

Self-reference by politicians on Twitter: Strategies to adapt to 140 characters



Roel Coesemans^{a,1,*}, Barbara De Cock^{b,2}

^a Department of Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Arts and Philosophy, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Pleinlaan 5, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

^b Institut Langage et Communication, Centre de recherche Valibel – Discours et variation, Faculté de Philosophie, Arts et Lettres, Université catholique de Louvain, Place Blaise Pascal, 1 bte L3.03.33, Bureau c355, B-1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

Received 25 March 2016; received in revised form 21 July 2016; accepted 4 December 2016

Available online 13 February 2017

Abstract

This paper studies how language is used on Twitter by Belgian and Spanish politicians in the context of the 2014 European elections campaign. Taking a pragmatic perspective on language use, we investigate three interrelated aspects of political communication on Twitter: (i) how political candidates adapt their language to the technological affordances of Twitter; (ii) which linguistic strategies the politicians use to express self-reference in function of different communicative goals and in relation to contextual factors such as ideological profile or nationality; and (iii) how some of the image building and community building strategies can be interpreted as reflexive signs of metapragmatic awareness. This study shows that the practice of self-referencing is a prominent feature of politicians' discourse on Twitter, which is used as a tool for professional communication, as most of the self-references refer to professional rather than private identities. When spreading tweets, the studied Belgian and Spanish politicians use a number of adaptability strategies. They use conciseness strategies, such as subject pronoun ellipsis in Dutch and full subject NP constructions of a first person plural verb form in Spanish and Catalan, to accommodate to the 140 character constraint of the microblogging service. To express identities the politicians not only make use of first person pronouns, but also use the Twitter handle, the hashtag or proper nouns, referring to themselves in the third person. This practice shows that Twitter is not only a tool for professional political communication, but also a tool for personal branding. To end, it is argued that different linguistic choices show signs of metapragmatic awareness with the politicians reflecting on the communicative practice in which they are involved, indicating that they creatively use this type of social media to render their campaign talk searchable and 'followable'.

© 2016 Published by Elsevier B.V.

Keywords: Political communication; Twitter; Self-reference; Adaptability strategies; European elections; Metapragmatic awareness

1. Introduction

During the 2014 European election campaign, the following message appeared on the Twitter account of European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, Marianne Thyssen (1).

- (1) @JunckerEU: #selfie on the #Juncker4President bus with @mariannethyssen @IvoBelet
@StevenVanackere @cdenv #vk14 #withJuncker (Marianne Thyssen)

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: roel.coesemans@vub.ac.be (R. Coesemans), barbara.decock@uclouvain.be (B. De Cock).

¹ <http://www.vub.ac.be/people/roel-coesemans>.

² www.uclouvain.be/barbara.decock, @barbaradecock

At that time she was a high-profile candidate, heading the list of the Belgian Flemish Christian Democrats under the flag of the European People's Party (EPP). How to read this message? Is this a well-formed sentence of written English? Why are the subject and the finite verb missing and why did she refer to herself in the third person as “@mariannethysen”? One of her main rivals from the Belgian liberals, Guy Verhofstadt, President of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), tweeted in the same period (2).

- (2) *in #EU we have talent, brain & creativity to excell & lead but EU lags behind due 2 bad regulation & bad business environment #ep2014 @Wayra* (Guy Verhofstadt)

What does this message mean? Who does the plural first person pronoun *we* refer to? Why did the liberal leader use ampersands in this 139-character opinion piece instead of the coordinating conjunction *and*, and why does the number two function here as preposition? These questions will be addressed in the next sections, as we are interested in the way politicians with European ambitions use language on the microblogging service Twitter. More particularly, we hope to shed some light on a few linguistic strategies that politicians use to adapt their communication to the technology of Twitter.

To study the dynamic interaction of form and function, linguistic structure and context, we will take a pragmatic perspective (Verschueren, 1999) and focus on how politicians, whose discourse largely relies on personal deixis, identity construction and community building, refer to themselves and (sometimes even simultaneously) affiliate themselves to different social or professional groups (for the study of personal deixis in other genres of political discourse, see Iñigo-Mora, 2004; Bull and Fetzer, 2006; Gelabert-Desnoyer, 2006; Pujante and Morales-López, 2008; Blas Arroyo, 2011). In particular, we examine how Belgian and Spanish candidates in the 2014 European elections profile and promote themselves via all kinds of identity references. Belgium and Spain are both relatively underexplored in this field (as opposed to e.g. Germany, UK and France). However, they share a few important characteristics. Both are countries where a certain form of multilingualism is constitutionally recognized. Voting is organized in large constituencies (Spain has one federal constituency; Belgium has three, one for each language community), as opposed to systems with much smaller constituencies such as the UK and France. In terms of group affiliation and identification, it is also noteworthy that both countries have regionalist parties. There are also some interesting differences, mainly regarding to the political structure. Whereas Spain has known a two-party system for a long time (though the 2014 elections precisely seemed to mark the beginning of the end of that system), Belgium has a long-standing tradition of coalition governments. At a linguistic level, the main languages used in the Spanish corpus are pro-drop, whereas the main languages of the Belgian corpus are not, which has an impact on the ways in which self-references may (or may not) be expressed. We will take up these characteristics in our analysis.

For the analysis of identity references, we will not only look at the functioning of personal pronouns as the typical means to express self-reference in political discourse (Bull and Fetzer, 2006), but we will also take into account a variety of other linguistic means to express self-reference and group membership in a computer-mediated context, such as *@-handles* or *hashtags* (#). Of course, we acknowledge that, as in other forms of political communication, the texts may not have been written or posted by the political leaders themselves, but rather by their team (see Roginsky, 2015:94–95). However, in Goffman's (1981) terms, the politician is the *principal* even if he/she is not necessarily the *author*. Draucker (2015:51–52) argues that, in view of the affordances of Twitter, viz. the possibility to not only produce but also retransmit messages, it is more appropriate to propose a ‘broadcaster’ role, defined as “a ‘followable’ party that makes talk available to recipients”. We will, then, consider the politicians as ‘broadcasters’, not necessarily as the actual authors of their tweets.

Our research questions are threefold: (i) How do European politicians adapt to the technological constraints and possibilities of Twitter? (ii) Which linguistic strategies are used to express self-reference and group affiliation in function of different communicative goals and in relation to such (contextual) factors as professional and personal profile or nationality? (iii) How can different strategies for self-reference be interpreted as reflexive signs of metapragmatic awareness, showing adaptability at work in political communication on Twitter? Put differently, the first question tries to gain an insight into the way politicians exploit the affordances of Twitter to produce effective and meaningful (re)tweets. The second question targets different linguistic strategies that politicians use when communicating through Twitter. The third research question follows from our assumption that “all language use is in some way metalinguistic in that its production and interpretation depend on the successful deployment and uptake of what has been variously referred to as the framing and keying strategies, contextualization cues, metamessages, code-orientation, and a plethora of other signals and devices exploiting and relying on the reflexive nature of language” (Jaworski, 2007:271). Following Verschueren (2012) we will consider any linguistic trace of a language user's reflexive awareness of the discursive processes he or she is involved in as metapragmatic. So, in the production and interpretation of meaning (i.e. meaningful tweets) the studied candidates inevitably reflect on their language use so as to optimally interadapt their communicative intentions to the context of the communicative event by metapragmatically signalling what their language is used for and how it can (or should) be interpreted in the dynamic interaction between author and audience.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5042712>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5042712>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)