

BREAKING THE RULES OF THE STANDARD OF THE BULGARIAN LANGUAGE ONLINE: LANGUAGE ADAPTATION OR LANGUAGE ILLITERACY

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Abstract. The purpose of the research was to explore the experiences of Bulgarian university students, representatives of generations Y and Z, with breaking the rules of the Standard of Bulgarian language when communicating with textual posts on the Facebook social network site (SNS) and social networking applications (apps). Breaking language norms is due to the perception of the SNS and social apps communication as speaking rather than writing. Therefore, many of the language rules applicable to the writing are broken. The research employed a phenomenological inductive research strategy. It used a narrative literature review from 2011 to 2021 and an in-depth interview of 15 university students as research instruments. The theoretical framework was built on the theory of communication accommodation and audience design. Two main themes crystallized in the in-depth interviews: 1) communication in SNS and social apps – visual, verbal, and informal and 2) context and communicator determine the level of the Bulgarian language rules observance. In these themes, perceiving SNS communication as speaking, not as writing, hurrying up to join the communication, and the perception of the online environment as informal, explained the breaking the language rules. The research is the first to study the issue in the context of the experiences of the language users, and it opens the scientific field to further research.

Keywords: Standard of the Bulgarian Language; breaking of linguistic norms; social network sites communication; communication accommodation theory; audience design model

1. Introduction

Why are the rules of the Bulgarian language Standard broken in social networking sites (SNS) and social networking applications (social apps)? The majority of the

existing scientific literature suggested that some reasons for language violations in social media are achieving social liking, belonging to a community, or quick persuasion. Compliance with spelling rules is a recommended but not mandatory requirement for comprehensible but competent communication. The language on SNS is used as a parallel one, different from the Standard of the Bulgarian language. It questions the level of literacy and self-control of young people. All these studies complement each other, but they show the tip of the iceberg of breaking the Bulgarian language norms. Unfortunately, there was hardly a study of the language users' individual experience with breaking the language norms in SNS and social apps.

1.1. Research problem

The study explores the underlying reasons for Bulgarian university students to break the Standard of Bulgarian language norms in their communication on Facebook and social network apps (Messenger, WhatsApp, Viber, and others). First, the researchers believe that these are environments for active synchronous verbal, not written, communication. Second, the violations of the norms of the Standard of the Bulgarian language are apparent in SNS and apps. Third, communication in these online environments facilitates relationship-building by adapting participants' communicative behaviour.

Daily violations of Bulgarian language norms in communication on social network sites risk internalizing language irregularities in online communication. It can be perceived as a deficiency in the observance of the Standard of Bulgarian language. The question remains whether breaking the language norm on SNS leads the Bulgarian language users to perceive the “language rules as incorrect and thus trying to compensate for their linguistics ignorance, or they stylize illiteracy” (Kirova 2017, para. 50). The research problem is explored amongst university students, representatives of generations Y (born 1981 and 1996) and Z (born 1997 – 2012) (Dimock, 2019). They are native speakers who actively communicate in SNS and social apps.

1.2. Background

According to the MarkeitngSmartLab Report “Bulgarian Language in the Social Media” (2021), social media is the highest in the age group up to 30 years old in Bulgaria. Facebook takes the lead as the most preferred social network site for 90.1% of the same age group. The up to 30-year old age group includes representatives of both generations. Generally, the young as the e-generation violate the Standard of Bulgarian language rules in their online communication. However, these language violations might be imposed for full functioning in modern (online) life. The language rules “spelling, grammar, lexical, stylistic can be ignored as long as they do not interfere with successful communication” (Grozeva 2017a, 15). This statement locates the knowledge gap of whether breaking the rules of the Standard of Bulgarian language in SNS and social

apps communication has deeper sociolinguistic roots. Filling the scientific gap requires looking beyond the simple indication of the violations of the language norms in SNS and social apps.

1.3. Purpose of Research and Research Questions

The research explores the underlining reasons Bulgarian university students, representatives of the generations Y and Z, experience breaking the Standard of Bulgarian language when communicating with textual posts on Facebook as an SNS and social applications (apps). The researchers believe that one of the main reasons for breaking the language norms on SNS and apps is communication with textual posts as speaking rather than writing. Speaking employs different language rules compared to writing. Therefore, many of the language rules applicable to writing are broken or deviate from speaking. This perception influences Bulgarian students' language violations in Facebook and apps communication. Thus to achieve the purpose of the research, researchers asked two specific research questions.

RQ1: *What research problems do Bulgarian scholarship within the 2011 – 2021 time-frame study related to the Bulgarian language on social media and social network sites?* The research question aims to identify all research within the 10-year period which studies the Bulgarian language and its use on social media and social network sites (SNS). In addition, the RQ concentrates on breaking the Standard of Bulgarian language norms on social media and social network sites (SNS).

RQ2: *How do Bulgarian students, representatives of generations Y and Z, perceive the communication with textual posts on Facebook and social networking applications as verbal or written communication?* The research question aims to identify students' perceptions of communication on SNS and apps. These perceptions emerge from the dichotomy formality-informality of the online environment: the communicators (who) and the 'place' (where) the communication takes place.

RQ3: *What direct or indirect experience do Bulgarian students, representatives of generations Y and Z, have with the Standard of Bulgarian language in their communication on Facebook and apps?* The research question aims to understand why the language deviates from the Bulgarian language norms on SNS and social apps. It also explains how students strive to follow the Standard rules and the most common reasons for personal language errors.

Four tasks were defined to answer the three research questions and to achieve the purpose of the research 1) to differentiate the concepts social network site, social networking application, and social media, 2) to analyze the current Bulgarian scientific literature on the issue for the last ten years, with the main emphasis on research from the last five years, 3) to conduct in-depth

interviews with Bulgarian students from different universities in Bulgaria, and 4) to summarize and analyze the results of the interviews.

1.4. Definitions of terms

Exploring the breaking of the Standard of the Bulgarian language requires a distinction between the concepts of social network sites, social networking applications, and social media. A *social networking site* enables connections between known members of existing social networks or connects strangers based on shared interests, views, or activities. These are “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site” (Boyd, Ellison 2007, 211).

A *social networking application* (social app) is a social networking tool that mediates the connection and communication between people without having the full functionality of a social network (Manning, 2014). On the other hand, *social media* are channels that “allow users to interact opportunistically and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others” (Carr, Hayes 2015, 50). This definition reflects the researchers' understanding that social networks and social media are distinct although complementing terms.

1.5. Literature review

Initial literature review showed that most of the existing Bulgarian scientific linguistics literature indicates the breaking of language rules such as punctuation in social media (Hristozova, 2020), use of definite and indefinite articles, spelling (Mitsova 2017), and characteristics of communication on Facebook (Kirova, 2017). Therefore, the second niche of research focuses on breaking the language rules in different online domains. The breaking of the language norms was studied in: the lexical expressiveness in journalists' blogs (Lukova, Vateva 2019; Vateva, 2020), the stylistic features of fashion and lifestyle forums (Lukova, 2018), blogs (Lukova, 2019), and Facebook profiles of politicians (Lukova 2020). The third area of research is Popova's (2020) inquiry of the entry of English words in the communication in Bulgarian in online forums. However, these studies analyze the language deviations, evaluate them, recommend proper correction of mistakes, and indicate the SNS communication with optional punctuation without exploring the underlying reasons for breaking the Bulgarian language norms in the SNS communication. One exception is Filipov's (2020) study of Burgas journalists' opinions about the state of the Bulgarian language on social media. The local media representatives defined the language as aggressive and free from any language rules characteristic for the young.

1.6. Theoretical Framework

The researchers implemented Howard Giles's (2001) theory of communication accommodation and Alan Bell's (1997) audience design model to explore the underlining reasons Bulgarian university students, representatives of the generations Y and Z, experience for breaking the rules of the Standard of Bulgarian language when they communicate with textual posts on Facebook and social apps. The theory of communication accommodation considers communication adjusting one's communicative behaviour to build up a positive public identity when socially connecting with others. Thus communicators "adjust their communicative behaviour based on evaluations of their fellow interactants' communicative characteristics, their desires to conjure up or maintain a positive personal or social identity, and sometimes with a need to forge a particular affective tone" (Giles 2016, 2). In close relation to the theory of Communication Accommodation is the audience design model. Bell (1997) claimed that a communicator chooses their style of communication according to their audience. The communication style signals individual and group-level relationships developed via communicative interactions. Communicators tend to mirror their style to a higher or lower degree to accept each other socially. It applies all codes and levels of language repertoire, which facilitates the audience design.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Strategy

The research employed a phenomenological inductive research strategy. In the broadest sense, phenomenology examines the direct experience and the behaviour determined by this experience with the phenomenon regarding the external and objective environment (Cohen et al. 2018). It focuses on the meanings that individuals form based on their experiences. A phenomenology inquiry describes the mutual meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell 2018, 121). The phenomenological approach allowed for exploring the personal understandings of Bulgarian university students of breaking the rules of the Standard of Bulgarian language when text-posting on Facebook and social apps. It is a phenomenon that all participants of generations Y and Z directly experience as senders or receivers of textual posts on Facebook. Inductive analysis facilitated research results and conclusions to crystallize free from structural methodologies (Filipov 2021). The study triangulated data sources from different universities, educational degrees, and majors to diversify the students' views. It helped to "minimize the subjective factor in the study and increase the validity of the results" (Filipov 2021, 109) of the qualitative research.

2.2. Participants

Fifteen university students from eight Bulgarian universities participated in the in-depth interviews. Burgas Free University, Varna Free University, and South-West University “Neofit Rilski” had three representatives. The Agricultural University of Plovdiv had two participants, and the rest of the universities had one representative each. Of the 15 interviewees, seven were undergraduates, seven were graduates, and one was a doctoral student. The students were registered in eight different programs: Agronomy, Architecture, Logistics, Primary and Preschool Pedagogics, Psychology, Business Management and Entrepreneurship, Digital Marketing, and Economics of Tourism. Ten interviewees were female, and five were male.

Table 1. Profile of the interviewed students

Interviewee	University	Major	Program	Age
Interviewee 1	Agricultural University of Plovdiv	Agronomy (Viticulture and Organic Production)	Bachelor	23
Interviewee 2	Agricultural University of Plovdiv	Agronomy (Viticulture and Organic Production)	Bachelor	20
Interviewee 3	Burgas Free University	Primary and Preschool Pedagogics	Master	33
Interviewee 4	Burgas Free University	Primary and Preschool Pedagogics	Bachelor	36
Interviewee 5	Burgas Free University	Law	Master	23
Interviewee 6	Varna Free University	Architecture	Master	21
Interviewee 7	Varna Free University	Architecture	Master	19
Interviewee 8	Varna Free University	Architecture	Master	21
Interviewee 9	Naval Academy “Nikola Vaptsarov”	Logistics	Bachelor	21
Interviewee 10	New Bulgarian University	Architecture	Master	19
Interviewee 11	Plovdiv University “Paisii Hilendarski”	Psychology	Bachelor	21
Interviewee 12	South-West University “Neofit Rilski”	Business Management & Entrepreneurship	Bachelor	21
Interviewee 13	South-West University “Neofit Rilski”	Business Management & Entrepreneurship	Bachelor	23
Interviewee 14	South-West University “Neofit Rilski”	Digital Marketing	Master	23
Interviewee 15	University “Prof. Dr. Asen Zlatarov”	Economics of Tourism	Doctoral	32

2.3. Instrument(s)

The phenomenological inquiry used a narrative literature review and an in-depth interview as research instruments. The literature review is a process of detailed “critical reading, consideration and sorting of various sources of scientific value. Its purpose is to identify the main attributes of the researched topic” (Filipov 2019, 955). Thus, this method hardly studies a scientific issue directly, but it facilitates building up the research context.

2.3.1. Narrative Literature review

The narrative literature review helps to locate gaps or contradictions in existing scientific knowledge, answering RQ1: *What research problems do Bulgarian scholarship within the 2011 – 2021 time-frame study related to the Bulgarian language on social media and social network sites?* It also demonstrates the value of a particular point of view. Talbott et al. (2017) stated that “a particular strength of narrative literature reviews is their methodological diversity: in a narrative review, researchers can combine evidence across different types of research designs to address their research questions” (p. 3). However, it is criticized for lack of systematicity. Despite its criticism and challenges, the narrative literature review was the efficient literature review type because there is no integrated scientific database where articles in the Bulgarian language can be located. Scientific journals of language and linguistics and sociolinguistics are scattered across university websites, and some of their content is not accessible. There are two journals of language and linguistics indexed on high-quality global platforms. *Orbis Linguarum* is indexed in Scopus (Q4 – Language and Linguistics), and *Bulgarian Language and Literature* is indexed in the Web of Science. Unfortunately, many scientific publications (journals, annuals, conference proceedings) cannot be found in the Central and Eastern European Online Library. Some publications are within the ten-year research period but exist only hard-copy, and accessing them from a distance is almost impossible.

2.3.2. In-depth interview

The second research method employed in the study was an in-depth interview. The in-depth interview is a qualitative research tool that is very successful in extracting individual perspectives in depth. It is an effective research method because it provides an opportunity to study the formation of meanings in the natural environment (Khan 2014). Open-ended questions invite for sharing and discussing sometimes sensitive matters. Such shares, at first glance, might have hardly any relation to the topic of the interview. However, they could spontaneously direct the interviewer to new aspects of the research topic (Ryan, Coughlan, Cronin 2009). Therefore, the in-depth interview allowed establishing an environment of comfort and free of prejudice when discussing breaking the Standard of the Bulgarian language rules. Interviewees shared personal

experiences, attitudes, and beliefs about themselves and those close to them.

2.4. Data collection and analysis procedures

2.4.1. Narrative Literature Review Procedures

The search for scientific papers studying the Bulgarian language in social networking sites and social apps for the narrative literature review procedure covered ten years (2011 – 2021). The search implemented a long-tail phrase search approach in three steps. The phrases included the phrases in Bulgarian 1) Bulgarian language AND social media, 2) Bulgarian language AND social network sites, 3) Bulgarian language AND Facebook, Bulgarian linguistics AND social media, Bulgarian linguistics AND social network sites. The first step included searching the journals of *Orbis Linguarum* (indexed in Scopus) and *Bulgarian Language and Literature* (indexed in Web of Science) articles' metadata and abstracts. The second step was to explore the scientific publications of the seven Bulgarian universities, which offer a program in *Bulgarian Philology* or *Bulgarian Studies* and have a positive rating score. These universities were:

1. Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski (61 Rating Score) – Bulgarian Philology
2. New Bulgarian University (55 Rating Score) – Bulgarian Studies
3. Veliko Tarnovo University St Cyril and Methodius (50 Rating Score) – Bulgarian Philology
4. Plovdiv University Paisii Hilendarski (49 Rating Score) – Bulgarian Philology
5. Shumen University Bishop Konstantin Preslavski (47 Rating Score) – Bulgarian Philology
6. South-West University Neofit Rilski (46 Rating Score) – Bulgarian Philology
7. University Professor Asen Zaltarov (38 Rating Score) – Bulgarian Philology

The presumption was that these universities, in the Rating System of the Higher Education Institutions in Bulgaria for 2020 of the Ministry of Education of Bulgaria, offering an undergraduate and graduate program in Bulgarian Philology and Bulgarian language studies, were expected to have publications of their own. The final step was to conduct a general Google long-tail phrase search for possible publications in journals outside the research framework. For example, there are publications, which are not part of any university, such as *LiterNet* (<https://litenet.bg/>) and *Media and Public Communication* (<https://media-journal.info/#>).

The SPIDER research model structured the inclusion-exclusion criteria of the papers found in the three search steps following the three steps.

Table 2. SPIDER model for Paper Inclusion – Exclusion Criteria

	Inclusion	Exclusion
Sample	• Papers studying Bulgarian language users' experiences, attitudes to and perceptions of Bulgarian language on social network sites (SNS) and social apps or social media; - Papers studying breaking of the Standard of Bulgarian language norms on social media and SNS;	Studies addressing Bulgarian language issues outside the SNS, social apps, or social media;
Phenomenon of Interest	The Standard of Bulgarian language norms on social media and social network sites;	Research examining other related research problems; Inquiries, which do not specifically focus on the Bulgarian language on SNS; social media and
Design	Conceptual papers, quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods empirical papers, preferably peer-reviewed	Papers outside the 2021 – 2011 time-frame; PhD theses, articles published in non-scientific journals;
Evaluation	Descriptive, explanatory, or exploratory research of Bulgarian language and breaking of the Standard of Bulgarian Language norms on social media and SNS;	Research not addressing the research problem of the current study;
Research type	Journal articles published in Scopus or Web of Science journals or peer-reviewed journals of Bulgarian universities, or independent Bulgarian scientific journals published between 2011 and 2021, with full text available in Bulgarian or English language	Papers outside the 2011 – 2021 time-frame; PhD theses, papers published in non-scientific journals;

2.4.2. In-depth Interviews Procedures

The in-depth interview consisted of 12 questions. Four of them were demographic questions related to the university, educational degree, major, and age of the interviewees. The other eight questions examined the experiences of the interviewees with breaking the rules of the Standard of the Bulgarian language in social networking sites and social apps. The fifteen interviews were taken through Zoom. The interviewees had the freedom to decide whether to have their cameras on or not. All interviewees chose to have their cameras on, which helped to build up a rapport. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with Sonix.ai. The average duration of the interviews was 52 minutes.

2.4.3. Validity and Reliability

The scientific validity of the study was determined through an expert opinion and a pilot interview. The questions for the interview were discussed with an expert, associate professor of Bulgarian philology. After the questions were corrected, the interview was pilot tested. The pilot interview was conducted with four university students from two different generations: two representatives of Generation Y and two representatives of Generation Z. The scientific reliability of the results was determined through the independent coding of the two researchers. The themes emerged after active discussion, merging, and removal of codes.

3. Results

3.1. Narrative Literature Review

The narrative literature review covered only research with an exclusive focus on the state of the Bulgarian language on social media and social network sites. Nevertheless, it answered RQ1: *What research problems do Bulgarian scholarship within the 2021 – 2021 time-frame study related to the Bulgarian Language on social media and social network sites?* Its purpose was to provide the state's national linguistic and cultural specifics with a specific but small language in SNS. In addition, it could give food for thought to international scholars whose language might face similar challenges, which SNS and social networking apps impose on their languages. Unfortunately, the studied scientific sources cover social media – forums and blogs, not social network sites. Therefore, the primary conclusion based on the narrative literature review was that exploring and explaining the impact of SNS and social networking apps on the Bulgarian language are in their infancy.

The study of the Bulgarian language in social media and social networking sites has intensified since 2017. Of the seven universities, which teach Bulgarian Philology or Bulgarian Studies, only three have research published in their journals or annuals. The first two steps of searching in Scopus and Web of Science and universities' scientific publications located seven articles. Unfortunately, the *Journal of Bulgarian Language and Literature* indexed in Web of Science had no publications on the research problem. The third step produced 12 papers published by other universities in conference proceedings or journals. The papers studied several aspects of the broad theme of the Bulgarian language in social media, such as *language norms deviations and specific grammatical uses in social media* (Hristozova 2020; Mitsova 2017; Tsonev 2020), *the language of the Internet* (Dobrova 2018; Grozeva 2017b; Hristozova, Popova 2019), *discourse and genre in social media* (Kirova 2017; Todorova 2016), *stylistics of web blogs and language features of web blogs* (Chervenkov, Velikova 2020; Kotsev 2017a; Kotsev 2017b; Lukova 2020,

Lukova, Vateva 2019; Lukova 2019; Lukova 2018; Vateva 2020), *foreign words penetration in the Bulgarian language in social media* (Popova 2020), local journalists' opinions on the Bulgarian language in social media (Filipov 2020).

Bilyana Todorova (2014) explores how the BG-Mamma forum users employ irony to stand out and to create “pleasure from the demonstrated intellectual and verbal superiority” (57) in the Gossip forum of BG-Mamma. From a pragmatics perspective, the researcher describes online communication and forum communication as economical and expressive. Language economy was the result of the reduced time for considering and editing the message.

In 2016, Todorova published a conceptual paper on the genre structure of text communication in social media talks about the multi-functionality of the online environment. Due to the strong centralization of the online environment, social networking sites manage to concentrate on existing genres and adjust them to the conditions of the new environment. The researcher concludes that “genre differentiation is preserved, although the integrated environment allows some blurring of boundaries and hesitation of the genre structure” (41). Furthermore, the easy access and communication in social media brings to the surface and makes visible the challenges communicators have with employing the Standard of Bulgarian language rules.

Following the 2016 paper, Todorova (2019) defines communication in BG-Mamma forums as written, informal and dialogical when analyzing the pragmatic load of the phrase “Do not experiment!”. The researcher applied linguistic pragmatics to analyze 67 communicative units from different sub-forums of BG-Mamma for 2015 – 2017. She used the #LancsBox program and double manual check to process the excerpted communication units. Todorova concludes that the phrase ‘*Do not experiment*’ was a cliché warning against action or inaction with negative consequences. “Clichés are often used to express pragmatic meaning because they save time, express emotions, etc.” (Todorova 2019, 71).

Mitsova (2017) focuses exclusively on managing the spelling rules of the Bulgarian language on Facebook. Her research purpose was to study the communication behaviour of Facebook groups members (Grammar Nazi), focusing on issues of the grammatical and orthographical norm of the Bulgarian language. She concludes that “a registered deviation from the language norm is corrected individually” (2017, 211). In addition, the Facebook groups' members acted as language police, using irony in their answers to questions or comments on overt language violations.

Grozeva (2017a), another researcher, suggested that the written communication of the e-generation on social media is close to the verbal speech. Although it is transmitted in writing (predominantly), communication is understood as oral. Another phenomenon that the author indicated was the

entry of the Latin alphabet in the offline Bulgarian language environment. It is a phenomenon that has its roots deeper in the formation of the online environment. She clarifies that the “desire for language economy, reflected in the simplification of syntax, morphological characteristics, and word formation, the tendency towards spelling, close to the phonetic letter” (p 16) were some of the reasons for a language rules violation on SNS and predominantly on social apps. It does not refer to the language on the Internet *per se*.

In a longitudinal comparative observation in two stages (2008 – 2010 and 2016 – 2017), Grozeva (2017b) examined the changes in the language used in commentary forums and blogs. She asked the overarching question of whether the Bulgarian language used on social media is a kind of a sociolect or an entire language system. The Bulgarian language used on social media is a cultural dialect, which is characterized by “proximity to oral speech, compensation of prosody and kinesics by using graphic elements, preference for simple communicative, provocative and interrogative sentences, ellipses and anacoluthons, and the use of computer jargon” (Grozeva 2017b, 208).

Chervenkov and Velikova (2020) define the language in the online forums as a medialect that is geographically and socially indifferent. They analyzed the language behaviour of news websites virtual groups members through the medialect's essential characteristics such as interdiscursivity, intertextuality, and precedence. “A medialect can be considered as a variant of a language, dependent and consistent with a given medium as a material intermediary for the transmission of information” (Chervenkov, Velikova 2020, 67). They state that interpersonal communication predominates between forum participants and predisposes breaking “the language norm, which is expressed in non-compliance with spelling, grammar and punctuation rules, arbitrary use of lexical and phraseological units, violations of syntactic and textual norms” (Chervenkov, Velikova 2020, 68).

Tsonev (2020) commented, in his in-depth comparative analysis of the ways of expressing the elative (absolute superlative) in the forums of BG-Mamma, that the Bulgarian language, which is used for communication in the online space, is closer to oral speech but is manifested through the written system of the language. He also expressed that the forum users and administrators redefine the rules of the Standard of the Bulgarian language. As a result, “The boundaries between oral and written communication on the Internet get erased, and the boundaries of what we consider right or wrong in the use of language expand” (Tsonev 2020, 151).

3.2. In-depth Interviews

The research explores the underlining reasons Bulgarian university students, representatives of the generations Y and Z, experience breaking the rules of the Standard of Bulgarian language when communicating with textual posts on

Facebook and social apps. The initial understanding of the researchers for the main reason behind the violation of the language norms was the perception of the communication in SNS and social apps as oral speech rather than written discourse. Therefore, first, they studied the perception of the characteristics of communication in SNS and social apps. Second, they explored the dimensions of personal experiences (actions and observations) using the Bulgarian language in SNS and social apps. As a result, two main themes crystallized in the in-depth interviews, which respectively answered the research questions 2 and 3 two research questions:

– *Communication in social network sites and social networking applications – visual, verbal, and informal.* The theme extrapolated that university students draw a line between a social network site and social media. Furthermore, it affected their perception of communication on SNS and social apps and the Standard of the Bulgarian language. (RQ2: *How do Bulgarian students, representatives of generations Y and Z, perceive the communication with textual posts on Facebook and social networking applications – as verbal or written communication?*)

– *The context and the communicator determine the level of observance of the Bulgarian language rules.* The theme revealed the individual's aim to follow the language norms or moderate them according to the context and the communicator in the SNS or social apps. Therefore, university students strive to comply with language rules when communicating publicly. The observance of the Standard of the Bulgarian language norms relaxes the more one enters more profound into the informal context. The intimate circle is where usually the language rules are the weakest. (RQ3: *What direct or indirect experience do Bulgarian students, representatives of generations Y and Z, have with the Standard of Bulgarian language in their communication on Facebook and apps?*)

3.2.1. Theme 1. Communication in social network sites and social networking applications – visual, verbal, and informal.

Social network sites (SNS) differ from social media for 13 of the interviewees. Two students find no difference between the two concepts. The significant difference lies in the dichotomy of communicating-informing. An SNS is a place for discussion, “a point of meeting new people, friends, and family” (Interviewee 14). It is more global and contains social media. The communication in SNS is interpersonal and lacks the mass effect of social media. An SNS is perceived as a personal space (despite being public) and a place for self-expression. “I refrain from posting on social networks. I even do it very rarely. In my opinion, this is more or less my personal space. When I publish too much on Facebook, I am more or less left without a place of my own” (Interviewee 9). Unlike SNS, social media has a more mass character and informs, according to the interviewees. In other words, an SNS is perceived

as a space for personal communication, while social media provides public information. “Social networks allow people to express themselves, while [social media] is an information environment” (Interviewee 6). Another difference is that the observance of the language norms is more typical for social media than for SNS. “Social media is more formally written” (Interviewee 2).

According to all interviewees, visual elements guide communication on SNS, though the text is the basis of communication. Visualizations determine whether the audience pays attention to the text and how easy it is to decode it. One of the reasons for this is that the young read less and less. “Therefore, the shorter and clearer the messages are, the better” (Interviewee 5) if it combines a text with a visual. Another interviewee commented that she does not have time to search for textual content as a working student. The content should grab the attention “to see if it is of interest to me; then, I open it. If it is exciting to me, I save it to read it later; or, if it's a video, I listen to it while I am doing something else” (Interviewee 9).

Emoticons are essential visual elements and serve various functions. They mainly attract attention and provoke a positive reaction to the post in informal and formal online social circles. “Smiling faces (smiley faces) have a strong effect on people's mood, and it was emphasized that smiley ... changes the perception of the individual on a certain issue” (Sönmez 2019, 472). However, the reaction is different “if I post only a text or a picture and a text in Facebook. The latter has much more” reactions (Interviewee 5). In addition to attracting attention, the visual elements illustrate the essence of the text message, technically facilitating the “writing” of the message. In other cases, they are the message itself, and the text performs a supporting function. However, for two interviewees, the text is the leading element in communication on SNS. “The text is more credible, more informative” (Interviewee 6), and after been grabbed by the visual, “I need a deeper information; therefore the text is crucial for me” (Interviewee 15). However, misunderstandings often happen when a text is not accompanied by a visual and particularly an emoticon.

Emotion and the unsaid are something that a pure text in SNS cannot convey. It instead gives the recipient the difficult task of deciphering the meaning of the words. Inaccurate decoding of the text message often leads to adverse reactions such as strained relationships between the communicators. The accompanying visual elements primarily mediate the reliance on the emotional charge of the text. “When I post only 'Ahaha,' it is perceived as irony. However, if I add a laughing emoji, it is understood as genuine laughter” (Interviewee 2). Apart from expressing emotion, visual elements also compensate for missing information. Information that the communicator does not know or does not want to express in words. “It's as if we put emoticons very often to fill in something we want to say, [but] we don't dare ... That is why we fill in unsaid things with

emojis” (Interviewee 11). Visual elements (emoticons mostly and gifs) also help a recipient see the communicator's intentions and intonation. For one of the interviewees, the lack of a visual element increases his suspicions about the communicator's intentions. As a result, the textual post on SNS is emotionally limited, something that the eye contact in verbal communication captures.

Communication on SNS is perceived and practiced as spoken rather than written. All fifteen interviewees expressed this view. “I have noticed that the writing is speaking” (Interviewee 13), particularly among 20-year olds and younger people. It gives another perspective to breaking the language rules linguistic norm, namely the attitude that it is a 'spoken' rather than 'written' mode of communication. “While writing, we talk. [Textual posts are] much closer to oral speech than written speech” (Interviewee 6). It could answer why the Bulgarian language's written rules are neglected in communication on SNS, but not so much in social media. Faced with a spelling or punctuation dilemma, most interviewees break up the written text either with emoticons or by continuing with a new message. The former is typical for SNS, while the latter is frequently used in social apps (Messenger, WhatsApp). One interviewee overcomes such issues with a voice message. However, it is strongly influenced by the online communication space. Thus, all interviewees believe that communication in social apps such as WhatsApp, Messenger, and Viber is closest to oral speech.

Additionally, five interviewees pointed out a “Comments” section in an online media and a blog, and two interviewees indicated the forum as truly informal online spaces. There is an unwritten rule for the forum. There is a desire to comply with the language rules when opening a topic, which is not the case with the comments. They are full of colloquialisms and jargon and deviate from the language norms.

Interestingly, thirteen interviewees stated that they try to follow the language rules in their personal public Facebook profiles. Their profiles are repositories of information that form a confident attitude and opinions about them. “It's quite complicated to have a profile right now, [on any social network], especially for people my age, because you look at what the photos are exactly; where they are made; what exactly did a person write” (Interviewee 10). The ego-defensive function of personal image (becoming a behaviour model) or expressing a social position (professional or voluntary) affects compliance with the Bulgarian language rules when communicating on Facebook. The majority of the interviewees shared that they rethought and changed their SNS communication behaviour to observe the language norms as students. “It's important for me to keep the language as it is.... I try to set an example with what I do. The younger ones often tell me you are an example for me because you are careful with your behaviour, with what you express” (Interviewee 12) on the Facebook profile.

Despite the positive indications for a change in their SNS language behaviour to follow the Standard of the Bulgarian language, the general opinion is that the haste to respond dominates communication in SNS and social apps. People are “in a hurry to write, to express our opinion and to send” (Interviewee 4). Five interviewees commented that people tend to hurry to respond because of the desire to react promptly, express an opinion, and convey a message. “The goal is to step in the communication quickly and very few pay attention how grammatically correct is the post” (Interviewee 15). The desire to immediately join the communication often affects language-literate communication. In addition, communication occurs during other activities with various emotional, rational and physical sources, affecting communicators' attention. The separation, and sometimes the distraction, of attention, lead to a different assessment of the communicative situation. It reflects the speed of response and the correctness of the speech. A contrary opinion provides one of the interviewees who commented that the desire for a quick response could not be a factor in violating the Standard of the Bulgarian language.

However, twelve out of fifteen interviewees pointed out language illiteracy as the descriptor of communication in SNS and social apps. The main reason for it was the lack of applied knowledge of the language rules. Other reasons were indifference, negligence, and the anonymity of the online environment. Two interviewees indicated laziness as a reason for breaking the language rules. “I know people who are grammatically extremely well versed. However, they are lazy to use the Cyrillic alphabet when communicating in the Bulgarian language. They work using the Latin alphabet because they work with foreigners all day” (Interviewee 15). Despite the reasons, language illiteracy dominates the SNS communication of the younger generation and older public figures.

3.2.2 Theme 2. The context and the communicator determine the level of observance of language rules

The context and the communicator determine how one communicates in SNS and social apps. All interviewees distinguished two types of context – informal context and formal context, in which communication happens. The informal context includes intimate, family, and friend circles. The formal context encompasses all other situations in which communicators have distant relations, such as public figures, authorities, organizations, companies, and others. Due to it, the initiator's communication interest is often temporary. The separation of the communication contexts into formal and informal provides a new perspective on following or breaking the Standard of the Bulgarian language when communicating in SNS and social apps. The deeper one enters the informal context, the less they observe the language norms. However, it can hardly be considered a rule but rather a natural human reaction to being linguistically more relaxed with the closest ones.

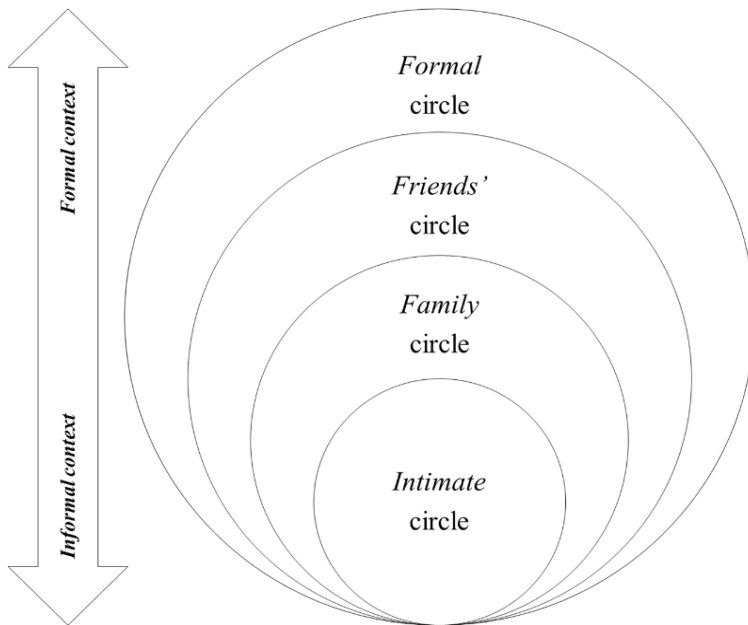


Figure 1. Communication *informality-formality* in the SNS and social networking applications

However, eleven interviewees claimed that the online environment is perceived as an informal environment in general. There, the Bulgarian language is different from the Language Standard. Interviewees observe it in the language behaviour of their peers and younger ones. One interviewee commented on her fellow students. Interviewee 11 gave an example where “recently we had the subject Bulgarian language, and I noticed how colleagues of my generation [Z] were supposedly more seriously prepared in this subject at the matriculation exams. However, they had almost zero interest in participating in the online lectures or preparing for the exam”. In contrast, older fellow students who had no matriculation exams were far more interested. They said: ‘We make many mistakes; we want to know why’ (Interviewee 11). Another interviewee gave an example with her children. “I have two children. The older one is so literate, more literate than some of my colleagues. The younger one, however, is not. The two are very different in language literacy. I educated them in the same way” (Interviewee 3).

Five interviewees defined the version of the Bulgarian language on SNS and social apps as a specific language, mostly of generation Z. One of the interviewees defined it as a language of illiteracy. In contrast, two interviewees commented

that people are not illiterate, but online anonymity predisposes violations of the language rules to express sarcasm, violence, or challenge, other communicators. Another aspect of online communication in general and breaking the language norms relates to blurring social boundaries. It is considered normal to communicate by shortening the social and hierarchical distance by using more informal language, which characterizes by more deviations from the Standard of the Bulgarian language. “Many people have stopped delimiting themselves in the online environment. It is not the person close to you [on Facebook]. Many people act as if it is normal to disrespect social boundaries. The shortening of the language distance is expressed in the more conversational way of communication, respectively non-observance of the language rules” (Interviewee 9).

All interviewees, would observe the language norms depending *where* online and with *whom* online they communicate. The vast majority of them are cautious about their online communication. “It depends on the person who writes me. I have noticed that when I write grammatically correctly – using proper punctuation, capitalizing the necessary words, expressing an independent thought on a new line, some of [the parents] try to respond in the same grammatically correct way” (Interviewee 4). Communicating with their professors or representatives of organizations, university students always aim to follow the norms of the Standard of the Bulgarian language. They perform this both on Facebook and in social apps. It is also true that when professors want to shorten the distance they address students in the second singular, and often use emoticons. The dynamics of everyday communication are high and require skilful switching between informal and formal codes.

Thirteen of the interviewees experience no issue switching codes in their SNS and online communication. Their communication as students or employees has helped them develop this skill. Every day, they have to switch from one media with its specifics, email or working chat group, and comment on a friend's post, Facebook, or chat with parents. However, two of the interviewees find code-switching difficult. For the first one, it is not easy to switch to formal communication. She defines herself as an outspoken representative of Generation Z. As a high-school student, she was not taught how to communicate via email, for instance. The second student has difficulty switching from formal to informal communication. In addition, it is a problem for her to shorten the communication distance with people who are not from her family circle. These challenges affect the correctness of the language of the communication.

The interviewees themselves also make language mistakes. The two main reasons for deviating from the Bulgarian language rules are the informality and relaxation of communication in the family and friends circle and the hurriedness when communicating in SNS and social apps. Only two of the interviewees pointed out that they do not have sufficient knowledge of the Standard of the Bulgarian

language norms. They both did not realize the importance of literate communication and underestimated language learning in their school years. A gap that they try to close and compensate.

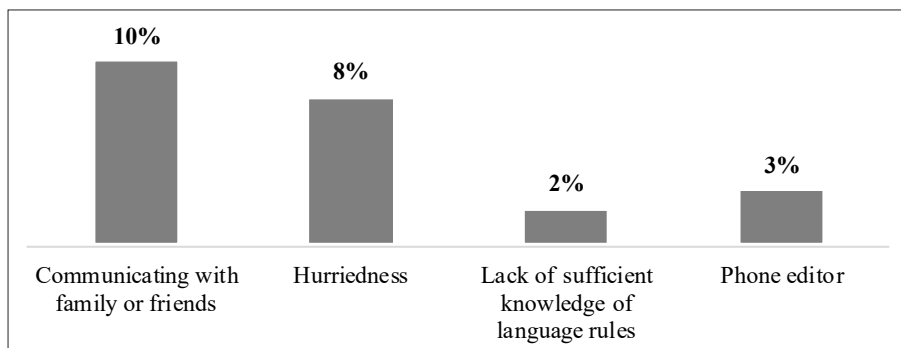


Figure 2. Personal reasons for breaking the norms of the Standard of the Bulgarian Language in Facebook textual posts and apps

4. Discussion

The current research is the first to study the personal experience of breaking the rules of the Standard of the Bulgarian language in the communication of Bulgarian university students on social network sites and social apps. The study explored the research problem by looking at it from the communication accommodation and audience design theory perspective. The interviewees unequivocally state that the communicator and the situation define the communication context's level of informality or formality. The more informal the context is, the more relaxed the abiding to the Standard of the Bulgarian language norms become. Other core reasons for breaking the Bulgarian language rules are 1) the mindset that communicating in SNS and social apps are considered as speaking, although it is performed via writing, 2) the hurriedness to answer and join the communication as quickly as possible, and 3) the perception of the online environment as informal primarily by Generation Z.

The Bulgarian language used for communicating on Facebook and social apps employs compensatory elements such as emoticons to convey emotion and reveal the intentions and expectations of communicators. Furthermore, visual elements such as emojis make redundant some punctuation, otherwise mandatory in a written text, in SNS communication. To achieve the purpose of their communication, participants adjust their language to the receiver and the situation itself. Sometimes the interviewees' language strays away from the norms of the written language rules due to technical factors such as the device used to communicate (laptop or phone, for instance) or ego-defensive reasons. Therefore, the literate usage of the

language in SNS and social apps could be perceived more as an adaptive function than breaking the Standard of the Bulgarian language.

An explanation of this phenomenon provides the theory of communication accommodation. First, communicators adapt their language use in the communication to the expectations of the interlocutor and at the same time reflect their technical capabilities and equipment features. The technological mediation of online communication turns it into an ongoing process. This accelerated communication process predisposes to maintaining communication 24/7. It also raises social expectations for immediate involvement in communication because the delay can put the interlocutor in a catching-up situation. Unfortunately, a quick response is not preceded by check for the language error message in most cases. It is essential to convey a message or a meaning. Whether it is made in a grammatically sound message is irrelevant, as explained by one of the students interviewed. Second, there is communication adaptation of public Facebook profiles to build online groups of followers united by common interests. The audience design is included in the daily communication between the members of these groups who develop their inter-group semiotic system. It is much more accurate for online communities because they have written compliance rules. This context is built based on the established and maintained relationships that systemic linguistics discusses.

Visualizing elements become part of the Bulgarian language in communication on social networks. They perform a signal function regarding the value of the message to its recipient. In addition, they become carriers of emotion, which helps to read the intentions of the sender. On the other hand, the lack of emoticons makes recipients suspicious. In this regard, online anonymity allows commenters in the “Comments” section or forums to freely violate the language's rules of the literary norm. However, the interviewed students strive to follow the modern Bulgarian literary language rules due to their social role (student and worker) and their expectations in the formal environment. In this regard, the interviewed students clearly distinguish formally from informal communication in SNS and social apps. Moreover, most of them very easily switch between the two levels of communication. Thus, students choose the style of communication (how) according to whom and where they communicate online. The theory of audience design gives this explanation.

5. Conclusions

Exploring the reasons for breaking the Standard of Bulgarian language could help first reconsider the SNS and social apps communication as a spoken one and not as written. Therefore, the challenges of complying with the literary norm remain. The problem is complex and does not lend itself to easy or standard answers. Ignoring the fact that in SNS and social apps and those environments that predispose to dialogue, communication is oral, not written, will hinder the fundamental understanding of

the violation of language rules in online communication. It is always necessary to consider the formality and informality of the online environment, which affects the linguistic correctness of the message. In this regard, communication (observance or non-observance of the language norm) in public profiles may be related to adapting the style to the followers. However, of course, illiterate writing in the online environment is not justified under any circumstances. That is why it is crucial to study the preconditions that lead to these violations of the language norm. The results show that people go through a process of personal awareness and change in online communication behaviour. It means that mastering the language norm in primary and secondary school education is mandatory for a more prestigious career.

6. Research limitations

It is essential to consider several limitations of the present study that do not allow generalization. First, the study uses a semi-structured interview of a deliberate sample of students and a narrative literature review. Therefore, it is not clear enough whether the findings have any reliability beyond the sample (Lewis & Ritchie, 2003), as well as the general population. In addition, those respondents who study Primary and Preschool Pedagogy express more extreme opinions on the reasons for breaking the language rules than the other interviewees. Subsequent quantitative research would increase the representation of other universities and majors. In addition, a study using a mixed methodology would dramatically increase the representativeness of the findings.

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