



Global Influence and Local Adaptation: The Integration of English in Chinese Internet Slang

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Abstract

This article explores the influence of English on Chinese internet slang, focusing on how English-derived acronyms, morphemes, and code-switching have become integrated into online Chinese discourse. Although China is typically categorized as a low-proficiency English environment, many elements originating from English continue to enter Chinese social media, creating hybrid forms. This study aims to investigate how English lexical and morphological elements are localized, repurposed, and recontextualized by Chinese netizens on social platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu. The method used in this study is discourse analysis, with data collected from various posts and comments on these platforms. The results indicate that, despite English not being the primary language in China, the use of English elements in internet slang is increasingly growing, reflecting a creative adoption that is localized according to Chinese culture and social norms. Elements such as acronyms and code-switching are used to express emotions, humor, and group identity, demonstrating the significant impact of global influences on online communication. Based on these findings, it is recommended that further research focus on the influence of social media in the formation of new languages and the relationship between language globalization and local culture, as well as its impact on the language proficiency of China's younger generation.

Keywords: *Chinese Internet Slang, English Influence, English Morphemes in Chinese, Internet Meme, Interlanguage.*

A. Introduction

Language exchange has existed since groups of people speaking different languages started interacting. One group wanted what others had and would engage in barter or ask for safe passage through foreign territory. When groups became more familiar with one another, and their interactions became more common, they developed a shared language (Bright, 2024); such is the case with Chinese and English, which created the first widely described pidgin language, Chinese Pidgin English.

When the internet was developed in the 1960s, it was not expected to become as commonly used as it is now. Thanks to the internet, individuals and cultures are connected and can freely exchange ideas. This free exchange of ideas had many consequences, including creating Internet Slang (Scagnoli et al., 2015). Currently, we can define Internet Slang as a nonstandard language people use to communicate on the World Wide Web (Zappavigna, 2012).

In 2023, approximately 67% of the world's population were using the internet in one way or another (International Telecommunication Union [ITU], 2023). Since 2008, China has had the largest population of people connected to the internet. In 2024, the percentage of Chinese with access to the internet reached 77.5% (Li, 2024), which means that approximately 20% of all Internet users were Chinese (Wang, 2024). Chinese netizens exhibit behavior similar to that witnessed in other relatively linguistically isolated countries. Namely, they focus more on

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domestically relevant content than on connecting with news and people outside China (Curtis et al., 2024).

Approximately 390 million Chinese have studied English at some point (Wei & Su, 2012); however, according to the EF English Proficiency Index, China ranked 82nd out of 113 countries in 2023. This ranking means that China is considered a country with a low proficiency in English (Giannakouloupoulos, 2020). This low proficiency may be one of the reasons why English does not have as profound an influence on Chinese internet culture as it does on other languages. However, this influence is present and often moves from the internet to the 'real' world.

This article explores three ways in which English influences Chinese slang: the use of acronyms, lexical code-switching, and the adoption of derivational morphemes, e.g., -er and -ing. These phenomena are analyzed as part of a broader pattern of digital translanguaging, a process described by Li (2018) as "involving flexible use of linguistic resources beyond the boundaries of named languages to make meaning, communicate, and perform identity." By looking closer at contemporary examples from Chinese social media platforms including WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu, this study contributes to better understanding how global English is recontextualized in creative and socially meaningful ways among Chinese speakers..

B. Methods

The research design for this study adopts a qualitative approach, specifically using discourse analysis to examine the integration of English elements into Chinese internet slang. The study focuses on how English-derived acronyms, morphemes, and instances of code-switching are localized and repurposed by Chinese netizens on popular social media platforms, including WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu. The research seeks to explore how global linguistic influences, particularly from English, are incorporated into Chinese digital communication, resulting in hybrid language forms that reflect both global and local cultural dynamics.

The research procedure involves purposive sampling of posts, comments, and captions from user-generated content on WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu. These platforms were chosen due to their widespread use among Chinese netizens and their significant role in shaping online discourse. Data collection will focus on identifying specific instances of English lexical elements such as acronyms (e.g., "LOL" or "OMG"), English morphemes (e.g., "-ing" or "-er"), and code-switching between English and Chinese. The data will be selected to ensure a variety of linguistic features are captured, including both mainstream and niche forms of internet slang.

For data collection, content will be extracted from a range of posts across the selected platforms, ensuring a diverse representation of internet slang. The study will focus on informal language used by Chinese netizens in daily interactions, including conversations, memes, and content that bridges language boundaries. The data will be categorized based on the presence of English-derived elements and analyzed to determine how these elements function within the Chinese linguistic system. Special attention will be given to how these elements are adapted to reflect Chinese cultural norms, humor, and social identity.

Data analysis will employ discourse analysis to categorize and interpret the linguistic features identified in the data. The coding process will focus on English-derived acronyms, morphemes, and instances of code-switching, assessing their role in communication on these platforms. The contextualization of each instance will help determine its function, whether it is used for expressing emotions, humor, or identity. By comparing the use of these linguistic features across different platforms, the study will highlight the ways in which English is

recontextualized in creative and socially meaningful ways by Chinese netizens, contributing to a deeper understanding of language globalization and local adaptation in the digital age.

C. Results and Discussion

The influence of English on Chinese has been thoroughly studied in the context of such formal domains as science, technology, and business. Chinese Pidgin English arose from early interactions between Chinese and English speakers, and while it is no longer in use, it left a legacy of loanwords (Mayang Pipit, 2024; Liu et al., 1986). While modern Mandarin is more resistant to widespread importation of lexis from English than languages like Japanese, scholars like Wei and Su (2012) have documented how phonetic borrowings, semantic calques, and orthographical adaptations from English continue to shape Chinese. While these processes have been analysed in formal registers, the role English plays in informal and digital communication is much less studied.

The development of the internet in China led to the emergence of a unique genre of Chinese internet slang. While nonstandard internet slang used in digital settings shows creative use of language while playing complex social functions like signalling group membership, negotiating identity, and resisting formality (Zappavigna, 2012; Scagnoli et al., 2015). Androutsopoulos (2011) and other sociolinguists argue that digital environments help foster hybridised linguistic practices, which often involve recombination of multiple languages.

Translanguaging, a new theoretical lens, is useful for understanding such phenomena. Li Wei (2018) defines translanguaging as the dynamic and fluid use of linguistic resources by multilingual speakers to perform social action, express identity and make meaning. Instead of switching between bound linguistic codes, users blend features of different languages to create a unified communication repertoire. Looking at Chinese internet discourse through the lens of translanguaging, we can notice how English acronyms, phrases, and morphemes are not borrowed, but adapted, reinterpreted, and localised.

A growing body of work discusses translanguaging in educational and diaspora contexts; however, relatively few studies explore how these practices develop in digital spaces within monolingual-majority countries. The aim of this paper is to address this gap by examining Chinese internet slang as a source of informal language contact and translanguaging. Particular attention is put to how English elements are embedded into Chinese online communication.

The following section explores how elements of English are incorporated into Chinglish internet settings. Chinese social media platforms, such as WeChat, Douyin, Weibo, QQ, and Xiaohongshu, are dynamic environments where informal language practices, including code-mixing, lexical innovation, and translanguaging, occur routinely (Androutsopoulos, 2011; Zappavigna, 2012). While English proficiency across China remains relatively low (EF EPI, 2023), exposure to English has contributed to an increase in the presence of English-based expressions in digital Chinese discourse (Wei & Su, 2012; Giannakouloupoulos et al., 2020). The majority of these borrowings take place without full semantic transfer; instead, they occur through localised usage, phonetic adaptation, and creative recombination.

The following subsections analyse the three most common patterns through which English influences Chinese internet language: the adoption of acronyms, code-switching with semantic adaptation, and the incorporation of English derivational morphemes. Each mode of influence reflects a distinct sociolinguistic function and contributes to the creation of a hybrid digital register (Blommaert, 2010).

Use of English acronyms became a prominent feature of Chinese internet slang. These acronyms are used as visual and symbolic shorthand that convey meaning compactly. Their use is a form of translanguaging, where Chinese netizens use English forms for communication purposes, not only for functional bilingualism but also as stylistic, humorous, or identity-making choices. (Li, 2018). While some acronyms, like DIY, retain their English meaning, others, like PUA, develop a new one.

DIY, while translatable into Chinese as 自己动手 (zìjǐ dòngshǒu), is often used in digital texts and social media posts in its English form. The ease of writing DIY on a Chinese input system is greater than that of writing the Chinese equivalent. Furthermore, the English acronym signals an identity of creativity and modernity.

PUA originated in English as an abbreviation for 'pick-up artist'. According to Hendriks (2012), PUAs form a subculture characterised by “a mix of hedonistic goals and ascetic discipline”. However, Wang (2023) identifies PUA as a form of intimate-partner violence, citing examples of power manipulation, emotional blackmail, and denial of partner’s value. According to Peng (2022), the usage of the acronym is extended to every type of interpersonal interaction, including workplace, parent-child, and friendship. These examples show that English acronyms are not just passively imported but instead acquire new meaning.

Translanguaging hybrids

According to Li (2011), translanguaging is a dynamic process during which language users incorporate various linguistic, cognitive, semiotic, and modal resources to make meaning, switching between named languages.

C位 (C wèi)

C位 (C wèi) translates literally to ‘C position’, and the English letter C stands for ‘centre’. The term originated in a video games and entertainment context where it refers to the person in the most prominent spot in a lineup. Currently, the term has spread to social media and refers to celebrities or influencers who occupy the spotlight. This hybrid of an English initial with a Chinese noun is an example of how language users incorporate foreign forms with familiar words to create a new idiom that also visually represents the meaning.

i人/e人 (i rén/e rén)

These two terms can be translated as 'i-person' and 'e-person'. I and E refer to the first letter of the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator results, which mean introverted and extraverted, respectively. The Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is a self-reported questionnaire that allows people to analyse their personality and match it with one of 16 personality types. Chinese internet users chose to use abbreviations that carry the semantic meaning and are visually appealing instead of using a translated form. The forms are particularly common in self-descriptions, meme culture and short-form videos. Its popularity among Chinese netizens in 2023 led to i人/e人 (i rén/e rén) being chosen as two of the buzzwords of the year.

city不city (city bù city)

Literally translated as “city not city”, this neologism originated as a humorous assessment of the definition of ‘city’. The phrase takes its origins from a short video of two tourists walking along the Great Wall of China and asking whether the site was sufficiently urban. The phrase soon became a meme structure for assessing whether a place, person, or event embodies ‘modern’, ‘fashionable’, or ‘urban’ qualities. The phrase follows the Chinese question pattern; hence, an answer often follows: city^啊 (city a) implies approval, while 不city (bù city) implies

disappointment. In this example we see how English words are not just borrowed but undergo semantic retooling to fit Chinese grammar to create hybrid constructions embodied with emotional and cultural meaning.

According to Qi and Li (2022), some semantic hybrids formed by Chinese speakers are created by selecting an English morpheme that is semantically equivalent, or near-equivalent, to a Chinese component character. Two particularly commonly used suffixes are ‘-er’ and ‘-ing’. These hybrids blend Chinese roots with English affixes to form new expressions that are compact, creative and embedded with cultural meaning. Their popularity also reflects “layered simultaneity”, in which, according to Blommaert (2010), global symbols are localised through familiar contexts.

-er suffix

In English, the suffix ‘-er’ is typically used to denote agent nouns, like ‘teacher’ or ‘player’. In Chinese, it’s attached to acronyms or root forms to denote identity or group affiliation. Qi and Li (2022) say that the English suffix stands for the Mandarin word ‘者’ (zhě), which is used to denote a member of a group or a person taking a certain action. A notable pattern is using a university with ‘-er’ to label students of a specific institution, for example:

- **LZUER:** A student from Lanzhou University (LZU)
- **HAUSTER:** A student from the Henan University of Science and Technology (HAUST)
- **BJTER:** A student from Beijing University of Technology (BJT)

‘Coser’ is another widely used term that incorporates the English ‘-er’ suffix. ‘Cosplay’ is a portmanteau of ‘costume play’ and is often abbreviated to ‘cos’ in Chinese social media. The addition of ‘-er’ shortens the more common in English ‘cosplayer’ to ‘coser’, while retaining the original meaning. This usage is an example of a semantic hybridisation, where English morphology is used with a local language to serve new social and expressive functions.

These uses of the ‘-er’ morpheme illustrate Li’s (2018) idea of translanguaging as identity performance, where language users choose forms not for their function, but to signal belonging, modernity, or digital fluency.

-ing Suffix

Another semantic hybrid often used in Chinese internet language is the suffix ‘-ing’. In English, ‘-ing’ is used to denote an ongoing action; in Mandarin Chinese, a continuous action, or a process, can be expressed using the word ‘着’ (zhe). Chinese speakers recontextualised ‘-ing’ to not only express the process but also to describe emotional states, lifestyle choices, or time-bound behaviours. Examples include:

冬补ing (dōng bǔ ing): “in the process of winter nourishment”

口水ing (kǒushuǐ ing): “drooling” (e.g., over food or desire)

长城ing (chángchéng ing): “doing the Great Wall” (e.g., climbing or visiting)

The usage became popular on social media, in advertising, and on short video platforms.

These hybrid forms show that English affixes are not mere direct borrowings. Instead, they are localised, mixed with Chinese syntax, and given a new semantic load. The result is a blended linguistic form that is recognisable to Chinese readers but would be opaque to most native speakers of English. This combination of recognisability and opaqueness underscores the in-group exclusivity and language play of Chinese internet discourse.

The above examples illustrate that English-derived elements are used in Chinese internet slang not simply as surface-level imports but as hybrid resources allowing users to fulfil various communicative and social functions. Following Li's (2018) definition of translanguaging (Li, 2018), we see that acronyms (e.g., LOL, DIY), morphemes (-er, -ing), and code-mixed neologisms (C位, i人/e人, city不city) are re-purposed within Chinese grammar to express, among other things, humour and identity. Each borrowing undergoes a semantic change; PUA no longer stands for a 'pick-up artist', and 'bug' acquires a new meaning of emotional abuse; 'DIY' becomes imbued with a sense of creativity and modernity, beyond its literal meaning. This flexible repurposing underlines the role translanguaging plays as an integrative practice of language use.

Building on Blommaert's (2010) notion of layered simultaneity, Chinese-English language hybrids show how globally recognised linguistic symbols can coexist with local discourse practices within a single utterance. The use of English morphemes is judged less by its grammatical 'correctness' and more by its ability to evoke in-group solidarity or playfulness. For instance, 'coser' and 'LZUER' both make use of English agentive suffixes to produce meaningful identity markers. Similarly, 'city不city' uses both English and Chinese to create an easily replicable template, exemplifying how digital language not only spreads widely but also evolves rapidly.

Finally, these practices help language users express their identity. Chinese netizens can construct their belonging within the glocalised digital communities by selectively incorporating English forms. These linguistic choices allow them to signal different meanings, from group belonging to cosmopolitanism. However, the creativity and ease of creating hybridised forms may lead to a digital divide. Therefore, further research should consider how translanguaging on Chinese internet is addressed in educational policy and digital literacy programmes.

D. Conclusion

English and Chinese hybrids present in Chinese internet slang show the way in which digital communication alters traditionally understood language exchange. Chinese netizens actively engage in a form of translanguaging, moving beyond simple lexical or semantic borrowings. These practices show the agency of individual users, whose playful use of language allows them to create meaning, signal identity, and negotiate social belonging. English elements present in Chinese internet slang are semantically recalibrated, embedded in Chinese structures and filled with new localised meaning. The examples of translanguaging underscore the need to view the internet as a source of new creative linguistic forms.

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