

To RT or not to RT: Authorship and attribution on Twitter

Fawn Draucker, ftd1@pitt.edu, @ftd318

Lauren B. Collister, lbc8@pitt.edu, @parnopaeus

University of Pittsburgh, Department of Linguistics



Evolution of Retweeting



Modal Affordances of Twitter

- Character limit of 140 characters per tweet
 - usernames and RT notation count towards this limit
- Addressivity
 - @username notation results in a notification to the user that you are "addressing" or talking about them
- RT as a user-created convention
 - As there was no affordance built into the Twitter medium to replicate another users tweet, around 2008, users began to create their own conventions for "retweeting" using the RT notation to indicate retweeted texts



boyd, Golder, & Lotan study retweets!

- In 2009, boyd, Golder, & Lotan conducted a study of retweeting practices and found that:
 - the most common syntax for retweeting is: (optional comment) RT @user Original Text
 - attempting to conform to the modal affordances of Twitter can cause erasure of authorship and attribution
 - "preservers" were most concerned with maintaining chains of attribution; "adapters" valued their added comments being fleshed out over preserving the integrity of the original tweet



Twitter introduces retweet interface

- In 2010, Twitter introduced a new tool for retweeting, which replicates the tweet wholeform
- "It will be very quick and easy to retweet, you'll never have to edit the text, and you also won't have to worry if your followers have already seen something, so this should encourage retweeting more and more useful stuff flowing farther." –Twitter co-founder Evan Williams
- The developers did not intend for the new retweet function to replace the "organic" RT, but to work alongside it
- Our question is: how did the introduction of this new feature change retweeting practices?



Our framework

- In current Twitter usage, we find the coexistence of both the user-created RT form and the form introduced by Twitter
- Preserving Retweets
 - Direct reproduction of a user's tweet, including username and avatar as well as original text. Does not allow for added content by the retweeter. Facilitated by Twitter interface.
- Adapting Retweets
 - Copy of a tweet made by a retweeter, usually signaled by the acronym "RT". Allows for added content and modification of original tweet. Facilitated by some Twitter clients but not the Twitter interface.

The Takeaway:

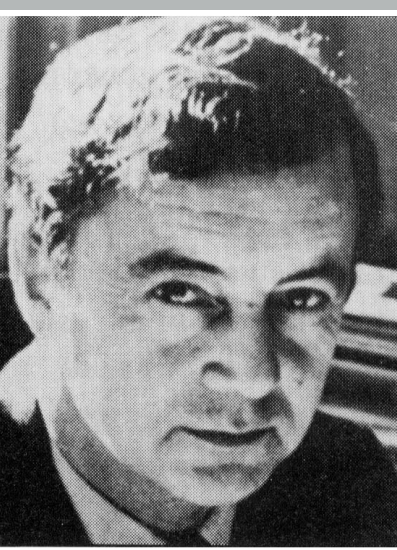
Preserving Retweets remove the possibility for confusion of attribution, but are inflexible
 Adapting Retweets allow for user input and modification, but often result in confusion over authorship and attribution



Evolution of Participant Roles

Traditional production roles

- animator* – the participant who physically utters; "the sounding box"
- author* – the participant who composes the utterance; "the agent who scripts the lines"
- principal* – the participant responsible for the utterance; "the party to whose position the words attest"



Goffman, 1981

Twitter production roles

Retained from Goffman:

- author* – the participant who composes the utterance; "the agent who scripts the lines"
- principal* – the participant responsible for the utterance; "the party to whose position the words attest"

Adapted from Goffman for Twitter medium:

- animator* – the participant who physically produces the text; "the typist"

Created for Twitter medium:

- broadcaster* – the participant who makes the available to recipients; "the transmitter"



Works Referenced:

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- Kress, Gunther. 2010. *Multimodality: A Social Semiotic Approach to Contemporary Communication*. New York: Routledge.
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Check out our poster at <http://ow.ly/efXVt> -- or scan this QR code!