utilising a variety of language resources instead of each language having its own resource. The second concept puts emphasis on treating PewDiePie as an actor in the world of Internet.

Starting from the concept of language resources (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011), the second example from the primary study (Beers Fägersten, 2017) portrays some elements where PewDiePie uses his Swedish language resources in a context where English ones would be expected in the sentence of “No, jävlar, oh jävlar, fitta fitta fitta” (Beers Fägersten, p. 6, example 2, 2017). Beers Fägersten (2017) then follows this example by claiming that these “codeswitches” (Beers Fägersten, 2017, p.6) are the reactions of the content creators PewDiePie persona into especially scary or unusual events happening in the game world. From the point of view of superdiversities (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011), another analysis of this situation (Beers Fägersten, 2017) would be that of PewDiePie simply switching to resources he is more familiar with while he is unusually focused on the game instead of using the resources that the audience expects him to use. It also seems like the content creator is also happy with using these resources in the video considering opted for translating the words instead of, for example, re-recording the video with him using his English resources for the whole time. Beers Fägersten’s (2017) next example supports this theory, with the content creator switching completely into his Swedish resources while also leaving the swearing out of the situation in the following line: “Nej asså jag vill- jag- nej, nej, nej, nej, nej, nej, nej, nej, nej, nej, nej, nej, NEJ! NEJ!” (Beers Fägersten, 2017, p.7, example 3). This line is preceded by multiple scary events in the game, with the content creator also seeming increasingly stressed because of the events, eventually switching to using his Swedish resources while also seemingly forgetting to swear. The next line of the example (Beers Fägersten, , 2017, p7, example 3) also has him continuing in Swedish but then changing back to both using his English and swearing resources mid-sentence, which could be taken as a sign of him remembering his way of acting again after briefly losing control of his language resources.

Moving on into the analysis of PewDiePie as an actor in the social environment of the world of Internet. For this part of the analysis, it is more logical to focus not on the examples of the primary study (Beers Fägersten, 2017) but instead on its analysis of the PewDiePie persona in order to map the social and demographical agendas and interactions he is involved with. In his article, Beers Fägersten (2017) mentions that English swearwords, like “shit” and “fuck” appear often in the

Swedish media (Beers Fägersten, 2017, p.4). This has, according to Beers Fägersten (2017), resulted in Swedes treating these as normal words instead of words that have a taboo attached to them. This has then been carried over to PewDiePie's English resources once he started using the language actively, making these words into a natural part of his vocabulary instead of something to be avoided, which in turn has helped his popularity in the YouTube service. Beers Fägersten (2017) also brings up the point of PewDiePie crediting his English skills as having been acquired through gaming instead of formal education, Beers Fägersten (2017) further notes that popular video games, with the majority of these being in English, have high amounts of swearing included in them. This further supports the view of PewDiePie possibly simply taking the swearing as a natural part of the gaming culture and adopting it into his videos. This would henceforth support the claim that PewDiePie's mannerism of swearing on his videos is also partly a case of him simply adapting his language resources (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011) into imitating the language seen in the games and media, making it a natural part of his vocabulary in situations where the environment itself is already seemingly accepting swearing.

5 Discussions and conclusion

In conclusion, it seems that signs of all of the theories in the secondary articles can be seen in action in the way that PewDiePie uses his language and in the way he acts or has been analysed to act according to Beers Fägersten (2017). For the case of language play (Lantz-Andersson, 2017), it can be claimed that the swearing that PewDiePie is doing in his videos can be interpreted as a way of focusing the viewers' attention in moments where something important is in action on his videos. In these situations the language play itself evolves from using swearwords to highlight these situations into using Swedish swearwords to highlight them into simply using Swedish in highlighting them. This point of view (Lantz-Andersson, 2017) could be supplemented by taking more of PewDiePie's videos into analysis in order to find out if his way of playing with the language has had other steps in its evolution or if it is still evolving further.

From the point of view of language policy (Leppänen & Piirainen-Marsh, 2009), the changes in language policy that are present in the videos can be examined along with the repetition for confirming that the viewer understands what he is trying to say. However, the primary study (Beers Fägersten, 2017) has relatively few examples of this in action. Because of this, it would be advisable to examine other videos from PewDiePie in order to find other cases of repetition and language policy changes (Leppänen & Piirainen Marsh, 2009).

For ecological language learning (van Liers, 2010), it can be claimed that PewDiePie does show signs of ecological language learning (van Liers, 2010) in action in his videos, especially when it comes to improving his video quality in ways that his audience seems to approve, namely by improving the density of swearing in his speech. The content creator also shows clear signs of having

a relationship with his fans or “bros” that he seems to keep in a high value, with this possibly providing more motivation to the content creator in improving his English. One way to continue on this avenue of research would be to start observing the way the content creator acts when meeting his fans in face-to-face situations, for example, and the way he takes their feedback in these situations into account in his future videos.

PewDiePie’s actions also seem to follow the theory behind superdiversities (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011), with the content creator using the resources that his audience is comfortable with in neutral situations, switching to his Swedish language resources but still keeping the original meaning under light stress and then moving into the resources he is most comfortable with when under heavy stress. One can also see signs (Beer Fägersten, 2017) of PewDiePie adopting English resources through the media he consumes while also keeping his Swedish cultures effects in his language and also being seemingly rewarded for it through the popularity of his. One way to take this analysis further in the future would be to start analysing PewDiePie’s motivations towards learning the English resources further through interviews about his school years and the way he was taught English during his education, for example.

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