

Title: Self and group reference by politicians on Twitter: Adapting personal deixis to 140 characters

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This paper studies how language is used on Twitter by politicians during the 2014 European elections campaign. More specifically, it focuses on how Belgian, German and Spanish politicians present and promote themselves, connect to different kinds of communities and comment on current affairs through microblogging. This kind of language use can be viewed as “a process of interactive meaning generation employing as its tool a set of production and interpretation choices from a variable and varying range of options, made in a negotiable manner, inter-adapting with communicative needs” (Verschuere 2008: 14). From such a pragmatic perspective, we aim at investigating how the candidates adapt their language use to different contexts when communicating on Twitter, especially how the technological constraints and ‘communicative affordances’ (Hutchby forthcoming) of this medium influence politicians’ language use. Special attention is paid to the distinctive use of personal pronouns to create professional and private identities, to affirm group membership and to link up with communities of possibly interested voters, followers, colleagues, campaigners, etc. (cf. Marwick & Boyd 2011).

The research questions are:

- How do politicians, whose discourse largely relies on personal deixis, adapt to the technical constraints of Twitter?
- How is person deixis used in function of different communicative goals and in relation to (contextual) factors such as thematic content, political and personal profile, authorship, nationality, language?
- Can deictic expressions be used to define identity-oriented Twitter styles (cf. Thimm et al. 2011)?

The analysis relies on a corpus comprising four comparable sub-corpora (Teubert 1996) contrasting two Germanic (Dutch and German) and two Romance languages (French and Spanish). The dataset, collected at the University of Burgundy, consists of the tweets of all Belgian, German and Spanish candidates for the European Parliament elections (May 25, 2014), active on Twitter between May 4 and June 1, 2014. The research presented in this paper focuses on the systematic study of 1st person singular and plural pronouns, as well as person deixis expressed through verb inflection (for Spanish).

We combine a quantitative and qualitative approach, analysing not only the frequency with which these forms are used, but also their reference and their meaningful functioning in the context of Twitter discourse. Indeed, we focus on (i) which reference is established (personal

or professional identity, local or European group) and, (ii) which clues lead to the establishment of this reference, taking into account also Twitter-specific features such as the use of hashtags, reference to other users, and the use of deictic forms in retweets.

Through this analysis, we show that language users adapt to the specificities of Twitter in various ways. Thus, we expect a lower frequency of person deictic forms than in other political communication, due to the conciseness constraint. The technical specificities of Twitter play a role in the construction of self and group reference. Finally, the particular use of deictics furthermore allows for defining the type of identity-oriented Twitter style European Parliament candidates construct, as well as for new insights into the relationships they create with their audience.

References

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