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Additional Information

Bonjour la famille!

Linguistic strategies for relationship maintenance in African online communities

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Rooted in African postcolonial pragmatics, this research pays particular attention to the strategic use of code-switching and other linguistic strategies for relationship maintenance in instant messaging communities that constitute translanguaging spaces. To this end, by means of a quantitative and Computer-mediated Communication Discourse Analysis, we examine the naturally-occurring interactions, on WhatsApp, of a group of 74 former university classmates who studied Spanish Philology in the mid-2000s at a Cameroonian university. The close observation of the group's interactional strategies for relationship maintenance shows that members construct their online *famille* – their new social space for self-presentation – by means of (1) sociolinguistic and pragmatic norms drawn from indigenisation; (2) kinship terms as forms of address, in English and Spanish in texts mainly in French; (3) the inclusion of religious terms as a politeness strategy. The use of Spanish as the tie-sign of the group is not as relevant as initially expected.

Keywords: African pragmatics; relational maintenance, Computer-mediated Discourse, postcolonial studies, language mixing practices, Computer-mediated Communication Discourse Analysis

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that “relationship-building and social intercourse are both central to, and strongly facilitated by, technologies for communication” (Thurlow and Poff 2013) and that texting or smartphone messaging (Yus 2022) is one of the preferred genres¹ (Deumert and Vold Lexander 2013) of communication for millions of people in their daily lives, as the figures regarding its use indicate. In February 2022, WhatsApp had 2 billion monthly active users according to Sinch Engage². This is also starting to be the case in many African countries, with an example being Cameroon,³ where up to 95% of urban young people in the country have adopted cell phones as their primary technical medium of communication (Poon et al. 2019). The middle class in Cameroon sees smartphones as icons of ‘modernity’ and ‘openness’ – a status symbol in Africa (Deumert and Vold Lexander 2013) mainly used to provide access to WhatsApp and Google (Miller et al. 2021).

Cameroon’s sociolinguistic and sociocultural landscape is complex. West and Central African countries are “multilingual and constitute rather heterogeneous linguistic settings” (Connell and Zeitlyn 2010: 203). Cameroon is one of the most multilingual countries in the world. More than 240 languages coexist with the two official languages, English and French, as well as the ex-colonial languages, and the main Lingua Franca, Pidgin English or English Pidgin (Echu 2008; Mulo Farenkia 2019a). As Ngefac (2010) claims, these languages have distinct statuses and functions in society; most of them are not fully standardised, not taught at school, and rarely written, as is the case in many other African countries. French is the dominant language in terms of number of speakers, and is used by approximately 80% of Cameroonians, whereas English is the official language of roughly 20% of the population in the country (Mulo Farenkia 2019a).

In this context, the present study examines the linguistic resources that contribute to configuring a successful online participatory space for a group of Cameroonian interactants to maintain old friendships. We will focus on the linguistic behaviours

¹ Following Deumert and Vold Lexander (2013: 226), texting is referred to as a genre because “we can identify both ‘formal similarities’ across texts, as well as ‘a pragmatic component’; that is, texting as a genre is characterized by linguistic form as well as social action”.

² <https://www.messengerpeople.com/global-messenger-usage-statistics/>

³ In Cameroon, the most widely used social media platform is Facebook, closely followed by the messaging application WhatsApp, whose use has increased dramatically in the last two years, as reported in January 2020 by <https://defyhatenow.org/common-digital-platforms-in-cameroon-and-their-usage-2/>.

performed to maintain relationships in the messages exchanged within an online community on WhatsApp, special attention will be given to relationship maintenance and solidarity through language mixing phenomena following Mulo Farenkia (2019a; 2019b) and Pérez-Sabter (2021a). This online community started as an offline group of university colleagues studying Spanish language and literature at one of the universities of Cameroon that offer the degree of Hispanic Studies. Several years after finishing their degrees and stopping having physical proximity, most of the members, the former colleagues, and now primary and secondary teachers of Spanish, became an online community when a WhatsApp chat group was created in late 2018 ($n=74$). The data gathered and analysed for the present research date back to May 2020, when one of the authors of this article joined the chat group named Generation 2006.⁴ This online chat provides a forum for maintaining contact with former university colleagues with whom one may have otherwise had limited (or no) interaction, as in the case of Facebook explained by Lampe et al. (2006).

This article will contribute to the growing body of research on online relational pragmatics in a greater variety of languages, namely English, French, indigenous Cameroonian languages, and Spanish, which, all together, contribute to the construction of the norms of appropriateness in the same affinity group. Centred within postcolonial studies (Anchimbe and Mforteh 2011), and more specifically postcolonial pragmatics (Anchimbe and Janney 2011; Mulo Farenkia 2019a), this study will examine the linguistic choices that contribute to maintaining relationships in a multilingual community from a country affected by colonialism, focusing solely on the online interactions of the participants. By postcolonial pragmatics, we understand that “just as colonisation led to new hybrid varieties of the colonial languages of power, it also led to new, culturally and linguistically mixed patterns of communication- and to new pragmatic strategies- in these varieties” (Janney 2006: 3 in Mulo Farenkia 2019a: 337). African postcolonial pragmatics is in need of more analysis to understand social norms of interaction, “preferably with naturally occurring data, of speakers’ verbal and non-verbal interaction in specific settings in their daily negotiations” (Anchimbe 2011:

⁴ The members of Generation 2006, *generatisonists* as they call themselves, consented for their WhatsApp interactions to be examined and published; consent was asked post-production to ensure maximum authenticity. In Cameroon, there are no published guidelines for the analysis and dissemination of social media data. However, our analysis follows the ethical regulations of the EU in relation to the anonymization of private data (General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) <https://gdpr-info.eu/art-5-gdpr/>).

1482). This is the context of our investigation, i.e. naturally occurring exchanges on WhatsApp – one of the preferred technical media of communication in the country at the moment, which has not received attention to date as far as we know.

The research questions addressed in this study are:

To what extent is solidarity and relationship maintenance realized through language mixing? What is the role of Spanish in this community formed by former students of Hispanic studies?

In two similar publications (Wentker 2018; Pérez-Sabater 2022), the relational maintenance of the particular communities examined is based on the use of English – the language which the members of these online communities are studying, in the case of Wentker (2018), or studied previously, in the case of Pérez-Sabater (2022). In an online community based in Cameroon, one of the most multilingual countries of the world (Mulo Farenkia 2019a), we try to understand whether the use of Spanish is what serves as the crucial point to tie together the community of former university colleagues, functioning as their “tie sign” (Tong and Walther 2011), and to what extent. In maintaining and building relationships, Tong and Walther (2011: 112) highlight the role of tie signs; echoing former studies on anthropology and sociology, they state that tie signs are understood as “the displays of mutual belonging through physical behaviours or adornments”.

More will be said regarding what we understand here about relational maintenance and tie signs, but posting on social media conveys information and shows the audience that sender and receiver are connected (Tong and Walther 2011). By means of a quantitative and qualitative study of the messages exchanged, we will ascertain what linguistic choices constitute the tie sign of this former offline community that is now nearly principally online.

Thus, a final research question will be: what are the tie signs of this online community? As will be explained below, the answer to this question will be the use of kinship terms.

The article is divided into four sections. Firstly, Section 2 describes the theoretical background of this study, as well as what we understand by postcolonial pragmatics, relationship maintenance, the particularities in African communities and relationship maintenance in CMC. Section 3 presents the sociocultural description of the participants

and the method of study. Sections 4 and 5 deal with the results of the analysis, which are interpreted and discussed in relation to the most salient underlying issues pertaining to the preferred linguistic strategies employed by this particular online community of Cameroonian graduates in Spanish literature and language for relational purposes. We shall finally outline certain conclusions and suggestions for further research in Section 6.

2. Theoretical background

Postcolonial societies constitute complex, hybrid communication environments characterised by "...extreme ethnic, cultural, and lingual diversity" (Anchimbe and Janney 2011: 1451). The aforementioned authors point out that, unlike traditional monolingual, monocultural Western pragmatic frameworks, postcolonial pragmatics, that is, the study of everyday linguistic communication in these societies with paramount ethnic, cultural and linguistic heterogeneity, attempts to "describe postcolonial interaction in its own right, on its own terms, free of the conceptual constraints of monolingual, monocultural pragmatic analytical frameworks" (Anchimbe and Janney 2011: 1451). However, although questions could be posed about the statement that the former colonial European societies are, in fact, monolingual or monocultural, it is true that, on the whole, African societies are more varied ethnically and linguistically. Thus, comparatively speaking, the premises posited by Anchimbe and Janney (2011) can serve as the point of departure in this research. Postcolonial linguistics/pragmatics takes "intermixed languages and communication practices as its point of departure" (Anchimbe and Janney 2011: 1451). It is for this reason that it can be considered the right approach to study functions and effects of hybrid discourse and group allegiances of online communities on instant messaging formed by African multilingual speakers.

There are several critical elements in the study of postcolonial communication practices. Of particular importance in postcolonial studies is the influence of indigenous languages in the linguistic panorama of the above-mentioned societies, that is, indigenisation, which Anchimbe (2014: 5) understands as "the inclusion, adaptation, and adoption of local or indigenous linguistic, geographical, ethnic, and cultural (i.e. ecological) elements into a language that is transplanted to a new ecology". The features involved in indigenisation depend not only on the language or languages used by each

community, the status of these languages, and the grammatical and lexical influences in the languages employed by a multilingual community, but also on patterns in code choice and macro-linguistic elements at the pragmatic level that ensure successful communication between interlocutors.

Relational and transactional works focusing on Cameroonian communication have amply documented that creativity and pragmatic considerations are at the centre of nominal address terms (Mulo Farenkia 2008a, 2008c, 2010; Nkwain 2014). For example, grammar and lexicon choices are pragmatically motivated in calling a stranger ‘uncle’ –implying respect and deference towards older people with the intention of negotiating social distance and power relations in Cameroonian English and Pidgin English (Anchimbe 2008, 2011; Echu 2008; Nkwain 2014). Strategies employed by French speakers include ethnonyms to indicate friendship that goes beyond ethnicity, expressing interethnic solidarity (Mulo Farenkia 2008a, 2010). Multi-ethnicity is also of crucial importance in the Cameroon French address system, as is the use of kinship terms (Mulo Farenkia 2008a, 2008c, 2010; Feussi 2008; De Féral 2012). A comparison of the use of address forms by Cameroonian Anglophone and Francophone communities shows that attitudes to interpersonal relationships, multilingualism, and vocal volubility shape how Cameroonians interact – their communicative style being a product of the confluence of many cultures (Mulo Farenkia 2008b). Other more recent issues in the literature on Cameroonian relational work address the complexity of thanking formulae as a reflection of indigenous sociocultural norms embedded in interactions in French (Mulo Farenkia 2019b).

Recent publications on online exchanges have addressed the online relationships of African multilingual interactants, their language use, and interactional patterns. For example, Pérez-Sabater and Maguelouk-Moffo’s (2020) article concerning interactions on Cameroonian Facebook pages about football confirms that Cameroonian national identity is still usually constructed through the exclusive use of English and French. Oyadiji’s (2020) work on socio-political attitudes in Nigerian news-based virtual communities certifies the role which ethnicity and religion play in interaction. Yet, not much has been written about semi-public online contexts in which the relationships among the members is explained, hence the need for the research published here.

2.1. Relational maintenance through CMC

Relational maintenance communication studies are centred on understanding communication mediated by digital media (Mason and Carr 2021), as well as how technology is transforming the way in which we conceptualise and understand relational maintenance (Tong and Walther 2011). Maintenance implies “perpetuating the overall satisfaction of the parties involved, creating a space for relationship maintenance which is distinct from either development or termination” (Mason and Carr 2021: 3).

A key issue in relational maintenance and CMC has been the comparison between face-to-face interaction and CMC communication (Ellison et al. 2007). CMC may be more desirable than face-to-face interaction for relationship maintenance, since the lack of nonverbal cues and greater control of the language in the written exchanges improve relational communication (Tong and Walther 2011). Along with the comparison between online and face-to-face interaction, the literature in the field has focused on social networks and social capital, particularly “the ability of individuals or groups to access resources embedded in their social network” (Ellison et al. 2014: 856).

Several central issues emerge as far as relational maintenance in Africa through online devices. Mwangi (2017) examines relationships of Kenyan adult users of WhatsApp, concluding that it has become a robust communication tool for keeping in touch with friends and family living abroad. In her master's dissertation, Mwangi (2019), centring on young adults' online romantic relationships, posits that, despite the connectivity problems of the continent, social networking sites, instant messaging, and smartphone applications are crucial in terms of reforming old, and creating new, friendships, as well as connecting family and colleagues. The author concludes her study on love relationships online by explaining that technology has changed our social relations, in which identity issues are challenging to manage since partners create new unreal identities or personas to engage on social media. In a South African context, Matenda et al. (2020: 2) examine social capital, which, in their view, refers to “an individual's use of social networks to gain access to and use resources”. Indeed, they argue that the use of social networking sites is decisive when it comes to cultivating social capital among young people in their country. Its use leads to common good as well as individual well-being, despite the digital divide and gender differences encountered.

The profusion of linguistic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic research on texting or smartphone messaging and relational maintenance has yielded exciting results. Such

studies shed light on the importance of linguistic strategies to construct identity and create and maintain relationships (e.g. Spilioti 2011; Tagg 2016; Pérez-Sabater 2022, 2024). Much research has focused on the role which graphical elements play in relationship maintenance and group solidarity. For example, Stark and Crawford (2015) affirm that emojis and emoticons are decisive elements in the effective mix of relationship maintenance, sustenance, and continuation, especially in women's chats. Sampietro (2019) investigates the contribution of emojis to relational dynamics. Her study concludes that emojis play an essential role in rapport management among individuals communicating on WhatsApp in the illocutionary, discursive, and stylistic domains. Pérez-Sabater discovers that emojis are decisive in maintaining friendship and show affect, as in the case of chat groups formed by women only (2019) or in groups formed by international colleagues (2021a). Cotelo García (2022) studies the contribution of lexical creativity and emotes on Twitch to virtual-community building. Other articles emphasise the role of humour and irony on WhatsApp in establishing and maintaining solidarity and in-groupness (Cruz-Moya and Sánchez-Moya 2021). Applying Leech's model of politeness, Culpeper and Pat (2021) investigate compliments in comments and metapragmatic comments on WhatsApp made by undergraduate college students from Hong Kong. Their results show that Leech's (2014) updated Obligation Maxim exerts the strongest force in the corpus. However, despite the myriad of recent investigations on the topic, relational maintenance practices of Cameroonian CMC have not attracted the attention of scholars so far, hence the need for the research carried out in this article.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

This study analyses the interactions between members of an existing offline community of university classmates who undertook Hispanic studies in the mid-2000s at a Cameroonian university of a French-speaking province and 'transferred' their interaction to WhatsApp in late 2018. This chat group, Generation 2006, is made up of:

Number of members	Provinces/colonial language	Religion	Profession
74 (54 women, 20 men)	67 Francophone 5 Anglophone 2 mixed families	65 Christian 6 Muslim 1 not religious	62 primary and secondary teachers 11 clerical jobs 1 university lecturer

Table 1. Participants in the chat Generation 2006

One of the authors of this article is a member of the group, as in Tsiplakou (2009: 373), which yields a number of advantages for the type of research undertaken here, including “...first-hand knowledge of the social and linguistic profiles of the participants”. The author’s first-hand knowledge of the group is updated and double-checked by means of an interview with the participants regarding their sociocultural background.

3.2. Method of analysis

Past quantitative research on language mixing strategies of online discourse normally encompasses quantifications based on the coding of textual data from social networks which the authors of the study belong to (e.g. Tsiplakou 2009). Usually, these quantitative data are combined with other methods of analysis, e.g. a detailed view of particular processes of language creativity and code-switching and mixing, sometimes through software-enabled, quantitative and manual, qualitative analyses of corpora (Deumert and Vold Lexander 2013; Pérez-Sabater and Maguelouk-Moffo 2019). This combination of methodologies is what we apply to the corpus gathered for this study. First, a quantitative examination was computed with Langdetect in order to obtain a general overview of the languages used in the chat and how the languages and the exchanges are distributed. Following this, a discourse analysis was undertaken.

3.2.1. *Quantitative analysis of the corpus*

The corpus comprises all the utterances exchanged in this community from 1 July 2020 until 12 April 2021.

To analyse the corpus quantitatively, the chatlog was downloaded, and a clean-up, which consisted of the removal of images/videos/memes, was undertaken⁵. The chatlog was further processed by removing parts of the document stating that the message had been omitted or a member had been incorporated into the group. Our intention was to then undertake a systematic approach to spelling standardisation because of the given extensive spelling variation of the messages. However, although there exists software for automatic spelling standardisation (see, for example, Lorenzo-Dus et al. 2020), due to the great variety of languages mixed up, there was no possibility of carrying out the process automatically, and manual standardisation was out of our reach.

Despite this drawback, we found that the library 'Langdetect'<langdetect> on Python 3.8, which is used to detect the language of texts and the number of words per utterance, was fairly reliable given the type of corpus in our hands. As for May 2021, this software can find out the probabilities for 55 top languages⁶. Also on Python, the library 'demoji' served to accurately find or remove emojis from our text. Since this whole file, with all the messages, contains utterances formed by more than a line, the file had to be prepared so that Langdetect could read it and correctly give the probabilities of the languages and the word count per message. The file with all the utterances contained metadata, the date the message was sent, and the sender's number, which the program used to distinguish between each message sent to the group, that is, the 'log' file. This allowed Langdetect to distribute the corpus per message appropriately.

In summary, the overall word count of the data set being examined is:

Number of words	62,672
Number of utterances/messages	4,265
Number of utterances formed by emoticons exclusively	381 (8.93%)
Utterances with text and emoticons	668 (15.7%)

⁵ We are conscious of the powerful role that graphicons play in today's interactions via WhatsApp (Sampietro 2019; Pérez-Sabater 2019). Nevertheless, their study is complex and would require a further article on their function and propositional meaning. This would be the focus of future research of this group's exchanges.

⁶ <https://pypi.org/project/langdetect/>

Utterances without emoticons	3,216 (75.4%)
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Table 2. Corpus: word count

Regarding the probabilities for the top languages in the chatlog, in the first stage, Langdetect identified the languages, but there were many errors.⁷ As Example (1) shows, this language detector provided misidentifications when recognising short portions of text:

Ça alors !!	Catalan	0.99999 (Wow)
Buen día y buen domingo.	Spanish	1.0 (Good morning and good Sunday)
Gracias 🙏	Spanish	0.99999 (Thanks)
Asiaaaa oooh bp de courage	Dutch	0.57143 (Courage, lots of courage)

Example 1. Utterances, language identified, probability and translation

In this excerpt of codification, the sentence coded as Catalan is undoubtedly French; the program must have confused “ça alors” (French) with ‘calors’ (heats in Catalan). Other crucial problems arose when the message contained emojis, as in the case of Gracias 🙏, which is not identified as 100% Spanish because of the interference of the emoji. Normally, there were errors in the codification when colloquial French and Cameroonian indigenous languages were involved, as in this case coded as Dutch: “Asiaa ooo” is a greeting formula in many local languages in the western part of Cameroon (in “Ngombaleu”, the language spoken in Bamessingué, for instance, it means “Hello”). It can also mean “wish you courage” or “I am sorry”. Despite these inconsistencies and misclassifications, when the corpus as a whole is computed, the software is much more reliable and tends to give the highest probability accurately; it forgets the detail and provides a broader, much more reliable probability, which, in our case, is 91% French. The box-and-whisker diagram in Figure 1 certifies that the probability of language detection in the corpus as a whole is very high, especially for French and Spanish. Unfortunately, the probability for African languages is so low that it is not shown in Figure 1:

⁷ “Language detection algorithm is non-deterministic, which means that if you try to run it on a text which is either too short or too ambiguous, you might get different results every time you run it”, as explained on their website.

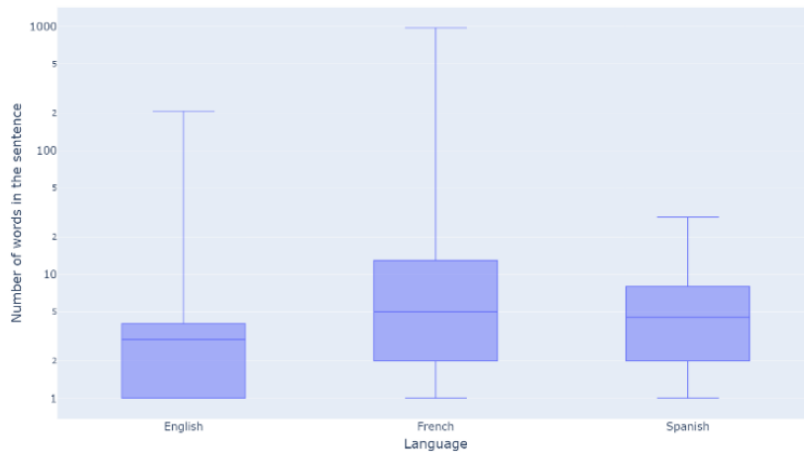


Figure 1. Box-and-whisker diagram of languages

For the graphs, the library ‘plotly’ was used to show the results in a chart.

In a second computing, most of the sentences initially detected as Afrikaans, Catalan, Dutch, Italian, German, and Portuguese were re-assigned to French, and the results were more accurate. The two authors of this article manually revised the new assignment for code reliability.

Finally, a word frequency examination was carried out with NVIVO – a software program for qualitative/content studies – which provided the lexical frequency and a cloud of words. This study serves to pinpoint areas of interest for a subsequent closer discourse analysis (Lorenzo-Dus et al. 2020).

We must clarify, at this stage, that we focus exclusively on text and the language-mixing phenomena encountered, we do not examine the part of utterances that contain no emojis, we simply remove the emojis and all the graphics encountered, thus, the authenticity of the data is not changed. The study of emoticons and the multimodal analysis of videos and memes in African exchanges are sure to provide fruitful and novel results in the field, but this is left for another time. The examination of these graphical elements will be the focus of a follow-up examination of this group’s interactions.

3.2.2. *Discourse analysis of language use*

Once the quantitative results had been obtained, a detailed discourse analysis following Herring (2007) was undertaken. The phenomena studied were language mixing

strategies and the functions involved in using several languages in the same communicative exchange, either the same utterance or the same thread. Drawing on Androutsopoulos (2013: 669), we focused on understanding "the pragmatic functions, social purposes, and interactional dynamics of CS online". Moreover, adopting the postcolonial socio-pragmatic perspective taken by Anchimbe (2008, 2011) and Mulo Farenkia (2008c, 2019a), the speakers' choices and intentions of language use are explored by approaching the social norms, linguistic, and ethnic diversity of Cameroonians. These members' language choices and intentions, which could contribute to the growing body of research in postcolonial pragmatics, refer to the use of nominal address terms, specifically kinship terms, lexis related to religion, and the role of Spanish in sustaining this 'family' of former university classmates, who are no longer interacting face-to-face.

Focusing on these three key elements in postcolonial pragmatics, the most relevant outcomes of examining the exchanges are interpreted in light of previous research.

4. Results and their interpretation

4.1. Quantitative results:

Langdetect produced the following results for the distribution of languages in the corpus. In general, the community studied interacts mainly in the majority language of the country, French, since most of the *generationists* 2006, as they call themselves, are Francophone and studied at a French-speaking university.

Figure 2 shows the results of the second and more accurate examination of the corpus that was revised manually by the two authors. The 'Unknown' category refers to the Native Cameroonian languages that the software is unable to recognise.

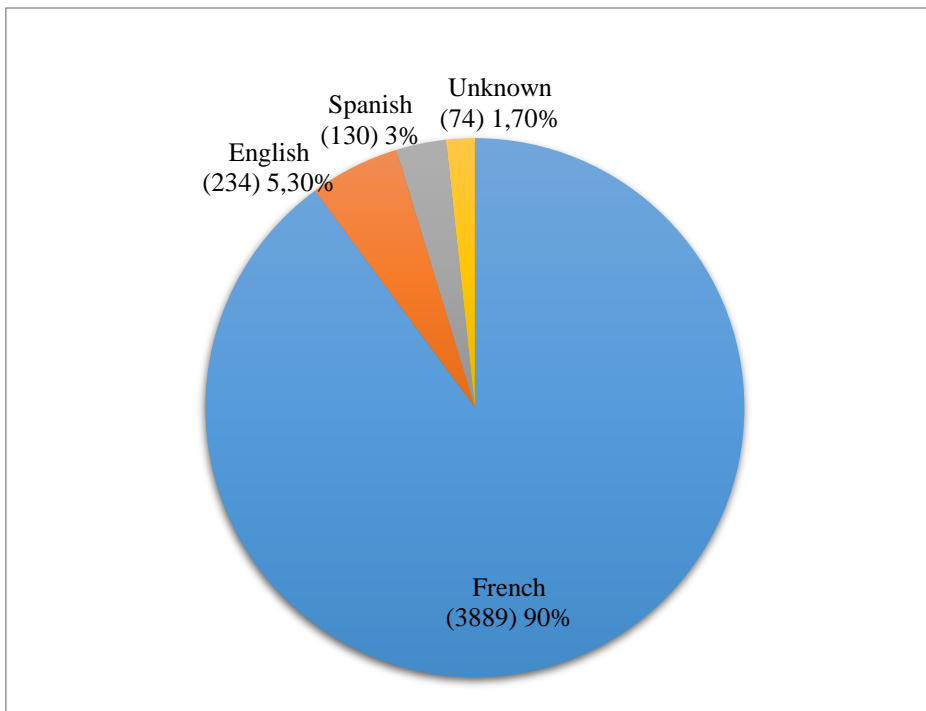


Figure 2. Utterances, languages, and percentages

Interestingly, the software confirms that utterances in French are far larger than utterances in English and Spanish (French, 15.5 words/message; English and Spanish, 5.3; unknown, 4.2). On the whole, these last three languages are only used in brief messages for greetings or in very short noun phrases.

The frequency-ranked first 1,000-word list reveals that, apart from pronouns and auxiliary verbs, the words are thematically distributed in 6 main groups, their position is added after lemmatization: (1) salutations, *Bonjour* or *bjr* (12) (good morning), *bonsoir* or *bsr* (48) (good evening); (2) collective nouns such as *famille* (31) (family), *groupe* (62) (group); (3) references to religious terms, *Dieu* (23) (God), *Seigneur* (50) (Lord), *amén/amen* (73), *Jésus/Jesus* (101), *Crist* (139), *Allah* (664); (4) kinship terms, *père* (80) (father), *papa* (327), *soeur* (655) (sister), *mama* (360), *mère* (362) (mother), *brother* (973) or *bro* (374), *frère/s* (107) (brother), *fille* (381) (daughter), *hein* (219) (pal), *sister/sista* (296), *hermana* (927) (sister in Spanish), *hermano* (902) (brother in Spanish), *miss* (127), *tío* (821) (literally uncle but colloquially brother, pal, fellow), *amigo* (958) (friend), *don* (868) (mister), *magni* (792) (mother of twins, Ngombaleu); (5) occupation terms, *docteur/docta/doc* (484) (doctor), *professeur/prof* (teacher) (650); (6) terms related to the COVID-19 pandemic, *masque* (497) (mask), *corona* (515).

Among the most frequently employed words, we find some in Spanish: apart from the previously-mentioned appellations, we have salutations such as *hola* (881) (hello), *buenos días* (502) (good morning), and *buenas noches* (732) (good night), as well as politeness indicators such as *gracias* (226) (thank you). Only one word in Cameroonian native languages is included in the first 1,000 words, *magni* or “mother of twins”. Despite this, in the following subsections the inclusion of words in these languages will be commented upon, since we believe its inclusion is of scholarly relevance.

4.2. Discourse analysis

The software-enabled, quantitative analysis has pinpointed some relevant strategies that must be paid deeper attention to corroborate their role in relationship maintenance, in constructing this community. The mixing of codes is the unmarked choice of many African societies (Simpson 2008); it is pragmatically unmarked in Cameroonian everyday conversations (Atanga 2012) and, without any doubt, the case of this community. The chatlog is principally in French, frequently in a very informal variety of the written language, with lexis in English and Spanish, as identified in the quantitative study.

Apart from the omnipresent use of language mixing phenomena to construct and maintain this online community of Spanish teachers, the members build their online ‘famille’ – their new social space for self-presentation and negotiation (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich and Bou-Franch 2019) – through different linguistic choices closely associated with ethnicity (Anchimbe 2011; Nkwain 2014; Mulo Farenkia 2019a).

In the examples below, groups of utterances as part of a thread are shown as they were sent, written typos are left as in the original to maintain authenticity. On African smartphones, predictive text software is generally limited to European languages, and so multilingual users generally switch predictive text off so as to text freely (Deumert and Vold Lexander 2013), which is sure to increase the number of spelling mistakes in our chatlog. Moreover, any interpretation of Cameroonian data must consider that only a few indigenous languages are undergoing a process of standardisation (Echu 2008), and in most of them there is no accepted orthography, while writers also freely spell as they like, as in many other African contexts (Deumert and Vold Lexander 2013). As

explained above, the software identified as unknown the lexical items in Cameroonian languages.

4.2.1. Nominal address terms

As Nkwain (2014: 190) argues, interlocutors of cross-cultural interaction avoid face-threatening acts by choosing address terms appropriately to “consolidate and foster solidarity, enhance camaraderie and engender warmth”. Mulo Farenkia (2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2019a) details different categories, patterns, and functions of nominal address terms in Cameroon French. In the utterances of this corpus, these categories and functions are often mingled in the same utterance or thread. As far as possible, we try to organise this section by following Mulo Farenkia’s subdivision of nominal address terms in kinship terms, honorific titles, occupation and rank titles, and friendship and endearment terms, although in several cases numerous categories will be approached simultaneously.

4.2.1.1. Kinship terms as forms of address. The Family

The main purpose of the group is social and recreational, as is the case with many chat groups on WhatsApp (see, for example, Wentker 2018; Pérez-Sabater 2022). This excerpt of a thread illustrates how the members address themselves when a generationist, Djork, announces the death of his father:

(2) Bonjour à toute la famille. J’ai la profonde douleur de vous annoncer le décès de mon père (Good morning to the whole family. I am deeply saddened to announce the death of my father, French)

Condoléances mon frere (Condolences, my brother, French)

Bjr à toute la famille Espa, J’adresse mes sincères condoléances à notre frère Djork (Good morning to all the family ‘Espa’. My sincere condolences to our brother Djork, French, Spanish)

Sincères condoléances bro (my sincere condolences, brother, French, Pidgin English/informal English)

Sincère condoléances, hermanito (My sincere condolences, little brother, French, Spanish)

In Example 2, the generationists address their friends as a family to enhance solidarity. They are usually referred to as brothers, sisters, or mothers, a way of showing respect for the group, as in the Mulo Farenkia's (2019a) study. In many cases, these kinship terms are in a language other than French. In African discourse, formulaic expressions of affection are frequently performed in a language different from the matrix one (Deumert and Vold Lexander 2013). In this example, lexis in Pidgin English/informal English and Spanish reinforces intimacy, closeness, alignment, and solidarity; it emphasises this sense of family and membership in the saddest moments for a participant.

In Example 3, the 'family' congratulates the parents of a new family member – a newborn:

(3) *Bonjour Ce baobab ! Je viens vous annoncer la naissance de mon fils* (Good morning, this baobab. I would like to announce the birth of my son, French)

Félicitations bro 🙌🙌🙌🙌❤️❤️ (Happy returns, brother, French, Pidgin English/informal English).

Félicitations hombre (Happy returns, man, French, Spanish).

This thread starts by calling this community a 'baobab'. This family constitutes a strong, big community – an African community embraced by the shadow of a giant African tree. Calling the group a baobab tree is a compliment; it is a way of showing respect for the members, as in Mulo Farenkia (2019a). The use of kinship terms in each utterance is also relevant as in Example 1. According to Anchimbe (2011), naming or appellations using formal and kinship terms have to do with how Cameroonian speakers address each other in their daily interactions. Calling a friend or even a neighbour brother or sister is a politeness or respect strategy rooted in indigenisation; addressing colleagues with kinship terms works as a way of expressing politeness to the people of the same age (Mulo Farenkia 2019a). In these examples, kinship terms play pragmatic roles such as relational, politeness, solidarity, or comradeship, as in Anchimbe (2011). They try to emphasise the sense of family throughout, to show how close they are

(Nkwain 2014) – “a strategy to maintain bonding within the group” (Mulo Farenkia 2019a: 340).

4.2.1.2. Social titles, friendship, and endearment terms

A clear relational maintenance aim has the use of nominal address terms in indigenous languages – a salient point that has surfaced in our corpus, since the written use of indigenous Cameroonian terms in public CMC, e.g. Facebook, is rare (Pérez-Sabater and Maguelouk-Moffo 2020). Indeed, the use of such terms is normally ‘marked’ in African texting and typically carries significant socio-symbolic meanings (Deumert and Vold Lexander 2013); this use of said terms is even more marked in our corpus of written semi-public practices of university graduates who are fluent in the two official languages.

Nelly’s birthday is celebrated in the family, and the generationists congratulate her and compliment her. In this case, we see very informal colloquial French, textese in French, with a short sentence in Spanish and a nominal address term in an indigenous Cameroonian language.

(4) 🥰🥰 *wouaou félicitacions magni bisous au bb et bcp d’autres graces dans la famille* 🙌🙌 *Feliz cumple Nelly* (Wow! Congratulations mother of twins. Kisses to the babies and many other graces in the family. Happy birthday, Nelly, French, Ngombaleu, Spanish).

Félicitations ! Congratulations ! Enhorabuena ! (Congratulations, French, English, Spanish).

Closely related to the Cameroonian ethnic background, we have *magni*, mother of twins, which is a polite form of address and an honorific title complimenting her fecundity in several indigenous Cameroonian languages of the western part, e.g. Ngombaleu. Anchimbe (2011) explains that *magni* or *many* is often inserted in conversations in English to name people we do not know so as to reduce power relations, losing its original ethnical meaning. Mulo Farenkia (2019a) adds that the indigenous term represents the sociocultural value implied in the idea that twins are divine blessings, which would not be implied by the appellation in French or English. This appellation clearly has pragmatic motivations such as showing respect, solidarity,

and group communion; it is employed among members of groups of any sort, social or tribal (Anchimbe 2011). In this case, however, the former classmates are aware of the fact that she has given birth to a couple of twins; consequently, calling Nelly *magni* is a compliment towards her. The utterance finishes in Spanish, wishing her a happy birthday. This utterance is followed by congratulations in different languages, the unmarked choice of this community as in Wentker (2018).

Indigenous lexis reinforces solidarity with the group (Oyadiji 2020). Despite their scarcity, their use helps create greater bonding in special moments for the group, such as when Armelle's baby dies. In this case, friendship and condolences with special endearment terms as solidarity strategies towards the devastated colleague are exchanged in the chat:

(5) *Bjr à tous. Juste pour vous annoncer le décès du bb de notre soeur Armelle* (Good morning everyone, only to say that the baby of our sister Armelle has passed away, French).

Weeeee courage à ma mbombo (Courage, my friend, French, Bassa language).

Beaucoup de courage ma sista, c'est la vie (Courage, my sister, that's life, French, Pidgin English).

Armelle is not only the sister of each member of the group, 'ma sista', but is also a dearest friend, as indicated by her being called *ma mbombo* – an ethnonym friendship term from the Bassa people (Mulo Farenkia 2008c) with a possessive adjective in French, following the pattern for condolences explained in Mulo Farenkia (2019a). By means of this ethnic word, greater solidarity towards Armelle and hence to the whole group is expressed, especially in difficult moments.

Also of relevance in the corpus is the insertion of honorific terms to compliment the others – a crucial strategy to maintain group cohesion within this group. As seen in (6), one generationist is thanked by other group members for his greeting (good morning):

(6) *Maaassa! Mon ami Barki a fait vivre ce groupe ce matin ! Bonjour chers tous* ("Dude! My friend Barki has made this group live this morning! Good morning my dear all, Pidgin English, French).

Merci beaucoup le très grand jaguar (Thank you very much, the very big jaguar, French)

Tu nous as beaucoup fait rire en fac mon grand aussi 🙌🙌🙌🙌🙌 (You made us laugh in college, my big, as well, French).

Terms complimenting the generationists, rooted in ethnicity and African culture, are the Pidgin English term *massa* and ‘big jaguar’, when addressing equals to express camaraderie (Nkwain 2014). Also, *mon grand* is an honorific term in French to compliment the interlocutor/s, common in Cameroonian conversations in French (Mulo Farenkia 2008c).

4.2.1.3. Occupation and rank titles

Occupation terms are employed to show respect and solidarity and to strengthen or soften speech acts (Mulo Farenkia 2008c, 2019). These are limited here to *prof/ professeur* (teacher), ‘teacher’, *docteur* or the informal *docta* or *doc* – address forms to compliment the members of the group and the whole community (Mulo Farenkia 2008c). ‘Teacher’ is employed in conversations in French to kindly address teachers – the profession of most of the generationists. *Docta*, an indigenised term originally from English, carries more respectful and bonding force (Mulo Farenkia 2008c), and more emotional commitment (Deumert and Vold Lexander 2013), reinforced by the positive adjectives employed in these examples. In this example, one participant has asked for the syllabus of Spanish 4, when the syllabus is sent, the members react by thanking her:

(7) *Merci prof* (Thank you, teacher, French)

Gracias Docta. Maravilloso 🙌🙌 (Thank you, doctor, wonderful, Spanish, Pidgin English)

Merci!!!!, teacher 🙌🙌🙌 (Thanks, teacher, French, English)

4.2.2. Religion

References to religion are present in many of these online texts to show solidarity, respect, and compassion, as religion is strongly embedded in African culture and language practices (Chiluwa 2013; Oyadiji 2020). Lexis connected to religion occupy the first positions in the frequency list as shown above. Examples 7 and 8 illustrate how these conventionalized rituals are inserted in the good wish for the beginning of the

academic year, Example (8), and when one generationist informs the others about a promotion (9):

(8) *Famille Bonne rentrée à tous!* (Family, have a good start!, French)

Merci!!! Bonne rentrée! Puisse Papa God être au contrôle 🙏 (Thank you. Have a good start! May Daddy God be in control, French, Pidgin English).

Amen

(9) *Macha Allah! Nous rendons grâce à Dieu* (Mashallah, what God has willed, we give thanks to God" (Arabic/Fulfulde, French).

Merci Felicitas! (Many happy returns, French, Latin).

Amén, prince! Tout est grâce (Amen, prince! All is grace, French).

Good wishes with a religious touch are common. Christian expressions are often in Pidgin English in the chatlog – the main Lingua Franca of Cameroon (Echu 2008) and the so-called official language of Christian Cameroonians – because it was the language adopted by the first religious missionaries for their religious activities (Anchimbe 2013; Kouega 2018); Papa God in Example (8). Similar to Christian formulae, Islam formulaic expressions in Latinised Arabic and/or Fulfulde are inserted in the corpus in French, Example 8, as in other research studies on African-based interactions (e.g. Androutsopoulos and Vold Lexander 2021). Fulfulde, the Indigenous language of the Cameroonian Gran North, mainly of Muslim worshippers, is used for Koranic education together with Arabic (Anchimbe 2013).

In this community, the inclusion of religious formulaic expressions is crucial for relational maintenance and the well-being of the group. These formulae are generally employed for good wishes of any type, as in the examples provided, and condolences. As indicated above, different confessions coexist, but conflict is usually avoided and God is addressed as Allah or God indistinctly, Example 8, despite this varied religious panorama. Only once is there a conflict concerning religion, when one generationist complains about the Pope defending homosexuality; in his view, the Catholic faith accepted homosexuality. The conflict only occurs in one utterance; it finishes when one of the persons involved leaves the group and the rest stop writing on the topic. As Bolander and Locher (2020: 6) indicate, digital discourse can “constitute a space where

norms and ideologies are negotiated in their own right”. The norm of this group is to avoid conflict, unlike other WhatsApp families, e.g. the feminist argument within a family chat group in Fernández-Amaya (2020). When a generationist does not agree with the topic of the thread or any statement, they leave the chat without any explanation, as in other studies on WhatsApp (e.g. Macharia et al. 2021), which may imply a certain face-threatening act (Brown and Levinson 1987) and some sort of impoliteness towards the family. This is somehow accepted because the colleagues rarely confront the others; conflict and impoliteness avoidance is decisive for this African family.

On balance, these fluid language practices (Androutsopoulos and Vold Lexander 2021) show that the members of this family comply with Cameroonian sociocultural exigencies and norms (Anchimbe 2016; Mulo Farenkia 2019a). Studies on politeness and relational work in Cameroon usually stem from the fact that relationships are sustained by the fact that “among many Cameroonian indigenous cultures being ‘polite’ goes with being well-behaved, serviceable to the community, humble and respectful. Polite verbal behaviour, i.e., ways of speaking, only comes to compliment these qualities” (Anchimbe and Janney 2011: 1454). Here, the creation of a polite environment for relationship maintenance implies conflict avoidance, complimenting the others, and being well behaved with the group, which is accomplished by the linguistic strategies employed by this family.

5. Discussion

Keeping in touch with people we do not see very often, an old friend or someone we knew in high school or university, has been one of the most frequently reported uses of social networks as a participatory space (Lampe et al. 2006; Tong and Walther 2011). The smartphone and texting are technologies of sociability for friendship maintenance, involvement, and bonding (Thurlow and Poff 2013; Yus 2022). Cameroonian online communities on WhatsApp are generally structures of mutual support and solidarity (Miller et al. 2021) and, as in other cases reported, are in perpetual contact (Cruz-Moya and Sánchez-Moya 2021). The results of our analysis confirm that this semi-public space serves the purpose of establishing solidarity and enhancing relationships. However, unlike Miller et al. (2021), the members offer and give only emotional

support; for example, when a relative dies, the financial support they saw in their study is absent from this group so far.

In general, WhatsApp in Cameroon is a ‘domestic space’ that “recreates the informality of the household” (Miller 2021: 9), which implies that this WhatsApp chat is the household where former ‘families’ reconnect. ‘Our family’, which goes beyond biological ties, is recreated also by their frequent use of languages in their informal variety – a tendency in African texting (Deumert and Vold Lexander 2013). The group is sustained and closely connected to the linguistic and pragmatic strategies rooted in the languages and cultures of the country, both native and imported, that Cameroonians employ in their daily conversations (e.g. Anchimbe 2008; Nkwain 2014); this time, however, in their everyday written conversations.

All in all, the examination of the corpus has brought about the following interesting results concerning the creation and enhancement of solidarity and relationship maintenance.

On the one hand, there is no doubt that the forms of address analysed are clearly culture-specific, rooted in the sociocultural context of the Cameroonian society (Nkwain 2014). These normativities are in accordance with what Anchimbe (2011) explains for Cameroonian English and French: as part of the process of nativisation or indigenisation of the two official languages of the country, kinship terms to address people who are not family are politeness indicators to show respect and be polite, carrying social and pragmatic significance. This is similar to what Mulo Farenkia (2019a) explains after the examination of conversations in Cameroonian service encounters, where the use of kinship terms as an addressing strategy maintains group, family, and community cohesion, since kinship terms serve to be polite and respectful with the others. Indeed, the inclusion of these terms contributes to relational maintenance in this chat group to sustain “both the existence of the relationship and satisfaction of each partner” (Tong and Walther 2011: 99) – on balance, to behave in accordance with Cameroonian sociocultural exigencies and norms rooted in the indigenous cultures of the country (Anchimbe 2016; Mulo Farenkia 2019a). Moreover, by code-switching to Spanish for these family names, the participants attempt to establish even closer links among the family of former university classmates, although the use of the language studied by the group is not as expected. Apart from naming, the practice of code-switching to Spanish in this translanguaging space is limited to short sentences and politeness indicators; it is

another linguistic strategy of the family's perpetual language mixing practices. Still, it does not have the preferred role in the process of maintaining friendships, as we see in other similar studies of chat groups formed by university colleagues (Wentker 2018; Pérez-Sabater 2022).

On the other hand, another salient outcome of the analysis is the continuous references to religion to show solidarity, respect, and compassion and enhance friendship maintenance. Religion is strongly embedded in African culture and language practices (Chiluwa 2013; Oyadiji 2020) – a significant topic of interest among individuals and social groups (Chiluwa 2008; 2013). References to religion in discourse are intimately connected to pre-colonial practices since “while a very small minority of the population adheres to animist religions, reflexes of which are also found in local practices associated with Islam and Christianity” (McLaughlin 2008: 81).

What's more, WhatsApp is linked to religion in Cameroon because one of the most common aims of this medium in the country is the coordination of religious activities (Miller et al. 2021). The 2019 Report on International Religious Freedom documents the prominence of religion in Africa and Cameroon: 69.2% of the 26.3 million Cameroonian population are active Christian worshippers, while 20.9% are active Muslim practitioners, and 5.6% are animists. A poor 3.2 % of the country's population report no religious affiliation⁸, hence the role of religion in the chat group and the fact that the only confrontation within this ‘family’ is about religion.

Finally, we would like to emphasise that many technologies today have become phatic in the sense that their purpose is generally to establish and maintain human relationships (Yus 2022). On smartphone communication, people often send text messages for relational bonding and social coordination but also “to be seen to be texting” (Thurlow and Poff 2013: 177) or, simply, to be seen to belong to the group, regardless of the amount of ‘production’ they offer to the rest. This is similar to the case of many chats on WhatsApp, in which frequently only a few interactants forming the group exchange memes or information regularly, and the others simply stay in silence, as in the Kenyan farmer's chat studied by Macharia et al. (2021). Here, the results evince that it is the belonging to this baobab tree which is vital for the generationists, and hence the need to keep the giant tree in perfect shape.

⁸ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-report-on-international-religious-freedom/cameroon/>

6. Conclusions

In this article, we posed two research questions. The first asked to what extent solidarity and relationship maintenance were realized through language mixing and what the role of Spanish was in this community formed by former students of Hispanic studies. The second asked what the tie signs of this online community were. The Results section above presents details of our answers to these questions that we summarize here.

Regarding the first research question, we see that many languages are used indistinctly in this community. However, we do not see a clear distinction between the formal and informal usage of the ex-colonial languages as in other cases, e.g. in Anchimbe and Mforteh (2011), but instead significant high frequencies of textese language, the digital varieties of French and English with abbreviations and oralised written text (Yus 2022), and indexical of digital writing (Deumert and Vold Lexander 2013). On the other hand, the two official languages are intermixed with lexicon in indigenous languages and Spanish. Interestingly, however, the members' use of Spanish as the preferred tie sign of the community is not as expected. We saw in previous research that Cameroonians' lexical creativity is paramount (Mulo Farenkia 2008c; Pérez-Sabater and Maguelouk-Moffo 2019); it is part of their everyday lives. This may be the reason why, unlike the results of Wentker (2018) and Pérez-Sabater (2022), Cameroonians' use of Spanish as the link of the group to establish its particular group-tie sign is not seen here. For Cameroonian natives, the insertion of the language they studied in their utterances is not a novelty that can establish the particularities of the group, since mixing languages and inserting different languages in the same text/conversation is common practice. What brings the group together is their sense of family: they are brothers and sisters who share a past at university and a present as teachers of Spanish. This will be the answer to the second research question.

A final interesting outcome of this study is that for African language writing, the results evince that "texting has emerged as a new literacy domain" (Deumert and Vold Lexander 2013: 541). The use of indigenous languages in public or semi-public written text is in its infancy (Pérez-Sabater 2021b) and pragmatically marked in African texting (Deumert and Vold Lexander 2013). In this corpus, the insertion of lexis in Fulfulde, Bassa, or Ngombaleu serves to construct closer ties among the generationists for

relationship maintenance, solidarity, and respect, as in everyday conversations, but in the present cases, written conversations of highly-educated Cameroonians.

Our findings must be taken with caution, for they are limited in terms of corpus size and features. This investigation has dealt with the exchanges of only one community communicating on one technical medium – among the many real communities interacting daily in Cameroon and in numerous African countries that have never been analysed. For this reason, despite the limitations of the corpus and participants, this article could work as a first guide for more enriching and novel outcomes in the field.

Future investigations can approach the interactions of this group of teachers on different social media applications to provide a better understanding of the communication strategies of Cameroonian texters, following the recommendations of Mason and Carr (2021), who indicate that the field requires studies of relational maintenance in multiple communication channels. A deeper study of the uses of graphical elements may also provide interesting academic results.

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