The Circle Sub-Cultural Vocabulary and Its Influence on Semantic Culture and Lexical Use of Chinese

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Abstract: The term circle sub-cultural vocabulary refers to words that transformed or coined within network circles, adapting to the Chinese lexical system. Some of them take on the characteristics of memes, relying heavily on social media platforms and gradually becoming part of Internet users' daily communication. They influence the Chinese lexical system, contemporary semantic culture, and people's language use habits. This study systematically explores words adopted within network circles, categorizing them based on distinct lexical origins and transformation modes. In general, circle sub-cultural vocabulary exhibits traits of separability, economy, and integration. Structurally, these words are not confined by syntactic rules. Conceptually, their semantics tend to become more abstract and general, reflecting the non-categorization characteristics of language. However, the use of circle sub-cultural words has led to emergence of dross semantic and destigmatization to some extent, exerting a negative influence on college students' lexical selection and usage.

1. Introduction

The concept of circle sub-cultural vocabulary consists of three components: circle, reflecting its origin; subculture, signifying its characteristics; vocabulary, representing its nature. The concept of circle can be traced back to the theory of the differential mode of association[1], which describes China's social structure as similar to ripples caused by stones thrown into water, with everyone at the center of their own circle, influenced by society[1][2][3]. Traditionally, circle's structure is centered around individuals, extending into society, maintained by blood ties, geography, and interpersonal relationships, and then manifested through communities[3][4]. Geographical boundaries or social relationships are the primary criteria for defining communities, with distance in geography or social connections resulting in varying degrees of centrality and power inequality within these circles[5][6].

In contrast, the formation of network sub-cultural circles does not rely on physical gatherings or real-world interpersonal connections projected onto network realm. Instead, cultural boundaries between different circles and the separability of social media platforms become more apparent[7][8][9]. Individuals of various ages, genders, and levels of knowledge voluntarily come together based on shared interests, forming relatively independent network circles[7][10]. Within these specific circle activities, participants are not mere observers but proactively engage in reading, rewriting, creating, and critiquing cultural contents, trying to contribute to cultural appropriation[2][3][7]. The formation

and dissemination of circle subcultures are entirely driven by participants' spontaneous actions, without external influences, thereby highlighting the role of memes in this process[11][12][13][14].

As cultural genes, memes rely on copying and spreading, with language serving as one of their carriers. Memes contribute to language development, and language, in turn, facilitates the replication and propagation of memes[12][13][15]. Under Internet environment, circle culture emerges through participants' spontaneous imitation, reproduction, and dissemination, with language forms exhibiting replication and circle-specific characteristics used as carriers of communication, resulting in the creation of vivid language memes[12][13][14]. Language memes foster the development of circle language system, while also demarcating cultural boundaries for different circles[16][17]. Among language memes, lexical stand out due to productivity, concentration, and ease of propagation[16][17].

Lexical within these circles are transformed or created, with some restricted to specific circles, serving as tools to maintain a sense of identity, while others gradually spread to other circles due to their replicable and intriguing characteristics, ultimately entering daily communication system of Internet users. This phenomenon influences Chinese vocabulary system, semantic culture, and lexical usage. Therefore, we define a category of vocabulary that emerges from interaction and communication within network circles, reflecting sub-cultural characteristics and functioning as cultural boundaries, as the circle sub-cultural vocabulary. Based on above background, this study investigates sub-cultural Internet circles phenomena and the usage of circle sub-cultural vocabulary, so as to explore their impact on semantic culture and lexical usage of Chinese.

2. The classification of circle sub-cultural vocabulary

Based on the concept of circle sub-cultural vocabulary discussed above, three Chinese online social platforms are noteworthy. Sina Weibo, which is similar to Twitter in many ways, allows Internet users to share short posts, follow others, and engage in discussions on a broad range of topics. Douban, on the other hand, serves as a versatile platform for Internet users to share their interests, reviews, and recommendations related to books, films and musics. Besides, Bilibili video website, which is a well-known platform featuring an extensive collection of user-generated contents related to animation and games. Therefore, this study utilizes them as primary corpus, and uses a lexical selection criterion that includes words that (i) belong to network sub-cultural circles, (ii) have a cultural boundary function and (iii) are either transformed from existing Chinese lexical systems or created in a new way. It should be noted that abbreviations, digital terms, code-switching phenomenon and homophonic words are frequently utilized in network circles, while they do not fall under lexical category, so we consider them to be cultural phenomena instead.

2.1 Classification by the criteria of lexical origins

Three network circles of fans circle (i.e., followers of idols), e-sports circle (i.e., followers of e-sports games), and ACG circle (i.e., followers of Japanese animation, comic and games) possess relatively developed lexical use systems. Thus, we consider words embraced by these circles as the primary lexical representatives. Under Internet environment, numerous independent network circles revolve around different idols[18]. During organized events, fans create or modify specific words to maintain consistent language use. Sociolinguistically, these expressions belong to jargon and are often difficult to comprehend for those outside of fans circle, and the features of fans circle dictate that members need to use particular language symbols to uphold their sense of identity, thus these type of language memes are generated. Besides, to avoid exacerbating disagreements, members of fans circle developed some special language forms so as to reduce visual conflicts. Accordingly, abbreviations and homophonic forms are prevalent among fans circle[18][19].

In the realm of e-sports, unlike fans circle, members require professional knowledge on

e-sports[20]. The primary lexical usage of this circle involves professional gaming terms, which do not involve transformation or recreation of existing lexical in process of interactive communication within circle. Therefore, we do not categorize them as sub-cultural vocabulary. In terms of circle sub-cultural words with e-sports circle, members predominantly utilize words from existing lexical system, modifying its semantics by expansion or alteration. Besides, there are many verbal conflicts in the process of game competition, so profanity meme is commonly used in the secondary creation of literature, film and television. After facing widespread criticism, member adopted avoidance strategies, utilizing abbreviations and homophonic to avoid being shielded or censored[18][19][20].

ACG circle originates from a gathering of enthusiasts who immerse themselves in two dimensional virtual world. It generally refers to the virtual space created by Japanese video games, comics and animation[21]. In China, the primary social platform for ACG circle is Bilibili video website. Members of ACG circle share and engage in the secondary creation of texts and videos while utilizing social media platforms. This results in a distinctive form of commentary known as *bullet comments*. This term originated from military jargon and was later adopted by ACG circle due to the rapid and concise comments sent by viewers, which resembled a series of bullets fired in warfare. This form is currently evolving, with a growing trend towards systematization. In terms of language forms, *bullet comments* rely on combining numbers and letters. Members of ACG circle require prompt feedback when viewing videos, thus they use homophonic numbers to communicate efficiently, adhering to the principle of economy. For example, numbers combination of 233 is commonly used to express emotion. This number's origin lies in its pronunciation in Chinese, which sounds like HaHa, a representation of laughter. As a result, when an individual uses 233 in social media or chatting, it typically indicates something is amusing or comical.

2.2 Classification based on Transformation mode criteria

Circle sub-cultural words reflect cultural characteristics, attributes and styles of network circles, and to some extent differentiates between distinct circles. The transformation of Chinese lexical by network circles plays a vital role in defining cultural boundaries of different network circles. Generally, lexical transformation modes involve modifying old words and creating new words.

Modifying old words refers to the process of altering their meaning and nature or expanding their meaning to better serve language expression and communication. In some cases, the modified words still retain a close relation to their original meaning. For instance, a word originates from a dialect of northeast China refers to the feeling of dizziness caused by drinking. In e-sports circle, this word is commonly used to describe an impulse to fight or conflict, and among fans circle, it conveys a feeling of excessive excitement when viewing pictures or films of idols. Additionally, some words have acquired new grammatical functions. For instance, the word of treasure was originally used as a noun. However, it is now often utilized as an adjective to describe an idol's peculiar characteristics, which could include unexpected talents or concealed scandals.

The network circles create novel linguistic forms that fall outside of the lexical category, a phenomenon known as lexicalization. A prime example is the morphing of the phrase *can hit* into a new word, which is used to describe a celebrity's exceptional appearance or acting ability. The descriptive objects of *can hit* belong to inanimate individuals, specifically the appearance or acting ability of celebrities. Thus, the phrase's action meaning is diminishing in usage. The characteristics of dynamism decrease, while description increases, and evolves from a phrase to a lexical unit.

3. The characteristics of circle sub-cultural vocabulary

Through investigating the origins and functions of circle sub-cultural vocabulary, this study highlights characteristics of separability, economy, and integration in terms of their form, generation

mode, and usage. Members of network circles use numerous abbreviations and homophonic words, condensing semantics of expression and developing a distinct language system, which exemplifies the feature of separability. Whether or not network circles create new forms for purposes of defining and upholding their circle's identity, these forms are employed in communication, necessitating deconstruction and analysis prior to effective communication.

Secondly, the transformation modes of circle sub-cultural vocabulary include transforming existing vocabulary and creating new words. This approach not only saves time in word creation and recognition, but also avoids using unfamiliar terms by transforming old ones while keeping the original vocabulary forms intact. Moreover, a significant amount of the neologisms originated from the network circles are both replicable and analogical. This kind of structure enables the creation of limitless expressions with distinct connotations, fulfilling the novel communicative demands of the network circles while remaining economically feasible.

Network sub-cultural circles are relatively independent, but as circle boundaries and influence expand, a blending phenomenon occurs between different circles. In recent years, to effectively break through the obsolete, mainstream culture increasingly focuses on appealing to the young generation through popular forms, so as to achieve the ultimate goal of effective propaganda effect.

4. The influence of sub-cultural vocabulary on semantic culture and lexical use

4.1 The phenomenon of the rising of dross semantic culture

Semantic culture refers the social culture meanings contained within lexical system, reflecting a nation's mode of thought[22]. Due to the influence of specific spiritual and cultural factors, massive Chinese words do not conform to contemporary standards, and disappeared gradually. However, the promotion of network circles has led to resurgence of some words with problematic origins. For instance, a word which originally referred to a *master* in the context of slave society, is now commonly used in sub-cultural circles to describe idols, and has become a weapon for fans from different circles to attack each other. Similarly, the word of *slave* is used to criticize idols with limited resources or low popularity within a team. This description fails to account for personal differences, instead drawing comparisons between idols and feudal slaves, and has a detrimental impact on modern linguistic culture. Additionally, the usage of these words, in conjunction with the prevalence of the Internet, suggests that they may propagate through various circles. Additionally, some words with negative connotations have been re-appropriated due to their cultural significance. For example, the semantics of *copying homework* from Internet or from peers has become a neutral term in modern times, often used to encourage individuals to emulate positive behaviors of others.

4.2 The phenomenon of destigmatization in network cultural context

The stability of a sub-cultural circle is not only attributed to cultural identity and shared values among members, but also to conflicts between different circles, which promote dynamic growth. The network circles of argumentation is characterized by language violence. This culture generates massive language forms that takes anti-social traditions, resulting in a negative impact on the online environment. One prominent aspect of this negative impact is stigmatization which often involves damaging the identity, social credibility, or social value of an individual during social interaction. Insults and negative words are distributed and solidified during interpersonal communication and interaction, eventually leading to the development of stigmatized speech labels.

Take the word *bitch*, for example. It is commonly used to stigmatize women. In Western societies, this word is used to attack women's bodies and social status. In ancient China, *bitch* referred specifically to women engaged in sex work. As the occupation disappeared, this word's

meaning gradually expanded to describe unscrupulous behavior in private life. It is often used to label women who do not conform to traditional norms. Thus, this term is frequently utilized to criticize women, pressuring them to conform to tradition and serve as a means of upholding feudal cultural values. However, within the network circles realm, anti-traditional discourse construction has led to a shift in the word's connotations and rendered its stigmatization characteristics obsolete.

Amidst the prominence of paternity in mainstream discussions, women's aesthetic construction, value orientation, and cultural consumption are subject to criticism, control, and exclusion. A striking aesthetic divide between men and women persists, with women often vilified as a mob and their favored idols blamed for advancing commercial values in contemporary culture[18][19]. When the aesthetics and cultural exchange of their circles face challenges and threats from the dominant mainstream, argumentation becomes their primary means of protecting their rights and interests [18][19]. With the ascent of feminist movements, language that was originally used to stigmatize women has been repurposed and transformed into a verbal weapon for arguments within network circles. The confrontation between men and women has gradually extended beyond aesthetics to many aspects of life. This reflects, to some extent, the growth of female consciousness.

Therefore, the word *bitch*, with the most female-stigmatized characteristics in Chinese vocabulary system, has become a means for women to express their individuality and resist mainstream discourse. By appropriating stigmatized words, they have made the semantics of these words more commonplace. The primary goal and semantic feature of using such words is to resist the moral discipline imposed upon women by traditional society. The meaning of the word has evolved from being derogatory to neutral, and the negative connotation has faded away.

4.3 The investigation of the usage of circle sub-cultural Vocabulary

To understand the usage of circle sub-cultural words, we take college students, who are the main users of social media. Data was collected through online questionnaires, resulting in 85 valid responses. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: (i) Basic information of participants such as the involvement in network circles. (ii) The situation of their understanding of circle sub-cultural words. (iii) The recognition of applying circle sub-cultural words into specific contexts.

We chose 18 circle sub-cultural words from various network circles. Generally, college students utilize a significant amount of circle sub-cultural words within these circles, and 8 of these words are used by over 40 participants in daily communication. Besides, 54.12 % of participants have attended some network circles, and 67.06 % of the same sample use circle sub-cultural words in daily communication, see Figure 1. However, participants have a limited recognition of origins of theses words, 70.59 % of participants, believed that these words have established fixed usage in specific contexts, it is unnecessary to know their origins. This phenomenon suggests that the use of circle sub-cultural vocabulary surpasses limitations of the circle's internal language. However, individuals who use such words may not be fully aware of its characteristics, while which does not impede their comprehension of these words. The function of these words as memes, are reinforced.
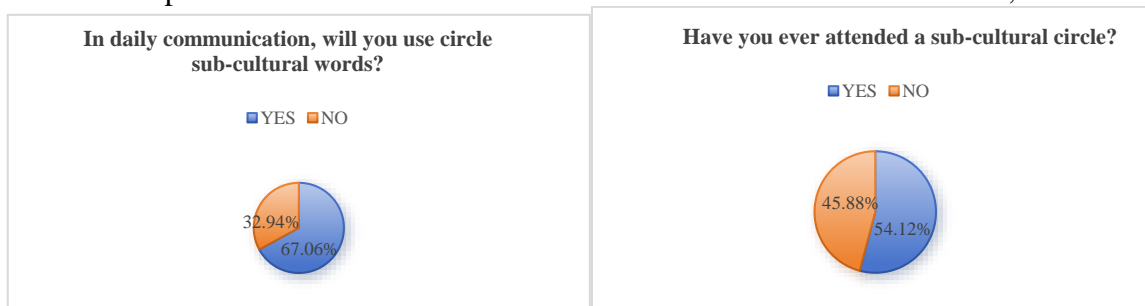

Figure 1: The network circle engagement situation

4.4 The investigation on the use of circle sub-cultural vocabulary on specific contexts

To comprehend how participants recognize circle sub-cultural vocabulary in specific contexts, the questionnaire presented two contexts. The first context involves the use of sub-cultural words with in literary, films with rich connotation. For instance, the term *jerk* describes the characteristics of Anna Karenina. The second context is the use of sub-cultural words in official context, such as using *coping homework* in official newspaper.

Overall, 70 students have employed the word *jerk* in daily communication to describe literary characters, making up 82.35 % of the total sample, and demonstrating a high frequency of use. (See Figure 2)

Will you use the term jerk to describe the characters of literature?
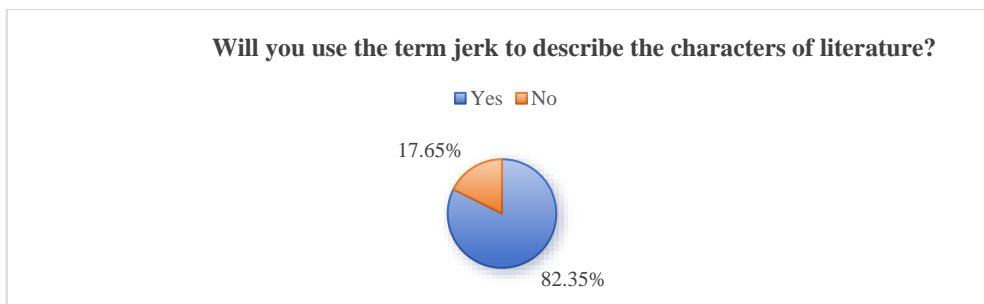
■ Yes ■ No

17.65%

82.35%

Figure 2: The general recognition situation on literature context

In contrast, in specific context, there is 30% of participants expressed their disagreement with these expressions, claiming that it disregards depth of the characters of language. This viewpoint warrants attention. Although descriptive vocabulary can convey the internet users' attitudes in a concise manner during daily communication, it overlooks to some extent the intricate psychological state, profound humanity, and specific historical context. (See Figure 3 for specific data).

In second official contexts, circle sub-cultural words with entertainment characteristics are sometimes employed. Out of total participants, 56 individuals stated that circle sub-cultural words can be used in official contexts, citing integration of sub-cultural and mainstream culture as a reason for this, accounting for 65.88 % (see Figure 3 for specific data).

Is it reasonable to use labeled words to cover the characters of literature ?

■ Reasonable ■ Unreasonable ■ insignificant

41.43%   28.57%

30%

Do you think circle sub-cultural words can be used in official context?
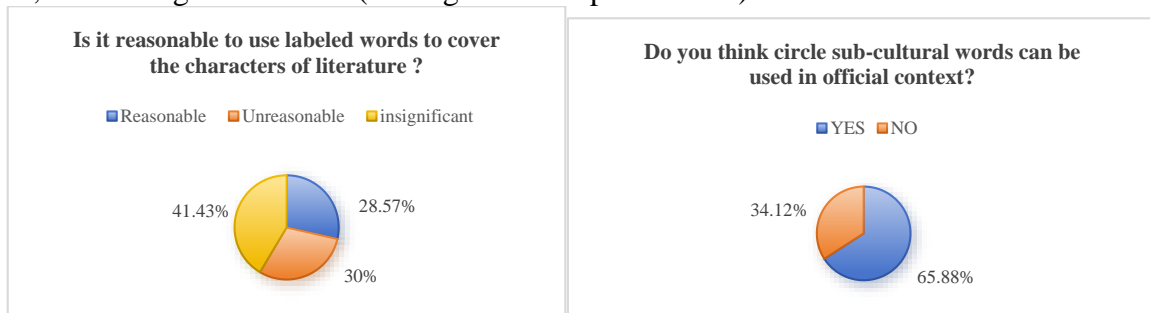
■ YES ■ NO

34.12%

65.88%

Figure 3: The usage of circle sub-cultural words on specific literature contexts

Participants exhibit a high level of identification with circle sub-cultural vocabulary in official contexts, in line with official cultural promotion that merges the activities of the younger generation and mainstream culture. However, opposition to this approach is prevalent in specific contexts identified in the questionnaire, with disapproval exceeding 60%, see Figure 4. These findings show that while network users have an understanding of incorporating circle sub-cultural jargon in formal context, its usage remains limited in some contexts.
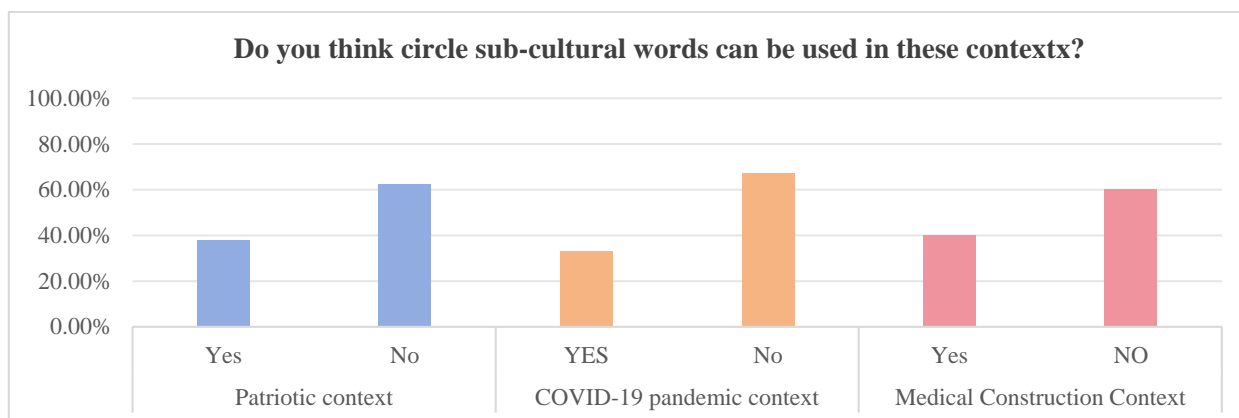
Figure 4: The usage of sub-cultural vocabulary on specific official contexts

5. Conclusions

Relying on social media, individuals with similar interests convene and segregate into distinct circles. United by shared passions, they restructured interpersonal communication and established novel linguistic forms, which are used to preserve the sense of identity within circle. Based on this background, this study analyzes words that are utilized in fans circle, e-sports circle, and ACG circle to comprehensively explore circle sub-cultural words and its influence. Generally, such words display traits of being separable, economical, and integrated. Specifically, in terms of form, they are not limited by original syntactic rules, and in concept, their semantics are more general and abstract, indicating the non-categorical characteristics. In terms of their influence on semantic culture, on the one hand, network circles have redefined some stigmatized words. On the other hand, the use of some words with dross semantic has resulted in a negative impact on today's society. Additionally, this study explores college students' use and recognition situation of circle sub-cultural words through questionnaire. These findings imply that college students frequently use circle sub-cultural words, but they are not fully aware of its origins and proper usage in some specific contexts. It is demonstrated that circle sub-cultural words have become parts of people's daily communication, while it remains somewhat restricted.

Acknowledgment

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