

Hashtagging and functional shift: Adaptation and appropriation of the



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Abstract

Hashtags are a widespread feature of online discourse that has proliferated with the growth of social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram. It has recently been noted that hashtags are also popular as an instrument for creative self-expression and language play. In this function, they are often used to qualify a user's attitude toward the preceding text, providing a meta-commentary on its content. We argue that this functional shift can be aligned with effects of (pragmatic) adaptation and (sociolinguistic) appropriation.

In this paper, we explore a form of functional shift that has so far received little attention, namely the use of hashtags outside of social media in contexts of public/urban space. Based on a self-collected dataset of such urban hashtags, qualitative analysis reveals varying degrees of commodification, professionalization and deictic status in their use. We conclude by linking this semiotic practice to other emerging appropriations of hashtagging in non-digital modes, such as spoken discourse and gesturing.

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1. Introduction: punctuation and the CMC research agenda

From the very early days of computer-mediated communication (CMC), nonstandard punctuation and related typographic features have been so strongly associated with digital linguistic practice that they have become part of how internet language is *enregistered* (Squires, 2010). Punctuation is a salient factor in the folk-linguistic perceptions of 'language on the internet' as part of the public imagination, of media discourse, and to some degree even scholarly discussion (for an overview, see e.g. Vandergriff, 2013). More to the point, punctuation in digital linguistic practice is usually framed as *deviant*. Thus analyses of CMC have variously remarked on the nonstandard nature of digital punctuation in a quantitative sense, such as the absence of punctuation marks where standard written punctuation rules require them, or their overabundant use, for example in clusters of exclamation marks that are felt to be excessive. In addition, punctuation in digital discourse has been framed as deviant in a qualitative sense, in that typographic resources become repurposed for other communicative needs (e.g. in emoticons). Very often, these analyses have been conducted from the vantage point of standard written orthography, so that CMC punctuation practices were seen as adaptations of, or deviations from, this standard. Poignant examples of such enregistering discourse can be found in folk-prescriptivist works such as Truss' (2003) book *Eats, Shoots and Leaves* that bemoans contemporary usage patterns of punctuation. In writing about digital linguistic practice, she disdainfully notes that "(a) nything new is welcome today. People experiment with asterisks to show emphasis ('What a *day* I've had!') and also

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angle brackets ('So have <|> !')" (Truss, 2003: 196). This overall tone and the underlying attitudes are in line with Squires' observation that "(l)internet language features are enregistered as being in contrast and even conflict with Standard English" (2010: 475).

These folk-linguistic perceptions of punctuation in digital linguistic practice are sociolinguistically relevant in that they help us understand the social meaning that digital discourse and its semiotic resources hold for language users. However, the very strong presence, and sometimes shrill tones, of such public imaginations clouds over the fact that descriptive and empirical research into digital linguistic practice has increasingly paid attention to punctuation and the associated typographic resources. In these recent approaches, the "linguistics of punctuation" (Nunberg, 1990) is seen as a part of language use that follows specific patterns and contributes to text-grammatical structures; it is furthermore assumed that the typographic domain is involved in and part of the construction of social meaning in written/digital discourse (Spitzmüller, 2013). Within this framework, attention has shifted away from standard written orthography as a benchmark, and has instead gravitated toward typographic resources and patterns that are indigenous to CMC practice. This renewed interest in digital punctuation and its description and analysis can be seen in studies such as Curzan's (2014) account of *slash* and its trajectory from a predominantly digitally used punctuation mark to an emerging conjunction; in Squires' (2012) variationist study of apostrophes in digital discourse and the constraints involved; or in Heyd (2014), where emphatic quote marks are discussed in terms of digital resources for emphasis marking such as asterisks or underscores. These approaches consider usage-based variation of these resources within the digital medium, and also their spread to and adaptation in non-digital spoken and written contexts. In this sense, the ongoing interest in digital punctuation is not just limited to the (socio-)linguistic analysis of CMC, but provides an ideal vantage point to closely examine convergence phenomena between online and offline linguistic and semiotic practice.

In the study presented here, we follow this tradition. Specifically, we consider the hash sign (#) as a typographic resource, and examine the semiotic practice of hashtagging, where the hash is combined with lexical entities; in this study, we pay particular attention to the changing and shifting purposes and resemiotizations of this usage. Through its rapid rise as a marker of metadata in social media, the hash has been promoted from a rather peripheral typographic resource to an emblem of social media linguistic practice. Through the global media attention devoted to hashtagging campaigns such as #jesuischarlie or #blacklivesmatter (that stand in contrast with hashtags that are less strategic and lexico-semantically marked, such as #bored or #fail), use of the hash can be seen as an ideal test case to explore ongoing offline/online convergence in the field of typographic resources – that is, their occurrence across public spheres both in online and offline environments (see also Barton and Lee, 2013; Lee, 2015). Because of this extremely dynamic context of variation and change, the hash has been recruited for a number of semantic, pragmatic and overall semiotic extensions in recent years. In other words, it has undergone the type of functional shift that is described and analyzed in this collection of studies as a process of *adaptability* (Verschuere and Brisard, 2003). The study presented here thus explores adaptability in the context of punctuation in digital linguistic practice.

In the remainder of this paper, we set out by situating our approach within the broader framework of research on adaptability in new media. Specifically, we discuss different understandings of functional shift as they are used in different linguistic traditions. We focus on the difference between *adaptation* (understood primarily as a pragmatic term describing communicative affordances) and *appropriation* (understood primarily as a socially motivated process driven by human agency on the more or less conscious level). We then provide an overview of the semiotic history and evolution of the hash as a semiotic resource, and review the existing literature on hashtags as a feature of digital linguistic practice. In our case study, we focus on a particular use of hashtags that has emerged secondary to their social media functions, namely the representation of hashtags in public space. We describe and analyze hashtags as part of the linguistic landscape in urban environments based on an ethnographic sample collected in Berlin and other cities. We show how strategies of adaptation and appropriation play a central part in the use of hashtags in public space, and suggest consequences for our understanding of digital/public convergence. We close with an outlook on other forms of multimodal hashtag use, specifically their adaptation to spoken and gestural contexts.

2. From adaptation to appropriation: pragmatic and sociolinguistic perspectives on functional shift in language use

The idea that language is an adaptive system which can change and evolve as external conditions change and evolve has been explored and described in many areas of linguistic enquiry. In some cases, this implies changes to the linguistic material itself, for example where language change manifests itself in mechanisms such as grammaticalization and lexicalization (Brinton and Traugott, 2005; Haspelmath, 2004; Heine and Kuteva, 2003). However, such adaptive processes also take place where the linguistic items remain stable in terms of their features, structures or constructions, but changes occur on the semantic, pragmatic or sociocultural level. Such processes of functional shift are of central interest to the analysis of adaptability, in particular of adaptive processes where new media and their specific technological capabilities are involved. In the following, we briefly consider a few theoretical approaches to functional shift.

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