From *Rest in Peace* to *#R.I.P.*: tracing shifts in the language of mourning

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Abstract

This chapter traces shifts in the language of mourning adopting an empirical, historicizing approach to the study of the expression *R.I.P.*, shorthand for *Rest in Peace*, which has become commonplace in everyday performances of mourning online. First, it considers an eclectic mix of data, including worship texts, an online debate relating to the appropriateness of the use of the expression, citizen sociolinguistic insights, and media commentary and brings to the fore changing meanings of *R.I.P.* as well as different attitudes to its contemporary uses. It then moves on to report the findings of a linguistic-discursive analysis of a corpus of tweets featuring the hashtag #R.I.P. (N=215), suggesting that *R.I.P.* is used as a stand-alone indexical expression, whose meaning emerges from the context in which it occurs. In the corpus examined, the expression was found to serve as a positioning resource in public acts of mourning, attesting to broader trends for personalizing and informalizing mourning, but also in a few cases its meaning was found to extend to the sharing of trivial experiences of loss and sadness. The study foregrounds the importance of an empirical, transmedia lens into "small" changes in language use, which are intricately connected to changing contexts and modes of communication.

1. Introduction

Registers of mourning have been changing as a result of increasing secularization and globalization in large parts of contemporary societies. These processes are attested, for example, in the gradual de-ritualization of the traditional Christian funeral ceremony, where high and formal registers have been giving way to everyday and informal registers (Cook and Walter 2005). In networked societies where mourning expands temporally, spatially and socially to online "techno-spiritual spaces" (Brubaker et al. 2013), informal registers for sharing grief are also found to be prevalent (Giaxoglou 2014). This is part of a broader move away from formal and institutionalized rituals to more informal and personalized practices of mourning and memorialization online (Gibbs et al. 2015).

Online mourning encompasses a wide range of activities, which attest to the extension of online life sharing to the sharing of death-related moments and events. It includes posting reactions to highly mediatized death, i.e. death which has attracted increased media attention, such as the death of a celebrity or a public figure, the sudden death of a young adult, or death in attacks and natural disasters. This form of sharing has been described as *ecstatic sharing*, which is focused on the instant proximity of the here-and-now (Giaxoglou 2018) and echoes modes of ecstatic news common in the live-reporting of disaster news (Chouliaraki 2006). There are also cases of more intimate sharing of affect in reaction to a personal loss relating to the loss of a friend, a family member or even a pet. Such reactions can be shared as one-off messages or they can involve more or less sustained interactions with the dead and other mourners on the dead person's memorialized profile page, in memorial pages or in group chats across different platforms. Despite their differences, all these activities attest to the remediation of death and mourning online, which is shaped by, with, and for networked publics, i.e. the imagined communities that emerge out of the interconnection between users, technologies, and practices (boyd 2010).

Sharing death and mourning online has implications for the styles and registers of the language of mourning. Users' language practices online can affirm social and linguistic conventions, but also extend, rework and creatively contest them, resulting in shifts in features, styles and registers of language which can become widespread. Despite the considerable scholarly attention paid to online mourning in terms of its impact on how we mourn and how we remember our dead (e.g. Christensen & Sandvik 2014; Giaxoglou et al. 2017; Pitsillides, Walker & Fairfax 2013; Walter 2017), little attention has been paid so far to the study of language use in these practices.

This chapter draws attention to shifts in the language of mourning and memorialization in line with Cook and Walter's (2005) call for the study of "small" changes in the language of transition rituals in relation to "big" social changes. Tracing shifts in registers of mourning online requires a historicizing angle, which builds on Herring's (2012) call for studying all the different types of digital discourse phenomena, be they *familiar, reconfigured* or *emergent*. It is also suggested that a combination of sources from different contexts can prove useful to developing a transmedia approach as part of a historicizing angle – that is, one which looks at how discourse phenomena are articulated across different contexts and media platforms, involving individuals' "meaningful selection of platforms, the combining of different media and a great deal of movement between them" (Tagg and Jankowicz-Pytel 2016: n.p.). This approach makes it possible to contextualize "small" shifts in language and registers as well as users' attitudes to them.

The focus in this chapter is on the changing uses and meanings of the expression *R.I.P* and the attitudes related to these. The expression is often described as an initialism of the expression *Rest in Peace*, which is pronounced by saying each letter individually. Its increasing use on social media has attracted media and social media attention and raised concerns in some circles about the appropriateness of its use. As will be argued, public views and debates about the expression *R.I.P.* are grounded either in the acknowledgment or the erasure of the linguistic and discourse antecedents that connect it to ritual practices and religious beliefs, while its online use points to the extension of its meaning to suit different communicative purposes in users' here-and-now.

The selection of this particular expression for analysis is motivated by its pervasiveness across ritual and secular contexts, offline and online, personal and public as well as commodified affective domains of language practice, as evident for instance in sympathy cards and custom images[1]. The study will address the following questions:

1. What are the key aspects of the public discourse on the meaning and appropriateness of contemporary uses of the expression *R.I.P.*?

2. What are the key forms, meanings and functions of the expression *R.I.P.* as it is used in online contexts?

The chapter is organised as follows: Section 2 presents the data and methods for the study. Section 3 contextualizes the public discourse around the meaning and appropriateness of the expression by tracing its language and discourse antecedents in ritual language. Section 4 discusses a debate in a specific religious circle, which has also attracted media attention. It also discusses public questions and answers relating to the meaning of the expression *R.I.P.* in crowd-sourced sites, such as Quora, and media commentary on the social behaviours associated with its use. Section 5 presents the findings of the linguistic and discursive analysis of current uses of the expression *R.I.P.* online, focusing on the micro-blogging platform Twitter, and provides empirical evidence about the key forms, meanings and functions of the expression in real contexts online. The chapter concludes by underlining the broader importance of drawing on a range of sources to trace shifts in language use and attitudes to these changes, which index bigger sociocultural changes. It contributes, thus, to the sketching of a transmedia approach to historicizing language and communication practices

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[1] For example, Getty Images lists 1475 *Rest in Peace* stock images and photos on their website.

2. Data and Methods

The present study has adopted a partial ethnographic perspective, which is a common angle adopted in virtual ethnographies (Hine 2000), i.e. ethnographies that are adaptive to the conditions in which they are employed (see also Androutsopoulos 2008). This perspective has made it possible to browse online and locate public views and opinions about the expression under focus, thus addressing the first research question above. In addressing this question on the public discourses surrounding *R.I.P.*, the study also draws on citizen sociolinguistic methods. Citizen sociolinguistic methods are motivated by new perspectives in the sociolinguistics of mobility (Blommaert 2010), which seek to enhance understandings of contemporary language practices in web-based contexts. To this end, the internet counts as an important source of data and also as a generator of social value: the accretion of comments, shares and responses to a particular post contributes to the increase of its social value, meaning and relevance (Rymes and Leone 2014: 31). Citizen sociolinguistic methods prioritize the second order descriptions of language users, i.e. meta-comments on language use and meanings shared in affinity groups and often found in Facebook comments and discussion forum contributions, as primary data sources positioning lay individuals as shapers of emergent language expertise (Rymes and Leone 2014: 29; Rymes 2014). In this study such public insights have been drawn from the crowd-sourced site Quora, based on a search for questions and answers relating to the expression under focus. The search yielded a user's question 'What's the meaning of RIP' and eleven answers in response to it posted between April 25, 2015 and March 25, 2017.

In addition, following a google-based search for media commentary devoted to the discussion of uses of the expression *R.I.P.*, ten media articles published between 2014 and 2017 were selected for discussion (see Media Articles). The preliminary consideration of these articles pointed to a debate among Protestants in Northern Ireland about the use of *R.I.P.* that sparked mainstream media attention and social media commentary on a religious commentator's Facebook page as a key event that deserved further attention as a source of citizen sociolinguistic insights shared among a specific religious group. This debate has been captured in two Facebook wall events extracted from the page of the religious commentator whose comments sparked the debate in the first place. A wall event refers to any individual update and all the comments that accumulate underneath it in a sequence of posts and which appear in reverse temporal order (Androutsopoulos 2014) - in this case seventy-four comments in total. The two wall events are related to each other and have been selected given that they include explicit references and public comments on using the expression *R.I.P.* within Protestant circles. These are further explicated below:

The first Facebook wall event involved the following update posted on 24th July 2017 by Wallace Thompson, the Secretary of the Evangelical Protestant Society[2]. The post, which is reproduced below, refers to the user's participation in a public discussion on the use of *R.I.P.* by Protestants, prompting fifteen comments:

> I took part in a studio discussion on BBC Radio Ulster "Talkback" at lunchtime today on the growing use of "RIP" in Protestant circles. The other participants were Fr Martin Magill and Rev Ken Newell. My only regret is that I didn't take the chance to praise the

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[2] The Evangelical Protestant Society is a mainstream inter-denominational umbrella organisation for evangelical Protestants in Northern Ireland.

Orange and Black institutions for their excellent doctrinal material on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation*.*

The second Facebook wall event involved an update posted by Wallace Thompson on the next day, 25th July 2017, noting the heated reaction sparked by his comments on the BBC Radio Ulster "Talkback" (see Post 2). The post, which is reproduced below, accumulated a total of sixty comments:

I have been subjected to some vile abuse in the last few hours, but some folks have stood by me, and I am grateful to Ruth Dudley Edwards for his article in today's Belfast Telegraph.

The comments to these two posts were coded for metalinguistic references to the form or meaning of *R.I.P.,* while comments touching upon broader issues of faith were left out of the analysis.

To address the second question about the different forms, meanings, and functions of the expression *R.I.P.*, a keyword search for the hashtag #RIP was conducted on the micro-blogging platform Twitter, which facilitates the broadcasting of short messages (until recently restricted to 140 characters) with and for networked 'followers'. The choice of Twitter was motivated by the fact that this platform has become the main hub for sharing breaking news and reactions to breaking news, including breaking news of death, thus making it an apt site for the study of generic uses of *R.I.P.* in memorial posts. Given that hashtags constitute resources for sharing and storying significant events, moments and stances (Giaxoglou 2018) and offer networked publics connective affordances enacting ambient affiliation (Zappavigna 2015), their study can point to uses of the expression as part of online participation practices.

In total two hundred and fifteen tweets were compiled for analysis (>400 before sorting and removal of retweets and irrelevant results). The tweets were extracted using Twitter's API which returns a filtered collection of relevant tweets matching a specified query. The results of this search included both popular and real time results[3]. As noted by Twitter developers, this search service is not meant to be an exhaustive source of tweets, as not all tweets are indexed or made available via the search interface (Twitter Developer, 2019).

The linguistic and discourse analysis of the tweets is based on the coding of data for particular aspects of form, grammar and discourse (see Table 1, Appendix). Discourse analysis is used in this study as an open-ended heuristic (Johnstone 2017: 8), which can be used to answer different questions and shed light into the production of meaning in context or the use of language as meaningful symbolic behaviour (Blommaert 2005).

Even though the sample is relatively small and random, given that results are subject to Twitter's filtering algorithms, it arguably captures a sufficiently representative sample of mainstream uses of the expression on this social media platform, given that the filtering brings up the most popular tweets from official Twitter and influencers' accounts' posts. The analysis offers an insight into the changing norms and meanings of the expression *R.I.P.* and points to more specific directions for further empirical research. First, however, the chapter seeks to

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[3] The extraction method did not allow the recovery of the specific emoji used, although it was possible to note which tweets had included one.

historicize our understanding of the contemporary uses and attitudes to the expression *R.I.P.*, by considering its antecedents, which relate to ritual language and religious discourse.

3. Antecedents to *R.I.P.*: *Rest in Peace* in ritual language

The brief overview in this section draws on the *Book of Common Prayer*, which sets forth the services and rites by authority of the Church of England. This section traces the antecedents of the expression *R.I.P.* in ritual language. The expression is often glossed as an initialism of the expression *(May his/her soul) Rest in Peace* and linked to the Latin expression *Requiescat in pace* (singular) or *Requiescant in pace* (plural). Within the *Book of Common Prayer*, the expression *Rest in peace* forms part of a longer versicle at the end of the brief ritual part of the funeral service, known as *Committal*, which takes place at the graveside, in a crematorium chapel or in the church. The prayer, reproduced below, accompanies the lowering of the coffin in to the grave or the transportation of the body to the crematorium (emphasis mine):

> *Rest eternal grant unto him/her, O Lord;*
> *And let light perpetual shine upon him/her.*
> ***May his/her soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed,***
> ***through the mercy of God, rest in peace.***
> ***Amen.***
>
> (The Book of Common Prayer, Burial II 1979: 501[4])

The versicle is addressed to God and expresses a wish about the soul of the departed as well as the souls of all the "faithful departed", contributing to the creation of a sense of a community of the dead among the congregation. The use of these expressions in the ritual sets up mediated positions between celebrants, mourners, God, and the dead. Mourners are receivers of what is said as is conventional in religious ceremonies, more generally, where even when they are invited to actively participate, their participation takes the form of a response.

When inscribed on headstones, however, uses of the expression *Rest in Peace*, construct a different configuration of participants to the one just described. Instead of embodying the word of God via the words of worship, mourners appropriate fragments of these conventional words and personalize them to address the dead directly, as in the case of the address *Rest in Peace Mom* inscribed on a headstone. Such uses indicate the disjoining of the expression from its ritual context in an attempt to establish an unmediated relationship between the mourner and the deceased.

At the discourse level, prayers and petitions to God project a wish for the dead to "rest in peace". These are often associated with a widespread belief about the need to purify the dead's soul of their sins. This belief echoes medieval Christian beliefs in the West about the Purgatory, a place imagined somewhere between Heaven and Hell, where the souls of the departed were thought to be subjected to the final judgment – unless they were saints and

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[4] Episcopal Church. 1979. *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church: together with the Psalter or Psalms of David according to the use of the Episcopal Church.* New York: Seabury Press.

would go straight to Heaven, or unrepentant sinners who were destined to Hell. In light of this belief, believers were expected to hold masses and pray to God on behalf of the dead not only as part of the grieving process, but also for helping to alleviate the cleansing process in the purgatory and hasten the successful transition of the soul to "the country of peace and light". Although the notion of the purgatory has in some ways been central to Western attitudes towards time (see Fenn 1995), it has also divided Christians, leading to theological debates about the place of prayers for the dead in different denominations. For those who believe in the existence of the in-between space of the purgatory, prayers for the dead are necessary and constitute a mourner's duty. For those who don't believe in the purgatory, prayers for the dead are unnecessary given that in their belief system there's nothing to be done to save the dead's soul after the death has transpired - having conducted one's life morally is the only assurance of 'peace' and redemption after death. Although the details of theological debates surrounding the purgatory are beyond the scope of this chapter, this brief mention of them points to how the use of the expression *Rest in Peace* as a prayer for the dead invokes particular religious beliefs underlying views of the afterlife.

As the next section will show, it is often the case that uses of *R.I.P.* are straightforwardly linked to the ritual expression *Rest in peace*, a prayer addressed to God for blessing the soul of the departed, and taken to index religious beliefs about the afterlife. This link has motivated, for instance, the condemnation of the widespread use of *R.I.P.* among Evangelical protestants in Northern Ireland, which will be discussed in the next section.

4. Citizen sociolinguistic insights into the meaning of *R.I.P.*

One occasion during which concerns about the use of *R.I.P.* among protestants became public was in 2017, when Wallace Thompson, secretary of the Evangelical Protestant Society, shared a Facebook post noting that the use of *R.I.P.* was against Protestant custom. This attracted media attention and social media reactions on Thompson's Facebook wall. Talking to BBC Talkback (Kentish 2017), Thompson explained that there is no use praying for the dead, given that there is no interim place of judgment and the only secure way to heaven is to lead one's life in line with God's word:

> The issue is obviously a sensitive one because people are expressing their grief. Just observing social media we have noticed the letters RIP are used a lot by Protestants, and some are evangelical Protestants. From a Protestant point of view we believe when death comes a person either goes to be with Christ for all eternity or into hell. [...].

Comments to Thompson's Facebook post offer important citizen sociolinguistic insights about perceptions of what the expression means and what beliefs it is associated with in this particular religious group. Most of the comments examined provided support for Thompson's view, showing their alignment to him - and to each other – through references to the scripture (Example 1). Some were also quick to affirm that they have never used the expression before and would never use it (Example 2) (emphases mine).

 (1)

I must agree with Wallace on this one. If we do not know Christ as Saviour, we will not rest in peace. Sadly, to think otherwise **is unscriptural and gives false hope**.

(2)

Wallace I have never used the term RIP even when I didn't know the Lord. As a Christian and a brother orange man I stand shoulder to shoulder with you. And if anyone is reading this and thinks I am a bigot and Roman Catholic hater, I certainly am not. I love every romantic Catholic for Christ what I am against is the error they are being taught. I stand for the truth of Scripture.

Others sought to contextualize the increased use of *R.I.P.*, attributing it to the importance of the memory of war dead within particular groups in the protestant orange order (Example 3) or its use of as a term of affection (Example 4) (emphasis mine):

(3)

The orange order forsook their Biblical roots a long time ago….loyal to the obsessive memorys [sic] of war dead … **no wonder the term RIP is used so much, because sadly orangemen/protestants are more obsessed with dead people today than the Papist are.**

(4)

I think you're correct from a scriptural point of view Wallace, but I don't think there's any harm using it. **These days it's simply used as a term of affection**, especially if the person who's died has suffered over a long period of time. When my dad died last year I'd have had no objection to people using the term.

Others, still, explicitly disaligned themselves from Wallace's condemnation of the use of *R.I.P.* (Examples 5) or sought to bridge the different views shared and lighten up the discussion by suggesting a reworked meaning to the expression more in line with this religious group's beliefs about the afterlife (Example 6) (emphasis mine).

(5)

Indeed the dead are gone and beyond help but the Rest in Peace endearment helps those still living and suffering grief. **Let's not be petty denying those in grief comfort because of misplaced superiority.**

(6)

Maybe it means rejoice in peace if you are lucky enough to die and repented [sic] in Peace Rejoice in Peace (thumbs up emoji)

This debate attests to differences between evangelical protestanism and more traditional strains but also reflects long-held differences of faith between Protestants and Catholics. Overall there seems to be no consensus about the meaning of R.I.P among members of this protestant group. Members are divided about whether R.I.P is false hope and unscriptural,

whether it's used as a term of endearment for the bereaved or an expression of love for the departed and whether it should be used, adapted, or not used at all. Users' views diverge on the matter, depending on whether they recognize and foreground the ritual antecedents of the expression which connect it with religious beliefs about life and death, or whether they by-pass such links to foreground instead the personalization - or even adaptation - of the expression by users for their own purposes.

More broadly, the debate attests to broader trends of secularization in society. As acknowledged in the *Catholic Herald* by Lucie-Smith (2017, n.p.): "uses of R.I.P. as a tag on social media points less to a mass conversion to Catholicism and more a turn to a handy expression" […] "the term has been divorced for most people from its living roots; it does not indicate any faith in the afterlife, or belief in Purgatory, nor is it, usually, in any sense a prayer made on behalf of the deceased." This de-coupling of the expression from the ritual contexts with which it used to be associated is exactly what turns it into a potent prompt and site for debates about faith and religious affinity among some religious groups.

Such debates show the important role that language and discourse antecedents play in shaping largely decontextualized interpretations and assessments of digital language practices. In cases when antecedents are assumed to be straightforwardly connected to current uses, they can be offered as prescriptive guides to language use in connection to appropriate religious custom. Yet, linguistic meaning is contextualized and dynamic: so even though there is no doubt that the expression *R.I.P.* is associated with ritual language and (different) religious beliefs about life and death, these associations can be - and often are - overridden (largely unconsciously) by users – even when they are expressly religious – and in the process, new meanings and new associations are created.

Interestingly, religious connotations are also prevalent in contexts outside religious group discussions as the examination of additional citizen sociolinguistic insights has shown. On Quora, a platform where people ask questions and crowdsource answers, many users have been seeking crowdsourced definitions of the meaning of *Rest in Peace* and *R.I.P.* Similarly to the debate among the members of the protestant group discussed above, Quora users are also divided among those who trace its antecedents to Latin language and liturgy, associating it with prayers to God for the dead (Examples 7-8).

(7)

"Rest in peace" (Latin: Requiescat in pace) is an expression wishing eternal rest and peace to someone who has died […] This blessing is given so that the person's soul may find peace AT LEAST AFTER THEIR DEATH.

(8)

RIP has its origin in Latin language where it's called "Requiescat in pace" which meant prayer to God for someone who has died.

Others suggest their own interpretation of the expression, referring to popular uses on gravestones (Example 9) or other uses they've come across (Example 10).

(9)

The acronym R.I.P., meaning "rest in peace", continues to be engraved on the gravestones of Christians from several denominations, especially the Catholic Church, the Lutheran Church and the Anglican Church.

(10)

R.I.P. is just a saying that people made to comfort themselves after the death of a loved one (or whoever).

Still others consider it to be a spiritual expression which serves as an incantation to spirits (Example 11):

(11)

"Rest in peace" refers to ones supposed "eternal rest", i.e. death. Those who rest in peace do not walk the earth after death, as do "restless spirits" (again, supposedly). If one is "resting in peace", one is not haunting ones [sic] earthly friends and/or relatives.

While commentators with explicit religious affiliations oscillate between judging it as "un-Protestant" or as "consoling" and are concerned about whether it is appropriate to use it or not, internet users express curiosity about what the expression means and offer a wider range of glosses to the expression, depending on their focus on the religious, spiritual or secular aspects of the expression. Internet users do not seem to be concerned about its appropriateness. The next section will turn to the consideration of mainstream media commentary on uses of *R.I.P.* which provides an additional angle to the use of the expression in relation to norms for mourning.

5. *R.I.P.* in the media: debating social media communication norms

Media commentators seem to be less concerned with the linguistic and discourse antecedents of the expression or its different meanings. They instead draw attention to aspects of communication norms in social media and express their stance about whether the use of the phrase conforms to social norms of mourning or not. In other words, their comments revolve around the use of the expression as an index of social behaviours.

Some see its use as "trite", "uncreative" or even "lazy" in comparison, for example, to wishes and commodified words in the case of other life events (e.g. birth, engagement, wedding). For instance, Julie Gray in the Huffington Post (2015) gives four reasons to stop using it: "1) It's lazy. 2) It's reductive. 3) It's unimaginative. 4) It's not really what we mean". The expression *R.I.P.* is seen here as another of those social media neologisms, analogous to *LOL* or *HAH!*, which express an emotion and more specifically, a three-letter shorthand for "aw, I'm sad this person died!" (Gray 2015). Such criticisms reflect popular concerns about social media language and communication, which are also often about young people. Such media accounts, in fact, say more about adults' ideas about digital communication than about anyone's actual language use online, especially given that abbreviations are common in online

interaction but their meaning and function emerges out of sustained interactions among communicators (Tagg 2012).

More recently, others, as for instance Rachel Moss, have drawn on their personal experiences of mourning and loss to revisit their negative views about writing *R.I.P.* on Facebook. Moss (2015) explains that *R.I.P.* is a way of saying "someone I knew and cared about died and I'm not coping very well, so please can you help me?", thus linking the expression with a cry for help and support.

Unlike Moss, Taya Johnson's personal experience (Johnson 2016), brings to the fore a darker side of *RIP* posts: when RIP posts started appearing on her Facebook timeline about an hour after her husband's death without her having announced his death online, seemingly well-intended expressions of sadness became the cause of serious upset for the bereaved. Johnson is not alone in this negative experience, which points to *posting-first* hierarchy norms reflecting existing social hierarchies of grief. This points to the expectation that members of the family will be the ones who set the tone and ground rules for the public displays of mourning, before friends, colleagues or acquaintances of the deceased start sharing their grief publicly. Cases like this one connect debates on the use of R.I.P. to debates about digital mourning norms and etiquette, which revolve around perceptions of mourning as a valid expression of emotion and the creation of a community of mourners or an indication of over-sharing and unnecessary affective competition (Giaxoglou and Döveling 2018).

In these and related public discussions connecting uses of R.I.P. to behaviors and social norms, people are often judged on their use of the expression without consideration as to why they use it or in what context they are using it in; instead, it is assumed that, for instance, using any abbreviation online serves as a quick way of communicating or that using *R.I.P.* can serve a single function, irrespective of who says it where, when, and why.

This public interest in the origins and meaning of this expression makes empirical insights into its uses and functions necessary. As Tagg (2012: 26) notes, mainstream media tend to amplify – or in some cases create – the fears surrounding digital communication, often focusing on sensational or alarmist cases of digital language use. The last section of this chapter presents the findings of the empirical study of uses of RIP on Twitter and provides insights into the new forms, meanings and functions that the expression seems to be taking on in digital communication contexts.

6. Uses of #RIP on Twitter

Most commonly in the corpus of tweets the hashtag #RIP occurs in capital letters (in 94% of instances). A small number of instances (12.5%) feature the expression in small letters: #rip. All of these occurrences of #rip with one exception are associated with figurative meanings, expressing sadness as something comes to an end (Example 12) or with jocular meanings making reference, for example, to the "loss" of hair after a haircut (see Example 13).

(12)

> Not to be sappy but I love my team and I cried like a baby when we got done dancing and I'm just gonna miss dance and my girls so much #rip [hyperlink to image]

(13)

im cutting my hair #rip

The use of #rip for humorous purposes is a case of use that is not directly connected to death and one that wasn't mentioned at all in any of the public comments discussed above. This type of use attests to the extension of the expression's meaning, whereby the association of *R.I.P.* with mourning the loss of a loved one extends to things, and also mundane and even trivial life moments, often marked by the use of small letters, rather than capitals. This seems to suggest in these cases an iconic connection between letter size and degree of seriousness or triviality.

An even smaller number of the full expression *Rest in Peace* or *May her soul rest in peace* (2.3% of instances) was attested in co-occurrence with the abbreviated version #RIP in the same message (Example 14) (emphasis mine).

(14)

Senior film and television actress #Shammi ji is no more with us. **May her soul rest in peace.** #ShammiAunty #actor **#RIP**.

Co-occurrences of the full expression with the tag #RIP point to the fact that these serve different functions. The full expression serves as a prayer for the dead remediated in the context of Twitter, whereas the abbreviated expression preceded by the hashtag functions as a meta-comment to the message. This use highlights the de-linking of *R.I.P.* from ritual language and religious discourse antecedents.

There was also a single instance of adaptation of the linguistic form, in which the same three letters were used to create a new acronym; again this co-occurred with the use of the keyword #RIP (Example 15).

(15)

R"esponsibility_"I"ntensity_"P"erseverance 3/07/18: A new era begins. #RIP [hyperlink to image].

In this case, the new acronym is not related to the expression Rest in Peace; rather, it is used as an advertising hatch to promote a swim and dive team. Such reworkings may benefit the commercial aspirations of the swim and dive team and attest to an additional way of extending the function of the expression for commercial purposes.

In terms of the grammar of the expression *R.I.P.*, if taken as a direct antecedent of *Rest in Peace*, then the verb 'rest' would be in the subjunctive, expressing various states of unreality such as wish, emotion, possibility, judgment, opinion, obligation, or action that have not yet occurred. It would also be followed – or in some cases directly preceded - by the name of the departed. In the corpus, however, uses of *R.I.P.* in the subjunctive followed by the name of the departed (e.g. RIP Christy) were not common (19% of instances). There is only one instance in the corpus of 'rip' (in small letters) used in the subjunctive as a shorthand for 'Rest in Peace' (Example 21). The lack of instances of uses of the subjunctive is not surprising,

given the broader decline of the subjunctive in English more generally, which is considered slightly old-fashioned and excessively formal.

(16)

> Top right was a caricature of #BudLuckey for the janitor in #toystory 3. He passed on February 24th. He was one of the most influential designers on Toy Story but most of all he was an amazing person. God bless you Bud. **May he #rip** [hyperlink to picture]

Most commonly, the tag *RIP* was used as an interjection at the end of a tweet (66.5%), not directly preceded or followed by the name of the departed (Example 17).

(17)

> Not sure why the good ones are always taken so early! Rest easy brother!! #**RIP**

There were also some cases - though few in this corpus - in which *R.I.P.* functioned as a noun (5.1% of instances), e.g. "RIP to my cousin" and very few instances of RIP used as an epithet, e.g. David Owen, RIP (2.4% of instances).

The grammatical function of uses of *R.I.P.* is further clarified when the discourse position of the hashtag is taken into consideration. In the majority of the tweets, the hashtag #R.I.P. appears at the end of the message on its own (46.9%) or among other hashtags (32.5%). In these positions, the tag marks the closing of the message and at the same time flags its content as a particular type of message, a R.I.P. post, i.e. a message expressing sorrow about the loss of someone adding to – and increasing visibility of - the accumulating messages on the event, moment or feeling. In these cases, *R.I.P.* connects to a wider discourse of mourning and remembrance. This use seems to suggest more generic uses of *R.I.P.* by people who are not necessarily making a claim to personal loss, but rather engaging in public memorializing online. In Facebook RIP posts shared on a Facebook group mourning the loss of a young adult, uses of RIP followed by the name, nickname of the departed or an endearment term were very common, e.g. "RIP bro"; "RIP Davey", making a claim to personal loss (Giaxoglou 2014). In the corpus of tweets, however, this type of discourse patterning is noted only in the few cases which involve similar expressions of personal loss (Example 18).

(18)

> I lost my dad today. This feeling I don't wish on anyone. I will miss u so much dad. I only wish that I could have spoken to u, seen u & even hugged u one last time before u left. Your baby girl remembers all our special moments we shared together daddy. **#RIP #POPS**

The use of *R.I.P.* as an interjection points to a shift in its grammatical, syntactic and pragmatic use. *R.I.P.* is currently used as a stand-alone expression that is not directly preceded or followed by the name of the departed. In such uses, *R.I.P* is not a ritual expression, a prayer to God for the soul of the departed, or even a way of marking of the last words of the living to the dead as in the case of gravestone inscriptions. Its main addressee is not God or the dead but rather networked publics. As a tag, it adds a meta-comment to the message and marks it

off as a special type of tweet, part of an accumulating number of hashtag mourning tributes. In its hashtag use it serves as a resource for banding and bonding networked publics together, while increasing the visibility of the event as well as that of the user beyond local groups and communities of mourners.

7. Concluding remarks

The above discussion shows how the meaning of the expression *R.I.P.* is being reconfigured as a result of its increased use on social media, prompting public debates about its meaning and appropriateness. Citizen linguistic insights on the meaning of the expression depend on which uses are taken as its antecedents, indexing different kinds of religious or social symbolic order.

Three general types of use and meanings were identified in users' meta-comments:

1. Uses linked to the ritual expression "Rest in peace" (Latin: *Requiescat in pace*) and serving as a prayer addressed to God for blessing the soul of the departed; these uses index religious beliefs about the afterlife and norms of communication with the dead mediated by God. Such uses were only rarely attested in the corpus.

2. Uses de-linked from ritual uses and serving, instead, as incantations aimed at protecting the living from the haunting spirits of the dead. These are addressed directly to the dead and index supernatural or paranormal beliefs about the after-life; notably, this meaning was suggested by citizen linguists, but it was not found in the corpus of tweets.

3. Everyday uses that are associated with digital language practices and practices of mourning online. In these cases, as shown in the analysis of the corpus of tweets, *R.I.P.* is used as a tag and meta-comment creating a frame that allows the message to be interpreted as a memorial message even if the reader does not know the user, the deceased or the death event referred to. These uses are mainly oriented to networked audiences, calling for support or seeking to enhance the visibility of the death event – as well as that of the user.

Finally, there are also commodified uses of *R.I.P.* (e.g. greeting cards, custom images), which further attest to securalization trends in Western society and foreground functions of the expression as a consolation addressed to the bereaved. These were outside the scope of this chapter.

Based on the above, the expression *R.I.P.* can be best described as an indexical and as situated in the here and now, similarly to every utterance and action. It is embedded in a range of social and cultural practices and its meaning needs to be seen in the context of these practices rather than as straightforwardly emerging out of its language and discourse antecedents. On social media *R.I.P.* follows the norms of online interaction, participation and sharing and can serve as a resource for positioning oneself as mourner and as participant in public acts of mourning. Its meaning can also extend to refer to a sense of loss on account of a seemingly mundane life moment (e.g. "i'm having my hair cut **#rip**"; "Its [sic] 17 degrees and I'm wearing 3 layers. I don't know how I'm going to cope in England next week. **#RIP #Me"** [hyperlink to image]).

Looking beyond the parameters of this study, it is worth noting that on Twitter, the expression *R.I.P.* is often accompanied by the use of emoji, e.g. folded hands emoji, heart emoji or a combination of these, where emoji further intensifies the specific affective undertone

of the message. Or on Instagram the abbreviation is often found in co-occurrence with a range of related hashtags bringing together different possibilities for reacting to the news of a death; for example, the account #rip on Instagram counting 20,733,560 posts describes the account using the following sequence of hashtags: #restinpeace #gonebutneverforgotten #restinparadise #wemissyou #inmemory #neverforget #youwillbemissed #resteasy #tragic #gonetoosoon. These co-occurrences would be worth of further empirical study as a way of investigating the multimodal extension of the expression's meaning.

Undoubtedly, the meanings and forms of *R.I.P.* will continue to change as the practices around mourning and remembering change, too; it might even be replaced by other popular expressions and forms, sparking new public debates and fuelling more moral panics. To further our understanding of registers of mourning and memorialization online, but also of language practices online more broadly, it is important to examine them as part of broader sociocultural practices that cross-cut online and offline realms. To do this, a historicizing and empirical angle, which considers evidence across media is necessary. This can provide a contextualizing lens to discourse phenomena - be they familiar, reconfigured, or emergent - that can complicate public views on the impact of social media use on language and communication.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Coding categories of corpus of tweets

Form	Abbreviated form in capital letters (RIP)
	Abbreviated form in small letters (rip)
	RIP followed by name (e.g. RIPStormin or RIP Charles Emerson)
	Full form *Rest in Peace*
	Other forms *May her soul rest in peace, Rest in Power*
Grammar	Verb (e.g. RIP Christy, may her soul rest in peace)
	Noun (e.g. RIP to my cousin)
	Interjection (e.g. RIP)
	Epithet (e.g. David Owen, RIP)
Discourse	Initial
	Body of text

	Final
	Hashtag space
Pragmatics (addressivity)	Addressing:
	the dead (e.g. RIP Katie)
	God (e.g. I pray to god that the dead is with you/reunited with Christ/ that her soul rests in peace)
	the bereaved (e.g. remember you who are in mourning that your loved one is resting in peace)
	Not specified or vague (e.g. #RIP)
	Other (e.g. #RIP NME)