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An Investigation Into Chinese Internet Neologisms

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Abstract

With the rapid progress of the Internet and easy access to social networking, online communication has become the common occurrence of netizens, hence the spring-up of Internet neologisms. These new expressions mirror emerging phenomena, fresh changes and trending fashions in all aspects of social life as well as play an increasingly important role in social media and people's daily life. Internet neologisms are full of profound social and cultural connotations, which renders it necessary to make an inquiry into the workings of Chinese Internet neologism (CIN). This paper is designed to make it clear what CIN is, how it is classified, and what are the features and social connotations underlying the seemingly bantering lingoes of CIN.

Key words: Neologism; Chinese Internet neologisms; Classification; Characteristics; Social and cultural connotations

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the introduction of worldwide web in 1994, the development of the Internet in China has gathered momentum and in 2008 China surpassing America became the major country with the largest netizen number in the world. Nowadays with the free access to

WiFi, the Internet has become pervasive and inseparable daily necessity in people's life, particularly the young. The ever-changing technology of the Internet reflected in language is the emerging of myriads of neologisms relative to today's society. New words adopted by netizens enter the language and provide us with vocabularies we need. The investigation into Chinese neologism will unveil much the constant change in the society and people's attitude. For the formation of Internet neologism reflecting much of the innovation and individualism of the netizens themselves, we choose in this paper the cognitive way of exploration in an attempt to have a complete view of the workings of Chinese Internet neologism.

1. DEFINITION OF CHINESE INTERNET NEOLOGISM

"Neologism" is stemmed from the French word "néologisme", with the prefix "néo" referring to "new" and the root "logos" the "words" combined to literally mean "the new words". Interestingly, both Cambridge Dictionary and Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English the online version define "neologism" as "a new word or expression, or a new meaning for an existing word". Similarly, the Oxford Dictionary explains it in this way: a newly coined word or expression or the coining or use of new words. It can be concluded that new meaning and restriction of use within a certain group of people are key tags labeled on neologism. When adding Chinese and Internet as the modifier of neologism, we add a special spectrum of where the new words are frequently used. Therefore, in this paper Internet neologism is defined as "*words with new meanings adopted by a fixed circle of people especially when using the social networking which has not yet come into the mainstream language*".

2. CLASSIFICATION OF CHINESE INTERNET NEOLOGISM

According to Yu (2001a), in a broad sense, internet neologism falls into three aspects: first, the computer or network related professional terms; second, new terms generating from new things and new phenomena; third, new terms used in the course of chatting on the internet. Narrowly speaking, the Internet neologism refers to the third aspect. Here the classification is based on the narrow sense.

Yu (2001b) divides the CINs into five categories from the broad perspective, which are shown as follows:

Paraphrase (like “菜单” menu),

Transliteration (like “黑客” hacker),

Combination of paraphrase and transliteration (like “因特网” Internet)

Acronym (like VIP, very important person),

Homophony (like “童鞋” from “同学”).

Classification of CINs in this paper is however divided into the following four categories.

2.1 Abbreviated CINs

By abbreviation, we mean shortening or simplifying long words or sentences either in Pinyin, Chinese characters, and sentence, English words or the compounded expression with letters and numbers inside.

2.1.1 Abbreviation of Pinyin (Phonetic Spelling)

For instance, *MM* (*mei mei*) stands for *妹妹* (*the younger sister*) or *美眉* (*the beautiful girl*) whose Chinese pronunciation is “*mei mei*” yet with differences in tone. Correspondingly, *GG* (*ge ge*) is originally used to call one’s brother, and then extended to call one’s boyfriend in a pout and flounce way. Besides, several abbreviations have evolved in the community of post bar. The one that posts a new bar is called *LZ* (*lou zhu*), meaning the initiator of the post. Accordingly, the one who makes comments and leaves a message ahead of the current comment is called *LS* (*lou shang*), meaning literally the upstairs, and the one that comment directly after is called *LX* (*lou xia*), downstairs literally. As a matter of fact, the appearance and effect of *LZ*, *LS* and *LX* are restricted to comment on such social networkings as post bar, Weibo, QQ and WeChat.

2.1.2 Abbreviation of English Words

Thanks to the flooding trend of globalization and the compulsory education of English for children of the age, English is widely employed in people’s daily life. For this reason, the Internet has been a readily accessible arena for the English abbreviations to play up. For example, *BF* the abbreviation of boyfriend and *GF* the abbreviated form of girlfriend refer to 男朋友 and 女朋友 in Chinese respectively.

2.1.3 Abbreviation of Chinese Sentences

It is formed by picking up three or four (four for the most part) key characters from one or more complete

sentences, achieving a humorous and sarcastic effect. See the following examples which are from Wikipedia online.¹

(1) 累觉不爱: 很累, 感觉自己不会再爱了.

lei jue bu ai: hen lei, gan jue zj ji bu hui zai ai le.

(2) 十动然拒: 女生十分感动, 然后拒绝了他.

shi dong ran ju: nv sheng shi fen gan dong, ran hou ju jue le ta.

(3) 不明觉厉: 虽然不明白是什么, 但是感觉好厉害啊.

bu ming jue li: sui ran bu ming bai shi shen me, dan shi gan jue hao li hai a.

(4) 人艰不拆: 人生已经如此艰难了, 有些事情就不要拆穿了.

ren jian bu chai: ren sheng yi jing ru ci jian nan le, you xie shi qing jiu bu yao chai chuan le.

(5) 我伙呆: 我和我的小伙伴们惊呆了.

wo huo dai: wo he wo de xiao huo ban men dou jing dai le.

(6) 高富帅: 长得高、帅, 又有钱.

gao fu shuai: zhang de gao, shuai, you you qian.

The first example is a literal abbreviation of the Chinese phrase “too tired to fall in love anymore”. It originated from an article on the Douban website. The article was posted by a post-95 boy who grumbled about his single status and expressed his weariness and frustration towards romantic love. Shortly, the article went viral on the internet, and the phrase was subsequently used as a sarcastic way to convey depression when encountering misfortunes or setbacks in life. The second example first appeared in an online portal to express the embarrassing and frustrating moments of being turned down by the girl you have affection for though you have had her moved. The origin of the third one can be traced back to a line spoken by Er Tou (one major character in the film *The God Cookery*) who responded after knowing Stephen Zhou’s aggressive ambition that “Though I have little knowledge about it, it sounds incredible”. “*Ren jian bu chai*” came from the lyrics of a song entitled “*Shuo Huang*” (Lies), by Taiwanese singer Yoga Lin. This phrase implies a situation that is too harsh and too tough to contemplate. This slang reflects that some people, particularly the young, are disappointed at the cruel reality and cannot but accept it unwillingly. The following two slangs as opposed to the above four are three-character expressions. They come from varied online sources. *Wo huo dai* firstly appeared in an essay by a primary school student posted on Sina Weibo in 2011. Now it is commonly used to express one’s surprise, amazement or wonderment towards something unusual around in a sarcastic and teasing manner. When talking about men with great wealth, a perfect body, as well as high qualifications and social status, *高富帅* (tall, rich and handsome) instantly occurs to the great majority.

¹ The following examples with no information about the source are all from wikipedia: 中国大陆网络语言列表.

The female equivalent goes to 白富美 which refers to the female who is of good complexion, beautiful outlook and well-being.

2.1.4 Contraction of Standard Chinese

The young female group is often heard to utter the group of new expressions. For the most part, the pronunciation of two Chinese characters is contracted into one or three into two to sound like another character(s). See the following instances:

(7) 不造: 不知道²

bu zao: bu zhi dao

do not know

(8) 表: 不要

biao: bu yao

do not (do)

(9) 酱紫: 这样子

jiangzi: zhe yang zi

(in) this way, look like this

(10) 我宣你: 我喜欢你

wo xuan ni: wo xi huan ni

I love you.

2.2 Homophonic Neologisms

There are numerous homonyms in Chinese Internet words. They are either homophonic with Chinese characters, numbers, or both to convey either irony, humor or euphemism.

2.2.1 Homophonic Chinese Characters

(11) 杯具: 悲剧³

bei ju

cup: tragedy

(12) 砖家: 专家

zhuan jia

bricklayer: expert

(13) 妓者: 记者

ji zhe

prostitute: reporter

(14) 鸭梨山大: 压力山大

ya li shan da

a pear as large as the mountain: pressure as heavy as a mountain

(15) 钙片: Gay 片

gai pian: gay pian

calcium tablet: movies or TV series concerning gay

(16) 赶脚:⁴ 感觉

gan jiao: gan jue

feelings

(17) 鱼唇: 愚蠢

yun chun

lip of fish: silly

According to Wikipedia, the idea of 杯具 was inspired from sigh of “悲剧啊 (what a tragedy)!” made by an Internet celebrity Yi Zhongtian.⁵ They are identical in pronunciation while totally different in meaning: 杯具 is the generic term for cups, while 悲剧 means tragedy. Besides, the coinage was also inspired by Zhang Ailing (the most renowned female writer in the Republic of China)’s words: 人生是一袭华美的袍, 上面爬满了虱子(*life is like a magnificent robe crawled with louses*), and netizens adapted it to 人生是一张茶几, 上面摆满了杯具 (*life is like a teapoy placed with cups*). The adaptation naturally has sort of banter in it while bittersweetly reflects people’s negative feelings about life. Likewise, Example (14) humorously compares pear to a mountain in terms of its heavy weight, which by exaggeration manifests the enormous pressure exerted on people from various aspects. In Example (12), 专家 was homophonically and humorously changed as 砖家 to insinuate discontent towards so-call experts for their less objective and instructive proposals. Netizens, finally find an outlet to resort to the net language to air their grievances. Different from 砖家, 妓者 may well sound harsher. There is no denying that nowadays a certain number of reporters against their professional integrity and social conscience, report only the fragment of truth or the most thrilling part or sort of scandal news to catch the eyeballs of the netizens, hence the click volume. This is especially true of the porter reporter on the Internet and the tabloid reporter. Viewed from this, there is no wonder that there is some reason underlying the analogy between prostitute and reporter, which gives vent to discontent, dispair and disappointment towards the so-called reporters nowadays. Gay or any discussion about sex is avoided in the Chinese mainland, for this reason, euphemisms on sex are widely accepted, Example (15) is a case in point. 钙片 is ingeniously insinuated as “Gay” for its homophonic feature. As with (15), Example (17) avoids using 愚蠢 which is quite an offensive expression by way of referring to 鱼唇—a monophonic word indicating the lip of fish. The crafty use of neologisms achieves the effect of softening the harsh words and showing the vague expressions.

2.2.2 Homophonic Numbers

First, see several examples.

² For the arrangement of each item of the examples: line 1, the neologism: the normal expression with no contraction of pronunciation; line 2, Chinese pinyin; line 3, the English translation.

³ For the arrangement of each item of the examples: The first line, characters before the comma is the widely-used internet neologism, after are the homophonic, normal characters; the second line, Chinese pinyin; the third line, English translation of Line first.

⁴ 赶脚: “赶” means rush in Chinese, “脚” means foot/feet. While the combination of two has no real meaning except being regarded as the homophony of “感觉” which means feelings.

⁵ Yi Zhongtian: He is a renowned lecturer in Bai Jia Jiang Tan—a wit show on CCTV hosted by different celebrities specialized on various subjects like history, literature, military, etc.

- (18) 1314: 一生一世⁶
yi san yi si: yi sheng yi shi
all life long/forever
- (19) 520: 我爱你
wu er ling: wo ai ni
I love you
- (20) 3166: 沙扬娜拉
San yi liu liu: sha yang na la
see you
- (21) 740: 气死了
qi si ling: qi si le
so angry
- (22) 6: 潮
liu: liu
awesome
- (23) 818: 扒一扒
ba yi ba: ba yi ba
dig out something (especially rumors)

When expressing his/her love for someone, what occurs to young people's mind would be the widely used and favored number combination: 1314520. Because of the perfect match with the Chinese affectionate expression 我爱你一生一世 (*I love you forever*), May 20 has become a love-expressing date of equal importance with Valentine's Day among young people in China. 沙扬娜拉 actually is literally translated from Japanese word sa yo na la (see you, bye bye). 6 is blurred out when seeing something great to show praise and admiration. From the above examples, we can see that the wide use of number neologism in Internet language manifests the cognitive choice of the netizens: To be ingenious, convenient and quick in new coinage.

2.2.3 Compound Homophony

When numbers, English letters and Chinese characters are combined we get the compound homophony. Take 3Q, *san q* in Chinese, it is homophonic with “thank you”. Likewise, 3X, *san x* bears similar pronunciation with “thanks”. 8k7 sounds similar to 不客气 (bu ke qi) in Chinese and represents “you are welcome”. Besides, the Chinese verb attached by -ing form meaning the progressive action is in vogue. Take 午餐*ing*, it means someone is having his/her lunch. By 聊天*ing*, we mean someone is right in the process of chatting (Wu, 2011, p.55).

2.3 Borrowed Neologisms and Dialect

The borrowed new expressions to great extent derive from the introduced TV series and movies. In Chinese mainland, movies and mangas from America and Japan are in fever, which is best mirrored in the borrowed neologisms.

⁶ For the arrangement of each item of the following examples: Line 1, before the comma is number representing neologism, after the comma is the inferred Chinese characters with much the same pronunciation; Line 2, the Chinese pinyin of the number and the character respectively; Line 3, the English translation.

2.3.1 Neologisms Borrowed From Japanese, Korean and English

- (24) 萌大奶⁷
もんだいない
mondainai
no problem
- (25) 米那桑
みなさん
minasan
everyone
- (26) 纳尼
なに
nani
what!
- (27) 欧尼酱
お兄ちゃん
o nīchan
brother
- (28) 欧巴
오빠
Oppa
brother
- (29) 思密达
습니다
seumnida

Usually appears at the end of the utterance to show anger and speechlessness.

For anyone that is interested in Japanese manga, もんだいない is not an unfamiliar daily expression, which is commonly accompanied by だいじょうぶ, hence the great popularity of 萌大奶. 纳尼 is blurred out when people hear something amazing or exceptional which is originated from 关谷神奇⁸ in a so-called Chinese Friends. 欧尼酱 is a lovely address to call one's brother. The Korean counterpart goes to 欧巴. Moreover, 酱 originating from ちゃん usually follows someone's name to show how lovely they are. Take 福原爱, she is a renowned and cute Japanese pingpong player who has popularity both home and abroad. Therefore, she is often called 爱酱 by Chinese netizens. 狗带 referring to “go die” gains enormous popularity for its regardless of orthodox grammar rules.

2.3.2 Neologism From Chinese Dialect

偶 and 僮 frequently seen in online chatting come from Taiwan and Shandong dialect respectively. Both are used to call the people themselves. The former is lovably addressed, while the latter has sort of grass-root feature.

⁷ For the arrangement of each item of following examples: Line 1, the neologism in use; Line 2, the corresponding Japanese hiragana or Korean; Line 3, corresponding Roman letters of the hiragana or Korean; Line 4, English translation.

⁸ 关谷神奇: A major character who acts a Japanese painter in the so-called Chinese Friends “爱情公寓” (ipartment). In the drama, 关谷 has formed his unique way of speaking with the frequent output of his Japanese words and accent, and “纳尼” is the most frequently used expression.

忽悠 from northeast humor sketches⁹ gains its status to mean play tricks and cheat someone (Wang, 2015, p.31).

2.4 Derivational Neologisms

According to the positions of affix, derivational neologism can be divided into two types, i.e. prefix and suffix.

2.4.1 Prefix

Take words beginning with 裸 (luo) for example, 裸官 (luo guan) means naked official, 裸婚 (luo hun) means bare-handed marriage (Qiao, 2013); and words beginning with 被 (bei), like 被辞职 (bei ci zhi) refers to be said to have resigned, 被离婚 (bei li hun) refers to be said to have divorced which is often the case for celebrities in the entertainment circle.

2.4.2 Suffix

Take 族 (zu) for instance, 隐婚族 (yin hun zu) the hidden marriage clan, is used to describe the group of people who conceal their marriage status and claim single. 喂老族 (ken lao zu) means people financially relying on parents. More examples, words ended with 男 (nan), like 牛奔男 (niu fen nan) means the promising guy, 经适男 (jing shi nan) the budget husband, economic man, and 乙男 (yi nan) the subman, etc.

3. CHARACTERISTICS OF CHINESE INTERNET NEOLOGISM

Features of CIN can be achieved through investigation of its origin, the way of generation, application area and composition method.

3.1 Characteristics in Terms of CIN's Origin

As listed above in Section 2, the origin of internet expressions varies a lot from Japanese, Korean, English and even Chinese dialects. It's about multi-code.

3.2 Characteristics in Terms of CIN's Ways of Generation

The randomness of choice, fast speed of transmission and short-time effectiveness feature the characteristics of CIN in terms of its generation. Some monophonic neologisms are inadvertently created by errors of typing, take 斑竹, when typing pinyin “ban zhu”, the first Chinese character that pops up is 斑竹 and netizens finds that it's quite acceptable as a new substitute for 版主, hence the wide use of 斑竹 instead of 版主. 神马 and 驴友 are coined in the same way, and they hold sway in no time. On the contrary, other new expressions inferring the soaring price of commodities has become outdated, such as 蒜你狠 (suan ni hen), 姜你军 (jiang ni jun) (Zhang, 2014).

3.3 Characteristics in Terms of CIN's Functioning Area

There is no denying that all the Internet new expressions have rooted themselves deeply in everyday life. Take 打酱油 (da jiang you) for example. It was first used by a citizen who responded to the interview that “It is not of my concern, I'm just passing by and taking the bottle into the store for the soybean”. Afterwards, 打酱油 was perceived as the first choice coming up to people's mind when they don't want to talk about politics, taboo, sensitive topics or something that has nothing to do with themselves, and they have no intention to know (Zhang et al., 2013, p.69). One more example, the epidemic environment of violating the property rights, copying existing academic achievements are best represented in the Chinese word 山寨 (shan zhai) concerning copying and imitating. In a word, Internet new expressions are closely interconnected with current affairs happening around.

3.4 Characteristics in Terms of CIN's Word Formation

(a) Combination of Numbers, Chinese characters, and English letters. This is saliently represented in the homophonic and abbreviated words. IC and V587 are the cases in point. The former means “I see” and the latter sounds like wei wu ba qi in the Chinese equivalent of being mighty and immensely impressive.

(b) Featured by three-and two-character expressions. Take 赶脚 (gan jiao, feelings), 捉急 (zhuo ji, be anxious), 垂果仁 (wai guo ren, foreigner), 我伙呆 (wo huo dai, my buddies and I are totally stunned), so on and so forth.

(c) Combination of coinages and old words bearing new meaning. The old words such as 山寨 (shan zhai) evolved from the meaning of the mountain area with villages¹⁰ to that of “copycat” on internet relating to copying and imitating. 翻墙 (fan qiang) originally referring to cross/climb over walls now is redefined as the action of getting away with the Internet scrutiny. Apart from that, coined words play an important role as well, as we have touched upon in the previous chapter.

(d) Metaphorical expression. Viewed from cognitive linguistics, a certain amount of neologisms get their new meaning by way of metaphorical formation. There are not a few cases to manifest it. According to *New Age Chinese-English Dictionary* (2010, p.133), 晒 (shai) means to “bask/sun or dry in the sun”. However, the accepted meaning online involves sharing and presenting in the circle of friends by way of social networking. 小刀 (xiao dao), a knife used to cut something hard, is metaphorically referred to 砍价 (kan jia, cut down the price/bargain). 晕 (yun, feel dizzy and the objects around are spinning) turns from its concrete meaning to depict feelings of being astounded or frustrated at the sound of something exceptional.

⁹ It is a four-people group based in Northeast China with the nickname of Northeast F4

¹⁰ Online Modern Chinese Dictionary: http://www.hydcd.com/cd/htm_a/28137.htm

4. SOCIAL CONNOTATIONS REFLECTED IN CINS

There is no denying that language is in a state of constant change, for they reflect the need for speakers. That's to say, the mental process of speakers is reflected in the ever-changing words, and since the whole society is made up of an individual unit, some hints can be drawn by exploring new expressions.

Succinctness. The communication tool in the social networking determines that succinctness holds sway among many properties concerning Internet expressions. It facilitates the high frequency of neologisms and conversely ensures the popularity and effectiveness of time.

Creativeness. With the increasing universality of the Internet, everyone with a cell phone connected to the network has an easy access to post what s/he is eager to express. In posting, netizens, more often than not are eager to be viewed as a prominent figure standing out from the average. Deviation from the normal expression catches their eyeballs. They either choose a different way of spelling or add a new meaning to the existing words or expressions, as is shown in 斑竹 (*ban zhu*), 酱紫 (*jiang zi*), 潜水(*qian shui*).

Vividness and visualization. Information exchange, for the most part, is taken place in different time and space without seeing the speakers face to face. In order to be fully understood, netizens will strive to make the typed words more vivid and expressive via such language signs as O(∩_∩)O (the smiling face attached to 谢谢 frequently), == (so on and so forth), /(ㄒ o ㄒ)/~~ (crying). Apart from that, visualized expressions are also the marker/indicator of ingenuity.

Mirror and outlet for social phenomena. Through meticulous investigation of Internet neologism, many facets of social life can be observed. Behind the simple and bantering lingoies lies not a few social problems that are of much concern. Take 糖高宗 (*tang gao zong*), 苹什么 (*ping shen me*) for instance, 糖 and 苹 replacing 唐 and 凭 respectively are highlighted and convey the message that the commodity price is unbearably soaring. 李刚门 (*li gang men*) and 艳照门 (*yan zhao men*) reflect the social phenomenon that there is a landslide in social morality. 蜗居 (*wo ju, dwelling narrowness*), 裸婚 (*luo hun, bare-handed marriage*) and 蚁族 (*yi zu, ant tribe*)¹¹ are sort of self-mockery that show how much

¹¹ 蚁族: It is used to describe a group of low income university graduates who settle for a poverty existence in the cities of China. Lian Si (Chinese: 廉思), then a postdoctoral researcher at Peking University, coined the term "ant tribe": To draw a comparison between the lives of these college graduates and ants: "They share every similarity with ants. They live in colonies in cramped areas. They're intelligent and hardworking, yet anonymous and underpaid." (according to Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ant_tribe).

pressure befalls on the young and how difficult it is for the young to live and to work.

SUMMARY

This paper presents a macro investigation of issues concerning Chinese Internet neologisms from the perspectives of its definition, classification, characteristics and social connotations. Through investigation, we find that firstly, CINs are mainly made up of two parties, i.e. coinage and old word bearing new meanings. Secondly, differing from the traditional Chinese words, CINs are of various forms with numbers, English letters, language signs, Chinese characters and even the combination of them. Thirdly, CINs are more embracing and tolerable compared with the traditional expressions in that they incorporate not only Chinese dialects but other languages like English, Korean and Japanese which are in harmonious coexistence and combined to express all kinds of feelings of netizens. Fourthly, the Internet provides an easily accessible approach to display individuality and neologisms function as the platform. Lastly, Internet neologisms are the language mirror to reflect social problems that the public concerns most. Study of Internet new expressions is in the ascendant. This paper by exemplary analyses presented is expected to add some fresh blood to the heatedly discussed area of Internet neologisms. The novice attempt welcomes many criticisms.

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