

Tweeting the Nation: The Online Construction of Symbolic Boundaries in the Catalan Independence Process

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Introduction and Socio-political Context

Over the last eight years, there has been a forceful resurgence of the Catalan independence movement. The impact of grass roots pro-independence organizations has been central to the process and these have motivated a huge increase in public support for secession (Balcells- Padró-Solanet, 2016; Cramer, 2014; Guibernau, 2013). Conceived as a bottom-up social initiative, this civil movement is reported by some to have had a stronger influence than political parties in mobilising the population (Ordeix-Ginesta, 2013). However, as noted by Cramer (2015), when evaluating the success of the grassroots movements, the role of Catalan cultural elites cannot be ignored; their leaders come from educated middle-class backgrounds and many are media professionals who understand the power and reach of new media.

There have been two principal mobilizers of the many demonstrations and initiatives: Òmnium Cultural, an organization founded in 1961 to preserve Catalan culture during the Francoist regime, and Assemblea Nacional de Catalunya (National Catalan Assembly - ANC), founded in 2011. They were pivotal in campaigning for the first, unofficial, referendum on independence in 2014.¹ Following the public vote, elections were called by the then president of the Generalitat (Catalan government), Artur Mas, and the third regional election in five years was held in September 2015 (Orriols-Rodon, 2016). The election was presented to the Catalan people as a plebiscite for independence, using the slogan “el vot de la teva vida” (the vote of your life) to emphasize the importance of the election and maximize participation (Martí-Cetrà, 2016). The turnout was the highest ever in a regional election with nearly 75% of the electorate casting their vote (Orriols-Rodon, 2016). The pro-independence coalition party, Junts pel Sí (Together for Yes – JxSí) won the election in terms of seats (62 seats), although not in terms of number of votes (48%).² They were also six seats short of a majority and needed support from the anti-capitalist, independentist party Candidatures d’Unitat Popular (Popular Unity Candidacy – CUP) which had gained 10 seats (Martí-Cetrà, 2016). Thus, as Soler Carbonell *et al.* (2016) point out, the then new regional government was made up of a number of, often diverging, ideological strands. In November 2015, the Catalan government proceeded with a declaration of the “process of disconnection” from Spain

¹ The so-called “referendum” was declared illegal by the Spanish Constitutional Court and it thus became a “public consultation”. In this paper, I refer to it as a referendum. However, the consultations in both 2014 and 2017 were unofficial and non-binding.

² JxSí was a coalition of a number of political parties from the left, centre and centre-right, including ERC and Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya (CDC) and representatives from the two main pro-independence civic groups ANC and Òmnium (Guibernau, 2015).

(which was suspended by the Spanish Constitutional Court) and forged ahead with its “roadmap” to independence, with plans to create state structures such as social security, a tax system and a public bank (Orriols-Rodon, 2016). Plans were made for a second referendum in October 2017. The Spanish government intervened, declaring the referendum unconstitutional. In the run up to the referendum, various Catalan officials were arrested, propaganda material was confiscated, and 10,000 police were sent to the region to prevent the vote taking place. Pro-independence supporters organized sit-ins in the polling stations and formed human shields to allow entry to voters. Shocking violent images of police beating unarmed voters circulated internationally were unavoidably associated with the Francoist regime and led to mass protests in the Catalan capital.

This study explores the discourses surrounding the referendum debate circulating on the micro-blogging site, Twitter. In what follows, I will briefly outline the concepts of national and collective identity. I will then introduce the notion of symbolic boundaries and finally discuss the influence of new media on activism.

National and collective identity

This paper follows a social constructionist approach to identity that argues that our knowledge and ways of understanding the world are constructed through interaction with others (Burr, 2003). We construct our identities through this interaction with the social world. The social constructionist perspective on identity views identities as fluid and dynamic and historically, contextually and discursively produced through language and other social practices (Wodak *et al.*, 2009). Identity is relational and defines “the relationship between two or more related entities in a manner that asserts a sameness or equality” (Wodak *et al.*, 2009, 11). It is also through the construction of difference, the “relation to what it is not” that identity is constructed (Hall, 1996, 4). We identify ourselves and are identified by others in diverse ways depending on a particular context and identities are therefore socially and culturally constructed (Hall, 1996). The way a community identifies with the idea of nation helps construct the distinction between “them” and “us”, and this sense of difference and identity is discursively produced, particularly through narratives of national culture. National identity can therefore be understood as “constructed and conveyed in discourse”, and therefore, “the product of discourse” (Wodak *et. al.*, 2009, 22). Communities are reified through this discourse, and members share beliefs and an identity of a common history, culture, origin, tradition and territory, creating an emotional attachment to both land and fellow members (Castells, 2010).

In relation to national identity construction, the idea of a collective identity is central to Benedict Anderson’s (1983) theory of the nation. One of the important contributions of his *Imagined Communities* is the notion of a discursively conceived nation. The imagined community is real inasmuch as an individual is convinced by it and identifies with it emotionally. Claiming that a nation is imagined by its members leads to the idea of a socially constructed community, and this community and its collective identity is constructed through discourse. An imagined community will exclude those who do not belong and draw boundaries between “us” and “them”. As Fligstein (2009, 127) argues, collective identity is “by definition about the construction of an ‘Other’ and is

anchored in sets of conscious and unconscious meanings that people share”. Billig (1995) notes it is the constant reinforcement of ideologies that is crucial to the reproduction of a collective identity and, as I will demonstrate in the analysis, nationalist ideologies are discursively constructed by users in the digital space.

Symbolic boundaries and Otherness

As discussed above, the (discursive) construction of identity is always relational and thus establishes a division between groups. Separateness and distinctiveness are key constants in nationalism and, in the case of Catalonia, the constant construction of the Other that takes place creates this division between the pro-union and pro-independence groups. The concept of symbolic boundaries is useful here. Lamont and Molnár note that “symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space” (2002, 168). Symbolic boundaries also “separate people into groups and generate feelings of similarity and group membership” (2002, 168).

Continuing Barth’s work (1969) on ethnic groups, the concept of boundaries has received increasing scholarly interest and has become central to recent work on identity in the fields of ethnicity (Jenkins, 2008), immigration (Warikoo, 2011), and the intersection of ethnic identity and social class (Lacy, 2007; Wimmer-Lewis, 2010). Specifically, boundary work and national identity have been explored by Bail (2008), Brubaker (2009) and Rivera (2008) in different European contexts. To date, however, very little attention has been given to the discursive construction of symbolic boundaries apart from Phelps *et al.* (2011) who explore the mediation of symbolic boundaries in relation to immigration in the Norwegian national press. To my knowledge, there are no studies that examine symbolic boundaries on social media platforms. This article analyses how pro-independence and pro-union groups discursively construct symbolic boundaries on Twitter. It will contribute to the present literature on boundaries and national identity and address the gap by examining this from a social media perspective.

The Internet and Mobilization

The power of the internet as a tool to mobilize large groups of people is now well established (Bekkers *et al.*, 2011; van Laer-van Aelst, 2010). A growing body of studies has investigated its effectiveness in online mobilization of protesters during the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia (Howard-Hussain, 2011), and the umbrella movement in Hong Kong (Lee *et al.*, 2017). In the west, Gleason (2013) looks at protests following the financial crisis and explores how activists use Twitter to support participation in the Occupy Wall Street movement. Similarly, Peña-López *et al.* (2013) study the online evolution of the citizen-led 15M/*Indignados* movement that began in Madrid in 2011. Other studies explore the role of social media platforms in political discussion (e.g. Barberá, 2015; Conover *et al.*, 2011). In the context of Catalonia, Balcells and Padro-Solanet (2016) examine group polarization and interaction between groups and Rodon *et al.* (2018) analyse how users cluster around different

hashtags and communicate opposing political messages. Palmer (2012) argues that the internet has more power to facilitate and increase the spread of nationalism than any other form of communication. This can be seen in Catalonia where the many different initiatives launched by activist associations have relied heavily on social media to engage the public. Òmnium Cultural was one of the first pro-independence organizations to use social media to mediate a mass demonstration. In 2010, under the hashtag *#somunanacio* (*#weareanation*), Òmnium used social media to disseminate information and mobilize support for a demonstration on Catalonia's new Statute of Autonomy. ANC and Òmnium were instrumental in the organization of both the first referendum in 2014 and the second in 2017 and have been extremely effective in their use of social media. On the other hand, pro-union organizations, such as Societat Civil Catalana (SCC), appear to have been less forceful in their use of new media to mobilize support until recently. However, specifically in the build up to the referendum in October 2017 and over recent months they have used online platforms to mediate pro-union demonstrations.

Data and Methodology

The data are taken from two sources. Firstly, I examine two short promotional videos; one produced by the pro-independence organization, ANC and the other by the pro-unionist group, SCC. The second data source is a corpus of tweets collected from the micro-blogging site, Twitter. A convention of Twitter is the hashtag (#) whereby users place a hashtag before text which makes a tweet more searchable by other users (Zappavigna, 2012). Hashtags provide a way to assign a keyword to a message which establishes the topic of the tweet and therefore serves as a type of metadata (*ibid.*). The dataset was collected using Twitter's advanced search function. All tweets containing the hashtags *#HolaRepublica* and *#NoNosCallaran* were captured from 22nd September 2017 up to and including 30th September 2017. The total number of tweets captured in the two datasets was 8323 (*#HolaRepublica*: N=3841, *#NoNosCallaran*: N=4482). Detailed qualitative analysis of this large dataset was not possible therefore a systematic sample of 350 tweets from the *#HolaRepublica* data and 354 tweets from the *#NoNosCallaran* data was taken from the finite population.³ A systematic sample of this size ensures it is representative of the total tweets collected. With respect to the language of the tweets, in the *#HolaRepublica* dataset, Catalan is the preferred choice of language (88.6%, n=310) and Castilian is the preferred choice in the *#NoNosCallaran* dataset (98%, n=347). This follows a recent study by Rodon *et al.* (2018) that found language is strongly correlated with the use of a hashtag. To address ethical issues of data collection (Whiteman, 2012), data collected were available under Twitter's Terms of Service (Twitter, n.d.). Tweets from organizations or political parties are reproduced as originally posted. Identifying information from individuals was removed to protect users' anonymity and all user names in the tweets were anonymized with the convention @user.

³ Based on a 95% confidence level and a margin of error of $\pm 5\%$.

Analysis

This study draws on the discourse-historical approach (DHA) as an analytical framework. DHA is a strand of critical discourse analysis (CDA) that focuses on linguistic theories of grammar, rhetoric and argumentation developed by Wodak and colleagues to explore discourses of discrimination, racism, and identity (Reisigl-Wodak, 2001; Wodak-Meyer, 2001; Wodak *et al.*, 2009). DHA examines text from the micro-textual level and the macro level, integrating a historical dimension into analyses and exploring the cultural, historical and socio-political context of the text. It has been applied to the analysis of collective, national identities in numerous studies (Krzyżanowski, 2010; Wodak *et al.*, 2009; Unger, 2013). With the exception of KhosraviNik and Zia's (2014) study of Persian national identity on Facebook, the approach has not been applied to identity construction in a social media context.

Reisigl and Wodak (2001) identify five types of discursive strategies involved in the construction of the positive-Self or negative-Other and this study will focus on three: *nomination*: how social actors, objects, events are named and referred to linguistically; *predication*: what characteristics are attributed to these social actors, and finally, *argumentation*: strategies used to justify or legitimize a claim. Argumentation strategies rely on what Reisigl and Wodak (2001) call *topoi*. *Topoi* are argumentative shortcuts that are employed to enable speakers to get from the premise of their argument to the conclusion without explaining the underlying warrant of the argument (Unger, 2013). In other words, *topoi* are standard arguments based on socially shared opinions and thus represent “premises that are taken for granted, as self-evident and as sufficient reasons to accept the conclusion” (van Dijk, 2000, 215). *Topoi* are usually implicit in a text and are often used in prejudice discourse on the “Other”, to make seemingly convincing arguments that are widely adopted. For example, in the data, independentists employ the *topos* of history to argue for independence, comparing present day central State repression with the Francoist regime.

In the analysis that follows, I focus on the strategies of nomination, predication and argumentation employed by Twitter users to construct symbolic boundaries through discourses of national identity, nationalism and the “Other”. I will explore three salient themes that I have categorized as follows:

- To vote or not to vote
- Democracy
- “Good” and “bad” Catalans

ANC and SCC videos

The two short (less than 60 seconds) videos were launched by ANC and SCC in the run up to the 2017 October referendum and were available on the organizations' websites and social media platforms. SCC's video in protest against the referendum has no voiceover. It shows various scenes with people of different ages accompanied by text including: children playing (stories), a

grandmother with her grandson (love), a group of *castellers*⁴ (successes) and a young child (future). The video depicts a rather utopian image of Catalonia (albeit an exclusive one as no ethnic minority groups are included).⁵ It ends with the following words:

*Que la convivència per la qual hem treballat durant tants anys no es perdi
Davant la rauxa, posa-hi seny*

Let's not waste the many years of work towards co-existence
In the face of rashness, use reason

The terms *seny*, meaning reason or common sense, and *rauxa*, meaning extreme rashness, are considered to encompass the national character and the spirit of Catalans. Indeed, as argued by Llobera (2004, 75) “the traditional Catalan *seny* was a manifestation of the *Volkgeist*”, one which made Catalans essentially different from Castilians. However, these notions essentialize the native Catalan and presuppose the eternal existence of the national character. The use of these expressions is interesting since the premise of SCC’s campaign seems to be to distance themselves from essentialist, ethnonationalist conceptions of Catalonia.

The video by ANC is a promotional spot for the referendum. Unlike SCC’s video, every scene contains multiple images of the *estelada*, the pro-independence flag. The video portrays an independent Catalonia after the referendum where the flags, and other pro-independence propaganda are being removed. As in the SCC video, each scene shows happy people of different age groups (again, there is an absence of ethnic minority groups), embracing and celebrating. The message is essentially the same as the SCC video, depicting a future utopian Catalonia, free of symbolism, showing harmonious co-existence. ANC’s video, however, has a voiceover that repeats the dominant discourse in Catalonia: “goodbye threats, injustice, contempt, fear – hello liberty, new country.”

In the analysis that follows, I will show how this discourse is reinforced by each organization and taken up by the public in the Twitter data.⁶ The core strategy throughout the dataset is the construction of the “Other” and thus each side is involved in an ongoing process of identity construction. The construction of collective identity and the delineation of an in-group and out-group is achieved linguistically through a number of devices such as categorization, metaphor and through the use of pronouns.

Twitter data

Table 1 shows representative examples of the nomination and predication strategies identified in the *#HolaRepublica* data. Two metaphorical representations describe the referendum as a sea voyage. In the first, the Spanish

⁴ *Castellers* are the people that form the *Castells* (castles), the human towers. This Catalan tradition dates to the eighteenth century and is a prominent part of Catalan culture.

⁵ For example, African or Asian ethnic minorities. The foreign population of Catalonia makes up 13.7% of the total population (IDESCAT, 2019).

⁶ All tweets have been copied from the originals and have not been edited for style, grammar or spelling.

State is conceptualized as a ship moving towards collision with an iceberg, and the second refers to the then Catalan president, Carles Puigdemont, steering Catalonia to its destination. The positive Self-representation emphasizes the pacifist, democratic attributes of the Catalan people as well as expected references to Catalonia as a new country. Categorization of the negative Other is achieved through strong, derogatory terms such as “sewer”, “scum”, and “neofascist”. There is also a reference to the lower cultural level of the Other, which is used as another way to argue for independence.

Table 1. Nomination/predication strategies: #HolaRepublica

Linguistic device	Catalan/Spanish	English translation
Pronouns	nosaltres/vosaltres/ells/aquells	we/you/they/them
Metaphor	el Estado avanza hacia el iceberg sort tenir-lo de capità en una travessa aquesta	the State moves towards the iceberg lucky to have him as captain on a voyage like this
Metonym	Renfe, Aena, Fomento ⁷	
Positive Self-representation	farem un país meravellós pacíficament, amb coratge nou país demòcrata catalán pacífico	we will make a wonderful country peacefully, with courage new country democratic pacifist Catalan
Negative Other-representation	clavagueres gentussa neofachas Espanïstan vergonya de país basura nivel cultural de algunos misèries minoristes dictadura manipulació	sewers scum neofascists Spainistan disgrace of a country trash cultural level of some miserable minority dictatorship manipulation

⁷ Renfe (Red Nacional de Ferrocarriles Españoles) is the state-run railways; Aena (Aeropuertos Españoles y Aeronavegación Aérea) is the Spanish Airport and Air Navigation Administration; Fomento (Ministerio de Fomento) is the Spanish Ministry of Development in charge of public works and transport. These state-run institutions are metonymic representations of the central State government.

Representative examples of the nomination and predication strategies identified in the *#NoNosCallaran* data (Table 2) reveal a similar pattern. Positive Self-representation includes pride in the country, and the democratic nature of pro-unionists. Similar derogatory lexis used by the pro-independence group is employed in the representation of the Other, including identical expressions (scum, manipulators, fascists) and also reference to the cultural level of the Other with the term “provincial peasants”.

Table 2. Nomination/predication strategies: *#NoNosCallaran*

Linguistic device	Spanish	English translation
Pronouns	nosotros/vosotros/ellos/aquellos	we/you/they/those
Positive Self-representation	orgulloso de mi país	proud of my country
	mayoría silenciosa	silent majority
	mi país, mi bandera	my country, my flag
	orgullosamente demócratas	proudly democratic
Negative Other-representation	generadores de odio	generators of hate
	gentuza	scum
	fascismo de independentistas	independentist fascists
	manipuladores	manipulators
	cobardes	cowards
	racistas	racists
	clan supremacista	supremacist clan
	nazismo	nazism
	pepresores, anti-demócrataas	repressors
	paletos provincianos	provincial peasants
sin escrúpulos	without scruples	

There are many references to the flag in the *#NoNosCallaran* data, referring to the Spanish flag. The flag signifies “the metaphoric kin group of the nation” (Eriksen, 2007, 3) and flags therefore can also be exclusive and create boundaries. The flag produces a semiotic landscape indexing a particular claim to an identity and creating a virtual national space. Guibernau (1996) argues that symbols, such as the flag, stand for something by themselves but also the flag bearer provides part of their meaning. This can be illustrated by the prolific posting of images of the Spanish flag and the two Catalan flags (the *senyera* and the *estelada*) in both datasets, which clearly indexes the users’ ideologies.

To vote or not to vote: pro-independence

This section will examine the nomination, predication and argumentation strategies employed to justify voting, or not voting, in the

referendum, starting with the hashtag *#HolaRepublica*. The tweets in examples 1, 2 and 3 were posted by ANC:

1. *@assemblea L'1 d'octubre podràs triar entre un estat repressor o una república de llibertats. Adéu repressió #HolaDemocràcia #HolaRepublica*

@assemblea On 1 October you can choose between a repressor State or a Republic of freedom. Goodbye repression #HelloDemocracy #HelloRepublic

2. *@assemblea L'1 d'octubre podràs triar entre un estat avariament o una república que funciona. Adéu RENFE, AENA, Fomento, #HolaDemocràcia #HolaRepública*

@assemblea On 1 October you can choose between a broken-down State or a functioning Republic. Goodbye RENFE, AENA, Fomento, #HelloDemocracy #HelloRepublic

3. *@assemblea L'1 d'octubre pots triar entre un estat al servei d'un partit o una república al servei de tothom. Adéu PP, #HolaDemocràcia #HolaRepública*

@assemblea On 1 October you can choose between a State serving one party or a republic serving everyone. Goodbye PP, #HelloDemocracy #HelloRepublic

ANC use nomination strategies of positive Self-presentation (Republic of freedom, functioning Republic) and negative Other-presentation (repressor State, broken-down State). Reference to the “repressor State” associates the current central government with the repressive Franco regime. The strategy of predication is also employed here through comparison which accentuates the differences between the two groups. Whilst the tweets suggest voters have a choice, the comparison of the negative features of the “Other” (the repressor Spanish State) compared with the positive qualities of the Catalan Republic are such that it reinforces the idea that there is only one way to vote. Catalonia is represented as being for everyone and the State only serving one political party, Partido Popular (the People’s Party – PP).⁸

Negative predication strategies argue the Spanish State is metaphorically broken, compared with a functioning Catalan Republic, and being broken is associated with state-run institutions, such as Renfe, Aena and Fomento. Over the last few years, delays in Renfe’s trains have often been equated with the State’s poor management of public services. In example 4, ANC’s message is reinforced and RENFE can be perceived as a metonym for the entire Spanish State:

4. *@user1 Gràcies @Renfe. No podries ser més oportuna. La setmana abans del referèndum i plena de retards. #HolaRepública #VotaSí*

@user1 Thank you @Renfe. You couldn’t be timelier. The week before the referendum and full of delays. #HelloRepublic #VoteYes

⁸ Partido Popular (People’s Party) were the governing party at the time of the referendum.

Argumentation strategies are used to justify the referendum and suggest the way people should vote. The topoi of failure and success are employed that adopt the dominant discourse of the pro-independence movement; the Spanish State is discursively constructed as a failure, and the Catalan Republic as a success. The argument for voting for independence is also based on the topos of threat: remaining part of Spain is a threat against the Catalan people. These topoi establish a division between the Catalans and the rest of Spain.

As mentioned previously, the *#NoNosCallaran* hashtag appears to be mainly associated with the pro-unionists who claim that the pro-independents try to silence their voices. However, in example 5, the pro-union *#NoNosCallaran* hashtag is appropriated by a pro-independence tweeter. Nomination strategies are employed in the negative representation of the Other. This is achieved using the pronoun “you” and reference to “franquistas” (Francoists) who are trying to silence the independence supporters’ freedom of speech, once again alluding to the repression of the Franco regime:

5. @user2 *#NoNosCallaran* eso es justamente lo que queremos, que los franquistas no nos calleis. Votar es libertad de expresión, no opresión.

@user2 *#theywon'tsilenceus* is exactly what we want, that you, the Francoists don't silence us. To vote is freedom of expression, not oppression.

The use of historic representations of the pro-unionists with very negative connotations is common throughout the dataset. This strategy can also be seen in the images in Figure 1 that explicitly contrast the negative characteristics of the pro-unionists with the positive qualities of the pro-independents:



Figure 1: Negative and positive displays

To vote or not to vote: pro-union

SCC used the days before the referendum to highlight the dangers of the independence movement and focus on the illegality of the vote. In example 6, SCC refer to the ballot boxes, which were made of opaque plastic. They explicitly question the transparency of the voting process and construct a negative representation of the Other (the pro-independents) with the use of the pronoun “they”:

6. @Societatcc *Las llevarán ya llenas, no hace falta ni rellenar con votos Ya tienen los resultados #NoNosCallaran*

@Societatcc They will already be full, it's not necessary to fill with ballot papers, they already have the results #theywon'tsilenceus

Finally, example 7 refers to the alleged use of children by the pro-independents in the referendum campaign. Predication is employed through pronouns and emotive language such as “hurt”, “poison”, “hate”. In this instance, however, the use of the first person plural pronoun “we” appears to be alluding to and evaluating the actions of the pro-independence groups:

7. @Societatcc *Estem molt preocupats i dolguts per la utilització de nens i de joves. No els intoxicuem ni fem créixer l'odi #Seny #NoNosCallaran*

@Societatcc We are very worried and hurt by the use of children and young people. We mustn't poison them or let hatred grow #Wisdom #theywon'tsilenceus

This concern is reiterated in example 8 that uses implicit nomination strategies that associate the independence movement with fascist Germany and the importance given to children in Nazi ideology (Pine, 2010):

8. @user3 *Estoy viendo madres con sus hijos de 3 años con la estelada al cuello y me acuerdo de Berlín años 30 #NoNosCallaran*

@user3 I can see mothers with their 3-year-old children with the *estelada*⁹ around their necks and it reminds me of Berlin in the 1930s #theywon'tsilenceus

Democracy – pro-independence

This section will explore the theme of democracy. This was one of the most salient themes of the dataset and I will show how the “Other” is discursively constructed as undemocratic by both sides. Example 9 is from a branch of Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC), the (pro-independence) Catalan Republican Left party. Nomination strategies of positive Self-representation are evident with reference to the “democratic people”, whilst reference to the negative Other is implicit in the text: those who are not in favour of independence are, by definition, undemocratic. The tweet thus creates a clear symbolic boundary between “us” and “them”.

⁹ The *estelada* is the unofficial Catalan pro-independence flag.

9. @ERC_Maresme *Contra la por... No defallirem, estarem al costat de la gent demòcrata d'aquest país. #HolaRepública #1Oct2017*

@ERC_Maresme Against fear...We won't back down, we are by the side of the democratic people of this country. #HelloRepublic #1Oct2017

The same argument is made in example 10. User3 significantly nominates and predicates the Other negatively as “adversaries” and “Francoists”, implicitly positioning them as undemocratic.

10. @user3 *Els adversaris són els de sempre, són els franquistes! Ara vindrà la democràcia plena! #LaLlibertatNoEsJutja #HolaRepública*

@user3 The adversaries are always the same, they are Francoists! Full democracy will come now! #Freedomshouldn'tbejudged #HelloRepublic

Similar references to Spain's past are evident in the following tweet (example 11) by ANC, which uses intertextual references to evoke Catalonia's history of repression. With the words “now we can free ourselves”, the tweet makes reference to a line from a song by the Catalan singer Lluís Llach.¹⁰ The song, “L'estaca” (The Stake), was written in the 1960s as a call for a united front against the Franco regime, the stake being a metaphor to where the people were tied.

11. @assemblea *41 anys després, seguim lluitant per dignitat i per llibertat. Gràcies @lluïslach Ara sí, ens podem alliberar! #HolaDemocràcia*

@assemblea 41 years later, and we continue fighting for dignity and for freedom. Thank you @lluïslach Now, yes, we can free ourselves! #HelloDemocracy

User4 uses the same discourse of liberty, freedom and repression, emphasizing ANC's message:

12. @user4 *L'1 d'octubre les ganes de democràcia, llibertat i dignitat seran més fortes que la por dels mitjans i la repressió. O ara o mai. #HolaRepública*

@user4 On 1 October the desire for democracy, freedom and dignity will be stronger than the fear of the media and repression. It's now or never. #HelloRepublic

These last three examples demonstrate how the argument for independence is legitimized through the topos of history, linking present-day Spain with the Franco dictatorship.

¹⁰ A politically active supporter of Catalan independence, Lluís Llach stood in the 2015 Catalan parliamentary elections as a candidate for the Junts pel Sí coalition. He was elected a member of parliament between 2015 and 2017.

Democracy – pro-union

The tweets from the pro-unionists that refer to democracy reveal very similar language to the independentists. The pro-union argumentation strategies are based on the topos of legality to criticize the referendum. Nomination and predication strategies employed in examples 13, 14 and 15 include the use of the first-person plural pronoun ‘we’ and the use of lexis such as *democratic*, *fairness*, and *legality* to achieve positive Self-identification. The comparison with fascism is used again; in example 14 the independence process is categorized as such, and in example 15, the label is strongly rejected:

13. @user5 #NoNosCallaran a aquellos que defendemos la libertad, la legalidad, la solidaridad y la equidad. Por una democracia real.

@user5 #theywon'tsilenceus those of us who defend freedom, legality, solidarity and fairness. For real democracy

14. @user6 #NoNosCallarán #DefenderLaDemocracia es decir #SI a la #democracia representativa #NO a al [sic] #fascismo revestido de #derechoa decidir

@user6 #theywon'tsilenceus To #DefendDemocracy is to say #YES to #representative democracy #NO to #fascism disguised as the #rightto decide

15. @user7 España sale del silencio. No somos fachas, ni ultras, somos españoles, orgullosamente demócratas, y amantes de nuestro país. #NoNosCallarán

@user7 Spain emerges from the silence. We are not fascists, nor ultras, we are Spanish, proudly democratic and lovers of our country. #theywon'tsilenceus

These examples are the inverse of the pro-independence tweets. Both sides contest their liberty is being repressed. The nomination and predication strategies are the same; however, who is democratic or who is fascist has been reversed.

The “good” and “bad” Catalans: pro-union

The final section explores the theme “good” and “bad” Catalans and begins by examining how the “bad Catalan” label came into being. The pro-independence organizations, ANC and Òmnium Cultural, disseminated a guide to voting through their social media platforms called *7 passos 7 vots* (7 steps, 7 votes). The purpose of this initiative appeared to be to encourage as many people as possible to vote, with advice such as:

Passo 1: Envia un Whastapp a tots els teus contactes preguntant-los si ja saben on han d'anar a votar.

Step 1: Send a Whatsapp to all your contacts asking them if they know where they need to go to vote.

Passo 2: Truca als pares, avis i tiets, ajuda'ls a localitzar el seu col·legi electoral i assegura't que podran desplaçar-s'hi.

Step 2: Phone your parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, help them to find their polling station and make sure they can get there.

The initiative was considered problematic by some, in particular step 4 which suggested:

Passo 4: Pensa en totes les persones que creus que no aniran a votar per algun d'aquests motius: tenen por, dubtes, o no són independentistes.

Step 4: Think about all the people you believe won't vote for one of these reasons: they're afraid, they have doubts or they're not pro-independence.

Some pro-unionists perceived this as a way of marking or tagging those who were not in favour of independence, and the idea of the pro-unionists being identified as “bad Catalans” became topical. Some people interpreted the notion of being included in a list as having fascist-like connotations and this is evident in some of the tweets and images. Figure 2 visually exemplifies this interpretation and employs entextualization as a semiotic resource. Entextualization is the process whereby a particular discourse (historically, culturally or socially situated) is taken from its original context and inserted into a new context (Blommaert, 2005). The systematic marking of Jews in Nazi Europe with a star intended to segregate, control and persecute the Jewish population. This symbol has been modified and recontextualized, implying that the Spanish non-independentists are being marked and controlled.



Figure 2: Spanish: Put my name down.

In the examples 16, 17 and 18, the tweeters nominate themselves as “bad Catalans” and in this way construct their pro-unionist identity. The argumentation strategy used is that the “bad” Catalans love Catalonia and work harder than the “good” (pro-independence) Catalans. This strategy could be seen as a counter-argument to the stereotypical evaluation of migrants as lazy in contrast to the hard-working Catalans. The “good/bad” binary discursively creates an in-group and out-group and thus constructs a boundary between the two groups.

16. @user8 *Piden a los ciudadanos que hagan listas de quién no irá a votar ¿Haciendo listas de buenos y malos catalanes? Momentos duros #NoNosCallarán*

@user8 They're asking people to make lists of those who won't be voting. Making lists of good and bad Catalans? Tough times #theywon'tsilenceus

17. @user9 *Que me apunten también, yo quiero ir en esa lista, en la que los "malos catalanes" son los que más la aman... #NoNosCallaran*

@user9 They can put my name down as well, I want to be on that list, on which the "bad Catalans" are those that love her [Catalunya] most... #theywon'tsilenceus

18. @user10 *Seguro estaré en esa lista pero trabajo por ella dia a dia.. no como otros que viven del cuento de una locura separatista #NoNosCallaran*

@user10 I'm sure I'll be on that list but I work for her [Catalonia] every day..not like some who sponge off others in a separatist madness #theywon'tsilenceus

The "good" and "bad" Catalans: pro-independence

In the final examples, pro-independence tweeters employ nomination and predication strategies to represent the "Other" as a non-citizen (or at least not a Catalan citizen). Implicitly those who are against the referendum are the "bad" Catalans. In example 20, the "good" Catalans who are pro-independence are associated with left-wing politics. Implicit in this message, and explicit in example 19, is the negative predication of the "bad" Catalans as fascists.

19. @user11 *Los que no están a favor del referéndum no son ciudadanos. de @jorditurull¹¹ #HolaRepública #referendum1deoctubre #fascistas #democracia*

@user11 Those who aren't in favour of the referendum aren't citizens @jorditurull #HelloRepublic #referendum1October #fascists #democracy

20. @user12 *Bonic acte amb @MaiteAymerich¹² i @toni_comin¹³ "Avui no es pot ser d'esquerres i no estar pel referèndum" #HolaRepública*

@user12 Lovely event with @MaiteAymerich & @toni_comin "Today you cannot be left-wing and not be in favour of the referendum" #HelloRepublic

¹¹ Jordi Turull was the spokesperson for the Catalan government and instrumental in the referendum campaign. He was arrested and sent to prison in March 2018, charged with rebellion. In October 2019, he was sentenced to twelve years in prison for sedition..

¹² Maite Aymerich was the mayor of the Catalan town, Sant Vicenç dels Horts, until June 2019.

¹³ Toni Comin was the Health Minister in the Catalan government. He was removed from his position by the Spanish government following the declaration of independence in October 2017 and is currently in self-imposed exile in Belgium. The Spanish government issued a European arrest warrant in October 2019 despite his election as an MEP earlier that year.

Discussion

Analysis of the referendum corpora reveals the diverse ways that the pro-independence and pro-union groups construct their collective identities. Twitter provides a platform for the creation of a virtual imagined community and gives members a space to share “ideological reciprocity and collective identity” (Palmer, 2012, 118). As found in other research on Twitter (Zappavigna, 2012; Gruzd *et al.*, 2011), the uptake of the hashtags *#HolaRepublica* and *#NoNosCallaran* enables users to reach this imagined community, sharing common values and indexing solidarity. Following the discourse historical approach, the paper has analysed how, through the use of nomination, predication and argumentation strategies, strong emotive language, images, and shared convictions establish symbolic boundaries between the two groups. These symbolic boundaries generate group membership and reveal a strong us/them binary between the pro-independentists and the pro-unionists (Lamont-Molnár, 2002). Argumentation strategies employed include topoi of failure and success, threat and legality to position the two groups for or against the referendum, using very similar discourse. Self-presentation strategies focus on both groups’ positive attributes, such as pacifism, democracy and pride in their country. The negative undemocratic Other-presentation emphasizes repression and manipulation. The independentists employ the topos of history to legitimize their claim for independence. This draws clear parallels with the Francoist regime and shows how discourses are embedded in Spain’s socio-political history and their persistence in present-day Catalonia.

Melucci (1996, 292) argues that the construction of a collective identity together with “the identification of an enemy” is central to group mobilization. In the data, the Other is constructed through linguistic devices often with war-like connotations such as “adversaries”, “cowards”, “attack”, “threats” and “struggle”. In this way, the “democratic” Catalans are positioned against the “undemocratic” Catalans suggesting there is an aggressor and a victim with both sides claiming their freedom is being repressed. The words used by both groups are the same, the nationalist ideologies are different.

This war-like discourse is interesting and is produced by individuals as well as the civic associations. As shown in the video content, both pro-independence and pro-union civic organizations embrace unity, plurality, and harmonious coexistence. Indeed, Catalonia’s condition of a cosmopolitan, welcoming nation is one of the foundations of Catalan society and often repeated in political discourse. This notion can be seen in these tweets (examples 21 and 22) from the two opposing organizations. SCC promote plurality, whilst ANC support a republic for everyone:

21. @Societatcc *Diem sí a la convivència a la solidaritat i a la pluralitat Diem prou a separar als catalans*

@Societatcc We say yes to coexistence, solidarity and plurality. We say stop the separation of the Catalans

22. @assemblea *estigueu Preparats per la Democràcia perquè debatrem sobre la República de Tothom*

@assemblea Get ready for Democracy because we will have a debate about the Republic of Everyone

Whilst the participatory nature of social media enables “ordinary” people to become engaged in civic and political communication (KhosraviNik-Unger, 2016), the democratic potential of the internet should not be overestimated. As argued by Saunders (2011, 6), the internet is not a neutral space and politicians and the elite use it to construct an “artificial solidarity”, create social cohesion and further their political agenda. This can be seen in the tweets and the videos. However, the notion of harmonious co-existence portrayed in the videos contradicts many of the on-line messages the organizations disseminate, which perpetuates the us/them binary. There is debate about whether or not social media platforms function as echo chambers, where like-minded users come together. My findings suggest that the mediation of the independence movement may encourage the echo chamber effect, which leads to further ideological polarization (Barberá, 2015; Gruzd-Roy, 2014) and eliminates the possibility of any rational deliberation of other viewpoints (KhosraviNik, 2017).

Conclusion

This study was limited to publicly accessible tweets containing the hashtags *#HolaRepublica* and *#NoNosCallaran* within a specific timeline and is not intended to be representative of the larger Catalan population, nor may the data be representative of all tweets from protected accounts (boyd-Crawford, 2012). Nonetheless, the findings suggest that Twitter is used as a platform by both pro-independence and pro-union groups to construct symbolic boundaries and create a collective, national identity.

Catalunya displays an image to the outside world of a modern progressive nation, frequently in contrast to an old, backward Spain. However, it could be argued that the very discourses of nationalism and difference that both sides criticize are the same discourses that they themselves disseminate on social media. This discourse is very potent and quickly adopted by the people, hashtags are created, and hegemonic ideologies are retweeted. In this way, nationalist ideologies (whichever side they come from), become naturalized and permeate the on-line (and off-line) discourse of the people. The impact of mediation of the Catalan independence question, whether this media impact is advocating union or independence, contributes to creating symbolic boundaries and becomes a struggle to eliminate the “Other”. Once this “Other” has been created, it is easier to incentivize the people to choose a side.

Social media sites have new and different affordances to enable certain discourses to be sustained or perpetuated (KhosraviNik-Unger, 2016). However, the online world should not be considered independent or different from the “offline” world. Social media cannot be said to be the cause of the boundary work that is generated by the pro-independence and pro-union organizations and the masses. It is not only the impact of technologies but the social actors who use them and a strong social movement is also necessary (Rambukkana, 2015). However, social media does make possible different communication strategies and structures that may further exacerbate, motivate and disseminate the construction of difference within the same “nation”. Whether Catalonia finally achieves secession from Spain or negotiates different conditions within the Spanish state, perhaps civic organizations and political parties should consider a

more inclusive approach in future campaigns to address the societal division that exists in Catalonia.

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