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Research on Features of Chatroom Netspeak From a Stylistic View

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Abstract

With the development and popularization of Internet, the appearance of computer mediated communication (CMC) has generated a new variety of language—netspeak, which received a wide publicity in modern linguistics. This paper focuses on the features of netspeak. Firstly, it gives an introduction of its background. Secondly, it discusses its features by employing a lot of examples from English and Chinese. In this part, this paper makes the analysis from the view of stylistics, focusing on phonological, lexical, syntactical and discursal aspects. Special mention is given here to some differences and similarities found in English netspeak and Chinese netspeak. Thirdly, the great influence of netspeak on written language is involved, which reflects in morphology, meaning, grammar and the degree of politeness. Finally, a conclusion of the features of netspeak is given as well as a reasonable anticipation of its tendency. Lacking in the knowledge of the stylistic features of netspeak, chitchat on line will result in failure in communication. Therefore, this paper, through the systematic analysis on netspeak, aims at revealing its distinctive features and getting netizens to communicate better. As the cyber culture is evolving, netspeak is also changing, which will generate more new features. The study on netspeak needs further analysis and it is never ended.

Key words: Netspeak features; Stylistic view; Illustration

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INTRODUCTION

In book *Language and the Internet*, Crystal comments: “If the Internet is a revolution, therefore, it is likely to be a linguistic revolution.” (Crystal, 2001, p.2) With the widespread use of computer and Internet, more and more people prefer to communicate on Internet through chatrooms, and the application of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) has generated a new variety of language—netspeak.

At the first place, let us come to the core term of this thesis: netspeak. The “netspeak” is a noun, morphologically consisting of two parts—“net” and “speak”. “net” means the Internet, and the suffix “speak” here involves “writing” and “talking”. Netspeak is “all alternative to ‘netlish’, ‘weblish’, ‘Internet language’, ‘cyberspeak’, ‘electronic discourse’, ‘electronic language’, ‘interactive written discourse’, ‘computer-mediated-communication(CMC)’ and other more cumbersome locutions.” (Crystal, 2001, p.22)

This part focuses on the theoretical basis of the thesis. As this study is based mainly on stylistics, most of the analysis is conducted according to stylistic theories. It is necessary to point out that at present there is no ready-made theories dedicated specifically to the study on netspeak. Moreover, the majority of the works in stylistics concern the study of literary criticism. But in this thesis stylistics is dealt with in its narrow sense. This thesis tries to “borrow” the general research principles of stylistics and apply these general theories to the newly born netspeak.

By employing stylistic theories to the study of netspeak (in English and Chinese internet chatrooms), the present study is going to pioneer academically in this new and challenging field. The major objectives of this research are as follows:

a) Through the revealing of the secrets of netspeak, this thesis will help people get a better understanding of the new variety of communication, and thus can better communicate on the Internet.

b) It is hoped that this study will be of much help for the evaluation of netspeak.

1. PHONOLOGICAL FEATURES OF NETSPEAK

1.1 Onomatopoeias

Onomatopoeias are the words which imitate natural sounds. They usually imitate sounds made by animal, thing, person, sometimes associated with some movement or action. For example, “coo-coo” for sound made by a kind of bird, “moo” for a cow’s cry.

To make language more impressive and vivid, netizens employ a large amount of onomatopoeias. The words express sounds of smile and cry are frequently used, such as “哈哈”, “呵呵”, “嘿嘿”, “嘻嘻”, “吼吼”, “嘎嘎”, “萌萌哒” (“么么哒”).

Sometimes, a device of the repetition of letters is frequently used in conjunction with onomatopoeias. To emphasize the meanings of *buzz*, *fizz*, *hiss*, for example, they can be written as *buzzzzzz*, *fizzzzzz* and *hisssssss*, etc. *ZZZZ* is the sound of snoring, *hehe* mimics the sound of laughing. *So* is written as *SSSSSSSSSO* and *nnnnnnnnnnno* to emphasize or exaggerate meanings or feeling as in “so sorry” and “no”.

1.2 Homophones

Homophones can fall into four groups: a) English letters stand for a sentence or a complete word: IC=I see, r=are, U means you. b) The homophones of Chinese: “斑竹”(mottled bamboo) is for BBS (“版主”) — the avatar of two crying girls, showing how hardworking and painstaking the administrator is. So it is very popular among young netizens. Another example is “杯具”, which means tragedy because it has the similar sound with Chinese “悲剧”. Similar words are listed as follows: 稀饭 (喜欢), 水饺 (睡觉), 洗具 (喜剧), 餐具 (惨剧), 蓝瘦香菇 (难受想哭), 神马 (什么). c) Homophones from other languages: 伊妹儿 (Email), 猫 (modem), 伐木累 (family), 欧巴桑 (obasan おばさん), 欧吉桑 (ojisan おじさん), 多拉马 (ドラマ), 萝莉 (loli ロリ), 正太 (shotai). d) Homophones that consist of numbers: 2—two, 4—four, 8—eight.

Numbers play a more important role in Chinese netspeak, expressing a certain meaning: “8” (/ba:/) is sounded like English word ‘bye’ (/bai/), so “88”

is for “bye bye” (when chatters are ready to go offline). Similarly, “8147” (不要生气) for “don’t be angry”, “687” (对不起) for “sorry”, and “520” (我爱你) for “I love you”. The following is the common “number-speak” used in Chinese chatrooms: 5555555—crying (呜呜呜), 184—all one’s life (一辈子), 56—boredom (无聊), 9494—I agree (就是, 就是), 7954—drinking causes delay in business (吃酒误事), 1314 all one’s life (一生一世), 584—I swear (我发誓).

This way is widely used among Chinese netizens, as it can save more time and money than typing Chinese characters, and two reasons can account for the use of “number-speak”: One is for convenience and rapid typing, the other is for humor and interesting style.

1.3 Sound Repetition to Mimic Infant Language

There is another phonological feature in chatroom language worth mentioning—the occurrence of the infant language. Such language can make words sound cute and humorous. For example, MM (美眉) refers to the beautiful girl, JJ (姐姐), DD (弟弟), GG (哥哥) refers to elder sister, younger brother and elder brother respectively. “虫虫” and “东东” refer to the netizens and “dong xi (东西)”.

2. LEXICAL FEATURES OF NETSPEAK

2.1 Colloquial Items and Slangs

Certain items such as “yep, nope, got, just, all right, ok”. And a number of mouth “fillers” such as “well, erm, you know, I think, of course” and so on are frequently used in netspeak.

Slang words and expressions add vitality to the chatting conversation. Slang is a casual use of language consisting of expressive but nonstandard vocabulary (He, 1999, p.199). The key characteristics of slang are strong desire of novelty and vivid emphasis. This is why netspeak comes into being. It seems that vulgar language, like fuck, bullshit, TMD, NQS are also rampant in chatrooms.

2.2 Abbreviations

Abbreviation or clipping is the formation of new words by deleting a part of the original and using what remains instead. There are four types of abbreviation or clipping in clipping netspeak:

a) Back clipping: The deletion occurs at the end of the word. It is the most common type of clipping, for example, app(application), info(information), com(commercial), edu(educational), gov(governmental), mil(military), net(network organization), nick(nickname).

b) Front clipping: The deletion occurs at the beginning of the word. page(webpage), site(website), U(you), Ur(your).

c) Middle clipping: The deletion occurs at the middle of the word.

ft(faint), bt(between), bc(because), pls(please), R(are), jk(just kidding).

d) Clipping often alters spelling: thanx(thanks), X(kiss), microphone(mike).

2.3 Acronyms

Acronymy is the process of forming new words by joining the initial letters of composite names. In netspeak, acronyms are not only for words or short phrases, but also sentences. For example, GTG (Go to go), WDYS (What did you say?), CIO (check it out!), PLS (please), TX (thanks). But on the whole, acronyms of phrases constitute a large proportion.

In Chinese chatrooms, some acronyms are based on Chinese pinyin: MM (meimei, younger sisters or beauties), JJ (jiejie, elder sisters), GG (gege, elder brothers), DD (didi, younger brothers), LP (laopo, wife), RMB (renminbi, Chinese monetary unit).

The great number of acronyms in netspeak shows that the creation of acronyms follows a principle of economy.

2.4 Coinage

Netspeak vocabulary is new and original. This can be perceived from the occurrence of numerous coined words. There are a lot of ways to coin new words: affixation (e-book=e+book, e-mail=e+mail, e-shop=e+shop), compounding (keypal=key+pal, username=user+name, mailbomb=mail+bomb, mouseclick=mouse+click) and so on. More examples are as follows:

The word “灌水” or “lurking” means a refusal to communicate with others; “顶” or “up” means your approval of a certain article or a person.

2.5 Meaning Shift

The novelty of netspeak also derives from a change of word meaning. Many words used in net jargon are taken from regular language and applied to new ideas or protocols. A gopher is not a furry rodent on the internet, but a software program designed to gopher through the vast amount of information so that the user can find what he / she is looking for: A server is not a waitress or waiter, it is another computer that tells your machine what it needs to know to communicate on the net; a dinosaur is not a large extinct reptile, but an ugly female who surfs the Internet; a frog is not a cold-blooded animal living in water and on land, but an ugly male.

3. SYNTACTICAL FEATURES OF NETSPEAK

3.1 Short and Simple-Structured Sentences

Short sentences are more often used in daily conversation, and in a chatroom the basic sentence patterns are as follows:

a) SVC

bones shaker (netname): I like the French very much.

freebird: i am newbie (新手).

b) SV

Winda: i see

AarOn: i don't know :(

c) SVO

zac—?: once someone donated an old blown doll.

DownSouth—943: im a male.

kitty 880: oh all are male.

In addition, one-word sentences (独词句) are often found in chatrooms.

3.2 Elliptical and Incomplete Sentences

Non-standard usage and highly colloquial constructions are the main characteristics in netspeak, and the omission of sentence components is the common feature in chatrooms:

a) I fine (the omission of a copular verb)

b) How it going (the omission of an auxiliary verb)

c) Me is 31 (non-standard concord between subject and verb)

d) You feeling better now? (the substitution of one case form for another)

3.3 Category Changes

In netspeak, vocabulary function shifts very frequently: a flame (noun) — all angry, hostile response sent to another person. To flame (verb) — to send someone such a response. 百度Baidu (noun) is the name of a famous online search engine, but now the utterance “百度一下, 你就知道” means you will find the answer if you search on Baidu engine.

4. DISCOURSE FEATURES OF NETSPEAK

The term “discourse analysis” is firstly used by all American linguist Z. S. Harris in 1952. Discourse analysis has two different schools: One is British school, the representatives of which are Sinclair and Coulthard Another school is American School, with Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson as its representatives. Discourse analysis is concerned with how “structures and regularities (of language) are the product of more general social processes and norms of interaction through which people's interpersonal goals, selves, and relationships are negotiated, and out of which a sense of social order is created.” (Schiffrin, 1988, p.252)

4.1 Intertwining Streams of Conversation

One feature of the language used in chatrooms is the organization of conversational sequences and exchange structures, The intertwining streams of conversation can be easily identified. There is an example from the English chatroom:

Linda: U home?
 Ann: Yes, what ab U?
 Vivi: hello, nice to me u!
 Blake: hello, where R U from?
 Linda: I'm in office, what's ur plan tomorro?
 Vivi: hello, who ant to talk Ann: go to cinema, together?
 Blake: I'm talking, donnt see?
 Vivi: oh, I C, I'm from newyork, and U?
 Linda: sound nice, I'll go!!!

The above ten-line extract includes four participants and three streams. The first stream is between Linda and Ann, and the second stream is Vivi's greeting to all the participants, the last stream is between Vivi and Blake. The three flows of conversation have intertwined and different topics are interwoven.

This phenomenon is largely due to the fact that the utterances have a larger life span printed on the screen than they do in oral discourse. Participants are able to scroll back and read what happened, thus keep track of the separate conversations going on, participating in several streams of conversation simultaneously.

4.2 Adjacency Pairs

It is well known that at least two turns keep a string of a conversation going—a complaint followed by an excuse (apology), a question followed by an acknowledgment, a greeting followed by a greeting. Sequences of two utterances constitute adjacency pairs—adjacent; produced by different speakers; ordered as a first part and a second part; typed, so that a particular first part requires a particular second.

However, sometimes adjacency pairs in chat room conversation violate this norm. There are lots of examples in which the first pair part is not followed by the second pair part immediately.

4.3 Frequent Use of Addressitivity in Conversation

One communicative obstacle on Internet communication is that strands of conversation become interwoven, making it unclear which participants are referring or “talking” to. There is, subsequently a convention to “indicate the intended addressee”, by placing the given “nickname” before the utterance, separated by a colon. In practice, as long as their name is mentioned somewhere, the problem is solved. This method can also be treated as a very effective way of being noticed in a “room”: Participants

are generally much more likely to respond if a statement/question is directed specifically at them.

CONCLUSION

“Any attempt to characterize the language of the Internet, whether as a whole or with reference to one of its constituent situations, immediately runs up against the transience of the technology.” (Crystal, 2001, p.224). Netspeak seems to be in a permanent state of transition. With so abundant language resource in chatrooms, this paper only involves a small fraction of it and confines to some aspects of the features in its limited space. As the cyber culture is evolving, netspeak is also changing, which will generate more new features. Therefore, a further observation and an in-depth study are expected in the future.

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