

# Bondability in Twitter discourse

**Mariza Georgalou**

Zappavigna, Michele 2012. *Discourse of Twitter: How we use language to create affiliation on the web*. London: Bloomsbury, 227 pp. ISBN (hardback) 9781441141866, ISBN (paperback) 9781472531544, ISBN (eBook-Watermarked) 9781441138712.

By the time a book or an article on social media is completed, users' practices and even the very same technologies may have changed and the scholarly work will have become outdated (Barton & Lee 2013: 8). This of course does not automatically invalidate research in the field neither should discourage researchers from continuously taking the social media pulse. That Michelle Zappavigna's book was published back in 2012 does not detract at all from its robustness. On the contrary, it has laid solid foundations and should therefore constitute a launch pad for anyone wishing to conduct qualitative as well as quantitative research on microblogging services (i.e. online platforms for posting short messages to the internet) generally and Twitter specifically.

In this seminal work, Zappavigna proposes and puts at the core of her apparatus the concept of *ambient affiliation*, that is, how users, who may not have interacted directly and probably do not know each other and may not interact again, bond together afforded by certain features of electronic text. Drawing on insights provided by functional linguistics, social semiotics and corpus linguistics, and analyzing a cornucopia of examples, Zappavigna succeeds brilliantly in showing that Twitter nurtures a new kind of sociality and belonging. In so doing, she demolishes the dominant argument that social media are exclusively associated with time wasting and the sharing of trivial information.

The book consists of ten chapters. In her introduction in Chapter 1, Zappavigna starts by outlining the salient characteristics and usages of social media placing strong emphasis on the real-time sharing of everyday experiences. She then provides a meticulous overview of previous studies on social media, language and affiliation.

Chapter 2 details the major dataset of the book, HERMES, a corpus containing 100 million words and nearly 7 million tweets. Zappavigna built the corpus herself using Twitter's streaming application programming interface, which allows to collect tweets from the public Twitter

feed. After discussing the challenges she encountered when processing the data, namely, the inclusion or non-inclusion of non-standard orthography, XML and escaped characters, emoticons and hashtags, abridged posts, spam tweets and retweeted tweets, the author presents a useful guide of the exact steps she took to design the corpus. Besides HERMES, her dataset consists of three additional specialized corpora: a hashtag corpus, an internet memes corpus and a corpus of tweets about Barack Obama's win in 2008.

Chapter 3 focuses on the language of microblogging. In the first part of the chapter, Zappavigna is concerned with the phatic, conversational, and heteroglossic dimensions of microblogging. She zooms in on three Twitter-specific affordances and the ways in which they contribute to these dimensions: mentioning (i.e. addressing and referencing other users with @ + their username), retweeting (i.e. republishing another user's tweet within one's own tweet) and hashtagging (i.e. labelling the topic of the tweets with #). The second part of the chapter looks at dominant linguistic patterns in HERMES. After detecting the most frequent words (the addressivity marker @ and the pronouns *I*, *me* and *you*) and the most common 3-word cluster in the corpus ('Thanks for the'), Zappavigna concludes that Twitter's discourse is more focused on interpersonal reciprocity.

Chapter 4 explores the kinds of evaluative language used in Twitter drawing support from Martin and White's (2005) appraisal model developed within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Through a multitude of examples from the HERMES corpus, Zappavigna delineates the three discourse semantic domains of the model (attitude, engagement and graduation). Based on an analysis of the use of emoticons in microblogging, she evinces that, in addition to narrating their everyday minutiae in their posts, users also show solidarity and enact relationships.

Chapter 5 examines how online communities on Twitter can be construed semiotically by dint of hashtagging. Zappavigna finds that microbloggers use this typographic convention with a view to marking experiential topics, enacting interpersonal relationships, and organizing text. As follows from her analysis, hashtagging can have two functions: ambient affiliation (sharing values and information pertinent to a common interest) and personal reflection (narrativizing self-representation). The thrust of Zappavigna's argument is that the expansion of meaning potential in the usage of hashtags constitutes the beginning of what she terms *searchable talk* (i.e. how we make our discourse findable by others). Through this spectrum, Twitter can be conceptualized as an 'interpersonal search engine' where 'you go when you want to find out what people are saying about a topic right now and in order to involve yourself in communities of shared value that interest you in this given moment' (p. 95).

Chapter 6 considers how memes circulating in Twitter are wittily deployed for social bonding purposes. Zappavigna specifically deals with memes created by phrasal templates, that is, phrases with 'slots' available to be modified (e.g. In Soviet Russia, [object] [verb] [you] – 'In Soviet Russia Twitter follows you', 'In Soviet Russia vodka drinks you'). Via a wealth of examples, she shows that in terms of ambient affiliation memes can be analysed from two perspectives:

frame level (i.e. bonding around the amusement of inserting items to the meme's phrasal template) and slot level (bonding around the values expressed in the meme that has been cloned by adding items into the template slots).

Chapter 7 tackles internet slang. Zappavigna centres upon the lexicon that Twitter users have created by appending the prefix *tw-* (from the word Twitter) to common words, for example *Twittersphere* (the entire Twitter community) and *tweeps* (peeps, i.e. people, of Twitter) as well as upon the slang terms *geek*, *noob* and *pwning* (i.e. defeating an opponent) encountered in the HERMES tweets. Her analysis reveals that Twitter users employ slang in creative, playful and self-parodying ways, fostering in this fashion solidarity with a putative Twitter community.

Chapter 8 sheds light on internet humour taking the term *fail*, an instance of internet slang and a popular internet meme, as a case in point. The humorous status of *fail* derives from a disparity between a trivial situation and its exaggerated negative evaluation. What Zappavigna observes is that *fail* bonds Twitter users in two ways: 1) self-targeted deprecation (e.g. 'So I am just a complete #fail this morning. Turns out my 10 am apt was at 9. O\_o ... sooo any Raleigh/Durham peeps wanna get up? Lunch?'), and 2) other-targeted mocking (e.g. 'Just received a very expensive piece of DM with the slogan "Marketing. Well executed." The letter is addressed to someone else #FAIL').

Chapter 9 is dedicated to political discourse online. Zappavigna commences by highlighting the fact that social media offer researchers an unprecedented treasure of language data about public thought. She then examines a corpus of tweets collected in the 24 hours after Barack Obama won the US presidential elections in 2008. The outpouring of emotional and evaluative language detected in these tweets showcases that Twitter sustains the expression of interpersonal meaning. As the author points out, the synergy between corpus linguistics and discourse analysis can enhance our understanding of how the language used in social media goes hand in hand with socio-cultural change. In her concluding remarks in Chapter 10, Zappavigna reiterates the bondability virtue of Twitter discourse.

*Discourse of Twitter and Social Media* is a very comprehensive and insightful source, essential for advanced students and researchers within the areas of discourse analysis, social semiotics and digital communication. Its major strength lies in that it makes an exceptionally useful contribution to the (re)theorization of social media as important sites for achieving affiliation providing a solid theoretical framework upon which further research can be pursued. To this end, Zappavigna introduces and exemplifies the terms *ambient affiliation* and *searchable talk*. What is more, she reworks in a fresh way Zhao's (2011) concept of *coupling*, namely, the relationship between two semiotic elements, which can be formed between metafunctional variables (e.g. ideational and interpersonal), between different semiotic resources (e.g. words and image) and across strata (e.g. semantics and phonology).

As already mentioned, the discussion in this book relies on Martin and White's (2005) appraisal model. Undoubtedly, this is a quite complicated and elaborate model, especially

to someone without any prior exposure to SFL. Yet, Zappavigna's readable style smoothly initiates the reader into the intricacies of both SFL and the appraisal model supplying helpful tables and figures. Interestingly, the model is explicated through tweets from HERMES.

Of vital importance is the practical advice Zappavigna gives to researchers who wish to conduct quantitative research on social media discourse. Apart from guidelines on how to build and process social media corpora, she suggests the usage of visualization software, such as Twitter StreamGraph (Clark 2009), which will prove particularly useful to linguists concerned with the general patterns of collocational flow over time. For those interested, Zappavigna elaborates further on the aforementioned quantitative approaches in Page et al. (2014).

Zappavigna has been innovative in compiling HERMES. A plausible question that may arise while reading her book is whether HERMES is publicly accessible so that other researchers can use it anew. Although, the answer is not found within the book, Zappavigna informs us in her personal website that:<sup>1</sup>

I would love to be able to share my Twitter corpora with you, however Twitter won't let me! See why here [she provides a link to Twitter's terms]. Feel free to complain to Twitter that researchers are getting caught in a net presumably meant for commercial developers!

This is a significant caveat to be taken into consideration by those aspiring to build their own social media corpora.

All in all, Zappavigna has produced a rounded piece of work from all aspects. But she has not settled there. Acknowledging that social media are a 'moving target' for scholars (Hogan & Quan-Haase 2010: 309 as cited in p. 3), she has already delved deeper into searchable talk in her most recent book (Zappavigna 2018). For certain, she will continue her substantial contribution to the field.

## NOTES

1 <http://socialmedialinguist.blogspot.com/p/corpora.html> [Accessed September 17, 2018]

## REFERENCES

- Barton, D. and Lee, C. (2013). *Language online: Investigating digital texts and practices*. London: Routledge.
- Clark, J. (2009). Temporal correlation for words in tweets 2009. Available from: <http://www.neoformix.com/?Projects/TwitterStreamGraphs/view.php> [Accessed September 17, 2018]

- Hogan, B. and Quan-Haase A. (2010). Persistence and change in social media. *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society* 30(5): 309-315.
- Martin, J. R. and White, P. R. R. (2005). *The language of evaluation: Appraisal in English*. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Page, R., Barton, D., Unger, J. and Zappavigna, M. (2014). *Researching the language of social media: A student guide*. London: Routledge.
- Zappavigna, M. (2018). *Searchable talk: Hashtags and social media metadiscourse*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Zhao, S. (2011). *Learning through multimedia interaction: The construal of primary social science knowledge in web-based digital learning materials*. PhD thesis, Department of Linguistics, University of Sydney, Sydney.

**Dr. Mariza Georgalou** is Adjunct Lecturer at the Department of English Language and Literature, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece

Email: [mgeorgalou@enl.uoa.gr](mailto:mgeorgalou@enl.uoa.gr)