

# Cultural Hybridity of Internet Communication (on the Material of Instagram Messages)

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**Abstract.** *The paper aims at investigating cultural hybridity on the Internet. Cultural hybridity is considered as one of the hybridity types developed in the conditions of a new communication channel and is understood as simultaneous use of different languages in the same text. It exists both as code-switching (within a text) or code-mixing (within a microtext). Quantitative and qualitative linguistic analysis of Instagram messages written by members of English, Russian and German cultures allows to reveal different levels of cultural hybridity on the Instagram: hypertextual (code switching in different messages of the same Instagram account), textual (code-switching between the message title, the message body, the comments to the message and automatically set interface information) and micro textual (code switching and code mixing in a message or a comment).*

**Keywords** – cultural hybridity, code switching, code mixing, Instagram, Internet communication, hypertextual, textual level.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Communication on the Internet is one of the recently appeared communication forms that has quickly developed since the late 1970s and exists now as an interesting and almost revolutionary communication format. It includes different social, functional, professional and national language forms and has developed new communication practices (e.g. emoticons as compensation for lacking visual contact in synchronous communication) and genres (e.g. a personal website).

One of the most significant trends in communication on the Internet is its hybridity, which is defined in this paper as synchronous use of different communication formats, types, codes in one communication act. The hybridity of Internet communication manifests itself in different types: orthographic, national (or cultural), oral/written, etc. This interesting and undoubtedly significant communication development has been investigated until now only in its separate manifestations (e.g. oralization, i.e. the integration of oral signs into written communication forms) which weren't seen as parts of one significant communication trend. Besides, different hybridity kinds of Internet communication are investigated not equally, and cultural hybridity of Internet communication is not so well known as its oralization.

However, the Internet, due to its global character, allows the users of different countries easily to communicate with each other. A natural consequence of the globalism of Internet communication is the growing number of cultural

contacts on the Internet and the permanent readiness to switch to another language.

This situation determined the aim of this paper which focus on such Internet communication feature as switching and mixing of cultural codes in communication on the Internet. As a practical material, *Instagram* messages are chosen since *Instagram* is a popular and often used global social network. The analysis of *Instagram* messages written by users from different countries with special focus on switching and mixing the national codes must show how the cultural hybridity is realized on the Internet.

## II. CULTURAL HYBRIDITY: THEORETICAL INSIGHTS

The origin of the term 'hybridity' can be explained in different ways. For Russian culture, a notion of a hybrid is connected first of all with agriculture and biology where it means an organism obtained by crossing genetically different parental forms (species, breeds and races) [6, p. 274]. For European and American scientific discourse, it goes back to the 18<sup>th</sup> century and is connected with colonial conquests and interracial contact in colonies [19, p. 316]. It explains the use of this term by European and American scientists working in the field of the human studies without every defining adjective and practically only in the context of colonial contacts reflected in fictional literature or mass media texts [5; 13]. This tradition is continued in today's investigations of colonial societies [7]. As my literature review shows, only one book mentions different understandings of hybridity, which can have different objects and be applied to history and archaeology, visual culture, political systems, human resource management, language, literature and society [9].

Thus, language is one of the objects, which could be investigated in terms of hybridity. According to Ch. Sanchez-Stockhammer, hybridity in language concerns the levels of speech sounds, of words and fixed constructions, of syntax, text, communication, individual languages and even models of language [9, p. 133–158]. Since communication is the most abstract syntagmatic level of language, which combines all the smaller languages units (sounds/letters, words, word phrases, sentences and texts), I propose to apply the term 'hybridity' to the communication process and communication products. In this context hybridity means *mixing of genetically different communication codes in a communication act*. Illustrations for such genetically different communication codes are oral

and written speech, figures and letters, verbal and non-verbal signs, different languages, genres etc.

Hybrid communication forms appear in all communication spheres, but Internet communication as a complex communication form mediated with technical means and telecommunication networks creates especially favourable conditions for hybridization of communication process. There is a rather vivid discussion about the features and peculiarities of Internet communication, many of which have a hybrid character, but none of the scientists uses the term 'hybrid' or 'hybridity' in these cases. We can read about the *heterogeneity* of institutional communication on the Internet [10], about the *convergence* of cultures [18], *oralization* [17, p. 174] or *interdiscursivity* [8]. In my opinion, none of the terms used is of an abstract nature and can cover all the mentioned forms of mixing different communication codes in one communication act as compared with the term 'hybridity'. The nearest term in this respect is 'heterogeneity' which is an antonym to homogeneity and means 'of different origin' [6]. However, it refers not to a communication act, but to the set of elements, i.e. it is not of syntagmatic, but of paradigmatic nature. Thus, the terms 'hybridity' and 'heterogeneity' are connected but mean not the same. It is illustrated with such an example: heterogenic lexicon can include common ('pure') and hybrid lexical units.

The specific of the mixed codes determine the type of hybridity. The observations of the communication on the Internet, as well as the review of scientific works [4, 11, 16, 17, 22, etc.], allow distinguishing the following hybridity types on the Internet communication:

- 1) **orthographic hybridity**, i.e. combination of different fonts (e.g. italics or capital letters with normal font) or letters, figures and symbols in one word/text: *digit@l*, *YouTube*, *OLEGator007*;
- 2) **cultural hybridity**, i.e. mixing of word elements/words or sentences expressed in different languages in one word/sentence/text: *welcome na zanyatiya* (English word 'welcome' is used in a sentence in Russian);
- 3) **oral/written hybridity**, i.e. using of oral text features in a written text: (German) *was willste mit dem bruder*, (Russian) *a cho mne spravlyatsa*;
- 4) **stylistic hybridity**, i.e. using of different functional style elements in one context: (Russian) *zelo resursoyomkaya programma* (the archaic adverb 'zelo' (*very*) is used with a professional word 'resursoyomkaya' (*resource-intensive*)),
- 5) **semiotic hybridity**, i.e. using different information coding systems (verbal and graphic, visual and acoustic) in one text/dialogue: (German) *was machst du?* – ;
- 6) **genre hybridity**, i.e. designing one text according to different genre types or combining different genre features in one text, cf. advertising in blog messages.

Among all the mentioned hybridity types I focus in this paper on *cultural hybridity* since it is one of the natural consequences of global communication on the Internet. It is realized as code-mixing [17; 21] and code-switching [2]. Since Internet text has a very complicated nature and

includes different textual levels [1, p. 6], it is important to identify not only code-mixing/switching, but also text levels on which different national codes are mixed.

Much has also been said about the use of international lexemes (borrowed mostly from English) in other national languages [18]. More complicated are the cases, when English or some other languages are used as communication means but are not native to the speaker, e.g. Chinese English [12]. In such cases, there is no formal code-switching from one language to another *in the text*, but there is switching from native national communicative code of the speaker to the foreign one *in the communication process* since the speaker has a certain cultural origin but uses a *lingua franca* to address the international audience. In such cases the foreign communication means and the own cultural identity are mixed.

These remarks show that the typology of cultural hybridity on the Internet concerns different language levels (word, sentence, text, communication process) and that the reasons for it should be sought in the communication process and its conditions. That is why one more term could be relevant in this research – *hybrid communicative activity*. Considering O. Issers' definition of the term 'discursive practice' [15, p. 14] and V. Mityagina's term 'communicative action' [20, p. 97] I understand with a hybrid communicative activity *using different national languages in a communication act, which is reflected in a communication product (a text)*. Repeated and commonly used communicative activities become discursive practices, which can have a hybrid nature.

Some words must be said about *Instagram* as the communication form chosen for practical analysis. *Instagram* is seen as a visual-oriented mobile platform [23, p. 73] or a social network [3] known since 2010, which allows the users to share visual content (photos and videos), to publish their comments and to build communities. I see *Instagram* as a social network, a complex discursive and communicative formation, which includes different communicative activities (filling the profile, searching and choosing connections, snapping, changing, uploading photos, streaming live videos etc.), realized online on mobile devices or desktops. Depending on communication goals a profile can belong to an individual (personal account type) or to an institution (an institutional account type). In both cases, the authors want to reach the possible widest audience, which can cause switching to other national codes, i.e. using cultural hybrid communicative activities.

Since the research of cultural hybrid communicative activities on *Instagram* is new in linguistics, there are many questions, which must be answered with this research:

- What types of cultural hybrid communicative activities are used on *Instagram*?
- What factors do the cultural hybrid communicative activities depend on? Do they depend on the culture of the users, on their personal or institutional status?
- To what languages switch *Instagram* users most of all?

- Are these activities commonly used, i.e. can they be regarded as discursive practices?

The answers to these questions will be given in the section with the research results in this paper.

### III. METHODS AND MATERIALS

To investigate hybrid communicative activities on *Instagram*, the following steps must be done:

1. **Selecting** practical material;
2. Giving the **discursive** analysis of the selected messages (user characteristic, the main goals of using *Instagram* account);
3. Giving the **textual** analysis of the selected material (text borders, text units with hybrid elements);
4. Preparing **statistical data** about the most typical hybrid text units;
5. **Interpretation** of the results.

As previous experience shows, practical material can be selected on the Internet in different ways:

- 1) according to the ‘snowball manner’, when the researcher takes one familiar account, then chooses another account(s) among the user’s ‘friends’;
- 2) using a certain search entry or a hashtag, it can also be a word in a certain language corresponding to a particular topic, which allows narrowing the search results;
- 3) using a random selection, i.e. taking accounts or messages, randomly appearing on the *Instagram* home page.

I conducted a pilot analysis of 21 accounts of British, German and Russian *Instagram* users, representing personal and institutional account types. The accounts are selected on the bases of all three above mentioned ways. In each account, I considered ten latest messages with their comments (January – July 2019). The list of accounts and the number of messages is given in Table 1.

TABLE 1. DESCRIPTION OF THE SELECTED RESEARCH MATERIAL

User's native culture	Account type and name		Number of messages
	Personal	Institutional	
English	msinterpretationservices, charmingadventurer, johannakonta, lidialial	oxford_uni, bbcnews, bp_plc,	70
German	deutschlernen.club, mariel_la_sophie, julia.goerges, tonistrehlow	fu_berlin, dw_deutschlernen, bmwmotorradde	70
Russian	teachers.land, mashaa_mars, vesnushka86, dariya_bonbon	nsuniversity, radiomayak, kamaz_official	70
Total			210

I considered English, German, Russian as native languages for selected *Instagram* users’ accounts because these languages belong to 10 most frequently used world languages [14]. They can thus represent the tendencies of using language on the Internet, and particularly of using cultural hybrid communicative activities.

### IV. CULTURAL HYBRID COMMUNICATIVE ACTIVITIES ON *INSTAGRAM*

#### 4.1 *Instagram* accounts’ characteristics

To correctly interpret the cultural hybridity of *Instagram* users a characteristic of collected accounts is necessary. According to research methodology, personal and institutional accounts are selected. In my research, the owners of personal accounts are:

- 1) foreign language teachers (msinterpretationservices, teachers.land, deutschlernen.club);
- 2) travelers (charmingadventurer, mariel\_la\_sophie, mashaa\_mars);
- 3) international known sportsmen (johannakonta, julia.goerges, vesnushka86);
- 4) persons without explicated professional background (lidialial, tonistrehlow, dariya\_bonbon).

Institutional accounts belong to:

- 1) universities (oxford\_uni, fu\_berlin, nsuniversity);
- 2) mass media (bbcnews, dw\_deutschlernen, radiomayak);
- 3) big companies (bp\_plc, bmwmotorradde, kamaz\_official).

The occupation type and the cultural background of a person could be identified from the account name, its owner’s name, a description of a profile and a brief analysis of the latest messages. The profile description of a personal (sample 1) and of an institutional account (sample 2) illustrate this.

(1) *Judy | Adventurer & LifeTaster / I quit my job to travel around Portugal / Conscious Lifestyle / Slow Travel | Self-Growth | Fashion* (<https://www.instagram.com/charmingadventurer>, accessed 30.07.2019).

(2) *BMW Motorrad Deutschland / Willkommen auf dem offiziellen #BMWMotorradDeutschland Account. Impressum: bit.ly/BMW\_Motorrad\_Datenschutz* (<https://www.instagram.com/bmwmotorradde>, accessed 30.07.2019).

The sample 1 shows that personal account type is marked with a first name (*Judy*), the personal pronoun *I*, and with a hobby listing, typical for an individual. The institutional account (sample 2) is marked with the company’s name (*BMW Motorrad Deutschland*), the use of the adjective “offiziell” (‘official’), and the link to legal information (*Impressum...*).

A significant analysis point, defining the choice of verbal means, is the global communication purpose of the account owner. A connection of a person to foreign languages causes its wish to write *about* foreign languages or *in* foreign languages to train them even if the audience is not wide. Travelling around the world or his/her world popularity could be significant for using cultural hybrid communicative activities to reach *Instagram* users all over the world who are interested in the described sights or person’s activities. Persons without any connection to foreign languages, foreign cultures or international fans have no exact cause for using hybrid activities, but they also use different languages on *Instagram* which goes back to the international character of the Internet and the interests of the user.

University and big companies usually address international students and partners in their *Instagram*

messages. The news provided on mass media accounts could be interesting all over the world.

#### 4.2 Text borders and texts units on Instagram

Since it could be significant to distinguish the terms “code-mixing” (within the micro text) and “code-switching” (within the text), let us consider text borders and text units on *Instagram*.

*Instagram*, as a social network and a complex Internet communication genre, has different text levels depending on which text borders are regarded.

**-Hypertextual level:** Different messages of the same account are seen as one hypertext. Such hypertext differs from other hypertexts through its author, account name and domain name in the URL. Only published photos, occasionally with the titles and no verbal posts are displayed on the hypertextual level.

**-Textual level:** A particular message of an *Instagram* user with all the technical information and with all the comments of other users is regarded. Each message differs from other texts through its visual motif (a photo or video which is commented in the initial message of the account owner and other users comments (cf. Fig. 1).

**-Microtextual level:** A message or a comment of a person is seen as a single micro text; it differs from others through the author’s name shown above the message or comment. As a rule, micro texts are not independent enough and could be often understood only with regard to the basic photo or video serving as a motif for publication and previous comments. The text elements are sentences or their semantically connected blocks.



Fig. 1. Example of an *Instagram* message demonstrating the use of different national languages on the textual level (fu\_berlin, 22 April 2019)

Fig. 1 illustrates the textual level of the analysis. It shows a video with the poster “XXII Congreso de la Asociación...”, serving as a kind of a text title, to the right from the video on the Fig. 1 there is the message of the account owner (consisting only of the user’s name, here: fu\_berlin) and the other users’ comments, two of them are in Spanish and one in English.

A generalized description of mentioned text borders and text units according to a certain text level is given in the Table 2.

TABLE 2. TEXT BORDERS AND TEXT UNITS ON *INSTAGRAM*

Textual levels	Text border markers	Text elements
Hyper-textual	Account owner name, domain name	Account description, stories, a row of posts (photos)
Textual	A photo (video) as a base of the text	A photo (video), occasionally with a title, interface information, message of an account owner, comments of other users
Micro-textual	User’s name	Sentence, a sequence of sentences

The identified text elements demonstrate that text is understood in this paper as a semiotic complex verbal and non-verbal unity, including titles, photos/videos, posts etc. It is typical for different genres of the Internet communication (blog, computer forum, web site) since classical “texts” consisting of grammatically connected sentences and paragraphs become in new technical conditions small and semantically depended from other “texts”. It is especially significant for visually and mobile-oriented *Instagram*.

#### 4.3 Cultural hybridity activities on different text levels

The conducted analysis shows that cultural hybridity is realized on all the mentioned textual levels:

- *hypertextual*: using several languages in the profile, stories and message titles;
- *textual*: using two or more languages in different text elements (title, initial message, comments, automatically set interface information);
- *micro textual*: using different languages in a post, including the list of hashtags.

The identified cultural hybridity types demonstrate, that textual and micro textual levels, where the text has many verbal elements are more significant for the research aims than hypertextual level. The latter seldom shows cultural hybridity because of the little number of verbal elements which hardly vary in their language.

Very dynamic is the automatically set interface language, which is chosen by the account owner and can be changed many times when communicating on *Instagram*. I consider interface language as the native language of the account owner (e.g. Russian for the users from Russia), but an *Instagram* user can not know, which interface languages are set by other *Instagram* users<sup>1</sup>. Besides, the interface language can be quickly changed in dependence on the language of the most frequently read posts. So in my research this hybridity type has a relative character. In any case, if a user chooses a foreign language as an interface language, it is a hybrid communicative action.

<sup>1</sup> A chosen interface language and the reasons for its choice can be investigated with special questionnaires or interviews with *Instagram* users. It could be an object of further research.

Different cultural hybridity communicative activities can be illustrated statistically on a material of a single account. The analysis of the ten last messages in the account *teachers.land* (accessed 31.07.2019) demonstrates the following data:

- code-switching on hypertextual level – 70%: 7 photos have titles in English whereas the profile information is expressed in Russian, 3 photos show no title,
- code-switching on textual level – 90%: just one message is expressed only in Russian, all the others demonstrate code-switching from English title to the Russian message body or mixing the languages in the message and comments to it,
- code-mixing on micro textual level – 90%: 9 messages expressed in Russian demonstrate words or phrases in English. Besides, hashtags in 9 messages are expressed in a mixed manner, e.g., [#teachers #teachersshare #vuz #vuzy](https://www.instagram.com/p/B0jGt2AHaOQ) (<https://www.instagram.com/p/B0jGt2AHaOQ>).

This brief review demonstrates how complex cultural hybridity on *Instagram* is. The owner of the account *teachers.land*, who is an English and language pedagogy teacher at Moscow state university, usually publishes her photos with titles in foreign (English) language, which is her professional subject but writes messages in her native (Russian) language to be fully understood by the readers. This *Instagram* user easily switches to English in her messages, thus showing her good knowledge of this language and her interest in it. She also adds hash tags to her messages expressed both in Russian and English to let *Instagram* users quickly find the proper message and to widen her community with international followers.

More complicated is the situation when different accounts of three cultures are considered. The data about using cultural hybrid communicative activities on different textual levels are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3. CULTURAL HYBRIDITY ON DIFFERENT TEXT LEVELS OF ENGLISH, GERMAN AND RUSSIAN *INSTAGRAM* USERS

Textual levels	English	German	Russian
Hyper-textual	11%	10%	10%
Textual	61,4%	88,6%	67,1%
Micro-textual	10%	15%	23%

Table 3 illustrates that there are no significant differences between English, German and Russian *Instagram* users on the hypertextual level. Foreign language teachers use hybrid communicative practices most often: *msinterpretationservices* (100%, English and Spanish), *deutschlernen.club* (60%, German and English), *teachers.land* (70%, English and Russian). All the others seldom use titles on photos or vary languages in their profiles and photo titles so that only 10 or 11% of all the considered accounts of each culture demonstrate cultural hybridity on the hypertextual level.

More hybridity can be observed on the textual level: the languages used in the title, the first message and the

comments to it as a rule differ. German and Russian *Instagram* user often mix hash tags in their native language (German or Russian) and English. English *Instagram* messages have, on average more comments in different languages. So the comments to the messages in the account *oxford\_uni* are expressed not only in English but also in Indonesian, Greek, Arabic, Persian, Russian, Portuguese, Maori, etc. This fact illustrates the interest of the international audience in studying at this university or its researching interests concerning many countries of the world.

Sometimes a kind of dialogue appears, when the question is asked in one language, and the answer is given in another language, cf. the English/Spanish sample (3).

(3) *what about 'time will tell'? – el tiempo lo dirá* (*msinterpretationservices*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B0h2Q9tm1P>, 30.07.19)

Surprisingly, least of all cultural hybridity on the textual level is found on mass media accounts: 0% on Russian *radiomayak*, 10% on *bbcnews* (only one messages concerning news from Hong Kong caused comments in Chinese) and 30% on *dw\_deutschlernen* (which is primary aimed at learning German and not at publishing news). This fact can be explained by targeting at native readers. A similar situation can be found on official accounts of big companies which have only a few comments to each message hardly varying in their language.

Personal accounts of sportsmen and travellers show most of all hybridity on textual level, going back both to the attempts of account owners to reach the international audience and to the interest of international followers and fans in such accounts.

Cultural hybrid communicative activities on microtextual level, i.e. within one message or comment are not typical. Most often foreign language teachers or travelers changing their experience about communication difficulties in other countries mix communication codes. Samples (4) and (5) illustrate this.

(3) *Hey ihr lieben, wir haben dieses Wochenende auf einer Finca mit der Family verbracht* (*marie\_la\_sophie*, [https://www.instagram.com/p/BzneCB\\_i3Rt](https://www.instagram.com/p/BzneCB_i3Rt), 17.07.19)

(4) *U menya podругa kofe zakazyvala with orekh)* (*mashaa\_mars*, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B0iayqaFUFp/>, 30.07.19)

In these samples, English words *Family* and *with* as well as the Spanish word *Finca* are used in a sentence expressed in a native language (German or Russian). Such cases show that English words and phrases are a part of an active lexicon of a user. In spontaneous communication, these words are remembered more quickly than similar words and expressions of the native language. Sometimes foreign words are a kind of exotic illustration of being in a foreign country, cf. posts of German exchange students from Mexico using greetings and post endings in Spanish and the main text in German.

One more strategy of code-mixing illustrates Russian tennis player Elena Vesnina (*vesnushka86*), who expresses her messages in both Russian and English. English text repeats the Russian text, and in this way, this user succeeds to reach both her fellow country people and international fans.

As for differences between personal and institutional accounts, the first are to a bigger extent hybrid as compared with the last. From all the regarded types of institutional accounts, only universities' *Instagram* accounts show a certain readiness to switch the codes, mass media and big companies focus on homogenous audience and seldom demonstrate cultural hybridity.

Summing up the results of the research, I give the answers to the questions relevant for research aims.

- The types of cultural hybrid communicative activities on *Instagram* could be classified depending on the textual level and include hypertextual, textual and micro textual cultural hybridity.
- The research results show that cultural hybridity depends less on the native culture of the users and more on their personal or institutional status. Users from non-English speaking cultures tend to mix hash tags and to integrate English words into their messages, whereas accounts of native British have more comments on different languages. Personal users who deal with foreign languages or travel around the world use much more different languages than institutional ones.
- The most popular language in sampled material is English used by native British and also by native German and Russian users. Less popular are German, Russian and Spanish. Occasionally, French, Arabic, Greek, Portuguese, Italian, Polish and some other languages are used. It reflects the most popular languages, and intercultural connections in Europe since some users (e.g. travelers) often change their living place.
- The reasons for switching and mixing cultural codes on *Instagram* are 1) to widen the audience, 2) to learn new languages, 3) to be authentic. Communicative activities that help to achieve these aims are 1) expressing profile information, message content and hashtags in different languages, 2) using titles in photos, 3) choosing topics connected with other countries, interesting facts and asking questions about them.

Cultural hybridity is often demonstrated together with other hybridity types (semiotic and orthographic), which reflects the complexity of communication nowadays, on the one hand, and similar reasons for using hybrid communicative activities on the Internet, on the other hand.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The conducted research allowed proving that hybrid communicative activities are widely used on the Internet. Due to its global character, Internet communication exemplified by *Instagram* creates favourable conditions for communicating in different languages, which is defined in this paper as cultural hybridity. Cultural hybridity is realized on different textual levels – on the level of hypertext, of text

and micro text. The textual level is the most suitable for it, as different languages are used in the title (if present), in the initial message of the account user, hashtags and other users' comments. An *Instagram* user can follow a discussion of a topic, expressed (or symbolized) both non-verbal – in the photo/video – and verbal, in the posts of discussion participants. Since they mostly represent different cultures, they like to use their native language, so that the discussion shows constant code-switching from the main discussion language to different languages spoken by the discussion participants.

Such really multilingual conditions stimulate cultural exchange and make other cultures nearer and clearer to each other. This multilingual environment is especially suitable for languages learning and keeping contact with persons and cultures users are interested in.

This research is just a pilot investigation of cultural hybridity in Internet communication exemplified on *Instagram*. It allows identifying some significant tendencies in this field, which could be the object of further investigations.

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