

The pragmatics of hashtags: Inference and conversational style on Twitter

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Abstract

This paper considers the pragmatic contribution of hashtags on the social networking site Twitter. Taking a relevance-theoretic perspective, I argue that hashtags contribute to relevance by adding a layer of activation to certain contextual assumptions and thus guiding the reader's inferential processes. The information contained in a hashtag may guide the hearer in the derivation of both explicitly and implicitly communicated meaning, and may also have stylistic consequences. Twitter facilitates one-to-many, asynchronous communication, and so tweeters are unlikely to be able to assume that they share contextual assumptions with all or any of their audience. By allowing tweeters to make their intended contextual assumptions accessible to a wide range of readers, hashtags facilitate the use of an informal, casual style, even in the unpredictable and largely anonymous discourse context of Twitter.
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1. Introduction

Twitter is an online microblogging site on which users, referred to here as tweeters, can post updates of up to 140 characters in length, known as tweets. These tweets then appear on the feed of anyone who has opted to follow that particular Twitter account, and they can also be found by non-followers via keyword searches using Twitter's in-built search functionality. A prominent feature of Twitter is the use of the # symbol, which, when followed by a word or phrase, is known as a hashtag.¹ Hashtags function primarily as metadata tags facilitating the retrieval of content from the site. In this article, however, I will argue that the role of hashtags has developed beyond their original purpose, and I will suggest that they now also function to guide readers' interpretations. I will show that they play a stylistic role, allowing users to maintain a personal, informal style in a mediated, largely text-based, public discourse context.

In Section 2, I start my discussion by considering the discourse style commonly associated with Twitter, and I suggest that the informal tone is perhaps unexpected given the features of Twitter as a communicative channel. Twitter, as an online platform, facilitates electronically mediated communication. As such, the messages that are posted on the site are constrained by the properties of the interface itself. Most notably, there is a restriction on the length of each tweet.

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¹ I will distinguish between the hash symbol itself, and the complete hashtag which comprises both the symbol and the word or phrase that follows it.

However, other properties of the platform also contribute to the discourse context and constrain users' behaviour. I first consider the stylistic consequences of the Twitter length restriction, and I then use Baym's (2010:7) "seven concepts" of mediated communication to analyse the specific discourse contextual conditions under which interlocutors are communicating when using Twitter.

In Section 3, I briefly outline the origins of the hashtag. Then, adopting a relevance-theoretic approach to utterance interpretation (Sperber and Wilson, 1986/95; Blakemore, 1987, 2007; Carston, 2002; Wilson and Sperber, 2004, 2012), I suggest that hashtags have been appropriated by users of Twitter to provide additional contextual information in an economical and stylistically unobtrusive way. This, I suggest, facilitates the production of utterances which are personal, informal and intimate in style in a medium which is public, lean in terms of social cues, and in which the discourse context is dynamic and largely unpredictable.

In Section 4, I consider a range of uses of hashtags to illustrate the different ways in which they can be used to guide a reader's inferential processes, and I show that there are attested uses associated with the full range of inferential tasks identified in relevance theory. Finally in Section 5, I sum up the ideas discussed, consider the stylistic role that hashtags fulfil and look to directions for future research in the area.

2. Style and relevance on Twitter

2.1. Twitter and conversational style

According to Twitter, Inc. and at the time of writing, there are 284 million monthly active users on Twitter and 500 million tweets are sent per day, with Twitter supporting over 35 different languages (Twitter Inc., 2014). Users include celebrities and corporations as well as "ordinary" members (Page, 2011, 2014) and the motivations for tweeting, and the content and style of those tweets can be as diverse as the site membership itself (Marwick and boyd, 2010).

Although broadly a text-based format, Twitter, like other social media platforms combines features from face-to-face spoken interaction with a written language interface (Ferrara et al., 1991; Georgakapoulou, 1997). Computer-mediated communication more generally has been described as "an Interactive Written Discourse" (Ferrara et al., 1991:8) and as "neither spoken nor written, yet both" (Baym, 2010: 64). Features more usually associated with face-to-face interaction include its "informality of style" (Georgakapoulou, 1997:142), with Tagg and Seargeant (2014:161) noting that interactions on social media sites "exhibit much of the interactivity and informality that is often found in speech". Zappavigna (2012:127) likewise notes that they "facilitate different kinds of casual, interpersonal interaction", and elsewhere, interactions on Twitter have been described as "conversational exchanges" (Honeycutt and Herring, 2009:1) and "lightweight chat" (Starbird et al., 2010:242).

Designed as a microblogging site, all updates on Twitter are restricted to 140 characters. It is, therefore, perhaps not surprising that users of the site have developed various techniques for optimising their use of these characters within the "reduced affordances of the character-constrained mode" (Zappavigna, 2012:95). Abbreviations and omissions, of the type previously observed in text messaging (Crystal, 2008; Thurlow and Brown, 2003), are common, and some of these are illustrated in the example in (1)²:

- (1) YouGov poll shows 4 the 1st time since the recession that a majority of ppl feel the econ is on the up, but still worried abt cost of living. 30/07/14

Common strategies include the use of numbers or letters to stand for homophonic words or morphemes, as with 4 (*for*); the omission of non-initial vowels, as with *ppl* (people) and *abt* (about); and the shortening of words, as with *econ* (economy) (Zappavigna, 2012). In example (1), the subject pronoun and copula in the second clause have also been omitted. While in this example, omission of the subject could be grammatical ellipsis driven by considerations of style, the omission of subjects and copula verbs, along with articles and prepositions, is another common strategy used in tweets and restricted registers more generally (Scott, 2010, 2013).

The length restriction and the need to abbreviate and omit elements of the messages mean that the tweeter has to depend on her readers to be able to reconstruct the full intended message from the non-standard, abbreviated forms. According to relevance theory an utterance is no more than a "schematic indication" (Wilson and Sperber, 2012:13) of a speaker's intended meaning. The more attenuated that form is, the more inferential work the reader will have to put in to derive the intended meaning. Furthermore, the character limitation also means that there is often no space to provide

² All of the tweets in this paper were taken from the author's own timeline. They were chosen to illustrate the range of functions that hashtags perform. Usernames and personal names of individuals have been anonymised. The date on which they were originally posted appears after the content of the tweet.

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