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Self-reference by politicians on Twitter: Strategies to adapt to 140 characters

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Abstract

This paper studies how language is used on Twitter by Belgian and Spanish politicians in the context of the 2014 European elections campaign. Taking a pragmatic perspective on language use, we investigate three interrelated aspects of political communication on Twitter: (i) how political candidates adapt their language to the technological affordances of Twitter; (ii) which linguistic strategies the politicians use to express self-reference in function of different communicative goals and in relation to contextual factors such as ideological profile or nationality; and (iii) how some of the image building and community building strategies can be interpreted as reflexive signs of metapragmatic awareness. This study shows that the practice of self-referencing is a prominent feature of politicians' discourse on Twitter, which is used as a tool for professional communication, as most of the self-references refer to professional rather than private identities. When spreading tweets, the studied Belgian and Spanish politicians use a number of adaptability strategies. They use conciseness strategies, such as subject pronoun ellipsis and full subject NP constructions of a first person plural verb form in Spanish and Catalan, to accommodate to the 140 character constraint of the microblogging service. To express identities the politicians not only make use of first person pronouns, but also use the Twitter handle, the hashtag or proper nouns, referring to themselves in the third person. This practice shows that Twitter is not only a tool for professional political communication, but also a tool for personal branding. To end, it is argued that different linguistic choices

show signs of metapragmatic awareness with the politicians reflecting on the communicative practice in which they are involved, indicating that they creatively use this type of social media to render their campaign talk searchable and 'followable'.

Keywords

Political communication, Twitter, self-reference, adaptability strategies, European elections, metapragmatic awareness

1. Introduction

During the 2014 European election campaign, the following message appeared on the Twitter account of European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs, Skills and Labour Mobility, Marianne Thyssen (1).

- (1) *@JunckerEU: #selfie on the #Juncker4President bus with @mariannethyssen @IvoBelet @StevenVanackere @cdenv #vk14 #withJuncker* (Marianne Thyssen)

At that time she was a high-profile candidate, heading the list of the Belgian Flemish Christian Democrats under the flag of the European People's Party (EPP). How to read this message? Is this a well-formed sentence of written English? Why are the subject and the finite verb missing and why did she refer to herself in the third person as "@mariannethyssen"? One of her main rivals from the Belgian liberals, Guy Verhofstadt, President of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), tweeted in the same period (2).

- (2) *in #EU we have talent,brain & creativity to excell & lead but EU lags behind due 2 bad regulation & bad business environment #ep2014 @Wayra* (Guy Verhofstadt)

What does this message mean? Who does the plural first person pronoun *we* refer to? Why did the liberal leader use ampersands in this 139-character opinion piece instead of the coordinating conjunction *and*, and why does the number two function here as preposition? These questions will be addressed in the next sections, as we are interested in the way politicians with European ambitions use language on the microblogging service Twitter. More particularly, we hope to shed some light on a few linguistic strategies that politicians use to adapt their communication to the technology of Twitter.

To study the dynamic interaction of form and function, linguistic structure and context, we will take a pragmatic perspective (Verschueren, 1999) and focus on how politicians, whose discourse largely relies on personal deixis, identity construction and community building, refer

to themselves and (sometimes even simultaneously) affiliate themselves to different social or professional groups (for the study of personal deixis in other genres of political discourse, see Iñigo Mora, 2004; Bull & Fetzer, 2006; Gelabert-Desnoyer, 2006; Pujante & Morales-López, 2008; Blas Arroyo 2011). In particular, we examine how Belgian and Spanish candidates in the 2014 European elections profile and promote themselves via all kinds of identity references. Belgium and Spain are both relatively underexplored in this field (as opposed to e.g. Germany, UK and France). However, they share a few important characteristics. Both are countries where a certain form of multilingualism is constitutionally recognized. Voting is organized in large constituencies (Spain has one federal constituency; Belgium has three, one for each language community), as opposed to systems with much smaller constituencies such as the UK and France. In terms of group affiliation and identification, it is also noteworthy that both countries have regionalist parties. There are also some interesting differences, mainly regarding to the political structure. Whereas Spain has known a two-party system for a long time (though the 2014 elections precisely seemed to mark the beginning of the end of that system), Belgium has a long-standing tradition of coalition governments. At a linguistic level, the main languages used in the Spanish corpus are pro-drop, whereas the main languages of the Belgium corpus are not, which has an impact on the ways in which self-references may (or may not) be expressed. We will take up these characteristics in our analysis.

For the analysis of identity references, we will not only look at the functioning of personal pronouns as the typical means to express self-reference in political discourse (Bull & Fetzer, 2006), but we will also take into account a variety of other linguistic means to express self-reference and group membership in a computer-mediated context, such as *@-handles* or *hashtags* (#). Of course, we acknowledge that, as in other forms of political communication, the texts may not have been written or posted by the political leaders themselves, but rather by their team (see Roginsky, 2015: 94-95). However, in Goffman's (1981) terms, the politician is the *principal* even if he/she is not necessarily the *author*. Draucker (2015: 51-52) argues that, in view of the affordances of Twitter, viz. the possibility to not only produce but also retransmit messages, it is more appropriate to propose a 'broadcaster' role, defined as "a 'followable' party that makes talk available to recipients". We will, then, consider the politicians as 'broadcasters', not necessarily as the actual authors of their tweets.

Our research questions are threefold: (i) How do European politicians adapt to the technological constraints and possibilities of Twitter? (ii) Which linguistic strategies are used to express self-reference and group affiliation in function of different communicative goals and in relation to such (contextual) factors as professional and personal profile or nationality? (iii) How can different strategies for self-reference and group affiliation be interpreted as reflexive signs of metapragmatic awareness, showing adaptability at work in political communication on

Twitter? Put differently, the first question tries to gain an insight into the way politicians exploit the affordances of Twitter to produce effective and meaningful (re)tweets. The second question targets different linguistic strategies that politicians use when communicating through Twitter. The third research question follows from our assumption that "all language use is in some way metalinguistic in that its production and interpretation depend on the successful deployment and uptake of what has been variously referred to as the framing and keying strategies, contextualization cues, metamessages, code-orientation, and a plethora of other signals and devices exploiting and relying on the reflexive nature of language" (Jaworski, 2007: 271). Following Verschueren (2009) we will consider any linguistic trace of a language user's reflexive awareness of the discursive processes he or she is involved in as metapragmatic. So, in the production and interpretation of meaning (i.e. meaningful tweets) the studied candidates inevitably reflect on their language use so as to optimally interadapt their communicative intentions to the context of the communicative event by metapragmatically signalling what their language is used for and how it can (or should) be interpreted in the dynamic interaction between author and audience.

In this paper, we will first comment on some specificities of computer-mediated language use on Twitter (2). Then we will present the data and methodology used (3) for analyzing the specificities of self-reference in European Parliament candidates' tweets (4). This will allow us to formulate some conclusions about the linguistic pragmatic strategies used by politicians to adapt to the new online medium of Twitter (5).

2.Computer-mediated language use in a microblogging social network

2.1 Tweeting as a meaningful choice-making practice

When spreading messages on Twitter the studied candidate members of the European Parliament (MEPs) are *using language* by means of '*new media*' *technology*. Both the concepts of 'language use' and the 'technology of new media', i.e. Twitter, seem self-evident, but they require some clarification. From a functional pragmatic perspective any 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" (Verschueren, 2008: 14). When tweet (1) appears on Thyssen's account to communicate that she is riding a bus with Jean-Claude Juncker, the leader of EPP in the race for the presidency of the European Commission (who after the elections indeed became president), this instance of language use can be seen as the product of a dynamic choice-making process, involving both (conscious and

unconscious) linguistic and extralinguistic choices to satisfy certain communicative needs, constrained by contextual factors.

A first linguistic choice is the choice of language. The English message is not arbitrary, nor necessary. After all, Thyssen's tweets are mainly in Dutch, her native language and the official language of her constituency. Only 2 of the 25 sampled tweets from her account were in English. Yet, in this *lingua franca* tweets get more international exposure, which is useful if you aspire to a European office. However, this post is actually a retweet and on a more practical level, retweeting without translating is less onerous than translating and much more in line with the affordances of Twitter. Nevertheless, she had other options. She could have translated Juncker's original tweet into Dutch, if she primarily wanted to communicate with her Belgian Flemish electorate or, rather, with the Belgian journalists, since it has been shown that MEPs mainly address journalists and other professionals (Roginsky & Huys, 2015). By retweeting this announcement from the whole range of possible tweets circulating that day, she chose to highlight this campaign message and make it visible to her own followers, fulfilling the 'broadcaster' role. In terms of group affiliation she associates herself in one go with the EPP campaign to pilot Juncker to the presidency of the European Commission (*#Juncker4President*) and also with her own national party (*@cdenv*), emphasized by the reference to two party members, who were also candidate MEPs.

Moreover, the linguistic structure of this tweet is also determined by the contextual factor of the activity type (Levinson, 1992). Thyssen is not just making conversation. The Juncker tweet is clearly part of the political campaign rhetoric and additionally functioned as a caption to the picture referred to as *#selfie*. Another linguistic choice concerns the fragmentary formulation instead of a full sentence. The missing finite verb signals that it is not the action (of taking a photo or riding a bus) that matters, but that it is the information about who is in the bus that is most salient for this communicative purpose. Thus, a negotiation of meaning has taken place to trade off the grammaticality of the utterance in favour of the communicative need to create the impression that they are one team, supporting each other. An alternative formulation could have yielded a different interpretation.

2.2 Adaptability and reflexivity on Twitter

An important contextual factor of all of the studied messages is the technology of Twitter. The studied politicians adapt their language use to this microblogging service. As with all forms of (digital) communication, the mediation of the communicative event has an impact on how it takes place. The concept of 'affordances' has been proposed by Hutchby (2001; 2014) to describe "the possibilities for action that they [the affordances] offer" (Hutchby, 2001: 26).

Hutchby argues that “technological artefacts both promote certain forms of interaction between participants and constrain the possibilities for other forms of interaction” (Hutchby, 2001: 32). In this sense, Twitter allows for communicating with a potentially large, geographically and temporally disperse, audience, combined with an almost direct transmission of the message (as opposed to some other forms of mass communication). In addition to the fact that the use of Twitter is not constrained by institutionally controlled instances, such as TV channels or newspaper editors, these qualities make Twitter a tool that can be used by anyone for both private and public communication. That is why Twitter is used extensively as a tool for self-presentation and self-praise (Dayter, 2014). On a more technical level, Twitter allows for combining written texts with audio and video material. The hash sign (#) introduces hashtags, which may be searched by users and which may, thus, create thematic links. Since a hashtag identifies a topic, it needs not necessarily be part of a sentence and, so, allows for introducing potentially (syntactically) peripheral elements. Compare (3), where *#eleccioneseuropeas* is part of a prepositional phrase, with (4) where it is not syntactically integrated. The way in which hashtags are used to express self-reference is discussed in 4.2.

(3) *RT @upvehu: @IzaskunBilbaoB , Ramón Jauregui, Josu Juaristi, @zoenubla e Iñigo Martínez Zatón debatirán sobre #eleccionesEuropeas* (Izaskun Bilbao)

‘RT @upvehu: @IzaskunBilbaoB , Ramón Jauregui, Josu Juaristi, @zoenubla and Iñigo Martínez Zatón will debate about #Europeanelections’ (Izaskun Bilbao)

(4) *RT @psoedealgeciras: #TuMuevesEuropa #VotaPSOE #ELECCIONESEUROPEAS2014 #ALGECIRAS <http://t.co/bIPunI7i23>* (Elena Valenciano)

‘RT @psoedealgeciras: #YouMoveEurope #VotePSOE #EUROPEANELECTIONS2014 #ALGECIRAS <http://t.co/bIPunI7i23>’ (Elena Valenciano)

Affordances go together with technological constraints. One of the fundamental constraints of the microblogging service is its character limit. As Twitter only allows for microposts of maximally 140 characters, example (2) in the introduction illustrates how symbols (&) and numbers (2) are used to act as function words and so save characters in order to force the political message into the 140-character format.¹ Also in this example hashtags and @-handles are creatively used to simultaneously generate meaning and provide metadata. These technical signs can be argued to function as markers of metapragmatic awareness.

The notion of metapragmatic awareness has to do with reflexivity, which can be defined as “the capacity of the mind to bend back upon itself, to be aware of its own experiences as

¹ Note that Verhofstadt could have saved one more character in his tweet, if he had spelled the infinitive of the verb *excel* correctly.

residing in a self that is situated in a social context of interaction" (Verschueren & Brisard 2009: 33). Thus, metapragmatics is "the study of a metalevel at which verbal communication is self-referential to various degrees" (Verschueren, 1995: 367). When we take an interpretive stance and assume that both Juncker and Thyssen presume that the people mentioned in the tweet of example (1) are more relevant for the implied audience than the action they are involved in, the highlighting of this information can be seen as metapragmatics at work. However, there are more markers of metapragmatic awareness, ranging from *verba dicendi* to sentence adverbs, question tags, hedges, quotations and indexicals, such as personal pronouns (Verschueren, 1999: 189-195). The latter can be considered as metapragmatic markers as they " 'shift' in relation to changes in the context of use [and] require reflexive awareness of the process of matching structural to contextual properties" (Verschueren 1999: 189). Indeed, the personal pronoun *we* in Verhofstadt's tweet of example (2) can only be understood with reference to the context, including the co-text. It functions to express self-reference, but it also creates a group identity. As it is preceded by "#EU", the first person plural pronoun can be interpreted as 'we the people of Europe (of which the author is a part) have talent, brains & creativity'. This small example also already shows that next to other-references, which will not be dealt with in this paper, self-references via personal pronouns "are key to the reconstruction and negotiation of identities and social roles" in political discourse (Bull & Fetzer, 2006: 3).

This is crucial to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships, which is typical of the kind of social media Twitter belongs to (Zappavigna, 2012). Twitter can be regarded as a tool for social bonding (Marwick & boyd, 2011). It creates social and professional connections in networked publics (boyd, 2011). The potential for an imagined collective of users to commune on Twitter and form "virtual groupings afforded by features of electronic text, such as metadata, [creating] alignments between people who have not necessarily directly interacted online" is called 'ambient affiliation' by Zappavigna (2012: 1). In professional contexts this social function can be exploited to turn Twitter into a tool of personal branding (Gratton, 2012; Ottovordemgentschenfelde, 2016).

3.Data and methodology

3.1 Presentation of the dataset

The data analyzed in this paper consist of tweets published by the Flemish (Dutch-speaking Belgian) and Spanish heads of list for the 2014 European Elections during the electoral campaign. The tweets were collected between May 4th 2014 and June 1st 2014 (viz. from three weeks before the elections till one week after election day). See table 1 for the distribution of

tweets over the studied politicians, situated within their European political groups: ALDE (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe), ECR (European Conservatives and reformists), ENF (Europe of Nations and Freedom), EPP (European People's Party), Greens/EFA (Greens/European Free Alliance), GUE/NGL (European United Left/Nordic Green Left), S&D (Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats).

								SUM
Spain	Izaskún Bilbao (Partido Nacionalista Vasco) + Ramón Tremosa (Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya) 451 + 400	/	/	Miguel Arias Cañete (Partido Popular) 57	Willy Meyer (Izquierda Unida) 701	Pablo Iglesias (Podemos) 474	Elena Valenciano Martínez (Partido Socialista Obrero Español) 334	2417
Belgium (Dutch-speaking constituency)	Guy Verhofstadt (Open Vlaamse Liberalen en Democraten) 292	Johan Van Overtveldt (Nieuw-Vlaamse Alliantie) 188	Gerolf Annemans (Vlaams Belang) 232	Marianne Thyssen (Christen-Democratisch en Vlaams) 25	Bart Staes (Groen) 150	Tim Joye (Partij van de Arbeid+) 146	Kathleen Van Brempt (Socialistische Partij Anders) 71	1104

Table 1: Heads of list, classified per European group² with the number of tweets sampled. Between brackets, the national party name is mentioned.

Selecting the heads of list allows for comparing data of persons with a similar potential impact on the political landscape. A comparison of the lists as a whole, by contrast, would offer a very different type of data, including a large number of candidates who know that they will never be elected (and in some cases also do not have the ambition to be elected). In the case of Spain, a very high number of lists was submitted for the 2014 elections, many of them by small, recently created parties, which obtained few votes. We selected for this study the heads of list of parties with a longer tradition and also included Podemos which, although it is a relatively new party, gained 5 seats at the European elections. Note in table 1 that there are two Spanish politicians for the liberal ALDE party. Both Ramón Tremosa and Izaskún Bilbao are members of the ALDE group. However, they are each the head of list of their own regional party, respectively Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya and Partido Nacional Vasco, which is why we included both in our dataset. A special case is Willy Meyer of Izquierda Unida. He was first part of GUE but changed to the Greens after the 2014 elections. However, he did not stay for long in the European Parliament, as he resigned on June 24th 2014, when it became

² The logos were taken from the official websites of the respective parliamentary groups.

public that his MEP pension fund was held by a Luxemburg SICAV, which he considered incompatible with his militancy. Finally, it should be noted that extreme rightist Annemans has only been a member of the Europe of Nations and Freedom group from June 14th 2015; before that he was a non-attached member in the European Parliament.

3.2 Methodological sketch

The main languages of the corpus are Spanish (Spain) and Dutch (Belgium). However, other languages are also present in the data, e.g. English, the Spanish co-official languages (Catalan, Bask and Galician), French, Italian and, more occasionally, other European languages. Our analysis will focus on the main languages used in each dataset but, since data selection was carried out by means of selecting geographical entities – not languages – we take into account all languages used in our corpus.

The following meta-information was available for each tweet: twitter handle (account name), publication date, as well as the content of the tweet. However, it was not possible to include images and other related media in the corpus. A reference to other media is available, though, which allows for reconstructing whether the message contained images or video material. The visual material, however, was not taken into account in this analysis, nor was the profile description of the Twitter user (but see De Cock & Roginsky, 2015: 139-141; Roginsky & De Cock, 2015 on the importance of the Twitter profile for self-presentation of European parliament members and candidates).

We coded each tweet for the following features: (i) the language of the tweet, (ii) the grammatical realization of the self-reference, (iii) the number, (iv) the identity referred to, (v) presence of (technological) features that may imply a reduction of speaker commitment (e.g. quotes or retweets). With respect to (ii), we distinguished between realization through a subject pronoun, an object pronoun, verb morphology, possessive pronoun or proper noun. Furthermore, with respect to (iv), we distinguished whether the tweeters refer to their private (non-political) identity, to their professional (political) identity or to their party membership.

In the next section the results of our analysis will be discussed from a mainly qualitative perspective, with a special focus on two phenomena of adaptability and metapragmatic awareness: the use of conciseness strategies as a means to adapt to the technological affordances of Twitter (4.1) and identity construction by self-reference in this specific type of new media (4.2).

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Conciseness strategies

The affordances of a technology do not only enable certain uses but also imply some constraints. As was pointed out in 2.2, the most obvious constraint for the use of Twitter is the 140 character limit of the message. This requires conciseness in the formulation of messages. The author may develop various strategies to realize this conciseness, e.g. through implicatures or through links to longer messages as a way to ‘work around’ the constraint, in Hutchby’s terms (2001: 122). Here we will be mainly concerned with conciseness related to the expression of the self. Indeed, since the author of the message is expressed at different levels such as the Twitter account handle and the Twitter profile, this is known information to the reader. This given information may facilitate an ellipsis of the reference to the self as subject, or other strategies that make reference to the self more concise.

A first strategy is the ellipsis of the subject pronoun. Within our corpus, this criterion only holds for non-pro-drop-languages (Dutch, French, English) but is not applicable to pro-drop languages (Spanish and Catalan). In the latter case, the absence of the subject pronoun is the unmarked option (Lujan, 1999 for Spanish; Nogué Serrano, 2008 for Catalan) and so it is impossible to evaluate the absence of the subject pronoun in terms of ellipsis. It can be remarked that the percentage of subject pronouns used is for almost all tweets in Spanish lower than what has been attested in other studies of political discourse (De Cock, 2014; Gelabert-Desnoyer, 2006) and some tweeters do not use any subject pronoun. This might suggest that the pronoun is dropped more easily on Twitter. However, since the presence or absence of the subject pronoun also depends on a variety of pragmatic-discursive factors, it is difficult to draw conclusions concerning a link between the absence of the subject pronoun and the conciseness constraint. We do find clear examples of subject pronoun ellipsis in the non-pro-drop languages. As table 2 shows, in a fourth of the Belgian tweets with (expected) subject pronouns (25%), the standardly required subject pronoun position was empty. Note that example (5) counts exactly 140 characters which may suggest that the subject pronoun was dropped in view of the technological constraint. This supposition is reinforced by the fact that also the VP *is* is abbreviated to *s*.

- (5) *Hoor nu pas van de vreselijke aanslag in Brussel. Mijn medeleven met de familie van de doden en gekwetsten. Dit s BARBAARS en ONAANVAARDBAAR* (Bart Staes)
‘[I] only just **heard** about the dreadful attack in Brussels. My sympathy to the family of the dead and injured. This [*i*]**s** BARBARIC and UNACCEPTABLE’ (Bart Staes)

An intermediary solution is the abbreviation of a reference, e.g. *m* instead of *me* (see example 6). A full ellipsis of the object being less easy to interpret than a full ellipsis of the subject, an abbreviation is an intermediary solution in that it reduces the number of characters necessary while maintaining a clear hint for the reader. This strategy, associated with other forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) (cf Bieswanger, 2013), was not pervasive and showed up especially in messages flirting with 140 characters, which would surpass this limit if the object were to be put in full. In (6), it is not unimaginable that the author first wrote the full message but, being alerted by Twitter that it exceeded the maximum number of characters, decided to abbreviate some forms (the preposition *de* was abbreviated into *d* and the object pronoun *me* to *m*).

- (6) *El alcalde d El Campo d Peñaranda m ha regalado este bolígrafo en acto con alcaldes y concejales del @PSOE Gracias! <http://t.co/tgDQxWzEDL>* (Elena Valenciano)

'The mayor [o]f El Campo d[e] Peñaranda has offered m[e] this pen during an act with mayors and eldersmen of the @PSOE. Thanks! <http://t.co/tgDQxWzEDL>' (Elena Valenciano)

While in Dutch *k* instead of first person singular pronoun *ik* is used as a shortening strategy in some other (mostly informal) contexts, we did not find any example in our sample. It seems that, in the case of the subject pronoun, a full ellipsis is preferred over a shortening, which could have to do with the tweeter's broadcaster role. Indeed, often the Twitter account owner is considered to be uttering the message. The relatively low overall frequency of abbreviations (only 1 instance in the Spanish subset and 2 in the Belgian subset) is in line with studies on other languages and other forms of CMC that have shown shortenings to be "less frequent than has often been suggested" (Bieswanger, 2013: 476).

Finally, we observe in the Spanish data the use of the construction with a full subject NP and a 1st (or 2nd) person plural verb form. This strategy allows for combining in a very concise way the expression of a specific group identity and membership of the author to that group (De Cock, 2010), without the need to add a 1st resp. 2nd person plural subject pronoun, as would be the case in other languages. Thus, in (7), Valenciano's tweet simultaneously realizes self-reference, group affiliation and a very explicit description of this group (viz. the women).

- (7) *Está claro: SI GANA CAÑETE, PERDEMOS LAS MUJERES #TuMuevesEuropa.* (Elena Valenciano)

'It's clear: if Cañete wins, **we the women** (gloss: lose.1PL the women) lose.' (Elena Valenciano)

While this strategy is grammatical in Spanish and is certainly not limited to Twitter, it does have a much higher frequency on Twitter than in other (political) genres previously analyzed: approximately 6.28% of 1st person plural verb forms in the Spanish tweets uses this construction and 1 out of 12 (7.7%) of the 1st person plural verb forms in the Catalan tweets, which is much higher than the maximum 1.4% found in a corpus study of Spanish informal conversation, TV-debates and parliamentary debates (De Cock, 2014: 156). The affordances of Twitter then seem to cause a higher use of this construction, which complies perfectly with the conciseness constraint of the platform. Interestingly, this strategy is also frequently used in dialogic political cartoons, another genre where conciseness is crucial (cf 25% of the cartoons in a two month span in *El País*, see De Cock, 2014: 161). In our sample, this strategy is also used in Catalan by Tremosa (see Nogué Serrano, 2005: 308-310; 2008: 184-186 for an analysis of the Catalan equivalent). It has furthermore been documented in Occitan (Alibèrt, 1935: 282) but seems otherwise quite unique from a typological perspective (Bhat, 2004:100).

In retweet (8) this linguistic strategy is creatively combined with a more technological strategy, namely the use of a twitter handle, referring to the party name, as a subject, thus realizing an even more concise strategy that permits to express party membership and include the twitter handle at the same time.

(8) *.@iunida nos comprometemos hoy con la gente, los jóvenes precarios, las mujeres, los que luchan por su empleo. Hay certidumbre si luchamos.* (Willy Meyer)

'We @iunida [Izquierda Unida] engage ourselves today for the people, the young people in a precarious situation, the women, those who fight for their jobs. There is certainty if we fight for it.' (Willy Meyer)

Thus, we see that, in the different languages in our corpus, different conciseness strategies with respect to self-reference are used. The concrete strategies vary in view of morphosyntactic specificities. The fact that these strategies often (though not exclusively) appear in messages that only narrowly match the 140 character constraint, suggests that they represent indeed a case of adapting to the platform's affordances.

	Belgian data (mainly Dutch)	Spanish data (mainly Spanish, Catalan, Bask)
Subject pronoun ellipsis	Frequent (25%)	Not applicable
Object pronoun ellipsis	No occurrence (0)	No occurrence (0)

Object pronoun abbreviation	Low frequency (2)	Low frequency (1)
Full subject NP with 1pl/2pl verb	Not applicable	Higher than average frequency (6.28% Spanish, 7.70% Catalan, not applicable for Bask)

Table 2. Overview of the presence of conciseness strategies.

Comparing the above-mentioned strategies of adaptability in table 2, it becomes clear that strategies relying on information reduction, such as object pronoun ellipsis or abbreviation are relatively rare. This confirms other research which has shown that abbreviations are less frequent in CMC than often thought. A notable exception is subject pronoun ellipsis in non-pro-drop languages, such as Dutch, English and French: 25% of the tweets produced in those languages in the Belgian subset contained this conciseness strategy. In contrast, the construction of a full subject NP with a 1st or 2nd person plural VP in Spanish and Catalan appears more frequently in Twitter than in other contexts, suggesting that Twitter users adapt to the conciseness by using more this highly informative structure. On a more methodological level, this section shows that self-reference seems to be a privileged locus for achieving conciseness, much more than abbreviations of other words, and that conciseness strategies depend (at least partly) on the morphosyntactic structure of the language. As such, analyzing the degree to which tweeters adapt their language use, requires taking into account the specific options offered by the languages' morphosyntactic structure.

4.2. Self-reference and construction of identity

As is shown in table 3, self-references are very frequent in our sample of political tweeting. For the majority of politicians more than 50% of their tweets comprised references to themselves with Valenciano (47%), Joye (29%) and Van Overtveldt (17%) as notable exceptions with little self-references compared to other tweeters from their respective countries. At the other end, both Arias Cañete (68%) and Meyer (68%), as well as Verhofstadt (73%) used a high number of self-references in their (re)tweets. This is no surprise, as it was explained earlier that self-references contribute to the expression of identities, which is a prominent practice on Twitter. Politicians use more singular self-reference than plural self-reference (to groups of which they are members), with the exception of Iglesias from leftist Podemos. This may be in line with his ideology that he is not the leader of a party but rather the spokesperson of a group. Self-reference may be realized through first person self-reference or through proper nouns (third

person self-reference), the latter being strongly associated with its appearance in retweets, as will be discussed below.

		ALDE	ECR	ENF	EPP	Greens/EFA	GUE/NGL	S&D	SUM
	ESP	Bilbao + Tremosa	/	/	Arias Cañete	Meyer	Iglesias	Valenciano	
	BEL	Verhofstadt	Van Overtveldt	Annemans	Thyssen	Staes	Joye	Van Brempt	
Total of tweets	ESP	451	/	/	57	700	474	335	2017
	BEL	292	188	232	25	150	146	71	1104
Tweets with self-reference	ESP	220 (49%)	/	/	39 (68%)	475 (68%)	255 (54%)	158 (47%)	1147 (57%)
	BEL	213 (73%)	32 (17%)	93 (40%)	16 (64%)	75 (50%)	43 (29%)	39 (55%)	511 (46%)

Table 3: Total amount of tweets in comparison to the number of tweets with self-reference.

Taking the contexts of the tweets into account, it becomes clear that most self-references, expressed by first person pronouns or proper nouns, identify the politicians as professionals (9), but let us first look at the less frequent identity references (see table 4). References to the politicians' private identities are very rare and in both datasets virtually limited to condolences. Compare (9) to example (10). There are only few examples of other private identity references, which may nonetheless contribute to the public image of the candidate (11).

(9) *As an #EP2014 candidate, I just signed the #ClimatePledge by @CANEurope to support #climate & #energy action. <http://t.co/LsbszHgFby>* (Tim Joye)

(10) *Het afscheid van #jeanlucdehaene valt **me** zwaar. Hij was tegelijk collega, vriend, mentor, klankbord, inspirator. **Mijn** dankbaarheid is groot.* (Marianne Thyssen)

'The departure of #jeanlucdehaene is difficult to **me**. He was at the same time colleague, friend, mentor, sounding board, source of inspiration. **My** gratitude is huge.' (Marianne Thyssen)

(11) *De vuelta a Madrid, **me he** encontrado con la dra. Peña y sus compañeras, que van de despedida de soltera <http://t.co/7L2v5dIX1H>* (Miguel Arias Cañete)

'Back in Madrid, I met dr. Peña and her friends, who are on a hens night <http://t.co/7L2v5dIX1H> [accompanied by a picture of the group].' (Miguel Arias Cañete)

Also references to (sub)national identities are quite rare, except for politicians who belong to parties with a strong regional basis and often regionalist ideologies, such as Van Overtveldt from the Flemish nationalists (21.9%) or extreme Flemish rightist Annemans (8.6%), who often

expressed a *subnational* identity. By contrast, in Spain Iglesias used a considerable amount (10.2%) of *national* identity references to nationally profile himself and his Podemos party, thus indicating that national political interests are also often at play during European elections.

POLITICAL GROUP	ALDE		ECR		ENF		EPP		Greens/EFA		GUE/NGL		S&D		SUM
REFERENCE / POLITICIAN	Bilbao / Tremosa	Verhofstadt	/	Overtoelt	/	Annemans	Cañete	Thyssen	Meyer	Staes	Iglesias	Joye	Valenciano	Van Brempt	
European identity	3 0.6%	14 6.6%	/	0 0%	/	0 0%	0 0%	1 6.2%	4 0.8%	0 0%	0 0%	1 2.3%	2 1.3%	0 0%	25 1.3%
(sub)National identity	13 2.8%	2 0.9%	/	7 21.9%	/	8 8.6%	2 5.1%	0 0%	9 1.9%	1 1.3%	26 10.2%	0 0%	5 3.2%	0 0%	73 3.8%
Private identity	11 2.3%	5 2.3%	/	0 0%	/	2 2.2%	5 12.8%	1 6.2%	2 0.4%	1 1.3%	8 3.1%	1 2.3%	14 8.7%	0 0%	50 2.6%
Professional identity	428 91.1%	181 85%	/	21 65.6%	/	77 82.8%	32 82.1%	13 81.4%	455 95.8%	70 93.3%	211 82.7%	27 62.8%	122 77.2%	35 89.7%	1672 87.6%
Rest	15 3.2%	11 5.2%	/	4 12.5%	/	6 6.4%	0 0%	1 6.2%	5 1.1%	3 4%	10 3.9%	14 29.8%	15 9.4%	4 10.3%	88 4.6%
SUM	470	213	/	32	/	93	39	16	475	75	255	43	158	39	1908

Table 4: Identities expressed in the tweets with self-reference

Our data confirm that Twitter seems to be apt for professional identity construction (cf Gilpin, 2011). Ten of the thirteen studied politicians evoke a professional identity in more than 80% of their tweets. Although most of the politicians place themselves in professional contexts, it is striking that they hardly express European identities. The tweets by Verhofstadt stand out with 6.6% of European identity references. This can be explained by the observation that Verhofstadt explicitly promoted himself as a European leader in the 2014 European elections, aiming for a high European office. In the context of the European election campaign the studied tweets do not just evoke daily professional activities, but often try to win voter support. By frequently referring to themselves, be it in a tweet they compose themselves or in a retweet, politicians try to involve a whole network of digital connections into their personal political projects. Put differently, by focusing their (re)tweets on themselves Twitter becomes a tool of personal branding. The majority of the professional identity references can be seen as evidence of a 'personalization politics', consisting of "a self-centered and self-reflective communicational logic" (Di Fraia & Missaglia, 2016: 35).

A certain degree of self-reflection is definitely present in the tweets that we analyzed and this brings us back to the notion of metapragmatic awareness. In section 2, personal pronouns were already identified as markers of metapragmatic awareness. However, the European politicians also used other strategies to refer to themselves, exploiting the technological affordances of Twitter. Instead of first person pronouns or possessives the studied

politicians also often used third person self-references, in which they referred to themselves by means of a proper noun (their own name). They achieved this by means of three strategies: (i) the use of the Twitter handle, (ii) a hashtag with (a part of) their name, or (iii) their name only. As figure 1 shows, the name only and a hashtag with the name were much less frequent than the use of the Twitter handle (@username).

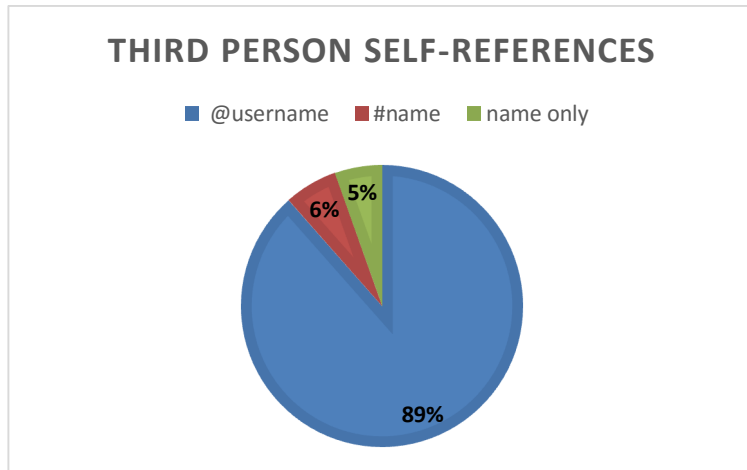


Figure 1: Strategies for third person self-reference.

However, some candidates extensively exploited the use of #name, e.g. *#Guy4Europe* (Guy Verhofstadt), *#VotaCañete* (Miguel Arias Cañete). An exceptional case of self-reference is Iglesias's use of the hashtag *#ChicoDeLaColeta* ('guy with the ponytail'), an insult launched by his opponents, humorously taken up for self-promotion.

Politicians can refer to themselves by means of their name only. However, this was quite rare in our dataset, except for Tremosa, who published 27 tweets containing his own name, all of them in retweets or quotes of media headlines in which he was mentioned (12). In the rest of the corpus only 23 instances were found, most of which occurred in standardized messages that come with signing pledges, as in (13).

(12) *RT @ARApolitica: **Tremosa** respon Margallo que Catalunya es pot comparar amb Québec i Escòcia però no amb Ucraïna <http://t.co/G4g4T1rmcd> via â€¦!* (Ramón Tremosa)

'RT @ARApolítica: **Tremosa** replies to Margallo that Catalonia can be compared to Québec and Scotland, but not to Ukrain <http://t.co/G4g4T1rmcd> via â€¦' (Ramón Tremosa)

(13) ***Tim Joye** wil een ander Europa, één dat welvaart creëert binnen de grenzen van 1 planeet! #wwfpledge <http://t.co/9IB1XD0XRK> #ep2014* (Tim Joye)

'Tim Joye wants a different Europe, one that creates welfare within the limits of 1 planet!
 #wwfpledge <http://t.co/9IB1XD0XRK> #ep2014' (Tim Joye)

	Politicians	Total of third person self-references	Third person self-references in retweets
Spanish	Miguel Arias Cañete	9	7
	Pablo Iglesias	1	1
	Izaskun Bilbao	153	151
	Ramón Tremosa	147	140
	Elena Valenciano Martínez	62	62
	Willy Meyer	266	261
Belgian	Marianne Thyssen	1	1
	Kathleen Van Brempt	19	18
	Gerolf Annemans	45	43
	Guy Verhofstadt	109	79
	Johan Van Overtveldt	7	6
	Bart Staes	30	18
	Tim Joye	6	5
	SUM	855	792

Table 5: The total number of third person self-references as compared to the number of third person self-references in retweets.

Table 5 indicates that 93% of all third person self-references occurred in a retweet. By retweeting tweets by others about themselves politicians contribute to their personal branding. Indeed, they put themselves back into the spotlights and highlight certain messages about themselves for their networked public, while reducing the threat of sounding immodest: positive information about their qualities as a politician is transmitted in a third person form from a different source. Typical retweets concern messages about campaign events or media appearances. Example (14) by Van Brempt illustrates that the politician advertises her own media performance by retweeting a message from television channel Canvas which contains her Twitter handle @kvanbrempt.

- (14) RT @canvastv: **@kvanbrempt**, @gannemans, @mariannethyssen, @jvanoverveldt, @BartStaes en Philippe De Backer om 20:00 in Terzake14! (Kathleen Van Brempt)
 'RT @canvastv: **@kvanbrempt**, @gannemans, @mariannethyssen, @jvanoverveldt, @BartStaes and Philippe De Backer at 8pm in [current affairs programme]Terzake14!' Kathleen Van Brempt)

As indicated in table 5, this feature of adaptability showed considerable individual variation. For instance, Meyer (Spain) and Verhofstadt (Belgium) used numerous third person self-references, whereas Iglesias (Spain) or Thyssen (Belgium) published only one retweet with a reference to themselves in the third person. In the case of Staes and Verhofstadt, the high presence of third

person self-reference is not only due to retweets but also to their own tweeting behavior: 30/109 tweets (27.52%) with a third person self-reference were created (i.e. not retweeted) by Verhofstadt and 12/30 (40%) by Staes. With the former, this is linked to Verhofstadt's very intensive campaign to become head of the European Commission. In order to increase his online presence, he extensively used his own handle and hashtags including his name. With the latter, it seems to be a clear personal strategy of Staes in order to increase his 'searchability' and 'followability' on Twitter (cf Zappavigna, 2012; Drauckner, 2015). In this respect it can also be noted that Staes writes his tweets himself,³ which excludes the possibility that a ghost-tweeter might be more tempted to use third person-reference than self-reference.

All candidates in our sample use third person reference in their own tweets only to display their professional identity. This suggests an increased awareness of the affordances of Twitter when using it as a professional communication tool. Also almost all *retweets* with a third person self-reference express a professional identity, so in that respect there is little difference between their own tweets and retweets. First person self-reference, by contrast, is used both for professional and private identity references.

Furthermore, when referring to themselves in the third person the studied politicians are both building an image and a community. While emphasizing their professional identities they promote themselves and increase their online visibility. This exemplifies that specific norms arise and may be negotiated in computer-mediated communication, which may differ from other genres (Herring et al., 2013: 11). Indeed, referring to oneself in the third person is considered pompous in other genres, but acceptable when done in a retweet or using the @- or # sign on Twitter.

This is done partly consciously, partly unconsciously, but it can be proof of some kind of metapragmatic awareness, as defined in section 2. By the linguistic choices they make the language users show signs of reflection on the communicative context they are involved in. While the @ character, for instance, is categorized by Zappavigna (2012: 34) as a deictic marker that functions as a vocative, our data show that '@username' can also serve a self-referential function and be interpreted as a marker of metapragmatic awareness. By using the Twitter handle to refer to themselves politicians are making optimal use of the affordances of the social media to enhance diffusion of their message (Mancera & Pano, 2013: 90). Likewise the self-promotional and self-referential use of hashtags is a marker of metapragmatic awareness since "hashtags assign a keyword in a tweet as metadata referencing the topic of the message as specified by the user" (Zappavigna, 2012: 85). This is beautifully illustrated by Verhofstadt's retweeting (15):

³ We thank Sandrine Roginsky (Université catholique de Louvain) for this information.

- (15) *RT @TRAMEuropa: After #selfEU, #Guy4Europe. @GuyVerhofstadt really knows how to use social media #P2014 #TellEurope <http://t.co/3OkwDz4itp>*

This tweet clearly involves a reflection on the communicative and pragmatic processes Verhofstadt is involved in.

5. Conclusions

As Verschueren & Brisard (2009: 42) already noted, “language itself is the adaptable phenomenon in a context of changing technologies”. We have shown in this study that the practice of self-referencing is an important feature of politicians’ discourse on Twitter. In the context of the 2014 European elections candidate members of the European Parliament used Twitter for self-promotional purposes, as they adapted their expressions of self-reference, often evoking professional identities, to the technology of Twitter, in particular its conciseness requirement.

Taking into account language-specific features, we have shown how subject pronoun ellipsis in non-pro-drop languages like Dutch and concise constructions such as a full subject NP of a first person plural form in Spanish and Catalan are used as strategies for respecting the 140 character constraint. We suggest that these linguistic strategies occur more frequently on Twitter than in other contexts of political communication. Moreover, person reference seems a preferred locus for achieving conciseness. Next, we have shown that self-reference is mainly used to express a professional identity and only rarely to express a private identity. We observed that self-reference on Twitter is not just expressed by personal pronouns, but also by proper nouns with the politicians referring to themselves in the third person. Third person self-reference predominantly occurred in retweets, in which the politicians mainly evoked a professional identity and the professional identity reference was even more outspoken in original tweets with third person self-reference (i.e. not in retweets). That is why we argue that the political tweets, including retweets, not only serve the function of spreading ideological messages or news updates, but are also used for personal branding purposes in the context of elections. The more politicians (re)tweet about and refer to themselves, the more exposure they get and so their chances to be followed and found online rise.

The use of a Twitter handle (@username) and of a hashtag containing their own name for self-reference (possibly in combination with the abovementioned strategies), are specific to Twitter and show how users adapt to the affordances of this microblogging platform. These linguistic choices show signs of metapragmatic awareness, of how to use the social media to render their campaign talk searchable and optimally spread their political messages. Moreover,

the 'broadcaster' role of the tweeter is apparent also in the high amount of retweets which again allow for personal branding and spreading (positive) news about themselves. Thus, we have shown that, although the overall tweeting frequency and the frequency with which specific phenomena are used may vary across the corpus, all political candidates adapt their language use to the specific affordances of Twitter.

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