

Inside the WTF Folder: Is That Really Research?

Danielle Sutton

In this article, Danielle Sutton discusses how her assumptions about what can and cannot be considered research are challenged when she decides to write a paper on political Facebook memes. In order to write a paper that meets the criteria of the assignment, Sutton ultimately has to unlearn much of what she thinks she knows about research.

Though I didn't technically begin my PhD work until August of 2015, after a two year break from school I was more than eager to get back in the classroom, so I decided to get a jump start and take a couple of classes the summer before. Because it had been two years since I'd finished my Master's program, however, I didn't have the benefit of other classes to help get my brain working again, and I had no idea what to do my final paper on. My classmates, all of whom were at least a year ahead of me, had clearly articulated research interests and seemed to come in to the class having already chosen their topics. To make matters worse, it was an accelerated course, meaning we had just four weeks to do the kind of work that typically takes an entire semester. So, naturally, I panicked.

A False Start

I spent the first week of the course thinking I would do something about language acquisition in children. I got started on my research that first week, and it didn't take long for me to realize that language acquisition was far too broad a topic for a twenty page paper.

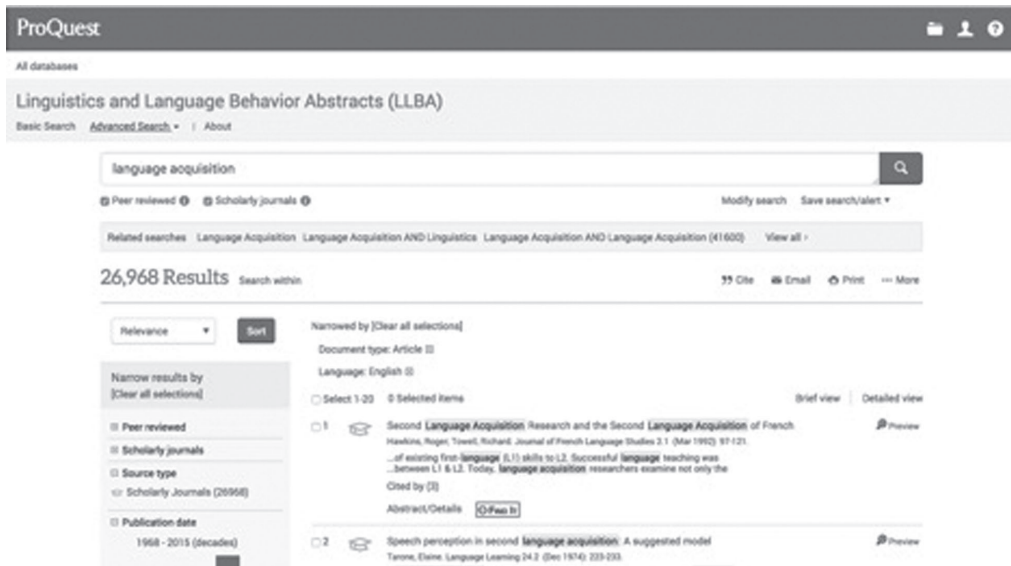


Figure 1: The point at which I realized that, research-wise, I was in over my head.

As my professor had instructed us to do, I went to Milner Library’s website, clicked on “Lists of Databases,” and found the Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts database. For my initial search term, I typed in “language acquisition,” checked the boxes for “Peer Reviewed,” “Scholarly Journals,” and “English.” Even with these restrictions, the database returned 26,968 results (see Figure 1, above). I felt sick to my stomach. There was no way I could make a dent in that amount of research in a regular class, much less in a class that only lasted a month. Still, once a week each student was supposed to present his or her research to the rest of the class for questions, suggestions, and feedback, so I gathered six or seven articles on various aspects of language acquisition and tried to come up with *something* to share with my classmates. My presentation ended up being more questions than answers, and while I got some good feedback, I still didn’t feel like I had a topic, much less an *argument*, and that was making me very anxious. I spent the weekend worrying that I’d fail my first PhD seminar.

That next week in class we learned about something called sociolect; whereas a person’s dialect is typically dependent on geographical space, sociolect has more to do with social space—including age, class, ethnicity, and political affiliation. In our discussion of sociolect, my professor made an offhand comment, something along the lines of, “I would love for someone to look at political Facebook memes from a linguistic perspective,” and I think an actual cartoon lightbulb lit up in the air above my head. I almost couldn’t wait until after class to see if it was OK to change my paper topic. Not only was sociolinguistics (the field of linguistics in which sociolect is

studied) by far the most interesting topic I'd read about in my week as a linguistics student, but I happened to have already done a significant amount of research in the area of political Facebook memes—I just didn't recognize it as such because, thanks to my prior experience with mostly literary analysis, it didn't line up with my mental representation of what "academic research" could be.

A Bit of Background

I don't remember when or why I started, but I love to hoard "like" items. In a way that's way less creepy than it sounds, sometimes I even find myself "collecting" people—in large groups, I make mental categories like "glasses" and "no glasses," or "people wearing blue," or "people wearing stripes." Collections I'm currently maintaining include: milk glass, owl mugs, things with pictures of bugs on them, and a glass jar of buckeyes (that one I should probably toss, since one of them is starting to mold).

Maybe one of the strangest things I've found myself collecting, however, is political Facebook memes¹. June and July of 2015 was a great time for collecting Facebook memes. In June alone, a white supremacist committed a mass shooting of black churchgoers in South Carolina, which was followed by a call for the removal of the Confederate flag from government property, and the US Supreme Court validated same sex marriage. In July, Muhammad Youssef Abdulazeez shot four military personnel in Tennessee, and Caitlyn Jenner debuted as a transgender woman on the cover of *Vanity Fair*. Suddenly my Facebook feed—a place I went to for pictures of my friends' babies, puppies, and sandwiches—was taken over by racist, homophobic, and passive² aggressive memes. Though I disagreed with much of what they were sharing, I wasn't about to get into political debates on Facebook. Still, I couldn't just scroll by, because much of what they were sharing was (at least it seemed to me) objectively appalling. Maybe that's why I started taking screen captures of the worst of the memes. Before long, it was second nature: see an abhorrent meme, press **COMMAND + SHIFT + 4** so that my cursor becomes tiny crosshairs, and draw a box around the offending content. After a while, I noticed there were twenty or so PNG files cluttering my desktop, so I created a folder called "wtf" to corral them all.³

¹*The Oxford English Dictionary*, which tracks English words from their very first recorded use, defines a meme as "an image, video, piece of text, etc., typically humorous in nature, that is copied and spread rapidly by Internet users, often with slight variations" ("meme, n.").

²And sometimes not-so-passive.

³Talk about unexpected trajectory—I never would've guessed that these random, impulsive screen grabs would've made their way into not one but two articles (including this one).



Figure 2: A meme shared by half of my (admittedly small) study's participants.

Is That Really Research?

Though I'd already collected around thirty memes by that point, once my professor signed off on my new topic it was time to begin researching in earnest. I opened my laptop and began looking through my *wtf* folder, and a few things became clear: first, the same handful of people was sharing the bulk of the political content. Second, those people were getting their memes from many of the same places, though each person seemed to have his or her own "pet" causes—one of my former high school classmates was really worked up about the Confederate flag, for example, while another seemed fixated on gun control, and still another was willing to share anything that was even a little anti-Obama. Finally, and most importantly, I realized that up until this point my "research"—though thanks to the antecedent knowledge I have of Facebook as a way of wasting time when I'm *supposed to* be doing something important, I still felt uncomfortable calling it that—had been very haphazard. When I was merely saving memes that caught my eye, haphazard was perfectly acceptable, but if I wanted to draw any reasonably scientific conclusions from my data, I would have to collect that data in a reasonably scientific way, which is why I made a research plan.

Based on the initial data I'd gathered, I identified those Facebook friends who shared the most memes and settled on seven "subjects," four women and

three men, all between the ages of 25 and 55. To get the most accurate picture of their sharing habits, I went to each person’s Facebook page and looked at everything they’d shared throughout June and July, saving and transcribing all the political memes.⁴ In addition to transcribing the images and text, I noted the level of engagement with the memes—that is, how many likes, comments, and shares each meme had. I entered all of this data into a spreadsheet and gave each meme a title based on the sharer’s initials and the date the meme was shared—for example, the fourth meme shared by Albus Dumbledore (not a real friend of mine) on July 4th would be titled AD007073. Not only did this make it easy to track down the PNG file associated with a chunk of text in my spreadsheet, but typing and transcribing into an Excel spreadsheet matched up nicely with my representation of what “academic research” was like. Finally!

This is the point in the article where I admit that my preconceived notions regarding research were not very useful to the process. Years upon years of student-ing have shaped my representation of what kinds of activities are scholarly—going to the library, reading books and articles, applying theory to primary texts and coming up with some sort of argument—while looking down on others as inherently value-less. Unsurprisingly, scrolling through Facebook is one of those activities I always feel a little guilty about, and socialization around this activity among my fellow graduate students supports this notion—we joke about how we’re looking at Facebook when we should be working, sometimes via Facebook itself. All this antecedent knowledge proved an unexpected challenge when I was collecting data. Somewhat unconsciously, I found myself feeling bad about scrolling through Facebook even as I was actively working.

Data Analysis: Now What?

Combing through months of my seven subjects’ Facebook statuses resulted in a total of 123 memes, which I then tagged according to topic. Because several memes hit on more than one topic (for example, one meme might be about the Confederate flag, President Obama, *and* guns), I ended up with 151 tags for a total of 26 topics. Once I had all this data, I had to figure out what to do with it. I learned in my linguistics class weekly research check-in that several of my classmates were using data analysis software, so I thought that might be a good place for me to start as well. I downloaded something called Nvivo, watched a few instructional videos, and then attempted to load my data, via spreadsheet, into the program. After several hours of trying to figure out what

⁴I’d learned my lesson about the danger of too-broad topics, so I decided it would be best not to include non-political memes, as well as political links or rants.

I was doing, which mostly involved clicking around and hoping some brilliant insight would materialize, I pretty much gave up. Though the software didn't really yield any insights that were useful to my argument, I did get some interesting word clouds, like the one below.

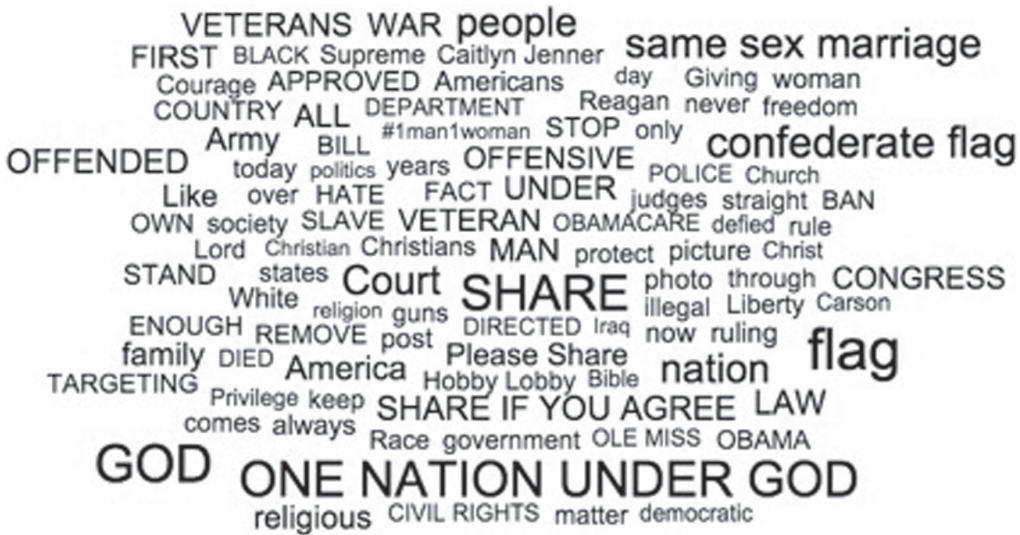


Figure 3: One of those interesting though ultimately useless word clouds.

After trying (and failing) to analyze my data with software, I was stumped as to what to do next. In collecting and transcribing my data, I had noticed some recurrent themes, or tropes—for example, *so and so is braver than Caitlyn Jenner*, or *history/heritage not hate*, and so on—but I didn't have a theoretical framework to give these observations any structure. In class the following Thursday, I shared my concerns, along with a sampling of some of the most popular memes and common tropes, with my professor and my classmates. These structureless observations included:

- Pictures of white people were typically neutral, while pictures featuring people of color were always racially charged—either to show how something about the culture in question is bad, or in a kind of tokenism (i.e., “a Black person said it, so we’re not racist!”).
- In scrolling through participants’ pages, it didn’t take much scientific rigor to notice that some people were what I termed *over-sharers*. Once I tabulated the data, this initial observation was confirmed: the two most active sharers posted 54 and 21 memes in the months of June and July (again, I only collected *political memes*—that means these people also posted standard status updates, links to articles, and non-political memes in addition to the political memes I studied). Interestingly, I wasn’t the

only one who noticed they were over-sharing—the most active sharers received the lowest levels of engagement (likes, comments, shares), which I could only assume meant that their other friends were just as sick of them as I was.

- Some memes were openly hostile (“If this offends you, you’re what’s wrong with America!”⁵), while others seemed to have a more inclusive, group-building function (“Type ‘I do’ and share if you support traditional marriage.”⁶).

It was this last observation that yielded the most helpful feedback.

Politeness Theory

Based on my observation regarding the apparent social function of political memes, my professor said it would be a good idea to look into *politeness theory*, so after class I made my way over to Milner Library and checked out a copy of the book that introduced the theory back in 1978. A branch of sociolinguistics, on its most basic level politeness theory is all about the notion of *face*. Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, who literally wrote the book on politeness theory, argue that everyone has a face—that is, a “public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself” (61). Smooth social interactions rely on the fact that we all work to maintain our own faces and the faces of others. Yet, according to Brown and Levinson, some acts—like bringing up politics or religion—are considered inherently threatening to face, and as social animals we humans have to figure out how to deal with that. For example, *I want to tell my brother that all the candy he feeds his daughter is making her act like a brat, but how do I do that without making it seem like I’m saying he’s a bad parent?*

Politeness theory provided a great lens through which to view my Facebook data, yet because it was developed in the ‘70s using direct, face-to-face communication, it doesn’t really account for the indirect nature of online interaction. While there are some more direct analogues—like sending a chat or posting on someone’s wall—the memes I was studying were always posted to the sharer’s friends list at large, which means that the *Heritage not Hate* Confederate flag meme might be seen by a redneck hunting buddy whose reaction is, “Hell yeah!” or by a Black coworker who’s more like, “Oh hell no.” Rather than seeing this gap as a challenge, I chose to explore this seeming incompatibility between politeness theory and what I had observed in online interaction, which allowed me to come up with my own original argument

⁵Actual meme text.

⁶Also actual meme text.

about how there's no such thing as an inherently face-threatening act in the world of the Facebook News Feed. The indirect nature of the News Feed makes the trajectory of memes unpredictable—something can be simultaneously threatening to your coworker *and* affirming to your hunting buddy.

Conclusion

If you're anything like me, you're probably wondering what the point was to transcribing all that data to begin with. Anyone with a basic understanding of how Facebook works could've reached the same conclusion I did *without* scrolling through months of Confederate flags and angry Minions—but that's kind of how research works. In many ways, my antecedent knowledge of what "research" means caused me to set up lots of roadblocks for myself. I started out expecting I'd find that second person pronouns like *you* are more likely to be used in a hostile way, while first person pronouns like *I* and *we* tend to be used in affirmative ways—or *something like that*. However, being open to new research methods and theoretical frameworks meant that I got the chance to learn about politeness theory, a branch of sociolinguistics I found very interesting once I sat down and read about it, and apply it to a genre I'd been curious about for quite some time. Now politeness theory is a theoretical framework that I'll have in my mental toolbox the next time I need to analyze any kind of social literate activity—for research, or simply as a human moving about in the world. Not only that, but I still have my spreadsheet of meme data and my *wtf* folder on my desktop, and I have a feeling that my writing and research on Facebook memes is far from over.

Works Cited

- Brown, Penelope and Stephen C. Levinson. *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987. Print.
- "meme, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, December 2015. Web. 2 January 2016.



Danielle Sutton is a PhD student in English Studies at Illinois State University. In her spare time she enjoys reading self-help books, baking, fermenting things, and screen grabbing the outrageous things people say on Facebook in the name of "research."

