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“One does not simply bstell e Flammküeche ohne Ziwwe”: Sociolinguistic Issues of Multilingual Computer Mediated Communication in Alsace

Abstract: This chapter discusses the sociolinguistic questions arousing about the subjective status of the Alemannic and Franconian dialectal speeches called *Alsatian* among society via a new phenomenon observed in Alsace: those dialects, which were traditionally limited to oral interaction, are more and more frequently written in computer mediated communication (CMC), despite their lack of standardization, and in combination with the other languages known by their speakers. To what extent, how and why *Alsatian* is becoming a written language is the main issue addressed in this chapter. After a presentation of some characteristics of the Alsatian sociolinguistic situation to explain the originality of those new multilingual written forms, the theoretical and methodological issues of their analysis will be discussed and will lead to a typology of ‘Alsatian’ writing strategies. A last section will question the part played by multilingual CMC in the combination of global computer mediated culture and regional identity through the analysis of multilingual Internet memes produced in Alsace.

Keywords: Alsatian, Computer Mediated Communication, Internet memes, language contact, regional identity

1 Introduction

Through its history, Alsace has always been a privileged field for the observation of multilingualism and languages in contact. Despite the imposition of standard languages in the education system (alternatively French and German) due to the emergence of national states from the 18th century on, on the one hand, and the effects of globalization which brings about a high diversity of languages as in many other regions in the world (Jørgensen et al. 2011), on the other hand, a fairly large part of the population in Alsace still uses German dialectal speeches called *Alsatian* (Huck and Erhart 2019). Until recently, those dialects were mostly limited to oral interaction, but in the two last decades, the Internet and *computer mediated communication* (from now on CMC) have radically

changed the way in which most Alsatians (as well as all other people who have internet access) communicate with each another (Paveau 2019): more and more speakers are now writing their electronic texts (SMS or e-mails, posts on social networks, etc.) in Alsatian increasingly frequently, despite its lack of standardization.

In this chapter, the sociolinguistic questions arousing via this new phenomenon about the subjective status of Alsatian among society are discussed. Since they have at least one standard language at their disposal in which they can read and write, why do Alsatians use another non-standardized language in their digital communication? How do they use it? What part does multilingual CMC play in the combination of global computer mediated culture and regional identity?

First, we will present some characteristics of the complex Alsatian sociolinguistic situation (section 2), followed by the discussion of the theoretical and methodological issues of the analysis of multilingual computer mediated communication in Alsace (section 3). In section 4, we will develop a typology of *Alsatian* writing strategies drawing on the corpora and first results of exploratory case studies we've been leading until now (Erhart 2018; 2020; 2022 for examples taken from the regional media, Erhart and Kahn 2022 for examples taken from the economic sphere). In section 5, we will focus on the analysis of multilingual Internet memes on a cultural basis, which will lead us to ask ourselves to what extent such multilingual CMC can be understood as “acts of identity” (LePage and Tabouret-Keller 1985, 14–15) and to what extent it influences the status or the perception of *Alsatian* as a language of its own.

2 Sociolinguistic context

The observation of language practices reveals that *Alsatian* is among the most perennial so-called *regional* languages (fr. *langues régionales*) in France, despite the very sharp decline in their practice: In 2001, INSEE declared “Alsatian, the second regional language of France” with about 500,000 speakers (Duée 2002, 1), while in January 2020, another survey revealed that only 5 % of the respondents declared *Alsatian* as their main language, while 25 % declared themselves *bilingual* (Alsatian-French) (IFOP 2020). 70 % declared French as their only language. Intergen-

erational transmission seems almost at a standstill: in the same survey, 82 % of those under 35 said they speak *only French*. Despite this undeniable decline in their practice, Alsatian dialectal speeches still seem to be invested with symbolic functions which have led to new uses of *Alsatian*, no longer oral, but written, on the Internet and social networks (Erhart 2020).

2.1 Traditional geolinguistic features

The collective term *Alsatian* began to be used at the end of the 19th century, at a time when Alsace was part of the German Empire, as a means of differentiation (Irvine and Gal 2000) from other German speaking

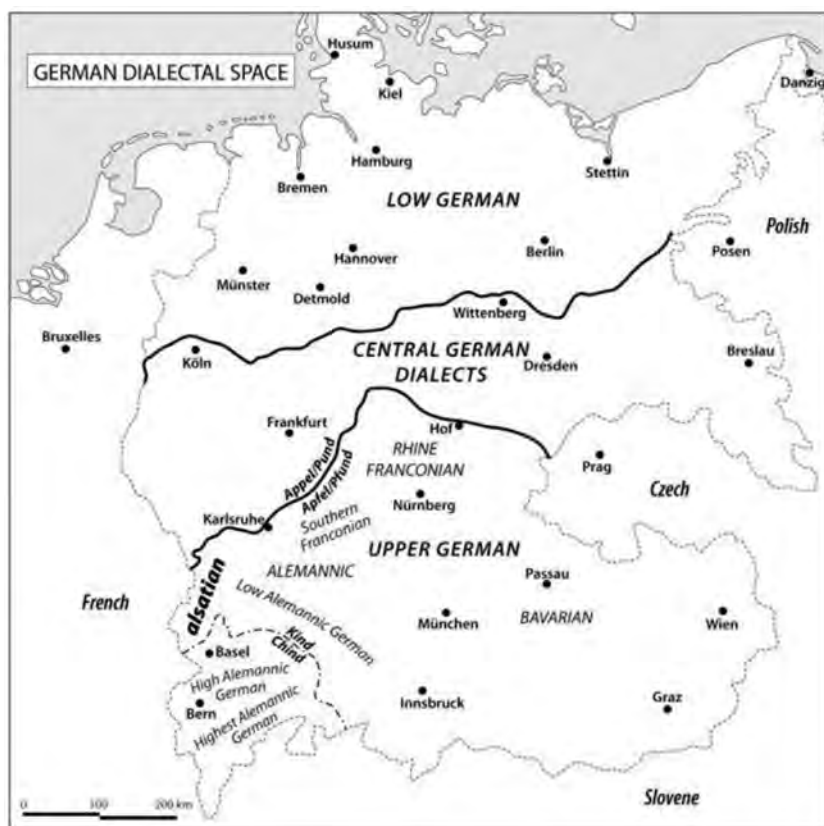


Fig. 1: German dialectal space (© Université de Strasbourg)

areas and has been used since then by lay people as well as politicians and scientists to name the Alemannic and Franconian dialects that were imported by Germanic tribes around the 5th century. Geographically, the Alsatian dialect area is located in the southwest of the German dialect area (Fig. 1).

The Alsatian dialect area is structured by phonetic elements stemming from the linguistic history of the German dialect area, and more specifically by the effects of the second Germanic consonant shift (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2: Effects of the Germanic Consonant Shift in Alsace (© Université de Strasbourg)

The Rhenish Franconian dialects, that are part of Central German, are spoken in the north-western part of the area (*Alsace bossue*) and can be distinguished from the Alemannic dialects, that belong to Upper German and are predominant in the rest of the area through the isophone *p/pf* (*Pund* [p^hʊnd] / *Pfund* [pfʊnd], ‘pound’), while in the southernmost part, the *k-/[x]*- isophone (at the beginning of a word, as in *Kind* [k^hɪnd] / *Ching* [xɪŋ], ‘child’) discriminates between Low Alemannic German and High Alemannic German (Huck, to appear). Inside of these three main areas, many other isophones and isoglosses lead to a great amount of diatopic variations. Those linguistic categorizations are not well known by speakers, who overcome this diatopic variation with the hyperonym *Alsatian*.

2.2 Language name and status

Although these dialects can be clearly assigned to the German dialects from a linguistic point of view, they are almost never referred to as *German* or *German dialects* by speakers, but as *Alsatian* (als. *Elsassisch*, fr. *alsacien*), sometimes still as *Elsasserditsch*, i.e. *Alsatian German*, or as *the dialect* (fr. *le dialecte*) (Huck and Erhart 2019, 156).

At regional and national level, however, the Alsatian dialects are considered as dialects of German, which is seen as the standard and written language of the Alsatian dialects and has therefore been taught as a *regional language* in schools since 1982 (Huck and Erhart 2019, 168). Whereas “it was not too difficult to ‘identify’ such ‘entities’ as ‘Alsatian’ as opposed to ‘French’, it was [...] impossible [...] to be agreement as to whether a bilingual education policy meant teaching both ‘French’ and ‘Alsatian’, or whether it must mean teaching ‘French’ and ‘German’, since ‘Alsatian’ was not identified as ‘a language’” (LePage and Tabouret-Keller 1985, 3). This may explain why the dialects are never referred to with the term *Alsatian* in the official school regulation texts that have been published since then. At the international level, only the Alemannic dialects spoken in Alsace belong to the ISO 639-3 standard Swiss German [gsw]. This excludes the Franconian varieties that are spoken in the North West.

2.3 New written uses of *Alsatian*

This lack of institutionalization can explain the fact that those dialectal speeches have never been standardized, what however does not mean that no written use is made of them. Until before the Second World War, there was no real need for standardization of the dialect due to the script-oriented tradition of reading and writing the German standard language, so that its written use remained fairly low among most dialect speakers (Bernhard et al. 2021, 289). However, dialectal features in the written German could be observed as early as the 17th century in the writing practices of “less experienced Alsatian writers” (Werner 2020, 93).

From the 1990s onwards, the presence of endogenous written German in Alsace became marginal. Nowadays, most dialect speakers no longer understand Standard German as a standard form of their mother tongue, but as a foreign language that is or must be learned in school. With a few exceptions, the Alsatians spontaneously use French as their written language. In fact, the majority of the dialect-speaking Alsatians surveyed do not trust themselves to write German, despite all the efforts made in the educational area: in primary elementary education standard German is taught as early as the third year of kindergarten (5 year-old children) for up to 3 hours a week and was used (and still is) as a teaching language in bilingual curricula (French/German) in elementary schools, in which 15 % of the pupils are enrolled voluntarily (12 hours in French, 12 hours in German).

Until the end of the 20th century, the Alsatian dialects were mainly written by poets, playwrights and writers, i.e. for a literary purpose, so that the corpus of written Alsatian is limited. In addition to the literary works, there are also some Alsatian dictionaries and encyclopaedias (also online), newspaper columns in Alsatian in *Les Dernières Nouvelles d'Alsace* and *L'Alsace*, and also some online texts, especially on Wikipedia in Alemannic. The written use of the dialect in terms of graphics is also free of norms. There are some suggestions for formal orthographic rules for the written form, such as the ORTHAL method (Zeidler and Crévenat-Werner 2008), which tries to integrate all the different variants of Alsatian, but no common, standardized written form has been able to prevail up to now. Many writers rely on the graphics of German, whose graphic choices seem to be closest to them, but are not necessarily

familiar to all today's readers. Most of them (for example Marie Hart or Germain Muller) especially adapt the vowels to their dialect so that one can recognize the different varieties when reading. On the readers' side, the greatest part of dialect speakers find it difficult to read or write Alsatian because – in contrast to French and standard German – they did not learn it in school, which is considered the place of written language acquisition.

To deal with this great amount of variations among written forms of Alsatian, computational linguistics and natural language processing research has begun within the Restaure project,¹ “whose goal was to develop resources and tools for three regional languages of France” (Bernhard et al. 2021, 286): Alsatian, Occitan and Picard. Several tools were developed to assist digital written communication in Alsatian, such as the ORTHALISEUR,² which offers corrections in accordance with the ORTHAL-method. Researchers of this project also contributed to the development of predictive keyboards for Alsatian and Occitan (AnySoft-Keyboard extensions for Gascon, Lengadocian and Alsatian) and Microsoft Swiftkey, which are conceived to make the use of digital social networks and messaging applications in Alsatian easier. The news about the creation of this predictive keyboard was successfully disseminated in the media and welcomed very positively.³ This shows that CMC might have an impact on the use of the written dialect. In our research, we formulate the hypothesis that dialect speakers, when they become writers, resort in the same fluid and unpredictable way to the different resources that make up their multilingual repertoire and make more or less conscious graphic choices referring to the symbolic functions and meanings of *Alsatian* when they are led to write it as when they speak (Bothorel-Witz 2007; Erhart 2020).

¹ Ressources informatisées et Traitement Automatique pour les langues régionales, funded by the project-based funding agency for research in France ANR (2015–2018)

² Demonstration interface accessible via the following link: <http://orthaliseur.alwaysdata.net/> (15/2/2022).

³ Many articles were published in the national press, for example in *Le Figaro* and *Le Parisien*.

3 Theoretical and methodological issues

Digital technology has not only led to the emergence of new forms of written communication that did not fit into any established tradition (Dürscheid 2020), but it has also increased its modes of appropriation (Candea and Véron 2019, 203). From now on, poets, playwrights and writers – who become increasingly rare – are no longer the only ones to write in Alsatian: both private users and institutional structures such as the public radio and television stations *France Bleu Elsass* and *France 3 Alsace* have been starting to write in Alsatian, e.g. in digital text messages or on social networks (Erhart 2018; 2020). CMC brought about “secondary orality” (Ong 2012, 133–34), a kind of intermediate stage between speaking and writing, without a clear separation between them, and, in our case, without a clear separation between Alsatian and the other languages in the speakers’ repertoire. Obviously, since CMC mostly takes the form of “dialogues” and is characterized by features such as “free turn-taking”, “familiarity of the partners”, “free development of a theme” and “spontaneity”, we are dealing here with what Koch and Oesterreicher (2012, 447) call “language of immediacy” to characterize the *spoken* pole of their conceptual continuum, but the effects of language contact also need to be taken into account for the study of those new written forms of *Alsatian*. In addition to that, CMC has visual characteristics going far beyond alphabetical writing, which reflect the meaning of the message or bring an additional meaning to it (cf. section 4). The iconic communication through *smileys* or *emoticons* would probably deserve and need a study apart, but we cannot ignore their presence in our corpora, so that we will try to take them as much as possible into account in our analysis.

The lack of available data, which is due to the very heterogeneous and complex sociolinguistic situation in Alsace (cf. section 2), makes it difficult to circumscribe the phenomenon of spontaneous Alsatian writing and to analyse the corresponding digital productions. The same difficulties arise in other German dialect speaking areas such as Switzerland or South Tirol in Italy, where CMC in dialects is more and more common and has become a research object (Dürscheid 2020; Ueberwasser 2017; Frey, Glaznieks and Stemle 2015). The Alsatian case differs, however, since German does not enjoy the same level of institutionalization as in

those areas where it is, at least partly, an official language, which is not the case of Alsatian in France (cf. section 2).

Another issue would be the fact that most of the CMC we have observed until now is multilingual, and only a part of it can be qualified as *Alsatian*. Actually, Alsatian is mainly used in short sentences or comments of a few words, as in greetings or birthday wishes, and more generally for the means of secondary orality, i.e. the writing of daily oral communication (rites of conversation, daily themes: weather, meals, etc.) which precisely characterizes the current use of Alsatian oral dialects. Longer posts are generally multilingual, as in Figure 3, which begins in French and switches in Alsatian after *Pari gagné*. The Alsatian part of this post can be identified through the use of diacritic signs which do not appear in French, nor in German (*mit*, *ünd*). It has to be noticed that those parts in Alsatian are not translated, which means the authors of this post are betting that the readers understand/can read both French and Alsatian.



Fig. 3: Screenshot of France 3 Alsace's Facebook page⁴

However, it is quite interesting to observe that the latter seem to develop and spread more and more, despite the absence of language planning (Haugen 1966) concerning Alsatian. Even in the economic sphere, private companies, especially restaurants (Fig. 5), seem to follow this trend and frequently use written Alsatian in their digital communication (Erhart and Kahn 2022). Since the language skills of standard German in Alsace are declining more and more, the written forms of the dia-

⁴ 'Suss Farm in Mattstall embarks on farm produce. Butter with wild garlic, walnuts and figs ... A milk producer for a long time, the Suss family has embarked on the production of farm products. A winning bet, *the family makes business with restaurants of the region and will soon open its own little store*' (our translation, Alsatian part in italics). Facebook, March 23, 2021. [https://fb.watch/6o8eu4vTVn/\(15/2/2022\)](https://fb.watch/6o8eu4vTVn/(15/2/2022))

lect that are encountered on social media in this area are mostly unique and peculiar, as can be seen on the following screenshot of a *Facebook* publication of a local distillery (Fig. 4) announcing that *De waldmeister⁵ wachs'ds* (instead of ger. *Der Waldmeister wächst* 'woodruff is growing').



Fig. 4: Screenshot of Distillerie Hepp's *Facebook* page⁶

If the spelling of the masculine definite article *de* is very common in Alsatian texts, the spelling of the conjugated verb *wachs'ds* is really surprising by the addition of an apostrophe before the person-number mark, on the one hand, and by the choice of the spelling <ds> instead of <t> for the person-number mark of the verb, on the other hand. It may be explained by the possible confusion between the plosive consonants [t] and [d] which are not distinguished in the Alsatian dialects (cf. *infra*), but it could also indicate a desire to put some distance between *Alsatian* and Standard German. Another explanation would be the lack of knowledge of the latter. This short example shows the originality of the Alsatian situation in comparison to other German dialects and the need to develop a specific grid for the analysis of the observed forms (section 4).

4 What leads to *Alsatian* written forms in CMC?

In this section, we will describe and analyse some Alsatian written forms used in CMC and try to identify and understand the strategies that led to their emergence. To do so, we will use the criteria formulated by LePage

⁵ Ger. *Waldmeister* (literally 'Master of the woods') stands for *asperula odorata*, which is used to produce liqueurs that are particularly appreciated in Alsace.

⁶ *Facebook*, March 23, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/DistillerieHepp> (15/2/2022).

and Tabouret-Keller (1985, 5–12) to characterize such linguistically heterogeneous situations as the Alsatian one. According to them, *predictability*, *acceptability* and the *creativity of speakers* are criteria that can distinguish a language from others not only on a typological level but also on a social and ethnic one. In our case, we will try to show that this hypothesis also applies to written acts in *Alsatian* and to what extent those reveal a social and ethnic solidarity among the speaker/writers of this language variety. Thus, our analysis is based on the hypothesis that there is such a language called *Alsatian* in the users' linguistic repertoire, which has to be considered as a separate system from the two standard languages with which it is in contact, Standard German and French.

Actually, these criteria fall under what Moreau calls a “functioning norm” (*norme de fonctionnement*), an implicit and descriptive norm which corresponds to “the linguistic habits shared by the members of a community or a subgroup of it” (1997, 219), from which a deviation would be immediately noticed (cf. Huck and Erhart 2020). Building on those three criteria, we will try to verify the existence of such a language as a *common Alsatian*, in spite of the huge variety of written forms and the lack of a prescriptive norm. Until recently, this functioning norm has only been described by linguists for the oral use of the Alsatian language (Huck, to appear) and the challenge here will be to see to what extent digital productions contribute to the elaboration of a functioning written norm of Alsatian.

4.1 Predictability

Predictability being “a condition to successful communication” (LePage and Tabouret-Keller 1985, 5), the first issue that we are confronted with is the lack of predictability of the written forms of Alsatian: Although the oral use of Alsatian involves a degree of unpredictability due to effects of language contact, mainly with French (Koehler 2020), the main features shared by these dialects are well known by their users (Huck, to appear) and allow a certain predictability of the forms produced orally. But when it comes to writing Alsatian, the CMC user has to take a chance on the potential reader “sharing his linguistic rules and values” (LePage and Tabouret-Keller 1985, 5), since there is no standard use of the written language known to users. Despite the difficulties in building relevant and

representative corpora discussed before (section 3), we can try to identify “discrete and identifiable units in the underlying system, a system which all speakers of the language share” (ib., 8), in order to determine the specific features of digital written Alsatian. To do that, we can draw on the features that are shared by nearly all Alsatian dialect speech-forms and identified in available language descriptions (Huck, to appear) to describe the many different forms they can take when they are written. In other words, we can try to see to what extent the functioning norm of Alsatian in oral communication can be transposed to written communication. A phrase as simple as *big kiss*, which is, on the pragmatic level, a loan transposition of the French *gros bisou* that closes many emails, instant messages or posts on social networks (Fig. 5), can then exist in many various forms in written Alsatian: *dicker Schmutz*⁷, *dicker Schmütz* (ORTHAL), *decker schmutz*, *dicker schmoutz*, *decker schmoutz*, *deger schmoutz*, *dieger schmoutz*, etc.

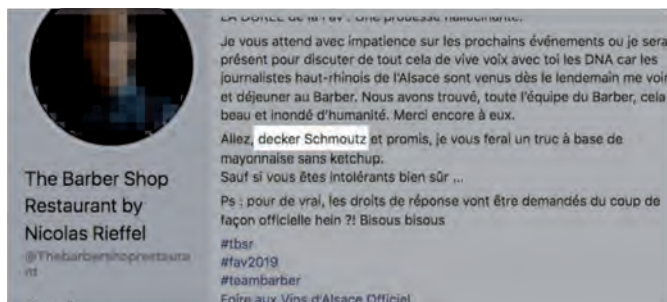


Fig. 5: Post on *The Barber Shop Restaurant's* Facebook page⁸

The main divergences with Standard German occur on the phonological level, and especially the vowel phenomena, which transcend the ages (Werner 2020, 101). For example, the phonographic marking of

⁷ This writing is the closest to German *dick* ('big'), but has a different meaning ('kiss' in Alsatian, 'dirt' in German). The use of capital letters on nouns is a feature of the German graphic system that often occurs in written Alsatian.

⁸ Facebook, August 11, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/Thebarbershoprestaurant> (15/2/2022).

the opening of the [ɪ], which is specific to Alsatian, can be <e>, <ì>⁹ or even in <ie>¹⁰, while the very open and long [ɔ] can be transcribed by <u>, <ù> or <ou>¹¹ (Fig. 5). The phonographic marking of diphthongs, which do not exist in French, nor in German, can in particular become a real challenge for writers. The phonographic marking of the consonants, especially the plosives [p] - [b] (*Pomp/Bomb* ‘bomb’), [t] - [d] (*Tisch/Disch* ‘table’, cf. Fig. 4) and [k] - [g] (*dick/dig* ‘big’, cf. Fig. 5), can also be problematic because the Alsatian dialects do not distinguish them. These two examples show that the lack of predictability of written Alsatian forms is compensated by a set of discriminating elements that allow distinguishing the forms of Alsatian quite clearly from both French and German.

4.2 Acceptability and norm elaboration

In this section, we discuss the existence of criteria which would allow to consider written forms of Alsatian as acceptable or not, in a perspective near to the one of perceptual dialectology or folk linguistics (Niedzielski and Preston 2010). As a non-standardized language, Alsatian is even more unpredictable and, in contrary to its oral occurrences, it is sometimes very difficult to distinguish its written forms from Standard German or French, which makes it even more difficult to determine which form can be categorized as Alsatian or not.

Since there is no established norm of writing Alsatian and since no one learnt to read or write it at school, its degree of acceptability may be as high as its degree of variability. The only valid criterion would then be that of the readability and understanding of the produced forms by other users, which is quite complicated to establish: how can we be sure that everything that is written is understood, or even read, by other users?

⁹ Diacritical signs have been added to many of the graphic regulations proposed so far, especially ORTHAL, to transcribe all the sounds of Alsatian that do not occur in French or German, such as [ã], [ɪ] or [ɔ], cf. http://www.orthal.fr/ORTHAL_2016.pdf (15/2/2022).

¹⁰ In this case, <ie> cannot indicate a diphthong, so that adding the <-e> after the <i> can only be a graphic strategy to indicate the inflection of the vowel.

¹¹ In this case, <ou> corresponds to the French graphem applied to the Alsatian phonem [ɔ].

The presence of reactions (*likes* or emoticons) or comments can only give some hints about that and remain biased by many contextual factors. Only explicitly formulated metalinguistic comments on some specific forms can allow us to get an idea of their degree of acceptability, but their occurrences in our corpora are very random and cannot be considered as representative. In absence of any established spelling rules, there must be some users who would not agree with the written forms they are confronted with but who refrain from criticizing, as they do not feel legitimate to do so. Bearing these limitations in mind, we will nevertheless search for evidence of these implicit norms in our data.

The following example is a post on the “fun Facebook page for the Alsatians of the whole world”¹² (Fig. 6) which explicitly asks its followers to “say IN ALSATIAN” which object is located next to them to their right (in their home or wherever they are) while reading this post, the fun challenge surely being to guess where the users are.



Fig. 6: Post on the *Alsace Facebook* page¹³

The wording of the instructions alone reveals the confusion between *orality* and *literacy* to which CMC has led: to respond to this instruction, users won't actually have to *speak* but to *write* on their phone or computer. At another level of analysis, the addition of a smiley at the end of the instruction seems to indicate that writing in Alsatian is just for fun (cf. section 5). Whatever the purpose of this publication, the fact that about 200 people commented it with various answers in *Alsatian* indicates that the latter is indeed considered by them a language that can be written.

¹² “La page Facebook fun et divertissante pour les Alsaciens et Alsaciennes du monde entier”, <https://www.facebook.com/alsacien> (15/2/2022).

¹³ *Facebook*, April 20, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/alsacien/posts/10158386427463435> (15/2/2022).

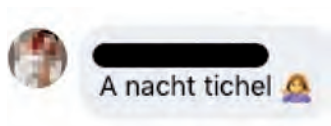


Fig. 7: Comment on the previous post (Fig. 6)¹⁴

Beyond the multiplicity of the observed written forms of the mentioned objects' names (e.g. *A nacht tichel*, *S'nocht dechel* and *A nocht Déchel* for 'night table', Fig. 7), some interesting attitudes can be observed among the reactions to this post. One user seems to be unsecure about her production and therefore also gives the French translation in parenthesis in her comment: "*A café tasala und à hacha bara (tasse à café et cendrier)*" ('a coffee cup and an ashtray') (Fig. 8). The form *hacha bara* is very far away from the German form *Aschenbecher* and can be seen as a *tinkered* form (*bricolage*) using the means of French graphemes (<r> for <x>, for example) that reveals some kind of linguistic distress (Lüdi 1994).

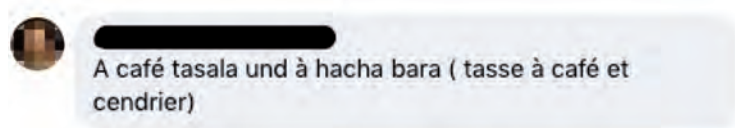


Fig. 8: Comment on the previous post (Fig. 6)¹⁵

Other users saw this post as an opportunity of learning new words, as in the following interaction between three users (Fig. 9): the first one asks for the Alsatian word for a video game controller ("Comment on dit manette en Alsacien?"), the second one suggests using the French word *manette* (probably meaning that there is no word in Alsatian for that) while the third makes the proposition *greff* which exists in Alsatian (ger. *Griff*) with the larger meaning of 'handle'. The first user reacts to this last comment with an astonished smiley, which could mean he was not actually expecting getting an appropriate answer.

¹⁴ Facebook, April 20, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/alsacien/posts/10158386427463435> (15/2/2022).

¹⁵ Facebook, April 20, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/alsacien/posts/10158386427463435> (15/2/2022).



Fig. 9: Comment on the previous post (Fig. 6)¹⁶

Another type of interaction observed is the peer-to-peer evaluation and correction among users (who are not supposed to know each other).



Fig. 10: Comment on the previous post (Fig. 6)¹⁷

¹⁶ Facebook, April 20, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/alsacien/posts/10158386427463435> (15/2/2022).

¹⁷ Facebook, April 20, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/alsacien/posts/10158386427463435> (15/2/2022).

In Fig. 10, an unsecure user answers “Une chééz? (Sais pas le dire en alsacien)”, *chééz* being the phonographic marking of the French *chaise* pronounced with an Alsatian accent (vowel lengthening), and creates a kind of emulation among other users who make several suggestions: a first user proposes “A Setz” which is more general (‘a seat’) and a second one “e Stüehl”, which reflects a possible dialectal pronunciation (graphematic display of the diphthong [yə]) of the German *Stuhl* and gets nine like-reactions from other users. A third one suggests the form “chdehl” which is immediately *corrected* by the second one with a comment saying (in French!) he would rather write it otherwise: “Stiehl plutôt”. This indicates that for this second user, the graphem <ch> for the hissing phonem [ʃ], which is used in French writing, is not acceptable for written Alsatian. In the further comment, a fourth user proposes “a Stuehl” which is close to the one proposed by the second user (“Stüehl”) and also gets one like reaction. Those two forms which are close to written German but differ in the phonographematic marking of the vowel thus seem to be the most acceptable. Of course, we cannot draw any conclusion from this only example but it shows that negotiations about what is acceptable or not may emerge in such publications, which thus can be seen as a laboratory for the development of a bottom-up norm of written Alsatian.

4.3 The creativity of users

“The absence of standard spelling systems leads to interpersonal variation, in which each writer chooses her/his own spelling convention” (Bernhard et al. 2021, 286). This freedom can be seen by CMC users as a challenge, or even as an obstacle, but also as an open space for their creativity. Since there are no rules for written Alsatian, users are able and free to make up their own rules (LePage and Tabouret-Keller 1985, 11) and can exploit all of the possibilities of their linguistic repertoire, including Alsatian.

This is the case in the following examples, which still refer to comments made in the context of the previously commented post (Fig. 6). To designate the object on his right, a user answers “À éclairèl (oder à crèm-nüdel in Süfflom)” (Fig. 11): he first uses the integrated French loan-

word¹⁸ to which has been added the diminutive suffix *-el*, a traditional Alsatian feature, which gives it a familiar and affective dimension.

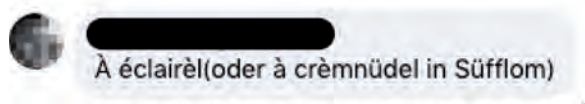


Fig. 11: Comment on the previous post (Fig. 6)¹⁹

Between parentheses he adds the metaphorical compound word *crèmnüdel* (literally ‘creamnoodle’) coined in his village,²⁰ which allows him to create a form of collusion with other speakers who will understand his pun, and at the same time to assert his local roots. However, the use of French diacritic signs shows that he is not familiar with the various Alsatian spelling regulations proposed so far, so he falls back on the graphic signs and diacritical marks he uses most, i.e. mostly in French (<é>, <è>) but also in German (<ü>), and then adapts it to his pronunciation of Alsatian. Thus, only individuals with a similar repertoire will be able to decode such productions. Another user answers “A muldi-brise” which is an unusual writing for the French word *multiprise* (‘multiple socket’) (Fig. 12).

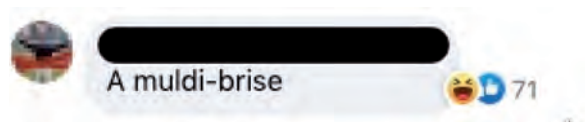


Fig. 12: Comment on the previous post (Fig. 6)²¹

¹⁸ An *éclair* is an elongated french choux pastry traditionally filled with chocolate or vanilla custard and glazed on top.

¹⁹ Facebook, April 20, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/alsacien/posts/10158386427463435> (15/2/2022).

²⁰ *Süfflom* is the Alsatian oral form of the toponym *Soufflenheim*.

²¹ Facebook, April 20, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/alsacien/posts/10158386427463435> (15/2/2022).

By using <d> and instead of <t> and <p>, this user reminds the others of the special way in which Alsatian dialect speakers pronounce those consonants in French and is characteristic of their accent (Steibl   2014). In this case, the creativity relies on the mixing of two codes, French and Alsatian, which seems to be very appreciated by other users who share the same codes: this comment got 71 like reactions, among which 51 smileys conveying hearty laughter, and the administrator of the *Facebook* page found it so funny that he/she re-posted it the following day to get other reactions by asking “vous aussi vous avez des *muldibrise* chez vous?” (‘do you also have *muldibrise* at home?’). The comic effect (no doubt intended by its initiator) of this playing with the effects of language contact raises questions about the cultural functions of this multilingual communication (cf. section 5).

This kind of digital multilingual productions can allow occasional speakers of Alsatian, especially among the youngest, to reappropriate a language of which they had little use and thus give it a new functionality. From this perspective, multilingual CMC can be seen as a means of agency, in the sense of speakers becoming agents of their language evolution, or even of empowerment for the community of Alsatian speakers who can compensate their lack of “interactions with societal institutions” (Cummins 1987, 29), which happen only in standard languages.

5 Alsatian as an identity marker in a global world?

In this last section, we still follow LePage and Tabouret-Keller who assume, in their analysis of “the nature of the relationship of ethnicity to language” (1985, 15) that “[w]ith every speech act all individuals perform, to a greater or less extent, an ‘act of identity’, revealing through their personal use of language their sense of social and ethnic solidarity or difference” (1985, back cover). In the absence of a more detailed and comprehensive study, we can only put forward hypotheses about why the *Alsatian CMC* users prefer to express themselves in a non-standardized written form than in standard languages. This phenomenon can probably be related to special functions of Alsatian that already appeared in the previously discussed examples: the feeling of belonging to a group, the emotional dimension, as well as the humour that is traditionally used in

dialect theatre and also in radio and television broadcasts (Erhart 2018) can now also be individually expressed or designed by using digital means, even by people who do not speak a dialect but are aware of those special functions.

As we have seen previously, forms in Alsatian are mostly short and completed by a text in French or possibly in another standard language – long and flowing texts in Alsatian are very rare in CMC. It is therefore interesting to consider the cultural and even identity-related added value of the presence of Alsatian forms in this type of multilingual communication. Indeed, the creation of a written norm for a language can not only be considered as a technical, graphical gesture (Haugen 1966) but must be understood as a cultural and social process. In order to focus our analysis of computer mediated written Alsatian on its cultural dimension, we would like to study a particular aspect of this phenomenon. For a few years now, there has been an increasing number of entertainment or humorous pages dedicated to Alsace on social networks,²² and especially on *Facebook*, on which multilingual memes, containing written Alsatian parts, started to spread. From there, users on text message applications such as *WhatsApp* often forward them to their contacts.

“The term ‘meme’ was coined by Richard Dawkins in 1976 to describe small units of culture that spread from person to person by copying or imitation” (Shifman 2014, 2)²³. Memes can be defined as “(a) a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content, form, and/or stance; (b) that were created with awareness of each other; and (c) were circulated, imitated, and/or transformed via the Internet by many users” (ib., 7–8). The primary functions of these “stock characters”, which are most often fictional, are diverted and remixed to “represent stereotypical behaviors” (ib., 112). Themes of such memes can be very various: they often comment the latest news but can also draw on specific identity markers.

²² Such as *Humour en Alsace*, *Made in Alsace* (sic), *Elsassisch memes*, *Meme uff Elsassisch*, etc.

²³ The word *meme* itself “derives from the Greek *mimema*, signifying ‘something which is imitated’, which Dawkins shortened to rhyme with ‘gene’” (Shifman 2014, 10).

In the following short case study, we will focus on two *Alsatian memes*, which are mixing worldwide famous pop culture stock characters with a locally well known Alsatian culinary tradition, the *Flammkûeche*.²⁴ It has become the subject of many posts and memes on the Internet, one aspect of the globalization of culture.

For the author of the following meme (Fig. 13), the onion topping is an essential feature of the *Flammkûeche* that cannot be disrespected without facing consequences.



Fig. 13: Alsatian Boromir-meme²⁵

This is why he remixes the well known²⁶ quote from the 2001 fantasy epic film *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, ‘One Does Not Simply Walk Into Mordor’, which has become a catchphrase, of which

²⁴ Generally pronounced [ˈflāmkʏæxə] or [ˈflāmkøːʃə], *Flammkueche* (ger. *Flammkuchen*) is one of the most traditional dishes in Alsace, made of a thin flattened bread dough base, traditionally topped with white cheese, onions and bacon, and baked on a clean part of the oven between the glowing. If we allow ourselves an exaggeration, we could say that this is the Alsatian version of pizza, which is served in almost every Alsatian traditional restaurant.

²⁵ Screenshot of the Facebook page *Elsässischi Memes*, July 18, 2019 <https://www.facebook.com/Els%C3%A4ssischi-Memes-152515232153974> (15/2/2022).

²⁶ At least from younger users, which suggests that it is also a generational tendency.

variants are often used in image macros featuring the character Boromir, who originally says the line in the film.²⁷ In this meme, the second part of the catchphrase is replaced by a sentence in Alsatian meaning ‘order a *Flammküeche* without onions’. The Boromir-meme was probably chosen for the very serious facial expression of its character and to give the violation of the onion tradition a very dramatic dimension. This is of course quite exaggerated but it shows a very deep attachment to the traditional *Flammküeche* of the author, who seems at the same time to be fully aware of the codes of modernity and of the globalization of communication. The discrepancy between the seriousness suggested by the image and the triviality of the topic it deals with also contributes to a humorous effect probably intended by the author.

What is also really interesting about this meme is its multilingual aspect: it shows a dynamic use of a multilingual and multicultural repertoire of which both global English and local Alsatian are part. The used graphic signs reflect traditional oral marks of Alsatian dialects: contraction of the prefix *be-* and apocope of *-en* in *bstell* (Standard ger. *bestellen*), phonographic marking of the vowels (diphthong [yə] transcribed by <üe>). The form *Ziwwle* contains most of the dialectal marks that allow distinguishing the Alsatian word from the Standard German *Zwiebeln* ‘onions’: the double writing (<-ww->) of the consonant [v] indicates that the previous [l] is short, contrary to the long [i:] of Standard German, and at the same time marks the intervocalic fricativation of [b] that is characteristic of the low Alemannic dialects of Alsace (Breuninger 2016).

Another example of remixing modern pop culture and Alsatian tradition is the following remixing of the “Drake alternative meme” (Fig. 14), built on a screenshot of the YouTube video “Hotline Bling” by the Canadian singer Drake.

²⁷ In the scene, the Council of Elrond reveals that an evil ring must be destroyed by being thrown into the fires of Mount Doom, a volcano deep in the territory of Mordor. Boromir promptly points out the difficulty of the task by saying, “One does not simply walk into Mordor”. Source: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/one-does-not-simply-walk-into-mordor> (15/2/2022).



Fig. 14: Alsatian Drake alternative meme²⁸

While the facial disapproving and approving expressions of the character in the two pictures can be understood even by people who do not know Drake, the written message is more complicated to decipher. In the form *Fla-meun-cuche*, the use of the French graphemes <eu>, <c> and <u>, which correspond to the sounds [ø], [k] and [y], as well as the decomposition of the word in three syllables through hyphens, suggest that the form corresponds to the erroneous pronunciation by non-dialect-speaking French speakers, who do not know that the correct spelling should be *flamm-küe-che* with an emphasis on the first syllable in the Alsatian pronunciation. The disapproving character in the image also suggests that this form is not correct. Why the author of this meme does not use hyphens in the form *Flammküeche*, approved by the character in the image, remains a mystery: only the use of <k> and <üe> hints to the fact that this is an Alsatian form but does not really help a non-native speaker for the pronunciation. The graphem <a> does not allow

²⁸ Screenshot of the Facebook page *Elsässischi Memes*, July 18, 2019. <https://www.facebook.com/Els%C3%A4ssischi-Memes-152515232153974> (15/2/2022).

distinguishing the sound [â], which is specific to the Alsatian dialectal speeches, from the French or the German pronunciation, and which is transcribed with an <à> by most of the Alsatian writers. The fact that the author of this meme does not use it can be explained by the fact that he does not know this writing habit or that he does not approve it, finding it unnecessary. In any case, this meme mocks as well as it denounces the way non-native speakers mess with the only acceptable pronunciation for native speakers (cf. section 4.2.). However, the message will only be understood by those who share the same speaking and writing codes, so that this meme seems to come from a desire to establish a connivance between the members of the group sharing the same linguistic features and to stand out by asserting its own specificities.

The shift from the original meaning and function of these macros to the meaning they obtain through their imitation and remixing implies that their authors take a more or less critical and humoristic distance with the commented topic, so that we can ask ourselves to what extent the Alsatian version of such memes can be seen as acts of projection of the social mind-sets that prevail in Alsace about those topics. By remixing markers of global and local languages and cultures, multilingual memes may say something about their authors' perception of the dynamics of language and culture contacts in the global world. Since those memes are spread worldwide and occur in many languages that are generally known and used by Alsatian speakers (French, German, English), it is interesting to ask ourselves why and for what purpose those memes are also developed in Alsatian. The two examples we discussed show that the use of written Alsatian functions as a marker of belonging to a specific culture. The combination of Alsatian with standard languages can be interpreted as means of standing out in a global world where standard languages tend to erase cultural differences.

6 Conclusion

The analysis we developed and discussed in this chapter allowed us to show that there were probably forms that could be qualified as *Alsatian* used by regional users of CMC, who create, share and sometimes negotiate specific forms, so that Internet social networks like *Facebook* become

open spaces for the elaboration of a written autonomous Alsatian language. The central question remains that of the scope of the phenomenon, which is difficult to assess in the absence of precise measures. The perception of this phenomenon also needs to be investigated, to understand if it remains a marginal playful activity of some isolated users or if it is strong enough to increase the distinction between Alsatian and the standard languages with which it coexists: if the digital uses of Alsatian were to remain anecdotal, their impact on distribution and transmission will remain weak, if not zero. On the other hand, if these uses were to become generalized, especially among the youngest speakers/writers, they could bring about a change in the sociolinguistic representations of Alsatian, and digital resources and tools could become a considerable leverage in stopping or even reversing its decline. However, this could only happen if the process was supported by a strong political will to assert Alsatian as a language and no longer only as a dialect confined to orality. This phenomenon, although still confidential compared to the majoritarian linguistic uses of CMC, could also be interpreted as a subversive, anti-establishment act, seeking to challenge the domination of standard languages on the web, even that of English.

Definitely, the choice to write in Alsatian on social media as well as the strategies which lead to very diverse written productions, stem from a form of identity affirmation, since they “are felt to have social as well as semantic meaning in terms of the way in which each individual wishes to project his/her own universe, and to invite others to share it” (LePage and Tabouret-Keller 1985, 247). Presumably, this is one way for users of CMC to assert their participation in the global world without giving up their local identity (Lee 2016, 123).

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