

## POPE, INTERRUPTED. A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON MEMES, HASHTAGS, AND SPEECH CHAINS

### PAPA, INTERROMPIDO. UM ESTUDO QUALITATIVO DE MEMES, HASHTAGS E CADEIAS DE FALA

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**ABSTRACT:** This article investigates the reaction, on Twitter, to Pope Benedict XVI's resignation announcement. Specifically, this is a qualitative study in linguistic anthropology of how memes and hashtags circulated on Twitter between the day of the announcement of said resignation and the Pope's last day in office, and identifies the speech chains created by them. The analysis of the *corpus* showed that Twitter users' deployment of hashtags serves two purposes: on the one hand, it creates a topic/comment structure that is later reproduced, modified or abandoned by other users. On the other hand, hashtags function as performative acts that create online *ad hoc* communities. In addition, this article also claims that English and Romance-language users created and circulated image and text-based memes differently, thus establishing two language-based speech chains. In sum, this article contributes to discussions on informational flux on online platforms by demonstrating that said flux does have constraints, and that those constraints are related to language-based communities of practice.

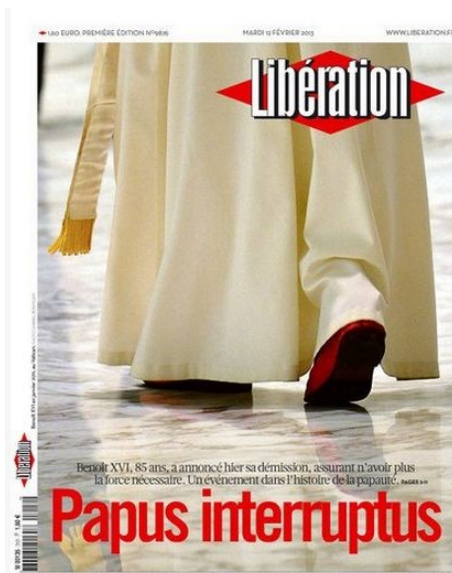
**KEYWORDS:** Twitter. Speech chains. Hashtags. Memes.

**RESUMO:** O presente trabalho investiga a reação, no Twitter, ao anúncio da renúncia do Papa Benedito XVI. Trata-se de um estudo qualitativo, em antropologia linguística, de como *memes* e *hashtags* circularam no Twitter entre o anúncio da renúncia e o último dia de trabalho do Papa, com o objetivo de identificar as cadeias de fala criadas por estes *memes* e *hashtags*. A análise do *corpus* mostrou que emprego de *hashtags* pelos usuários do Twitter serve a dois propósitos: por um lado, cria-se uma estrutura tópicocomentário que é, depois, reproduzida, modificada ou abandonada por outros usuários. Por outro lado, as *hashtags* funcionam como enunciados performativos que criam comunidades online. Ademais, o presente artigo também afirma que usuários de língua inglesa e de línguas românicas criaram e circularam *memes* baseados em imagens e textos de maneiras distintas, estabelecendo, conseqüentemente, duas cadeias de fala baseadas nas suas respectivas línguas. Em resumo, este artigo contribui para as discussões sobre o fluxo informacional em plataformas online, ao demonstrar que há restrições a esse fluxo e que tais restrições estão relacionadas às línguas das diferentes comunidades de prática.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Twitter. Cadeias de fala. *Hashtags*. *Memes*.

## 1 The exiting Pope

11 February 2013. Shortly after Benedict XVI announced his upcoming resignation, the following image started circulating on Facebook:



Picture 1: Papus Interruptus on *Libération*.

Source: <[http://journal.liberation.fr/publication/liberation/1161/?utm\\_source=dlvr.it&utm\\_medium=twitter#!/0\\_0](http://journal.liberation.fr/publication/liberation/1161/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter#!/0_0)>.

At first, one could wonder why such an image should be considered novel. After all, it was just another attack on the Catholic Church by a left-wing French publication. However, it was more than that. The picture had an embedded link which took the reader to the first page of the corresponding report on *Libération's* website. In order to read the following pages, it was necessary to subscribe to the magazine – and pay for it. But the use of a capitalist technique by a self-proclaimed leftist publication was just one of the multi-layered discourses present on the cover of that *Libération's* issue.

The use of Broken Latin was also significant. Latin was the language Ratzinger chose to announce his resignation, which made it virtually impossible for those gathered in St. Peter's Square to understand what the Pope was actually saying. By using Broken Latin on its cover, *Libération* referenced both the uttering of the resignation itself, and the lack of Latin fluency of most Catholics. Furthermore, the syntax and morphology used by *Libération* – the fictive nominative form *papus* followed by the past participle *interruptus* – mirrors another popular Latin phrase: *coitus interruptus*. In other words, the publication was also referencing the Church's long-standing ban on contraceptive methods. Needless to say, the picture went viral and the hashtag #papusinterruptus was one of the trending topics on Twitter within minutes.

The wide circulation of this magazine-cover-turned-into-meme raises some questions. In the first place, the length of the hashtag challenges claims (cf. SIMMONS *et al.*, 2011) according to which shorter hashtags are the ones that make it to Twitter stardom. In the second place, and more importantly, the wide circulation of the meme and the hashtag among speakers of various languages – none of them Broken Latin! – would

seem to validate two theories. Firstly, it might indicate that Appadurai (1990) is correct, that post-globalization reality is indeed completely fluid, and that cultural scenarios face no restrictions when travelling around the globe. In particular, the #papusinterruptus phenomenon shows the free-flowing nature of ideoscapes and mediascapes. Secondly, and this is a corollary of the previous point, individual languages do not matter so much in this day and age. Now, we would be experiencing a post-varieties era in which messages are more relevant than the languages used to convey them (SEARGENT, TAGG, 2011). Nevertheless, these hypotheses will prove problematic if one continues to investigate how Pope-related memes circulated in the days following Benedict XVI resignation announcement.

The arguments presented in this study contradict both Simmons' (2001) and Appadurai's (1990) claims. In this article, I argue that, contrary to what one might think at first, certain cultural scenarios (APPADURAI, 1990) do not flow freely, and that individual languages still matter. Pope-related memes that circulated on Twitter in the days following 11 February 2013 illustrate that Twitter users perform language-based communities through the creation, replication, and modification of specific hashtags. In other words, tweeters self-organize around speech chains<sup>1</sup> (AGHA, 2003) they themselves craft. These speech chains engender language-based circuits that constrain the circulation of different types of memes, thus creating different communities. Hashtags and memes are the most prominent tool tweeters use to perform their belonging to a given community.

The paper is organized as follows. Firstly, I expand on the critique of Appadurai's (1990) concept of cultural scapes, and present the concept of speech chain (AGHA, 2003). After that, I explore some of the affordances of Twitter and how they are dealt with by Twitter users. The following section is on methodology and data collection. Finally, the data is presented and analyzed before I present my concluding tweets.

## 2 Speech chains and the circulation of cultural scenarios

In his effort to understand (post)modern processes, Appadurai (1990) avoids engaging in an archeological enterprise in a Foucauldian sense – in other words, Appadurai does not aim at unveiling the historical and discursive roots of contemporary practices. According to the author, the past is “not a land to return to [...] it has become a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios” (APPADURAI, 1990, p. 4). Appadurai focuses on the synchronic organization of the aforementioned cultural scenarios, or landscapes, which are five: ethnoscapas, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes (APPADURAI, 1990, p. 6-7). Appadurai's tone is celebratory: reality is fluid, and there is a constant flux of people, information, technology, capital, and ideologies. In fact, Appadurai (1990) affirms that “both points of departure and points of arrival are in cultural flux, and thus the search for steady points of reference, as critical life choices are made, can be very difficult” (APPADURAI, 1990, p. 18). This claim does not conflict with other claims made by social scientists such as Spitulnik (1997) and Squires (2010), who agree upon the fact that searching for points of departure might be an impossible enterprise, if not completely irrelevant.

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1 In this article, the nouns and phrases *speech chains*, *networks*, and *communities of practice* are used interchangeably, to avoid repetition. The concept of *speech chains*, as defined by Agha (2003) and explained in *Section 2* of this paper, is the one being referred to each time one of these phrases is used.

Finally, Appadurai's theory might be particularly seductive to those familiar with Deleuze's and Guattari's (1987) concept of *rhizome*: a multisemiotic and multilayered structure whose points of departure and arrival are not identifiable, and that connect multiple points in multiple dimensions. However, one must note that Deleuze, Guattari, Spitulnik and Squires all emphasized that there are constraints to the mobility of meanings and forms, whereas Appadurai did not investigate who and what is able to travel and to experience the deterritorialization process he describes.

In fact, many scholars have pointed out deficiencies in Appadurai's celebration of free-flowing manyscapes. For instance, Boellstorff (2003) notes that the circulation of cultural scenarios is restricted, and even determined, by local subjectivities. For instance, subjectivities, like the *gay* and *lesbi* ones in Indonesia, are crafted in the disjuncture between tradition and modernity – and modernity is usually identified with the Indonesian nation-state, not necessarily a global flow of mediascapes. When studying the Caribbean, Freeman (2001) argues that the circulation of people, technology, and goods in Barbados is not unrestrained, but rather conditioned by specific political and economic arrangements. These arrangements engender positionalities and circuits, thus constraining what circulates, and how the circulation occurs. Finally, Jacquemet (2005) demonstrates that Argentine telenovelas are successful in Albania only if they are dubbed in Italian. In other words, local ideologies of symbolic and economic capital take precedence over the fetishization of originality, and media products do not just “fly”, in spite of technological affordances. This study contributes to this stream of scholarship which seeks to understand how the circulation of cultural landscapes is constrained. In particular, since my goal here is to understand the circulation of linguistic messages on Twitter, the concept of speech chains is especially useful. According to Agha (2003), a speech chain is

[a] historical series of speech events linked together by the permutation of individuals across speech-act roles in the following way: the receiver of the message in the (n)<sup>th</sup> speech event is the sender of the message in the (n+1)<sup>th</sup> speech event [...] where the terms ‘sender’ and ‘receiver’ [...] are variable names for interactional roles specified in different ways at different points along the speech chain (AGHA, 2003, p. 247).

Two of the points made by Agha (2003) deserve clarification. In the first place, this definition is not concerned with identifying points of departure or arrival. Tracing speech chains is a way to understand how cultural values are transmitted and changed – not where they came from or where they will end up. Secondly, speech chains are not necessarily connected to traditional accounts of dyadic interactions where participant A is the sender of the message and participant B is the mere receiver. The concept of speech chains allows for a more dynamic – and realistic – understanding of the production and circulation of cultural values. For instance, the sender may be a collective subject, such as mass media, and the receiver may be multiple, or each speaker may be both the audience and the initiator of a speech chain at the same time (AGHA, 2003; SQUIRES, 2010)<sup>2</sup>. With Agha's (2003) definitions in mind, I argue that Twitter users construct, circulate and negotiate cultural values through language-based speech chains.

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2 In other words, speech chains are potentially rhizomatic (DELEUZE, GUATTARI, 1987; JACQUEMET, 2005).

### 3 The medium and its affordances

Twitter, released in 2006, is now one of the most popular social media platforms alongside Facebook. Although there is a plethora of conversational triggers (ZUBIAGA *et al.*, 2011), roughly half of the posts on Twitter, also known as tweets, are about entertainment and sports (CHEONG, 2009), and Twitter usage increases significantly during prominent events, such as the World Cup or the Olympics (BECKER *et al.*, 2011). The expressive quantity of tweets during prominent events, and the relative short life of trending topics (BRUNS, 2012), may be related to the affordances of the medium. Each tweet cannot exceed 140 characters, which favors the communication of short informative messages rather than analytical ones.

But the medium also has other affordances. For example, all tweets are publicly visible by default. This means that twitter-users, also known as tweeters, cannot differentiate between categories such as “best friends”, “friends”, “acquaintances”, or “public” when selecting their target audience. Nevertheless, tweeters have managed to compensate for these constraints by taking advantage of affordances offered by Twitter. For example, each username is preceded by the “@” sign. When a tweeter wants to make sure that another user will be aware of something (s)he posts, (s)he just needs to tag the target user by including the target’s username (@username) in his(her) tweet. Another affordance designed by Twitter developers is the follower/followee network. Users may subscribe to other users’ tweets and vice-versa, thus creating a community of writers/readers.

When the affordance is not there, users create it. For example, tweeters started using the hash (#) symbol to indicate the topic of their tweets. The ubiquity of this practice led Twitter managers to incorporate it into Twitter design by making hashtags searchable (ZAPPAVIGNA, 2011). This development allowed for the creation of two overlapping networks: the default follower/followee network, and the relatively more recent hashtag-based one (BRUNS, BURGESS, 2011).

Although nowadays only 30% of the trending topics are hashtagged (BRUNS, 2012), this mechanism has proven extremely powerful. In the first place, it allows users to structure their tweets in a topic/comment format, in which the hashtag indexes the shared topic and each individual tweet is a comment (HUANG *et al.*, 2010).

Additionally, hashtags are linguistic technologies which make phrases extractable (BAUMAN, BRIGGS, 1990) by design, thus facilitating their enregisterment in distinct contexts (SQUIRES, 2010). As has been noted by Spitulnik (1997), the circulation of discourses across communities, their transformation into “public words” (SPITULNIK, 1997, p. 166) and usage in contexts where they apparently do not belong may trigger humor. This phenomenon is particularly noticeable in the circulation of memes, humorous posts that account for approximately 12% of tweets (CHEONG, 2009). Tweeters often engage in meme-replicating practices, thus indexing solidarity (ZAPPAVIGNA, 2012) and creating a network that goes beyond the originally designed follower/followee structure. What is more, hashtag usage requires constant monitoring, as seen below.





Picture 2: Monitoring Hashtags.

Source: <<https://twitter.com/roygrubb/status/307126698275663873>>.

In the example above, the user asks which hashtag was being used on 28 February 2013, Ratzinger's last day as Pope Benedict XVI. By asking this question, the user demonstrates his awareness of the ever-changing hashtag landscape, and also indicates his will to use the relevant hashtag and thus secure his membership in one of the many hashtag-based communities.

Despite its frequency, the use of hashtags is a possibility, not a requirement. Users may choose not to hashtag their tweets, or to use innovative hashtags that do not necessarily correspond to any given ongoing conversation. Therefore, by using and reproducing a specific hashtag, users are (i) explicitly indicating their desire to participate in a given exchange and (ii) creating and maintaining a certain topic-based conversation. In other words, hashtags can be understood as performative statements: they create, reproduce, and defy ad-hoc publics (BRUNS, BURGESS, 2011).

#### 4 Methodological mazes

This study analyzes tweets that were published from 11 February 2013 to 29 February 2013. These dates cover the period between the announcement of Joseph Ratzinger's resignation until his last day in office. All tweets mentioned here address Ratzinger's resignation in a humorous or sarcastic way.

Although it is true that hashtags make tweets searchable (ZAPPAVIGNA, 2011), the default searchability is quite limited: Twitter's proprietary search engine only allows users to search for hashtags that were published within the last 48 hours. Nevertheless, time-limit constraints on the searchability of hashtags are not the sole challenge of Twitter-based research. Endogenous (or "local") and exogenous (or "non-local") trends present different rates of hashtagging and retweeting (NAAMAN *et al.*, 2011). Since what might be considered local by some users may be considered exogenous by others, it is not always possible to verify the ubiquity of a given meme. For instance, memes tracing parallels between Benedict XVI and the on-again off-again Italian prime-minister Silvio Berlusconi may be considered endogenous by Italy-based users and exogenous by users based in other countries. This fact may entail retweeting with or without hashtagging.

Additionally, the circulation of twitter memes is affected by competing influences. Some users are "more likely to replicate/retweet the behavior of someone who is seen as having stature or authority" (PONTORIERO, GILLE, s/d, p. 5-6) while others tend to replicate the behavior of their closest acquaintances. Moreover, there is a third group, one that does not "discriminate among sources of tweets, only content" (PONTORIERO, GILLE, s/d, p. 5). Consequently, the amount of retweets might not be indicative of the popularity of a given tweet.

It is true that the issues mentioned above might hinder the reliability of any quantitative study of Twitter. Nevertheless, it is possible to conduct a *qualitative* study that focuses on the mechanisms of the circulation of hashtags and memes rather than on the amount of retweets a given post has. In order to do this research, I created a Twitter account and followed users who had retweeted the #papusinterruptus hashtag. I also searched for hashtags which were potentially related to the Pope, such as #papa and #pope. Searching for these hashtags took me to yet other hashtags, such as #vatican, #vaticano, #novopapa, #dimissioniPapa, and #pontifexit, among others.

This method had two main advantages. On the one hand, I was able to participate in two overlapping types of Twitter networks: the follower/followee and the hashtag-based ones. On the other hand, this seemed to be a more natural way of collecting data, for it allowed me to navigate Twitter as users of social media usually do it: by starting with a topic of interest and then allowing myself to explore related posts. By doing so, I could witness the creation and abandonment of hashtags – and their respective ad hoc communities. The hashtags I encountered were written mainly in Italian, Portuguese, Galician, French, and English<sup>3</sup>. The most common hashtags in English were<sup>4</sup>:

Table 1: Common hashtags in English, in alphabetical order.

#Benedict
#ExBenedict
#fuckthepope
#fuckthisshit
#papadontpreach
#papusinterruptus
#pontifexit
#pope
#popexit
#ThePope
#Vatican

Since the orthography of some words coincide in a variety of Romance languages (“papa”, for instance, is found in Galician, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish), I decided to collate Romance-language hashtags in a single group even when some of the hashtags were clearly written in one specific Romance language (for example, “#dimissionidelpapa” is Italian and “#chegadessamerda” is Brazilian Portuguese). I also included in this list English-language hashtags that accompanied Romance-language texts:

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- 3 Curiously, even when the researched hashtag contained potential Spanish words, such as #papa, Spanish-language Pope-related memes did not seem to be common.
- 4 Since this is a qualitative study, providing figures on the number of tweets in the corpus could be misleading. For instance, it could lead the reader to infer that a hashtag that was not frequent in the corpus was not frequent at the time, which may or may not be true. To avoid such misinterpretations, I will provide lists of hashtags I encountered in alphabetical order.

Table 2: Common hashtags in Romance languages, in alphabetical order.

#chegadessamerda
#dimissionipapa
#dimissionidelpapa
#novopapa
#papa
#papusinterruptus
#partiu
#pope
#Ratzinger
#sappiatelo
#ThePope
#ultimaaudienza
#vaticano

At this juncture, a note of caution is necessary since this article is not only about hashtags and memes, but also about the crafting of speech chains. I do not intend to imply that users who tweet in Italian are based in Italy, or that those who tweet in Galician are in Galicia. It is important to note that all personal information available on Twitter is self-reported, and might be conflictive. For instance, not all users disclose their location, some users state they are in more than one country at the same time, the language a user posts in does not necessarily correspond to any language spoken in the country (s)he affirms to be in, etc. (CHEONG, 2009). Furthermore, since I understand hashtags as community-making performative statements, I am not interested in unveiling which language a given user speaks natively. Instead, I am interested in understanding which performative statement a user produces when (s)he uses language A and not language B. In other words, the concept of “locale” is important in this study, but “locale” does not translate into “place”. The locales I discuss here are linguistic locales, performatively created and sustained – or abandoned – by users every time they hashtag their tweets.

## 5 Producing and circulating memes

Pope-related memes seemed to be distributed in two distinct groups: image-based memes and text-based memes. I call text-based memes those memes which have no pictorial components except for the user’s profile picture. I call image-based memes those memes whose main source of humor is either (i) fully concentrated in a picture, including commercial logos or (ii) emergent from the interaction between text and image. When collecting data, I noticed that English-language tweeters and Romance-language tweeters presented different trends regarding the production and circulation of Pope-related memes.

### 5.1 English-language tweeters

The occurrence of image and text-based memes seemed to be balanced among English-language tweeters. Image-based tweets could rely solely on the image itself, as seen below.





Picture 3: The Pope working at Walmart.  
Source: <pic.twitter.com/x6EXLBYB>.



Picture 4: The Pope drinking Budweiser.  
Source: <<https://twitter.com/ansonmount/status/305528891823509505>>.

Users who retweeted exclusively image-based memes, such as those in (3) and (4), tended to replicate both the picture and the hashtag. The same tendency was observable among memes which combined image and text:



Picture 5: The Pope's job prospects: something more glamorous.  
Source: <<https://twitter.com/fintanotoolbox/status/301001973988208640>>.



Picture 6: Fake Time Cover: Quitter of the Year.  
Source: <<https://twitter.com/emudeer/status/302968760917184512>>.



Picture 7: 'Come here little children. Come to Pope the Papa'.  
Source: <<http://memegenerator.net/instance/35301977>>.

Whereas image-based tweets tend to be replicated as they are – image and hashtag – text-based memes present a different pattern. Pope-related text-based tweets do not seem to differ from other text-based tweets. The hashtag tends to be replicated while the text is changed.

Text-based tweets exhibited a different pattern. For instance, tweets hashtagged #fuckthepope normally contain critiques of pedophilia practiced by members of the Catholic Church. Moreover, they openly accuse Ratzinger of trying to protect priests involved in child abuse. Examples (8) and (9), below, illustrate the topic/comment format of text-based tweets (HUANG *et al.*, 2010). In addition, they demonstrate that hashtag users are aware of the array of comments that are relevant to a given topic.



Picture 8: #fuckthepope - baby rape.  
Source: <<https://twitter.com/ogeverlast/status/307180747712774144>>.



Picture 9: #fuckthepope - geriatric pervert.

Source: <<https://twitter.com/bassnectar/status/307227938674339841>>.

Although a hashtag such as #fuckthepope may invite a plethora of anti-Pope statements, Twitter users know exactly which set of comments is adequate to the community they want to belong to, thus clearly indicating their orientation toward the formation and maintenance of a hashtag-based speech chain. Contrary to text-based tweets, image-based tweets rely less on the creativity and personal opinions of individual users. Both topic and comment are provided, and the user joins the community simply by replicating them.

## 5.2 Romance-language tweeters

Exclusively image-based memes also circulated among Romance-language tweeters, as observable in (10):



Picture 10: Ceci n'est pas un pape.

Source: <<https://twitter.com/shawnsobers/status/301468234182426624>>.

The meme above explicitly references Magritte's famous work:



Picture 11: Magritte's pipe.

Source: <[http://4.bp.blogspot.com/\\_kwoegBU-2wY/TPT-ozX\\_VOI/AAAAAAAAAw/38I4JYbsbEA/s1600/Margritti+this+is+not+a+pipe.jpg](http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_kwoegBU-2wY/TPT-ozX_VOI/AAAAAAAAAw/38I4JYbsbEA/s1600/Margritti+this+is+not+a+pipe.jpg)>.

The explicit intertextuality translated into popularity, and (10) circulated even among non-Romance language speakers. In fact, image-based tweets seemed to be more popular among Romance-language tweeters than among English-language tweeters. However, image-based tweets exhibited a different behavior when circulating among Romance-language tweeters, as seen below.





Picture 12: The Pope's career in Hollywood.  
Source: <pic.twitter.com/zw1OKWPT>.



Picture 13: The Pope as Darth Vader.  
Source: <twitpic.com/c35jtb>.



Picture 14: The Pope's career in agriculture.  
Source: <pic.twitter.com/E5Sq8iIR>.



Picture 15: The Pope as a young Nazi militant.  
Source: <pic.twitter.com/R6ijqcrFSH>.

Tweets (12)-(15) exhibit a different pattern than the one observed in image-based tweets as circulated by English-language tweeters. Romance-language tweeters tended to maintain the hashtag, but change the picture.

Therefore, it is possible to argue that Romance-language tweeters treated image-based tweets like English-language tweeters treated text-based ones. In other words, the image was understood as a personal comment that was changed to conform to each individual user's point of view, whereas the maintenance of the hashtag indexes belonging to a larger community.

Additionally, the themes present in image-based tweets as circulated by English and

Romance-language tweeters vary. It is true that tweets related to alternative career paths for the Pope are present among both English (examples 3-5) and Romance-language tweeters (examples 12-14). However, criticizing Ratzinger for being a quitter seems to be more frequent among English-language users (6) than among Romance-language ones. Also, English-language users seem to be more likely to criticize the Church for trying to get away with pedophilia (7). Romance-language users, on the other hand, seem to concentrate their critique on Ratzinger's former Nazi enthusiasm (15). Text-based tweets also circulated among Romance-language users.



Picture 16: #NovoPapa - Lula.

Source: <[https://twitter.com/Assem\\_Neto/status/302864835933265922](https://twitter.com/Assem_Neto/status/302864835933265922)>.



Picture 17: #NovoPapa - Luiz Inácio II.

Source: <<https://twitter.com/Miyudo/status/301711643900010498>>.

The pattern of production and circulation of text-based memes among Romance-language tweeters mirrors that of English-language tweeters. The hashtag is replicated whereas the text changes, thus illustrating the topic/comment format of text-based tweets. Moreover, although the hashtag #NovoPapa (New Pope) certainly invites an array of comments, users know which comments are relevant in a given hashtag community. For example, both (16) and (17) offer comments about the former Brazilian president Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, who was president for two consecutive terms, elected his successor, Dilma Rousseff, and – rumor has it – wants to run again. Tweets (16) and (17) suggest that such a power-hungry person would be a good candidate for a life-term position, like that of the Bishop of Rome.

## 6 Restrictions on the circulation of memes

Examples (3)-(17) illustrate that tweets circulate differently among English and Romance-language tweeters. These examples also demonstrate that the production of tweets also presents differences. English-language users treat image and text-based tweets differently, and do not seem to favor one or the other. Romance-language users seem to favor image over text-based tweets, and treat them alike by preserving the topic (the hashtag) and changing the comment (the text or the image).

Furthermore, as Naaman *et al.* (2011) observed, the endogenous or exogenous nature of tweets also affect their circulation. For example, tweets like 16 and 17, which explicitly reference a Brazilian politician, circulated widely among Brazilian Portuguese-

language users, but did not seem to be popular among users who tweeted in other languages. This is also true for image-based tweets, such as the ones below.



Picture 18: 'The new Pope will restitute faith'.

Source: <<https://twitter.com/Sardo1979/status/300952409277071360>>.



Picture 19: 'Secret revealed'.

Source: <<https://twitter.com/antcar83/status/300922421479878657>>.

Tweets 18 and 19 both reference Italian former Prime-Minister Silvio Berlusconi. Tweet 18 alludes to allegedly endemic corruption during Berlusconi's tenure, while tweet 19 alludes to supposedly promiscuous relations between the Catholic Church and the State under Berlusconi's rule. Endogenous tweets also circulated among Brazilian Portuguese-language users:



Picture 20: #partiu #vaticano.  
Source: <pic.twitter.com/1EQek4bf7L>.

The character depicted in (20), Inri Cristo, is a Brazilian man who claims to be the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. Tweet 20 shows him on his motorcycle, and the embedded hashtags, which are reproduced by the tweeter, indicate that Inri Cristo is on his way to the Vatican to finally claim St. Peter's throne.

Memes like 18-20, which may require specific cultural knowledge, had a more restricted circulation: tweeters who tweeted mostly in Italian and Brazilian Portuguese, respectively, replicated them. Additionally, although Romance-language users oriented to engaging in exchanges conducted primarily in Romance languages, there were exceptions:





Picture 21: European Portuguese: The Pope quits.  
Source: <pic.twitter.com/P7kEsLCC>.

Tweet 21 shows that English-language memes also circulated among Romance-language users. More specifically, example (21) demonstrates that an English-language tweet was replicated accompanied by introductory remarks made in a Romance language (in this case, European Portuguese). Nevertheless, this bilingual pattern is not always observed among Romance-language tweeters.



Picture 22: #fuckthisshit.  
Source: <<https://twitter.com/ivegotthepower/status/301361391158317058>>.

Similarly to example 1 (#papusinterruptus), example 22 (#fuckthisshit) circulated widely on Twitter, and also made it to the trending topics. However, users who tweet mostly in Brazilian Portuguese circulated a different version of this meme:



Picture 23: #chegadessamerda ("Fuck this shit! I quit").

Source: <[http://c4.quickcachr.fotos.sapo.pt/i/B9411cdad/14611036\\_Md6hM.jpeg](http://c4.quickcachr.fotos.sapo.pt/i/B9411cdad/14611036_Md6hM.jpeg)>.

The Brazilian Portuguese version differs from the English one in significant ways. The disposition of the pictures which compose the English-language meme is organized differently, the text is circumscribed by a speech bubble which resembles those of Brazilian graphic novels, and the Brazilian Portuguese text is colloquial and its first half has a syntactic structure not shared with other Romance languages, not even European Portuguese. These semiotic processes can be understood not as an appropriation of foreign categories, but rather as a local interpretation of widely circulating signs. In other words, the Brazilian rendition of the meme is not translation, but an instance of dubbing (BOELLSTORFF, 2003); i.e.: the designing of local categories vis-à-vis global ones, mediated by national ideologies. More specifically, this particular meme might indicate that, among some Brazilian Portuguese-language users, anti-religious sentiment is conflated with an anti-English language stance.

## 7 Final tweets

Although research on Twitter presents a myriad of challenges, as exposed in section 4 (Methodological Mazes), it is possible to draw a few conclusions based on the sample selected for this study. They are: (i) hashtags matter, (ii) language matters, and (iii) tweets are potentially rhizomatic.

It is through the use of hashtags that one makes his tweet searchable (ZAPPAVIGNA, 2011) even if for a short period of time due to Twitter affordances. By choosing to hashtag his post, each Twitter user performs his affiliation to a certain community by indicating the conversational topic in which he is engaging and contributing a comment to the exchange. The fact that hashtags are only searchable for a short period of time does not seem to impact the formation of ad hoc publics negatively. As example 2 shows, users are aware of the hashtag changes, and negotiate those changes in order to maintain their status as a member of a given community. The use of hashtags as performative speech acts by all tweets analyzed here ratify previous research, such as

Bruns and Burgess's (2011) – according to whom hashtags function as performative speech acts of belonging to a certain community.

Nevertheless, hashtags are not the only fact that matters; language also does. For instance, English and Romance-language tweeters treat image and text-based tweets differently. *English-language tweeters* showed no preference for one type of tweet over the other. Additionally, they kept the topic in textual exchanges (the hashtags) while changing the comments (their personal remarks). Image-based tweets were treated differently: the topic and the comment (the picture) were replicated without being modified by the users.

*Romance-language tweeters* exhibited a different pattern. There was a preference for image-based tweets over solely textual ones. Moreover, both sorts of tweets were treated similarly: users clearly performed affiliation to a community by keeping the conversational hashtag, and tended to change the comment regardless of its nature (text or image). One could conclude, therefore, that the English and Romance-language tweeters studied here perform being part of a community differently, which entails the existence of distinct felicity conditions. For instance, changing the image would be infelicitous in an English-language speech chain, whereas not changing it would be infelicitous in a Romance-language one. Since linguistic differences are relevant for the formation of speech chains that have their own felicity conditions, it seems that this might not be the time to fully implement a post-varieties approach to language, as defended by Seargent and Tagg (2011).

Finally, tweets are potentially rhizomatic, in Deleuze's and Guattari's (1987) sense. Speech chains on Twitter are formed around porous language-related lines of force that correspond to different manners of producing and transmitting messages. Consequently, any given user does more than simply stating *one* personal stance on a particular topic every time he hashtags his post. Along with his particular opinion, each individual tweeter is also performing his affiliation to a specific ad hoc community (through the use of a hashtag) and to a broader speech chain (via the language he uses, and the restraints associated with it). Furthermore, besides performing all these affiliations, users can also combine the expression of multiple sentiments. For instance, it seems that tweeters who posted in Brazilian Portuguese oriented to conflating an anti-Catholic Church stance with an anti-English language one. This demonstrates that cultural values face limitations to their circulation, including local interpretations of global events and nationalistic stances.

In sum, these findings demonstrate that the free-flowing, post-globalization reality taken for granted by Appadurai (1990) is not ubiquitous. In spite of being porous, language-based lines of force are indeed performed by tweeter users. In fact, at least in the corpus studied here, language does circumscribe the production and circulation of messages. Additionally, the messages that circulate are crafted in a rhizomatic manner. They encompass a series of stances which reference other tweet-rhizomes available in and out of the Twitter sphere.

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