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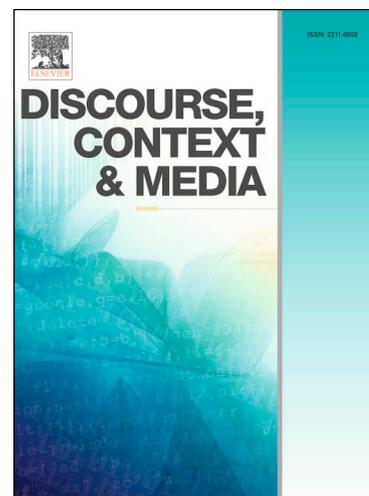
“Hashtags Work Everywhere”: The Pragmatic Functions of Spoken Hashtags.

Kate Scott

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**“Hashtags Work Everywhere”: The Pragmatic Functions of Spoken Hashtags.**

Dr Kate Scott

Department of Linguistics and Languages  
Kingston University  
Penrhyn Road  
Kingston upon Thames  
Surrey KT1 2EE  
United Kingdom

kate.scott@kingston.ac.uk

Abstract:

Hashtags online perform a range of linguistic (Zappavigna, 2015) and pragmatic (Scott, 2015) functions alongside their categorising and searching functionalities. In Scott (2015), I argued that these different functions are, at least partly, driven by the properties associated with mediated discourse. However, hashtags are also sometimes produced in spoken discourse, where the interlocutors share a physical context and are likely to have access to a range of contextual assumptions and non-verbal cues that are unavailable online. In face-to-face communication the audience is less likely to be “imagined” in the sense of boyd (2010) and the speaker is less likely to have to negotiate “context collapse”, as identified by Marwick and boyd (2011). Drawing on principles from the relevance-theoretic pragmatic framework (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/95), I argue that in such an enriched context, the range of pragmatic functions of hashtags is likely to be reduced, and will be motivated by factors other than an impoverished discourse context. I draw on data from attested spoken examples and show that spoken hashtags seem to be largely restricted to their interpersonal “metacomment” (Zappavigna, 2015, p. 6) function, and that they are most commonly used to provide evaluative judgements on the rest of the utterance and to guide inferences concerning the speaker’s attitudinal stance.

Keywords: Hashtag; Computer-Mediated Communication; Tagging; Pragmatics; Relevance Theory

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## 1. Introduction

The following (slightly abridged) exchange took place in the comments section of the Guardian Online<sup>1</sup> newspaper on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2013:

(1) @roolby: Where are the hover boards I was promised for the millennium in the decades before #stillwaitingstillwaiting #nonsensepredictions

@LePendur: You’re not on Twitter – hashtags don’t work here

@roolby: @LePendur – hashtags work everywhere

The hashtag originated on Twitter in 2007 when Chris Messina (2007) suggested that users add a hash symbol to tag words or phrases in order to “track content and updates”. As acknowledged on the Twitter help pages (Twitter, Inc, n.d.), hashtags were “created organically by users”. They were then integrated into the platform interface in 2009 when Twitter started to hyperlink each tag so that users could click on the hashtag to access related content that was tagged in the same way. In the exchange above, the objection by @LePendur that hashtags “don’t work here” focuses on this original searching and categorising function. The Guardian comments section does not support hyperlinking in this way, and so, in this sense,

<sup>1</sup> With thanks to Tim Wharton for bringing this example to my attention.

@LePendu is right. However, @roolby's reply provides evidence of users' intuitions about the evolving and use-driven nature of hashtags and their functions. They now "work" everywhere because their use is not restricted to facilitating searches and linking material. Rather, they now play a more varied and complex role in the communication of the speaker's<sup>2</sup> message itself, and they have moved beyond Twitter to be found in other online media as well as in offline written contexts and face-to-face communication. In this article I focus in particular on this last category of uses - hashtags in spoken, face-to-face communication - and examine how their use offline reflects their evolving functions. I start in section 2 by outlining existing work on the evolving pragmatic functions of hashtags in mediated online contexts. In section 3, I then introduce the phenomenon of the spoken hashtag and consider populist attitudes towards it, briefly also looking at other examples of written aspects of language that have moved into the spoken domain. In section 4, I analyse attested examples of spoken hashtags in terms of their pragmatic functions, and compare offline and online use and distribution. Finally, I reflect on what the use and interpretation of spoken hashtags might tell us about language change more generally.

## 2. The Evolving Pragmatic Functions of Mediated Hashtags

Hashtags first developed on Twitter to facilitate the grouping together of tweets on a similar topic and to thereby enable searching. Despite the linguistic and pragmatic innovations (Scott, 2015; Zappavigna, 2015 ) that I briefly outline in this section, their role in facilitating content searches and aggregating content remains a key function online. For example, at the Poetics and Linguistics Association annual conference 2015, delegates included the tag #pala2015 in their tweets to help fellow participants find their posts, as in example (2). Similarly, tweeters following a particular soccer match might include a tag to identify the game, and to link their post to other content discussing the same game, as in (3):

(2) @mysonabsalom 18th July 2015 And that's PALA 2015! Thanks for everything! #pala2015

(3) @chelseadids 1st March 2015 Well done you Blues. Norwich gave us a good game though #NORvCHE

However, alongside these uses, we find an array of hashtags which seem to contribute something more or different in terms of their meaning, and these have been analyzed from various theoretical perspectives.

Zappavigna (2015) takes a systemic functional linguistics approach to the analysis of hashtags, considering the experiential, interpersonal and textual functions they perform. At a textual level, the hash symbol is "a form of punctuation signalling that the tag is metadata" (2015, p. 6). However, hashtags may simultaneously

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<sup>2</sup> This article discusses spoken, written and electronically mediated utterances. I will refer to the producer of these utterances as the speaker.

perform an experiential or interpersonal function alongside this practical, textual function.

The search terms and topic markers in examples such as (2) and (3) fall under the experiential function. They function to indicate what the tweet is “about” (Zappavigna, 2015, p. 5), but often go beyond the mere facilitation of searching. To illustrate, Zappavigna discusses examples of tweets about the television series *Breaking Bad*, each of which is tagged with the hashtag #*breakingbad*. As Zappavigna notes, many of these “would be relatively opaque or bizarre without the hashtags indicating the semantic field evoked” (Zappavigna, 2015, p. 9). This is the case with the example given in (4):

- (4) 3 days to go, until my tv obsession begins the end of it all. #BreakingBad  
(Zappavigna, 2015, p. 9)

These hashtags are performing an experiential function by providing a context in which the tweet is to be interpreted. Zappavigna goes on to claim that this “type of contextualizing relation between the post and the tag is how hashtags have been popularly conceived” (2015, p. 9) and she claims that it is their most commonly found function (2015, p. 6). As discussed in Scott (2015), this contextualising function plays an important role on Twitter, and on social networking sites more generally, where the audience for a tweet may be largely “imagined” (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Litt, 2012) and the context largely collapsed (Wesch, 2009; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Topic marking hashtags may therefore perform the dual functions of labelling a tweet for searching purposes and providing contextual information to aid interpretation. However, as Zappavigna (2015, p.11) notes, users also use hashtags to express opinions and for “adopting stances and negotiating affiliations”. In these cases, hashtags, such as those in (5) and (6), perform an interpersonal function and have “little to do with aggregating posts into searchable sets and much more to do with adopting particular attitudinal dispositions” (p.13).

- (5) Tattoo no.5 booked #excited

- (6) When you find out things you really wish you didn't #upset #seriously  
(Zappavigna, 2015, p. 12)

In her Twitter study, Page (2012) also considers the different functions of hashtags and divides her data into two categories which broadly parallel Zappavigna's (2015) experiential / interpersonal distinction. Page (2012) labels these as “topic-based” and “evaluative” respectively. She finds that “hashtags are primarily used to make the topic of a tweet visible, rather than to emphasize stance” and she notes that “expressive uses of hashtags do occur, but that these examples are by far in the minority” (p.187).

In Scott (2015), I reached similar general conclusions about the range of functions that hashtags may perform. Adopting a pragmatic approach, I aligned the categories of use with the levels of communicated content identified in relevance

theory, and in doing so, identified sub-categories of use based on the pragmatic motivation for including the hashtag. According to relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/95; Carston, 2002; Wilson & Sperber, 2012; Clark, 2013a), to derive a speaker's overall intended meaning, a hearer must decode the utterance and perform various inferential tasks. First, she must construct a hypothesis about the explicit content of the utterance. To do this she must decode the linguistic content and perform disambiguation, reference resolution and other pragmatic enrichment processes until she has a truth evaluable proposition expressed. This proposition may then be embedded under attitudinal or speech act descriptors resulting in higher level explicatures. Finally, the basic and higher level explicatures may interact with contextual assumptions, resulting in intended implications known as implicatures. Inferential processes contribute at each of these levels, and we find examples where hashtags are used online to guide these processes, thereby compensating for the lack of contextual information in mediated contexts.

The experiential and interpersonal functional uses can thus be further categorised in terms of the interpretative inferential tasks they contribute to. The hashtags which play an interpersonal function guide the reader in the derivation of higher level explicatures. For example, in (5), by including the hashtag *#excited*, the speaker encourages the reader to embed the proposition expressed, given in (7), under an attitudinal descriptor to produce the higher level explicature in (8):

(7) Tattoo no.5 is booked<sub>3</sub>

(8) The tweeter is excited that [Tattoo no.5 is booked]

Meanwhile, those hashtags which fall under Zappavigna's (2015) experiential function contribute to relevance by guiding the derivation of either the proposition expressed or the implicatures. That is, they sub-divide into uses which contribute to the derivation of the explicit meaning and those which contribute to what is implicitly communicated. For example, in (4), the content of the hashtag guides the hearer to the intended explicit content. Without inclusion of the hashtag, the reader would not be able to assign reference to *it all*, and therefore would not be able to derive a truth-evaluable basic level proposition expressed. Compare this to the same hashtag as used in example (9) which contributes not to the explicit content, but to the implicatures of the utterance.

(9) might of had a dream i was a drug lord last night *#breakingbad*  
(Zappavigna, 2015, p. 9)

In this case, it is possible to derive the explicit content of the tweet without using the information contained in the hashtag. That is, the hashtag *#breakingbad* does not contribute to the derivation of the proposition expressed by the tweet. While the

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<sup>3</sup> In this representation of the proposition expressed, I have enriched the original utterance to include the copula verb. See Scott (2010; 2013) for a discussion of abbreviated and omitted forms in certain registers.

explicitly communicated message might be clear, the broader context in which the tweeter intends the post to be interpreted is less likely to be obvious. By using the hashtag to reference the television programme, the tweeter makes certain contextual assumptions highly accessible, and, according to relevance theory, the reader is entitled to presume that these accessible assumptions will contribute to the overall relevance of the utterance in some way. For example, the reader might assume that the tweeter has watched the series *Breaking Bad* and that watching it may have had some influence on the fact that they have had such a dream. In each of these experiential cases the tweeter is using the tag space to guide the reader towards the intended interpretation. Here and in Scott (2015), I therefore suggest that applying the relevance-theoretic framework to hashtag data allows us to explore the cognitive pragmatic motivation underlying hashtag use, and that this provides an important extension to and alternative perspective on the descriptive functional categories identified by Zappavigna (2015) and Page (2012).

Clark (2016, p. 145) briefly considers the evolving functionality of hashtags from a language change perspective. He suggests that the early uses of hashtags, though primarily motivated by the intention to mark topics for content aggregation and searching purposes, might still have encouraged readers to draw inferences. These inferences might then become associated with the hashtag as a communicative device and “new uses encourage different kinds of inferential processing which might eventually become conventionalised”. In Scott (2015), I argued that this development of pragmatic functions of hashtags is ultimately linked to and driven by the properties of the online discourse context. The tweeter has a limited number of characters at her disposal and she has to negotiate context collapse while communicating with an imagined audience. The content in hashtags has, at least in part, been co-opted to help negotiate these contextual factors and guide readers to the intended interpretation. I argued that this function of hashtags offers an efficient and effective way to manage communication in the impoverished mediated context while conforming to a format with a restricted character limit. While these pragmatic functions may have developed online, they, unlike the search functionality, do not depend on the technological affordances of an online mediated discourse context and so are free to move beyond it. In the next section I introduce attested examples of cases where hashtags have been used in face-to-face, spoken communication.

### 3. Spoken Hashtags

#### 3.1 Examples and Attitudes

The spoken hashtag<sup>4</sup> has been the focus of various articles in the popular press and on blogs (Biddle, 2011; Humphrey, 2012; Mack, 2012; McWhorter, 2012; Meltzer,

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<sup>4</sup> By “spoken hashtag” I refer to instances in which the word *hashtag* is spoken aloud as part of an utterance. Cases where the word “hashtag” is used to refer to a specific hashtag or to the act of hashtagging are excluded. For example, neither use of *hashtag/#* in (i) would count as a spoken hashtag for my purposes:

(i) The hashtag for this conference is #conf1

2012; Schuhmacher, 2013; MacDonald, 2015; Goodwin, 2015). These articles provide a range of anecdotal examples of hashtags in spoken language. For example, Meltzer's (2012) article "How to say 'hashtag' with your fingers", has an accompanying reader comments section in which the following examples are provided:

- (10) Two young girls were sat at the bar talking to each other about some or other tripe and I kid you not one turned to the other and said "He was so fit! hashtag i definitely would"
- (11) I'm afraid I recently sat on a train from Manchester to London in the same carriage as a group of middle-class 20-year-old girls (loudly sharing tales of their "gap yahs" in South America) who constantly interrupted each other with things like "hashtag OMG!" and "hashtag awkward" and "hashtag pissed" in every other sentence.
- (12) My brother heard someone shout "Hashtag; Banter !" in a pub in London this year. I can only hope that he drank up and left immediately.

In October 2015, a user posted the following message to the Reddit "British Problems" discussion board:

- (13) In work, one manager complaining to another about what someone had done. Finished it by using her forefingers and middle fingers to make a hashtag in mid-air and said #JustSaying<sup>5</sup>

The discussion that follows from this original post consists mostly of other users responding with examples of phrases, sayings and jargon that they find annoying, including non-standard uses and pronunciations such as *pacifically* for *specifically* and *expresso* for *espresso*. In this way, the contributors to the discussion position spoken hashtags as being in the same category as these non-standard variants, and so they are stigmatized and presented as marked and problematic. This negative attitude towards the spoken hashtag is a popular theme throughout these articles and posts, and indeed we also find it in the examples provided in the Meltzer comments section above. The two young girls in (10) are described as talking "tripe", the writer of (11) begins apologetically with "I'm afraid", and the narrator in (12) implies that the speaker of "hashtag banter" would be best avoided. On his blog, Biddle (2011) claims that the hashtag is "ruining talking", describing it as a "linguistic tumor" and a "vulgar crutch".

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Spoken hashtags may or may not be accompanied by a hand gesture, but I have not included any examples where there is only a hand gesture without any spoken token of the word "hashtag".

<sup>5</sup> Taken from :

[https://www.reddit.com/r/britishproblems/comments/3ntgv5/my\\_boss\\_used\\_her\\_fingers\\_to\\_make\\_a\\_hashtag\\_to/](https://www.reddit.com/r/britishproblems/comments/3ntgv5/my_boss_used_her_fingers_to_make_a_hashtag_to/)

Goodwin (2015) appears to be taking a more balanced approach as she describes how the hashtag has “evolved from its primary function to being a way for people to provide social commentary, impart sarcasm and other narratives”. However, Goodwin’s discussion quickly then descends into the familiar patterns associated with technopanic (Marwick, 2008), as she laments that we have “pretty much streamlined the communication process so we basically don’t even talk to each other in real life anymore”. As Baron (2000), Baym (2010), and Tagg (2015), amongst others, discuss, this kind of reaction to the influence of technology on language is nothing new, and similar claims have been made throughout history. Socrates (quoted by Plato) warned that the invention of the alphabet would “create forgetfulness in the learner’s souls...they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality” (as cited in Baym, 2010, pp. 25-26), and similar worries about the “linguistic and social status quo” (Tagg, 2015, p. 3) have resurfaced with each new communicative technology. Thus we see spoken uses of the hashtag fitting into a familiar pattern in which linguistic innovation and use of non-standard forms are stigmatized and presented as cause for moral panic. While examples of hashtags spoken aloud are not the first time that moral panic has arisen around an aspect of new media and communication, it is also not the first time that a punctuation mark or other feature of written language has found its way into a spoken utterance. In the next section, I consider some examples of this, and discuss what these cases of spoken punctuation might reveal about the emergence of spoken hashtags.

### 3.2 Hashtags and Spoken Punctuation

As McWhorter (2012) notes “there are expressions such as “e.g.” and “i.e.” and “with a capital ...”—all of which are so well-established that they feel like speech to most of us” despite originating in written language media. In example (14), the speaker describes, as part of her spoken utterance, how the word *trouble* would be represented if written, and in doing so draws the hearer’s attention to the extent and perhaps type of trouble she is describing.

(14) She means trouble with a capital T (BYU-BNC B20)<sup>6</sup>.

Similarly, in (15) the speaker speaks the punctuation mark to emphasise the finality of what she is saying, and in (16) the speaker uses a spoken description of typographical features to frame his description of the woman under discussion.

(15) I don’t like walking full stop (BYU-BNC KD1)

(16) ...I just happened to find this woman and she was The Person That Knew, in, you know, in initial caps... (Daniels, 2016)

<sup>6</sup> Examples of usage taken from the British National Corpus (BNC) were obtained under the terms of the BNC End User Licence. Copyright in the individual texts cited resides with the original IPR holders. For information and licensing conditions relating to the BNC, please see the web site at <http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk>

Both Pullum (2010) and Curzan (2013) discuss the use of the spoken word *slash* to represent the forward slash punctuation mark, in examples such as (17):

(17) There is also a study slash guest bedroom (Pullum, 2010)

Both conclude that *slash* has moved beyond being a punctuation mark to become a word in its own right. With these examples in mind, examination of the functional role played by punctuation in written utterances may cast light on why they are also sometimes co-opted into spoken language use, and I again turn to the relevance-theoretic framework of utterance interpretation to do this.

According to relevance theory, languages have a range of items that can be used to guide interpretation. That is, rather than encoding a conceptual meaning, some elements of language contribute to communication by providing instructions on how interpretation should proceed; they perform a procedural role (see Blakemore 1987, 2002 for further discussion of procedural meaning and its role in relevance theory). According to Wilson (2011, p.20) procedural items include punctuation and prosody and their “function is to guide the comprehension process in one direction or another”. In face-to-face spoken communication, much of this procedural work may be carried out by non-linguistic behaviours such as facial expressions and gestures. Speakers may also use prosodic and intonational cues including contrastive stress, along with choice and placement of nuclear tone to signal meaning and to communicate information about attitudes and emotions. As Wharton (2009, p.145) describes, these procedural cues may be used to guide the “identification of the speaker’s meaning by narrowing the search space for inferential comprehension”. However, these visual and prosodic cues will be unavailable to the speaker when communicating via a written medium. Punctuation, it seems, evolved, as least in part, to bridge this gap. As Baron (2000, p. 171) discusses, traditionally, punctuation had two main functions: “to aid readers in dividing up text for subsequent oral delivery” and “also to help clarify meaning”. Whereas a speaker may use prosodic cues such as tonality, pitch variation, and stress to help guide a hearer to her intended meaning, a writer does not have these prosodic tools at her disposal. Full stops and commas may be used to indicate sentence and phrase breaks respectively, variation in font or case may be used for emphasis or to indicate contrast, and question and exclamation marks may guide the reader as to which speech act is being performed. Whereas writing may have originally been a representation of speech, the relation between speech and writing is no longer one way, and as the examples in (14)-(17) show, conventions from written language can move the other way, into spoken language. In each of these cases, it seems that the written form of the utterance provides the speaker with an option that compensates for the lack of prosodic and visual cues, but does not map on to them exactly. In some cases, the written features may offer a communicative function that is not as directly or specifically available in the standard spoken form. For example, in (15), the speaker is indicating that there are no exceptions or mitigations to her statement and that the hearer should take it as final and definite. While she may have indicated

that her utterance was complete by using a falling tone, the phrase “full stop” leaves absolutely no room for doubt. While the relation between prosody and meaning is complex and there is no one-to-one mapping between tones and mood or speech acts (Clark, 2012; 2013b), a full-stop unequivocally indicates the end of a sentence in writing. This can therefore be used by a speaker for emphasis, and by describing out loud how the utterance would have been written, the speaker guides the hearer towards her intended meaning.

Given these examples where conventions associated with traditional written language are represented in spoken utterances, it should not be surprising that elements from mediated communication also cross over into speech if they perform a useful interpretive role. Baym (2010, p. 63) describes digital communication as a “mixed modality” that “resembles both written language and oral conversation” and so we might expect features associated with the online digital context to have even greater potential to migrate into spoken interaction. However, the speaking of punctuation and case features as illustrated in (14) - (17) is not random. It is used when it serves a clear communicative purpose. Similarly, we might predict that the use of a convention associated with mediated communication in non-mediated discourse contexts would also be driven by communicative motives. In the rest of the article, I consider what these purposes might be and draw on theories about the evolving functions of the hashtag discussed in section 2 to do so.

#### **4. Analysing Spoken Hashtags**

##### **4.1 A Note on Data and Data Collection**

As discussed in section 3.1 above, spoken hashtags are marked and often stigmatised and they are confined to very specific informal discourse contexts. They are also a fairly recent phenomenon. As such, it was not possible to find examples in existing corpora of naturally occurring data. However, the fact that spoken hashtags are infrequently used does not mean that they are not used systematically or that speakers do not have intuitions about how they are appropriately used. My aim, therefore, was to collect attested examples and consider how the spoken hashtag contributes to the overall meaning of the utterance in which it occurs. The examples discussed here come from two main sources. First, the attested examples given in the articles discussed in section 3: (Biddle, 2011; Humphrey, 2012; Mack, 2012; McWhorter, 2012; Meltzer, 2012; Schuhmacher, 2013; MacDonald, 2015; Goodwin, 2015) were collected. Second, I asked my own social media contacts to provide me with examples of spoken hashtags that they had heard or used. While this is far from ideal, it does provide a snapshot of speakers’ intuitions about how hashtags are appropriately used in spoken utterances. This resulted in a set of 20 unique examples of spoken hashtags. Several examples, including *#blessed* and *#awkward* were given on multiple occasions and by various informants. Even with this small range of examples, patterns begin to emerge of how hashtags are appropriately used in spoken utterances as compared to in social media. A consequence of only having access to this secondary, written representation of spoken data is that

information regarding the intonation patterns of the original utterances is not available, and nor do we know whether extra-linguistic cues such as gestures accompanied the original utterances. Furthermore, in some cases, the speaking of the word *hashtag* is represented by the symbol and sometimes by writing out the word itself. I have maintained the typographical representation used in the source material in each case, and no meaningful distinction is intended between use of # and *hashtag* to represent the spoken word. In the next sections I consider the patterns that emerge from these examples and consider how they relate to the range and distribution of online functions. I analyse them in turn, based on the functions they perform, and against the frameworks discussed in section 2.

#### 4.2 Interpersonal functions of spoken hashtags

The majority of examples provided by informants or discussed in the articles are used to perform an interpersonal function, either communicating the speaker's attitude or evaluating or commenting on the main utterance or stimulus. Within this category of metacomments, there are instances of hashtags being used to perform a range of sub-functions. In some cases the hashtag is used to describe the attitude or emotions of the speaker. In relevance-theoretic terms, these guide the derivation of higher level explicatures. For example in (18) and (19), the hashtags guide the addressee to the higher level explicatures given in (20) and (21):

(18) #blessed

(19) #proud

(20) The speaker is blessed that [...]

(21) The speaker is proud that [...]

Higher level explicatures have truth conditions in their own right which are independent from the truth conditions of the basic level explicature communicated by the utterance. Whereas in these examples the hashtag explicitly describes the speaker's emotions, in other cases, such as (22) and (23), the specific attitude or emotion must be inferred from the content of the hashtag:

(22) #are you kidding me

(23) #did that just happen

In these cases the speaker uses a rhetorical question in the tag to communicate surprise or disbelief. The relevance lies in the fact that the questions have been asked and in the associated attitude, rather than in any real interest in receiving an answer.

Other interpersonal hashtags are used to provide some sort of comment on or evaluation of the proposition expressed in the main utterance. For example in (24), the speaker adds the label "banter" to signal that the hearer should not take the

utterance too seriously, and in (26), she explicitly labels the content of the main utterance as the “truth”, communicating her epistemic stance.

(24) #banter

(25) #sarcasm

(26) #truth

In several cases the attitude or evaluation is achieved via the use of an established, formulaic meme hashtag, as in examples (27)-(29):

(27) #sorry not sorry

(28) #first world problems

(29) #YOLO (you only live once)

These are the most commonly occurring examples, with (28) and (29) reported in several different sources and by various informants. They provide information about the speaker’s attitude towards the main proposition and therefore fall into the category of metacomments. However, they do so by using an established and set phrase or saying. By labelling a tweet with *#firstworldproblems* on Twitter, for example, a tweeter is acknowledging that the main content of the tweet is a worry or complaint about something fairly trivial. Likewise, *#YOLO* provides an explicit justification for doing something risky or indulgent because “you only live once”. Each has become a shorthand label for a particular category of utterance, and in each case, by labelling it as such, the tweeter shows they are aware that their utterance fits within that category and forms part of a set with all of the other utterances that share the tag. According to relevance theory, when a particular expression or device is used frequently or recently, it becomes easier to access and interpret, and thus demands less processing effort of the hearer. Using established phrases in this way is therefore an efficient and effective way to communicate a metacomment about the main utterance and guide the hearer’s interpretation both offline and online. Interpersonal functioning hashtags made up the majority of the offline attested uses in the dataset.

### 4.3 Experiential functions of spoken hashtags

As discussed in section 2 above, experientially functioning hashtags provide topic information which contextualises the post and guides interpretation. Online data from Twitter includes cases where the content of the hashtag contributes to the derivation of the explicit content of the utterance and cases where it contributes to the derivation of implicatures. In Scott (2015), I argued that this is particularly useful on Twitter, as the “imagined audience” and “context collapse” make it hard for a tweeter to judge which contextual assumptions will be accessible to the readers of the posts. Adding contextual information in a hashtag is a quick and easy way to provide

information about the intended discourse context. However, in face-to-face communication this motivation is likely to largely disappear. The speaker knows who she is speaking to, and speaker and hearer share a physical context. Therefore, while, as noted by both Zappavigna (2015) and Page (2012), the experiential function is one of the primary functions of hashtags online, we might expect such uses to be less common amongst the spoken examples. Of the examples collected only two contain information that exclusively falls under the experiential function rather than the interpersonal function. These are given in (30) and (31):

(30) I can't wait to go to Florida this spring break #no more snow

(31) #I can't date you if... (insert silly qualifier)

In both cases the hashtagged content performs an experiential function by providing contextual information which affects the overall interpretation of the utterance. However, the decision of the speaker to include a spoken hashtag in her utterance is not, in either case, driven by a need to compensate for lean contextual cues, but rather by other pragmatic considerations which are specific to the overall message she wishes to convey.

The hashtag in (30) is given by Goodwin (2015) as an example of an attested use, and provides contextual information which helps the reader to infer why the speaker can't wait to go to Florida. The hashtag does not play a role in the derivation of the proposition expressed by the main part of the utterance. Rather it provides additional contextual information which guides the computation of implicatures. By including the spoken hashtag, the speaker indicates that the information in the utterance is relevant in some way. There may be many reasons why the speaker might be looking forward to a spring break in Florida. However, the hashtag encourages the hearer to infer that at least one reason is the weather, without ruling out the possibility that there may also be other reasons. Without knowing anything more about the speaker or where she lives, the hearer is likely to infer that she has been living somewhere where it snows a lot, and that a trip to Florida will provide a welcome break from that. The information in the hashtag contributes to the speaker's overall meaning by guiding the derivation of implicatures not otherwise available via the discourse context.

The decision to present this additional information as a hashtag, rather than as part of the message proper, encourages the hearer to view the content as ancillary information rather than as a part of the core message. It is presented as contextual information to be used in the derivation of implicatures rather than as content in a determinate proposition expressed. The hearer is encouraged to draw inferences that connect the main proposition expressed ("I can't wait to go to Florida") with the hashtagged content ("no more snow"), but there is no one determinate implicature that automatically follows. The speaker may be looking forward to no more snow or hoping for no more snow. The possible paraphrase in (32) may capture part of this meaning, but it does not follow that this is the only reason why the speaker is looking

forward to going to Florida, and neither is this necessarily the only way in which “no more snow” might be relevant.

(32) I can't wait to go to Florida this spring break because there will be no more snow

Presenting the content as a spoken hashtag both encourages certain inferences, while not restricting the interpretation to one or two determinate propositions. Example (31) functions in a different way and stands alone within the dataset as the only instance in which a spoken hashtag appears non-finally and in which the hashtagged material is integrated into the main part of the utterance. It is also notable as being the only example in the dataset where the hashtagged material directly affects the truth conditions of the main utterance. The non-hashtagged material functions as the antecedent in a conditional statement, with the hashtag containing the consequent: “I can't date you”. Embedding a proposition under a conditional operator directly affects the conditions under which it will be true. Compare, for example, (33) and (34).

(33) You can't drive

(34) I can't date you if you can't drive

The utterance in (33) is true if and only if the addressee can't drive. However, the truth of (34) does not depend on whether the addressee can or can't drive, but on whether the speaker would date the addressee if he can't drive. Having established that the content of the hashtag directly affects the truth conditions of the utterance in this case, the next step is to consider what the act of verbally tagging the consequent achieves. That is, what is the difference between, for example, (34) and (35)?

(35) #I can't date you if...you can't drive

By presenting the consequent as hashtagged material in a spoken utterance, the speaker of (35) frames the utterance as associated with an online meme. Just as the interpersonal uses in (27)-(29) not only communicate an attitude, but also present the whole utterance as one in a set of related utterances, so inclusion of the word *hashtag* in (35) presents the utterance as one in a related set or sequence of similar utterances. On Twitter the same hashtag is found in written tweets accompanying descriptions of personal characteristics which are thereby presented as undesirable, as in (36)-(38):

(36) #ICantDateYouIf You still stuck on your ex (@ImNot\_4You 5<sup>th</sup> June 2016)

(37) #ICantDateYouIf you don't drive (@maddiyagid 20th May 2016)

(38) #ICantDateYouIf you have more followers than me (@DaReal\_BoN\_BoN 18<sup>th</sup> March 2016)

By presenting the consequent of the conditional in this way, the speaker presents the utterance as an instance of this meme. Memes, as Marwick (2013, p. 13) explains, “encourage a type of iteration, imitation, parody, and satire that can spawn literally thousands of variants”. They are the “raw material for creativity” (Marwick, 2013, p. 13) and form an important part of the participatory culture associated with new media discourse and literacies. The addition of the spoken hashtag signals to the hearer that this utterance should be taken as part of this particular meme set, and situates the speaker as a participant in this discourse. While the linking functionality of the hashtag does not work offline and in spoken language, the fact that a hashtag may be used to thematically mark and link memes does carry over into the offline world, and is likely to affect how it is interpreted. Whereas without the hashtag, (34) is a statement about who the speaker will and won't date, with the hashtag it becomes part of a collaborative language game in which the speaker is a participant.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Distribution and patterns of use

In Scott (2015) I argued that hashtags offered an effective way for tweeters to navigate the constraints of an imagined audience, context collapse, and restricted character limits. We could explain these uses in terms of constraints on the speaker's abilities in a mediated context. Once hashtags move to an offline, spoken context, those constraints are likely to disappear. The discourse context is much richer, the audience is less likely to be imagined, and the speaker is no longer subject to length constraints. With this change we find a marked difference in the distribution by function of the hashtags. Both Page (2012) and Zappavigna (2015) found the interpersonal function to be in the minority online, with the experiential /topic function dominating. However, offline, the reverse appears to be the case. Relevance theory provides us with a framework for subdividing the experiential uses into those which contribute to explicit meaning and those which contribute to implicitly communicated meaning. In the examples where the spoken hashtags do perform an experiential function or mark a topic, either the hashtag contains information which guides the derivation of implicatures, as in (30), or the hashtag is inserted to explicitly present the utterance as a variant on an established meme, and thereby guide the hearer towards a particular context for deriving implicatures, as in (31). As discussed in section 4.1, the examples used here represent a very small sample and are largely drawn from anecdotal examples. With a larger dataset, we would be able to explore whether any other experiential motivations for spoken hashtags emerge, and whether the examples discussed here form part of a wider pattern.

According to the relevance-theoretic view of pragmatics, the relevance of an utterance depends on two factors: cognitive/contextual effects, on the one hand, and processing effort, on the other. A speaker aims to make her utterance optimally relevant and optimal relevance is a balancing act between these two factors. The more contextual effects that a hearer can derive, the more relevant an utterance will

be. However, the more processing effort a hearer has to expend to derive those effects, the lower the relevance of the utterance. Therefore, a speaker has two ways in which she can increase the relevance of her utterance. She can produce an utterance which leads to more contextual effects, or she can produce an utterance which demands less effort of the hearer. This second option often involves guiding the hearer's inferential processes via the use of procedural information and can thus help to minimise the risk of misinterpretation. In Scott (2015) I argued that online hashtags could be used to guide the inferential processes involved in derivation of the proposition expressed, higher level explicatures and implicatures, and that this was a particularly useful tool in the lean, context-collapsed context of asynchronous social media discourse. In the offline, spoken contexts, the use of hashtags still contributes to relevance by guiding inferences, but as the richness of the discourse context varies, so does the distribution of the pragmatically motivated functions. In only one case, example (31), does the hashtagged content make a direct difference to the proposition expressed by the utterance. However, in this case, the relevance of presenting the content as a hashtag lies not in the propositional content, but in presentation of the utterance as part of a meme-set. The only other experientially functioning spoken hashtag, (30), contributes to the derivation of indeterminate and ancillary implicatures. The majority of spoken hashtags from the attested examples fall into the interpersonal function category, contributing to higher level explicatures relating to the speaker's attitudes and stance. These attitudinal aspects are often communicated in face-to-face communication via non-verbal means such as facial expressions, gesture or affective prosody (Wharton, 2009). While these non-verbal means are available to speakers in the spoken contexts, the use of a verbal hashtag allows the speaker to both explicitly foreground this aspect of the communicated message, and, as with the experiential use in (31), present the utterance as part of a group of utterances that might be so tagged.

Written language, whether offline or online, tends to provide a reader with a leaner discourse context than is available to a hearer in face-to-face spoken communication. When this written language use takes place online, interpretation is further complicated by context collapse and the imagined nature of the audience. Punctuation and typographical features in written media can help fill the contextual gaps inherent in these online discourse contexts, and in doing so it play an important role in the communication of meaning. However, if and when these written features develop functions which contribute to communication above and beyond substituting for unavailable non-verbal features, they may be co-opted back into spoken language. We can see this happening with traditional punctuation and typographical features in examples such as (14) to (17), and the examples discussed here suggest that use of the word *hashtag* as part of a spoken utterance has also become an option, albeit marked, for some speakers.

## 5.2 Concluding Remarks

It would be easy to assume that spoken hashtags are no more than a language game, and that speakers are simply mimicking, and perhaps in some cases mocking, linguistic behaviour online. As Clark (2016, p. 149) notes, “[i]n early uses of [spoken hashtags], the speaker is clearly expecting the hearer to recognise that this alludes to the use of the hashtag marker on Twitter and how it is used there”. However, a closer look at a small set of attested cases suggests that there is more to their use in spoken language than simply a direct transfer of their online use to an offline context. Speakers are adapting their use to fit with the affordances and constraints of the discourse context, and offline uses reflect the pragmatically motivated online functions more closely than they reflect the online uses linked to searching functionality and content retrieval. Even with a limited set of examples, a clear distributional difference emerges, with experiential, topic-based pragmatic uses dominating in the lean, collapsed and imagined context online, and interpersonal uses linked to attitudes and emotions becoming more prominent in the offline, spoken uses.

It remains to be seen whether hashtags in spoken language will become established in the way that, for example, Pullum (2010) claims that *slash* has. History would suggest, and relevance theory would predict, that this would only be the case if they continue to serve a different or additional function which contributes to relevance. However, even with the limited examples discussed here, we see how speakers adapt their use of the hashtag relative to the discourse context and in order to make their utterance relevant. While the emergence of spoken hashtags may be regarded as cause for concern by those writing and commenting in the blogs and articles discussed in section 3.1, the development and adaptation in use and function that the examples demonstrate is evidence that speakers are as linguistically innovative and pragmatically sensitive as ever.

In sum, @roolby, the poster of example (1) is right. Hashtags do work everywhere. They work everywhere because speakers adapt their functionality to the discourse context, and because hearers assume that their contribution is relevant.

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