"Hashtags work everywhere": The pragmatic functions of spoken hashtags

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ABSTRACT

Hashtags online perform a range of linguistic (Zappavigna, 2015) and pragmatic (Scott, 2015) functions alongside their categorising and searching functionalities. In Scott (2015), I argued that these different functions are, at least partly, driven by the properties associated with mediated discourse. However, hashtags are also sometimes produced in spoken discourse, where the interlocutors share a physical context and are likely to have access to a range of contextual assumptions and non-verbal cues that are unavailable online. In face-to-face communication the audience is less likely to be "imagined" in the sense of boyd (2010) and the speaker is less likely to have to negotiate "context collapse", as identified by Marwick and boyd (2011). Drawing on principles from the relevance-theoretic pragmatic framework (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/95), I argue that in such an enriched context, the range of pragmatic functions of hashtags is likely to be reduced, and will be motivated by factors other than an impoverished discourse context. I draw on data from attested spoken examples and show that spoken hashtags seem to be largely restricted to their interpersonal "metacomment" (Zappavigna, 2015, p. 6) function, and that they are most commonly used to provide evaluative judgements on the rest of the utterance and to guide inferences concerning the speaker's attitudinal stance.

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1. Introduction

The following (slightly abridged) exchange took place in the comments section of the Guardian Online[1] newspaper on the 6th of January 2013:

(1) @roolby: Where are the hover boards I was promised for the millennium in the decades before #stillwaitingstillwaiting #nonsensepredictions
@LePendu: You're not on Twitter – hashtags don't work here
@roolby: @LePerdu – hashtags work everywhere

The hashtag originated on Twitter in 2007 when Messina (2007) suggested that users add a hash symbol to tag words or phrases in order to "track content and updates". As acknowledged on the Twitter help pages (Twitter, Inc, n.d.), hashtags were "created organically by users". They were then integrated into the platform interface in 2009 when Twitter started to hyperlink each tag so that users could click on the hashtag to access related content that was tagged in the same way. In the exchange above, the objection by @LePendu that hashtags "don't work here" focuses on this

original searching and categorising function. The Guardian comments section does not support hyperlinking in this way, and so, in this sense, @LePendu is right. However, @roolby's reply provides evidence of users' intuitions about the evolving and use-driven nature of hashtags and their functions. They now "work" everywhere because their use is not restricted to facilitating searches and linking material. Rather, they now play a more varied and complex role in the communication of the speaker's[2] message itself, and they have moved beyond Twitter to be found in other online media, as well as in offline written contexts and face-to-face communication. In this article, I focus in particular on this last category of uses - hashtags in spoken, face-to-face communication - and examine how their use offline reflects their evolving functions. I start in Section 2 by outlining existing work on the evolving pragmatic functions of hashtags in mediated online contexts. In Section 3, I then introduce the phenomenon of the spoken hashtag and consider populist attitudes towards it, briefly also looking at other examples of written aspects of language that have moved into the spoken domain. In Section 4, I analyse attested examples of spoken hashtags in terms of their pragmatic functions, and compare offline and online use and distribution. Finally, I reflect on what the use and

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[1] With thanks to Tim Wharton for bringing this example to my attention.

[2] This article discusses spoken, written and electronically mediated utterances. I will refer to the producer of these utterances as the speaker.

interpretation of spoken hashtags might tell us about language change more generally.

2. The evolving pragmatic functions of mediated hashtags

Hashtags first developed on Twitter to facilitate the grouping together of tweets on a similar topic and to thereby enable searching. Despite the linguistic and pragmatic innovations (Scott, 2015; Zappavigna, 2015) that I briefly outline in this section, their role in facilitating content searches and aggregating content remains a key function online. For example, at the Poetics and Linguistics Association annual conference 2015, delegates included the tag #pala2015 in their tweets to help fellow participants find their posts, as in example (2). Similarly, tweeters following a particular soccer match might include a tag to identify the game, and to link their post to other content discussing the same game, as in (3):

(2) @mysonabsalom 18th July 2015 And that's PALA 2015! Thanks for everything! #pala2015
(3) @chelseadids 1st March 2015 Well done you Blues. Norwich gave us a good game though #NORvCHE

However, alongside these uses, we find an array of hashtags which seem to contribute something more or different in terms of their meaning, and these have been analyzed from various theoretical perspectives.

Zappavigna (2015) takes a systemic functional linguistics approach to the analysis of hashtags, considering the experiential, interpersonal and textual functions they perform. At a textual level, the hash symbol is "a form of punctuation signalling that the tag is metadata" (2015, p. 6). However, hashtags may simultaneously perform an experiential or interpersonal function alongside this practical, textual function.

The search terms and topic markers in examples such as (2) and (3) fall under the experiential function. They function to indicate what the tweet is "about" (Zappavigna, 2015, p. 5), but often go beyond the mere facilitation of searching. To illustrate, Zappavigna discusses examples of tweets about the television series *Breaking Bad*, each of which is tagged with the hashtag *#breakingbad*. As Zappavigna notes, many of these "would be relatively opaque or bizarre without the hashtags indicating the semantic field evoked" (Zappavigna, 2015, p. 9). This is the case with the example given in (4):

(4) 3 days to go, until my tv obsession begins the end of it all. #BreakingBad (Zappavigna, 2015, p. 9)

These hashtags are performing an experiential function by providing a context in which the tweet is to be interpreted. Zappavigna goes on to claim that this "type of contextualizing relation between the post and the tag is how hashtags have been popularly conceived" (2015, p. 9) and she claims that it is their most commonly found function (2015, p. 6). As discussed in Scott (2015), this contextualising function plays an important role on Twitter, and on social networking sites more generally, where the audience for a tweet may be largely "imagined" (boyd, 2010; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Litt, 2012) and the context largely collapsed (Wesch, 2009; Marwick and boyd, 2011). Topic marking hashtags may therefore perform the dual functions of labelling a tweet for searching purposes and providing contextual information to aid interpretation. However, as Zappavigna (2015, p.11) notes, users also use hashtags to express opinions and for "adopting stances and negotiating affiliations". In these cases, hashtags, such as those in (5) and (6), perform an interpersonal function and have "little to do with aggregating posts into searchable sets and much more to do with adopting particular attitudinal dispositions" (p.13).

(5) Tattoo no. 5 booked #excited
(6) When you find out things you really wish you didn't #upset #seriously (Zappavigna, 2015, p. 12)

In her Twitter study, Page (2012) also considers the different functions of hashtags and divides her data into two categories which broadly parallel Zappavigna's (2015) experiential/interpersonal distinction. Page (2012) labels these as "topic-based" and "evaluative" respectively. She finds that "hashtags are primarily used to make the topic of a tweet visible, rather than to emphasize stance" and she notes that "expressive uses of hashtags do occur, but that these examples are by far in the minority" (p.187).

In Scott (2015), I reached similar general conclusions about the range of functions that hashtags may perform. Adopting a pragmatic approach, I aligned the categories of use with the levels of communicated content identified in relevance theory, and in doing so, identified sub-categories of use based on the pragmatic motivation for including the hashtag. According to relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/95; Carston, 2002; Wilson and Sperber, 2012; Clark, 2013a), to derive a speaker's overall intended meaning, a hearer must decode the utterance and perform various inferential tasks. First, she must construct a hypothesis about the explicit content of the utterance. To do this she must decode the linguistic content and perform disambiguation, reference resolution and other pragmatic enrichment processes until she has a truth evaluable proposition expressed. This proposition may then be embedded under attitudinal or speech act descriptors resulting in higher level explicatures. Finally, the basic and higher level explicatures may interact with contextual assumptions, resulting in intended implications known as implicatures. Inferential processes contribute at each of these levels, and we find examples where hashtags are used online to guide these processes, thereby compensating for the lack of contextual information in mediated contexts.

The experiential and interpersonal functional uses can thus be further categorised in terms of the interpretative inferential tasks they contribute to. The hashtags which play an interpersonal function guide the reader in the derivation of higher level explicatures. For example, in (5), by including the hashtag *#excited*, the speaker encourages the reader to embed the proposition expressed, given in (7), under an attitudinal descriptor to produce the higher level explicature in (8):

(7) Tattoo no. 5 is booked[3]
(8) The tweeter is excited that [Tattoo no. 5 is booked]

Meanwhile, those hashtags which fall under Zappavigna's (2015) experiential function contribute to relevance by guiding the derivation of either the proposition expressed or the implicatures. That is, they sub-divide into uses which contribute to the derivation of the explicit meaning and those which contribute to what is implicitly communicated. For example, in (4), the content of the hashtag guides the hearer to the intended explicit content. Without inclusion of the hashtag, the reader would not be able to assign reference to *it all*, and therefore would not be able to derive a truth-evaluable basic level proposition expressed. Compare this to the same hashtag as used in example (9) which contributes not to the explicit content, but to the implicatures of the utterance.

(9) might of had a dream i was a drug lord last night #breakingbad (Zappavigna, 2015, p. 9)

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[3] In this representation of the proposition expressed, I have enriched the original utterance to include the copula verb. See Scott (2010 and 2013) for a discussion of abbreviated and omitted forms in certain registers.