

English Dominance and “America-Centricity” in Argentinean Tumblr Users’ Tags

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INTRODUCTION

Digital spaces are massively global, and therefore also massively multilingual (Androutsopolos 2013), yet stereotypes of the Internet as an English-only space persist (Thurlow et al. 2004). This paper seeks to understand how multilingual interaction on the social networking site Tumblr shapes and is shaped by such ideologies. Drawing from a broader multimodal project on English-language media and pop culture fan communities in Argentina, I examine explicitly stated beliefs about the use and meaning of one of Tumblr’s communicative affordances (Gershon 2017)—organizational tags. In online chats with Tumblr users, and during observations and recordings of in-vivo Tumblr use, my Argentine research participants reveal two contrasting perspectives on the use of organizational tags. For some users, tags offer the possibility for community-building and greater interaction among L1 Spanish speakers on Tumblr. Yet others see them as a way to make it easier for non-Spanish speaking users to censor any non-English content, thus maintaining the “English dominance” and “America-centricity” of interaction on Tumblr. In other words, the same use of the same communicative affordance of a social media platform can be used to index quite radically different sociopolitical positionalities (cf. Valentinsson 2018a). The bivalent indexical potentiality offered by this particular tagging practice (Cotter and Valentinsson 2018) produces a semiotic effect of leveling (Park 2010)—that is, simultaneously *highlighting* (Bucholtz and Hall 2004) linguistic practices that do *not* reflect “English-dominance” and “America-centricity” while also allowing these practices to be more easily *erased* (Irvine and Gal 2000). I further argue that this semiotic effect only becomese fully

interpretable when considered within the context of historical and current language ideologies in Argentina. More broadly, these findings highlight the importance of contextualizing online discourse analysis within its “offline” sociopolitical contexts. As anthropologists we should of course examine *all* talk—including online talk—and the affordances of communication platforms—including digital ones—as embedded within broader power structures and constellations of language ideologies.

BACKGROUND

Per Tumblr.com’s official help documentation, “tags” on posts are freely-chosen keywords designed to “make it easier for readers to find posts about a specific topic on your blog”¹ (cf. Hyde et al. 2012 and O’Reilly 2012). Tumblr “tags” are visually similar to hashtags on other social media sites. They usually appear at the bottom of a post, and in theory create intertextual links between the post in question, and other posts across the site with the same tags. In practice, Tumblr users also use the tags of a post to write metacommentary and “side-bar” thoughts, among other affective and pragmatic uses (Bourlai 2018, Hurtig 2017). In this paper, I focus on the stated “official” use for tags—organizing and sorting blog content. Here is an example from my data:

¹ <https://tumblr.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/226161387-Tagging-your-posts>

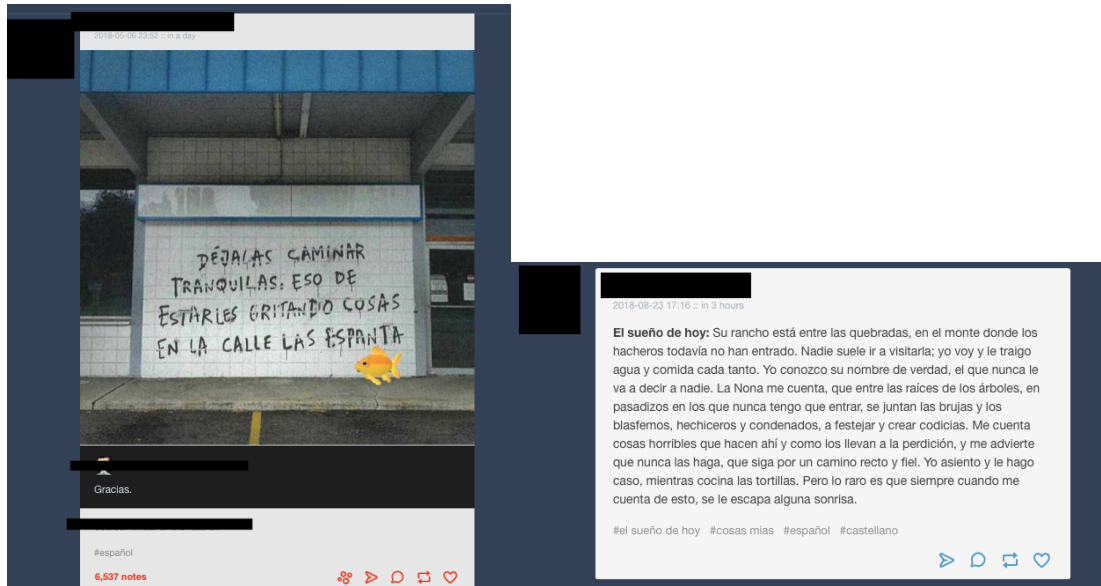


Figure 1. Organizational tags on a Tumblr post

The tags on this post tell us that the post contains spoilers (for a particular show, but also in general), and they tell us in multiple different ways. Clicking on the first tag leads the user to the set of all other posts that are tagged with #OUAT spoilers, across the website. It also includes a tag that is both organizational and affective at the same time: with the #anti-a&e tag, anyone reading the OUAT spoilers tag knows that this post contains negative discussion of the primary show runners (A&E are their initials) and also that the author is likely not themselves a fan of said show runners. Tumblr users can also elect to block certain tags—such as #anti-a&e, for instance, if they *are* fans of the OUAT showrunners and don't wish to interact with posts discussing their work negatively. So, even tags that function primarily for organization can have stance-taking and other pragmatic effects.

The specific set of organizational tags I examine here are employed by Tumblr users from Argentina who use the social networking site primarily to participate in English-language media/pop culture fandom. English is by far the most common language on the platform, and most of the participants in my research are highly proficient in at least written English. As a

result, many of their posts are in English, or feature English strongly. In my corpus, English-dominant posts are *never* tagged according to their language, yet posts written entirely in or featuring Spanish are often tagged to indicate this:



Figures 2 and 3. Metalinguistic organizational tags

I call this subset of organizational tags *metalinguistic tags*. Given that these tags have the potentiality to further highlight what is already marked linguistic choice on this platform, I wanted to know more about what motivated this tagging choice, and what this meant for my participants.

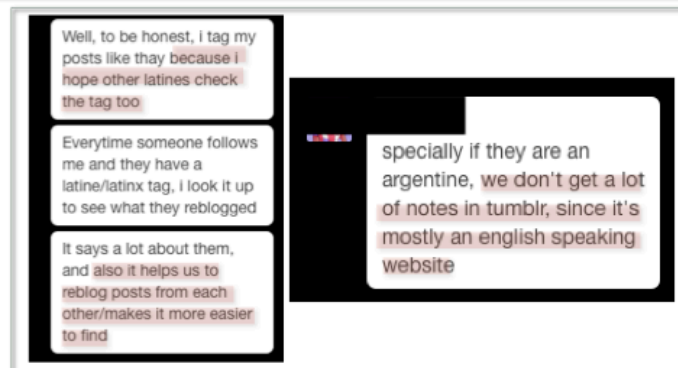
DATA & ANALYSIS

Following Androutsopolous (2008)'s framework for Discourse-Centered Online Ethnography, I begin with some of the "core" Tumblr users in my participant groups. Each of these Tumblr users employs a unique tagging system for their blog to explicitly mark posts in Spanish, about Argentina, or Latin American culture and politics more generally. (By the way, these are all screenshots of the in-platform 1-1 chat system).

Steve:



Erika:



Excerpts: Tumblr chats with users “Steve” and “Erika”

Steve asserts that they use their tagging system as a way to push back against the Anglocentricity of Tumblr: by tagging content about Argentina, or Latin America, they make it easier for Argentines and Latin Americans using the platform to find community with each other. In tagging Spanish-language posts specifically, they mention that the English-dominance of Tumblr can get physically and mentally overwhelming. They see their “Spanish” tag as a haven, or a place for L1 Spanish speakers using the site to take a break from the constant barrage of English. Erika shares a similar point of view, citing a desire to help other Latines find similar content, and reflecting on the difficulty of doing this on a “mostly English speaking website”. Steve and Erika post the most explicitly political content, and seem to post political content more frequently than other users in my participant group. The motivations that these users state for their tagging practices seem to reflect the broader political sensibilities they express through the

content they share: anti-anglocentrism, anti-English only on the Internet, and anti-linguistic imperialism.

To different degrees, these political stances were shared by nearly everyone in my participant group. But not all of them see their metalinguistic tagging practices as a way to enact pro-Argentine, pro-Latin American, or pro-Spanish stances. Take my participant Pablo. During one data collection session, we were jointly examining his blog as he talked me through his thought processes while navigating the site and making decisions about how to participate. Here you see a screenshot of his blog’s “about” page—not all Tumblr blogs have this, but those who do use it to give a brief summary of the typical content of the blog and biographical information about the author(s), and often the tagging system the author(s) uses. Here is what he had to say about it:

Excerpt: “No quiero molestar”

1. MC: bien y por qué (.) por qué::= #00:00:01-8#
2. PA: =Pablo speaks spanish? .hh y para no molestar [me parece #00:00:06-5#
3. MC: [para no molestar? [qué? #00:00:07-2#
4. PA: [é sí (.) es—é #00:00:08-4#
5. MC: Épero molesta si querésÉ ((laughter)) no yo digo (.) no #00:00:10-4#
6. PA: si no no no >[la verdad es que estoy de acuerdo (.) estoy de acuerdo< #00:00:13-0#
7. MC: [es tu blog #00:00:12-2#
8. PA: no es una postura ((mía)) es contradictorio con lo que todo lo que digo (.) pero es como (.) tsk que sé yo (.) #00:00:18-8#
9. MC: hmm #00:00:19-5#
10. PA: e-eso me mato (.) sinceramente Éporque es como daleÉ #00:00:23-7#
11. MC: esto- esto me encantó #00:00:24-9#
12. PA: sí (.) tsk #00:00:26-9#
13. MC: [hmm #00:00:28-4#
14. PA: [pero:: tsk es como que (.) esto no—no le interesa a todos mis followers entonces (.) que sé yo (.) o sea sé que es mi blog y yo puedo postear lo que yo quiero (.) pero tampoco quiero molestarles entonces yo hice mi propio posts (.) mi propio: tag (.) para no mo—no molestar tanto por ahí (.) a pesar de que (.) Éna no tiene sentido ((laughter))É #00:00:49-2#

Excerpt: “No quiero molestar” English translation

1. MC: okay and why (.) why::= #00:00:01-8#
2. PA: =Pablo speaks Spanish? .hh well to not bother people [i think #00:00:06-5#
3. MC: [to not bother people? [what? #00:00:07-2#
4. PA: [É yeah (.) it’s—É #00:00:08-4#
5. MC: Ébut bother them if you wantÉ ((laughter)) no i mean (.) no #00:00:10-4#
6. PA: yeah no no no >[in all honesty i agree (.) i agree< #00:00:13-0#
7. MC: [it’s your blog #00:00:12-2#
8. PA: no it’s a thing i do it contradicts with what i with everything i say (.) but it’s like (.) tsk i dunno(.) #00:00:18-8#
9. MC: hmm #00:00:19-5#
10. PA: that-that one killed me (.) honestly Ébecause it’s like come onÉ #00:00:23-7#
11. MC: this- this one i loved #00:00:24-9#
12. PA: yeah (.) tsk #00:00:26-9#
13. MC: [hmm #00:00:28-4#
14. PA: [but:: tsk it’s like (.) this doesn’t—it’s not interesting to all of my followers (.) i dunno (.) like i know that it’s my blog and i can post what i want (.) but i also don’t want to bother them so i made my own posts (.) my own: tag (.) to not bo—not bother people so much (.) even though (.) Énah it doesn’t make sense ((laughter))É #00:00:49-2#

The first thing Pablo pointed me to was the tag he uses to organize his Spanish-language posts-- #Pablo speaks Spanish. In the first line I attempting to elicit an analysis from him about what kind of content he puts in this tag, and why he uses it. His response, in line 2, is that “he doesn’t want to bother people”. This is referring to the fact that by explicitly tagging his Spanish-language posts, he is making it easier for users employing Tumblr’s tag-blocking function to avoid seeing his Spanish-language posts, thus, in a way, *highlighting* the Anglocentrism of the platform and *erasing* its potential multilingual aspects. The surprise I express in line 5 leads him to clarify that he does see a contradiction between this practice and his own political stances. Like the other users I mentioned, Pablo is definitely anti-Gringo imperialism, and pro-more content and positivity for Spanish-language and Latin American content. But, as he tells me later in this session, this choice is practical as well: according to Pablo, if you want to talk to other people in your fandom on Tumblr, you’re going to have to use your English, no matter what. The ideological conflict behind Pablo’s tagging practice reveals the indexical bivalency of these metalinguistic tags: even when users like Steve & Erika who employ metalinguistic tagging systems for their blogs specifically as a way to make life easier for other folks from their region and linguistic community to find and consume content, the communicative affordances of Tumblr make it such that users who don’t want to engage with that content can also more easily *disengage*. In short, the potential for linguistic hybridity and multiplexity on Tumblr is semiotically *leveled* through practices such as metalinguistic tagging

CONCLUSION

This data shows that that Tumblr, like the rest of the Internet, *is*, objectively, a multilingual space; but also that ideologies and experiences of English dominance and/or America-centricity remain strongly felt by some users. Metalinguistic tagging practices by

Argentine Tumblr users allow both of these conflicting realities to be indexed concurrently—or bivalently, as Cotter and Valentinsson (2018) put it. This bivalency, in turn, creates a semiotic effect of *leveling*, in which Tumblr’s linguistic multiplexity is both highlighted and erased simultaneously (Park 2010).

But what does this semiotic leveling mean outside of the relatively narrow interactional context of Tumblr? Britain’s pseudo-colonial presence in Argentina (Graham-Yool 1981, Gallo 2001) from the early 1800s to 1930s created strong links between the English language and the wealthiest elite classes in Argentina. More recently the globalization of media, pop culture, and international communication technologies, has led to a shift in these associations, linking English additionally with (positively valued) upward social mobility, opportunity, and a cosmopolitan outlook (Valentinsson 2018b). This shift has of course not erased English’s historical connections in Argentina—but it has transformed them somewhat. In oral, offline conversation, Argentine fans of English-language media and pop culture construct “fan” positionalities by carefully moderating their English use: a quote or slogan from a television show is enough to make you seem like a cool, connected, in-the-know fan, but dropping too many English discourse markers and more general phrases you’ve learned from participating in English-dominant fan communities online makes you seem snobby and stuck-up. Relatedly, “overuse” of English is viewed by negatively by many working and middle-class people as a pro-imperialist, pro-“gringo” behavior. This “offline” background allows us to more fully understand the underpinnings of the bivalent indexical potentialities of metalinguistic Tumblr tags. While Tumblr users like Steve and Erika see metalinguistic tags as a communicative affordance that allows them to resist the negative connotations of being major participants in a strongly English-dominant, America-centric online space, users like Pablo see them as another tool through which

engage in global, transnational communities—even if it also supports ideological systems which he himself does not subscribe to.

Like other linguistic and anthropological approaches to online discourse analysis (Abidin 2018, Androutsopolous 2008 and 2015, Christiansen 2015 and 2016, Rea 2018, inter alia) I believe these findings highlight the importance of conducting online discourse analysis with an eye towards how the “discourse” in question is situated within broader sociopolitical structures, power relations, and language ideologies.

TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

(()) – unintelligible speech

[word – overlap
[word

((laughter)) - laughter

word= – latching
=word

(.) – untimed pause

£word£ - smile intonation

wo::rd – lengthening

>word< - increased rate of speech

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