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Additional Information

Mixing Catalan, English and Spanish on WhatsApp: A case study on language choice and code-switching

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The purpose of this study is to examine language choice, language alternation and code-switching practices in Instant Messaging (IM). Specifically, this article presents the results from an analysis of the written conversations of a specific community formed by Valencian adults fluent in English. Taking a computer-mediated, discourse-centred ethnographic approach to online discourse, the study has shown that, in this specific trilingual online community of language teachers, language choice and the choice of a specific written variety is intimately related to audience. The group members mix Catalan, English and Spanish regularly, their language choice and code-switching strategies serving to establish in-group solidarity, familiarity and lessen face-threatening acts. Switches to English, sometimes followed by a switch to Catalan, are usually employed for humorous word play. Interestingly, the case study exemplifies how the use of a certain language may be highly correlated to ideological and political considerations.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, Computer-mediated Communication, Instant Messaging, language choice, language-mixing phenomena, linguistic creativity.

1. Introduction

From a sociolinguistic point of view, creative linguistic resources in online communication can be used “...for strategic styling, for representing certain identity aspects in specific situations, and for emphasizing what kinds of cultures or lifestyles one is willing to align oneself with” (Peuronen 2011, 154). The creative linguistic resources this article considers are language alternation practices, specifically code-switching (CS), in the written exchanges of a WhatsApp¹ group made up of former university classmates who studied English Philology in the late 1980s. Traditionally, multilingual practices and CS have been studied in the oral conversations of bilingual groups (Gumperz 1977). With the advent of the Internet, multilingual practices have gone beyond oral and/or face-to-face interactions and are now taking place online en masse. Unfortunately, although these mixing phenomena have been studied since the beginning of Computer-mediated Communication (CMC) research (Georgakopoulou 1997), the spread of CS and language-mixing practices on an unprecedented scale has not attracted academic attention in equal measure, as noted by Androutsopoulos (2013).

In the same vein, although in recent years the number of studies has significantly increased (Lee 2016, 2017; Kulavuz-Onal and Vásquez 2018; Pérez-Sabater; Maguelouk-Moffo 2019), Leppänen and Peuronen (2012) highlight the need for more studies on online multilingualism from a variety of perspectives and methodologies to document the specificities and differences between the languages employed and their functions and meanings on the Internet. In the case of Catalan and Spanish, little attention has been given to language preference and CS in written online conversations.

¹ At the moment, WhatsApp is the most popular social-networking service and Instant Messaging (IM) application with more than 1.5 billion users according to www.digitalinformationworld.com

Over the last five years, exchanges on WhatsApp in the Spanish-speaking context have been approached extensively from different methodological perspectives and theoretical frameworks. The pioneering article written by Calero Vaquera (2014) described the technical affordances and linguistic characteristics of this technical medium; Pérez-Sabter (2015) compared the informal character of adults' online conversations in Catalan, English and Spanish; Vela and Cantamutto (2016) proposed a new technique to study private interactions on this technical medium; Maíz-Arévalo (2018, 2021) analysed emotional self-presentation in profile status; and Pérez-Sabater (2019) and Sampietro (2019) focused on the pragmatic functions of emoticons and their role in online exchanges. Fernández-Amaya (2020) examined conflict management in a family chat group and Cruz-Moya and Sánchez-Moya (2021) the multimodal expression of humour in a group of senior users. The impetus behind the profusion of studies on WhatsApp, of which only a few examples have been given here, comes from the need to examine current online exchanges in the most popular messaging application in Spain and other Spanish-speaking countries. However, none of these publications has centred exclusively on CS. In this context, the aim of this article is to address this specific gap in the literature by analysing language choice and CS in a multilingual environment as well as the functions performed by language-mixing practices, focusing principally on the creation of in-group identity (Pérez-Sabater and Maguelouk-Moffo 2019), interpersonal alignment (Georgakopoulou 1997; Androutsopoulos 2013) and the expression of solidarity in online exchanges (Bou-Franch 2006) on WhatsApp (Pérez-Sabater 2021). As in Tsiplakou (2009), this case study can be regarded as a contribution toward understanding the discourse practices of a close-knit social group by means of ethnographic observation and a discourse analysis of their online textual practices. In line with Wentker's (2018) study of WhatsApp interactions, the members of an a priori homogeneous

group, such as the one studied here, can demonstrate linguistic variation. The novelty of this article, as stated above, lies in the fact that these practices are used among a multilingual group writing in Catalan, English and Peninsular Spanish (henceforth Spanish), a field in need of extensive research. This article also addresses identity issues in digital discourse in the Hispanic cyberspace, a key area of digital discourse analysis in need of scholarly attention as well, according to Bou-Franch (2020).

Gumperz (1977) pointed out that depending on factors such as origin, profession, region and social class, each group tends to establish its communicative conventions of use regarding CS. In this vein, this article approaches the interplay between language choice, language-mixing phenomena and the discourse functions involved in these language-mixing practices by answering the following research questions:

- a) How is language choice negotiated in this multilingual group?
- b) Does CS occur and for what purpose? What discourse functions are performed by CS to Catalan and English?

This article is organised as follows: Section 2 briefly reviews some of the theoretical concepts and the general language context that inform this research. The participants, corpus and methodology are described in Section 3. The next section, 4, presents the language choice and CS results with an interpretation of the data using the most relevant literature in the field. Finally, Section 5, conclusion, deals with the implications of the findings and gives an outline for further research.

2. Theoretical background: revisiting some concepts

Since the early 1970s, sociolinguistics has focused on situations in which members of one community, fluent in two languages, regularly use both in their daily routines. The seminal definition of CS established by Gumperz (1977:1) has been a crucial point of departure in these studies: CS is "...the juxtaposition of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems, within the same exchange." Considered primarily as a marginal or transitory phenomenon by academia (Gumperz 1977), the Internet has increased the opportunities for CS on an unprecedented scale (Androutsopoulos 2013).

Traditional distinctions in conversational CS have evolved and have been adapted recently to the study of CS in CMC. In this regard, Hinrichs (2006) argues that for online studies categories need to be renegotiated and some conceptually-separated types redefined. A key issue that needs to be addressed is the definition of online multilingualism. Androutsopoulos (2015, 185) determines the scope of what he calls 'networked' multilingualism. In his view, this is a cover term for multilingual practices "...that are shaped by two interrelated processes: being networked, i.e. digitally connected to other individuals and groups, and being in the network, i.e. embedded in the global digital mediascape of the web." As for language choice, in line with Lee (2017, 23), in online environments language choice is basically concerned "...with the codes or linguistic resources available to online participants and how they negotiate their code preferences when communicating with others." In public social networks such as Facebook, Lee (2016) explains that participants may or may not share common codes or languages because this technical medium provides translation facilities for comments or news feeds in many languages. In 2019, however, WhatsApp does not yet include translation facilities.

Another important concept in need of redefinition is what it is understood by online CS, as not all the linguistic diversity hosted in CMC written texts qualifies as online CS. Code-switching practices in networked multilingualism exclude the simple coexistence of different languages on a webpage or thread; only when a dialogical interrelation occurs can we talk about online CS (Androutsopoulos 2013).

Translanguaging, a term imported from bilingual education (Li 2011), has gained importance recently in online multilingualism. Translanguaging communicative practices are “...the ways in which groups and communities of people experience and do things that involve more than one language” (Lee 2016, 26). As Pérez-Sabater and Maguelouk-Moffo (2019) explain, social media can be seen as a multilingual virtual space, a translanguaging virtual space that is not just a physical location or historical context, but a network of real or virtual social relationships for the multilingual language user to “...generate new identities, values and practices” (Li 2011, 1223). Other new terms have been suggested to refer to language choice, CS and switches that go beyond single words, phrases or sentences in online studies. For example, Jaworska talks about ‘digital code plays’ in her analysis of the online interactions of German expatriates living in Great Britain when referring to language alternations based on “...conscious manipulations and playful distortions of linguistic material” (2014, 59). Similarly, Hinrichs (2016) has recently proposed the term ‘digital language contrasting’ to refer to both language choice and code-switching in online discourse practices. However, these alternative referents are still a long way from being adopted unanimously by academia to substitute the traditional CS and language choice firmly rooted in the field.

Besides redefining terms, recent literature in the field has readdressed the functions involved in CS. Language choice, CS and language-mixing phenomena are resources that have

pragmatic, discourse and social functions (Androutsopoulos 2013; Lee 2016). The functions identified so far in CS include switching for formulaic discourse practices, switching to perform culturally-specific genres or to convey reported speech. Androutsopoulos (2013, 681) specifies that interactants can “...switch to or from the interlocutor’s code to index consent or dissent, agreement and conflict, alignment and distancing.” A pragmatically informed micro-analysis of CS in CMC can show how the use of different languages by the members of a group may serve these functions and identity values.

Regarding online identity, identities in social media do not only refer to who we are but “...also who we want to be to others, and how others see us or expect us to be” (Lee 2017, 55). Online identity is, under constructivist approaches followed here, constructed or created (Yus 2018, 2021), often through creative orthography, code choice and code-switching (Lee 2016). Indeed, online identity is, in Lee’s view, a dynamic concept “...always open for reappropriation, recontextualization, and transformation” (2017, 55). Likewise, in-group or intra-group identity involves a sense of belonging to a social group and is generally co-constructed by means of special discursive features working as inherent sources of in-group or intra-group identity; these features also establish inter-group differentiation (Yus 2018). In a similar vein, Li (2011) points out that in translanguaging spaces, “...identities, values and practices” do not simply coexist but combine to create “...new identities, values and practices” (Li 2011, 1223).

A final reflection on the literature addresses the fact that CS does not occur when there is a deficit in either language; it is no longer to be regarded as a ‘dirty mixing of languages’ (Wolff 2018), but rather a valuable linguistic tool used for different purposes (Wentker 2018). ‘Overall code-switching’ that normally constitute the unmarked choice in off-line bilingual communities with a significant function in conversation (Myers-Scotton 1988, 2000), is nowadays the

preferred variety in many online communities. It is the easiest way to communicate within the group (Dorleijn and Nortier 2009), the unmarked choice (expected) (Wentker 2018).

Published research on online language-mixing phenomena has explored its different aspects. For example, it has focused on delimiting the genres that favour the use of CS (Lee, 2016, 2017). Other publications have identified the close relationship between CS and identity in several technical media such as emails, Facebook and blogs. For example, Lam (2004) explains how Cantonese-English code-switching in a chat room is used to develop a collective ethnic identity. Hinrichs (2006) studies how in Jamaican emails and discussion fora, Patois is employed as a resource to create humoristic identity. In Tsiplakou's email study (2009), language alternation between Greek and English is the mechanism deployed par excellence to construct that group's online communicative identity. Leppänen and Peuronen (2012) see how in a fan fiction story published online, Finnish is used to identify the real world and English represents a fictional realm and in a blog entry, multiple language choices are functional and meaningful to construct the cosmopolitan identity of the writer. Lengyelová (2019) deals with CS to English in Slovak business email, emphasising how English as a Lingua Franca is used with Slovak to create a distinct group code.

In addition to these studies, research published in two book chapters presents a complete revision of language choice and CS in CMC. In the first chapter, Androutsopoulos (2013) highlights that the pragmatic functions and identity values of different codes in a group's usage cannot be assumed a priori. Another significant point made is that the use of linguistic heterogeneity to index social identities on the Internet goes beyond a simple "...reflection of spoken conversational patterns." In her book chapter, Lee (2016, 129) updates Androutsopoulos' (2013) list of selected research on CS in digital communication and concludes that, essentially,

mixed-language texts enable participants to “...manage relationships, perform multicultural identities and build communities.”

Recent research on the interactions of WhatsApp, language mixing phenomena and identity deal with how overall CS between English and German can be a powerful resource to construct group identity in a chat group formed by friends who study English at university (Wentker 2018) and how CS is a key strategy to demonstrate group solidarity during moments of sharing that are special and highly significant for the participants of a chat group formed by international work colleagues (Pérez-Sabater 2021).

Despite the list of studies outlined here, little has been published with regard to English-Spanish online mixing practices exclusively, even though Spanish is the third most-used language on the Internet after English and Chinese. Relevant exceptions are the articles by Negrón Goldberg (2009), Montes-Alcalá (2016) and Pérez-Sabater and Maguelouk-Moffo (2019). The first deals with naturally-occurring written CS in the emails of Latinos and affirms that English is associated with formal and professional contacts while Spanish is related to intimacy, informality and group identification. The second compares CS in email, blogs and social networking and finds that the socio-pragmatic functions found conform to most of those traditionally associated with spoken CS. The last case explores language-mixing strategies on public Facebook pages devoted to football, concluding that Spanish and, to a lesser extent, Catalan are used for identity construction in online communities devoted to sports. Despite these publications and the recent academic interest in documenting language-mixing phenomena, little research has been done into semi-public (Tagg and Lyons 2019) online practices in multilingual contexts and even less when these contexts involve so-called minority languages such as Catalan.

Before describing the methodology and corpus, a brief outline of the language context must be provided.

2.1 *Catalan and Spanish in Valencia*

Since the Constitution of 1978, most peripheral Spanish territories, such as Galicia, the Basque Country, Catalonia, the Valencian Region, the Balearic Islands and parts of Navarre, are bilingual communities with two official languages for teaching and use in the public domain (Moreno-Fernández 2007). In Valencia, the main law governing linguistic policy, *Llei d'Ús i Ensenyament del Valencià* (1983), regulates the use of Valencian² in the public arena with an emphasis on its mandatory teaching (Blas Arroyo 2002). Traditionally, Valencia has presented diglossic attitudes paradigmatically (Blas Arroyo 2005); also, Valencian sociolinguistic reality presents a lower level of linguistic loyalty to the autochthonous language than that observed in other bilingual Spanish territories such as Catalonia (Blas Arroyo 2002). Figures included in the article by Gimeno-Menéndez and Gómez-Molina (2007, 100) demonstrate this sociolinguistic reality: “Spanish is the predominant language in intergroup communication (street 70.6%; traditional shops 64.5%; shopping malls and department stores 74.1%; in the workplace 57.2%; etc.).”

In recent years, however, some changes have been observed in this regard. In certain sectors of Valencian society, the use of Catalan in the public space is regarded positively. For instance, some groups of young people who attend schools where classes are taught in Catalan demonstrate a clear preference for the use of this language at all levels of education.

² In this study, I will refer to the variety of Catalan spoken in Valencia as Catalan, following Blas Arroyo (2007).

Regarding language choice, Blas Arroyo (2005) says that a Catalan speaker from Valencia has traditionally changed his/her language when addressing an interlocutor with a different ethnolinguistic identity. However, willingness to accommodate the preferred language of others is starting to change mainly due to ideological factors, which results in 'dualingual' practices (Gómez Molina 1999-2000; Blas Arroyo 2008).

As for CS in Valencia, following sociolinguistic and pragmatic criteria, Gómez-Molina (1999-2000) identifies and analyses the myriad of cases of CS phenomena found in conversations carried out by Catalan speakers with multiple examples of switching to Spanish and vice versa; that is, Spanish speakers switching to Catalan profusely. Gómez Molina also highlights that Spanish 'tag-switching' is becoming increasingly popular. This involves the use of certain expressions in Catalan inserted into a sentence in Spanish, a practice that does not require the speaker to have a high level of competence in Catalan. In this way, Spanish speakers converge to some elements of bilingual discourse in societies where the autochthonous language is now acquiring prestige, serving as an indicator of, in this case, Valencian identity (Blas Arroyo 2005).

Finally, it must be said that lexical transfer and lexical borrowing, extensively studied in Catalan/Spanish sociolinguistics (Gómez Molina 1999-2000; Kempas and López Samaniego 2007), are not analysed here. The focus is exclusively on language choice and CS in written communication as deliberate choices with, usually, a clear purpose, a gap in the literature that this study attempts to fill.

3. The case study

3.1 *Participants*

This study analyses interactions between members of an existing offline community of university classmates who studied English Philology in the 1980s which ‘transferred’ online in March 2015. This WhatsApp group is made up of 37 women and 4 men. The author of this article is a member of the group, as in Tsiplakou (2009, 373), which yields a number of advantages for ethnographic research of the type undertaken here, including, “...first-hand knowledge of the social and linguistic profiles of the participants.”

Before outlining the linguistic repertoire of this community, I need to clarify the following: the participants were born in the second half of the 1960s and attended school during Franco’s regime. Due to the language situation under the dictatorship in Spain, participants were educated in Spanish only at primary and secondary levels. The mainstream media were exclusively in Spanish, so the native speakers of Catalan in the group had daily contact with Spanish since their early childhoods. When the participants of this case study attended university in the 1980s, Catalan was an obligatory subject at university and therefore all group members reached an intermediate level in the language before graduation.

Having all these previous considerations into account, the figures gathered from a questionnaire completed by the group regarding their language background are as follow: 51% are native speakers of Spanish, 29% native speakers of Catalan and 22% were born in mixed families, i.e., that have Spanish and Catalan as native languages. All members can understand Catalan and 70% are also proficient in writing Catalan. The percentage of the group proficiency in written Catalan is much higher than that seen among the wider population. The most recent

figures published in 2015 by the Valencian Government about the knowledge of the autochthonous language reported that around 55% of Valencian university graduates can write proficiently in Catalan (Generalitat Valenciana 2015). The higher proficiency of the group's members is probably due to the fact they are linguists and presumably have higher language skills than non-linguists. Moreover, nearly all the group members work in education in the public sector where a command of Catalan is necessary for promotion. All have a native-speaker level of Spanish, although 1 woman was born in Germany and 2 in France (but all have Spanish parents). Most participants have a very high level of English (C1) and 7 have a level approaching native (C2). Nearly all members are teachers of English in secondary schools, 3 teach at university and 1 is a jeweller.

The main purpose of the group is social and recreational in nature although sometimes the chat is used to exchange information or clarify aspects of the members' professions. The tone of the exchanges is usually casual and friendly. It can be said that these participants form a close-knit social group who meet face to face only once a year but communicate frequently on WhatsApp to develop and maintain their relationship. However, their use of WhatsApp is unlike the more common frame of 'perpetual contact' of other WhatsApp groups, for example, the one studied by Cruz-Moya and Sánchez-Moya (2021) with members constantly sharing irrelevant content in terms of propositional load, principally to maintain sociability and group cohesion. The members gave permission for their interactions to be studied but, to ensure anonymity, only Christian names have been shown in the examples. None of the group members knew in advance that their WhatsApp conversations would be used in a study; therefore, the corpus is made up of exchanges which occurred naturally in a semi-public environment.

3.2. Corpus

The corpus comprises the interactions of the whole group over nearly 5 years. It consists of 50,689 words.³ Emoji, images and videos were discarded. Further examinations could include multimedia sources, following the multimodal analysis of language choice by Lee and Barton (2011).

3.3 Methodology

Lee (2016) posits that methodology used in online discourse analysis should move beyond mere comparisons of face-to-face and online practices. In her view, most work in the field of new literacy studies must involve discourse analysis and direct contact with the users of the tool through interviews. This insider's perspective can provide interesting insights which help us understand new media writing (Lee 2016). Following this line of thought, a discourse-centred online ethnography has been the approach taken here: a 'bird's eye view' of the distribution of languages over the whole data set is combined with detailed analysis of individual cases of switching and mixing (Androutsopoulos 2013). Brief informal interviews with the participants complete the study.

Following the discourse functions detailed by Androutsopoulos (2013, 681), those functions which are performed by CS to Catalan and English are examined: switching for formulaic discourse purposes, to perform culturally-specific genres such as poetry or joke telling, for emphatic purposes, to index a certain addressee, to mitigate face-threatening acts and to index

³ To prevent bias, the threads in which the author of this research actively participates were removed from the corpus.

consent or dissent, agreement and conflict, alignment and distancing. Special attention is devoted to CS to create group alignment, solidarity and in-group identity (Wentker 2018; Pérez-Sabater and Maguelouk-Moffo 2019; Pérez-Sabater 2021); in other words, strategies to consolidate their in-group membership and feelings of group membership and bonding (Pérez-Sabater 2021).

4. Results and their interpretation

The first research question (RQ1) sought to understand how language choice is negotiated in the group. The analysis shows that the dominant language is Spanish but participants also interact in Catalan and English; sometimes Latin and Greek are used (1 participant studied classical languages as well, and all the participants learned Latin during their first 2 years at university). Language choice is clearly dependent on personal preferences and ideological factors. While 38% use Catalan and Spanish indistinctly, normally depending on the intended addressee or accommodating the main language of the thread, as in the study of Climent et al. (2007) on Catalan/Spanish language choice in CMC, most users consistently communicate exclusively in one language, regardless of topic or addressee. More than half of the native Spanish speakers (62%) employ English or Spanish but rarely Catalan. As explained in the interviews, this is due to their lack of confidence in writing this language correctly (a type of Labovian ‘linguistic insecurity’ but one regarding users’ concerns about inaccurate spelling) or for political/personal reasons; some (4) are active members of a conservative political party which has traditionally held an ambiguous position on linguistic policy in Valencia (Lado 2011). With regard to Catalan, some members (3) use Catalan exclusively, despite the fact that 2 of them are not native speakers

of the language. As reported in the interviews, this is due to their support for the autochthonous language in public spaces and their active support of a Valencian nationalist political party. Along with Catalan, these members often resort to English, the group's distinctive code, when the thread is being written in Spanish to avoid writing in Spanish.

Interestingly, the interviews also revealed that some of the native speakers of Catalan are not confident enough to write in this language in exchanges between linguists. Far from what Aracil (1966), following Labov (1966), named self-hatred attitudes of Valencian speakers towards their language, their reluctance is a consequence of being educated exclusively in Spanish: they are afraid of making mistakes in a group of proficient Catalan writers. These participants prefer to communicate using the language they know how to write best, as they are likely to fear being considered under-educated in Catalan by their university classmates. It is important to highlight that the participants consistently write in Catalan standard code, unlike those in other studies on online writing in Catalan (see, for example, Pérez-Sabater 2015). This rigour in standard code use by those members who employ Catalan in their messages may also contribute to other members' concerns regarding writing in Catalan, magnifying their fear of making errors. Also remarkable is that some participants (5 women) regularly use English to avoid writing in Spanish: their classmates know they are native speakers of Catalan and they would lose face⁴ if they wrote in Spanish.

Examples 1 and 2 show this multilingual participation: Example 1: Thread wishing Merry Christmas to the whole group. The first 2 utterances are in English, then Spanish and Catalan.

⁴ Research into face, or the image of self, presented and recognised in everyday life, derives from Goffman's (1959) work and is a cornerstone of politeness theory as developed by Brown and Levinson (1978).

Example 2: The image on the right includes Latin, Greek, Spanish and Catalan. The second utterance is a tree in Spanish wishing Season's Greetings to teachers.

(1)

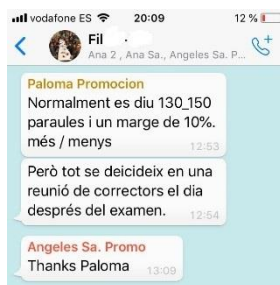


(2)



Example 3: Utterance in Catalan written by Paloma, a native speaker of Spanish. This is an excerpt of a thread about the number of words required in the composition paper of the English language A level exam. Paloma specifies the number of words and clarifies that the final decision on the maximum length of the essay is reached in a meeting after the students sit the exam.

(3)



As intuited and later corroborated by an interview, Paloma has chosen a very formal variety of Catalan in this case because of the topic. As a native speaker of Spanish, she associates the use of Catalan with her job in a secondary school, where the inclusion of what Blas Arroyo (2002) names the ‘Valencian enrichment teaching model,’ a teaching model based on Catalan monolingualism, has institutionalised the use of the autochthonous language in the educational system. Language choice is here topic-dependent since, as we will see in Example 7, Paloma usually writes in Spanish when other topics are addressed. According to Gómez Molina (1999-2000), topic is one of the variables that influences language choice in bilinguals’ and Spanish speakers’ conversations in Valencia and its suburban area.

Examples 4 and 5: An excerpt from an episode of talk in which a meal is planned by the group members. Example 5: an excerpt about buying a retirement present for one of the university teachers.

(4)



(5)



These examples show two different threads in which some classmates, such as Carmina, write in Catalan (Example 4) and in Spanish (Example 5) depending on the base language of the thread. There are two striking features here. Firstly, in Example 4, Carmina carefully constructs the message and includes words restricted to the formal written variety of Catalan in Valencia such as *doncs* (then) but, at the same time, the text shows very informal, conversational characteristics and ‘textese language’ (Pérez-Sabater 2019) such as reduplication of letters. Only very minor errors are made in her utterances in Catalan: 1 ‘r’ and 1 accent are missing from *Que morooooooooo*, correct spelling *què morooooooooo* (how lucky), the verb *vens* needs an accent so that *véns* means *comes*, otherwise it means *sells*. Secondly, in Example 5, in contrast, Carmina does not type the message in Spanish, she chooses speech recognition and composes her message by means of WhatsApp Dictation, here and in many of her messages sent to the group, as corroborated in her interview. By dictating the message into her smartphone’s microphone, it is then translated into text, which can produce a message full of mistakes and lack of punctuation: *colgants* instead of *colgantes* (pendants), *nonrecomindo* for *no recomiendo* (I do not recommend). Despite the fact that Dictation is available for Catalan too, it is only used for Spanish in the corpus. This clearly exemplifies how carefully the members use the autochthonous language. Another relevant issue documented in these threads is that Neus, unlike Carmina, does not accommodate to the main language of the thread, she employs English in Example 4 and standard Catalan in a thread in Spanish (Example 5). Neus is one of the classmates with the firm purpose of supporting the autochthonous language in public spaces.

Regarding the second question (RQ2), whether CS is employed and why, and to what extent the discourse functions performed by code-switching to Catalan or English are different: the analysis shows that CS to English is used constantly, almost in every written utterance where

Catalan or Spanish are the base language. It is usually used to start the thread, as if writing in the Romance languages directly is offensive or too brusque, as Examples 6 and 7 illustrate.

Example 6: Utterance in Catalan: *Hello!!!* Has anybody attended the lecture on the A level

exams by any chance? My boss went and no news. *Thanks!!!* Example 7: Utterance in Spanish:

Hey team, take note!! The group dinner party will be on Thanksgiving every year. Great, Paloma

....

(6)

(7)



A switch to English starts a thread in formal Catalan (Example 6); the autochthonous language is again the language chosen for a conversation about the group members' profession. The closing utterance of this brief exchange is exclusively a thanking formula in English, a politeness indicator that is very frequently included as a closing remark in online discourse, as stated by Lorenzo-Dus and Bou-Franch (2013) and Pérez-Sabater (2017), among others. The same 'we code' is the code to greet the group in Example 7, a recurrent strategy in online discourse as noted in other studies such as Tsiplakou (2009), where CS to English is also the preferred opening in the online interactions of her group of colleagues. Particularly interesting is the fact

that here the thread starts with Paloma's greeting in English trying to attract the attention of the whole group. The greeting is significantly inclusive since it addresses the colleagues as a team: Hey team, take note!! The purpose of this salutation in English is twofold: on the one hand it gives greater emphasis to her salutation and, on the other, it serves to create tighter ties in the community, an online community or family hosted in the same translingual space.

Another salient point from these results is that the switch to English is often followed by a switch to Catalan, always English first followed by Catalan.

Example 8: Utterance in Spanish: Isabel and Ángeles, you can spend the night at my house if you want. This is Paloma. And this. You know. There is dinner and then *Sleepover in Carmina's house*. Example 9: Utterance in Spanish: It must be Vicente C. Because I always turn up (*included dancing*). Yes, Vicente B. You are the superman who always turns up. I was talking about Vicente C.

(8)



(9)



These double switches have a humorous purpose, as in Example 8, where *Sleepover* is followed by *Ca Carmina*, Carmina's house in Catalan. In example 9, *dancing inclòs*, included dancing, follows the same pattern. Emoji and double switches reinforce the playful style of these

utterances. Double switches are usually written by non-native speakers of Catalan, such as Paloma and Vicente B in the above examples. These participants create the puns on the spur of the moment, they are never used again and there is no evidence that they plan them, which demonstrates the authors' creativity and high linguistic competence in the three languages, similar to the puns created by the subjects of other studies, for instance Li (2011). In the corpus, the native speakers of Spanish often code-switch to Catalan for language play, as in the conversations studied by Gómez Molina (1999-2000), and for formulaic discourse practices, since this language is now acquiring prestige (Blas Arroyo 2005). In contrast, native speakers of Catalan rarely code-switch to Catalan when they write in Spanish, they do not use Catalan for language play as participants of other studies do with autochthonous languages, for example, Cypriot Greek speakers in Tsiplakou (2009).

In summary, with regard to functions, these exchanges of relational-oriented messages most of the times generate feelings of connection and in-group bonding, as in many social networking sites (Yus 2021). The playful use of different languages visibly serves to this purpose by creating and enhancing informality, familiarity and solidarity, as in the case studied by Peuronen (2011) or Pérez-Sabater (2021). Basically, language alternation and language-mixing practices are employed for alignment, to construct a sense of family; a family different from other online families characterised by the pervasive presence of English. This is the language the group uses to express familiarity, intimacy and consolidate their in-group membership. Indeed, in this context, English functions as the 'minority' language, the 'we' code (Gumperz 1977), the one that serves to connect the group and create a distinctive personality. These results are different from those of Negrón Goldberg (2009) and Montes-Alcalá (2016) where minority

codes, in their case Spanish, were used to affirm in-group intimacy and familiarity, whereas English was the base, neutral language.

Along with Tsiplakou (2009, 372), the examples demonstrate that participants consider online communication a platform where CS and language alternation are accepted and enhanced as an “...integral part of the orality and casualness of the mode/genre.” Constant CS is the un-marked code in their chat, it is what creates the sense of togetherness, solidarity and alignment between members; it is the marker of this group’s identity as in Wentker’s (2018) study of English/German mixing practices. Possibly, the reason for this un-markedness is the nature and purpose of the chat group itself: former classmates of English Studies who wish to be in touch through WhatsApp and, for this reason, they CS to English, and, to a lesser extent to English and Catalan in the same utterance; this ubiquitous mixing of languages becomes the preferred code in this translingual space. The members automatically switch to the mixed code when they meet online as in Wentker (2018) and Dorleijn and Nortier (2009:128) “...because it is the easiest, the most relaxed and therefore most spontaneous, least monitored, and most unconsciously produced way of speaking.” Although in this Valencian chat group, participants do not always seem to write in a relaxed way, especially when the message is written in Catalan.

Finally, I need to say that, following Peuronen (2011, 158), this article takes a social perspective on multilingualism, seeing languages as not “...clearly definable, bounded systems but as sets of linguistic resources that speakers, or Internet users draw on in specific social situations.” In this case, these social situations are intimately related to the medium where these interactions take place. In this study, unlike the Greek friends in Tsiplakou’s (2009) corpus and the classmates in Wentker (2018), the participants rarely code-switch to English in face-to-face conversations, the former university colleagues only code-switch and mix languages when they

communicate online. I also need to explain that, although language-alternation practices are clearly medium-related, this does not mean medium-driven. Here, it is important to avoid an over-simplistic deterministic approach to language-mixing phenomena and the conclusion would be that this online context simply facilitates CS practices; in other words, WhatsApp is the medium in which language-alternation phenomena are expected and unanimously accepted by the group of philologists.

5. Conclusion

There is no doubt that digital technologies constitute a new space for social interaction that has changed the ways in which we communicate (Bou-Franch 2020). Among these changes, the literature has claimed that CMC is a "...sociolinguistic milieu in which speakers and writers feel they have considerable latitude in the language they use" (Baron 2011, XIV). On the one hand, however, the results have shown a somehow different perspective, since, in this particular trilingual online community of language teachers, language preference is carefully chosen depending on a wide range of factors. Generally, language choice and the choice of a specific written variety is intimately connected here to the writer's audience; in other words, writers design their style to accommodate their audience in, for example, the members' exclusive preference for the formal variety of Catalan. Also important is the case of those participants whose language choice depends on what the audience expects from them. This is the case of some native speakers of Catalan who regularly use English instead of Spanish, the language they know how to write best, to avoid losing face. Other classmates, who actively support a Valencian nationalist political party, also avoid writing in Spanish and normally employ Catalan or English,

regardless of the base language of the thread, because of their support for the autochthonous language in public spaces. A final remarkable finding regarding language choice has been illustrated in the examples: the incipient social standardisation of the local language (Blas Arroyo 2002), as Catalan is generally used by native Spanish speakers when dealing with matters related to education.

On the other hand, the results show that the group members do have certain latitude in their language style, their texts are varied and creative with abundant language mixing phenomena and textese language. These creative linguistic resources serve to co-construct and shape their online community. CS is an essential component of this specific IM community of adults and makes a significant contribution to establishing and reinforcing community identity in this translanguaging space. Basically, CS to English is a favoured strategy for group members to express gratitude and for pragmatic, routine formulae and humorous language play. This characteristic of the group's sociolinguistic performance marks them apart from other online communities and serves to construct their particular group identity. As in Poplack (1980), Gómez Molina (1999-2000) and Zentella (2016) in bilingual conversations and Wentker (2018) in online discourse, CS forms part of the repertoire of this community, it is the un-marked code of the group, the group's private 'we code' for creating feelings of group membership and bonding in their written exchanges.

This article attempts to summarise the linguistic changes favoured by technology. However, I do not aim to provide universal principles or general maxims regarding linguistic behaviour. I simply seek to offer some explanation as to how individuals, within non-Anglophone fora, use language-mixing strategies. More participants and case studies would be

required for a larger statistical analysis of today's written online practices involving several languages.

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