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## Paper 210

**“Learn English before you start posting...”**

### **The sociolinguistics of inequality in a translocal Czech Facebook meme page**

by

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# “Learn English before you start posting...”: The sociolinguistics of inequality in a translocal Czech Facebook meme page

## Abstract

The present work focuses on sociolinguistic inequality appertaining to the mobility of both communicative resources and those who deploy them in Facebook pages devoted internet memes. Drawing on recent theories of translocality and the sociolinguistics of globalization, the paper discusses focuses on the dynamic relationship between form, function and meaning of communicative resources that may produce radically different social effects in multiple locales bound by an interest in the same memetic format or genre. On one hand, the paper shows how translocality may be useful tool in uncovering the ways in which specific memes provide socio-cultural coherence in such locales through shared patterns of the form-function-meaning relationship. One the other hand, it also demonstrates how participants negotiate and renegotiate these relationships through metapragmatic reflexivity, as they utilize their communicative competences and normative alignments. Adhering to an action-oriented perspective, the paper shows that sociolinguistics inequality may result not only in discourses of exclusion and discrimination, but also of inclusion and collaboration.

**Keywords:** translocality; metapragmatic reflexivity; sociolinguistics; internet memes; Countryballs; Facebook

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Interest-driven social media are witnessing a rise in a new type of flexible collectivities organized around internet memes (Varis and Blommaert, 2015) – multimodal cultural artefacts that are imitated and reiterated around the web through recontextualization processes, such as resemiotization and entextualization (Shifman, 2013; cf. Leppänen et al., 2014; Valdez 2017; Rymes, 2012). This paper focuses on Facebook meme pages as one of such collectivities which constitute a translocal activity space where participants of different backgrounds congregate with shared interest in one particular type of memes – Countryball comics. Self-described as ‘geopolitical satire meme’, Countryball is a memetic format consisting of simple, easy-to-draw comics that reinvent and reinterpret historical as well as contemporary international relations and geopolitical events through the prism of national and sociocultural stereotypes. Through interaction, participants make sense of the global as well as local sociocultural flows and contingencies captured in Countryball memes on multiple Facebook pages (*Czechball*, *Brazilball*, *Germanball*, etc.) by which they also weave together new, multi-layered and emergent normative orders as well as sociolinguistic inequalities that create social effects of inclusion and exclusion.

This paper focuses on two types of sociolinguistic inequality. On one hand, people travel (browse) across various social media platforms and their communicative competences and repertoires travel with them. It follows that participants encounter and align themselves with a number of emergent as well as stable and institutionalized norms, expectations and preferences in communicative behaviour within different localities, such as Countryball meme pages. In such a polycentric mediascape, their communicative competences and normative alignments might subsequently become a basis on which they can be ridiculed, denigrated or disqualified from a particular communicative environment, but also a basis on which they enrich and contribute to it. On the other hand, communicative resources (both linguistic and semiotic) travel as well. Resources that are constitutive or otherwise linked to internet memes fall victim to frequent recontextualizations as they go viral, and meaning in context dialectically emerges “as value effects derived from local enactments of historically loaded [communicative] resources” (Blommaert, 2015: 108). This creates layered and stratified system of values of communicative resources which needs to be accounted for in analysis.

To this end, paper examines metapragmatic reflexivity (Blommaert and Rampton, 2011; Verschueren, 2012; Lucy, 1992) – a type of interaction which includes meta-level discussions in comment sections about normativity regarding communicative and social conduct in *Czechball* as one of the Countryball Facebook pages. By focusing on grassroots normative policing, the paper aims to explore not only the situated and pre-existing norms, but also the dynamics of shaping and negotiating the relationship between form, function and meaning of communicative resources upon their recontextualization in *Czechball* page. More specifically, the paper approaches *Czechball* as a local sociolinguistic system with its own historicity, patterns of experience and normative conduct which are, nevertheless, infused with translocally shaped variables generated by the incessant reiteration and recontextualizations of memetic resources in different Countryball locales. It shows that translocality is an important parameter in the study of digital and often heteroglossic communicative practices in the era of superdiversity and increasing globalization (Vertovec, 2007; Bailey, 2010; Leppänen, 2012) which highlight mobility of both language users and

semiotic resources, as well as their inequality (Blommaert, 2010: 5). Nevertheless, before proceeding further, it is necessary to outline the key terms used in this paper in more detail.

## **2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Endless permutations of Internet memes testify to the remarkable level of their semiotic productivity based on recognisability and grassroots, bottom-up dynamics which span different and often distant social niches with different normative preferences and expectations. The present work thus draws on recent theories of translocality (Leppänen et al., 2009; cf. Hepp, 2009; Nederveen Pieterse, 1995) in order to examine negotiation of normativity in such locales which stem from dialectical interplay of the local and the global. The forms of sociolinguistics inequality which emerge from this interplay are approached through frameworks developed within the sociolinguistics of globalization (Blommaert, 2005, 2010; cf. Pennycook 2007; Rampton, 2006), which in turn build on the tradition of symbolic interactionism (e.g. Blumer, 1962; Goffman, 1974). In the same vein, the present work is anchored in a discourse-analytical approach informed by digital ethnography (e.g. Androutsopoulos, 2008; Kytölä and Androutsopoulos, 2012) as an action-oriented perspective aiming to account for the social effects that result from the situated deployment of particular communicative resources that prompt metapragmatically reflexive responses. Finally, this approach puts attention to context and contextualisation in interaction as a point of departure, which sets it apart from similar actor-oriented or system-oriented works approaching memes and memetic discourses as products of online communities and niches with respect to their normative-evaluative frameworks (e.g. Milner, 2017; Miltner, 2014; Nissenbaum and Shifman, 2017; Gal et al., 2015; Wiggins and Bowers, 2014).

### **2.1 Meme pages as translocal ‘light communities’**

Facebook meme pages highlight two important aspects of translocality: a sense of *connectedness* and *fluid understanding of culture* against the backdrop of increasing globalization (Hepp, 2009; Nederveen Pieterse, 1995). On one hand, translocality refers to various social and cultural spaces being connected by the media facilitating and promoting such connections through transport and mobility of discourses, in which the uniqueness and importance of the local emerges also in relation with other locales. On the other hand, it draws on exogenous or outward-looking sense of culture characterized by hybridity, translation and identification, which, in the context of the new media, translates into “a conception where both territoriality (‘we here now in our place’) and de-territoriality (‘they there beyond the bounds of our locale’) are reference points for communication, meaning making, and identification” (Leppänen et al., 2009: 1081-2).

The Facebook page *Czechball* is a case in point. Like other pages such as *Germanyball* or *Brazilball*, *Czechball* is an offshoot of Countryballs (also known as Polandball) – geopolitical satire meme-comics that appear in a specific format featuring sphere-shaped characters covered in colours denoting flags of both real and fictional states, countries or regions, while the narrative is usually based on satirical reinterpretation of geopolitical events and international relations through the prism of national and socio-cultural stereotypes. Specific examples follow below.



Fig. 1 Greek Debt Crisis



Fig. 2. UK-USA relations



Fig. 3. Fourth partition of Poland

Since their origin in 2008, Countryball comics have developed a number of recognizable communicative scripts and patterns that are derived from continual reiteration of such stereotypes and highly idiosyncratic in their nature, together forming what could be called ‘Countryball register’. Countryball comics have thus generated a reservoir of linguistic, semiotic and discursive resources for alternative portrayal of geo-political realities in a jocular, ludic format divorced from the constraints of political correctness on one hand; and, on the other hand, it provides also participants with resources for meaning making, identity work and navigating interpersonal relationships. This reservoir is by no means entirely static or sedentary. New realities produce new resources enregistered to the Countryball universe (Agha, 2005), while old resources fade away from use. Moreover, some resources lend themselves to constant negotiation and re-negotiation in terms of form, function, meaning and their mutual relationship. For example, given the position and influence of Germany in the European Union, the term ‘Germony’ (fig. 3) has acquired a recognizable historical value which may potentially signify a number of ideologically related stereotypical connotations, including not only the typical efficiency-oriented, yet humourless and workaholic breadwinning father-figure of the European Union, but also that of Germany actually being the ‘Fourth Reich’ which succeeds in conquering Europe through trade and financial discipline only to exploit its economic muscle to dictate key policies. These meanings are in constant dialectic development as testified by the events following European migrant crisis which has expanded the key policies dictated by Germany from fiscal to migration policy (Author 2018). In fact, a Wikipedia-like website (*polandball.wikia.com*) has been established to describe the Countryball phenomenon and to monitor its trends and development.

Through social media practices such as posting and commenting on countryball memes, its members situate their individual local (i.e. Czech) context transcribed into countryball cartoons in the global discursive practices and patterns of the Countryball culture. In other words, countryball pages provide platforms or venues where “participants are orienting not only to their local affiliations, but also to groups and cultures which are distant but with which they share interests, causes or projects” (Leppänen and Häkkinen, 2012: 5).

It follows that Facebook pages such as *Czechball* might be considered as a ‘light community’, that is, *focused but diverse occasioned coagulations of people* that converge around a shared focus, be it a shared interest, object, game, project, another person, event, or, as in this case, Countryball meme-comics related to the current or historical social and cultural sphere of a given country or countries. Such ‘light communities’ are prompted by each post in a given page, and thus they are bounded in time and space delimited by its comment section although the technological affordances of ‘liking’ and ‘sharing’ expand it further. This also implies a certain level of fragmentation since different people may congregate around each post, yet from a social perspective, this fragmentation is fractal because the impetus for congregation – posting countryball memes – provides the communicative environment with socio-ideological coherence and normative orientation derived from the memetic format and its translocal features.

Unlike longer-lasting communities of practice and more ephemeral affinity spaces, ‘light communities’ dedicated to internet memes represent transient, shifting and interactively constructed collectivities based on ‘conviviality’ (Varis and Blommaert, 2015) rather than learning or sustaining regular participation and mutual engagement. Furthermore, norms are not primarily derived internally from the communal practice or space in question, but externally from translocal and transcultural flows and their apprehension in memes which are subsequently featured as posts.

As a result, ‘thick’ identity categories such as nationality, ethnicity, gender, religion, status in the sense of Durkheim (Blommaert 2018) are not the main organizing principle in ‘light communities’; nevertheless, ‘light communities “might complement or, in some circumstances even accentuate and intensify the ‘thick’ community identities” (Blommaert and Varis 2015: 55, original emphasis). Although name *Czechball* frames the page in many ways as *Czech*-based platform, namely in presenting *Czech* perspectives and views on geopolitical issues through the Countryball prism, the translocal character and appeal of the Countryball phenomenon draws in also non-Czech participants who consequently engage with the memetic content and/or attempt to establish interaction with other participants. As a result, such perspectives and views are often accommodated for international audiences. Consider for example the following comment discussing the new profile picture of the page that features Czechball character with a caption “Czech is strong”:

Má to být jako "Čech je silný!", "Čeština je silná!" (s tím souhlasím) nebo "Český je silný!", též možno parafrázovat "Co je české, to je silné! " (také možno chapat ve dvojsmyslu)?

It is as "Czech (person) is strong!", or as "Czech (language) is strong!" (I agree with that) or as "Czech (anything) is strong!" Which we can say like "What's Czech, that's Strong! (In english it doesn't rhyme) " (also might be understood as 'If you know, what I mean')?

Interestingly, the author of the comment includes an English translation of his evaluative explanation against the backdrop of a ‘classic’ tag line ‘Polan stronk’ (Poland is strong) in the Countryball universe (more on that in the following subchapter), which has

been recaptured here. The rhythmicity (here caused by nasal consonance in coda position) is taken as one of the evaluative criteria for an adequate Czech equivalent of the tag line, i.e. “Co je české, to je silné!” (my emphasis), which, as the author notes, does not rhyme in English (“What’s Czech, that’s Strong!”). In addition to discussing the semantic ambiguity of ‘Czech’, the author also ponders a possible interpretation of ‘strong’ as virile. This is achieved by deployment of another catch-phrase (“if you know what I mean”) commonly used to point out double entendre in memetic content, usually in the form of sexual innuendo (see *Know Your Meme* website).

The translocal nature of internet memes thus appears to have significant bearings on meaning-making processes as well as normative orientations and evaluations which may concern communicative resources from more than one language, including the structural properties such as prosody or indexicality. This however does not mean that all normative orientations are aligned by virtue of translocality. The following chapter adopts three analytical concepts from sociolinguistics of globalisation (sociolinguistic scales, orders of indexicality and polycentricity) in order to account for the layered and stratified systems of value of communicative resources in the light of their translocal facets. This will lay the groundwork for the analytical lenses focusing on ‘micro’ details regarding metapragmatic reflexivity performed by participants upon negotiating normativity in comment sections and how it consequently reflects higher-level, ‘macro’ normativity pertaining to the ‘light community’ in question, while also taking into account the underlying techno-social infrastructure of Facebook; more precisely, its connection with other Countryball locales and Countryball universe in general.

## **2.2 The sociolinguistics of inequality**

Despite the fact that certain individual semiotic components consisting of internet memes are translocal, they are not equally accessible to everyone. More specifically, it may be assumed that not everybody is equally familiar with the communicative resources native or ‘enregistered’ to the community and their historicity, i.e. the value attribution and meaning-ratification processes upon which specific forms of such resources receive specific functions and meanings in a given communicative environment. The differential access to forms and their contextualization (Blommaert, 2005: 76) leads to differences and inequality in normative alignments among participants, and while some alignments are preferred or expected, others may stand corrected, ignored or dismissed. This line of enquiry thus builds on a long tradition of addressing (socio)linguistic inequality in ethnographically-inspired language studies (e.g. Gumperz, 1982; Gal 1989; Rampton, 1995; see Blommaert and Maryns, 2002; Hymes, 1996 for an overview).

The paper focuses on the differential sociolinguistic inequality manifest in metapragmatic reflexivity taking place in the comment sections about *correct* or *supposed* usage of the linguistic, semiotic and discursive resources in the comment sections. Such confrontations point to the connection between reflexivity and *sociolinguistic scales* outlined in Blommaert and Rampton (2011: 10):

Participants also often orient to the “multi-scalar”, “transpositional” implications of what’s happening. After all, messages, texts, genres, styles and

languages vary conspicuously in their potential for circulation – itself a major source of stratification – and sometimes this can itself become the focus of attention and dispute, as people differ in their normative sense of what should carry where.

Sociolinguistic scales represent a central notion in Blommaert's sociolinguistics of globalization (2010: 34) along with *orders of indexicality* and *polycentricity*: “sociolinguistic phenomena in a globalization context need to be understood as developing at several scale-levels, where different orders of indexicality dominate, resulting in a polycentric ‘context’ where communicative behaviour is simultaneously pushed and pulled in various directions” – normative centres (ibid.: 42). All three notions together offer a useful conceptual and analytical toolkit for the purposes of this paper, as will be explained below.

Adhering to the later conceptualisation of scale as ‘spatiotemporal scope of understandability’ (Blommaert et al., 2015; cf. Collins et al., 2009; Kell, 2013), scale co-creates semiotic recognisability and validity of particular communicative resources in particular communicative spaces; in other words, “the *degrees* to which particular signs can be expected to be understandable” in a given time and space (ibid.: 123, original emphasis). This becomes evident in situations where the resources constituting the peculiar idiosyncrasies of countryball phenomenon, which are to be expected or even preferred in (local) countryball pages (as their emblematic features), are discarded when reflexively measured against a different, higher scale-level; namely, for example, at the level of standard, codified or institutionalized patterns of language.

Moving back to the previous comment on “Czech is strong”, we can now see the motivation behind the evaluative explanation of the caption in the profile picture which might invoke or index (point to) qualities such as lowbrow culture, and perhaps even ignorance or illiteracy since the referent of ‘Czech’ is not immediately clear without supplying additional grammatical devices such as a noun or an article. But grammatical correctitude is not enough; in order to understand “Czech is strong” as an emblem of Countryball universe, one needs to know the original and frequently reiterated tag line ‘Poland is strong’ (more popular as ‘Polan stronk’ and similar derivatives) and the contexts in which it appears, i.e. when the Polandball character attempts to somewhat whimsically reassert itself upon facing denigration or bullying by more powerful countryballs such as Germanyball or Russiaball (such as that in the fig. 3).

Scale in this sense organizes what Silverstein (2003) described as ‘indexical order’ – a broader set of expectations in terms of the relationship between form, function and meaning that contributes to sociocultural coherence among groups and individuals within a particular communicative environment (cf. Agha, 2007). The focus on indexicality expands the analysis from solely denotational meanings to the sociocultural load of every utterance in question since indexical meanings unfold what ‘anchors language usage firmly into social and cultural patterns’ (Blommaert 2005: 12). As with regard to translocality and globalization, Blommaert (2005, 2010) extends the notion of ‘indexical order’ in an effort to take on board indexicalities that operate on higher plane of social structuring, seeing that some forms of semiosis are valued more or less than others. Inspired by Foulcault's orders of discursivity (1984 [1971]: 109), he distinguishes indexical orders from ‘orders of indexicality’ – patterns of indexicalities that indicate “systemic patterns of authority, of control and evaluation, and

hence inclusion and exclusion” (Blommaert, 2010: 38). Indexicality is thus an important feature of metapragmatics since it refers to associations between forms and (typical) usage as well as stereotypes that are reiterated during communicative events while, at the same time, it reifies the connection between pragmatically usable systems of signs, and metapragmatic activities related to any layer of language and meaning making.

In this vein, indexicality explains the note in the given comment on rhyming qualities, which is present in the English caption “Czech is strong” that stands as Czechball’s take on ‘Polan stronk’. The deviance from standard orthography in ‘Polan stronk’ indexes the whimsicality of Polandball character which constitutes its unique personality and hence cannot be derived into a direct equivalent ‘Czek stronk’ or the like, because Czechball has position and character is different in the Countryball universe (cf. both characters on *Polandball Wiki*). The Czech version that is offered in the comment (‘Co je české, to je silné’) adheres to a similar rhyming pattern, but appears in standard orthography and therefore does not collude with the indexical traits bound to Polandball’s character. At the same time, both the English caption “Czech is strong” and the comment discussing it spell out the intricate delicacy of orders of indexicality in the making, that is, the emic (locally enacted) general sense and forms of *normalcy* in social interaction *vis-à-vis* translocality.

Finally, this points to the fact that there is never a single normative centre in communication; participants may orient to or shift between multiple competing as well as complementary normative centres, hence the term *polycentricity*. Such centres can be seen as evaluative authorities or ‘super-addressees’ in Bakhtin’s words (1986), against which our communicative conduct is measured (Blommaert, 2010: 39). We have seen a participant discussing a caption accompanying a profile picture of Countryball Facebook page with a specific idea of how it *should be* seen or how it *could be* interpreted in the light of the different orders of indexicality. Therefore it might be said that the author orients to at least four normative centres at the same time: two of them are established and institutionalised (standard English and Czech), one semi-established (‘Countryball register’) and one emergent (local ‘take’ on Countryball register). There is also a clear hierarchy between the centres with decreasing scope of understandability; put simply, standard Czech and English are used for explanation and evaluation (valid at a higher, national and transnational scale or even global scale with English), followed by indirect connection to a specific and emblematic resource from the Countryball register (valid at a lower, translocal scale pertinent to Countryball locales), against which its emerging Czech counterpart is measured (valid at a local, situated scale pertinent only to the post and its comment section).

In the same way, other participants skilfully draw on and tailor communicative resources associated with other languages as well as genres, subgenres, styles and registers into a *heteroglossic* communicative input (Bakhtin, 1981: 291; Leppänen et al., 2014; cf. Androutsopoulos, 2011; Thurlow and Mroczek, 2011). Crafting such heteroglossic discourses subsequently brings together different orders of indexicality with different scopes of understandability and validity, which ultimately projects orientations and alignments to different normative centres. Using this analytical toolkit may shed some light into what role translocality plays in these differences that make up the inequality in the mobility of resources, how it is navigated in digital communities, and how it contributes to inequality among participants from a sociolinguistic point of view. After a brief survey of the

methodological approach and collected data, the analysis shows how such inequality may be re-balanced or bridged in an inclusive collaboration (first excerpt) as well as in a excluding conflict (second excerpt).

### **3. APPROACH AND DATA**

Methodologically, the present approach is situated in discourse-analytical perspective informed by digital ethnography (e.g. Androutsopoulos, 2008; Kytölä and Androutsopoulos 2012). As noted by Varis (2016: 57), technological affordances of digital platforms facilitate mobilisation and recontextualization of communicative resources, “making often for complex and unpredictable uses, reuses, trajectories and uptake” with an unprecedented speed, extend and visibility to the researcher. In order to develop crucial insights for interpreting the translocal communicative practices marked by metapragmatic reflexivity in the light of their unpredictability, an ethnographically-inflected approach seems helpful in three ways. First, ethnography roots its epistemological and ontological basis in human action and the way it is compelled by social meanings, intentions and beliefs that need to be studied in their locally situated contexts rather than through rigid experiments or standardised methods and measurements (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Hymes, 1996). Second, for this reason, digital ethnography wields the capacity to challenge the limits of ‘classic’ analytical categories (Blommaert and Dong, 2010; Blommaert, 2018), preconceptions about the universality of digital experience with regard to language use (Varis, 2016), or generalising and narrow statements about digital communication (Androutsopoulos 2008). Third, and most importantly, digital ethnography offers a flexible approach aiming to produce detailed and situated accounts or ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1973) through qualitative approach to adequate contextualization of microscopic acts of interaction so as to explain macroscopic structures, phenomena and processes (Blommaert and Dong, 2010: 18–19), and to make sense of the broader social effects that stem from individual facets of sociolinguistic inequality described above.

This of course requires careful selection of collected data and a reflexive position of a researcher. The author has conducted half-year long non-participant observation of *Czechball* between July 2017 and January 2018, during which attention was devoted to participant’s comments to every post while field notes focused on the translocal and metapragmatic facets of particular communicative exchanges. The data were extracted through screenshots at the very end of the observation period when the activity in respective comment sections had ceased. Finally, two posts and 13 comments were selected for a fine-grained analysis on the basis of several reasons; first, practical reasons (the comics’ size was not excessive with regard to the spatial constraints of this paper); second, reflexive reasons (the author focused only on samples that he could analyse with sufficient detail based on his tacit knowledge gained by systematic observation and previous research in *POLANDBALL* and *Polandball 2.0* pages); and finally, methodological reasons (the selected data are representative of metapragmatic activities therein).

Finally, given the highly personalized nature of Facebook, all personal details were omitted for the reasons of privacy. Participants are identified by numbers and their comments are transcribed as faithfully as possible to the original.

#### 4. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Emblematic of the Countryball phenomenon are its communicative practices – countryballs are often “interacting with each other mostly in poorly written English, and exhibiting personalities derived from national and international opinions and stereotypes of them” (Polandball Wiki, About). However, the use of ‘poorly written’ or ‘broken’ English is strategic here because it involves styling – conscious deployment of various linguistic repertoires and their mixture depending on the individual countryball and author’s access to Countryball universe. The reason is that stylized utterances can often emphasize and hyperbolize realization of their targeted styles and genres in order to produce ‘strategic inauthenticity’ (Coupland, 2001: 348-350), which invokes national and socio-cultural stereotypes and issues of identity and ideology related to the particular countryball and its geopolitical milieu. What is important here is that such styling presupposes there is a qualified audience capable of interpreting the linguistic, semiotic and discursive value of styled performance. The first excerpt provides an illustrative segue into such practices.

##### 4.1 Excerpt 1. ‘We can into banschluss’

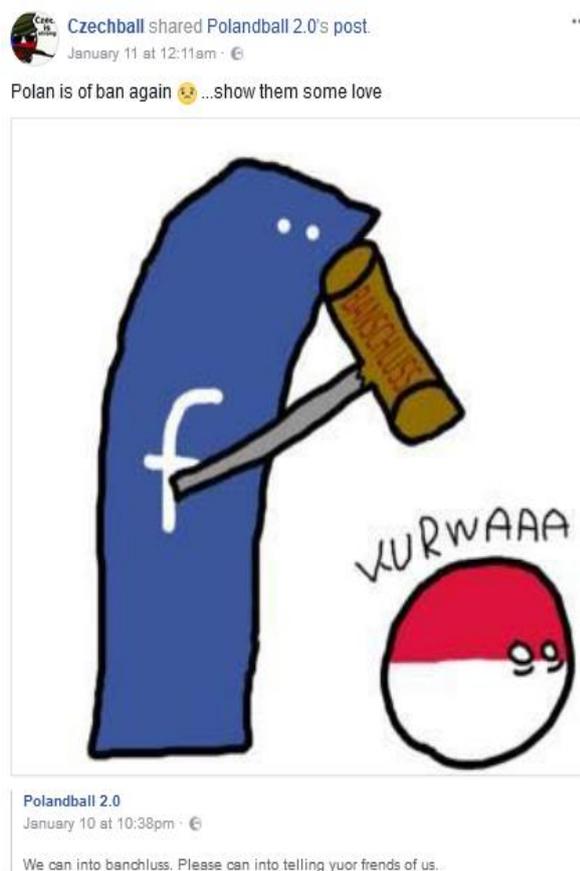


Figure 4. Excerpted from the main page of *Czechball* on 28th of January, 2018.

Countryball phenomenon – the original idiosyncratic caption (‘we can into banschluss. Please can into telling your friends of us’) and the *Czechball* caption (‘Polan is of ban again 😏 ...show them some love’) display a significant potential to galvanize the fans within and across different countryball localities into action.

... There are several things to note first in the post from the first excerpt. The post is a shared call for support and solidarity with the original (and most likely the biggest) Countryball page on Facebook – *POLANDBALL* – that had been suspended at the time. Expectedly, Countryball comics might be offensive to some people due to their satirical and often disparaging humour; therefore, some content might be reported as violating the Community Standards of Facebook, which can lead to temporary suspension of the page and deletion of the flagged content. Frequent suspensions might result in a permanent removal of the page, which happened to be the case with *POLANDBALL* in early 2017. *Polandball 2.0* had been subsequently established in the considerable effort to secure continuance of the original page until it was reinstated two weeks later with *Polandball 2.0* becoming a back-up page (Author 2018). Furthermore, it is a testament to the translocal nature of the

The captions themselves deserve a closer inspection. Both contain relatively conventionalized orthographic and grammatical deviations from *standard* English in the Countryball universe (see Author 2016 for an overview), namely the use of –ing(s) ending in unsanctioned positions (‘into telling’), letter switching (‘yuor’), overpunctuation (‘...show’), overusing the preposition *of* (‘is of ban’, ‘of us’), and an iconic of the Countryball syntactic pattern *X can(not) into Y* carrying a sense of ludic jocularly as part of linguistic stylization that was transposed from its origin in LOLcat memes marked by ‘lolspeak’ – a pidginized variety of English used to convey somewhat waggish images from the lives of cats (Blommaert and Varis 2014: 11). A word or two also need to be said about the indexically-laden term ‘banschluss’, which is a portmanteau of *ban* (i.e. Facebook’s suspension mechanism) and the German word *Anschluss* denoting a political or economic union, but commonly referring to the annexation of Austria into Nazi Germany in 1938. Since then, *Anschluss* has become an established dictionary entry in many languages and a well-known term with complex and serious orders of indexicality in historical discourses. However, the term has been also enregistered into Countryball register; it has been down-scaled to a catchword capitalising on the original orders of indexicality to satirise the seriousness in one countryball asserting power and seizing control over another by force.

The term ‘Banschluss’ subsequently extends the motifs of suppression and imposing authority onto Facebook in a graphical manner. Although the term *Countryballs* suggests a roundish shape of the cartoon characters, some of them had been developed with infamous gimmicks, such as the rectangular shape of the Reichtangle character epitomizing the expansionist and imperialist past of former Germany that has been transposed onto the Facebook character. Its derivation – ‘Faceblock’ (here holding a hammer inscribed with the word ‘BANSCHLUSS’) – has been created as an unofficial character to index the strictures of Facebook’s Community Standards censoring certain countryball content. The next point to notice in this respect are the inverted colours of the Polandball character (red-top and white-bottom to further underline its whimsical nature) and its vocally prolonged expletive in Polish ‘kurwaaa’ (roughly ‘fuuuck’) – a trade mark exclamation occurring whenever Polandball is stressed or facing sinister reactions from other countryballs.

Having explained the background of the first excerpt, it is clear that the idiosyncratic stylization goes beyond solely linguistic practices – to the semiotic and discursive levels – the ways in which the comics are drawn, represented and interpreted. The following exchange unfolds an inquiry about the actual reason for the punitive measures taken by Facebook. Participants are marked sequentially (comments upon a comment are indented) and numerically in order to preserve anonymity. Parentheses () indicate my translation, square brackets [] contain my notes and braces {} signal tagging of other participants.

**Participant 1:** Why Polan so much into bannings..?

**Participant 2:** Turks 😊

**Participant 3:** They want to feel like powerfull kurwa.. after they fucked up WW2.  
(🙄🙄)

**Participant 4:** no no 😊 poland use cheat or hacks he therefore received a ban 😊

**Participant 1:** Used hacks for into space..? Oh kurwa

**Participant 5:** {Participant 3} At least we haven't been so fucked twice those times without vaseline by everybody 38/39 remember kurwa ? 😊

**Participant 2:** No it's not about that, Turks are pissed off cuz they lost some kind of Countryball competition to Poland 😊

**Participant 1:** Hahaha dumbass Türks

Participant 1 (P1) opens a conversation thread by inquiring about the reasons for repeated bans (i.e. suspensions) of the page. As previously indicated, the mechanism for suspension on Facebook is triggered by a sufficient number of reports from other users who perceive the published content as violating the Community Standards or otherwise problematic. This would, however, only be a trivial explanation. Looking at the comments, two lines of reasoning can be in fact identified.

On one hand, P2 consistently argues that the page was reported out of spite by Turkish users who are stereotypically profiled as the enemies of Polandball and its allies. It is important to remember that although Countryball comics have earned global popularity and garnered countless fans across every major social network, local Countryball platforms may be divided and exercise *geopolitical warfare* against one another not only by means of the satirical format of the comics and the so called Countryball competitions in which fans vote in online polls for the best countryball platform, but also by exploiting the technological affordances of the social networking sites hosting the platforms (e.g. reporting option on Facebook). Finally, P1 appears to be amused by P2's reasoning and contends 'Hahaha dumbass Türks'. Interestingly, he grafts Turkish diacritics marking vowel harmony onto English (Türks), by which he intensifies the sense of mockery and denigration, which is very similar to the notorious mock-Spanish catchphrase 'Hasta la vista, baby' (Hill, 1998).

On the other hand, the second line seeks explanation by drawing on the shared contextual universe of Countryballs. P3 and P5 interpret the suspension against the historical background, whereby Polandball, burdened by the predicaments of the Second World War, now proudly strives to become a respected player in the international geopolitical arena, yet its efforts might be too aggressive, hence the suspension. P4 goes even further and asserts that Polandball must have used tricks and forbidden practices, while P1 specifies this endeavour by invoking a well-known running gag in Countryball universe *Poland cannot into space* – a classic way for other countries to poke fun at Polandball and its ambitious efforts undermined by the stereotype that many Poles living abroad are employed for menial jobs (hence Polandball is frequently portrayed with a toilet plunger).

All comments maintain a jocular, ludic character accentuated by laughing or smiling emoticons. Considering that the comments stand as a reaction to a call for support for the original countryball page, it is understandable that one line of argument seeks to identify and disparage an out-group enemy (Turks), while the other strengthens the in-group cohesion by recourse to *classic* inside jokes and catchphrases. Similarly, the frequent phatic use of the word "kurwa" - it is not used in its denotational sense ('a prostitute') nor as a purely expletive interjection ('fuck/shit/damn') denoting discomfort, but rather as a means of expressing union with the community, and thus different orders of indexicality can be seen at play here. Countryball platforms endow the word with exclusively social and bonding functions for establishing friendly atmosphere and interpersonal relations, whereas in standard usage, especially in formal, institutionalized settings, the word is generally considered a taboo with no significant value; on the contrary, its deployment in such environments may associate the

speaker with lower social status or even disqualify him/her as untrustworthy, tasteless or even repulsive due to indexical ties to discourses laden with obscenity and vulgarity. Interestingly, the whole comment section contains only one post in the Czech language, which, however, indicates another important point.

**Participant 6:** Už zase jo kurva?! 😞  
(Once again yes kurva?! 😞)

‘Sharing’ the original status might be viewed in terms of recontextualisation, whereupon the shared content is extracted from its original discourse and deployed into another while its form is largely preserved, but its reception and the way it is framed and understood depends on the local sociocultural milieu of the hosting platform. It is therefore no surprise that *Czechball* sharing *Polandball 2.0*’s content provoked a *Czech* phatic equivalent of ‘kurwa’ (i.e. ‘kurva’). It should be also noted that there is no punctuation to clearly demarcate the line between the phatic and propositional content, as would be expected in standard usage. Countryball is a heavily polycentric phenomenon – participants in local countryball pages may orient to different normativities at the same time. Participants do not draw solely on highly normative *standard* varieties of languages, but rather on particular resources from diverse registers of those languages. Even in this small sample we may see an unfolding heteroglossic discourse drawing on variety of resources from different languages as well as their registers and genres, including computing register of English (‘hacks’), multiple taboo registers (‘pissed off’, ‘fucked up’, ‘dumbass’, ‘kurwa’, ‘kurva’), vernacular English (‘cuz’), mock-Turkish (Türks), emoticons and ASCII code made into a graphic-textual object (i.e. the so called *Le Lenny Face* - ‘( ͡ಠ\_ಠ)’) indicating sexual undertones).

The interaction above can be seen as a cooperation upon which every participant utilizes various semiotic resources that are not necessarily from the Countryball register, but given the fact they are all of lower scale-level and they are deployed with a goal to answer the question, they all fall within one order of indexicality. No conflict thus arises as participants orient to different, yet complementary normative centres. The following excerpt illustrates an opposite situation.

#### **4.2 Excerpt 2. ‘learn English before you start posting...’**

Countryball pages do not always post content featuring countryballs, but their posts usually contain politically charged satire in one form or another. The post in the second excerpt includes a short video of what appears to be a late-night celebration of the relative success of a far-right, anti-EU and anti-immigration political party *Freedom and Direct Democracy* in Czech 2017 parliamentary elections. Published in the immediate aftermath of the elections, on October 22, the video features its leader (Tomio Okamura) with prominent party members and supporters facing the camera while dancing to loud, fast tempo electronic dance music reminiscent of rave parties. The same video appears in a number of mutations on YouTube with different (mostly parodic) soundtracks and/or visual effects, so it is hard to ascertain the authenticity of the shared video, but that is not of concern here – its reception is.

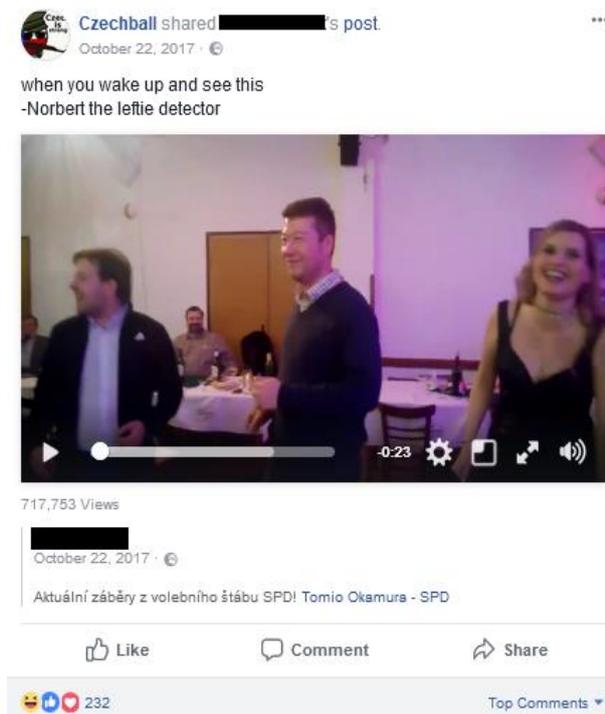


Figure 5. Excerpted from the main page of *Czechball* on 27th of January, 2018.

network constituted by the Countryball phenomenon, and so the *local* becomes infused with the *global*. The reason is that Countryball register offers relatively stable patterns or batteries of resources for semiosis with purchase beyond the bounds of the local or national. To maintain their stability and durability, they are, to a certain extent, ordered and therefore normative on the basis of their historical becoming. As Blommaert (2010: 138) notes, “every act of language is an act that is grounded in historical connections between current statements and prior ones – connections that are related to the social order and are thus not random but ordered.” Yet, at the same time, the histories of becoming are not equally accessible to all participants; in fact, the difference may be quite significant. This will become clear in the following interaction between two Czech participants in the comment section below the post. Again, the translation included in parenthesis is mine.

**Participant 7:** POLANDBALL can into more funny - is of politically neutral. Czechball taken over by triggered lefties, help POLANDBALL, will help you in return invest in eastern polen!

**Participant 8:** {Participant 7}, learn English before you start posting...

**Participant 7:** Asi nevíš jak se píše schválně komolenou angličtinou na Polandballu... (You probably don't know how to write in the broken English of Polandball on purpose...)

So my question is: Are you pretending to be smart or you are just full of nonsense? Oh wait that's the same. Maybe next time try to ask and then lecture. Hope I never hear about you in the future.

In his first comment, P7 mobilizes several linguistic resources associated with Countryball in voicing his discomfort about too many ‘triggered lefties’ being active on the right-leaning *Czechball* (as anticipated by Norbert’s caption), while also admitting that the

original page (*POLANDBALL*) displays a greater potential for humorous content since it is politically neutral. He suggests that, historically, the original Countryball content was impartial because every country/countryball ought to be subjected to satire more or less equally without systematically favouring any particular political perspective – something that the original page still maintains according to P7 (unlike *Czechball*). Additionally, there is one more linguistic-ideological aspect of P7's comment that deserves further attention. Besides the already noted linguistic features typical of Countryball, P7 mentions 'polen' – a common way for Germanyball to address Polandball in the comics (see fig. 3), often from the position of power and dominance both historical (martial) and contemporary (economic). This is an important lexical choice because it invokes and reiterates the stereotypical insignificance of Polandball's character in Countryball comics that is further underlined by his allusion to the infamous advertising campaign *Why didn't you invest in Eastern Poland?*. The campaign was organized by a Polish governmental agency promoting Poland as an attractive destination for both domestic and foreign investment with a particular focus on Eastern Poland as an economically struggling macroregion. The campaign was, however, met with serious mockery (Lubin, 2013) which inspired multiple parodies on the internet while some of them became memes. This had not gone unnoticed by the Countryball fans, and soon it became part of Countryball register.

P7's skilful deployment of Countryball resources nevertheless provokes another participant (P8) to question his communicative competence, proposing – somewhat paradoxically – that he should learn English before he uses it in a similar way again. Although P8's retort seems rather simple, it is a symptom of a larger problem in sociolinguistics of globalization. It indicates a degree of inequality leading to discrimination and exclusion that has been increasingly more documented in sociolinguistic literature on social media where the term 'grammar Nazi' figures as a key word (Kytölä, 2012; cf. Švelch and Sherman, 2017).

It is reasonable to assume that P8 has, very likely, not been exposed to Countryball resources in use since they are not as frequently manifest in the comment sections of *Czechball* as in *POLANDBALL* (Author 2016). From the perspective of P8, P7 attempts to write in English but multiple orthographic and grammatical 'errors' undermine the value of his statement, making it in fact worthless (i.e. outside the scope of understandability). He views P7 as lacking resources for adequate participation in this particular communicative space, and suggests that he be excluded from it until he acquires them; in other words, until he aligns himself with the normative order embodied in prestigious, standardized English with global currency. On the other hand, the Countryball phenomenon represents a semi-established and flexible normative centre with a different kind of currency which is not recognized by P8, let alone acknowledged. The reason that P8 approaches P7 purely from the synchronic point of view, as he displays insufficient access the contextual universe and register pertinent to Countryball. Put otherwise, the conflict between two scale-levels (higher institutionalised English with global normative validity vs. lower semi-established register with here-and-now validity) becomes the focal point of both explicit and implicit metalinguistic, language-ideological critique of P7. Explicit because it is openly and mercilessly discarded, and implicit because the difference in accessibility to particular resources consequently creates imbalance of power between both participants. P7's response to P8 further upsets this imbalance.

Although the first part is in Czech and the second in English, together they form a coherent whole connected by a cohesive marker ‘so’, yet both parts are meaningful on their own. The Czech opening serves as a face-saving move on the part of P7 for it justifies the ‘errors’ by accentuating the intent to ‘commit’ them. This intent stems from the fact that such ‘errors’ are in fact meaningful on a local scale-level (i.e. on a Countryball platform) in the sense that they are part of non-random set of precepts for semiotic conduct valid in that particular time and space. More specifically, he points to the fact that what counts as ‘errors’ is in fact ratified and recognized as a valid code for making oneself understood and/or display certain identity (e.g. being a Countryball fan) in that particular context. The use of Czech to convey this message is instrumental since it minimalizes the danger of misunderstanding, assuming that English is not a native language for the addressee (P8). In addition, it is clearly a personal message aimed to that one particular participant.

The other segment in English presumes that the audience is already initiated and knowledgeable of Countryball registers/genres, so it serves not as a defensive, face-saving move, but rather as an offensive, face-threatening one aimed to dispatch the opponent and end the interaction. It can also be said that P7 exploits a *pretextual gap* (Blommaert and Maryns 2002) – a gap between expected communicative competence in a given locality and what can be actually deployed by a given participant on the basis of his competence. A significant divergence between expected and available competences might then become a strong factor in gatekeeping practices.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Seeing meme pages as local sociolinguistic systems with their own historicity and patterns of normativity seems useful in making sense of the speed of change and high level of unpredictability encroaching social and cultural dynamics of today. By focusing on the ways in which communicative practices are collectively recognized and ratified by participants, the study of translocality helps to trace the ways in which specific communicative acquire different values within and across different localities and how such differences contribute to the social effects of inclusion and exclusion. Furthermore, sociolinguistics of globalisation offers an analytical apparatus for a critical socio-historical scrutiny of their trajectories of usage instead of examining mere *snapshots* of their history as they are in a particular time and space. This allows for more precise understanding communicative dynamics and social cohesion of online (not only) memetic environments. For example, conventional approaches to code-switching can hardly give a detailed explanation of constructions such as ‘eastern *polen*’ or ‘remember *kurwa*’ since there is far more than *language* (in the traditional sense of *English, Polish, or German*) taking place. This bears important implications with regard to sociolinguistic inequality.

First, we are here reminded of ‘second type of linguistic relativity’ (Hymes, 1996: 45) given the fact that as soon as particular communicative resources become part of a particular memetic genre, their meaning and function might change depending on the local, situated uptake. This invites critical historical questioning of the issues related communicative competence in the age of globalization and superdiversity because of the unequal capacity to realise intended functions by mobilising linguistic and semiotic resources available to each participant.

Second, it follows participants enter interactional exchanges not only with their communicative repertoires and competences, but also personal histories, perceptions and expectations that readily affects the configuration of the exchange before it even begins; hence we see participants exploiting ‘pretextual gaps’ to expel others from the communicative space. The ethnographic focus on metapragmatic reflexivity – on small ‘micro’ acts such as evaluative and/or explanative comments – can shed some light on how specific actions are *recognizable* and *recognized* by the participants themselves, which reveals the economies of indexicals at play, which in turn points to larger ‘macro’ patterns of authority, access, power and the organization of social life of these new flexible collectivities appearing on social media.

Third, social media afford and promote seemingly ‘empty’ forms of phatic communication (Miller, 2008; cf. Varis and Blommaert, 2015), such as ‘sharing’ or ‘liking’ on Facebook, which, however, bear significant communicative ramifications in terms of translocality. Each of such communicative actions yields another levels of uptake as it reaches other users in different localities who consequently draw inferences not only about the meaning of the shared or liked content, and about others who reacted to it. In order to adequately describe these new layers of contextualization, attention needs to be paid also to the techno-social affordances and constraints on communicative action, particularly how the underlying technological infrastructures and user interfaces define the ways of deploying and engaging with specific resources at specific places.

To conclude, all of these implications stem from older problems pointed out by Hymes, Gumperz, Goffman, Garfinkel and others, but the novelty of digital communication invites us to recalibrate old analytical perspectives, which might inform us of the increasing complexity and fragmentation of social systems in the online-offline nexus. That is, interactively constructed and negotiated systems where traditional identity categories such as ethnicity or social class do not necessarily lie at the basis of their foundation, and where normativity develops organically from grassroots (bottom-up) mundane, everyday interactions rather than from traditional (top-down) bodies of authority and institutions.

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