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# Moments of sharing, language style and resources for solidarity on social media: A comparative analysis

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## ABSTRACT

This research draws on Androutsopoulos (2014) to analyse the language, language mixing phenomena and participation in online exchanges among members of a transnational community: colleagues in a project team who have been working together for over four years. Informed by sociolinguistics and Computer-mediated Discourse Analysis theory (Herring, 2004), this contribution compares the colleagues' usual moments of sharing on WhatsApp with their interactions using the same medium during three extraordinary online moments of sharing, which are also significant off-line moments for the group. These three special moments of sharing took place after the terrorist attacks in Manchester in May 2017 and in Turku in August 2017, and the outbreak of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in Europe in March 2020. An examination of the messages exchanged during these extraordinary moments provides considerable evidence that moment, style and audience engagement are closely intertwined. While graphical elements, such as emoji, as well as textese language, are pragmatically unmarked in the typical practices of the community, their absence is the marked choice during the three special moments of sharing analysed. Importantly, the study also shows that code-switching is a key strategy to demonstrate group solidarity during moments of sharing that are special and highly significant for the participants.

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## 1. Introduction

A previous study yielded evidence of a correlation between subject matter and formality in online fora devoted to politics and football (Montero-Fleta et al., 2009). The aim of the present study is to delve further into this topic by examining the networked communicative practices of a group of transnational work colleagues. Their ordinary online exchanges on WhatsApp are studied and compared to the group's interactions during three extraordinary, special moments. The main objective of this examination is to observe how certain off-line moments, which are significant for the colleagues, affect the group's online language practices. Androutsopoulos' (2014) empirical approach to the analysis of language and participation on Facebook during special moments of sharing is adopted to carry out this task. The three stages proposed by Androutsopoulos' (2014) approach—selecting, styling and negotiating—are applied to the corpus of 14 shared moments.

Moments from the lives of this work community are entextualised on WhatsApp, a 'semi-public' mobile application (Tagg and Lyons, 2019). On the one hand, this technical medium is similar to conventional social networking platforms as it allows participants to interact in groups of different sizes, usually less publicly than on platforms such as Twitter (Pérez-Sabater,

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2019). On the other hand, it is considered more private than other social media because a user must provide their mobile phone number to be able to interact with others in one-to-one interactions or in one-to-many conversations (Wentker, 2018) such as chat groups formed by friends, relatives or simply members of clubs or gyms (Fernández-Amaya, 2020). I consider moment analysis particularly suitable to evaluate the exchanges of this community of international colleagues as their interactions only occur on a number of particular occasions. In this sense, their use of WhatsApp is unlike the more common frame of ‘perpetual contact’ in mobile devices (Spilioti, 2011). Indeed, many chat groups on WhatsApp are highly dynamic and constantly active, with members sharing irrelevant content in terms of propositional load, principally to maintain sociability and group cohesion (Cruz-Moya and Sánchez-Moya, 2021).

As Childs (2016) explains, following the rise of CMC as a significant channel of communication, studies of contemporary sociolinguistics now tend to include written conversations as a data source for analysis. In her opinion, interactions on Instant Messaging (IM) have attracted significant academic attention because of the collaborative character of the exchanges via this technical medium, where speakers are continuously “... adjusting, refining and honing their “online speech” in an effort to communicate in a way that they feel is stylistically appropriate for the conversational situation” (Childs, 2016: 262). Strategic styling is frequently performed in online discourse by means of creative linguistic resources, which are often deployed in search of alignment (Peuronen, 2011). Among these resources, particular attention has been given recently to language mixing phenomena as powerful resources for enhancing intimacy, closeness, alignment and group solidarity (Tsiplakou, 2009; Androutsopoulos, 2015; Pérez-Sabater and Maguelouk-Moffo, 2019). The solidarity reinforcement function is defined by Culpeper (2011: 244) as the establishment of “affective connection/convergence”. On the other hand, closeness or connectedness (Arundale, 2006) in interpersonal relationships is understood in terms of social distance (Leech, 1983; Culpeper, 2011).

In this area, this study forms part of an ongoing line of research focusing on formality/informality in online discourse and the presence of language mixing phenomena in social media as part of a continuing process of general discourse informalisation (Pérez-Sabater, 2019). Academics have highlighted the fact that online communication favours the blurring of styles, registers and genres (e.g. Baron, 2011). Multilingualism and language mixing phenomena are only one facet of the overall heteroglossic character of online communication and, together with other semiotic resources, language mixing is a discursive resource writers can use to create meaning (Leppänen and Peuronen, 2012). In this vein, examining the WhatsApp messages exchanged by this group of transnational colleagues can shed some light on the process of informalisation of current discourse practices and the role of code-switching (CS) and language choice in the workplace. Indeed, according to Androutsopoulos (2013), work contexts are an area lacking in Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) and language mixing phenomena research. Focusing exclusively on exchanges on WhatsApp, this study elucidates the correlation between linguistic style and communicative intention in social media when extraordinary external events affect the members of a work community by addressing the following research questions:

To what extent/in what way is formality in language style a preferred resource for solidarity and closeness in special moments of sharing?

Most publications on CS as a sign of in-group solidarity have centred on online communities formed by interactants who are either bilingual or possess a certain degree of proficiency in the language or languages employed in the exchanges (Georgakopoulou, 1997; Tsiplakou, 2009; Lengyelová, 2019). The second research question of this study asks whether, in a community formed by multinational members, solidarity can be realised via code-switching to a language which is not shared by all the participants.

To my knowledge, no other discourse-based study of this nature has been conducted.

The structure of the article is as follows. First, the theoretical background of the article is detailed in Section 2. Section 3 deals with the research context, data examined and analysis undertaken. In Section 4, Results, Androutsopoulos' (2014) approach is applied to the community's typical moments of sharing (4.1); Section 4.2 focuses on the group's communicative practices during three special moments of sharing. Section 5 offers a discussion of the results and Section 6 some conclusions with suggestions for future lines of research.

## 2. Theoretical background: moment analysis

The theoretical framework for this article is based on Androutsopoulos' (2014) analysis of special or significant moments of sharing and the relationship between sharing and linguistic repertoires. With the aim of showing how the multilingual interactions of two participants on Facebook are affected by the heterogeneity of a multinational group of Facebook friends, Androutsopoulos devises an empirical approach divided into three stages: selecting, styling and negotiating.

In order to frame his case study, Androutsopoulos (2014) draws on Li (2011) and John (2013). Firstly, the term ‘moment analysis’, taken from Li (2011), must be clarified. Li (2011) critiques the fact that modern linguistics has principally focused on ‘universal principles’, such as structured patterns of variation or general maxims, in linguistic actions or ‘linguistic patterning’ (Gumperz, 1977). Moment analysis, in turn, seeks to attend “... to critical and creative moments of individuals' actions”. For Li, a moment is “... a point in or a period of time which has outstanding significance” for the group or the individual and an impact “... on subsequent events or developments” (2011: 1224). In his article, he proposes the use of this analysis framework

to examine translanguaging practices in translanguaging spaces. Said spaces are not just physical locations or historical contexts but networks of real or virtual social relationships for the multilingual language user to “... generate new identities, values and practices” (Li, 2011: 1223). He considers translanguaging to be intimately related to globalisation, as enhanced contact between people from different backgrounds encourages greater creativity in language. It is also related to identity construction because individuals deliberately construct and modify their socio-cultural identities by means of social practices such as translanguaging (Li, 2011).

Secondly, some attention must be given to the term ‘sharing’. John (2013: 168) defines ‘sharing’ as the term that “... describes our participation in Web 2.0”, with sharing being a synonym for participating or telling in social networking. In Androutsopoulos’ (2014) case, sharing is communicating on Facebook. In this paper it is understood as online exchanges conducted not through a ‘traditional’ social networking site such as Facebook, but rather, messages shared on WhatsApp, a semi-public messaging application (Tagg and Lyons, 2019), as explained in the Introduction.

Androutsopoulos (2014) draws on previous research into moment analysis and sharing to talk about ‘moments of sharing’. However, he is not interested in the method of analysis designed by Li but rather in the concept of ‘moment’ as “... a theoretical and analytical tool by which to delimit the boundaries of sharing practices” (2014: 6). In his study of social networking practices, ‘moments’ refers to “... single communicative acts which entextualize an event that is of importance to a participant and their network of ‘friends’” (2014: 6). These sharing practices during significant moments need to be addressed to a ‘knowing audience’. The audience has an important role in decisions regarding what is being shared and the style in which it is shared because the audience’s background knowledge and linguistic resources are necessary to understand such moments. This concept goes back to Bell’s (1984) ‘audience design’, which refers to the fact that a speaker’s imagined audience can shape what the speaker says and their style of speaking in the media. Regarding style, Coupland (2007: 1) refers to style in general as “... a way of doing something”; in sociolinguistics, to ways of speaking. Androutsopoulos (2014: 9), following Coupland, defines styling as the way “... participants mobilise semiotic resources for entextualization”. In computer-mediated communication (CMC) there is abundant research associating digital discourses with a marked degree of informality, as occurs with attempts to type informal ways of speaking (e.g., Murray, 2000; Pérez-Sabater et al., 2008; Baron, 2011; Peuronen, 2011; Yus, 2011). Typically, informal conversations exhibit the use of first person, colloquial forms of address, fragmentary or simplified sentences, humour and recurrent idioms, among other characteristics, which are also pervasive in informal computer-mediated exchanges (e.g. Baron, 2008; 2011; Peuronen, 2011; Yus, 2011). More formal discourses, on the other hand, are normally associated with elements characteristic of written language such as formal terms of address, third person pronouns, formal paragraph division or the absence of spelling mistakes (e.g., Baron, 2008).

Thirdly, background knowledge and linguistic resources lead us to another concept, linguistic repertoire, which must be explained to frame our study. Androutsopoulos (2014) indicates that the concept of repertoires has to be redefined in digital communication. There must be a shift from its original sense, in which repertoire only “... refers to the totality of languages, dialects or styles employed in a speech community”, to the idea of individual repertoires that must include—in addition to languages, dialects and styles—how technology reshapes “... the communicative spaces in which resources from a repertoire can be deployed” (2014: 7). These resources include modalities of language use, situation types, degree of synchronicity and publicness. Basically, Androutsopoulos explains that repertoires are reconfigured by “... speakers’ trajectories and the flow of their communicative exchanges across time and space” (2014: 7). In this paper, the information about the background knowledge and repertoires of the group participants includes the languages they are fluent in, the situation types of the exchanges and the degree of synchronicity, publicness and formality observed in them. In addition, power relationships within the workgroup are also explored since, as Cassell et al. (2006: 440) explained, in online exchanges, language “... is one important way to uncover the relationships among power, dominance, persuasion, and cooperation”. For example, in Culpeper (2011) the relationship between the participants, in terms of distance-closeness, is managed by the use of taboo terms to indicate in-group familiarity, closeness and group cohesion.

In this article, by comparing the interactions of the same group of people and observing the connection between the moment entextualised and style, I intend to validate the idea that the nature of CMC genres depends more upon communicative ‘intention’ than on the sociolinguistic ‘conventions’ (Strawson, 1964) that have evolved within the technological constraints of a given medium. This comparative element of this research, its focus on adult users and the work-related context of the exchanges examined are the aspects of the paper which may enrich the wider study of moment analysis and sharing on social media.

To finish the theoretical background to this article, we must address previous research into the discourse of WhatsApp. Scholars examining the digital discourse of these messages have addressed these exchanges using different approaches, many of them rooted in pragmatics. Recent research, for example by Flores-Salgado and Castineira-Benitez (2018), has involved quantitative and qualitative examinations of the pragmalinguistic characteristics of WhatsApp requests made by Mexican Spanish users. Pérez-Sabater (2019) and Sampietro (2019) studied the pragmatic functions of emoticons and their role in online exchanges in Spanish chat groups. In Wentker (2018) and in Pérez-Sabater (2022), we see how the linguistic construction of group identity in a community of university classmates is constructed through language mixing and code-switching. Fernández-Amaya (2020) examined conflict management in a family chat group. Cruz-Moya and Sánchez-Moya (2021) observed the multimodal expression of humour in a group of senior users. Reactions to the humour of emotional self-presentation in WhatsApp users’ profile status are analysed in Maíz-Arévalo (2021). These are some examples of the many interesting scholarly studies regarding WhatsApp. However, despite the recent academic interest in this technical medium, there are no publications about multinational exchanges in the workplace authored by multilingual participants.

### 3. Method

#### 3.1. Corpus

Let us start by describing the primary data collected, the participants and their language repertoires. The corpus is formed from the networked language practices on WhatsApp of a group of transnational colleagues, international partners in a three-year government-funded project (September 2015–August 2018). After the final evaluation of the project in January 2019, most members have continued to be part of the chat group, using it to keep in touch and strengthen relationships within the group. Overall, the digital data collected is from nearly five years of interactions: from the beginning of the project in 2015 until the moment this article was finished in 2020. The messages in the corpus are mostly related to certain moments that are important for group collaboration: the five transnational meetings held during the project. Apart from these important work-related off-line moments, the 'life' of the group is entextualised on WhatsApp in three other types of moment: to perform seasonal rituals such as Christmas greetings; it was once used by the project leader to complain about a task not being completed; and when terrorist attacks occurred in the cities or countries where the colleagues were located and the coronavirus pandemic hit Europe in 2020. The 14 moments<sup>1</sup> comprise a total of 402 text messages, containing 4732 words. In line with [Baron's \(2008\)](#) study of SMS and Instant Messaging, graphic elements such as emoticons and emoji are counted as words, unlike other studies focused on emoji which calculate them separately (for example, [Sampietro, 2019](#)). Images are only analysed if text is included in captions. Consequently, on average, each message contains approximately 11 words and/or emoticons and emoji.

#### 3.2. Participants

With regard to the participants, the workgroup is formed by 12 people: 10 women and 2 men. They come from different backgrounds and countries, and work in 5 different higher education institutions in Europe. They form an online community that displays the characteristics described by [Herring \(2004: 346\)](#) for online communities. In her view, to be considered a community, an online group must meet six sets of criteria: "1) active, self-sustaining participation; a core of regular participants; 2) shared history, purpose, culture, norms and values; 3) solidarity, support, reciprocity; 4) criticism, conflict, means of conflict resolution; 5) self-awareness of group as an entity distinct from other groups; 6) emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, rituals". Herring specifies how these criteria can be assessed objectively. For instance, solidarity can be measured through humour, positive politeness ([Herring, 1994](#)) and reciprocity. [Herring's \(1994\)](#) positive politeness in CMC<sup>2</sup> draws on [Brown and Levinson \(1987: 62\)](#) to refer to the participants' use of positive face in their desire to be "ratified, understood or approved of, liked or admired".

The detailed language background of the colleagues forming this community, whose ages range from 45 to 63 years, is as follows:

1. Turku team, Finland: 3 Finns in total. 2 teachers whose level of English is C2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and 1 technician with a B2 level of English. One of the teachers has an A2 level of Spanish as well. Veera, a member of the Finland team, is also the leader of the whole project. She is responsible for its outcomes: several publications on online language learning.
2. Manchester team, Great Britain: 2 women and 1 man, 3 native Spanish speakers who have been working in Manchester for more than 20 years as language teachers. Their level of English is C2.
3. Frankfurt-based team member, Germany: 1 British citizen, a native English speaker, working for an international institution based in Frankfurt. In addition to English and German, he can also speak Portuguese and Spanish at B1 level.
4. Gdansk team, Poland: 2 Polish teachers with a C2 level of English. They work in one of the universities in Gdansk.
5. Valencia team, Spain: 2 native speakers of Spanish with a C2 level of English and 1 native speaker of English with a C2 level of Spanish. They all work in a Spanish university in Valencia. The author of this article is a member of this team. I will address this matter below.

Thus, the repertoire of this group, in its original sense, that is, "... the totality of distinct languages, dialects or styles employed" ([Androutsopoulos, 2014: 4](#)), is English, Finnish, German, Polish, Portuguese and Spanish.

To ensure anonymity, the names of the institutions where the colleagues work are not mentioned, only the cities where these universities are based. Moreover, some proper names have also been changed on my telephone so that the work partners' real identities cannot be identified by the reader. For example, Veera is not the team leader's real name. The team members have given consent for their names to be changed to ensure their anonymity. However, other participants in the chat have asked for their real names to be used in the examples. All of them have given their permission for their exchanges to be included in this article.

<sup>1</sup> More details about the corpus are given in [Appendix](#).

<sup>2</sup> For an overview on im/politeness scholarship see, for example, [Bousfield and Locher \(2008\)](#), [Culpeper et al. \(2017\)](#). For im/politeness in CMC, [Locher \(2010\)](#) and [Lorenzo-Dus et al. \(2011\)](#).

### 3.3. Analysis

In digital analysis, information about linguistic repertoires must be complemented by other data that may serve to contextualise the study, such as situation types, modalities of language use, degree of synchronicity and publicness of the medium (Androutsopoulos, 2014). Regarding situation types, both formal and informal situations occur in the corpus. Formal situations arise when the group first starts to interact and on the few occasions when work issues take centre stage. Meanwhile, informal situations occur as time passes and the work partners build closer relationships. Concerning modalities of language use, in line with Androutsopoulos' (2014) proposed method of analysis, only written exchanges are scrutinised. As for the degree of synchronicity, research regarding WhatsApp has demonstrated that conversations or discussions in chat groups can be developed in either synchronous or asynchronous ways (Cruz-Moya and Sánchez-Moya, 2021). In many studies, WhatsApp is regarded as highly synchronous (Fernández-Amaya, 2020) mainly because of its audio notifications; in others, its asynchronous character is stressed (Flores-Salgado and Castineira-Benitez, 2018). In the case presented in this paper, as in Wentker's (2018) chat group, it seems to be quasi-synchronous most of the time, as we will see in Sections 4.1 and 4.2. Regarding publicness, it is important to stress that only messages sent to the whole community are examined; that is, one-to-many messages following Baron's (2000) classification. WhatsApp messages which the project participants addressed to me exclusively are not included in the corpus. As in Tsiplakou (2009), I must declare myself to be a member of this group. This has advantages when it comes to corpus gathering because gaining permission to analyse private exchanges is often more straightforward. In addition, forming part of the group is advantageous for another crucial reason: the researcher has first-hand knowledge of the social and linguistic profiles of the people involved in the group.

With regard to analysis, in line with Androutsopoulos (2014), first, the 11 more typical moments of sharing of this community are examined following the three stages proposed by Androutsopoulos (2014): 'selecting' the moments to share; 'styling', which refers to the style chosen to express what is being said; and finally, 'negotiating', the engagement of the audience after a moment is shared. The analysis focuses on the style of the exchanges in these shared moments. In socio-linguistics, style is often closely connected to how speakers construct "... a way to be or identity by combining the social and linguistic resources available in a community in a salient way" (Moore, 2004: 307). The phenomena of discourse styles are addressed by means of a Computer-mediated Communication Discourse Analysis (CMCDA) (Herring, 2004). Discourse examination attends to formality and informality observed in interactions occurring at specific moments, which may entail the use of strategies of textese language (Thurlow, 2007) or characteristics of oralised written texts (Yus, 2011). Other issues explored are accommodation (Riordan et al., 2013; Pérez-Sabater, 2017) and the construction of group solidarity through language style (Kleinke et al., 2018). Language choice and code-switching are also examined (Androutsopoulos, 2015), although the use of languages other than English consists mainly in the insertion of Spanish on several occasions detailed in Sections 4.1 and 4.2. In Computer-mediated Communication Discourse (CMCD), Gumperz's traditional definition of code-switching (CS) as "... the juxtaposition of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or sub-systems, within the same exchange" (Gumperz, 1977: 1, 1982: 59) must be redefined as the coexistence of different languages or different linguistic varieties in one online platform does not necessarily constitute CS. For multilingual online texts to qualify as CS, "... evidence is required that [different language choices] are in some way dialogically interrelated by responding to previous, and contextualizing subsequent, contributions" Androutsopoulos (2013: 673).

In a second step, the same methodology is applied to three extraordinary moments of sharing for the group of transnational colleagues. These are characterised by a difference in style, compared to the previous 11 more typical exchanges, and members' special participation in these conversation threads. The three special moments have an impact on the group's interactions (as we will see below), are highly personal in nature and are closely connected to off-line moments that are important for the group and their cities and countries of residence. These take place immediately after the following events:

1. Manchester Arena attack. On 22 May 2017, 22 people were killed and 116 injured in a suicide bombing at Manchester Arena when a 22-year-old terrorist detonated a home-made bomb in the Arena's foyer as crowds were leaving a performance by US singer Ariana Grande ([www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com)).
2. Killings in Turku, Finland. On 19 August 2017, a knifeman "targeted women in Turku terror attack", killing two women and injuring several other ([www.bbc.com](http://www.bbc.com)). This happened the day after terrorist attacks in Barcelona and Cambrils on 17 and 18 August 2017 in which 17 Spanish people and tourists were killed and many others injured.
3. Coronavirus outbreak in Europe. After originating in China in 2019, the virus arrived in Europe in January 2020. The coronavirus spread through multiple countries around the world during spring 2020 and was consequently declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) (<https://www.bbc.com/news/health-51358459>). In spring 2020, the pandemic was particularly serious in Italy and Spain.

## 4. Results

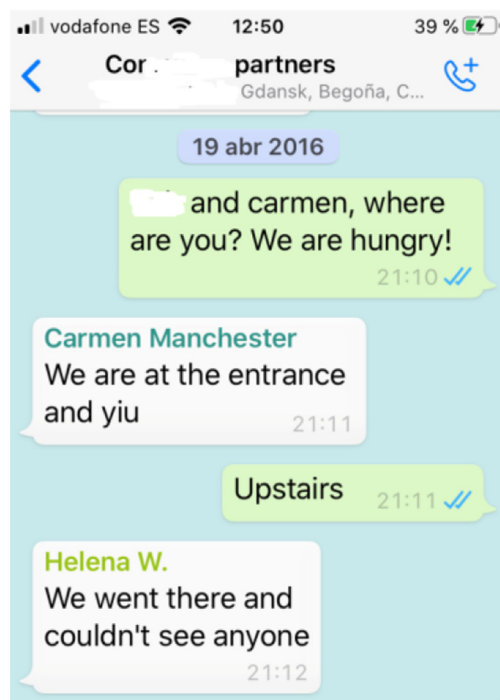
### 4.1. Practices of sharing, selecting, styling and negotiating

In this subsection, I comment on the 11 written examples of typical group communication in the corpus, using the three stages proposed by Androutsopoulos (2014) to analyse moments of sharing. Selecting has a small subsection of

its own because the explanation of how the corpus patterns in terms of time is provided in Section 3. Particular attention is given to styling; selecting and negotiating are investigated in close relation to the style of the moments entextualised.

#### 4.1.1. Selecting

Over years of continual project tasks, the participants have selected what they share on each platform. While the group normally communicates about work-related issues by email, they have mostly used WhatsApp as a highly synchronous communication platform to discuss practical matters regarding their five transnational face-to-face meetings, as [Example 1](#) illustrates.



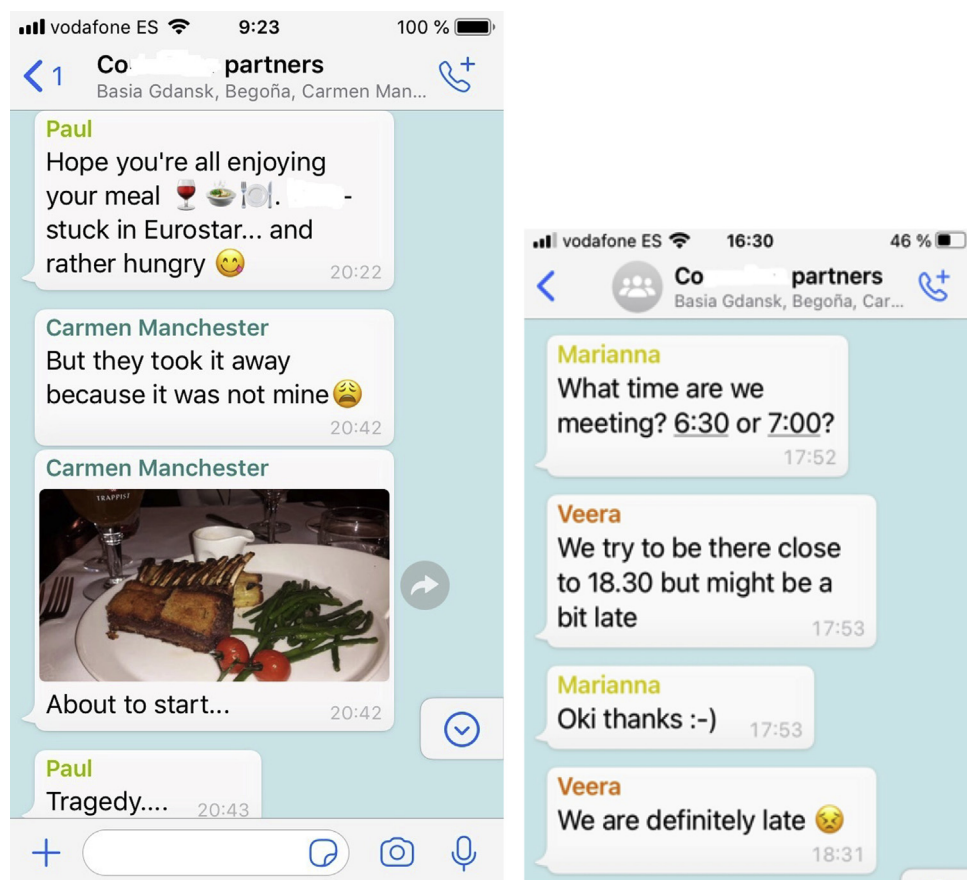
**Example 1.** Synchronous interaction.<sup>3</sup>

WhatsApp is the tool to organise off-line moments. It functions as the group's public noticeboard, an extension of the face-to-face gatherings when partners relax over dinner and socialise. It is the medium used to connect the group and maximise sociality, employed with a clear relational purpose, as in other examinations of WhatsApp messages, for example in [Pérez-Sabater \(2019\)](#) and [Fernández-Amaya \(2020\)](#). Texting is a social tool par excellence ([Thurlow and Poff, 2013](#); [Cruz-Moya and Sánchez-Moya, 2021](#); [Yus, 2021](#)). This is the reason why emotional lexis, emoji and expressive punctuation are abundant in the language practices observed in these shared moments, as we will see below, unlike in the results of one of the cases examined by [Androutopoulos \(2014\)](#) where emotional language is scarce.

#### 4.1.2. Styling

In general, the utterances examined in the 11 more typical moments of sharing show a clear pattern of sameness in which the resources provided by WhatsApp are fully mobilised to fulfil the ludic purposes of the chat. Friends and communities usually have established local stylistic norms of interaction, although texters can change their stylistic choices depending on the message ([Thurlow and Poff, 2013](#)). The following examples illustrate the general style of the shared moments, particularly their playful character, with the use of a myriad of emoji, picture elements and pictures with captions. These results are in accordance with the literature on CMC: synchronous communicative exchanges are "... more likely to be informal in register and playful in tone" ([Herring, 2007: 23](#)).

<sup>3</sup> I obtained the permission of the participants to use these data post-production to ensure authenticity.



Examples 2 and 3. Playful language in threads after work.

Example 2, on the left, is part of a conversation thread taking place during a transnational meeting in Brussels. One of the colleagues, Paul, had to leave early and the others are gathering to have dinner after work. While Paul is stuck on a train and hungry, the others are having dinner and joking about their situation because the waiters confused the group's orders and had to take away the food they had served to Carmen Manchester. This is "a tragedy" according to Paul because everybody is very hungry. Example 3, on the right, takes place during the transnational meeting in Gdansk. In this thread, the partners ask when they agreed to meet after work and Veera and her group communicate to the rest of the participants that they are late. In both examples, we can see some clear markers of orality. For example, fragmentary sentences with the absence of subjects as in the utterances written by Paul and Carmen: 'hope', 'stuck' and 'about to start'. Past research has consistently revealed that one of the strategies employed by CMC users to reduce the time needed to write is "... simplified syntax, such as subject or modal deletion" (Murray, 2000: 402). We also see some textual features historically associated with CMC such as the reduplication of punctuation marks (Yus, 2011). However, since the group is made up of middle-aged adults and language teachers who do not frequently abuse the linguistic characteristics which specialists have claimed to be markers for orality in CMC (e.g., Baron, 2008) in front of other linguists, some traits, such as phonetic orthography, are rare in the messages. Normally, as in several utterances in these two examples, a final laughter or picture element with emoji for smileys and emoji for objects contextualises the messages as playful or jocular, as in Sampietro (2019). Emoticons and emoji have become conventionalised as markers of the texter's communicative intent. When inserted in final positions, they normally mark the tone of the message or its illocutionary force (as stated by Dresner and Herring, 2010 and Konrad et al., 2020). Inserting pictures with captions to illustrate the message being sent is another strategy to reinforce the playful character of the moments. In WhatsApp chats, humour and playful language reinforce solidarity and social cohesion (Cruz-Moya and Sánchez-Moya, 2021).

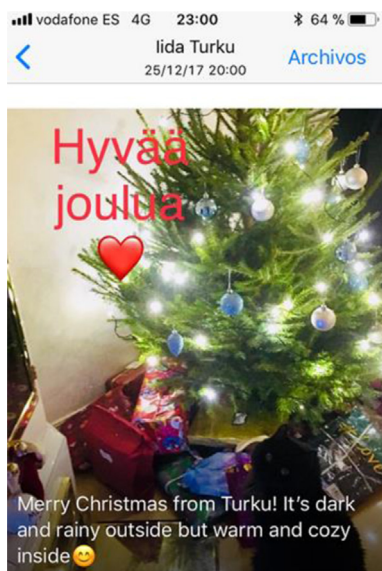
These WhatsApp exchanges exhibit another interesting language practice that needs to be addressed. Utterances are normally only in English, the common language of communication within the group, but sometimes lexis in languages other than English is inserted in the texts. The literature on language mixing phenomena has illustrated the use of code-switching on social media for thanking, greeting, sending good wishes, formulaic language expressing common speech acts (see, for example, Kulavuz-Onal and

Vásquez, 2018; Pérez-Sabater and Maguelouk-Moffo, 2019) and also for expressing emotions within a specific group (Wentker, 2018). In these 11 moments of sharing, digital CS and choosing a language other than English is used in several specific situations:

a) To send season's greetings

Participants prefer to send their Christmas greetings to the whole group in their native language, despite the fact that languages such as Finnish or Spanish are not shared by the whole group. In many cases, the translation into English is included in the caption that frames the picture or video.

Examples 4 and 5 show pictures and videos with CS. Example 6 is entirely in Spanish.



**Example 4.** *Hyvää joulua*, Merry Christmas in Finnish.

Lida sends her greeting in Finnish, but the good wishes are translated into English in the caption. The context and the day the message is sent to the community make this translation redundant; it is not necessary to be fluent in Finnish to understand the text in the message, the picture 'says it all' as in the corpus gathered by Androutsopoulos (2014). Lida feels the need to share the good wishes in her native code but at the same time express her wish in the 'we' code of the community as an alignment strategy, as in the corpus of Tsiplakou (2009).

In a similar vein, Examples 5 and 6 include a video and a picture with a caption in Spanish to send good wishes to the group. Example 5, on the left, includes a response with another message of good wishes, this time from Poland.

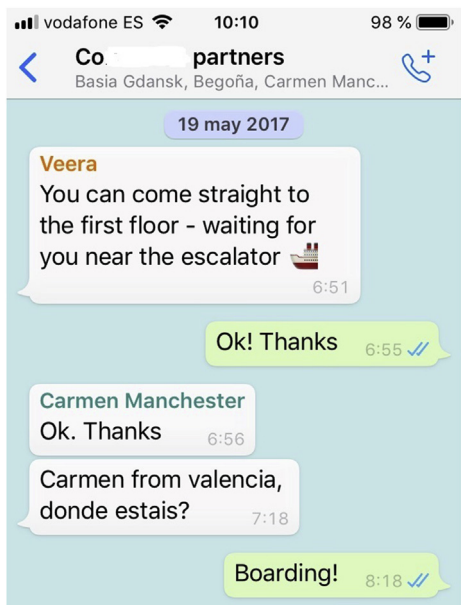
Carmen Manchester (Example 5) and Begoña (Example 6) send a video and a picture to the whole group whose captions begin with season's greetings in Spanish, their native language. In these cases, no translation is provided as, again, the context gives enough information to clarify the meaning of these foreign noun phrases for the non-Spanish speakers in the project team.

Audience response demonstrates various degrees of engagement depending on the utterance being shared. In the utterances above, responses have a highly synchronous character. As in Carmen's message in Example 5, Hanna answers immediately by starting her utterance with an exclamation containing reduplication of vowels, non-conventional indicators of prosody and intonation, typically used in texting (Thurlow and Poff, 2013). In this response, again we see fragmentary sentences with the omission of verbs in search of immediacy; users feel that WhatsApp is a quicker and more immediate communication tool than other messaging applications according to Church and de Oliveira (2013). In most of the examples above, emoji are used rhetorically (Garrison et al., 2011) like a full stop to terminate the utterance, a common sign-off on WhatsApp (Sampietro, 2019). They are the unmarked choice in this community and often lack propositional meaning, functioning as community conventions with the intention of building intimacy (Pérez-Sabater, 2019; Sampietro, 2019) and compensating for gestural cues in textual CMC (Konrad et al., 2020).





Examples 5 and 6. *Feliz Navidad*, Merry Christmas in Spanish.



Example 7. Carmen from Valencia, *donde estais?*: where are you?.

## b) To indicate or specify certain addressees

Addressee specification is a classic discourse function of code-switching (Gumperz, 1977). Addressing someone using a shared native language other than English has the purpose of searching for a quick answer, one of the ecological factors outlined by Lee (2016) for language choice in online discourse.

Example 7 illustrates one case in which CS serves this purpose. The Valencian team is late to one of the transnational meetings and Carmen Manchester addresses the leader of the group in the native language they share, looking for a rapid resolution to the situation, one of the purposes of switching to a common native language on social media according to Lee (2016).

## c) To reinforce the ludic atmosphere of the chat by means of language play

In this case, rather than code-switching, we see the use of languages other than English. As Example 8 illustrates, colleagues often switch to the local language, in this case, Finnish, to have fun after work. The team is having dinner in a Scandinavian restaurant and take pictures during the meal. Later that evening, photos are uploaded to the group's chat and some captions are added to them.



Example 8. Picture with caption in Finnish *Viikinkien lagerolut*: Viking's lager.

Agnieska Gdansk, a native speaker of Polish, has probably asked one of the Finnish teachers the correct words for this caption: a plural genitive form meaning 'Vikings' and the noun for 'lager beer'. Socialising involves relaxing over dinner after a long day of work and part of this festive and playful atmosphere is expressed by choosing a language other than English, particularly in the case of Finnish, a complex code with cases. Playing with a foreign language is part of the game and the socialising purpose of the chat, as seen in Wentker's chat group (2018). Example 8 is in line with Herring's suggestion (2007) that CMC heightens language play as it allows interactants to reflect on their communications in ways that would be difficult in face-to-face conversation. Agnieska's caption is a clear example of how the group members employ the linguistic resources they have to hand to achieve their communicative aims, regardless of their fluency in these languages, as in the corpora of Kulavuz-Onal and Vásquez (2018).

Overall, we could say that these examples illustrate the usually playful, casual and friendly tone of the group's WhatsApp messages during typical moments of sharing, similar to the tone observed in the WhatsApp messages exchanged by the community studied by Wentker (2018) and Pérez-Sabater (2022). This tone is created by the inclusion of textese language traits, graphic elements and language play through code-switching and language choice. In addition to languages and linguistic features, the authors are able to fully mobilise the affordances of the medium, a plethora of paralinguistic and multimodal elements (Cruz-Moya and Sánchez-Moya, 2021), to convey their message, thereby emphasising the convivial tone of the exchanges. The results add weight to the observation that social media encourage creativity by making it easy for users to mix different kinds of semiotic and linguistic resources only available to them when writing (Jones and Hafner, 2012).

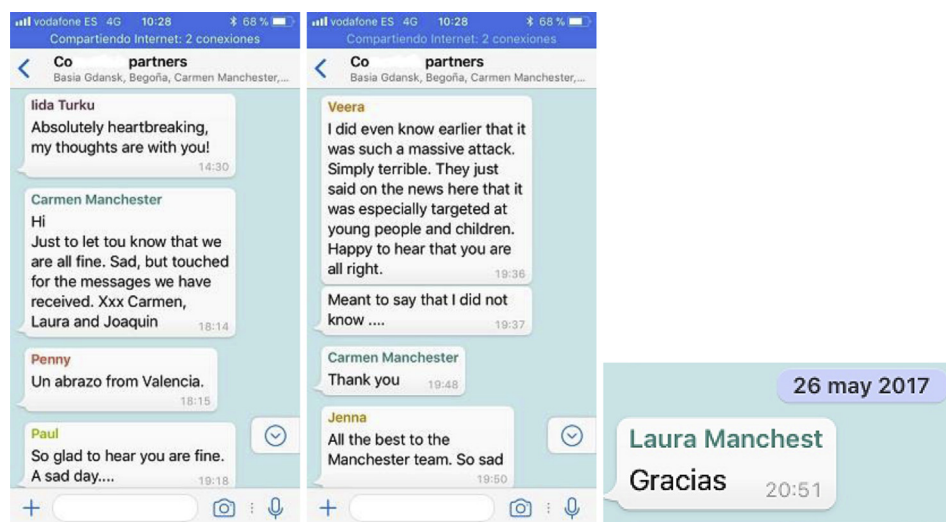
#### 4.2. Special moments of sharing

Let us now turn our attention to the group's use of WhatsApp during three significant moments for this networked community: the group's exchanges after the terrorist attack in Manchester in May 2017, the thread after the killings in Turku in August 2017 and the messages exchanged during the early stages of the coronavirus pandemic in Europe in March 2020. Following Androutsopoulos (2014: 8), these moments of sharing are made significant not only "by their styling but also by their interactive negotiation".

Before commenting on the main characteristics of the utterances shared during these crises, we must state that, on these occasions, the members of the team only communicate through WhatsApp. The medium is selected spontaneously and unanimously as the community's exclusive communication tool.

#### 4.2.1. First moment of sharing: thread after the Manchester Arena attacks

Most of the utterances in [Example 9](#) are exchanged on 23 May, the day after the attack in Manchester, which killed more than 20 people, mostly teenagers. The attack is relevant to the group because three members of the project team live in the city with their families, which include young children and teenagers.



**Example 9.** Moment 23 May 2017.

Here we see a pattern which is quite different to that of the 11 more typical threads analysed in the previous section. At first glance, we notice the absence of emoji or pictures. The contrast to the previous examples is so stark it is almost as if this chat were between members of a different project team. This moment of sharing has interesting stylistic characteristics. Most utterances are fragmentary sentences, beginning abruptly in media res: '[it is] absolutely heartbreaking ...' or '[I am] so glad to hear you are fine. [it is] A sad day ...'. However important this might be, the most outstanding feature of this chat thread is that all the messages centre around one utterance: the text posted by Carmen Manchester at 18.14. The colleagues had sent several messages to the group asking about the well-being of the members living in Manchester and their families (see the first utterance by Lida Turku) before Carmen Manchester can reply. When Carmen's text appears, it immediately takes centre stage and interactions are negotiated after it with a sudden outbreak of almost synchronous messages.

Stylistically speaking, it is worth mentioning that Carmen Manchester's text is the only one with a greeting, although a very informal formulaic routine. Basically, the message follows formal writing conventions in structure: it is divided in some way, the salutation is separated from the main text and it includes three 'Xs' as a sign-off, a substitute for a kiss in traditional correspondence on paper, a typographic symbol to signal affection commonly found in informal writing (Lyddy et al., 2014). Although sent by the team leader, the message is signed by all three members of the Manchester team. However, despite the relatively formal character of this text, we observe some informal traits usually associated with texting (Baron, 2008) such as errors, 'tou' for 'you', and fragmentary sentences with the absence of the subject, [I am sad].

The networked audience reacts to the message written by Carmen Manchester in quite a significant manner: most participants show their affection by responding to this message with a noun phrase or a short sentence. Interestingly, some utterances include some form of farewell formulae, for example, 'All the best', while others use code-switching as in the message written by Penny, a native speaker of English living in Spain. The insertion of Spanish here seems to express greater solidarity with the colleagues in Manchester, who are native speakers of Spanish. Following Androutsopoulos' classification of CS discourse functions (2013), closer affection and relationships are implied with '*un abrazo*' (a hug). Laura's message some days later consisting exclusively in the politeness indicator '*gracias*' also strengthens the solidarity and social closeness with the whole team of transnational partners. It seems that thanking in Spanish is required at this dramatic moment as it appears to go beyond a normal 'thank you' message in English. According to de Fina (2007), code-switching as a solidary function needs to be studied in each situation because in communities which are particularly linguistically diverse, its meaning must be investigated within each specific interactional context. This case is a distinct example of CS as a sign of in-group solidarity (see, for example, Gumperz, 1977; Georgakopoulou 1997; Hinrichs, 2006; Leppänen and Peuronen, 2012) to indicate 'in-group' rapport (Auer, 1999) and create a feeling of togetherness among the group members (Wentker, 2018). Studies of CS and language choice on social media, for example Hinrichs (2016), affirm that English is preferred for maximum intelligibility and this reflects a kind of politeness because 'friends' do not need to translate posts if the message is written in the lingua franca of

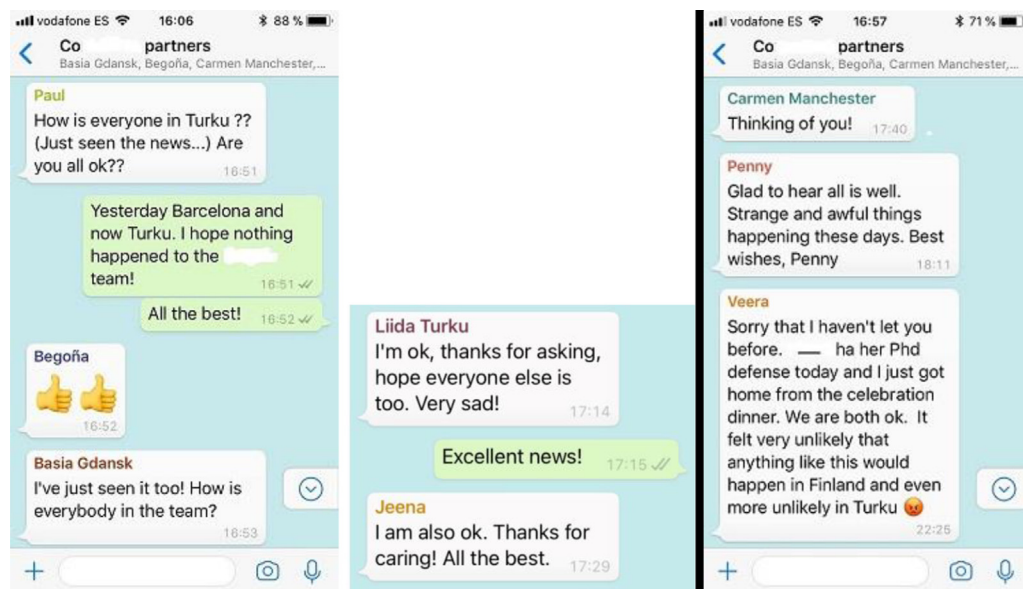
the Internet. In the case of small communities, however, Gumperz (1977: 10) affirms that CS is “typical of the communicative conventions of closed network situations,” as is our case. Moreover, *gracias* does not usually raise issues of intelligibility, as it is a word easily recognised by many non-Spanish speakers.

Another relevant characteristic of this moment of sharing is that the team leader writes much longer messages than the other group members. Veera’s powerful position within the group as the leader of the whole team is reflected in her longer text which includes some of the usual characteristics of oralised written CMC, such as mistakes (the first sentence should be negated) and fragmentary sentences with the omission of the personal pronoun subject of the verb and the copular: Happy to hear ... [I am]. Nevertheless, Veera realises she has omitted the negation in the first sentence because she rereads her message and corrects herself in a second message, which is not a frequent routine in texting according to Jones and Hafner (2012).

#### 4.2.2. Second moment of sharing: thread after the Turku killings

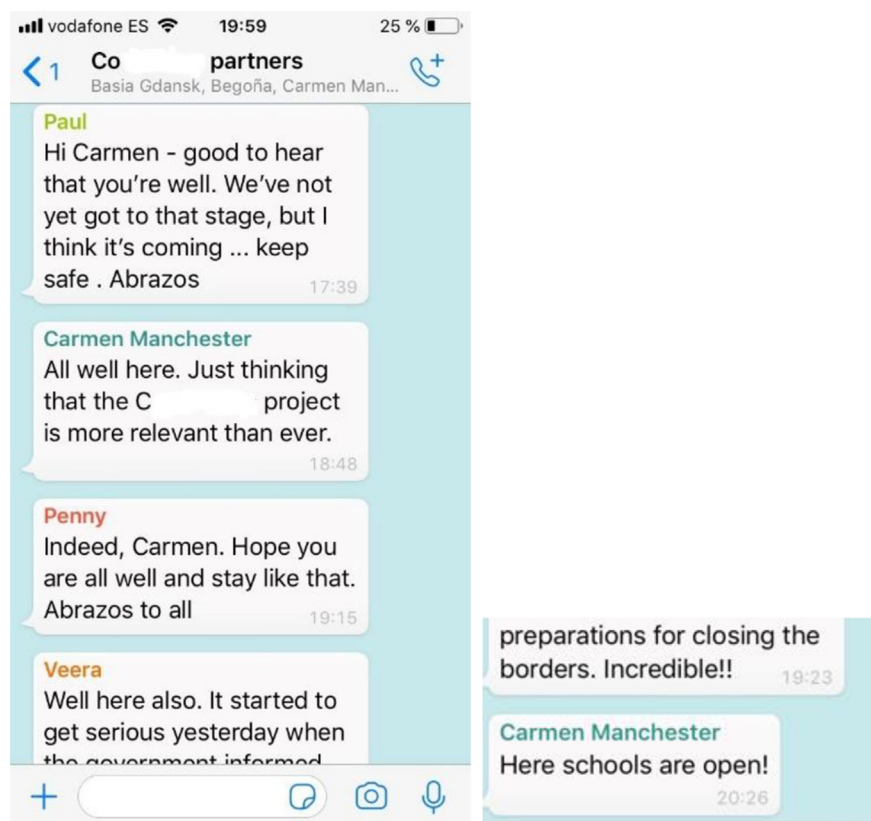
Similar observations can be made about the group’s messages during another important moment of sharing for the community: their interactions after the terrorist attacks in Turku, Finland.

This thread includes the messages exchanged after two women were assassinated in the main square in Turku (see Example 10).



**Example 10.** Moment 19 August 2017.

In this case, we see an immediate reaction the moment the attacks are reported in the media. The messages from Paul, Carmen, Begoña and Basia are written simultaneously, just after watching the incident on the news. As in the previous moment of sharing, the style of this chain is very different to the playful character of the group’s more typical interactions observed in Section 4.1: there are no pictures, only an angry face and a double thumbs-up emoji, a symbol of approval (Sampietro, 2016), one of the very few utterances consisting exclusively of emoji. Contrary to the corpus of WhatsApp messages in Wentker (2018) and Sampietro (2019), in the group’s usual communicative exchanges, this type of messages are rather rare, maybe because of the age of the interactants or the professional, working nature of the group. The relative formality of this moment is also enhanced by the inclusion of formal stylistic routines with farewells such as ‘All the best’ or ‘Best wishes’. In search of immediacy, some utterances are formed by fragmentary messages such as ‘thinking of you’ or ‘Glad to hear ...’. As in the Manchester case, Veera, the leader of the entire project team, writes a much longer message, 45 words, to apologise for not having informed the whole group of the well-being of the Finnish team members earlier. A final emoji terminates her message, reinforcing her expression of anger towards the attack. The little face expressing anger not only has a rhetorical function, substituting a full stop, but clearly serves to compensate for the lack of prosodic and gestural cues in written discourse (Konrad et al., 2020). This time, the emoji Veera has chosen does help convey the intention of the utterance it is attached to (Dresner and Herring, 2010), enhancing the illocutionary force of the message (Sampietro, 2019).



Example 11. Moment March 2020.

4

#### 4.2.3. Third moment of sharing: thread in the early stages of the coronavirus outbreak in Europe

This thread takes place nearly two years after the project finished. When the coronavirus pandemic hits Spain hard and lockdown measures are applied in March 2020, the former colleagues use their WhatsApp group to enquire about the well-being of the whole group and every member informs the rest about their personal situation (see Example 11).

As in moments of sharing 1 and 2 discussed in this section, this thread has a formal style and obviously lacks the light-hearted appearance of the usual communications among the partners in this technical medium (as discussed in Section 4.1), with a notable absence of emoji, pictures and videos. Again, there is one salutation to greet the group in Paul's text, although it is highly informal and not separated from the main body of the message. Even so, typical features of oralised written discourse, such as fragmentary sentences, are employed in almost every utterance: “[it is] good to hear that ...”, or “[it is] All well here”. Linguistic similarity at the structural and stylistic levels is evident in the thread, as in other studies of electronic discourse (e.g., [Bunz and Campbell \[2004\]](#) in email and [Riordan et al. \[2013\]](#) in Instant Messaging). For example, once again we observe formulaic language for salutations (as seen in Paul's message) and some form of sign-off formulae in every message. Particularly interesting is the use of code-switching with “Abrazos” (‘hugs’) in practically every message, accommodating Paul's farewell. In line with the above cases, this is an example of the ‘searching of group solidarity’ communicative strategy because, at the time these messages are sent, Spain is suffering severely from this new and terrible virus. The group adopts this farewell as an intimate formula to express good wishes towards the Spanish team and all the project team members. Once the well-being of the project members has been established, the colleagues start discussing the lockdown measures adopted in the countries they are living in and the messages appear to lose the similarity observed at the beginning of the thread.

Negotiation in this case is not as immediate as in the previous two cases. This is possibly because the group is no longer working together and therefore contact between its members is not as frequent as it used to be; and secondly, in some cultures, a disease may be considered too private a matter to be discussed in a semi-public environment.

<sup>4</sup> This time I have not included the whole message sent by the project leader, Veera. I have also omitted some messages which were in the thread. This is because colleagues start to give their opinions on this crisis as soon as they know the others are well and the thread becomes very personal.

## 5. Discussion

With regard to the first research question, the study of these 14 moments of sharing has corroborated that dramatic off-line situations require formality in associated online messages. In [Montero-Fleta et al. \(2009\)](#), there was a clear correlation between subject matter and formality in CMC. However, in these threads, it is not the subject matter of the messages per se (establishing the well-being of the group participants), but rather the off-line situation impacting some of the participants that appears to give rise to certain communicative actions and the adoption of a more formal style. The relevance of this observation is that this may be the first time this correlation has been demonstrated using a semi-public dataset in the context of the workplace.

Several interesting aspects of the analysis regarding language style and resources for solidarity can be highlighted:

Firstly, we must mention the inclusion of salutations and several sign-offs, a common pattern in the three special moments of sharing analysed, in contrast to the group's typical communication practices on WhatsApp, which normally lack these politeness indicators. Although greetings and farewells are crucial formulae in setting the tone of email ([Bunz and Campbell, 2004](#)), many studies have emphasised the optionality of salutations and sign-offs and their generalised absence from business and corporate email communications, for instance, [Waldvogel \(2007\)](#). However, more recent studies of workplace emails obtained rather different results and claimed that most of the messages in their corpora contained introductions and sign-offs terminated the communicative exchanges (e.g. [Bou-Franch, 2011](#)). In SMS messages, academics have frequently noted the relative absence of salutations and sign-offs, although culturally-based differences are evident in this case. [Ling \(2005\)](#), for instance, indicated that relatively few messages in his corpus from Norway included these formulations. In contrast, [Spilioti's \(2011\)](#) examination of Greek texting suggests that her texters' relational work is manifested by the introduction of closings, whose 'marked behaviour' depends on the position of the text in the thread and, above all, on the participant's relational concerns. Many studies of exchanges using WhatsApp have focused on users in Latin-America and Spain because WhatsApp is the most popular communication tool in these geographic regions (<https://www.messengerpeople.com/global-messenger-usage-statistics/>). As [Flores-Salgado and Castineira-Benitez \(2018\)](#) explain, salutations and farewells are common as a politeness strategy to show solidarity with the community among Mexican Spanish interactants. Similar results are obtained by [Pérez-Sabater \(2019\)](#), who illustrates how texters in Peninsular Spanish often insert salutations and closings with emoji for relational purposes, especially in texts written by women. Also drawing from a corpus of Peninsular Spanish, [Sampietro \(2019\)](#) documented the role of emoji in signalling closing sections or as a strategy to help negotiate openings in WhatsApp messages. In the messages exchanged during the three special moments for the networked group detailed in this paper however, farewells formed exclusively by words substitute the group's local stylistic norms of interaction—an emoji for smileys or an emoji for objects—to terminate the utterance. The group spontaneously changes their stylistic norms and adopts communicative strategies which, almost unanimously, exclude picture elements. Recent research on emoji suggests that they are becoming pragmatically unmarked on social media as their pragmatic meaning of indicating playfulness and social intimacy is weakening ([Konrad et al., 2020](#)). In the three moments of crisis analysed, there is evidence their absence is pragmatically marked for this community. The dramatic off-line situations seem to require a change of stylistic panorama. As in face-to-face contexts, graphic elements seem to be impolite strategies in exceptional moments.

Secondly, the formal style of the exchanges during these three special moments of sharing is seen in other features in addition to the presence of sign-offs and a lack of emoji. These are the division of text into paragraphs and the frequent absence of textual deformation features commonly associated with CMC.

Finally, the study has revealed other issues that are not as closely connected to formality and moment entextualisation. In spite of the socialising purpose of the chat, the project leader wants to maintain her role as an organisational actor. Veera is relating to the others in the social persona of group leader, the most powerful participant in the project team, even in the ordinarily playful atmosphere of their typical WhatsApp interactions. The members normally converge to the structural and stylistic levels used by their boss. This convergent linguistic behaviour may be explained as another strategy to maintain group cohesion, as in [Giles and Ogay \(2006\)](#), [Pérez-Sabater \(2017\)](#) and [Wentker \(2018\)](#). The transnational partners employ similar stylistic choices, although linguistically mimicking other colleagues does not seem to involve converging in message length. While members tend to send messages a maximum of two sentences in length, as in the above examples, Veera's messages are always much longer. This could be the reason why, on average, message length in this corpus is longer than that seen in other studies. Here we find around 11 words per utterance, whereas in [Baron's \(2008\)](#) study of IM and texting, message length is around 6 words. Veera's particular tendency towards longer interactions could be in line with what scholars have called 'babble theory', a characteristic of leaders' email communication based on empirical studies which suggest that longer and more frequent interactions in CMC predict leadership (see, for example, [Cassell et al., 2006](#)).

As for this study's second research question, regarding the role of code-switching to enhance solidarity and closeness, the comparison of the team members' messages to each other shows that solidarity is enhanced by some patterns of 'minimal bilingualism', to use [Androutsopoulos' \(2007\)](#) words. Scholars analysing CS before the mass use of texting concluded that code switching in bilingual environments is more common in face-to-face oral communication than in writing ([Li, 2002](#)). In this particular community, off-line CS is only anecdotal and normally excluded from conversation, as the members do not share any language other than English. Written code-switching, on the other hand, is the strategy employed to transmit greater solidarity towards some members of the team and the whole group in the three exceptional moments studied. [Herring \(2007\)](#) stated that one of the six sets of criteria that characterise a community is solidarity and support. Here, there is no doubt that this group forms a real community where members show support even after many years of collaborative working or indeed because of their years spent collaborating as a team. [Culpeper \(2011\)](#) explains that some particular terms can be used as a mark of familiarity and closeness in group relations. However, connectedness and deep familiarity

(Hernández-Flores, 1999) between these relational partners go beyond such terms and are demonstrated by language choice in special moments. Code-switching to convey the writer's desire to reinforce solidarity with the addressees has been an interesting finding of examinations of online interactions in close-knit communities of friends (Georgakopoulou, 1997; Tsiplakou, 2009). The novelty of this article stems from the nature of the community: transnational partners, who do not share any other language in addition to English, and whose desire to indicate alignment and in-group solidarity takes them to include terms in a language other than English, regardless of their fluency in said language.

## 6. Conclusions

This case study applies Androutsopoulos' (2014) analysis to the interactions of a group of transnational colleagues communicating via social media during off-line moments which are significant for the group; it does not aim to focus on 'universal' behavioural standards (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2011) but rather attend to contextually-appropriate behaviours.

As in Androutsopoulos (2014), we suggest that moment analysis is intimately related to selecting, styling and negotiating. With regards to style, we see examples of rather formal writing on WhatsApp. This brings to the fore that the nature of CMC genres depends "... more upon communicative 'intention' than on the sociolinguistic 'conventions' that have evolved within the technological constraints of a given medium" (Montero-Fleta et al., 2009: 777). In this vein, we have illustrated how some sort of structural and stylistic formality seems to be necessary in messages exchanged during extraordinary moments, observed in the use of greetings, farewells, paragraph division and the absence of emoji, unlike the less formal style seen in most of the typical exchanges in this community chat. It appears that the seriousness of the moment must be reflected in the writing style. This would answer the first research question addressed in the Introduction.

Finally, the inclusion of switches to express good wishes during these significant moments highlights the fact that CS to the native language of the addressee enhances solidarity, which answers this article's second research question. The study emphasises the relationship between linguistic repertoires and communicative practices. Specifically, the findings show that code-switching is used mainly to send good wishes and establish solidarity in critical moments for the group. The examples illustrate how the team members in Germany, Poland and Finland use the mother tongue of the team members residing in Manchester or Spain to demonstrate greater alignment and solidarity with these participants, indicating the closeness of the partners after several years of collaboration.

As a concluding remark, it must be acknowledged that case studies in linguistic research may be limited because the findings from one study may not always generalise elsewhere. However, interestingly for CMC research, restricting the scope of research facilitates a detailed, in-depth understanding of what is being studied in order to document the ample variety of group practices that characterise computer-mediated environments within what Lorenzo-Dus et al. (2011) called the third-wave in CMC research. In this context, this study, which combines case studies and the examination of pivotal moments in which relevant off-line moments affect the linguistic practices of a given community, can be seen as a contribution to the understanding of current semi-public online communication. Future research could focus on the stylistic and language practices of another globalised group made up of members from different backgrounds who also use different languages to provide opportunities for language creativity, in line with Li (2011). For example, said studies could examine other shared moments during the global coronavirus pandemic of 2020/2021 with a focus on the role of language mixing phenomena.

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## Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

## Appendix

CORPUS: 14 MOMENTS, 402 text messages			
Transnational meetings	Christmas greetings	Complaint about a task	Events related to the cities/countries of partners
Valencia (Spain), April 2016: 32 messages	December 2015: 12 messages	January 2017: 2 messages	Manchester attack, 22nd May 2017: 38 messages
Gdansk (Poland), October 2016: 29 messages	December 2016: 12 messages		Turku attack, 19th August 2017: 28 messages
	December 2017: 12 messages		

(continued)

CORPUS: 14 MOMENTS, 402 text messages

Transnational meetings	Christmas greetings	Complaint about a task	Events related to the cities/countries of partners
Manchester (UK), April 2017: 47 messages			COVID-19 outbreak, Europe, March 2020: 48 messages
Brussels (Belgium), October 2017: 53 messages	December 2018: 12 messages		
Turku (Finland), May 2018: 69 messages	December 2019: 12 messages		

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