



WhatsApp has half a billion users worldwide. Photo: Riaz Kanani

Swiss researchers study WhatsApp messages

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WhatsApp users are being asked to send their messages to Swiss university researchers as part of a unique linguistics project investigating how people communicate with the global messaging service.

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Researchers at the universities of Zurich, Bern and Neuchâtel are aiming to compare the language patterns of WhatsApp messages with SMS, after similar research was carried out on text messages five years ago.

The project will investigate how different languages and dialects are used in WhatsApp messages, how users interact with each other and the linguistic differences between SMS and WhatsApp messages.

Any Swiss resident can donate their messages to the project between now and July 13th. Messages may be in English, German, French, Italian or Romansh.

Everyone who successfully submits their WhatsApp messages according to the criteria will be entered into a prize draw, with some 60 prizes up for grabs.

Since 1 June over 200 people have donated their conversations. The

researchers hope to receive data from at least 2,000 users by the deadline.

Speaking to The Local, Dr Cedric Krummes, content coordinator of the project, said: “Because we are a multilingual project, we welcome chats written in English.”

“We are keen to explore how the English-speaking population in Switzerland writes in WhatsApp. I am particularly interested to see how expats use other languages in their English. How much German, French, Italian or, why not, Romansh, has become part of their English?”

The messages donated to date show that WhatsApp users love mixing and playing with languages, says Krummes.

Some German speakers mix English words into their messages, while others change the spelling of certain words.

“We saw that in our text message collection from 2009 as well: ‘bisous’ becomes ‘bizoo’. Sometimes, they even come up with something that looks like foreign language but isn't. ‘Becos tacos’ looks like Spanish but it's actually a word play on the French ‘becs’ (kisses).”

“The biggest opportunity will be to analyse how WhatsApp users actually interact with each other,” added Krummes.

“Text messages used to be ‘closed systems’ like little letters – greeting, main part, taking leave. WhatsApp is more open and conversations can carry on for days. Or rather, they fade in and out.”

Details of the project and how to donate messages can be found on whatsup-switzerland.ch

WhatsApp, which allows users to send messages on their smartphones for free, counts more than half a billion monthly users worldwide.

The service was founded in Silicon Valley in 2009 by former Yahoo! engineers Jan Koum and Brian Acton.

Initially free to download and use for the first year, it then charges just \$0.99 a year for continued use.

In February this year WhatsApp was bought by Facebook for \$19 billion.

Caroline Bishop (news@thelocal.ch)