Ghanaian usage of the interjection 'hmm' in online discourse

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Abstract

This study presents a qualitative analysis of the interjection *hmm* in written online discourse among Ghanaians. Using the theory of pragmatic borrowing, the study focuses on the orthography, positions, collocational patterns, and discourse-pragmatic functions of the interjection. The data analyzed were obtained from Twitter (X). The results show that in online discourse, *hmm* can be lengthened to show the intensity of one's emotion or reaction. The interjection can begin and end a post or be in the middle of a post. Also, it can co-occur with other interjections, pragmatic markers, and specific reference terms. *Hmm* functions as a verbal token of silence, and a user who opts for it may avoid face-threatening acts and avert trouble. It may also be used in various contexts to express a range of emotions, such as disappointment, pain/grief, and pity. The study supports the observation that social media interactions share some similarities with face-to-face interactions.

Keywords

online discourse, social media, silence, emotion, Ghana

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Introduction

Discourse on social media platforms has become a ubiquitous phenomenon in recent times. Some studies have claimed that language use on such platforms is specific to "internet language"—a set of conventions that exist only in digital spaces (Androutsopoulos, 2006). However, the term "internet language" has been criticized for its oversimplified connotations. Recent studies have therefore shown the importance of a rigorous approach in understanding the unique characteristics of computer-mediated communication (CMC). High et al. (2023), for instance, discuss how CMC impacts well-being, emphasizing the need for a nuanced analysis of online interactions. Studies such as Bieswanger (2013) and Darics (2020) argue that there is no distinction between the verbal modalities of online discourse and face-to-face interactions. It is, however, acknowledged that because the platform is predominantly text-based, there is often a lack of paralinguistic cues such as eye contact, facial expressions, nodding, hand gestures, and voice cues (Peterson, 2023). To fill the gap of gesture and voice cues, online interactants tend to use linguistic and non-linguistic strategies such as emoticons, capitalization, abbreviations peculiar to computer-mediated communication, unconventional orthography, and interjections. The choice of any of these communication strategies is dependent on the nature of the online platform (Chu, 2006; Darics, 2020).

In online interactions, especially when synchronous, interactants often show overt indications of understanding than they would in face-to-face conversations. Also, the interactants frequently use discourse fillers, including interjections such as 'ah', 'oh', 'um', and 'wow', to signal their continued attention and maintain the flow of the interaction (Schandorf, 2019; Sheehan et al., 2024). From a pragmatic perspective, these interjections are context-bound and often express one's reaction to a situation as well as one's mental state, action, or attitude (Ameka, 1992). They are lexical forms that constitute utterances by themselves (though they may not have lexical meaning), and they are "… isolated in relation to the speech material used in the rest of language" (Drzazga, 2021: 241). Interjections have no synchronic connections to other independently existing lexical forms in a language (Shannon, 2018). Goddard (2014) notes that these interjections may have multiple meanings. For instance, the interjection *wow* can be used to express surprise, wonder, or even other emotions. In online discourse, participants sometimes need to express their emotions, which leads to the use of various interjections. It is noteworthy that the usage of interjections on such occasions may imitate spoken language, and their meaning and pragmatic functions may not differ. However, since written texts lack vocal cues like intonation, the meaning of these interjections can be understood through the context alone (Taavitsainen, 1995, 1998; Levisen, 2019).

The use of interjections in online interactions has attracted scholarly attention in recent times (Anderson et al., 2024; Honkanen & Müller, 2021; Thompson, 2019; Unuabonah & Daniel, 2020). In general, previous studies on the use of interjections in online interactions have focused on their features, meanings, and functions (Alieva et al., 2014). For example, Lockyer (2014) examines the emotive features of interjections that are considered diminutives by means of the -ie/-y suffix on Twitter. Similarly, Thompson (2019) explores the meaning and use of the Akan interjection *tweaa* in online political comments posted on Ghanaweb.

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Despite the growing body of research on interjections in online interactions, there remains a gap in examining the use of the interjection *hmm* in Ghanaian online discourse, particularly on Twitter. While research has explored the usage of interjections in general or within specific cultural contexts, the functions and emotional expressions they are associated with in Ghanaian digital communication are still underexplored. This study, therefore, aims to add to the existing literature by investigating the use of *hmm* among Ghanaians on Twitter in light of Andersen's (2014) theory of pragmatic borrowing. The theory of pragmatic borrowing is particularly relevant for analyzing interjections like *hmm* in the Ghanaian context because it provides a framework for understanding how such linguistic elements acquire new pragmatic functions in online discourse. Understanding the functions and emotions conveyed by *hmm* in this context is significant for several reasons. First, it sheds light on how Ghanaians adapt their linguistic practices in digital spaces, reflecting broader sociolinguistic trends and cultural nuances. Second, the study contributes to the understanding of how cultural and linguistic influences shape online communication in Ghanaian contexts. This perspective enriches current discussions in digital pragmatics. Lastly, this research highlights the intersection of language, emotion, and digital communication. It shows how interjections such as *hmm* mediate the expression of emotions in online interactions.

The study is guided by two main research questions: (a) How is *hmm* used among Ghanaians on Twitter? and (b) What emotions does *hmm* convey in this context? To answer these questions, the paper examines the orthography, position, and discourse-pragmatic functions of *hmm* in tweets posted by Ghanaians. The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section describes the theoretical framework guiding the study. Section 2 outlines the methodology used. Section 3 presents a general overview of the use of *hmm* in different languages, with particular attention to face-to-face interactions in indigenous Ghanaian languages. This is followed by Section 4, where the use of *hmm* on Twitter in the Ghanaian context is discussed in line with the research questions. Section 5 concludes the study.

1. Theory of pragmatic borrowing

This study relies on the theory of pragmatic borrowing propounded by Andersen (2014), just like previous research on the use of interjections in Outer Circle varieties of English (Anderson et al., 2024; Unuabonah, 2020; Unuabonah & Daniel, 2020). Pragmatic borrowing can be defined as the transfer of not only linguistic forms but also their associated pragmatic functions and cultural connotations. Andersen (2014) suggests that when colonial languages came into contact with local languages, they influenced each other at all levels. This included the borrowing of interjections, pragmatic markers, general extenders, and politeness markers from the source language into the recipient language. The theory also examines the spelling adaptation, scope, collocations, positions, distribution, semantic stability, and pragmatic multifunctionality of these discourse-pragmatic features (Unuabonah, 2020).

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The Ghanaian sociolinguistic context offers a rich environment for studying pragmatic borrowing, as evidenced by some studies on indigenous interjections. For example, Thompson (2019) analyzed an Akan interjection *tweaa,* which expresses contempt. She demonstrates how netizens use the interjection to convey various messages in ways peculiar to Ghanaian communication patterns. Anderson et al. (2024), in agreement with Otoo and Sapaty (2018), identify *eii* as an interjection in Ga that expresses surprise. Also, while corroborating with Ameka (1991), Anderson et al. (2024) indicate that the interjection *ehe* shows that the user has recalled or remembered some information. Generally, several factors make the Ghanaian sociolinguistic landscape particularly well-suited for examining pragmatic borrowing.

These factors include, first, the multilingual nature of Ghana. Ghana has over 80 indigenous languages (Anyidoho & Dakubu, 2008), and major languages such as Akan, Ewe, and Ga significantly influence Ghanaian English. Secondly, the need to maintain the original cultural meaning of expressions. Thompson (2019) suggests that borrowed linguistic elements in Ghanaian English often carry their discourse-pragmatic features in a form that English equivalents cannot fully capture. Also, the use of indigenous linguistic elements in English helps construct Ghanaian identity online (Thompson & Agyekum, 2025). Furthermore, Adika (2012) notes that social media allows code-switching and the integration of indigenous expressions into English-language discourse. Thus, social media platforms, such as Twitter, provide spaces for linguistic innovation, where borrowed linguistic elements with discourse-pragmatic features thrive.

In this study, the interjection *hmm* is considered a linguistic element that has been borrowed from Ghanaian languages into English, which justifies the use of the theory of pragmatic borrowing.

2. Methodology

Setting

Data for this study were gathered on Twitter. In this study, we maintain the label Twitter because, although the platform is now X and has undergone a few changes, the platform was so called at the time data collection started. Twitter, according to Diemer (2013: 225), is "characterized by a strong sense of immediacy (similar to spoken discourse) and a conscious, but playful use of language with a strong interactional element". It can be accessed from a mobile device or any type of web technology. The interactions are asynchronous and visible to all users. Also, since Twitter only allows 140 characters per post, the messages are concise. These and other characteristics usually encourage language use on the platform in a more liberal manner, which may result in some deviations from standard language use. One advantage of using posts on Twitter is the ease of accessing multiple linguistic forms, which may not be the case with spoken discourse and other forms of written language.

Communication on Twitter is usually public and one-to-many, so it can be read by a greater number of people. The posts are often more aimed at informing a wider audience rather

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than sending personal messages. They contain oral-style interactional markers such as conversational particles/connectives, phatic exclamatives, pause fillers, response cries, repairs, tags, as well as interjections, which can all be said to be more typical of spoken rather than written language (Myers, 2010; Puschmann & Burgess, 2013). When one posts on Twitter, they have sent a message to the public, and anyone with a registered account on the platform can respond. Thus, people can respond to each other's posts quickly. In the data examined in this study, the majority of the posts with the interjection "hmm" are single posts without any response. However, a few are part of a thread.

Data collection

Data for this study consist of tweets related to Ghanaian sociopolitical, entertainment, and sports events, posted between 2019 and 2024. The initial data collection plan covered the period from 2023 to 2024. However, due to the limited availability of relevant tweets, the search window was extended retrospectively to 2019. This extension also allowed for greater thematic variation. Since discussions surrounding sociopolitical, entertainment, and sports topics frequently prompt users to participate in online discourse (Matthes et al., 2023), including these areas enhanced the diversity and representativeness of the dataset.

All tweets were gathered manually using Twitter's Advanced Search feature. Keyword-based queries included orthographic variants such as "hmm", "hmmm", and "hmmmm", filtered by language and location (Ghana) to ensure relevance to the Ghanaian context. Particular attention was given to replies to posts made by Pulse Ghana, a prominent news platform whose content frequently engages users across the three focus domains. However, the dataset was not limited to this source, and additional tweets containing the interjection *hmm* in relevant contexts were also included. In total, 389 tweets were initially collected, with tweet length ranging from 3 to 60 words. Many posts referred to widely discussed topics (e.g., elections, football matches, celebrity controversies), which facilitated thematic classification. Tweets that were off-topic or written exclusively in indigenous Ghanaian languages were excluded to maintain linguistic consistency. This resulted in a final dataset of 302 tweets.

Data Analysis

The dataset was imported into AntConc (version 3.4.0w), where the KWIC (Key Word in Context) tool was used to examine collocational and discourse-pragmatic patterns (Anthony, 2014). The study analyzed each post on the basis of its content. To avoid relying solely on the intuitions of the authors in determining the function of the interjection being examined, we looked at the context or in the co-text for cues guaranteeing the presence of an emotion (Dressler & Barbaresi, 2001). In cases where the co-text is not enough to provide context to the comments, the links to published reports on social issues that people tweeted about are included. Where a conversation thread is needed to provide context, we added the other comments to study the connotations and functions.

Although the approach to analyzing these tweets was primarily descriptive, the data collection process was rigorous enough to allow for future expansion using the same criteria. To minimize potential bias, an inter-rater reliability analysis was conducted. The authors independently classified the tweets into various discourse-pragmatic functions, and the classifications were then compared across all three authors in a meeting, where

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disagreements were resolved. The comments are presented for analysis just as posted by users, without any form of alteration. In instances where a word is spelled wrongly or there is a grammatical mistake, the siglum [sic] is applied. English translations are provided to tweets that are partially in a Ghanaian language or Ghanaian Pidgin English for clarification purposes. In cases where the Ghanaian language forms (e.g., discourse particles) do not impact the general understanding of the tweets, no English translation is provided.

Given that, like other studies on social media discourse (Davis et al., 2018; Tilley & Woodthorpe, 2011; Zhang et al., 2012), this study uses posts directly without alteration, there is a need to address the ethics of this practice. The guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers remain flexible to context, counseling common-sense avoidance of harm and ensuring protection and respect for privacy that might be expected. As noted by Bolander and Locher (2014), care is most needed when dealing with vulnerable populations talking about personal issues. We took note of these considerations while compiling our dataset. It is generally agreed that, unlike online platforms such as Facebook, privacy concerns are less applicable to Twitter, as messages are clearly intended to be publicly available to all netizens (Bruns et al., 2013). Even though we omitted the names of users and presented no identifiers with the posts, we admit that people who want to could still trace them back to the users who submitted them. Still, as the posts used as data for this study are not personal matters of users and do not come from a vulnerable population, there is minimal potential for harm.

In the next section, the study focuses on the orthography, positions, collocational patterns, and discourse-pragmatic functions of hmm in line with the theory of pragmatic borrowing.

3. Usage of Hmm in other languages with a focus on face-to-face interactions in indigenous Ghanaian languages

In this section, a brief overview of the use of *hmm* across various languages, with a focus on face-to-face interactions in indigenous Ghanaian languages, is provided. This is necessary to set the background for the discussion of the use of *hmm* on Twitter in Ghana.

Like other interjections, *hmm* is "an element of a peripheral class of the category 'sentence' which is context-bound and which typically encodes pragmatic meanings" (Drzazga, 2021: 244). It is a primary interjection that serves dual purposes. Based on the context, it can function as a phatic interjection and as an emotive interjection (Ameka, 1992; Unuabonah, 2020). The form, *hmm,* has been identified as an interjection in English that is often used in various forms of computer-mediated communication including web chats and social media (Hışmanoğlu, 2010; Palacio & Gustilo, 2016). Apart from English, *hmm* can be found in other languages, including Belize Kriol (Decker, 2005), Calunga (Byrd, 2012), and Czech, German, and Polish (Schultze & Tabakowska, 2004).

The meanings and functions of *hmm* are culture-specific and it is even possible that it may be phonetically different across the aforementioned languages. For instance, according to

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Hışmanoğlu (2010), *hmm* in English is "a filler that indicates hesitation in agreeing about what was said in order to avoid offending the person" or "an indirect way of indicating disagreement" (p. 9). In Czech, German, and Polish, the interjection expresses "mental states such as 'I need a while to think this over; I hesitate'" (Schultze & Tabakowska, 2004, p. 555). *Hmm* also expresses the idea 'so that's what you think!' or 'I don't believe that!' in Belize Kriol and other Creoles (Decker, 2005). Unuabonah (2020) identifies *hmm* as a space filler or hesitation marker used among Nigerians to show that the speaker is reflecting on or thinking about something.

Research shows that the interjection *hmm,* phonetically represented as [ɦmm], can be found in various Ghanaian languages including Akan and Ewe (Ameka, 1991; Agyekum, 2002; Houphouet et al., 2018; van de Geest, 2009; Yankah, 2012, 2015). Ameka (1991) describes *hmm* in the Ewe language as "an interjection which may be used to express 'pain', 'grief', 'regret' and the like" (p. 650). He added that the orthographic representations of *hmm* in Ewe include *hmm, huu, hum,* or *mhuu*. Speakers often exclaim *hmm*! to demonstrate how bad they feel when they think about a previous occurrence or some previous behavior of theirs (especially, a regrettable one). Ameka (1991) explains that in Ewe, the uttering of *hmm* is reported with the phrasal predicate *ɖe hu̱* 'issue hu' as in the maxims, *hu ɖeɖe meɖea hia ɖa o* 'the use of *hmm* (=grieving) does not relieve pain/remove one's needs', and *hu geɖe ɖeɖe veve ko wo dzaa* 'grieving a lot only increases one's adrenalin'. Both maxims suggest that the act of using *hmm* does not reduce one's woes; it rather adds to them. Therefore, these maxims, as noted by Ameka (1991), indicate that the use of *hmm* among Ewes in Ghana is viewed as an 'acting' rather than a 'saying'. Also, the maxims show that a speaker who uses *hmm* suggests an element of helplessness.

Using the semantic explication method, Ameka (1991) explicates the meaning of *hmm* as follows:

> I know something bad is happening to someone
> I don't want it
> I feel something bad because of it
> I want to do something about it
> I do this: [Hmm] because I want people to know what I feel (Ameka 1991, p. 651)

As noted by Ameka (1991), in the first component, the use of 'someone' in the appropriate context can be interpreted as someone else or the speaker. This is because the use of the interjection, *hmm,* among Ewes is not always self-oriented. Also, the progressive verb 'happening' helps one understand that the knowledge or thought of it is very current, even though it might have occurred earlier. The second component hints at a bad situation that the speaker wishes did not exist. The speaker wants to do something about the bad situation due to his/her feelings about the situation. The speaker thus utters *hmm*.

In relation to the functions of *hmm* in Ewe, Ameka (1991) states that it may be used to signal regret, compassion, sorrow, and self-pity in a situation where someone reflects or thinks about an occurrence. Consider an example below where *hmm* expresses sorrow or pity for another.

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1. *Hmm enye nublanui ewɔ nubla nui fia kokɔ dzɔtsu sia nanɔ tsatsam anɔ nuɖuɖu fim anɔɖuɖum* (Ewe)
   '*hmm*, it is a pity, it is a pity that this tall and stout chief should be wondering and stealing food to eat. (Ameka 1991, p. 650, ex 11).

In this example presented by Ameka (1991), the speaker shows compassion and sorrow for a wandering chief whom he found stealing on his farm. The co-text of the interjection makes it clear that the speaker is wondering why someone of the man's status could sink so low to become a thief.

The interjection *hmm* has been identified as a verbal token of silence in Akan. Yankah (2015) describes it as a sigh that "encapsulates a whole narrative, creatively deformed into a loud silence" (p. 8). According to Yankah (2012), the Akan traditional society has created a verbal space for silence, and this is marked with phrases such as *Mese hmm* (roughly translated as 'I say silence', 'I say nothing', or 'I reserve my words'). This phrase suggests a virtual implosion of words in the speaker or non-speaker in order to avert anger, confusion, or potentially conflicting situations that could lead to social crises (Agyekum, 2002). Consider the following dialogue from Agyekum (2002: 35) that illustrates a practical use of *hmm* in speech events among Akans:

2. Background of the case: A woman aged 33 from Assisiriwa in the Ashanti Region of Ghana went to the street, and heard that some other women of her age were saying nasty things about her. According to her, she became tongue-tied and could not speak. The following indicates how she reacted to the situation when she came home and had a chat with her sister.

T1: A: *Metee asem no me bo fui yie*. 'When I heard the news, I was furious.'

T 2: B: *Woyee deen*? 'What did you do?'

T 3: A: *Asem no mee me nti na menhunu nea menka*. 'My belly was filled by the matter so I did not know what to say.'

T 4: B: *Enti deen pa ara na woyee*? 'What did you actually do?'

T 5: A: *Megyee ahomekoko guu so sei ara hmm*! 'I sighed over it and just responded hmm!

(Agyekum, 2002, p. 35, case 2)

Agyekum (2002) observes that speaker A who used *hmm* in the excerpt had been provoked because she was told that some acquaintances of hers had denigrated her. She was baffled and at a loss for words. As can be seen in T5 in the excerpt above, her response to the provocation was a sigh and an utterance of *hmm*. To Agyekum (2002), the use of *hmm* in this case incorporates the silence that averted the trouble or conflict that could have ensued. This implies that among the Akans, not every situation requires verbal intervention, especially when it would be considered careless, unstrategic, and tactless to express one's thoughts in words. Therefore, the use of *hmm* as in this case can be seen as a discretionary exercise in restraint.

It is noteworthy that in the foregoing examples of the use of *hmm* in face-to-face interactions, the interpretation of the interjection may be influenced by non-verbal cues

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such as the speaker's tone, voice, facial expressions or body language. For instance, in a conversation, the use of *hmm* with a nod may show active listening and encourage the user's interlocutor to continue speaking. Consider in example 3 the use of *hmm* among the Akans that signals a speaker to continue. This speech event is rather formal as the interaction is between a medical practitioner (MP) and a patient (PT) in a consultation room.

3. MP: *Yareɛ a yɛrehwɛ no yɛfrɛ no schizophrenia*. (Akan)
   'The sickness we are treating is called schizophrenia.'
   PT: *Hmmm*.
   Hmmm (Houphouet et al., 2018, p. 44, ex. 5)

In this dialogue, the medical practitioner announces to the patient the diagnosis. Here, the patient only responds with *hmm* and makes no input. *Hmm* in this dialogue forms a complete utterance. Houphouet et al. (2018) observe that the patient uses *hmm* just to allow the doctor to continue with what must be done or his treatment procedure. They added that it may also serve as a moment of reflection on the diagnosis to the patient. They further noted that although patients and their caregivers, in many cases, lack understanding of medical terms such as schizophrenia, they do not seek any form of clarification from the medical practitioners. That is, *hmm* in used in such contexts to serve a phatic function.

Considering the foregoing, it can be realized that in face-to-face interactions among Ghanaians, a speaker can exclaim *hmm* when s/he reflects on something that has been said or that has happened and feels bad about it. Also, the expression *hmm* can be used to represent silence in speech events that are delicate in order to avoid trouble. Additionally, it is said to allow for the continuity of speech from one's interlocutors. While in face-to-face interactions, speech interactants can depend on non-verbal forms of communication to determine the function of hmm, in written online discourse, readers depend on the co-text. The following section discusses the uses of *hmm* on Twitter among Ghanaians.

4. Ghanaian Usage of Hmm on Twitter

In this section, some characteristics of *hmm* on Twitter are explored, focusing on its spelling variations, positions and collocation patterns in tweets by Ghanaians. The discourse-pragmatic functions of *hmm* on Twitter are then discussed, specifically its role as a discourse marker and the types of emotions it conveys during online interactions.

4.1. Orthography, Position and Collocation Patterns

4.1.1 Orthography

We observe that *hmm* varies in terms of orthography. Like in other words that are onomatopoeic, the variation in the orthography of *hmm* is often based on the repetition of a letter(s) to parallel the extension of a phoneme in face-to-face interactions. The letter 'm' is usually repeated to lengthen the interjection and show the intensity of the speaker's

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emotion (Anderson et al., 2024; Darics, 2013; Kalman & Gergle, 2014; Thompson, 2019). As observed by Govindan and Balakrishnan (2022), *hmm* is often elongated in tweets to stress its meaning in context. Generally, there is no limit to how an interjection can be lengthened on an online platform. In the dataset for this study, the letter 'h' with up to between two and eight 'm' was found, with the form having three 'm' recording the highest number of occurrences (n=195 out of 302 posts). In the examples presented in this paper, the use of the various elongated forms of *hmm* is demonstrated. For instance, the form with two 'm' *hmm* is shown in example 4, with three 'm' *hmmm* is shown in example 5, and with four 'm', *hmmmm* is shown in example 6.

4. *eii nti black stars paa nie. hmm seisei deɛ ive stopped o. can't risk my heart*
   'Eii so is this really black stars, hmm now, I have stopped (supporting the team). I cant risk my heart'

5. Ghana Black Stars won't put an effort in winning a game but rather will lose or draw a match and later on count on other with mathematics. Hmmm as for mathematics in football Ghanaians are good with that …

6. *So no one go rap with E Levy and Ghana Card hmmmm I feel like entering my TV kraaaa hmmm*
   'So no one will rap about E Levy and Ghana Card I even feel like entering my television hmmm'

4.1.2. Position and Collocational Patterns

Hmm, like almost all interjections, can appear in any position in an online post. It is only connected to other clauses in a post by means of context. It can be loosely attached to a preceding or subsequent clause that serves as its host clause in a post.

In examples 7 and 8, for instance, it occurs at the initial position to introduce the clause describing the feelings or thoughts of the user.

7. Hmmm... Which part of Accra is this... Or Accra shift go join another continent? #earthtremor
8. The hope is gradually been[sic] lost ooo. Hmmm Kwame Nkrumah Ghana paaa nie
   'The hope is gradually being lost o. Hmmm is this really Kwame Nkrumah's Ghana?'

In examples 9 and 10, *hmm* is seen at the final position in a post. Here, it emphasizes the emotion of the user that can be deduced from the preceding clauses.

9. Our river bodies are being polluted by illegal miners and as we are fighting galamsey, hmm NPP
10. Government invests in athletics for four years and sees good results Ghana will get from it. Still, the government dey spend more money on football but yet still it the same hmmm

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In some instances, *hmm* is repeated in a post. It does not appear in succession but appears at the beginning and end of the post, as seen in the examples below. The repetition shows an emphasis on the emotion being expressed.

11. Hmmm Ghana is really in a bad shape for the helpless, how can you make people buy forms then go through all processes but never heard from you then you choose to take those you like to go train hmmm
12. Hmmm why aren't i a Nigerian and arsenal fan but God say Ghana he go born me for plus man u hmmm

The interjection *hmm* can occur independently, functioning as a complete utterance in response to a preceding post. However, it is relatively uncommon to find it used independently as an original post. Consider the following exchange between A (original post) and B (reply):

13. A. If u step out of ur door.... that's 100 cedis gone *Ye bl3 oo.. Ye bl3 papa*
'If you step out of your door …, that's 100 cedis gone. We are suffering oo.. we are really suffering'
B. Hmmm

In this context, where the dialogue is asynchronous, B's use of *hmm* simply shows comprehension of A's statement and signals that B does not want to take a full turn (Knudsen et al., 2020). Nevertheless, the utterance of *hmm* carries substantial meaning beyond just acknowledgment. Here, *hmm* serves as a communicative tool that conveys an emotional or cognitive response to the preceding message, allowing the speaker to express understanding or agreement without necessarily elaborating further. Similar to the use of *hmm* in the face-to-face discourse in example 3, in example 13, B's response is minimal yet meaningful, demonstrating the power of an interjection to maintain the flow of conversation. The use of *hmm* in this case can be interpreted as "I understand", which could imply alignment or agreement with A's sentiments or serve as a form of validation of A's experiences and feelings. It also might signal empathy from B towards A's situation. In this case, B's response does not invite further elaboration. Rather, it offers a concise emotional or cognitive response that acknowledges A's message without disrupting the flow of the conversation. This minimal response is similar to how *hmm* functions in face-to-face Ghanaian discourse, where it often marks understanding, empathy, or restrained commentary. Thus, the use of *hmm* online reflects a pragmatic continuity with spoken discourse.

In addition to occupying clause-initial or clause-final positions and functioning as a standalone tweet, *hmm* can also co-occur with other discourse particles. Such collocations can enrich the meaning of the utterance, lay emphasis, or add layers of emotion. For instance, as illustrated in examples 14, 15, and 16 below, *hmm* appears alongside other interjections. In example 14, *hmm* appears alongside *eiii* (or *eii*), an interjection typically used to express disbelief, shock, or surprise (Anderson et al., 2024). This combination adds nuance to the emotional response being conveyed.

14. Politicians are the biggest scammer[sic] in Africa especially in Ghana our[sic] is far different from scammed hmmm asem ooo guys let's wake up early and

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change our minds for good and stop following the politicians in the name of the coins that they give us eiii hmmm

In examples 15 and 16, *hmm* co-occurs with the interjections *err* (*erh/eh*), and *heerrrrr* (*herr*), respectively. Both are phatic interjections that function as markers of emphasis that express an intense feeling (Unuabonah, 2020).

15. This country err hmm. NDC is demonstrating against bad governance and they're playing reggae with Asiedu Nketia dancing & laughing on top of car while the ordinary poor citizen pays huge taxes to take care of presidents and vice spouses. NDC & NPP bi joke

16. Heerrrrr hmmm this has been my fight oo. I'm even tired. Go on a BBC report which is good about Ghana and see how same Ghanaians will write negative stuff about the country as if Ghana is the only country with negative things going on

Furthermore, *hmm* can co-occur with discourse-pragmatic markers. An example of this is *kraaaa* (*koraa*) in example 17 below. The marker *koraa* originates from the Akan language and usually functions as an intensifier to heighten the force of the statement it accompanies (Amuzu et al., 2018). This co-occurrence demonstrates how *hmm* can collaborate with other markers to enrich one's intent and the overall communicative impact of their tweet.

17. So no one go rap with E Levy and Ghana Card hmmmm I feel like entering my TV kraaaa hmmm

Another marker in example 18 that co-occurs with *hmm* is *dier* (*deɛ*), a focus marker in Akan that highlights specific information within a message (Abrefa & Sanusi, 2021). Here, the combination with *hmm* enhances the communicative effect by signaling the user's particular attention to the national SIM card registration process.

18. Ghana 1 step forward 200 steps backwards. This sim card registration dier hmmm

It is clear that *hmm* usually co-occurs with other interjections and pragmatic markers, but it also appears alongside various content words, including nouns such as *Ghana* in example 11, where it precedes the noun, and *Ghana card* in example 17, where it follows it. Although these are not fixed collocations in the traditional lexical sense, their co-occurrence helps situate the emotional and pragmatic function of *hmm* within topical discourse. That is, *hmm* frames or emphasizes the sentiment expressed about the issue under discussion. Also, the collocational patterns show that the co-occurrence of *hmm* with other interjections and local pragmatic particles is not arbitrary but functionally motivated. These combinations help to index specific emotional states, intensify affect, and foreground speaker stance. They also reflect the integration of local communicative norms into social media platforms.

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4.2. Functions of Hmm

The form *hmm* is a prototypical primary interjection that serves various expressive purposes. Apart from its expressive function, *hmm* also acts as a discourse particle. In the following sections, *hmm* is explored as a discourse particle in 4.2.1, and the emotions it expresses are demonstrated in 4.2.2.

4.2.1 Hmm as a discourse particle

As a discourse particle, *hmm* is used to express hesitation or the desire to remain silent during a speech event. It signals a choice to withhold further comment. For instance, in Example 19, a user responds to a tweet from Pulse Ghana featuring a photo of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana, with the caption "caption this".

19. Hmm, I WONT SAY ANYTHING

The use of *hmm* here suggests that the user pauses to reflect on the photo, considering who he is as a person and his legacy and impact on the nation. The user may have had some complex thoughts about Kwame Nkrumah, which he chose not to fully articulate. Thus, the statement in capital letters "I won't say anything" that follows *hmm* further emphasizes the user's choice to remain silent. In the context of a highly symbolic image like that of Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, employing *hmm* as a verbal token of silence is a powerful statement that acknowledges the complexities surrounding his legacy or the political implications of providing a caption for it. To the user in example 19, the act of saying nothing may carry more weight or hold more significance than providing a caption.

Also, example 20 is a response to a news headline "Govt needs $2.1m to fix damaged Tema-Mpakadan train — Prosecutor tells Court", which was posted by Pulse Ghana together with a photo of the damaged train on 7 June 2024. The news suggested that a truck driver was arrested and appeared before a court for causing an accident involving a newly purchased train after leaving an unattended truck on the railway line. In court, the prosecutor mentioned that the government needed $2.1m to fix the train. The user in example 20 is familiar with the story, given that the news was broadcast nationwide.

20. I have nothing to say but hmm.

This reaction to the large sum of money required for repairs of the damaged train indicates a sense of disapproval or disbelief without directly stating it. Beginning the tweet with "I have nothing to say …" the user implies that they are aware of the situation but prefer not to share their thoughts or provide a full verbal response. Opting for *hmm* serves as a way to communicate disapproval without explicitly critiquing the subject matter or the entities involved.

In examples 21—24, the use of *hmm* is a reaction signaling disappointment over the poor performance of the Black Stars and Manchester United soccer teams in January 2022. Ghana Black Stars had drawn (1-1) with Gabon during the African Cup of Nations, while Manchester United had lost (3-0) to Aston Villa. It can be seen that the users who are

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possibly fans or might have just been supporting both teams were not happy with their performance. In example 21, the tweet begins with *herh*, an interjection that expresses shock among Ghanaians, and ends with *hmm* to convey dissatisfaction.

21. Herh black stars hmm

Likewise, in example 22, the use of *hmm* suggests that the user prefers to say less about the Black Stars and Manchester United, implying that silence is more appropriate in this context.

22. Black star plus Man U! Hmm I don't wan[sic] to talk much … !!

Similarly, in example 23, the user is expressing displeasure about these two football clubs. The expression *hmm* is emphasized by "if I talk, I will be in trouble". Here, the user explicitly connects *hmm* with the desire to avoid trouble. This aligns with Agyekum's (2002) view that *hmm* can represent silence as a strategy to avert conflict.

23. Ghana Black Stars Manchester United Hmm if I talk I will be in trouble

In example 24 below, *hmm* takes the initial position to demonstrate the user's inability to find words to describe the performance of the black stars. This reaction is further heightened by the adverb of degree, 'seriously'.

24. Hmm...seriously I have lost words to describe this current black stars team

Together, examples 19—24 demonstrate how *hmm* is intentionally used to avoid commenting or to express complex feelings without fully articulating them. The silence that *hmm* constitutes, as Yankah (2012, p. 1078) observes, "carries the potency of words but forebodes uncertainties". This is evident in the user responses in these examples, where *hmm* functions as both a verbal cue and a strategic avoidance of further engagement.

4.2.2. Hmm and emotions

It is not very easy to decode the kind of emotion that accompanies a particular occurrence of *hmm,* given that the posts are devoid of intonation and gestures. We, therefore, rely on the context or co-text of the interjection for clues. Here, we demonstrate that *hmm* expresses disappointment, doubt, pain/grief, worry, and pity. However, we admit that none of these emotions is traditionally attached to the interjection, *hmm*.

Disappointment

In example 25, the user is expressing disappointment in Ghanaians because to him/her, people in Ghana do not give attention to issues related to climate change and indiscipline but give much attention to issues related to sex.

25. All my Ghana people care about is sex related issues then boom attention but talk about climate change and indiscipline nobody cares! Hmmm Ghana

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Again, on issues that need public attention and citizenry discourse, the user in example 26 focuses on musicians and is wondering why none of them will rap about E-levy (a charge of 1.75% of the value of electronic transactions proposed by the government to take effect from February 2022) and Ghana card (a national identity card issued to Ghanaian citizens by the National Identification Authority). In Ghana, music is one of the mediums through which issues of national interest are brought to the attention of people in authority and citizens (Kambon & Adjei, 2017; Thompson et al., 2021). Although the introduction of the e-levy and Ghana card has generated some negative reactions from citizens, the user is disappointed that no musician has added their voice to the ongoing discourse. In addition to lengthening *hmm*, the user emphasises the disappointment by repeating the interjection.

26. *So no one go rap with E Levy and Ghana Card hmmmm I feel like entering my TV kraaaa hmmm* (Ghanaian Pidgin English)
'So no one will rap about E Levy and Ghana Card hmmmm I even feel like entering my television hmmm'

In example 27, the use of *hmm* conveys a sense of frustration and disappointment. The user is reacting to the perceived unfairness of the situation, where they are being taxed despite experiencing a significant loss in betting [gambling]. According to the user, they only win once out of 20 losses. *Hmm* here functions as an expression of emotional exasperation, signaling the speaker's disapproval of the taxation policy, while the additional phrase "*Hmm* a country called Ghana" suggests a deeper sense of disappointment regarding the sociopolitical context in Ghana.

27. Taxation on bet should be stopped immediately. 1 win from 20 losses and you have to tax me 10% Hmm a country called Ghana

In a similar vein, the user in example 28 is disappointed in the fact that one can use only the Ghana card to register their SIM card and no other valid ID card, even though they used those ID cards to obtain the Ghana card. Apart from the use of a lengthened form of the interjection *hmm*, the sense of disappointment is heightened by the use of capital letters to describe the Ghana card registration process as a nightmare in the first sentence of the post. It is also realized through the use of the rhetorical question, "what kind of a system are we living in?"

28. THE GHANA CARD REGISTRATION IS A NIGHTMARE. What kind of a system are we living in? The passport & other valid National IDs are the basic documents for registering for the CARD. Yet you cannot use these same Cards to register your SIM. Hmmm

Doubt

When *hmm* is used to express doubt, the user is trying to signal that s/he is not sure if s/he should believe what someone said or that something happened. By this expression, the user cannot be liable for the truth value of a statement or an occurrence. Consider the following.

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Background: The French Ambassador to Ghana, Anne Sophie Ave (who has been nicknamed Ambassador Akosua), was enstooled by the people of Hani in the Tain District of the Bono Region as the Nkosuahemaa (Queenmother for Development) of the town, under a stool name "Nana Benneh III". The picture that was published online saw her in Kente cloth and some ornaments. The interjection *hmm* in example 29 expresses doubt about whether or not the ornaments the Ambassador wore are real gold.

29. The way Ghana are [sic] praising the woman as #AmbassadorAkosua, hmmm Hope those ornaments are not real gold.

The use of *hmm* in example 30 shows the user's doubt about the fight about "galamsey" (a local Ghanaian term which means illegal small-scale gold mining) in Ghana. The doubt expressed here is because, according to the user, the river bodies are being polluted by illegal miners.

30. Our river bodies are being polluted by illegal miners and we say we are fighting galamsey, hmm

In example 31, we see a purported dialogue between the political party in power, the NPP (New Patriotic Party), and Ghanaians about free things, such as food, water, and electricity, that were given at the peak of the pandemic in the year 2020. The use of *hmm* in line 2 expresses the doubt of Ghanaians that they were not going to pay for these items later. Their doubt is even made clearer in the statement 'we don't trust you' in line 2.

31. L1. NPP everywhere from March to Dec 2020: Free is free
    L2. Ghanaians: Hmm we don't trust you. We'll pay later
    L3. NPP in December 2020: We said free is free. Vote for us for giving you freebies
    L4. NPP in March 2021: Pay for the freebies
    L5. Ghanaians: Ah …

Pain/Grief

In the following examples 32—35, *hmm* expresses pain or grief about a particular situation. In example 32, *hmm* begins the post and ends it to emphasize the pain of the user. Apart from repeating *hmm* many times, the expressions "where did we go wrong", "so sad", and "God have mercy" demonstrate the intensity of the user's pain about the behaviour/deeds of the Ghana Water Company Limited (GWCL).

32. Hmmm Ghana where did we go wrong, so sad. God have mercy Hmmm my issue with them GWCL is why the open the tap only during midnight.. I just don't get..... This stress up and down to sleep small to you be timing water flow Hmmm Ghana.. But the bill dier they know houses to bring it day time

In examples 33-35, the aggrieved users are lamenting about:

a) the daily traffic situation for workers

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33. Hmmm traffic makes people think u are hard working ..cos u wake up early to work and return late night.. meanwhile u spent 8 hours in traffic alone

b) the number of hours spent at the National Identification Authority (NIA) office for updates on their Ghana card

34. I wanted to do some updates on my Ghana Card , hmmm I went to the NIA office and waited from 8:00am to 9:00pm

c) the loss of Ghana and Manchester United in their respective soccer games

35. Hmmm why aren't i a Nigerian and arsenal fan but God say Ghana he go born me for plus man u hmmm

Worry

The interjection *hmm* can also be used as an interjection to express worry. In addition to the co-text, the interjection in each of the examples below is used to express that the user finds himself in a situation that he/she is concerned about.

36. I'm worried, so worried cos drivers in Accra don't care about bikes/motor riders. Now my license is ready but I'm worried and scared to ride in this Accra. Hmmm

In example 36, the user repeatedly expresses that he is worried about riding a motorcycle in Accra because of the behaviour of drivers. He suggests that even though he has acquired a license, he is "scared to ride in this Accra". The expression of worry, apart from the use of *hmm*, is intensified by means of repetition and the choice of the adverb of degree 'so' preceding 'worried'.

37. Ghana make hard oooh wey Doctors and nurses even collect bribes before attending to a patient hmmm asem paa nie
'Life in Ghana has become so difficult that doctors and nurses even collect bribes before attending to a patient. Hmmm it is a big issue'

In example 37, the user expresses worry about how difficult Ghana has become to the extent that "doctors and nurses even collect bribes before attending to a patient". The user does not just stretch hmm in this case, but adds in Akan *asem paa nie* 'it is a big issue'. This closing statement *asem paa nie* implies that the user finds the attitude of the health workers concerning.

38. Bet go show you ... Woman go show you ...Lotto too go show you ..... The government too go show you .... eeeiii hmmm now dier in Ghana nowhere safe o
'Bet will show you .... Woman will show you ....Lotto too will show you ..... The government too will show you ... eeeiii hmmm presently, in Ghana nowhere is safe'

In the same vein, the user in example 38 is expressing worry through parallelism that nowhere is safe in Ghana.

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Pity (either for self/others)
The interjection *hmm* can be used to signal pity for oneself, as in example 39, or others, as in examples 40 and 41. In the examples provided below, the users express sorrow evoked by a situation that they perceive as inappropriate and hurtful.

39. Ghana card got 13.2 m registered but me hmmm Only 46 followers heeer life no balance ooo
'Ghana card got 13.2 m registered but me hmmm Only 46 followers heeer life is not fair o'

The feeling of self-pity in example 39 is a result of the user's reflection upon the number of followers he has on Twitter as compared to the number of people who have registered for the Ghana card within a short period of time.

40. John Mahama isn't Lucky kraaa he fixed Dumsor before leaving power today Npp government claiming and receiving all the praises hmm it's sad erhh
'John Mahama isn't Lucky at all he fixed Dumsor before leaving power today NPP government is claiming and receiving all the praises hmm it's sad erhh'

In example 40, the pity towards John Mahama (president of Ghana from 2012-2016) is because, according to the user, he fixed an energy crisis before ending his tenure, but the political party in power is being praised for his efforts. The phrase "it's sad" with a discourse-pragmatic marker that signals emphasis among Ghanaians (*erh)* at the end of the tweet emphasizes the user's feeling of pity toward John Mahama.

41. Npp come power like more than 4 years this but still Abronye or watever in name be dey blame John Mahama for GH issues hmm.. I am just sad for the fools who will side with him.
'NPP has been in power for more than 4 years but still Abronye or whatever his name is blaming John Mahama for issues in Ghana hmm.. I am just sad for the fools who will side with him.'

Just as in the previous example, the user in 41 claims that Abronye (an executive member of the ruling party, NPP) is blaming former president John Mahama for issues in Ghana. The expression of pity in this example, however, is not toward John Mahama but rather the people who agree with Abronye's opinion, "I am just sad for the fools who will side with him". The expression 'I am just sad' used here reinforces the pity the user feels towards those who side with Abronye.

Conclusion

This study focused on the orthography, position, and collocational patterns, as well as the discourse-pragmatic functions of the interjection *hmm* in posts on Twitter by Ghanaians in light of the theory of pragmatic borrowing. In relation to the orthography, we observed that hmm is often elongated by reduplicating the /m/, and this results in *hmm* with a three

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or more-character sequence. Regarding the position, *hmm* is used to initiate a post, in which case it appears to constitute a spontaneous expression of an emotion that precedes the verbal expression. It is also used to end a post and expresses how the preceding information should be taken. With respect to collocational patterns, it was demonstrated that *hmm* often co-occurs with other interjections and pragmatic markers in indigenous Ghanaian languages.

The study showed that *hmm* functions as a discourse marker that serves as a verbal token of silence. As a verbal token of silence, *hmm* reflects a deliberate choice not to voice an opinion. *Hmm* conveys the user's emotional response without a direct, lengthy statement. It is seen here that *hmm* is employed as a meaningful rhetorical element to subtly comment on the discourse surrounding sensitive topics related to politics, sports, and entertainment. One who opts for *hmm* over a lengthy utterance in a potentially conflictive situation averts trouble or completely avoids face-threatening acts.

Also, *hmm* expresses a wide range of emotions. Thus, there is no particular feeling attached to it, and its meaning depends purely on the context. *Hmm* expresses disappointment, doubt, pain/grief, worry, and pity for self and others. The core of these expressions is not parallel but somehow related, hence the suitability of the interjection. Disappointment is caused by unmet expectations, whereby the outcome of an event contrasts with what one believes or thinks they should be. Similarly, doubt occurs when an assertion or occurrence does not match what one believes. Pain/grief, worry, and pity, in a broad sense, have to do with this divergence as well, since each of these feelings can be caused by situations that are not in line with one's expectations and get one concerned.

Furthermore, the findings indicate that the use of *hmm* in digital spaces closely mirrors its function in face-to-face Ghanaian communication, where it is employed as a discourse strategy to manage silence, emotion, stance, and politeness. In both modes, *hmm* allows speakers to respond without taking a full verbal turn, thereby facilitating interactional alignment and conveying affect without overt elaboration. Its frequent co-occurrence with other interjections and indigenous pragmatic particles reflects a culturally embedded expressive system that persists across spoken and online discourse.

In all, this study demonstrated that social media interactions exhibit some characteristics that show striking similarities to face-to-face interactions. It also highlighted an aspect of language use among Ghanaian social media interactants. Specifically, the study has shown how Ghanaian online interactants are able to borrow local discourse-pragmatic elements into Ghanaian English to meet contemporary communication needs while maintaining their cultural identity in digital spaces. Moreover, it has shed some light on the usage and discourse pragmatic functions of the interjection *hmm* among Ghanaians on Twitter. In Ghana, it is common to include *hmm* and other interjections in tweets to express a wide range of emotions. As the number of instances of the use of *hmm* in this study is relatively limited, it should be assumed that the results of the analysis reveal only general tendencies, which can be further confirmed in another study that is based on a wider corpus. In this regard, a quantitative study is recommended to reveal the frequency of use of the interjection *hmm* in relation to each of the functions identified.

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