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SOCIAL MEDIA AND MINORITY LANGUAGES IN EVERYDAY LIFE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TWO TWITTER CAMPAIGNS PROMOTING THE IRISH LANGUAGE

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Introduction

The Irish language ('Gaeilge'), although the first official language of the Republic of Ireland, is a minority language in public life. In recent years, social media campaigns have been organised to promote the use of Irish online. In this paper, we analyse two such campaigns by exploring how participation in them is connected to everyday practices of media use and meaning making, and how this in turn influences the success of minority language promotion in social media.

We investigate the "International Social Media Day for Small Languages" (ISMDSL), organised on 26 September 2017, and #TrasnaNadTonnta, which ran from 22-26 January 2018. ISMDSL was part of the European Day of Languages (EDL), an annual Council of Europe event that promotes linguistic diversity. In this campaign, minority language users were encouraged to tweet using #EDL2017 as well as their respective minority language hashtag (e.g. #Gaeilge, #Cymraeg, #Frysk). We focus on just #EDL2017 #Gaeilge. #TrasnaNadTonnta was initiated by the Ireland Canada University Foundation, which supports scholarly exchange between Ireland and Canada. It means 'across the waves', and is the title of an Irish-language song about a traveller who returns to Ireland from abroad. It is traditionally learned in primary school and would therefore be familiar to most people who grew up in Ireland.

Both campaigns were international in scope, and shared the aims of gaining visibility for Irish by encouraging people of all abilities to use it on Twitter. However, #TrasnaNadTonnta was by far more successful. Our investigation begins with asking, *why?* Drawing on sociolinguistics and media and communication studies, we conducted a comparative analysis to address the following research question:

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- How can everyday life and media use influence participation in Twitter campaigns that aim to promote the Irish language?

Theoretical Framework

Sociolinguistic research examines whether social media can facilitate communication in and revitalisation of minority languages (e.g. Cunliffe et al. 2013, McMonagle 2019, Ní Bhroin 2013, Stern 2017). Social media are understood to facilitate users of minority languages in forming communication networks. Some studies indicate that targeted campaigns can boost minority language usage on Twitter – e.g. the *PraatMarFrysk* campaign to promote Frisian in the Netherlands (Jongbloed-Faber 2014; McMonagle et al. 2019). Furthermore, McMonagle et al. (2019) have found that Irish-language users apply hashtags to promote Irish *internationally*, more so than the other languages in their study (i.e. Welsh and Frisian).

At the same time, dominant approaches in media and communication studies highlight how the production and consumption of digital media are socially situated and negotiated (cf. Silverstone 2016). Assumptions that access to digital media somehow compensates for social disadvantage are challenged by indications that processes of individual and collective meaning-making are inextricably connected to everyday life. This influences the ways in which individuals participate in and avail of digital media opportunities.

Our study employs these interdisciplinary foundations to examine which aspects of everyday social and technological life contribute to the relative success of the #EDL2017 #Gaeilge and #TrasnaNadTonnta campaigns.

Methods

There was a dramatic difference in the total number of Tweets posted in each campaign. #EDL2017 #Gaeilge generated a total of 47 tweets, while #TrasnaNadTonnta generated 10,663 tweets. We therefore analysed all tweets posted in #EDL #Gaeilge (N=47) and the top tweets in #TrasnaNadTonnta (N=260). This relatively small overall sample allowed us to explore how the success of each campaign related to everyday media use and processes of meaning-making.

We adopted the coding book from McMonagle et al.'s (2019) content analysis of minority language hashtags on Twitter. By piloting a small sample of tweets (N=50), we revised the coding book to better reflect our sample content and study aims. Coding categories adopted from McMonagle et al. included the following: Agents (i.e. who was tweeting), language (i.e. in which language(s) they were tweeting), topic (i.e. the topical content of the tweets), and other hashtags applied. To further explore meaning-making within the Tweets we added categories relating to Interactivity (i.e. @tweets and retweets), the use of Emojis, and a specific focus on 'Place' as a sub-topic. Research ethical guidelines were followed and the data was treated anonymously during sampling and coding.

Findings & Analysis

Although both campaigns were planned with similar aims, significant differences emerged. Firstly, both campaigns connected to other hashtags. #EDL2017 was part of a

larger campaign that included hashtags from other (minority) languages. #TrasnaNadTonnta linked to other planned hashtag campaigns to promote the Irish language including #Gaeilge (Irish); #Gaeilge2018 (Irish2018); #BliainNaGaeilge (YearofIrish). While #TrasnaNadTonnta was a unique hashtag developed specifically for this campaign, #Gaeilge (connecting the Irish language to #EDL2017) is a general hashtag.

With regard to Agents, a larger percentage of individuals (compared to organisations) were represented in the #TrasnaNadTonnta sample (62% versus 38%). Irish embassies and diplomatic missions were also well represented amongst the organisations tweeting in this sample, but absent from #EDL2017 #Gaeilge. Connected to this, the topic of 'Place' was a significant feature of the #TrasnaNadTonnta campaign. Tweets referring to place indicated both locations where Irish people have emigrated to and from where tweeters were located. Place was not a relevant sub-topic in the #EDL2017 campaign.

We find that the success of each campaign was dependent on the participants identifying connections between the campaigns and their everyday lives. Based on the combination of Agents and Topics in our sample, #TrasnaNadTonnta found particular salience among the Irish diaspora, for whom the language is a marker of a unique cultural identity. This Twitter campaign provided a platform for Irish-language users to connect with others across Europe, North America, Asia and Australia – places where the Irish language has not been traditionally spoken. Although the same platform was provided in #EDL2017 #Gaeilge, Irish-language Twitter users did not identify with this campaign to the same extent. We further surmise that the unique hashtag created for #TrasnaNadTonnta, reminiscent of a song sung in childhood, had particular semiotic appeal when compared with the more policy-oriented approach of #EDL2017.

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