

COLOMBIAN EXPRESSIONS OF CONDOLENCE ON FACEBOOK DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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ABSTRACT. This article is an examination of 245 responses to three death notice posts published on Facebook. The respondents had no other choice in reacting to the news given the gathering restrictions created by COVID-19 (April 2020-November 2021). By determining the way language points to the participants in conversation (i.e., personal deixis), it was found that to maintain social relationships, the respondents preferred to orient their message of condolence towards the bereaved or the family, followed by orienting the condolence towards both the bereaved and the deceased. In Spanish, orienting the message toward the self (i.e., *Lo siento* 'I am sorry') appeared to be the least preferred response. Behavioral cultural expectations also suggest that to demonstrate empathy, Colombian Spanish speakers make use of linguistic routine formulas focused on religious sayings or expressions that reveal signs of affection when expressing condolences. In managing the respect component, the respondents tended to ask God for mercy and strength for the bereaved/family and prayed for the deceased's soul. In addition, 18% of responses included emojis. These emojis were used to upgrade and strengthen the force of the expressions of condolence. Although the results cannot be generalized to the entire Colombian population, this study serves as a base to understand how Spanish speakers, and specifically those who use computer-mediated communication (CMC), respond to condolences, a topic scarcely investigated.

Keywords. condolences; bereaved; rapport management; personal deixis; emojis.

RESUMEN. La presente investigación examina 245 respuestas a tres anuncios de defunción publicados en Facebook. Los que respondieron no tuvieron otra opción para actuar dadas las restricciones sociales creadas por COVID-19 (abril de 2020-noviembre de 2021). Al determinar la forma en que el lenguaje señala a los participantes en la conversación, es decir la deixis personal, se encontró que, para mantener las relaciones sociales, quienes respondieron al anuncio prefirieron orientar su mensaje de condolencia hacia el doliente o la familia, seguido de un mensaje de pésame hacia el doliente y el difunto. En español, orientar el mensaje hacia uno mismo (es decir, decir "lo siento" o algo semejante) es la respuesta menos preferida. Las expectativas culturales de conducta también sugieren que para demostrar empatía, los

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hispanohablantes colombianos tienden a ofrecer condolencias en forma de fórmulas rutinarias, centradas en dichos religiosos o expresiones que revelan muestras de afecto. En cuanto al componente de respeto, las respuestas tendieron a suplicar a Dios por la misericordia y la fortaleza para los dolientes/familia y también extendieron sus oraciones por el alma del difunto. Además, 18.8 % de los mensajes de condolencia incluyeron emojis, cuyas funciones fueron resaltar y fortalecer la fuerza de las expresiones de condolencia. Si bien, los resultados no pueden generalizarse a toda la población colombiana, este estudio sirve de base para comprender cómo los hispanohablantes, y en especial aquellos que hacen uso de la comunicación digital (CMC), responden a las condolencias, un tema escasamente investigado.

Palabras clave. condolencias; afligido; gestión de relaciones, deixis personal; emojis

1. Introduction

Before the impact of coronavirus SARS-Cov2 (COVID-19) most Colombian people, as other cultures, usually followed a three-part funeral that included 1) the Vigil service, which takes place at the wake, 2) the funeral mass or ceremony, and 3) the rite of committal that occurs at the cemetery. Each one of these funeral parts allowed for expressions of condolences mostly face-to-face. However, the mandatory confinement declared in March 2020 and its strict measures did not allow funerals to occur until after August 2021. For this reason, both funeral homes and their clients had to virtually experience their mourning. Facebook, “the most significant, popular, and far-reaching [...] social network in Latin America” (Capriotti & Zeler 2020:120) at the time of COVID, allowed users to share the news about death. This article examines 245 posted Facebook comments written by a group of Colombian Spanish speakers in response to a friend’s or relative’s death announcement.

News of a person’s passing, either in face-to-face interactions or on social platforms (Kuang 2015; Cardozo, Raspanti, & Zanfagnini 2020), is usually met with politeness that includes gestures of tactfulness and respect towards the deceased as well as the surviving relatives or friends. Although politeness has been described as universal (Brown & Levinson 1987), the universality has come under fire in recent years as research has found politeness to be dynamic, interactional, and negotiated. According to Eelen, universality is shaped by a “set of social values which instructs interactants to consider each other by satisfying shared expectations” (2001: 128). One of those expectations is to create social bonds between each other in culturally appropriate ways given that each culture has its own ways to express grief and/or compassion. As Turner and Stets (2005) express, emotions are socially constructed, and what people feel is conditioned by socialization into culture and participation in social structures. In this respect, and by analyzing the ways in which (dis)harmony is managed (i.e., rapport-management approach by Spencer-Oatey 2000), García found that “[Peruvians] use strategies that respected their own norms of interaction and protect/maintain/enhance both their own and the interlocutor’s respectability face wants at the time of expressing sympathy” (2009: 422). In other words, during interactions, interlocutors try to protect their positive public self-image and want to be seen as valuable members of the society. By using Spencer-Oatey’s (2000, 2005) rapport-management approach and by observing the use of personal deixis², we can determine the interpersonal

² It can be said that the relationship between language and context is best manifested through the concept of deixis. It refers to a set of expressions whose interpretation depends on the context in which they appear. According to Yule (1996: p. 10), personal deixis involves a basic three-part division, represented by forms of address (i.e., pronouns) and possessives.

relations of a group of Colombian Spanish speakers in two behavioral expectations: showing empathy and valuing respect.

Likewise, Wierzbicka argues that “different cultures encourage different attitudes toward emotions, and these different attitudes are reflected in [...] the lexicon [,] [...] the grammar of the languages [, and the routine formulas] associated with these cultures” (1994: 133). Elwood (2004), Zunin and Zunin (1992), Yahya (2010), and Tareq (2013) have demonstrated how the routine formulas employed to express a condolence vary in frequency and form depending on the culture and the social factors (e.g., social distance, age, gender) involved in the interaction. For example, in a comparison of routine formulas between Japanese speakers, Japanese English learners, and Americans, Elwood (2004) found that the only group in which the routine formula “future-oriented remark” was absent was the Americans. This latter group was more likely to use the strategy “offer of assistance” and “express concern” than the other two groups. Tareq (2013), on the other hand, found that Arab speakers used similar strategies as those in previous studies. However, Arab speakers enhanced the politeness of their message by involving religious expressions that took the form of supplication. Also, females initiated more condolence utterances than males did.

When discussing the routine formulas, it is important to mention that English speakers often express their sincere feelings through personal deixis. That is by using the pronoun “I.” Therefore, in the example “I am (very) sorry (deeply sorry) for your loss”, the pronoun plays the main focus when offering the condolence. In Spanish, on the other hand, speakers “exhibit a strong rapport-enhancing orientation using expressions focused on paying homage to the deceased and showing respect to those left behind through words or actions that provide comfort, closure, and strength to bear the loss. An example of this is in (1):

- (1) Señor dale Fortaleza a la señora Marta y a mi comadre, sus nietos, hermanos para salir Adelante y él descanse en paz. Una gran persona, mi Dios lo reciba en su santa gloria. Paz en su tumba.
‘Lord, give a lot of strength to Mrs. Marta, to my godmother, to her grandchildren, and to her brothers to keep going, and may the deceased rest in peace. A great person, may God receive him in his Holy Glory. Peace in his tomb.’

While individualistic societies (i.e., Americans) manifest their feelings and emphasize self-restraint and control of emotions (Bednarek 2008), interdependent people (i.e., Hispanics) use emotions as a public instrumental action involving others as a way of showing closeness and friendliness (Bravo 2008). For this reason, in the sociocultural context that condolences imply, politeness should not be seen only as a way of seeking absolution from God for the deceased, but also as a way of maintaining and reinforcing social relationships, especially with family or friends (Hernández-Flores 1999). In this article, the strategies for expressing condolences in a group of Colombians will be examined.

Previous research on how Spanish speakers offer condolences in writing is scarce. In fact, Quesada Vargas (2009) is the only study, to our knowledge, that focuses on the analysis of linguistic patterns of condolences published in newspapers. This type of publication, unlike the newer technological platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, etc.), are typed and edited by professional editors, resulting in unreliable data. The newer social

networking platforms, on the other hand, allow users to manage their own written information providing researchers with a better sample of natural data. Communication via social networking, technically referred to as computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Herring 1996), has been extensively used for studies of speech acts and of expressions of condolence in several languages but not Spanish. Research has demonstrated that there are user-related patterns of language use associated with interaction with CMC that are worth analyzing (Androutsopoulos 2006; Crystal 2001; Dürscheid & Frehner 2013). Some of these characteristics include emojis, non-standard spelling, abbreviations, and non-standard punctuation. In the same spirit of ethnomethodology, computer-mediated data have been collected and analyzed following the methodology known as netnography. This is defined as “a participant-observational research based in online fieldwork [that] uses CMC as a source data to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon” (Kozinets 2015: 60).

This article is organized as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of relevant literature on the theoretical framework and previous studies on condolences. Section 3 describes the data collection method used, including a description of the data (Facebook responses to a notice of death), the context, and data analysis. Section 4 presents the results and discussion. Section 5 ends the article with concluding remarks and possible future directions.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Levels of pragmatic analysis

Since the second half of the last century, the theory of speech acts proposed by John Austin is based on the assumption that in saying something, one is doing something. He added that communication is a series of communicative acts or speech acts that are used systematically to accomplish particular purposes. According to him, all utterances, in addition to providing meaning, perform specific actions (or things) through specific forces. Likewise, Searle (1979) categorized the speech act of offering condolences as expressive acts. These acts have the purpose of externalizing the speaker’s psychological state as speakers deal with situations of grief and condoling. Even though one must be prepared to offer condolences in life, most of the speech acts studies tend to explore are those acts that occur in one’s daily life (e.g., requests, apologies, complaints, refusals, etc.). Research on how condolences are realized in different cultures is useful for second language learners (L2) who wish to interact successfully in a community which is not their own. Indeed, Elwood describes that “news of a death may be announced without prior indication, leaving the speaker with no time to prepare” (2004: 252). Sympathy, as an emotion, is guided by rational behavior based on sociocultural and pragmatic norms that are difficult for L2 learners to acquire. When sympathy is expected, both native speakers of the language and L2 learners might fail to communicate a pragmatically appropriate utterance, and thus, they might face negative consequences in their communication including pragmatic failure or a lack of intersubjectivity between interlocutors. For this reason, studying the speech act of condolences is vital.

Although this article does not deal with a cross-cultural analysis of expressions of condolence, it might serve second language learners in learning how to express emotions such as sympathy in a culturally and pragmatically appropriate manner. This is an essential component of communicative competence.

Based on studies in the Spanish speaking world, showing closeness and friendliness are key factors in interaction (Bravo 2008). Accordingly, in this socio-cultural context, politeness in expressions of condolences is seen as a way to enhance social relation, especially with family and friends (Hernández-Flores 1999). In studying this, the “rapport management approach” (Spencer-Oatey 2000, 2005) is used to describe the way language is used in the management of social relations. Judgment about appropriate behaviors in a given context derive from two interactional principles: the “equity principle” (i.e., people have the right to be treated fairly) and the “association principle” (i.e., people’s perceived right to associate with others by showing involvement, empathy and respect) (Spencer-Oatey 2005: 99-100). In the analysis of expressions of sympathy, García (2009) found that female Peruvians preferred to express empathy and involvement while males preferred to convey respect and empathy.

Research on the relationship between form and function has been greatly influenced by speech act theory. Renkema states that “in speech act theory, language is seen as a form of acting” (1993: 21). When communicating in any written or oral interaction, those involved cannot understand each other if they do not understand the context or if they do not know who is speaking, about whom, where and when. The presence of personal deixis is one of the goals of the study. This type of deixis concerns itself with the grammatical persons involved in an utterance: (1) those directly involved (e.g., the speaker, the addressee), (2) those not directly involved (e.g., the deceased), and (3) those mentioned in the utterance. Thus, by observing the personal deixis one can determine to whom the message is directed: the bereaved, the deceased, or the self.

Although the selection and use of personal deixis including personal pronouns, possessives, and vocatives have not been studied in the context of expressions of sympathy, analyses of political discourse have highlighted that the use of personal deixis is crucial in how politicians maintain their relationship with their followers (Blas Arroyo 1999; Wilson 1990). For example, Wilson (1990) has shown how politicians ‘manipulate’ the pronominal system to accept or reject responsibility for certain acts, establish political alliances, or strengthen solidarity among the members of the same political group. Wilson suggests that a pragmatic analysis of the deixis can offer “a pronominal window into the thinking and attitude of politicians towards particular topics and political personalities” (1990: 59). Therefore, analyzing the expressions of condolence in relation to the personal deixis will offer us a clearer picture of the attitude and motive(s) used when offering a condolence.

2.2. Condolences in Spanish

Research on expressing condolences in Spanish has been scarce. García (2009) and Quesada Vargas (2009) pioneered the first studies that serve as the basis for our analysis; however, the two researchers’ methodology and data are different from the methodology of the present study.

García (2009) studied how condolences worked for Peruvian Spanish speakers in a situation exhibiting power differential and social distance between participants. Using Spencer-Oatey’s (2000, 2005) rapport management approach, which focuses on how social relationships are constructed, maintained, or threatened through interactions, García determined that participants in Peru used a variety of pragmatic strategies that responded to the behavioral expectations of involvement, empathy, and respect (see Table 1 for examples of each strategy). For example, the participants showed desire to be part of the

interlocutor's inner group by "claiming in-group membership", "requesting information", and "offering cooperation." Also, Peruvians used strategies that respected the empathy component and that contributed to soften the change of footing in the interaction. These strategies included "expressing sympathy", "expressing grief/sorrow", "offering comfort", "expressing disbelief", and "giving advice." Finally, to show respect, Peruvians tended to use "preparators", "provided explanations", "praised the deceased or the widow", and "provided business information."

Table 1. Strategies and examples of expression of sympathy taken from García (2009: p.418).

Strategy	Example
1. Involvement component a. Claiming in-group membership b. Requesting information c. Offering cooperation	a. I used to work there with your husband for three years. b. But, how did it happen? What has happened? c. Anything that I can help you with, you let me know.
2. Empathy component a. Expressing sympathy b. Expressing grief/sorrow c. Offering comfort d. Expressing empathy e. Expressing disbelief f. Giving advice	a. Thinking of you. b. Everyone is despaired. c. Don't worry. d. I am really sorry. My condolences. e. I cannot believe that this has happened. f. It would be good to see the doctor to find out what he died from.
3. Respect component a. Preparator b. Providing explanations c. Praising deceased d. Praising widow e. Providing business information	a. I have to tell you something. b. I have just found out that your husband has passed away. c. He was a totally healthy man and full of many projects and many plans in the office. d. You have been so good to him. e. There are bills in dollars and he has passed away and I don't know how to pay for it.

Even though Peruvians exhibited orientation towards the maintenance and reinforcement of interpersonal relationships, some speakers violated the principle of fairness and, for example, offered advice or discussed business information at a time when condolences were given. García suggests that by not breaking the communicative goal, this behavior can be understood as accepted behavior in the culture. The results cannot be generalized to all Peruvians, but García demonstrated that regardless of the differences in power and social distance, her participants respected the image of the bereaved, and the communicative goals were highly focused on the communicative transaction: expressing their condolences to the bereaved and offering their unconditional support and cooperation.

García's research suggests that Spanish is a language where the speakers pay homage to the deceased and show respect and concern for those left behind. Although the validity of the role-play used for the research has been discussed (Félix-Brasdefer 2003), it is possible that the participants react differently in real situations. Also, García's study included only one role-play and, therefore, there is a need to analyze other situations using natural data and other varieties of Spanish, such as from Colombia.

In a different study focused on the funeral death notices written by friends or coworkers of the deceased, Quesada Vargas (2009) demonstrated that Costa Ricans show their respect for the deceased and their empathy by denying the person's departure and by presenting the deceased as an active subject still full of life and as a participant. In doing so, Costa Ricans make use of the present tense in phrases such as: "(s/he) rests in the Peace of the Lord", "(s/he) walks with our Lord", and "(s/he) returns to our father's lap". The word "death" was replaced 89% of the time by using "passing", "departure from life", and "loss". Furthermore, these words were accompanied by adverbial phrases, such as "profound, with profound regret, sadly, with sadness" that strengthen the force of the speech act. In expressing their concern and support for the others, Costa Ricans build up bonds of solidarity with the mourners through displays of affection expressed by words referring to hugs, affection, and solidarity. And although the relatives or friends do not receive these physically, at least when they read the death notices, they perceive the understanding and the companionship of those who appreciate them. These feelings help to mitigate the pain produced by the death. Quesada Vargas's analysis of words and expressions of condolences may have been influenced by the newspaper's editors or proofreader. This is why gathering data written by the authors of the Facebook response may yield more authentic responses.

2.3. Cross-cultural variation of expressions of condolence

Studies focusing on the study of speech acts including apologies, requests, refusals, etc., have mostly analyzed the data following Olshtain and Cohen's (1983) proposed classification of the routine formulas for apologizing. This classification constitutes the core of all categorizations used in the studies of speech acts including condolences. Accordingly, Elwood (2004) confirmed five routine formulas pointing to offering condolences:

1. Acknowledgement of the death with interjections like "oh" or "oh my God."
2. Expression of sympathy like "I'm so sorry."
3. Offer of assistance like "is there anything I can do?"
4. Future-oriented remarks which took the form of words of encouragement or practical advice, like "try not to get depressed."
5. Expressions of concern which relates to showing care for the well-being of the speaker and/or his/her family and includes questions like "How are you doing?"

Meiners (2017) compared expressions of sympathy of native speakers of Spanish, native speakers of English, and intermediate Spanish L2. He recorded conversations with 60 participants who reacted to the mention of a death in the family by a native speaker of Spanish. Results of the study demonstrated that the way speakers reacted was influenced by social and politeness factors, personality differences, and conversational structure. Also, although there were differences in how sympathy was expressed by native speakers of

English and Spanish, speakers of both languages tended to rely heavily on the use of routine formulas. The Spanish native speakers, who were bilinguals born in the US, used five formulas to express sympathy: acknowledged the situation, expressed sympathy, used exclamations, continued the conversation, or used interjections. Results suggested that because the interlocutors did not have a close relationship, there was a preference to simply acknowledge the situation by using expressions of sympathy, interjections and exclamations loaned from the English language as shown in (2):

- (2) a. lo siento
 'I'm sorry'
 b. wow
 c. oh, no!

According to Meiners, *lo siento* 'I'm sorry' "is a routine formula [in both English and Spanish] used to express sympathy and compassion" (2017: 324). This article argues that personal deixis oriented to the self (i.e., "I") "plays a powerful role of persuasion, due to the fact that pronouns serve to codify certain feelings of identification and belonging to the same group" (Blass Arroyo 2020: 4). However, the use of this pronoun in Spanish has not been widely examined in the study of condolences, and therefore, we cannot assert it makes up part of a routine formula. Furthermore, García (2009) and Quesada Vargas (2009) reported that use of the verb *lamentar* 'to be sorry' and *sentir* 'to feel' in expressions including the first-person *yo* 'I', as in *Lo lamento* or *lo siento* 'I am sorry', was quite low. Analyzing data coming from native speakers of Spanish in a context with no bilingualism appears necessary.

Overall, the study of condolences in Spanish is scarce and has its limitations in type of methodology (e.g., use of role-plays in Garcia's research and written obituaries in Quesada Vargas) and analysis of the data (e.g., frequency of words and expressions in Quesada Vargas). The present study sets out to fill the gap in the study of the speech act of condolences. For the present research, computer-mediated data (i.e., Facebook) was examined to determine how empathy and respect is shown in daily communication in a group of Spanish speakers from Colombia). Also, strategies and internal elements in the condolence responses are examined.

2.4. Computer-mediated communication and condolences

Research involving CMC and speech acts have been studied extensively in several languages (compliments in English (Holmes 1995; Maíz-Arévalo 2012, 2013); apologies in Farsi (Al-Shboul & Maros 2013;); refusals in Spanish (Placencia & García, 2019). However, the speech act of condolences has received less attention in CMC. The few studies (Tareq 2013; Kuang 2015; Cardozo, Raspanti & Zanfagnini 2020) have determined that social networking sites support social interaction and reconfigure on-line communities. From a sociolinguistic view the work with CMC, and specifically on Facebook, has focused on sociability in terms of performance/construction of identity, networked relational practices (Bou-Franch & Garcés-Conejos Blitvich 2018), and the building of communities around the notions of face (Maíz-Arévalo 2019). The notion of the "communicative wall event", originated in studies of personal Facebook, is considered the basic unit of interaction and is defined as:

“a multi-authored sequence of user posts that is displayed on a user’s Facebook wall. Wall events are visually set off from each other and displayed in reverse chronological order on Facebook profiles. They consist of a minimum of one post (the initiative contribution or opener), which can be followed by ‘likes’ and/or comments posted by ‘friends.’ (Androutsopoulos 2015: 193)

Part of the performance of identity and relational practices of CMC when expressing condolences has focused on identifying the routine formulas in a similar manner to face-to-face communication. For example, Tareq (2013) analyzed the frequency of routine formulas of 85 emails written with the purpose of expressing a condolence directed at a Hebrew native speaker colleague who had lost his daughter. Results of her study revealed that her Arab native speakers used strategies like those proposed by Olshtain and Cohen (1983). However, Tareq (2013) concluded the speakers used more “religious expressions” appropriate to behavioral expectations of the culture. Similarly, Kuang, conducting an analysis of SMS condolence messages by Malaysian speakers, found that there was a combination of routine formulas including “expressing sympathy, eulogizing, offering assistance, expressing uncertainty, showing concern, and expressing wishful thoughts” (2015: 10). Al-Shboul and Maros (2013) analyzed 678 Facebook posted comments by Jordanian native speakers of Arabic. They identified seven major strategies: praying for God’s mercy and forgiveness for the deceased, reciting Quranic verses, enumerating the virtues of the deceased, expressing shock and grief, offering condolences, realizing that death is a natural part of life, and using proverbs and sayings. The use of these strategies was attributed to respondents’ strong adherence to their religious beliefs (i.e., Islam). Finally, Cardozo, Raspanti, and Zanfagnini (2020) described the way in which native speakers of English living in England tend to express condolences when they are informed via Facebook about the news of a close person’s passing. The authors found that by frequency, British speakers preferred expressing sympathy, offering a eulogy (i.e., description of the deceased), or expressing sympathy and eulogy (a combination of the first two). There were no expressions of concern nor offering of assistance and only a few cases of expressing wishful thinking. According to the authors, this may be due to message-size limit or brevity expected when using CMC.

Besides the main routine formulas, researchers have explored the role of emojis in a CMC. The work of Novak et al. (2015) has demonstrated that the role of emojis is not just to communicate positive or negative sentiments, but also more specific emotions such as anger, happiness, and sadness. Kelly and Watts (2015) interviewed 20 participants about their use of emojis in CMC. The participants stated that they used emojis not only to express emotions but also to serve other functions, such as keeping a conversational connection, creating a space for playful interaction, and creating a shared and secret uniqueness. On the other hand, Danesi found that emojis cannot completely replace the written form, but they “expand, and annotate the meaning of a written communication, usually by enhancing the friendliness of the tone, or else by adding humorous tinges to it” (2017: 15). Emojis then are ubiquitous, but how they are used in many CMC platforms, especially Facebook, and in the speech act of condolences, is still understudied.

Due to the general availability of free social platforms and mobile apps (e.g., WhatsApp, Tinder, etc.) there is an increased attention to the understanding of linguistic behaviors while using them. However, until recently that attention has been focused mostly on the English language. Spanish is indeed a global language experiencing steady growth. Learning how speakers offer condolences on social platforms is an area that needs further

exploration. Thus, the present research is guided by computer-mediated data published by native speakers during an authentic situation. The data compiled for this paper may not be substantial, but it will, nonetheless, be able to provide an analysis that can shed light on how Colombian Spanish speakers construct their condolence messages by adopting Spencer-Oatey's (2000) rapport management approach, which has proven (García 2009) to be particularly suitable for analyzing condolence messages. This framework allows the researcher to focus on the construction and maintenance of interpersonal relationships through a series of behaviors subject to situational and cultural variation (Spencer-Oatey 2000: 12). Furthermore, within the examination special focus will be given to the use of personal pronouns. Gardelle & Sorlin (2015) argued that the choice of a given personal pronoun might reflect the speaker's solidarity with the addressee, [...], intimacy, high degree of emotional excitement, and so on [...] (59)". Previous studies have argued, for instance, that the use of the first-person pronoun "I" in an expression of sympathy in English reveals not only a common practice, but, pragmatically, is the way to connect and show sympathy with the interlocutor. Thus, the present study examined the following research questions. In the context of Facebook communication:

RQ1: How does personal deixis work in the expressions of condolence in a group of Colombian Spanish speakers to fit the behavioral expectations when responding to news of a death via Facebook?

RQ2: What are the main strategies and the internal linguistic features of expressions of condolence expressed via Facebook?

3. Method

3.1. Setting

Netnography, a field of ethnography, is a social media research methodology that allows researchers to understand social interactions in contemporary digital communication contexts. The Facebook condolences posts for the present study belong to a community predominantly of Colombian origin and who are friends or acquaintances of the researcher.

In relation to ethical matters, the use of a social network—Facebook—conforms to the recommendations of the Association of Internet Researchers in that the exchanges examined for the present research appear on a site of public access. Therefore, informed consent from participants is not required. However, the person who published the death notice of the loved one on Facebook was informed about the study and permission was sought to use the data. Also, all participants' identity information was modified to protect their privacy.

3.2. Procedures for data collection and analysis

The Facebook responses to news about a friends' or of a loved one's death were easily accessed in the researcher's Facebook news feed. Since netnography requires the researcher to participate in the focused online community through any means like contact, collaboration, and interaction (Kozinets 2015), the social network fit the purposes of the research.











The 245 written condolence messages (from three death notices) posted on Facebook were collected between May 2020 and July 2021, a time when the mandatory confinements due to Covid-19 did not allow face-to-face social gatherings of any kind due to the high rates of contagion in Colombia. Although a distribution of gender was done, the unbalanced number among females and males did not allow gender comparisons. Female posts were overwhelmingly higher than those written by men. In addition, due to the lack of information about the age of the respondents, age is not included for the results of the present study. The messages were transcribed exactly as posted including not only the linguistic verbal elements but also the features including emojis or images. To make the examples easier to read, the spelling was corrected when needed using standard Spanish.

For each research question, the data coded by the researcher was analyzed through the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences. For the first research question that focused on determining how personal deixis worked in each expression of condolences, the analysis of personal pronouns use pointed to whom the message was oriented. For the purposes of this study the researcher used the principal fields of meaning that pronoun deixis activates in communication. These fields, introduced by Blas Arroyo (2020), include the speaker's world, the interlocutor's world, and the intermediate world (i.e., both the speaker and the interlocutor may be part of the message). However, to fit the speech act of condolences, four different orientations of the message were found: 1) the bereaved/family's world, 2) the deceased's world, 3) the bereaved/family and the deceased's world, and 4) the responder's world.

For the second question, the strategies and their main linguistic features, it proved useful to draw on García's (2009) strategies that responded to the behavioral expectations of the cultural group (i.e., involvement strategies (claiming in-group membership, requesting information, and offering cooperation); empathy strategies (expressing sympathy, expressing grief/sorrow, offering comfort, expressing empathy, expressing disbelief, and giving advice); and strategies to show respect (preparator, providing explanation, praising deceased, praising widow, providing business information)).

One useful finding is the use of emojis. As mentioned before, authors agree that these add emotional content, substitute for verbal communication, and contribute to politeness (Derks et al. 2007; Rezabeck & Cochenouor 1995; Sampietro 2019; Dresner & Herring 2010; Vandergriff, 2013). In the present research, the following emojis (see Table 2) were found and will be analyzed in regard to the expressions of condolence:

Table 2. Emojis found in Facebook responses relating to the expressions of condolence

Emoji	Description	Possible meaning
	Loudly crying face	Uncontrollable tears, perhaps due to sadness
	Pensive face	feeling of sadness, disappointment, regret, or loneliness
	Crying face	Upset or in pain
	Growing heart	Love or increasing affection
	Hands together	Prayers
	Clapping hands	Round of applause in celebration
	Sunflower	Solidarity
	Woman with arms crossed	Disagreement, denial
	Angel	Angels and blessings
	Tomb	Express condolences

In addition to emojis, a few images were included as an isolated response or an accompaniment to a verbal message. All the images were religious in nature and included angels, the Virgin Mary, and women hugging each other. Because the number of images was low (four images in the entire corpus) we do not analyze them.

4. Results and discussion

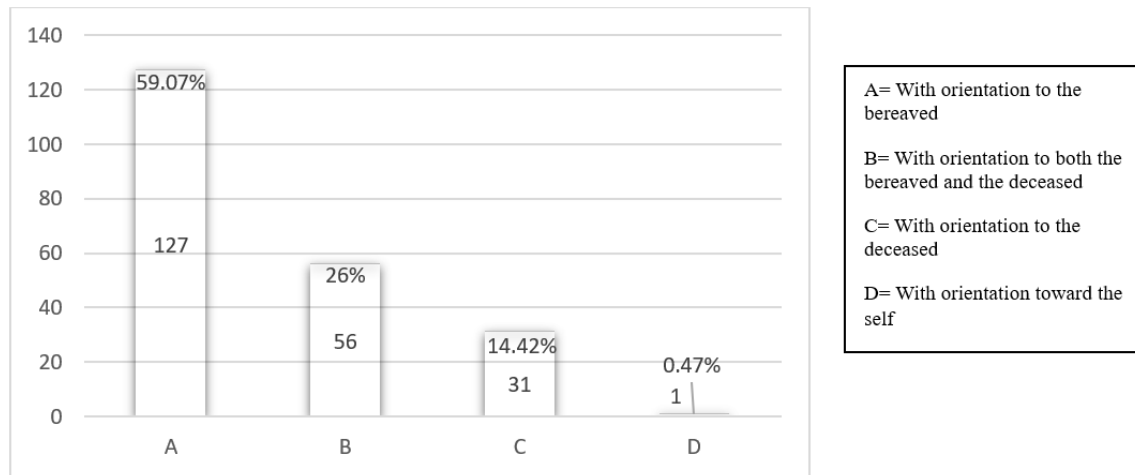
4.1. Personal deixis and expressions of condolence

The first research question sought to determine the field of reference (i.e., personal deixis) used in the responses and its pragmatic implications. Spanish, as all other languages, has deictic words, phrases or expressions that refer to something different depending on who speaks or write them, and in what context. Personal deixis localizes an entity in relation to the position of the speaker or hearer (Green, 2008). Some prototypical examples of personal deixis are personal pronouns (e.g., I, you, we), demonstratives (e.g., this, that), adverbs of place (e.g., here, there), adverbs of time (e.g., now, later), etc. The analysis of the personal deixis by observing to whom the message was oriented allows for a characterization of behavioral expectations the culture has regarding expressing condolences.

Results demonstrated that the Colombian Spanish speakers seem to orient their messages toward four different recipients: 1) the bereaved/family's world, 2) the deceased's world, 3) the bereaved/family and the deceased's world, and 4) the respondent's world. Figure 1 displays graphically the distribution (frequencies and percentages) of the field of reference. As shown, the preferred personal deixis was oriented towards the bereaved/family (59%; n=127 responses), followed by a message which orientation was mixed (both the bereaved/family and the deceased) (26%; n=56 responses). With minor frequencies, the third category corresponds to orientation towards the deceased's soul

world (14%; n=31 responses). And last, but notable, is that the personal deixis oriented towards the respondent's world was the least preferable orientation of the message. This orientation only accounted for one case (0.47%). It is important to mention that in this analysis, 30 responses were not included as they did not include any verbal or textual material; instead, emoji elements were included. Emojis will be discussed later in the results section.

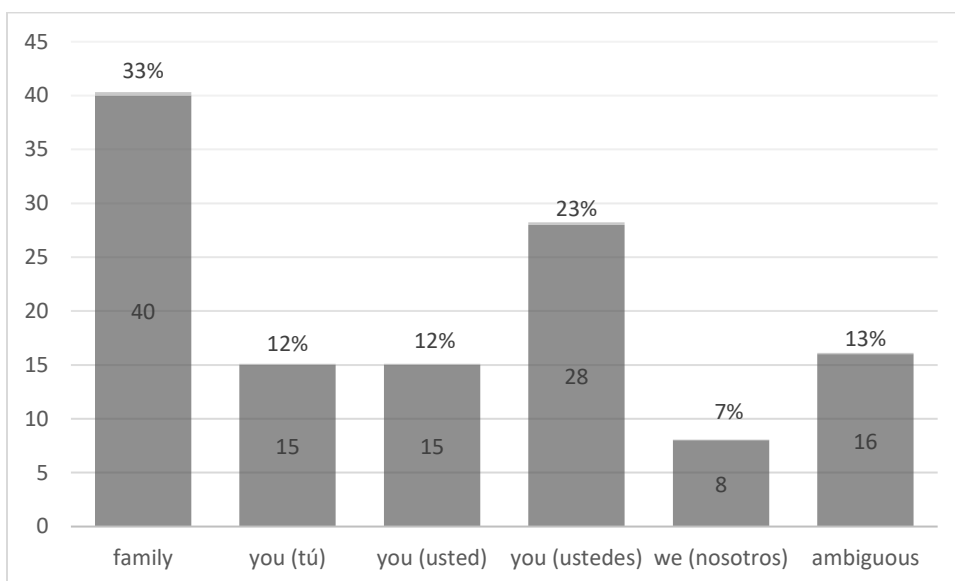
Figure 1. Distribution of frequencies and percentages of the field of reference (personal deixis)



When the bereaved or family members were the focus of the attention in the expression of condolences, there are some characteristics related to the use of pronouns that are important to point out. First, respondents tended to use collective pronominal nouns such as *familia* 'family' and *ustedes* 'you all'. Second, the use of the pronoun *nosotros* 'we' alludes to a closer emotional involvement and adds emphasis to the feelings of grief. Next, the use of the pronouns *usted* 'you' (formal) and *tú* 'you' (informal) were not clear cut in the explanation of solidarity and acquaintance because of the split results. In addition, several expressions appeared without any pronominal information and therefore the researcher looked back to the plurality and singularity of the nouns and the relationship those have with the recipient of the expression.

When using collective pronominal phrases (see Figure 2) the preferred pronoun was the third-person singular *la familia* 'family' (33%) or the third-person plural *ustedes* 'you all' (23%). In examples such as: *Fortaleza para toda la familia* 'Strength for the entire family', *Que el señor dé mucha fortaleza a toda la familia* 'May the Lord provide strength to the entire family', the person to whom the message is directed include more than the Facebook friend. It appears that directing the condolence to the entire family expresses appreciation for the friendship. In sentences such as *Mi oración con ustedes* 'My prayer with you', and *El señor está con ustedes. [...] María santísima estuvo al pie de la cruz, ahora está con ustedes* 'The Lord is with you [...] Holy Mary was at the foot of the cross, now she is with you', the respondent shows appreciation and worry for all members of the family as well.

Figure 2. Distribution of personal pronouns within the expressions of condolence



Another interesting way of offering condolences in this particular group included the presence of the pronoun *nosotros* ‘we’. The respondent added emphasis to the expression of condolence by inserting himself/herself as part of the grieving situation (7%; n=8). In *La paz del señor esté con todos nosotros* ‘The peace of the Lord be with us’, *lamentamos la pérdida* ‘We are sorry for your loss’, and *los acompañamos en su dolor* ‘we are with you in this painful moment’, the respondent expressed the mutual feeling for the loss and pray for everybody including him/herself.

The personal pronouns *usted* ‘you’, associated with solidarity used among friends and close relatives, and the pronoun *tú* ‘you’, related to the degree of familiarity and distance, appeared evenly in the gathered data (12%). This result may suggest that rapport management of expressions of condolence cannot be explained by simply observing these two pronouns. In cases where the personal pronoun is excluded from the message, the researcher decided towards whom the expression was directed by analyzing other elements such as direct object pronouns (e.g., *los/las* ‘to you [masculine/feminine] all’). For example, in *El amor de Dios los fortalezca y los llene de su paz* ‘May the love of God strengthen you and fill you with his peace’, it can be suggested that the message is oriented to the entire family of the bereaved as *los* ‘you all’ indicates plurality.

In addition, an interesting finding is that there were responses that did not include a personal pronoun (n=16;13%). We refer to these as “ambiguous” sentences (see Figure 2). The singularity or plurality of the nouns, however, helps us determine the recipient of the expression. For instance, in *Muchas bendiciones y resignación, amén* ‘Many blessings and patience, amen.’, the many blessings and patience could only be directed towards the bereaved or the family. Also, in *Fortaleza, un abrazo* ‘Strength, a hug’, and *Fortaleza* ‘Strength’, we can imply that the hug is for the bereaved and not for the deceased.

Finally, the use of vocatives (i.e., words or expressions used to designate the person being talked to while talk is in progress) was varied when directing the expression towards the bereaved/family. The respondents used proper names, names of endearment (e.g., Maruchita, Dieguito, where the suffixes -ita and -ito denote affection), honorifics (Dear G., Mrs. G., and *Don/Doña* ‘Mister/Missus’ C.), or nouns that show a parental or religious

relationship *comadre* ‘godmother of my children’; *mi madrina* ‘my godmother’, *papito/mamita* ‘daddy/mommy’, and *primo* ‘cousin.’ These terms of address demonstrate affection and respect toward the recipient and play an important role in the construction of interpersonal relationships, as we can see in (3).

- (3) a. Mi Marta, mi oración con ustedes.
 ‘My Marta, my prayer with you.’
- b. Dieguito, un abrazo fraterno.
 ‘Dieguito [proper name with the diminutive -ito to show a close relationship], a fraternal hug.’
- c. Marta, Dios te dé mucha fortaleza para afrontar la pérdida de tu mamá.[...]
 ‘Marta, God gives you lots of strength to face the loss of your mommy.[...]’

Next, when the expression of condolence was directed towards the deceased (14.4% of the responses) in examples such as *Descansa en paz* ‘Rest in peace’, the lack of personal deixis allows only for a description of the expressions and internal modifications, as will be seen in the next section.

Lastly, when the expression of condolence was directed toward the self exclusively, the respondent used the first person singular embedded in the verb (i.e., the use of the suffix -o at the end of the verb forms or shows the first-person singular pronoun in Spanish). Thus, in *lamento mucho* ‘I am so sorry’, the verb *lamentar* ‘to lament’ incorporates the pronoun yo ‘I’ with the suffix -o. It is clear from the data that orienting the message toward the self was the least preferred strategy (See Figure 1.1; n=1; 0.4%). Indeed, there was only one case that appeared. However, in a few cases when the expression appeared to be directed towards the self, respondents chose to include more than one orientation to minimize the impact of the expression, as in *Sintiéndolo mucho por la partida de tu familia pero ellos están descansando con nuestro padre celestial. Cuidense mucho. Bendiciones* ‘sorry for the departure of your family member but they are resting with our heavenly father. Take care. Blessings.’

Overall, the results of analyzing the way speakers use the personal deixis in expressions of condolences written in Facebook by a group of Colombian Spanish speakers found that the culturally preferred orientation of the expression of condolence is toward the bereaved and/or his/her family, followed by praying and showing affection for both the bereaved and deceased, and lastly, but less common, is to orient the message towards the deceased. The group of speakers avoided directing the message to the speaker himself or herself.

4.2. Strategies for expressing condolences and internal modifications: empathy and respect expectations.

In determining the strategies to express condolences and the internal linguistic modifications, we found that when responding to the news about the death via Facebook, the respondents mostly used four strategies to show empathy and respect as behavioral expectations of the culture (see Table 3). When orienting the message towards the bereaved/family, as the ones who are ultimately suffering the loss, they demonstrated their empathy by offering 1) condolences in the form of routine formulas and 3) by offering

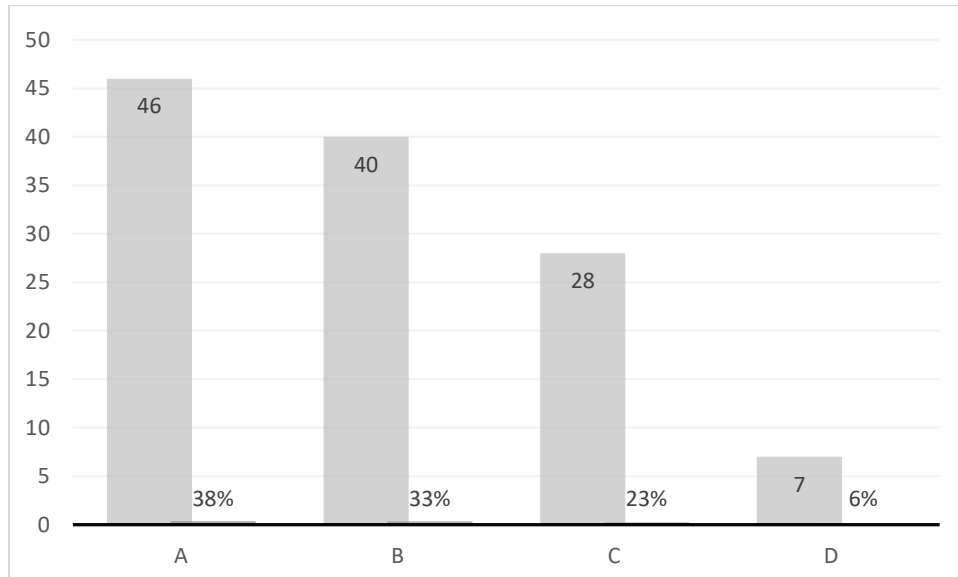
comfort in the form of signs of affection. In managing the respect component, the respondents tended to praise God for mercy and strength for the bereaved/family and prayed for the deceased's soul.

Table 3. Strategies for expressing condolences according to behavioral expectations.

Behavioral expectation	Strategy	Example
1. Respecting the empathy component	Offering condolences	Mi sentido pésame. 'My condolences.'
	Sending signs of affection	Fortaleza, un abrazo. 'Strength, a hug.'
2. Valuing the respect component	Praying for God's mercy and strength to be with the griever/family	Dios les bendiga y les llene de fortaleza. Un abrazo. 'God bless you and fill you with strength. A hug.'
	Asking God to receive the deceased's soul in heaven/eternal life. Or a wish for the deceased's eternal life	Diosito la tenga en su Santo Reino. 'God have him in his Holy kingdom.'

Figure 3 shows the distribution of strategies employed to show empathy. As can be seen, sending signs of affection (n=46; 38%) was the preferable strategy. Most respondents sent "hugs" in their message. Although the bereaved or their families did not receive those physically, at least when they read the message, they perceived the affection and understanding of those who sent them. These feelings contributed to mitigating the pain produced by the death. Respondents understand that they cannot be physically with the bereaved/family, but by adding prepositional phrases such as *a la distancia* 'at a distance', *desde la distancia* 'from a distance', and *en la distancia* 'in the distance', or adjectives such as *fraternal* 'fraternal/friendly', *gigante* 'big', and *fuerte* 'strong', the respondents extend their love, affection, respect, mutual appreciation for the Facebook friend and/or family members.

Figure 3. Strategies for respecting the empathy when the message is directed towards the bereaved/family



- | |
|--|
| <p>A. Sending signs of affection</p> <p>B. Mix of strategies</p> <p>C. Praying God's mercy and strength to be with the bereaved</p> <p>D. Offering condolences</p> |
|--|

The second most commonly used approach involved a combination of strategies (n=40; 33%). In the phrase *Para Marta y sus hijos mi sentido pésame, que Dios les dé mucha fortaleza* ‘My condolences to Marta and her children, may God give you all a lot of strength’, the message is oriented to the friend and his/her family, followed by an expression of condolence, and a sign of affection. Most of the messages in which a combination of strategies appeared seem to use a sign of affection as an essential item in the expression of condolence as shown in (4):











- (4)
- a. Un abrazo fuerte y mucho consuelo Marta. Dios les dé mucha fortaleza para sobre llevar este momento de dolor.
‘A big hug and a lot of comfort Marta. God give you a lot of strength to bear this moment of pain.’
 - b. Abrazo fraternal, María Auxiliadora les proteja y consuele.
‘Fraternal hug, Mary, the helper, protect and comfort you all.’
 - c. Comadre desde la distancia un fuerte abrazo. Dios y la Virgen les concede la fortaleza para superar este dolor.
‘Godmother of my son, from the distance a big hug. God and the Virgin grants you strength to overcome this pain.’

d. Marta mucha fortaleza para ti y toda la familia, Dios llene de paz sus vidas. Un gran abrazo. Lamento mucho tu pérdida.

‘Marta a lot of strength for you and your whole family, God fill your lives with peace. A big hug. I am sorry for your loss.’

It seems that a behavioral expectation includes the interpersonal touch as central to social relationships and emotional health for this group of speakers and in the Facebook context. Interpersonal touch is vital for normal human development as it promotes close relationships across the life span and can stimulate, communicate, and help regulate emotion (Gallace & Spence 2010). In the Hispanic world, for example Burleson et al. (2019), have argued that people put great emphasis on warm interpersonal interactions where touch plays an important part. Even in a moment when there is no physical connection due to COVID-19 restrictions, the expressions of condolence are still filled with affection and touch in the maintenance of the social bonds, specially of friends and family.

The third strategy employed to respect or show empathy is to pray to God for mercy and strength to be with the bereaved/family as in *Que el señor dé mucha fortaleza a toda la familia* ‘May the Lord give a lot of strength to the whole family’ and *Dios les consuele*

  *solo él puede hacerlo*    ‘God comfort you   only he can do it   .

It is important to notice that the use of emojis adds meaning to the message. These will be discussed at the end of this section. The act of asking God also demonstrates how the respondent wants to connect and strengthen the familiar ties with the interlocutor via the religious connection they may have.

Finally, when the message was oriented towards the bereaved/family, a routine expression of condolence could appear in the message (n=7; 6%) as the only item. The verb *sentir* ‘to feel’ and the noun *condolencia* ‘condolences’ appeared as the main ways to provide the expression of condolence. We confirm with the analysis of these expressions/offers of condolence that, contrary to Meiner’s (2009) assertion, Spanish speakers prefer not to use the first-person personal pronoun *yo* ‘I’, even when it is embedded in the verb. Therefore, the expression *Lo siento* ‘I am sorry’ does not seem to be a first choice when expressing condolences in Spanish. Although it appeared in the data, its use was minimal. In (5) we have all the cases in which the first person was used in the condolence.

- (5) a. Mi sentido pésame a Mario.
‘My condolences to Mario.’
- b. Cuánto lo siento Marta, mi más sentido pésame.
‘I am so sorry Marta, my deepest condolences.’
- c. Muchas condolencias para toda la familia.
‘Many condolences to the whole family.’
- d. Un saludo de condolencia a la familia Escamilla.
‘Condolences to the Escamilla family.’

- e. Prima Marta te acompaño en la pena.
‘Cousin Marta, I am with you in grief.’

When the expression of condolence is directed towards the deceased soul, the respondents focused only, as the main strategy, on asking God, the Virgin Mary or a religious entity to receive/help/take the deceased soul in/to heaven/eternal life or provide peace for them. Some of the religious expressions do not have exact equivalents in English such as asking God to let his/her soul rest in peace or allow peace over the grave of the deceased ‘*Paz en su tumba*’. Considering that 79% of the population in Colombia identify as Catholic (Pew Research Centre, 2014), it is not surprising then why religion is deeply infused in the speaking practices of Colombians, and more when expressing condolences as we can see in (6).

- (6) a. Dios los guarde y los tenga en su Santo Reino.
‘God keep them safe and have them in his holy kingdom.’
- b. Que mi Señor la tenga en su santa gloria 🙏 amén.
‘May my Lord have her in his holy glory 🙏 amen.’
- c. Diosito la tenga en su eternidad elevemos oraciones descanse en paz.
‘God have her in her eternity let’s raise prayers rest in peace.’
- d. Brille para ella la luz perpetua.
‘Let perpetual light shine upon her.’

When the message is oriented towards both the bereaved/family and the deceased’s soul, there was a mix of the strategies including prayers for God’s mercy and strength to be with both the bereaved and the deceased, a direct offer/expression of condolence (routine formula), and signs of affection. Although there was no specific pattern found, it was observed that more than one of these strategies were included as one can see in (7). In example (a), the message included wishing strength for the family followed by a prayer for God’s mercy on the soul. Finally, a routine formula “*Paz en su tumba*” ‘Peace in his tomb’ ended the message. In (b), the respondent first asked God for strength for the family. Then, he expressed to keep the deceased in his prayers. He ended the message by expressing signs of affection.

- (7) a. Toda nuestra solidaridad con la familia. Dios lo tenga en su gloria. Paz en su tumba.
‘All our solidarity with the family. God have him in his glory. Peace in his tomb’.
- b. Marta, en estos momentos de tristeza y ausencia de tu padre, que el señor te dé mucha fortaleza, el consuelo es que partió a la casa del señor, oro por su eterno descanso en la gloria de Dios padre. Un abrazo desde la distancia.

‘Marta, in these moments of sadness and absence of your dad, may the Lord give you a lot of strength, the consolation is that he left for the house of the Lord, I pray for his eternal rest in the glory of God, the father. A hug from a distance.’

Finally, when the personal deixis is oriented towards the self, the use of the first-person personal pronoun is expected. However, as mentioned before, this was the least preferred way to orient the message. The direct offer of condolence *lo lamento mucho* ‘I am so sorry’ appeared in the data by itself on only one occasion. Results confirm then that Spanish speakers characterize by showing a collective behavior and not an individualist one, as is the case of Americans who prefer orienting the message toward themselves using the first-person pronoun “I”. Hispanic speakers, as previous studies and the present study show, worry about the well-being of others first, including the bereaved/family and the soul of the deceased.

In summary, when expressing condolences on Facebook, the group of Colombian respondents preferred mostly to direct their message towards the bereaved/family or to both the bereaved/family and the deceased. When orienting the message towards the other, Colombians create a close connection with the friend. Condolences in our context were mainly displayed by sending signs of affection statements, which demonstrates, like previous studies, that Hispanics are more collectivists. This collectivism is perpetuated in values that characterize emphasizing warm interpersonal relationships in the form of *simpatía* ‘sympathy’, a constellation of personal qualities encouraging interpersonal harmony, respect, affection, and positive emotion; *familismo* ‘familism’, identification, connection, and solidarity with both nuclear and extended family; and *personalismo* ‘personalism’, where personal rather than impersonal interactions are favored.

The frequent references to religious entities also demonstrate the connection to Catholicism and how it plays an important role in maintaining or creating strong ties with the bereaved/family. Indeed, it appears that these expressions make up a routine part of expressions of condolence by this group of Colombian Spanish speakers who sent their response via Facebook. Some of these expressions include the ones in (8).

- (8) a. Paz en su tumba.
‘Peace in his tomb.’
- b. [Que] descanse(n) en paz.
‘[May] s/he rest in peace.’
- c. [Que]Dios lo/la tenga en su gloria/santa gloria/santo reino.
‘[May] God have him/her in his glory/holy kingdom.’
- d. Brille para él/ella la luz perpetua.
‘Let perpetual light shine upon her/him.’

Based on Elwood’s (2004) and Garcia’s (2009) strategies to offer condolences and by focusing on the empathy and respect components, the group of Colombian Spanish speakers used fewer strategies to convey their condolences. Routine formulas or strategies for “expressing regret and grief”, “using poems”, “offering assistance”, “expressing

concern”, or “offering explanations” were not typical in the computer-mediated data. A possible explanation is that the confirmed COVID-19 death toll doubled during the first half of 2021, reaching 100,000 before the end of June (Rondón-Quintana & Zafra-Mejía 2021), people were not surprised at all if someone died because it was becoming normal to lose many people and, therefore, expressions of grief and explanations were unnecessary. Also, the offers of assistance were an impossible task because people were not able to travel, and huge restrictions were imposed to contain the pandemic. The use of poems, contrary to what Iranian respondents do (Farnia, 2011), are not part of the repertoire of strategies by this group of speakers. In a single case, a respondent added a link to a poem s/he wanted to share after expressing his/her condolence.

The last item to examine in the present research is the use of emojis. From the 159 emojis supported by Facebook (Sampietro 2019), in the gathered responses, participants mainly used ten of those emojis. This shows that despite the variety of pictographs available, users typically rely on a small number of emoji to accomplish their communication of condolences. An analysis of the emojis revealed that 46 responses (18.8%) contained verbal material and emoji(s), and 26 responses (10.6%) included only one or more emojis as the main response. The most frequent emojis used were the hands together/praying hands 🙏 (84 instances), the crying face 😭 (30 instances), and clapping hands 👏 (14 instances). Other emojis included pictograms that depict religious meanings such as tombs, crosses, and angels.

To build on previous studies on emojis, the present research has found that emoji serve several communicative functions such as indicators of emotion, upgraders, or as replacement of a verbal expression.

As we can see in (9) below, the emoji not only serves as the main expression of condolence, but it is used iconically to indicate how the respondent presumably felt. A sad face with a teardrop running from one eye indicates the sadness that the respondent feels when finding out the news about the death. The fact that the emoji is used four times could also be interpreted as being used to emphasize the emotion—great sadness. The repetition of emojis seems important since using one or two of them would not produce the same visual effect of support and therefore would not indicate the same level of emotion. Tanner (2005) argues also that an exaggerated number of emojis indicate a high-involvement style in communication. The repetition of emojis in the responses to a death notice could indicate connectedness and support for the bereaved/family.

(9) 😭😭😭😭

Other emojis used in the data to express various emotions include a loudly crying face (😭) which indicates uncontrollable sadness, pensive face (😞) which may express regret and pensiveness, a heart (❤️) that might express love and affection, and a woman with crossed hands (🙏) that indicates feelings of denial.

Besides indicating feelings, emojis can also function as upgraders “to increase the force of a speech act” (Spencer-Oatey 2000: 36). In (10), the emoji “hands together” is placed

next to expressions that have religious meaning. The emoji mirrors the physical gesture of hands together used as a religious practice to focus on God, surrender to him, and submit to his will. It is a reminder that we are not in control, but God is, and a way to trust in his work, not our own.

(10) Amen 🙏 Dios les dé el descanso eterno 🙏 y brille para sus almas la luz que no tiene fin 🙏 .

‘Amen, 🙏 May God give them eternal rest 🙏 and that the light shines for their souls eternally 🙏 .’

In (11), the emoji serve as fillers for missing words. In the first part of the response, the heart and the sad faces literally complete the verbal ideas “We are with you with all our heart and with sadness.”

(11) Acompañándoles de ❤️ y con 😞😞 Dios les bendiga abundantemente 🙏🙏

‘We are with you with all our ❤️ and with 😞😞 . God bless you all abundantly 🙏🙏🙏 .’

An interesting feature of the use of emojis is what we can call an unleashed chain of responses. That is, when one respondent used emojis, it was highly probable that the next respondent will use the same emoji, increase the number of repetitions of the emoji or choose a different emoji until a different respondent expresses his/her condolence without an emoji. Table 4 reveals how the chain of responses happens in Facebook.

Table 4. Use of emoji in a chain of responses

Responses in order*	
[1]	❤️ 🙏🙏🙏
[2]	😊
[3]	😞😞😞😞
[4]	Que Dios la tenga en su Santa Gloria 🙏 amén
[5]	😊 🙏🙏🙏🙏

* The number in brackets indicates the position within the data. The repetition of emojis appears exactly as the respondents used them.

5. Concluding remarks and implications

In sum, among 245 posted responses to a notice of death via Facebook, respondents preferred to direct the messages to the bereaved, to both the bereaved and the deceased or to the deceased, but almost never does the message refer to how they were feeling themselves. Also, praying to God for mercy and strength for the bereaved/family, praying for God's mercy and strength to be with the deceased's soul, and a combination of these two were the most frequently used strategies among the respondents when offering the condolence. When considering the empathy and respect components that fit the behavioral expectations of the culture, the results of the present study found that the respondents used fewer strategies if compared to those adapted by Elwood (2004) or García (2009). This fits well with Maíz-Arévalo's analysis of CMC speech acts in that "[the use of Facebook leads] to a simplification of some strategies and the amplification of others" (2013: 65). As a result, the particular setting studied shows a preference for "sending signs of affection", "praying for God's mercy and strength to be with the griever/family", and "asking God to receive the deceased's soul in heaven/eternal life."

The use of religious expressions is a strong characteristic of condolences in a Colombian setting. However, since Facebook communities tend to be integrated by (close) friends, relatives and acquaintances or friends of friends who eventually might become friends, it will be important to determine if this CMC is reproduced in face-to-face counterparts. Is there variation in the number of strategies and in the preference of religious expressions? The use of these expressions and emojis with a focus on religion as well reveals how the religious background (Catholic) of the culture is deeply ingrained in most respondents and how it affects their linguistic choices. By using them, respondents behave in a culturally appropriate way to the context. In other words, faith can be shared using religious icons. The study of this group of Colombian Spanish speakers agrees with Farnia's research. On one hand, offering condolences in a direct manner and using routine expressions of sympathy (i.e., "my condolences", "I am sorry", etc.) was the least preferable strategy of the group of Colombian Spanish speakers interacting on Facebook. On the other hand, the use of religious expressions is ingrained in the cultural values of the speakers and projected into the language.

Although this study has generally answered the proposed research questions, there needs to be more extensive research on the speech act of condolences by Colombian Spanish speakers to provide a more detailed picture of the frequently used strategies for expressing condolences in a social network.

The general findings may be constrained by the following considerations. First, data from different settings is needed to generalize the findings. For example, we can compare the expressions of condolences that appear in the memorial book used at the face-to-face funerals in Colombia. Second, more studies with different and controlled contextual factors (e.g., age, gender) and different methods of collection (e.g., role-plays, discourse completion tasks) are recommended to gain more vital knowledge of the strategies used for expressing condolences in the Colombian context. Third, a comparative study with expressions of condolence in other parts of the Hispanic world may also yield interesting information about the frequency and strategy patterns.

Regardless of these limitations, the findings of the study provide some useful insights and information that can be used by second language learners who want to learn how language works in a situation dealing with the death of a relative or a friend in Colombia.

Second language learners need to realize that transferring sociolinguistic rules from their first language to the second language limits their communicative competence and may create miscommunication.

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