#MeToo discourses as communities of practice in English, German and Spanish

XIII International Corpus Linguistics conference

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The language of social media

The empowering effect of social media

Social media

- empower individuals to reach a large audience, change established views
- introduce or perpetuate frames in ways previously impossible
- "undermine the boundaries [...] and challenge the power of traditional news organisations" (Ahmed 2010)

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Hashtags as a linguistic phenomenon of social media

- Why do we use hashtags in social media?
- What are the linguistic functions and effects of hashtags?

Introduction
○●○○

Communicative effects of hashtags
○○

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
○○○○○○○○○○○○○○

Why study hashtags?

Aren't hashtags the same as any name we give to issues? 🤔

Introduction
○●○○

Communicative effects of hashtags
○○

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
○○○○○○○○○○○○○

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What's linguistically interesting about hashtags?

- categorising & evaluative potential, no inherent evaluation (unlike "crisis", "scandal", etc)

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- broadcast linguistic innovations → usually short-lived, but potential to spread faster than in traditional speech communities (Cunha et al. 2011)

Introduction
○○●○○

Communicative effects of hashtags
○○

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
○○○○○○○○○○○○○

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Le Hoang Nguyen @nguyenle · Sep 15
This young @astros fan is ready to go in to play #centerfield against the @Royals. #AgsWin #Astros #MLB #TakeItBack⚾ #nobaddays #**YODO** #havepassionwilltravel #putmeincoach @ Kauffman Stadium instagram.com /p/B2cd5IDAhc0/…

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Why study hashtags?

What's linguistically interesting about hashtags?

- paralanguage – like intonation or emojis, but more powerful #UnbackedClaim

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What's linguistically interesting about hashtags?

By definition internationally shared → normally used cross-linguistically

- translation defeats purpose of cross-border solidarity (cf #moiaussi, see also Desjardins 2017: 80)

Introduction
○○○●

Communicative effects of hashtags
○○

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
○○○○○○○○○○○○

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Marilyse Hamelin
@Marilyse

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Comment #MoiAussi a changé la face de la musique pop

Comment #MoiAussi a changé la face de la musique pop
On assiste dernièrement à une véritable prolifération d'œuvres musicales ouvertement féministes. Laurence Nerbonne souffle sur les braises de #MoiAussi...
voir.ca

1:24 PM - 10 Sep 2019

Si l'actrice américaine Alyssa Milano a balayé la twittosphère et lancé le mouvement #MeToo, c'est pourtant à Tarana Burke, une militante féministe de Harlem, que revient la maternité de

Introduction
0000

Communicative effects of hashtags
●○

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
0000000000000

The #MeToo hashtag

- coined in 2006 by Tarana Burke as movement for black women's safety at the workplace (see Garcia 2017)

Introduction
oooo

Communicative effects of hashtags
●o

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
oo

This study
ooooooooooooo

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Introduction
0000

Communicative effects of hashtags
●○

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
000000000000

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Introduction
○○○○

Communicative effects of hashtags
●○

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
○○○○○○○○○○○○○

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- began trending on Twitter on 24 October 2017
- actress Alyssa Milano responded to allegations of sexual assault by Harvey Weinstein
- encouraged "members of the public to join in to showcase the magnitude of the problem of sexual violence" (Mendes et al. 2018: 236).

Introduction
0000

Communicative effects of hashtags
●○

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
○○○○○○○○○○○○○

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- began trending on Twitter on 24 October 2017
- actress Alyssa Milano responded to allegations of sexual assault by Harvey Weinstein
- encouraged "members of the public to join in to showcase the magnitude of the problem of sexual violence" (Mendes et al. 2018: 236).
- has received little scientific interest, given its continued impact

Introduction
0000

Communicative effects of hashtags
○●

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
○○○○○○○○○○○○○

Hashtags for community building

Benefits produced by hashtags (Keller et al. 2018: 28–29)

- sense of community, solidarity and support

Introduction
0000

Communicative effects of hashtags
○●

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
○○○○○○○○○○○○○

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Introduction
0000

Communicative effects of hashtags
○●

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
○○○○○○○○○○○○○

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Introduction
0000

Communicative effects of hashtags
○●

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
0000000000000

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→ hashtags channel emotion and form communal activism

Introduction
OOOO

Communicative effects of hashtags
OO

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
●O

This study
OOOOOOOOOOOOO

Dialogicity on Twitter (Page 2012)

$\rightarrow$ Do **dialogic exchanges** (needed for participatory interaction) occur on Twitter?

Introduction
oooo

Communicative effects of hashtags
oo

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
●o

This study
oooooooooooooo

Dialogicity on Twitter (Page 2012)

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Introduction
0000

Communicative effects of hashtags
00

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
●○

This study
000000000000

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- rhetorical questions, inclusive "we" for solidarising $\rightarrow$ heteroglossic acknowledgement of wider audience (2012: 195)

- treating the audience as a collective ("guys", "os cuento", "ihr") $\rightarrow$ dynamics of **broadcast talk** (conversationality simulated, not dialogic), "micro-celebrities"

Introduction
○○○○

Communicative effects of hashtags
○○

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
●○

This study
○○○○○○○○○○○○○

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- self-branding via hashtags mainly found in one-to-many broadcasts rather than conversational, addressed messages (2012: 187)

Introduction
0000

Communicative effects of hashtags
00

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
●○

This study
000000000000

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- self-branding via hashtags mainly found in one-to-many broadcasts rather than conversational, addressed messages (2012: 187)

- hashtag talk involves multiple participants talking simultaneously about the same topic, rather than individuals conversing (2012: 196)

Introduction
0000

Communicative effects of hashtags
00

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
0●

This study
000000000000

Functional linguistic approach to hashtag use

Hashtags enact three simultaneous communicative functions as meaning in context (Zappavigna 2015)

- indicating topics – experiential

Introduction
0000

Communicative effects of hashtags
00

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
0●

This study
000000000000

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- organizing the structure of the post – textual

Introduction
0000

Communicative effects of hashtags
00

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
0●

This study
0000000000000

Functional linguistic approach to hashtag use

Hashtags enact three simultaneous communicative functions as meaning in context (Zappavigna 2015)

- indicating topics – experiential
- organizing the structure of the post – textual
- metacomment construing an evaluative stance – interpersonal

Introduction
oooo

Communicative effects of hashtags
oo

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
oo

This study
●oooooooooooo

Research objectives

Semantic prosody

Pragmatic colouring applied to words by its collocates (=words occuring along with it) (Louw 1993: 158–159, Vessey 2013: 13–14)

- to study the semantic prosody of the #MeToo hashtag

Introduction
○○○○

Communicative effects of hashtags
○○

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
●○○○○○○○○○○○○

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Introduction
0000

Communicative effects of hashtags
00

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
00

This study
●000000000000

Research objectives

Semantic prosody

Pragmatic colouring applied to words by its collocates (=words occuring along with it) (Louw 1993: 158–159, Vessey 2013: 13–14)

- to study the semantic prosody of the #MeToo hashtag
- to study the authors' evaluative stance in occurrences lacking collocates
- how do discourses around what seems to be the same concept diverge across languages?

Introduction
oooo

Communicative effects of hashtags
oo

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
oo

This study
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Method

Exemplary data

- extraction of tweets involving #MeToo hashtag, in collaboration with Oliver Czulo (University of Leipzig)
- time span recorded (2 snapshots):

  German 10–23 July 2019, 23 July – 30 August 2021
  Spanish 31 July – 6 August 2019, 30 July – 30 August 2021
  English 6 August 2019, 30 July & 30 August 2021

- primarily qualitative analysis based on 875 English, 750 German and 530 Spanish tweets
- limitation: country identity not always (correctly) given

Introduction
○○○○

Communicative effects of hashtags
○○

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
○○●○○○○○○○○○○○

#MeToo collocates in English 2019

Introduction
○○○○

Communicative effects of hashtags
○○

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
○○○●○○○○○○○○○

#MeToo collocates in Spanish 2019

#MeToo collocates in German 2019

Introduction
0000

Communicative effects of hashtags
00

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
00

This study
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#MeToo collocates in 2021

Compared to the 2019 data, in 2021:

- the dominating collocate in English is *movement* (61%), in Spanish it is *movimiento* (57%)

Introduction
0000

Communicative effects of hashtags
00

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
00

This study
000000●0000000

#MeToo collocates in 2021

Compared to the 2019 data, in 2021:

- the dominating collocate in English is *movement* (61%), in Spanish it is *movimiento* (57%)
- in German, the only collocates appearing with any frequency are *Bewegung* (21%) and *Debatte* (14%)

Introduction
0000

Communicative effects of hashtags
00

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
00

This study
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#MeToo collocates in 2021

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- in German, the only collocates appearing with any frequency are *Bewegung* (21%) and *Debatte* (14%)
- thus, the observation from 2019 is confirmed, though preference seems to have shifted a bit

Introduction
0000

Communicative effects of hashtags
00

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
00

This study
000000●000000

Results for 2021

	collocate		isolated		external		unrelated	
	2019	2021	2019	2021	2019	2021	2019	2021
EN	25%	15%	16%	20%	47%	32%	4%	17%
ES	23%	11%	29%	35%	31%	29%	3%	11%
DE	16%	18%	25%	29%	45%	44%	4%	6%

Observations:

- similarity between EN and ES data: decrease in #MeToo as collocate, increase in isolated and unrelated use
- DE data shows hardly any change
- While EN and ES now show less usage of #MeToo as collocate, DE data retains frequent use, also in external use

Introduction
○○○○

Communicative effects of hashtags
○○

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
○○○○○○○●○○○○○

#MeToo without collocates: Four stance categories

Introduction
○○○○

Communicative effects of hashtags
○○

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
○○○○○○○●○○○○○○

#MeToo without collocates: Four stance categories

Criticise

Reject/hijack

Introduction
○○○○

Communicative effects of hashtags
○○

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
○○○○○○○○○●○○○○

#MeToo in English (isolated)

2019 **2021**

Support

Criticise

Reject/hijack

Mention

Introduction
○○○○

Communicative effects of hashtags
○○

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
○○○○○○○○○○●○○○
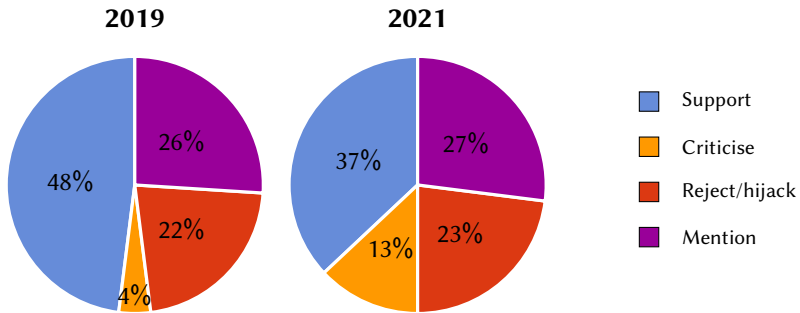
#MeToo in German (isolated)

2019

2021

Support

Criticise

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Introduction
○○○○

Communicative effects of hashtags
○○

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
○○○○○○○○○○○○●○○
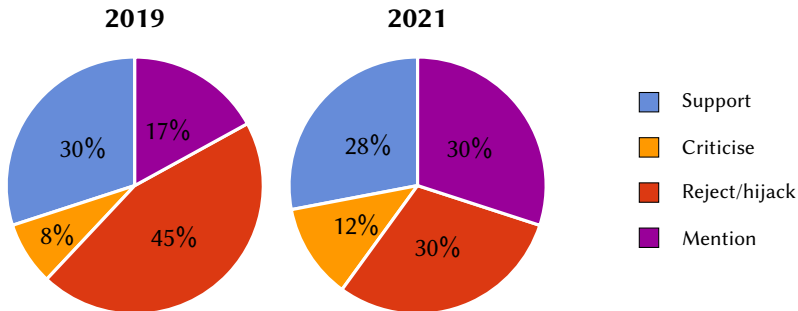
#MeToo in Spanish (isolated)
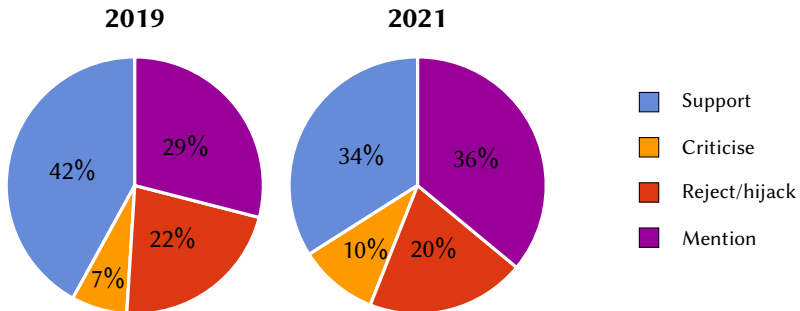
2019

2021

- Support
- Criticise
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Introduction
○○○○

Communicative effects of hashtags
○○

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
○○○○○○○○○○○○●○

Conclusion

Some tentative observations

- Some framings can be identified cross-linguistically (Bisiada 2021)

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- German discourse: semantic prosody frames #MeToo more reluctantly ("debate") or even negatively ("hysteria") than in English and Spanish ("movement", "movimiento")

Introduction
0000

Communicative effects of hashtags
00

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
00

This study
0000000000000●0

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Introduction
0000

Communicative effects of hashtags
00

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
00

This study
000000000000●0

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- mirrored by authors' stance where no semantic prosody is used
- strong views of support and rejection decline → polarisation around #MeToo softens

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Introduction
○○○○

Communicative effects of hashtags
○○

Functional linguistic studies of hashtags
○○

This study
○○○○○○○○○○○○○●

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