

Reinterpreting the use of hashtags: the humoristic use of #jesuis

Barbara De Cock & Andrea Pizarro Pedraza (Université catholique de Louvain)

Barbara.decock@uclouvain.be

Andrea.pizarro@uclouvain.be

In January 2015, the attack on the French satiric magazine *Charlie Hebdo* headquarters in Paris caused a lot of reactions on social media, including the appearance of the hashtag #jesuischarlie in order to express support and alignment with the victims. From then on, the stem #jesuis has been productive e.g. #jesuisparis after the November 2015 Paris attacks, but has also evolved into humoristic uses. In these, humor has an adversarial function (Veale et al. 2006): they ridicule the conveyed political or emotional load, underlining among others the superficiality of the massive social media protest (Kuipers 2002) and/or intentionally pushing the boundaries of the taboo of violent death. While the hashtag was originally developed as a way to indicate thematic coherence and to structure messages, its uses are now also largely rhetoric (Giles et al. 2015: 49). This paper will address from a linguistic-discursive perspective the hashtag #jesuis and its variants, specifically those used for humoristic purposes, with the aim of placing this strategy among other functions of hashtags (Zappavigna 2015).

Our analysis will be based on a database of tweets from 2015-2016 containing #jesuis. The hashtag is not only produced in French tweets, which is another proof of the creativity of its use. We will focus particularly on the evolution of hashtags that were initially supportive, such as #jesuischien ‘Iamdog’ (concerning the death of a police-dog), to the ridiculing by means of the playful breaking of the taboo of death, through hashtags such as #jesuiscafard ‘Iamcockroach’, #jesuisfourmi ‘Iamant’. The latter use a parallel syntactic structure (Davies 1984), but refer to animals that are lower in the taxonomy, in terms of emotional connection, therefore questioning the pertinence of mourning.

With this study, we wish to explore how the hashtags are used not only as a structuring device, but also as a preferred locus for polyphonic echoing of previous hashtags and for humoristic uses. The recognizability of the hashtag, both at a technical level by means of the #-sign and by means of its linguistic structure, contribute to its specific role for rhetoric uses, viz. to express affiliation and to challenge the limits of taboo in social media, which encourage their users to rapidly express themselves on sensitive societal topics, such as terrorism.

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