Twitter discourse

#hashtags as pragmatic markers

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September 2016

Tutkielmanani esitän, että hashtagien käyttö on laajentunut perinteisestä temaattisesta ja aihekohtaisesta käyttöön myös interpersonalisaatioksi. Tutkimuksen molemmat hashtagit, #justkidding ja #sorry, ovat luonteeltaan interpersonalisia ja niitä voi kutsua pragmaattisten funktioidensa takia pragmaattisiksi markkereiksi. Totean tutkielmanani myös, että hashtagien käyttö muuttaa Twitter-viestien sisältöä usein ratkaisevasti, mikä vaikuttaa viestien sisällön tarkoitukseen. Tutkielmani mukaan hashtagit ovat tärkeä osa Twitter-viestintää, ja luonnehdin niitä siksi metadataksi, joka ohjaa lukijan käsityksiä Twitter-viesteistä ja niiden sisällöistä.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords
Twitter, hashtag, pragmatiikka, verkkoviestintä, sosiaalinen media

Säilytyspaikka – Förvaringställe – Where deposited
Muita tietoja – Övriga uppgifter – Additional information
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1 Introduction

The conventional purpose of tagging is to provide a simple way to find relevant information from large quantities of data. More specifically, hashtags in social media have been traditionally used as identifiers of a similar theme or topic, which makes them tools for users to find relevant messages and take part in conversations (Laniado 2010). Hashtags were first used on Twitter (Twitter Inc. 2016) but their use has since spread to other social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, and they have become a regular communication tool for millions of users on different social media sites (Caleffi 2015: 46).

In recent years, the possible functions of hashtags have, however, changed and evolved. They no longer serve only the simple purpose of finding relevant information. Lately, I have noticed that hashtags are slowly but surely popping up in new kinds of environments, such as in text messages and even in speech. This observation is supported by recent research: Caleffi (2015: 46) explains that the hashtag symbol is not only popular online, but offline as well, and that it appears in places such as newspaper headlines, advertising and even speech. These new environments and new ways of use suggest that the function and role of the hashtag has evolved. It seems that the hashtag now also functions as a guide to the reader’s interpretations and that they can also “play a stylistic role, allowing users to maintain a personal, informal style in a mediated, largely text-based, public discourse context.” (Scott 2015: 8). In my thesis I will find out more about these relatively new functions that hashtags have in communication, in one specific form of social media: Twitter.

In addition to the basic function of searchability and hyperlink connection, hashtags seem to be used to communicate underlying tones and maintaining social relations, such as in example 1 below.
Example 1: hashtags with pragmatic functions

In example 1 above the user @alysha_stone first writes that she loves “early morning sessions” and then adds the two hashtags #justkidding and #whodoes at the end of the tweet. These hashtags do not really provide a logical hyperlink to any themes or topics of conversation, but instead they are used to provide metadata about the tone of the tweet and metacommentary about the utterance itself. These kinds of functions can be labeled integral to the communicative goal of communication on Twitter, and as such they can be looked from the point of view of pragmatics. Hashtags also share many features with linguistic elements that have been called pragmatic markers or discourse markers in earlier studies. For example Aijmer (1996: 216) describes discourse markers as “Syntactically detached from the sentence as speech-act adverbials, they can appear initially, medially or finally”. Furthermore, Ziv and Jucker (1998: 4) describe discourse markers as text structuring devices and as “instructions on how given utterances are to be processed”. This is why one of the research questions of this study is whether hashtags can be considered to be pragmatic markers, as they seem to share many of their qualities.

Face-to-face communication strategies cannot be implemented as such in an online environment: the technological possibilities and realities bring with them a need for new kinds of linguistic and paralinguistic means of communication. You cannot smile or nod your head in an online chat or a Twitter discussion, but you can for example add emojis or hashtags to express your feelings and to add more communicative layers to your messages. It is, however, important to remember that not all online communication is similar either: like face-to-face communication, online interaction can be divided into several different registers that all call for different kinds of communication strategies. For example a work email is stylistically and strategically probably miles away from a tweet.
Hashtags and their functions have been studied in recent years, and researchers have been able to find out that they do indeed seem to have new and varying functions in addition to the original function of topical tagging to mark topics and thus to make the tweets more searchable. In this study I take a closer look at two specific hashtags that to my knowledge have not yet been the focus of any earlier studies. These hashtags are #justkidding and #sorry, and this study strives to find out about the different pragmatic functions that these two hashtags have on Twitter. The purpose of this study is to contribute and add to earlier research (Zappavigna 2015, Scott 2015, Caleffi 2015) about these new and emerging hashtag functions and their role in Twitter communication, and to provide a closer look at the specific uses of the two hashtags from a pragmatic point of view. What functions beyond topical tagging are there for hashtags on Twitter, and how do they change the meaning of the tweets?

In my thesis I answer the following questions regarding #justkidding and #sorry:

1. What kind of pragmatic functions do the hashtags #justkidding and #sorry have in the tweets?

2. How do the hashtags change the meaning of the tweets?

3. Can the hashtags #justkidding and #sorry be considered to be pragmatic markers?

In order to find answers to these questions a small corpus of tweets has been compiled by searching for tweets with the hashtags #justkidding and #sorry. The data is analysed and categorised according to the pragmatic use of the hashtags (question 1), by considering the effect of the hashtags in terms of the intended meaning of the tweet (question 2), and finally by comparing the results of this study to earlier research about pragmatic markers it is determined whether the hashtags can be considered to be pragmatic markers (question 3).
2 Background

2.1 Computer-mediated communication and Twitter

Androutsopoulos (2006) divides the relatively brief history of CMC research into three waves. During the first wave the technological aspects of CMC were stressed: the emphasis of the research lay heavily on the new mediums of interaction, which led to specific labels such as ‘electronic language’. The second wave moved on from the technological aspect to a more broad view of CMC, where different social and contextual factors were also taken into consideration. The third wave expands this even more by broadening the field with more research within sociolinguistic and pragmatic frameworks, which highlights the fact that the CMC language use is as diverse as its users, and not confined to a certain technological variation (Androutsopoulos 2006).

Twitter is a microblogging platform that was originally launched in 2006 as a tool for a particular group of friends to share status updates between each other (Twitter Inc. 2016). Twitter quickly grew in popularity and soon it was used by people around the world, and today it has over 300 million active users (Twitter Inc. 2016). Because it was originally developed to be used by sending SMS messages, messages on Twitter, called tweets, are limited to 140 characters per tweet. Users can tweet by using their phones or from a computer. Users can also address their tweet to a specific other Twitter user by adding the symbol @ and their username within the tweet, usually at the beginning of it. Users can also ‘retweet’ something that they see on Twitter, meaning that they can share someone else’s tweet on their own timeline, this is marked by the letters ‘RT’ at the beginning of the tweet. On Facebook people ‘friend’ each other, but on Twitter users ‘follow’ each other, which means that they only see the tweets of the people that they themselves follow. Users can also search for tweets about a certain topic by searching for a certain hashtag.

Twitter was originally meant for simple status updates, but the users of the platform started molding the Twitter culture and ways of use by having short
conversations with each other, by addressing their messages to certain people: using the @ sign before their usernames (Yus 2011: 137). Hashtags, too, were originally an invention made by Twitter users themselves and the popularity of the use of hashtags resulted in Twitter making hashtags a formal feature of Twitter in 2009 by making the hashtags hyperlinks that allow users to search for tweets with specific hashtags (Scott 2015: 12).

Using the hashtag (#) in Twitter communication is convenient because they save space from the 140 character limit and they provide an easy connection between the Twitter user and a wide audience (Yus 2011: 148). However, nowadays hashtags are not only used to connect tweets within the same topic as they have evolved to fulfill other functions as well. These functions and a more detailed explanation of hashtags is presented in section 2.1.1.

It is important to study CMC in relation to other social and communicative studies, and not as a secluded entity of its own. And as Locher (2010: 1) states, “Online communication is as real as offline interaction”. People still tend to differentiate between ‘real life’ and ‘online life’, which implies that ‘online life’ is somehow unreal (Locher 2010). This differentiation is of course outdated, because in the present day offline and online life has in many ways intertwined, largely due to social media.

Some differences between face-to-face communication and online communication are, however, inevitable due to the technological aspect of online communication. Boyd (2010: 7) names four affordances that according to her affect users’ participation in online communication. These affordances are persistence, replicability, scalability and searchability (Boyd 2010). As Scott (2015: 10) agrees that these affordances can be quite useful in understanding the discourse context of online communication, and in terms of this study how the distinct features of Twitter as a communicative channel affect the Twitter users’ discourse strategies. Although Boyd (2010: 7) acknowledges that these affordances are intertwined and codependent, for clarity’s sake I will now briefly take a look at each affordance in terms of Twitter.
Nowadays all online communication is often by default considered as persistent. As people tend to say, if you post something online, it will stay online forever. In the case of Twitter, even though a tweeter may delete a tweet at any time, chances are that someone somewhere had time to take a screenshot of it, or that it is otherwise stored somewhere online. However, even though the tweets may be persistent, they might very well lose their essence if they are read outside the original context that they were created in (Boyd 2010: 8).

The second affordance by Boyd (2010), is replicability: online content can easily be replicated. Normally it would be hard to differentiate between the original content and duplicates: finding the original message can prove to be hard online. But, in the case of Twitter this is in a way much easier as people tend to ‘retweet’ each other’s tweets instead of blatantly using copy-paste, and the retweets automatically show the original source of the message as in example 2 below. A retweet is marked with the letters ‘RT’ at the beginning of a message, followed by the username that the tweet is originally from.

```
rt @YsaCatapang: It was a little pitchy, @DrakeBell. #JustKidding Your performance was great!!!!#BerkeleyStar
```

*Example 2: a retweet*

The third of Boyd’s affordances is especially significant in terms of Twitter: scalability (Scott 2015). Twitter posts, or ‘tweets’ as I will continue to call them, can have an unlimited amount of readers, and Twitter users can have a limitless amount of followers. This means that the tweeter has no information about who reads their tweets and when they read them, and as such has no control over their potential audience (Scott 2015: 12). This is a
major feature of the discourse context of Twitter: the audience is ambiguous and can vary a great deal depending on the amount of retweets, followers and the used hashtags. The tweeter has to rely on the 140 character long text to communicate their message as intended, without being able to assume to have a shared context with most of their readers (Scott 2015: 12). Still, it is important to remember that as Boyd states in her study: “Scalability in networked publics is about the possibility of tremendous visibility, not the guarantee of it.” (Boyd 2010: 9).

The fourth affordance of online communication by Boyd (2010) is also extremely relevant when it comes to Twitter: Searchability. Online communication is in general highly searchable, but Twitter has made searching for specific tweets extremely easy for Twitter users. Hashtags are a big part of this searchability, as topical tagging is often used on Twitter and other microblogging sites to connect messages and speakers of the same topic, and hashtags in general are all hyperlinks that make finding tweets with a particular hashtag extremely easy. Searchability is such an important aspect of online communication that Zappavigna (2015: 289) describes online communication, especially on Twitter, as ‘searchable talk’. Zappavigna (2015: 289) explains that this searchability is not in any way limited to topical tagging, but instead it only marks the beginning of ‘searchable talk’ that connects microbloggers in multiple ways, through hashtags that provide social metadata about the users, such as their location and who they are talking to.

Another important aspect of CMC is the concept of the imagined audience: “a person’s mental conceptualization of the people with whom he or she is communicating.” (Litt 2012: 330). Online communication, especially social media communication, often happens in highly public environments where it is difficult for people to even grasp the potential size of their often invisible audience (Litt 2012: 330). When it can be assumed that close friends, acquaintances, family and colleagues are all in the same potential audience, not a lot of common ground can be assumed with all of them (Litt 2012:331). Could this kind of ambiguity of the imagined audience lead into an increase in
the use of communicative strategies of making the content of the message extremely clear? One way to stress important undertones in communication on Twitter is to use clarifying hashtags.

Different forms of social media are rising and falling all the time, but Facebook seems to be able to keep its position as by far the most commonly used social media platform, as it has been cited to be in 2010 (Lenhart et al. 2010: 3) as well as in 2016 (The Statistics Portal 2016). In addition to Facebook, different kinds of social media platforms are widely used for different needs: Instagram for picture sharing, Snapchat for quick messaging, and Twitter for status updates and conversations. Over 70 percent of online young adults and teens use social networking sites like these actively (Lenhart et al 2010: 3) and all of these social media platforms do have something important in common: they all make connecting with people easy, and the “human need for permanent connection” with other people as well as the need to know what others are doing has been described by Yus (2011: 136) as one of the main reasons for using social media.

2.1.1 Hashtags

Although hashtags are a relatively new phenomenon, they have already been the topic of a fair amount of studies in the academic field of CMC. Scott (2015) approaches hashtags and their pragmatic functions from a relevance-theoretic perspective and argues that hashtags contain pragmatically important information that guides the reader’s interpretation. Zappavigna (2015: 289) studies social media, Twitter and specifically hashtags from the systemic functional linguistics point of view and concludes that hashtags can have interpersonal and structural meanings in addition to being topic-markers. Caleffi (2015: 67) explores the typographical tendencies of creating hashtags in both online and offline environments, concluding that hashtags can be seen as the result of a new morphological process called ‘hashtagging’.
While tags are usually used as external metadata to describe the content of a text, in Twitter hashtags are an integral part of the message (Laniado 2010: 474). They are linguistically integrated into the structure of the tweet, while usually metadata is hidden and somehow separated from the main text (Zappavigna 2015: 278). Hashtags are marked with the # symbol and they can include an abbreviation (#lol), a word (#sorry), a phrase (#justkidding) or even an entire clause (#IWasJustKidding) (Zappavigna 2015: 275). There is no other limit for the length of a hashtag than the overall limit of 140 characters that can be used per message on Twitter. Hashtags are not case-sensitive (#SORRY and #sorry register as the same), and all letters and words must be written together (#sorrynotsorry but not #sorry not sorry) (Caleffi 2015: 48). Twitter users can develop their own hashtags, and they vary a lot in their shape and length (Caleffi 2015: 48), with the shortest ones being abbreviations and the longest ones can even fill up the whole 140 character limit. Caleffi (2015: 52) argues that hashtags have become a new morphological mechanism that produces items (hashtags) “whose linguistic nature may be difficult to identify and relate to any traditional part of speech”.

Abbreviations are quite common on Twitter, and it could be argued that the main reason for this is the 140 character limit to tweets. Tweeters need to omit elements from their messages, and trust that their readers are able to understand the message as intended even though the message is in an abbreviated form (Scott 2015: 9). This character limitation could also be explained to be the reason why contextual information is not often explained within the tweet itself and background information is rarely given (Scott 2015:10), although hashtags seem to have partially solved this problem, as they are often used to provide crucial contextual information in a concise and effective way.

Laniado (2010: 472) suggests that hashtags that have become popular and are much used on Twitter share certain features that have led to their popularity. These features are frequency, specificity, consistency of use and stability over time. In other words, a popular hashtag has to be used frequently, its meaning has to differ from the word without a hash (#), it is
used consistently by several users, and finally it should become a stable and meaningful part of the Twitter vocabulary (Laniado 2010: 472). Although hashtags can be used in several ways that do not always strive to meet these requirements, both of the hashtags of this study do fit with the description of a popular hashtag provided by Laniado (2010).

Hashtags are a part of a tweet’s linguistic structure but they also act as metadata, as Zappavigna (2015: 276) explains in her study, hashtags are “a form of descriptive annotation produced by users, rather than assigned by the microblogging service”. In her study about different linguistic functions of hashtags Zappavigna uses a metafunctional approach based on systemic functional linguistics (SFL), which considers that language enacts three simultaneous functions (experiential, interpersonal, and textual), which according to SFL have to be considered when analysing any linguistic meaning (Zappavigna 2015). These three functions can be implemented on hashtags as well. In this particular study, the hashtags are categorised into two main functions that are comparable with Zappavigna’s (2015) functions: topical hashtags and interpersonal hashtags.

2.1.2.1 Topical hashtags

The general use of hashtags on Twitter can be broadly divided into two different categories. The other main category is topical tagging, or as Zappavigna (2015) looks at it, the experiential function of tagging. Topical tagging is used for describing the content of the message, and by that making it easier for people to find tweets about a certain topic, event or theme. For example according to Twitter’s own trending topics list #MasterChefBR is a popular hashtag to use during the airing of this TV show in Britain, which helps the viewers who want to talk about the show on Twitter to find each other and react to each other’s tweets live during the airing of the said TV show. This kind of interaction that happens during a specific event is called live-tweeting. Lochrie and Coulton (2011) explain that live-tweeting has
formed a new kind of inter-audience discussion forum on Twitter and that mobile phones have become a second screen for TV. This evolvement has not gone unnoticed by TV broadcasters, as they often use Twitter and topical hashtags to further extend their relationship with the audience by interacting with the audience via Twitter and sometimes even showing a live Twitter feed on TV screen as well (Lochrie, Coulton 2011). In a similar way the example below shows the use of a topical hashtag in a live-tweeting situation.

Example 3: Topical tagging

In example 3 above the user @valdez_alex23 makes a comment about an American football game, which is made clear by the use of the time specific topical tag #CHIvsGB which lets the readers know the particular game that the tweet is commenting on (Chigaco Bears vs Green Bay Packers) as well as the other topical tag #BearsNation that refers to the group of Chicago Bears fans.

Topical tagging can also be used to sum up the topic of discussion or a relevant piece of information about the general context of the tweet without the aspect of live-tweeting. An example of this can be seen below.

Example 4: Topical tagging

Example 4 is a retweet by user @rditmas and in addition to the interpersonal #justkidding it also entails a topical hashtag #Thanksgiving that provides
information about what the content of the tweet relates to, which is in this case the celebration of Thanksgiving. As it can be seen from this example, topical hashtags are an efficient way to provide crucial metadata about the content of the tweet.

Topical tagging, however, is not the only way to use hashtags on Twitter. The other important functions are the ones that this study will concentrate on: hashtags with pragmatic meaning. Hashtags that carry pragmatic information are not constructed to provide topical information about the tweet, but to perhaps emphasise a certain word or guide the interpretation of the tweet. These kind of hashtags are called interpersonal and their possible functions include emphasis, humor, interpersonal relationships and organizing text (Zappavigna 2015).

2.1.2.2 Interpersonal hashtags

Interpersonal hashtags are not used to comply with the original function of hashtags on Twitter, topical tagging, which is a way to increase the searchability of different topics of conversation. Interpersonal hashtags are a relatively new creation by tweeters themselves, to use hashtags with various kinds of communicative functions that are not primarily topical or factually informative. Zappavigna (2015) defines the interpersonal function of hashtags as negotiating relationships, as they provide metacommentary about the content of the tweet, and tell about the tweeter’s attitude towards the subject at hand and the content of the tweet. An example of the use of interpersonal hashtags can be seen below from example 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alysha_Stone @alysha_stone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Love early morning sessions #justkidding #whodoes ?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Example 5: Interpersonal tagging*

In example 5 above the user @alysha_stone claims that she loves early morning sessions, sessions of what remains unknown, but the attitude of the
tweeter and the intended meaning of the tweet is clarified by the two interpersonal hashtags that follow the tweet: \#justkidding and \#whodoes, which go on to contradict the whole tweet and make it seem more like a sarcastic remark.

Both hashtags chosen for this study are interpersonal: \#justkidding and \#sorry are both interpersonal by nature, as they can be used to maintain interpersonal relations, to emphasise something, as means of sarcasm, or to make fun of something. It seems that interpersonal hashtags share a considerable amount of features with pragmatic markers, and could as such be studied as pragmatic markers, as I argue in this study. The definition of hashtags as pragmatic markers is further explained in section 2.4.1.

Both topical and interpersonal hashtags can also be used to organise posts: the # symbol provides a linguistic marker indicating the beginning of a tag and its status as metadata (Zappavigna 2015: 287). Hashtags can occur in multiple places in a tweet: they can be added to the very end of a tweet as additional data and separate from the rest of the tweet, or they can be integrated seamlessly into the content of the tweet (Zappavigna 2015: 287). This positional variation connects interpersonal hashtags with pragmatic markers, which can also occur in various positions within utterances.

Using hashtags, topical and interpersonal, has become a routine like custom in the world of Twitter. Coulmas (1981: 2) stresses the importance of routine and linguistic conventions, as enacting routines and using the specific register of a certain communicative group is an important part of being a successful member of the community, be it online or elsewhere.

2.4 Pragmatic markers

Interpersonal hashtags are used to provide information about the tone of the tweet and to uphold relationships with readers. These features, and others (c.f. 2.1.2.2), have a clear connection to pragmatics and especially to pragmatic markers. In essence, pragmatics is about the interpretation of
utterances (Scott 2015: 10), which seems to fit the general use of interpersonal hashtags on Twitter and their role as pragmatic markers in Twitter communication. CMC is an evolving form of communication as new kinds of social media are invented all the time and the communicative culture of different forms of CMC continues to change. In this evolving world of online communication the use of interpersonal hashtags seems to be a relatively new form of pragmatic markers. The research on pragmatic markers is interconnected with a broader field of research that studies small linguistic units and their connection to meaning, and often these linguistic units are called discourse markers.

Östman (1981: 1) describes language as a “communicative, context-sensitive system, socio-psychological instrument which is being used to communicate our ‘underlying’ intentions”. Understanding these underlying intentions requires a person to master not only the appropriate linguistic, but also the communicative competence that has to do with understanding different discourse types and registers, such as lying, joking and irony, as these skills are needed for knowing how to participate in the communication and to be aware of social norms such as politeness (Östman 1981: 1). Pragmatics makes a big part of communication, and it deals particularly with the notion of the underlying intentions of language that Östman (1981) talks about. Fraser (1996: 167) describes pragmatics as the “process by which the language user takes a sentence representation provided by the grammar and, given the context in which the sentence is uttered, determines what messages and what effects the speaker has conveyed.” In other words, pragmatics is about the process that enables language users to understand intended speech-acts and messages by taking the surrounding context of the situation into consideration and reading the situation by deciphering multiple linguistic and paralinguistic signals to reach the final conclusion of understanding.

One way to approach pragmatics is to look at the smaller and often ignored parts of language that carry meaning and guide the interpretation of an utterance, these linguistic items are called pragmatic markers. Earlier research on pragmatic markers is terminologically fuzzy as many studies
define the term slightly differently. However, it could be said that pragmatic markers have been studied as discourse markers since the late 1980’s, starting with names like Shriffrin (1987: 41), who describes discourse markers as “a functional class of verbal (and non-verbal) devices which provide contextual coordinates for ongoing talk”.

The term ‘discourse marker’ seems to be the most used as a broader term, but the terms and their definitions vary considerably in the field of linguistics. As Fraser (1999: 932) states, the term ‘discourse marker’ can be defined in multiple ways and it has been called pragmatic marker, discourse particle, pragmatic connective, pragmatic expression, and pragmatic particle, just to name a few. This diversity in the terminology reflects the overall complexity of the different functions that these markers have, as well as the broad range of approaches that can be taken towards the study of them (Ziv, Jucker 1998: 1). Although there does not seem to be a consensus on the terminology or the elements that should be counted as discourse markers, at least many researchers (Ziv, Jucker 1998, Fraser 1999, Brinton 1996) do agree that the terms that are used to describe discourse markers are at best fuzzy and their definitions vary from study to study.

Discourse markers seem to share certain basic features, but very few of them have all of them (Ziv, Jucker 1998: 2). Aijmer (1996: 200) describes discourse markers as “routinized elements which contribute to the coherence of discourse in various ways” and continues to add that discourse markers have the important function of commenting on and organizing information. ‘Discourse marker’ seems to be the most commonly used term because it covers a lot more ground than ‘discourse particle’ or ‘pragmatic connective’ for example. Another much used term is however, ‘pragmatic marker’, and this term is preferred by many researchers such as Brinton (1996: 30), who explains that ‘pragmatic marker’ better captures the wide range of functions that are filled by the linguistic items deemed as such. These functions include but are not limited to: expressing a connection and relevance of the pragmatic marker in terms of the earlier utterance, creating structure, and
managing interpersonal relationships (Brinton 1996: 31). For these reasons in this study I use the term ‘pragmatic marker’ as well.

Brinton (1996: 1) draws a parallel between pragmatic markers and the SFL point of view as she concludes that pragmatic markers can be defined by two main functions that also fall into the SFL categories: “textual” and “interpersonal”. Indeed, these two frameworks (SFL and pragmatics) seem to share some common ground in their respective perspectives. This comparison also supports the argument that interpersonal hashtags can be considered as pragmatic markers.

Grammatically speaking pragmatic markers can come from a variety of areas. Fraser (1996: 171) explains that pragmatic markers can be drawn from all sections of grammar (including verbs, nouns, adverbs, idioms). Functionally pragmatic markers provide a reflection of the ongoing “metalinguistic activity in the speaker’s mind”, meaning that pragmatic markers provide information about the speaker's attitudes and intentions. (Aijmer 2013: 4).

Using pragmatic markers requires a wide understanding of linguistic and paralinguistic conventions, while in the other end deciphering the situational meaning of pragmatic markers requires the reader or hearer to use clues such as the lexical meaning of the marker as well as its grammatical features, such as the position of the pragmatic marker (Aijmer 2013: 15). The positional distribution of pragmatic markers in utterances is considered to be quite open to variation, which is one of the defining characteristics of pragmatic markers. For example Aijmer’s (2013) results vary a lot in terms of the positional distribution of the pragmatic markers in question, with some of them appearing mostly in initial position, while others are mostly used in medial position. In general the positional tendencies seem to be quite different with different pragmatic markers.

In this particular study I argue that the interpersonal hashtags #sorry and #justkidding can be considered to be pragmatic markers because their
pragmatic functions and their positions within the tweets seem to comply with earlier findings about the functions and positions of pragmatic markers.

2.4.1 Hashtags as pragmatic markers

As I explain in section 2.1.2, hashtags can be divided into two clear categories of use: topical hashtags and interpersonal hashtags. Topical hashtags are used to increase the searchability of the tweet and to sum up the topic of conversation, while interpersonal hashtags are used with more broad communicative functions in mind. Out of the two kind of hashtags interpersonal ones can be considered to be pragmatic markers, as they are used to bring out the underlying intentions of the message.

In this study I consider the data, both hashtags #justkidding and #sorry, as pragmatic markers. Both Fraser (1996: 196) and Aijmer (1996: 216) describe pragmatic markers as separate and distinct parts of the content of an utterance. This correlates well with the use of many hashtags on Twitter and other social media, as they are clearly a separate part of the main message. The difference is brought on by the use of the hashtag mark (#) and also the tendency to add hashtags at the very end of the tweet, as a separate part of the main body of the message. Aijmer (1996: 216) calls pragmatic markers “afterthoughts” and further explains that they act as detached “speech-act adverbials” that “can appear initially, medially or finally”. This idea of changes in the placement of the marker is taken into specific consideration in the analysis of this study as it is relevant to find out whether the interpersonal hashtags of this study act according to earlier research on pragmatic markers, in terms of position as well as function.

Ziv and Jucker (1998: 4) describe the linguistic functions of pragmatic markers (or in his words discourse markers) as follows:

“Accordingly, discourse markers have been analysed as text-structuring devices (marking openings or closings of discourse units or transitions between them), as modality or attitudinal indicators, as markers of speaker-hearer intentions and
relationships, and as instructions on how given utterances are to be processed.”

The function of many interpersonal hashtags, including the particular hashtags of this study, match this description by Ziv and Jucker (1998). Hashtags are prominently used as means to create structure within the tweet: they often mark the end of a tweet, but they do act as transitional units within the tweet as well. Interpersonal hashtags are a means to connect with the readers of the tweet: as such they are integral in creating and upholding writer-reader relationships, especially because maybe most importantly they provide instruction to the intended tone and meaning of the message.

3 Materials and Methods

3.1 Twitter and Hashtags

The data of this study consists of tweets collected from Twitter that contain one of the two specific hashtags: #justkidding and #sorry. Twitter was chosen as the best social media platform for this particular study because hashtags originated on Twitter and thus the culture of using hashtags is most lively on Twitter. Additionally Twitter is a mostly text-based form of social media which suits a linguistic analysis better than many other forms of social media, such as Instagram or Facebook, which are more picture based and generally contain more multimedia content. Also, Twitter is used mostly as a ‘status update’ service, where users publish utterances that are often understandable separate entities meant for a wider audience and thus do not require much knowledge about what happened before or after the said tweet. Although, as it will be seen from the results of this study, this too is an element of Twitter that is rapidly changing.

The specific hashtags #justkidding and #sorry were chosen because of their popularity and high usage, and because they often have an interpersonal function instead of a topical one. The popularity and high usage of these hashtags can be seen from several statistics that are provided about the use
of hashtags on Twitter. These kinds of statistics were considered when deciding upon the hashtags of this study. For example Ritetag.com provides interesting facts about the use of #justkidding, which can be seen from the figure below.

Figure 1 #justkidding, ritetag.com, October 22nd

The figure above shows what hashtags are often used with the chosen #justkidding. The related hashtags have been colour coded: the blue ones (#notreally, #rickroll) are hashtags that are often used with #justkidding in long term, whereas the green ones (#climatechange, #china, #f1) are popular hashtags in relation to #justkidding during a shorter period of time. Lastly the gray hashtags are underused, which means that they have not been used much recently.

The colour codes tell us quite a lot about the general hashtag use on Twitter: the hashtags that change quickly (green) are often related to certain hot topics of discussion on Twitter, which makes them topical hashtags, while the hashtags that survive and thrive for a longer period of time (blue) are often interpersonal hashtags that have evolved to be a consistent linguistic element that stays in use longer.
Furthermore, the amount of use of the chosen hashtags #justkidding and #sorry has been looked into as well when looking for appropriate hashtags for this study. Frequency of use and the evaluated exposure numbers can be seen from figures 2 and 3 below.

Figure 2: #justkidding tweets frequency, ritetag.com

Figure 2 presents the usage data of #justkidding during 24 hours on October 22nd 2015. According to this figure #justkidding was used in a unique tweet 17 times per hour. Also, the figure presents a calculated estimation of how many Twitter users are exposed to the hashtag in an hour.

Figure 3: #sorry tweets frequency, ritetag.com
Figure 3 shows that #sorry was used 42 times per hour during the same 24 hours on October 22nd 2015, as well as the number of users that potentially saw the hashtag in use in Twitter during that same time. Both the amount of use of #justkidding and #sorry was thus deemed as popular enough for this study and popular enough to be a meaningful subject of study in general.

Another interesting aspect of the chosen hashtags is their relatively wide use around the world: not all tweets with these particular hashtags in them are written entirely in English. When it comes to studying tweets in general, it is important to remember the global scale of Twitter communication: people tweet in many languages and even when they tweet in English they might not be native English speakers. This affects the overall interpretation of this study as the data is a global sample of Twitter discourse instead of a controlled sample of only speakers from a certain part of the world. This means that the hashtags #justkidding and #sorry seem to have become globally used pragmatic markers that are often embedded into tweets in many languages. The distribution of the use of different languages with the hashtags #justkidding and #sorry can be seen from figure 4 below.
As it can be seen from the figure above, most tweets that use the hashtags #justkidding and #sorry are written in English, but a considerable amount of them are written in other languages as well. This highlights the status that these hashtags have in Twitter communication in general: they are stable units of language that do not necessarily need to be translated in order to be used in tweets.

### 3.2 Data Collection

The data for this study was collected by searching the chosen hashtags on a site called Topsy (www.topsy.com). This site was chosen because it is a certified partner of Twitter, and so it has all the Twitter data since 2006. Topsy also provides a tool for detecting the language used in a tweet, which makes it easier to limit the data to tweets in English. Additionally, a Topsy tool was also used to make a note of tweets that included pictures or links in them. This study concentrates on text-only tweets, with no pictures or links to other social media in them.
There was, however, an unexpected problem with the data search tool Topsy. It was shut down in late December 2015, due to changes in the ownership and development plans for the future. This means that I was not able to collect all the data that I previously planned on collecting. However, I was able to collect enough data to complete this study, even though the scope of it changed. The data collection for this study happened during November and December 2015. The data consists of batches of 100 tweets with a certain hashtag per collection time. The following data was collected for this study: #justkidding (200 tweets), #sorry (200 tweets). This makes a total of 400 tweets.

3.3 Method of Analysis

Firstly, the data collected for this study has been cleaned up, meaning that any remaining tweets in other languages than English have been removed, as well as possible duplicate retweets (duplicate tweets with the exact same content than another tweet). Out of the 400 collected tweets, a total of 176 tweets were text-only. For the analysis section of this study the data has been closely analysed and classified by the pragmatic functions of the hashtags in question. The specific pragmatic functions were determined by close examination of the data. At the end of the analysis process two clear pragmatic functions emerged for both #justkidding and #sorry. These functions are explained in detail in the results section 4.

In addition to the pragmatic functions I have also taken a look at the positioning of the hashtags: are they only used at the end of the tweet or does the position vary, and if so, does it correlate with earlier research of the positional distribution of pragmatic markers? Tables have been created to present the use of hashtags with different functions and their different positions within the tweets. Finally, a number of examples from all functional and positional categories are examined at closer level to make the classifications and definitions as clear as possible.
3.4 Ethical issues

As the distinction between the so called ‘real life’ and ‘online life’ is becoming more and more intertwined, the ethical issues of internet research are also expanding. It is often thought that everything that is publicly found online is fair game and automatically free to use, but a researcher should still keep in mind the basic ethical issues that cover all social research. Respecting people and their right to privacy online is important as well. In terms of the data collection in this study, the issues of identity and public vs. private communication are the most important aspects to consider.

The difference between a private and public space can be quite hard to define online, and one helpful option to differentiate these is to consider whether the users of a specific communication channel see it as a public or private space (Buchanan, Ess 2008: 280). In the case of this study, the data was collected from the public messages on the microblogging site Twitter. Twitter provides its users the option of sending private and public messages to each other, so I think that I can safely argue that the Twitter users understand the differences in these two ways of messaging on Twitter, and generally use those two ways of communication accordingly.

The issue of identity has also been a major theme in the ethics of online research discussion: there are multiple opinions to whether researchers should conceal the identities of their research subjects, and even their online pseudonyms (Buchanan, Ess 2008: 280). In the case of this study, I have chosen not to conceal the Twitter usernames, because they are all pseudonyms that do not reveal the user’s real names.

All in all, CMC provides some ethically tricky situations for researchers, especially in social sciences, but I think that in the case of this particular study the ethical aspect of the data collection is quite clear and fair.
4 Results

In the introduction of this thesis I present three research questions that all deal with different aspects of hashtag pragmatics: hashtag functions, intended meanings, and the question of whether hashtags could be called pragmatic markers. In order to find out the answers to these questions I have to look at the hashtags in relation to earlier research on pragmatic markers and their features, which includes the positional distribution of hashtags. This is why the results have been structured to provide both functional and positional information about the hashtags, as well as other interesting findings that emerged during the analysis process.

The following research questions were presented in the introduction of this study:

1. What kind of pragmatic functions do the hashtags #justkidding and #sorry have in the tweets?

2. How do the hashtags change the meaning of the message?

3. Can the hashtags #justkidding and #sorry be considered to be pragmatic markers?

In this section I strive to answer these questions by providing a pragmatic classification of the use of the two hashtags, #justkidding and #sorry. The tweets with #Justkidding were categorised to have two differing pragmatic functions: firstly tweets where the hashtag acted as a softener and secondly tweets where the hashtag acted as a contradicting marker. The tweets with #sorry were divided into two categories as well, according to their function of use. These categories are tweets where #sorry is used to express a serious apology, and the tweets where the hashtag is used as a ritual apology. In addition to the classification to these pragmatic functions a look at the structural use of the said hashtags is also provided, as their placement within the tweet is relevant in terms of comparing the hashtags to other pragmatic markers.
As stated in section 3.4.1, both #justkidding and #sorry are hashtags with an interpersonal function as they convey attitudes and enact relationships with the imagined audience, and they strive to create a connection between the tweeter and the reader. Additionally, in this particular set of data, #justkidding and #sorry are also used to organise text, as part of a tweet’s linguistic structure with the # acting as an emphasis, meaning that according to Zappavigna’s (2015) definitions they sometimes carry a textual function as well. One of these two functions do not rule the other one out, as the case seems to be in my data as well: these two functions are often intertwined.

4.1 #sorry

The data for #sorry was collected in two batches: on November 27th 2015 and December 6th 2015. Out of the 200 tweets 69 were text-only. The second collection time was coincidentally near the publication date of pop singer Justin Bieber’s single, called ‘Sorry’, which also affected the data collection, as all tweets using the hashtag #sorry in relation to the song and not the speech act of apologising, were ruled out from this particular study. Additionally 27 tweets out of the 69 text-only tweets were retweets (contained the same exact text as another tweet) or were not written in English, which leaves 42 tweets in total for this analysis.

According to the results of this study, #sorry seems to be used in several different types of situations in the realm of Twitter communication. In this study I was able to determine two main categories that the uses of #sorry can be divided into: ritual apologies and serious apologies. As one can see from table 1.1 below, in this set of data the amount of ritual apologies is far greater than the amount of serious apologies. This complies well with Aijmer’s (1996: 97) statement according to which apologies are most often “polite gestures” that “do not express the speaker’s true emotions”. Aijmer (1996: 97) further describes ritual apologies as softeners and as a way to ensure harmonious relationships.
The distribution of #sorry to serious and ritual apologies can be seen from table 1.1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ritual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As table 1.1 above shows, most of the instances of #sorry in this set of data were instances of ritual apologies, with the addition of only three instances of serious apologies. There were also 6 instances where the pragmatic function of the hashtag could not be determined, and these instances were categorised as 'unclear'. The following section 4.1.1 takes a closer look at #sorry as a ritual apology.

4.1.1 #sorry as a ritual apology

As it can be seen from table 1.1, most of the instances of #sorry were categorised to function as ritual apologies. Examples from this category can be seen from below.

**Sam Brownell @brownell_sam**

ran into my brother's doppelgänger last night and i told him he does not look like tom brady either #sorry

*Example 6: #sorry as a ritual apology*
In example 6 the user @brownell_sam tells a story about running into a look-a-like of his brother and then says that he did not look like the athlete Tom Brady either. @brownell_sam then adds the #sorry at the end of the tweet probably because the tweet itself could be interpreted as teasing or even rude. Still, the #sorry apology does not seem to be a serious one, because of the casual and joking tone of the tweet. Here the #sorry seems to function as a pragmatic softener and ritual apology, where the user makes sure that their message is not misunderstood in any possible context.

Remy Lyn @jerseyrem

RT @KapusoNation07: How come Rated K beats #KMJS11 on this year 2015 PMPC Star Awards for TV ? Where’s the credibility on that award givin #sorry

Example 7: #sorry as a ritual apology

In example 7 the user @jerseyrem retweets a tweet by @KapusoNation07 who wonders why one Filipino TV show won over another one in a Filipino TV awards show and then goes on to question the credibility of the said awards show, adding the #sorry at the end of the tweet. In this example as well as in example 1, the user first says something that can be interpreted as a negative remark, and then adds the #sorry at the end of the tweet to soften the message. In this particular instance the possibly rude remark is claiming that the mentioned award show does not have credibility. Both examples seem to embody Aijmer’s (1996) definition of “sorry” as a softener that does not reflect the writer’s true emotions but instead strives to soften the message to be less impolite. The use of the # symbol adds an emphasis on the apology, and guides the interpretation of the whole tweets.
4.1.2 #sorry as a serious apology

As table 1.1 displays, #sorry is used as a serious apology in only 3 tweets of the collected data. These instances were all directed at a specific Twitter user and they contained multiple apologies in addition to the #sorry at the end of the tweet. Examples of using #sorry as a serious apology can be seen from examples 8 and 9 below.

**Example 8: #sorry as a serious apology**

In example 8 the user @halimamoh360 apologises to another user multiple times within the one tweet. First @halimamoh360 begins with ‘sorry’ and explains that she did not understand something, followed by a repeat of ‘I'm sorry’ with multiple exclamation marks and a question mark to stress the importance of the utterance. @Halimoh360 then proceeds to add the request ‘forgive me?’ and the final #sorry at the very end of the tweet. In this particular tweet the #sorry at the end seems to function as a final thematic categorisation of the whole content of the tweet. The user is clearly very sorry about their behaviour, and is ready to apologise in any way that helps her situation.

**Example 9: #sorry as a serious apology**

Example 9 shows us a more simple form of a serious apology. Again, the tweet is directed at a specific user, this time a commercial account of the
Fitbit company. This instance of #sorry, even though it is serious, is not quite as serious as the apology in example 8. The user @b_odams first claims that they just noticed something and adds the #sorry and the additional #iamanidiot to the end of the tweet. In this case the user does not include any additional apologies into the body of the tweet, but the additional #iamanidiot does provide confirmation that the apology is serious, as the user brings himself down as the person who was wrong with it.

4.1.3 The position of #sorry

Table 1.2 shows the position of the #sorry in the collected data. The position of #sorry varies but it is clearly most frequently positioned at the end of a tweet (30 instances) and also sometimes used in the middle of a tweet (6 instances). The #sorry is however never used initially in this particular set of data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Initial</th>
<th>Medial</th>
<th>Final</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As it can be seen from the table 1.2 above, the large majority of #sorry instances are found at the end of the tweet, outside the sentence structure of the tweet itself. This is interesting as Aijmer (1996: 216) shows that although syntactically separate, pragmatic markers can occur in multiple positions (initial, medial and final). This clear tendency of #sorry to be used at the end position could be due to the short history of hashtag use, as topical hashtags are usually added at the very end of a tweet and the creation of interpersonal hashtags is still a relatively new phenomenon.
In example 5 below the #sorry is used in a medial position, which correlates with earlier research about the positional flexibility of pragmatic markers. The use of a hashtag before the word also adds an emphasising effect on the word ‘sorry’ within the tweet.

- **Rendrick** - @rendrickmachado

No way I cannot believe I watching at Tronnor videos #Sorry but is cute @ConnorFranta

*Example 10: #sorry position in tweet*

In example 10 above the user @rendrickmachado addresses another user and claims that they cannot believe that they are watching certain videos, using the #sorry in the middle of the tweet. In this case the use of #sorry is in no way seriously apologetic, and it has been classified as a ritual use of the hashtag. The decision to add the # in front of the word ‘sorry’ in the middle of a sentence adds to the emphasis of the word.

### 4.1.4 #sorry unclear cases

Some of the tweets (6 instances) were categorised as unclear because the appropriate pragmatic function of #sorry could not be determined clearly enough. These tweets were in general too confusing to understand and as such had to be ruled out of classification.

Most of the unclear cases are tweets that consist of hashtags only, as is example 11.
Example 11: ‘#sorry unclear cases’

As it can be seen from example 11, tweets that have no other content than the hashtag are quite impossible to analyse on their own, as the reader has no idea what the #sorry is referring to. This is due to the evolving nature of using Twitter to have conversations with other users instead of just writing isolated status updates. This is also the case with tweets that are hard to understand because of lacking context even though they have text in them, as in the second example of the ‘unclear’ category, as seen below in example 12.

Example 12: ‘#sorry unclear cases’

The tweet in example 12 is a retweet and clearly a response to something, but as the whole conversation is not available, it is quite hard to understand its meaning. As such, the #sorry at the end of the tweet remains a mystery, as it is hard to guess what the tweeter is referring to with the use of #sorry.

The data also contains two instances where the user does not refer to themself when they use the #sorry within the tweet, and these cases were categorised as unclear as well. An example of a case like this can be seen from example 13 below.
**Example 13: #sorry unclear cases**

In example 13 the user @rhemd_ uses #sorry to refer to another person’s actions, instead of their own. @rhemd_ does not want to apologise to anyone, seriously or ritually, instead they use the word to describe other people’s deeds. This kind of use is clearly different from the other instances, as the user does not allude to their own personal communication but instead comments on another person’s ways of communicating, and as such it did not seem to fit into either of the functional categories.

### 4.2 #Justkidding

The data with #justkidding was collected in two batches: on November 27th and on December 6th 2015. Out of the 200 tweets 107 were text-only. The other 93 tweets included pictures and links to other social media sites such as Vine, Instagram and Youtube, and these tweets were excluded from this particular study. After this possible retweets that occurred multiple times in the data were removed as well. After the elimination process 84 unique text-only tweets were left to be analysed for this study.

According to the results of this study, #justkidding too seems to have multiple functions in the world of Twitter communication. I was able to determine two main pragmatic functions for the uses of #justkidding in the data: #justkidding as a softener and #justkidding with a contradicting function. Unlike with the #sorry data, the division between the use of these two functions was quite even, as it can be seen from table 1.3 below.
Table 1.3 The distribution of #justkidding according to whether it has a softening or a contradicting function

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Softening</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contradicting</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclear</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.2.1 #Justkidding as a softener

Over half of the data consisted of tweets that used the #justkidding as means to soften the main message of the tweet. Aijmer (2013: 89) describes the softening function as mainly being used to “maintain a harmonious relationship between the speakers” or as in this case, between the reader and writer. These tweets are mainly some kinds of claims that could be regarded as impolite or face threatening towards other Twitter users, with the final addition of #justkidding usually at the end of the tweet. This category of #justkidding as a softener is quite similar to the ritual use of #sorry that was presented in the earlier section, as many of those instances too included a softening function. An example of #justkidding as a softener can be seen below from example 9.

**dobbyisapoorelf @dobnatt**

@Pacharamala @aiiamai Yes I know, I am smart and handsome haha #justkidding

*Example 14: #justkidding as a softener*

In example 14 the Twitter user @aiiamai first directs their message to two other users and then praises himself, ending the tweet with “haha #justkidding”. In this case, as in other cases where the hashtag is used as a softener, the #justkidding seems to have been added to the end to make sure
that the previous statement is meant to be taken with a grain of salt. In this particular case the “haha” that precedes the hashtag in a way functionally synonymous with #justkidding, as it is meant to let the reader know that the writer is laughing and does not mean their message to be serious. This instance of #justkidding as a softener can be considered mostly lighthearted and playful, but some instances of the data are closer to actual potentially rude utterances that are softened with the hashtag, as it can be seen from the next example.

Chris Hogan @chrishogan360

RT @adamwnewsome: @ChrisHogan360 I was taught that if you don't have something nice to say, don't say nothing! #justkidding #BBN

Example 15: #justkidding as a softener

In example 15 above the user @chrishogan retweets a message that was originally addressed to him by @adamwnewsome, who in their tweet exclaims that he was taught “that if you don’t have something nice to say, don’t say nothing! #justkidding #BBN”. The latter hashtag #BBN is a topical hashtag that refers to the fans of University of Kentucky sports fans who are called Big Blue Nation (BBN). In this example the #justkidding is again used as means to soften the main body of the tweet, to make sure that it is not taken too seriously and the readers do not get offended.

4.2.2 #Justkidding with a contradicting function

In addition to the use of #justkidding as a softener, as presented in the previous section, the said hashtag does have another equally prominent pragmatic function in this set of data: the contradicting function. The use of #justkidding with a contradicting function is in essence the same as using sarcasm, as in these cases the use of #justkidding changes the whole meaning of the tweet to the complete opposite of what is being literally said in
it. Liebrecht, Kunneman, and van den Bosch (2013: 30) describe that sarcasm is characterised by shifts in the evaluative valence of the utterance. Liebrecht et al. (2013: 30) further specify that these shifts can go two ways: a literally positive utterance can shift to an intended negative meaning, or vice versa, a literally negative utterance can shift to an intended positive meaning. In this particular study the shift seems to go mainly from negative to positive, as potentially negative utterances are turned into sarcastic remarks or jokes with the help of #justkidding.

Because sarcasm is a specific type of irony, the terms ‘verbal irony’ and ‘sarcasm’ are often used interchangeably. Burgers, van Mulken and Schellens (2011: 190) define verbal irony as “an utterance with a literal evaluation that is implicitly contrary to its intended evaluation”, which matches the definition of sarcasm by Liebrecht et al. (2013) in the paragraph above. In this particular study I only use the term ‘sarcasm’ to cover the contradicting function and the evaluative shift that the #justkidding has in these particular instances. The first example of a tweet that uses #justkidding with a contradicting function can be seen below from example 11.

**Example 16: #justkidding with a contradicting function**

In example 16 the Twitter user @saveautohistory addresses their tweet to two other users and then asks them “Football? There’s football today? How come I didn't know? #justkidding”.

![We Save Auto History @saveautohistory](image-url)

@FireballWhisky @Dee_Kujo Football? There’s football today? How come I didn't know? #justkidding
moved from Twitter communication to spoken language, one would imagine that the #justkidding would be replaced by a sarcastic tone of voice and possibly other telling paralinguistic tactics. A similar pattern as in example 11 can be seen from the second example of this category below.

**Case @caseyireneb3**

Thankful for having the flu and a 101.5 temperature #justkidding

*Example 17: #justkidding with a contradicting function*

In example 17 the user @caseyireneb3 addresses the tweet to all possible followers and writes “Thankful for having the flu and 101.5 temperature #justkidding”. Again, the sarcastic tone can be read from the tweet without the added hashtag, as it can be generally said that not many people enjoy being ill. Still, @caseyireneb3 decides to add the telling #justkidding at the very end of the tweet just to be sure that the sarcastic and contradicting nature of the utterance does not go unnoticed by any possible reader.

**4.2.3 #Justkidding textual reference**

In some cases it could be argued that the #justkidding is not directly related to the whole tweet, but instead it comments on another hashtag, which most often occurs right before #justkidding. An example of a case like this can be seen below in example 18. These cases have also been analysed in terms of the pragmatic function of the hashtag (softening or contradicting), but the particular use of the hashtag differs from other cases, which is why a closer look at these cases is deemed worthy and interesting.
Aubree Anderson @auuubraayeee

Started the day with zero Thanksgiving plans. Ended the day having gone to three different Thanksgiving dinners. #getonmylevel #justkidding

Example 18: #justkidding textual reference

In example 18 the Twitter user @auuubraayeee describes her Thanksgiving experience and tells the readers that she ended up going to three separate Thanksgiving dinners. She then ends the tweet with two hashtags: #getonmylevel followed by #justkidding. Although it is possible that @auuubraayeee means to refer to the whole tweet with #justkidding, it seems more probable that she means only to refer to the first hashtag #getonmylevel with it, because the first hashtag (#getonmylevel) is a statement that could be interpreted as obnoxious or even rude. This means that the pragmatic function of the hashtag is definitely softening, however the commentary relation to the first hashtag instead of the whole tweet makes this and a few other instances stand out from the other ones.

4.2.4 The position of #Justkidding

The distribution of the position of #justkidding looks very similar to the positional distribution of #sorry that can be seen from table 1.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initial</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medial</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.4 The position of #Justkidding
As it can be seen from the table above, most of the use of #justkidding happens at the very end of the tweet, as a separate construction after the main body of the message. This way the hashtag’s function as metadata that guides the interpretation of the whole tweet is emphasised. In this set of data there are only five instances where #justkidding is used medially, and zero instances where it is used initially. The medial use of #justkidding as a part of the structure of the tweet adds a certain emphasis on the phrase in the middle of an utterance, as it can be seen from example 14 below.

**fadi francis @fadi__francis**

RT @YsaCatapang: It was a little pitchy, @DrakeBell. #JustKidding Your performance was great!!!! #BerkeleyStar

*Example 19: #justkidding position*

In example 19 @fadi__francis retweets a tweet originally by @YsaCatapang. The tweet is addressed to the official Twitter account of an American singer @DrakeBell. In the tweet the original tweeter @YsaCatapang criticises the singer by saying “It was a little pitchy, @DrakeBell. #Justkidding Your performance was great!!!! #BerkeleyStar”. The latter hashtag is a topical hashtag that lets the reader know that the tweet is about a singing competition called ‘Berkeley Star’. In this instance #Justkidding is used with a contradicting function, as the writer actually means the opposite of what they first say, but instead of ending the tweet with the said hashtag, the tweeter continues and elaborates that the performance was actually great.

**4.2.5 #justkidding unclear cases**

Some of tweets with the #justkidding (15 instances) could not be categorised as contradicting or as softening, because the pragmatic function of the hashtag could not be determined clearly enough. These tweets were
categorised as ‘unclear’, and they are in general too short (consist of only the hashtag) or in other ways too confusing.

As it is with the unclear cases of #sorry, some of the unclear cases of #justkidding are tweets that consist of the hashtag only, but most of them are tweets that are clearly a part of a broader conversation which cannot be seen from the one tweet alone. This makes determining the intentions of the message quite hard, as it can be seen from example 20 and example 21 below.

Example 20: #justkidding unclear cases

In example 20 it is quite impossible to determine what the #justkidding is meant to allude to, whether it is about the whole tweet or just the latter part of it. Similarly the following hashtags do not clarify the message of the tweet at all, and thus it has been classified as unclear.

Example 21: #justkidding unclear cases

Example 21 is a good example of a tweet that is missing a lot of important context, as it is clearly a response or comment to something that the reader now has no idea about. There are no topical hashtags to inform about what kind of ‘winning’ the user is talking about. Also, as it was in example 20, it is
unclear what the #justkidding is referring to: whether it is meant to comment on the whole tweet or just the hashtag #roundtwo before it.

All in all the unclear cases of both #sorry and #justkidding were mostly due to lack of context, which leads to other problems such as determining the relationship between the tweet and the hashtag in question. Nevertheless, most of the tweets with both #justkidding and #sorry were clear enough to be analysed and categorised, so the unclear cases are only a relatively small percentage of the whole set of data.

5 Discussion

In the introduction section of this study the research questions and goals for this study are presented: I set out to find out about the pragmatic functions that the hashtags #justkidding and #sorry have in Twitter communication, whether hashtags could be called pragmatic markers and how their use possibly changes the meaning of the tweets. As explained in the results section, two main pragmatic functions could be determined for both #justkidding and #sorry: softening and contradicting functions for #justkidding, serious and ritual functions for #sorry. The results confirm the presupposition that is presented in the introduction: hashtags do have varying pragmatic functions and they relate to managing relations by conveying important information about the tone of the tweets. #Justkidding is often used to joke, to express sarcasm and to soften the content of the tweets, while #sorry is sometimes used to seriously apologise, but more often to soften the main message with a ritual apology. The two hashtags do share some common ground as #justkidding as a softener and #sorry as a ritual apology can both be used to soften the message within the main body of the tweet.

Both #justkidding and #sorry change the meaning of the tweets in the data a great deal, as they often turn the whole meaning of the message around, or soften the messages considerably. It could be argued that if there was enough common ground between the tweeter and the reader, the latter could decipher that the tweeter is for example kidding even without the hashtag
#justkidding, but this kind of common ground and knowledge cannot be assumed in a generally public microblogging site as Twitter. This means that it would be highly likely that the omission of the #justkidding, in many of the cases in this study, would result in miscommunication. As such, the results of this study imply that the use of hashtags is an important part of Twitter communication and omitting them would radically change the meaning of the tweets. Hashtags are a big part of the nature of Twitter communication, as they help Twitter users to communicate efficiently while managing relations and keeping the social harmony intact in the communication.

I argue that the interpersonal hashtags #justkidding and #sorry can be considered to be pragmatic markers, and thus they act as an important element of conveying the underlying intentions to the readers. Interestingly, the positional distribution of both #justkidding and #sorry do not fully correspond to the positional distribution of pragmatic markers in earlier research. According to Aijmer (2013: 44, 80) the position of pragmatic markers varies quite a lot, with instances often occurring in all three positions (initial, medial and final), whereas in the results of this study only two positions were represented (medial and final), with the final position being the most common. However, this difference in positional distribution might be due to genre differences (c.f. 4.1.3) as hashtags, especially topical ones, are usually added to the very end of the tweet. However, both of the hashtags in this study were not only used in a final position, but also medially, which could imply that the function of interpersonal hashtags as pragmatic markers could be changing this custom on Twitter.

The importance of hashtags in Twitter communication is enhanced by the special nature of CMC communication in general, as online communicators have had to develop ways to convey the nonverbal aspects of communication in an online environment, this is often done via various linguistic and paralinguistic tactics (Park 2008: 2056). These tactics comprise of devices such as emoticons, emojis, memes, and hashtags. Liebrecht et al. (2013: 35) explain that hashtags and similar paralinguistic elements of CMC communication can be thought of “as the social media equivalent of
nonverbal expressions that people employ in live interaction when conveying sarcasm." This idea supports the category of #justkidding with a contradicting function (cf. 4.2.2) as #justkidding is often used to convey sarcasm and to make sure that the sarcastic remark is understood as such and not taken seriously. Interestingly, emoticons have been proven to be used in a similar way, to provide the intended humorous context to utterances that are meant as jokes or irony (Skovholt, Gronning, Kankaanranta 2014: 788).

Furthermore, interpersonal hashtags and emoticons are generally similar communicative tools, as emoticons have been called “pragmatic modifiers” because they too are often used to soften the messages that they are attached to (Skovholt et al 2014: 792). This particular function is quite similar to the softening function of #justkidding and the ritual use of #sorry in the data of this study. Skovholt et al (2014: 792) explain that emoticons are used “to downplay potentially face-threatening directives”, which correlates well with the results of this study. The ritual uses of #sorry, as explained with the help of Aijmer (1996: 97) earlier in section 4.1.1, are not sincere apologies, but can instead be regarded as ritual apologies, or softeners.

There is a clear connection between frequency and the meaningfulness of an utterance: if a specific utterance becomes extremely frequent, it begins to lose the power of its meaning. Coulmas (1981: 4) mentions a few examples of routine expressions that have lost some of their meaningfulness because of their frequent use, such as ‘Nice to meet you!’ I would argue that in the context of this study the #sorry most often seems to be affected by this kind of erosion of meaning, as it is clearly used more often in a routine like way instead of using it as a serious apology.

As pragmatics and pragmatic markers deal with the underlying intentions and communicative goals, they also consequently deal with politeness. As David Morand (2003:1) states, “Politeness theory is systematically related to variables of interest in CMC research – such as status, cohesion, impersonality, friendship and communicative efficiency”. All linguistic interaction is automatically also managing social relations (Spencer-Oatey 2000: 12) and because of that people are automatically not only interested in
their own face and its needs, but also taking into consideration the face needs of others. Both Brown and Levinson (1987) and Spencer-Oatey (2000) agree that losing face is an awful experience, and that is why it is usually in everyone’s best interest to manage each other’s faces. The results of this study also imply that hashtags can be used, and are used, as means of politeness, mostly to avoid situations where someone’s face needs could be compromised. Spencer-Oatey (2000: 35) also states that it is often perceived to be “more embarrassing and face threatening to be criticized or praised in front of one or more people than to be criticized privately.” Keeping this in mind, it could be that the generally public nature of Twitter communication leads to the use of more ‘safe’ communication strategies, as in apologising for something just in case, or adding the #justkidding at the end of a sarcastic remark just to make sure that all the readers understand the intended irony.

In a microblogging environment, such as Twitter, where the tweeter largely communicates to an imagined audience, features like hashtags and emoticons are important social cues and the lack of them would make misunderstanding more probable (Scott 2015: 11). All in all, my findings seem to support Caleffi’s (2015) and Zappavigna’s (2015) results in the sense that hashtags have become their own linguistic strategy and structure that can be used in multiple ways and that can carry various pragmatic functions.

As language is a tool for managing interpersonal relations, it is often used to promote and maintain harmony in social relations (Spencer-Oatey 2000: 3), as is the case with both #justkidding and #sorry. Especially #sorry is, in some cases, clearly used as a preemptive tool to make sure that the readers do not feel that their faces are threatened due to the tweet, this is often the case with both serious and ritual use of the hashtag #sorry. In these cases the tweeter takes the reader’s face needs in consideration even before they have had the chance to respond to the tweet. This is interesting because as Spencer-Oatey (2000: 18) states, apologies are usually post-event speech acts, meaning that typically some kind of a social offence has already taken place before the apology is issued. I would argue that the biggest reason for
this is the technological aspect of Twitter, or as Boyd (2010) described one of the affordances of CMC communication, the scalability of Twitter communication. Twitter users have no way to control their potential audience (Scott 2015: 12) as the size of their audience might be anything from a few readers to millions of readers, and the readers are not aware of the tweeter's attitude and thoughts about the content of the tweet without the additional hashtag. Within Twitter communication apologising later, be it seriously or ritually, might simply be too little too late, as things can escalate quickly in a microblogging site and all of the tweets can be read on their own, possibly without the context of the possible following tweets. Preemptive apologising is also unlikely to be face-threatening to the tweeter if the offence is a minor one, and in these cases the apology often forms to be a routine (Spencer-Oatey 2000:18).

It has been established that hashtags are an important part of reaching communicative goals on Twitter, but in addition to that they are also an integral part of Twitter's rhetoric. Hashtags are a stylistic choice as well as a communicative choice. Hashtags allow tweeters to communicate casually and informally, while at the same time they provide the readers important contextual information in a concise way (Scott 2015: 13). Hashtags manage relations, especially the hashtags with an interpersonal function, such as the hashtags #sorry and #justkidding. They connect the tweeter to the audience and help to keep the tweet in the 140 character limit (Scott 2015: 13).

Interestingly, the formation of hashtags seems to combine two major elements of language: innovation and routine. As stated by Coulmas (1981), both of these elements are fundamental to language and communication. Hashtags are highly innovative, as their formation provides countless options for the writer: they can use the hashtag to convey a number of communicative functions and morphologically and syntactically form the hashtag as they please. This way, hashtags create new innovative utterances and ways of communicating every day. On the other hand, hashtags, like other parts of language, are a part of the social world of communication, and as such they are treated like any other new form of
language: some of them stick around and some of them don’t. Certain hashtags in a certain morphological and syntactic form have become conversational routines that are used frequently and broadly from all over the world and with different languages (c.f. 3.1), such as #justkidding and #sorry, which are also used in tweets that have no other utterance in English in them. These kinds of patterns of language that remain in the same form even when the language around it changes have become global because of the online contact via mediums like Twitter that connect people from around the world.

Why do people then decide to add the # symbol before a word or phrase, instead of leaving it out? Why use #justkidding and #sorry as a hashtag at all, why not just add the words “just kidding” or “sorry” at the end of the tweet? This study agrees with the earlier studies by Zappavigna (2015), Caleffi (2015), Scott (2015) and others in saying that using a hashtag form does make a difference. Hashtags can be used as informative and thus important pragmatic markers, and although the initial reason of use might be saving space in the 140 character limit, hashtags have developed into linguistic elements that carry meaning and that are a style choice as well. As this study shows, adding the hashtag before the word or phrase slightly changes the meaning of that utterance: it guides the reader’s interpretation, it emphasises it, and connects it with all other messages using the same tag. Especially the importance of the emphasis created by the addition of the hashtag cannot be stressed enough, as adding the emphasis with the hashtag highlights the word in the reader’s mind, highly affecting the interpretation of the whole tweet (Scott 2015: 14). People who use #justkidding or #sorry do it knowingly and take part in a linguistic movement where it is common to “hashtagify” phrases and use a feature such as #justkidding. In addition to being practical, it unifies people, as using the same sort of language strategies and slang expressions such as hashtags can increase inter-speaker solidarity (Andersen 2001: 17).

This particular study takes a close look at the use of two specific hashtags and their pragmatic functions in Twitter communication. However, this is quite
a narrow scope and does not provide ground for generalising the results to the use of all interpersonal hashtags on Twitter, for which a larger scale study would be needed. Also, it has to be noted that all of the tweets in this study have been collected during November and December 2015, which makes the results a window to the use of the hashtags during that particular time. Again, a more wide scope in terms of the collection time of data would also be beneficial to a larger scale study. Finally, when it comes to analysing intended meanings, humour, and sarcasm, the subjective view of the researcher plays a big role in analysing the data, which has to be taken into consideration as well when reading the results of this study. Nevertheless, this study has strived to create clear enough functional categories and definitions so that any other researcher that would study the data from the same point of view would come to at least similar conclusions. More on possible ideas for future studies and other concluding remarks on the themes of this particular study can be read from the next section.

6 Conclusions

I suggest in the introduction of this study that hashtags have evolved from their original intended function, and I believe that I have shown that to be true in the results of this study. These results are in this way similar to many other recent studies on hashtags, and that is why it can be safely argued that new communicative functions of interpersonal hashtags, such as hashtags as softeners and as markers of sarcasm and joking, are here to stay in addition to the still important search function of topical tagging (Scott 2015: 19).

Hashtags have become conversational routines in Twitter discourse and they seem to have multiple pragmatic functions. Only the imagination of the tweeters seems to be the limit of the scope of different ways of their use. Social media, and especially the mostly text-based world of the microblogging site of Twitter provides a perfect playground for imaginative people to create and test out new ways to use hashtags in their communication. Zappavigna (2015: 278) even argues that hashtags and their
new ways of use are a part of a bigger shift regarding the role of metadata: that it is not just about categorising and tagging, but more towards active commentary.

The use of hashtags might have started on Twitter, but the phenomenon has definitely spread across to other mediums online and to face-to-face communication as well, as it has been stated by Caleffi (2015) and Zappavigna (2015) among others. It will be interesting to see how the use of hashtags in all kinds of communication will evolve with time: whether they will be replaced by something new altogether, or whether they take a more prominent place in language in general. Both of the hashtags in this study, #sorry and #justkidding, are popular now, but whether their popularity will prevail and their ways of use change with time will remain to be seen.

The idea of language change and contact is evolving as the contact does not need to be physical anymore, largely due to the innovations in CMC and especially social media. Andersen (2001: 3) calls young people the pioneers of linguistic change, which makes the effect of CMC on language change even more relevant as social media and other CMC channels are largely used by young people. It has been reported that since 2006 teens and young adults have moved from macro-blogging (blogs, online journals) to micro-blogging (short status updates), while macro-blogging has increased among older adults (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, Zickhur 2010: 2). Twitter users are mostly made of young adults as “one-third of online 18-29 year olds post or read status updates” on Twitter (Lenhart et al 2010: 3). Still, though young people have been called a “prime source of information about ongoing linguistic developments”, it is still important to remember that age is not the only important parameter in sociolinguistics (Andersen 2001: 7). Also, it is quite important to keep in mind that new linguistic forms (such as hashtags) could also be only a manifestation of that particular age and time that will not last or spread to other language users.

A new way of communicating requires a new way of looking at language. In addition to the notion of the implications of sociolinguistics, language change and CMC, it would also be interesting to approach the changing language of
CMC via speech act theory. This would need new perspectives, as Reed suggests (as cited in Culpeper 2013) that online interactions should not be taken as digital texts but instead as digital acts, which would mean that a retweet could be considered a ‘tweet act’. Continuing on this logic ‘liking’ something on Facebook could be taken as a digital act, as well as using hashtags such as #sorry. This proves that online communication is an important part of the daily language contact and communication of the people of today, and as it is claimed in the background section, online life has intertwined with offline life in a way that requires new perspectives on the study of language and communication in general.

Although hashtags have been studied during recent years, I am sure that there is still a lot more to find out about them, and many perspectives that have not yet been explored at all. On a general level these new perspectives could include studies on hashtags and politeness, use of hashtags compared in different social media, a comparison of hashtags and emojis, and the use of hashtags outside CMC. More specifically it would also be interesting to continue the study of pragmatic hashtag functions, but in a larger scale, with a larger set of hashtags or perhaps as a corpus study. As this study focuses on two specific hashtags only, it would be interesting to see a larger scale examination of different kinds of interpersonal hashtags and their pragmatic functions. Instead of a hashtag specific data collection, this could be done by an all-inclusive data collection of a larger amount of tweets. This way the amount of topical hashtag and interpersonal hashtag use could also be verified.
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