

Sociolinguistics of Youth Activism: Implications for The Future of Political Language

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ABSTRACT

From gun control reforms to climate change protests, today's young activists have been described as 'louder and more coordinated than [their] predecessors' (Marris, 2019: 471). This article looks at the linguistic changes at work behind this description: how does their language make youth activists' voices grow stronger, and how does it help them discuss, mobilise and organise their campaigns. The article begins with a comparison of the language of youth activists today and that of their predecessors, to better assess the extent and nature of these changes. It then analyses the influence of the internet and social media on the political language of contemporary youth. Finally, it considers reactions to youth activist language and reflects upon its implications on the future of political voices. This article aims to bridge the gap between existing literature in the field, which separately contrasts contemporary youth activists with their predecessors, or examines the impact of the internet and social media on their activities. We propose, instead, that focusing on the language of contemporary youth activists, as a legacy and an evolving creative process, on and offline, will provide a better understanding of their impact on the future of political language. We find a nuanced picture, where the linguistic opportunities offered by the internet and social media increase the reach and organisation of contemporary youth activists, but make them look performative and nonchalant, perhaps because they are considered in the terms of traditional politics.

Key words: Sociolinguistics, Youth Activism, Internet Language, Political Language

INTRODUCTION

From gun control reforms to climate change protests, today's young activists have been described as 'louder and more coordinated than [their] predecessors' (Marris, 2019: 471). This article looks at the linguistic changes at work behind this description: how does their language make youth activists' voices grow stronger, and how does it help them discuss, mobilise and organise their campaigns. The article begins with a comparison of the language of youth activists today and that of their predecessors, to better assess the extent and nature of these changes. It then analyses the influence of the internet and social media on the political language of contemporary youth. Finally, it considers reactions to youth activist language and reflects upon its implications on the future of political voices.

This article aims to bridge the gap between existing literature in the field, which separately contrasts contemporary youth activists with their predecessors, or examines the impact of the internet and social media on their activities. We propose, instead, that focusing on the language of contemporary youth activists, as a legacy and an evolving creative process, on and offline, will provide a better understanding of their impact on the future of political language. We find

a nuanced picture, where the linguistic opportunities offered by the internet and social media increase the reach and organisation of contemporary youth activists, but make them look performative and nonchalant, perhaps because they are considered in the terms of traditional politics.

As younger generations become actors and audiences in traditional politics, these new opportunities have the potential to influence the evolution of political language.

Definitions

Young people

Youth Activism is defined here as the "behaviour performed by adolescents and young adults with a political intent" (Hart & Lakin Gullan, 2010: 67). In this article, no distinction will be made between adolescents and young adults, and they will be regrouped under the terms 'young people' and 'the youth', used interchangeably. While the age boundaries will not be taken strictly, this article will consider young people to be approximately within the age range 10-24 years, as per the World Health Organisation's definitions of 'Young People' (Note 1). These age boundaries are not overtly stringent for two main reasons: practically, social media policies restrict access to users' ages and it is difficult to assess the precise

age of protest participants. Secondly, the main interest in this article is to consider young people who are free to express themselves without having to fear for their immediate life conditions. This presupposes that a young person is not yet employed in a career where their affiliation with a cause will have a direct impact on their income and livelihood.

Activism and politics

This article considers ‘Youth Activism’ to encompass various “activities and motivations” (Hart & Lakin Gullan, 2010: 68) – it does not restrict activist causes to local, national or global issues and understands activism as various actions, such as creating organisations, protesting and raising awareness. For the purpose of the research at hand, examples will be taken from activist motivations that are not limited to local or national politics. This is so that the examples analysed can reflect broader changes to the political language of youth activists rather than language specific to a particular country’s political institutions and terms.

Following from this, we consider activism to be political in the sense that it is an “activity through which people make, preserve and amend the general rules under which they live” (Heywood, 2010: 3). This will at times contrast with the conception of politics as a “process” of conflict and cooperation (2), as the examples analysed are not directly related to specific electoral or institutional processes. This is in part because of the age range considered in this article: youth activists are young people who are only starting to take an active part in these processes and people who are a few years away from being able to do so. Therefore, while youth activism is ‘political’ in the sense that its motivations and activities revolve around debating or protesting the formal and informal “rules under which they live”; because those involved in youth activism either cannot or do not partake in political processes that directly affect those rules, this article admits a certain distinction of youth activism as an issue-based form of politics rather than an institutional and practical process.

Purpose of Study

This article will examine whether there is a recognisable political language among contemporary young activists, and whether there is any evidence to suggest that their political language altogether is evolving. The question this article seeks to answer is:

Does the language of youth activists today reflect broader changes to the political involvement of the ‘internet generation’? Can these affect the future of traditional political language?

Three research topics will guide our answer:

- How is the language of young activists today different from that of their predecessors, and why?
- What changes to the political language of young people can we identify, and what are the effects of these changes?
- What are the main reactions to this language, and what do they imply for the future of political language?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Political Engagement and The Internet

Existing literature on contemporary youth activism examines how the internet and social media have affected levels of political participation and engagement among young people. The relationships and communities, which play key roles in the processes that interest and involve young people in political life, have changed and shifted towards an online setting as the internet and globalisation have grown prominent in their social lives (Epstein, 2015).

The findings most relevant to the study of the online political involvement of young people can be (broadly) summarised in two dimensions: firstly, these platforms counteract young people’s apparent disinterest for traditional forms of politics by providing them with the opportunity to focus on the specific issues that interest them, and to work with their peers in a less hierarchical dynamic (Vromen et al., 2015; Bakker & De Vreese, 2011). Secondly, face-to-face interactions, relationships, and mediating institutions have been shown to represent an essential part of the process of involvement in the political world for young people (Fullam, 2017; Flanagan, 2013; Pancer et al., 2007). While young people less confident in their own political opinions and identities might find the ‘public’ aspect of most social media too intimidating to post statements, these platforms remain a space in which they can form diverse circles of peers, explore opinions and develop a sense of membership and a collective perception of efficacy and agency (Ekström, 2016; Velasquez & Larose, 2015).

Online Political ‘Participation’: The How

Research into different types of internet use provides relevant insights into how these processes work: political participation is only indirectly correlated with information and interaction, but directly and positively correlated with ‘creative production’ (Ekström & Ostman, 2015). Ostman (2012) found that the expressive, collaborative, and performative dimensions of user-generated content provided participants with skills and confidence that encourages their political attitude and behaviour, despite being negatively correlated with political knowledge.

While the aforementioned literature offers a comprehensive understanding of what sets today’s youth apart in terms of their political ‘becoming’, much fewer and less varied research is available about what happens next. The work of Zappavigna (2014) in explaining how language is used to ‘create affiliation on the web’ is of particular pertinence in examining the linguistic processes at work on the internet. It is important to bridge the gaps between the literature on the how and why of online youth activism. In other terms, between the literature concerned with what makes social media a helpful and practical space for youth activists, and the one concerned with how they take advantage of it.

A noticeable amount of literature is concerned with the ways in which the internet and social media facilitate political participation. Particular areas of interest have included the existence of markers to structure and spread content (such as

hashtags and intertextuality) (Brown et.al., 2017), to interact and form relationships (such as retweets and mentions), and the multimodality of content (Cameron & Panovic, 2012). Beyond these ‘technological’ affordances, other contributions of the internet are compatible with activism, such as the ability for users to express themselves in their own way when the ‘norms’ are seen as sterile (Shaw 2012), and to reach communities they would not have access to offline (Nardenson, 2017). The study of the internet as a safer alternative to offline activism (Chak, 2014; Shirky 2011) and as an opportunity to encode meaning to control audience understanding (Lee, 2018) has received considerable attention.

Online Political ‘Content’: The What

Most of the literature available looks at how particular content is produced, and at what happens to this content, with a strong emphasis on the interactional dimension of content sharing and reacting. However, there is a surprising lack of research concerning the nature of the content itself: what activists say, and how. Some literature has looked at how humour is coded and decoded in online content (Reves et.al., 2012) and at how meaning can be hidden so that only the people whom the content creator wants to understand will be able to infer it (Yaqub & Silova 2015).

These last findings have valuable significance in the context of online activism, and specifically of youth activism. They imply that the internet not only influences youth political participation, but also affects the expression of this participation, its intelligibility and therefore reception by other generations. Online language has been shown to vary between gender, age, and personality (Schwartz et al, 2013). The ways in which the youth communicate online have been criticised and contemplated to harm language ever since it became a part of their every-day social life (Curey, 2019; Tagliamonte, 2015). Much like ‘internet language’, contemporary youth’s forms of political participation might be considered inefficient and meaningless by the generations currently in charge because they do not have the tools to understand them - which in turn feeds into a cycle of where the youth create and use channels unsanctioned by their control (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016).

Situating With Existing Literature

Youth activists are the next generation, and their political engagement and participation will play a part in shaping our future. The existing literature proposes fairly thorough accounts of what makes today’s youth activists different from previous generations, and of how the internet and social media are an invaluable space for them to use. This article proposes to bridge the gap between these two fields by exploring the language of contemporary youth activists on and offline, and considering both its history and potential impact on the future of political voices.

METHOD

The analysis of language used on social media and of language used by youth activists are both emerging fields.

Different methods have been used to analyse them (separately) both quantitatively, through creating and using datasets to look at language as a corpus, and qualitatively – using various approaches of Discourse Analysis.

Jenkins et.al. (2016) *By Any Media Necessary: The New Youth Activism* and Zappavigna’s (2014) *Discourse of Twitter and Social Media: How We Use Language to Create Affiliation on the Web* introduce core concepts and present compellingly crafted case studies which have inspired the approach used in this article.

Discourse Analysis

This article proposes that because of its nature, the material collected will be best interpreted by using several Discourse Analysis approaches in conjunction. Notably, elements of the following approaches, which have been described in Cameron & Panovic’s (2014) *Working with Written Discourse*, will be used selectively as described in Figure 1.

I believe that many more Discourse Analysis approaches could be used when analysing the language of youth activists, and hope that research will be carried out in order to provide frameworks for analysing online political language systematically.

Case Studies and Examples

Due to the novelty of the field, no reliable and freely accessible dataset on the language of youth activists (for instance through the analysis of banner protests or social media content) is - to the best of my knowledge - available for quantitative Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis. Collecting and analysing such datasets, specific to the content produced and shared by activists on social media, is beyond the scope of this article, but would provide more extensive insights into the political language used by young people online. For now, a few examples will be used in each case study – these examples will always include text, but will differ in format (protest banners, multimedia posts, interactions) and content. These examples have been selected based on topical and linguistic relevance and will demonstrate a variety of features that will be analysed with one or more Discourse Analysis approaches as mentioned in the previous section. The case studies described in Figure 2 were selected for their ability to represent contemporary youth activism: each of them is a response to issues currently relevant to youth movements and has already encompassed both online discussion and offline mobilisation.

Ethics

Page et.al. (2014) conveniently detail and exemplify the technical and ethical complexities of *Researching Language and Social Media*. This section will justify the choices made during the processes of selecting, quoting and anonymising content used in this article based on the ‘Points for reflection’ highlighted in the chapter ‘What are Internet research ethics?’ (Page et.al., 2014: 58-79).

<p>• Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Because the public status of all material treated means that the audience is (if not de facto, de jure) large, and the discourse used has a political meaning that might wish to shape said audience's understanding of reality. • CDA will help us understand potential patterns and covert meanings in our examples, rather than in analysing the content itself (ibid.)
<p>• Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MMDA)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When we will analyse language which combines different semiotic codes, and look both at the overall meaning and the interactive meaning of these codes. • Notably, we will be using Peirce's (1991) trichotomy, according to which a sign can represent an object in three different ways: as an icon (similar to what it represents), an index (natural association) or a symbol (conventional association)
<p>• Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlight the technological and social facets scheme described by Herring (2007) to classify the language in our examples systematically. • Note that this article does not conceptualize language found on the internet as distinctly different from offline language, as CMDA might sometimes suggest, but instead understands online and offline discourse to be complementary, especially in the context of youth activism
<p>• Multilingual Discourse Analysis (MLDA)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion of code-switching used by activists whose main language is not English.

Figure 1. Overview of discourse analyses used

<p>Part I. Youth Activism – Past and Present</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Case Study: Coat Hanger and Abortion Protests <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2 photographs of Protest Banners (1968 & 2016) • 3 Tweets containing the hashtag #CoatHangerRebellion
<p>Part II. Influence of the Internet on Political Language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Case Study: Fridays for Future <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 verified Fridays for Future pages on twitter and their descriptions • Ralph in Danger memes: 2 from instagram page @climemechange, 1 from Twitter, 1 included on a protest banner (photo)
<p>Part III. Reactions and Implications</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fridays for Future <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two photographs of protest banners quoting Greta Thunberg speeches ➤ Black Lives Matter and Blackout Tuesday <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Two tweets discussing the use the hashtag #blacklivesmatter when reposting a black square on Instagram

Figure 2. Description of corpus used

Privacy

All data collected used in this article is collected from the Internet, publicly available (ie: on public websites and from public profiles/user pages) and free from privacy restrictions under each site-specific terms and conditions. The website from which the content is extracted is therefore be mentioned for each example and links to the terms and conditions of each social media platform used is be available in the Annex.

Usernames and identifying elements on photographs have been removed to guarantee anonymity when content is extracted from social media sites, except when the user is a verified public figure (and this is identifiable on their

profile). This is both to respect ethical and privacy concerns, and because such examples will be used textually and separate from the user's identity, so data which might be subject to data protection will not be collected. Additionally, even when interactions will be studied, only those interactions publicly available and which do not make reference to personal information about either user will be collected, as again only reactions to the content of a post, rather than to its creator will be useful to our analysis.

This article does not make use of interviews or datasets which could require further ethical considerations.

Creative content

Pages have been used which specialise in sharing content that does not include or refer to the user's identity – in that case, the page will be credited to account for creative ownership over the material used (this will be the case only in our analysis of memes) while ensuring the author remains anonymous as per their seeming preference in not making their identity known on the page's profile. When the content is available through a news outlet's website, credit will be given for photographs (as found on the website) in the figure. All sources for such creative content can be found in the Appendix.

FINDINGS

Youth Activism – Past and Present

To understand the impact of today's youth activists on political language, it is important to note they are not the first generation to use language that challenges political norms. However, today's young activists have been described as 'louder and more coordinated than [their] predecessors' (Marris, 2019: 471). Campaigns such as #FridaysForFuture have mobilised 'unprecedented numbers of youth' (Fisher, 2019: 430) who protested against inaction towards the climate crisis by refusing to attend school.

The Literature Review above highlights findings related to the impact of the internet and social media on whether young people become politically involved. We now turn to analysing their language, and in particular contrasting it with those of previous generations, to understand the extent to which the internet has influenced not only engagement levels, but the discourse youth activists produce.

We first point out that similarities exist in the language of youth activists today and those that preceded them. It is possible to find the same expressions or symbols in the protest banners of the Civil Rights Protests of the 60s and 70s and those of the Black Lives Matter Protests that took place following George Floyd's death in the summer 2019 (which we turn to in 4.3). This is not entirely surprising: many youth movements today fight for comparable causes to previous generations – against racism, for women's and LGBTQ+ rights, for the environment, etc... Due to this topical similarity, we can expect to find some of the same vocabulary and visual symbols in youth activism across generations.

Case study – the coat hanger and abortion protests

Figure 3 highlights the image of the coat hanger, used in pro-abortion protests linked to women's rights campaigns in the 70s and more recently in Ireland. The activists who created both signs employ similar linguistic and discourse features to denounce the unsafe practices of unofficial procedures and demand access to legal abortion.

We first note that both banners are multimodal: they not only display multimedia content, with the combined use of image and text, but they also express both an explicit and implicit encoded meaning. The coat hanger has a semiotic meaning here, it is used as an index (Peirce, 2001) for its

natural association with 'unofficial' (or illegal) abortions performed by using its hook, and therefore represents the danger of forcing women into unsafe procedures. Pragmatically, then, we can see that the creators of both banners meant for their audience to infer meaning to the coat hanger, and that the text accompanying the image serves to 'anchor' (Barthes, 1997) its meaning into the context of abortion.

In both cases, the effect is to denounce the shocking procedures of "back street" abortion graphically without explicitly depicting the operation. The audience able to infer the correct meaning to the coat hanger must therefore be aware of such procedures, meaning that either it is a supportive audience who would agree with the need for safe abortions, or an opposing audience who will be forced to think about the procedure while decoding the meaning.

Additionally, there are similarities in the text used on both banners, with a call to "stop" and a claim that it "can't continue". In the 1968 banner we note that a figure is given, "10000 deaths", and the protester's demand is explicit, "legalize abortion". The danger of unofficial abortion procedures is also emphasised: the skull and cross bones is a symbol of death and the word 'Quack' written on the board refers to incompetent doctors.

On the other hand, in the 2016 banner, even the textual meaning is partly encoded, with the mention only of the coat hanger being a "surgical device", which would only be decoded by an audience already aware of the nature of unofficial abortions. This might be because in the later banner the goal is to denounce an ongoing practice, nearly 50 years older than that denounced in the 1968 picture, and that the expectation is therefore that the audience will be able to infer meaning without explicit reference to abortion. As such, we see that in activist campaigns that have been present across generations, there is a certain history of the intertextuality and discourse used which allows encoded meanings (such as that of the coat hanger) to be decoded with less anchoring.

Although Figure 3 stands as a lone example here, many of today's protests, at least those pertaining to causes that previous generations have protested against, use similar lexical and discursive repertoires on banners. Banner-making is indeed not a phenomenon new to this generation of youth activists, so this conclusion could have been expected. On the other hand, new practices are now available online – we look here at the use of hashtags.

New opportunities: #coathangerrebellion

Access to safe and legal abortion is an ongoing issue in many countries still, and the recent protests in Poland have made use of a specific hashtag, #CoatHangerRebellion, to coordinate actions: protesters were to bring a coat hanger with them to the pro-abortion protests (Note 2). We see here that the index used in both banners in Figure 3 has lived not only through the ages, but also into the digital sphere and across languages, as the hashtag was used extensively by Polish protesters, who often did not translate it. This suggests that these activists are educated about women's reproductive rights not only in their own socio-political context, but also have an idea about what is happening in similar campaigns



Elliot Landy/Corbis, *Abortion Rights Demonstration, 1968*

William Murphy, *Pro-abortion protesters in Northern Ireland, 2016*

Figure 3. Abortion protest banners and the coat hanger symbol

elsewhere in the world. In turn, this may indicate that they wish to signal solidarity with women all over the world in similar situations, and that the hashtag is used to facilitate the global reach and impact of their campaign.

The hashtag used here functions as a linguistic marker, as do the @ mention and the retweet function (Zappavigna, 2014) which will be discussed in relation to Figure 4. This language of microblogging allows tweets and their authors' not only to refer to each other, but also to make content searchable: just as the tweets collected in Figure 4 were selected from searching the hashtag on Twitter, anyone interested in abortion protests in (and beyond) Poland might search the hashtag or tweets that mention a particular user to find information or ongoing discussion about the topic.

In Figure 4, three tweets have been extracted from the search results of the hashtag #CoatHangerRebellion – each tweet is from a public user and readily accessible to anyone who might search the hashtag on the platform.

Through the lens of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the table on the right of Figure 4 provides quick analyses of the intertextuality at play around the hashtag #CoatHangerRebellion in each of these tweets. Intertextuality corresponds to any text which cites/refers to or simply alludes to another text (Cameron & Panovic, 2014). In CDA, intertextuality is studied not only for its content but also to highlight choices made by the author about the framing and altering of the referenced text.

In this example, each user is taking advantage of both the technological and social facets of Twitter (as highlighted by Herring, 2007) by making their tweets searchable, topical and public. In that way, the hashtag #CoatHangerRebellion has a social function: it creates “ad hoc social groups or sub communities” (Zappavigna, 2011: 801) by grouping tweets relating to the campaign, which helps users create and cultivate a sense of collective group identity.

Here, we note that although abortion rights do not only concern nor rally youth activists, young people have traditionally always been at the forefront of women's rights, and

have no doubt played a role in translating or at least propagating the symbolic hashtag through social media.

Therefore, we have seen in this case study that linguistic markers and indexes are used transnationally by abortion activists and play a role in signalling (and creating) group identity and solidarity globally. We now turn to a more detailed analysis of the influence of the internet on youth activists' language.

Influence of The Internet on Political Language

Case study: fridays for future

In 2018, Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg protested in front of the Swedish Parliament to denounce inaction in the face of climate change. She started the School Strike for Climate, also known as Fridays for Future, a movement consisting of young people not going to school on Fridays to instead join worldwide protests and demand action against climate change. The movement has been shown to “[increase] public awareness of, and [stimulate] public engagement with issues of climate change” (Thackeray et.al., 2019: 1042). This increase was visible in the relative frequency of search terms such as “climate change” and “global warming” on Google and in traditional media (newspapers, television and radio reporting) (1043).

In this context, looking at the language used in Fridays for Future campaigns will give us insights into the political language of young activists involved in them. This will highlight the influences of the internet, where the movement is organised and discussed.

Organising campaigns: Geographical coordination

Literature available studies social media content to better understand how Fridays for Future has managed to coordinate young people on a global scale. Boulianne et.al. (2020: 215) looked at hashtags and tweet ‘functions’ and found that the majority of tweets containing the hashtag

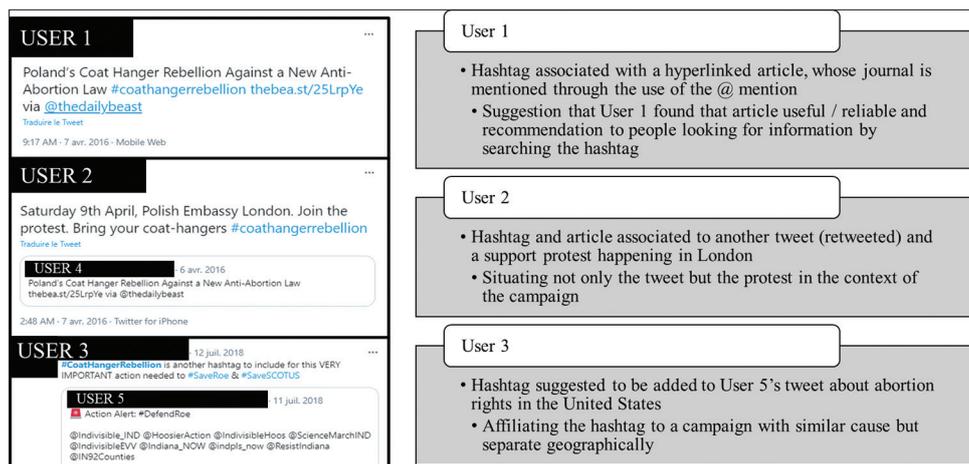


Figure 4. The hashtag #coathangerrebellion in abortion campaigns on twitter

#schoolstrike4climate were informative, followed by tweets containing opinions, attacks and promoting mobilisation.

Another function of the hashtag worth highlighting in the context of youth activism today is its ability to create “ad hoc social groups or sub communities” (Zappavigna, 2011: 801), as mentioned in the first case study. In the context of Fridays for Future, this is particularly important not only in terms of grouping tweet content, but in signalling the belonging of different pages to the movement. In Figure 5 we see that the hashtag #FridaysForFuture is present in each of the twitter pages’ descriptions: this technical facet of Twitter (Herring, 2007) makes them searchable, and regroups them under the same movement.

We see in Figure 5 that ‘Fridays For Future’ twitter pages exist on global, continental, national and local levels. It is worth noting that as this level increases in size, so does the number of people following the page. This reflects the content sharing structure of the campaign: activists will follow each page encompassing their location, from global to local. Therefore the hashtag #FridaysForFuture, when used in a page’s description, becomes a linguistic marker which does not only signal content, but also plays a role the global organisation of the movement.

The use of hashtags as an affiliation marker exemplifies how the internet and social media metadata offer young activists, and youth movements with innovative organisational resources. This level structure allows for information to be shared (about climate change, policies and mobilisation) from the top down, and for local initiatives and actions to gain attention from the bottom up.

While the global communication and coordination of the movement is facilitated by such technical facets of social media, the contrast between the global scale of the movement and particular locations of participants creates challenges on the social facets side (Herring, 2007), notably in terms of audience language. This is visible in some pages’ choice of language, and can be analysed through the use of Multilingual Discourse Analysis (MLDA). In Figure 6 we see that the hashtag #FridaysForFuture is used in each page’s description in English, and the different language choices which appear alongside it are detailed in the table on the right.

Code-switching between English and the national language of the page can be understood as a ‘contextualization cue’ – defined as a “feature of linguistic form that contributes to the signalling of contextual presuppositions” (Gumperz, 1982: 131). These cues can be looked at through ‘accommodation theory’ and through the ‘markedness model’ as described in Cameron & Panovic’s work (2014: 130).

Accommodation theory looks at how linguistic behaviour converges or diverges according to an interlocutor. Here we could understand the use of English as converging towards a global audience, presumed to have prior knowledge of the English language. Symmetrically, switching to the national language represents convergence towards the national audience of the page. In compromising between the two languages, to different extents (page name, description, and hashtags), pages therefore find a balance between converging with both the global movement and local activists. Note that here we assume the strategy of the pages is not to diverge from either language, as they are national pages of a global movement and as such should seek to represent both audiences.

The markedness model developed by Myers-Scotton (2006) suggests that when code-switching occurs, one of the codes used is ‘unmarked’ (the expected code) and one is ‘marked’ (chosen to challenge the expectation). In this case, it is possible that national pages’ accommodation strategies rely on norms of expected languages: perhaps Brazilian activists use Portuguese in their actions and communications so using English challenges the normal language of the movement by situating it in the global context. On the other hand, perhaps Greek activists situate themselves more firmly within the global movement, and expect that communications about it will be conveyed in English rather than their national language.

The code-switching between languages in these national pages’ descriptions reflects different expectations and strategies used to compromise between being searchable by a global, English-speaking audience, and being intelligible and showing solidarity with a specific national audience.

The internet affects the political language of youth activists by giving them linguistic resources, such as hashtags, to coordinate both on a global level and on a local one. This



Figure 5. Fridays for future twitter pages on different geographic levels

	<p>Greece</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Page Name: English •Description: English •Additional: #Greece indicating the country but in English
	<p>Germany</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Page Name: English •Description: German
	<p>France</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Page Name: English but different format •Description: French •Additional: #youthforclimate repeating their English name
	<p>Brazil</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Page Name: Portuguese •Description: Portuguese •Additional: #fridaysforfuturebrasil indicating the country but in English, #grevepeloclima repeating their name

Figure 6. Language and code-switching in fridays or future twitter pages

is significantly different from what previous generations of youth activists had access to, as using a hashtag makes content and pages immediately and durably searchable globally. Therefore, both the spatial and temporal reach of youth activists is increased by the linguistic opportunities of the internet, but new linguistic choices need to be made to accommodate for this new relationship between global and local audiences.

Creating a political code: Understanding memes

The section above highlighted influences of the internet on organisational capacities of youth political language. We now look at its influences on the linguistic content produced by youth activists. As we have seen with the hashtag above, and with the coat hanger, specific markers and indexes, visual and linguistic, are useful in engaging and showing affiliation with communities globally and across languages. The specific influence of the internet lays in making the spread of such affiliation signals fast and wide, removing physical barriers of the offline world, to the point where complex meanings, rather than a single hashtag, index or phrase, can be encoded.

Several studies have been interested in the development and spread of various memes. Initially thought about as a natural form of content replication and imitation by Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene* (1989), where the term was coined, memes have since been granted more complex and political meanings. Bown & Russell (2019: 411) have highlighted the transformative nature of memes and the fact that they reflect the very quick framing and reframing of online content. Zappavigna (2014: 107) describes an approach to memes on two levels in terms of ambient affiliation which we will use throughout this case study: at the frame level, there is bonding around the aesthetic content, recognised as a template; at the slot level, there is bonding around what is actually expressed by inserting a specific meaning into the template.

In Figure 7, two memes with similar template levels have been collected. The memes have been posted on the Instagram page @climemechange, a page entirely dedicated to memes about climate change and moderated anonymously. The template of the meme is commonly referred to as the ‘Ralph in Danger’ meme, which according to the website Know Your Meme (Note 3) pairs an image of a character from *The Simpsons*, Ralph Wiggum, sitting on a bus with the caption “(chuckles) I’m in danger” and an additional caption

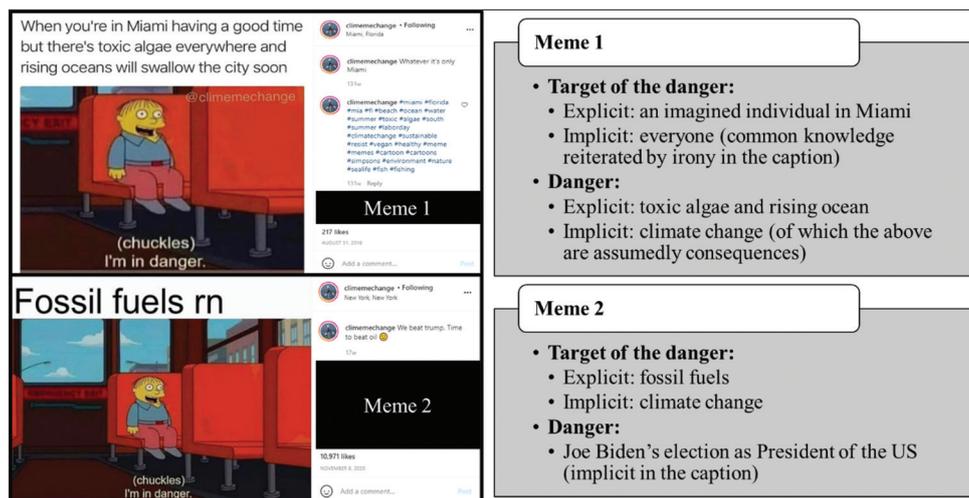


Figure 7. 'Ralph in danger' meme on instagram



Figure 8. Ralph in danger meme propagation – offline and across issues

in which the slot level is inserted. The table in Figure 7 uses CDA to decode who is represented, explicitly and implicitly by Ralph (the target of danger) and what the danger is.

The frame level piques the interest of the audience and creates a sense of community: if the reader recognises the template they will feel confident they can decode the meaning, and therefore will both be motivated to do so and feel as though they are part of the inside joke when succeeding.

The slot level is described by inserting a target and cause of danger, explicitly and implicitly, in the meme and post captions. Interestingly, while both memes reflect a negative attitude towards climate change, in meme 1, Ralph represents people endangered by it while in meme 2 he represents one of the causes of climate change being (potentially) endangered by reforms. A single meme can therefore be encoded in a variety of seemingly contradicting ways, but remain decodable (or decode-able) into a singular, coherent meaning.

Memes are now common for young people, and therefore youth activist communities on the internet. The various and complex forms and levels of encoding meaning, both through the choice of meme and the explicit/implicit slot level insertions, have become something regular users are able to decode almost naturally. We see in the number of likes of both memes that while the same frame slot is used, the second meme received a much higher number of likes. This reflects on one hand the growing popularity of the page (and

potentially of the nature of its content) and the growing ability and enjoyment of Instagram users to decode the meaning of this meme and in the context of this climate change.

In Figure 8 we see that the 'Ralph in danger' meme frame level has been replicated on a protest banner (left) and its slot level has been modified to insert a meaning about transphobic discrimination (right). Therefore, while the hashtag #FridaysForFuture was a useful tool for youth activists to organise around one specific campaign, memes are among the linguistic resources available for them to express themselves across causes and issues.

Memes allow youth activists to employ political language creatively. While creative political expression is not a new phenomenon for youth activists (as highlighted by the coat hanger example), the level of complexity in the encoding of meaning and the speed and efficiency with which it can be modified and shared across issues affect youth political language. This creativity is, however, grounded in common knowledge possessed by social media users which allows efficient and proper coding and decoding of meaning. This knowledge and structure make memes efficient linguistic resources for expressing opinions and sharing information within informed communities. However, their use in general and traditional political language is limited by this community-level coding strategy.

Reactions and Implications

While we accept the limitations highlighted above, we now turn our reflection towards the impact of the changes in the language of youth activists. We have seen the way specific linguistic frames and markers differentiate today's youth activists' abilities and expressions, we must now consider why their language might be changing and to what effect.

Credibility: Performative language and representation

Firstly, let us address one main concern about the effect of any changes to the political language of the youth – the question of credibility. Bergmann & Ossewaarde (2019: 269) consider ageist representation of young people in the media – flipping the primary understanding of ageing as discrimination towards older age groups, and looking instead at the ways in which youth activists are represented. They find that in the case of the climate movement studied in the previous section, by “personalising the debate on youth climate activism” singlehandedly on Greta Thunberg, German media created a cult of personality on her which made her an “instrument of discussion” (287). German media are not the only ones to have ‘iconised’ Thunberg. Familiarity with Greta Thunberg alone has been shown to be positively correlated with “greater intentions to take collective action” across ages and political preferences (although the effect proved to be stronger for people with liberal values) (Sabherwal et.al., 2020: 11). Olesen (2020: 14-16) highlights that in this context it is not a particular dramatic event (unlike for other figures of youth activism such as Malala or the Parkland students) or a single tweet or action that projected Thunberg to a status of “icon” but rather her performance and the co-performativity of her audience on and offline.

This idea of performance and performativity has become a common source of criticism for youth activism today. A certain “appropriation into the logic of spectacle” has developed from emphasising self-representation over representation in political processes (Buettner, 2020: 837). In this way, when quoting Thunberg’s self-described “personal or emotional” (Note 4) statements on protest banners (as in Figure 9), activists may be considered both by older generations and by their peers to miss the point. Thunberg herself commented that “those phrases are all that people focus on. They don’t remember the facts, the very reason why [she says] those things in the first place” (Note 5).

This issue of performativity threatens the impact of youth activists’ language because they might not focus on their own political representation, but also because it affects the way those who should be representing them perceive and consider their demands.

When Emma Gonzalez and other students from Parkland, Florida gave speeches demanding reforms on gun control following a shooting at their high school, they were termed ‘crisis actors’ (Conti, 2018: 441). The suggestion, fuelled by the information that many of them were in the school’s drama club, was that their performative expressions were ‘staged performances’, inauthentic and opportunistic rather than legitimate political speeches.

Thus, while the internet has offered youth activists today with new linguistic opportunities to mobilise, coordinate action and create communities amongst themselves, the perceived ‘performativity’ of their expression appears as an obstacle to their representation in political processes. This is a significant limitation to the impact of such linguistic changes on the future of political language: if youth activist expression does not translate into today’s political sphere and processes, it risks not finding a place in those of tomorrow.

The paradox of slacktivism

Another phenomenon interferes with the impact of youth activists’ language on political voices: slacktivism. Dennis (2018: 185) defined it as a “pejorative term that refers to inauthentic, low-threshold forms of political engagement online”. Slacktivism, a compound of “slack” and “activism”, has been used to criticise youth activists for appearing superficial when taking part in activist campaigns through liking or sharing others’ content on their own social media. It is important to note that such criticisms often consider political participation as a “public-only” phenomenon and discard the empirical significance of private political interactions (199). The authenticity, consideration, and effort-level attributed to such ‘slacktivists’ might be ill appreciated by critics, especially considered against traditional standards and at individual, rather than community level.

However, slacktivism does reveal a weakness in the impact of changes to the political language of youth activists – the fact that the virality of content can at times be detrimental to its political usefulness. It is now a common phenomenon for many young people to see their social media inundated by a viral post periodically – when an event triggering activist movement occurs. This was the case during the Black Lives Matter protests following the death of George Floyd at the hands of the police in the United States. Messages of support and solidarity with the black community, and demanding to defund police and punish police brutality appeared in tremendous numbers on all social media platforms, as well as petition and resource websites.

In the commotion of posts, a particular trend took over on Instagram, which consisted in users reposting a black square on their stories. The trend originated from a collective action, Blackout Tuesday, encouraging to pause content release for a day to take a stand against racism and police brutality – the black square representing taking part in the action (Lerman, 2020). Instead of using the hashtag #BlackoutTuesday to show their participation in the collective action, users shifted to the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter to situate their reposting in the more general campaign. This diverted attention from the Blackout Tuesday initiative and from the resources (petitions, donation links) otherwise shared with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter.

In Figure 10 below we see two verified twitter users commenting on the confusion created by the viral re-posting with ill-fitting hashtags. John Amaechi, replying to a tweet quoting his previous post about the difference between performative and pragmatic action, associated using the black square on Instagram with the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter



Steven Saphore/EPA, *Some of the many signs protesters brought to the Sydney climate strike rally, 2019*

Martyn Wheatley/i-Images, *Panic on the streets of London: protests in the English capital, 2019*

Figure 9. Thunberg’s “emotional” statements on climate protest banners

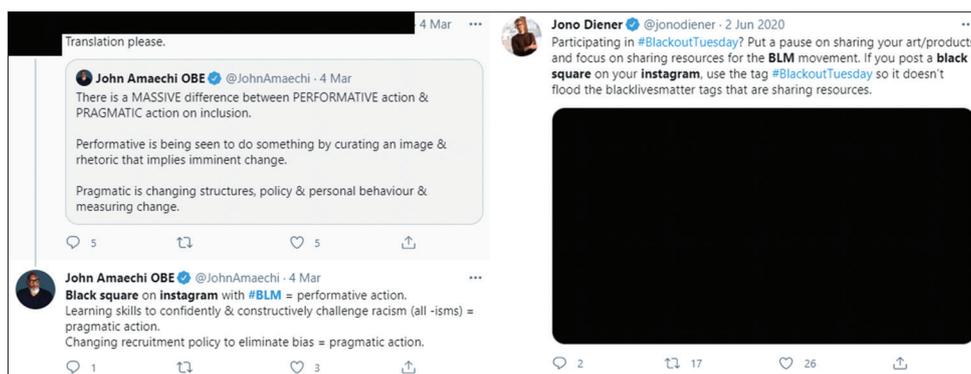


Figure 10. Twitter discussion of hashtags #BlackoutTuesday and #BlackLivesMatter on Instagram

(abbreviated as #BLM) with performative action, and suggested ‘pragmatic’ alternatives. Jono Diener seems to be taking part in the Blackout Tuesday initiative himself, but explains to his followers how to accurately do so.

This highlights the paradox at play in the language of youth activists today: because the internet offers linguistic opportunities to show support and affiliation with political causes easily, using such linguistic tools may be seen as reproducing precisely the “all talk no action” strategy youth activists criticise political actors about. As such, slactivism might be an obstacle to the translation into political processes and institutions of changes to the political language of youth activists, on the basis that such a language is considered performative rather than pragmatic. On the other hand, all campaigns mentioned in this section (March for Our Lives, Fridays for Future and Black Lives Matter) have arguably had political impacts – they have undeniably increased interest, engagement and awareness levels on their respective issues and demands.

DISCUSSION

The case studies in this article have explored aspects of the language of youth activists today and the analysis carried out has revealed emerging themes and elements of answers for each of these questions.

Linguistic legacy and new opportunities

This article determined that the language of young activists today does bear similarities to that of previous

generations. We found, however, that the use of the internet as part of their campaign brought new features to this language.

The case study of abortion activism revealed that although youth activists may use similar lexical and discursive devices today as they did in the 1970s, the use of social media to situate their activities with global efforts affects the language they use. Social media, in this case, acts as a place where their language can be made publicly accessible, and altered with linguistics markers to be searchable and spreadable globally. The effect is that while aspects of the language of youth activists are not new, the contributions of the digital sphere to their campaigning strategies have an impact on their reach, and therefore on their language, as they must use the correct markers to best take advantage of such new opportunities.

Features of New Political Language

The internet and social media provide new linguistic tools for youth activists to organise and express themselves creatively, as well as control who can understand them. They are able to make their content and online presence searchable by using linguistic markers, so as to signal belonging to, and facilitate organisation of, campaigns. They are also able to code the meanings of their content to manage which audiences it is intelligible to, on a global scale. The internet and social media therefore offer youth activists’ language with new opportunities and possibilities which they can, and have, used politically.

In 4.2., we have highlighted challenges and limitations of these uses, such as compromises between different audiences and community-restricted access to meaning. Indeed, while the new features of their language may benefit youth activists politically, such limitations may complicate the translation of these new linguistic features into traditional political language. However, as their presence and importance does not seem to weaken, the influence of the internet and social media should not be underestimated. Institutional and procedural political processes might currently seem somewhat impermeable to the changes in youth political language, but the linguistic influence of the internet on the next generations might naturally transpire into their political voices as they grow into the active participants and audiences of such processes.

Implications for the Future of Political Language

Contemporary reactions to the language of today's youth activists reveal that some of its newly acquired abilities have nuanced outcomes. Performativity and slacktivism have both been sources of criticism against the way young people express themselves politically. On one hand, we can concede that young activists can, in part, use their language for self-representation, and therefore can seem passive in their online efforts – notably by simply sharing others' content. If this is the case, self-representation might either not translate into their political voices as they become participants in traditional political processes, or it might even evolve in ways that political expression will no longer be of interest for young people.

This article considers this vision Manichean and emphasises that we have seen youth movements and campaigns achieve political changes: examples include (but are not restricted to) Greta Thunberg addressing the UN, Davos and various political institutions, as well as politicians and corporations endorsing Black Lives Matter and introducing internal changes. Therefore, performativity should not be shortened to inauthenticity and slacktivism should not be confined to nonchalance. Rather, the indirect, ill-understood ways in which they do achieve political changes should be studied in depth. The loudest reactions might be those of the generations currently in positions of power, but the implications concern future generations, whose engagement levels and accomplishments cannot and should not be discounted.

CONCLUSION

This article sought to answer the question:

Does the language of youth activists today reflect broader changes to the political involvement of the 'internet generation'? Can these affect the future of traditional political language?

Firstly, we found that new opportunities introduced (notably) by the internet distinguish the language of today's youth from that of their predecessors. Secondly, we identified that it is in part thanks to metadata, in the form of searchable linguistic markers, and to creative frame/slot level encoding that the internet and social media influence youth activists'

language. We also noted that their language, thereby impacted, facilitates their organisation, communication and control over who can, and who is encouraged to, understand their voices. Finally, we noted that reactions to the political language of youth activists today reveal some of its differences from traditional political voices. Criticisms arise from the performativity and perceived nonchalance of youth engagement in political issues. We discussed how and why these characteristics (or characterisations) might limit the extent to which youth political language becomes translated into political processes.

This article also aimed to bridge the gap in existing literature by focusing on the causes and consequences of youth activists' language, rather than considering separately what sets them apart and how the internet shapes their language. Therefore, while acknowledging their limitations, this article emphasises that we must consider the influence of youth movements in the last decade, together with the importance of the internet in young people's lives and the changes that are already identifiable to their political language. This article posits that there is potential for the political voices of their generations to be influenced by their current activist language, and suggests that future research into these influences will delineate the extent and ways in which traditional politics might evolve.

While this article was limited in the amount of language studied, the case studies and particular examples of language selected highlighted certain realities of the language of youth activism, which indicate trends that have the potential to considerably impact their political expression. Further research into these linguistic changes, for instance through the collection and analyses of specific corpus of social media activist discourse, youth activist speeches, youth movement banners and traditional media and adult reactions would more clearly delineate what impact we can expect youth activist language to have on the political voices of their generations. Such findings may be helpful in anticipating what such 'new' political voices will look like, and therefore facilitate political analysis at the turn of a generational changeover that should soon introduce millennials into positions of power.

Because of the novelty of the field, attention should also be given to the processes through which the next generations will engage and participate in political processes as they become active in traditional, institutional politics. Indeed, even if we find that the political language of youth activists is changing, these linguistic developments might be confined to youth movements if political actors remain impermeable to their influence. If creative, discreet forms of political expressions are silenced, criticised or not taken seriously, the political voices of future generations might have to comply with traditional ways of talking about, and doing politics if they want to be heard and taken into consideration.

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APPENDIX

Appendix 1: Sources of Figures' Content

Note that as per what has been described in the Ethics section, sources are only provided for creative that does not infringe on privacy concerns.

Figure 3

- 1968 photograph available at: <https://www.wnystudios.org/podcasts/takeaway/segments/260361-40-years- battle-over-roe-v-wade>
- 2016 photograph available at: <https://www.varsity.co.uk/comment/10170>

Figures 5 and 6

- Twitter search used: https://twitter.com/search?q=fridays%20for%20future%20filter%3Averified&src=typed_query&f=user
- (Searches for the name 'Fridays for Future', filters the results by showing content only from verified users, lists user pages)

Figure 7

- Instagram page @climemechange available at: <https://www.instagram.com/climemechange>
- Meme 1 Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/BnKKFechAFq/?utm_source=ig
- Meme 2 Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CHT1shTnb6g/?utm_source=ig

Figure 8

- Photograph of protest banner available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/media/gallery/2019/apr/12/student-climate-change- protests-best-of-the-banners-in-pictures>

Figure 9

- Sydney protest banner photograph available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/sep/20/signs-of-the-times-the- best-climate-strike-placards>
- London protest banner photograph available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/gallery/2019/sep/20/greta-thunberg- face-of-the-global-climate-strike>

Appendix 2: Privacy Policies

Twitter

Available at: <https://twitter.com/en/privacy>

The Privacy Policy mentions:

Twitter is public and Tweets are immediately viewable and searchable by anyone around the world. We give you non-public ways to communicate on Twitter too, through protected Tweets and Direct Messages. You can also use Twitter under a pseudonym if you prefer not to use your name.

Instagram

Available at: <https://help.instagram.com/519522125107875>

The Privacy Policy answers the following questions in the 'Controlling Your Visibility' section ([https://help.instagram.com/116024195217477/?helpref=hc_fnav&bc\[0\]=Instagram%20Help&bc\[1\]=Privacy%20and%20Safety%20Center](https://help.instagram.com/116024195217477/?helpref=hc_fnav&bc[0]=Instagram%20Help&bc[1]=Privacy%20and%20Safety%20Center)):

1. Setting Your Photos and Videos to Private

How do I set my Instagram account to private so that only approved followers can see what I share?

How do I turn off my activity status on Instagram?

2. About Privacy on Instagram

Who can see my private Instagram post if I add a hashtag?

Who can see when I've liked a photo, or when someone's liked my photo on Instagram?

Are my comments and mentions on Instagram hidden?

What happens if I share my Instagram post to another social network?

How do I remove a follower on Instagram?

People are getting suggestions to follow other people after they follow me on Instagram. How do I turn this off?

Notes

Note 1: The World Health Organisation's handout on Adolescent Health contains definitions for these age groups in section B-5: https://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/documents/pdfs/9241591269_op_handout.pdf

Note 2: See Amnesty International's article on the protests here: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/09/a-dangerous-backward-step-for-women-and-girls-in-poland>

Note 3: More information about the 'Ralph in danger' meme available at: <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/ralph-in-danger>

Note 4 and 5: 4 From Greta's speech at the UN Climate Change COP25 in Madrid, December 2019. Video available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eo_-mxvGnq8