Analysis of the protest movement of African Americans in the United States through denotative and connotative meanings of Hashtags

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Abstract

The study investigates the main hashtags used in the African American protest movement in the United States. The relevance of the study is determined by the need to recognise the tendencies of the protest movement due to the fact that, having originated several years ago, it continues to play a huge role in the life of society, reaching a higher level today, which is confirmed by the statistics provided in this study. Special attention is paid to a single denotation and a variety of connotations of lexical units, expressed in graphic form with hashtags. It is emphasised that in the study of a specific social phenomenon, an expanded base of lexemes should be considered, which allows to examine the socio-political phenomenon as a multifaceted and ambivalent one. Quantitative analysis identifies the culminating moments in the diachrony of this process and the specific sub-regions where this phenomenon is most common. The novelty of the study is considered in the fact that this socio-political phenomenon is considered from a linguistic standpoint.

Keywords: activism; denotation; connotation; social network; #Black Lives Matter

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1. Introduction

To date, one of the main trends in the world is globalisation, which is conditioned by the integration of many spheres of society through the Internet. One of the most developing segments of this network are social networks where media discourse is carried out. Some ideas acquire the status of "big ideas" that captivate the minds of political subjects and sometimes the masses, and begin to substantially influence national and international decisions, thereby determining practical international activity (Torkunov, 2019). This phenomenon is interesting to study from a linguistic standpoint. Firstly, due to the widespread use of English as an international language of communication. Secondly, due to the priority of English in many social networks (such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.). Thirdly, this phenomenon is the result of the principle of saving speech efforts, substantiated by André Martine (Martine, 1963) and expressed through lexical units in the form of hashtags.

Over the past ten years, the form of communication of both political figures with each other and their interaction with society has completely changed. With the advent of the second-generation Internet, the process of information coverage has moved to a qualitatively new level. Firstly, the provision of news by politicians with the advent of Twitter and Telegram into the life of society has become almost instantaneous. Secondly, the transmission of information has acquired a more intuitive form through the transmission of the message to the target audience. In addition, something appeared that previously only indirectly related to the media. This phenomenon was the backlash and interaction of politicians with their target audience, an understanding of its reaction to specific actions and statements (Torkunov, 2018). Despite the above fact, the process of hashtagging, along the vector of its distribution, is directed not only from politicians to the population – sometimes this process is reversed in situations when the population attracts the attention of the establishment through their media texts, requiring specific decisions to be made to resolve certain problems in society (Tahiri & Muhaxheri, 2020).

Thus, in 2020, one of the most popular hashtags on social networks was the #Black Lives Matter hashtag, which expresses the concern of a certain part of society with the problem of discrimination against black people, oppression of their freedoms and unacceptable behaviour of law enforcement agencies in relation to this population group. This movement, which began in 2013 in the United States of America, has come a long way to the point when people in Europe drew attention to it. This trend not only emphasises the global scope of the problem, but also helps to compare the facts influencing the process of spreading the slogan, to trace its diachrony, which will allow to more specifically anticipate events and their consequences for a particular region. In addition, with conflicting opinions regarding a single socio-political phenomenon, antagonistic positions may arise, expressed in media discourse through contradictory lexical units; this study investigates contradictory hashtags. The hashtag #Black Lives Matter will be considered as the initial unit. Alternatively, hashtags #White Lives Matter, *#Blue Lives Matter*, and #All Lives Matter.

1.1. Literature review

In July 2013, a protest movement began using the hashtag #Black Lives Matter on social media after the court acquitted George Zimmerman in the February 2012 case of the February 2012 murder of African American teenager Trayvon Martin. However, this protest movement gained national recognition in the United States only during the demonstrations that took place in 2014 after the deaths of two African Americans. The death of Michael Brown led to rallies and riots in Missouri, the death of Eric Garner was a trigger for protests in New York (Day, 2015). Thus, the first wave of hashtag activism #Black Lives Matter began, with the support of tens and hundreds of thousands of people on

social networks. This wave of hashtag activism gradually subsided over the next 2015. However, then the number of daily users of the hashtag began to increase. The next wave of hashtag activism took place over roughly 10 days of summer in July 2016, when the hashtag #Black Lives Matter was mentioned on average at almost 500,000 tweets per day, peaking at around 1,500,000 tweets on its peak day. This time frame also included reports that Alton Sterling was shot dead on July 5, 2016 by police in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. On July 6, 2016, Philando Castile was shot and killed by a police officer in the suburb of St. Paul, Minnesota. And the next day, during protests against the aforementioned deaths, a black gunman killed five police officers in Dallas, Texas. About a week and a half later, another black gunman killed three police officers in Baton Rouge (Anderson et al., 2020). According to the information platform Pew Research Center, the following mentions of hashtags from 2016 to 2019 on the social network Twitter were insignificant (Anderson et al., 2020). For example, on June 16, 2017, the Minnesota police officer who shot Philando Castile was found not guilty, prompting a new burst of Twitter activity on posts with hashtags #Black Lives Matter. On September 22 of the same year, President Donald Trump called on the owners of the US National Football League to terminate the contract with football players who protest, supporting the Black Lives Matter movement during the performance of the national anthem of the United States. During this period, the Twitter community lost some interest in the movement, however, the increased use of #Black Lives Matter hashtags was noticed on June 16 and September 22.

Another event that influenced the publication of posts with the hashtag #Black Lives Matter on Twitter was the assassination of Stephon Clarke. The reactions also did not differ on a wide scale. The real outbreak of #Black Lives Matter hashtag use occurred on May 28, 2020, three days after the murder of George Floyd. The number of posts of the hashtag #Black Lives Matter has reached 8,800,000. Protests in the United States of America have reached from 15 to 26 million people. This event became epoch-making not only for the United States – protests spread throughout the world, covering countries such as Canada, Australia, Japan, and most of Europe.

Through the media, a certain picture of the world arises, with the mechanism for creating a communicative media event as a result of the interaction of a media text with the consciousness of a person serving as the basis of this picture (Zelenskaya, 2018). In this context, the #Black Lives Matter hashtag constitutes a lexical display of a socio-political phenomenon that broadcasts information and evokes a public response to ongoing events. In this regard, special attention should be paid to the linguistic component of this phenomenon.

1.2. Research questions

The study investigates the main hashtags used in the African American protest movement in the United States from a linguistic point of view. Special attention is paid to a single denotation and a variety of connotations of lexical units #Black Lives Matter, #White Lives Matter, #Blue Lives Matter and #All Lives Matter.

2. Methodology

2.1. Analysis of the hashtag #Black Lives Matter from a linguistic point of view

First of all, it is important to note the fact that the #Black Lives Matter hashtag is the semantic core of an entire group of hashtags related to the phenomenon that reflects the racial issue in American society. These lexical tokens include #BLM, #White Lives Matter, #Blue Lives Matter, and #All Lives Matter. With regard to the first hashtag #BLM, it is worth paying attention to the fact that it is an abbreviated lexical unit, which confirms the principle of saving speech efforts, presenting hashtagging

as a process of double language compression, implemented at the semantic and graphic levels. This trend is becoming a fairly common phenomenon in the media discourse #MAGA (Make America Great Again), #Jan25 (January 25), #FF (Follow Friday), etc. The hashtags #Black Lives Matter, #White Lives Matter, #Blue Lives Matter and #All Lives Matter organise a group of lexical units that have a denotation expressing a class of phenomena that reflects the protest of the American population against discrimination, and concatenated by the –Lives Matter token. Connotation, according to Roland Barth's theory, is a kind of pragmatic information that reflects not the objects and phenomena themselves, but a certain attitude towards them (Bart, 1989). In this case, the connotation is expressed through the first part of the lexical token, expressed by the colourative in the first three hashtags - Black, -White, -Blue. For a more detailed understanding of this phenomenon, this study is going to cover the extra linguistic component of hashtags #White Lives Matter, #Blue Lives Matter, and #All Lives Matter. The most radical of the three hashtags above is the #White Lives Matter hashtag, which emerged in early 2015 as a response to the #Black Lives Matter protest movement, which emerged in 2013 to protest police brutality against African Americans.

Since 2015, the White Lives Matter proponents, especially members of the Texas Aryan Revival Society, have been promoting the above slogan with protests and leaflets, developing a free campaign to spread the message. By 2016, other white supremacist groups, including the Ku Klux Klan groups, were also adopting the slogan, and it soon became key for white supremacist, continuing to move even after the early campaigners ceased their activities (White Lives Matter, 2020). Perhaps the least common use of the White Lives Matter slogan is that it is associated in most cases with neo-Nazis, white supremacists and the Ku Klux Klan. However, a considerable number of white people are positive about the actions envisaged for different groups of the population, provided that the lives of white people are not ignored, and some of the people who do not oppose BLM can support the slogan White Lives Matter, provided that that they will add the word "too" to it (Moshman, 2017). This hashtag is also reflected in popular culture. BTS fans launched an attack on what they saw as racist hashtags, including #White Lives Matter and #All Lives Matter, with a seemingly endless number of K-pop fans, and then flooded the I Watch Dallas app with dissent after the Dallas Police Department urged citizens to share the video which filmed illegal protests (Madden, 2020). A more reasoned response to the Black Lives Matter movement compared to the above was the hashtag #Blue Lives Matter. After New York Police Officers Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos were killed on December 20, 2014, a number of law enforcement officials decided to create a social media movement to counter media reports that police believed were directed against the law enforcement officials (The police tribune, 2020). The campaign participants were both working law enforcement officers and those who retired. The Blue Lives Matter delegate is retired Lieutenant Randy Sutton, an officer in the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department. In the same month, the Blue Lives Matter NYC campaign was launched in New York City to support police officers and their families (Blue Lives Matter NYC, 2015). In addition, the organisation contributed to raising social awareness of the needs and concerns of police officers. The organiser of this movement is Police Sergeant Joey Imperatrice.

In addition to hashtags on social media, over 300 billboards with the slogan "Blue Lives Matter" were placed in the US. The media discourse also includes the hashtag #thankublu (thank you blue), which is used to provide moral support to law enforcement officers (Logan, 2015). People who claim to feel overwhelmed at the mention of the #Black Lives Matter hashtag on social media have created #Blue Lives Matter, #All Lives Matter, and a host of others on similar topics focusing on non-African American identities. The hashtag #Blue Lives Matter has also garnered a lot of attention due to the police killings. As stated above, on July 7, 2016, an African American shot and killed five police officers at the Black Lives Matter protest in Dallas. Part of the US population opposed the participants in the Black Lives Matter movement, accusing them of influencing armed attacks on law enforcement

officers with their protest actions. In this case, there is an evident confrontation between the sects based not on ideology, as in the case of #White Lives Matter, but on specific events (police deaths) and attempts to prevent them.

The response of the Black Lives Matter movement in society was to condemn these violent acts. The campaign also focused on the call that all lives matter and that African Americans are targeted by police aggression without receiving proper justice. This lack of fairness suggests that, in the context of this slogan, the lives of African Americans are irrelevant compared to the lives of the white population of the United States, and therefore society should pay attention to the development of a culture that places equal value on the lives of people of all walks of life and races (Ernesto et al., 2019). The vast majority of research on the BLM campaign attempts to contextualise the popularisation of the #Black Lives Matter hashtag. Firstly, social networks are becoming an ideal platform for expressing protest sentiments, and hashtags are becoming transparent material for quantitative analysis. Secondly, this material is easy enough to verify by means of various automated linguistic software and specialised software for SMM and SEO analytics (Erton, 2020). For example, researchers Gallagher, Reagan, Danforth and Dodds (2018) compare the Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter campaigns based on the use of the same-name hashtags on the social network Twitter. Scientists have found that the variety of topics associated with the #Black Lives Matter hashtag is broader than the topics covered by the #All Lives Matter hashtag, which interacts more closely with conservative sentiments (Gallagher et al., 2018).

Social media empowers every person to have a different perspective on what he or she does and does not do. For many groups, these concepts come in the form of comments that relate to the #All Lives Matter counter-movement. The researchers noted that much of this "trolling" occurs as a way of trying to end the conversation entirely, using the hashtag #All Lives Matter to silence the Black Lives Matter protesters (Mundt, 2018).

The hashtag #All Lives Matter, which is also the opposite of the hashtag #Black Lives Matter in comparison with the hashtags #Blue Lives Matter and #White Lives Matter, is more neutral in structure and connotation, it is no coincidence that in the United States of America, where tolerance is one of the main qualities of a civil society representative, it has become quite popular. On the one hand, it expresses the discontent of the US population regarding the protests and rallies of the Black Lives Matter movement. On the other hand, this hashtag is difficult to accuse of discriminatory nature.

3. Result and Discussion

### 3.1. The connotative nature of lexical units

Having covered the extra-linguistic context of these lexical units, the authors of the study compiled Table 1, which reflects the connotative nature of the hashtags #Black Lives Matter, #White Lives Matter, #Blue Lives Matter and #All Lives Matter in degree from the most to the least tolerant attitude towards protest.

Table 1. The connotative nature of hashtags

| Hashtag	Denotation	Connotation
#Black Lives Matter	Protest against discrimination of America's black population	Positive towards protest
#All Lives Matter		Neutral (latently negative) towards protest

#Blue Lives Matter	Negative towards protest
#White Lives Matter	Strongly negative towards protest

In connection with the given data, it seems logical to analyse the above presented hashtags #*Black Lives Matter*, #*White Lives Matter*, #*Blue Lives Matter* and #*All Lives Matter* in the diachronic aspect to identify patterns of their use and involvement with each other through the Google Trends service (Google Trends, 2020).
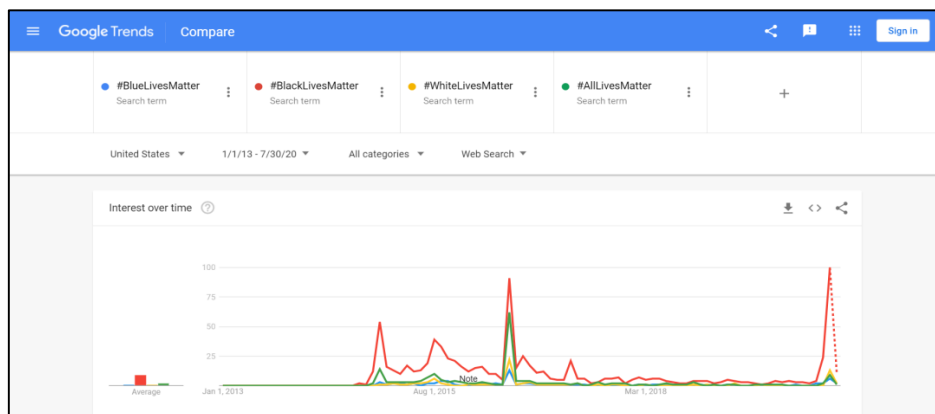
Figure 1. The use of hashtags in a diachronic aspect

As Figure 1 demonstrates, despite the fact that the hashtag #*Black Lives Matter* appeared back in 2013, its distribution took place in 2014 and beyond. Furthermore, this hashtag is the most used on the Internet compared to the other three, with the exception of July 2016, when there were police killings in Dallas, which is detailed in Figure 2.
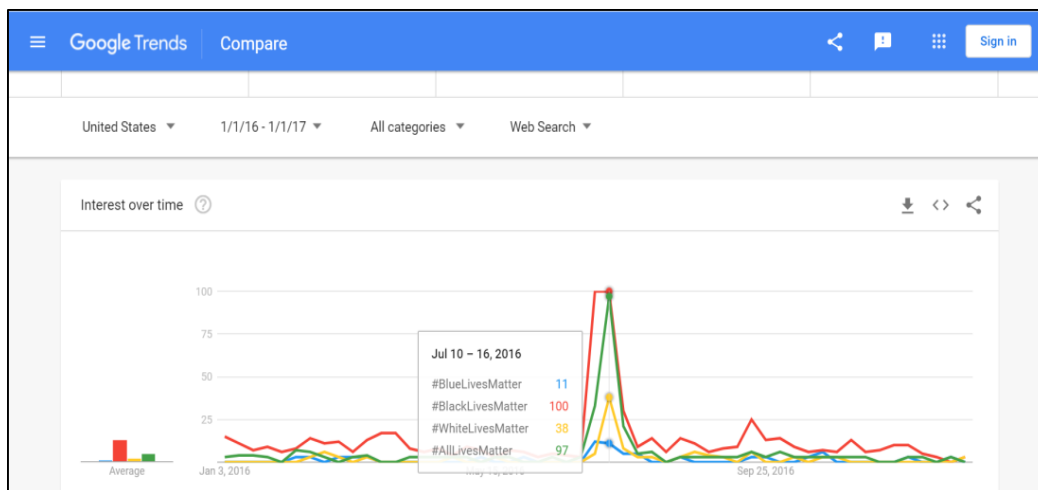
Figure 2. Hashtag statistics based on –Lives Matter in mid-July 2016

Investigating the use of hashtags in the United States of America, detailed statistics obtained regarding these lexical units is presented in Figure 3.
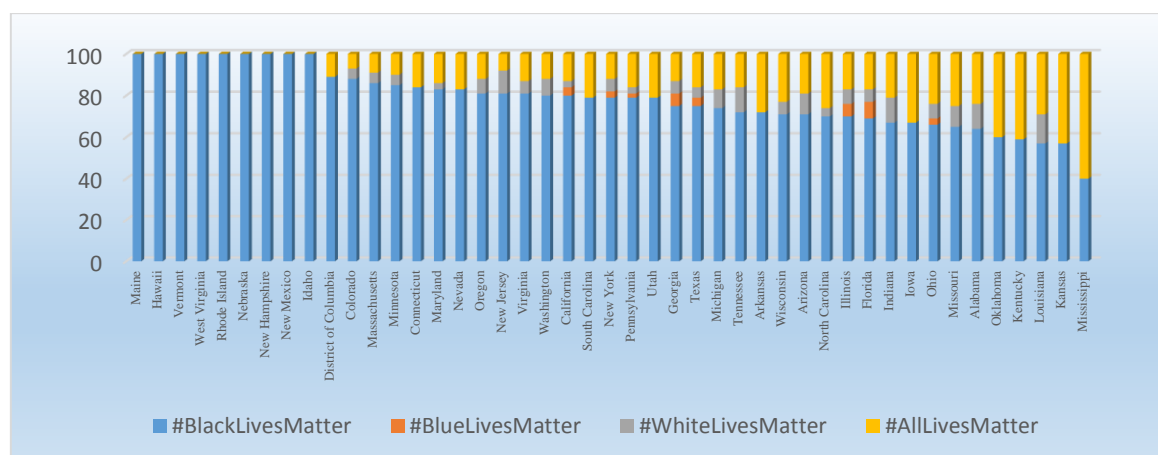
Figure 3. The use of hashtags based on –Lives Matter across the USA

This diagram demonstrates that in 20% of states, the population on the Internet used only the hashtag #*Black Lives Matter*. In the vast majority of US states, the #*Black Lives Matter* hashtag occupied a dominant position (more than 50% in terms of interest in this topic) compared to the hashtags #*White Lives Matter*, #*Blue Lives Matter*, and #*All Lives Matter*. Only in Mississippi was the level of interest in these lexemes at 40%, which is interesting in the context of the fact that to date Mississippi has the highest percentage of African American population in the United States among all states – about 38% after Washington State (District of Columbia) – 55%. The situation in Louisiana is also interesting, where the African American population is 32% (third in the US), but only 57% of the state's population positively perceives the protests of the Black Lives Matter movement, the rest prefer the hashtags #*White Lives Matter* and #*All Lives Matter*. In other cases, there are no trends, however, the above fact suggests that the more heterogeneous the population of the state by racial composition, the more probable it is that counter-movements will be more supported by the population.

4. Conclusions

Thus, in the process of analysing the main lexical units, expressed in the form of hashtags and covering the subject of the protests of African Americans in the United States regarding their discrimination, the authors of this study come to the conclusion that any socio-political movement is reflected in the language, or, in the given situation, in the media discourse. Hashtags are a convenient tool for studying socio-political processes from a linguistic standpoint due to the fact that they are convenient as a material for quantitative analysis and they are easy to verify. It becomes clear that the protests in the United States of America cannot be adequately described merely from the perspective of a single lexical unit, since this phenomenon is complex and multifaceted. In this regard, to understand the complete linguistic picture of this campaign, a number of lexemes expressed in the form of hashtags and having a single denotation should be examined. It is the constellation of the connotative meanings of the lexical units #Black Lives Matter, #White Lives Matter, #Blue Lives Matter, and #All Lives Matter that contribute to a real understanding of society's attitude towards the problem of discrimination, and also allows to identify the culminating moments in the diachrony of this process.

In the study, due to the analysis of the chronology of events, all of the above-mentioned protest tokens were divided into four main categories. It was established that each lexical unit expressed by a hashtag has a certain connotation. The slogan #Black Lives Matter began to have a positive connotation towards the protest. #All Lives Matter expresses a neutral (latent negative) connotation

towards the protest. The hashtag #Blue Lives Matter became negative towards the protest. The expression of discriminatory sentiments with a sharply negative connotation was demonstrated by the message #White Lives Matter, but this is not always an indicator of the ultra-right vector, sometimes this lexical unit is used only as a response and disagreement with the ongoing protests and the destabilisation of the situation in the country.

Furthermore, this study highlights the fact that the distribution of hashtags is directly related to the geography of its distribution. Thus, all the hashtags of the #Black Lives Matter movement emphasise: the higher the percentage of the African American population, the more common the slogans #White Lives Matter, #Blue Lives Matter, and #All Lives Matter are. Notable, the cyclical nature is observed during the protest movement. It was found that each subsequent outbreak of manifestation exceeds the previous one in scale. Thus, it becomes possible to extrapolate possible collisions of opposing campaigns by means of setting their location.

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ABD'deki Afro-Amerikalılarsiviltoplumhareketininhashtaglerindenotatifvekonotatifanlamlarıaracılığıylaanalizi

Özet

Makalede, ABD'deki Afro-Amerikalılar sivil toplum hareketınde kullanılan ana hashtagleri araştırıldı. Araştırmanın alaka düzeyi, sivil toplum hareketinin eğilimlerini tanıma ihtiyacıyla belirlenildi, çünkü birkaç yıl önce ortaya çıkmış, toplum yaşamında büyük bir rol oynamaya devam ederek bugün daha yüksek bir seviyeye ulaşmıştır, ve bu, makalede verilen istatistiklerle onaylandı. Çalışmada, hashtag'lerle grafik biçiminde ifade edilen, sözcük birimlerinin tek tip denotat'a ve konotasyonlarının çeşitliliğine özel dikkat gösterildi. Belirli bir sosyal fenomenin çalışmasında, sosyo-politik bir fenomeni çok yönlü ve kararsız bir fenomen olarak incelemeye izin veren genişletilmiş bir sözlükbirim(lexeme) tabanını dikkate alınması gerektiği vurgulanmaktadır. Kantitatif analiz yoluyla, bu sürecin diakronidaki doruk noktasına ulaşan anlar ve bu fenomenin en yaygın olduğu belirli alt bölgeler tespit edildi. Araştırmanın yeniliği, bu sosyo-politik fenomenin dilbilimsel bir bakış açısıyla görülmesi gerçeğinde görülmektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: aktivizm(eylemcilik); denotat; konotasyon; sosyal ağ; #Siyahilerin Hayatı Önemlidir.

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