

## **English as an International Language: English/French Language Alternation in Politically Motivated CMC in Congo-Brazzaville**

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### **Abstract**

The world is witnessing an unprecedented growth of the English language worldwide. Now more than at any time in linguistic history people are powerlessly assisting the expansion of one global language, English, dominating other languages even in countries, such as Congo-Brazzaville, where its presence was not long ago barely observed. There has been a growing interest in studying the sociolinguistic change brought about by the lingua franca nature of English. English is increasingly used along other languages in Facebook communication. It is therefore important to thoroughly examine the main pragmatic functions of English/French alternation in a politically motivated Facebook interaction among Congolese users. In this study, a corpus of 265,147 words, including 9,330 comments were collected from October 2015 to July 2016, the time period highlighted by two major national political events, mainly the constitutional referendum (October 25, 2015) and the presidential election (March 20, 2016). The analysis revealed seven communicative functions (e.g., offering advice, astonishment, criticism, anger/cursing/insult, appraisal, hope boost and motivation, jocular mockery) trigger the use of English in politically motivated Facebook communication. The lingua franca function of the English language worldwide is on the top of the factors influencing and motivating Congolese Facebook users to resource to this language in Facebook interaction. The users tend to be driven by the mere idea that in order to put the communication on international scale, a global language is needed regardless of whether all fellow users understand it.

**Keywords:** Congo-Brazzaville, computer-mediated communication, English as an international language, language alternation, Markedness model.

### **Introduction**

Congo-Brazzaville is a non-English multilingual country in which over fifty languages are spoken within the national borders, and of all these languages, French is the only national official language.

Kituba and Lingala, two widespread indigenous lingua francas in Congo-Brazzaville, are both well-known across the country and overused daily in communicative transactions in major cities such as Brazzaville and Pointe-Noire. Still, it is mostly the linguistic systems of both languages that have generated studies carried out by missionaries and (local) language experts (Ndamba, 2011; Nkeket Ndabiza, 2012; Samarin, 2013; Tsoumou,

2018). They have described the phonological, morphological, derivational, lexical, syntactic, and semantic systems of the two languages. Technically both languages are relatively codified – as shown by the availability of dictionaries, textbooks, etc. – and can be used both in written and spoken means of communication, but they are still hardly recognised institutionally. For example, neither is taught at school nor institutionally implemented despite the fairly elaborated written forms available.

The offline sociolinguistic landscape in Congo-Brazzaville, therefore, includes French on the one hand, and Kituba, Lingala and ethnic languages, on the other hand. Most Congolese people, for instance in Brazzaville, are relatively fluent in French, Kituba and Lingala. While French is mostly used in official transactions, it is no surprise to unofficially use Kituba and Lingala at work, in shops and restaurants. They are heard in songs, at church, and in clubs, to name a few places. Tsoumou (2018, p. 192) explains that interactions among Congolese people mix languages, and language alternation is in fact a real communicative strategy in Congo-Brazzaville.

Historically, the English language has not been part of the sociolinguistic environment in Congo-Brazzaville, except for its limited presence observed in the national education system where it is taught as a foreign language in the curriculum from middle school to university. In the distinct absence of studies, it is not easy to speculate on the extent to which English is daily used among Congolese in offline communicative exchanges. The driven goal of this paper is, nevertheless, an examination of the extent of Congolese Facebook users' knowledge of the English language on Facebook. Such knowledge is important as it will be taken as an indication of the impact of English as an international language in Congo-Brazzaville. The major issue to bear in mind is the absence of a substantial number of Congolese people who are able to speak English in face-to-face communication. In view of this, the use of the English language online can lead to miscommunication, misinterpretation and linguistic ambiguity given the distance factor and constraint imposed by computer-mediated communication (CMC hereafter). It will certainly require some appropriate English pragmatic skills as to make good use of English instance in CMC.

It is also important to point out before moving forward that greater attention devoted to the nature of English as an international language has massively been directed to teaching and learning English by foreign learners (Acar, 2010; Dewi, 2012; El-Saghir, 2010; Mckay, 2010, 2018; Nunn, 2010; Savignon, 1983). This one-sided intellectual devotion misleads if one seeks an exhaustive understanding of the English language worldwide since scholars seem to put the entire focus on how and what to teach non-English speaker learners of English in this era of English as an international language. Investigations on multiple facets of pedagogical aspects of the English language as well as intercultural competences of foreign learners have thus been the center of interests, leaving aside thorough examination of actual communicative competence of English users in settings other than classroom

in countries where it has limited presence (McKay, 2018). This weakness in the literature obstructs any possibility to grasp an understanding of the English use and the degree to which it has challenged other languages in completely non-English countries. This paper not only intends to redress this imbalance through an analysis of political discourse, but more importantly it grapples with Facebook users' competence of the English language in widely open communicative setting where high language skills are required. The study enhances a comprehension of the extent to which non-English speakers who happen to be Facebook users are mindful of both linguistic and pragmatic rules and norms.

Literature on language alternation usually points out three main categories of language alternation, put forward based on the two parallel research tracks (e.g., purely linguistic and sociolinguistic). These categories involve conversational, intersentential and intrasentential. On the one hand, there are scholars interested in determining social functions of language alternation who have mainly examined sociolinguistic, pragmatic as well as sociopsychological patterns of this phenomenon through an analysis of conversational and intersentential language alternation (Androutsopoulos, 2011; Auer, 1984, 1995; 1998; Lowi, 2005; Wei, 2002, 2005; Zentella, 1997). On the other hand, there are scholars advocating for the belief that language alternation is constrained by purely linguistic/grammatical rules. The main focus of this line of research has been an examination of intrasentential language alternation (Myers-Scotton, 1992, 1993b, 1999c, 1997c, 1998a, 1998b, 2002, 2016; Myers-Scotton & Jake, 1998; Paolillo, 2011; Poplack, 1981; WardHough, 2010). Since the present paper is mainly focused on pragmatic functions of English/French alternation, only conversational language alternation will be overviewed.

### **Conversational language alternation**

Conversational language alternation encompasses (a) how pragmatic meanings are produced by the alternation of more than two languages in a conversation are communicated; (b) how these meanings are simply specific to a given social or conversational context (Tsoumou, 2018). In other words, conversational language alternation can be described in terms of social and pragmatic functions – such as quotation, repetition, emphasis, and so on – emerging from the use of more than one language in a conversation. Gumperz (1982a) distinguishes two subtypes of language alternation within conversational language alternation: situational language alternation which depends on the situation in which the interaction occurs, and metaphorical language alternation which is a topic-based form of alternation. Both terms were first introduced and discussed by Blom and Gumperz in the 1970s. In earlier days, the emphasis of the two concepts was merely on the analysis of homogenous groups who share the same experience of the two languages or linguistic varieties. According to Heller (1988) the two concepts are now

equally applicable to inter-group interactions as well. Auer (1984) explains that:

at the heart of the distinction between situational and metaphorical language alternation lies the assumption that there are situational parameters (i.e. participants constellation, topic, mode of interaction, etc.) that allow one to predict language choice; [and] there is a simple almost one-to-one relationship between extralinguistic parameters and the appropriate language for this situation. (p. 88)

In other words, the social meaning of an interaction results in both social factors and the appropriate use of the language for a particular situation. Situational and metaphorical language alternations are both connected to the verbal behaviour that multilingual speakers exhibit whether in a particular situation or because of the constraints underlying some topics in any given society. The realization of either lies exclusively in certain social cues (or rules and norms) governing a given setting, topic, event, activity and so on. Auer (1984, p. 90) argues that the “distinction between situational and metaphorical language alternations amounts to a distinction between extralinguistic parameters defining components of the speech situation, and the linguistic (ones), each of which may be related to conversational language alternation”. This author further explains that parameters such as time, place, and topic are supposed to define the situation, whereas other parameters such as shifts between sequential units (story/comment, ongoing sequence/side sequence), different “keys” (e.g. joking versus seriousness) or shifts in intimacy or cooperativeness apparently leave the situation unchanged.

However, it is essential to point out that Auer is critical of Gumperz’s (1982a) view of both situational and metaphorical language alternations. Firstly, Auer (1984) explains that it is absurd to regard the situation as responsible for language alternation, since any situation is accomplished by co-participants rather than chosen by them. The situation of interaction is barely stable: it is constantly created by language speakers as they communicate. In Androupotsoulos’ (2013) words (p. 669), language alternation is viewed as a “device in the internal organisation of conversational turn”. Similarly, Auer (1984) argues that speakers’ turns, and utterances are responsible for changing, maintaining, and /or re-establishing features of the situation.

Furthermore, Auer (1995) introduces two analytical concepts to determine the role an interaction plays in the process of language alternation. The first is termed “preference- (or participant-) related” language alternation, which comprises switches that suit the speaker’s or addressee’s preference, as well as instances of language negotiation between the interlocutors. The second is termed “discourse-related” language alternation, which Auer (1995) regards as a contribution to the organization of discourse in a particular conversational episode (see also Androupotsoulos, 2013; Shin & Milroy,

2000; Supamit & Shin, 2009). According to Martin-Jones (1995), to speakers:

discourse-related language alternation serves as a resource for accomplishing different communicative acts at specific points within interactional sequence, e.g. changing footing, moving in and out of different frames, doing a side sequence, representing the voices of different characters in a narrative, making topic changes. (p. 99)

Shin (2009) summarizes preference-related and discourse-related language alternations as tools to negotiate the language of the interaction and accommodate the language competences and preferences of conversational participants, as well as to organize conversational tasks.

Multiple taxonomies have been proposed in the literature on language alternation depending on the viewpoints from which language alternation has been approached. Gumperz (1982a) identifies six types of functions, namely, quotation, addressee specification, interjection, reiteration, message qualification, and personalisation versus objectivation. Flyman-Mattsson and Burenhult (2009) find five functions of language alternation in second language acquisition contexts, mainly linguistic insecurity, topic switch, affective functions, socialising functions, repetitive functions. Finally, Gulzar (2010) identifies eleven functions of language alternation, including: clarification, giving instruction effectively, translation, socialising, linguistic competence, topic shift, ease of expression, emphasis, checking understanding, repetition function, end creating a sense of belonging.

Language alternation online has also received a substantial amount of attention throughout the years (Tsoumou, 2018), especially on Facebook as a result of claims pointing out that Facebook tends to be a multilingual environment (Bukhari et al., 2015; Inuwa et al., 2014; Sukyadi, et al. 2012).

The functions of language alternation thus vary depending on the context of the study, since multilingual speakers mix languages in order to fulfil specific pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and discursive functions.

However, despite all attempts to investigate language alternation, the attention paid to this phenomenon in Congo-Brazzaville remains scarce, given the number of languages spoken within the national borders and the unstoppable expansion of English as an international language. The present paper bases on Tsoumou (2018) findings on the increasing use of English along with other languages in Facebook communication. It is therefore important to examine the main pragmatic functions of English/French alternation in Facebook interaction among Congolese users. The paper provides empirical answers to the following research question:

What triggers the use of English in political communicative exchanges, given that Congo-Brazzaville is a non-English speaking country? In other words, what are the pragmatic functions displayed through the use of English on Facebook?

The departure point is the assumption that Congolese Facebook users do not just embrace English as a result of the international nature of this language, but they are to some extent pragmatically competent in how and when to make use of English.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A socio-psychological theoretical model, named Markedness Model, is applied in an effort to offer an exhaustive understanding of both the interactional as well as socio-cultural meanings surrounding multilingualism on Facebook.

The Markedness Model attempts to establish a principled procedure that both speakers and listeners (or writers and readers) use to judge any linguistic choice that they might make or hear as more or less marked, given the interaction in which it occurs. Two concepts are fundamental within the markedness mainstream, namely, marked and unmarked choices. The former is the unexpected choice people bring into the interaction under certain circumstances. The latter is the expected choice made by speakers in conformity with norms governing the context of the interaction.

Myers-Scotton (2006) indicates that using the concept of markedness implies that a code choice is viewed as a system of oppositions. Such oppositions are partly understood as indexing right-and-obligations sets between participants in each interaction type. Within the markedness mainstream, unmarked choice (as opposed to marked choice) is crucial. According to Myers-Scotton (2006), unmarked choices are those that are more or less expected, given the ingredients of the interaction (participant, topic, setting and so on). In other words, the unmarked choice refers to some way of communicating that is less likely to cause a social ripple (Myers-Scotton, 1993a, 1993b, 2006).

Markedness is thus a productive way to gain insight into language use and language alternation in the interaction involving Congolese people where French is a potential unmarked code when it comes to written interaction. Theoretically, French is expectedly viewed as an unmarked choice since it is, within the Congolese Facebook community, the only language dedicated to written discourse, especially on Facebook, where the interactions are mostly written-based. Any other language used beside French appears as a marked choice given the highly official status of French in the country. The marked choices, on the other hand, are those that are unexpected, given the right and obligation set that is in effect (Myers-Scotton, 2006). The use of English in Congolese-based Facebook communication is a perfect example of the marked choice.

Furthermore, the Markedness Model relies on the negotiation of principles and the maxims informing these principles. In other words, the model is pragmatic based, considering the speakers' language choice as a negotiation of the rights and obligations (RO henceforth) set underlying the

context of the interaction. Thomas (1995) considers RO to be the dimensions needed in order to explain any situation in which a speech act involving a major imposition is performed with a minimal degree of indirectness.

Myers-Scotton (1993a) argues that speaking one's ethnic language in the same interaction types indexes a different RO set, one in which the speaker's rights and obligations are based on ethnic solidarity, and perhaps specifically, on the socio-culture values and accomplishments of that ethnic group. Principles underlying all code choices can ultimately be explained in terms of such speaker motives.

Markedness Model thus accounts for the idea that code choice can be both indexical and symbolic in a couple of different ways given various social attributes governing any given linguistic community. Both indexicality and language alternation symbolic side are the subject of change because they are dynamic. Myers-Scotton (1993a, p. 86) provides an example of English in Nairobi, where the author reports that "speaking English fluently in Nairobi may be indexical of any of a set of attributes, including most prominently 'plus high educational level/ socio-economic status', 'plus authority', 'plus formality', and 'plus official'".

## **Method of study**

### ***Research design***

The present paper, which adopts both qualitative and quantitative approaches, analyses Facebook comments made by Congolese users while discussing national political issues from October 2015 to July 2016, the time period highlighted by two major national political events, mainly the constitutional referendum (October 25, 2015) and the presidential election (March 20, 2016). The data collection process was relatively straightforward as the researcher was constantly connected to Facebook as to closely observe the ongoing interactions as they appear on the personal newsfeeds. Overall, a corpus of 265,147 words including 9,330 comments were therefore collected. It is important to point out that previous studies have also used this method in the data collection procedures as it falls within netnographic mainstream and its applications in Maíz-Arévalo (2015) and Tsoumou (2018).

While reviewing methodological issues regarding online research, Bolander & Locher (2014) contend that:

scholars wishing to use online data for sociolinguistic research will all, at one point, need to make ethical decisions; they all will also have to characterize their data with respect to modality and to reflect upon the implications of their data's mono- or multimodality for the research design, to consider the suitability of mixing methods and focusing on online and/or offline contexts in light of their research question, and to face the challenge of annotating their data when using the web as a

corpus, or as a pool of data from which to create a corpus. (p.15)

Online research has been subject to criticisms with respect to ethic concerning computer-mediated communication, owing to the fact that most research conducted online usually allows no contact (or limited contact) between researcher and participants. Critics such as Villi and Matikainen (2016) point out that face-to-face contact between an ethnographer and participants guarantees a safe environment for many participants to provide the researcher in most cases with both consent and support. The argument often put forward is that online research method fails to provide nonverbal behavior of the participants, albeit recent research has found that online users have developed alternative ways of expressing nonverbal communication (Maíz-Arévalo, 2017). Finally, because many online users often act anonymously, netnography<sup>1</sup> has also been seen as a method failing to provide researchers with accurate information related to variables such as age, social class and so on, which variables may appear important to carry out, for example, a transgenerational investigation of online culture.

Although the nature of online data (public or private) as well as participants' consent are therefore main concerns of CMC research (Villi & Matikainen, 2016), online social interactions are sometimes viewed as if they took place in either a public or private space. Walther (2002, as cited in Kozinets, 2015, p. 138) reports that “people who post material on a publicly available communication system on the Internet should understand that it is public, not private or confidential”. However, Kozinets (2015, p. 139) advises that the netnographer has choices when it comes to ethic procedures, but there are certain requirements that are well established, such as informed consent and risks versus benefits. Even though most online researchers consider messages posted online to be public acts, gaining the consent of participants is usually the best-reported advice and the safest practice within the netnographical tradition.

In the present study this advice was carefully followed, taking into account both risks and benefits. The collection of the data was therefore carried out in line with the protocol used in Maíz-Arévalo (2015) which advises the gathering of data without informing participants so as not to prejudice their behavior. Bolander and Locher (2014, p.16) likewise advise that methodology in empirical research (both qualitative and quantitative) co-evolves in connection with the research question. Nevertheless, in January 2017, once all the data had been collected, hundreds of people who left their comments were informed of the investigation via the researcher's own personal Facebook page. Fortunately, none of them expressed any disagreement.

Preceding problems also prevented the researcher from revealing his identity while the data collection was in process. The presence of the researcher was thus not disclosed to participants because it appeared that exposure to the participants was highly risky for the researcher for two major

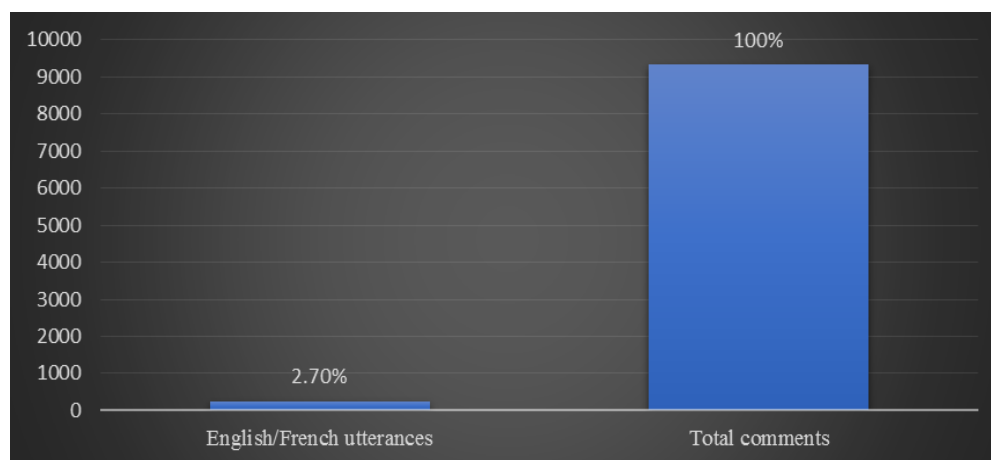


reasons. Firstly, in a country such as Congo-Brazzaville where politics can at time be a serious and dangerous issue, searching for information regarding politics throughout the period when the current data were collected could have generated suspicion. Multiple subjective intentions could have been formulated as to which political side the researcher supported.

Another point is that, the languages Congolese people speak usually say much about their origins. On the other hand, politics and languages are strongly connected in that most political ideologies are based on the linguistic division of the country. Exposing the nature as well as the purpose of the study could have influenced the way people interacted online, potentially drawing the researcher away from observing naturally occurring data.

Data for this study were derived from text-based Facebook interactions carried out by Congolese users. After the collection of the data, it was decided to clear up the data by carefully deleting long-length videos which were beyond the scope of the study as they seem to open an avenue for future research, more focused on multimodal elements. Language alternation is a verbal linguistic phenomenon. Text-like Facebook comments are therefore easy to categorize in terms of the languages involved in the corpus.

A statistical description in terms of the languages involved in the corpus shows (Figure 1) the presence of the English language among the languages Facebook users resort to in the back and forth politically motivated Facebook-based interactions. English is in fact present in the online sociolinguistic landscape of Congolese Facebook users.



*Figure 1.* Overall comments versus English/French utterances

At a first glance, English/French comments appear as a tiny number with only 2.70%. However, a closer examination of Figure 1 reveals that English is clearly in use amongst Congolese people, especially among Facebook users who are engaged in politically motivated interactions.

## Results

The choice of a language of an interactional exchange is predetermined by multiple extralinguistic driven factors that stand and reflect on interlocutors' background as well as the degree to which a society has integrated or appropriated a particular language. Factors such as prior language acquisition, sharing cultural and linguistic backgrounds are indeed key in the process of enhancing a mutual linguistic engagement.

In the previous section it was revealed that Congolese Facebook users resort to English in communicative exchanges. This section examines pragmatic purposes for which English is used in Facebook interaction. Figure 2 reveals that the use of English is pragmatically a goal-oriented communicative act by which Facebook users employ this language to freely express feelings and emotions.

A statistical examination of the English presence in the dataset indicates not just seven different pragmatic functions, but more importantly, expressions related to making fun and jocular appear to be the most used of all categories of English instances as shown in Figure 2. An analysis of the excerpts will certainly point to the reasons for this fact.

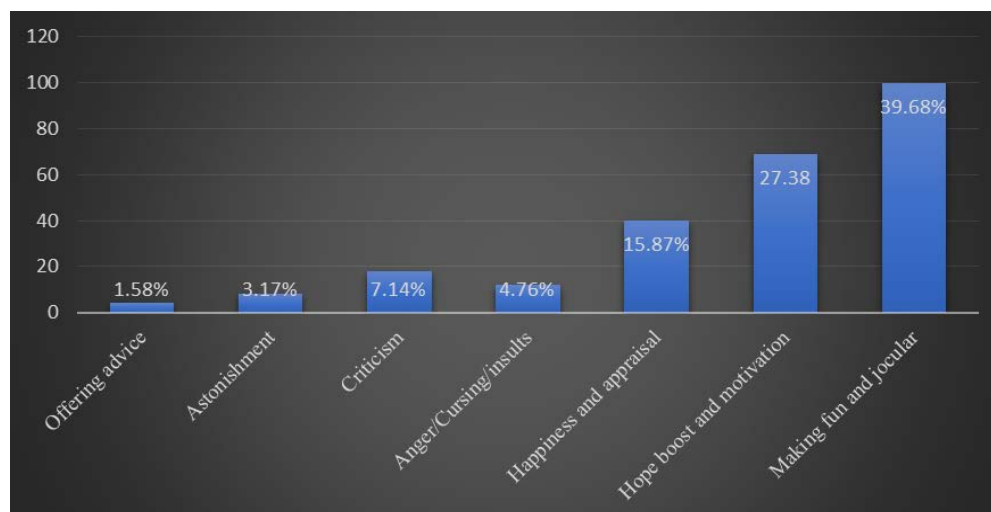


Figure 2. Pragmatic purposes of English/French alternation

Figure 2 shows several pragmatic functions pursued by Facebook users in variable rates, ranging from the least to the most frequent. English/French alternation is, in other words, a multifunctional linguistic phenomenon adopted on Facebook. One after the other, these functions will be examined.

### A. *Advice offering*

The category of offering advice includes Facebook comments written in English with the intent of offering a guidance or recommendation with regard

to prudent actions. Advising in the context of politics consists in offering suggestions about the best course of action to take amid political turmoil in the country. This category of comments accounts for 1.58%, making it the least used class of pragmatic purposes pursued by Facebook users while employing English. Example 1 shows how the user calls upon fellow citizens to accept the fact that Sassou is the president of the country in the meantime persuading them to believe that the only force for change left would come from the change they can make to their own individual behavior.

1. Brothers and sisters no matter your statement,he remain the president of congo unless you can change the fact that he is the first Congolese worldwide the best to do right now and this year 2016 is our mentality

Interestingly, the user refers to fellow citizens as sisters and brothers implying certain proximity and closeness between him/her and others. Within the markedness mainstream, the use of English here can be assimilated with the user's desire to index a new right and obligation set under which English is as an important communicative tool as other languages used in Congo-Brazzaville. In example 2, the user recommends fellow Facebook users to consider the fact that he/she is a serious journalist, and as such, there is no need for him/her to be tempted by corrupt behavior which can compromise trust and reliability.

2. Please Brazza News , tu est un journaliste serieux , reste toujours professionnel , ne tombe pas dans la betise mon frere , ne gache pas tout , il en va de ta credibilite . sassou va partir mais ta credibilite doit rester. Thank you my brother. God bless you and your family  
*[Brazza News, you are a serious journalist and you should keep up your professionalism. Do not get tempted by foolishness my brother. Do not mess all up as your reliability is at stake. One day Sassou will leave but your reliability should remain. Thank you, my brother. God bless you and your family]*

The comment starts in the unmarked language French and closes by a good wish uttered in the marked language, English, indicating to some extent certain closeness between the user and the new outlet owner. The use of words such as brothers and sisters in example 1 and 2 convey interpersonal and affective stances important in solidarity and social rapport building among users.

## ***B. Astonishment***

Astonishment is an expression of extreme surprise which can be taken as an indication of the mood of the user. In example 3, the user resorts to the use of astonishing linguistic device. By expressing their surprise through the use of the popular (especially among English speaking communities) astonishment expression *Oh my God!!* accompanied by two heady exclamation marks, this Facebook user shows sign of their communicative ability to use the English language in an appropriate context.

### 3. Oh my God!!

This category accounts for 3.17%, making it the second least used in the dataset. One may argue that expressing an astonishment via the use of *Oh my God!!* would index how communicative competent the user might be, since this expression implies some pragmatic knowledge which, in turn, indicates the ability to employ such an expression in an appropriate communicative context.

In example 4, the user also resorts to the English language as he/she opens his/her astonishment utterance by employing *what?* as an indicator of amazement about someone or something.

### 4. What? Ceux sont vraiment des enfoirés! *[What? They are all disgraceful]*

Language is not just a simple means of communication; it is also a key to social norms governing a given society. As mentioned earlier, rights and obligations set norms under which language users can resort to whatever tool available while being mindful that social norms are worth being cautiously followed and respected. Using any linguistic item implies that the user understands the importance of the relevance of their utterance in the process of meaning making in the interaction.

## ***C. Criticism***

Criticisms stand for the expression of disapproval of someone or something on the basis of perceived faults or mistakes. It is no surprise that political discourse is known for being a contentious communicative exchange of criticisms between interlocutors involved. In example 5, the user expresses a critical observation of the African politicians' attitudes towards their political engagement, implying that African leaders have some patterns of not willingly wanting or accepting to peacefully pass down the power as prescribed in the constitutions.

5. All that because they don't want to step down i don't know what's going on with African leaders seriously they're crazy

French/English comments related to political criticism account for 7.14% utterances. In example 6, the user opens the criticism in the unmarked language, French, but resorts to the marked language, English, in the second half of the comment. The user believes that the opposition leaders in the country are nothing more than a bunch of complicit disruptors who are serving just as badly as the sitting administration.

6. Les opposants arrêtés de distraire le peuple. Vous êtes tous du pouvoir en place. You think that Congolese people are stupid? We all know what you guys are doing. You will all go tohell.  
***[Political opposition leaders need to stop fooling people. You are all allies to the sitting administration. Do not even think that the Congolese people are stupid. We all know what you guys are doing. You will all go to hell]***

While the criticism in example 5 is entirely written in English, aimed at African leaders entitled to power of life, the criticism in example 6 targets the political opposition in Cong-Brazzaville who, according to the user, is inactive.

The use of the personal pronoun *we* in example 6 reveals some facework the user displays as a way to reduce social distance with fellow citizens. Park (2008, p. 936) points out that positive face desire relates to creating positive interpersonal relationships by reducing social distance between speech participants. In example 6 the user refers to fellow citizens as family members he/she knows well on the basis of sharing common ground, interest and knowledge.

#### ***D. Expressing anger/curse/insults***

The category of comments in which Facebook users utter anger, curse and insult accounts for 4.76%, making this group the third least used in the dataset. Anger is usually expressed through comments showing strong feeling of displeasure, hostility or antagonism towards someone or something. In example 7, the user does not hide the displeasure by making an overt request and an order to terminate a fellow citizen.

7. Whoever sees this man please let us know, or if you can, kill him on my behalf. le pays te sera reconnaissant.  
***[Whoever sees this man please let us know, or if you can, kill him on my behalf. The country will be grateful to you.]***

On Facebook, as in face-to-face interaction, users resort to multiple linguistic devices at their disposal in the process of verbally bringing up their inside feelings. They can wish others well or misfortune. Communication is not just a pleasure-delivered means amongst interlocutors, rather it is also a frustration-expressed process through which people freely speak out their mind, sometimes without any fear of repercussion. In example 8 below, the user resorts to offensive or morally inappropriate language as he/she overtly utters his/her anger.

8. FUCK YOU

Being insensitive, insolent, or rude to somebody is one way people sometimes express themselves in situations they feel attacked or demeaned. In both examples 7 and 8 one can witness anger and frustration through the use of outrageous language.

*E. Happiness and appraisal*

Appraisal stands for the act or process of developing an opinion of value usually expressed in a happy state of mind. In other words, joy and positive emotions can lead to a development of good judgment about someone or something. In example 9, the user praises an online news outlet for delivering good news to them. The example is a case of language alternation in that the user starts the comment in the unmarked language, French, and ends up switching to the marked language, English, by importing the English word *news*.

9. Actuellement brazzanews est au top,rien ne peut l'échapper merci des news  
*[BrazzaNews is currently at the top. Thanks for delivering good and fresh news to us.]*

The category of happiness and appraisal accounts for 15.87%, making it the third most used group of comments in the dataset. In example 10, the user alternates three languages at once in the same utterance while praising the news outlet. Firstly, the Kituba word *ba* is user as an opener; then the user resorts to the English language by employing the second personal pronoun, *you*, before finally closing the comment using the unmarked language, French.

10. Ba laisse you brazzanews avec toi toujours informer en temp réel  
*[They should leave you alone, BrazzaNews. You are doing a good job at delivering real time news]*

This over alternation of languages certainly requires advanced linguistic and pragmatic knowledge which substantially enables the process of meaning making. Conversation on Facebook is an open-ended implying that any

communicative act uttered is exposed to a wider audience. In order to guarantee the success of communication, all comments should be written in a way that allows others a fair understanding of the utterance. Employing such an over alternation may indicate how self-assured one can be as they post comments because without confidence the utterance can fail in the process of understanding.

#### ***F. Hope boost and motivation***

The belief and expectation of prosperous life conditions are frequent in any country undergoing a political crisis. In most cases, such an expectation becomes a daily wish, as encouraging people to expect positive political changes to the effect of a fairer society becomes a substantial force and power to keep the motivation going. In example 11, the use expresses a boost, as he/she tends to believe that people still have the power to overcome the dictatorship. Interestingly enough, this user employs the inclusive personal pronoun *we the people*, implying that he/she is part of the people willing to fight until the last breath.

11. Qui a dit a monsieur 8% qu'il etait detenteur du permis d'occuper du Congo? En dehors de ses nombreux enfants, neveux et godillots qui d'autre a du respect pour lui? We, the.people of Congo shall overcome the Nguesso1er dictatorship once for all! Vive le Congo Libre, Fier et Debout!  
***[You gave Mr. 8% the right to own the Congo. Who else respects him beyond his close family members? We the people shall overcome the Nguesso dictatorship once for all! Long live free Congo, Proud and standing up]***

Hope boost and motivation comments account for 27.38%. This category is the second most frequently used in the dataset. In example 12, the comment is entirely written in English. The user encourages fellow users not to live under fear, to be positive and expect a bright future. This user shows self-determination as well as self-assurance as a way to convey to fellow citizens that no matter how long oppression may take, the victory will come, and people will find back their freedom.

12. Do not worry guys they are just like beheaded snakes which their bodies are waiting for the heart to stop pounding. The reign of Mr 8% ended long ago. Like I previously said the heart of a beheaded snake takes time to stop. No matter how long is going to last, literally speaking things are over for this group of criminals.

While in example 11, the comment is made up of the unmarked language, French and the marked language, English, the user in example 12 employs English in the entire comment.

### ***G. Making fun/jocular mockery/banter***

The majority of English/French comments posted by users fall within the category comprising contemptuous, humorous and playful utterances. This category accounts for 39.68%. In example 13, the user teases the situation by using the English expression *time over*.

#### 13. Time over

Using English expressions, such as *time over*, as a way to utter banter is an indication of language competence which is the knowledge of the language and the ability to use that knowledge to interpret and produce meaningful texts appropriate to the situation in which they are used (Fauziati, 2015). In example 14, the user opts for derision as he/she describes fellow Congolese as a bunch of cowards before closing the comment with laughter *LoL*.

#### 14. C'est tous cowards lol *[They are all coward, LOL]*

In example 14 the use of *LOL* is a way of making fun and teasing the nature of the inactive political opposition. Maíz-Arévalo (2015, p. 297) defines jocular mockery on Facebook as involving an explicit diminishment of someone of relevance to self or some other Facebook users within a non-serious or jocular frame. Jocular can be seen as an indicator of solidarity and social rapport building among interlocutors through the reduction of social distance constrained by the nature of computer-mediated communication.

### **Discussion**

It goes without saying that English is truly an international language. It has transcended borders and boundaries and is now a language even observable in completely remote non-English speaking such as Congo-Brazzaville. Many factors can be identified from the presence of English in Cong-Brazzaville, especially in terms of computer-mediated communication. To begin with, the expansion of the English language worldwide correlates with the advancement the new technologies, and particularly, of computer-mediated communication. From the earlier days, it was already argued that English was the main language of the internet (Androutopoulos, 2013; Herring, 2007) even though such an argument later became flexible due to studies counterarguing that online communication constitutes an increasingly multilingual communicative environment (Allothman & Alhakbani, 2012). It is safe to argue that



technologies are a substantial contribution to the development and strength of English as an international language, because, with its ubiquitous nature, computer-mediated communication allows many non-English speaking communities to be exposed to the language daily. As Clyne and Sharifian (2008, p. 283) contend “the widespread use of international technologies for communication, for example the use of internet, has made it increasingly difficult to distinguish between local and international interactions for people using their computers at home”.

Secondly, another factor behind the use of English in Congo-Brazzaville might be the political one in that, as argued elsewhere (Tsoumou, 2018), Congo-Brazzaville may be tempted by the idea to put their national political issue in the international context so as to (a) attract the attention and compassion of other countries as well as international institutions, such as the UN, and the EU, (b) associate the use of English with certain identities such as modern or a social elite identity, (c) consider English as another practical medium of communication. The last two communicative purposes fall within Clyne and Sharifian’s (2008) argument that any language fulfils two main functions: it is the main medium of human communication, but it is also a symbol of identity. Like any other language, pragmatic functions revealed in the analysis (e.g. offering advice, criticism, etc.) point to the argument that Congolese Facebook users employ English not just for sole drive to communicate their thought, but also they engage in complex interactive strategies that prove to a certain extent the awareness of both pragmatic and linguistic standards of English use.

Congolese Facebook users are not just knowledgeable of the importance of English as an international language, they are also pragmatically competent on the ground of their ability to communicate competently but not on the ground of their ability to use English exactly as native speakers do. One thing is to make use of a widely popular English expression such as LOL, and another thing is to be able to express deep emotions and feelings in a language that is neither a L1, L2 nor L3 in an open-ended Facebook interaction. It certainly requires substantial linguistic confidence and self-assurance for any user to engage a language such as English in Congo-Brazzaville. It would be interesting to investigate the extent of pragmatic success and failure through an analysis of the conversational organization of the interaction in order to rationally determine whether or not reactive acts to previous comments made in English meet success or failure.

Another point is the discursive competence displayed in the examples analyzed. Discourse competence is defined by Canale (1983, p. 9) as a “mastery of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text in different genres”. In spite of being written in more than one language, the English utterances tend to be well-written in a clear way that can be well interpreted by any user with a relatively good knowledge of the English language. In other words, discourse competence is to some extent mastered by Congolese Facebook users employing English in

their comments online. As for pragmatic and linguistic competences, discourse competence is a relevant way to avoid the occurrence of misinterpretation in a given interaction.

In resourcing to English, Congolese Facebook users, involved in the national political discourse, pursue different interactive goals as they perform various interaction activities, such as offering advice, astonishment, criticism, expressing anger, appraising, hope boost and making fun, in various tones. Bolander and Locher (2014, p. 17) already predicted that the “people interacting online can perform various interactional activities (e.g., debate, praise one another, give advice) when they engage in communication (“activity”); the “tone” of these activities can vary (e.g. friendly, contentious, formal, casual)”.

English/French alternation, as has been analyzed in this paper, has certainly reshaped the Congolese sociolinguistic landscape in such a way as the use of English is adding upon several different existing linguistic communities (e.g., the French linguistic community, the Lingala linguistic community, the Kituba linguistic community) a new linguistic community comprising of Congolese English speakers. As mentioned previously, language alternation is a linguistic phenomenon through which group boundaries are marked. Congolese Facebook users who speak English may find themselves building up a sociolinguistic community within which only fellow Congolese with ability to understand English can integrate. As Crystal (2003, p.22) explains “language is a major means (...) of showing where we belong, and of distinguishing one social group from another (...)”. Likewise, Clyne and Shaifian (2008, p. 284) point out that through language, group boundaries are marked between *us* and *them* and group relations are expressed. The question as to whether English is challenging French and local languages in Congo-Brazzaville, however, remains to be seen as it requires collecting and analyzing major datasets from both on- and offline settings. What holds true about the data examined in this paper is, however, that there seems to be a clear turning point in language choice in Congo-Brazzaville where English, as a global lingua franca, becomes an essential part of spontaneously thoughtfully produced communicative activities.

As pointed out earlier, a statistical description of English instances in the dataset demonstrate that making fun and jocular-related expressions were the most produced of all the seven categories identified in the dataset. As most of the expressions analyzed consist of internationally well-known and overused internet-based words and phrases (such as *Lol*, *time over*, etc.), the basic explanation of this statistical discrepancy is certainly the desire and enthusiasm of Congolese Facebook users to frequently use laughter as a remedy as well as an escape from the ongoing national political turmoil, since a state of enjoyable exuberance can be a curative measure to effectively deal with dark and tough times as well as political standoff in the country. In addition, one may also argue that the use of these internationally well-known expressions is connected to what Yashima (2009, as cited in Chevasco, 2019)

describes as “a willingness to feel connected to a global community, regardless of language, and to interact with citizens from other countries” (p. 5).

Finally, there are certainly norms guiding online interactions as, for instance the use of English in this paper, is an indication that participants are guided by norms for social practice and language use certainly determined top-down through the outside influence of both globalization and English as an international language. This goes along with Androutsopoulos’ (2006, p. 421) argument according to which the interplay of technological, social, and contextual factors contributes in the shaping of computer-mediated language practices. This determinism has to be acknowledged (Bolander & Locher, 2014) since in the particular context of Congo-Brazzaville, one can contend that computer-mediated communication has shaped a new sociolinguistic landscape which can be referred to as online sociolinguistic configuration (Tsoumou, 2018).

## **Conclusion**

This paper set out to examine communicative purposes in the English/French alternation among Congolese Facebook users engaging in politically motivated Facebook interactional exchanges. One main research question was therefore posed at the outset (e.g., what triggers the use of English in political communicative exchanges, given that Congo-Brazzaville is a non-English speaking country? In other words, what are the pragmatic functions displayed through the use of English on Facebook?). The findings not only revealed that English is in fact used, but more importantly the instances analyzed show multiple communicative goals achieved using English.

The lingua franca function of the English language worldwide is on the top of the factors influencing and motivating Congolese Facebook users to resource to this language in Facebook interaction. The users tend to be driven by the mere idea that in order to convey the communication on an international scale, a global language is needed regardless of whether all fellow users understand it.

Proficiency in the use of English among Congolese Facebook users is not easy to determine, especially when the interaction occurs online. This is an avenue for future research. Nevertheless, based on the data analyzed, there is a pattern indicating to some extent the pragmatic appropriacy in the use of English on Facebook. In other words, it may be difficult to determine the proficiency of users based on Facebook interactions, but it seems to be clear that Congolese Facebook users are discursively competent as they make use of English words, sentences or phrases with explicit intents. Pragmatic functions found in the analysis point to the argument that Congolese users are pragmatically competent in the use of English since they seem to be knowledgeable of how and when to curse, give advice, or express anger.

Finally, the findings in this paper open avenues to investigation on the extent to which English, as an international language, has affected Congolese communicative exchanges in offline interactions as well, because writing on Facebook shows only one side of the users' competence in the English language. It goes without saying that full mastery of a language requires an assembly of discourse competence, linguistic competence, actional competence, sociocultural competence, and strategic competence, well displayed both in written and spoken discourses. Very specifically, it would be interesting to examine students' appropriation of this language and determine whether there might be a trend to the effect of encouraging and enabling an implementation of English in the national curriculum in the future.

## Notes

The findings reported in this paper are an extension of the findings of my PhD dissertation which aimed to examine codeswitching in computer-mediated communication amongst Congolese people in 2018. The dissertation reported, among many other things, several categories of languages involved in CMC amongst Congolese people. These categories include the unmarked language French, the marked languages involving English, Kituba, Lingala, and ethnic languages. The presence of English came up as a surprise since Congo-Brazzaville is historically a French-speaking country. In the present paper I intend to thoroughly determine specific pragmatic functions of the use of English in politically motivated computer-mediated communication in Congo using the same dataset.

<sup>1</sup>Nethnography is a participant-observation and human based research method which observes and explains online values, cultures, groups and social rituals. Kozinets (2015, p. 18) explains that netnography is a means of obtaining a cultural understanding of human experience from online social interaction and content and presenting them as a form of research.

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