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“I am a real cat”

French-speaking cats on Twitter as an enregistered variety and community of practice

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This paper is an exploration of the variety of French-speaking cats on Twitter. Among the many creative phenomena that the internet has produced, animal-related language varieties, the language used by pets, have been explored as early as the 2000s, yet with a strong and almost exclusive focus on English. I first describe the shared repertoire of lexical, semantic, phonographic, and syntactic features used by French-speaking cats, and show how the simultaneous use of a childlike code and a formal register constructs the sociolinguistic persona of cats as ambivalent animals. I argue that the French variety has become “enregistered” (Squires 2010) insofar as it is perceived and ideologically constructed as a variety of its own while promoting a welcoming culture towards new members. In doing so, cats show that the belonging to a community of practice, notably by drawing on a common repertoire of resources, does not need to be linked with processes of exclusion.

Keywords: Twitter, internet variety, enregisterment, community of practice, French, cats, cat-related language varieties, LOLspeak, LOLcat

1. Introduction: Francophone cats online

“I haven’t had my feed yet. I’m waiting.” (*G pas eu ma pâtée encore. J’attends.*) – this is how French-speaking cats order food from their owners, the humans who live at their home. Or, rather, this is how Francophone Twitter users instantiate their cats and give them a voice and an online presence. Among the many creative phenomena that the internet has produced, animal-related language varieties, the language used by pets, have been explored from the early 2000s on, yet with a strong and almost exclusive focus on English (Brubaker 2008; Gawne and Vaughan 2011; Fiorentini 2013; Bury and Wojtaszek 2017; Podhovník 2018). Typ-



ical features of English-speaking cats are the imitation of a baby voice as well as specific orthographic, grammatical, and lexical features (misdeclined verbs, misdeclined gerunds, incorrect plural and verb forms, article dropping) (Gawne and Vaughan 2011; Fiorentini 2013; Podhovnik 2018). But Francophone cats behave differently.

This study is the first exploration of the variety of French-speaking cats on Twitter. In this paper, I use the term *cats* as a shortcut for the people posing as their cats, and usually make a distinction based on the main variety the Twitter users draw on: English or French (thus, ‘English-speaking’ or ‘French-speaking’ cats). In what has now established itself as a community of practice characterized by a shared repertoire of lexical, semantic, phonographic, and syntactic features, users present their cats as arrogant yet needy pets who use a childlike code and a formal register at the same time. The unique combination of these apparently contradictory traits (insecure and independent, childish and formal) corresponds to the sociolinguistic persona of a cat as an ambivalent animal. As has been shown in *The Ambivalent Internet*, many online behaviors are “[s]imultaneously antagonistic and social, creative and disruptive, humorous and barbed” (Whitney and Milner 2017:10), and may trigger opposite responses, such as finding the cats’ accounts funny, ingenious, clever, or, on the contrary, disturbing, useless, silly. Following Whitney and Milner (2017:10), *ambivalent* here “means ‘both, on both sides,’ implying tension, and often fraught tension,” but not in “the blasé sense of indifference.” Even if “positive negative” cats posts “that express admiration of the very characteristics that many deride in cats, such as independence and impudence” (Austin and Irvine 2020:447) may be typical for cats more generally, it is noticeable that this ambivalence is not only present in the *personality* of French-speaking cats, but in their *language* and *metapragmatic positioning* about language as well.

Although cats’ accounts may seem innocuous, especially in comparison to e.g., trolling, they are in fact highly relevant for their members and audiences – and for sociolinguists. Embodying ambivalence in the topics they cover, their playful use of language, and their positioning towards language use, cats’ accounts promote an openness towards new members by accepting anyone self-identifying as a cat, while still relying on a set of features that build the core of the variety. In doing so, cats show that the belonging to a community of practice, notably by drawing on a common repertoire of resources, does not need to be linked with processes of exclusion. While most tweets include pictures of cats, in this paper, the idea is not to explore cats images as “the most prolific visual content to feed the new medium of the world wide web” (Berland 2008:432). Rather, I focus on how users posing as cats create a linguistic variety by drawing on existing and new resources in order to collectively perform how cats would speak (or write).

I argue that the creation, maintenance and development of a relatively stable – yet ever-evolving – set of linguistic features to index social properties (here, being a cat) goes along with the formation of an enregistered internet variety (Squires 2010). As an ideological construct, enregisterment describes the process through which “a linguistic repertoire becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of forms” (Agha 2003:231). As argued by Squires (2010), internet varieties need not be linked with the distribution of specific linguistic features to undergo a process of enregisterment. Rather, when the ideological component of enregisterment is centered, it becomes clear that “speakers’ perceptions of linguistic variation, social structure, and other pertinent concepts are put to use in construing practices as group- and/or variety-specific” (Squires 2010: 460). French-speaking cats combine both: They are linked through their consistent use of linguistic features and by the metapragmatic recognition that the ways in which cats speak is a variety. Yet, and this may be partly specific to this community and enregistered variety, Francophone cats do not expect other members to perform a cat identity by drawing on specific resources or embodying specific values. Rather, the inclusivity they promote speaks for an understanding in terms of self-assignment: “I say that I am a cat, so I am cat.” Beyond the sociolinguistic exploration of this variety, I also draw on direct exchanges I had with the users posing as cats on Twitter. Similar to YouTube comments as “a valuable source of user-generated metalinguistic data” (Jones and Schieffelin 2009:1062), the Twitter replies posted as reactions to my posts offer insights into the metapragmatic assessment of the cat-related variety by the users themselves. The paper thus simultaneously explores “the poetic, metapragmatic, sociolinguistic, and ideological dimensions of [the French cat-inspired variety] as a specialized register” (Jones and Schieffelin 2009:1063).

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2, I describe cat-related language varieties as a “cat-inspired idiolect” (Podhovnik, forthcoming) or “internet-specific language variety” (Squires 2010) relying on language play (Gawne and Vaughan 2011). Section 3 details the linguistic features commonly described in the literature for English. When describing the corpus of tweets qualitatively examined for this study in Section 4, I outline my first encounters with cats’ accounts, show that one account is pivotal in initiating and maintaining the language variety, and suggest how to integrate my connection with the digital community in the analysis. In Section 5 I describe and analyze qualitatively the rich interplay of lexical, semantic, phonographic, and syntactic features which build the ambivalent sociolinguistic persona of French-speaking cats on Twitter. In Section 6, I then argue that the integration of new members by older accounts fosters the community of practice by emphasizing a welcoming culture where the variety is acquired progressively. I conclude by reflecting on how French-speaking cats, who exem-

plarily shed light on how people navigate digital networks, become “a ‘pure’ corner of the Internet” (Maddox 2021: 3333) performing cuteness, but also and more importantly, creativity and tolerance towards language use.

2. Cat-related language varieties until now

Animals have been said to be the most popular inspiration for creating language varieties on the internet (Crystal 2018: 458). The systematically growing collection of LOLcat image macros found on *icanhascheezburger.com* (Santos 2012; Fiorentini 2013; Bury and Wojtaszek 2017), Reddit (Bury 2017), The Cat Bible Project (Gauer and Benson 2011; Gawne and Vaughan 2011), or Instagram (Podhovník 2018), allowed linguists to explore the language used by pets – or rather the language people imagine their pets would speak if they were able to (Gawne and Vaughan 2011: 111; Miltner 2011: 58), yet with an almost exclusive focus on English varieties. Importantly, as Podhovník (forthcoming) argues, although LOLcats are “still regarded by some as the typical cat of the Internet,” “there is more to online cat life than the LOLcat meme and LOLspeak.” LOLcat is one of the animal-inspired varieties explored for English: the one used in image macros with one or more cats, in which the image’s text usually displays nonstandard English (see Section 3 for a presentation of the main features typical for the variety). Podhovník (2018) thus proposes a wider definition of *cat-* (and other animals) *inspired idiolects*, which involves the multiple varieties found on several social media platforms. Going beyond LOLcat, she suggests a collective term – “purrified English” (Podhovník 2018: 12).

LOLcat is “a compound word derived from the internet acronym ‘LOL’ (‘laughing out loud’) and ‘cat’” (Brubaker 2008: 118). As “one of hundreds of dialects used by the netizens” (Bury 2017: 82), LOLcat emerged as a multimodal phenomenon that can be summarized as such: “Take a digital photo – often one of household pets, particularly cats – and purposefully place misspelled text on top” (Brubaker 2008: 118). Importantly, however, not every picture of a cat accompanied by a short text becomes a cat-related variety: Only those posts where “the cats may use a form of cat language” (Podhovník, forthcoming) resort to it, as “[c]hoosing LOLspeak [...] means that it is the cat talking” (Podhovník, forthcoming).

A recurrent aspect in the literature discussing animal-inspired varieties is their problematic definition. In one of the first blog posts on the topic, the non-linguist Dash (2007) considers LOLspeak as a “Kitty Pidgin.” Although LOLspeak seems to meet some features of pidgins, it does not fulfill necessary structural characteristics (Rosen 2010: 2). Above all there is no language that could be a sub-

strate (Gawne and Vaughan 2011:103), as the only source of LOLspeak is another language and its internet varieties (Podhovnik, forthcoming). Moreover, pidgins are usually a means of cross-linguistic communication (often within the context of strict hierarchies, as in colonial contexts) (Velupillai 2015:15), which is not the case with LOLspeak. Most importantly, the characterization of LOLcat as “Kitty Pidgin” draws on some unfortunate conceptions of pidgins: It activates or reinforces stereotypes often associated with pidgins, e.g., that they are somehow ‘quirky’ and ‘exotic,’ when in fact pidgins are relatively common contact phenomena. Finally, the denomination ‘pidgin’ is often linked with standard language ideologies attached to language structures perceived as ‘deviant,’ as pidgin is often viewed as a failed attempt to speak the dominant language (Velupillai 2015:15). Calling LOLcat a pidgin would then implicitly confirm this view, as if some formal structures such as word reduplications (Fiorentini 2013:92) or grammatical reductions were indicators of language deficiency.

Other terms, often used as synonyms, have been used to describe animal-related varieties: play languages, language games, and ludling. Play languages are typically based on “a small set of rules from a language in use in a particular speech community” (Sherzer 2002:26) and involve a conscious manipulation (Crystal 2018:458). An example is ‘talking backwards,’ “in which the syllables of words are reversed” (Sherzer 2002:vii), or doggo memes (the language used by dogs) (Punske and Butler 2019:2), where “the linguistic features better define the meme.”

But other authors take issue with the characterization of LOLspeak as play language. Gawne and Vaughan (2011:103) argue that LOLspeak is not a play language, as it draws on “sets of emblematic resources” (Podhovnik 2018:2) and not on a small set only (Gawne and Vaughan 2011:103; Bury and Wojtaszek 2017). For this reason, *language play* seems to be the most adequate term to characterize LOLspeak and animal-related varieties more generally, as “it involves the patterning of linguistic form, the creation of alternative realities, and the social use of both of these for intimacy and conflict” (Cook 2000:5). As I will show, the French cat variety indeed combines the three features: (1) it relies on a relatively constant, yet highly flexible and extensible pool of linguistic resources; (2) it brings cats as talking animals into being; and (3) it fosters the creation and maintenance of online communities sharing common ground but also disagreements.

To sum up, “cat-inspired idiolects” (Podhovnik, forthcoming) are “internet-specific language varieties” relying on language play (Gawne and Vaughan 2011) which present “sets of linguistic features [...] conceived as distinctive, imbued with social meaning linked to social personae, and linked to what are perceived as distinct varieties of language” (Squires 2010:459). The French cat variety is thus not a new or invented language: It resorts to a constant and relatively closed set of

existing phonographic and syntactic features deriving from language acquisition and regionalisms and, at the same time, draws on an evolving and more open set of lexical innovations.

3. Typical features of English-speaking cats

Important for the linguistic description of English-based LOLspeak is the idea that it “involves the manipulation of every linguistic level” (Gawne and Vaughan 2011: 104). Although LOLspeak is based on the creativity of its users, some features and rules have been standardized through adopting and further spreading by community members. Extensively studied for English, LOLspeak is characterized by nonstandard orthography, lexical innovations, and grammatical deviation.

Typical linguistic features of LOLcat first include *nonstandard orthography* visible in abbreviations (Fiorentini 2013: 85; Laksono and Putranti 2016: 73), letter substitutions such as *4* (*for*) and *R* (*are*), which are most widely used in text messaging (Podhovnik, forthcoming), the replacement of <s> for <z> (Fiorentini 2013: 96; Bury 2017: 86), including the auxiliary verb *iz* for *is* (Laksono and Putranti 2016: 73), and letter inversions (Bury 2017: 85–86), for instance the purpose typing of *teh* instead of *the* (Gawne and Vaughan 2011: 108). Nonstandard orthography also includes baby-talk features such as the “simplification of consonant clusters” (Rosen 2010: 6) and the “replacement of *r* by another consonant (e.g., English *wabbit* for *rabbit*)” (Rosen 2010: 9).

The *lexical* inventory contains onomatopoeias such as **snap snap snap snap** (Bury and Wojtaszek 2017: 39) and univerbation strategies such as *kktxbai* ‘okay, thanks, bye’ (Fiorentini 2013: 104). The most prominent lexical features are derived from the “cat world” (Gawne and Vaughan 2011: 111) or “cat talk” (Bury 2017: 87), also known as “meowlogisms,” created by substituting a part of a word with a cat-related word (Podhovnik 2018: 10). Some examples are *purrfect*, *pawty*, *cameowflage*, *caturday*, *hissterical*, *clawsome*, as well as the word *meowlogism* itself.

Finally, *grammatical deviation* (Brannon 2012: 37) is central to LOLspeak, including the omission of subject *it* or the use of verbs and adjectives as nouns (Gauer and Benson 2011). Various phrasal templates were also found, such as *I can has X* (Calka 2010; Gauer and Benson 2011; Gawne and Vaughan 2011: 115; Lefler 2011; Laksono and Putranti 2016), and *Do not want X* (Gawne and Vaughan 2011: 118). Morphological traits are regularized irregular verb forms in the past tense and double-marking of past tense (Gawne and Vaughan 2011: 114), and the usually not occurring subject-auxiliary inversion in questions (Laksono and Putranti 2016: 73). The use of <z> instead of <s> is also common to mark the

third-person singular (*iz*) and sometimes for the first (*I*) and second person (*you*) as well (Podhovnik, forthcoming).

The features discussed here were identified on various sources: Reddit (Bury 2017), The Cat Bible Project (Gauer and Benson 2011; Gawne and Vaughan 2011), Instagram (Podhovnik 2018), and captions on LOLcat pictures circulating the internet as well as various LOLspeak forums. This indicates that the regularities spread out of the original website *icanhascheezburger.com* were adopted outside the community (Golbeck and Buntain 2018: 587). The norms are thus not completely set and further modifications and alternatives are possible (Podhovnik, forthcoming). Santos (2012: 75) claims that the process of standardization within LOLspeak may be “compared to the evolution of languages,” which has accelerated in the case of internet-varieties (Santos 2012: 64). The playful modifications on multiple linguistic levels indicate the high metalinguistic awareness of the community creating the varieties (Gawne and Vaughan 2011: 120; Fiorentini 2013: 106; Bury 2017: 85). It now remains to be shown, however, whether these features also apply to Francophone cats.

4. Investigating cats online: The corpus

4.1 How it all began

My inquiry began from my Twitter account (@BerLinguistin) as a follower of Sütterlin Scat Katz (@SuetterlinKatz), a pivotal account curated by Claire Placial (@claireplacial), an associate professor in comparative literature at the Université de Lorraine (France). (I have asked her permission to use her real handle and name in the paper.) As my first steps on Twitter were connected to the search of an academic community, I first followed @claireplacial. While both accounts are not linked, they both retweet each other, thus making the connection between the author and her cat visible, which led me to discover @SuetterlinKatz as it was already well established (mid-2018). Sütterlin Scat Katz’s account is very active (several posts per week, if not per day), and plays a central, formative role in shaping the French cat variety, which became even more visible once I scrutinized 80 cats’ accounts that are very similar in their language use and metapragmatic assessment of it. This led me to posit that Sütterlin Scat Katz was leading the dissemination of pragmatic and sociolinguistic norms of use. My hypothesis was then confirmed when I discovered that *20 Minutes*, a free daily newspaper

in France, devoted an article to the French cat variety¹ entitled the “Touitou des pôitchats” (“The lil Twitter of lil cats”) in which they interview Claire Placial as a core member of the community. The media interest for the phenomenon as well as the explicit focus on Sütterlin Scat Katz in the article show, first, that Francophone Twitter accounts of cats are not a marginal phenomenon, and, second, that Sütterlin Scat Katz is constructed as playing a central role. As the cats’ accounts display pseudonyms and do not directly point towards their authors, I have not anonymized the screenshots.

4.2 Sütterlin Scat Katz: The established member at the core of the community

@SuetterlinKatz is one of the biggest French-speaking cat accounts. The Francophone Twittersphere of cats began as a Tumblr (suetterlinkatz.tumblr.com) which is still visible but not active anymore (see (1)). The account then moved to Twitter, growing from 6,378 followers on 28 February 2020 to 8,381 followers on 25 October 2021, thus showing the increasing popularity of the account.

Example 1. Account of Sütterlin Scat Katz (@SuetterlinKatz), 25 October 2021



Sütterlin Scat Katz is explicitly recognized as the founder of the French cat variety by the other members of the community, as the following thread shows:

1. See <https://www.20minutes.fr/arts-stars/culture/2702019-20200123-20-minutes-enquete-touitou-potchats-communaute-tres-feline-twitter> (accessed 25 October 2021).

Example 2. “Who is the first lil cat that created a lil Twitter?”



The dialogue, in which I have included similar misspellings in the English translation to get a similar effect, reads as follows:

- Mommy is asking herself. Who is the first lil cat that created a lil Twitter? That he is too smart after all. And that thanks to him we are a big community super greyt
- I think thot @SutterlinKatz is the one who really launched the our lil Twitter with her language andallthat. But I wos not there either, I arrived a lil bit before @tokyoetberlin
- Well in fact no I am not the first cat there was @Baruch_Lechat before and also @BitchestheCat but it is true that I am a top-tier cat influencer

The account @Baruch_Lechat mentioned by @SutterlinKatz was opened in 2013 and the last tweet was posted on 16 September 2017. The cat died in 2020, as we learnt through the owner’s account, @Eris_Lepoil. The account consists mostly of pictures and short texts and is not characterized by a specific language, so that it does not belong to the cats using the French cat variety. @BitchestheCat, followed only by @SutterlinKatz, is an English-speaking account posting pictures of cats accompanied by short texts that read as captions such as “Messing with puff.” or “He’s just a content fucking cat.” No special language is involved, and the account is presented according to the perspective of the cat’s owner (third-person pronoun *he*) and not through the cat’s experience.

A thread from a non-cat’s account (meanwhile deleted or made private) also underlines the pivotal role of @SutterlinKatz:

Example 3. “First of all, the temptress is @claireplacial, with the twitter of her cat @SutterlinKatz”



[Thread] I will talk to you about Twitter accounts for cats with the distance my girlfriend and I have based on the account we created for Evey: why, how, what for and where to twitter.com/EveyLeChat [account deactivated]

First of all, the temptress is @claireplacial, with the twitter of her cat @SutterlinKatz. Let's not deny that she convinced many French-speaking people to create a Twitter for many cats! You may think it's stupid, but in fact, it's fulfilling...

The unexpected success of a thread on a first version of this paper on 5 December 2020 during Linguistweets, the first international Twitter conference on linguistics,² and successive tweets during the writing of this paper confirmed my hypothesis, as many cats explicitly endorse @SutterlinKatz as their model:

2. See <https://www.linguistweets.org/en/> (accessed 27 October 2021).

Example 4. “We will have a paper on the lil cats that we will be the ones being the celebrity above all the colleague @SutterlinKatz that she is our model I hope you have the payment as liver pâté honored colleague.”



Example 5. “Good news: the language of the lil Twitter (*twitwi*) of the lil cats (*potichats*) is finally getting recognition... thank you @SutterlinKatz who inspires us #dominationinaction”



Sütterlin Scat Katz is thus recognized as a leading figure, which can be explained both by the early creation of her account and the socio-technical affordances of Twitter. As Claire Placial, account owner of @SuetterlinKatz states in the newspaper *20 Minutes*: “I didn’t think about a system, it came little by little and it spread [throughout Twitter].” The impact of Sütterlin Scat Katz may be representative of the ambivalence of the community: On the one hand, cats almost unanimously proclaim their allegiance to a central member – who happens to be linguistically informed, as Claire Placial is an associate professor in comparative literature – and recognize her as an inspiration and leader, on the other hand, the community is organized in nonhierarchical ways and promotes inclusivity in language use and how it integrates new members (see Section 6).

4.3 A structured network of interrelated accounts

In (1), Sütterlin Scat Katz describes herself as *Minoustre des Cultes* ('Minister for Religious Affairs'), which points to a network of cats as ministers. Many French-speaking cats endorse (often self-attributed) functions, sometimes corresponding more or less to existing ministries in the human world, sometimes referring to inside jokes among cats, as for Les chafouines who are *Minoustresses du lard décoratif intérieur* ('Ministers of interior decorative art/lard'), a word play coined by Sütterlin Scat Katz (see (9) below). Altogether, the cats form a government, thus showing that they explicitly describe themselves as being part of network of interrelated accounts.

I hypothesize that the close-knit community of French-speaking cats may be analyzed through its more prolific and central members. Golbeck and Bountain (2018) indeed show that the rising popularity of a single dog-rating account (measured by the number of followers) led to an increased use of its original lexical forms in the nearest community (retweets and mentions) but also outside of it (tweets without mention, posts on Reddit) (Golbeck and Buntain 2018: 589–590). The study defines mentions as the main spreading tool, but it is worth noting that Twitter affordances support linguistic propagation by creating links to influential posts: retweets, which determine trending topics and thus increase the spreading of posts (Asur et al. 2011: 2). This explains how a community of smaller users may play a huge role in the spreading of language varieties in contrast to the original idea-giver, whose part is most important at the beginning (Zhang, Zhao and Xu 2016: 12). In the case of the French cat variety, this means that while Sütterlin Scat Katz is unanimously regarded as the creator of the variety, adopting the norms of the community of practice does not require knowing or interacting with @SuetterlinKatz's Twitter account anymore. Indeed, the well-established community now (in 2022, i.e., seven years after the creation of the account in September 2015) counts several core members leading the dissemination of pragmatic and sociolinguistic norms of use.

4.4 Data selection and researcher's involvement with the online community

I selected the 80 Twitter accounts included in this study manually by looking for cats' accounts with which Sütterlin Scat Katz regularly interacts (retweets, mentions, likes, followers/following) and which use the French cat variety consistently in the majority of the tweets. I excluded accounts displaying no use of cat's language or consisting only of retweets. While I first considered a quantitative corpus-based analysis (104,000 tweets from the 80 accounts I selected were retrieved), the significant variation between nonstandardisms as well as the

importance of the relation between text and image call for a qualitative, fine-grained study in this first exploration. Although the data is multimodal by nature, I have decided, for the purpose of the present paper, to focus on text-based interactions. By that, I obviously do not mean that semiotic resources should be analyzed independently. Rather, I acknowledge the complexity, for this opening investigation, of the textual features converging to the emergence of the enregistered variety, while keeping in mind that systematic multimodal analyses are still crucially needed.

Throughout this investigation of the internet variety, I regularly interacted with the cats on the platform. The analysis relies on two interrelated types of data: first, tweets using the French cat variety (e.g., (6), (7)), second, metapragmatic assessments by the community, including spontaneous comments (e.g., (2), (3)), and reactions to my tweets, i.e., cats directly engaging with me (e.g., (4), (5)).

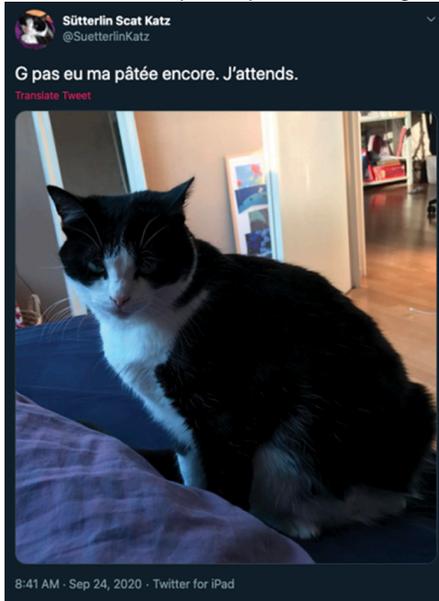
5. Constructing an ambivalent sociolinguistic persona: Cats as arrogant yet needy pets

In describing the formal structures typical for the French cat variety, I show that the unique combination of discussing mundane topics and political matters as well as the use of a childlike code and a formal register sketch an ambivalent sociolinguistic persona characteristic for French-speaking cats.

5.1 Recurring topics: More than snapshots of the cats' daily lives

The cats' accounts revolve around a relatively fixed set of topics that can easily be depicted with pictures – an important aspect, as the tweets are almost always accompanied with pictures. The quantitatively most represented topic is being hungry and consequently, wanting humans to wake up to feed them – here humoristically taken upon with a picture of the cat with a frowning face:

Example 6. “I haven’t had my feed yet. I’m waiting”



Other recurring motives are motivated by the cats’ ambivalence: For instance, they both want to go outside yet fear it, or are excited about paper boxes and yet destroy them. Altogether, the topics cats engage with reflect the “cat’s outstanding characteristics”: “sensuality, softness, cuteness, a strong sense of personal space, and a wily capacity to pretend indifference” (Berland 2008: 432).

Another important aspect, probably influenced by Claire Placial’s literary background, concerns recurring discussions on the notion of authorship:

Example 7. “Fake news! I’m not a people, I’m a real cat!”



Example 8. “I am a real cat”



The tweet reads: “But I don’t agree very very much the madam the teacher she said this is my human who writes my account she said I am the fiction but I am not the fiction I am a real cat as there is.” The framing of cats as discourse participants is constitutive of the existence of a distinct cat’s language: The variety can

develop as a variety of its own only on the postulate that cats – and not their owners – speak:

Example 9. “Uh no there are already too many humans on the twitter”



When I tweeted to announce the comeback of my mom’s cat after eight months, Pluches, a rabbit on Twitter, exclaims, “He [my mom’s cat] needs the Twitter!” I reply, “Well okay but I don’t live with my mom anymore! I’ll have to convince her to get on Twitter then.” Feu Crapouille then argues that “Uh no there are already too many humans on the twitter” and that my mom need not create an account, but only Feu Crapouille’s colleague, i.e., my mom’s cat.

Playing around who is behind the account is common practice that establishes cats as principals i.e., “someone who is committed to what the words say” (Goffman 1981: 144). In her analysis of family interactions, Tannen (2004: 400) examines acts of *ventriloquizing* as “a discursive strategy by which family members, in communicating with each other, speak through nonverbal third parties – preverbal children or pets” (also see Mondémé 2018: 89–91 for French). Drawing on the Goffmanian framework, Tannen shows that animals are not the *principals*, as the family members interact through them but remain responsible for the content. On Francophone Twitter however, the cats are instantiated as the *principals*. Going further, the cats’ accounts display agency by arguing that the cats are also the *authors* of the content produced as they “select [...] the sentiments that are being expressed and the words in which they are encoded,” as well as the *animators*, as if they were “individual[s] active in the role of utterance production” (Goffman 1981: 144). The cats thus are the animation of an author (the one creating the variety) who is also the animator (the one typing) and principal (the one responsible for the content) of an alternative world.

Obviously, the cats’ voices remain mediated through humans. In her exploration of dog blogs, Leppänen (2015: 66) indeed considers that the dog’s discourse is “pervasively contaminated by the human voice and human perceptions and discourses about dogs.” The constant tension between pretending to *be* a cat on the one hand, and surfing on the basic knowledge of the recipient that the account *cannot* be enacted by a cat on the other, is symbolic for the ambivalence pervading the cats’ means of expression (and palpable in shortcuts such as speaking of ‘French-speaking cats’ in lieu of ‘accounts of French-speaking Twitter users posing as their cats’). Insisting on acting as *authors* – “I’m a real cat,” as the title of this paper says – then paradoxically emphasizes even more that the accounts are obviously not curated by the cats, thus contributing to the playful ambivalence characteristic for French-speaking cats.

Finally, the cats’ accounts do not only present snapshots of the cats’ daily lives, but also address current social issues (10) or language matters (11):

Example 10. A cat retweeting information about suicide prevention



While the first tweet in (10) is written in the cat variety, the following tweets are written in standard French, thus showing that the cat’s account moves beyond its strict editorial line to reach a wider audience: “We must help people to pass these crises which can often be only temporary,” the thread concludes.

Example 11. “Reminder for the *Cacadémie française*: the Correct Use of language it is: you say what you want, this is it”



In her bio, @SutterlinKatz describes herself with three attributes: as a *féliniste* (wordplay feline/feminism), as a *cacadémicienne*, a portmanteau word consisting of *caca* (‘poop’) an *académicienne* (female member of the Académie, here the French Academy, council for matters pertaining to the French language), and as appreciating *le lard moderne*, a wordplay or homophone around ‘the modern art’ (*l’art moderne*) and ‘modern lard.’ The wordplays emphasize typical traits of Sütterlin Scat Katz, in particular the consistent interest for poop and food, but also match the online persona of the cat’s owner, who is (from what can be read on her main account) a feminist, critical of language standardisms, and interested in arts and aesthetics. The comment by Nounours le présinours, who asks to “approve of *chocolatine*,” refers to the linguistic divide between *pain au chocolat* and *chocolatine* (‘chocolate bread’), two competing linguistic expressions to refer to the same pastry depending on the region. In the reactions to Sütterlin Scat Katz’s tweet, the cats plead for a general openness towards all language varieties, concluding “that the important thing is not the pain au chocolat or the chocolatine, the important thing is to enjoy yourself when you eat it.”

Some tweets experiment with gender-inclusive language, here with the use of the point within a word (*humain.e*) or the highly disputed gender-neutral pronoun *iels* (blending of *ils* and *elles*, masculine and feminine form of plural ‘they’):

Example 12. “Generally the religious humans who they have the big robes it’s very convenient too you can build shacks”



Inventing a French cat variety then becomes a way to challenge standard language ideologies and to transform language as a creative playground on which all language varieties are not merely allowed or tolerated, but also celebrated. Despite the consistent use of recurring features, the French cat variety has indeed not undergone a consistent process of standardization. The French cat variety indeed varies a lot, and this cannot only be explained by the absence of any overarching control mechanism such as the French Académie française which attempts to monitor language change. More profoundly, French-speaking cats resist homogenization, promoting that ‘say[ing] what you want’ (11) is at the core of the cats’ persona, and thus is reflected in their innovative and sometimes idiosyncratic use of language (see Section 6).

5.2 Lexical features: Euphemisms, exaggerations, and wordplays

The French cat variety is characterized by specific lexical features referring to the “cat world” (Gawne and Vaughan 2011:111). Similar to the “meowlogisms” (Podhovnik 2018: 10) of English-speaking cats, wordplays with the word *chat* are frequent and potentially unlimited. Examples usually include lexical blendings (fusion of two lexemes with partial loss of the phonological and/or graphic material of one them) such as *chaventure* (‘cat’ + ‘adventure’), *chamour* (‘cat’ + ‘love’), *chami* (‘cat’ + ‘friend’), *channiversaire* (‘cat’ + ‘birthday’), or *challoween* (‘cat’ + ‘[H]alloween,’ also see (14)). Less frequently, the alteration takes place on more complex phonosyntactic patterns: *cha suffit* (instead of *ça suffit*, ‘it’s enough’) or

on *chabonne* for *on s'abonne* ('let's subscribe'). Following English LOLcat, we also find *chatmedi* from *chat* ('cat') and *samedi* ('Saturday'), leading to the hashtag #chamedi (equivalent of #Caturday).

Furthermore, Francophone cats exhibit a range of features reminiscent of a childlike code, which possibly contributes to expressing a specific, twisted form of endearment and affection towards the cat's owner they tyrannize at the same time, once again pointing to the cats' ambivalence. Cats are 'lit cats' (*pôtichat* or *potichat*, portmanteau word blending *petit* 'little' with childlike or regional pronunciation (\poti\ instead of \pəti\)) and *chat* 'cat'), and cat owners are 'humans' (*humain-e*, *numain-e*) or the cats' parents. Cats often use euphemisms such as *la grande sieste* ('the big nap' for the death) or, on the other hand, hyperbolic expressions such as *le grand dehors* ('the big outside') and *la grande majesté / beaucoup la majesté* ('the High Majesty' / 'a lot of majesty'). Another hyperbolism is the expression *bonne journée/20*, 'good day/20', where the number 20 is the maximal amount of points you can get in the French grading system and denotes an exceptional performance at school. All these expressions are typical for cats and used only by them, but they partly remind us of a childlike code, in particular when considering vowels' alterations and hyperbolisms.

Other features typical, yet nonspecific for the variety used by cats, are lexical items pointing to a formal register such as *prédater* ('predate'), *prestance* ('stature'), *offuqué* or *outré* ('offended'), which evolved into the hashtag #Scandaloutrage, portmanteau word blending 'scandal' and 'outrage' and used exclusively by cats. Taking advantage of the techno-social affordances of Twitter, the use of #Scandaloutrage as a hashtag enables the members of the community to find each other quickly, but also to manifest affiliation (Zappavigna and Martin 2018). The combination of a formal register with the childlike code contributes to the cats' ambivalence.

A further specificity of French-speaking cats is that they do not recognize new words, in particular English loanwords that are being transcribed according to a French pronunciation: The Twitter-related word *thread* is constantly misspelled (e.g., *trèfle* in (10)), and we also encounter *choutingue* for 'shooting' and *meking off* for 'making-of' in (13), and *l'allowine* for 'Halloween' in (14), *taupe modèle* for 'top model' in (15):

Example 13. “My human she made the *chouting* [shooting] to me there you go this is my official picture and my picture *meking off* [making-off]”



Example 14. “My human she offered me WINGS for the *allowine* [Halloween]”



Example 15. “Look how I am the *taupe modèle* [literally ‘model mole,’ imitating ‘top model’]”



The French transcription of English words may not only be viewed as reflecting children’s difficulties in language acquisition, but also as a hint to the cliché of French people incapable of speaking English without a strong French accent. Here again, we see that through language play and self-deprecation, the French cat variety challenges discourses about languages. Going further, it may seem paradoxical that cats integrate English borrowings only by following French morphophonetics, while at the same time being highly creative when it comes to French nonstandardisms. This, as well, is instrumental in constructing the cats’ ambivalence: Cats make fun of English words, thus implicitly aligning with stereotypical language ideologies critical of English borrowings as a sign of “American imperialism” (*hégémonie américaine*) and globalization (Saugera 2017: 61), but also, in simply using them, further show that English borrowings belong to the French language.

5.3 The semantic field of personal relations: Childlike politeness and obsequiosity

The cats’ ambivalent online persona is reinforced by the use of diverging person-referring expressions to communicate with humans, cats, or dogs. While cats are ‘colleagues,’ or, following the childlike or regional pronunciation $\text{\}o\text{\}$ rather than $\text{\}ə\text{\}$, *pôticolleagues* (‘lil colleagues’), the cats’ owners are ‘humans’ (*humain-e*) or parents (*momon* for *maman*, ‘mom’):

Example 16. “I’ve had my themilk and I maz the hug with mammy”



We notice the same vowel alteration, as the French vowel / $\tilde{\alpha}$ / is realized as / \tilde{o} /, which seems to reflect a general evolution since the 1970s (Vajta 2012:150), but mostly is used as a distinction marker. Although the pronunciation of nasal vowels greatly varies in French, the orthographic spelling *mamôn* instead of *maman* reads as nonstandard. The referring terms index opposite relationships: When viewed as humans, the cats’ owners are at the cats’ service, while when seen as parents, the cats describe themselves as dependent on someone else. Although cats usually stick to one person-referring expression on their account, the use of these concurring forms in the community is another marker of ambivalence typical for French-speaking cats.

Another recurring pattern is the double use of the form of address *Madame* (‘Madam’) or *Monsieur* (‘Mister’) together with the first surname instead of the last name and the informal pronoun of address *tu* (T-form) instead of *vous* (V-form). The cats thus address me as *Mrs. + Naomi* (my first name), which is reminiscent of how children acquire pragmatic competence, but can also read as intentionally obsequious:

Example 17. “Mrs. Naomi she made the analysis of the cat sociolect that it is how we speak I con gratulate you Mrs. Naomi here is finally a linguist that she has an interesting subject”



Another possibility to signal ambivalence in address forms is the combination of *Mrs.* and the person-referring term *l'humaine* ('the human'), as in the following examples: *Bonsoar Madame la lhumaine* ('Good evening Mrs. the human'), *Oh pardon Madame l'escl... euh l'humaine* 🐱 ('Oh sorry Mrs. ScL... mmh human'), *Bisounez Madame la mamon de Soya* ('Make kisses Mrs. the mammy of Soya'). The combination of nonstandard French with mutually exclusive forms of address can be construed as an example of childlike code, but also as “mock politeness,” understood as “a kind of mismatch” (Taylor 2016: 2–3) during which the surface form of the utterance does not reflect the social meaning implicitly put forward. By being “ostensibly ‘polite’” (Haugh 2015: 4), the tweets sound obsequious, which also aligns with the cat’s persona as an animal fighting for its own interests and ready to do anything to reach its goal.

Finally, the third group of referents frequently mentioned are dogs, preceded by the expression *horresco referens* (in Latin ‘I shudder as I tell’) used as an epithet (*le horresco referens chien de la voisine*, ‘the horresco referens dog of the neighbor’). The modifier is also used for inanimate entities that cats despise such as medicinal products, or the lawn mower, the rain (*T’es très courazeuse avec l’horresco referens kimouille*, ‘You’re very brave with the horresco referens that gets you wet’), or the automatic spellcheck on a computer (*C’est à cause du horresco refer-*

ens correcteur 🐾. *Et les les écrans sont pas faits pour nos coussinets*, ‘It’s because of the horresco referens corrector 🐾. And the screens are not made for our paws.’).

5.4 Phonographic features: Between sociolect and language acquisition

The French cat variety presents a wide range of phonographic features which usually are not specific to cats but are to be found in some French varieties. Regarding phonographic variation, I have already commented on vowel alterations such as $\text{\textbackslash}3\text{\textbackslash}$ (‘on’) instead of $\text{\textbackslash}\tilde{a}\text{\textbackslash}$ (‘an’) in *momon* (*maman*, ‘mom’) or *dimonche* (*dimanche*, ‘Sunday’) (see also (20)). One of the most prominent features is phonetic elision, which renders spelling in the process of being learned or the difficulty in separating words that children learning the French writing system may encounter. First, nonstandard word separations such as *le partement* instead of *l’appartement* (‘the flat’) or *mon numaine* instead of *mon humaine* mimic the liaison typical for French language, i.e., the pronunciation of a linking consonant between two words, usually after the indefinite pronoun *un* (‘a’): *un appartement* [$\text{\textbackslash}\tilde{a}\text{\textbackslash}_\text{apartəmā}$]. The humorous effect in the nonstandard spelling of *le partement* is created by the inaccurate (yet frequent in language acquisition) transposition of the liaison principle to definite articles (*le*, ‘the’) and to words beginning with an aspirated *h*, with which, despite some exceptions, there is usually no liaison. The difficulty in separating words is visible through most tweets and thus counts as one of the most prominent features, especially as it can apply to all types of words: *lekonkours* for *le concours* (‘contest’), *l’ami graine* for *la migraine* (‘the migraine’), *comvoissi* for *comme voici* (‘here it goes’), *comême* for *quand même* (‘still’), *pasque* for *parce que* (‘because’). The blending of words culminates in *un tipeu* (*un petit peu*, ‘a little bit’), an apheresis and sociolinguistic feature indexed with low-esteemed dialects (Antillean creoles, Normandy, see Thibault (2008: 19–20)).

We thus see that the French cat variety cat does not only create new forms *ad hoc*, but also considerably relies on existing French varieties ranging from child-like code to regionalisms. These phonographic variations can be interpreted as “performing cuteness through pets” (Maddox 2021: 3335), as $\text{\textbackslash}3\text{\textbackslash}$ instead of $\text{\textbackslash}\tilde{a}\text{\textbackslash}$ and unnecessary liaisons may sound “softer” (see Wile 2020: 52 for English) and thus contribute to construct the persona of cats as lovely little creatures. Yet the ambivalence central for French-speaking cats is once again visible as cats draw on divergent pools of resources: While the imitation of a childlike code activates a connotation of cuteness and mimics how the cats’ owners address their pets in a baby voice, the misspellings based on deprecated varieties, on the contrary, operates on well-known language ideologies via stereotypes to imply that cats are not able to speak like humans (that use unmarked and highly valued standard vari-

eties of French), although it is worth noting that Twitter users take issue with this hierarchical interpretation (see (21) and (22) below).

5.5 Syntactic features: A mix-and-match

Finally, the French cat variety presents typical syntactic features that are used – in this combination, but also often independently – only within the community. *Que*-constructions are a noticeable feature of Francophone cats (see *que il est trop malin*, *que grâce à lui* in (2), *que c'est nous* in (4), *que le numéro de Isis* in (10), *qu'est-ce qu'on veut*, *que merci* in (11) *qu'iels ont les grandes robes* in (12), *qu'elle a un sujet intéressant* in (17)), and can involve the repetition of an NP as a pronoun congruent in number and gender (underlined in (18)):

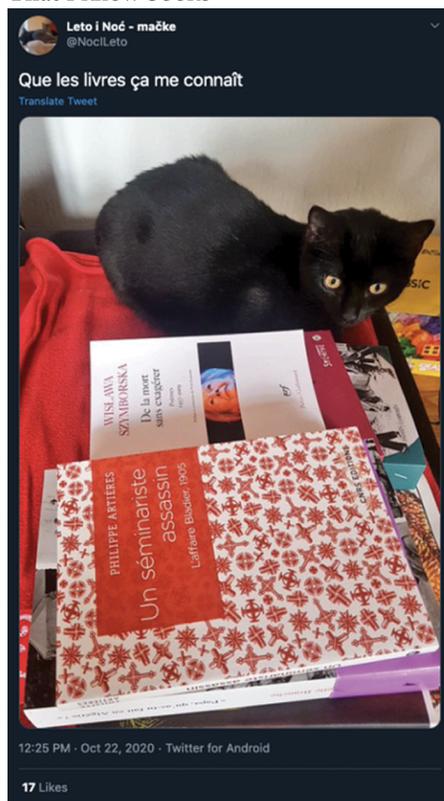
Example 18. “Oh oh the restaurant it has put salmon pâté in the order of the human that she is a greens eater (🥰🥰) so I'm the one who got it [the salmon] 🐱🐱”



(18) combines two features, namely *que*-constructions (the human **that she**) and the double mention of a unique referent ('the restaurant **it**', 'the human **that she**'). The use of *que* ('that') can read as a subject relative pronoun in standard French (*qui*): 'the human **who** is.' As a non-cat user comments, "[t]his generalization of *que* as the sole relative pronoun is common in nonstandard French, especially to

replace *dont*²³ (usually ‘those’) (e.g., *elle dont je connais la mère / celle que je connais sa mère*, ‘she whose mother I know’). Moreover, the same referent is thus instantiated twice, as an NP and the corresponding pronoun, although the repetition appears unnecessary in standard French. The use of *que*-constructions is so pervasive that it is one of the first features adopted by new members such as *Leto i Noć – mačke* who joined in September 2020:

Example 19. That I know books



An important difference between (18) and (19) is, however, that *que* (‘that’) is used without antecedent in (19), which may also be reminiscent of the title of a popular song by Johnny Hallyday, a French rock and roll and pop singer: *Que je t’aime*. As Claire Placial observes, the integration of *que* in newest tweets thus works differently than her initial use: “I have the feeling new accounts [*sic*] tend to use *que* more at the beginnings of tweets [as in (20)], while Scat’s account uses it as a “par

3. See https://twitter.com/Jeanotin_Guern/status/1335271128118534149 (accessed 12 September 2021).

défaut” [by default] pronom relatif [relative pronoun].”⁴ We thus see that the use of specific features within the community does not need to rely on a strict pattern to index the cat’s sociolinguistic persona, but can creatively extend and adapt core features with presumably shared hints to pop culture.

Another common syntactic feature is the use of verbs of with an ending in *-ir* instead of *-er*, which I render in the English translation as *-en* instead of *-ed* (*killen* for *killed*):

Example 20. “Unfortunately despite all the efforts the plant has killen itself. I specifically blame the Human, who she has preveneten me several times to provide care to the depressive plont”



(20) is typical for the ambivalent sociolinguistic persona of Francophone cats: On the one hand, the use of more complex verbs belonging to the second or third group (*suicidir* instead of *se suicider*, *empechir* instead of *empêcher*) reads – once again – as a typical feature of childlike acquisition, on the other, it can be interpreted as hypercorrection, i.e., as nonstandard use as a possible attempt at sounding more elaborate by extending a usage perceived as distinctive of a higher social status. Together with the high register expression *prodiguer des soins* (‘provide care’), the double interpretation of verbs with an *-ir* ending contributes to the specificity of Francophone cats compared to their English counterparts:

4. See <https://twitter.com/clairerplacial/status/1335619512641740806> (accessed 22 September 2021).

As ambivalent pets, French-speaking cats sound simultaneously innocent and feigned.

Another typical syntactic pattern is a mix match of auxiliaries, where ‘have’ is used for ‘be’ or the other way around: *elle a rentré* (‘She is come home’). Finally, most cats have issues with definiteness and overuse definite articles where they would not occur in standard French, as in *le Twitter* (‘the Twitter’) in (9). Two metalinguistic accounts on the reasons behind this use are offered: First, it enables to mix up feminine and masculine forms and to make the variation more visible (*le / la* instead of *un / une*), second, it is seen as a specificity of the language of the south of France imbued with low prestige.

The textual analysis of the main features of French-speaking cats has shown their specificity compared to English-speaking cats, as displayed in Table 1:

Table 1. Comparison of English-speaking and French-speaking cats

	English-speaking cats	French-speaking cats
topics handled	not discussed in the literature	a. mundane fixed set of topics that can easily be depicted with pictures <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – being hungry – symbolic for the cats’ ambivalence (e.g., want to go outside yet fear it) b. recurring discussions on the notion of authorship <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – social issues or language matters (e.g., gender-inclusive language) -> combination of everyday affairs and socially relevant debates (usually tackled from a humoristic and/or leftist perspective)
lexical features	– “meowlogisms” (Podhovnik 2018: 10) – hashtags (#Caturday) – onomatopoeias – univervation strategies -> relatively limited lexical inventory (although potentially infinite)	– “meowlogisms” (Podhovnik 2018: 10), including lexical blendings (<i>chaventure</i>) – hashtags (#chamedi) -> wordplays – euphemisms (<i>la grande sieste</i>) – hyperbolisms (<i>la grande majesté</i>) – formal register – nonrecognition of English borrowings -> combination of childlike code, formal register, and ironic distancing with dominant language ideologies in France

Table 1. (continued)

	English-speaking cats	French-speaking cats
semantic field of personal relations	not discussed in the literature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - double use of the form of address <i>Madame</i> + first name - dogs as <i>horresco referens</i>: use of Latin -> combination of childlike code, childlike politeness, and obsequiosity (mock politeness)
phonographic features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - abbreviations - letter substitutions - letter replacements - letter inversions - consonants simplification <p>-> baby-talk features (and, partly, features typical for computer-mediated communication)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - vowel alterations such as \ɔ\ ('on') instead of \ã\ ('an') - child-like or regional pronunciation \o\ rather than \ə\ - phonetic elision (parallels with language acquisition) <p>-> combination of childlike code and regionalisms</p>
syntactic features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - omission of subject <i>it</i> - use of verbs and adjectives as nouns - <i>I can has X / Do not want X</i> - regularized irregular verb forms in the past tense - double-marking of past tense - non subject-auxiliary inversion in questions - use of <i>-z</i> instead of <i>-s</i> for the third-person singular (<i>iz</i>) <p>-> nonstandard grammar</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>que</i>-constructions - double mention of a unique referent (repetition of an NP as a pronoun) - verbs of with an ending in <i>-ir</i> instead of <i>-er</i> (<i>suicidir</i>) - mix match of auxiliaries - overuse of definite articles <p>-> combination of childlike code (including nonstandardisms) and hypercorrection (by repetition and overuse of certain features)</p>

The column for English-speaking cats is based exclusively on a literature review, while the column for French-speaking cats relies on my empirical analysis of the Francophone community. Both cat-inspired varieties “involve[] the manipulation of every linguistic level” (Gawne and Vaughan 2011:104), but the set of features used by French-speaking cats is characterized by its ambivalence. English-speaking and French-speaking cats thus do not share as much in common as we may have expected, leading to think that the Francophone community

has established itself on its own rather than as a continuation of the English-based phenomenon. English-speaking cats resort to a simplified vocabulary and phonetic reductions. Taken together, these features mostly contribute to the sociolinguistic persona of English-speaking cats as babies or inapt at using standard English. Even if childlike code also belongs to their repertoire, French-speaking cats simultaneously draw on highly elaborated resources, including formal vocabulary, hypercorrection, and plays with other languages (English, Latin). The use of regionalisms moreover shows that the use of nonstandardisms, for French-speaking cats, does not only resort to made-up forms (as is mostly the case for English-speaking cats), but draws on existing varieties.

To sum up, the topics addressed by Francophone cats as well as the linguistic features they use point to an ambivalent persona characterized by a childlike code and/or variation pertaining to regionalisms and language acquisition as well as a formal lexical inventory and a high degree of metapragmatic awareness about language variation and change. This unique combination explains why the following tweet gave rise to defensive reactions:

Example 21. “why do you think that cats, if they had the ability to speak, would talk like babies??? I love my cat but she is super demonic and very intelligent!!! she will not be like ‘my human being she’ll gimme croquifeed. mioummioum bleg”



Members of the community indeed consider that variants, including regional and childlike ones that build the core of the variety, are not used to ridicule cats as unable to speak:

Example 22. “If you’re talking about the lil Twitter of cats: That’s a language we use, it’s not to infantilize cats. It’s just a way to express yourself. This movement of the cats’ Twitter has been created by a linguist in France [Claire Placial]. If you want more information, feel free to ask.”



As we see in this metapragmatic comment, the use of a childlike code is not construed as a way to mock cats (or children), but as a “language we use [...] to express [ourselves].” Importantly, as Haraway (2003: 37) argues, “[t]o regard a dog as a furry child, even metaphorically, demeans dogs and children.” For this reason, the use of a childlike code is always ambivalent. On the one hand, it can activate feelings of cuteness, on the other, it creates a hierarchy between competent and noncompetent language users based on the idea that babies and toddlers do not know (yet) how to speak. Refusing to see the use of a childlike code as a way to “infantilize cats” thus recenters the playful use of language as constitutive of the variety, rather than a means of demeaning other species.

In this sense, nonstandard features (are meant to) index the belonging to a community of practice. What also becomes apparent in this tweet is the willingness to open the community to new members, as the final utterance shows (*avec plaisir*, translated as ‘feel free to ask’), and as I will now turn to.

6. Constituting a community of practice: Towards the enregisterment of the variety

The consistent use of a set of linguistic features by multiple users can be interpreted as the pool of shared resources the members of the community draw on, which in turn fosters a sense of belonging activated both by the community-specific language and the emotional response to animals’ pictures (Wile 2020: 53). I have shown that the French cat variety relies on a consistent set of linguistic features. Yet, no user posing as a cat argues that the use of these features is a necessary condition to be recognized and fully accepted as a member of the community. The enactment of the community of practice thus builds upon an apparent paradox:

The members constitute themselves as such by displaying specific linguistic features promoted top-down by the most prominent cats who act as vehicles of language change, but *not* using the full set of features or not engaging with them at all does not preclude any cat to enter the community of practice. Participating in the creative practice of modifying and inventing linguistic features brings people together and maintains the community bonds (Fiorentini 2013: 93; Bury 2017: 88; Bury and Wojtaszek 2017: 31; Crystal 2018: 458), thus leading Gawne and Vaughan (2011: 121) to call these aggregates of people “communities of practice.”

Communities of practice are defined by mutual engagement, a joint negotiated enterprise, and a shared repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated over time (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). In her study of the #blackcat community on Instagram, Podhovník (2018: 2) describes users enacting cats as a ‘light’ community of practice, i.e., an heterogeneous group of users who share interest to a particular topic “triggered by a specific prompt, bound in time and space” (Blommaert and Varis 2015: 54). In a ‘light’ community, members are included through following, liking, commenting, and using cat-related hashtags (Podhovník 2018: 6–10).

Francophone users build a community of practice insofar as they gather around a common topic freely selected (mutual engagement), actively engage in a specific use of Twitter by specifically creating cats’ accounts (joint negotiated enterprise), and collaboratively develop new and innovative linguistic resources (shared repertoire of negotiable resources accumulated over time). Because the community is bound by regular interactions, especially in the form of mentions, and because the users actively welcome newcomers, I argue that on French-speaking Twitter, the community is not as ‘light’ as other online gatherings may be (for instance, people reacting to an ephemeral hashtag), as most cats interact very frequently with one another (sometimes on a daily basis) and provide support to the other members, for instance when a cat ‘goes to the big nap’ (dies) (also see Section 4.3 and (10)).

Most importantly, the French cat variety has become “an enregistered variety” (Squires 2010). Indeed, it is not so much, or not only, the use of specific linguistic features that make the variety, but the fact that it is perceived and ideologically constructed as a variety of its own. In Squires’ words, “it is not first and foremost a correlation between the internet and the use of these features that precipitates their enregisterment; it is rather the perception that there is some correlation, driven by the belief that internet language is unique” (Squires 2010: 470–471). Beyond special ways of languaging, it is the belonging to a community and the metadiscourse around it that contribute to the enregisterment of the French cat variety as an internet-related (here Twitter-bound) variety.

As we already saw in (22), French-speaking cats are very welcoming:

Example 23. “The buddies we have the the new colleagues that they are @RitaetRomo1 that have just come on the lil Twitter. Have to welcome them well! Welcome the friends 🍷🍷🐱🐱”



Francophone cats regularly invite newcomers to adopt the rules they want and foster a sense of belonging related to the mere fact of being a cat rather than a cluster of expected linguistic features: “you say what you want, this is it” (11) is the most central aspect in being a cat online. This is why, when asked how to be part of the ‘cat’s lil Twitter,’ no linguistic feature is mentioned as salient or constitutive of the variety:

- Example 24. – “look @DeweyDouxOui the nice little cat! Maybe you can explain him about the cats’ toutitoui?”
- “Well, it’s very simple: the toutitoui [Twitter] of the potichats [lil’ cats] is the potichats that make the toutituteur [Twitter] to explain how we adopt and train humans. And it’s also a moral support when there are humans who are sad. com’on colleague, come on toutitoui.”



It is mostly stated after Cook (2000) that language comprehension decides which users are members of the community and which are outside of it. Miltner (2011:30) observes that LOLspeak “creates the sense of <in-group-ness>” since only habitual users are able to properly use it. This does not apply, however, to Francophone cats, for whom the basic principle is “do as you want”:

- Example 25. “One had to translate for us, we like your tweets very much that because it’s very important to do the linguistics of the real life lil cats and not the prescriptive one because we don’t do anything we want to do as good lil cats but with conventions a lil bit to meow together”



Reacting to my thread in English, a Francophone cat explains:

Example 26. “There’s no real protocol”



As already highlighted in (11), Francophone cats actively defend the right to use language as they want as an inherent part of their identity against the policing or standardization of their variety. Using the French cat variety is thus, importantly, one of the rare moments when the belonging to a community is not bound to following norms.

7. Conclusion

This exploration of the French cat variety has shown that a specificity of French-speaking cats (compared to English-speaking ones) is that they do not only speak like babies, but also like clever, arrogant, and needy pets. This ambivalence is constitutive of their online persona: For their owners, Francophone cats do not only act like innocent children, but are also highly complex and sophisticated creatures, which is reflected in their formal register and dealing with political matters. Most importantly, the use of nonstandardisms, including a childlike code, variations typical in language acquisition, and regionalisms, is not constructed by the members of the community as a way to mock cats as deficient in their language practices, but as creative ways to animate an online cat’s persona.

Beyond the use of a consistent, yet not closed, set of linguistic features, a central aspect for the creation, maintenance and development of the variety is its metalinguistic acknowledgment as a variety of its own – a process called enregisterment. The French cat variety “becomes differentiable within a language as a socially recognized register of forms” (Agha 2003: 231), not only because the members of the community use and share a similar repertoire, but because they recognize and foster it as a variety.

Central to French-speaking cats is a welcoming culture based on the idea that anyone who feels like a cat can be one, whether they fully embrace the semiotic and linguistic practices of the community, only some, or not at all. This open-

ness sharply contrasts with recurring conservative debates on language use in the French-speaking community, especially in metropolitan France. In actively fostering diverse language practices that index the belonging to a community rather than promoting, say, the exclusive use of nonstandard variants as a marker of ‘being a cat,’ the people behind cats’ accounts promote a digital culture of acceptance and diversity in which the degree of conforming to a variety does not impact your integration as a full member of the community.

As everything else in the French-speaking community, the culture of openness remains ambivalent: The cats still cultivate the image of one cat, Sütterlin Scat Katz, as a starting point and pivotal account in the community, and attribute themselves Ministry positions that may read as ways to establish hierarchies or signal impact. Yet the inclusive stance is innovative on two grounds: First, as it fosters progressive language ideologies against (top-down) standardization, second, as it makes the internet, and especially Twitter, (finally) a nice place to interact in. Through these online practices seemingly on the margins, we thus gain valuable insights on how well-developed and well-established an internet variety based on imaginary language users can become. Despite their status as fictional characters, the Francophone cats enacted on Twitter build a cohesive community of practice apt at creating sociolinguistic norms, maintaining old ones through dissemination and adoption by the newest members, and, if necessary, dropping norms altogether. Because of the balance between preservation and creativity, it is to believe that French-speaking cats, despite their already senior status in internet ages (they were created in 2015), still have a bright future ahead of them.

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