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Likes, Tweets And Other “Friends”: Social Media Buzzwords From A Terminology Perspective

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Abstract

Social media have developed at a rapid pace since the beginning of the 21st century and have undoubtedly come to play an integral part in the social and professional life of billions of people worldwide, defining many of our communication habits and affecting the way we talk. As the title suggests, the present paper centers on social media terminology in English and focuses on those social media terms that have become buzzwords - that is, terms which have migrated into general language and which are used in everyday communication. In particular, the aim of this paper is to discuss the status of these widely used linguistic units from a terminology perspective, i.e. whether they are terms or words, and to examine three term-formation patterns characteristic of widely used social media vocabulary: terminologization, conversion and derivation.

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1. Introduction

Not long ago perceived as “kids’ stuff” or a waste of time, the use of social media has quickly and undoubtedly become a “serious business”. Recent years have witnessed a constant, unprecedented development of social media worldwide. Defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content” (Kaplan and Haenlién 2010: 61), social media include (but are not limited to) social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Google+, LinkedIn), microblogging

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sites (e.g. Twitter, Tumblr), blogging sites (e.g. Wordpress, Blogger), photo- and video-sharing sites (e.g. Flickr, Pinterest, YouTube) and social bookmarking or news aggregation sites (e.g. Digg, Reddit) (cf. Flynn 2012).

Social media have undoubtedly come to play an integral part in the social and professional life of billions of people worldwide, tailoring new communication practices and altering social relations. The ongoing technological advances in social media, the increasing number of publications on social media, the university courses or degrees in social media as well as the professional organizations providing training and certification in social media, national and international social media awards, the new job titles that have emerged on the labour market (e.g. social media manager / coordinator / specialist / consultant / copywriter) are just a few examples that illustrate the broadening scope of social media in recent years and attest its growth into both a professional and an academic field, which is inextricably linked to a variety of other fields, such as communication, public relations, marketing, advertising education and politics.

The explosive growth of social media has sparked significant scholarly interest in the field. Considering the focus of most academic research in social media, however, one will soon notice that the terminology of this recent field is completely neglected. As the main component of specialized communication, “terminology plays a crucial role wherever and whenever domain-specific information and knowledge is generated, used, recorded and processed, passed on, implemented, translated and interpreted” (Infoterm, 2005), and consequently, the development of domain-specific terminologies, has become a top priority concern to meet the requirements of 21st century specialized communication.

Acknowledging the importance of terminology to effective specialized communication, the present paper is an attempt at initiating academic research into social media vocabulary. As the title indicates, I have decided to begin my investigation of social media terminology with an analysis of those English terms that have become buzzwords, i.e. terms that a considerable number of people have become familiar to and use in everyday communication. Most of these terms are related to Facebook and Twitter – two of the leading social media platforms worldwide. The next section addresses the question of whether these terms, given their migration into everyday language, belong to general language (i.e. they are words) or to specialized language (i.e. they are terms). In the third section of the paper, I turn my attention to the way in which these linguistic units were formed from a terminology perspective and I discuss three term-formation patterns characteristic of widely used social media vocabulary: terminologization, conversion and derivation.

2. Social media buzzwords: general or specialized vocabulary?

Let us consider the following sentences, which are very likely to be encountered in contemporary everyday communication in English: “I’ve reached 100 *likes* on my *post*.”, “Why didn’t you *comment* on my *status*?” “I’m going to *unfriend* you if you keep *poking* me.”, “Not only that you *tagged* me in that horrible picture, but you also *posted* it on my *wall*.”, “How often do you *tweet*?” Or the one that makes the headline of an article I have just come across, published by CNN International in September 2010: “Many social networkers happy just *to lurk*”. Had they been uttered no more than six or seven years ago, such sentences would have made no sense to many of us; nowadays, however, they are at least familiar to most of us. What is more, many linguistic units such as the ones in italics above, which designate social media concepts related to certain extremely popular platforms (mostly Facebook and Twitter, but also Pinterest and Instagram), have become recurrent presences in our lives in one form or another.

Whereas, as mentioned earlier, there has been no scholarly interest in the terminology of this new, dynamic field (not to my knowledge, at least), social media buzzwords, i.e. the linguistic units exemplified in the previous paragraph, have nevertheless been the subject of many non-academic articles in various online, general audience publications (e.g. Griggs 2014, Jasilek 2013, May 2013, Reed 2014, Zimmer 2009). These articles usually stress the effect of social media on language, illustrating the ways in which social media vocabulary (especially Facebook vocabulary) has been changing language, mostly by providing common or old words with new meanings (a process which, from a terminology perspective, is called terminologization and which will be explained and exemplified in the next section).

As can be easily inferred, I have so far used the word *terminology* to refer to the vocabulary of a particular subject field in general, and of social media, in particular. However, terminology can also be defined as “the language discipline dedicated to the scientific study of the concepts and terms used in specialized languages” (Pavel and Nolet 2001: xvii). Hence, from a terminology perspective, what is referred to generically as *language* in the non-academic articles above can be analysed in two ways. In broader terms, *language* has the meaning of *general language*, i.e. “the spoken or written system of communication used by a particular community of country” (Pavel and Nolet 2001: 108), as opposed to *specialized language*, i.e. “natural language used by a community of subject specialists in a particular field of knowledge” (Pavel and Nolet 2001: 115). In narrower terms, *language* is used more or less synonymously with *general vocabulary*, i.e. the vocabulary we use in everyday communication, as opposed to *specialized vocabulary*, i.e. the vocabulary of a specialized language.

While there is no doubt that social media is making its presence felt in general, everyday language, the question I am trying to find an answer to in this section is the following: are these social media buzzwords part of the general vocabulary, and hence, part of general language, or are they part of specialized vocabulary, and hence, part of specialized language? That is, are they *words* belonging to the general lexicon of the English language or are they *terms* belonging to the field of social media?

Although they are indeed familiar to most computer-literate native speakers of English and have become recurrent occurrences in everyday English, as highlighted in the above-mentioned articles, the social media linguistic units under analysis in this paper are, in my opinion, terms not words. First of all, they should be treated as terms because they display the most important characteristics of terms, according to terminology theory (e.g. Cabre 1999, Pavel and Nolet 2001, Picht and Draskau 1985, Sager 1990, ISO 704/ 2000). In Cabre’s (1999: 81) words, “the most salient distinguishing feature of terminology in comparison with the general language lexicon lies in the fact that it is used to designate concepts pertaining to special disciplines and activities.” Despite their familiar ring, social media buzzwords such as *like*, *post*, *friend*, *pin*, *check in*, *wall*, *profile*, *trend*, etc. denote specialized concepts in the field of social media and represent only a small part of social media terminology, the great majority of social media terms being known primarily to social media professionals (e.g. *reach*, *organic reach*, *paid impressions*, *engagement*, *e-inclusion*, *API*, etc.). The specialized semantic content of these buzzwords is attested by the definitions of the concepts they represent. For instance, The Twitter Glossary available on the Twitter website (<https://support.twitter.com>) defines the term *a follow* as “the result of someone following your Twitter account.” Also, it is noteworthy that the specialized semantic content of these buzzwords is, with few exceptions, absent from general English dictionaries, which points to the fact that they are part of specialized language and hence, their meaning is to be found in specialized dictionaries. Although I could not find any hardcopy dictionary covering social media terminology (probably because of the novelty of this field), there are plenty of online glossaries available on various Internet sites dealing with social media, including the official websites of the leading social media platforms, which provide definitions for social media *terms*, among which one can find the lexical units under discussion in this paper.

Furthermore, as emphasized by Pavel and Nolet (2001: 19), “[a] *term* or terminology unit in a *specialized language* is distinguished from a word in *general language* by its single-meaning relationship with the specialized concept that it designates (called *monosemy*) and by the stability of the relationship between form and content in texts dealing with this concept (called *lexicalization*).” An analysis of various social media-related texts will soon reveal the high degree of lexicalization of social media buzzwords, which not only are systematically associated with the same set of semantic features that distinguish the concepts they represent from others in the field, but also occur in relatively fixed or similar collocations and lexical combinations (cf. L’Homme 2000). This can be accounted for by the fact that these designations observe the terminological principle of monosemy, each identifying only one social media concept (as attested by their definitions); conversely, most general language words have multiple meanings. This difference becomes obvious if one compares the definition of the verb *to like* in a general English dictionary to that in a social media glossary. Once again, this means that we are not dealing with general language words but with strongly motivated social media terms that have been purposely created to name novel specialized concepts.

As stated earlier, a number of social media terms related to networking sites have migrated from the language of social media into general language, becoming part of the everyday vocabulary. Not long ago known only to social media experts or, more specifically, primarily to those social media specialists developing social media networking sites, these terms have now become commonplace: we encounter them both in chitchat and at the workplace, we hear them on TV/the radio, we read them in newspapers, magazines and novels, etc. Just like in the case of computer terminology (cf. Meyer 2000), this migration can be accounted for by the fact that these particular social media concepts and corresponding terms designate realities that have become important in our lives. According to (Lipschultz, 2014: 6), social media is becoming perhaps the most important communication source in the 21st century. Social media in general, and social media networking sites, in particular, have become central to the functioning of our society, developing into key components of our private and professional lives. Consequently, those social media terms that refer to the social media concepts “we live by” nowadays, as (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) would put it, have become active in general language.

(Meyer, 2000) calls this process of lexical migration from specialized to general vocabulary “de-terminologization”, which may also result in certain semantic, pragmatic and grammatical changes in these terms. She points out that an increasing number of terms from various fields are migrating into general language, a phenomenon which she accounts for by our evolution into a knowledge society – “a society in which specialized knowledge is replacing manual labour as the axis around which economic development revolves” (Meyer 2000: 50). Similarly, (Cabre, 1999: 229) explains that “[n]ew terms are becoming a part of the general lexicon, depending on the development of the technological progress and its commercial impact.”

In light of the above, it may be argued that those social media lexical units that have migrated from specialized to general language are nowadays used by professionals and non-professionals alike, being simultaneously part of both social media terminology and general English, regardless of the possible differences in usage which de-terminologization may have brought about and which should undergo terminological investigation.

Moreover, despite their widespread use, these lexical units should, in my opinion, be still regarded as terms not words, mainly due to the reasons outlined earlier in this section. From a terminology perspective, I suggest that these social media “buzzwords”, as I have labeled them in non-academic language, should be regarded as *popular terms*, which are part of the *general terminology* of speakers of English (who had never heard of them until a few years ago). Also, it should be emphasized that the laypersons’ understanding of the concepts designated by these terms is probably much shallower than that of social media specialists.

This conclusion points to the fact that it is rather difficult to draw a strict demarcation line between specialized and general language, on the one hand, and between specialized and general vocabulary (i.e. between terms and words), on the other, the two being parts of a continuum (cf. Cabre 1999, Meyer 2000). In the following section, I will discuss three term-formation patterns characteristic of social media popular terminology.

3. Social media popular terminology: term formation patterns

Term formation relies greatly on word formation methods and can be defined as “the process of naming the concepts required by a particular special language community for the development of cognitive processes and communication. It is a conscious human activity and differs from the arbitrariness of general word formation processes by its greater awareness of pre-existing patterns and models and of its social responsibility for facilitating communication and the transmission of knowledge” (Sager 1997: 25). According to terminology theory (e.g. Sager 1997: 28-40, ISO 704/2000: 31-35), there are three main term formation methods: using existing linguistic resources, modifying existing linguistic resources and the creation of new linguistic entities (translingual borrowing).

Existing linguistic resources can be used to create new terms by processes such as terminologization, transdisciplinary borrowing, conversion and semantic transfer within a special language. Conversely, new terms can also be coined by derivation, compounding and abbreviation, which involve modifying existing linguistic resources. The third term formation option usually consists in the importation of foreign language terms, which may then undergo various degrees of adaptation in the receiving language. However, compared to the other two term formation methods, translingual borrowing “typically occurs in response to a demand for the expression of a concept which, in many cases, has originated in another country” (Picht and Draskau 1985: 112). In other words, both concept and term are transferred from one linguistic community to another – a process referred to as “secondary

term formation” (Sager 1997: 27). Since most, if not all, social media concepts originated in The United States, this last term formation method falls outside the scope of this paper.

In what follows, I will take a closer look at some popular social media terms and analyse them according to the way in which they were created. More precisely, I will discuss instances of terminologization, conversion and derivation, as these particular term formation processes seem to be not only productive, but also interesting from a terminology perspective.

3.1. Terminologization

Consider the following popular social media terms in English, arranged alphabetically, which designate various actions and entities specific to social media sites:

- actions: *to block, to check in, to comment, to follow, to like, to lurk, to mention, to pin, to poke, to post, to share, to tag, to tweet*;
- entities: *Facebook, friend, connection, favourite, home, notification, page, profile, status, trend, Twitter, wall*.

What probably strikes one most in these terms is their familiarity, which makes them extremely user-friendly and easy to remember; they are the opposite of the “heavy”, scientific-sounding terms one usually expects when dealing with terminologies. What accounts for their familiarity is the underlying term formation process, namely, *terminologization* – the process by which a general language word is endowed with a specific meaning which corresponds to a specific concept within a specialized field. “In this way the word acquires the status and characteristics of a term: i.e. it now belongs to a subject field and is part of the system of terms” (Picht and Draskau 1985: 106).

Consider the meaning of the following social media terms and contrast it to the meaning(s) of the corresponding general language words; the definitions below have been adapted from various online social media glossaries in order to better reflect terminological principles for the creation of definitions (cf. ISO 704/2000: 17-19):

- *to like*: action shared by several social media networks (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn) that allows users to give positive feedback on social media content without posting a comment
- *to share*: action shared by several social media networks that allows users to distribute content from other network users or from Internet sources
- *to tag*: action that allows Facebook users to create a link to the profile of another Facebook user
- *to tweet*: action that allows Twitter users to post up to 140 characters of text, photos, videos or links
- *friend*: a user of the social media network Facebook who has connected to another user’s profile, usually by invitation
- *trend*: a topic that is the subject of many posts on a social media site
- *wall*: the profile page of a Facebook user, where his/her content and activity as well as posts from other Facebook users addressed specifically to him/her used to be displayed until 2011, when it was replaced by the Timeline.

Similarly to popular computer terminology (cf. Meyer 2000: 43-44), what contributes most to the user-friendliness of these terms is their metaphoricity (in a Lakovian-Johnsonian sense), in that they facilitate one’s understanding of specialized concepts by allowing social media users to make sense of technical, more abstract or complex concepts in terms of simple, concrete and well-known ones (cf. Lakoff and Johnson 1980). The result is a *transparent* terminology, in line with term formation principles (cf. ISO 704/2000), which allows even non-professional social media users to understand the underlying concepts at least partially, without a definition.

The effort of creating transparent, easy to remember terms by terminologization, as manifest in the examples above, may reveal an anticipation of the terms’ migration into general language. Actually, it is highly probable that these terms may have been coined purposely for widespread use outside the field of social media, given that they designate user-interface concepts (broadly speaking), on the one hand, and the prospect of a rapid spread and incorporation of social media into our professional and non-professional lives, on the other.

3.2. Conversion

Conversion or zero derivation (cf. Cabre 1999: 93) lies in a functional shift from one lexical category to another, without any change in form of the existing term, as illustrated by the following verb – noun pairs of terms belonging to the field of social media: *to check in* (verb) – *check-in* (noun), *to comment* (verb) – *comment* (noun), *to facebook* (verb) – *Facebook* (noun), *to favourite* (verb) – *favourite* (noun), *to feed* (verb) – *feed* (noun), *to follow* (verb) – *follow* (noun), *to friend* (verb) – *friend* (noun), *to like* (verb) – *like* (noun), *to mention* (verb) – *mention* (noun), *to pin* (verb) – *pin* (noun), *to poke* (verb) – *poke* (noun), *to post* (verb) – *post* (noun), *to share* (verb) – *share* (noun), *to tag* (verb) – *tag* (noun), *to tweet* (verb) – *tweet* (noun), *to trend* (verb) – *trend* (noun).

Such instances of terminological conversion raise the question of directionality, which has only been investigated with regard to conversion in general language (e.g. Bauer and Valera 2005, Plag 2003: 107-115) and which is perceived by lexicographers as “unresolved and irresolvable” (Bauer and Valera 2005: 11), as “it seems that for the vast majority of cases it is impossible to establish the direction of conversion” (Plag 2003: 111).

However, directionality is fairly obvious in some of the term pairs given above. If we consider the pair *to facebook* (verb) – *Facebook* (noun), it immediately becomes clear that conversion took place from noun to verb: first, there was the proper noun designating the name of a social media networking site, which subsequently converted into a transitive verb designating the action of communicating with someone or searching information about someone on the Facebook site, as noted by the Macmillan English Dictionary Online (www.macmillandictionary.com). The noun was coined first (through terminologization) because the underlying concept and the corresponding reality came into being first. Examples such as “That guy I met last night *facebooked* me this morning”, “her current employer *facebooked* her before hiring her” and “I *facebooked* her about a meeting”, provided by Macmillan English Dictionary Online, point to the fact that conversion can be accounted for in this case by the principle of linguistic economy characteristic of our fast-paced, digital society. It is noteworthy that this instance of conversion is very similar to the famous *Google* (noun) – *to google* (verb) pair.

Likewise, in the case of *to favourite* (verb) – *favourite* (noun), which is the Twitter counterpart of the pair *to like* (verb) – *like* (noun) on other social media sites (e.g. Facebook, Pinterest, LinkedIn), directionality can be easily inferred: first, the noun *favourite*, which is the only from the pair that is a word in general English, became a Twitter term through terminologization; this term was then converted into a verb denoting the action of liking a tweet. Another similar case in point is the pair *to friend* (verb) – *friend* (noun), with the slight difference that general English dictionaries attest the existence of the word *to friend* as the archaic form of *to befriend*. As pointed out by Griggs (2014), “[u]ntil Facebook came along, nobody used the word ‘friend’ as a verb. Now it’s not uncommon to ask a new acquaintance to spell their name so you can friend them on Facebook.”

Although establishing a clear, one-way direction of conversion in social media terminology is outside the scope of this paper, there are certain assumptions that can be made about the direction of conversion (i.e. from verb to noun or from noun to verb) in some other term pairs provided above. For instance, in the case of pairs such as *to check in* (verb) – *check-in* (noun), *to comment* (verb) – *comment* (noun), *to follow* (verb) – *follow* (noun), *to like* (verb) – *like* (noun), *to mention* (verb) – *mention* (noun), *to post* (verb) – *post* (noun), *to share* (verb) – *share* (noun), *to tag* (verb) – *tag* (noun), where the verb denotes concepts related to social networking actions commonly performed by social media users, it can be assumed that conversion took place from verb to noun, as it is usually the social networking actions in question which have prompted the corresponding entities expressed by nouns. In other words, the realities designated by the nouns are the result of those designated by the verbs. Simply put, the existence of *likes*, *follows*, *mentions*, *comments*, *check-ins*, *posts*, *shares*, etc. requires performing the corresponding actions first. Conversely, in pairs such as *to trend* (verb), i.e. to be the subject of many posts on a social media site, and *trend* (noun), i.e. a topic determined algorithmically to be very popular on a social media site, where the concepts behind these terms are not, strictly speaking, user-interface concepts (there is no button for the action, so to speak), it is probable that conversion happened from noun to verb.

3.3. Derivation

Derivation or affixation (cf. Cabre 1999: 92, Sager 1997: 31) is a term formation method consisting in the addition of affixes, i.e. of prefixes, of suffixes, or both, to lexical bases. Functionally, most suffixes produce a

change in the part of speech, whereas prefixes “serve the purpose of closer determination of a concept – narrowing its intension – while at the same time showing the relationship that exists between the new concept and its origin” (Sager 1990: 73). However, suffixation may also involve some type of determination besides the change of word class, as pointed out by Sager (1997: 32). In what follows, I shall discuss the case of the prefix “un-”, as it is employed in popular social media terminology.

The negative prefix “un-” has been added to a number of social media verbs already mentioned in the previous sections, in order to designate opposite concepts. What is interesting about this prefix is the reversible nature of the social media actions expressed by the resulting derived verbs. Simply put, the prefix “un-” points to the fact that social media users are allowed “to undo” some of their actions. For instance, the verb *to unfriend* expresses the action of removing a friend from a social networking site. It is noteworthy that this term has become so popular in general language that it was declared the Oxford word of the year 2009 by the New Oxford American Dictionary (cf. <http://blog.oup.com/2009/11/unfriend/>). If one wishes to take a less drastic step, various social networking sites also offer users the opportunity *to unfollow* other users while remaining friends. Similarly, users can *untag* themselves from social media content or they can *unlike* or *unfavourite* items they have previously liked or favoured on networking sites. Please note that the last two verbs do not express users’ dislike of something they see on a site, but rather their change of mind in terms of overtly expressing a positive attitude towards something. Simply put, *to unlike* and *to unfavourite* have to do with withdrawing one’s public approval of, interest in or support for a post, a page, a picture, etc., for a variety of possible reasons, such as mistakenly hitting the Like or the Favourite button, no longer being interested in a particular item, no longer wanting others to see that one likes / favourites a particular item, and disliking, for one reason or another, an item one has previously liked / favoured.

4. Concluding remarks

The main goal of the present paper has been to increase terminology awareness in the field of social media – a new and extremely dynamic specialized domain that has quickly become central to a variety of other domains as well as to our daily lives. This expansion of social media has resulted, among other things, in the migration of a number of specialized terms expressing social networking concepts to everyday language. As argued in the paper, these linguistic units should still be considered instances of specialized lexis (as opposed to general vocabulary) despite their widespread use by the general public. However, I have suggested the name *popular terms* for these particular units, as it simultaneously reflects both their terminological nature and their popularization among non-specialists, as well as the continuum, rather than the dichotomy between general and specialized language.

Many of these popular social media terms were formed by *terminologization*, a term formation process that has greatly facilitated the understanding of the corresponding concepts by the general public and the rapid spread of these terms into general English (e.g. *to like*). *Conversion* seems to be another productive term formation method in the field, with the observation that it is intrinsically linked to terminologization, as one of the terms in the exemplified noun-verb pairs (usually the verb) was initially a general language word that acquired some new specialized meaning and then underwent a functional shift from one lexical category to another (e.g. *to like* (verb) – *like* (noun)). As far as *derivation* is concerned, I have illustrated the way in which the prefix “un-” is added to several verbs denoting social networking actions in order to highlight their reversible nature.

Further research will reveal whether the migration of social media terms into general language has caused the resultant popular terms to undergo more or less significant semantic, pragmatic, stylistic, grammatical, etc. changes, as in the case of computer terminology (cf. Meyer 1999). Also, it would be interesting to examine the foreign language equivalents of these popular social media terms, in particular in what concerns term formation methods.

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