PRESCRIPTIVE PRACTICES IN AN ENGLISH-SPEAKING LANGUAGE-ORIENTED ONLINE COMMUNITY:

A case study of *Your Grammar Sucks* videos

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract

Internetin myötä kielenkäyttäjille on avautunut lukuisia mahdollisuuksia julkaista tekstejään ja mielipiteitään ja saada ne mahdollisesti hyvin suuren yleisön nähtäville. Perinteisiin medioihin kuten kirjoihin, sanoma- ja aikakauslehtiin sekä televisioon verrattuna Internetin keskustelupalstoilla, blogisivustoilla ja sosiaalisen median sivustoilla, kuten Facebookissa, kielenkäyttö on verrattain vapaata. Samaan aikaan kun kirjoittajille on avautunut vapaus julkaista kirjoituksiaan instituutioiden niitä rajoittamatta, kielenkäyttäjät ovat ottaneet tehtäväkseen valvoa toistensa kieltä kritisoimalla ja korjaamalla toisten kirjoituksia sekä määrittämällä, mikä on hyväksyttävää kielenkäyttöä ja mikä ei. Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena onkin tutkia erään verkkoyhteisön preskriptiivistä käyttäytymistä sosiaalisessa mediassa.

Tutkimuksen aineisto koostui 33:sta YouTube-sivustolla julkaistusta videosta nimeltään *Your Grammar Sucks* (vapaa suom. "Kielioppisi on syvältä") ja niille jätetyistä kommenteista,. Videoiden pääasiallinen tarkoitus on pilkata sosiaalisessa mediassa esiintyviä tekstejä (esim. YouTube-kommentteja ja Facebook-päivityksiä), jotka kielellisesti tai sisällöllisesti poikkeavat yhteisön hyväksymistä standardeista. Tutkimus pyrkii vastaamaan kysymyksiin, millaiset kielen poikkeamat valikoituvat pilkattaviksi, miten videoilla luodaan huumoria poikkeamien ja niiden kirjoittajien kustannuksella sekä miten videoiden katsojat kommentoivat aihetta. Tutkimus hyödyntää aineistolähtöistä grounded theory –metodologiaa sekä multimodaalista analyysia.

Vaikka video-sarjan nimi viittaakin kieliopin painotukseen, tutkimuksessa selvisi, että yhteisön jäsenet kiinnittävät huomiota poikkeamiin standardista myös monilla muilla kielen osa-alueilla, esimerkiksi oikeinkirjoituksessa. Siinä tuli myös ilmi, että standardista poikkeavien tekstien ja niiden kirjoittajien pilkkaamiseen käytetään sanallisten arvioiden ja mielipiteiden ilmaisemisen lisäksi multimodaalisia keinoja, esimerkiksi sijoittamalla ne konteksteihin, jotka korostavat niiden ominaisuuksia, jotka poikkeavat standardista ja antavat niille uusia merkityksiä (entekstualisaatio ja resemiotisaatio). Lisäksi todettiin, että niin sarjan tuottajat kuin sen yleisö ovat ottaneet käyttöönsä juuri samoja standardista poikkeavia kielen piirteitä, joita videoilla pilkataan, lainaamalla ja generoimalla niiden perusteella uutta "huonoa" englantia.

Asiasanat – Key words social media, normativity, grounded theory, sociolinguistics sosiaalinen media, normatiivisuus, Grounded theory, sosiolingvistiikka

Säilytyspaikka – Depository JYX

Muita tietoja – Additional information

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1 INTRODUCTION

In the past there have been only a few opportunities for language users to publish their and gain wider audience for them without being strictly regulated by institutions. The traditional media, such as literature, the television, as well as newspapers and magazines, are controlled by editors and producers, for example, who decide what is published and what kind of language may be used. Informal, unregulated writing has been confined to personal writings and correspondence, fanzines (Androutsopoulos, 2000), bulletin boards and graffiti, for example. Only relatively recently the Internet has created platforms for non-professionals to share opinions and publish texts without being controlled by institutions. Millions of people can now post their writings on discussion forums, blogs or other social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter without being edited by outside influences.

This situation fosters non-standard language use, as web users may also have little inclination to follow norms of standard language in online contexts. Many people use deviating language, for instance non-standard spellings, on purpose (e.g. Sebba 2007), while non-standard language may also be produced unintentionally, as the texts may not be proof-read before publishing, resulting in a great deal typographical errors and ungrammatical sentences. Moreover, the Internet is used people with a great variety of native languages and ethnical origins, as well as educational backgrounds. English, because of its status as a world language, is often used as a lingua franca between these people. Because of the different levels of competence in the language, it is understandable that deviations from the standard occur.

At the same time as online users are free to publish texts without being regulated by institutions, lay people have adopted the role of language gate-keepers, criticizing and correcting other people's language use. Non-standard language, for example typographical errors, deviating punctuation and speech-like spellings, produced online is noticed and commented by people who are informally called the 'grammar police' or 'grammar Nazis', that is, those who insist on correcting what they consider mistakes. In the present study I will refer to this phenomenon as prescriptivism (Battistella 2005: 46, Myhill 2004)

The phenomenon of the 'grammar police' is a current topic that has been noticed and widely discussed in the media. For instance, the topic has occured several times in the online edition of *The Guardian* (Brune, 2013; Marsch, 2013; Stamper, 2013). The phenomenon is not restricted only to the English language either, as in the editorial of Finland's most read newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, Eloranta (2011) mentions cases of readers calling the editorial staff to complain about the linguistic choices made in the articles.

The tendency has also been discovered and researched by sociolinguists (see for example Beal 2010 and Schaffer 2010). These studies confirm that prescriptive approach to language still persists today among lay people. The contrast between sociolinguists and lay people is striking, as the sociolinguistic academia has moved more and more towards descriptivism, with the design to describe language use rather than prescribing it, while lay people express normative opinions about language with eagerness and emphasis.

A great part of the previous research of prescriptivism has oriented towards studying attitudes against non-standard speech (e.g. Preston 1993, Lippi-Green 2012), but recently there has also risen an interest towards the non-standard written language and the reactions it causes particularly in the context of the Internet (e.g. Thurlow 2006, Jones & Schieffelin 2009). While the previous research has studied printed media (Thurlow 2006), discussion forums (Kytölä 2008, 2012) and blogs (Beal 2010), the present study focuses on a medium that has been discussed less in the context of prescriptivism, video. The data used in the study is also unique in the respect that in addition to verbal evaluations of language there are various other techniques to mock and denigrate deviations from the standard language use.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the prescriptive approach on language on the Internet. It is a qualitative case study with some quantitative data to aid the analysis, examining one instance of prescriptivism on social video sharing website, YouTube. The data include some videos from the video series called *Your Grammar Sucks* and aim of the study is to examine the attitudes towards non-standard linguistic features and their users, and shed more light on this topic using methods of grounded theory. It contributes to the research that has recently risen in the sociolinguistics about the normative attitudes

of the modern society (see e.g. Beal 2010; Burridge 2010; Schaffer 2010, Jones & Schieffelin 2009; Kytölä 2008, 2012) and attempts to answer the questions what kind of linguistic features are disapproved and ridiculed and how, while striving also to discover whether the humor displayed in the data shows signs of discrimination against any social group.

2 MODERN-DAY PRESCRIPTIVISM

The second chapter of the thesis is organized in sections according to the themes that are discussed. Firstly, there is a brief summary of the historical background of the phenomenon, where the prescriptivists of the online communities are compared to the prescriptivism of the 18th century and the origins of the present day attitudes traced to that time period. Other suggested reasons for prescriptive attitudes are also reviewed. Secondly, the position and significance of lay people, claiming authority over language issues, i.e. folk linguistics, is discussed. Thirdly, a few types of non-standard language use that is targeted by prescriptivism are examined, as well as the different prescriptive approaches and reactions to non-standard language. Moreover, humor as a tool for disparagement is examined. Finally, lay people operating as experts on other spheres of life is also examined in the context of YouTube.

2.1 The origins of the 21st century prescriptivism

The origins of the prescriptive practices of language users that can be discerned today can be traced to several sources in the history and in the modern society. They are discussed briefly in the present section and include the doctrines of the 18th scholars that still persist today, as well as the present day institutions, such as the education system and media, as well as the family.

2.1.1 The influence of the 18th century scholars

The term 'prescriptivism' is often applied to the attitudes and actions of many scholars of the 18th century, referring to the practice of favoring some structures of language over others and proscribing undesirable words and expressions. According to Baugh and Cable (1991: 253–270) there was a tendency to favor rules and order in the British society of the 18th century, and reason, adopted from the rationality of science, was celebrated in many spheres of life. They state that there was a great desire to stabilize the English language and to create a consistent grammar that could be abode by. Battistella (2005: 46) traces the emergence of prescriptivism also in the study of Latin, providing a few arguments to support his statement. Firstly, it was believed that learning Latin was easier

when the student could master grammatical rules in his or her native language. Thus interest towards the rules English increased. Secondly, the scholars desired to stabilize English so that it would follow Latin's example, since it was noted that English seemed irregular and illogical, when compared to Latin. Battistella (2005: 47) continues by analyzing the contribution the Industrial Revolution had on the rise of prescriptivism. Because of the social mobility it produced, people in the upper classes wanted to distinguish themselves from those who had risen from the lower classes, achieving the distinction through attention to grammar. Those who wanted to achieve a good social standing sought the help of grammarians.

Baugh and Cable (1991: 253-270) describe how the courses of action for standardizing English included publishing dictionaries and grammars which demonstrated the scholars' opinion of the correct use of the language. They continue that following the example given by France and Italy, efforts for establishing an academy of the English language, which would protect it from undesirable use, were also made. Later on in the 1800s was quite common to copy and rewrite the work of others and through this practice of repetition rules became established and strengthened by multiple authorities (Anderwald 2012: 29).

Several of the rules and proscriptions that were established in the 18th century, no matter how faulty or prejudiced, persist even until this day. A fact that tells about the great power of the 18th century scholars is that the prescriptive rules that are still followed today may stem from the dislike of only one person. Baugh and Cable (1978: 274) provide the example of the proscription of the double negative that was condemned by the grammarian Robert Lowth. Because of his writings the structure has continued to be a controversial one, causing strong objections even in the modern times, thus demonstrating the power that the works of influential scholars have had and continue to have.

Although the term 'prescriptivism' is often used to refer to the 18th century, as discussed above, it is not confined to that time. Beal (2010), for example, sees the recent rise of language-related websites as a continuation of the prescriptivism of the 18th century. An example of this phenomenon that Beal provides are the websites of the Apostrophe Protection Society, which focuses on guarding and overseeing the correct use of the apostrophe, punishing incorrect use through ridicule.

2.1.2 The influence of the present day institutions

The prescriptive rules to language use are reinforced by institutions, for example. Lippi-Green (2012: 96-97) traces prescriptivism to the social norms of the education system, family and media. According to her, school teachers are often under pressure, as they face high expectations from parents who wish the teachers to raise their children to be successful and intelligent citizens. She elaborates that trying to meet these expectations, teachers have created rigid rules of speaking and writing that the pupils are prompted to follow. Following the rules is encouraged by promising success as a result and threatening with failure if they are not abided by.

Similarly, Agha (2005: 51) discusses the influence of institutions to normative attitudes in the context of registers. According to the author, the social registers are created and enforced by the family and normative institutions, such as school. Registers are "characterological figures stereotypically linked to speech repertoires (and associated signs) by a population of users" (Agha, 2005: 45), in other words, they contain certain features and characteristics that are associated with specific groups of language users. Agha (2005: 51–52) explains that the learning of registers starts from infancy and continues later in life through more or less explicitly prescriptive practices. He suggests that language style guides, for example, include direct instructions of desirable and undesirable language use, while the mass media and how it displays speakers of different dialects is a more subtle influence. Lippi-Green (2012: 101-129) provides an example of the latter, discussing Disney feature films, which are often contain many ethnic stereotypes. She points out that antagonists and minor characters possess socially marked or foreign accents, while the heroes and heroines speak Standard American English, in this way creating stereotypes of people with standard and non-standard accents. This, among other factors, can have the effect that non-standard varieties of English are stigmatized and seen as inferior. For instance, the discriminated sociolects and dialects that Lippi-Green (2012) discusses are African American Vernacular English as well as Southern, Hawaiian, Latino and Asian varieties of English.

Some prescriptive views are defended by claims of being logical (e.g. double negative equals positive), not all arguments are based on rational, but rather on emotional points. Moreover, the reasons for rejecting words or structures may not always be purely linguistic, but may also include political and social considerations. Burridge (2010), for example, describes the situation in Australia, where the influence of American English on the Australian variety is widely disapproved, while British and French influence is embraced, the rejection of the words and expressions not being caused by the linguistic forms themselves, but instead the distaste of the American culture. Burrigde continues that ironically, many of the expressions that are considered to be essentially Australian (e.g. 'the Bush'), actually originate from American English.

The question of authenticity appears also to be one of the factors determining which linguistic forms are accepted by language users and which are not. For example, Trotta (2010: 53) suggests that the dislike of the use of the word 'fun' as an adjective in the United States may originate from the fact that it is believed to have been created by advertisers. The disgust of the linguistic forms created by an institution, in contrast to the natural process of language change, is an old phenomenon, as already in the 1800s the structure of progressive passive was objected to, because it was viewed as a construction of the press (Anderwald 2012: 39). Moreover, for the argument that the disgust and rejection of some structures and words is not based on purely linguistic issues speaks the notion that the non-standard features that are disapproved today were also used by Shakespeare, but still few would dare to claim that reading the author's works results in the decay of language (Trotta 2010: 59).

Prescriptive attitudes can also be explained by the Golden Age Principle by Labov (2001: 514), defined as follows: "At some time in the past language was in a state of perfection." Labov suggests that when complaining about language change and evaluating new linguistic forms, people often act and think according to the principle; i.e., they believe that their language used to be perfect at some point in the past, while each alteration to the language takes it further away from its ideal form. However, the principle can also be criticized, as Anderwald (2012) indicates that not all change is always viewed negatively. She demonstrates her point by examining the some of the grammarians 19th century, and their opinions towards the changes which occurred in the English language during that time. While there were strong negative reactions towards some new forms, e.g.

progressive passive, other changes to the syntax (e.g. *have* replacing *be* as an auxiliary for perfect tense) were seen as positive developments. Anderwald (2012) relates the varying reactions to the rate (faster changes are more noticeable and thus more subject to critique) and the stage of the change (changes which are more developed are more acceptable to the public), as well as the frequency of the linguistic form (the changes in rarer structures are more striking, as people cannot get accustomed to them as easily as with forms which they see more often).

2.2 Folk linguistics

Voicing opinions of language is a common practice for many people, not only for those who have been trained academically and receive their living from studying languages. 'Folk linguistics', that is, non-linguists talking about language, is a highly relevant field for the present study, which attempts to study the attitudes of non-linguists. The definition of who counts as a non-linguist is needed. According to Paveau (2010) the definition is not as clear and rigid, as one would think. She forms a continuum from a professional linguist to the ordinary speaker, between which she places writers, editors and language enthusiasts, for example. However, in the present study it is not possible to know the professions or pastimes of those who ridicule the discussed texts and it is therefore not possible to determine whether they are language professionals or not. Because YouTube is often used mainly by young people who might not have a profession yet, I assume that, if not indicated otherwise, they are non-professionals and can be included in the group of non-linguists.

As Myhill (2004: 389) states, prescriptivism has been rejected and condemned by many linguists, and sociolinguists, in particular, and they have, instead, embraced the descriptive approach to language, focusing on defining the linguistic forms which are used in reality instead of determining how language ought to be used. One reason that is provided for this change of approach is that in the English language 'correctness' is linked with prestige, the language of the higher class being often considered to be correct, while less prestigious varieties are determined to be incorrect (Myhill 2004: 393). At times the situation can be reversed and non-standard language is preferred, for example in online contexts, or other situations where non-standard language marks the membership to a

social group (e.g. Sebba 2007, Androusopoulos 2000). More often, however, English prescriptivism discriminates lower social groups and is therefore not the preferred approach by the majority of linguists.

Laypeople, on the other hand, do not shun away from prescriptive views. According to Beal (2010) there is a great interest in proper grammar, especially in punctuation, among non-linguists. She sees the current discussion as return of the prescriptivism of the 18th century. Her focus point is "the greengrocer's apostrophe", which refers to using the genitive*'s* to mark the plural, for example in *apple's for sale*. According to her there is a vast amount of antagonism towards the use, which receives special attention from the public. Lippi-Green (2012: 16) addresses the same issue as well. She describes how written language is idealized over spoken language and its forms, punctuation in particular, guarded with care. She states that when talking about grammar it is common for lay people to include punctuation in the concept, although the traditional definition contains only syntax and morphology and thus deviations in punctuations are commonly considered grammar mistakes among lay people. Furthermore, the same applies to spelling, which is not included in the definition of grammar, but it is still considered to be 'bad grammar' to use non-standard spellings.

There is often a stark contrast between what linguists and laypeople conceive as grammatical. According to Lippi-Green (2012: 10–11) the linguistic forms which non-linguists view as ungrammatical are often determined by social norms. She compares the socially created grammar to the innate ability of every human being to generate language. A sentence can convey its message well even though it might not be considered as 'good language', which, in most cases means standard language. As an example she provides dialectal expressions, such as "Vicky be working after school" and "The house needs painted", and maintains that these expressions carry their meaning across to the hearer or reader, but would be considered non-standard by laypeople. In contrast, Lippi-Green states that placing articles after nouns (e.g. *dog the*) would be considered ungrammatical also by linguists. Van Polanen Petel (2006: 509) addresses the same issue by making a distinction between the 'calculus' and 'protocol' of communication. He states that the former contains the information of what is said or written, whereas the latter only the manner with which it is done. He argues that prescriptive rules of the constituent-order

(e.g. the organization of temporal, local and modal complements in a sentence) fall into the sphere of protocol, since they do not contribute to the meaning of an expression.

Even though social media is often a platform for informal language use where little formal regulation of language is found by the administrators, other users take it upon themselves to take care of the correctness of the language use of others. Jones and Schieffelin (2012: 1071) noted that a significant number of the comments they examined on YouTube criticized not only the language depicted on the videos but also the comments of other viewers. She observed that some users viewed non-standard language use, even deviation only in punctuation, as an opportunity to question also the content of the comment and the writers themselves. Similar observation was made by Kytölä (2008: 244–247) who noticed that because of his deviating language the credibility and even identity of Altan was questioned on the football forum, even though he demonstrated possessing a great deal of knowledge about football.

2.2.1 The validity of folk linguistics

The question whether the opinions of non-linguists are even worth investigating is relevant for the present study. There may be a tendency to dismiss the intuitions of non-linguists as non-scientific, as they are not based on linguistic theories or knowledge. Preston (1993) answers the critiques of folk linguistics being non-scientific and inconsistent by demonstrating that folk opinions, when studied closely, are, indeed, consistent and contain patterns.

Paveau (2010: 47–52) also argues that the opinions of non-linguists are valuable and worth studying. For instance, she states that they provide important sociolinguistic data of the public attitudes. Furthermore, Paveau states that folk intuitions can be fully incorporated into linguistic knowledge, as they include data that would be difficult to obtain using other scientific methods. Drawing from other researchers, she refers to the non-linguists' ability to observe the language around them and comes to the conclusion that lay people's opinions of language have validity in linguistic theories. Thus, they should not be viewed with condescension or regarded as naïve.

Also Trotta (2010) justifies the investigation of metalinguistic practices by non-linguists. His focus point is the popular culture, because of its presence everywhere in the society and its position of being an important informant for the population, as it provides knowledge of the world and in many EFL countries it might be the easiest access to authentic English and thus the attitudes or opinions expressed of language in popular culture have an influence on the minds of the public (ibid.: 44–45). Jones and Schieffelin (2012), who examined YouTube comments in their study, also needed to determine whether the comments are worth studying. Although some researchers consider it a waste of resources, they regard the comments valuable in the sense that they demonstrate the existence and nature of metalinguistic views held by the public (ibid.: 1062).

2.3 Non-standard language

Non-standard language is an issue that can spark strong reactions, especially when occurring in written texts. For the purpose of the present study non-standard language is defined as any language forms which deviate from written Standard English, that is, the widely accepted register of formal language. Non-standard language thus includes, for example, non-standard native dialects or sociolects of English, the varieties non-native English, the "netlingo", as well as unintentional deviations from the standard (e.g. typographical errors). The structures proscribed by the prescriptive rules that originate from the 18th century, such as the split infinitive, are not considered as non-standard language, as for a long time they have been widely accepted among educated speakers.

2.3.1 Non-standard spellings

Non-standard spellings can stem from several causes and motivations. Sebba (2007) argues for the social aspect of orthography. He states that the rules for standard spelling are social conventions, which can vary according to the situation, time and place. Non-standard spelling might not be, as it can often be viewed in the media and by the public, a result of ignorance, but a conscious channel of constructing one's identity and indicating membership to a group. There is strong support for the fact that variation in spelling has social meaning (Sebba 2007). Androutsopoulos (2000: 528), for example, provides a few

reasons for using non-standard spellings on purpose. One of them is the desire to distance oneself from the dominant culture and identify with a subculture.

Sebba (2007: 34–38) lists several strategies which are used in the creation of non-standard spellings. The varying orthography can imitate a dialect (e.g. *wuz ere* for was here), use characters out of the alphabet (e.g. *gr8* for great) or loan from other languages (e.g. the letter x in German, as in the spelling of Abwexlung instead of the standard Abwechslung). A similar categorization is provided also by Androutsopoulos (2000: 521). He explains motivation to use non-standard spellings through identity building (ibid. 528). By imitating a specific nonstandard dialect, the writers identify themselves with the speakers of the dialect. Of course, when the writer has not had any intention to deviate from standard norms, but the variation is due to a typing error or another kind of mistake and is thus unintentional, there is no similar social meaning attached to the spelling.

Sebba (2007: 46) suggests that in platforms which are regulated the least, such as graffiti and Internet fanzines, people can feel pressure to conform to non-standard norms. He uses the term *focussing*, defined as the phenomenon of group members starting to use language in more and more similar ways. 'Focussed' language use does not necessarily have to support standard norms. As a support for his ideas, he suggests that Standard English can rarely be found in graffiti. He states that of the popular expression of "X was here" can be found countless of different variations of spellings, but rarely in the standard form (Sebba 2007: 34), the spelling being focussed to the anti-standard.

2.3.2 Computer-mediated communication

Thurlow, Lengel and Tomic (2004: 118–127) challenge the common opinion in the media that CMC is so different from other language that it forms its own variety. Still, they provide some characteristics of what they call "netlingo", i.e. the language of the Internet. He states that the determining factor of its nature and form is the desire that the exchange of thoughts must occur as rapidly as in speech, as well as unceremoniously and in a friendly manner. As a result of the values mentioned above, people using netlingo resort to abbreviations, acronyms and homonyms, and pay less attention to spelling and punctuation, for example (ibid.: 124). Androutsopoulos (2006) also lists characteristics of CMC which can be associated with the language of the Internet and have been studied

by researchers. They include "emoticons, unconventional spellings, representations of spoken language features, regional dialect features, obscenity, and code-switching" (ibid.: 425). He also points out the emergence of the written forms of the varieties which have earlier been used only in speech, attributing the credit for this occurrence to the absence of institutional control (Androutsopoulos 2006: 429). The use of the variety of the communication techniques online can be a cause for moral panic (see Section 2.2.3), but Thurlow (2006: 686) points out the creativity of the use, referring to the imaginative ways the keys of the keyboard are utilized in the online discourses.

The idea of computer-mediated communication forming its own variety called 'netlingo', 'webslang' or other names attributed to it, is a popular opinion in the mainstream media, but it is, however, challenged by many linguists. Androutsopoulos (2006: 420) questions the existence of 'the language of email', for example, maintaining that the variation in the language of email that occurs in different contexts exceeds any similarities that are shared by different emails. He argues that the discussion about CMC has overlooked the social contexts, while concentrating on the linguistic features, resulting in "homogenized and simplified conceptions of language use in CMC" (ibid.). Although preferring the term "discourse styles" over "Internet dialects", Androutsopoulos (2006: 430), however, admits the existence of "the new forms of communication and community" on the Internet.

2.3.3 Reactions to non-standard language

There can be several ways of responding to non-standard language. One strategy of reacting to non-standard language, on one hand, which has already been discussed, is the establishment of explicit rules which proscribe the use of undesirable structures and words. This reaction is typical for style guides or language websites, for example (Beal 2010, Schaffer 2010). Some people, on the other hand, wish to avoid seeing non-standard language altogether. The existence of this attitude is revealed, for example, by the popularity of a Firefox[1] add-on called *Comment Snob*, the function of which is to hide the comments (e.g. in YouTube) which the user of the add-on does not wish to see. People can customize the program to hide comments according to the number of spelling errors, the use of capital letters (whether the words are all or none of them in capital letters),

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[1] Web browser.

exaggerated punctuation, swearing or any undesirable words or phrases in them. (Mozilla Add-ons, 2014.) Non-standard language can also be the cause and target of moral panic and disparagement humor. These approaches are discussed in more detail below.

Non-standard language may be a cause of general uproar, especially in association with CMC. Thurlow (2006), for example, is one of the scholars who have studied the moral panic that the new linguistic forms create in the media. Through a corpus of 101 articles collected from several newspapers, he investigated how computer-mediated communication and the linguistic structures and words it has brought about are received in the media. The newspapers mostly approached the subject from three perspectives: the emphasis on the uniqueness of the phenomenon; the "statistical panic", i.e. the discussion of the overwhelming amount of CMC; and finally, the "moral panic", i.e. the fear of the decay of English. The latter was discovered to be the most dominating theme in the corpus (Thurlow, 2006: 678). Computer-mediated communication was mostly described in negative terms and the social ills it can create discussed throughout the corpus. The journalists reports, as Thurlow noticed, were more based on common knowledge and anecdotes rather than linguists' views or empirical research (ibid.: 683). Jones and Schiefelin (2012), when studying contemporary AT&T television commercials, observed similar attitudes to technologically mediated communication. The commercials, which depict a young girl communicating with acronyms commonly used in texting, were interpreted by the authors to reinforce and highlight the moral threats to the English language, caused by CMC. They state that

> [t]he linguistic practices associated with computer-mediated communication emerge as a verbal contagion threatening to contaminate young people's language, undermining not only intergenerational communication, but also their very ability to speak proper English. (Jones and Schiefelin 2012: 1056)

Even though the commercials present the topic in a light-hearted and humorous manner, they are based on the more serious fears and anxieties that language users have about the decay of language.

Thurlow et al (2004: 123–124) suggest that the role of the Internet, overall, may be exaggerated over other factors which create language change. He admits that the

terminology of the Internet and the new technology has influenced the vocabulary of off-line English, but he questions the accusations that the Internet being the main culprit for the falling standards of English among youngsters. Similarly, Burridge (2010) suggests that linguistic standards and moral standards are linked in people's minds, causing the fear of "bad" language leading to corruption of morals and bad behavior. Greenbaum (1988: 32), who approaches the topic as a grammarian, also links language use with other aspects of behavior, stating that in people's minds "correct performance marks the user as a responsible member of a society". Using deviating language, on the hand, makes a person guilty and partly responsible for the falling standards of English. Also Battistella (2005: 48) states that prescriptive grammar is based on a belief that not only language but also the society will suffer if mistakes and ungrammatical language is condoned.

Using non-standard language can be allotted to laziness and ignorance. Preston (1993: 185) provides an example the opinion of one European American of the African American Vernacular, she considering it only a result of laziness, low class and ignorance, while the users lack the means or desire to speak "properly". Preston (ibid.) indicates that AAVE is seen as a performance that can be easily altered, rather than a regular language variety, like the Standard English.

In reality, however, the situation is more complex. Beal (2010: 63) considers it arrogant to assume that those who use non-standard language lack education. She suggests that to a linguist it is "a matter of proof-reading", i.e. that the incorrect language use is due to carelessness rather than ignorance. Moreover, using deviating spellings can also be a conscious choice (Androutsopoulos 2000; Sebba 2007). As already mentioned, according to Thurlow et al (2004: 124) in computer-mediated discourse communicating fast and in a friendly manner is valued. This is most likely one reason why less attention is paid to correct spelling: in some context it is more important to be fast than correct, as long as one is understood. Through non-standard spellings a more informal tone can also be achieved.

2.4 Disparagement humor

It can be argued that the entertainment culture of today draws from malicious humor. By examining make-over television shows McRobbie (2005) demonstrates how it has been become acceptable in the entertainment environment to ridicule and denigrate people according to class differences, for example. Earlier it would have been considered to be "offensive, discriminatory or prejudicial", but not in today's "post politically-correct" societies as long as it is understood that all is done ironically, being thus only harmless fun (McRobbie 2005: 100). The author points out, however, that even though no harm might be meant by the snide comments directed at the participants of those television shows, it does not mean that they would still not feel humiliated (ibid. 106). Leppänen and Häkkinen (2012) generalize this phenomenon not only to concern women and make-over television shows, as in McRobbie's study, but more generally also other media (YouTube) and genres in the context of 'buffalaxed' videos, where amusement is received from creating and watching videos of foreign cultures and languages with denigrating and mocking added to them.

The term that is used to describe the sort of behavior that aims to attack its target through humor is called *disparagement humor*. The concept is defined by Ferguson and Ford (2008: 283) as "remarks that (are intended to) elicit amusement through the denigration, derogation, or belittlement of a given target". Denigrating humor can be used as a way of communicating inferiority of dialect, for example. Lippi-Green (2012: 69-70) introduces a model of the language subordination process, which lists ways of communicating that somebody else's variety of language is inferior to others. These ways include claiming authorial position in determining what correct language is and what is not, trivializing the variety through humor, for example, and marginalizing and denigrating speakers of the stigmatized variety.

One can found countless websites on the Internet which use ridicule and disparagement humor as a way of creating entertainment, a significant number of them focusing on targeting non-standard language use. For example, on the website of Apostrophe Protection Society, which concentrates specifically on the use of apostrophe, visitors are invited to share warning examples of incorrect language use (Beal 2010). Although it might be done on the pretense of education, Beal (ibid.: 61) believes that the purpose of

this "hall of shame" is providing entertainment rather than information. She suggests that pointing out and correcting the mistakes of others can create a feeling of superiority and security. The tendency has not changed much from the 18th century, as Baugh and Cable (1978: 277) remark that even though the scholars' practice of correcting published authors could be justified by the claims of education, it was most likely also a source of enjoyment and self-congratulation.

Ferguson and Ford (2008: 296) provide the social identity theory to explain this. The theory can be used to explain the reasons for using denigrating humor. The authors explain that when an individual or a group of people feels threatened, they can use disparagement humor to gain social distinctiveness, which is achieved when compared to the target (Ferguson and Ford 2008: 298). Highlighting the ridiculousness somebody else people gain a feeling of superiority, since in comparison they do not appear as ridiculous as their target at that moment (ibid.: 300.)

When comparing disparaging ethnic humor of local and non-local groups among Israelis, Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman (2013) discovered evidence that suggests that superiority is a significant factor in making fun of groups that are familiar to the person ridiculing them, whereas humor of less familiar groups utilizes different methods. The authors believe that ridiculing local groups, in this case Arabs and sub-groups of Jews, is a way of constructing the national identity in comparison to the inferior ethnic groups near them.

The practices of *entextualization* and *resemiotization* can be used as tools for disparagement. Resemiotization is the "process of semiotic change in the circulation and flow of discourses across social and cultural boundaries" (Leppänen et. al 2013: 8). Entextualization, on the other hand,

> is the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic product into a unit –a *text*–that can be lifted out of its interactional setting (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 73).

In other words, in the process of entextualization discourse is taken from its original context and placed into a new one that through metadiscourse guides its interpretation of the entextualized discourse. Leppänen et. al (2013: 19–22) discovered the instance of a

misspelled tattoo and the way the non-standard language was recycled and modified. The original text was taken out of its context and made fun of by modifying it and providing it with new meanings.

Imitation and ironical use is another strategy for mockery. For example, Kytölä (2008, 2012) discusses one example of ungrammaticality triggering disparagement. During their study Kytölä came across a Turkish man ("Altan") who tried to be accepted into a Finnish online football forum, but because of his non-standard English he was met with ridicule and even racism. The language that he used became an inside joke within the community, creating a variety of 'Altanese', comprising of from the user adopted phrases and structures that were used to mock him.

Hill (2004: 129–134) discusses disparagement humor in the context of 'Mock Spanish'. She explains that the language, which is especial popular in the United States, utilizes actual Spanish words (such as *mañana*) and structures (e.g. *hasta la vista*), but what differentiates it from the Spanish language is that their meaning are changed to include negative or denigrating associations. Alternatively, Mock Spanish can only resemble Spanish, while including grammatical errors (such as *no problemo*, while the actual Spanish word is *problema*) or highly anglicized pronunciations. According to Hill, tt is a very common phenomenon in everyday life, media and even official domains, such as politics and is used to indicate that its users are humorous and laid-back, as well as worldly, as they can master some Spanish; according to her, it is also important in the construction of the American identity.

While reproducing a positive image of the White users, Mock Spanish can be highly discriminating towards the Spanish speaking population. The problem is that the associations that its features have are often strengthening negative stereotypes about the cultures of Spanish-speaking people (Hill 2008: 129). For example, the word *mañana* ('tomorrow') used in a sentence such as *I will do it mañana*, conveys the association with laziness because of the stereotype of Spanish-speaking people being lazy as using the Spanish equivalent instead of the English *tomorrow*, the speaker indicates that he or she the reason for the procrastination is indolence (ibid.: 136–137),. Another example provided by Hill (2008:136) is the change of the meaning of the word *nada*, meaning 'nothing' in Spanish, whereas in Mock Spanish it has the negative meaning of 'absolutely

nothing'. Similarly, although disparaging humor can be thought to be harmless by those who practice it, and have an impact of both those who have access to the social resources and those who do not.

The case of Mock Spanish falls under Lippi-Green's (2012) language subordination model, as it demonstrates how the inferiority of another language can be communicated through humor. Hill (2008: 133) links the rise of the use of Mock Spanish especially in the media in the 1980s and 1990s with the endeavors to make English the official language of the USA. It can be possible that Mock Spanish was, and is still, deliberately used to denigrate the language so that English would have a stronger hold. The social identity theory also supports this idea (Ferguson and Ford 2008).

Billig (2005: 202–203) argues for the point that disparaging humor is useful for the purpose of maintaining order in the society. He remarks that the fear of being laughed at prevents members to act against norms of the society, as non-conforming action is often punished by the ridicule of other members. In this way people are effectively controlled by the fear of losing social status.

2.5 YouTube and amateur video

YouTube is a platform for people from all over the world to share videos online and comment on others. A great deal of the content is created by the viewers themselves, that is, by lay people who do not have big production companies to help them. This act is sometimes referred to as prosuming (a blend of producing and consuming) (Leppänen and Häkkinen 2012: 19). Founded in 2005, YouTube has been visited by over a billion individuals each month. It is an international platform, as it is localized in 53 different countries and operates in 61 languages (YouTube 2013). It is vastly popular platform for creating, distributing and consuming audio-visual content. Burgess et al. (2013: 6) describe it as an online environment which is characterized by "dynamic change" and "diversity of content" and at the same time by its "everydayness".

YouTube is a platform where the social, cultural and economic value is not created by the activities of the company itself but primarily by its users who produce, consume and assess the content of the website (Burgess et al. 2013). The term participatory culture is

used to describe the practice which is "the apparent link between more accessible digital technologies, user-created content, and some kind of shift in the power relations between media industries and their consumers" (Burgess et al. 2013: 10), being is the shift from the passive role of the audience to actively interacting and producing content themselves.

Tolson (2010) compares YouTube to the more traditional media, such as the television, and finds differences in the communication. In his article he concentrates on vlogs, that is, video diaries, where the users simply talk about various topics, typically about their lives. He refers to them as "ordinary experts", by which is meant that they claim expertise on the topic they are discussing without official titles, education or professions, but instead just as ordinary people. Burgess et al. (2013: 25) refer to this phenomenon as *amateur video* and link it to the broader unit of "vernacular creativity", in other words, "the wide range of everyday creative practices" which are not produced as a part of high or commercial culture.

In contrast to the amateur videos, YouTube also consist of content which is produced by traditional media companies, including for example music videos, television series and movies. In addition to these two categories, there is also a great deal of videos that cannot easily be placed into either category. While performing an analysis of YouTube's most popular videos Burgess et al. (2013: 41–57) observed that the videos produced by traditional media were viewed and favorited[2] more, whereas user-generated videos invited more discussion and video responses, as a majority of the videos in the Most Discussed and Most Responded categories were made by amateurs and moreover, were mostly vlogs. The reason for the genre dominating these categories is explained by the authors by the way in which it claims the audience's attention by addressing it directly, in a way that resembles face-to-face conversation (ibid.).

YouTube is often dialogic in nature (Jones and Schieffelin 2012: 1061). The content creators often have interaction with the viewers whom they can address directly via the comment section. Thus there is less hierarchy between the producers and the viewers of content than in traditional media and, if there is some, it is not created by institutions (Tolson 2010: 285). Leppänen and Häkkinen (2012) discuss and explain the vast

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[2] Feature available for registered users to add videos to a personal list of favorites, which is public.

enthusiasm to engage in the amateur video production, in the context of 'buffalaxed' videos. They state that most of the content-creators do not receive any financial reward from their contributions, but instead they gain the admiration and approval of the audience (Leppänen and Häkkinen 2012: 20). Burgess et al. (2013) remind us, however, that the system might not be any more democratic than in traditional media, when it comes to the popularity and visibility of different YouTube channels and the creation of YouTube celebrities. Dialogue between the creators and the viewers might also be non-existent, as there content-creators have the possibility to turn off comments and 'likes' (see discussion in Section 6.1 for 'likes').

Vlogging is the genre which is most typically associated with the user-generated content of YouTube, and perhaps due to this characteristic the website has been mistaken of being primarily an egoistic platform where the users only post representations of themselves (Burgess et al. 2013). As Burgess et al. (2013) observe, however, the YouTube community and its practices are much more social than often thought. They state that content creation, distribution and consume is a way of networking, rather than just broadcasting oneself. As an example of the social character of the website, the authors provide the narrative of Lonelygirl15, a popular vlogger, who, however, proved to be an actress and the vlog an experiment of a bigger production company. The attempt to discover the fakeness or the authenticity of a channel or a user through online investigations has since become a way of participating in the YouTube community. The authors (2013: 57) emphasize that role of

> the activities of not only content creators but also audiences as practices of participation, because the practices of audiencehood – quoting, favoriting, commenting, responding, sharing, and viewing – all leave traces, and therefore they all have effects on the common culture of YouTube as it evolves.

Thus stressing the role of the audience, they suggest that the ways of which the content is processed in different social media sites after its creation might be more important than the actual production of content (ibid.).

Jones and Schieffelin (2012: 1061) attribute the success of the website to the dialogic nature of YouTube. Moreover, Burgess et al. (2013: 64) believe that one significant factor

of success is the usability of the site, providing an easy to use platform for even those that are not expert technology users.

2.5.1 Folk linguistics in YouTube

Language is one of the many topics that are discussed on YouTube. Jones and Schieffelin (2012), for example, studied a series of viral AT&T commercials where a pre-pubescent girl uses the abbreviated language of SMS when speaking to her mother. Later in the series the same variety of English is taken up by the family's son and finally, grandmother. The authors indicate that the view the commercials provide of the use of CMC is somewhat contradictory. On one hand, CMC is depicted as a threat to the English language, with predictions of it transferring to the speech of young people and creating distance between different generations. The youth's ability to speak English is also questioned, as the mother states that the abbreviated forms her daughter uses are not English, thus taking part and provoking the moral panic of the media. On the other hand, the manner of presenting the issue is humorous and playful, communicating that their approach to the topic is not as serious as perhaps in other media.

As Jones and Schieffelin (2012) state, the AT&T commercials became widely popular, quickly spread to YouTube and became known by their catchphrase "IDK my BFF Jill". The authors discovered that the viewers wrote in the comments of what they thought of the language depicted on the commercials. Some condemned the use, voicing prescriptive opinions, whereas others expressed their delight and stated that they were also going to start talking like the people on the videos. Many were already using the acronyms, such as LOL and LMAO, in their written texts. As Jones and Schieffelin (2012: 1061) point out, the transfer of the AT&T advertisements from television to YouTube provided the viewers a natural platform to comment them. This is another example of the differences between YouTube and the traditional media, television, for example: the participatory culture that it creates and maintains. The discussion was not limited only in the language of the commercials, but the viewers extended the evaluation and criticism also to each other's texts, as they used the platform to correct and criticize the comments of others (Jones and Schieffelin 2012: 1071). The authors (2012: 1062) write that "in [YouTube]

where language practices are dynamic and changing, prescriptivist norms are nonetheless asserted, and language choice gives rise to social stereotypes and assessments."

The present chapter has focused on examining the previous research on the topic of the study. As has become clear, an ever-increasing amount of research has been made on prescriptivism, disparagement humor and folk linguistics. However, few studies have concentrated on studying them together or in the context of audio-visual texts and YouTube. The present study attempts to fill this gap.

3 METHODOLOGY

The present chapter concentrates on the methodology of the study. First, the study aims are discussed by presenting and elaborating on the research questions. Second, the process of data selection and collection is described and the choices which are made during the research project are justified. Finally, the methods of analysis are explained in the last section.

3.1 Aims

The aim of the study is to investigate a YouTube video series called *Your Grammar Sucks* (*YGS*), which concentrates on entertaining its audience by ridiculing other people's language use. More specifically, it focuses on small pieces of texts, comments and posts that are taken from social media sites, such as YouTube, Facebook or Twitter, and are found to be faulty by the audience and the creators of the show. The texts are featured as screen captions on the videos, read aloud and ridiculed using various methods that include verbal and non-verbal strategies.

The specific research questions are:

- What kind of linguistic forms are chosen for the discussion?
- How are these forms discussed and ridiculed?
- How does the audience react to the videos, mocked texts and their writers?
  - Is there discrimination towards any group of people?

The first question aims to study the attitudes that are directed at written non-standard language on the Internet. Firstly, the purpose is to investigate what kinds of linguistic features are placed under scrutiny. The results might provide some insight to the question which forms people are most eager to condemn and correct and are perhaps considered to be the most offending and harmful to the English language. Another interesting question is how much the discussion actually concerns issues of grammar, that is, morphology and syntax, and how much time, on the other hand, is allotted to criticizing other aspects of language, such as spelling and punctuation. Furthermore, another aim of

the first research question is to discuss whether the chosen features include non-standard dialects or sociolects.

The second research question includes the manner of how the texts are discussed. The main function of the *YGS* video series is to entertain the audience through humor, and therefore the techniques of creating amusement on the expense of the texts and their writers are examined and categorized. One aim is to investigate the attitudes towards the non-standard forms through the manner they are presented and described. Because of the format and its use of the mode of video, a wide variety of semiotic and modal resources are available for the producer of the show. These resources are utilized in the mockery of non-standard texts, in addition to verbal commentary and evaluations.

The third research question concentrates on the audience reaction, which can be studied by examining the comments that the viewers have left on the videos. This study aims to answer the questions of how the audience perceives the videos, whether they agree or disagree with the opinions voiced in them and what kind of attitudes and opinions of their own they voice in the comments. The question focuses also on the relationship between audience and the writers of the disapproved texts. I strive to examine what is said or implied of the mocked writers, focusing on questions such as what kind of people they are assumed to be and how they are portrayed. The last sub-question seeks to discover whether the previous factors, i.e. the texts chosen, the manner of discussion, the opinions of the writers, or any other factor, displays discrimination towards any group of people.

3.2 The data

The data of the present study are collected from the video series *Your Grammar Sucks* which is broadcast on YouTube. The videos are produced by Jack Douglass, a popular American video blogger, or 'vlogger'. By the time of the study Douglass's channel had over 1.8 million subscribers and the *YGS* series included 99 videos (August 2015)[3]. The videos feature texts that deviate from the standard in grammar or some other linguistic aspect and mostly originate from the comment sections of YouTube. In the videos

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[3] Towards the end of the study the Your Grammar Sucks series has expanded to a number of 109 videos and the channel has over 2,2 million subscribers. (8 June, 2016)

Douglass reads aloud the texts submitted by the viewers, while using different methods of creating humor. The texts are also placed into raps, songs and sketches, for example. As the texts ridiculed on the videos are not chosen only the creator, but also the viewers, studying them reveals what kind of language use is considered 'bad' by a greater number of people.

The audience reaction to the videos is studied when the comments that the viewers have left on the videos are examined, as they may reveal and possibly explaining the attitudes towards non-standard language. Moreover, what the audience considers amusing, as well as unamusing, is visible in the comments and by examining them it can be seen whether the videos are well received or criticized by the viewers. Furthermore, the comments demonstrate the participatory culture (Burgess et al 2013) and the social nature of *Your Grammar Sucks*, as well as the whole YouTube, by illustrating the interaction that the different users have with each other. By studying the comments it is also easier to understand the videos themselves. Some cultural references, for example, might be missed by the researcher but noticed by the other viewers.

The present data source was selected, as it possesses valuable characteristics regarding the research questions. *Your Grammar Sucks* videos are very popular on YouTube, each video having at least half a million views and the most viewed reaching up to five million views. At the end of each video Douglass invites the audience to "help [him] clean up YouTube" by sending all "amazingly bad comments" they encounter to him so that he can make fun of them, and indeed, almost all of the texts featured in the series are submitted by the viewers of the show, thus revealing the prescriptive attitudes of a large group of people. In addition, the videos deviate from more traditional forms of prescriptivism (as shown e.g. in Beal 2010 and Schaffer 2010), as they do not always contain metalanguage or explicitly expressed evaluations of the texts, but also a great deal of implicit criticism, expressed by using non-verbal communication, such as tone and gestures.

3.2.1 Videos

At the time that the videos were collected for the data sample (November 2015) there were altogether ninety-four *Your Grammar Sucks* videos, each of which has hundreds of thousands of views, while many have well over a million views. Because of the vast amount of videos and comments, I did not attempt to study the data in great detail on the whole. Using a random sampling method, 33 videos were selected from the whole pool of *Your Grammar Sucks* videos. All the featured texts from the chosen videos were collected, resulting in a sample of 1192 texts.

The video series include special episodes that occur regularly after a certain number of videos. For example, almost every video that completes the set of ten videos (e.g. the 20th or 40th video) is comprised of short sketches where the ridiculed texts are placed in imagined contexts. Raps and songs appear on videos which are fifth in the sets of ten (e.g. 15th and 25th video) and a drinking games in the first videos of the sets of ten, this practice starting from the twenty-first video. At the time of the data collection there are twenty-two of these special episodes in the series, while the rest of the videos follow the same pattern of simply reading the non-standard texts aloud.

When selecting the videos for the present study, these special characteristics of some of the videos had to be taken into consideration in order to provide a comprehensive view of the data. Because the "regular" episodes form the bulk of the video series, the majority of the selected data also consists of these videos. A random sample of twenty-two videos was taken from the set of the 77 videos from which the special videos had been omitted. It was made sure, however, that the first YGS video was included in the sample, the audience reaction to the first video being particularly valuable for the interest of the study. The remaining eleven videos of the sample were chosen from the special episodes according to their relevance to the present study, the sample including two musical episodes, three rap songs, two drinking games and four sketch episodes.

The videos were transcribed focusing on each featured text at a time and the methods the humor is created in each of them. Because of the amount of data included in the study, the transcriptions are rough and only one of the videos was transcribed in more detail.

The focus was on the spoken words and the most prominent methods for creating humor, including for example expressions, gestures, tone of voice, accents and written texts.

3.2.2 Comments on the videos

The present study also includes the comments that the viewers have left on the videos. Each *Your Grammar Sucks* video has over a thousand of comments, the most commented videos reaching up to tens of thousands comments. The following table demonstrates the rate of which comments are produced on the videos (Table 1).

Table 1. Comments and the number of comments per day on YGS videos.(24 May, 2016)

	Comments	Comments per day
Total	444,345	-
Mean	5,771	22.2

The average number of comments on a video was 5,771, the count ranging from a little over a thousand to over forty thousand comments. On average, the viewers wrote approximately 22 comments per day. However, one has to be careful to draw any final conclusions about the number, as, like with the view count, the number of comments varies greatly according to the time a video has been available. YouTube does not provide statistics which would reveal when the comments have been written on each video, but it appears that they, just as the views, are produced more frequently right after a video has been uploaded. The videos that have been available for years receive significantly less comments on a day than those which have been uploaded only for days. By comparing the average rates of comments from videos of different ages (Table 2), we receive some indication of this.

Table 2. The number of comments on some of the videos.(24 May, 2015)

#YGS	Days since uploading (24 May, 2015)	Comments	Comments per day
7	1009	3457	3.4
17	925	3006	3.2
27	778	6034	7.7
37	638	5101	8.0
47	487	6248	12.8
57	274	3778	13.8
67	106	2215	20.9
77	8	1470	183.8

It is clearly visible in the table that the number of the comments per day grows the more recent the video is. The last video had gained almost fifteen hundred comments in only eight days, the average number of comments per day being approximately 184 comments in a day. The number is substantially greater than on the other videos. From this we can conclude that the rate of comments follows the same pattern as the views: the more recent a video is the more frequent is the commenting on them.

For the purposes of the present study it is not possible or sensible study all the comments, but a sample was taken from the total number of the comments. For the second research question, the 20 most recent comments were collected from each video within a week's time (from 23 April, 2015 to 2 May, 2015). After an initial analysis 10 additional comments were collected from each video in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the data, resulting in a final sample of 990 comments. In addition, three videos were randomly selected from the sample of 33 videos and from them all of the comments available are briefly investigated to ensure that the most recent comments are in line with the earlier ones.

3.3 Methods of analysis

The present study was conducted by applying the methods of grounded theory and multimodal analysis. Although the data stem from one source, three different sections were examined: the written non-standard texts which were chosen to be ridiculed in the videos; the actual videos and the ways they present the ridiculed texts; as well as the comments from the audience of the videos. The texts, videos and comments were analyzed using methods of grounded theory.

3.3.1 Multimodal analysis

Kress and van Leeuwen (2001: 20) define multimodality as "the use of several semiotic modes in the design of a semiotic product or event [and] the particular way in which these modes are combined". Communicative modes, on the other hand, may be defined as "systems of representation or semiotic systems with rules and regularities attached to them" (Norris 2009: 79). Modes are differentiated from media, which are "the material resources used in the production of semiotic products and events, including both the tools and the materials used" (Kress & van Leeuwen 2001: 22), modes being realized through different media. For the present study, however, I will adopt the method of Norris and not make distinction between the two groups, but consider them both as 'meditational means' (Norris 2009: 80).

Van Leeuwen (2004) argues for studying language together with other semiotic modes, maintaining, for example, that speech acts should more appropriately be called communicative acts, not restricting the communication to speech. Also Norris (2004: 101) emphasizes the connection between all the modes of communication and therefore the importance of studying non-verbal and verbal communication together, as studying only spoken language without the visual aspects could lead to distorted results. Moreover, van Leeuwen (2009) specifies how the different articulations of voice quality (e.g. pitch, loudness and articulation), for example, carry meaning, and are semiotic means.

Therefore, in addition to the verbal resources applied in the production of *YGS* videos, I examine the non-verbal and visual resources used as means of creating humor. The modes and other semiotic means that contribute to the creation of humor in the show are

discussed. These include verbal communication (speech and writing) and non-verbal communication, such as facial expressions, prosody, proxemics, gestures and actions, as well as colors and music. Resources that do not appear to carry meaning or contribute to creating the humor on the videos, such as clothing, or the color of the background, are not included in the study.

3.3.2 Grounded theory

Grounded theory is a data-driven research methodology created by American sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in the 1960s, and since then the methodology has divided into several branches (classic grounded theory, constructivist and feminist grounded theory) (Breckenridge 2014). The present study draws mostly from the constructivist grounded theory by Thornberg and Charmaz (2014), although the work of other researchers is also explored here.

The methodology influences not only the analysis of the data but already data collection, as data are collected in several rounds, while the analysis that is conducted in between the rounds guides the process through the insights that arise; this data collection method is called *theoretical sampling* (Corbin and Strauss 2008: 143; Thornberg and Charmaz 2014: 155). The process is over when the data becomes saturated, that is, when "all the concepts are well defined and explained" (Corbin and Strauss 2008: 145).

The analysis is conducted by coding and categories are formed through in various stages. The first stage is *initial coding* (or *open coding*, the term used Corbin and Strauss 2008: 160) where sections of data are given codes that describe them (Thornberg and Charmaz 2014: 156). Thornberg and Charmaz (2014: 156–160) explain that these codes arise from the data and are influenced by previous conceptions or assumptions of the researcher as little as possible. The codes are then compared and clustered in the process of *focused coding*. In the final stage of coding, *theoretical coding*, the codes formed in the analysis are compared to previous research and those concepts which fit the data are integrated into the categories.

Thornberg and Charmaz (2014: 159–165) emphasize comparisons being an important part of the analysis, as during the process there is constant comparison between the data, codes, categories and the memos that are written during the analysis, through which the data, comparisons and insights are managed.

The present study does not follow any branch of grounded theory methodology, but utilizes some methods that are most useful for the present study. For example, the method of theoretical sampling was applied only in studying the comments on YGS videos. After studying the initial 20 most recent comments per video, another 10 were added. Moreover, the comment sections of three *YGS* videos were examined in the light of the initial coding. Because of the limitations of the study, the same could not be applied to other sections of data (the videos and with them the mocked texts). However, for the purpose and scope of the present study the initial sample of videos is sufficient to depict and explain the data in question. In addition, because the data were relatively restricted, consisting only of *YGS* videos that are rather uniform (with the exceptions that were taken into consideration when selecting the sample of data), there was no need to have the initial analysis and the formed codes and concepts to guide the data collection.

The codes that arose from the analysis were under constant revision during the different stages of coding and analysis. They were refined by comparing them to the data, other codes and the theoretical framework. By writing memos the data were managed and processed further, as the possible insights, doubts and connections between the categories were written down and brought together. Using these methods categories discussed below in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 were formed.

3.4 Terms and ethical considerations

Before dwelling into the analysis, some terms used in the discussion of the data need to be clarified. The term 'text' is used to refer to the pieces of texts featured and mocked on the show. They are comprised of a comment on YouTube or a discussion forum, Facebook or Twitter post, or a sign in an offline context, for example, and are presumably written by one writer. If the writer has edited their text by a subsequent piece of text, for example, it is considered part of the same text. Additions to the proscribed texts by other users, on the other hand, are considered also to be the target of the disparagement only if

they feature considerable deviations from written Standard English. 'Comments' are distinct from 'texts', as the term is used to refer to the contributions of the *YGS* audience to the comment sections of the *YGS* videos.

There are also several references to 'Standard English' in the analysis. In this study I discuss only written Standard English. Even so, it is acknowledged that there are also several variants of written Standard English, e.g. Standard American English and Standard British English. I consider those features, structures and words that are accepted in the major varieties of written Standard English as standard. Those features which are considered standard in spoken English but not in written language are here regarded as dialectal and non-standard. It needs to be emphasized that in line with key tenets in the sociolinguistic tradition there is no value judgment in categorizing features into standard and non-standard language. The present study applies the descriptive approach to the data, the aim of the study being description of the data sample instead of prescribing what is acceptable language use and what is not.

4 "AMAZINGLY BAD" TEXTS

In the following three chapters I will be concentrating on analyzing three major sections of the data: the categorization of the texts that are being mocked in *YGS* videos, the strategies of mockery and the audience reactions in the comments.

The present chapter concentrates on studying and categorizing the texts that are mocked in *YGS* videos. The mocked texts are categorized into groups according to the ways they deviate from standard language use. The categories that were formed in grounded theory analysis are: deviations in spelling, syntax and morphology, punctuation, cohesion, non-standard lexical choices, content and style, as well as code-switching. The categories are not exclusive, as many of the texts fit several categories. Because of this, information about the number of deviations in each category is not provided. However, the qualitative data show what types of deviations are chosen to be mocked in the *YGS* community.

4.1 Non-standard spellings

Many of the deviations detected in the analysis concern spelling. The data include cases where the error changes the meaning of the misspelled word to something else than intended, as well as errors that produce non-words. The category includes misspellings, which seem to have occurred unintentionally, and non-standard spellings that appear to have been done on purpose to achieve a specific goal.

The first group that is discussed in this section is misspellings which produce semiotic changes of a word or a phrase. Due to a spelling error a whole sentence can receive a different meaning than what seems to have been the original idea of the writer. The included texts are grammatically correct, but their meanings appear unusual or improbable to be what the writer has meant to express. The expressed ideas can be highly unusual and ludicrous (as in Example 1). Because of resemblance with a more probable utterance the original idea of the writer can in many cases be easily inferred. It has to be noted, however, that the fact that the expressed meanings are unusual or disturbing does not mean that the author did not intend to say what he or she did. Neither the creator of the show, the audience or the researcher can determine the original purpose or the message of the writer to an absolute certainty. As the texts are taken out of context, it is

possible that they are misinterpreted and thought to be misspelled, when, in fact, the writers of the texts have written exactly what they have meant to say. In this case the content rather than the form of the text is being disapproved.

Misspellings that produce violent, sexual or in some other way disturbing meanings are common in the data. For example, *YGS* 71 features the following text.

(1) I'd rather be pissed off, then pissed on..

'I'd rather be pissed off *than* pissed on' is an idea that has been recited for example in movies (e.g. *Robin Hood: Men in Tights*) and it seems likely to be the message that the writer of Example 1 has intended to express. There is only a one letter difference between the two sentences: between the words *then* and *than*, which are, depending on the pronunciation, phonetically very close to each other or even homonyms. Unfortunately for the writer, however, this small difference in spelling changes the meaning of the sentence to one that greatly deviates from the original idea. The meaning is altered from the speaker being rather angry than urinated on, to the speaker wanting *first* to be angry and *then* to be urinated on. The error this small might not produce much humor in a different context, since mixing the words *then* and *than* is a fairly common due to a minor phonemic distinction and does usually not create problems in understanding. In this sentence, however, the difference is vital.

The preference to include the type of spelling deviations where the meaning of the word changes is visible also in the large number of texts where the words *rapping*, *raping* and *wrapping* are used interchangeably. The spellings of these words and their derivatives are easily confused, resulting often in extraordinary and disturbing new meanings. They are a running gag in the series and occur in almost every episode, often multiple times (2).

(2) a. Don't stop raping eminem.

b. Toby is an awesome raper!

In Extract 2a the problem is not only the spelling of the word *rapping*, but the use of punctuation. The original idea of the writer has most likely been to tell Eminem not to

give up rapping ('Don't stop rapping, Eminem'), but because of the used spelling and punctuation s/he is telling somebody else not to stop raping Eminem. The 'humor' of the mistake is created due to the discrepancy that exists between the intended and the expressed message, as often the case in this type of texts. They are meant to be compliments but they end up being accusations of criminal action. This is visible in Example 2b, where the writer has most likely intended to praise a known artist called Toby for his rapping skills, but has instead ended up accusing him of being a 'raper'[4]. The juxtaposition of the praise (*awesome*) and rape is troubling and, is likely, therefore, to produce humor among the audience, as it has most likely occurred by accident.

Not all misspellings produce new meanings, but instead they result in non-words that have no meaning in Standard English. This is, in fact, most often the case when the texts feature misspellings in *YGS*. Texts which produce a great deal of amusement among the audience feature drastic deviations from the standard. They appear to be a result of more than a typing error, as they seem to be intentional deviations that result from an ignorance of standard spellings (Examples 3a–c).

(3)   a. ray gun or pistol hmmm disurgeons disurgeons lol

         b. I never ask you for your apeanyon

         c. thats a beautiful younacorn cake. thank you.

The deviations presented above produce non-words that are difficult to understand, but the intentions of the writers can be inferred. The writer of Example 3a has most likely intended write *decisions* instead of "disurgeons", while "apenyon" (3b) probably stands for *opinion* and "younacorn" (3c) for *unicorn*. It is difficult to determine how the deviating spellings have occurred in these cases, as they can hardly have resulted from a typing error; it seems as though the writers have been ignorant of how to spell the words. They could also have occurred due to the auto-correction function of mobile phones. The humor that these alien forms produce for the audience could be a result of the feeling of superiority (Ferguson & Ford 2008; Boxman-Shabtai & Shifman 2013; Beal 2010), since

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[4] Even though the standard variant for the concept is *rapist*, the YGS community appears to accept the form *raper* to convey the same meaning.

the viewers may feel superior by the fact that they would be able to spell the words correctly, while somebody else has failed at the task.

YGS has usually its focus on major deviations in spelling or grammar and those that are very small or common are rarely featured, since they are not as humorous as more drastic ones. However, in *YGS* the mockery does at times target even very small deviations, as can be seen from the following examples that have been included in the videos (4a–c).

(4)   a. She is beatiful :)

b. I had to laugh so hard I almost pucked xD

c. laying in bed listening to thunder crack and rain dance on my wondow.

The examples 4a–c deviate from the standard only by one letter, as they are either missing a letter (4a), have an extra one (4b) or one letter has been changed (4c). These texts are rarely the ones which receive expressions of amusement, approval and admiration from the audience, since typing errors and not proofreading a text before sending it rather than ignorance seems to be their cause and they could be made by anybody. However, they demonstrate that in the *YGS* community even the smallest of deviations may be mocked.

The data include also texts with non-standard spellings which are most likely done on purpose, in contrast to the previous examples which are probably occurred unintentionally, for example due to a typing error or the auto-correction feature of mobile phones. The deviations from standard spellings are frequent and systematic and do not appear to have occurred by accident, but instead to seem to carry meaning, as argued by Sebba (2007). For example, the non-standard spellings in Extract 5 are most likely a conscious choice, used to imitate speech and perhaps to achieve an informal and humorous style.

(5)   SEY WUT YOU WUNT ABOT THE RUSSIANS BUT THEY SUR NO HOW TO PORDY
[Say what you want about the Russians but they sure know how to party]

The extract in Example 5 features non-standard, speech-like spellings. The spellings of the words *what*, *want* and *party* as *wut*, *wunt* and *pordy* respectively suggest that the

writers has attempted to achieve aspects of speech in writing. Other non-standard spellings (e.g. 'sey', 'abot' and 'sur' for *say*, *about* and *sure*) produce no distinction in pronunciation, but instead they achieve an informal style. As it can be seen from the 'translation' of the text to standard spellings, in other aspects than spelling it follows the rules of Standard English, the main target of mockery clearly being the non-standard spellings.

Some texts in the data contain other types of non-standard spelling that appear to be intentional. The texts usually deviate from the Standard English by not only featuring non-standard and speech-like spellings, but also by incorporating numbers, deviating punctuation and other keys of the keyboard into writing (6a and 6b). These features are usually associated with online contexts and youth culture (Androutsopoulos 2000: 528; Tagliamonte & Denis, 2008).

(6)   a. ~*Missinqq Hym Al0tt :(! #
           #Didnt _Talk_F0r_A_Dayyh_But_Seeemz_Lyke_A_Year :(:*
            [Missing him a lot
            Didn't talk for a day but seems like a year]

           b. $0me 0f th3$3 @n$w3r$ ©®ack m3 up
            [Some of these answers crack me up]

The data show a dislike towards the spellings featured in Examples 6a and 6b, even if the text would otherwise follow the norms of Standard English. For instance, tf the deviating spelling of Example 6b is ignored (using *3* for *e*, *$* for *s* and *@* for *a*), Extract 6b follows the rules of Standard English in syntax and morphology (*Some of these answers crack me up*). In many of these cases Douglass refuses to read comments like 6a and 6b aloud, only shaking his head disapprovingly or saying the words: "If you type like this, fuck you", demonstrating that there is a strong dislike towards this type of language use in the *YGS* context.

4.2 Non-standard lexical choices

The deviations in the current category concern the use of words or forms that do not fit their contexts either because of their meaning or because of grammatical issues. The

present category is differentiated from the previous one by the notion that the unusual lexical choices cannot easily be allocated to misspellings. Some deviations here concern idioms and collocations, words that usually appear together, on one hand, and words and phrases that are rarely used together, on the other hand. The extract below provides an example of this category (7).

(7)   With this song until my worst moments are nothing and become yellow

In addition to the unusual word order and phrases of the sentence in Example 7, perhaps the most alien and striking feature of the text is the phrase "become yellow", which is not a common phrase in day-to-day speech. The phrase is pragmatically problematic, since a "moment", an abstract concept, cannot concretely become the color yellow. In art these types of deviations are common, but in the YouTube comment section it appears out of place.

Some texts in the data deviate from standard in their use of auxiliaries. In the examples the auxiliaries *be*, *have* or *do* are used interchangeably against the rules of Standard English (8a and 8b).

(8)   a. @jacksfilms How is u meet Tay Zonday

        b. damn i have 16 years old im men and i love this song jaja lol

In Example 8a the writer has used the auxiliary *is* instead of *did*, which would be the standard choice in the sentence. These types of deviations would not appear in spoken language between native speakers (Lippi-Green 2012: 12), but are likely to be made by non-native speakers of English. Indeed, in Example 8b the deviation appears clearly to be an L1 transfer. In Spanish, as well as other Romance languages, and Slavic languages, the phrase "I am 16 years old", when translated word to word into English, is said "I have 16 years" ("Tengo 16 años"), which is close to what the writer of the example has written. Further evidence that the writer is a Spanish speaker is the word "jaja" at the end of the text, which with the Spanish pronunciation of the consonant "j" would be pronounced as "haha".

Some *YGS* videos feature texts that include language use that deviates from written Standard English but are standard in certain dialects (9).

> (9)   hahahahaha you're kid has a well stupid name

The greatest deviation in the example 9 appears to be dialectal. It features a misspelling in the word 'your', but the deviation is, however, rather common and minor and rarely included in the *YGS* videos as the only deviation, since it is not likely to produce much amusement for the audience. Attention is thus turned to the noun phrase 'a well stupid name' due to the unusual use of the adverb *well* as an intensifier. The phrase was discovered to be British slang[5] due to several viewers pointing it out in the comments. The phrase is defended in the comment section by viewers who consider it acceptable in speech, as they either use the forms in their own speech or know them to be used by others. Because the creator of the show is American, it is possible that the phrase was unknown to him. It is uncertain whether the text would have been included in a *YGS* episode, had it been known, but at least the viewers who recognize the phrase argue that does not deserve to be mocked.

Similarly to the category of non-standard spellings, the present category also includes very minor deviations. The example below, where a deviating pronoun has been used to refer to the adjective *stupid,* demonstrates this (10).

> (10)   Either you are stupid...Or acting like one...

Since the concept of "stupid" is not a noun or a pronoun, and is therefore not countable, it cannot be referred to as *one* in Standard English. Instead, the pronoun *it* would be used in Standard English (i.e. "either you are stupid or acting like it"). The deviation is subtle, and for a non-native speaker, like myself, it is almost unnoticeable, demonstrating that the deviations do not need to be drastic in order to be included in the disparagement.

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[5] *"Brit. slang*. Used as an intensifier to qualify (chiefly predicative) adjectives, with emphatic force: downright, absolutely."
http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/226983?rskey=Hji3Az&result=6&isAdvanced=false#eid. (23 August 2015).

4.3 Deviations in syntax and morphology

Even though the examples discussed have thus far focused on aspects of language that are not regarded as part of traditional definition of grammar, the data also include instances of deviations in grammar, i.e. in syntax and morphology (Batstone 1994: 4). As these deviations violate the innate rules of grammar, they are more likely to be made by non-native speakers than native speakers, but instances that can be made both by L1 and L2 speakers are also discussed.

In the following examples the focus of the criticism is on issues of morphology. Morphemes are the smallest meaningful units in a language that can have either lexical or grammatical functions (Brinton & Brinton 2010: 82–83), and when changed, may either alter the meaning or the syntax of the utterance to a deviating one. The deviations make the sentences appear elliptical and foreign-sounding (11).

(11)   a. We Delivery

b. yes, they're very scariest

c. best music ever for move the ass :)

d. This show sucks now it got crapper and crapper!

As can be seen from Examples 11a–c, deviations in this category might be such that changes the part of speech of a word to one that does not fit the sentence (Example a, where *deliver* has become *delivery*), while they might also concern verb or adjective inflection, as in examples 11b and 11c, where the writers use standard part of speech but have deviated from the standard inflection. In Standard English Example 11b would more commonly be written, "yes, they're very scary", using the positive form of the adjective, or alternatively, "yes, they're the scariest", as the adverb *very* cannot modify a superlative. Similarly, Example 11c deviates from the norm in the inflection of the verb *move*, where *moving* would be the acceptable form.

Example 11d differs from the other examples in the sense that it is defended by a number of people in the comment section of the video for being acceptable in their dialect. Others, on the other hand, argue that the comparative form should be *crappier* instead of *crapper*,

pointing out that the latter word is a slang word used to refer to the toilet. It is not considered that the words *crappier* and *crapper* are the comparative forms of two separate slang words: *crappy* and *crap*. In this case the question is whether the word *crap*, which is most often used as a noun or a verb, may also be used as an adjective. If the adjective use is accepted, with phrases such as "crap job" and "a crap dancer"[6] being acceptable, the comparative and superlative forms 'crapper' and 'the crappest' seem possible and even natural progression for the use.

Utterances which deviate from the standard in syntax, on the other hand, may include a deviating word order (*Why does exist the dislike button?*), miss obligatory constituents (e.g. predicate, object) or the predicate or other verbs may be missing complements or have deviating ones, making the utterances sound elliptical or foreign. Again, these deviations are more likely to be made by non-native speakers. In some of the instances the L1 transfer is clearly visible (12).

> (12) You do realize, that the global bee poputationen alarmingly quickly shrinks currently ... !? !?! just sayin...

The deviating word order in Example 12 suggests that the writer is a non-native speaker of English. Firstly, placing the predicate (*shrinks*) at the end of the sentence follows the German word order. A German transfer can also be inferred from the word "poputationen" (populations), which has the suffix -*en* that is used to index plural in German words.

However, the data also contains instances of syntax deviations that can be made by both L1 and L2 speakers of English. These instances are e.g. sentences where an obligatory constituent has been omitted and the sentence is elliptical (e.g. *That sucked that was harable [sic] what if that happened to*). This may easily happen to both non-native and native speakers by accident while writing.

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[6] Featured in the online Oxford English Dictionary, under crap, n.[1] and adj.
http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/43863?rskey=u0OiRP&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid (3 June, 2016)

4.4 Deviating punctuation

One of the deviations concerning punctuation frequently feeatured in the *YGS* episodes is that punctuation is missing completely. In texts with only one sentence this is not regarded as much of an issue and hardly ever drawn attention to. Longer texts, on the other hand, are treated differently, as their lack of punctuation is highlighted through various methods. The example below, for instance, is read fast and without pauses, and by taking exaggeratingly deep breaths before starting to read the text and after a comma (13).

> (13)   My bf broke up with me last nite 2 get back 2gether with his ex he always told me 2 nvr worry about being jealous of her i always knew that she still had feelings for him but he didn't like her until she found her way back into his heart n he stopped noticing me, she always hurted him n i never would do anything to hurt his I ASKED HIM WOULD YOU RATHER HAVE SOMEONE WHO WILL LOVE YOU MORE OR SOMEONE WHO WILL LOVE YOU LESS now i watch in pain seeing her with him, knowing he can do better with me

The text includes a number of non-standard aspects, such as spelling ("nite" for *night*, "nvr" for *never*), capitalization and syntax ("i never would do anything to hurt his"), but judging by the presentation of the text, its punctuation is also being criticized.

In contrast, the data also includes instances of using too much punctuation and in deviating places, such as full stops and exclamation marks in the middle of a sentence or a clause (14a and 14b). These instances are rare when comparing to the number of the texts without punctuation.

> (14)   a. i'am) so (sorry) david yost, I wish! were, so you&I can'meet' for the 'very' first, time. you, were my! favorite, Power ranger in blue. as Billy Cranston on the show#
>
> b. Have Yall ever heard of the Bible if God wanted. Same sex he Would of said it But He didn't itz not Rite For There To Be Same Sex Im. Just Saying Wat im Feeling Nd If yuh Got A Fucking Problem with It Then Fuck yur Fucking bitch itz A Sin ndd Yall Will See yall Will Burn In Hell

Example 14a is an extreme instance of using punctuation in a non-standard way and is very likely written in such a way intentionally. This might be done to provoke or gain attention, for example. The deviating punctuation in example 14b, on the other hand, is likely to be a result of mistyping, which is rather common, especially when writing on a

cell phone. In both cases the viewers are made aware of the punctuation by the narrator, even more so in the latter one. Example 14a is introduced with the words "Here's an example of using too much punctuation", whereas not only does Douglass say before reading Example 14b, "I'd like to call this one 'weird periods'", but the issue of punctuation is emphasized by the words 'WEIRD PERIODS' appearing on the screen, as well as by repeating the phrase again after reading the text.

4.5 Deviations in content

Even though the texts on *YGS* are mostly selected because of their form, they can also be mocked because of their content. The topic was discussed briefly in Section 4.1, when discussing the texts that are mocked and proscribed because of their unusual meanings that appear to have resulted from misspellings. Here the issue is revisited by examining unusual meanings which cannot be allocated to misspellings. In several of the cases included in this category the language is flawless except for the content (15), demonstrating again that *Your Grammar Sucks* series concerns a variety of issues other than grammar.

        (15)   i can sum it up in 3 words: evolution is a lie.

Except for the deviating capitalization, the text in example 15a follows the norms of Standard English. Interesting about the example is that the mockery is not targeting the person's language competence but his or her ability to count, or rather, his or her understanding of the concept of word. The problem of the sentence is that the clause "evolution is a lie" that according to the writer contains three words, has, in fact, four words in it. It is possible that the he or she has not counted the article "a" as a word and has therefore landed on a different conclusion about the number of words in the clause as the creators of *YGS*. Moreover, the comment strongly opposes the evolution theory, which may also have been a reason for including the text in *YGS*.

Texts which elicit irony are also popular among the *YGS* community, and especially those that revolve around the topic of language and spelling (16).

(16)   Your a genuis. I'm in fourth grade and have very good grammar.

Example 16 appears to be unintentionally ironic because of the conflicting statements in it. The writer congratulates him- or herself of having *very good grammar* while misspelling the words *you're* and *genius*. As already noted, spelling is not included in the linguistic definition of grammar, but in colloquial language the terms are often used interchangeably, and thus the viewers can find a contradiction between the self-congratulating declaration and the deviating spellings, which would indicate that the user does not have 'very good grammar'. It is possible that the deviations from standard spelling norms are done consciously to provoke others. However, here I focus on the reactions of the members of the *YGS* community, who treat the deviations as unintentional mistakes.

4.6 Deviating style

Texts that are proscribed because of their style form an interesting group of the data. Most of the texts that are picked up by *YGS* viewers are YouTube comments or Twitter or Facebook posts, and studying them reveals what kind of styles are considered inappropriate in this context. Although an inappropriate tone or register is usually not the only offence in the texts, it is clearly indicated when they are being proscribed and mocked among other deviations, such as misspellings. This is mostly done by acting the texts out and emphasizing the characteristics that are specific to each text (see Section 5.1). Some of the proscribed styles are judged to be too aggressive (17), or too formal (18), for example, for their context.

(17)   WOW, U FAGS PLAY MINECRAFT? BRO, GET A LIFE U SAD FUCKS. MINECRAFT FUCKING SUCKS C.O.D. IS WAY BETTER BRO. THIS GUY SOUND LIKE STRAIGHT UP FAG BRO. TERRIBLE VIDEO BRO, FUCK U AND YOUR SUBSCRIBERS U FUCKING FAG.BRO CODIS SO MUCH BETTER BITCH. BRO, U PRICK you're 30 YEARS OLD UNEMPLOYED AND LIVING WITH UR MOTHER. TERRIBLE VIDEO, DISLIKED AND FLAGGED BRO.

The text in Example 17 is written almost entirely in capital letters, is abusive and contains several profanities. In the video these features are highlighted and mocked by using angry expressions and gestures, rising volume and finally ripping a t-shirt apart. In contrast,

Example 18 demonstrates that not only can texts be proscribed for being too informal by using deviating spellings and grammar, but they can also be considered too formal for the context of social media. The data includes several instances where the texts are read with features of a 'posh' accent, while pretending to be holding a wine glass, a character named as 'Sophisticated man' (see later discussion on the characters in Section 5.1).

> (18) Harry Potter is the best saga of the history much better that twilight indeed I get excited to listening to these songs I grew with harry love in the whole saga Hermione granger indeed the better thing

Douglass starts by reading the text in example with normal voice and tone, but switches to the 'Sophisticated man' tone, which is slightly lower, affected and utilizes characteristics of an English accent. The word *indeed* seems to function as a trigger for the switch, as it occurs after Douglass has read the word aloud. Although the text also includes other problematic features (such as deviating syntax, spelling and punctuation), special attention is drawn on the style of text through strategies mentioned above.

To elaborate the point of style being one of the aspects of the mocked texts that is judged and evaluated, Spanish instances of the data are briefly discussed. Although most of the mocked texts in the data are written in English, there are some that are written in other languages, most commonly in Spanish. It is doubtful how much the audience, many of which are English-speaking judging by the overwhelming majority of English comments in the comment section, can understand from the Spanish texts. At times there are requests for translations, indicating that there are a number of viewers at least who are not competent speakers of Spanish. These requests are often met with poor translations, some of which seem to have been done with Google Translate[7]. Even if a great deal of the audience could speak and understand Spanish, it is also doubtful whether they could be as competent in the language as to be able to detect the deviations in the texts and enjoy them.

The Spanish texts included in *YGS* often have some striking aspects in their style that do not require much competence in Spanish to appreciate. Repetition and excessive use of

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[7] Online machine translator, https://translate.google.com (Retrieved 9 June, 2016)

punctuation are aspects that are likely to produce amusement in the audience and can be found in the data sample (19a and 19b).

(19)　a. La mamá empieza a llorar y a gritar ... Porque?! ... Porque?!!!! ...
　　　　[The mother begins to cry and scream ... Because?! ... Because?!!!! ...]

　　　b. xDDDDDDDDDDDDDDDDD No paro de gritar ese nombre wuuunnnn XDDDD
　　　no paro de cagarme de la risaXDDDDD alan alan alan alll!!! alan alanalan alan alan
　　　alan alan alan alan!!!!!!!
　　　[xDDDDDDDDDDDDDDDDD I won't stop shouting that wuuunnnn name XDDDD
　　　i won't stop shitting myself of laughterXDDDDD alan alan alan alll!!! alan alanalan
　　　alan alan alan alan alan alan!!!!!!]

In both examples the repetition and exaggerated use of punctuation are remarkable. The style of both texts is such that one does not have to understand every word to find humor in them. Example 19a has an overly dramatic style with the repetition of the word *porque* – most likely meant to stand for *por que*, 'why' – and the use of punctuation, while in Example 19b the deviation is even more poignant with the excessive repetition of the name 'Alan'. Not understanding the language might even perpetuate the humor, as imagining reasons why anyone would repeat one word could be even funnier than understanding what is actually being said.

4.7 Deviations in coherence

The term *coherence* stems from the field of discourse studies and can be defined as "implicit or inferred relations in discourse, which, in contrast to cohesive ties, are not explicitly articulated" (Georgakopoulou and Goutsos 2004: 15). It is based on the assumption that "all parts of a text contribute to [its meaning], no part being random or purposeless." (ibid.). The texts included in this section concern texts that appear to break these principles of coherence, juxtaposing ideas that are conflicting and contradictory to each other, as well as including parts that seem detached and unrelated to what has previously been said. The incoherent parts usually appear at the end, producing a type of a punch line for the text. These parts might seem particularly out of place if they deviate from the tone of the rest of the text, by being aggressive, dramatic, incomprehensible or otherwise unrelated to the rest of the text (20).

20) a. this game sukes and I love my sister.

    b. Ummmm ... words make my barin hurt ... PONNIES!

Examples 20a and 20b demonstrate how coherence is also taken into consideration when practicing prescriptivism in *YGS* context. Both of them include spelling mistakes, as well as non-standard capitalization and punctuation, but they also feature incongruity with parts of sentences coming off as out of place and completely unconnected to what has been said earlier. It is difficult to find any connection between the sentences "this game sucks" and "I love my sister" in Example a. The text might have been featured in *YGS* just for the spelling mistake (*sukes* instead of *sucks*), but it is made more entertaining by the incongruity of the utterance. The situation is similar with Example b that has the unrelated word *ponnies* at the end. What makes the incongruity even more striking than in example a, is that *ponnies* is a non-word (perhaps a misspelling referring to ponies) and is, moreover, highlighted by writing it in capital letters and with an exclamation mark. It is possible that when presented in its original context the text is completely coherent and understandable, but when detached from it, it appears incomprehensible and ridiculous.

4.8 Code-switching

The data include several instances of 'Spanish breaks', which feature texts written entirely in Spanish or in a mixture of Spanish and English, "Spanglish", and some of which were already discussed in Section 4.6. The practice of using two or more languages in one sentences is called code-switching, "the systematic, alternating use of two or more languages in a single utterance or conversational exchange" (Levine 2010: 50). Below is an example of a text where the writer uses both English and Spanish in one sentence and which is included in *YGS* videos as an example of undesirable language use.

(21)   Este video... Es uno de los mejores de internet Junto con Beatbox dog sings trololo Y todas las versiones del perro beatbox
[This video... Is one of the best of the internet Along with Beatbox dog sings trololo And all versions of the beatbox dog]

The example is roughly translated into English, where it can be seen that there is hardly any mistake, whether in grammar, lexis or spelling, made in the example. A search on YouTube reveals that "Beatbox dog sings trololo" is a name for a video where a dog seems to sing according to the rhythm of a viral humorous song. Therefore, the text shows no deviations from Standard English or Standard Spanish, except for punctuation and capitalization as well as translating *beatbox dog* into *el perro beatbox*, thus mixing English and Spanish with each other.

Similar to the instances mentioned in Section 4.6, where the style of the Spanish texts rather than their grammar is the source of amusement for the viewers, in the Spanglish texts the humor can be traced to other aspects of the language than the syntax or lexicon deviations. To achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the 'Spanish breaks' in the *YGS* series I searched for Spanglish texts from those videos which were not included in the initial thirty-three videos. Altogether ten instances of 'Spanish breaks' were mentioned, in addition to one 'Portuguese break'. It seems that they only appear approximately until *YGS* 27, with one exception later on the show. With this additional data it appears that the humor of the Spanglish comments relies at least partly on code-switching. The English parts of the comments are emphasized, and even if there are spelling or grammatical errors in Spanish, little attention is drawn to them. An example can be found from *YGS* 27 (22).

> (22)   El estribillo el para hacer terrible headbang.
>   [The refrain the [sic] for doing terrible headbang.]

Example 22 features a sentence that is written mostly in Spanish but has the English word *headbang* in it. The word order of the noun phrase *terrible headbang* also follows the English model, since in Standard Spanish most adjectives follow the noun. The sentence includes a misspelling, as *es* ('is') has turned into *el* ('the'). Because of the mistake, the clause is missing the predicate and is ungrammatical. This deviation can be easily overlooked, however, as the focus is drawn to the end of the sentence. *Terrible headbang* is uttered louder and with a higher pitch and accompanied with a demonstration of Douglass whipping his head back and forth.

The categories presented in Chapter 4 show that *Your Grammar Sucks* episodes include a variety of deviations from Standard English, both those that concern grammatical issues and those that do not. They show various types of language deviations are proscribed in the prescriptive online community in question. The examples of non-standard language in the data also range from very minor to greater deviations from the norms of standard language. The ways of ridiculing the texts, briefly touched already here to aid analysis, are discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

5 METHODS FOR CREATING AND PERPETUATING HUMOR

YGS is first and foremost meant to be a comedy series, with the purpose to entertain its viewers, which is why humor, and how it is created and perpetuated, is one of the most significant aspects of the show. As we have already seen from the previous chapter, the way of presenting the mocked texts carries a great impact to way they are to be interpreted. The manner of presenting the texts has also an impact to the humor that is created. The aim of the present chapter is to explore the various strategies utilized by Douglass and other presenters through which the ridiculed texts are made more amusing for the audience.

The strategies discussed in the present chapter are roughly divided into three categories: entextualization and resemiotization, verbal and non-verbal evaluations, and ironical use. Some strategies fit none of the categories well, and these instances are discussed in Section 5.4.

5.1 Entextualization and resemiotization

The proscribed texts that are featured in *YGS* have been detached from the context in which they have originally been written. It is difficult to determine in what kind situation they have appeared, what may have been said before, or if the texts are written as a response to something that would explain the deviations in them. Also, not much can inferred from the writers of the texts. Their sex, age, and occupation are not known to the viewer, even if they are stated explicitly in the texts, or the user name, they cannot be known to a certainty. In the process of *entextualization* (Bauman & Briggs 1990; Leppänen et. al. 2013) the mocked texts are *decontextualized* from their original context (YouTube comment section, Facebook and Twitter posts and comments, as well as some offline contexts) and *recontextualized* in the YGS videos, where they are read and acted out. At the same time they are resemiotized (Leppänen et. al. 2013), as the texts are given new meanings by placing them as lines in sketches and as lyrics in songs and raps.

5.1.1 Expressive reading

When the mocked texts are read aloud, they are transferred from the written mode to speech. In the process of entextualization and resemiotization the characteristics of the texts change and new attributes that are not visible in the original texts are added to them, as Douglass utilizes a variety of verbal and non-verbal resources to perpetuate the humor elicited by the texts. As he is reading, Douglass creates a group of characters that parody the mocked writers, expressed through various facial expressions, prosody, gestures, proxemics and actions. These characters show different emotional (e.g. angry, happy, sad, excited) and mental states (e.g. on drugs), as well as nationalities (e.g. foreign vs. native speaker) and socio-economic statuses (e.g. 'Sophisticated man'). They differ also in their relationships to the viewer. Some are confidential, leaning towards the camera as if sharing some personal information, while others appear even hostile.

The characters are often caricatures and their characteristics are exaggerations. Anger, for example, is indicated through angry facial expressions, low voice, speaking through teeth and in some of the cases, ripping a t-shirt apart. This type of exaggerated anger is common in several types of artistic genres, e.g. cartoons, but rarely seen in day-to-day life. It is used to mock texts the style and content of which are aggressive, by showing what kind of image the text gives of its writer. Texts that are written in all capital letters, indicating shouting or emphasis, are often treated this way.

Native and non-native accents are incorporated to demonstrate nationalities and socio-economic statuses. At times an accent is accompanied with expressive hand gestures and strong facial expressions. The pitch, tone and volume of voice are also varied. For example, when Douglass speaks with a 'Spanish' accent or in Spanish, his voice is low, soft and monotone. When incorporating an 'Italian' accent, on the other hand, his pitch is higher and varies more, while the pace is also faster. Both native and non-native accents that differ from Douglass's own accent are demonstrated. For example, in addition to the "wine glass" that he holds or pretends to hold in his hand, the 'Sophisticated man' character utilizes a 'posh' English accent to display a caricature of a person belonging to the upper-class.

The voice and expressions used with accents are often relatively humorous or silly (Figure 1). They differ from Douglass's normal voice and expressions, being more exaggerated and unnatural.

[The figure was removed due to copyright reasons.]

Figure 1. 'Sophisticated man'.

It needs to be pointed out that although the practice of imitating an accent is present in the data it is used only in a fraction of the texts. An accent other than Douglass's own can only be differentiated in the reading of 55 texts of the total 1192 (4,6 %) texts in the sample. As Douglass reads the majority of them using his normal accent and voice, the series does not suggest that only non-native speakers produce the featured deviations, but that native speakers deviate from the standard as well.

Some of the characterizations made of the writers are based on the spelling, content and style of the texts. The writers may have included emoticons and demonstrations of sounds (e.g. hahaha for laughter) to demonstrate their emotional state and tone of voice. Similarly, in some cases the trigger to incorporate an accent can be traced to aspects of the proscribed text. Speech-like or dialect-imitating spellings (e.g. *dhiz*, *dhem*, *sum* for *this*, *them*, *some*), dialectal words (e.g. *ain't*) or syntax may function as a trigger for an accent. Furthermore, if a location or a nationality is mentioned, a corresponding accent might be used.

However, not all of the texts have these clues, and in these cases characteristics of the writer have often been made up for the entertainment of the audience. In many of the cases of imitating an accent the motivation appears not to stem from features that would index a specific language variety or ethnicity. In the example below a German accent is incorporated into the reading, although there are few clues suggesting that the writer of the text is actually German.

(23) a.

[The figure was removed due to copyright reasons.]

[screenshot of the text on the screen] your commetry is not bad it is good for a person how has not been doing to for long

Douglass [reading in a low, strained voice and 'German' accent]: Your cometry is not bad. It is good for a person how has not been doing to for long.

b.

[The figure was removed due to copyright reasons.]

[screenshot of the text on the screen] can you just please put your songs free on itunes just for day then i will loads of youtube account and subscibe [sic] only you please please <3 PLEASE AM DESPERATE

Douglass [reading in a high voice and a 'Russian' accent]: Can you just please put your songs free on itunes, just for day. Then I will make loads of youtube account and subcibe. Only you. Please, please, please, am desperate!

Example 23a has non-standard syntax and a non-word *cometry* that suggest that the writer might not be an L1 speaker of English, but nothing within the text indexes specifically to a German-speaking writer. Still Douglass utilizes a 'German' accent and voice that is named by the fans of the series as the 'Schwarzenegger voice', because of the resemblance with the speech style of the Austrian-American actor. In Example 23b there are some words missing (just for *one* day, only *to* you, *I* am desperate), which has probably been the motivation to include a non-native accent in the reading, but again, there is no indication that the writer is Russian.

In this way, the methods utilized not only reflect clues already visible in the text itself but also add to them and alter it the meaning of the text. In the image below is demonstrated a case where Douglass's facial expression that he uses when reading the text aloud creates a new meaning and context for the text (24).

(24)

[The figure was removed due to copyright reasons.]

[screenshot of the text on the screen] this video made me feel a lil guy

Douglass: This video made me feel a lil guy.

The writer of the text in Example 24 has most likely intended to say 'this video made me feel like a lil [little] guy', but has unintentionally omitted the particle *like*. The result is a sentence the meaning of which is rare in the English language and makes the reader try

to infer what the writer has intended to say. One possibility is the abovementioned interpretation, while the sinister expression that Douglass uses while reading the text suggests another. The expression is usually reserved for morally questionable or 'creepy' contexts in Douglass's videos. Indeed, it shares resemblance to pop cultural icons such as Norman Bates from the film *Psycho* and Alex from *A Clockwork Orange* (Figures 2 and 3), both mentally-ill and violent characters.

[The figure was removed due to copyright reasons.]

Figure 2. Anthony Perkins in *Psycho* (1960).

[The figure was removed due to copyright reasons.]

Figure 3. Malcolm McDowell as Alex in *A Clockwork Orange* (1971).

The resemblance of Douglass's smile to the latter was even pointed out by a viewer on another video. Using intertextuality in this way, Douglass suggests a new, morally questionable meaning: "this video made me feel up a little guy", indicating that the writer is guilty of pedophilia.

Sexual assaulting is a highly condemned act in Western societies, especially when targeting children, which is why some viewers might find it amusing when someone unintentionally admits doing it, similarly to the raping jokes discussed in Section 4.1. The facial expression of the presenter suggests a meaning that the viewers might not have thought by themselves.

5.1.2 Songs and raps

Texts are also entextualized and resemiotized by singing them out in different styles, borrowing characteristics of raps, musicals and even Christmas songs. The songs and raps do not form coherent ideas or thoughts, as they are collections of unconnected pieces of text from different writers and contexts. At times two or more consecutive texts may share same themes or topics, but mostly they are completely unrelated to each other. However, the texts are almost always put into an order that makes the verses rhyme (25). Below are displayed some consecutive texts from *YGS* 35.

(25) i really not an heater
   so funny, but so beautifull either!
   you are cool but need a diffrant
   10:31 Gay and JB... Where is the different!
   i woped ur ass wile raping on a dime XD
   who ever don't like this song most be out of there damn mine

Douglass delivers the verses with an earnest face and at times exaggerated theatricality and passion. The source of humor in these cases is the juxtaposition of the passionate style of singing and the form and content of the texts which might discuss topics which may seem nonsensical or completely unfitting to the new context (26).

(26)

[The figure was removed due to copyright reasons.]

[screenshot of the text on the screen] save you a masturbated?
Douglass [singing]: Save you a masturbated!

For example, the text in Example 26 is incongruent with the passionate style of Douglass's delivery. Not only is it pragmatically problematic, as it is difficult to infer what the meaning of the utterance is, but also it includes a reference to masturbation, which is a topic that is not usually associated with musicals and the theatrical style used by Douglass. By raising his fist and gazing into the distance Douglass highlights the incongruence, as he appears to sing about something noble and heroic, which are features not usually associated with masturbation. Again, sexual jokes appear to be popular in the *YGS* context.

In addition to the juxtaposition of incompatible style and texts, the songs are also used to comment on the mocked texts. The raps and songs in episodes *YGS* 35, 45 and 85 include refrains which directly address the viewers and the mocked writers, commenting and condemning their English competence. For example, in *YGS* 85 it is sung, while the lyrics appear written on the screen: "You're never making any sense / 'cause you never read your own comments / never used a dictionary once / 'cause YOUR GRAMMAR SUCKS."

5.1.3 Drinking games

Entextualization and resemiotization are also applied when turning reading the mocked texts aloud into a drinking game. In the game the participants take turns to read the proscribed texts aloud and are required to drink a portion alcohol each time they stutter, misread or laugh. This game might be played either by Douglass alone, or, in most cases, with a friend. As the participants get more intoxicated, the more of these "offenses" are likely to occur. Here, again, the texts are taken from their original contexts and planted into a new one, where they are commented and given new meanings. The concept of the game appears to suggest that the texts are particularly difficult to read without laughing or stumbling on words. The purpose of the texts is not to communicate their original meanings anymore, but to offer challenging tasks for the participants of the game. The drinking game episodes of *YGS* seem the least scripted ones, as the comments of the participants appear to be spontaneous reactions to the texts and the reading.

5.1.4 Sketches

In addition to the strategies discussed above, some *YGS* episodes are collections of small sketches where the proscribed texts function as dialogue for the characters. Many of them mock and amuse by coming up with reactions that people would have to the proscribed texts were they uttered aloud. A typical approach in the series is to show two people having a conversation where one of them utters a proscribed text or part of it, while the other person appears to be left confused, disgusted, aghast or angry by the utterance. Confusion seems to be the most frequent reaction and the question "what the fuck?" one of the most common responses to the proscribed texts in the sketches. This strategy is not always applied, however, as in other skits deviating language use is not paid any particular attention, but answered as if there was nothing extraordinary about it. Moreover, in some cases a proscribed text is answered with another one, thus creating a dialogue of non-standard language. A source of amusement in these cases is the fact that a conversation can be formed by putting together deviating texts written by different people from different situations.

In a number of sketches the aim is to create a context around the text that is as fitting as possible. For instance, the references featured in the texts are taken into consideration and attempted to be included in the sketch. One example of this is a clip featuring the text *Why is so perfect Liam's voice?* where a person is shown first to be listening to the voice of the actor Liam Neeson before uttering the sentence. Also the deviating language use or unusual content that the proscribed texts have is explained, if possible. For example, if a text appears to end abruptly, it is explained by a situation where character chokes in the middle of a sentence and cannot finish it.

In other cases, on the other hand, texts are intentionally put to contexts where they appear out of place. One example is *YGS* 20, where the whole episode is comprised of one long sketch with a number of proscribed texts in it. The sketch features a corporate meeting where the participants are trying to find a new slogan for their company, the proscribed texts functioning as suggestions for the slogan and other parts of the dialogue. Here entextualization and resemiotization are used as powerful devices for mockery, as the texts are put into a context and given a role the requirements of which they cannot meet. Slogans, as stated in the video, should be *something catchy, witty, memorable*, and the proscribed texts are most likely not written with this criteria in mind. The humor is produced by the juxtaposition of the new context and meanings, and the nonstandard forms and unfitting contents of the texts.

At many times the humor is maximized by making the characters of the sketches appear conflicting in what they say and do, or, for example, being contradictory to the general opinion. Examples of this are two sketches, included in *YGS* 50, which feature two seemingly homophobic men discussing homosexual people with the words of a proscribed text, while confessing homosexual tendencies. The two situations are presented in the example below (27).

(27)

SITUATION 1.
Two men talking in a stairway.
Man 1: Say you have two butts and you have a hand on both and one's a guy butt and one's a girl butt. You don't know until you see the –
[an African American man goes by them, they nod at each other]

Man 1: Hey.
[Man 1 keeps looking at the African American man as he passes and then looks at man 2]
[Screenshot of the text appears on the screen] that black guy is gay and im not trying to be racism but i dont no his name but he is gay
Man 1: That black guy is gay. And I'm not trying to be racism, but I don't know his name but he is gay.

SITUATION 2.
Two men talking and sitting on a sofa.
Man 1: If you're looking at a butt and then the person turns around and looks, okay that's a dude, it doesn't matter that I was admiring the butt, coz I'm not doing anything to it.
[Screenshot of the text appears on the screen] Hey, why would boy kiss a boy……..a gay
Man 2: [smiling] Hey Steve, why would boy kiss a boy? a gay
Man 1: [smiling] That's really funny.
Man 2: That's good right?
The men attempt to high-five, but miss.

The humor of the sketches is produced by the conflict between the characters' utterances, as they talk about homosexuality in an offensive manner, while appearing to struggle with their own homosexual tendencies. The mockery is thus not only targeting the output of the texts, but in particular their content, displaying condemnation of homophobic opinions.

As seen from the analysis above, the different ways of resemiotization and entextualization used to ridicule the proscribed texts do not require metalanguage to convey the message, even though some can be included. Metalanguage is analyzed in the following section, as the verbal and non-verbal evaluations of the texts are examined.

5.2 Evaluations of the texts

Another major category of the mockery strategies is commenting the proscribed texts. The data include altogether 150 instances where a text is commented either verbally or non-verbally. The comments uttered on the videos are almost exclusively critical towards the featured texts and their writers. In some cases the criticism is more implicit than in others. The data include instances of Douglass telling explicitly what is wrong about the text in question and what should be done differently, but also more subtle strategies of conveying criticism, such as irony.

A number of the comments uttered in the videos about the proscribed texts are explicitly critical and even abusive. The texts are called awful or bad, or it is more specifically explained what is wrong about them. It is criticized that the texts do not make any sense or that their spelling is wrong. Douglass also addresses the writers directly a few times to tell them what to do differently (*Oh my god, use a period!*, *Also, don't type like that*). The show does not even shun away from personal criticism, as disapproval is targeted not only at the texts but their writers as well. In the data a few instances can be found where the writers are called *idiots*, *dumb*, and *illiterate*. This practice is also visible in the title of the series, as the title *Your Grammar Sucks* is already an insult to the viewer.

With that being said, it is more common to use subtler ways to mock and show disapproval of the proscribed texts. Instead of saying explicitly what is wrong about a text, advising the viewers to write differently or abusing them, the message is conveyed through various implicit strategies. Irony and joking are used in multiple cases, the extract below being one example (28).

> (28)
>
> Douglass [narrating before showing or reading the text]: And now the solution to both anorexia and obesity.
>
> [screenshot of the appears on the screen] any anerexic people just please eat if anyone out there wants to loose weight just exersize and eat heather if you and to change and loose weight still eat starving yourself isnt gonna help anything its just gonna get worse
>
> Douglass [reading]: Any anorexic people, just please eat. If anyone out there wants to loose weight, just exercise and eat heather. If you and to change and loose weight still eat starving yourself isn't gonna help anything it's just gonna get worse.
>
> [Words on screen] NAILED IT

By calling the mocked text *the solution to both anorexia and obesity*, Douglass gives the viewer a perspective on how to observe it and to judge whether it really is the solution to anorexia and obesity. It becomes clear that the text provides little information to solve either of the problems, which is highlighted with the ironic words "NAILED IT" flashing on the screen after the text is read. The same ironic strategy is used in other cases as well, for example with a text that is characterized as *the solution to gay marriage*.

In addition to irony, characterizations are one indirect strategy to shame the mocked writers. Utterances *of course your name is glee lover* and *yeah you type like one of her fans* to writers that proclaim to be a Nicki Minaj or *Glee* fan create a stereotype of a group of people based on what type of entertainment they enjoy. The opinions imply that those who like the television series *Glee* or the music of Nicki Minaj, do not either have the ability or inclination to write according to the norms of Standard English.

Belittling is another method used in *YGS* to mock and shame the people who deviate from the writing norms of Standard English. The most common example of this is the utterance Oh, Olga! that is exclaimed every time after reading a text from Olga Kay, another content creator in YouTube whose Twitter posts are frequently featured on *YGS*. The practice appears condescending towards her, and has been taken over by the fans of the show, as it occurs in fan responses (featured in *YGS* 50 and 60) where the viewers have recorded their own video clips of themselves mocking non-standard English. Olga Kay is not the only person who is treated condescendingly. Other examples of the strategy include condescending phrases such as *So close* and *Whoops a daisy*, conveying an air of superiority.

The closest Douglass comes to the phenomenon of moral panic (Thurlow 2006) is when he comments the texts by focusing on the number of 'likes' a mocked text has received. The practice of wondering and commenting on the number of people who have shown approval of the proscribed texts demonstrates implicit criticism on the texts, as it portrayed as impossible that anyone could or should agree with a text that is somehow deviant.

Douglass does not always need use verbal resources to convey his opinion. Laughter, for example, is one of the non-verbal strategies to show an opinion, and it is frequently used in the *YGS* series. When Douglass laughs while reading the proscribed texts, it indicates that a text is particularly humorous or stupid because of its deviating language or content. Laughter as such might not be considered a conscious strategy for mocking something or someone, since a burst of laughter is often not a conscious choice. However, the decision not to edit the clips of laughter out but to include them in the video, even though it is clear from Douglass's videos that he would be able to do it, certainly is a deliberate choice. Other non-verbal strategies include Douglass's various expressions that may appear

during or after reading proscribed texts. Douglass looks straight into the camera while making the expressions, in this manner wordlessly conveying his opinion to the viewer. Such expressions are for example frowning and grimacing, for displaying confusion and disapproval over the texts.

[The figures were removed due to copyright reasons.]

Fig 4, 5 and 6. Expressions of disgust, confusion and condescendence.

5.3 Ironical use

Another strategy to mock the proscribed texts is using them ironically, while being fully aware of the deviations in them. In these cases the texts are used to convey meanings, comment on other texts and overall, to create a sense of belonging the other members of the community. This type of mockery of other people's language competence through imitation and appropriation was also discovered in a web discussion forum, where the mimicry and quotations of 'bad' English became an inside joke of the group (Kytölä 2008, 2012). Douglass applies only a few of the proscribed texts this way, while the viewers of the show use the method more extensively.

In the videos included in the data there are five instances of ironical use of the proscribed texts by quoting: the word *biches* and the phrase *:a what a fucke?!,* which occur in multiple episodes and other contexts, e.g. Twitter, and the phrases *respecht!, babie killers*, and *sirsouly* that are used only once each, and within their immediate vicinity. *Biches* is most likely a misspelling of the word bitches and is featured in the first *YGS* episode. The typing error was taken over by Douglass and is now used by him and the fans when referring to the *YGS* community (29).

(29)

Original text:

u guys SUCK DICK
NO FUNNY
BICHES

Tweet by Douglass (17 June 2015):

YIAY today! Sketch today! LIVE CHAT today! Gonna be a good day, biches

The phrase *a what a fucke* is used almost as frequently. Because of its deviating spelling and syntax, it was included in *YGS* 21 the first time, and has since been added to a number of following episodes with the purpose to comment other proscribed texts. The phrase is most likely a variation of the saying 'what the fuck' and is used in *YGS* episodes with that meaning, to convey confusion and perplexity over a text or a part of it. It indicates that there is something incomprehensible or particularly strange about the text. Usually a smaller version of Douglass is edited into the frame asking the question, and if the text is particularly puzzling, possibly multiple of them.

The phrases *respecht*, *babie killers*, *sirsouly* ('seriously') are used similarly to *a what a fucke* to comment another proscribed text. In contrast, however, the uses of these quotes have not carried over to other videos but are restricted to the video where they are originally featured. The same forms that are previously mocked and proscribed are used in the videos to convey meanings, either positive (*respecht*!) or negative (*:a what a fucke?!*), in a humorous way.

In addition to quoting and using texts that have appeared on the series previously, new non-standard language is generated based on the deviations in the proscribed texts.

(30) Original text:

@jacksfims how is u meet Tay Zonday

Douglass: Let me see. I is meet Tay Zonday at a party a couple of years ago.

In the example above Douglass answers the question with the same non-standard phrase featured in the mocked text (*is meet*), while it is apparent that he is aware of the deviation. The ironical use highlights the deviation made in the original comment, by repetition.

5.4 Others

Other strategies employed by the producers of the show that do not fit to either of the categories above are discussed in the current section. They are highlighting deviations through repetition and emphasis, and suggestions.

Through repetition and emphasis attention is drawn on the proscribed aspects of the mocked texts. Misspellings and uncommon or inappropriate words are uttered more loudly than rest of the texts. Struggling while reading a text aloud (e.g. pauses, stuttering, misreading) is also a method of highlighting the proscribed aspects of a text. In some cases Douglass takes a new take after struggling to read a text aloud and starts reading it again from the beginning. The fact that he has included also the failed attempt shows the audience how difficult the reading has been, and indicates a particularly deviating syntax, misspellings and incoherence, for example.

Suggestions for the possible meanings of the mocked texts are used to draw attention to the possible misunderstandings that the texts can create. In these cases Douglass appears to be guessing the intended meaning of the writer by suggesting alternative versions of the texts that follow Standard English norms. One or more suggestions might be presented, none of which is usually the most probable option to be the intended meaning (31).

> (31) Original text:
>
> Can I please have you babies?
>
> [words on screen] SUGGESTION #1
>
> Can I please have you, babies?
>
> [words on screen] SUGGESTION #2
>
> Can I please have you? Babies!

In the example above the original text included in the video is most likely to have a typographical error ('Can I please have your babies?'). However, this option is not considered in the suggestions, where the punctuation is modified to achieve rather different meanings. This way the ambiguity of the text is highlighted, suggesting that the writer might have also meant something else than the most likely meaning. The given

suggestions are silly and improbable to be uttered aloud in any context, and thus they are likely also to produce humor in the viewers. The image that is created of the writer is that he or she is unintelligent or eccentric.

There are a number of cases where a text is read neutrally without any of the abovementioned strategies, e.g. strong facial expressions, silly voices, accents, sketches or mocking comments. It is possible that Douglass has not wanted to pay as much effort for mocking each text, but at times this can also be a conscious decision. For instance, if the content of a proscribed text is being highlighted, it might be read aloud without a strong accent or expressions, in order to keep the focus on the content and let the text speak for itself.

The importance of the ways of presenting the mocked texts, however, is highlighted when examining the comments that concern Douglass. Many commentators compliment Douglass of his acting and reading skills. They pay particular attention to his expressions and accents. Some proclaim that they miss certain ways of presenting, which show more effort than the usual reading, such as the 'Sophisticated man'. The strategies that he uses are a vital part of the humor in the series.

6 AUDIENCE REACTIONS

In addition to the *YGS* videos themselves I studied the comments left on them to examine how the audience reacts to the videos. I wanted to know what kinds of attitudes are shown towards the proscribed texts and the people who have written them. This ended up being a very fruitful decision, as the comments of other viewers not only revealed the mindset of the *YGS* fan base, but also provided valuable information for understanding the videos themselves.

The easiest method to learn what the viewers' opinions of the videos are is to look at the statistics provided by YouTube. The audience has a possibility to give a video a 'like' or a 'dislike'. The like/dislike ratio is shown under the video for all viewers, although the opportunity to vote for one or the other is only available for registered users. The vote can only be cast once for one video. The 'dislike bar' gives an indication whether the viewers enjoy the videos or not.

The current chapter is organized as follows: I will first briefly examine the statistics of the videos and then proceed to discussing the comments left on them. There are three focus points that will be studied about the comments: the different responses that the viewers expressed of the mocked texts, the attitudes and opinions about the writers of the texts and finally, other significant trends that appear in the comment sections.

6.1 Statistics

By looking at the like/dislike ratios on *YGS* videos, we can assume that most of the viewers enjoy them. On average only 0.9 percent of the voters (250 out of 25,731) click 'dislike' on any of the videos. Even at the highest the 'dislike' percentage is only 2.5 percent (1,131 out of 44,584). The drinking episodes, where reading texts out loud is made into a drinking game, are disliked at a slightly higher rate, with 1.5 percent of the voters (393 out of 25,983) choosing the 'dislike' option (this can, however, be a coincidence, as statistical significance was not tested). Since the videos are likely to be sought and watched by people who are inclined to like them, either because they are fans of the series or simply interested in the topic, the percentages do not necessarily mean that the reaction of a wider public would be as positive.

In addition to voting for 'like' and 'dislike', the audience has, of course, the alternative of clicking neither option. This third option is chosen by a large portion of the audience. The sum of likes and dislikes reaches the number of 170,000 at the highest, while it mostly varies between 10,000 and 30,000. At the same time the view count varies between 500,000 and 5,000,000. As mentioned before, only registered users can click like or dislike and only do it once, while any viewer can watch the video as many times as they want. This might explain the difference between the number of views and likes. However, it is also possible that there are a great number of people who have the opportunity to vote for or against the video but choose not to.

It seems that the majority of the audience has the role of passive receivers who choose only to watch the videos without participating actively. They are referred to as 'lurkers' (Baym, 2000: 8). This is common in online participation. For example, in the study of Baym (2000: 144–145) it was estimated that the researched website was visited and read by 48,000 people. When the posters (2,503) are deducted from this number, it appears that almost 95 percent of the participants were lurkers. How these people respond to the *YGS* videos is difficult to know, but the fact that the series have stayed running for four years, each episode attracting at least 500,000 views, is an indication that they are enjoyed by a large number of people.

6.2 Attitudes towards the proscribed texts

The first topic studied in the collected data was the attitudes and opinions stated about the mocked texts. The aim was to examine whether the same ideas that were reported by previous research, for example the moral panic and the worry about the future of the language, would appear in this context, and also to search for other reactions to non-standard language use. The data do contain instances of these phenomena, in addition to various other responses. The statements expressed about the non-standard texts vary greatly between the viewers, their reactions ranging from being horrified and disgusted over them to incorporating them in their own language use.

6.2.1 Disgust, anger and frustration

Unfortunately, aggressive or abusive comments are present in the data. A typical reaction to the non-standard language use for the audience is to claim that the language use causes them physical pain. Viewers declare that the texts cause them any physical condition from headache to cancer, kill their brain cells and make their eyes bleed, while others maintain that this kind of language use drives them to insanity. Even so, there are only a few instances of the moral panic that has been detected by Thurlow (2006). The data do not illustrate that many viewers being worried about the future of English, at least not explicitly. The nearest occurrence in the data is found in the following extract where a user shares his or her horrification about the written texts (32).

(32)   The thing that we need to remember is that people are actually serious about these things they write. It's fucking horrifying.

The writer of Example 32 assumes that those people who are featured on *YGS* are not joking or writing intentionally badly, but are *actually serious*. The user finds this horrifying but does not specify what exactly s/he is scared of. Another example is the following comment that shows disapproval directed at the humankind for producing and approving non-standard language use (Example 33). As we can see from the example, a user has written a comment with misspelling in it and a *YGS* viewer disapproves the number of 'likes' the comment has received.

(33)   Original text:

I totally except you for who you are!

Comment:

0:11 2790 likes?....................... WTF humanity, im leaving this planet

It is easy to infer that the writer of the original comment has meant to write 'i totally accept you for who you are'. A large number of people have agreed with the idea and expressed their approval by liking the comment. They have either ignored or been oblivious to the misspelling in the comment. The viewer of *YGS*, however, condemns this

practice, believing, perhaps, that all those people have failed to recognize the error. The user is so disappointed at the behavior of this large number of people that he or she states the intention to leave the Earth, the acceptance of misspellings being apparently so insufferable that it is impossible for him or her to stay.

In addition to the reactions mentioned above, the data contain comments where the texts are explicitly criticized. The texts are called for example stupid and ignorant, as in the following extract (34).

(34) Original text:

$0 fO d@ n3W yEarZ Ma R3zOlut!0n b3 ! FiNA l00z3 eIqhtY pOUnDS n B3 Ev3n Mo43 BoOtyLicIOUz! I FInA kNoW dhAt I b3 Alr3di S3xI Ho2 I AM buHT 3Va sInc3 i qiV3 BI4th ,M@ d3Al3R sAiD Dat I b3 fINNa lOOze sUMwEiqHt cUZ h3 DoN W@n+ m3 2 q3t rAp3d CuZ MA pHAT B3 2 s3Xiii! DaYUM niqQA I b3 DraNKIN frOM MA dAWq DiZh, JuZt $piT ON mA cUMpuTr Sc433n! tImE 2 qO sHav3 Ma pUbIcHur N sLaP a HO3. I b3 oU+ lIk@ rOck3+sHiP!

Comment:

In YGS 67, Jack MANAGED to read the whole comment at 1:01 here, that is by far the stupidest comment I have ever seen. And I bet Jack thinks it is one of the worst ever, too. He did call it the greatest comment ever.

In the comment the user refers to the text shown above. The writer of the text uses non-standard spelling and capitalization, utilizing numbers as well as other keys of the keyboard to deliver his or her message, the New Year's resolution to lose weight. The user is of the opinion that the text is the most ignorant comment s/he has ever seen and believes that Douglass must also be of this opinion despite his statement of the text being *the greatest comment ever*. The user does not seem to consider the deviating text to have been written as a joke and that the creativity of the spelling could be appreciated.

6.2.2 Translations

A somewhat common trend is also to translate the proscribed texts into a more acceptable language. The translations can occur between two languages, such as translating a text

from Spanish to English, but it is also common to translate texts that are written with deviating spelling or grammar into Standard English and standard spelling.

Texts that utilize non-standard spellings, including also numbers and other symbols (discussed in Section 4.1.) are treated by a number of users as a language that differs from other varieties of English. The viewers appear to have a need to explain the texts and translate them into Standard English. One particularly popular text to translate is the sentence "theres never not not nuttin", because of its multiple negations. The phrase first appeared in *YGS* 10, where it was made into a rap song, and has since reoccurred in later episodes and become one of the most popular catch phrases of the series. Several users have wanted to explain the meaning of the text using the logic presented in example 35.

> (35) Original text:
>
> theres never not not nuttin
>
> Comment:
>
> **theres never not not nothing** *BREAKDOWN*
> theres never nuttin (means "There's always something.")
> theres never not nuttin (means "There's not always something.")
> theres never not not nuttin (means "There's not bot [sic] always something.")
> theres never not not nuttin = There's always something.

The phrase is explained one negative at a time, using the logic that two negatives cancel each other out. This logic does not apply to many dialects, where multiple negative can be used to emphasize and give more force to the negative. Double negatives are quite frequent in African American Vernacular English (AAVE), for example.

6.2.3 Amusement

By far the most common reaction to the non-standard texts in the comment sections is amusement. This is most often expressed by simulating laughter in writing, using emoticons or explicitly stating the amusement. A fairly frequent trend is also to report physical reactions that demonstrate surprise and amusement (choking, drink coming out

the nose). Many of the comments include also a quote, reference or a link to the part that the viewer found particularly entertaining. Some include only the quote without any clarifications why they have chosen to write the particular text in the comments, but it can be inferred that these users, like other commentators, choose texts which they find particularly funny or entertaining. The conclusion is supported by Leppänen & Häkkinen (2012) and Jones & Schiefelin (2012) who made similar observances when studying YouTube comments. Amusement over a text is sometimes combined with words of admiration. In Douglass's outro he asks the viewers to send him 'amazingly bad comments'. Similarly, some viewers call the texts 'amazing' and point out their favorites.

6.2.4 Explanations and defending

At the same time as some texts are being judged and laughed at, there are some texts which are defended. These comments usually criticize Douglass for including texts which, in their mind, is not "bad grammar" or questionable in any way. There are a few qualities of texts which make viewers question their being in the videos. For example, a text might be said to be a quote or a reference, a pun, dialect or written in another language.

 For example, *YGS* 55 included a text "rigtig god sang", which appears to be nonsense when read as English, but is understandable in Danish, meaning "really good song". The fact was pointed out by a great number of viewers. The case demonstrates that the viewers are keen to defend texts which they do not agree should be included in the show as examples of bad English.

More often than not, the viewers are not unanimous of which texts are justly mocked and proscribed and which should not be included in the videos. This can lead to long debates and arguments in the comment section. One example of this can be seen in the comment section of *YGS* 42. The video shows a comment that used to the first names of the members of the boy band One Direction to form a pun (36). The proscribed comment sparked up conversation in the comment section, as some of the viewers did not think it was bad English, while others disagreed with them.

      (36)   Original text:

I luv her she is amazayn!
ans she is so pretty
and a fabalouis song
and brilliam

Comments:

User A: At 0:53 if you're a directioner than [sic] its correct. :)

User B: Actually 0:53 wasn't a typo its [sic] just how carroty directioners express themselves

User C: There is one about 1D
 amaZAYN
 fabuLOUIS and
 brilLIAM
 extraordinHARRY
 PhenomeNIALL
 Xx

User D [as a response to User C]: It's misspelled anyway

The users acknowledge that the comment is a pun concerning the band members of One direction and not a typographical error, suggesting that it should not be included in *YGS*. Even though the user b has a negative, even judgmental tone when discussing the proscribed comment and the writer ("carroty directioners") and seems to disapprove the practice, he or she still defends it for not being "a typo". User C goes further to making the puns more explicit by capitalizing the names, at the same time adding two more puns that are not included in the original comment (extraordiHARRY, phenomeNIALL). User D, on the other hand, does not accept the explanation but insists that puns or not, they are still misspellings, and indicates that the comment is thus rightfully included in *YGS*.

The disagreements also occur in the case of non-standard capitalization. Some proscribed texts are featured in *YGS* because they capitalize every other letter, as they go against what generally is considered appropriate language use. Several viewers, however, point out in the comment section that the style is a reference to a fictional internet series called *Homestuck*, where a character always types by capitalizing every second letter. Thus a deviation from the norm can be a uniting factor for those who understand where it stems from, like an inside joke. It may be enjoyable for them to see the reactions of other people

who are not 'in the know'. The disagreements that occur in the comment section indicate that what is considered 'bad' English is often highly subjective.

6.2.5 Ironical use

The self-proclaimed purpose of the series is to 'clean up YouTube': to show what kind language use is undesirable and to punish its use with mockery. It was discovered during the study that the proscribed texts are, in fact, taken up by the community and used for expressing something in a humorous way. The texts are not only repeated and quoted, but they are used for conveying meanings (37). This was practiced on the videos as well, as Douglass uses some texts to comment on others.

> (37)   Original text:
>
> am i the only one finding this enjoying?
>
> Comments:
>
> User A: am i the only one finding this enjoying?
>
> User B [as a response to User A]: No.
>
> User C [as a response to User A]: nope

am i the only one finding this enjoying? is a quote from the video that the users are commenting on (*YGS* 20). User A does not only repeat the sentence in the comment section, but he uses it to ask the other viewers whether they find the video enjoyable, too. Other users confirm this action by answering him in another comment or by clicking the 'like' button. By the time of the study (1 June, 2016) the comment has been 'liked' 244 times, a great number of viewers agreeing not only with the content of the question but also with how it was asked. The same features and sentences that are condemned and ridiculed by the shows' producers and viewers alike are celebrated when they are repeated by the members of the community (cf. Kytölä and Westinen 2015: 17).

Some expressions carry over beyond their immediate context to other videos and contexts. Most common, perhaps, is the word *biches*, used by both Douglass and the audience. Other texts that have become catchphrases among the YGS community include, for example, *:a what a fucke?!* which is a modification of the phrase "what the fuck", used for expressing approximately the same sentiments; *This Guy is ducking g hallatious*, used for expressing amusement over somebody; and *nice grandma idiot*, used for criticizing a person's language competence. A text has to become famous enough for the viewers to use them out of their immediate context so that others can understand them being references to past videos and not demonstrations of the writer's language incompetency. It needs to be clear that the writer is using them ironically, with the knowledge that what they write is not standard. However, the quotes are not always recognized by all of the commentators, even if they are from the very video they are commenting on. Those who do not understand the joke are scolded and laughed at. As the comments that use the proscribed texts ironically accumulate dozens of 'likes' (as in Example 37), it appears that the ability to recognize and quote phrases from past videos is considered significant social capital among the *YGS* community.

This phenomenon can be traced as far as the very first episodes of *YGS*. Already in the first comments of *YGS* 6 can be seen quotes from the previous episodes, for example the quote from the *YGS* 1 (Example 38), used to express approval of the creator and the current content.

> (38) Original text (*YGS* 1):
>
> Jack your grea, your very funny, you deseve more views!
>
>
> Comment (*YGS* 6):
>
> Jack you are grea, very funny, you deseve more views
>
> This made my day :)

Quoting a text outside of its immediate context (outside the video it originates from) gives an indication that the user actually means what he or she says, instead of just repeating a phrase or a sentence they find particularly funny. Writing the sentence "Jack you are grea,

very funny, you deseve more views" under the video it appeared on might have only indicated that the user liked it or found it amusing, but taking the quote out of its context and writing it on a different video suggests that the user wants to express something themselves through the comment. After the quote the user complements the compliment with his or her own words ("This made my day"), confirming that his or her intention was indeed to congratulate Douglass for his work.

Not only do the viewers use the quotes in the *YGS* context online, but some also state using them in offline contexts (39).

> (39) User A: I think "their arguments are exactly the same as each overs" is one of the funniest ygs comments ever. I started using it in real life too.
>
> User B: "Wow, what a dutch", "Ducking g hallatious", "DIS SOME GODLY SHIAT DAWG", and "I never ask you for your apeanyon" are my faves.
>
> My best friend and I use these all the time as a joke XD
>
> User D: Whenever I go to my friends [sic] houses and they have a dog, I say "Your dog is asorbable!" And they look at me like I'm crazy.

User A admits using his or her favorite *YGS* phrases outside of their immediate context. Right afterwards it is also stated that the person uses them as a joke. Similarly, User B uses the sentence because it is really funny his or her opinion. Here we can again notice that the members of the community use the proscribed texts ironically. The main issue that is being mocked might therefore not be the texts and the linguistic forms themselves, but ignorance and the inability to notice that there is something wrong with the language. It seems quite acceptable to use the forms as a joke. It is also notable that, although not stated explicitly, the friend they are used with is also familiar with the phrases and can therefore appreciate the joke. This is not the case in the final comment where the friends of the user march 22 are not in on the joke and do not understand the reference, which according to the commentator leads to them being perplexed. The fact that others do not understand the joke does not seem to bother march 22 much. It is possible that he or she even enjoys it, as s/he is sharing an inside joke with the *YGS* community.

6.3 Attitudes towards the mocked writers

In addition to the opinions and reactions to the proscribed texts, I wanted to study the attitudes that the audience has of the people that have written the texts as well as others who write similar language. Similarly to the opinions about the texts, there is also a continuum of reactions about the writers. The continuum run from abusive and violent comments to those that show support of the writers.

6.3.1 Abusing

The most unfortunate and worrisome response to non-standard texts in the comment sections are the comments which insult and threaten their writers. All together the data include 52 comments that are critical or even abusive either directly towards the mocked writers (29) or towards the texts they have written (23) (Example 40). However, this group is a small minority in the entire pool of comments (4.36 %).

> (40)   This isn't bad grammar, just typos and really, really stupid people.

Stupid, ignorant and idiotic are some of the insults directed at the writers, as demonstrated in Example 40. Even more worrisome than insulting are the violent comments which show different degrees of aggression towards the writers of the proscribed texts (Example 41).

> (41)   a. I want these people dead.

> b. I really wish I could lock people up for years for English rehabilitation so bad, sometimes xD

Wanting people dead for the language they write (41a) is an extreme reaction, even if the comment is made by joke. By looking at their user name that is Grammar Comrade, it is,

however, possible to infer that the user is playing a role and not sharing a personal opinion. Still, there are others who seem to stand behind their words. Extract 41b, for example, shows a user who would like to imprison these writers until they learn English. Again, this is most likely a joke, but nevertheless it demonstrates the involvement and interest that the members of the *YGS* community have in how other people write.

6.3.2 Educating

There are a few examples of viewers who write educational comments in the comment sections, apparently with the purpose to teach the people who make mistakes like those featured on the show proper language use. Interestingly, the "educators" choose to do this action in the comment section, although it is only a small possibility that the people who have written the mocked texts will read their advice.

One user includes the *YGS* even clearer to her target group, when educating about the differences of the words *wrapping*, *rapping* and *raping* (42).

(42)
A SHORT LESSON:
wrapping: wrapping a gift
rapping: talking in a song
raping: fucking without consent

you're welcome biches

After defining each of the three words, the user addresses the YGS audience directly using the unofficial name of the fan base ("biches"). In this way she indicates that not only the people whose texts are featured on the videos need to be educated in this area but also the viewers of the series.

There are different styles of executing this action, but in most comments there are indications of condescendence, in some more than in others. They are often also accompanied by signs of frustration and even aggression, as in the example below (43).

(43)

> Also, WE NEED TO STOMP OUT THIS 'SHOULD OF WOULD OF COULD OF' CRAP,LIKE…NOW. Yes, I understand, they sound alike. But so do you're and your. THAT DOESN'T MEAN THEY'RE INTERCHANGEABLE. 'Could've' is a CONTRACTION FOR 'COULD HAVE', THIS ISN'T ROCKET SCIENCE, PEOPLE. (goes back to beating head against wall)

The example takes a stand against the frequent misspelling of the contraction *'ve* as *of*. The writer of the example appears rather aggressive in style. He or she uses capitalized letters for emphasis and forceful language. The descriptive interjection in the parenthesis, *goes back to beating head against wall*, demonstrates the frustration that the writer has over the topic.

6.3.3 Amusement and joking

Just as viewers find sources of amusement in the proscribed texts, they also find entertainment at the expense of the writers. In addition to explicitly expressing amusement over writers, it is a rather common trend to joke about them by modifying, elaborating and putting their texts into new contexts which highlight the deviations in them. This is done by misunderstanding the texts intentionally, not acknowledging the most probable option of the intended meaning and a possible misspelling in a text. This is done to achieve a humorous effect and to joke with other viewers (44).

(44) Original text:

I'm not wearing any parents

Comment:

Guys, guys. Imagine yourself wearing your parents.

Not only do the viewers point out and highlight the deviations that they find humorous as in the example above, but they also elaborate and apply them. Many state agreeing with the mocked writers. For instance, in Example 45 the user has verified the idea of a

skyraper (a probable misspelling of *skyscraper*) by giving it an antonym: *groundraper*, and thus highlighting the new meaning which is the result of the misspelling.

> (45)   Original text:
>
> oh no its a skyraper
>
> Comment:
>
> What about a groundraper?

Irony is a method that is often used by Douglass for mocking the proscribed texts and they writers, and it is also applied by the audience as well (46).

> (46)   Did anyone else pause video to read what [the writer] said? It was beautiful.

Irony is effective only when other users are aware that the person is not being serious, but actually means the opposite what he or she says. Thus, whoever uses irony for mocking must assume that the other viewers would not agree with what he or she is saying. For instance, in Example 46a the user assumes that others would not find the text in question beautiful but instead in some way inappropriate, strange or incomprehensible, and could therefore appreciate the humor in calling it beautiful.

6.3.4 Defending

A small minority of the comments in the data defend the writers of the mocked texts and offer explanations for the deviating language use. The most common argument used for defending a writer is that he or she is likely to be non-native speakers. It is argued that for someone who speaks English as a second language even flawed language is impressive. Non-native speakers are excused more easily than native speakers for making mistakes and writing imperfect English. At least one user considers it "harsh" to criticize people who are just learning it (47). The same excuse is not given to native speakers.

> (47)

> I have to wonder… how many of those comments were written by people who don't speak english [sic] or who are trying to learn it as a secondary language? it seems a bit harsh to critique their grammar :/

Other strategies to defend the writers are to explain the deviations made in the text. To account for spelling deviations carelessness is mentioned a number of times as well as the autocorrect feature of mobile phones. Google translate is another device that is blamed for deviating language. By offering this type of explanations to the deviations made the commentators suggest that the non-standard language is not due to unintelligence but rather to carelessness, not reading the text before posting it and to using flawed technology to communicate in a foreign language.

6.3.5 Relating

In the previous categories we can see the divide to 'us' and 'them' that the YGS audience has in the attitudes towards the writers of the proscribed texts. Even if the writers are being defended by the viewers the differentiation still exists.

There are, however, also commentators who can relate to the writers. They most often do it made expressing their worry about ending up on the videos themselves, or tell that they have to check their comments for multiple times before posting them on the comment section. These viewers recognize that they have the potential to make the same mistakes as those who are featured on the videos. They may attribute the errors they themselves make to carelessness, but some also confess that they cannot spell very well or that their competence in grammar is not good. Similarly, some viewers tell stories about their friends or family members who have made some silly errors in speech or writing (e.g. "My mom actually said "aboose" by accident a while ago XD"). In these cases the errors are often allocated to carelessness, too.

6.4 Other notable trends in the comments

The comment sections contain a great deal of material that is not mentioned in the analysis above. The most important trends will be examined here.

6.4.1 Correcting others and oneself

First I will be looking at the relationships the commentators have to each other and focus specifically on two points: the practice of correcting each other's grammar and spelling errors and the emergence of mock "bad" English. It should be pointed out that the users have also various other types of interaction: they, for example, ask each other for information (e.g. names of the songs used and the visitors in the show) and confirmation (*Anyone else on a YGS marathon?*), and agree or disagree with other commentator's opinions. I have, however, focused on the two points mentioned above because they provide additional insight to the research questions and enlighten the practices that are characteristic for the *YGS* community.

A fairly common interaction between the commentators of *YGS* videos is to point out what they think are mistakes in each other's comments. The comment section of any language-orientated video would be likely to include this practice, as the viewers are likely to be particularly interested in language and grammar and also possibly to have prescriptive opinions. The practice is so common in the *YGS* comment sections that the first user in Example 48 voices out his or her concern about it.

(48)

> User A: Am I the only one who feels like the second I post a comment it's [sic] grammar will be judged? XD
>
> User B [as a response to User A]: Well maybe not a second, is 4 weeks good enough?, anyway, when you mean someone's or something's thing, you type 'its' not 'it's' because that would mean 'it is'. You might be thinking why it is not like the other words like this, well I simply don't know.

User A makes the hypothesis that immediately after comments appear on the site they are going to be evaluated and corrected if there are any mistakes in them. User B confirms the hypothesis by acting accordingly and correcting the comment User A has written. He or she not only informs that the word *it's* should be spelled as *its* but also educates User A for the proper use of the two forms, former being an abbreviation for *it is* and the latter marking the possessive. He or she uses a somewhat condescending tone ("You might be thinking why it is not like the other words like this", i.e. other possessive forms that utilize

's), appearing to conclude that the other person has made the misspelling out of ignorance rather than carelessness.

Another example can be found in the comments of YGS 13.

(49)

> User A: You are so hobosexual. Burn in the deepest depthsof Hell with Justin Bieber as the leader of your whole army of iLluMinAtI CoNfiRmED
>
> User B: THAT RANDOM 'OF' SHOULDN'T BE THERE!!!!!!!!
> It is supposed to be:
> Burn in the deepest depths of Hell with Justin Bieber as the leader of your whole army. Illuminati Confirmed.
> NO 'OF'
> I apologize. I do this. I troll people about their grammar. This is why I am hated.

User A uses a quote from the video in question ("hobosexual") to apparently abuse Douglass and condemn him into hell. As the comment appears quite nonsensical combination of sentences, there is reason to believe that s/he is joking and writing badly on purpose. However, another User B responds to User A as if s/he were serious, pointing out a mistake in an aggressive manner with capital letters and exclamation marks. User B offers a suggestion for the correct syntax (*It is supposed to be: Burn in the deepest depths of Hell with Justin Bieber as the leader of your whole army. Illuminati Confirmed.*) The point of the criticism is the use of the preposition *of* (*NO 'OF'*). Later in the comment s/he apologizes for the behavior, with the simple explanation that s/he just "do[es] this". By apologizing for something that s/he does any way, the user suggests that s/he cannot control his or her actions. Correcting somebody's grammar is thus depicted as something that is inevitable and a part of the writer's personality; something that he or she just cannot help doing.

Even Douglass is not safe from being criticized and corrected according to what the viewers think is correct language use. In relation to a text that was included in one of the YGS episodes, a user criticizes Douglass's use of punctuation in the opening frame of one of YGS videos (50).

(50)   Original text [title of a video]:

YOUR GRAMMAR SUCKS

WHO NEEDS SCHOOL

Comment:

Jack, buddy, it is "who needs school?" (Notice the question mark)

The deviation is minor and very common for informal online contexts. It is possible that the audience is particularly critical when it comes to Douglass, who presents himself as an expert of the English language, even if he is an "ordinary expert" (Tolson 2010).

Perhaps because of the fear of being judged and mocked, as expressed by user 1 in example 37, some viewers correct themselves if they make a typing error, even if the comment would be understandable without the correction. Some of them feel the need to explain and justify the mistakes they have made (51).

(51)

User A: 3:23 "Don't believe in gays" so why would you be homophobic of [sic] you don't think gay people exist…?

User A [as a response to the earlier comment]: *if damn swiping keyboard always does that

In the original comment the user types *of* instead of *if* and excuses himself by explaining that it was a typing error, caused by the user's cell phone or a tablet ('swiping' the touch screen). By blaming on the technology he or she differentiates him- or herself from those people who are featured on the videos and by correcting the mistyping immediately, he or she protects himself from being mocked by other viewers. In this way he indicates that he or she has noticed the misspelling and provides excuses for making it.

6.4.2 Mock "bad" English

Over a tenth (106 out of 990) of the comments in the data sample displays language use that could be described as mock "bad" English. This language use deviates significantly from written Standard English. Comments with minor deviations from the standard (missing punctuation, deviating capitalization and occasional typographical errors) are not considered as this type of language use. The included comments are mostly written with non-standard spellings or grammar or both, and their content may also be impossible

to understand. In most cases the deviations are so drastic and frequent that they are with great probability not due to typing errors or carelessness (52).

(52)

a.
Y ur a fringing retort thar desebes to haav negetave 10 cubscibers lik wtg thid seriese deserved 1 veiw!!! Y do u hav too manty scubscibers I not scubsciber anymire ands I Neva wasd hmmph

[Why you're a frigging retard that deserves to have negative 10 subscribers like what the fuck this series deserves 1 view!!! Why do you have too many subscribers I'm not a subscriber anymore and I never was hmmph]

b.
Wen i Wes for i eat gerbog pat tnt iz fuzze as me beck

Moreover, it is probable that these comments are written intentionally in a non-standard way is that the show is likely to be enjoyed by people who are interested in language, and are able to spot deviations in other people's texts and have prescriptive opinions about them, it is also quite probable that the viewers are capable of writing Standard English according to its norms. Thus it is likely that at least a great deal of the non-standard language in the comment section is deviating on purpose.

Furthermore, there is evidence of this type of activity in previous research. The practice of writing intentionally 'bad' English was discovered by Kytölä (2008; 2012) on the web discussion forum Futisforum, where intentional non-standard language was motivated by shared humor between the participants at the expense of somebody who did not follow the standards of the community ('Altan'). Imitating and modifying the posts of Altan was used as a strategy to joke with other members of the community, while ridiculing and humiliating Altan at the same time. The situation shares great resemblance with the non-standard language use in the comment sections of *YGS* videos.

There could be various motivations for commentators to write language that deviates from the standard. For example, many of the other commentators seem to believe that the main motivation for the 'bad' English is that their writers want the texts to be picked up and featured on the YGS videos. Some of them state explicitly that they enjoy writing non-

standard English. A number of users claim doing it for a joke. It is also possible that those users want to rebel against the rules that restrict writing in the community (e.g. Sebba 2007: 56) or simply to provoke those viewers who become irritated by deviating language use ('trolling', see Baym 2000: 187). Moreover, it is possible and even probable that at least for some people, the practice of generating "bad English" is a strategy for disparagement, as in the case of Altan (Kytölä 2008; 2012).

The humor and enjoyment of the "bad" English is not shared by all commentators. A significant number of commentators conclude that these comments come from people who want to be featured on the YGS videos as examples of "amazingly bad" English. They tell others to stop writing non-standard comments and that they are "trying too hard", implying that they are not believable enough to be featured on YGS and to be considered amusing by others (53).

(53)

> User A: Ee thank they you Bisho land land Jamba kcneif one off consonant NCOs ncosmcs rpmn I DUNT NEM,MMMEEEDDDD BOBS FIRST THINF YOU SEEE! I LOVE YOU JACK OF THE FILMS! NMMEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEED chief NCOs ncosmcs NCOs yrhraaknnihfe
>
> User B [as a response to User A]: Tryin' too hard, buddy

As seen from the analysis above, the comment sections of YGS videos do not show a uniform approach to non-standard language, but the opinions of different commentators vary greatly from defending the mocked texts and their writers, and relating to them, to showing strong negative reactions to them, as even aggressive comments can be found in the data. Moreover, the prescriptivist practices are not restricted only to the mocked texts displayed on the videos but there is also a wish to correct and educate other commentators as well as Douglass himself. At the same time non-standard language is used and generated by the members of the community, demonstrating that the same deviations that are ridiculed are later embraced and enjoyed as an inside joke.

7 DISCUSSION

The research aims of the present study were to investigate the prescriptive practices and attitudes that are visible in the *Your Grammar Sucks* online community. The specific research questions were to examine and categorize the linguistic forms that are selected to the discussion, the strategies of creating humor in the videos over the mocked texts, and the reactions of the audience to the mocked texts and their writers. The question of whether the data show any sign of discrimination will be discussed below in the light of the findings of the other research questions.

When describing and explaining the theoretical framework of the present study, I examined the origins of prescriptive ideas and practices to the doctrines of the 18th century scholars, institutions, such as media and the educational system, as well as the family. Non-standard language that is targeted by prescriptivism was discussed and the reactions to it explored, focusing on disparagement humor and practice of mocking non-standard language through various methods. Moreover, the phenomenon of folk linguists was briefly discussed and the validity of studying folk linguistic opinions explained. Finally, YouTube was described as a dialogic platform where the users are consumers and producers of content at the same time.

The present study focused on studying YouTube videos from the *Your Grammar Sucks* video series, the non-standardly written pieces of texts featured on them, as well as some of the comments on each video. Grounded theory, which is a data-driven research method, was applied in the collection and analysis of the data. The aim was not, however, to formulate a theory based on the findings, but only to describe the data resource in question.

The first research question of the present study was what kind of linguistic deviations are selected to be mocked on the YGS series, and it was discovered that a variety of different levels of language is included: deviations in spelling, syntax and morphology, lexicon, punctuation, coherence, content and style, as well as code-switching. The second research question was how humor is created on the series at the expense of the proscribed deviations and those who have produced them. Three main strategies through which humor is created and perpetuated were discovered: entextualization and resemiotization, evaluations of the proscribed texts, and ironical use. Finally, the third research question

was how the audience comments on the videos and the non-standard language featured on them, and what kinds of attitudes toward non-standard language are revealed. The findings were categorized into attitudes and opinions toward the proscribed texts as well as toward those who have written them. In both cases the scale of attitudes was wide, ranging from very negative reactions to defending the mocked texts and their writers. The categories discovered of the reactions toward the proscribed texts were: disapproval, translations, amusement, defending, appropriation, and of the attitudes toward the mocked writers: abusing, educating, amusement, defending and relating.

One of the main findings was that although the title of the video series discussed is *Your Grammar Sucks*, they concern also a variety of other levels of language. It appears that in this context 'grammar' is not restricted to refer to only morphology and syntax, but language in general. What was surprising is the examples of content, style as well as code-switching, which were mocked along with other features. Moreover, the fact that also very minor deviations from the standard were discovered in the data, was surprising, as they are not likely to produce much humor in the audience.

There is evidence in the data that supports the claims of previous research of the feeling of superiority as the motivation for disparagement humor (Ferguson and Ford, 2008; Boxman-Shabtai and Shifman, 2013; Beal 2010). Condescendence towards the mocked writers could be perceived in both the YGS videos and the comments of the audience, as belittling, for example, was one of the methods to of punishing non-standard language use. Also the fact that very minor deviations were included in the disparagement appears to indicate the delight of being able to find fault in other people's writings and pointing it out. This can be seen also in the comment sections, where viewers engage in the practice of correcting each others' comments.

One aim of the present study was through the research questions to examine whether any group of people is being discriminated in the *YGS* videos and comments. It was investigated whether the linguistic forms selected to be mocked, the strategies to mock them indexed any specific group of people, or, moreover, whether the comments and opinions uttered targeted someone or something in particular. The questions of what and who are being mocked and how it is done, are central topics of the study.

It is difficult, however, to pinpoint the target group of the disparagement humor of the videos. No specific dialect or sociolect features are particularly prominent in the data, nor does it seem that a particular ethnic or socio-economic group is targeted. There are certainly a number of texts which show dialectal words and syntax, but they often feature other deviations from the standard, such as misspellings. Moreover, these texts are feverously defended in the comment section by people who identify with the dialect and consider the disapproved features acceptable in their dialect.

Features that are considered as mistakes by the strictest prescriptivists (for example ending a sentence with preposition and words such as *irregardless*) but are common in spoken language are also not a prominent subject of mockery in the *YGS* series, as these type of deviations, although they might appear in the featured texts, are not pointed out or highlighted in the series. On the contrary, texts with deviations that would not emerge in spoken language of native speakers are chosen for the discussion. Already the decision to read the mocked texts aloud and to place them in sketches as a strategy to mock and highlight the deviations in them indicates this. If reading a text aloud or placing it in a conversation between two people somehow perpetuates the humor elicited by it and highlights the ways the text deviates from the standard, the disapproved features of the text cannot be acceptable in spoken language.

Moreover, there is no clear indication of the videos targeting particularly either native or non-native speakers. The texts included in the videos are likely to have been written by both L1 and L2 speakers, as there are deviations that are likely to be made particularly by non-natives (in syntax and lexicon) and those that can be made by either group (in spelling, punctuation, capitalization, content and style). However, some commentators point out that the fact that those texts which clearly index non-native speakers are included in the mockery at all is harsh and discriminative, as L2 speakers should be excused for using deviating language.

The use of mock accents needs also to be addressed. Even though a majority (approx. 95 percent) of the mocked texts are uttered with the speakers' standard accent, the fact that mock accents are used at all, may be experienced as offensive, not only by the original writers of the ridiculed texts, but also by those who identify with the accent or nationality in question. The representations of people with strong non-native accents as silly and

nonsensical reinforce negative ethnic stereotypes, suggesting that a strong foreign accent correlates with stupidity.

There seems also to be a particular dislike towards certain branches of youth culture. Similar to the previous research (Thurlow et al 2004: 126; Jones and Schieffelin 2012) the disapproval and condemnation of "internet varieties" can be seen in the data. The varieties of English that prosper particularly on the internet and utilize deviating spellings and capitalization, for example, are strongly disapproved, with Douglass even refusing to read them aloud. These are typically associated with young language users, teenagers and pre-teens (Androutsopoulos 2000; Tagliamonte and Denis 2008). A part of the audience shares the same dislike, as they display disapproval of non-standard spellings and 'internet varieties'. Moreover, in addition to the features of the texts chosen for the discussion that index youth culture, the commentary on the videos shows disapproval certain branches of youth culture by suggesting that the fans of a certain pop artist or a television series are likely to write deviating language.

Finally, the *YGS* videos target the individual people behind the mocked texts. As the disparagement humor is detached from the contexts where the mocked texts have originally appeared in time and space, it is uncertain whether the original writers ever come across the mockery targeted at them. Thus the disparagement is not as direct as in the case of Altan (Kytölä 2008, 2012) who was directly in contact with the cruel humor targeting him. It is not impossible, however, that the people being mocked would witness the mockery themselves. Unless the user names of the texts' writers have been censored by the people who have originally picked them up and sent to the show, they are shown on the videos. It is possible, for example, for the viewers to search the mocked writers' user accounts in YouTube and continue the mockery on their account. In YouTube and Twitter the user names ensure the anonymity of the mocked writers (although some have used their real names as user names). However, the owners of established user accounts are likely to want to preserve the esteem of their user name on the internet (Niemi-Pynttäri 2009: 142).

The opinions voiced about the texts and their writers range from good-humored comments that relate to them to extremely harsh and cruel evaluations and ridicule about them. In this light openly ridiculing the user names on the videos can be seen as public

humiliation. Similar to the Mock Spanish discussed by Hill (2008), disparagement humor in the *YGS* context may appear as harmless fun for the participants, but for those who are being ridiculed it may feel discriminative and humiliating. Moreover, even if the writer's of the mocked texts are not directly faced with the disparagement and might never see themselves being ridiculed, other viewers may relate to the language use that is associated in the videos and comments with lack of intelligence, for example. The practice also conveys the message to the viewers that it is acceptable to ridicule, abuse and humiliate for entertainment (McRobbie 2005).

8 CONCLUSION

The present study has only scratched the surface of the *Your Grammar Sucks* community and its prescriptive practices in its attempt to provide an overall look to them. The community is a very rich environment that offers a variety of viewpoints for new, more detailed studies. Because of the sheer abundance of data and interesting viewpoints that they offered, it was challenging to conduct the present study, as the amount of data was almost unmanageable. The result is that the analysis and discussion of the data had to be rather superficial, the main object being to briefly describe the videos and comments in question. However, contributed to the on-going discussion of prescriptivism and normativity, providing a number of new observations that expand the view point of the prescriptivist practices that occur in online contexts and could be investigated further in future research.

The *YGS* video series is still continued today, and new data for research are produced every day. Not only are new videos produced and commented, viewers still continue to watch and commented on even the oldest videos in the *YGS* series. In future studies, the topics touched on the present study could be discussed further in more detail. The practice of generating mock 'bad' English, for example, had to be discussed only briefly in the present study, but it could be studied in more detail, to investigate the reasons and motivations behind the practice as well as the different forms of it, offering another insight of what is considered 'bad' language use in the attempt of imitating it. Moreover, the multimodal discussion of the data was limited in the present study. The use of resemiotization and entextualization as tools for mockery and prescriptivism could be explored more in future research.

Perhaps the most significant implication of the study for the wider public is an indication of what is considered incompetent language use by lay people in the social media. The message of the study is not, however, to dictate what kind of language use is acceptable and what is not, but, on one hand, to make language users aware of what kinds of attitudes and reactions to non-standard language use they may face in online contexts, and also, on the other hand, make language users reflect on their own prescriptive behavior and attitudes to non-standard language.

Prescriptive attitudes have persisted for centuries among language users and there appears to be no change in the attitudes in the immediate future. What is even more unfortunate is that prescriptivism is realized in mockery and disparagement, targeting people because of their dialect, sociolect or learner language. The least that sociolinguist academia can do is to raise awareness of the issue and provide information so that the agents (the media, education system, families) that play a role in creating prescriptive attitudes can be influenced and we can move towards a more tolerant language environment.

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