Language as pride, love, and hate: Archiving emotions through multilingual Instagram hashtags

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Abstract

This paper examines multilingual hashtags as discourse of emotions about social movements, with a focus on the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. With the Chinese search word #雨傘運動 (“Umbrella Movement”), over 9000 hashtags were collected from 700 posts on Instagram. These hashtags were coded by language choice and their broad discourse functions of fact, opinion, and emotion. Our analysis suggests that while stating facts and expressing opinions, a significant proportion of Instagram hashtags about the Umbrella Movement are also affective in function (e.g. #ilovehongkong, #hate). These hashtags convey emotions associated mainly with political demands, solidarity, unity, hatred, frustration, and dissatisfaction. We also conducted online interviews with selected Instagram users to understand better their multilingual hashtagging practices and language attitudes. Overall, the present study suggests that affect was expressed and experienced through a common set of linguistic resources - Cantonese, mixed code, and traditional Chinese characters - which then became codes of unity and solidarity in difficult times. Interviewees also produced discourses of pride in Cantonese which further suggest the use of Cantonese in asserting their unique Hongkonger identities. Drawing on Ahmed’s (2004) notion of ‘affective economies’, this article concludes by unravelling the relationship between language, emotion, digital technologies, and politics.

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1. Introduction

Digital social media have provided ample opportunities for ordinary people to engage in a wide range of social activities. The affordances of social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter enable users to not only update their everyday lives, but also be actively involved in social events through textually-mediated and multimodal practices (Lee and Barton, 2013). One such practice is tagging, which can be broadly defined as the act of creating and publicly display their emotions about people, object, and political events (E.g. Maireder and Schwarzenegger, 2012; Thorson et al., 2013; Bruns and Burgess, 2015). A growing number of studies have also found that hashtags play a crucial role in organizing and sharing breaking news about social or political events (e.g. Papacharissi and Oliveira, 2012; Zappavigna, 2012, 2015). To date, however, research into social tagging from a language perspective is limited, and much attention has been given to monolingual English hashtags on one site, Twitter. Compared to other social media, Instagram, one of the fastest growing platforms, is clearly an under-researched platform. To contribute to this limited but growing body of literature, this article aims to examine the relationship between expressions of emotion and language choice in hashtags on Instagram revolving around the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. It also offers a discussion of how affective multilingual hashtags help perform users’ identities online.

These keywords are hyperlinked, they are easily searchable by people sharing similar interests on certain topics, thus giving rise to “ambient affiliation” (Zappavigna, 2015, see also Lee, this issue). An increasing number of studies have also found that hashtags play a crucial role in organizing and sharing breaking news about social or political events (e.g. Maireder and Schwarzenegger, 2012; Thorson et al., 2013; Bruns and Burgess, 2015). A growing number of studies also show that political hashtags allow users to articulate and publicly display their emotions about people, object, and activity (Papacharissi and Oliveira, 2012; Zappavigna, 2012, 2015). To date, however, research into social tagging from a language perspective is limited, and much attention has been given to monolingual English hashtags on one site, Twitter. Compared to other social media, Instagram, one of the fastest growing platforms, is clearly an under-researched platform. To contribute to this limited but growing body of literature, this article aims to examine the relationship between expressions of emotion and language choice in hashtags on Instagram revolving around the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong. It also offers a discussion of how affective multilingual hashtags help perform users’ identities online.

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1.1. Instagram hashtags

Launched in 2010, and acquired by Facebook in 2012, Instagram is an image/video-sharing mobile application where users snap, post, and share images online instantly. As of June 2016, the app has reached over 500 million users (Instagram Blog, 2016). Posts on Instagram may also be shared to other social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Flickr, potentially reaching larger audiences. Unlike Flickr which started as a website, Instagram is primarily an application that allows users to post directly from their mobile phones and devices. Instagram also encourages active sharing and social networking. While posting to Instagram, users may at the same time choose to share an image to other social network sites, including Flickr. In addition to posting images and videos, users may optionally add captions and up to 30 hashtags for each post. A hashtag, a keyword prefixed by the hash (#) symbol, may consist of just one word (#hope) or a string of words written without spaces (#fightfortherighttobefree). According to Instagram Blog (2012), adding tags “is a great way to find new followers and share your photos with more people.” In practice, however, connectivity is by no means the only function of hashtags. Scholarly research on social tagging has already identified a much wider range of functions of tags. In this regard, this article will provide a useful extension of existing research, overwriting the range of possible functions of hashtags that were collected from one particular social event – the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong.

1.2. The 2014 Hong Kong #umbrellamovement

The 2014 Umbrella Movement, also known as Umbrella Revolution, was one of the largest scale political movements in Hong Kong history. It was driven by a series of pro-democracy campaigns and protests as a result of increasing conflicts between supporters of the Movement, activists, the Hong Kong SAR government, the central Beijing government, the police, as well as non-supporters of the Movement. Inspired by the occupy movements around the world, the Umbrella Movement is sometimes referred to as the ‘Occupy Central’ movement. Between September 28 and December 15, streets of three major locations in Hong Kong were occupied by protesters who demanded genuine universal suffrage in Hong Kong, among other political demands. The name, Umbrella Movement, derives from the fact that umbrellas were used by protesters to protect themselves against tear gas and pepper spray from the police on September 28, 2014, a major trigger of the Movement.

Similar to many social movements across the globe, the Movement had a strong digital and social media presence (Lee and Chan, 2016; Tsui, 2015). Images, videos, and breaking news about the Movement were uploaded and shared almost instantly on Facebook and Twitter. Numerous ‘Events’ pages on Facebook were set up to organize Movement-related activities. For example, the ‘Wear Yellow for HK’ page urged people to dress in Yellow in support of the Movement. As the majority of news sources about the Movement were first reported locally in Chinese, breaking news was translated into English and posted to live feeds on Twitter and reddit. On Instagram, people have posted images of the protest sites, key proponents of the Occupy campaign, artworks, as well as slogans of the campaign. With few exceptions, most of the posts and hashtags are supportive of the Movement.

2. Social tagging and political events

Social media have played an increasingly indispensable role in organizing, planning, sharing, and reporting political events. For example, in October 2009, Twitter and Facebook were used extensively by student protesters during the ‘unibrennt’ movement in Vienna (Maireder and Schwarzenegger, 2012). ‘Unibrennt’, which literally means ‘the university is burning’, was a protest movement in which students occupied the largest lecture hall in Vienna to express their dissatisfaction towards education policy in Austria. The success of the protest, according to Maireder and Schwarzenegger, is largely attributed to social media where participants voluntarily organized themselves into a community of “connected individuals”. As with the Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, communication about the ‘unibrennt’ protests was largely facilitated by social media especially Facebook. Another major socio-political campaign that relies heavily on social media is the Occupy movement around the world. Thorson et al. (2013) observed that YouTube is used as a major platform for publicizing, circulating, and archiving moments or feelings related to the Occupy protests around the world. Those videos that went viral on Twitter and other platforms have then become “a stock of resources available to publics associated with the Occupy movement” (Thorson et al., 2013, p. 440).

For both the ‘unibrennt’ or Occupy movements, hashtags were an important means to curate contents and connect those who were directly or indirectly involved in the events. The hashtag #unibrennt on Twitter made it easy for people to follow relevant conversations and posts generated by people outside their immediate social networks. Thorson et al. (2013) found that Occupy videos were more likely to receive more views if they were retweeted with common hashtags on Twitter. They describe these hashtags as “connective goods” that unite supporters of the events, in the sense that like-minded people were connected for similar reasons. Occupy-related hashtags also make discussions on Twitter accessible and ongoing. On the contrary, Small (2011) notes that for posts related to Canadian politics, political hashtags such as #cdnpoli serve the primary function of informing rather than political discussion and reporting. What seems clear from these previous studies is that hashtags for socio-political movements tend to serve multiple functions.

2.1. Emotion online

Regardless of the primary function of hashtags, user-generated contents in social media are rich in stance, opinions, and evaluation (Barton and Lee, 2013; Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan, 2013). Before the advent of social media, numerous studies already showed that in computer-mediated communication, writers’ emotions can be indicated by emoticons (Dresner and Herring, 2010; Harris and Paradice, 2007). There is also a possible correlation between emotive language and online behavior. Huffaker (2010), for instance, noted that in discussion forums, messages charged with emotions tended to receive more feedback. The newer affordances of social media pave the way for users to express their feelings by means other than emoticons. For example, marking emotions with the ‘Like’ button has become a norm on most social network sites. Recently, Facebook has even introduced the additional buttons of ‘love’, ‘angry’, ‘sad’, ‘wow’, and ‘haha’ to elicit users’ more specific reactions to a post. The ‘sharing’ or ‘retweeting’ function on Facebook, Twitter, and other social network sites enables users to share their feelings not only with their immediate networks, but also with an unknown public around the globe.

Emotions can be explicitly marked through language. Discourses of emotions have been researched extensively in various branches of linguistics. In pragmatics, emotions are performed through ‘expressive’ speech acts, i.e. performative utterances that articulate feelings and emotions (Searle, 1976). From a discourse semantics perspective, Martin and White (2005) study emotions as part of a system of meanings called affect, which belongs to the broader system of attitude. This perspective has lately been
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