

“#IN BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE”, MEMES AND PHENOMENA: LINGUISTICS AND ITS SUGGESTIONS TO EXPLORE DIGITAL EVENT PROPAGATION

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, oriented by a Linguistics' perspective (HALLIDAY, 1987; KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2000; AUTHOR, 2015a, 2015e), we make use of linguistic theories and methods as primary sources of investigation to analyse the propagation process of *digital events* such as “#In Brazilian Portuguese” - largely disseminated via *Twitter.com*, in February, 2015. In doing so, it means that we neither rely only on references oriented by Communication principles (RECUERO, 2006) nor on the conceptions derived solely from Memetics (TYLER, 2011, 2013). In that way, we briefly present to readers who are not familiar with (whether those are language researchers, professionals of related areas, and/or professors/teachers acting at the several stages of educational systems) some theoretical and methodological aspects, and also key terms that we consider to be relevant so that the reader can recognise and investigate the dissemination of *digital events* like the *memetic phenomenon* “#In Brazilian Portuguese”.

KEYWORDS:

Internet (memes), Social/digital media, Linguistics, Viral marketing, Internet memes and teaching.

RESUMO

Neste trabalho, orientados por uma perspectiva da Linguística (HALLIDAY, 1987; KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2000; AUTHOR, 2015a, 2015e), apresentamos, de maneira sucinta, aos leitores menos familiarizados (sejam estes estudiosos da linguagem, profissionais de áreas correlatas ou professores dos diversos estágios educacionais) algumas sugestões teórico-metodológicas e termos-chave relevantes para pesquisas voltadas ao estudo de aspectos da linguagem. Nesse sentido, a partir de investigações da referida natureza, como já se faz em estudos de orientação comunicacional (RECUERO, 2006), ou memética (TYLER, 2011, 2013), objetivamos que pesquisadores possam proceder, a partir da perspectiva da Linguística que sugerimos, ao reconhecimento e à investigação da propagação de *eventos digitais*, tais como o *fenômeno de memes* “#In Brazilian Portuguese” – difundido majoritariamente através da rede social *Twitter.com*, em fevereiro de 2015.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Memes (da Internet), Mídias sociais/digitais, Linguística, Marketing viral, Memes da Internet e ensino.

INTRODUCTION

In the present paper, we offer some suggestions to researchers/professionals who (directly or indirectly) work in association with language studies. In that way, our intention is that this group of people can have theoretical and methodological resources at their disposal, in order to identify and investigate the propagation of “*digital events*” (SOUZA JÚNIOR, 2015a) that often spread through and dominate the Web, such as the “*memetic phenomenon*” (SOUZA JÚNIOR, 2015a) recognised as “#In Brazilian Portuguese”.

By considering the aforementioned resources, our objective is to briefly present a Linguistics-oriented approach that we believe to be useful to identify and investigate the propagation of digital events, and the linguistic aspects that influence such dissemination. It means that the approach that we suggest in here is not mostly oriented by principles and concerns considered in studies derived from the field of Communication (RECUERO, 2006), as Souza Júnior (2015a) remarked. The approach also aims to propose to researchers some reflection in the sense of avoiding unscrutinised interpretation and application of Memetics’ principles (DAWKINS, 1979, 1982; DENNETT, 1995; BLACKMORE, 1999, 2002; TYLER, 2011, 2013), according to what Leal-Toledo (2013) and Souza Júnior (2015a) observed.

“MARK 1:18 – IMMEDIATELY THEY LINKED THEIR NET (WORKS) AND OTHERS FOLLOWED MEMES”

When the Web is dominated by a large quantity of disseminated items – i.e. expressions beginning with hashtags (#), edited and/or captioned images, videos, *gifs* (roughly speaking, animated images) or social media profiles that incorporate celebrity or anonymous’ identities – , The Press, in general, news websites and blogs hurry to state that a new ‘meme’ has been born. The necessity to record the emergence of that event (which might take either hours or years to disappear), associated with the indiscriminate use, triggered via domino effect, of the term *meme* gave rise to the resignification of the concept that the evolutionary biologist, Richard Dawkins (1979), called “the non-biological bother of genes” or “the gene of culture”, in the last chapter of his book “The Selfish Gene”.

When Dawkins (1979, 1982) says that memes are the *genes of culture*, it implies to assume that ideas or information are replicated mostly in a homogeneous way, having brains

– and exclusively them – as their artifacts of transmission. For example, computer, texts or words, in contrast, would not have that 'transmission power', according to the author (1982). Moreover, a meme would be an idea or a piece of information that is capable of gathering three basic characteristics: “fidelity” (a meme maintains its original idea); “fecundity” (a meme is quickly spread in several ways or modes of construction); and “longevity” (a meme lasts for some time).

Tyler (2013), presenting the memetic conception of *informationalism*, argues that memes could exist both *inside our minds* (i.e. a memetic perspective named *internalism*) and *outside of those* (i.e. a memetic school called *externalism*). The author (2013) takes as a basis a positioning found in Daniel Dennett (1995) to support his view. Thus, Dennett’s perspective, on the other hand, differs from that of Dawkins (1979, 1982) in relation to the 'prestige' of brains being the only artifact that would have the capacity of transmitting a meme.

In turn, Dennett (1995, p. 347-348) claims that brains – alone – would not be able to endure the (unpredictable and sometimes intense) 'gymnastics' of memetic processes of propagation. The philosopher (1995, p. 347) adds that computers, texts and/or words would have the power of transmitting memes. He also argues that the nature of that transmission would not always be completely homogeneous, since, in contrast with the characteristic of fidelity, a meme would evolve based on the criterion of “design” (DENNETT, 1995). Hence, under the rules of the latter criterion, the original pattern of ideas or pieces of information could be altered when they were passed on. In that scenario, there could be co-existent patterns of propagation in the process of dissemination of a meme, therefore.

For Susan Blackmore (1999, 2002) – “considered by Dawkins and Dennett Memetics’ main supporterⁱⁱⁱ”, as Leal-Toledo (2013, p. 182) reports –, the propagation we see on the Internet, and especially on the Web, from the viewpoint of its composition, present much more than *a unique meme* of Dawkins (1979, 1982). The author (2002) argues that, on the Internet, the process of meme propagation is developed via a *group* or a *complex of memes* – i.e. a *memplex*.

In the scope of Brazilian studies on memes and the Internet, Raquel Recuero (2006), mostly oriented by a perspective based on the field of Communication, presented a model of transduction of what Dawkins (1979) called a *meme*, taking on, consequently, the epistemological positioning of that author (1979). To investigate memes in the *online domain*, Recuero (2006) applied the three criteria of identification of a *meme offline* posited by

Dawkins (1979) – i.e. *fidelity/ fecundity/ longevity* –, and, then, added to that model one criterion of identification that dealt specifically with Communication issues, which was named “reach” (i.e. memes, on the Web, may enter local and/or global domains).

Finally, in the scenario of studies derived from Linguistics, Souza Júnior (2015a) expands the proposal of Recuero (2006), adopting the epistemological positioning of Dennett (1995), Blackmore (2002) and Tyler (2011, 2013). In doing so, Souza Júnior (2015a) understands Internet memes as a conceptual and compositional expansion of what Dawkins (1979, 1982) called a meme. In that way, for the researcher (2015a), Internet memes would be seen as a *compound of practices* – a) of production and distribution of language; b) of production and distribution by media – that starts being propagated as a complex or a group of memes of the Internet. Such complex or groups would have two kinds of nature: a) “(multi)media” (PALÁCIOS, 2003; SALAVERRÍA, 2002); and b) “multimodal” (HALLIDAY, 1987; KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2000; SOUZA JÚNIOR, 2015d; 2015e).

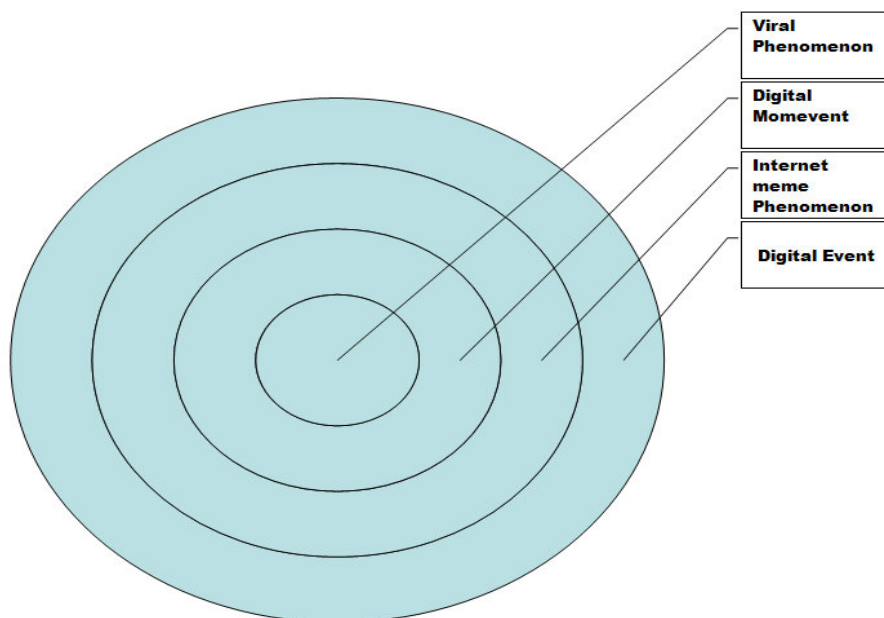
Besides that memeplex's usual constitutive aspects of memetic nature (*fidelity/design; fecundity; longevity*), Souza Júnior (2015a) corroborates the principle of *media reach* (RECUERO, 2006), and suggests two other principles to deal with the linguistic analysis of Internet meme phenomena propagation: a) *functionality* (the evolution of Internet memes can be analysed by the different *purposes* that they can indicate); and b) *linguistic reach* (the evolution of Internet memes can be analysed by the different items – animate/inanimate? – that they can address ; and also by means of which language - native or foreign? – they address Internet users).

The author's analysis (2015a), based on what he calls an *integrative approach (abordagem integradora)*, starts, firstly, from an *internal and compositional dimension* – i.e. the ways or modes of construction of media/linguistic practices (the complex of Internet memes) encapsulated into items or “*unities of propagation*” (SOUZA JÚNIOR, 2015a, p. 46-55). As examples of those unities we could have: *expressions, images, videos, gifs or memetic profiles*. Secondly, the abovementioned analysis advances to an *external and relational dimension* – i.e. what/ who those referred *unities* or items address/ how are they distributed?/ to what/whom? ; and what types of relation emerge within these elements’ process of propagation?

In this external dimension, the analysis is focused on digital events and on the identification of their different types. The Press, in general, often seems to be unsure on how to identify, precisely, whether those events evolve as: a) a *viral phenomenon* (presenting dissemination with a few or no copies; it is mostly based on views) ; b) an *Internet meme phenomenon or a Memetic phenomenon* (unities of propagation being distributed from different sources/domains, causing the emergence of an event both via copies – identical or not – as well as through views); c) a *digital movement* (its diffusion may occur more frequently in association with the quantity of views than with its dependency on the dissemination of unities of propagation that can influence the spread of events of such kind).

To recognise digital movements it is key to observe how their proponents seem to prioritize social causes/issues while participating in the dissemination process of such events. Ideally, those participants try hard to avoid fragmentation in regard to the purposes they seek to transmit through the unities of propagation they are to create. Notwithstanding, on the Web, there is no guarantee that such fragmentation can be avoided, resulting, then, in a change where a digital movement might start developing a propagation dynamics of a memetic phenomenon.

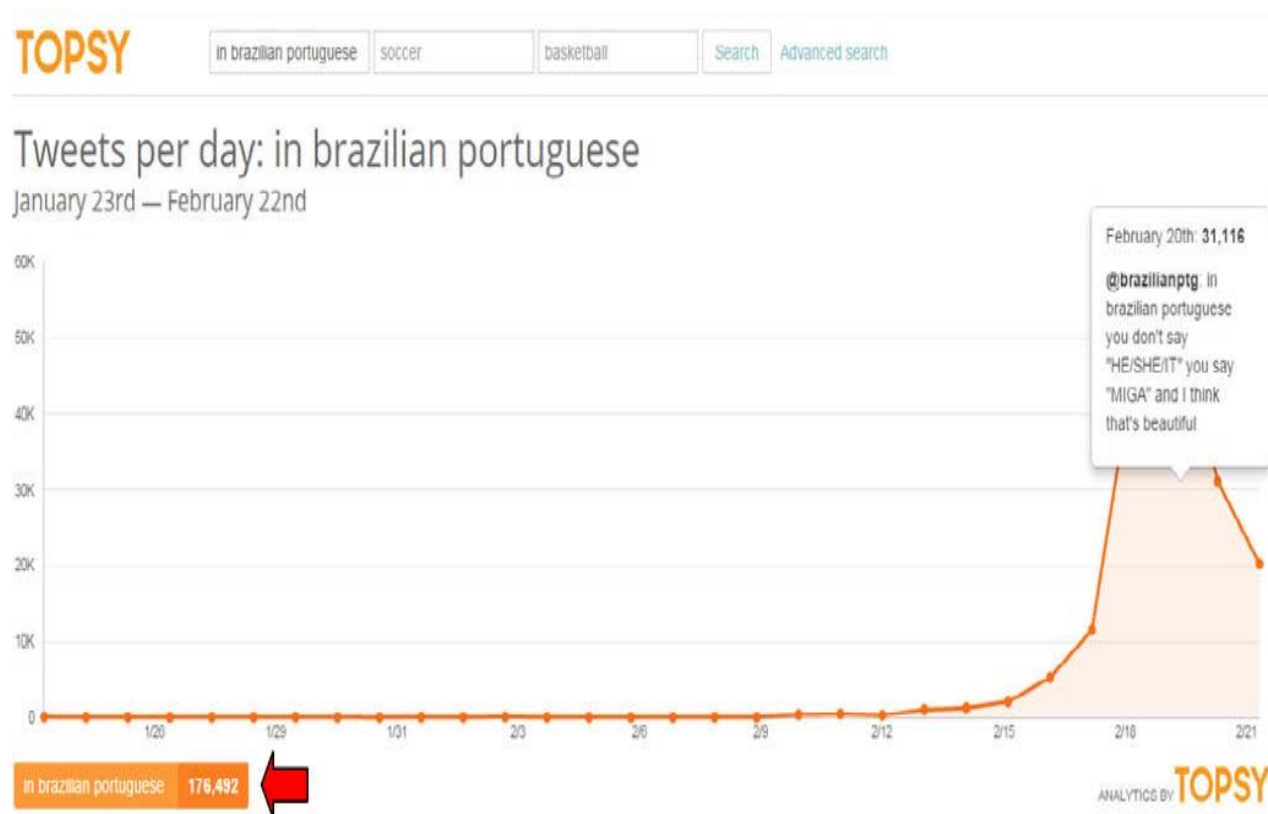
Digital events and the different types of phenomena that may emerge within their domains can be illustrated as follows:



Scheme 1: Some of the digital event processes we can recognise on the Web so far, and their immediate levels of expansion.

THE PROPAGATION OF “#IN BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE”: ASPECTS OF IDENTIFICATION AND ANALYSIS

According to the Brazilian website *Youpix.com*, specialised in the events of the memosphere, the phenomenon “#In Brazilian Portuguese” is just one example of bilingual phenomena (Portuguese-English) that emerged on the Web. Youpix's bloggers add that, in a previous occasion, Internet users (especially Brazilians) had already encountered an event recognised as “Nível de Inglêsⁱⁱⁱ” (i.e. “Level of English”). Moreover, Youpix's crew informs that “#In Brazilian Portuguese” might have first appeared on the social network *Tumblr.com*; nevertheless, the phenomenon's most relevant diffusion level reached its peak within the domains of *Twitter.com*. We can see, in picture 1, the amount of mentions regarding the memetic expression “#In Brazilian Portuguese”:



Picture 1: The amount of mentions for “#In Brazilian Portuguese”, on *Twitter.com*. Retrieved February 22, 2015, from Topsy.com:<<http://topsy.com/s?q=in%20brazilian%20portuguese>>.

“#IN BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE”: A BRIEF COMPOSITIONAL ANALYSIS OF INTERNET MEMES

There can be several unities of propagation that contribute to the appearance of a digital event on the Web. The phenomenon “#In Brazilian Portuguese” seems to have had its complex of media/linguistic practices – a *media-linguistic memplex*, according to Souza Júnior (2015a, p. 37-38) – encapsulated and disseminated through a *memetic expression* and a *memetic profile*, while unities of propagation. Let us see an example of each of these referred unities, in picture 2, as follows:



Picture 2: Memetic expression (A) and memetic profile (B), respectively, as units of propagation of the digital event “#In Brazilian Portuguese”. Retrieved February 22, 2015, from Topsy.com:

<<http://topsy.com/s?q=in%20brazilian%20portuguese>>.

Largely propagated through the dissemination of memetic expressions, the phenomenon “#In Brazilian Portuguese” presents that expression itself as a *unity of analysis* to the researcher. In that way, considering the conceptions that served as a basis for the work of Souza Júnior (2015a), and in opposition to what The Press^{iv} frequently states, the meme is not the expression: “#In Brazilian Portuguese [ANIMATE ITEM] don’t say ‘[ITEM X: WILL BE JUXTAPOSED OR CONFRONTED AGAINST ITEM Y]’ you say ‘[ITEM Y: COMPLEMENTS OR PROPOSES OPPOSITION TO ITEM X]’ and i think that’s beautiful.” Taking that into consideration, we can see this whole expression as a *unity of propagation*, and, consequently, as a *unity of analysis*. Let us relate the given description to the following examples in picture 3:



Picture 3: A Memetic expression revealing its mode of composition/construction, respectively, juxtaposing (A) and confronting (B) two items. Retrieved March 07, 2015, from Topsy.com: <http://topsy.com/s?q=in%20brazilian%20portuguese>.

From our linguistic perspective, the real memes, hence, are forms or the modes of construction and the ways of indicating purposes that Internet users transmit through expressions they create on the Web. Those two kinds of information (forms or modes of construction and ways of indicating purpose) lead us to understand that the referred items X and Y do not reveal a single form or mode of construction while memes that can potentially be spread.

In the propagation process of the phenomenon analysed here, a type of construction based on a sort of digital “dialogism” (BAKHTIN, 1997) appears as a primary practice of production of language and by media (Internet users type characters with the use of a keyboard and create a linguistic expression that has been sent to him/her and, consequently, that compound of practices also gets popular, moving from one screen to another). As a consequence of that process, the diffusion of the memetic expression can show further advance via mechanisms of online visibility, frequency of mention and measurement of views – common features of social networks).

Despite the presence of dialogism, regarding exclusively the context of the phenomenon we discuss here, and focusing on the items X and Y abovementioned (and their possible translations in the conversion from Portuguese to English, or *vice-versa*), it is possible that new practices of production and distribution of language emerge, such as, *intertextuality*, *metaphor*, *metonymy*, *periphrasis*, *antithesis*, *nominalisation* and the *occultation* of some parts of the memetic expression investigated. Dialogism can also be substituted by “resignification” (FAIRCLOUGH, 2001) as a practice of production of language.

With respect to that, such substitution will make us capable of perceiving the structure of a memetic expression as intact; however, the purpose of that same expression might be being constantly modified from one propagation to another. Such modification (s) must be identified at the several levels of investigation. Such levels must be revealed throughout analyses that focus on the *external dimension of propagation* of “#In Brazilian Portuguese”.

“#IN BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE” AND ITS EXTERNAL DIMENSION OF PROPAGATION: SOME ASPECTS OF ANALYSIS

When a large quantity of Internet users take part in the dissemination of a given unity of propagation and if such participation occurs in a massive way, as noted before, a new memetic phenomenon emerges on the Web – the external dimension of propagation of Internet memes. Those phenomena may stay on the Web or migrate to the offline world.

Memetic expressions, while unities of propagation that encapsulate Internet memes and disseminate them, allow us to analyse how several sorts of relations are constructed through the use of such expressions. In turn, it is also possible for us to investigate the pattern of those uses, with the intention to define who/what these unities of propagation address; that is to say: we investigate whether memetic expressions will be directed towards animate items (people in their living conditions and their several social roles) or inanimate items (institutions, objects/intellectual productions, phenomena of natural or semiotic nature). In picture 4, we can visualise one of the relational patterns observed with the emergence of the memetic phenomenon “#In Brazilian Portuguese”:



Picture 4: The official profile of the American TV series *House of Cards* expressing linguistic and media reach attributed to the propagated memetic expression. Retrieved March 07, 2015, from Topsy.com: <<http://topsy.com/s?q=in%20brazilian%20portuguese>>.

In the picture above, we can perceive the memetic expression presenting its "*linguistic reach*" (SOUZA JÚNIOR, 2015a) – the profile of the TV series "House of Cards", an institution (inanimate item), addressing, via a bilingual message, "they", which represents the Brazilian people (animate item). The memetic expression also presents its global "*media reach*" (RECUERO, 2006; SOUZA JÚNIOR, 2015a), once a supposedly American Internet user, representing the profile of "House of Cards", participates in the analysed process of propagation.

From a viewpoint of Linguistics, every unity of propagation reveals two central features: a) the way it is constructed (form); b) the way it functions – i.e. *functionalities* – and the purpose(s) that they convey. A given form may appear subordinated to one or more purposes (such subordination is applicable both to linguistic and media practices of construction). The different ways of indicating purpose that a unity of propagation may reveal can be well explored, as we suggest, by making use of the theoretical framework offered by Systemic-functional Linguistics (HALLIDAY, 1987; KRESS; VAN LEEUWEN, 2000; MARTIN; WHITE, 2001; SOUZA JÚNIOR, 2015a, 2015e). Furthermore, such exploration can be focused, if necessary, on the distribution and frequency of such item. In picture 5, we can observe some patterns of purpose expressed through the use of the memetic expression "#In Brazilian Portuguese":



Picture 5: The different uses of the memetic expression indicating constructed relations with purposes of positive polarity (A: praise) and negative polarity (B: criticism). Retrieved March 07, 2015, from Topsy.com : <<http://topsy.com/s?q=in%20brazilian%20portuguese>>.

Yet, in relation to the investigation of aspects such as distribution and frequency of occurrence, Corpus Linguistics (BERBER-SARDINHA, 2004; SHEPHERD, 2009; SOUZA JÚNIOR, 2012, 2013a, 2013b, 2015a) – according to our view, regarded as a methodology – can appear as an important resource to analyse large digital corpora formed by memetic expressions. To investigate the propagation patterns of memetic images, on the other hand, Souza Júnior

(2015d, 2015e), based on Kress and van Leeuwen (2000), mentions a qualitative and quantitative approach that he called Propagatory Analysis. Basically, through that approach the patterns of construction (visual syntax) of memetic images and their multimodal propositions (meaning that texts and/or visual representations disseminated produce) are mapped out, and we verify which of those seem to be more frequent throughout the process of propagation of a digital event and also the reasons why one pattern reveals to be more frequent than others.

Critical Discourse Analysis (FAIRCLOUGH, 2001, 2003; SOUZA JÚNIOR, 2013a, 2015c) also offers a wide range of interpretative tools to deal with the propagation process of phenomena like the one we address in this paper. In that way, we can recognise these phenomena as true “social events” (FAIRCLOUGH, 2003) that are permeated by “hybridisation” (CANCLINI, 1997). In this regard, independently of the events’ online nature of emergence, our aim is to identify whether there are disputes or not of a given sort, and also how different segments of society participate in these events. The investigation on how those segments of society take part in such events may focus on their roles, media/linguistic practices or semiosis that they construct in order to take action through the combination of these post-modern semiotic modes of production and distribution, which, day by day, seem to characterise contemporary societies.



Picture 6: Memetic expression being used to condemn homophobic discourses, however, part of the expression that could corroborate such position is occulted. Retrieved March 07, 2015, from Topsy.com : <http://topsy.com/s?q=in%20brazilian%20portuguese>.

Besides, as Souza Júnior (2015a) suggests, digital events could be viewed as elements of contextualisation in order to attend to educational purposes (once “#In Brazilian Portuguese” was propagated as a bilingual phenomenon, Brazilian educators could address its dissemination throughout the process of teaching of English as Foreign Language, for example, observing the specific needs of their educational scenarios). In 2014, the board responsible for the State University of Rio de Janeiro's (Uerj) entrance examination made use of themes that emerged with the propagation of digital events such as the Brazilian digital movement

recognised as “rolezinho”^v, in order to create questions for the abovementioned admission process. Global media reach events like “#Ican’tbreathe^{vi}” or “#JeSuisCharlie^{vii}” could be explored in a similar way.

Lastly, another way of addressing the dissemination of digital events, as Souza Júnior (2015a) argued – a practice that becomes more and more frequent nowadays – is to explore the emergence of a wide range of possibilities that the propagation of an Internet meme phenomenon offers. In that way, the aforementioned process allows language (and media) professionals to architecture more comprehensive actions (and research, consequently) in the areas of Advertising and *Marketing* – roughly speaking, giving rise to what is recognised as Viral Marketing^{viii}. In picture 8, we can observe an example of such occurrence, as follows:



Picture 7: A Bank implementing a strategy of Viral Marketing, and promoting itself throughout the propagating process of a memetic phenomenon. Retrieved March 07, 2015, from Topsy.com: <<http://topsy.com/s?q=in%20brazilian%20portuguese>>.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this article, we intended to offer some theoretical and methodological suggestions to researchers who belong to the field of language studies – linguists more specifically. Nevertheless, such suggestions are meant to be useful and available to other professionals that deal with language as a field of study and/or research. In that way, we aimed to contribute with instruments that would enable researchers to identify and investigate the propagation process of digital events, which presently – and often – emerge on the Web.

As a consequence of that, as Souza Júnior (2015a) suggests, it is possible for us to see opportunities to address the dissemination of such events from a *receptive perspective* (i.e. to understand how digital propagation is formed; their different types; the kinds of relation that are created in that process) as well as from a *productive perspective* (i.e. finding ways to take advantage of and promoting the diffusion of phenomena, as illustrated with the strategy of

Viral Marketing in picture 7; or addressing those kinds of dissemination as an educational tool in order to contextualise and/or introduce discussion or teaching topics).

In conclusion, we sought to present the referred suggestions so that they could serve as a basis for the identification, investigation and the facultative appropriation of the diffusion mechanisms related to the emergence of digital events that spread on the Web.

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ⁱ In the original English version, from the Bible: “Immediately they left their nets, and followed him”

For the sake of translation, the Brazilian metaphor we tried to maintain here was the association with: fishes=memes; net(works)=The Web or the sea of information and virtual domains; Internet users=fishermen.

ⁱⁱ “(...) considerada por Dawkins e Dennett a principal defensora da Memética.” (LEAL-TOLEDO, 2013, p.182). The author of the present article is responsible for all the translations.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cf.: <http://youpix.virgula.uol.com.br/memepedia/nivel-de-ingles-meme/>

^{iv} Cf.: <http://oglobo.globo.com/cultura/revista-da-tv/perfil-oficial-de-house-of-cards-no-twitter-entra-na-onda-de-meme-brasileiro-15378384>

^v Cf.: <http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rolezinho>

^{vi} Cf.: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/people-in-nature/201412/why-i-can-t-breathe-will-be-the-meme-the-decade>

^{vii} Cf.: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Je_suis_Charlie

^{viii} Cf.: http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marketing_viral