Autonomous language learning on Twitter: Performing affiliation with target language users through #hashtags

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the potential of social networking sites for autonomous language learners, specifically the role of hashtag literacies in learners' affiliation performances with native speakers. Informed by ecological approach and guided by Zappavigna's (2012) concepts of `searchable talk` and `ambient affiliation`, the current study employs an autoethnographic approach by analyzing the researcher's own Twitter experiences in his target language, Spanish, over the period of a year. The participant's journal, tweets and conversations, and both qualitative and quantitative analysis of the hashtags accompanying tweets show that Twitter has potential to create a space for autonomous learners to enrich their language learning experiences. The thematic analysis of the data further reveals that hashtags, which perform an affiliative function, enable the learner to bond around particular values within authentic discourse communities in his target language. The methodological and practical outcomes of this longitudinal study for second language learning and teaching contexts are also discussed.

1. Introduction

Information and Communication Technologies have experienced an impressive growth and become ubiquitous in various aspects of lives of individuals in recent years. Technologies such as social networking sites (SNSs) started to be popularly used in daily life and explored in social sciences. This development has drawn the attention of academic researchers from the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) as well. Many teachers and researchers have begun to use and work on those technologies which have a potential for second language teaching and learning. Although the importance of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in SLA research has been relatively well-investigated (Chun, Kern, & Smith, 2016) and the amount of research concerned with the use of SNSs in foreign language learning and teaching is growing (Lomicka & Lord, 2016; Reinhardt, 2017), the research specifically addressing particular features of SNSs such as hashtags are yet to be further examined in SLA contexts. Being informed by the ecological approach, the present study aims to

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contribute to this area of the scholarship by analyzing language learning experiences and specifically hashtag literacy practices of a learner on Twitter.

1.1. Understanding Dynamics of Twitter

Twitter is a popular microblogging platform in which users can send micro-posts known as `tweets` in 140 characters or less. Members can follow other users and interact with them by responding to them or exchanging direct messages with them. They can read tweets of the users they follow on their feeds as well as being able to rebroadcast them to their followers (i.e., retweeting). Hashtag is among the conventions that are heavily used on Twitter. It is represented with the # symbol and used to mark keywords or topics. A hashtag can be integrated into any part of the tweet so that the particular tweet to be easily found by others. A user can either initiate a hashtag or participate in an ongoing discourse through a hashtag. Hashtags have been especially attractive for some researchers who examined the ways they are used (e.g., Rightler-McDaniels & Hendrickson, 2014; Zappavigna, 2011, 2012). Focusing on conversational and affiliative characteristics of tweets, Zappavigna (2011) pointed out a shift in searching only for content to searching what people say online and how they form communities around shared values. Abel, Celik, Houben, and Siehndel (2011) noted that hashtags have helped users create topics of conversations and gathered those sharing similar interests.

Since Twitter functions as both a synchronous and an asynchronous space, users can join a conversation by expressing themselves and drop out of online discourses anytime they want to. They can simply witness conversations but choose not to take part as well. As there is a huge amount of tweets produced by users every single day, hashtags have an important role in the identification of a discourse and formation of a network around various values. In addition to these, hashtags allow users to expand their audience beyond the people who follow them at a given moment (Zappavigna, 2012) and construct identity through enacting stances by using them (Evans, 2016). Considering ubiquitous use of social networks across the world, these ideas could be extended into language learning and teaching contexts. Hashtag practices of language learners are interesting cases to explore the potential of forming collaboration and aligning with others by means of a particular convention.

1.2. Theoretical Underpinnings

The theoretical framework of this study is informed by both socio-cognitive and interactionist traditions of applied linguistics, thus taking an ecological approach (van Lier, 2004). Having the potential of transcending interaction and socio-cognitive discussions, ecological frameworks may be considered to be appropriate for the investigation of problems arising in technology-mediated language learning environments (Reinhardt, 2012). Since what is happening in the environment is taken into account in the ecological approach (van Lier, 2004), it provides a fresh perspective without necessarily choosing psychological aspects of acquisition over its social aspects or vice versa. It emerges from needs to adapt to new research and teaching situations in the light of recent technological developments and requires balanced consideration of both frameworks for methodologies to analyze data which can become more complex with the addition of technology to the equation (Reinhardt, 2012). As a result, as exemplified in Reinhardt's (2012) state-of-the-art work, many studies focusing on technology-mediated second language learning contexts elements from both interactionist and socio-cognitive approaches by finding them useful. However, the combinations are not necessarily syntheses of these approaches when it comes to methodological directions.

The present study acknowledges various aspects of interactionist and socio-cognitive approaches in terms of theoretical and methodological practices. The fact that the interactionist approach places great emphasis on the interaction between a learner and other language users and the way in which it creates

opportunities for the negotiation for meaning (Gass, 1997) is taken into account in this study. It is hypothesized that Twitter can provide authentic opportunities for language learners to interact with native speakers and negotiate to create meaning as well as negotiating for the created meaning. In order to make the current research more comprehensive and present a better account of an autonomous learner's SNS use, the socio-cognitive perspective is embraced as well. According to socio-cognitive understanding of language acquisition mentioned by Atkinson (2002), language and its acquisition is complex, rich, ecological, and `fully integrated into other activities, people, and things` (p. 537), and they are seen `in terms of "action" and "participation" as providing an extremely powerful semiotic means of performing and participating in activity-in-the-world` (p. 537). Since a learner's microblogging use and his participation in potential communities are explored in this study, the contextual focus of socio-cognitive perspective provides some width and breadth. The current study methodologically benefits from this approach as well by creating research conditions very similar to an autonomous learner's actual conditions of learning and by focusing on the participant's perspective.

Another research project informing this study is Zappavigna's work (2012), where she introduced two new concepts: searchable talk and ambient affiliations. `Searchable talk` arises from shift of searching from information-based search in electronic discourses to searches on hashtag-directed conversational spaces like Twitter. This way of discourse tagging leads us to `searchable talk` and enables our discourses to be found by other users with whom users bond around particular values. `Ambient affiliation` is defined as `a form of online communion through hashtagging` (p. 83) and it is `ambient in the sense that social media users may not be interacting directly, but instead participating in mass performances of hashtagging or contributing to iterations of Internet memes` (Zappavigna, 2013, p. 1). While users' habits of searching by hashtags or key words are pointed out in searchable talk, ambient affiliation signifies various forms of fluid, non-permanent communities through hashtags.

@user #DiaMundialdelaSalud ¡Feliz día mundial de la salud a todos!

La salud es que más importante que la tenemos

(@user #WorldHealthDay Happy world health day to everyone!

Health is the most important thing we have)

The example above is one of the tweets collected from the data of the study. As a learner, I join the conversation around a trending topic in target language community. The hashtag I employ `seems to intensify a "call" to affiliate with the values in the tweet` (Zappavigna, 2011, p. 11). As pointed out by Zappavigna (2011), this kind of metadata integration into an online talk increases `the "loudness" of the discourse by increasing the likelihood that users' words will be found` (p. 11) as a result of bonding around shared values. By using a Twitter corpus, Zappavigna (2012) showed that Twitter users indeed created ambient affiliations thanks to various hashtagging practices by bonding around values including social media memes, political discourses, jokes, and internet slangs. One of the goals of this study is to understand if a language learner can create ambient affiliations created in target language contexts by making use of their hashtag practices. Since the creation of such an affiliation requires negotiation for and of meanings and necessitates interaction in a context, the approach taken in this research has been informed by both interactionist and socio-cognitive approaches.

1.3. Second Language Learning and Social Networking Sites

SNSs are among the frequently visited web pages across the world. As observed by researchers (e.g., Jones, 2014; Reinhardt, 2017), informal use of SNSs by students is increasing and learners are frequently engaging in the participatory web. In line with the growth of the social media, the research regarding the potential and use of SNSs in educational context has recently experienced an increase.

Aydin (2012), who reviewed the literature on educational use of Facebook, concluded that the SNS could be a valuable educational environment overall and especially in regards to learning about different cultures. The social interactivity aspect of SNSs offers an attractive environment for learners to engage in web-based cultural tasks in foreign language classes (Antenos-Conforti, 2009). Mills (2011) found that students engaged within the Facebook community of an intermediate French course and argued that the enhancement of communication modes helped participating students develop relationships in their communities. Similar to Mills (2011), a critical review of recent literature on Facebook shows that the pedagogical affordance of the site are not fully implemented although it is considered as an accessible alternative to traditional learning management systems (Manca & Ranieri, 2016).

Some of the technical features of SNSs have also been identified as suitable for contributing to the language learning process. For instance, it was noted that SNSs encouraged informal and social communication (Jones, 2014), opportunities to practice writing were created thanks to status updates, messages, and comments (Prichard, 2013), and it allowed students to reach native speakers easily and practice their target language with them (Perifanou, 2009). Studies concerning with Twitter use in language teaching and learning is less compared to Facebook although the number of studies is increasing. One of the earliest empirical studies was conducted by Borau, Ullrich, Feng, and Shen (2009), who found that their ESL student participants (n=90) were positive towards the use of Twitter and microblogging was suitable for the communicative and cultural competence training of online students. Antenos-Conforti's (2009) work revealed that brevity and interactive nature of Twitter played an important role while it enabled students to connect with native speakers in both synchronous and asynchronous fashion. Similarly, Brick (2013) argued that the potential benefits included the opportunities for learners to practice speaking and writing with native speakers as well as to provide and receive immediate feedback from their teachers and peers. Researchers also drew attention to the potential of SNSs for the development of pragmatic and socio-pragmatic awareness (Blattner and Fiori, 2009; Blattner, Dalola & Lomicka, 2016; McBride, 2009). McBride (2009) further noted that it was partly because use of those sites required learners to display netiquette (i.e., etiquette on the internet) and develop critical self-awareness. Autoethnographic approach to explore the use of microblogging in language learning is scarce as well. In one of those studies, Clark and Gruba (2010) tracked the English language practices and uses of Japanese students in *LiveMocha*, a social networking site designed for language learning. Their analysis of longitudinal transcript and student diary data showed that learners gained confidence in their L2 and successfully became members of an online community in which they both had the role of language learners and teachers.

Overall, up-to-date scholarship reports that microblogging has the potential to positively impact education and SLA contexts in particular (Hattem & Lomicka, 2016). However, there is a need for further examination of individuals' social media literacies and certain socio-literacy practices in informal SNS contexts. Such investigation may contribute to a better understanding of learners' everyday practices and the ways those practices can be transferred for the purpose of a SNS-mediated L2 teaching pedagogy. In order to respond the need, the following research questions are addressed in this study:

1. How can microblogging, Twitter in particular, contribute to the language learning process of autonomous learners?

2. What is the role of hashtag practices in language learners' creations of affiliation with target language users in social networking context?

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

In order to respond to the research questions above, an autoethnographic approach (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) was employed in this study. Allowing the researcher to be both informant and investigator, autoethnography requires `being critical about personal experiences in the development of the research being undertaken, or about experiences of the topic being investigated` (Méndez, 2013, p. 281). Autoethnographic studies demonstrate a record of a particular phenomenon or culture and how the researcher interprets them while aiming to be as objective as possible (Cunningham & Jones, 2005). It provides rich data, a relatively easy and close access to learners' worlds (Méndez, 2013), becomes an alternative to sole researcher-as-observer stance (Starr, 2010), offers method-friendly research (Chang, 2008), and accommodates the researcher's influence on the research that has been carried out (Ellis et. al., 2011). However, the nature of an autoethnographic study bears a number of limitations which are listed by Chang (2008) as `(1) excessive focus on self in isolation of others; (2) overemphasis on narration rather than analysis and cultural interpretation; (3) exclusive reliance on personal memory and recalling as a data source; (4) negligence of ethical standards regarding others in self-narratives; and (5) inappropriate application of the label "autoethnography" ` (p. 54). The ways these limitations were aimed to overcome are discussed in Data Collection and Analysis section of the present paper.

2.2. Participant

The current research undertook an autoethnographic approach in line with other studies in which second language experiences play an important role (e.g., McNamara, 2013; Terui, 2012). In this study, I am both researcher and informant. Being a speaker of Turkish and English, I have had three years of experience with Twitter where I had an active account and used the site mainly for professional purposes. I created a separate Twitter account in order to investigate what kind of role an online social network could play in second language learning process, Spanish in this case. When I initiated using Twitter solely in target language, my level of Spanish was an early stage of pre-intermediate level, which roughly corresponds to A2 level in Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) standards. Following the first month of using Twitter in Spanish, I started to take a Spanish 102 language class in a large Southwest University in the United States. I followed some Spanish-language accounts by aiming to be immersed in a virtual community of Spanish speakers. Posting tweets regularly in Spanish, I tried to interact with other users through mentioning them, being mentioned by them, 'favoriting' their tweets, being 'favorited', being retweeted, and finally creating affiliations through hashtag practices.

2.3. Data collection and analysis

For the purpose of overcoming limitations of autoethnographic study mentioned by Chang (2008) above, the focus was on the researcher's self-experiences in connection with others, emphasis was placed on the analysis rather than individuals' personal data, a number of data sources was used, and all the data were anonymized. There were three sources of data which included the journal, the visual materials, and tweets with the hashtags. *The Journal* was self-developed and consisted of two main sections. While the first one included observations related to overall experiences and were written as often as possible, the second one had recordings of activities and general topics that were covered in Spanish language class and they were accompanied by the dates. *The Visual Materials* consisted of Twitter screenshots of conversations with native speakers that were found to be significant by the researcher throughout the learning experience. The visual materials also included some of the tweets

that appeared in the timeline of the account and each screenshot was accompanied by a brief note explaining its purpose. There were a total of 55 screenshots. Finally, a total of 621 tweets posted by the participant between December, 2013 and 2014 were collected. The number of hashtags in the tweets was 262. There were 94 followers of the Twitter account and 167 accounts had been followed at the time of data collection.

Following the collection of the data, a thematic analysis (Glesne, 2010) was made by searching through the data for major and minor themes. In line with Glesne's (2010) suggestions for thematic analysis, all parts of data were coded in the same way and a particular code was specifically examined in order to see how it changed in relationship to other codes. The comparisons made between codes and patterns within the larger themes were identified for the purpose of revealing complexities. Not only were combinations made between some of the subcategories, but also some of the main categories were pulled apart into subcategories.

The thematic analysis of participant's hashtags in the tweets revealed that apart from non-categorized ones, there were two main categories of hashtags: Affiliative (n=118) and Reflective (n=159) (Table 1). As the function of the hashtags is not static and they `shift with user's interests over time as they respond to their social world` (Zappavigna, 2012, p. 87), the tweets themselves along with the hashtags were taken into consideration throughout the coding procedure. When applicable, more than one category was assigned to some of the hashtags. This explains the numerical difference between the number of hashtags (n=262) and the total number of categorized hashtags (n=319).

Table 1. Categories of hashtags emerged from thematic analysis and examples of them

	Sub-category	Example from the current study
Affiliative	Tracking and Participating in Events	Finalmente he visto el primero episodio de la temporada nueva de #JuegodeTronos. Lo me gustó y espero ver episodios proximos. (*I have finally seen the first episode of the new season of #GameofThrones. I liked it and I hope to watch upcoming episodes*)
	Celebrations and Losses	#DEPLuisAragones gracias Luis Aragones. Fue en mi equipo turco, Fenerbahce después de la copa de Europa en el verano de 2008. (*#RIPLuisAragones thank you Luis Aragones. He was at my Turkish club Fenerbahce following the European championship in the summer of 2008.*)
	Memes and Sense of Humor	#SabesQueEresSeriefiloCuando tienes unos episodios de series diferentes para ver todo el tiempo! (*#YouKnowYouAreTVSeriesGeekWhen you always have some episodes to see from different series!*)
Reflective	L2 Learning Experiences	He memorizado 85 nuevas palabras en español la semana pasada. #feliz #vocabulario (*I have memorized 85 new words in Spanish last week. #happy #vocabulary*)
	Daily Chatter	La primavera ha venido al desierto. ¡Mira a estos colores! #Arizona [attached picture] (*Spring has arrived into the desert. Look at those colors! #Arizona [attached picture]*)
	Personal Interests	Estoy leyendo "El viaje y mar" antes de dormirme. Aquí es parte acerca de "la mar" y "el mar" #literatura #Hemingway [attached picture] (*I am reading 'The Old Man and the Sea` before sleeping. Here is a part about `la mar` and `el mar` #literature #Hemingway [attached picture]*)

3. Findings and Discussion

The current study aimed to understand the potential of microblogging environments for foreign language learning through the perspective of Twitter use of a foreign language learner. As the focus of this study is to understand the role of ambient affiliations in language learning context, findings regarding how affiliative types of hashtags are used by the participant are presented and discussed in three main categories below: Tracking and Participating in Live Events, Celebrations and Losses, Memes and Sense of Humor.

3.1. Tracking and Participating in Live Events

The tweets (n=49) included the posts indicating learner's involvement in a live event either through simply tracking it or participating in them. Figure 1 shows two different hashtags through which the learner is affiliated with the ambient community following a specific event. In these cases, I had been watching a Champions League soccer game between Atletico Madrid and Barcelona as can be seen from the picture I attached into the tweet. In my first tweet, `Let's Go @Atleti ! #UCL`, I employed the most common form of hashtag for Champions League games, which is also promoted by the organization itself. In addition to the hashtag #UCL, I also 'mentioned' the club I was referring to. In my second tweet, instead of using the hashtag #UCL, I chose a more specific one (#AtletiBarca) and attached a photo from the live game by including the name of the stadium in the tweet as well: `A crazy game at Vicente Calderon`. The following excerpt, taken from my journal, gives more detail about the adoption of a more specific hashtag:

> Today, I watched some parts of the match between Atletico Madrid and Barcelona, which I thought offered a good opportunity for me to use my Twitter account in Spanish as they are both Spain-based teams. While I generally use #UCL when I tweet about Champions League games, I realized that a trending topic in Spain was #AtletiBarca and that made me use this one rather than #UCL, which is used by non-Spanish speakers as well. (Journal notes).

Figure 1. Examples of `Tracking and Participating in Live Events`.

The metadata awareness of hashtag use is clearly reflected in this journal entry as I chose a Spain-based trending hashtag over a general one. #AtletiBarca helps me create alignment with Spanish speakers easier since it is trending in Spain, which means that people there mostly track the game by using this hashtag. I contribute to this ambient group by not only stating my opinion on the game but also attaching a picture taken through the TV screen. The use of stadium's name helps me display my

familiarity with the topic and creates another affiliation with those whose tweets include *Vicente Calderon* even though it is not hashtagged. As a learner, I participate in an ambient community by posting tweets, following users' reactions, and being exposed to an authentic discourse in my target language rather than simply watching the game by myself.

Among the other hashtags used in this sub-category were: *#FuerzaValpo*, *#IncendioValpo*, *#FuerzaNortedeChile*, *#TerremotoenChile*, *#MalaysiaAirlines*, *#GlobosdeOro*, *#PremiosGoya*, *#LasMilyUnaNoches*. The first four hashtags were the ones 'trending' either in Chile or/and Spanish speaking countries. While the first two are related to the fire incident that occurred in Valparaiso, Chile; the third and fourth ones started to trend following an 8.2 magnitude earthquake in the north of Chile. *#MalaysiaAirlines* trended following the event of a plane of Malaysia Airlines being lost. I expressed my supports and concerns by using these hashtags. I used Twitter to stay informed about the news, but also had an authentic environment to contribute to the ongoing discourse in my target language. For example, when I followed *The Golden Globe Movie Awards* and Spain's prestigious movie event *The Goya Awards* in Spanish on Twitter, I became part of ambient affiliative movie enthusiasts or followers through hashtags. Even if I did not use these hashtags at the exact time of these two events, I could still become part of these communities since Twitter enables users to drop in and out of conversations any time. The case of *#LasMilyUnaNoches* is particularly interesting and should be mentioned here (Figure 2) with the following journal entry:

> I was interested in seeing if there was anything related to Turkish in Spanish language going on here and searched the word `Turco` and `Turca` on Twitter. Although a bunch of tweets in languages including Italian showed up, I also had a chance to see what people wrote by using it. Apart from seeing tweets of the users whose nicknames or nametags included a part of this word, I was pretty satisfied with the result. I even found out that a Turkish TV series started to air in Chile (#LasMilyUnaNoches) and asked on Twitter where I can watch it in Spanish. (Journal notes).

Figure 2. Conversations generated following the use of #LasMilyUnaNoches.

Pointing out the difficulties along the way partly because of not searching in the form of hashtag, I noted that I actually reached out to an ambient community gathered around the Spanish version of a Turkish TV series: A Thousand Nights. As seen in Figure 2, my question about where I can see episodes of this particular TV series attracted the attention of other users who are aligned with this hashtag. My interaction with three native speakers can be taken as proof of those Spanish speakers using searchable talk for various purposes. In his case, they tried to help a member of a group by providing answers to my question and contributing to overall discourse on the newly started yet popular Turkish TV series in Chile. For language learning, this might mean that learners can reach authentic discourse communities relatively easily if appropriate hashtag literacy practices are employed. As seen from the example above, I benefited from what Zappavigna called `searchable talk` since Spanish speakers forming an ambient community around #LasMilyUnaNoches were able to see and react to my post despite the fast-flowing nature of microblogging. Furthermore, the dates of interactions also show the asynchronous aspect of Twitter and how it can be important for the ambient affiliation to continue its effect for a longer period of time.

3.2. Celebrations and Losses

This category included 46 hashtags with tweets that performed an affiliative function involving celebration of a special day or days of week, remembrance of an event, or loss of a well-known person.

It may be observed on Twitter that a new day or start of a new month usually trends with words themselves or through a particular hashtag such as *#FelizMiercoles (#HappyWednesday).* Among all the hashtags employed, it was clear that I tried to join the conversations by using such hashtags as the following examples indicate:

> #FelizSabado a todos. Estoy muy emocionado porque tuve conversación con un amigo colombiano en español por más de una hora!! *(#HappySaturday to everyone. I am very excited because I had conversation with a Colombian friend for more than an hour in Spanish!!)*

> @user muy bien! Son las once aquí, pero deseo un día muy feliz! ;) #felizmartes *(great! It is eleven [pm] here, but I wish you a happy day! ;) #happytuesday)*

> #FelizJueves a todos desde el desierto! #Arizona [link of attached picture] *(#happythursday to everybody from the desert! #Arizona [link of attached picture])*

All three tweets include a hashtag related to the start of a new day and the emergent discourse. The remarkable thing is to observe that these hashtags are not only integrated into tweets as forms of metadata, language about language, but also accompanied by other thoughts almost in a way to expand the number of ambient affiliative networks. The first one, for instance, performs both affiliative and reflective function as the hashtag connects me with the affiliative network of *#FelizSabado* and creates a space for reflecting on my experience in the target language. This can also be interpreted as a way to invite native speakers of the *#FelizSabado* ambient community to notice the existence of a novice and very excited learner. In the second example, I interact with a native speaker wishing him a happy day and remember to attach a hashtag to be part of a larger community while also developing an interpersonal relationship with a native speaker. The last hashtag allows me to create alignments with both the Spanish affiliative network of *#FelizJueves* and a virtual community of *#Arizona* in various

languages. It can be argued that while I show eagerness to be affiliated with native speakers, I sometimes prefer to do so by including the local context and values.

@user #11M10Aniversario Comparto tus dolores y memorias como un extranjero porque terorismo no tiene nacionalidad.

(@user #11M10Anniversary I share your pains and memories as a foreigner because terrorism does not have nationality)

The tweet above is another example belonging to this category. Trended during March 11, 2014, this particular hashtag was used in Spain for the remembrance of Madrid bombings which had its 10th anniversary then. By posting the tweet, I am expressing my sympathy for the tragic event and find a chance to share my opinion on a more general topic, terrorism. In addition to being part of the community of people aligning or misaligning under this hashtag, I benefit from the space created by Twitter, which allows me to state my ideas about a relatively large topic in smaller pieces. Moreover, I purposefully use the word *extranjero (foreigner)* to further emphasize my sympathy as well as my position.

One of the most note-worthy ambient affiliative networks was created following the news about the death of world-wide known Colombian novelist Gabriel García Márquez. Passionately called `Gabo` mainly in Latin America, an extensive affiliative network around the tag *#GraciasGabo (#ThankyouGabo)* was formed (Figure 3).
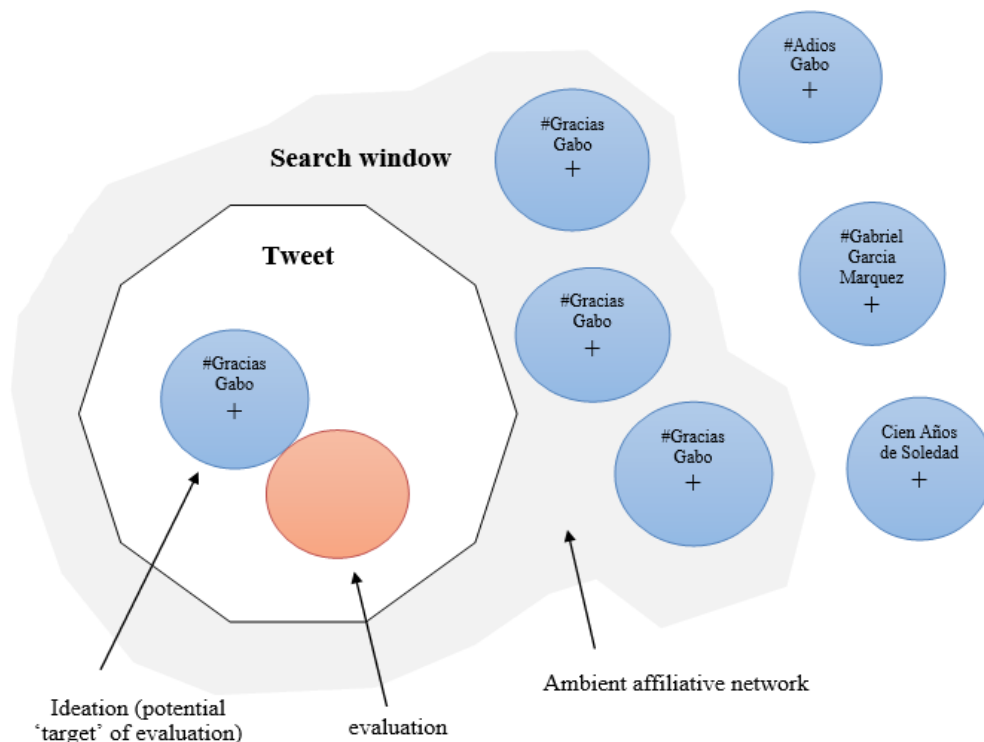
Figure 3. The ambient affiliative network formed around #GraciasGabo (adapted from Zappavigna, 2011).

Adapted from Zappavigna (2011), Figure 3 draws a picture of how an ambient affiliation is created and where it is located within a larger context of Twitter environment. As seen in the figure, a tweet including the hashtag *#GraciasGabo* is joining the conversation on the literary loss of Márquez with other tweets using the same hashtag. The figure also shows that parallel affiliative networks are

formed through hashtags and key words focusing on the writer himself, his books, and his literary traditions such as *#AdiosGabo (#GoodByeGabo), #GabrielGarciaMarquez, Cien Años de Soledad (Hundred Years of Solitude),* and *Realismo Mágico (Magical Realism).* In relation to this particular affiliative network, I noted down the following experience about it:

> Seeing that there were others who felt the same way I did about the loss of a favorite writer of mine helped me feel better. Reading through tweets with #GraciasGabo and #GabrielGarciaMarquez made me understand once again how influential he was. I also found a chance to tell him goodbye by tweeting in the language he wrote (Journal notes).

Due to the topic of interest, I emotionally reflected on how hashtags related to Márquez assisted me reaching out to the posts of other people towards the loss of an important figure in the literature. It is important that I found an authentic environment to express my feelings by bonding around a number of affiliative groups through a collective grief. As mentioned, Twitter provided a genuine space for me to use the target language to talk about the loss of Márquez, who wrote in Spanish.

3.3. Memes and Sense of Humor

Among the hashtags performing an affiliative function, the fewest hashtags consisted of those including social media memes and sense of humor (n=23). The low number might be explained with that sense of humor and figurative meanings in a foreign language are generally expected to take longer time for learners to acquire compared to literal/first meanings. In spite of this, there were examples of sharing values around social media memes and sense of humor in hashtags of the analyzed tweets.
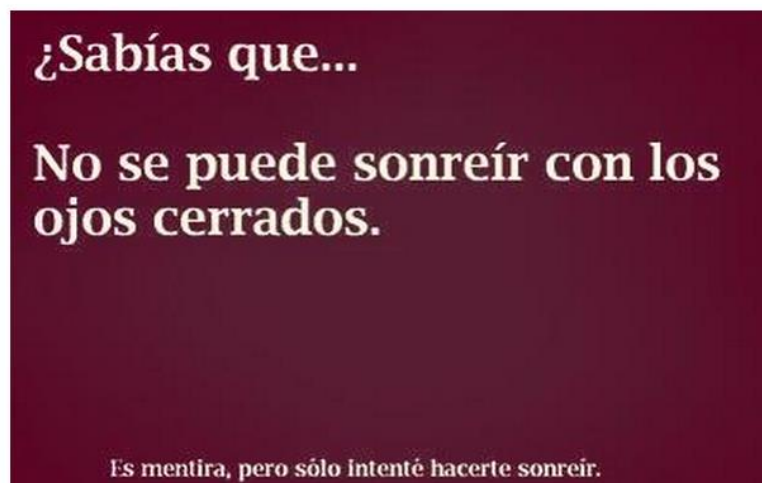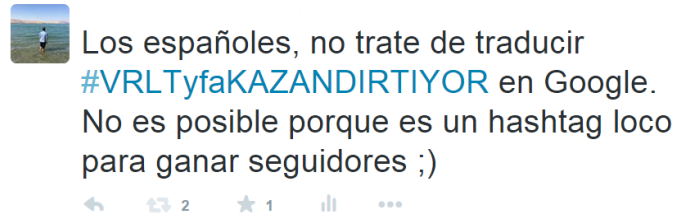

Figure 4. The use of #FelizMiercoles accompanied by an attachment.

Figure 4 displays an example for the reflection of sense of humor. I attach a text-based picture *(Did you know that… you can't smile with your eyes closed?)* I found online and I use the same question by making an addition through an imagined conversation with the participants of *#FelizMiercoles* affiliative network *(Look at the photo for the explanation).* When the imagined audience is led to the picture, they are expected to read the smaller text below *(It is a lie, but I just wanted to make you*

smile). This particular example shows how I appropriate materials in the target language and use on Twitter, find a platform to show that I can understand what I read and share them with others, and include an affiliative network to be part of while doing all of these. Another interesting thing is that this tweet was posted at 10:54pm in Mountain Time Zone (Arizona) but it is clearly intended for speakers across the ocean in Spain where it is early morning. This exemplifies the fact that I am aware of the audience and networks I want to be part of.

Los españoles, no trate de traducir #VRLTyfaKAZANDIRTIYOR en Google. No es posible porque es un hashtag loco para ganar seguidores ;)

Figure 5. The use of Turkish #VRLTfyfaKAZANDIRTIYOR in Twitter context of Spain.

Figure 5 above shows my experiences with a Turkish hashtag trending in my target language communities. *#VRLTyfaKAZANDIRTIYOR* is a hashtag literally meaning Team VRL (standing for VAROL) MAKES YOU GAIN (followers) in Turkish. It was started by the followers of a Turkish Twitter phenomenon who wanted to 'gain' followers through this hashtagging at that time. Following its appearance in trending topics of Spain, the hashtag was quickly embraced by Spanish users. While some speakers tried to understand what it meant and why it trended, some of them realized that using this hashtag helped them gain Turkish followers. This made some users to turn the hashtag into a social media meme and share humorous things about Turkish people, culture, and language. Some of them even tweeted in Turkish language. Figure 5 *(Spanish people, do not translate #VRLTyfaKAZANDIRTIYOR on Google. It is not possible because it is a crazy hashtag to gain followers)* shows that although I am novice in this particular foreign language experience, I bring my expertness on Turkish language into a target language context. This shows that microblogging platforms have the potential to help novice learners behave as experts by presenting them opportunities to share their content knowledge with affiliative networks in their target languages.

To sum up the findings, almost half of the hashtags that accompanied the tweets performed an affiliative function in the form of *Tracking and Participating in Live Events, Celebrations and Losses,* and *Memes and Sense of Humor.* The data showed that the number of affiliative hashtags increased as I gained more experience with the target language use on Twitter. I clearly gained a good understanding of the role of searchable talk and the importance of ambient affiliations in terms of accessing speakers in my target language and started to employ those types of hashtags more.

4. Conclusions

The purpose of the present study was to understand the role of an autonomous language learner's hashtag literacy practices in creating affiliative performances in interactions with target language speakers in a microblogging environment. In order to serve this purpose, an autoethnographic approach was used in the light of an ecological framework. Analysis of the journal, visual materials and the tweets showed that Twitter could contribute language learning process of autonomous learners in a number of ways. The findings also revealed that the hashtagging practices played an important role in language learners' creations of affiliation with target language speakers.

In line with the literature (e.g., Antenos-Conforti, 2009; Hattem & Lomicka, 2016; Lomicka & Lord, 2012) the quantitative analysis of hashtags revealed that Twitter has the potential to create

spaces for foreign language learners to have direct access with target language speakers and it offers opportunities to create ambient affiliations with native speakers. It is found that hashtags have a major role in reaching out to target communities and joining ongoing authentic conversations especially with the effective use of searchable talk introduced by Zappavigna (2012). As shown in this study, concepts of searchable talk and ambient affiliations can increase the Twitter literacies of learners for language learning and help them exploit the contextually rich environment. As Antenos-Conforti (2009) correctly foresees, social networking can be transformed into educational networking.

Even though it was not the main goal of the present study, the analysis revealed that a great number of hashtags performed reflective functions. Thus, it is interpreted that Twitter provided an environment for an autonomous learner to find a space for himself to share his reflections regarding his target language learning experiences as well as a platform to write about his daily life in his target language. It can be argued that consistent use of SNSs can help language learners develop their own voices in their target languages while becoming familiar with socio-pragmatic forms of language in a rich setting as reported in the past research (e.g, Blattner, Dalola, & Lomicka, 2016; Mills, 2011; Reinhardt & Ryu, 2013). Finally, it was observed that learners can be greatly exposed into authentic discourses in SNS contexts. However, the role of the input for beginners should be explicitly analyzed in order to see how ill-structured forms or colloquial use of language affect the language learning experiences of individuals.

Informed by the previous research and the findings of the present study, it is suggested that teachers and learners maximize the affordances of Twitter use in target languages in a number of ways. For instance, the use of a resource such as Twitter as part of a well-designed SNS-mediated activity by classroom members can help teachers create a virtual learning environment for learners and it may help learners develop an autonomy in a structured learning environment (Hafner & Miller, 2011; Lee, 2011). Learners may even exploit the tool for their own purposes by developing an agency while meeting curricular objectives (Hattem, 2014). Explicit addressing of the concepts of searchable talk and various functions of hashtags can assist learners to efficiently become part of ambient affiliations and maybe permanent communities in their target language. Should they be encouraged to benefit from searchable talk by making searches in familiar topics in target language, they can participate in authentic discourses as an expert contributor even if they are novice learners. This can be especially true for learners who are guided to participate in and become members of groups in which they can draw upon their knowledge in a particular topic of interest (e.g., literature, digital games, arts and crafts). As stressed by Godwin-Jones (2011), the guidance of teachers on the use of technological tools and online services for fostering learner autonomy is one of the primary roles of teachers. As a result, individuals may develop Social Networking Site / Social Media literacies (Solmaz, 2017) that can increase their engagement in the participatory spaces online. Overall, self-directed language learners can independently and interdependently navigate and take advantage of digital technologies thanks to their high level of digital literacies.

Autoethnographic studies have certain limitations, which are mentioned early in the paper. Although a number of precautions (e.g., various data collection and analysis techniques) was taken for the purpose of increasing the validity of the methodology, it should be noted that different results may arise from the experiences of another individual's Twitter use. It is suggested that a longitudinal investigation of learners' multiple SNS uses with various methodologies may provide further insights regarding learners' experiences and digital practices. Socio-literacy practices of learners in less commonly taught languages and in SNSs other than Facebook and Twitter should be examined as well. The employment of methodologies such as Social Network Analysis or the use of analytics services provided by SNSs might offer alternative routes to approach the data. Later, the investigation

of such socio-literacy practices may be transferred into classroom context for designing a SNS-mediated pedagogy in L2 teaching and learning.

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Twitter'da özerk dil öğrenme: #etiketleri kullanarak hedef dil kullanıcılarıyla bağlantı kurma

Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı sosyal paylaşım sitelerinin özerk dil öğrencileri için potansiyelini ve özellikle onların hedef dil kullanıcılarıyla kurdukları bağlantıda etiket kullanım becerilerinin rolünü araştırmaktır. Çalışma, ekolojik yaklaşım ve Zappavigna'nın (2012) "searchable talk" ("aranabilir söylem") ve "ambient affiliation" ("ambiyant bağlantı") kavramlarından hareketle araştırmacının Twitter'ı bir yıl süre zarfında hedef dili olan İspanyolca'da kullanım deneyimlerini analiz ederek otoetnografik bir yaklaşım kullanmıştır. Katılımcının günlüğü, twitleri ve kurduğu iletişimler ve twitlere eşlik eden etiketlerin hem nitel hem de nicel analizi, Twitter'ın özerk öğrenciler için dil öğrenme deneyimlerini zenginleştiren bir ortam yaratma potansiyeline sahip olduğunu göstermiştir. Verinin tematik analizi ise bağlantı kurma fonksiyonu içeren etiketlerin öğrencinin öğrendiği dili konuşan topluluklarda hedef dilde çeşitli değerler etrafında buluşmayı sağladığını açığa çıkarmıştır. Bu boylamsal

araştırmanın ikinci dil öğrenimi ve öğretimi bağlamında metodolojik ve pratik sonuçları da çalışmada ele alınmıştır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Sosyal paylaşım siteleri; Twitter; özerk dil öğrenimi; ambiyant bağlantı; etiketler

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