

# CODE-SWITCHING IN THE WRITTEN COMMUNICATION OF THE ROMANIAN USERS OF FACEBOOK

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**ABSTRACT.** Code-switching is a sociolinguistic phenomenon which appears frequently in the written messages (*status updates*) of the Romanian users of the most important online social platform. There is certain diversity in what concerns the foreign language used in these contributions, the switching type or the extent to which a foreign language is appropriated, depending on a series of social factors like the age, education, geographical location or marking of the affiliation to a certain linguistic community. The data gathered during many years of research tries to create categories, subtypes and strategies. These are meant to illustrate and explain, whenever possible, this sociolinguistic feature of the written communication between Romanian users speaking Romanian as their native language. This data can prove itself useful in sketching a certain language profile in asynchronous, computer mediated communication.

**Keywords:** Facebook, computer mediated communication (CMC), code-switching, Romanian users.

## 1. The studying of today's web language in computer mediated communication. Context and methodology

There is an increasingly consistent sociolinguistic concern in the study of the computer mediated communication even outside the United States, the "birth place" of sociolinguistics. This has been proven to be not only suitable to the environment (identifying of the communica-

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tion situations and language varieties, studying of online communication inside linguistic communities), but also one of the few approaches which can highlight the relevance of the data gathered from the studied texts.

As opposed to the beginning phases of studying CMC, which were focused on marking the differences between the language used on the internet and the old linguistic behavior, today the main objective is shifting towards identifying and searching certain common language features, through which the members of the global community gain a certain identity. The illustration of the degree of homogeneity of the internet as a linguistic environment still remains a shared goal, just like the illustration of the way the internet holds a collection of distinct dialects or a junction of usages and tendencies which defy classifications.

The linguistic variety used on the web is closer to written language, as opposed to the other communication instances on the internet, in the sense that its main feature is closer to oral speech than the degree of transcribing of the spoken language. Web language is identical neither to the written language nor to the spoken one; it displays characteristics of both forms, acquired through selection and adaptation. When typing by using a keyboard, users adapt their text by following the conventions of the oral or written discourse, depending on their specific needs. (Crystal 1, 2004).

Being, from its creator's point of view, a "rather social invention than a technical one", (Berners-Lee, 2001), World Wide Web is synonymous, nowadays, with its most frequent uses and popular platforms. Web is no longer only a place for studying or multimedia content consumption; it has become an interactive environment of converging daily human activities, in which language still plays an essential role in users' communication inside online communities.

In studying online communities, sociolinguistics carefully measures the degree of identity and affiliation of the members. These variables may remain purely theoretical and much more limited in online communication, as well as the systemic power of linguistic distinctive features inside the community. "Although I like the metaphor of 'global village', the internet is not, most of the times, like one. With all due respect for human interac-

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tion, the internet is rather a huge collection of distinct vicinities, in which people with common interests can share information, work together, tell stories, joke, discuss politics, play games or help each other.” (Crystal 1, 2004:59). A measurement of the linguistic identity inside online communities is provided by the degree and duration of development of an occupational dialect by the communities, dialect to which the newcomers will have to adapt.

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The increasingly popular social networks have become the places where users post information about themselves, their interests, as well as new places for communication between entire networks of members. In the places shaped by these networks, new methods of defining an identity and maintaining the “impression management” are created, much more creatively than the old communication forms allow. (Goffman, 1967)

According to the NIS (National Institute of Statistics), almost 70% of Romanians aged between 16 and 74 years old (about 11 million users) joined the internet in 2016, 1.2 % more than the previous year. According to the latest statistics provided by ANCOM, the mobile internet access rate in the middle of 2016 was 95%, and the biggest spike is that of 4G data usage. As for broadband internet connection, it counted 14.8 million users.

In the same document compiled by Initiative Media, which measured media ratings for 2017, Romania (along other countries in the EU11 area) scored a growth in the number of new Facebook users. The document shows that 7 million Romanians access Facebook daily, and 6.2 million users access this social network via mobile devices (Media Fact Book, 2017), whereas printed publications continually decline. At the same time, Facebook is the second company in Europe after Google, managing to create approximately 5 billion virtual friendships.

Facebook is the social network with the most spectacular worldwide growth, having over 1.3 billion users across the globe. (Statista.com, 2017).

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Studying code-switching was one of the recorded features, among other linguistic particularities, in Facebook<sup>2</sup> status updates. These status updates, no matter their nature or topic, provide information not only about users' social profile components (age, gender, intervention time, even education), but also their psychosocial state. The reasons behind the "share" are utilitarian, informational, militant and, above all, autobiographical, and the users who send the information understand it better when they repost it. It has been established that almost 80% of Facebook posts have an autobiographical content. From a linguistic perspective, there is an obvious intertextuality of the environments, a resemblance with the publishing in what concerns the idioms or phrases as a part of a repeated speech, in which there are asked questions as an interaction feature, pre-sequences which test the availability of the addressee and autobiographical writing.

The examples from the study have been gathered along many years (2012-2014; 2017). After a strict selection of the initial corpus, the examples used were the ones which show, without a doubt, the linguistic particularities of the written content produced by the Romanian users online. Aside from the published material, the corpus was compiled using texts gathered from two separate Facebook accounts, which observed weekly about 1000 unique users in total. The family names or the middle names have been censored, as to insure the authors' privacy. The examples chosen belong to Romanian users, most of them living in Romania (in Iași, Bucharest, various cities from Moldova), but also from the Republic of Moldova. A significant number of users (a small percentage of the whole, nonetheless) has left Romania for UK, Italy or France. This has been mentioned whenever necessary. About 45% of the recorded users are students (20 – 25 years old) in college (BA, MA or PhD), 30% are young, aged 25 to 30 years old, and the remaining 25% are older than 30 years old.

The present paper continues the study dedicated to code-switching in Facebook users' communication, illustrating, with new material, the texts and communication situations in which users rely to a non-native

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language. The examples belong to the users in the focus group from the initial study. Whenever possible, details concerning the intrinsic aspects of the context were given.

## **2. Code-switching, multilingualism, and “global Englishes” in the content generated by the Romanian users of Facebook**

Multilingualism has evolved along the civil rights movements, equal rights, gender or social equality which appeared at the same time with multiculturalism, in the mid-1960s. Multiculturalism was a political movement which brought the right of maintaining the cultural heritage of the country of origin (traditions, language) to the attention of the authorities. It triggered a lot of positive changes in what concerns the rights of the minorities in countries like France or India (currently, models of forms of multiculturalism worldwide). Instead of social assimilation, multiculturalism allowed social integration based on accepting the differences – even the linguistic ones, a key element in defining group identity.

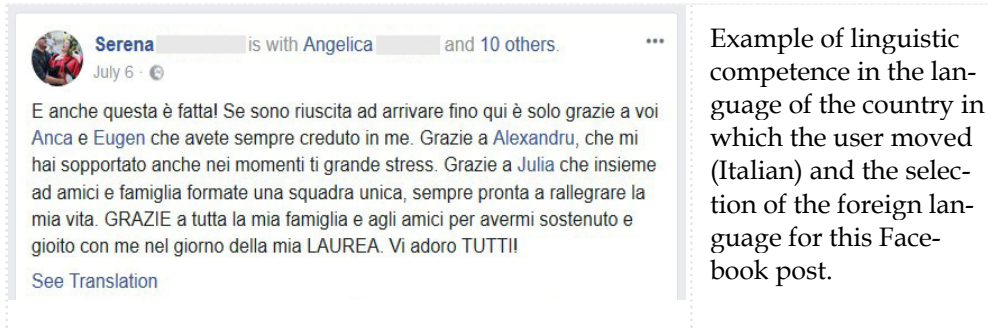
Multiculturalism’s evolution and tendencies are complex, manifesting themselves with variable competence at various levels of language. One of multiculturalism’s principles is that, at the individual level, this can manifest itself by knowing a few words in a foreign language or through a linguistic proficiency (Figure 1) (Edwards, 1994). At the same time, there are also particular linguistic competences, seen as a continuous interval, which combine listening, speaking, speaking and writing skills, at a phonetic, syntactic, lexical, semantic or stylistic level, in various forms varying from one individual to another. (Romaine, 1995). Thus, multiculturalism may manifest itself through a passive linguistic competence, meaning that an individual understands multiple languages, but cannot communicate in these languages, or through a linguistic competence in which comprehension and producing sentences are supplemented by writing talent. The example of the writer Joseph Conrad (Mesthrie, 2011:265) is often mentioned for emphasizing the way in which proficiency levels manifest themselves: Conrad was born in Poland and acquired the English language during adolescence. He spoke English fluently, but his poor pronunciation often made his message hard to get.



**Fig. 1.** Code-switching illustrated by using alternating codes based on the audience, in the case of multiple linguistic competences.

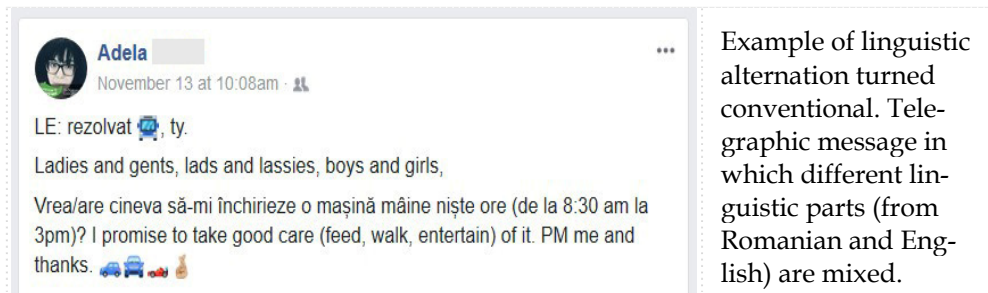
Another manifestation of multilingualism, which can be identified in speaking, in informal writing and in stylized linguistic performance, is code-switching, ubiquitous in the case of individuals having multiple linguistic competences. Code-switching means using linguistic elements from multiple languages in the same conversation, clause (intra-sentential) or sentences (inter-sentential), and it is not characteristic to just one age category. Characteristic to polyglot children and adolescents, as well as adults, code-switching is a communicational norm in the interactions of the individuals who know and use multiple linguistic codes. Alternating languages has stylistic functions in this case, and it emphasizes the linguistic competences and even the cultural identity of the speaker. (Figure 2).

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**Fig. 2.** Example of Italian language competence as a marking of affiliation to a new community.

When it occurs frequently in multilingual communities, language alternation is no longer seen as a mere sociolinguistic phenomenon, instead it becomes conventional, creating new identities (“spanglish”, “romgleză”) (Figure 3).



**Fig. 3.** Example of linguistic alternation turned conventional – “Romgleză”.

Depending on the linguistic competences of the addressees and the context, polyglots choose to use a certain language from the mastered ones, which “marks group identities and affiliations, negotiates roles and social statuses and establishes solidarity or interpersonal distance” (Mesthrie, 2011:270) (Figure 4). The choices are influenced by the surrounding environment of the speaker (family, friends, neighbors, colleagues), which may limit or enhance the possibilities of expressing in a different language, depending on how diverse it is. Also, changing the addressees could mean a change in language as well.



**Fig. 4.** Example of code-switching as a marking of affiliation to a new community; migrant Romanians.

No matter the manner in which they manifest themselves, code-switching meets mixed reactions, from secret admiration for these linguistic varieties seen as identity markers, to critiques accusing a deformation of the mother tongue.

Multilingualism can be societal in countries in which the linguistic diversity is accompanied by the levels of various linguistic competences the individuals have – in Tanzania or Kenya – or by itself – in Australia, the ex-British big colony – country having citizens from all around the world. However, it has been established, after a linguistic census published in 2006, that only 20% of the citizens still use one of the inherited languages (about 400 in number), while the rest show interest only for the English language. Another example is Switzerland, where speakers use one of the four national languages: French, German, Italian or Romansh.

Between these types of multilingualism, an important research topic is the issue of linguistic borrowings, in the case of the words which enter as they are in the vocabulary of a native language, when individual and societal multilingualism is relatively low. Most of the times, these lexical borrowings come from English, which is used in many national or international institutions. Borrowings from English take place as they are, in the case of the countries with an English proficiency (Figure 5). Thus, the so-called local forms of English appear, like Japanese English, which has its own lexemes.



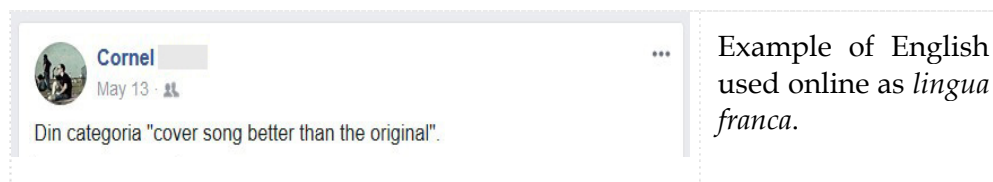


Fig. 5. English as *lingua franca*.

### 2.1 Pragmatic types and grammatical types of code-switching

The issue of code-switching has been widely debated in the recent years, due to a shift in communicational focus from monolingualism to the users' ability to use multiple languages at the same time, in the same conversation. The exchanges used to happen regularly, so the researchers focused more on code-switching than on lexical borrowings or linguistic interference.

The first important aspect which appeared in the sociolinguistic sphere was when it was pointed out that studies should focus on linguistic production, not on perception. (Muysken, 2011) and that, in the case of code-switching, there is no limit of only two languages used. During a conversation – one of the many forms of communication events – there may be however many codes, not separated, whether they are dialects or languages.

Also, depending on certain criteria like the degree of multilingualism of the speaking community, the linguistic matrix, the occurrence of code-switching when the meaning of the foreign word borrowed is already found in an existing word, the quantity of the words borrowed, there is required a separation between code-switching and linguistic borrowing. At the same time, the main difference between code-switching and linguistic interference is the difference of usage in communication: code-switching is based on knowledge of the languages which are used, whereas linguistic interference means applying the knowledge about the mother tongue to a foreign language.

In language sociology, important progress has been made after defining the criteria of the “domain” in the interest zone of linguistic contact and code-switching (Fishman, 1971). The concept of domain refers to

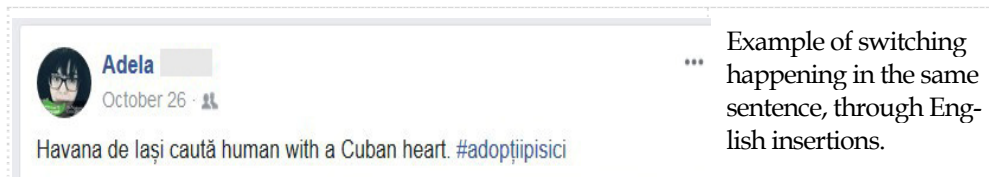
regions depending on which language speakers plan their daily life and according to which they make their suitable linguistic choices (home, work, church, friends etc.). The distinguishing features between the situational and the metaphorical switching also had a powerful influence (Gumperz, 1972). Situational switching takes place depending on several factors not controlled by the speaker's will (like when a new speaker joins an existing conversation), and metaphorical switching is an atmosphere "diversion" created by the speaker. Based on these concepts there have been conducted consistent studies about interaction patterns in code-switching, focusing on the irregularity of the linguistic forms or the identification of the code-switching based on discourse, respectively the one based on the speaker.

There have been distinguished four types of code-switching within the pragmatics of bilingual conversations (Auer, 1999):

1. Conversational or discourse code-switching, happening separately or at the same time between language A and language B;
2. Preferential code-switching, which requires a negotiation of the linguistic choice;
3. The neutrality situation, in case there is no base language and no linguistic interference;
4. The situations based on insertion or transfer, in case there is a base language with insertions from a second language;

The study of the contact between languages led to the identification of the grammar level where these switches take place. Traditionally, switches are categorized depending on their position of occurrence:

1. Intra-clausal switch, happening in the same sentence (Figure 6);



**Fig. 6.** Example of intra-clausal code-switching.

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2. Code-switching based on a single word – a sub-clausal sub-category, having a single switch element (Figure 7);



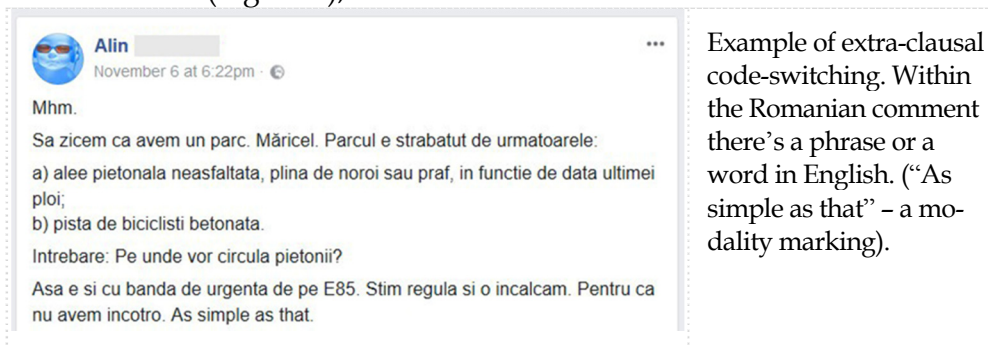
**Fig. 7.** Changing codes with a single switch element.

3. Inter-sentential code-switching, happening between two separate sentences or two coordinated sentences from the same structure. (Figure 8);



**Fig. 8.** Example of inter-clausal code-switching.

4. Extra-clausal, iconic code-switching, happening between a sentence and an extra-clausal element attached to it. The most common refer to using conjunctions or other discourse markers. (Figure 9);



**Fig. 9.** Example of extra-clausal, iconic code-switching.

In the study of code-switching it is also used the principle of symmetry (Muysken, 2000), according to the amount of the linguistic material considering the quantity of base language and foreign language. When the meaning carried by the native language is not affected by the insertions of foreign material, the term “asymmetric” is used, because there is a single base language; when there occurs a change in meaning by inserting linguistic material, there is an alternation (symmetry).

## *2.2 Globalization and world Englishes*

The last two decades of globalization required changes at the linguistic level as well, mainly because the number of English speakers increased in various countries and social contexts. Thus, sociolinguistics found new territory to explore in the dialectal differences and discourse contexts of certain world Englishes. In very many countries, English has become “a native language, a symbol of local identity, an instructional environment a cultural icon of success and Westernization, a goal which includes the promise of a better life” (Schneider, 2011:52).

From the first studies which captured the spread of this phenomenon of expansion of the English language a series of terms has been imposed, like “English World-Wide” or “World Englishes” (Bailey & Goralach, 1982; Kachru, 1992), names which besides marking the scale of the event, focus on a certain social and linguistic particularity. Still “World Englishes” can be distinguished from other terms which used to mean a certain method and study particularity, and could represent a broader, generic character in which, undoubtedly, fit all the varieties of English world-wide.

Many authors have emphasized the practical nature of acquiring linguistic competence within various cultures. The attraction of English was that globalization was taking place in English, the language of international politics and economy, media, tourism and travelling (Crystal, 2000). These ways of perpetuating English promoted it to the status of lingua franca of intercultural communication. This is also the reason why it was introduced in educational systems as the first foreign language.

English has always been favored and dominant, and it played this role ever since the technologies used in creating the internet were developed. It dominated (and still does) the majority of online and offline contexts. English is, nowadays, learned by people worldwide, more than in any other century (Graddol, 2000). It wasn't just the internet which facilitated English language's prevalence, but also the entire globalizing mechanism, consisting of political, economic and cultural forces which attributed English the role of lingua franca in worldwide affairs. People belonging to different cultures and territories have managed, through the internet, to communicate, and this could have happened only in English. The entire context nowadays encourages the continued spread of English. Overall, right now, there is the conclusion that the general tendency is to favor big languages (Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, Hindu, Russian) and English especially. Some linguists have shown that due to concentrating the resources in North America and through the economic mechanisms of the internet used nowadays, the expansion of the use of English will be encouraged (Dannet, 2007).

The globalization of English presents a huge potential for sociolinguistics, raising awareness on problems about the method and directions of research. The most conventional approach is the micro-sociolinguistic approach, which focuses the status and political role of English in any multilingual country in which the post-colonialist process of building a nation required linguistic policy and planning.

### **3. Conclusions and future discussions**

The linguistic phenomena recorded during the Westernization of the world are always varying and it is not always in favor of the English language – the one in which all the globalizing processes begun. In most fields, the dominant linguistic form is American English, the one used by the “businessman with international aspirations” (Schneider, 2011:351), but in many non-standard fields and everyday contexts, like CMC, it is not even remotely present, being replaced by other varieties of English. The influences between English and local languages take place both

ways and, generally speaking, the influence travels faster from west to east, but the speed of expansion of the English language does not seem to be justified. Cultural and linguistic globalization means, just as much, importing values, practices and linguistic particularities from the East and shaping certain phenomena like the Bollywood film style.

Code-switching is a linguistic particularity present in online communication of the Romanian users of Facebook and it has, most of the times, stylistic purposes. As for linguistic and code-switching choice, the most important role is played by the context. In multicultural areas, lingua franca is the English language, whereas, in many other countries (like Romania), educated people or with minimal knowledge, the native language and the English language are used alternatively. In the case of the users who have left the country, resorting to linguistic codes varies according to the cultural identity of the country or countries (Figure 10).



**Fig. 10.** Examples of code-switching based on alternating languages (Italian, English).

Among the immigrants, the new language is used to fit in and maintain social and interpersonal connections with the new acquaintances. If this is natural, the use of the native language with compatriots is interpreted as a sign of cultural alienation (Fialkova, 2005).

Correlating the results of the analysis of the code-switching with the other linguistic particularities of online language, it remains to be seen if in Romania we will be able to speak, just like it is already done in Ukraine, a native language variety present on blogs, forums and other

online platforms (“padronkavskiy zhargon”), variety in which words are written phonetically and it is used to express discontent or disagreement with the content posted online or other users.

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