

An Analysis of the Popularity of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms on Social Media from the Perspective of Cognitive Sociolinguistics

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Abstract: The rapid development of the Internet has spawned a large number of Internet language. As a new way of language expression, Chinese Pinyin Acronyms are being preferred and frequently used on the Internet and in daily social communication. Compared with the traditional network buzzwords, Chinese Pinyin Acronyms present a characteristic of varied structures, unique pronunciation, diversity, crypticity and entertainment. This paper intends to study Chinese Pinyin Acronyms from the perspective of cognitive sociolinguistics, and analyze the motivations for the popularity of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms from three aspects: semantic factors, cognitive factors and psychological factors.

1. Introduction

Pinyin Acronyms can be traced back to the beginning of the Internet. At that time, there were a few acronyms such as “GG”¹, “lz”² and “MM”³ on the social media platforms. Later, although other acronyms have also arisen on the Internet, the number and scope of usage were relatively small. Using Pinyin Acronyms to refer to people's names began on the Internet in 2005, initially in the entertainment industry. At that time, in order to avoid attacking each other among fans or discussing some private matters, the fans would use Pinyin Acronyms to refer to their idols' names, such as LYC, ZBC and ZLY⁴.

With the rapid development of the Internet, the number and the expression forms of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms constantly increase and are widely used in people's daily communication. For example, “I have been a fan of many idols, but I have always been bp.”⁵, “xjj⁶ says this is cuter.”, “rwkk⁷ whether it works or not.”. It can be seen from the above-mentioned examples that Internet Chinese Pinyin Acronyms are broadly used in daily communication and come in a variety of forms. Exploring the characteristics of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms and analyzing the popular reasons behind them can help us better understand this language expression, which is also helpful to enrich the study of Pinyin Acronyms.

2. Characteristics of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms as Internet Language

This paper selects 134 online Chinese Pinyin Acronyms with looking for the network buzzwords in the past three years on “Chicken Dictionary”⁸. After sorting out these Pinyin acronyms, it can be found that Internet Chinese Pinyin Acronyms have the following characteristics:

2.1 Disyllabic, Trisyllabic and Tetrasyllabic Structure

Recently, there has been mainly three types of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms on the Internet. The first type is acronyms composed of pure Chinese Pinyin initial letters, which includes two syllables (one English word counts as one syllable), three syllables and four syllables. For example, “tt”⁹, “blx”¹⁰ and “wjby”¹¹. The second type is acronyms made up by Chinese Pinyin Acronyms and English word acronyms. For example, “rxl” [rxl: refers to “真心累”(really xin lei), really tired] where “r” is the acronym of English word “really” which means “very” and “xl” is the Pinyin Acronym of Chinese “心累”(xin lei) which means tired. The third type is acronyms composed of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms and numbers. Such as “y1s1” [y1s1: refers to “有一说一”(you yi shuo yi), seek truth from facts and not exaggerating] where “y” is the Pinyin Acronym of Chinese “有”(you) meaning

hold, “s” is the Pinyin Acronym of Chinese “说” (shuo) referring to speaking and “1” is the numerical expression of Chinese “一” (yi) which means the truth or fact.

According to the verification results of specific usage situations and expression meanings on Chinese media platforms which are Baidu, Weibo and Zhihu for 134 online Chinese Pinyin Acronyms, the first type has the largest number with a total of 125 acronyms accounting for about 93.28% of the total Chinese Pinyin Acronyms collected. The second type has eight acronyms accounting for about 5.97% and the third type has only 1 acronym accounting for about 0.75%. From the above figures and proportions for each type of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms, it can be concluded that Chinese Pinyin Acronyms showed on the Internet at present are mainly made up by pure Chinese Pinyin initial letters and are mostly two-syllables, three-syllables and four-syllables.

2.2 English Lowercase Letters for Form and Pinyin Pronunciation for Pronunciation.

Chinese Pinyin Acronyms on Internet language are usually showed in the form of English lowercase letters, and the corresponding pronunciation is pinyin pronunciation rather than the pronunciation of English letters [2]. For example:

- (1) xs¹², I suddenly have the urge to write 100 exercises again.
- (2) I forgot to wish you a happy birthday on pyq¹³ yesterday.
- (3) Today is also a day to own ssmy¹⁴.

In example (1), the lowercase letters of Chinese Pinyin “xiao si” are selected and the corresponding pronunciation is read from front to back according to its pinyin pronunciation which reads “xiao si”. Examples (2) and (3) follow the same rules of selection and pronunciation: “pyq” is the lowercase letter of Chinese Pinyin “peng you quan” and reads “peng you quan”; “ssmy” is the lowercase letter of Chinese Pinyin “sheng shi mei yan” and reads “sheng shi mei yan”.

2.3 Diversity and University

Although Chinese Pinyin Acronyms have already appeared on the spring up of the Internet, the number of acronyms of this type was small and the form only included disyllabic or trisyllabic acronyms for referring to people's names. With the continuous development of social economy, the number of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms showing on the social media has obviously increased. Meanwhile, the form of Pinyin Acronyms has increasingly diversified, ranging from the original two-syllable and three-syllable acronyms to the present four-syllable acronyms even the acronyms combined Chinese Pinyin Acronyms with English word acronyms or numbers. It can be seen from the above discussion that Chinese Pinyin Acronyms increase in the number and have varied expressions for form.

Chinese Pinyin Acronyms were frequently used by fans in the entertainment industry in the beginning. For example, “There have not been 5,000 praises of kp¹⁵ today, no more points.” “Sorry, I did not see hyh¹⁶ say that you cannot transfer the language of the comment area to other places.”. With the spread and influence of the Internet, in today’s daily communication, people can see the phenomenon of using Chinese Pinyin Acronyms for appellations, addresses, and objects everywhere. For example:

- (1) My db¹⁷ has become like this. Does anyone know what happened?
- (2) Now, the language of the fans in the millennial generation is becoming more and more bksy¹⁸.
- (3) Did yz¹⁹ come to gs²⁰ today?
- (4) You are kh²¹, dpq²².

As can be seen from the above examples, Chinese Pinyin Acronyms are used in every aspect of daily life and a growing number of people are trying to use Chinese Pinyin Acronyms in their social communication.

2.4 Crypticity and Exclusivity

Fans as the first group to use Chinese Pinyin Acronyms, they use these acronyms with the purpose of facilitating the release of gossip, or avoiding conflicts between fans of different stars. Chinese Pinyin Acronyms are mainly used by fans to refer to the stars’ name especially the online celebrity with a huge fan base. The second purpose of using acronyms for them is to avoid the risk of being reported and blocked by online communities when using sensitive words, such as “毒唯” (du wei) referring to fans who only focus on their love idols and want other stars to die. If this word is used on the Internet, the author may take the risk of being banned to post or being reported. However, if the author use Chinese Pinyin Acronym “dw” instead of Chinese “毒唯”, the risk can be avoided. From the point of view, Chinese Pinyin Acronyms present the characteristics of crypticity.

Another purpose is that a certain community do not want their community to be expanded, so they use Pinyin Acronyms to prevent someone else from entering their community. People in the community use Chinese Pinyin Acronyms for encrypted conversations that only those who are familiar with the community can quickly understand. If outsiders want to enter the community, they must first “decode” the meaning of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms or else they are not admitted to enter the community. For example, “jrjj” [jrjj: refers to “嘉人姐姐” (jia ren jie jie), the fans of the star named “任嘉伦” (Ren Jialun), jia ren means family]. Fans use this kind of “code word” to identify “their own people” which means the fans of “任嘉伦” (Ren Jialun) and have their own communication to separate out those they think “do not understand the meaning of the acronym”, thus establishing the boundary between insiders and outsiders of the community. Based on the above-mentioned analysis, it can be concluded that Internet Chinese Pinyin Acronyms have a certain degree of exclusivity.

2.5 Entertainment and Fashionableness

Chinese Pinyin Acronyms were originally used by fans of celebrities as a kind of “code word” and were widely spread among people for their entertaining way of expression. For example, “There is no fluctuation on the face, but the inner is ssfd²³.”, “I feel nsdd²⁴ whatever he does.”. Compared with those rigid words, the novelty expression form and bright visual impact of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms in text will make people feel joyful and delightful when using these acronyms in the process of social communication.

Nowadays, the rapid development of Internet has extended an increasing number of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms of entertainment nature. At the same time, people’s pursuit of new things and pop culture has made the use of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms a fashion on the Internet and in daily communication. People begin to imitate the usage of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms and add Pinyin Acronyms to their own conversations. For example, “dr1²⁵ I am new here.”, “xjm²⁶ can ask for an original picture!”, “they szd²⁷!” In the context of social background, using Chinese Pinyin Acronyms has become a fashion.

From what has mentioned above, it can be found that Internet Chinese Pinyin Acronyms are mostly disyllabic, trisyllabic and tetrasyllabic structures and have various forms and unique pronunciation. In addition, Chinese Pinyin Acronyms present a characteristic of diversity, crypticity and entertainment.

3. The Popular Motivation of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms as Internet Language

The popularity of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms is the result of multiple factors. The simple and labor-saving usage and polite and decent expression are the semantic factors for the popularity of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms. Conforming to the limited capacity of short-term memory and the cognitive characteristics of highlighting the whole are the cognitive factors of their popularity. Meanwhile, people’s psychology of seeking for new things and following others’ behavior make the form of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms richer and frequently used and widely spread. The above-mentioned three factors together contribute to the popularity of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms.

3.1 Semantic Factors

3.1.1 Simple and Labor-saving Usage

Using Chinese Pinyin Acronyms is simple, fast and labor-saving, in line with the principle of language economy. According to the Economy Principle of Language, a single act of communication urges people to adopt more newer and more complex language units, while a remarkable organic inertia requires people to possibly reduce the consumption of energy in speech activities and use less specific and more frequently occurring units. [4]. In social communication, people all want to spend the least time and energy to express and obtain the most information, so there is a greater demand for concise and convenient language expression and input methods. Chinese Pinyin Acronyms such as “jb”²⁸, “xsl”²⁹ and “bdjw”³⁰ are mostly short and concise and have certain advantages in terms of length and input, which fully accords with the principle of linguistics’ economy, so they are sought after by the public.

3.1.2 Polite and Decent Expression

Chinese Pinyin Acronyms make the language expression more euphemistic and appropriate in social communication, which are in keeping with the personality of Chinese. Chinese people are reserved and introverted and they always try to avoid using straightforward words to hurt or belittle others. For example, “虽然但是” (sui ran dan shi) which means a strong meaning of transition will give the other people a great

psychological gap and make them feel anxiety when they sound the word. If use Chinese Pinyin Acronym “srds” that can express the same meaning, the anxiety can be relieved and even give people a feeling of empathy. Words like “小学鸡” (xiao xue ji) which refers to a person who is naive in behavior and immature in mind or often makes trouble will offend some people when it is used in conversation. But if use Chinese Pinyin Acronym “xxj” that can express the same meaning of “小学鸡” (xiao xue ji), a humorous and encouraging emotion to inform the other party’s deficiency can be conveyed politely and at the same time it will make the expression more effective and efficient.

3.2 Cognitive Factors

3.2.1 Limited Capacity of Short-term Memory

The capacity of human memory is limited, which objectively requires people to delete superfluous words and contents to make sentences or texts brief and to the point. In *Psychology and Life*, co-authored by US psychology professors Richard Grieg and Philip Zimbardo, the researchers estimate that for the memory span of about 7 chunks, when other sources of memory are separated, the pure contribution of STM is only 2-4 [5]. Chinese Pinyin Acronyms are mainly composed of disyllabic, trisyllabic and tetrasyllabic structure, which can save the capacity of short-term memory and are convenient for people to identify and process information. For example, “hhdX” is the Pinyin Acronym of Chinese “哈哈大笑” (ha ha da xiao) meaning laugh happily. “hhdX” consists of four letters and is briefer and more concise than the latter. From what has mentioned above, it can be summarized that Chinese Pinyin Acronyms reduce the burden on human’s memory and make human’s brain process information more easier and convenient, so Chinese Pinyin Acronyms are welcomed by people.

3.2.2 Cognitive Characteristics of Highlighting the Whole

Chinese Pinyin Acronyms occupy relatively smaller in text because of their short and concise structures, which highlight the whole text and produce a strong visual impact. The cognitive psychologist, Giora, argues in the “The Graded Sakiencie Hypothesis” that the more significant the meaning of the code formed in the human brain due to convention, familiarity, frequency and typicality, the faster it is acquired [6]. Chinese Pinyin Acronyms highlight the function of the whole text and emphasize the author’s theme so that readers can quickly understand the author’s meaning when they read the text. For example, “my favorite pants was scratched by her, qswl³¹.” In this sentence, while the readers do not understand what the pants really means to the author, the Chinese Pinyin Acronym “qswl” is extremely prominent in the sentence and the readers can recognize and feel the theme and emotion of the author instantly through this acronym, so as to better understand the author's meaning.

3.3 Psychological Factors

3.3.1 Psychological Drive of Pursuing Novelty

Psychological difference is an important motivation for the popularity of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms. The psychological difference refers to the pursuit of novelty and distinctiveness. Chinese Pinyin Acronyms have intuitive and novel visual impact in form, which accords with people’s psychological characteristics of pursuing novel language expression forms. The groups using Chinese Pinyin Acronyms consider themselves as the representatives of fashion and they intend to show their uniqueness through using Chinese Pinyin Acronyms in their social communication. For example, people often use “笑死我了” (xiao si wo le) to express someone or something is particularly funny. However, this statement can no longer arouse people's interest because of high frequency of usage in social communication. Thus, the netizens create Chinese Pinyin Acronym “xswl” which can express the same meaning, so as to show their own unique personality and fashionable style.

3.3.2 Psychological Effect of Following Others’ Behavior

People’s psychology of imitating and following others’ behavior is also one of the motivations for the popularity of Internet Chinese Pinyin Acronyms, which can be explained by the Meme theory. Memes was invented in 1976 by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene*. According to Dawkins, Memes like viruses that can infect human brains and change their behavior, making them focus on the model. As long as someone leads a certain thing (such as slogans, fashionable terms, fashion, etc.), the others will consciously or unconsciously imitate it, spread it out and “hype” it, which becomes a meme phenomenon of “conformity” and “self-made” [8]. When a group of people begin to use Chinese Pinyin Acronyms in a popular way, other groups

will follow to use Chinese Pinyin Acronyms in their social communication. For example, the Chinese Pinyin Acronym “yyds” refers to “永远滴神” (yong yuan di shen) used to express that someone or something is excellent and amazing as God. This expression is first used by fans to praise their idols and then other people on social media see this expression and use it in their daily conversations, like “Chinese Team yyds”, “This color is really yyds.”, “New Energy yyds” and so on.

4. Conclusion

Chinese Pinyin Acronyms are popular on the Internet and are spreading to every field of daily life. This paper studies and analyzes the characteristics and motivations for the popularity of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms as Internet language from the perspective of cognitive sociolinguistics. Based on the relative theory and knowledge of cognitive sociolinguistics, it finds that Chinese Pinyin Acronyms have the characteristics of varied forms of structure, unique pronunciation method, universality, crypticity, fashionableness, etc. The motivations behind the popularity of Chinese Pinyin Acronyms include semantic factors, cognitive factors and psychological factors that all work together to make Chinese Pinyin Acronyms become a widely used and popular Internet language in today’s social communication.

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