

Reference to self and other in the digital public sphere: the case of political blogs

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Abstract In this paper, we analyze how a political blog author (Spanish Alejo Vidal-Quadras) establishes the reference to self and other in his blog entries. We furthermore look into the commentators to this blog react and establish reference to self and other in the digital public sphere. More concretely, we show that they not only take up the references established by the main blog author but also create new references. These allow, on the one hand, for profiling themselves as part of a group and, on the other hand, identifying their interlocutor among the variety of possible interlocutors in the digital public sphere. By addressing different interlocutors, the commentators turn the comments section into a dialogic space, a dimension that is lacking in the main blog entries. However, the fact that they almost invariably identify interlocutors other than Vidal-Quadras but address Vidal-Quadras without explicitly identifying him, shows that Vidal-Quadras remains the main ratified interlocutor in view of his ownership of the blog. This paper shows then how participants in the digital public sphere create a complex relationship of self and other reference in political blogs.

Keywords reference, political discourse, blog, digital public sphere, Spanish

Introduction

In this paper, we will analyze how political blog writers and their audiences interact in the digital public sphere. If compared to more classical interaction forms, such as political meetings, the digital public sphere has some specific features. In the first place, limits of time and space have become irrelevant (Yus, 2011) to the extent that anyone with an internet connection can read blogs and post comments. Moreover, internet has become for many people a usual part of everyday life (Castells, 2006), thus making participation to this form of (political) interaction more much more easy. Furthermore, anonymity is often possible in reactions, or, alternatively, authors may use an alias. Finally, the structure of a blog to which readers may post comments, which are public, raises the question whether the commentators wish to address the blog author or the audience at large. Indeed, blogs involve a variety of readers, ranging from subscribed readers to occasional readers. Comments are a way for readers to express their

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opinion or appreciation, but not all readers do so. Both the gradual disappearance of time and space restrictions, and the multiplicity of readers and addressees, create specific challenges for the use of deixis in the digital public sphere. In addition, interactions in the digital public sphere are mediated through text only (at least in the case of blogs). This implies that the identity of the commentators is construed in the text, including the choice of a name (or pseudonym) but also the contributions to the comments section.

The construction of the own identity is even more the case for political blogs, since identity construction and group membership hold a central place in political discourse (Mühlhäusler & Harré 1990; Bazzanella 2002; Blas Arroyo 2011; De Cock 2011, 2012, 2014). Thus, the use of person deixis has a high stake in this genre, more than in journalistic blogs or in blogs on more general topics.

The data analyzed for this article consist of the blog entries and the readers' comments of the blog of Alejo Vidal-Quadras Roca, a Spanish politician, then vice-president of the European Parliament.

The blog may be found at <http://www.alejoresponde.com/> Alejo Vidal-Quadras was a member of the Partido Popular (PP), until January 27th 2014, when he leaves the party to join Vox, a new party consisting mainly of former Partido Popular-members who do not agree with the decisions taken by PP leaders.

Research questions

Our research seeks to show how the author and commentators establish reference to self and interlocutor and use it to position themselves and others in the digital public sphere.

Through a discursive analysis, we will focus on two aspects of reference: on the one hand, the reference to the self and to the interlocutor by Vidal-Quadras and, on the other hand, the way this reference is taken up in the reactions to the blog. For the reference to self, we will analyze how the contributors use singular and plural person deictic strategies in order to establish different personal and group identities, and in order to switch between them. For the interlocutor reference, we will analyze the different ways to discursively construct the interlocutor as a singular or plural identity, with special attention to which interlocutor is constructed both in the blogs and in the comments.

Finally, we will analyze whether the persons who react to Vidal-Quadras' blog use self and interlocutor reference through deictics in the same way as he does, or whether they switch the reference in their comments, thus establishing other (group) identities.

Methodology

The corpus analyzed in this paper consists of 10 blog entries, published between September 2013 and March 2014 (see table 1). We selected the blog entries that generated most comments, given our interest in how the commentators create reference to the self and interlocutor.

Table 1. Overview of blog entries in the corpus, including word count of the entry and the number of comments.

Date	Title of blog entry	Word count (blog)	Number of comments
15/01/2014	<i>El estado insaciable</i>	374	91
11/12/2013	<i>Claves presidenciales</i>	562	55
16/10/2013	<i>El síndrome japonés</i>	476	44
31/10/2013	<i>Tercera vía</i>	504	39

14/12/2014	<i>Gasto público</i>	419	37
02/01/2014	<i>Esquemas mentales</i>	478	36
18/09/2013	<i>¿Bolsillo o sentimiento?</i>	403	31
26/12/2013	<i>La madre del cordero</i>	422	29
19/03/2014	<i>Defender lo indefendible</i>	542	29
09/01/2014	<i>Artur Mas, esa pluma al viento</i>	463	27

All references to self and interlocutor were detected and coded for manually.² We included therefore not only personal pronouns and person reference through verb inflection, but also object and possessive pronouns, as well as any form of interlocutor address (such as address forms and vocatives). All occurrences of person deixis were coded for the reference they establish, that is, to which self or interlocutor (or collective related to the self or interlocutor) they refer.

Analysis

Overall, the tone of the comments to the political blog entries, is very different from that in comments to on-line newspaper articles and columns, where commentators often use a rather aggressive tone towards the author and/or other commentators (López & González, 2013). In our data, however, most commentators are supportive of Vidal-Quadras and the views he expresses in the blog entries. Moreover, it is clear that some commentators are regular readers and create a community of authors who know each other, at least online.

We will now first discuss how the reference to the self is established (4.1.) before turning to the reference to the interlocutor (4.2.). Finally, we will discuss whether there is continuity in self- and other-reference between Alejo Vidal-Quadras and the commentators to the blog (4.3.).

Reference to self

In this section, we will discuss which aspects of the identity as a self are put forward by the authors (Vidal-Quadras and the commentators of the blog), more concretely whether they profile themselves as an individual or as member of a group.

Alejo Vidal-Quadras. The blog entries by Vidal-Quadras contain few explicit references to the self through a 1st person singular form. This may be due to the fact that the genre of political blog as such clearly implies that Vidal-Quadras express his personal views. The few references that do occur mainly appear in the final paragraph of an entry. After a more general analysis of an aspect of Spanish society, Vidal-Quadras formulates his own point of view or commitment, as in (1), which is the final utterance of a post concerning the Spanish budget.

- (1) *No pierdo la esperanza de que la reiteración infatigable de una verdad acabe con la mentira.* (Alejo Vidal-Quadras, February 14th, 2014)
 ‘I don’t lose hope that the tireless reiteration of a truth puts an end to the lie.’

In one case, the blog entry (from September 18th 2013) begins and ends with a personal anecdote concerning Vidal-Quadras’ daughter who tells a joke concerning the Catalan independentist movement. This exemplifies the strategy of storytelling, as a technique to increase the persuasive effect of the blog.

² We are grateful to Javiera Muñoz Guerrero and Christian Pardo Gamboa for coding the examples.

The reference to the self as a group member, through 1st person plural forms, mainly concerns reference to the Spanish people as a whole (2), in 22 occurrences. By doing so, Vidal-Quadras underlines his representative function; he thus tries to present himself as expressing the general public opinion of the Spanish people.

- (2) *Es un hecho conocido que nuestra tasa de natalidad está muy por debajo de la de reposición, por lo que el futuro del sistema de pensiones es más bien sombrío.* (Alejo Vidal-Quadras, December 26th, 2013)
'It is a known fact that our birth date is much below the replacement rate, due to which the future of the pension system is rather gloomy.'

Indeed, though Vidal-Quadras had a European mandate during the period of this study, as a vice-president of the European Parliament, he hardly writes about Europe but focuses on Spain. This may be in line with his criticizing the national politics of the Partido Popular and preparing his switch to Vox, which is underlined by the total lack of a description of Partido Popular group membership. The only PP group-related reference he establishes is the reference to a small group of PP-dissidents (4 occurrences).

The only post which lacks any reference to the self is *Arturo Mas, esa pluma al viento*, posted on January 9th 2014. As suggested by the title, this post is as a whole a critique of Arturo Mas, president of the Catalan Generalitat. The focus is then entirely on criticizing Mas, while the author himself remains outside the spectrum of the post.

Commentators. The commentators, by contrast, use in almost the same proportion 1st person singular and plural forms. While comments to some entries trigger a slight dominance of singular forms and others of plural forms, overall both forms are used fairly evenly. The commentators are not well-known persons and do not necessarily know each other off-line. They do not introduce themselves or give further information concerning their background. While we may deduce from their messages that they are often militants of Vidal-Quadras, no formal membership is required to read and comment to the blog. Thus, no formal plural membership is established by the mere fact of commenting on Vidal-Quadras' posts. Commentators may use singular self-reference given that they contribute as individual. However, the high use of plural reference forms may indicate their desire to present themselves as representative of a larger group of citizens and, thus, give more weight to their opinion.

The reference to a singular form serves two important purposes, namely expressing opinion and argumentation through opinion and speech verbs (3), and narrating political activity (4). The expression of opinion and argumentation is to be situated in the field of the expression of subjectivity. This strong link between the 1st person singular and the expression of subjectivity is in line with results found for other genres (De Cock, 2014). The narration of political activity is related to the specific type of blog and shows that commentators are often politically active citizens. Indeed, also in political discourse through other digital media, the self-portraying of militancy is frequent (De Cock & Roginsky, 2015).

- (3) *Quiero decir que me duele que nuestra esencia se intente diluir en lo europeo; y creo que estar en la Unión Europea nos ha perjudicado mucho.* (Corona, October 21st, 2013)
'I want to say that it hurts me that there are attempts to dilute our essence into the European; and I believe that being in the European Union has impaired us a lot.'

- (4) *Sr Vidal-Quadras, soy militante del pp [sic] desde hace más de 20 años en Toledo.* (Rafael, October 20th, 2013)
'Mr. Vidal-Quadras, I'm a PP militant since more than 20 years in Toledo.'

Let us now look into the reference of the 1st person plural forms. The commentators overwhelmingly use the 1st person plural to refer to the Spanish people as a whole (5). This can be justified in various ways. Vidal-Quadras (and both parties he is a member of during the time the data were collected) places a strong emphasis on Spain as a nation. Furthermore, most of Vidal-Quadras' posts deal with topics related to the Spanish political and/or economic situation, which may trigger a self-representation as Spanish citizens. Given that the commentators then also discuss mainly general Spanish political affairs, they use a 1st person plural that represents their identity as part of the larger community of Spanish people (as opposed to other possible group identities, such as social class, autonomous community etc.). These plural forms then are a way for the commentator to represent a community and, thus, enhance his/her point of view.

- (5) *Necesitamos menos funcionarios, menos políticos, menos cargos públicos, menos sindicalistas y más industria, más innovación, más tecnología..... en resumen, necesitamos más economía productiva (pero el Estado aplasta al sector productivo de la sociedad).* (Agustín, January 16th, 2014)
'We need less civil servants, less politicians, less public jobs, less trade unionist and more industry, more innovation, more technology.... in summary, we need more productive economy (but the State destroys the productive sector of the society).'

By contrast, only one reference in the whole corpus creates a group membership as European citizens. This is in line with the low presence of self-reference as a European parliament vice-president — or, indeed, references to Europe as a whole — in Vidal-Quadras' entries.

The second most frequent reference is an inclusive reference, including the author of the comment and the reader(s). As in (6), this inclusive reading may be reinforced by *todos* ('all'). The inclusive use serves the persuasive aims of the commentators. Indeed, in example (6), commentator Agustín includes the readers in his claims that we all want costs to be reduced (*todos queremos que bajen el egasto [sic]*), thus transforming a personal point of view in a shared opinion.

- (6) *La gente tiene que saber que saber que, con 350.000 empleados públicos menos, la partida de gastos de personal ha subido. Todos queremos que bajen el egasto [sic], no que reduzcan funcionarios, pues eso se traduce [sic] en peores servicios y más paro, gastando más dinero.* (Agustín, January 19th, 2014)
'The people need to know to know that, with 350000 state employees less, the part of staff costs has gone up. We all want that they cut the costs, not that they reduce the civil servants, so that is translated in worse services and more unemployment, spending more money.'

However, the inclusive use occurs in comments to only half of the blog entries, and is entirely absent in the comments to the other half of the entries. The concentration of inclusive readings in certain comment strings, may be due to phenomena related to priming, viz. "the unintentional and pragmatically unmotivated tendency to repeat the general syntactic pattern of an utterance" (Bock & Griffin, 2000: 177). In view of its unintentional and unmotivated nature, priming has been mainly analyzed in oral data, e.g. Travis (2005, 2007) on subject expression in Spanish. Given the specific nature of online comments, it is impossible to directly transpose methodologies developed for oral language analysis to these data.

In addition to these uses where the interpretation relies on contextual clues, 21 occurrences in our corpus are examples of the construction of a 1st person plural form with a full subject NP that specifies the group reference, e.g. (7). This is a high frequency, if compared to other discourse genres (De Cock, 2014: 156). This construction of course allows for a double rhetorical effect, namely expressing group membership (through the use of the 1st person plural form) and defining this group in a very specific way through a full NP – in this example *los cristianos* ‘the Christians’. Indeed, this allows for a degree of specificity of reference that deictics, and especially the intrinsically vague 1st person plural form (De Cock, 2010) cannot realize.

- (7) *Los cristianos sabemos que solo Dios es perfecto.* (Antonio Fernández Benayas, January 22nd 2014).
 ‘We, Christians, know that only God is perfect.’

As mentioned in the introduction, Vidal-Quadras changes political party in the period under the discussion. This change is preceded by a period in which he publically expresses his critiques towards the PP-leaders and in which he already creates a group of dissidents, before finally leaving PP and joining the newly established party VOX. Overall, however, political party membership is rarely overtly constructed, perhaps since political affiliation is almost ‘given’ among the community of commentators who seem to majoritarily sympathize with Vidal-Quadras. Indeed, commentators to the blog mainly adhere to Vidal-Quadras’ and many of them share his discontentment concerning the PP and applaud his change to Vox, even though he does not comment upon this party switch in his blog posts. Unsurprisingly, then, self-reference as part of a political group involves references not only to the PP, but also to a group of dissident PP-members, and to VOX. This may be formulated very explicitly through a full subject NP as in (8) *todos los militantes del PP que nos sentimos engañados por este fraude que es Rajoy* ‘we, all the militants of the PP who feel betrayed by this fraud that is Rajoy’.

- (8) *Estimado Don Alejo, el nuevo partido VOX ha nacido, esperamos todos los militantes del PP que nos sentimos engañados por este fraude que es Rajoy, que tome usted ya la decisión de unirse a esta esperanza que es VOX.* (Oscar, January 15th 2014)
 ‘Dear Don Alejo, the new party Vox has born, all militants of the PP who feel betrayed by this fraud that is Rajoy, hope that you already take the decision of uniting to this hope that is VOX.’

Finally, though rather rare, a first person plural form may be used to refer to the community of commentators (9). Interestingly, the commentator uses the term *foristas* ‘forum participants’, showing that the comments section in practice rather functions like a discussion forum. He presents himself as spokesperson of the community of participants when he criticizes the lack of argumentation and openness in another commentator. He thus claims that all commentators would benefit from a well argued discussion.

- (9) *Estimado Antonio, en ocasiones calificas los comentarios de otros foristas según tu gusto y opinión, pero no llegas a dar ningún argumento. De esa forma parece que quisieras censurar las opiniones de los demás, en lugar de justificar la tuya. Creo que aquí todos disfrutaríamos con una discusión bien argumentada, con la adecuada apertura de mente que todos deseamos tener.* (Sergio, January 30th 2014)
 ‘Dear Antonio, at times you qualify the comments of other forum participants according to your taste and opinion, but you don’t manage to give any argument. In that way, it seems that you want to censure the opinions of the others, instead of justifying yours. I

believe that here we would all benefit of a well argued discussion, with the adequate openness of mind that we all wish to have.'

Thus, in summary, when referring to self as member of a group, the commentators clearly privilege maximally inclusive references (all Spanish people) or inclusive uses (including the other readers). These reinforce the argumentative purposes of the comments since the commentator presents his/her point of view as not merely personal but as shared by a large community. The use of singular self-reference, by contrast, is related to the expression of subjective positioning and of militant action.

Reference to interlocutor

In this section, we will discuss to which extent the authors refer to the interlocutor, and to which interlocutor they refer when doing so. This information gives us insight into the way discourse is constructed and interaction is viewed and represented by the interaction participants.

Alejo Vidal-Quadras. Vidal-Quadras uses few references to the interlocutors in his blog entries, thereby clearly showing that a blog is not an interactive communication form but rather a way of expressing own views and opinions. Moreover, he does not react to the comments posted by commentators and, thus, does not engage in interaction in the comments section either. We will now discuss those rare occurrences of 2nd person forms.

A first string is the following use of a 2nd person singular (10), which should be understood as a generic reference, rather than as a truly deictic 2nd person form (Kluge, 2010). As such, this case does not really address the interlocutor but rather narrates an experience of the author in a 2nd person singular form, in order to create the intersubjective effect of interlocutor empathy (De Cock, 2014: 224)

- (10) *La única ventaja de que te engañen es que aprendes la lección y no dejas que te vuelva a suceder.* (Alejo Vidal-Quadras, January 15th 2014)

'The only advantage of that they betray you is that you learn the lesson and you don't let it happen to you again.'

The only case in which Vidal-Quadras actually address his readers is the extract (11), which concludes a blog entry. While one commentator answers quite literally to this call by giving a seventh element (12), Vidal-Quadras does not react to this comment (nor to any other).

- (11) *Por supuesto, la entrevista es tan larga y rica en agudas observaciones que seguramente he obviado algunos puntos de la misma igualmente fascinantes. Si ustedes encuentran más claves presidenciales que añadir a las que acabo de reseñar, por favor háganmelas saber porque mi sed de aprender es, en paralelo a la paciencia del Presidente, inagotable.* (Alejo Vidal-Quadras, December 11th, 2013)

'Of course, the interview is so long and rich in sharp observations that I have surely forgotten some equally fascinating points of it. If you discover more presidential clues to add to those that I have just summarized, please let me know them because my thirst of learning is, in parallel to the patience of the Presidente, inexhaustible.'

- (12) *Permítame apuntar una séptima clave: el señor Presidente tiene el valor y la capacidad suficiente para demostrar que su forma de hacer las cosas, aunque mejorable, está siendo una de las más adecuadas para sacarnos del bache en el que nos había metido el gobierno anterior.* (Antonio Fernández Benayas, December 11th, 2013)

‘Allow me to point at a seventh key: Mr. President has the sufficient courage and capacity to demonstrate that his form of doing things, though it may be improved, is being one of the most adequate ones to get us out of the slump in which the preceding government had put us.’

In all, Vidal-Quadras does not use his blog entries for establishing a dialogue with his readers (which often turn out to be his militants). Rather, his contributions are limited to expressing his own views.

Commentators. The reference to the singular interlocutor in the commentators’ contributions is rather complex, since the commentator addresses only one interlocutor among a variety of potential interlocutors. We should distinguish in this case between comments addressing mainly Vidal-Quadras and comments addressing another commentator. The comments addressed to Vidal-Quadras may explicitly mention him through a vocative, such as *Estimado Sr. Vidal-Quadras* ‘Dear Mr. Vidal-Quadras’, *Don Alejo* ‘sir Alejo’, *Alejo, estimado profesor* ‘dear professor’ (referring to Alejo Vidal-Quadras being a physics professor), *señor europarlamentario* ‘mister MEP’ (one mention in a critical comment). However, in many cases no vocative is used and the author simply uses a formal or informal address verb form or pronoun to talk to Alejo Vidal-Quadras. The informal address forms such as *Alejo* may be linked to the impression of informality and very low social distance of the digital public sphere. In TV- or radio-interactions, address of politicians usually remains formal. By creating this blog with comments section, Vidal-Quadras exposes himself to a more informal address. In spite of frequently being addressed by commentators, Vidal-Quadras never reacts to the comments posted to his blogs, which, again, show that he does not consider his blog an interface for direct dialogue with citizens or militants.

When addressing other commentators, however, almost all comments are introduced by a vocative, singling out the intended interlocutor, e.g. *Don Antonio* ‘Sir Antonio’, *amigo Sergio* ‘friend Sergio’ or *Gatoweb* (a nickname). By doing so, the commentator not only identifies an interlocutor but also links his message to one of the topics mentioned in the previous comments. Concretely in (13), the commentator shows his agreement with previous comments concerning energy policy in Spain. While this is one of the topics in which Vidal-Quadras is specialized, he does not discuss it at all in the blog entry to which this comment is posted. Thus, commentator Sergio singles out interlocutor Agustín not only to identify an interlocutor but also to link his contribution to Agustín’s previous thoughts concerning energy policy.

- (13) *Agustín, completamente de acuerdo. El problema de la energía en España sería un debate apasionante, si tuviéramos espacio y tiempo.* (Sergio, December 20th, 2013)
‘Agustín, I totally agree. The problem of energy in Spain would be a fascinating debate, if we had space and time.’

The difference between the almost consistent identification of the interlocutor vs. the less consistent identification of Vidal-Quadras illustrates the different status occupied by these interlocutors. Indeed, as author of the blog, Vidal-Quadras seems the most evident interlocutor and is automatically ratified (Goffman, 1979). It is thus less necessary to identify to explicitly identify him. By contrast, the commentators are less intrinsically linked to the blog and, moreover, there are various of them. Thus, identifying them is more necessary in order to avoid disambiguation and ratify them as interlocutors.

Whereas the singular and plural references to self are quite evenly distributed, the results are very different for the reference to the interlocutor. Indeed, interlocutor reference is mainly established in the singular form, with only a small proportion in the plural form.

After each blog entry, Vidal-Quadras is addressed by commentators (totaling 60 addresses in our corpus) but 58 interlocutor references address another commentator. The fact that comments are not necessarily addressed to the author of the main entry but also to other commentators, is also observed in comments to online articles (González & Rodríguez, 2014). This shows that interaction in this medium relies on a complex configuration of interlocutors and, indeed, that the commentators address different types of interlocutors in their posts. Thus, comment sections often turn into debate areas, even though it is not the initial aim of such sections. Moreover, this use also ties in with the fact that some commentators 'know' the other commentators, viz. some commentators are frequent contributors. They sometimes refer to each other's earlier posts and create as such a small online community.

As we have pointed out above, in this type of digital genre, especially in the comments section, there is a large group of potential interlocutors. Users addressing a plural interlocutor generally do not explicitly specify their interlocutor and seem to address the commentators or readers at large. The only exception is (14), where the commentator explicitly addresses the other commentators, calling them forum-participants (hereby showing that indeed the comments section seems to work like a discussion forum), singling out one contributor (Agustín). Interestingly, this lady expresses view rather opposed to those of the other commentators, who complain about the tax-system, while she defends the tax system and the government serviced paid through it.

(14) *Estimados foreros (y especialmente Agustín): Soy una “vocacional” pagadora de impuestos, porque entiendo que en un país civilizado los impuestos son una contribución a gastos comunes básicos que repercuten en el bien común.* (Elvira Franco, May 25th 2014)

'Dear forum members (and especially Agustín): I am a “vocational” payer of taxes, because I understand that in a civilized country taxes are a contribution to common basic costs that have an impact on the common good.'

Continuity Vidal-Quadras – commentators

If we compare the reference to the self and interlocutor by Vidal-Quadras and the commentators, we observe in the first place very different frequencies. Whereas the reference to the interlocutor is very limited in Vidal-Quadras' entries, commentators construct much more explicitly their interlocutor(s), thus creating a more interactive discourse. The higher presence of interlocutors in the commentators' productions also leads to a more frequent use of strategies to distinguish between those interlocutors. It is clear from those strategies that Vidal-Quadras, as author and owner of the blog space is the ratified interlocutor and that other interlocutor must be introduced explicitly.

When looking into the reference to the self, we should distinguish between singular and plural self-reference. Both Vidal-Quadras and the commentators use self-reference to express their views or opinions. In the case of Vidal-Quadras, this is limited, however, to specific parts of the text structure, mainly the final paragraph. The commentators display a higher use of singular self-reference, throughout their comments. This highlights the different nature of the blog entries, which have an important expository function, and the comments, which are mainly related to personal opinions.

When using plural self-reference, the commentators do take up the group memberships established by Vidal-Quadras, especially the considerable presence of reference to the Spanish

people as a whole. Vidal-Quadras does not refer to his Catalan identity, which is in line with his being highly critical towards the Catalan autonomous movement, but he does not refer either to a European identity, which is more surprising for a European Parliament vice-president. The commentators follow this line and do not create a self that is related to Catalonia or Europe. As far as political identity is concerned, commentators replicate Vidal-Quadras' portraying of a group of PP-dissidents or, at least, PP-members who are not satisfied with the PP-leaders. Interestingly, commentators also create a group-reference to VOX, whereas Vidal-Quadras, who switches to VOX and very soon becomes the president and head of the European list of VOX, does not use a plural self-reference referring to VOX. Understandably, self-reference to the group of commentators is established only by the commentators. Thus, in summary, the commentators take up the self- and interlocutor-references established by Vidal-Quadras but they also develop a wider range of interlocutor- and group-references, which show on the one hand, the diversity of possible interlocutors and, on the other hand, the variety of possible political group identities.

Conclusions

In this analysis of the reference to self and other in the public digital sphere, we have shown the diversity of strategies developed by a political blog author and especially by the commentators to the blog.

Some patterns in the commentators' use of person deixis in interaction are in line with results concerning spoken language debates. Thus, the lower frequency of 2nd person plural forms and the higher use of inclusively used 1st person plural forms is parallel to the results obtained for TV-debates in De Cock (2014). The fact that public affairs of general interests are discussed favors a self-reference as part of a collectivity. Furthermore, it seems that the 2nd person plural form is mainly used to directly request an opinion or reaction, whereas attempts to convince the interlocutor(s) are rather constructed through inclusive 1st person plural forms. Similarly, the privileged use of 1st person singular forms with communication and cognition verbs has been demonstrated for other genres (De Cock, 2014).

Vidal-Quadras construes his self mainly by means of referring to his being Spanish and, to a lesser extent, to his activity as a politician. However, he rarely addresses his interlocutors and, when he does so, these addresses seem to be a rhetorical device rather than real loci for interaction.

The specific communicative situation of the digital public sphere has repercussions on the construction of the self and the interlocutor to larger extent in the comments section. In blogs, in particular, the identity of the participants is mediated only through the text. The importance of plural self-reference in particular is related to this specificity. The individual identity seems to decline in favor of an identity where the commentator presents him/herself as representing a larger group, thus adding weight to his/her contribution. This group identity typically represents the Spanish people as a whole and, to a lesser extent, the community of commentators.

Furthermore, the commentators address a variety of interlocutors, including Vidal-Quadras, a single other commentator or the community of commentators. The need to identify the correct interlocutor among different possible interlocutors and the lack of non-verbal ways to do so (which may be used in spoken language), create specific patterns. Indeed, interlocutors other than Vidal-Quadras are invariably identified, through a vocative, a personal pronoun, or to a reference to the interlocutor's comment. The identification of the commentator to whom a further comment is addressed, is due to their need to be ratified and to the need for thematic continuity in the discussion. Indeed, successive commentators may comment on different elements of the blog. By addressing a specific commentator (by means of a vocative or other

identification), the next commentator not only singles out the persons he wishes to address but also the topic he wishes to react to. Vidal-Quadras, by contrast, may be addressed by means of a vocative, but is not always explicitly identified. This shows that Vidal-Quadras remains the ratified interlocutor by default, in view of his authorship and ownership of the blog. The other possible interlocutors, by contrast, have a secondary status. They should then be ratified by the commentator in order to become ratified interlocutors. This variety of interlocutors in the commentators' production is also present in comments to on-line journalistic articles (González & Rodríguez, 2014), and, thus, seems to be a more general feature of comment sections in the digital public sphere.

While the commentators use the references established by Vidal-Quadras, then, they also create new references, especially new plural self-references and new interlocutor references. Whereas Vidal-Quadras' text then remains rather close to typical opinion texts published in other media, the commentators fully use the possibilities of the digital public sphere and create a complex web of self- and other-references.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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