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"Awww, we r sorry *wai*": Pragmatic Functions of L1 Discourse Markers in Ghanaians' English-Based WhatsApp Conversations

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Abstract

The use of discourse markers (DMs) in written conversations has long been seen as features of oral conversations that chatters transfer into their written conversations when they wish to activate the informal relationships they developed in oral conversational contexts (see e.g. Landone 2012 and Ramón 2015). This paper shows this conclusion to be true of the use of seven DMs *(o, wai, saa, paa, waa, koraa and la)* by Ghanaians in their in-group English-based WhatsApp conversations. The DMs are from some Ghanaian languages, and using the Markedness Model of Myers-Scotton (1993, 1998, 1999), it is shown that they occur as marked codeswitches in the otherwise English texts where, in addition to informalising interactions, serve as exhibits of Ghanaian chatters' identity and in-group solidarity; it is unlikely that such forms as **wai, saa, paa, waa, koraa and la** will appear in chats of non-Ghanaians. Data analysed for the study were extracts from WhatsApp platforms with only Ghanaian participants.

Résumé

L'utilisation de marqueurs de discours (MD) dans les conversations écrites a longtemps été considérée comme des éléments de conversations orales que les chatteurs retranscrivent dans leurs conversations écrites lorsqu'ils souhaitent activer les relations informelles qu'ils ont développées dans des contextes de conversation orale (voir Landone 2012 et Ramón 201). Cet article démontre la véracité de cette conclusion en utilisant le cas de sept MD *(o, wai, saa, paa, waa, koraa et la)* utilisés par les ghanéens dans leurs conversations faites en anglais dans leurs groupes WhatsApp. Lesdits DM proviennent de certaines langues ghanéennes et, selon le modèle de Markedness de Myers-Scotton (1993, 1998, 1999), apparaissent comme des alternances de codes marquées dans les textes en anglais et, outre le fait qu'ils rendent informelles les interactions ils servent de preuve de l'identité ghanéenne des chatteurs et de la

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solidarité qui les ces chatteurs lie au sein du groupe ; il est peu probable que de telles formes **que wai, saa, paa, waa, koraa et la** apparaîtront dans les conversations de non-ghanéens. Les données analysées pour l'étude étaient des extraits tirés de groupes WhatsApp avec uniquement des participants ghanéens.

Keywords: computer-mediated communication (CMC), computer-mediated discourse (CMD), discourse functions, codeswitching (CS), discourse particles/discourse markers, whatsapp communication.

Introduction

This paper discusses the pragmatic functions of seven discourse markers – *o, wai, saa, paa, waa, koraa and la* – by Ghanaians in their in-group English-based WhatsApp conversations. However, it was not our original plan to investigate the functions of discourse markers (DMs), where by DMs we follow Ramón's (2015: 337) definition of DMs as:

> …short words or phrases, particularly frequent in spoken communication, which do not add major propositional content to the utterance they belong to, but rather express the speaker's attitude towards the listener, negotiate background assumptions or express other types of interpersonal or textual meanings that contribute to the overall texture and coherence of discourse.

Rather, we had set out to document the manifestations of codeswitching in the conversations of Ghanaians on WhatsApp platforms and to compare the details with what have been reported about their spoken codeswitching. We had to narrow our focus to the DMs after we examined the data.

The data were drawn from conversations on eight WhatsApp platforms, the details of which will be given in section 4. Of the 685,280 words that were used in those conversations, 99% were from English, Ghana's official language and medium of instruction from primary four, with the remaining 1% coming from three major languages in southern Ghana, namely Akan, Ewe and Ga. Remarkably, 83% of the 1% are instances of use of the seven DMs afore-mentioned. Our 'disappointment' with the data led us to literature which, when pulled together, (see section 2) helped us to appreciate this near-absence of codeswitching on the platforms and the reason why the DMs predominate as codeswitches. It is to deepen insight gained from that literature that we ask the following research questions:

1. What discourse functions do the DMs from Ghanaian languages perform when they are used in English-based WhatsApp conversations by Ghanaians?

2. How and to what extent is the use of the DMs a reflection of their use in spoken codeswitching?

3. Are the DMs codeswitches or borrowings into Ghanaian English?

It is the first such study of DMs in computer-mediated communication in Ghana.

The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 is the literature review while section 3 introduces the theoretical framework. The data collection method is explained in section 4 and analysis of the data is carried out in section 5. Concluding remarks are made in section 6.

Types of bilingual speech communities and the kind of computer-mediated communication they engage in

A lot of work has been done on codeswitching in Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC). One recurrent research question that was explored concerns the extent to which codeswitching in CMC genres (e.g. WhatsApp, sms text messages, e-mail, Instant Messages / im / online chats, and social network sites such as Facebook and YouTube) reflects characteristics of spoken codeswitching, which has received attention for a much longer time. For one thing, however, it is obvious that

> CMC technologies rule out one key mechanism of conversational organisation, the turn-taking system; more generally, the lack of visual channels – and, in asynchronous
> CMC, the temporal gap between contributions – means that important dimensions of the interactional co-construction of meaning are altered or restricted. (Androutsopoulos (2013: 3)

Looking past these differences and concentrating mainly on the sequential organization of computer-mediated discourse, some scholars find telling similarities between CMC-based codeswitching and spoken codeswitching while others do not. Marjie (2010), Deumert and Masinyana (2008), and Elsayed (2014) are among those who see resemblances while Spitzmüller (2006) and Hinrichs (2006) represent those who hold the counter position. Our examination of works from the two camps reveals that the quality of literacy skills which bilinguals have in their languages ultimately determines the degree to which their spoken codeswitching will resemble their CMC-based codeswitching.

Scholars who have acknowledged that there are similarities between CMC-based codeswitching and spoken codeswitching have worked on data drawn from bilinguals who are biliterate. Marjie (2010), for example, studied the Kiswahili-English codeswitching that Kenyans write in online chats and concluded that it is an extension of their spoken codeswitching. She observes that the written codeswitching in the chats is as pervasive as the spoken codeswitching that Myers-Scotton (1993) described. She also observed that as in their spoken codeswitching they use Kiswahili as the matrix language (i.e. as the language of codeswitching grammatical structures) and English as the embedded language, a language restricted to supplying single or multiword items for insertion into slots in Kiswahili-based grammatical structures. The important background to recall here is that Kenyans have high literacy skills in Kiswahili and English, which are their national and official languages respectively.

Barasa (2016) provides deeper insight about what is happening in Kenya. She distinguishes Kiswahili, English, and Sheng from all other local languages in respect to why they can or cannot be used in CMC-based codeswitching:

> … most vernacular languages in Kenya do not have a conventional orthographic system and thus many users are inexperienced in writing in a vernacular language. For this reason, it can be concluded that code-switching that includes a vernacular language is less common in cmc contexts. (p. 59)

She goes on to summarize the situation thus:

> All in all, the findings demonstrate that code-switching between English, Swahili and Sheng, without including a vernacular language, is the most prevalent in the cmc genres. This is expected considering that these are the standard languages (and codes) that are shared by the majority of participants. (p. 60)

The last sentence in the above quotation is instructive: it points to the fact that the three languages are used in CMC by youths from the many ethnic groups in Kenya because they share speaking and literacy skills in them. This explanation applies to English-French codeswitching by Cameroonian bloggers (cf. Anchimbe 2015) because they too are bilingual and biliterate in the languages involved; Cameroon has a bilingual official language policy that encourages educated Cameroonians to speak and write French and English. Smedley's (2006) findings about the pervasive English-Tagalog codeswitching of Filipinos in CMC may similarly be traced to Filipinos' bilingualism and biliteracy in English and Tagalog.

Another population that falls in this category is Kuwaiti speakers of English whose codeswitching on WhatsApp has been described by Elsayed (2014). Elsayed (2014) built a corpus of 100 messages from 60 participants across four WhatsApp groups he created, and his findings about the distribution of Arabic and English elements in the messages reveal that Kuwaitis write codeswitching the way they speak it. The study showed that 60% of the messages were composed of a blend of Arabic and English units while 15% were completely Arabic and 25% completely English. In the case of the intra-sentential codeswitching, the switches were used to fill lexical gaps, communicate cultural terms, express euphemisms and provide technical terms. In terms of discourse purposes, codeswitching was used to reproduce quotations, make side comments and make conversational repairs. The participants switched from Arabic to English to project the positive attitude they had towards English and the converse was to mark their Arabic identity.

There have been a considerable number of studies of codeswitching on Facebook that demonstrate similar transfer of speech patterns into writing. Most of these studies, which were conducted in Asian and Arab countries, have demonstrated how pervasive codeswitching involving English and an indigenous language is on Facebook. Notable among them are Dabrowska (2012) on codeswitching in conversations of Indian Facebook users and Shafie and Nayan (2013) on its use by Malay-English speaking Facebook users in Malaysia. Similar observations about the pervasive use of codeswitching on Facebook have been made by Khadim (2014) on codeswitching involving English in conversations of Bangladeshi Facebook users. In all these case studies, the pervasive use of codeswitching is said to be a transfer of oral conversational norms into writing, which is made possible because the users are bilingual and biliterate.

We now turn to cases where bilinguals known to engage in pervasive spoken codeswitching do not use codeswitching in CMC. Such studies are few, but they successfully highlight the reasons why codeswitching speech communities do not engage in CMC-based codeswitching. One such study is Sperlich (2005). In his study of native speakers of Niuean, an Oceanian language, he finds that their CMC is generally in English as they limit their use of Niuean to greetings and other forms of phatic communication. Sperlich had hoped that the availability of cyberforums would help increase the natives' literacy skills in Niuean but discovered regrettably that the forums "do not seem to bring about the promised assistance for maintaining and reviving the Niuean language' (Sperlich 2005: 76). Also, as we noted earlier, Barasa (2016) observes an analogous situation in Kenya where natives hardly use codeswitching involving their indigenous languages other than Kiswahili in CMC because most of them lack literacy skills in their mother tongues.

Unfortunately, Ghanaians belong to this category of CMC users; majority of them lack literacy skills in their mother tongues. As early as 1998, Andoh-Kumi lamented that "It is … interesting to find graduates in a Ghanaian language (e.g. Akan [sic]) who often write letters and notes to one another in English (and not in Akan). (Andoh-Kumi 1998: 126). And in 2005, Amuzu echoed that lamentation when he asserted that

> In Ghana even those who by training should be confident in their level of literacy in their mother tongue hardly put such skills to use in their inter-personal written communications with brethren and friends; they prefer (or are compelled) to use English. (Amuzu 2005: 237).

Evidently, the persistence of this situation has led to educated Ghanaians' near-exclusive (i.e. 99%) use of English in WhatsApp conversations even though the majority of them[1] can speak Akan, or at least Akan-English codeswitching, as their lingua franca.

It is, however, instructive to note that in spoken codeswitching in Ghana, English is hardly the matrix language (cf. Amuzu 2010 and Amuzu and Singler 2014). Rather, as elsewhere in Africa, e.g. Kenya (cf. Myers-Scotton 1993 and Marjie 2010), it is African languages which play this role while English functions as the embedded language. Therefore, the dearth of codeswitching in the WhatsApp conversations captured in our data is also traceable to the fact that Ghanaians are not used to constructing English-based sentences in which they insert words from Ghanaian languages.[2] The outstanding question, however, is why as much as 83% of words from Ghanaian languages is constituted by only seven discourse markers (DMs). This statistic is readily anticipated by Tay et al (2016: 482) when they noted that "Discourse particles are optional items because their inclusion or omission does not affect the grammatical 'correctness'… of an utterance". In other words, the DMs from Ghanaian languages readily occur as codeswitches in English clause-final positions in WhatsApp conversations because in such positions, as we shall find in section 4, they do not come under English matrix language control. On the other hand, most non-DM words from Ghanaian languages (usually Akan) occur in well-formed constructions in the language they are from, as with the Akan sentences in turn 3 (*Yoo mate.... medaase* 'Okay, I hear… thank you') and turn 6 (*Nyame Nhyira mo pea '*God bless you abundantly') in the conversation captured in Extract 2 in section 3.

Codeswitching Involving DMs in CMC

There has been a plethora of works in recent times that claim that DMs from local languages have been incorporated as borrowings into varieties of English in post-colonial English-speaking countries. Among them are Tay et al (2016) and Unuabonah and Oladipupo (2018). Tay et al (2016: 480) note that

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[1] Yankson (2018: 17), for instance, observes that "It is generally accepted that Akan is the most widely used Ghanaian language. It is the only Ghanaian language which is in widespread use beyond its borders by both migrants and by considerable numbers of second-language speakers".

[2] Such sentences are indeed possible, as when one says "Everything became *nyamaa*" ('There was chaos everywhere'); *nyamaa* is an ideophone in Ewe and Ga. The point is people rarely speak this way even in informal situations.

"with the exception of interactions in highly formal contexts, Malaysian English, with its set of unique discourse particles such as *lah, meh, lor, hor, wei*, and *leh*, is used pervasively in oral conversations at almost all levels of society". The DMs, they claim, complement what an utterance expresses by conveying the "speaker's attitude or stance, and to guide the hearer towards the speaker's intended meaning" (Tay et al 2016: 482). Unuabonah and Oladipupo (2018) similarly discuss three DMs (*o, sha* and *abi*) from Nigerian languages that they claim have become borrowed by Nigerian English. According to them, "***o*** is an emphasis marker and a mitigation marker, ***sha*** is a discourse marker, an attention marker and a mitigation marker while ***abi*** occurs as a discourse marker and as an agreement marker" (p. 8). While we shall draw functional similarities between some of the DMs discussed by these authors and the seven DMs from Ghanaian languages found in our data, we shall not go as far as to claim that the DMs are borrowings in Ghanaian English. For us, they are codeswitches and we shall argue that their use in the English-based WhatsApp conversations reflects their use (also as codeswitches) in the spoken informal English of Ghanaians.

There is scarcity of research on the use of DMs in CMC. As recently as 2016, Palacio and Gustilo bemoaned this fact when they stated that:

> Despite the plethora of research done in the classification and functions of DPs across languages, it cannot conceal the dearth of research that focuses on the use and functions of DPs [discourse particles] in computer-mediated communication (CMC), which is an important area of investigation due to the fact that technology has revolutionized the way humans interact nowadays. (Palacio and Gustilo 2016: 4)

However, the research that has so far been done shows that DMs are as frequently used in written communication as they are in spoken communication (Landone, 2012). Landone (2012: 1800) summarizes our state of knowledge about the use of DMs in CMC when he notes that :

> …until now, they DMs have been viewed as being prototypical in oral discourse with the sole exception of written reproductions of oral dialogue (for example, in literature). In computer-mediated discourse (CMD), these DMs appear to be genuinely useful and as they are written, they are adopted as the result of conscious choice on the part of the speakers and not as an unconscious impulse as sometimes occurs in conversation…

We think that our data support this claim that the usage of DMs in computer-mediated discourse is conscious and deliberate and we shall demonstrate in data analysis that WhatsApp users purposely employ these seven DMs in their conversations to convey specifiable discourse intentions.

Markedness Model

In line with our position that the seven DMs (***o, wai, saa, paa, waa, koraa and la)*** are codeswitches that are used deliberately in the English-based WhatsApp conversations, we have decided to employ the Markedness Model of Carol Myers-Scotton (1993, 1998, 1999, 2006) in the data analysis.

The framework stipulates that although bilinguals in codeswitching speech communities have available to them at least two language varieties to choose from when they engage one another, their language choices are rule-governed because each choice may convey a social meaning. It holds that through experiences with routinised language practices and language socialisation a bilingual gets to know which language in his community is appropriate for each category of interlocutors or speech situations. Such a language is the “unmarked or expected code” for the occasion. The framework intimates that when interlocutors use the unmarked code for their interaction type they would mutually interpret it as representing the activation of their normal social relationship. What happens when someone uses a code that is not expected for an interaction, i.e. a “marked code”? The theory stipulates that when that happens his/her interlocutors will become alert and will instinctively try to interpret his/her intentions for using the marked code.

As indicated, Ghanaians routinely use English monolingually in WhatsApp conversations largely because most of them do not possess literacy skills in the Ghanaian languages they share. This has made English the unmarked code of the platforms we observed, to the extent that 99% of words used in the conversations come from English. As also indicated, of the remaining 1% of the words which are from three Ghanaian languages, 83% are made up of instances of the DMs listed above. The framework adequately prepares us to scrutinise writers’ intentions for using the DMs and their interlocutors’ reactions.

Data Collection Procedure and Presentation

The Community of Practice (CofP) ethnographic approach was used in data collection. CofP was proposed by Lave and Wenger (1991) and popularised by Eckert and McConnel-Ginet (1992) in the investigation of language use patterns, especially linguistic variation and change. As an ethnographic approach, CofP enjoins the researcher to do long-term observation of language practices in specific communities of practice (i.e. social groupings that individuals construct for and by themselves); and, thus, recordings of naturally-occurring linguistic behaviour and interview transcripts form the bulk of data collected. As is made clear in the sections, original WhatsApp interactions among members of chat groups, some of which have been functional for two or more years, constitute the primary data. The secondary data are the interviews conducted with some platformers regarding aspects of what they have said in the interactions. It will become clear that each chat group is a CofP.

The data were collected from eight mixed-sex WhatsApp chat groups with the consent of members. The chats were first retrieved through Microsoft Notepad, which aided in retaining their original formatting. The notepad was then converted to a Word document as demonstrated in Extract 1. For confidentiality sake, a few digits in the telephone numbers have been replaced with the letter 'x' in Extract 1.

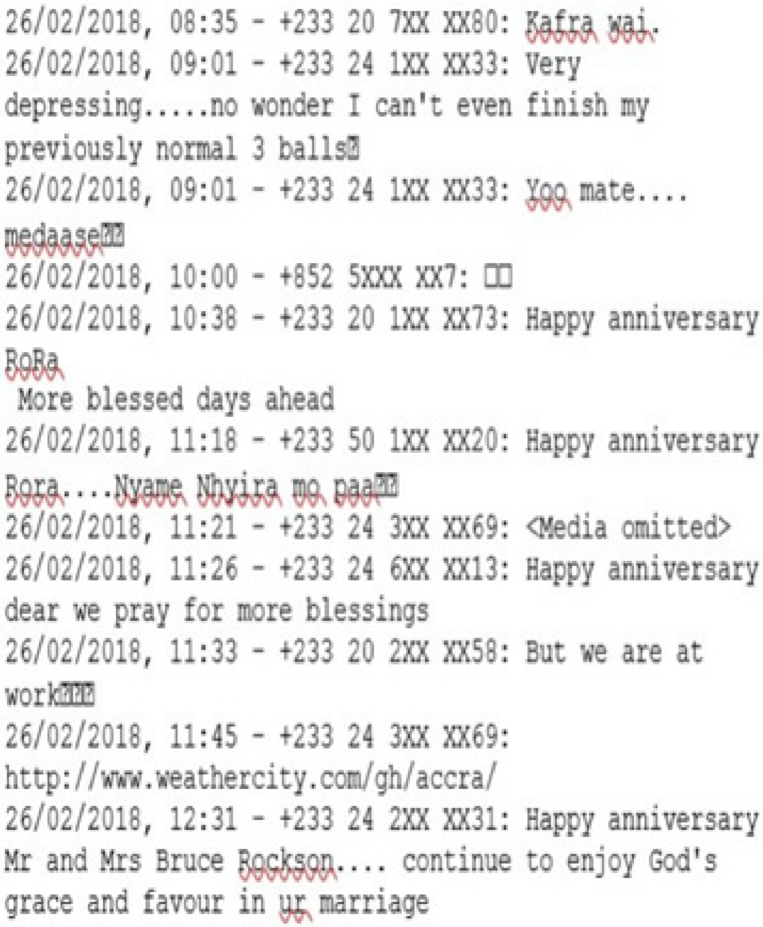
In presenting the data in the paper, the names and phone numbers of platformers are replaced with pseudonyms for ethical reasons. Extract 2 is the reformatted version of what is in Extract 1. An attempt is made to distinguish English expressions from expressions in other languages:

i. All English items are in normal font.

ii. The Akan, Ghanaian Pidgin English (GhPE), Ga, and Ewe items occasionally used are italicised. However, the specific language involved is indicated against the English translation that we provide in curly brackets.

iii. Square brackets are used to spell out abbreviated English words and, more importantly, the meaning of a DM in context.

iv. All DMs appear in bold font.



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26/02/2018, 08:35 - +233 20 7XX XX80: Kafra wai.
26/02/2018, 09:01 - +233 24 1XX XX33: Very
depressing.....no wonder I can't even finish my
previously normal 3 balls⍰
26/02/2018, 09:01 - +233 24 1XX XX33: Yoo mate....
medaase⍰⍰
26/02/2018, 10:00 - +852 5XXX XX7: □□
26/02/2018, 10:38 - +233 20 1XX XX73: Happy anniversary
RoRa
 More blessed days ahead
26/02/2018, 11:18 - +233 50 1XX XX20: Happy anniversary
Rora....Nyame Nhyira mo paa⍰⍰
26/02/2018, 11:21 - +233 24 3XX XX69: <Media omitted>
26/02/2018, 11:26 - +233 24 6XX XX13: Happy anniversary
dear we pray for more blessings
26/02/2018, 11:33 - +233 20 2XX XX58: But we are at
work⍰⍰⍰
26/02/2018, 11:45 - +233 24 3XX XX69:
http://www.weathercity.com/gh/accra/
26/02/2018, 12:31 - +233 24 2XX XX31: Happy anniversary
Mr and Mrs Bruce Rockson.... continue to enjoy God's
grace and favour in ur marriage
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Extract 1: Extracted WhatsApp message in Microsoft word

Each post in Extract 2 is numbered as a turn.

1. PHAT: *Kafra* wai. {Akan: Sorry, okay?}
2. AMA: Very depressing.....no wonder I can’t even finish my previously normal 3 balls
3. PHAT: *Yoo mate.... medaase* {Akan: Ok I hear…...thank you}
4. PHAT: Happy anniversary RoRa
   More blessed days ahead
5. RUBY: Happy anniversary Rora....*Nyame Nhyira mo pea*😍😍 {Akan: God bless you abundantly}
6. JOE: <Media omitted>
7. AMA: Happy anniversary dear we pray for more blessings
8. LIZ: But we are at work😨😨😨
9. MYSHELL: http://www.weathercity.com/gh/accra/
10. MZ: Happy anniversary Mr and Mrs Bruce Rockson.... continue to enjoy God’s grace and Favour in ur [your] marriage

Extract 2: Reformatted version of the exchange in Extract 1:

As noted, eight chat groups were observed. In what follows, each chat group is described.

The Chat Groups

The church groups

There were two ‘church groups’, both youth groups. One of them, Catechism Group, is based on a university campus. The members are university students who belong to a catechism class in the Catholic Church. Its members are 17 to 24-year olds. However, one female student in this group, aged approximately 40, is a nun.

The second one, the Regular Church Group, comprises young Catholics from a cosmopolitan neighbourhood aged between 18 years and 35 years. Both groups are made up of participants from different ethnic backgrounds.

Undergraduate Alumni Groups

Two of the groups are made up of university students. Of the two, one is a university undergraduate alumni year group who have been out of school for four years. Therefore, members of that group hardly meet each other. The participants are between 25 and 27 years of age. This group will simply be called Undergraduate Year Group.

The other alumni year group is the National Service Year Group whose members completed university the previous year. The group is made up of 21 to 23 year olds. Members meet regularly in their office in the department at the university where they serve as teaching and research assistants.

Basic School Alumni Groups

There were two groups in this category too. Both groups completed basic school in the same year, 1999; therefore, they have the same age range, between 31 and 34 years. Members of one of these chat groups attended a basic school in the Ashanti region of Ghana. Because of the monolingual nature of the community in which the school is located, all the members come from the Akan ethnic group. On the other hand, members of the other chat group attended a basic school in Accra and because of the plurilingual nature of Accra members come from different ethnic groups, notably Akan, Ewe, Ga, and Dangme.

The 40-50s Group

Members of the two groups in this category age between the ages 45 and 55. The two groups are also alumni groups. One group is a Senior High School alumni group and the other group comprises Ghanaians who were fellow postgraduate students in a Norwegian University in the 1990s. A feature that distinguishes the two groups is ethnic composition. Whereas members of the Senior High School alumni group are predominantly Ewe, the Norway Group comprise people from many ethnic groups in Ghana although Akans dominate.

Introducing the Discourse Markers

The seven DMs from Ghanaian languages that are discussed in the paper are *o, saa, paa, wai/wae, koraa/kraa, waa* and *la/lah.* All of them are clause-final markers except when waa occurs in Ghanaian Pidgin English sentences. The DM o that is present in messages by Ghanaian WhatsApp platformers may be traced to the same form in indigenous lingua francas like Akan and Ga; however, its presence in Nigerian English as discussed in Unuabonah and Oladipupo (2018) suggests that it may be regarded an aerial (West African) DM. It has variants when used in English-based WhatsApp conversations, namely *oo, ooo, oooo* or sometimes much longer. The variation comes from lengthening the sound. When it is lengthened, it sometimes shows emphasis. The lengthened forms are not found in its regular usage in Ghanaian languages. The discourse particle ***saa*** that is found in the messages originates exclusively from Akan. It occurs at clause-final position. The vowel may be lengthened for stylistic purposes or to show intensity. *Paa* also originates from the Akan intensifier *papa w*hich means very well or very much. As with *saa, the vowel in* ***paa c***an be lengthened for stylistic purposes or for intensity. It also occurs in clause-final position. *Wai* also has an Akan origin. The original form of ***wai*** is the expression *w'ate '*you hear'. Even in Akan, this wai form has grammaticalised into a DM, which is the form transferred to the English-based WhatsApp messages. Sometimes, it is spelt wae by platformers. Its meaning and usage appear to be identical to the English discourse marker 'okay?'. When used in CMC, the question mark is dropped but is read with the question tone. Tay et al. (2016) made a similar observation about the use of DMs by Malaysian Facebook users. According to them, although prosodic features, such as question tone, are very important in interpreting an utterance, their absence in CMC does not affect their interpretation. Like the DM ***o, wai*** usually serves as a closing frame marker and is very useful in the organisation and assignment of turns during interaction. Also like ***o,*** it does not appear at the end of interrogatives. Rather, it is used at the end of imperatives and statements. *Koraa* is sometimes spelt *kraa. I*t has an Akan origin as well and usually functions as an intensifier although as will be shown, its use may produce some other effects in some contexts. *Waa* has Ga origin but is popularised as well by its borrowed version in Ghanaian Pidgin English. As with ***o, saa,*** and ***paa,*** its vowel may be lengthened for stylistic purposes or to show intensity. *La/lah* has Ewe origin. It is used at the end of imperatives and declaratives. It does not allow vowel lengthening. It is mostly used by Ewe speakers, but, as with its use by Ato in example (1), there are also a few users who are not ethnically Ewe.

Data Analysis

The data analysis done in this section takes a cue from Landone's (2012) assertion that the DMs in written conversations are not merely indicative of the transfer of oral conversational norms but mean much more. According to Landone (2012: 1800), DMs in written communication can mean more in pragmatic terms because "…as they are written, *they are adopted as the result of conscious choice on the part of the speakers and not as an unconscious impulse as sometimes occurs in conversation (emphasis ours).* The seven DMs under investigation in this study are codeswitches (from Akan/Ewe/Ga), and we shall demonstrate through the Markedness Model that by using them in their English language sentences users effortlessly highlight social messages and sentiments they wish to convey during chats.

Informality Markers

The primary pragmatic use of the seven DMs is to mark the informal relationship that exists among participants who have been friends or colleagues and have indeed set up the platform to advance their engagement as communities of practice. It appears, judging from findings reported in Tay et al. (2016), Palacio and Gustilo (2016) and Unuabonah and Oladipupo (2018) – see section 2.2, that clause-final DMs generally mark informality. This is the function illustrated in the use of *ooo, la, and paa* in the exchange in example (1).

Example 1:

This extract is taken from the Undergraduate Year Alumni Group (the non-national service group). It is Mothers' Day and Ato sends a video which celebrates women to the group page. This video triggers a conversation among Ato, Anna, Winne and Sandra. The conversation revolves around the celebration of the women on the platform and the fact that they need to attend the wedding of one of their colleagues.

1. Ato: Blessed be all ladies on this page. As today all over the world, we celebrate womanhood. I take the opportunity to wish you all, the near future world class mothers a heart warming happy mother's day. I encourage you all to take the Holy mother Mary as your model and all her good virtues in order to stand tall among all ladies in all your endeavours. Amen
2. Anna: Amen!
3. Anna: Happy Moms' day 2 [to] u [you] too sis
4. Winne: Eiiiii choir ma'am *u dey* [GhPE: *are you around*]
5. Winne: Thanks oooo Anna
6. Ato: My pleasure
7. Anna: *i dey* ***oo*** {GhPE: *I am around* oo}
8. Anna: hpe u gud? {GhPE: hope you are good}
9. Winne: Am[I'm] good oooo [*indeed*] dear

   I just miss you rough [very much]
10. Anna: aww.. ms [miss] u [you] more luv
11. Ato: Remember this lady guys
12. Ato: She's marrying on d[the] 4th of june (sic)
13. Sandra: Eiiii
14. Sandra: Sis lizzy
15. Sandra: *Way3 K3se3* ooo {Akan: *you have grown very fat*}

16. Ato: Dose [those] around kumasi can go support, venue is St Louis shs [Senior High School]
17. Ato: Yes la {Yes *indeed*}
18. Ato: Her arms are twice mine
19. Sandra: O nice nice
20. Ato: Yes oo
21. Winne: Eiiii wonders
22. Winne: *Obolo paaaa nie* {Akan: this is *indeed* a fat person}

In this conversation, platformers routinely use the DMs *ooo, la,* and *paa* as though they have been interacting in an informal speech situation. And it is not only the DMs they have used to signal the informality of their interaction: they also use contracted forms, non-standard spellings (e.g. Dose for ‘those’), pidgin expressions (e.g. “Dose around kumasi can go support”), and multiword codeswitching to Akan (e.g. *Way3 K3se3 ooo* ‘you have grown very fat’) to accentuate the informality of their relationship.

Because the DMs mark informality, platformers are able to use them to defuse some potentially stressful situations they find themselves in. This is demonstrated in Example (2) involving some members of the National Service Group, who, as noted earlier, are working as teaching and research assistants at a university. It has been raining since morning and Doe has been unable to come to work. She began the exchange in informal mood by using Ghanaian Pidgin English expressions in turn 1 to announce the weather condition and although she used English in a formal way in turn 2 (where he used standard spelling), she returns to informality in turn 3 by opting to use abbreviatory spellings of English words. Thus, by turn 4 when Carie used the first instance of ***oo,*** the intimate informal relationship that platformers have as office mates has been fully invoked by Doe. However, a closer look at Doe’s turn 3 indicates that she is worried for Carie, assuming she too has been unable to report at work where she is scheduled to serve as an invigilating assistant at an examination hall. Carie’s use of ***oo*** in the turn 4 soothes that worry: she went through the rain to work and was able to discharge her duties at the examination hall. Doe was momentarily relieved, as shown in her *ohk* ‘okay’ in turn 5, but in turn 6 she relapsed into her state of worry: now she wants to be sure whether Carie hasn’t mistimed when she was due to invigilate. Carie has not got the schedule wrong and once again uses *oo* in turn 7 to allay her friend’s fears. Doe’s second ohk in turn 8 seems to have shown the desired effect, a sense of genuine relief. It is at this point that Abla enters the discussion with comic relief: she has been unperturbed by the fact that she has not been able to make it to work and has *even (i.e. kraa)* been sleeping all day. This makes Doe ‘laugh out loud’ *(lool)* in turn 11 only to betray her lingering state of apprehension, in turn 12. Her use of the DM *paa i*n that turn 12 departs from the stress-releasing function that the DMs have so far been playing. *Paa* here marks emphasis (discussed further in the next section) on her determination to go to work despite the incessant rain.

Example 2:

1. Doe: *na wer dem dis rain too* {GhPE: *where is this rain too from?*}
2. Doe: I'm stuck in my room
3. Doe: Carie dnt [don't] u [you] hve [have] a ppr [paper] today?
4. Carie: I had ooo am [I'm] done
5. Doe: Ohk [okay]
6. Doe: No 11:30?
7. Carie: No *oo*
8. Doe: Ohk
9. Aba: Sleeping on my bed *kraa* [even]
10. Doe: Lool
11. Doe: Might go wid [with] umbrella
12. Doe: Today *dierr* [Akan: as for] I'm determined *paa* {as for today, I'm **very** determined}

It is significant to note that platformers we observed avoid using DMs in WhatsApp interactions when they are aware that their addressees are above or much below their social circle. In other words, they seem to regard such use of DMs as inappropriate. This point was especially evident in the near-absence of DMs in chats by members of the Catechism Group. The inhibiting factor there is the presence of one member, who, besides being much older than all others, is a nun who occasionally sends posts aimed at preaching spirituality and morality.

Despite having said this, we are also aware that there are a few occasions where platformers use DMs deliberately with addressees who are not in their social circle. Such use of DMs may be intended as a game-changing strategy, a signal to an out-group addressee that a prevailing formal relationship should be changed to an informal one. This is what is evident in the extract in Example 3.

Example 3:

An Assistant has been helping Lecturer to carry out fieldwork at Dansoman, a suburb of Accra. She was tasked to return to the site to gather more data but failed to do so. The interaction, initiated by Lecturer, began with exchange of greetings.

1. Lecturer: Hello, Agnes.
2. Assistant: Good morning, Madam.
3. Lecturer: So, have you been able to return to Dansoman?
4. Assistant: No, Madam. I was hoping Rojo would go with me. He speaks Hausa very well.
5. Lecturer: I see. But we are running out of time ***oo***.
6. Assistant: I am very sorry, Madam. We will go this weekend.
7. Lecturer: Try to go, *wai*.
8. Assistant: Even if Rojo will not, I will be there first thing on Saturday morning.
9. Lecturer: **[thumb up] [thumb up]**
10. Assistant: Thank you, Madam.

Unlike the other interactions discussed, English (in standard spelling) is used throughout. Given the lecturer/employer—assistant/employee relationship between the pair, this pattern of language use can only deepen its informal nature. It is possible that Lecturer senses this being the situation by turn 5, where she uses *oo* at the end of a potentially face-threatening reminder about they "running out of time". Given the social standing of Lecturer in the university, where she is a full professor, it is likely that Assistant did not miss this use of oo and the fact that it is strange (= exceedingly marked) and may only have been intended as an invitation to her to treat the interaction as somewhat informal. In turn 6, however, Assistant continues in her formal style. If there were any doubts that Lecturer wants to decrease the social distance between the two of them, it evaporates in turn 7 because here she decides to punctuate her request with the DM ***wai*** 'okay?' Her use of *wai* has the effect of minimizing the potential harshness of her command "Try to go", making it sound more like a cordial request. Although Assistant is clearly, and understandably, reluctant to reciprocate the gesture to go informal, note that Lecturer is in no mood to coil back into formality; she blatantly signed off informally with two thumb-up emoticons. Assistant's 'Thank you' may mean anything, including an appreciation of Lecturer's choice to be so friendly.

In summary, Example (3) highlights the fact that DM usage in chats involving Ghanaians is constrained by some social factors, e.g. the degree to which users feel that they are indeed (or want to be) in-group members: in the example, Lecturer wants very much to be regarded as a co-investigator of Assistant but Assistant is coy about that definition of their relationship and so never reciprocated Lecturer's DM usage.

Another point that the examples highlight is that the DMs are used with confidence that fellow platformers would understand what they mean. Such confidence can only come from sociolinguistic competence in speaking English in oral conversational situations with other platformers (see the sociolinguistic profile of each WhatsApp group in section 4). In this sense, the DMs informalise users' English-based interactions.

We will show in subsequent subsections that the basic functions of all seven DMs are, indeed, to mark informality and in-group solidarity. However, while performing these functions, a DM's functions may include making emphasis, expressing apology, or reiterating a point. In what follows, therefore, we will continue to illustrate the informality and solidarity marking functions of the DMs but pay greater attention to explaining the additional function that they are seen to be performing in given extracts.

Markers of Emphasis

In addition to signalling the informality of interactions on a platform, the DMs *o, saa***,** *paa* and *waa* may also function as markers of emphasis on what is said. An example of emphatic ***paa*** has already been discussed in Example (2): Doe used it to highlight her determination to defy the heavy unending rain to go to work. We now discuss similar usages of *oo, saaa* and *waa.*

Example 4:

Members of the National Service Group had been asked to go to the General Office in their department to collect Christmas gifts. However, only a few of them are still around and have collected theirs; the rest left the department before the instruction was issued. An attempt by those around to collect the gifts on the absentees' behalf failed. In the extract, Maame informs the absent friends about the situation. Notice her use of the DMs ***oo*** and ***saaa*** as markers (not only of informality of the interaction but also) of emphasis regarding what she is saying.

1. Maame: Those.... [3]
Pls try n get here asap [Please try and get here as soon as possible]

2. Maame: Cz [because] they r [are] not willing to give ur [your] Xmas stuff to us **oo** [**you hear!!**]

3. Maame: Those on campus

4. Maame: Please try n [and] get here for yours
5. Maame: Thank you
6. Maame: Lingsa [Linguistics Students Association], lingsa
7. Carie: Thanks
8. Carie: No language no society
9. Doe: What stuff?
10. Doe: Some of us have travelled
11. Maame: Ohhh
12. Maame: We v [have] pleaded *saaa* [repeatedly!!]
13. Maame: To take for the rest
14. Maame: But they r [are] proving difficult
15. Doe: They should just keep it for us till we come back

In turn 2, Maame's use of *oo* emphasizes her feeling of helplessness amidst a desire that her friends can return as quickly as possible to collect their gifts. When Doe tells her that some of them have travelled (turn 10), she uses *saaa* in turn 12 to trumpet the fact that she has done her best but in vain. The use of *waa* as a marker of emphasis is illustrated in example (5).

Example 5:

This extract is taken from the Accra Basic School Alumni Group. It is one of the platformers' birthday and as is customary the others sent her birthday wishes. After the birthday wishes, there was the proposal that they organize a homecoming where they would all meet. This conversation is between two males on the platform and it revolves around the date of the homecoming.

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[3] The dots are in the original.

It is in Ghanaian Pidgin English and Kwesi used the DM *waa* 'really' repeatedly to emphasise things he said.

1. Nana: *Make we make dis happen {Let us make this happen}*
2. Kwesi: *Masa i beg waa first 2 weeks in July dieeer i no go dey {Master, I really beg you since I will not be around during the first two weeks in July}*
3. Nana: Kk [okay]
4. Kwesi: *I beg waa nt to sound as if i want to be imposing smth on anybody {I really beg you; it is not to sound that I want to impose something on anybody}*
5. Nana: *So we go wey all d options n see which go favour we all although no dat will favour everyone. we sure will loose some. {So we will weigh all the options available to see the ones that would be favourable to everyone but it won't favour everybody}*
6. Kwesi: *Cos i go like come waaa {Because I would like to really come/…would like to come no matter what.}*
7. Kwesi: Yh man [yes man]
8. Nana: *No yawa* [*no problem*]
9. Nana: *Make we make dis happen* {Let's make this happen}

It is instructive to note that prior to this exchange, when many platformers including females actively participated, the language of interactions was Standard English. The two men switched to Ghanaian Pidgin English when they realised that the interaction had become a dialogue between them. It is interesting to note that ***waa*** appears only in Pidgin English sentences. The reason for this is probably, as noted elsewhere, that the form originates from Ga as a marker of emphasis and is borrowed as such into the pidgin; no other language has as yet borrowed the form.

Face-saving and Apology Markers

Sometimes, *oo* and *wai* 'okay?' serve as face-saving markers, that is they are used to minimise (tone down) the effect of an utterance; see Example 3 for an earlier illustration of this effect when Lecturer used *wai* to minimize the potential harshness of her command to Assistant, making it sound more like a cordial request. This is the kind of DM function Landone (2012) describes in his study of Spanish digital spaces. In Example 6, both *oo* and *wai* perform this face-saving function.

Members of Catechism Church group have planned a party and Fanny promises to provide the meat. However, Winne is among those who doubt that Fanny is serious and not just joking. In turn 1, she commands Fanny to stop '*deceiving us'*. Without hedging this utterance with a lengthened oooo, this command would have been a serious face-threatening act, an effrontery to Fanny. The DM's mitigating effect seems to have worked, because in turns 4-6 Fanny did not show any sign of being embarrassed. Rather, she seeks to assure Winne and the others to 'have faith' in her to deliver on her promises. Despite her assurances, however, Winne remains unimpressed. In turn 7 she declares that Fanny is "exaggerating it too much…" and in turn 8 she goes even tougher, pronouncing that "We don't want to put our hope in u [you]." She did not end it there. She continues with what is even more face-threatening: she now suggests to the entire group that instead of hoping that Fanny will deliver, they should "just buy fish here n [and] use it *wai"*. Her use of *wai* here plays a dual discourse function. One, it marks the fact that she is humbly employing other members of the group to "just buy fish" instead of wait to be disappointed by Fanny. Second, it probably is her attempt to soothe the hurt feeling that Fanny must by now be nursing. Fittingly, note that she follows the DM up with a final remark in which she tells Fanny, "but if u bring it too we'll appreciate [it]", thus suggesting that she (Fanny) has the choice to prove her and everybody wrong.

Example 6:

1. Winne: Fanny, stop deceiving us *oooo*
2. Winne: Item 13 is important [Item 13 refers to snacks served at events]
3. Winne: Very essential
4. Fanny: Oh Winne u [you] dnt [don't] hv [have] faith
5. Fanny: Am [I'm] even going to buy e [the] cow now n [and] will buy e[the] goat next week
6. Fanny: Will [I'll] send u [you] pics [pictures]
7. Winne: U [you] r [are] exaggerating it too much dear
8. Winne: We don't want to put our hope in u [you]. We'll just buy fish here n [and] use it ***wai*** but if u bring it too we'll appreciate

The face-saving function of *wai* and *oooo* in the Example 6 above appears to be parallel to the function of *lor* used in Facebook interaction of Malaysian young adults (Tay et al. 2016). Tay et al. opines that *lor* softens the imposing and abrupt nature of an advice.

The next two examples illustrate slightly different senses from that of mitigating the effects face-threatening acts. Here, the DMs are used to enhance an apology (Example 7) and a plea (Example 8). The conversation in (7) is taken from interactions of members of the same platform observed in Example (6). A participant (Anna) left the group and Winne draws attention to the incidence. Adjoa sends a general plea (signaled by her use of ‘please’**)** for Anna to be reconnected to the group. In turn 4, Winne mentions the administrator’s name and repeats the plea for Anna to be reconnected to the group. Note, however, that because her plea is the second in a row (which could make it appear insistent, even intimidating), she ends it with a lengthened *oooo. T*his DM heightens her plea and erases any notion of intimidation from the request. Winne then announces that “She [Anna] is back on what’s app [WhatsApp] again”, implying that the problem that caused her leaving the group was caused by her phone going off WhatsApp momentarily. When at last the administrator, Naakie, responds with an assurance that she will add Anna, Winne is on hand again to urge her to “hurry” up with it, pausing however to use a now longer ***ooooo*** to mitigate the commanding tone she seems to be using.

Example 7:

1. Winne: What happened before Anna left
2. Adjoa: Pls [Please] add Anna again
3. Adjoa: Send this to 2 groups and see magic. I AM ALSO SHOCKED!!!!
4. Winne: Naakie pls [please] add Anna *oooooo*
5. Winne: She is back on what’s app [WhatsApp] again
6. Naakie: Ok will do
7. Winne Hurry *oooooo*

Wai is used in (8) as an even more effective apology-marker than ***ooo*** is used in (7) above. In turn 1, Adjoa started with a complaint that no one on the platform remembered to wish Mavis a happy birthday and then apologizes on behalf of the group to Mavis. Her use of *wai* (meaning here *okay?*) at the end of her apology makes her appeal almost child-directed; i.e. it lends her plea a needed pampering tone. It creates the right mood for an outpouring of felicitations and further apologies to follow. In the end, in turn 5, an emotional Mavis could only accept the apologies and acknowledge the greetings.

Example 8:

1. Adjoa: So nobody wish my one n [and] only Mavis a happy birthday mpo [at least]. Awww we r [are] sorry *wai* [*okay?*]
2. Charles: Awwwww happy birthday Mavis
3. Charles: We r terribly sorry
4. Adjoa: Happy birthday Mavis
5. Mavis: Awww, thanks but the day is still young. Bless you

Marking Reiteration

The DM *la* usually reiterates the message encoded by the sentence it ends. When it is used, it indicates to the other party that the speaker has already conveyed a particular point and that he/she is repeating that point. Thus, it sometimes also signals that the user is irritated that his/her point was not noted earlier on.

The extract labelled as Example (9) is taken from Regular Church Group. On the previous day, a participant posted a video that had long been in circulation and had thus lost currency and news-worthiness. Such posts have been referred to as '*pasco'* among Ghanaian users of WhatsApp. One such post, a video, started an argument on the platform. The next day, Paul in turn 1 in the extract wants to post a video and decides to ask permission before going ahead. In turn 2, Sena pre-emptively labels the video Paul intends to post as *Pascos.* It is this interruption which prompts Paul to repeat his request, this time with the reiterative DM *la:*

Example 9:

1. Paul: I wnt [want] to post something.
2. Sena: Pascos [Posts that contain dead news]
3. Sena: Lol [laughing out loud]
4. Paul: Clear me la.
5. Paul: Gv [give] me Vito [veto] Power.

Conclusion

This study initially set out to investigate manifestations of codeswitching in WhatsApp conversations of Ghanaians in a bit to compare the characteristics with those found in spoken codeswitching, which has been documented extensively. The focus shifted to the discourse functions of seven Ghanaian language DMs *o, wai, saa, paa, waa, koraa/kraa* and *la i*n the WhatsApp conversations when it was discovered that they constitute the majority of Ghanaian language words used in English-based conversations. It was found unexpectedly that only 1% of words used in conversations on eight WhatsApp platforms are from Ghanaian languages (the 99% are English words) and that 83% of that 1% are instances of the seven DMs. A survey of the literature on codeswitching in computer-mediated communication (CMC) explains this statistic: Ghanaians do not engage in codeswitching in the WhatsApp conversations because majority of them can only write English. Their near-exclusive use of English in the conversations contrasts them with fellow Africans in Kenya and Cameroon, for instance. They do a lot of codeswitching in CMC and the reason is that they are biliterate in their nationwide lingua francas. In Kenya, where pervasive Kiswahili-English codeswitching characterises CMC (cf. Marjie 2010 and Barasa 2016), educated citizens are taught to read and write Kiswahili and English, the country's national and official languages respectively. In Cameroon where English-French codeswitching characterises conversations on popular blogs (Anchimbe 2015), there is the background that the country has bilingual official language policy. The statistic is therefore a sad reflection of the dominance of English over local languages in Ghana. The seven DMs are monosyllabic clause-final particles, which explains why Ghanaians write them easily in their desire to convey important discourse messages to interlocutors.

Using the Markedness Model of Myers-Scotton (1993, 1998, 1999, 2006) as our data analysis framework, we demonstrated that the DMs perform discourse functions analogous to those reported for DMs used in CMC elsewhere. For example, they convey speakers' desire to make their interactions informal, show speakers' in-group solidarity, soften otherwise tense atmosphere around ongoing interactions and allow speakers to place emphasis on things they say. It is indicated that what sets Ghanaians apart from, for instance, Malaysians and Nigerians is that they still use the local DMs as codeswitches. Tay et al. (2016) and Unuabonah and Oladipupo (2018) made it clear that the local DMs Malaysians and Nigerians use in English-based sentences must be regarded as borrowings into Malaysian English and Nigerian English respectively. We do not think a similar argument can be advanced at this time about the local DMs being used in WhatsApp conversations and elsewhere.

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