

***Multilingual Expressions on Whatsapp: Cameroonian Students'
Cultural Identity***

Nsom Karlson Nsom*

Sharda University, Greater Noida-India

nsompro@gmail.com

&

Brinda Chowdhari

Sharda University, Greater Noida-India

Abstract

This paper pinpoints the chemistry of culture and language that Cameroonian students use on social media. This is done by analyzing how Dschang University students use verbal and nonverbal language on WhatsApp. The initial tenet is that the students use the digital platform to brandish their multilingual and multicultural expressions. As such, it is necessary to know the types of languages used, determine what accounts for their use, and discuss the possible implications. To do so, the Dynamic Model of Edward Schneider and the Social Semiotics of Theo Van Leeuwen informed the analysis. Screenshots were taken and downsized using convenient sampling from the students' WhatsApp groups. Results reveal that besides facilitating instant interaction in academic peer-to-peer communication, WhatsApp posts also virtually represent students' identities such as tradition, costume, gastronomy, and rituals. The study establishes that local colour, code-switching, code-mixing and neologisms that result in language appropriation are motivated by the multilingual background of the students. As such, WhatsApp and other social media platforms can be used to potentially contribute to the spread and exposure of the linguistic and cultural landscape of Cameroon worldwide.

Keywords: *Digital Culture, Language Appropriation, Online Identity, WhatsApp Posts*

Introduction

The unprecedented advancement of digital technology has changed how people engage and connect in both writing and speaking (Rahmat et al., 2022; Sultana, 2023). While Poon et al., (2019) claim that the introduction and dependence on some of these digital technologies such as the instant messaging WhatsApp app impacts the way students interact with language and culture, Tabe (2023) adds that such a platform facilitates debate, disseminates knowledge, and improves the

*Corresponding author

student-teacher relationship. These recent studies have discussed how Cameroonians switch and mix codes in social media platforms. Nonetheless, the implications of such language use on WhatsApp by students in higher institutions have not been sufficiently established. So, this study examines how languages and cultures are represented digitally through an examination of Dschang University students' WhatsApp posts. The argument is that an account of these sociocultural and linguistic online traits can add to create awareness about Cameroonian students' origins, beliefs and identities.

Language is defined as a systematic, conventional use of sounds, signs or written symbols for communication and self-expression (Berger, 2014). Thus, the role of this language coupled with other newly developed linguistic features bent to communicate certain aspects of culture in identity is what motivated the paper. To explore the sense of who we are and our relationship to the world, online users create virtual representations for themselves through available discursive choices. This is done with the selective appropriation of symbolic resources in words, photos, videos, and other modalities on the internet like emojis and stickers.

Given Spencer and Franklin (2012) advance that culture¹ defines how identity is manifested, it is necessary to address it here in context. The question is, what is an online identity? Simply put, an online identity is who we are and what we do whenever we are connected to social media which adds to our development (Wängqvist and Frisé 2016). In other words, it is the summary of the characteristics and interactions that represent people on the internet. Just as Weedon (1987) asserts, language is what we use to construct our subjective knowledge of ourselves and the world, the initial claim is that the language people use

¹ *Culture can be defined as an order of life in which people construct meaning through the practice of symbolic representations. This symbolic representation is manifested in values, images, notions, ideas, and behaviours*

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online can shape their identities. On top of that, identity is constituted in and through language (Norton 2013) and we use language to articulate ideas and to represent ourselves and our social relations. In relation, new trends in WhatsApp conversations heavily use nonverbal cues that people use to represent ideas about themselves and are capable of expressing facial reactions, gestures, attitudes and behaviours that construct their ideas online. Moschini (2016) opines that these features are manifestations of popular culture and visual nature.² Cameroon is a multicultural and multilingual country given its two official languages and the over 270 indigenous languages/cultures. In the course of this inquiry, digitally mediated posts were retrieved from randomly selected students' WhatsApp groups at Dschang University. In an earlier work by Code (2013), social media can enable identity expression. As such, the aim is to demonstrate how rational preferences over language articulation make use of code-switching, code-mixing, calque, borrowing, neologisms and the like that collectively define the identities of the online students.

MULTILINGUALISM IN CAMEROON

The hallmarks of colonialism and its impact on Cameroon determine its diverse linguistic landscape. This claim can be traced historically. Before colonialism, most African and Asian areas already had well-organised and established political, social, economic and communicative setups. These countries had complex multilingual landscapes and colonialism only came in to add to this complexity by introducing colonial languages. Anchimbe (2009) corroborates with Makoni and Meinhof (2003) to confirm that before the era of colonialism, many African and Asian contexts were already heavily multilingual due to intertribal marriages, the arbitrary relocation of slaves for the slave trade and slavery, migrations, the search for peaceful neighbours, the search for fertile soils, and interethnic

² *Multiculturalism is defined as the ability of societies, institutions, groups, and individuals to engage, on a regular basis, with more than one language in their day-to-day lives (Cenoz, 2013).*

conflicts. They concluded that nothing in their world made sense and that they were living in a completely chaotic environment. Many people in postcolonial situations have been plagued by this kind of thinking, which makes them believe that everything that reflects their ecological or contextual surroundings is inferior.

Bokamba (2007) claims that this "*ukolonia*" inclination is common in postcolonial situations, where individuals prefer to favour Western ideas over numerous things that have a contextual actuality. In these situations, some people now consider their own culture and native tongues to be inferior. They believe that effective communication can only occur through colonial languages, and they are even willing to compromise their own identities in favour of one that firmly connects them to the West (Anchimbe, 2009). A single speaker can typically speak two or more languages. However, in these kinds of situations, relatively few individuals are aware that multilingualism is a highly fortunate trait. Put differently, a lot of people in multilingual environments believe that speaking an exonerative language is more respectable than speaking a language that is based on sociocultural realities.

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION ONLINE

The construction of online identity in literature and language dates from the 1990s. It was the first literature that responded quickly to the emergence of digital technology. While traditional print publication methods persisted, fiction writing and publishing shifted to the Internet. However, it soon became clear that internet platforms were being used by the literary community to create and read literature. Keshava Guha's 2019 debut book *Accidental Magic* depicts this shift in the early 2000s from print to digital media. He looks at the adoption and application of digital technologies by literary readers in *Accidental Magic*. In doing so, he points out that digital technology affects storytelling as an art form as

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well and argues that, in contrast to early times, online communities now have two forms of storytelling.

In a bid to expand Lam's (2000) phenomenon of *textual identity*, which clearly states the function of language manipulation in creating identity through online discourse, the term *multimodal identity* has been able to develop with the multimodalities available in Social Network Sites (SNS). Treating an SNS page as a dynamic, multimodal hypertext reflecting the user's identity, Knobel and Lankshear (2008) examined the socially recognized ways, meaningful content, encoded texts, and participation in discourses evident in some media profiles of two individuals. They found that the users' different qualitative use of wall posts, status updates, and collocations with other technologies reflect their socially identifiable ways of engaging in the SNS space. Thus, SNSs are ideal places for the virtual construction of self since the users can design their profiles with multimodal resources such as texts, photos, videos, and hyperlinks. Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin (2008) looked at how social media followers present their "hoped-for possible selves" by "showing rather than telling" (p. 1816). They showed that identity construction on an SNS profile tends to be rather implicit (through affiliations with certain activities) than explicit. Tabe (2023) discusses code switching and code-mixing Cameroonians use in social media platforms like emails and Facebook. He finds that languages used vary from English to Cameroon Pidgin English (CPE), French to English, English to French and other native languages. An understanding of this variation shows how language practices provide insights into users' intimacy and cultural identity in online interactions.

Despite independence, Africans in general and Cameroonians in particular have not still given their native languages enough exposure. The continuous valorisation of foreign languages and cultures at the expense of home languages causes linguistic discrimination. The situation is because of the failure of the colonised minds to be

decolonised. This is because the political, economic and social life of the colonised nations was invaded, transformed and controlled by the colonisers. Worldviews, cultures and languages of the colonised people were badly dealt with and they were made to see themselves as barbaric and inferior (Ngefac, 2011).

As already mentioned, before colonialism, most if not all African countries already had their own languages. As such, this work boils down to the opinion that technology has brought relief with the advent of WhatsApp groups where people, like the case of students, can freely share their social and cultural identities through linguistic practices. In other words, this paper examines how WhatsApp followers use both verbal and nonverbal expressive means available to construct and develop their identities. Hence, it exposes the function of WhatsApp not only to be a communicative channel through which Cameroonian students and people elsewhere use it as a means of exchange but also as a tool for language appropriation.

The Dynamic Model

The Dynamic Model is the groundwork of Edgar Schneider. Realised in 2007, the model addresses the idea of language ecology and adds that specific linguistic traits arise through a process of "competition and selection" as language progresses. The approach aids in illuminating how social and linguistic identities are promoted and how history and environment shape language structures in the many variations of English. The following are the guiding concepts of the dynamic model:

1. The impacts of language contact are stronger in communities with closer ties or higher levels of bilingualism or multilingualism
2. The social factors influence the structural consequences of language contact. Consequently, history will be crucial

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3. There are several ways to accomplish contact-induced modifications, including code-switching, code alternation, acquisition tactics, and

4. It is possible to think of language evolution and the creation of contact-induced varieties as speakers choosing from a range of available linguistic variants.

The entire "ecology" of the contact situation—which includes elements like demography, social interactions, surface relationships, and surface linguistic similarities—determines which of these characteristics are eventually accepted. When combined, these lead to the emergence of extra-linguistic elements, identity building for both sides, sociolinguistic contact setting determinants, and structural impacts. This theory is relevant to our investigation because it assisted in analyzing the diversity of the several language forms that were employed interchangeably to try to show how Cameroon has become a multilingual nation throughout time through an online dialogue that was not interactive.

Social Semiotics

The common linguistic practices these students use online consist of images in the form of emojis and stickers. So, the social semiotic approach of Theo Van Leeuwen (2017), as discussed in one of his seminal works, *Language Awareness and Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Visual Composition*, is used to read the content of the pictorial representations. The approach mainly informs two multimodal aspects: written and visual language. This contribution adds to the seamless efforts of Gunther Kress that resulted in the publication of *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*.³ Social semiotics which is sometimes called social semantics⁴ is a branch in

³ Bateman, John; Wildfeuer, Janina; Hiippala, Tuomo (2017). *Multimodality: Foundations, Research and Analysis- A Problem-Oriented introduction*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter. ISBN 978-3-11-047942-3.

⁴ Paul Thibault, *Agency and Consciousness in Discourses: Self-Other Dynamics as a Complex System*, Continuum, 2004, p. 209.

the field of semiotics that investigates meaningful human practices in specific social and cultural settings. It looks at meaning-making as a social practice. Semiotics as initially defined by Ferdinand de Saussure as cited in (Bouissac, 2004, p.240) and Berger (2014), is a *science of signs* that accounts for meaningful communication in society. Social semiotics therefore refers to the systemic study of signs, structures, and practices with particular functions. This theory opines that language constitutes only one of the many systems of signs. In a bid to translate any material which has persuasive undertones like advertisement, various signs, their meaning and significance as well as their relationship between text and context have to be considered to establish their significance and role when translating into a different language and culture. Social semiotics is another approach used in communication to understand how people communicate by a variety of means in particular social settings. The social accomplishments that modes of communication might achieve in daily interactions with others are what make them what they are, not a rigid set of guidelines and procedures. Despite this emphasis, a crucial question still has to be answered: How do people use signs to accomplish certain goals in the context of institutional and interpersonal power relations? This is significant because social relationships and society at large can be shaped by semiotic systems. The idea that communication modes offer historically specific, socially and culturally shared communication alternatives is a fundamental component of the social semiotic approach.

Research Methods and Material

This research collected posts from WhatsApp Groups of the University of Dschang. The choice for this university was its bilingual nature that welcomes citizens from around the country of Cameroon. This included some selected number of WhatsApp posts from mid-October 2019 to early February 2020. Firstly, the posts were extracted and with the aid of the

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qualitative method, they were selected. With a comparative approach, the posts were classified into language forms like pidgin, English, and Camfranglais which are most often at times incorporated into stickers as revealed by the data collected. This procedure helped in the examination of the various codes of communication that shape and determine the multilingual status of Cameroon. Taking into account the need to address how language use online can help to construct people's identity in real-life situations, attention was given to the names people answer on WhatsApp and the other linguistic practices that denote them.

Posts selected for this research were obtained from the Faculty of Letters and Social Sciences, Modern English Letters Level 1, Commonwealth Club. The reason was that these platforms contain an absolute majority of the student active population so far as language is concerned in every given academia and as a result could better serve as a laboratory for language description. At the level of instruments, tools included a non-participant online observation of the various posts and even in this process, an order was issued by the various administrators of the selected groups that permitted the taking of screenshots which were later on cropped and used in the analysis. This ensured ethical consideration. Analysis of data came to expose the sudden evolution and variability of languages that stem behind the framework of both technological and sociocultural factors.

CONSTRUCTION OF ONLINE IDENTITIES

In the construction of home-based languages with the aid of verbal cues on WhatsApp, the rational preferences that guide and orient messages are quite revealing as they help express cultural values as portrayed in the table below.

Table 1 Digital Linguistic Hybrid

N/	Expression	Meaning in English	Description
1	“Chop kola”	Chew or eat kola	Pidgin English
2	“Dis why I use Juju...”	This is the reason I use magic	Borrowing and vocalisation in spellings
3	“Kontri njama njama from Bamenda”	Vegetable from Bamenda	Local colour and code-mixing
4	“Jeune Fong, Fabrice Ngankam...”	Name-calling	Mixed names (hybrids).
5	“Direction Bangang.”	The direction to Bangang	A locality in Cameroon, West Region of Cameroon

Source: Commonwealth Student Association WhatsApp Group, Dschang University 2019

Fig. 1 Digital Identities

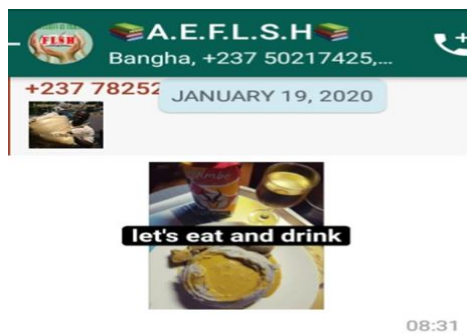


Image 1.

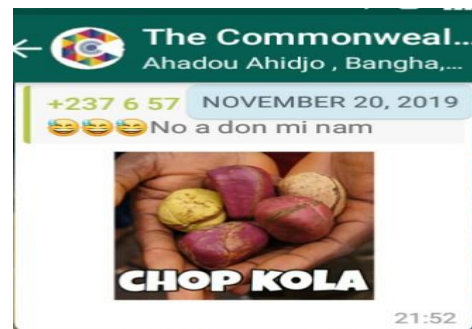


Image 2.



Image 3.



Image 4.

Source: Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences WhatsApp Group, Dschang University 2020

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As shown in Table 1, Indigenous given names, like “Dongfack” which stems from the Bamileke land, in the West Region of Cameroon, “Bangha” a family given name from Kom, a clan found in the North West Region of Cameroon, “achu”, “nkati nkati” popular gastronomy still from the North West, a loanword like “juju” used in Cameroonian tribes and countries in West Africa to either refer to the application of charms and repeated cases of negligence in vocal spelling like “dis” for the normal English word “this,” to show native pronunciation and the alteration of word spellings. All of these help in defining online identities as they help to situate a certain group of persons at a particular point in time. Through this form of language use, people’s backgrounds and beliefs are easily shared and understood by the targeted community. The fifth excerpt, “Direction Bangang” refers to a specific locality in Cameroon, adding geographical and cultural context to the language used. Images 1, 2 and 3 are pictorial representations of a Cameroonian delicacy “achu,” kola nuts and palm wine respectively. Meanwhile Image 4. Is a traditional regalia with a written in French, “je ne suis pas n’importe qui”. This can be translated into English as, I am not just anyone. The post exudes prestige. To sum up, each of these representations highlights different ways in which language is used to capture cultural identities and linguistic diversity on WhatsApp.

LANGUAGE APPROPRIATION

Van Leeuwen's lens of social semiotics (2017) makes sense of emojis, stickers, and language used on WhatsApp posts. This is in line with meaning-making resources in a multilingual context.

Fig. 2 Multimodal Communication



Image 5.



Image 6.

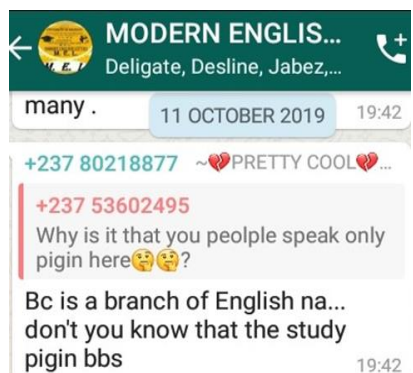


Image 7.



Image 8.



Image 9.



Image 10.

Source: Modern English Letters WhatsApp Group, Dschang University 2019

For example, on image 5 “Why is it that you people speak only pigin here...?” In the sentence, pidgin is written as “pigin”. Notably, the difference in spelling is proven by subsequent posts/reactions. Essentially, the two repeated emojis adds to express the degree of curiosity in an informal but academic context. Meanwhile, image 6 reads,

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“They’re from KUMBA...” This is followed by seven successive emojis with smiling faces. Such emojis send a message of mockery. They implicitly convey a negative attitude in the overuse of pidgin. These reveal linguistic revolutionary ideas on the widespread of diverse modes of interaction in academic WhatsApp platforms, as Images 7, 8, 9 and 10 support the use of pidgin. In a multilingual country such as Cameroon, where multiple languages and media coexist, emojis add to beautify its linguistic diversity on social media.

Meta-Linguistic Commentary

The discussion about language use itself, as shown in Image 7, “Why is it that you people speak only pidgin here?” and responses like “Bc is a branch of English na,” indicates an awareness of linguistic choices and their social implications. The use of Pidgin English and code-switching in these messages reflects broader sociolinguistic dynamics in Cameroon. It shows how individuals in this case, represented by students, navigate multilingual environments online by adapting their language use to foster understanding and inclusivity.

Also, emojis and stickers provide non-verbal cues that reveal different attitudes towards languages. Such an attempt underscores the adaptability and resourcefulness of Cameroonian students in using digital communication tools to maintain social cohesion and mutual understanding in a linguistically diverse setting. This reinforces the claim that people are more likely to deviate linguistic norms not because they lack knowledge of language but because they intend to express a feeling of belonging and socialisation.

Conclusion

The study reveals indigenous linguistic practices students of Dschang University use on WhatsApp to reveal their identities. This involves an analysis of verbal and nonverbal languages not just for digital interactions but intentional extensions of language appropriation and

cultural representation. Findings show that these students construct their partial identities through self-acknowledgement. Also, answers are contextually provided to the following questions where do we come from (roots)? What do we eat and drink (gastronomy)? How are we called (name)? And what do we wear (clothes)? As already demonstrated in the combined result and the discussion section, code-switching, code-mixing, and loanwords are all forms of language used for such purposes. Concerning the results obtained, two principal implications were identified. First, linguistic vitality can resolve the issue of language discrimination and second, online platforms greatly facilitate global culture.

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