

## “Let’s talk about el catalan’s 😊”

### Student teachers’ use of plurilingual and plurimodal resources in WhatsApp interaction

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#### Introduction

In their definition of Virtual Exchange (VE), O’Dowd and Dooly (2020) point out that although “this technology-enhanced collaborative approach to teaching and learning languages has had several names over its (relatively) short history, each of them with their own particular connotations” (262), “they all highlight both the medium (virtual, online, digital, distance, global, networked) and the underlying purpose (exchange, intercultural, collaboration, learning)” (ibid.). The authors underscore a distinctive feature of VE, that is

the notion of sustained interaction (vs. short-term contact) involving a complex integration of collaborative work that promotes learning [and] that the exchange is somehow integrated into students’ formal learning, including, for example, guided reflection on the exchange during class time and the recognition of academic credit for their work.

(ibid)

The growing research on VE in teacher education focuses on the goal of raising the participants’ awareness of the usefulness of VE programmes and equipping them with pedagogical skills necessary to design and run such exchanges (Dooly, 2009; Dooly and Sadler, 2020). Despite the increase in such studies, there is a shortage of research exploring the use of plurilingual and plurimodal resources in the co-construction of meaning in the course of international dialogic interaction that takes place in VE. This chapter aims to fill this gap by applying Conversation Analysis (CA) to explore WhatsApp interaction between three student teachers from universities in the US and Catalonia. In particular, we attend to the impact of plurilingual and plurimodal code-switching (Auer, 1988) on the sequentiality of the interaction. Researchers have previously argued that emoji may have more communicative purposes than simply conveying emotions or pictorially representing facial expressions or gestures (Kelly and Watts, 2015). Extending from these authors’ work, it is suggested that emojis may be deployed to orchestrate the interaction (e.g.

mitigation through humour) or to elicit a next-turn interaction from other participants (e.g. orientation of an expected response). With this brief study, we aim to contribute to Meredith's call for deeper understanding of how "technology impacts upon interactional practices" (2019: 254); in this case during a VE in a foreign language (FL) teacher education course.

## Methodological framework

The data come from screen grabs that were voluntarily submitted by three preservice teachers who had been asked to meet in an online chat to discuss the task design and assessment of a project-based activity during a semester-long VE. Their tasks would then be implemented in their internship schools. Two of the student teachers (Linda and Katherine) are MA students in a FL teaching programme at an American university. The other student teacher (Jaume) is enrolled in a BA degree in a university in Catalonia to become a FL teacher (English) in primary education. The names of the participants have been changed to protect their identity. All participants gave written consent to use their data for research purposes before carrying out the VE.

According to Gumperz (1977: 1), conversational code-switching can be defined as the "juxtaposition of passages of speech belonging to different grammatical systems or subsystems, within the same exchange". In this chapter we approach code-switching from two perspectives and set out to explore the communicative role of plurilingual and plurimodal resources, such as emojis, laughter tokens and punctuation symbols. In this study, we argue that emoji characters "might posit word-like properties and show grammatical patterns and orders, similar to words" (Stamatov, 2017: 2). Building on Jackendoff and Wittenberg's (2014) hierarchy of grammatical complexity for sentence-level utterances, Stamatov (2017) further argues that emojis can be "regarded as a new form of a visual language" and that this is increasingly accepted by "researchers and journalists alike" (9). In his study, in which participants (all experienced emoji users) were asked to communicate through emoji characters in isolation, Stamatov (2017) found that the participants used combinations of emoji that included features of "linear grammar and morphologically limited combinatorial structures" such as "placing the agent (or doer) before the patient or object of that action"; proposing that this is a recurring pattern seen in "other instances of communication, such as gesture-based communication" (Stamatov, 2017: 13).

The author also found that there were "sequencing patterns of emoji when people were asked to communicate without words" (Stamatov, 2017: 34) and "that people do use emoji patterning that resembles patterns found in other communication systems" (34), concluding "that emoji possess grammar, [although] a very simplistic one" (41). Following on this argument, emoji are understood here as an alternate code or language variant (albeit not a full-fledged language) and is an additional modality within the participants' repertoire. Moreover, in

line with McSweeney's (2018) observation that the use of emojis requires a conscientious change between keyboards, we argue that this shift is an intentional action by the participant, further supporting our argument that the use of emoji is a deliberate code-switch, carried out with interactional intent.

Additionally, a micro-analytical perspective of code-switching views code alternation as a mutually organised event within the contextually delineated interaction. As Auer indicates, "variation in the repertoire has to be dealt with in a way that is sensitive to the general social and linguistic situation of the 'community'" (ibid.). The members in this dataset belong to a virtual community of future teachers (Dooly, 2011); that is, a group of digitally competent individuals with mutual interests of completing an assigned group task (Dooly and Tudini, 2016). While the WhatsApp chat takes place outside the classroom, it is a requisite of the course and therefore it can be considered as an extension of institutional talk (ibid.).

## Analysis and discussion

In excerpt 1, the beginning of the session starts with a greeting adjacency pair, of which both the first and second part end with an extra-sentential code-switch into emoji (lines 1 and 2). Jaume begins his turn with a rather effusive textual message ("Hi darling", complemented by three exclamation marks, line 1) and then code-switches to emoji with another rather lavish emoji (smiling face with heart eyes).

Excerpt 1. Hi darling!!! Participants: One Catalan student teacher, Jaume (JAU), and two American student teachers, Linda (LIN) and Katherine (KAT)

- 1 JAU: Hi darling!!! 😍
- 2 KAT: Hi! 🙋
- 3 JAU: Sorry for being late!
- 4 What about Linda?
- 5 KAT: Greetings for the first time on whatsapp! 😊
- 6 Linda is not in our group
- 7 JAU: Ok, should we add her to our group?
- 8 KAT: Hold on, I'll do it
- 9 JAU: Ok 👍
- 10 JAU: Hi Linda!!! 😍
- 11 LIN: Yea!
- 12 Hola Jaume! 😊
- Hello*

- 13 JAU: Hi girl!!! 😊
- 14 LIN: ?Como te vas?  
 ?how goes you? ((Linda uses the incorrect syntax))
- 15 JAU: HAHAHahaha 😂
- 16 Muy bien guapa!!! 🍌 [medium-dark skin tone]  
 very well pretty one
- 17 LIN: Now I just need to learn Catalan! 😏
- 18 JAU: LOL! you should 🤪

In his first turn, Jaume initiates the code-switch that Katherine aligns to, demonstrating, through her own use of emoji, her interpersonal affiliation to Jaume's affective stance. The next adjacency pair, which includes an expansion by Katherine, contains a new emoji (smiling face, line 5), which orients to the previous two uses of this code, further demonstrating the empathetic communication between the co-participants.

In line 4, Jaume begins to manage the institutional task, requesting information about the presence of the third participant in the group, Linda. Jaume responds to Katherine's offer to add Linda to the WhatsApp group with a preferred response "ok" (line 9) and then code-switches to add a thumbs up emoji to accentuate his alignment with her orchestration of the online events.

In line 11, Linda joins the group. Her first turn includes interesting shifts that involve three codes: she begins her turn in English, then continues her turn in Spanish (or Catalan), followed by a third shift into emoji (lines 11 and 12). Despite Linda's use of Jaume's L1s in line 12, in line 13, Jaume completes the Turn Construction Unit (TCU) in what might be considered the 'institutional' language (English). In his switch back to English, Jaume appears to be orienting to the institutional task and goal (Drew and Heritage, 1992), which is to discuss their projects in their target teaching language. However, Linda responds in line 14 with a code-switch to Spanish, although her syntax is incorrect. At this point, Jaume does align with Linda's more 'playful' role of experimenting with another language by responding with laughter in two codes (textual and emoji, line 15). Arguably, these two codes for laughter (textual and emoji) convey deep laughter, not merely chuckling or giggling, as communicated through the use of repetition and capital letters, followed by a more emotionally-charged emoji of rolling on the floor laughing. They also seem to reinforce one another (as verbal and gestural communication often merge).

Jaume then provides another sign of affiliation to Linda's code-switch to Spanish as he delivers an affective response in line 16. Despite the fact that timing in text chats are difficult to calculate (due to overlap in text writing which is not visible in the screen grabs), Jaume's response seems to fit the

accounting that “agreements, confirmations and acceptances [...] generally are performed with no delays” (Pomerantz and Heritage, 2013: 214). Moreover, Jaume’s affiliative response is extended with an emoji, which can be interpreted as his appreciation and encouragement for Linda’s (somewhat bungled) attempt to use his L1. This code-switch is interesting in the way in which Jaume has changed the skin tone of the emoji, displaying a proficiency in the code that the others do not demonstrate as they tend to use the default skin tone of the emoji throughout the exchange.

The next two turns show continuance of this affiliation between the co-participants as Linda declares that she should now try to learn Jaume’s second language, Catalan, to which Jaume, once more, provides a two-code response, including the use of an emoji (line 18) as an embodiment of his agreement and appreciation.

In excerpt 2, Katherine provides a topical bid to bring the attention of the group back to the institutional task (line 19), followed by an embodied grimace, delivered through an emoji. Katherine’s opening bid is not a direct request to move on-task; instead it is mitigated, not only by asking the status of the other participants’ regarding their outside-of-class tasks but also through the use of the emoji. The use of the grimace can also be seen as a pre-empt of her co-participants’ potential reluctance to begin the task. Up to this point in the exchange, the co-participants have been more oriented to more interpersonal aspects and Katherine seems aware that she is shifting topic to something less pleasant as she begins her turn with a token initiation device of “so” (line 19) and ends her turn with the emoji.

Excerpt 2. So how are you doing with the project? 🙄 Participants: One Catalan student teacher, Jaume (JAU), and two American student teachers, Linda (LIN) and Katherine (KAT)

- 19 KAT: So how are you all doing with the project? 🙄
- 20 LIN: not too bad, ya’ll?
- 21 JAU: well.. not too bad ok 👍
- 22 KAT: yeah,i think I’m doing okay--but I have a lot more to work on 🤔
- 23 LIN: well let’s talk about yours first, Katherine
- 24 JAU: we all have a lot to do.. 😞
- 25 KAT: sure ok 👍
- 26 JAU: that’s ok, Katherine first 😞

The co-participants commiserate on the little progress and amount of work they are dealing with (lines 21–22) through the use of code-switches between

the textual code (monolingually in English) and emojis and then, in line 23, Linda shifts the focus directly to the task at hand with an explicit suggestion. In this turn, Linda's prefacing of her suggestion ("well") indicates that she is aware of her accountability for a topic shift to a less pleasant one but interestingly, she does not make use of the possibility of using a shift to emoji to mitigate her rather direct suggestion, which is almost instructional (e.g. 'teacher talk') and not common among equal peers.

In the analysed interaction, emojis are used frequently with the aim to represent an affective stance and interpersonal affiliation, and to convey specific communicative intent (e.g. a joke, exasperation or playfulness). However, the use of plurimodal resources is far from being that straightforward. Here, Linda chooses not to close a turn with an emoji that would mitigate her dissatisfaction with a sudden topic shift imposed by the third interactant. Consequently, a deliberate absence of an emoji in an interaction otherwise abounding with code-switching that include graphical icons also seems to carry a pragmatic value, aiming to communicate participants' emotional attitudes.

In line 24, presumably due to a semi-synchronous mode of Whatsapp interaction, Jaume's turn is not a direct response to Linda's instruction, instead he continues bemoaning his unfinished workload, using code-switches between text and emoji. Nonetheless, in line 25, Katherine does align to Linda's suggestion and immediately afterwards, in line 26, Jaume also orients to Linda's suggestion although the text and shift to an emoji can be interpreted more as a reluctant acquiescence.

The co-participants then dedicate several turns to work through the project (not included in this chapter for sake of brevity). Then in excerpt 3, line 116, Katherine apologises for the amount of time the co-participants have spent discussing her project and expresses her gratitude for their contributions and ideas for improving her project. Katherine enacts her apology and gratitude through embodied code-switching: (Emoji: Face with hand over mouth) and (Emoji: grinning face).

Both Jaume and Katherine accept and mitigate her apology by indicating that the interaction has been profitable for them (lines 118 and 119). Katherine then (line 121) provides another sequence-initiating action, similar to the one she had offered in excerpt 2. Her formulation is designed to elicit a preferred affirmative response. Jaume immediately agrees using both text and an emoji. Katherine maintains the negotiations and orchestration of the interaction to accomplish the task with another open-ended question: "Anyone of you?" (line 123) to which Linda suggests they talk about Jaume's project. She does so by making reference to an identity that she presumes he might have, calling him 'the Catalan', followed by a code-switch to a winking face (line 124). Jaume acknowledges the attributed identity although perhaps somewhat ambiguously (use of non-capital text laughter and an emoji, line 125).

Excerpt 3. Let's talk about el catalan's. Participants: One Catalan student teacher, Jaume (JAU), and two American student teachers, Linda (LIN) and Katherine (KAT)

- 115 KAT: yup! i'll definitely put that in and let you know how it comes out! 😊
- 116 i feel bad for talking about my project for so long now... 🤔
- 117 I've got many useful ideas from 😊 both of you!
- 118 JAU: that's the reason we've met!!! 😊
- 119 LIN: it's fine. It is helpful to talk about your project. I learn by talking  
120 about stuff! 😊
- 121 KAT: we can talk about another project
- 122 JAU: ok 👍
- 123 KAT: anyone of you?
- 124 LIN: let's talk about el catalan's 😊  
the Catalan's
- 125 JAU: hahahaha 🤔

Given that laughter as a response to her statement can be seen as disaffiliative, Linda seems to be unsure of whether she has correctly attributed a Catalan identity to Jaume. The absence of other visual contextualisation cues characteristic of face-to-face communication may have caused a mismatch between the intended meaning of an emoji and the way it is understood by the receiver. Uncertain of the meaning of Jaume's use of multimodal resources, Linda asks for reassurance, mitigating her previous statement with "I don't want to assume", and code-switches to an emoji (line 127, excerpt 4).

Still, Jaume does not give her a direct answer; instead he corrects her spelling of the word, in capital letters. However, since capital letters in text chat is often understood as shouting, Jaume quickly demonstrates his positive orientation to Linda's identity attribution through the use of an emoji of clapping hands with special skin tone, which requires extra work in the code-switch (line 128). The interaction then moves to an expanded explanation of Linda's interest, accomplished through a second-person storytelling (Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann, 2000) of a friend of hers who identifies herself as a "Catalan independentist" (line 129), during which there is explicit uptake of Jaume's previous error correction (lines 131–132). Linda's explanation also helps her represent herself as an accountable party in the interaction by making explicit her interest and reason for asking somewhat personal questions.

Excerpt 4. Are you catalan by the way? Participants: One Catalan student teacher, Jaume (JAU), and two American student teachers, Linda (LIN) and Katherine (KAT)

- 126 LIN: Are you catalan by the way?
- 127 I don't want to assume 😊
- 128 JAU: *EL CATALÁN* 🧑🏾 [medium-dark skin tone]  
the Catalan
- 129 LIN: One of my best friend here is a catalan independen<sup>t</sup>ist.
- 130 JAU: Really?
- 131 LIN: Yeah. Do you identify as Catalan?
- 132 (with an accent on the a) 😊
- 133 JAU: Yeah
- 134 LIN: My friend says she is Catalan, NOT Spanish.  
Anyway, your project looks great!
- 136 JAU: Yeah, an accent 'catalán' in Spanish, and other kind of accent  
'català' in Catalan
- 138 Well, I'm Catalan and Spanish at the same time
- 139 LIN: Cool 🧐
- 140 So you are a dancer?
- 141 JAU: Yeah 🧑🏾 [medium-dark skin tone]
- 142 LIN: I think the kids will love your lesson.
- 143 JAU: I hope so 🙏
- 144 KAT: Yeah! I really like your project too 👍

Jaume's rather short answer to her personal questions (line 133) prompts Linda to give an explanatory summary of her friend's identity (line 134), although she then quickly orients back to the institutional goal of discussing their projects, initiated with a token "anyway" to indicate change of topic. Jaume, however, does not accept the topic bid right away and continues on the topic of Catalan and Spanish identity while using the exchange to 'teach' the proper spelling of the two adjectives. In line 139 Linda seems to distance herself from what could conceivably become a political discussion with a short answer in English and emoji, then asks another question about his identity (line 140) but which is related to the institutional task, as we can see by Linda's post-TCU expansion (line 142). Only after the orientation of the topic has returned to the



institutional task does Katherine join the exchange again (line 144), after a significantly long time of being a ‘silent participant’. She rejoins the interaction by demonstrating her enthusiasm for Jaume’s project, displayed through the use of exclamation mark and emoji.

These short plurilingual exchanges can be seen as examples of “presenting a friendly face” in an international setting (Nussbaum and Cots, 2011: 239; Moore, 2011). The small talk is used by two participants not only “to move between personal and professional identities to achieve their institutional goal” (Dooly and Tudini, 2016: 51), but also as a springboard for an intercultural inquiry about the participants’ cultural and linguistic identity. The few studies that set out to explore plurilingual practices in online communication revealed that code-switching may serve, for instance, to clarify the meaning, separate facts from personal viewpoints, negotiate the functioning of an online community and establish interpersonal relationships (Androutopoulos, 2013). The use of languages other than the institutional language (English) in the analysed interaction falls into the last category, as some rather basic, and occasionally incorrect, Spanish and Catalan expressions were used to exchange greetings and to mark a transition between tasks.

In this particular case, plurilingual code-switching is indicative of task orientation – the American student who initiates plurilingual exchanges treats this international interaction as an opportunity to expand her intercultural understanding, whereas the remaining two participants either adopt a responsive position, in alignment with the code-switching between language and emoji as is the case of Jaume, or choose to focus principally on the institutional task, as displayed by Katherine, who code-switches with emojis far less than the other two participants.

Throughout the interaction Jaume’s embodiment through emoji allows him to represent himself as a proficient and effusive user of multimodal resources. In comparison with the other two interactants, Jaume displays a distinctive communicative style both in terms of the quantity and the choice of graphic icons, which include emotionally-loaded emojis, laughter tokens, exclamation marks and sophisticated skin-tone emoji, perhaps to highlight his identity and cultural distinctiveness. His communication style stands in a stark contrast to previous research findings in the Spanish context, which indicate that women use emojis more profusely, whereas men tend to go straight to the point and do not engage in ‘unnecessary’ greetings (Pérez-Sabater, 2019). Jaume’s elaborate code-switching may be rooted in being the only non-native speaker in this conversation. In studies on plurilinguals’ code-switching for expressing emotion, it has been argued that plurilingual individuals may feel “significantly less logical, less serious, less emotional and increasingly fake when using their L2, L3 and L4 compared to their L1” (Dewaele, 2016: 473). Given that English is not Jaume’s L1, perhaps his embellished greetings, including code-switches to rather ornate emoji, helps him demonstrate an affective status to

his co-participants. However, this study is based on one conversation and future research is necessary to explore whether plurimodal code-switching is culture or context dependent, or whether it stems from individual predispositions towards a particular communication style.

## Conclusions

This small study illustrates that resorting to other speakers' use of resources may be a useful tool for initiating polite small talk preliminary to on-task work (Dooly and Tudini, 2016), forging interpersonal relations and encouraging an intercultural enquiry that goes hand in hand with the completion of an institutional task in VE. By considering the use of emoji as an additional code, we have demonstrated that the student teachers taking part in the VE and are able to manage and orchestrate the online interaction, making use of all the plurilingual and plurimodal resources at hand. As can be seen in this chapter, meaning making in technology-mediated interaction goes beyond the use of linguistic resources and depends on users' familiarity with different genres, text-types and semiotic resources, which help to overcome the absence of visual channels, social context cues (e.g. facial expressions, gestures, nodding) and prosodic features that occur in a natural conversation.

In line with the 'experiential modelling approach' (Guichon and Hauck, 2011: 195), teachers are more likely to implement tools and pedagogical innovations they have experienced themselves as students. Given the more and more prominent role of technology-enhanced language learning scenarios, future teachers' awareness of the tools used in online interaction and the ability to engage in a digital intercultural dialogue may have far-reaching implications in their future teaching and assessment practices. It is important that interactions such as these, which involve future teachers, be analysed in detail in order to gain insight into the alignment (or gaps) between the tools, tasks and learning objectives in VE learning projects. Arguably, the teachers' practical knowledge of the properties and conventions of online interaction, including the use of plurilingual and plurimodal resources found in commonly used social media, may prove valuable in facilitating successful VE interactions, encouraging authentic language use and providing corrective feedback (cf. Moffitt, Padgett, and Grieve, 2020).

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