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#AINTNOBODYGOTTIMEFORTHAT: CULTURAL APPROPRIATION, STYLIZATION AND THE SOCIAL LIFE OF HASHTAG INTERJECTIONALITY

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As a keystroke it neither means nor adds anything,
and yet the hashtag restructures all language - or what is left of it.
Benjamin Burdick, *#hashtag* (2014)

Abstract: This paper will discuss a particular hashtag meme as one example of a potential new manifestation of *interjectionality*, engendered and fostered in the written online context of social media. The case derives from a video meme and hashtag from the United States which 'went viral' in 2012. We will ask to what extent hashtags might perform interjectional-type functions over and above their referential functions, thereby having links to other, more prototypically interjectional elements. The case will also be discussed from multiple sociolinguistic perspectives: as an example of the (indirect) signifying of 'whiteness' through 'black' discourse, as cultural appropriation in the context of potential policing of these racial divides in the United States, and as a case of performative stylization which highlights grammatical markers while simultaneously downplaying phonological markers of African American English. We will end by speculating as to the implications of the rise of (variant forms of) hashtags for processes of creative language use in the future. [1]

1. Introduction

This paper is concerned theoretically with one example of the kinds of linguistic creativity afforded by new technological developments, based on the idea that a social media tool such as Twitter has opened up the arena of what it is possible for language users to do in the realm of interjectionality. I use the term "hashtag interjectionality" specifically as an innovative use of the hashtag. This interjectionality is a creative use that moves the hashtag beyond being a

simple sorting too, which was its original designed purpose. Many writers have noted the rise of enregistered 'internet language' forms (Squires 2010). The hashtag has also recently become a way of referencing social movements and trends (#MeToo, for example), and, I argue here, moving into the realm of interjectionality and the forceful expression of feeling is also a natural step.

We will base this discussion around the idea of a continuum of interjectionality (following Ameka 1992 and Stange 2009, 2016), the idea that expressions can be more or less 'interjectional', fluctuating between levels of 'emotiveness' vis-à-vis levels of 'cognitive content' (see further in section 3 below). In the era of the hashtag, and *contra* Burdick above, we will claim that the hashtag does of course 'mean' something, indeed, can mean and do many things, and has demonstrated its potential as a linguistic device. The paper will focus empirically on a family of hashtags we characterize as the #aintnobody… family, which is at time of writing a meme with about six years of history behind it. As such, it is not particularly special in itself: it has lived a mundane life and not been part of a spectacular social movement the way #MeToo, #TimesUp and #BlackLivesMatter have done. It fits into a middle range, neither being one of the very first instances of hashtags (the type emerged in 2007); nor is it brand new. As a meme in 'middle age' it seems to have proven to have a certain amount of staying power and has thus attained a kind of 'every-day-ness', which makes it suitable to serve as an example of the kinds of broadly sociolinguistic processes this paper will illustrate as being at play in social media usages of hashtags.

The present paper will therefore discuss this hashtag (and its family of variants) from several perspectives. To begin with, I will present relevant theoretical approaches to *interjectionality*, (following Stange (2016, 2009) and Ameka 1992), a key theoretical concept here that emphasizes gradability rather than absolutist definitions of what makes interjections the special part of speech they are (as discussed in Ameka 1992). The essence of my theoretical claim in this paper is that we can find similarities and echoes between hashtags and the structural and, especially, functional, classes of interjections and interjectional phrases. The particular example presented here shows tantalizing relations to several features of interjections as a pragmatic class. Although the parallel is not perfect, it does reinforce the view that there is a place in the literature for a foregrounding of degrees of interjectionality affecting various pieces of linguistic form in the (relatively) new 'written language' arena of social media (see also the other papers in this journal issue).

After these theoretical reflections, I will consider other more sociolinguistic aspects of this particular hashtag. There are several that I find particularly interesting, so the case will be discussed from multiple perspectives, as noted

above. For example, the tag itself mediates and semiotizes race politics in the United States in a particular way. We will thus consider the tag as an example of (indirect) indexicality of 'whiteness' through 'black' discourse (in the manner identified by Jane Hill in 1999). Secondly, it can be seen as an instance of cultural appropriation within this context of the potential policing of racial diversity and race in the United States, as several commentators have noted. The other interesting angle is that a specific phonetic stylization process (Coupland 2007), using varying degrees of 'bleaching' of the written form is a central part of this semiosis, even in the face of the possibility of the repeated performance of the original clip which is enabled by the video meme technology that permeates social media. To conclude, I will urge that, in line with many other streams of scholarship, we need to focus on degrees rather than absolutes – moving the analytical focus from interjections to shades of interjectionality. Combining that particular analytical move with a sensitivity to the social semiotic levels that any instance of novel language use can construct will enable innovative types of linguistic performance such as these data examples to be understood more fully.

2. The data

The example case derives from a video meme and hashtag originating in the United States, which subsequently 'went viral' in 2012. The original news clip from which it derives is from an interview with Kimberley 'Sweet Brown' Wilkins, the resident of an apartment building that had caught fire. The interview was originally broadcast on KFOR-TV in Oklahoma City, on April 8, 2012.

Wilkins' own dramatic escape from the burning building is related to the news interviewer as a short narrative. Kimberley Wilkins performs this monologue in a basilectal form of AAVE, with many linguistic features of that type of speech. The monologue in full is transcribed here:

Voiceover: One resident describes her horrifying experience when she first realised the complex was on fire

Kimberley Wilkins: Well, I woke up to go get me a cold pop and then I thought somebody was barbecuin'. I said "Oh Lord Jesus it's a fire" and then I ran out, I didn't grab no shoes or nothin' Jesus I ran for my life. And then the smoke got me, I got bronchitis. Ain't nobody got time for that.

Source: Web1.

The interviewee's final utterance, often transcribed as "ain't nobody got time fo' dat" became a much-quoted stereotyped fragment from the episode and, as commonly happened at that time, an auto-tune version of the interview by the Parody Factory emerged soon after, also in April 2012 (Web2).

Various versions of the written tag can now be found on Twitter:

#aintnobodygottimefodat

#aintnobodygottimefordat

#aintnobodygottimefothat

As well as the form used in the title here:

#aintnobodygottimeforthat

There is also an existing acronym form #angtft (as well as #angtfd) which seems to have emerged at the same time as the longer form of the hashtag, according to Twitter archives online.

In terms of rates of usage, a simple Google search on 26th February 2018 revealed that the various forms yielded different numbers of hits:

#aintnobodygottimeforthat	123000
#aintnobodygottimefothat	3810
#aintnobodygottimefordat	5460
#aintnobodygottimefodat	4410
#angtft	811

Table 1. Forms and Google 'hits' for the #aintnobody… family of hashtags, February 2018.

In terms of its subsequent quotation and re-usage, at time of writing, the hashtag seems to be used most commonly to express a range of emotional responses. It appears most commonly as an expression of frustration at time wasted, or of effort wasted, on the part of self and other people. Annoyances of other kinds can also feature. It seems also to be used commonly in connection with illness on the part of the speaker/writer, such as influenza or bronchitis (which was part of the original interview, so this may be a case of more extensive quotation), for example during the winter months. Note that in the Urbandictionary.com definition of the acronym form, it is glossed as "especially useful when time is short" (Web3).

In other cases, the hashtag seems to express reflective bemusement at, or a general sense of detachment from or unwillingness to engage with, the topic of the tweet. It is also commonly used to express anger at and rejection of other people's actions. The examples given below are all from different tweeters. Note however that example (d) also seems more 'contentful', because it spells out the implicitness of the (…) after "the building of IKEA furniture".[2]

a. It's funny how I can look at dogs and be all. "omg I want one!" but when it comes to kids, I may think they're cute but never do I say that I want one.☺#AintNobodyGotTimeForThat
b. You know you're old when you ask someone what 'starting a streak' means and what the point of it was. #AintNobodyGotTimeForThat
c. I don't get how some people can be two-faced hypocrites #AintNobodyGotTimeForThat
d. Love IKEA furniture. However, the building of IKEA furniture.... #AintNobodyGotTimeForThat
e. Life is too short to eat olives with pips in #AintNobodyGotTimeForThat

Thus, we can see in the meanings of the emotional responses expressed by this hashtag a sense of the perception of something negative, either within oneself or in one's own experience, or deriving from other people, that is emphatically rejected by the use of the hashtag. These and similar emotive usages provided the primary impetus for looking at this hashtag as a potential interjection-like utterance, exhibiting some degrees of *interjectionality.* This terminological and theoretical discussion will be the focus of the next section.

3. Interjections and interjectionality

Ameka's classic 1992 paper on interjections classification distinguishes between interjections, which are single bounded utterances, and interjectional phrases, which are more complex utterances made up of items that can also appear in other contexts. His classification scheme would put the #aintnobody… family into the class of interjectional phrases, since they fulfil the criterion of being "multi-word expressions, phrases, which can be free utterance units and refer to mental acts" (Ameka 1992: 111). They are most clearly examples of "completive or exclamatory utterances" (1992: 104). Like Ameka, we do not label these hashtag forms 'interjections' proper, but reserve that term for shorter, less complex utterances. We will prefer to suggest that these hashtags are 'interjectional' and 'display interjectionality' to some degree.

We can note that longer syntactic structures shortened to acronyms are also interesting in themselves, although there is not scope in this paper to delve deeply into this. #angtft can be said to function as a pointer to the full form, and it is an example of the mode of internet writing that is now commonplace (cf. '#MAGA', Trump's campaign slogan from 2016 and other older 'leet speak' abbreviations such as 'ffs' = 'for fuck's sake', 'fwiw' = 'for what it's worth', 'wtf' = 'what the fuck' and so on. See also Squires 2010 for further discussion of this mode of writing and its enregisterment).

Interjectionality, as a complex of features and functions that an utterance can have more or less of, or be used with more or less of, was introduced in Nübling (2004) and has been explicated by Nübling and Stange in a series of publications. Stange (2009: 31) for instance refers to 'parameters of interjectionality' – and in her 2016 study, Stange (2016:17) explicates her approach to determining the degree of interjectionality of an utterance:

> "an interjection is said to exhibit a high degree of interjectionality if
>
> 1. It is primarily emotive
> 2. It is exclamatory
> 3. It does not require an addressee
> 4. It is produced semi-automatically."

By means of this model, she sets up a continuum (in her figure 2.2, based on Nübling (2004:18)) between the highest and lowest degrees of interjectionality, where a scale from emotive to cognitive to conative to phatic interjections moves from the highest to the lowest degree of interjectionality, as the interjections vary along the parameters described in 1 through 4 above.

Our data examples (a, b, c, d, e above) seem to most clearly fulfil the criteria for interjectionality in the first three cases. The #aintnobody tags are clearly expressive of emotion and exclamatory. The tags seem to be just as much used as a reply to other tweets on Twitter as they are used in solo tweets that are not addressed to anyone else (although no large quantitative study of this has been carried out). In these cases the hashtags simply accompany personal private musings on a topic, and so they are not dependent on a specific addressee but, in the way of social media at large, utterances can be simply "put out there", addressed to the public audience at large. The degree to which the tags can be regarded as spontaneous outbursts and thus 'semi-automatic' in Stange and Nübling's terms is more difficult to ascertain in a written medium, simply because of the asynchronous nature of tweeting as a language practice. Certainly, the tag's usages could be said, *prima facie,* to be based on different degrees of reflection. We can ask, given the content they report on, is the use

in (a.) above more 'reflective' and less semi-automatic than (e.) or (c.), where reflection on a person's attitude to having children could be seen as a more considered emotion than the immediate frustration of eating olives with pips, and reaction to that experience more or less "in the moment" as expressed in the tweet or spontaneous anger at other people's hypocrisy? While we cannot at all determine with accuracy how "automatic" the reaction expressed in any one tweet was, there can also be more or less surprising tweet connections made between topics and the hashtag, but exploring this in more detail is outside the scope of this paper.

Other linguists have started to investigate hashtags in use and tried to define their semantic and pragmatic, as well as formal and functional properties. Hashtags seems to cover many functions, but the interjectional function is definitely there in those accounts. Scott (2015), for instance, takes a relevance theory-perspective and claims that "the role of hashtags has developed beyond their original purpose (as metadata tags, ed.), and […] they now also function to guide readers' interpretations" (Scott 2015: 8). Hashtags, she argues, give contextually relevant information that helps readers find their way to the intended interpretation in a discourse context (such as social media) that is large and dynamic and to some extent discursively unpredictable, also in terms of scalability, with the potential of individual tweets to reach millions of readers.

Norrick's (2009) approach to interjections also gives a promising perspective for this paper. His claim that interjections are a large and open-ended functional class of utterances seems particularly appealing here, where we are seeing pieces of linguistic form take on a role as emotion-expressers, with greater and lesser degrees of the kinds of characteristics that make up 'interjectionality' as we have been using the term here. It opens the door for hashtags to fulfil this particular interactional role, and that is what we are claiming has happened with the #aintnobody… hashtags.

4. #Aintnobody… and race politics in the United States

Two overriding political themes can be taken up in connection to the #aintnobody… hashtags. The first concerns its semiosis of race and racial divides in the United States, and the second concerns aspects of cultural appropriation. These two are ultimately intertwined and have echoes to other racial diversity problematics in the same context, as will be discussed below.

Two commentators that I am aware of have raised issues of uncomfortableness around the spread and continued usage of the #aintnobody… tags, and these issues were raised quite quickly after the meme's initial dissemination in April 2012.[3]

In 2013, Sesali Bowen wrote a blog post condemning the cultural appropriation by the white majority in the United States of certain elements of underprivileged black women's experience (often suitably sanitized) under the rubric of 'ratchet culture'. The 'Sweet Brown' #aintnobody… memes were placed in this category. Bowen's argument is that these examples (including the Miley Cyrus 'twerk' phenomenon that was the original impetus for her commentary) are an expression of cultural appropriation of aspects of (female) black lived experience into the white world, essentially for the purposes of selling something. As she writes "It is super easy to borrow from the experiences of others as a way to be "fun," or stretch boundaries on what is "acceptable," without any acknowledgement of context or framework." She claims that

> "ratchet works to simultaneously police and defy gender, class, sexuality, and respectability norms. Folks with certain privilege are willing and able to float in and out of ratchet at will".

This move between association and disassociation with features of black women's experience is however not available to all, but, the writer claims, only to certain types of (non-black) privilege. Black people on the other hand (and perhaps especially black women) will be read through the lens of their race and its affordances and limitations at all times. The author argues that using a hashtag meme that originates from dramatic negative circumstances, transforming it with humorous or mocking intent constitutes therefore an illegitimate act of appropriation (Bowen 2013).

In a slightly different vein, in October 2013, Charles E. Williams wrote on the topic for the Huffington post (Williams 2013). He writes that he had himself admired the honesty and unguarded language in the original interview, but had also speculated as to whether reacting with humour to the depiction of tragic events (such as a house fire) using such unmonitored black community language constituted a racist stance on the part of white observers. Williams argues that it is best if "quite frankly this kind of dialect and the humour it sometimes encourages stays in the confines of my cultural community" (Williams is an African-American Baptist pastor). He quotes W.E.B. du Bois, who wrote in "Souls of Black Folks" from 1903: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity". This consciousness of othering, Williams argues, leads him to be nervous in public contexts of revealing his own (basilectal) African American Vernacular English, knowing as he does what it can lead to of judgmental attitudes and consequences. The empowered conclusion he ends with, however, is that this language and its authenticity ought to be an

object of pride, even in the face of mainstream condemnation or rejection, a point that has been very familiar to sociolinguists at least since, for example, the publication of Labov 1969.

The fact remains that the #aintnobody… hashtags provoke different responses for different readers, and the political backdrop to what is for some a seemingly innocuous internet meme is by no means straightforward. As Susan Gal has written (2018: 9), the use of a register of language (such as African American Vernacular English) is always "a response to other ways of naming the phenomenon: essentially dialectic". The hashtag bears something of its original context, and the phonetic details of the way it was uttered with it on its travels, particularly when snippets of the original video and audio can be circulated endlessly on the internet. Moreover, as Gal points out, "participants enact speaker types by using register fragments conventionally linked to such person typifications" (Gal 2018: 5), so as the enactment of a speaker type who provokes mockery and humour, the "Sweet Brown" typification carries on in each discursive iteration, making its usage, as Bowen also claims, a political act marking and policing a racial divide.

Jane Hill, in a series of publications (eg. Hill 1999) has indeed shed light on the tendency of white mainstream culture in the United States to appropriate the language of others. She claims that "white public space is constructed partly through intense monitoring of the speech of racialized populations… for signs of linguistic disorder". Her cases mainly concerned Latino/Latina language forms, which are commonly appropriated and reframed within white discourses. Hill's condemnation of the practice centres on the fact that such stylizations carry with them an assumption of "white public space" being the normatively unmarked order, in a dialectic juxtaposition, as Gal would also claim. This mechanism of contrast, I maintain, can be seen at work in the #aintnobody… hashtags as well. We will see further the ways in which this racial political context is worked with in the following section, which will discuss phonetic stylization and variations in orthographic 'mainstreaming'.

5. Phonetic Stylization in #aintnobody tags

In section two above, we showed the various forms in which the hashtag occurs online:[4]

#aintnobodygottimeforthat

#aintnobodygottimefothat

#aintnobodygottimefordat

#aintnobodygottimefodat

#angtft

The details of the stylizations involved in the spelling of these tags are complex: 'ain't nobody' occurs in all instances, and its implied contrast is with standard 'nobody has', without the negative concord of 'ain't nobody'. 'Ain't' in itself is a much-stigmatized verbal auxiliary, standing grammatically in place of 'isn't', 'aren't' or 'hasn't, haven't (depending on grammatical context). But 'ain't' and the negative concord with 'nobody' remain in all the manifestations of the hashtag, apart from the acronymic form.

The other variations at the end of the hashtag show evidence of a gradual 'bleaching out' of the spelling of the particular AAVE/Southern phonological features that are present in the original performance. 'Fo dat' shows both non-rhoticity ('fo' for 'for'), typical both of AAVE and traditional Southern US English, and DH-stopping, common in AAVE and for instance, New York traditional speech ('d' for the voiced interdental fricative). '..Fordat' retains DH-stopping and retains rhoticity, and '...fothat' does the reverse: maintaining the non-rhotic 'fo' and using standard 'that' instead of the stopped version, 'dat'. '...Forthat', the form which as we noted in section two garners the highest numbers of Google hits and thus seems to be the most commonly used form, has fully standardized the phonological variation while keeping the two signs of grammatical variation, 'aint' and negative concord. The most common form is now the most phonologically 'mainstreamed' form. The final form in our list, a completely reduced acronym, in the style of many internet terms which likewise have been reduced to initials, carries with it no visible signs of phonetic stylization (although there is also a marked form #angtfd which seems to be mostly used by the black twitter community, at first glance).

Following Nikolas Coupland (2007), we can see these written forms as carrying with them various degrees and types of linguistic stylization. Coupland writes extensively on this phenomenon, which involves either oral or written performance of a style which sticks out, which marks itself literally as the 'marked' item of a dialectical pair that contrasts an upholding of and a breaking of language norms. Coupland claims that "speakers design their talk in the awareness – at some level of consciousness and with some level of autonomous control – of alternative possibilities and of likely outcomes (2007: 146)." His further elaboration of stylization makes the following points (2007:154):

- Stylisation is therefore fundamentally metaphorical. It brings into play stereotyped semiotic and ideological values associated with other groups, situations or times. It dislocates a speaker and utterances from the immediate speaking context.
- It is reflexive, mannered and knowing. It is a metacommunicative mode that attends and invites attention to its own modality, and

radically mediates understanding of the ideational, identificational and relational meanings of its own utterances.
- It requires an acculturated audience able to read and predisposed to judge the semiotic value of a projected persona or genre. It is therefore especially tightly linked to the normative interpretations of speech and non-verbal styles entertained by specific discourse communities.
- It instigates, in and with listeners, processes of social comparison and re-evaluation (aesthetic and moral), focused on the real and metaphorical identities of speakers, their strategies and goals, but spilling over into re-evaluation of listeners' identities, orientations and values.

Especially interesting are the comments on the fact that stylisation as a metacommunicative mode requires a 'knowing audience'. Interestingly, the reproduction possibilities of video and audio memes mean that global knowing audiences can constantly be created anew on the internet as it functions today, without the need for such pre-existing cultural (or sub-cultural) knowledge.

If we combine Coupland's theorizing of stylization with Gal's theory of register in a linguistic anthropological light and Hill's discussion of language appropriations that position speakers and performers as more or less mainstream, we have a powerful set of tools to understand the internet hashtag #aintnobodygottimeforthat and its other family members. After the initial positioning of this instance of speech as nonstandard, nonmainstream and stigmatized, it has become normalized into mainstream discourse through orthographic bleachings (ultimately, all the way to an acronym) that remove evidence of non-standard phonology. The internet being what it is, the visual and phonetic qualities of the original clip still lurk in the background, and are indeed revived from time to time, to bring back the racial and social marking of the tag and tying it to its original performance. But in its new position, which has brought it to the edge of the 'interjectionality' universe, as the examples in section two showed, spelling variations have made it more mainstream, more 'non-AAVE' and more used in the social media universe as an informal emotive interjection, more mundane and, potentially, more lasting and mainstream.

6. Conclusions

This paper has dealt with the horizon of new linguistic openings that technological developments afford in social media contexts such as Twitter. Interjectionality as a shaded area, a case of degree rather than absolute, has been a major focus here. The #aintnobody… family is not particularly special in itself, but it has attained a kind of 'every-day-ness'. At the same time, as an instance of sociolinguistically interesting semiosis, it opens up a discussion of

white privilege and markedness in the context of the social and racial diversity in language in the United States. It serves as an interesting example of creativity and play in hashtags with burgeoning interjectional power. It remains to be seen to what extent these types processes persist and continue to innovate, but at present, we see no reason to expect limits on the creativity of hashtags in the future.

Notes

[1] I thank the editors of this volume, Carsten Levisen, Eva Skafte Jensen and Tina Thode Hougaard for organizing a very fruitful "Interjection Day" at Roskilde University on 11th October 2017, where this paper was first presented as a contribution to a workshop on "Interjections and New Media". I also owe thanks to the helpful input from an anonymous reviewer who provided the impetus for revisions that moved the research process forward during 2018. My biggest thanks go to my daughter Rebecca Fabricius, a digital native and a skilled and artistic social media user, who was the first to alert me to the #angtft meme, and who delightedly shared my interest in it with her friends, in true collaborative twenty-first century style.

[2] This case also seems parallel to the ironic "not so much" (also found as a hashtag #notsomuch) that is listed on Urban Dictionary and found on social media.

[3] Note also that Kimberley 'Sweet Brown' Wilkins sued Apple Corporation in April 2013 for unauthorized use of her words in a song produced for profit on iTunes.

[4] A more detailed quantitative and qualitative comparison of the contexts of use of these different hashtag variants in corpus twitter data is beyond the scope of the present paper but would be a natural extension of the present work.

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Web1: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bl57EcPQLjg.

Web2: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=waEC-8GFTP4.

Web3: https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=ANGTFT.