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Lithuanian and Romanian migrant students' communication on Facebook and motivation for language choice

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1 Introduction

This study seeks to identify and analyse how and why Romanian and Lithuanian students at the University of Manchester utilise their multilingual repertoires to communicate on Facebook. We have used a mixed-methods approach, and have collected a sample of posts and comments—in addition to distributing a questionnaire and conducting interviews—to examine how these student groups used language and which common factors could be seen influencing this use.

Central to the questionnaire and interview elements of the study is the question of which factors participants *believed* to influence their linguistic choices, and whether these differed between the two national groups or between participants' reported use and the real-world use studied from the sample of posts. The attitudes held by speakers were also key to understanding the usage data collected from all sources, and these may also indicate the degree to which speakers' choices regarding their use of language are deliberate or unconscious.

Although some studies of online multilingual practices by Romanian speakers do exist (e.g. Pittman 2008; Constantin & Kavoura 2016), none of these focus on migrant students; the same is true of Lithuanians (e.g. Jakelienė 2018; Vaicekauskienė & Vyšniauskienė 2019). This study therefore addresses this gap in the literature, in addition to taking a comparative approach to the attitudes of the two student communities. Despite the shared historical context—both countries having been members of the Eastern Bloc—these countries exhibit different outlooks on language policing. The State Commission of the Lithuanian Language regulates language use in most public media (Lietuvos Respublikos Seimas 1995). Contrastingly, the Romanian Academy's Linguistics Institute has a different approach; while still concerned with the 'correct' usage of language, it focuses on having updated resources such as dictionaries, which "contribute to the correct knowledge and acquisition of the Romanian language". One of their main objectives is the cultivation and promotion of the language (Parlamentul României 2001).

2 Methodology

Using three mixed methods of data collection allowed us to gain different insights. We used qualitative and ethnographic methods to study patterns of language use in posts and comments in two Facebook groups through participant observation. We also gathered quantitative data on how participants viewed their own online language use through the questionnaire, which received 53 responses (33 Lithuanian speakers and 20 Romanian speakers). Interviews then allowed for a more in-depth and ground-up view of individuals' attitudes to language choices.

To maintain comparability between interviews, while still allowing flexibility in the conversation, we took a semi-structured approach using an interview guide (see appendix). These guides were written to explore themes that we identified from questionnaire responses, while reflections from earlier interviews also impacted what we prioritised later on.

We held 1 group interview (attended by 3 Lithuanians and 1 Romanian) and 4 individual interviews (2 with Romanians and 2 with Lithuanians). The initial group interview allowed us a broader, more open-ended discussion. This helped us to identify themes that we explored in more depth in subsequent individual interviews. We chose interview candidates from the questionnaire respondents whose answers were atypical, and who had agreed to be interviewed. We initially aimed to interview an equal number of Lithuanians and Romanians, but were unable to do so for the group interview due to participant availability.

Some changes were made to our proposed questionnaire before we released it. We recognised that, by referring to "your native language" the phrasing of several questions in the questionnaire ignored the possibility of participants speaking native languages apart from Romanian and Lithuanian. We changed these questions to clarify at what points we were interested in the use of national languages (Romanian and Lithuanian). We also edited the questionnaire to allow us to ask about proficiency and use of languages apart from Romanian, Lithuanian and English.

We observed that parts of our original questionnaire that asked about language use were open to being interpreted in a more general context, whereas our intention was to examine language use online specifically. We clarified this, for example, by changing "when speaking Romanian" to "when communicating online in Romanian".

In this study, the terms 'formal', 'proper' and 'correct' are used to refer to how speakers identify their language choices. These words usually refer to the way prescriptivist language institutions manage language use with a specific goal (e.g., to keep the language 'pure' from other languages' influence). These terms do not reflect our outlook on these languages but describe how participants identify their language habits. Additionally, a scale between 'strict' and 'relaxed' style is used: 'strict' outlook on language refers to the speaker adhering to prescriptivist rules; on the other hand, a speaker being 'relaxed' towards these rules means adhering to informal descriptivist rules. Code-switching refers to the use of elements of two or more different languages in a single utterance by bilingual interlocutors (Myers Scotton & Ury 1977: 5).

3 Findings

Language use and awareness of audience

Lithuanian and Romanian were the preferred languages on the Facebook groups we observed. The majority of interactions were in Lithuanian or Romanian with occasional code-switching to English, which was more prevalent in comments than in posts. No other languages were used. In interviews, this was often associated with the consideration of the audience. Several interviewees claimed that they preferred using their national language with an audience of speakers of that language. We focused on students at the University of Manchester, who are expected to have a high enough level of English language proficiency for academic use, namely at least a CEFR B2 level of English, which may vary by course (The University of Manchester 2021). Therefore, we assume that they have a high level of proficiency in both languages, leading to a greater ability to code-switch.

Within our interviews, we asked questions exploring the context of writing a post. Posts within the closed Facebook groups are seen by those who speak both Romanian/Lithuanian and English, and that makes it easier to switch between those languages. Posts specifically to groups of strangers would be in the shared native language, as this environment is perceived as more formal. Private messages to friends who speak both languages could include code-switching, but often public posts would be in one language. However, this depends on personal preference. One participant from our group interview even said "audience is more important than identity".

Based on our dataset, the posts were generally more formal than the comments. The commenters code-switch much more than the posters. The self-imposed pressure for posters to write in the most 'proper' way possible was discussed during the interviews. One Lithuanian speaker mentioned that they feel anxious to post on Facebook; they would ask their friends to proofread it because they fear making mistakes and want to write in "proper and beautiful Lithuanian". This notion seems to represent the way posts are written; most selected posts from the Lithuanian group contain little to no code-switching and the commenters use more translingual speech. One such comment included the word *icropint* (see figure 1) which includes the Lithuanian prefix (*į-*) and suffix (*-int*), but its root is the English word *crop*. This phenomenon was also mentioned during the interviews, with many respondents naming words such as *managementas* (*management* with the Lithuanian noun ending *as*), *gameris* (*gamer* with the Lithuanian noun ending *is*) and so on.

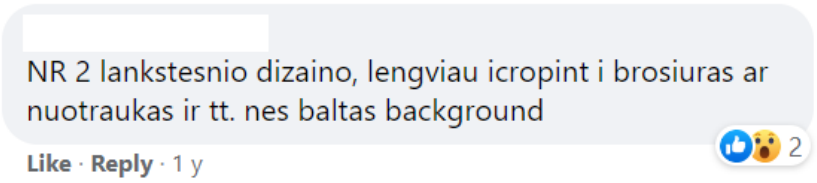

Figure 1

While we were unable to find examples of this phenomenon from the Romanian dataset, some interviewees mentioned that they use certain words in English with Romanian inflections to better fit Romanian speech patterns. Some examples mentioned were *bookuim*, where the root is the English verb *book* but it is inflected in Romanian using the ending *-im*, and *weekend-ul*, where the root is the English noun *weekend* and the ending is the Romanian definite article *-ul*.

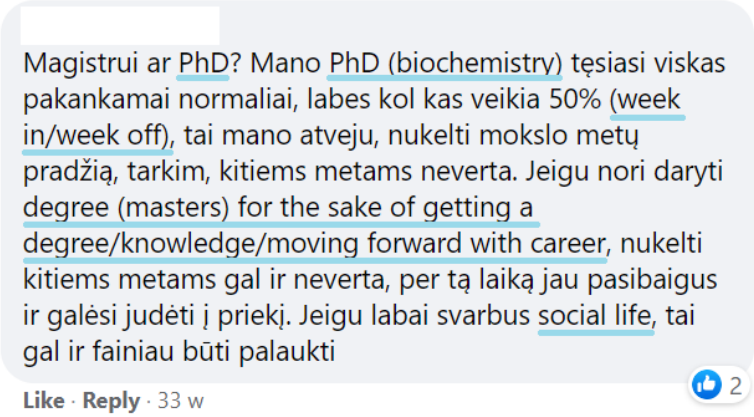

Figure 2

A frequent occurrence in the comments was code-switching within a sentence. In figure 2, the commenter uses a mixture of Lithuanian and English, with the latter underlined. In the interviews, several Lithuanian and Romanian participants mentioned using English words while speaking in their native language because the English words were easier to access in their mental lexicon or because they did not want to translate them which would be difficult. As an example for the latter, the commenter in figure 2 uses *moving forward* idiomatically, which could be difficult to translate, as well as English words that may be more accessible in this context.

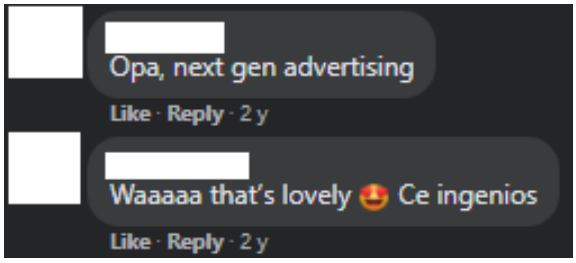

Figure 3

This was also evident in data collected from the Romanian Society group. In figure 3, we can see that quite a lot of English is used both in the post itself and in the comments. The phrases *next gen advertising* and *that's lovely* are used in English, which may also be due to them being difficult to translate. In both cases, they are preceded by Romanian interjections.

Code-switching within a word and within a sentence occurred frequently in this dataset, and many of these words were mentioned in the interviews; on this basis, we assume that they are used by the Lithuanian participants. The same tendency was displayed in the Romanian Society group, where the posts used quite formal language and code-switching has been kept at a minimum, but the comments either use quite informal language or write humorous statements. For example, figure 4 is in both Romanian and English, and the language is quite formal. The commenters are making jokes about the ambassador, using very formal language mockingly, calling him *Excelenta Sa* ('his Excellence').

Figure 4

Technical and university-related language

Terms and phrases relating to university and technical terms tend to remain in English. This featured heavily in both the questionnaire and the interviews. In the questionnaire, the vast majority (91%) of respondents said that they use English to refer to their courses' names when communicating online, as well as 89% of respondents saying they use English lexis for technical terms, as summarised in table 1.

	Frequency of respondents referring to course names in English	**Frequency of respondents using English for technical terms**
Romanian	19 (95%)	20 (100%)
Lithuanian	29 (88%)	27 (82%)
Overall	**48 (91%)**	**47 (89%)**

Table 1: A summary of the frequency of respondents' use of English for particular purposes.

This technical language use accounted for most of the examples of code-switching found in posts and comments from the groups. For example, in one post from the Romanian Society group (see figure 5), *Faculty of Biology, Medicine and Health* was used in English as opposed to being translated into Romanian. When we asked about this in the interviews, the general consensus was that they did not know the terminology in their native language and that it

was easier to keep those specific terms in the language they learned them in rather than translating and risking being misunderstood.

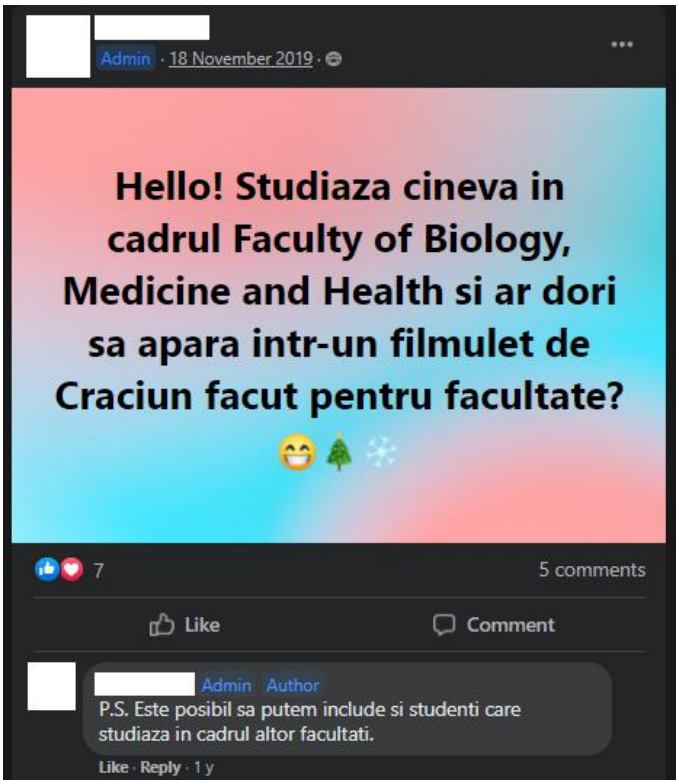

Figure 5

English is considered the 'lingua franca' of the internet (Lee 2016). A lot of internet slang is in English, and most scientific journals are published in English (van Weijen 2012). Interviewees claimed that they use English on Google as it gave them better results. In fact, 61.2% of online content is in English (W3Techs 2021). Additionally, the students stated that literature and resources for their field of study were more widely available in English. This could be indicative of why our interviewees claimed to use English for technical or university related terms.

Attitudes to code-switching

Our interviews revealed broadly negative attitudes to code-switching online. This negative outlook was more pronounced amongst Lithuanian than Romanian participants. On the other hand, some participants stated that "using a mixture" of English and their national language was acceptable in more colloquial settings such as a private online chat. Lithuanian participants in particular view public online spaces, such as the Society group or their own Facebook wall, as "formal". They reported attempting to use either "proper Lithuanian" or English and several claimed to never use a mixture of languages**.** One Lithuanian interviewee referred to code-switching as "disrespectful to both languages".

In contrast, Romanian participants held a more relaxed outlook on language formality. When asked about their attitudes to language use in interviews, Romanians reported that they perceive online spaces as more informal and thus were more likely to code-switch. However, one participant mentioned that since Romanian has polite speech, using English in a more formal online setting might "come across as rude".

This disparity in attitudes may reflect the prevalence of language planning in Lithuanian culture and the impact it has on individual attitudes. For example, in Lithuania, laws exist to promote the use of "correct" Lithuanian in all public media. This prescriptivist outlook exists because of a strict language policing system, namely a law passed in 1995 which states that all public language has to be 'correct' Lithuanian (Vaicekauskienė 2020: 202). There are institutions that monitor 'language violations' (ibid.: 206) and the lists of 'transgressors' are available to the public (ibid.: 207). Equivalent laws do not exist in Romania.

However, observations from other datasets appear to contradict the views discussed above. Our study of Lithuanian and Romanian Facebook groups showed that comments on posts included a lot of code-switching, in spite of Lithuanian interviewees' assertions that they would attempt to avoid doing this. Unexpectedly, as shown in figure 6, Lithuanian respondents to the questionnaire actually claimed to code-switch more than Romanian respondents did. Here, we found that there was a disparity between how people use language and the ideologies they have behind their language use. One explanation for these results is that the Lithuanian interviewees held generally more prescriptivist views than the wider usership of this Facebook group.

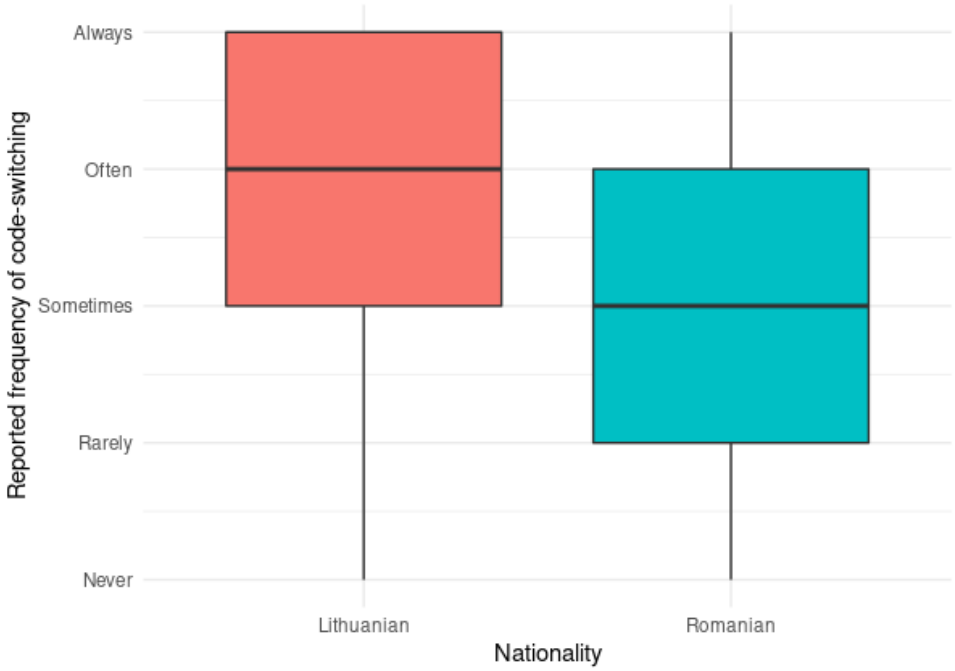

Figure 6: Boxplot showing the rates of code-switching in online discourse reported by questionnaire respondents.

Emotional connection

Several of our interviewees mentioned a sense of emotional detachment from the English language. Just over half (51%) of respondents to our questionnaire claimed to code-switch into English for “expressions of emotion” with a higher proportion of Lithuanians reporting this (58% cf. 40%). One question asked for examples of words or phrases they might use in English during a Romanian or Lithuanian interaction. The group of phrases that we chose to categorize as “reactions'' was the largest group in these responses, as summarised in table 2.

Number of mentions from respondents	Category name (as assigned by researchers)	Words and phrases in category (as quoted from respondents)
10	reactions	*Awkward, astonishing, relatable, cute, random, OMG, crazy, love*
9	technical/academic terms	*Misogynistic, cavity*
5	set phrases	*To be fair, puts me on the spot, bothers me, If you know what I mean, good luck, Nevermind, by the way*
3	Okay	*Okay*
3	Sorry	*sorry*

Table 2: Summary of words and phrases reported by participants as being used as English insertions in conversations with Lithuanians or Romanians.

4 Reflection

We made sure to balance our data by using the same number of sources for each language. Originally, we had planned to use the Facebook page for the Romanian Society as well as the closed Romanian group. However, we decided against using posts from the public Romanian Society page to keep the data balanced, as we were only using one Lithuanian source.

Carrying out language analysis can be difficult because as researchers, we are making assumptions and interpreting choices, which are difficult to quantify. However, our mixed-methods approach helps with this, as we are able to gain insight into individuals' interpretations of their own language use through interviews and the questionnaire.

We decided to focus our study on students based in Manchester, as they were easier for us to contact, due to us being students at the same university. Our work is partly self-reflexive,

as we have one group member who speaks Lithuanian, and one who speaks Romanian. They were both already in the Facebook groups we were studying, and are both students that have come to England specifically for university, and so are part of the demographic we are looking at. However, the other three members of our group are not speakers of those languages and acted as an outsider eye when looking at data. But they are also bilingual, meaning they are familiar with the processes described. This gave our study a unique strength, as we had a mixture of perspectives when looking at the data and developing interview questions. We also had both an English speaker and the Romanian or Lithuanian speaker carry out interviews, in order to give a variety of viewpoints when asking questions and to give interviewees the option to speak in another language. However, this also limited the analysis of the Facebook groups to one perspective, due to only one member of our group speaking each language.

Carrying out research online made the interactions in interviews very different to how they would have been in-person, especially in the group interview. Holding it on Zoom made it harder to have free-flowing discussions, as there was a lot more of a turn-taking etiquette and it was harder to tell when people wanted to start talking. However, it also made organising the interviews much easier and more efficient, and as a result, we were able to talk to more people than we may have been able to offline.

5 Conclusion

Through this study, we have shown the motivations behind how Romanian and Lithuanian student migrants use language through our chosen Facebook group posts, questionnaire data and interview discussions. We found that audience and language ideologies were the most important factors when considering language choice, and that prevailing attitudes to language in Lithuania led to negative beliefs about code-switching. The speakers stated that they felt formality was important within the posts because of the audience they were posting for, but that they felt less pressure to be formal in the comments. This was reflected through an increase in code-switching. Additionally, we found a disparity between how people use language and the ideologies behind their language use. Our data suggests that Lithuanians regulate their own language use more than Romanians, but for both groups the intended audience was the most significant factor behind language choices.

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Appendix - interview guide

Main thing we want to gain from interviews - how people connect to the languages they use and how they feel about language use online

- Are you Romanian or Lithuanian?
- When online, which language do you tend to use more with people with a shared native language?
- In which areas do you use which languages and why?
- Have you ever made a post in the Facebook group? If so, what language did you make the post in?
- Use of technical/educational language only in English - does this limit you when discussing your subject in your native language?
- Do you think this impacts your online use of language? If so, how?
- Studying in a foreign language and in a foreign country - did this change your perception of your language? Does this make you feel closer to your native language?

Dependent on the people that you're talking to:

- Do you believe that English is an easier language than your native language?
- Do you prefer to use English or your native language online?
- Are there any online spaces that require you to use a certain language over another?
- Do you tend to use reaction and 'internet culture' phrases online in mostly English? Are there any typical English phrases you translate into your native language?

Ask about the specific phrases used in English that they said in the questionnaire

- Why do you use certain phrases in English/your native language?
- Do you have any specific phrases that you use that are a mixture of your native language and English? (code-switching within a word)
- Responses to the questionnaire showed a significant difference in the number of people who said using their language helped them feel closer to other Lithuanians/Romanians on the one hand and on the other hand those who said it helped them express their national identity. Do you feel the difference between using these languages?