



How are linguistic structures used to mobilise people to take action on human rights issues? A corpus study of activist tweets

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Background

- We use powerful language to provoke change. We use it to get people to take action, for good or for bad. Activists use language to mobilise others, call out 'the bad guys', and ultimately produce collective action. Collective action refers to actions that groups or individuals make to seek a collective change. For more on the definition of 'collective action' see Postmes & Brunsting (2002).
- Twitter has the ability to form networks which would have been inaccessible before, share opinions and raise awareness to new levels, and above all else get people to take action.

Research questions

- Do activists use different linguistic structures for different action types? For example, do they use different linguistic structures to get people to sign petitions than to get people to go to events?
- Do different types of activist structure tweet 'calls to action' differently? What are these structures used in 'calls to action'?

Hypotheses

- Each action type (collecting signatures for petitions, network formation etc) will correspond most frequently to a particular sentence type.
- Activist structures (organisations, movements, and individual activists) will be able to be differentiated based on frequency of each linguistic structure e.g. individuals may use 'please' more than organisations.

Results

- 62% of 'collecting' tweets had a declarative + imperative sentence structure.
- 71% of 'opinion voicing' tweets had a declarative sentence structure. 41% of 'awareness raising' tweets had a declarative structure, and 41% had declarative + imperative. This suggests that the main difference between 'opinion raising' and 'awareness raising' is that 'awareness raising' inform the audience of information, and then encourages them to act through the imperative structure, whereas 'opinion voicing' is purely putting information out.
- Individual activists use 'please' more than movements or organisations, organisations use 'please' the least.
- Enumeration was used most for 'collecting' and 'calling out the 'them' group'.

Discussion

- From examining this small corpus, there is some evidence to say that different activist structures use linguistic structures differently in creating 'calls to action'. In principle, organisations produce more formulaic tweets, with individuals tweets being more random in structure. This can also link to the finding that 'please' is used more by individuals. It is a politer and more personal way of constructing a call to action, which would not be as favoured by large brick and mortar organisations.
- Different linguistic structures will be used more and less frequently with certain action types to mobilise people to take action. For instance, if you are asserting an opinion it makes sense that you would use a structure which does not ask anything of anyone and asserts what you're saying as credible. This can be seen in the data with the high frequency of declarative 'opinion raising' tweets.

References

Postmes, T., & Brunsting, S. (2002). Collective Action in the Age of the Internet. *Social Science Computer Review*, 20(3), 290–301.

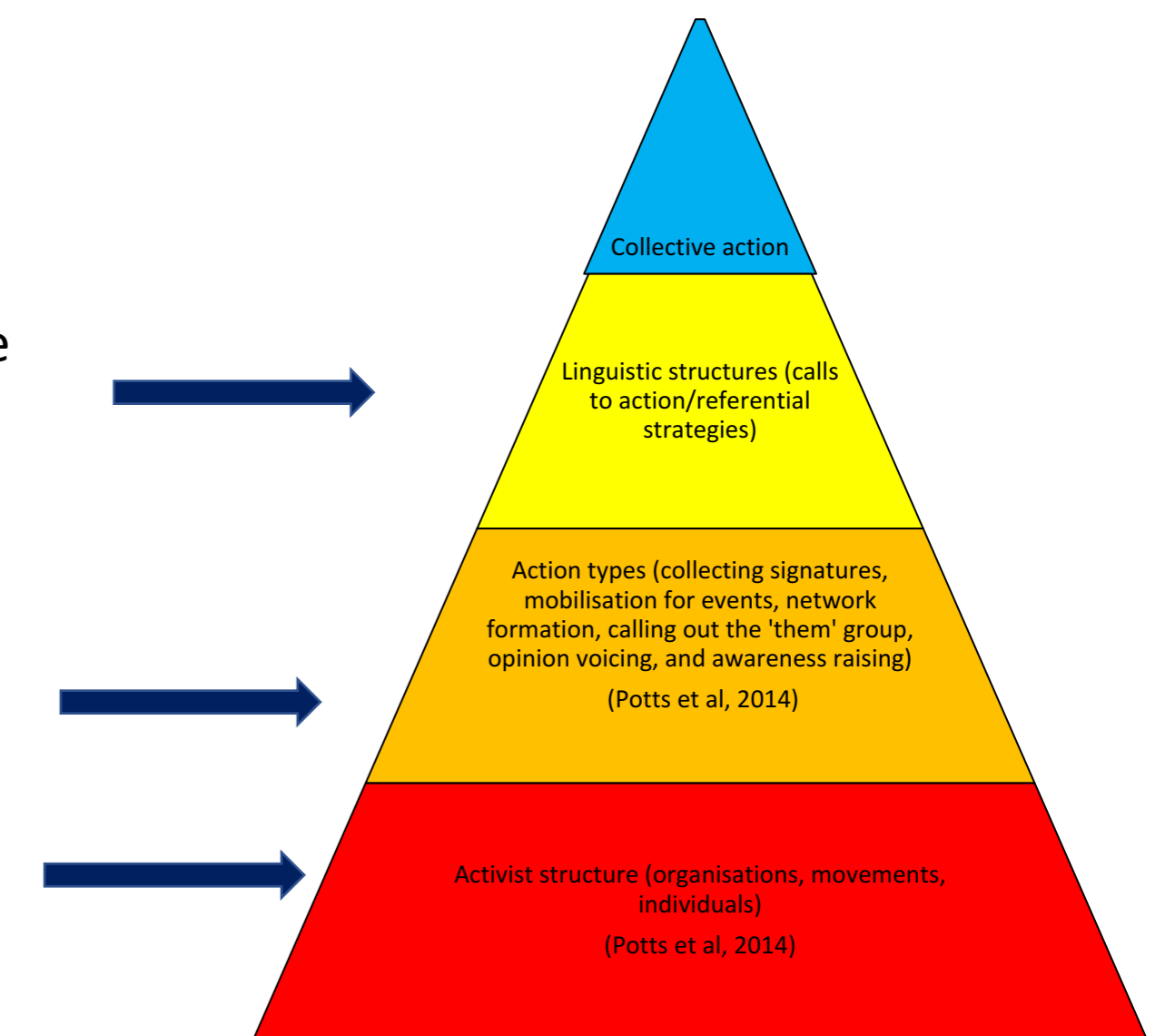
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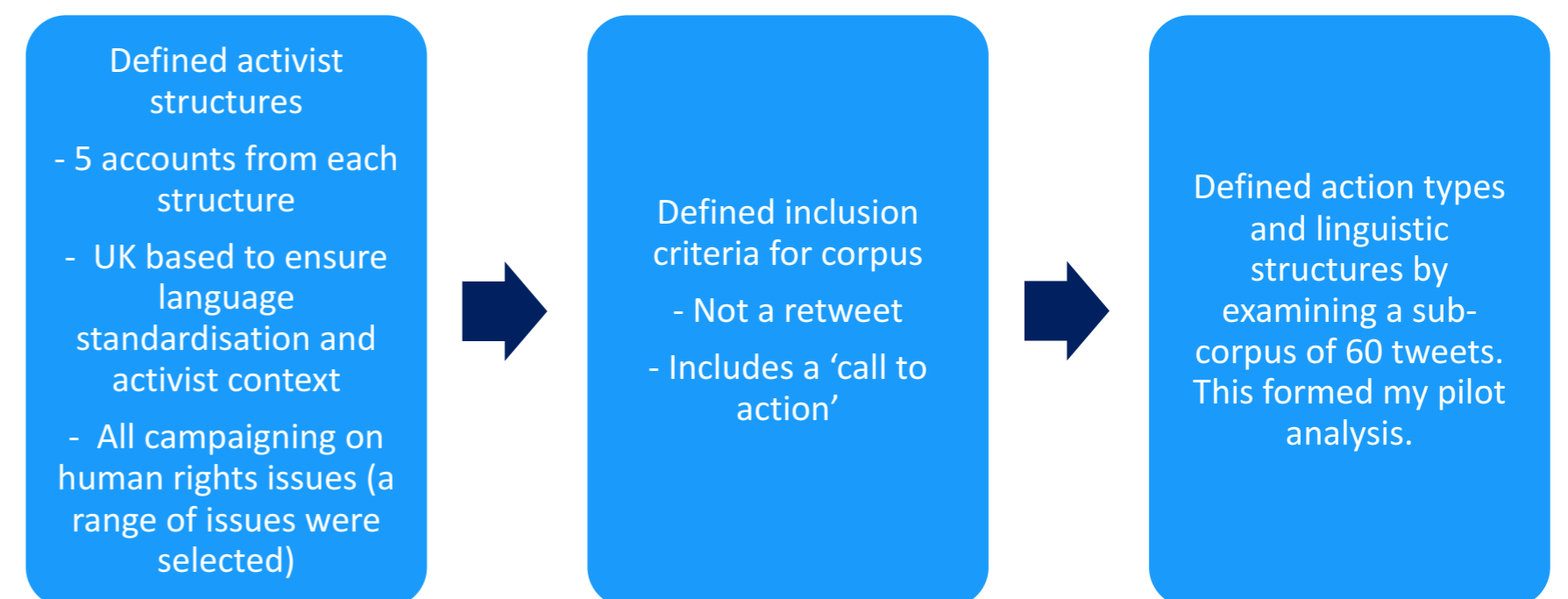
Methodology



- Corpus of 300 tweets
- 5 linguistic structures (sentence structure, modality, inclusive/exclusive we, please +/- and enumeration)
- 6 action types
- 3 activist structures (5 twitter users per activist structure)



Process



Participants (activist structures)

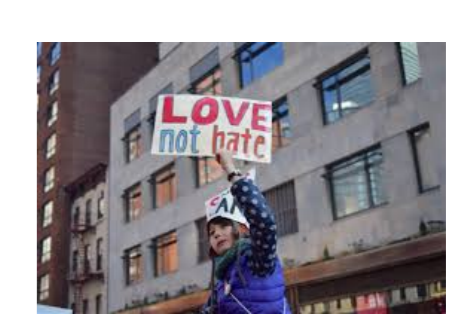
Organisations
e.g.



Movements
e.g.



Individuals
e.g.



Conclusion

- Based on this small corpus it appears that there is a link between action types, and frequency of these linguistic features (notably sentence type).
- There also appear to be differences in how linguistic structures are used to communicate certain action types inter activist structures.

Next steps

- Expand the corpus to see whether these hypotheses can be observed on a larger scale.
- This study examines 6 key action types, but there might be more that could be considered such as 'thanking' as a sub type of 'network formation'.
- To examine further inter activist structure differences, it would be useful to consider how the activist structure campaigns in terms of the Social Change Grid (Sheila McKechnie Foundation, 2018), and how that influences their messaging.
- This corpus highlighted a number of 'battle' metaphors which could be explored further.

Acknowledgements

Supervised by Dr Julia Kolkman, Department of Language and Linguistic Science, University of York

Project completed as part of the Laidlaw Research and Leadership Scholarship

