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The Postmodern Features of Netspeak and Language Change

网络语言的后现代特征及语言变化

陈光明

指导教师姓名: 吴建平 副教授

专 业 名 称: 英语语言文学

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Abstract

The boom of the Internet has given birth to a new culture ---- cyber culture together with its carrier and container a new language variety ---- netspeak. In the narrow sense, netspeak refers to the written language variety that is used in online communities like BBSs, forums, chatrooms, OICQ, ICQ, MSN, etc.. Due to the postmodern characteristics of cyber culture, netspeak, being the carrier and container of this culture, inevitably bears certain postmodern features such as heterogeneity, hybridity, anti-authority, and playfulness. With the blooming of online communities and further blurring of the virtual reality and our real life, netspeak has become a trendy language variety and is no longer used exclusively in the cyber world. It is now imposing much influence on the language people use in everyday life: not only has it pooled a variety of new terms into our everyday language, but also led to changes that challenge grammatical conventions. It has also resulted in stylistic change in formal and academic writings especially among young people. Will this new language variety be a curse to the development of the Chinese language or, on the contrary, a blessing? This thesis casts the focus on exploring and interpreting the postmodern features of netspeak and tries to answer the question: how should we deal with language change resulted from the influence of netspeak.

Key words: netspeak, cyber culture, postmodern, language change

摘 要

二十世纪末因特网的诞生及其飞速发展给人类带来了一种全新的文化以及这种文化的载体，那就是网络文化和网络语言。从狭义上讲，网络语言指的是在网络社区中使用的一种语言变体，如 BBS、网上论坛、网上聊天室、OICQ、ICQ、MSN 等。由于网络文化本身具有后现代特征，其载体网络语言自然也呈现出后现代风格，比如多元化、混杂、反传统和游戏性。随着网络社区的蓬勃发展，加上现实空间和虚拟空间之间界限的模糊化，网络语言不仅变得越来越时尚，它的运用也不再局限于网络世界中。受其影响，人们在现实生活中的语言运用也发生了变化：它不仅给日常生活用语注入了大量新词汇，而且还导致了一些与传统相悖的语法变化。另外，网络语言还造就了日常生活用语中的文体变化。一些人，特别是年青人甚至在正式文体或是学术性的文章中也运用网络语言的风格进行写作。这些变化使我们不禁发问：到底这种新的语言变体对于中文的发展来说是诅咒还是福音？我们应该如何面对由网络语言带来的语言变化。本文旨在探讨网络语言的后现代特征并试图解答以上问题。

关键词：网络语言；网络文化；后现代；语言变化

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Chapter One A general introduction to netspeak

1.1 The birth of a new written language variety ---- netspeak

From the 19th century up to now, mass media have witnessed three great leaps. First, newspaper gave away its unchallengeable leading role to radio at the beginning of the 20th century. Then it took only about half of the time for television to rob radio of this place. During the latter half of the 20th century, many people preferred enjoying audio and visual effects to taking the effort to decode the written words and they were said to have developed “the least effort syndrome”. However, the greatest leap was yet to come and it was incomparable in terms of the speed of development and the growing number of users. Since the mass became accessible to the Internet in the 1990s, within a period of no more than 10 years, it has beaten all the three traditional means of mass media. According to a research done by Jupiter, an American IT investigation company, in 2005 approximately 806 million people worldwide use the Internet and online services. (司晨) The Internet is growing exponentially in all areas: it created a world called cyberspace where a rapidly increasing number of people are finding themselves working, studying and playing on the Internet. And the people on the Internet are not all rocket scientists and computer programmers; they’re graphic designers, teachers, students, artists, musicians, feminists, and your next-door neighbors. As to the situation in China, according to a CNNIC survey, in the past 7 years, the number of netizens has grown 140 times. By June 30, 2004, the number of Chinese netizens has run up to 87 million, next only to those in America and

the time they spent online has increased to 13 hours per week on average. It is predicted that since 2004, the annual growth of Chinese netizens will be about 30%. In 2005, there will be more than 100 million Chinese netizens. (CNNIC)

Although the Internet is renowned for its multi-media means in transferring information, including audio and video files, films, animated pictures and graphics, and so on, the online communities exist and thrive only because of effective written communication. “在现实空间里，我们除了用语言来交流，更多的还得借助其他工具。而在网络上，我们唯一依靠的就是语言，语言的功能被网络发挥到了极限。可以说，网络就是语言世界。(To carry out communication in real life, we must frequently refer to other means of communication besides language. However, in the cyber world, we can merely rely on language, whose function has been maximized there. So it can be said that the cyber world is built on language.)” (雷默 6) In online communities, if you cannot express yourself well in written language, you either learn more effective ways of communicating, or get lost in the shuffle. No wonder it is exclaimed that in the age of the Internet, written language has regained authority after audio and visual media took away its dominating place in the age of newspaper. But taking a closer look at the form of written language used in online communities, we can easily find they are quite different from other varieties of written language either in the past or in the contemporary life ---- a new written language variety which is often referred to as “netspeak” has been born.

1.2 Defining netspeak

The new written language variety netspeak in a broad sense can refer to all forms of written language used in the field of Internet communication via the computer. Generally speaking, it can be put into three categories: first, computer and network jargons such as: 鼠标(mouse)、硬件(hardware)、软件(software)、病毒(virus)、局域网(intranet)、防火墙(firewall)、浏览器(Internet Explorer); second, terms related to the network in particular such as: 网民(netizen)、网吧(cybercafé)、黑客(hacker)、短信息(text message)、第四媒体(the fourth media)、电子商务(e-business)、虚拟空间(cyberspace)、信息高速公路(Information Superhighway); third, terms originated from and used in online communities in particular such as: 美眉(beautiful girl)、大虾(veteran netizen)、斑竹(webmaster)、恐龙(ugly guy)、菜鸟(trainee)、东东(thing)、酱紫(like this)、瘟都死(Windows). In this thesis, the term “netspeak” is used in the third sense. It is a written language variety used by netizens to carry out communication in cyber communities such as online forums, BBSs, chatrooms, OICQ, ICQ, MSN, etc.. Its specific terms and style are enjoyed by the insiders but need to be decoded by outsiders with efforts. But netspeak is not used exclusively in online communities. Netizens carry over the terms and style to other online activities so it can also be perceived in online news, online novels, e-mails, etc.. What deserves mentioning is that the boundary among the three categories of netspeak mentioned above is a fuzzy one. In addition, when referring to netspeak, text messages sent via cell phones should also be taken into consideration for they bear eminent features of netspeak and contribute to its development. This thesis is an article about Chinese netspeak and in the

following parts, this author will equate “netspeak” with “Chinese netspeak”. But the English netspeak will also be referred to from time to time since it has a strong influence on the Chinese netspeak. Chinese netizens have borrowed many terms from it and use them in their communication generously.

1.3 General features of netspeak

The cyber world is a rather open system which puts far fewer restrictions on participating in online activities. All kinds of netizens participate in online activities and contribute to netspeak more freely. Therefore, netspeak is heterogeneous in nature. And in online communities, the participants are more like “talking” than “writing” to each other so there are strong oral speech features like ungrammaticality, redundancy and heavy use of modal exclamation in netspeak. However, there is also a high demand on the communicating speed due to the designed feature of some online communities such as the chatroom. Therefore there are also many “concise” means of writing in netspeak. All in all, there are several distinctive features as to netspeak:

Morphologically speaking, acronyms and abbreviations make up a large part of netspeak vocabulary to save time. Numbers are also used to take the place of words for the sake of brevity. What’s more, there is a heavy use of the paralingual symbol called “emoticon” which is made of keyboard symbols and logos.

Semantically speaking, there is an explosion of new words or words with new meanings in netspeak. Such new inventions are often “jargons” which can

put outsiders into total darkness.

Grammatically speaking, there is a strong oral tendency in netspeak and grammaticality does not play a central role as in other written language varieties. Expressions which are considered to be ungrammatical in the conventional sense or improper in formal writings are common in netspeak.

1.4 The necessity to study netspeak

“Netspeak” is evolving on both national and international levels. Firstly, the technological vocabulary once used exclusively by computer programmers and elite computer manipulators called “Hackers” has spread to all users of computer networks as mentioned in 1.1. Secondly, the language which is currently spoken by people on the Internet has been rapidly spilling over into advertising, business and other fields. The words “online”, “network”, and “surf the net” are occurring more and more frequently in our newspapers and on television. Television advertisers, newspapers, and international businesses have jumped onto the "Information Superhighway" bandwagon, making the Internet more accessible to large numbers of not-entirely-technically-oriented people and then making the Internet-specific terms penetrate into everyday conversation. As a result, technological vocabulary is entering into non-technological communication and netspeak is entering into the non-virtual space.

“It was inevitable that our language would be affected because the Internet is not simply a technical phenomenon, it’s a cultural phenomenon, and it doesn't even matter if you’re on it or not, you are nonetheless affected by its

presence in the culture”, says Liss Jeffrey, adjunct professor at the McLuhan Program in Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto. What’s more, as the famous linguist David Crystal said in his book *Language and the Internet*, such a phenomenon of the new language variety “is going to ‘change the way’ we think about language in a fundamental way”. (Crystal 238) Therefore, to make a study on netspeak can enable us to catch a glimpse of the new cultural trend and gain a better understanding about the changes taking place in our everyday language. And it really matters to us because no matter whether you admit it or not, you are already “in” this new trend and language change.

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Chapter Two The relationship between cyber culture and netspeak

2.1 The relationship between culture and language

Although a consensus has not been reached as to the exact relationship between language and culture, it is feasible to say that they are closely interrelated to each other. According to Eugene Nida, a well-known linguist and translation theorist, “Since culture is defined succinctly as ‘the totality of beliefs and practices of a society,’ nothing is of greater strategic importance than the language through which its beliefs are expressed and transmitted and by which most interaction of its members takes place.” (Nida 105) From the viewpoint stated above, we can perceive a popular view towards the relationship between language and culture: language is an essentially important carrier and container of culture.

Human knowledge and experience are described and stored in language. Customs, habits and behavioral patterns can be described and analyzed in language. Social institutions, value systems, beliefs, world views can be described, analyzed and evaluated in language. Even the visual arts like painting, sculpture, and dancing and the auditory arts such as music and singing can be described and evaluated in language. To be sure, culture can exist in the form of materials. But language as the medium of communication is indispensable in their production and use. Without cooperation between designers and engineers and workers television sets or computers, for example,

could never have been produced and such cooperation would be impossible without language. Moreover, TV sets and computers are sold together with manuals for their proper use. In short, language can represent every aspect of culture. It is the carrier and container of culture.

As the most important medium to contain and carry culture, language, on the other hand, is also strongly influenced and shaped by culture. The influence of culture towards language is more readily seen in the level of vocabulary. For example, according to Rosch, vocabulary can be classified into three levels: the basic object level, the superordinate level and the subordinate level. On the third level, the classification of words is closely influenced by cultural factors. (高一虹 6~7) That is why Eskimo tribes commonly have as many as seven different words for snow to distinguish among different types of snow: falling snow, snow on the ground, fluffy snow, wet snow, etc. because they virtually live in the world of snow. In contrast, certain African cultures in the equatorial forest of Zaire have no word at all for snow.

But words are not the only language items that reflect the influence of culture. Grammar, language uses, idioms and proverbs etc. are also shaped to various degrees by culture. On the level of grammar, for example, Chinese is said to be more paratactic while English more hypotactic because the Chinese people differ from the English people in their conventional thinking patterns. The former put more emphasis on “understanding” while the latter on “reasoning”. (潘文国 361) Take similes for another example. When Chinese people talk about something plain, we would say it is as plain as “water”. While in some western culture, it can be as plain as “milk” for milk is such a

common drink in their culture that it is almost like drinking water in our culture. To go to extremes, according to the so-called linguistic relativists, similarity between languages is relative and people who speak different languages also think differently. There are more structural differentiations between languages than similarities. And the reason that counts for such a difference is that various cultures differ from each other greatly, thus languages shaped by these cultures also show great distinction from each other.

Be some of the statements above tentative ones, they could exhibit the influence of culture towards language. As a matter of fact, culture, in its board sense, includes language as one of its key components. Therefore, it is essential for us to take a look at the features of cyber culture before dipping into its carrier and container ---- netspeak.

2.2 The postmodern features of cyber culture

2.2.1 What is cyber culture

Culture, in its broadest sense, equals “civilization”. It is all the achievements made by human beings in the process of altering the natural world, spiritual or material. In its narrow sense, it is usually used to refer to the spiritual achievements which are in contrast to the material ones. But it can still be talked about in a narrower sense and defined as a specific life style. Such a life style is not exclusive to classic fields like art and philosophy, it also includes common life style like what we often refer to as “fast-food culture”, “popular culture”, etc.. In this thesis, cyber culture will be discussed about in

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