Language Use as Social Practice on the Chinese Internet

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a discourse analysis of two bulletin board systems (BBS). The analysis was done to identify online language practices within the contextualized parameters of online communities and ongoing sociopolitical development in China. Chinese Internet users employ various discourse strategies to establish community identities, organize online interactions, and defy censorship. These practices demarcate an emergent, public, non-official discourse universe apart from but responsive to the official discourse universe of Chinese political communication.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid diffusion of the Internet has prompted developments in the variety and creativity of language use. Internet users often create new words or appropriate the meanings of existing words in order to express themselves and to communicate with each other. The resultant “Internet language” has unique lexical and discourse features. Existing research on communication in cyberspace, however, typically investigates such language use by analyzing the linguistic characteristics of online texts (e.g. Gao, 2006; Lin 2002; Wu 2003; Yao 2005; C. Yang, 2007). Such research, moreover, often situates language change in narrow technological contexts. In contrast, the discourse analysis of language presented here aims to understand online discourse patterns within the
contextualized parameters of online communities. In so doing, the chapter also touches on the broad sociopolitical environment associated with the wide diffusion of the Internet in China.

Chinese Internet users employ a variety of linguistic and discourse strategies to establish and maintain community identities, organize and sustain online interactions, and avoid and defy censorship. Moreover, unique multi-coded discourse practices on the Chinese Internet delineate an emergent public and non-official discourse universe in which Chinese individuals express themselves and debate social issues. This online discourse differs from the official discourse universe characteristic of mainstream Chinese media, which is tightly controlled by the Chinese government. In fact, online language and discourse practices on the Chinese Internet serve as both a catalyst for and a result of recent technological and social developments in China. As a result, the Internet enables the greater Chinese public to interact with, within, and against an official discourse that demands strict limitations on what one can say or do.

This chapter presents a critical discourse analysis of two distinct BBS forums in two prominent online communities in China. These forums are tianya.cn and jjwxc.net, and they demonstrate vivid examples of online language practices and represent the burgeoning space of online public expression and opinion in China. The use of this approach allows the current findings presented here to be compared with similar studies in other socio-cultural contexts. Such cross-cultural comparisons are the key to understanding and encouraging cross-cultural communication on and about an increasingly multilingual Internet (Danet & Herring, 2007). Additionally, in examining
these issues, the author also provides up-to-date information about Internet diffusion, user activities, and Internet regulations in China.

THE CHINESE INTERNET

Since its inception in 1994, the Internet access and use has diffused rapidly throughout China. Today, with over 384 million users (a group that constitutes 28.9% of the country’s total population), China has surpassed the United States as the world’s largest Internet market. Over 90% of Chinese Internet users connect to the online environment via broadband, and another 8% can do so through mobile phones. As of 2009, there were 3.23 million Websites registered in China, and the overwhelming majority of these sites were in Chinese (China Internet Network Information Center, CNNIC, 2010).

Like elsewhere in the world, the Internet in China abounds with various user applications ranging from email, news portals, and videocasts to blogs and social networking sites. Online bulletin board systems (BBSs), however, are among the most popular online communication platforms available to Internet users in China. 80% of Chinese Websites, for example, run BBS forums (iResearch, 2007), and BBS-based online activities are popular among 40% of Chinese Internet users in comparison to only 17% of Internet users in the U.S. and 17.1% of Internet users in Japan (Tai, 2006). The total number of daily BBS page views in China, moreover, is over 1.6 billion, with 10 million posts published daily (Lu, 2008). Given their enormous reach and popularity, it is perhaps no surprise that BBS forums have effectively become “mass media” for disseminating formation and crystallizing public opinion among Chinese netizens (Xiao, 2008).
A number of factors contribute to the popularity of this medium. China’s Internet population, for example, is young and relatively well educated compared to the China’s general population. Over 60% of the Internet users in China are under the age of 30. More than 40% of these individuals are either high school students or high school graduates, and 25% of them are working toward or have completed more advanced degrees (CNNIC, 2010). These demographic characteristics are conducive to the development of a lively online environment for public deliberation.

What sets the Chinese Internet apart from the rest of the online world, however, is the government’s extensive control and censorship over the massive network of users and public discourses in China. Not only does the Chinese government directly control the Internet gateway infrastructure, and therefore the online information traffic in and out of China (Xiao, 2008), but it also actively employs various tactics to police the use of the Internet in China. These monitoring tactics include coercive co-option of Internet service providers, filtering, discipline of dissident use, suppression of cyber cafes, and most recently the use of Web commentators to manipulate public opinion (Jiang, in press; Qiu, 2000; Zittrain & Edelman, 2003; Tai, 2006; MacKinnon, 2009).

Yet it would be wrong to conclude that Chinese Internet users are hopelessly trapped behind a great wall of cyber-censorship. Given the ephemeral, anonymous, and networked nature of online communication, the government’s control tactics cannot be deployed invariably across all online media or cyberspace access points (Benkler, 2006; Jiang, in press). Consequently, opportunities for public discourses are left open for an increasingly vocal online public in China. In fact, recent years have witnessed a growing number of social incidents that originated from and were sustained by online public
opinion in China (e.g., Z. He, 2008; Tai, 2006; G. Yang, 2003, 2006; Zhao, 2008).

In 2006, Baogang He coined the term “authoritarian deliberation” to recognize limited yet lively public debate and discussion of political issues in China. He argues that in contrast to democratic deliberation, which often dwells upon an idealized notion of a public sphere (Habermas, 1989), authoritarian deliberation in China takes place within the boundaries sanctioned and prescribed by the party-state. This concept has been productively applied to the study of public discussion and opinion formation on the Chinese Internet (Jiang, in press).

The development of online public opinion formation and expression signals the revival of a non-official political discourse universe in China (Esarey & Qiang, 2008; Z. He, 2008). That is, two distinct discourse universes have developed since the inception of the communist regime. One is the official/government-controlled discourse universe, which features “ritualized rhetoric that is characterized by indoctrination, abstractness, vagueness and ambiguity” (Z. He, 2008, p. 183). This discourse universe functions to “legitimize and justify the mandate of the ruling Communist Party, hold the institutionalized state apparatus together, and preempt challenges to the status quo” (Z. He, 2008, p. 183). The other is the private universe characterized by non-hegemonic expressions of ordinary Chinese people (Z. He, 2008, p. 183).

Previously, while the official universe dominated the public spaces of expression carried in the party-state controlled mass media, the private non-official universe primarily existed among trusted friends and family members (Esarey & Qiang, 2008). As the Internet increasingly provided a new channel for information dissemination and public opinion formation, the non-official discourse universe extended its boundaries (Z.
He, 2008). As a result, these two discourse universes are increasingly interactive in contemporary Chinese political communication. The dominance of the official universe is often exposed, ridiculed, and challenged by civic-minded Chinese netizens active in the online non-official discourse universe (Z. He, 2008).

**LANGUAGE USE ON THE CHINESE INTERNET**

Although computer-mediated communication has become increasingly multimodal, online interaction still takes place mainly in textual forms. Early studies of cyberspace interactions mainly focused on identifying common characteristics of online languages and categorizing them according to medium-specific features (Androutsopoulos, 2006). For instance, in his study of “netspeak,” a broad term for a homogeneous online language as distinguished from the standard natural language, Crystal (2001) found online communication was often a hybrid of written and spoken languages. Moreover, the linguistic features of online communiqués varied across different online media such as e-mail and chat groups. Thus, studies such as Crystal’s paid less attention to the socially situated discourses in which these features are embedded (Herring, 2004).

Herring (1996), by contrast, argues that the study of online language practices needs to pay more attention to the interplay of contextual and social factors in addition to technological ones. According to Herring, it is essential to study the role of language use in the formation of online social identities and social interaction. In other words, characteristics of “Internet Language” can be further understood as resources that particular groups of users draw upon in their construction of discourse styles used to achieve various social purposes in particular contexts (Herring, 2004).
Although there have recently been an increasing number of studies of online language use in China, these research efforts tend to focus on discovering lexical, syntactic, and distinct discursive features of online Chinese discourse in comparison to standard Chinese interactions (Lin 2002; Wu 2003; Yao 2005; Gao, 2006; C. Yang, 2007). At the lexical level, online Chinese (in the context of this study, the term refers to Mandarin – the official language of Mainland China), much like its foreign counterparts, is anomalous and dynamic in nature. Chinese Internet users often invent new words or expressions, or they appropriate existing words or phrases to represent meanings that differ from their natural language counterparts (Wong, Xia, & Li, 2006).

Common varieties of online Chinese include the following factors:

- **Stylized Mandarin** (e.g., “东东 (dōng dōng)” for “东西 (dōng xī)” meaning “things”)
- **Stylized dialect-accented Mandarin** (e.g., “偶 (ǒu)” for “我 (wǒ)” meaning “I, me”)
- **Stylized English** (e.g., “酷 (kù) for “cool”)
- **Stylized initials** (e.g., “HX” for “和谐 (hé xié)” meaning “harmony”)
- **Stylized numbers** (e.g., “88 (bā bā)” for “bye-bye”) (C. Yang, 2007)

At the sentential level, the most salient feature of Web sentences is that they are short and straightforward. This construction is particularly characteristic of the sentences found in BBS forums in China. At the discourse level, online expressions often feature aspects such as

- Chinese-English code-switching
- A combined written spoken style
• Humor

• Other features such as the use of paralinguistic cues, local dialects and unconventional expressions (Gao, 2007)

Little research, however, goes beyond the mere description of these linguistic characteristics of “online Chinese” in order to examine the social implications of Web-based discourse practices in the contexts of online communities or the broad socio-cultural environment in China. A noted exception is the discussion of the role of language in online identity construction by Gao (2007), who examined the linguistic construction of modern identities by Chinese Internet users.

**DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

This study primarily examines language use and discourse practices on the Chinese Internet as done within the contexts of online communities and the online social environment. To examine this topic, the author performed a discourse analysis of two Chinese BBS forums. Each of these forums, in turn, had a distinct character and approach to social interaction among its participants. Using the previous literature on online communities and online political deliberation, the author’s analysis of this situation focuses on examining how forum participants use different linguistic strategies to maintain community identity and sustain online communication. This analysis also explicates how language practices are shaped by perceived community identities and the broad social environment.

The principle data for the current study are in the form of online discussions from BBS forums, which support public and asynchronous communication. A typical BBS forum often consists of topically related threads of sustained discussions on subjects of
shared interest to participants. Such discussion threads usually start with a series of responses to an initial post. These responses then typically evolve into stretches of interaction among various discussants, and this evolution tends to take place when more users start responding to existing posts. Additionally, these forum discussions are often monitored by administrators who review postings for appropriate content and style.

One of the online forums examined in this study is a part of jjwxc.net, a Website where amateur romance authors can write and post their works online for interested audiences to read and comment on. As of this writing, jjwxc.net has 300,000 registered writers and over 5 million registered readers. (The actual reader population might be much larger than that number as registration is not required for reading and commenting in this forum.) On jjwxc.net, writers usually post their works from the beginning of the narrative and then turn the writing into an ongoing and interactive process. As a result, readers are able to comment on and discuss story plots and characters on the BBS forum attached to each story.

In this context, responsive writers often exchange ideas with the readers directly. It is thus not unusual for a writer to modify her or his story according to the popular demand of fans. In fact, popular writers often boast their own homepages where all of their works are often read and followed by thousands of readers and fans. In essence, these BBS forums serve as communicative spaces for writers, readers, and fans to come together not only to write, read, comment, and exchange ideas on a literary work, but also to socialize and bond with each other based on similar interests and viewpoints towards issues related to the writing.

Given the romance nature of the works, it is perhaps not surprising that the writers
and readers on the Website are overwhelmingly young females. Additionally, several popular thematic genres have developed based on the tastes of reader populations. *Danmei* (耽美), for example, is a distinctive genre involving romance between male characters. The discussions carried out in a BBS forum hosted by a popular Danmei writer are analyzed below and are referred to as the **Romance forum** in the remainder of the paper.

The other forum is called *Guoji Guancha* (国际观察), or **Comments on International Affairs**. This forum is affiliated with tiany.cn, which has over 24 million registered users and is thus China’s third largest social portal (iUserTracker, 2007). The forum provides a platform for in-depth analysis and comments on China’s international relationships as reflected in current news stories. The discussion threads in this forum constitute the data for this part of the analysis and are referred to as the **Int’l affairs forum** hereafter. In reviewing this resource, relevant news stories in the mainstream press were monitored and consulted to supplement the forum content.

The analysis of online texts as social practice is rooted in the tradition of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995, 2000; van Dijk, 1997). Going beyond linguistic details of the texts, discourse analysis focuses on the mutually constitutive relationship between discursive practices and their situational and societal contexts. The discourse’s text (the written words), which is shaped by and helps to shape social and cultural shifts, provides an empirical basis for study (Fairclough, 1995, 2000; van Dijk, 1997).

The author then systematically analyzed thematic features of the language use in the two forums. This examination identified major themes, and it helped clarify discursive elements within each theme. Excerpts of the discussions that reflect the
theoretical framework and the arguments of the study were recorded descriptively or in the form of verbatim quotes. As a result, the analysis presented here accentuates the interactional aspects of online debates over sensitive and controversial issues and their influence on the communicative enactment of group identity.

**Internet Language Use for Community Identification**

Online messages generated by anonymous or pseudonymous users often demonstrate community identification processes (Herring, 2004). Given its multifaceted nature and the interdisciplinary interests it inspires, the term “online community” has been an elusive concept to define (e.g., Jones, 1995, 1997, 1998; Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2005). Researchers have tried to delineate the concept from a sociolinguistic perspective (Androutsopoulos, 2006). Baym, for instance, identifies group-specific vocabulary and humor among the “consistent and distinctive language practices” that indicate the emergence of a coherent online community (Baym 2003, p.1016). She further argues that online communities emerge as participants who “create and codify group-specific meanings, socially negotiate group-specific identities, form relationships [. . .] and create norms that serve to organize interaction and to maintain desirable social climates” (Baym 1998, p 62).

The community identification function of language use is especially acute in the Romance forum, whose participants are female fans of romance stories. Here, the participants embrace this group identity through a set of expressions they use to refer to each other. In the case of a happy story in which a beloved character enjoys an easy life, the writer is called “亲妈 (qīn mā),” meaning “the birth mother.” In contrast, “后妈 (hòu mā)” or “the stepmother,” refers to the writer of a sad story in which a beloved character
suffers greatly. Finally, the fans call themselves “姍妈 (yí mā),” meaning “the aunts,”
(which refers to sisters of the mother in Chinese culture) to indicate the close relationship
between the readers and the writer. The following are excerpts of forum discussions.
Example 1a

我们要HE，XX, 你可要当亲妈啊！

(Translation: We want a happy ending, XX, be a birth (loving) mother!)

Example 1b

XX是绝对的后妈，总是整一个暧昧又混乱的NP局面，

(Translation: XX is absolutely a stepmother, (who) always creates a dubious and
chaotic romance with multiple parties involved in it.)

Example 1c

姍妈们对virginity

嗤之以鼻，一来XX是男生，二来我们是现代人，偶要是胆敢振臂高呼XX要守贞，
会被姍妈们的唾液淹死。

(Translation: You, the aunts, don’t give a damn about virginity because: One,
XX [the main character in the story] is a man; two, we (unlike XX) live in a modern
society. If I dare to call on XX to preserve his virginity, those aunts would drown me
with their saliva.)

Additionally, Table 1 presents some of the special lexicon used in the Romance
forum. The creative use of these phrases allows forum participants not only to express
their opinions and emotions towards a particular writer or story, but to do so in a
personalized and close-knit community atmosphere.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE
Besides these lexical characteristics, the Romance forum also exhibits a distinctly open yet discrete discourse style. Although the nature of the romance stories in the forum is overwhelmingly light entertainment, the forum participants often find themselves in serious discussions of larger relationship-related issues including love, gender, and sex. These discussions usually originate from particular writings, but they also often go beyond the stories themselves. Interestingly, forum participants, who are young, educated, and open-minded, never shun expressing their innermost feelings towards these issues. However, issues regarding sexual relationships, and especially those concerning gay rights, are still very sensitive, or even taboo, topics in Chinese society. Forum participants are thus acutely aware of the need to balance the tension between the expression of private opinions and the public discussion environment. As a result, these participants often resort to code-switching strategies (i.e., the linguistic practice of alternating between English and other forms of coded words and Mandarin). The resultant codes are often hard for outsiders to decipher. By employing these coded expressions in their discussion, the forum participants keep the discussions viable for the community yet also keep themselves safe from the scrutinizing public or peeping strangers.

**Internet Language Use for Interactive Practices**

BBS forum posts, varying in length and duration, are more complex than conversational turns (Androutsopoulos, 2006). A single post, for example, might contain replies to one or more previous messages and address specific individuals or the general forum audience. Moreover, a popular discussion thread is often large in scale and long in duration. In the Int’l Affairs forum on tianya.cn, for instance, the most popular thread
has remained active for the last two years, has attracted more than 10 million views, and has accumulated over 140,000 replies. Such a thread is often viewed and replied to by many people all at once. As a result, it is often hard to navigate through the conversations and to carry on the discussions in such a complex communicative environment.

In response to situations such as these, Chinese BBS forum participants have developed a set of terms designed to help address these problems. Each thread is referred to as a “楼 (lóu),” meaning a storied building that consists of layered posts termed “stories.” Each previous post is referred to as “楼上 (lóu shàng,” (i.e., “upstairs”) by the author of the immediately following post. To address an old post, discussants may simply identify it by naming the number of the “story” it was posted on. These metaphorical terms give the thread a spatiotemporal reference that is helpful in orienting the discussants. See Table 2 for a summary of such language use in the two forums.

INSERT TABLE 2 HERE

Additionally, a series of relevant terms have been developed to facilitate communication, and they do so by helping the discussants identify and categorize their behaviors and attitudes. A discussant, for example, might show his or her support for the content of a thread or a particular reply by propping it up “顶 (dǐng)” with a short reply that makes the thread reappear on the front page of the forum for better visibility. Or, someone could hit it “with bricks” “拍砖 (pāi zhuān)” to express his or her disagreement. Small talks, or “灌水 (guàn shuǐ),” meaning non-substantive comments, are allowed, but discussants are aware that too much small talk will “tilt the building,” “歪楼 (wāi lóu)” and thus place the thread in danger of losing its focus and its ability to attract participants. These popular and unique terms are part of the discourse by which the discussants
express their opinions. They are also a kind of meta-discourse through which the discussants consciously characterize and evaluate their conversations.

Online messages generated by anonymous discussants rarely indentify an individuals’ social status directly. However, that factor doesn’t mean online participants have a uniform status or identity. Rather, research reveals there is often a hierarchical structure in online communication. Even though this kind of hierarchy is not directly tied to social status or class, it has similar connotations (Androuotsopoulos, 2006).

In Chinese BBS forums, a communicative hierarchy is often made visible through the use of labels. For instance, the “楼主 (lóu zhù),” or the owner of the building, is the initiator of the thread, and is very often a person who serves as a main contributor of the postings to that thread. Thus, the person becomes the individual with the most discursive power in the discussions. In contrast, “小白 (xiǎo bái),” a newbie, often self-labels him- or herself as such in order to avoid attracting criticisms to his or her inappropriate comments. Both “楼主 (lóu zhù)” and “小白 (xiǎo bái),” as well as other respondents, are subject to the supervision of a “斑竹 (bān zhú),” or an administrator who often participates in the discussions and has the most management power.

Because of the complex structure of communication in the forums, this hierarchical structure is very useful in maintaining the exchanges. To stay focused on the topics and to maintain the order of the communications, participants need to respect the appeals from the “楼主 (lóu zhù),” obey the ruling of the “斑竹 (bān zhú),” and use the efficient means of expression discussed previously.

**Internet Language Use for Authoritarian Deliberation in Segmented Discourse Universes**
Although the Int’l Affairs forum focuses on foreign politics, the discussions often slip into discussions of China’s domestic political issues. Like most other commercial online spaces that are closely supervised by the Chinese government, tianya.cn (in which the forum resides) mainly relies on keyword-based filtering schemes to self-censor “undesirable” content on its own site. This approach is used in order to avoid troubles with the authorities. However, this censorship does not prevent the forum participants from passionately debating sensitive political issues. Like their counterparts in the Romance forum, the participants in this forum often use coded language to refer to sensitive concepts and to bypass mechanisms for keyword filtering. For instance, the members of this forum use the term “MZ,” as shorthand for “mín zhǔ (民主),” meaning “democracy,” and “TG,” a shorthand for “tǔ gòng (土共),” to mean “the Chinese Communist Party or the CCP.”

Example 2a

兄弟我告诉你，**MZ**可是万金油，永远没有错的。

(Translation: Bro, I’m telling you: **Democracy** is a panacea that will never fail.)

Example 2b

A: 如果要实行**MZ**，我只希望是中国特色的党内**MZ**。想玩政治，进党。

(Translation: If (we are) to practice **democracy**, I hope it is a **democracy** with Chinese characteristics, i.e. **democracy** within the CCP. Interested in Politics? Get in the Party.)

B: 内部**民主**？要不要听党主席的话？若需要听又叫何**民主**，这还是独裁。

(Translation: **Democracy** within the CCP? Should we listen to the party president then? If so, why call it democracy. It’s still dictatorship.)
Example 2c

The CCP is willing to talk to Dalai Lama (DL). But the U.S.’s meeting with DL has destroyed the premise on which the talk dwells. In other words, the U.S. and DL, especially the U.S., are not sincere about solving the Tibet issues with talks at all.

In addition to bypassing censorship, phrases and expressions are invented to classify discussants’ viewpoints according to the political leanings reflected in the comments they make. This kind of classification helps the discussants not only to evaluate the comments but also to make sense of the complex conversational context where many people are expressing different viewpoints simultaneously. By labeling the comment or the poster in order to classify someone as belonging to a certain political camp (often done in derogatory terms), the discussant signals how he/she understands the comment or author and where he/she stands on the issue. For instance, “FF” (short for “fēngqīng,” meaning “angry youth”) labels discussants who post emotional comments with extreme political views on social issues. Such discussants are very likely to be young college students who have been deeply influenced by the communist political worldview that is rooted in class struggle and is antagonistic. “JY,” or “jīng yīng”
(meaning “social elites”), is a label for those individuals who often express liberal, right-leaning political views. These discussants are believed to belong to the social elite whose typically well-educated members often have social and capital resources. These individuals usually make comments in favor of the adoption of a Western-style democratic political system and a neo-liberal economy in China – an overall context from which they would benefit most.

Example 3

I've been fairly new to the forum and have been lurking under the water. I have recently come across this thread. I really feel “grateful” to you, the (rightist) social elites, who “fight diligently for” the democracy in China. Honestly, I have many grievances against the CCP… And I considered my views middle-of-the-road with a slight right leaning. (However,) The shoddy performances by you, the elites, have been so repulsive that I, a fairly apolitical person, have finally turned into an angry youth (a supporter of the CCP). So all I can say here is you are really something.

Table 3 provides additional examples of this approach

Finally, online language on the Chinese Internet provides a way for the online public to interact with the official discourse. As discussed earlier, there are two discourse universes in Chinese political communication: official discourses carried by the
mainstream media and private non-official discourse. With the advent of the Internet, private non-official discourse has entered the public domain through various forms of network communication (Z. He, 2008). Moreover, the two discourse universes are increasingly interacting in China’s contemporary political environment (Wang, 2008). While reports on a social issue by the mainstream media often set off intense debates in online forums, the mainstream media has also picked up topics hotly debated by netizens (e.g., Tai, 2006; G. Yang, 2003). In most cases, the interaction between the two universes is reflected in the Internet language by Chinese netizens to challenge the hegemony of the official discourse in framing social issues.

One such example is the popularization of the expression “猫猫 (duò māo māo),” meaning “(to play) hide and seek.” The phrase originated from a mainstream news story about a man who died in local police custody. The police claimed that the man died in “an accident” when he “ran into the wall playing hide and seek blindfolded” in the jail cell. Outraged by the ludicrous explanation, the netizens quickly seized the phrase “hide and seek” in the official account and turned it into a popular expression sarcastically voicing their distrust with the local officials who were believed to be trying to cover the incident.

The phrase has become a generic expression that is widely used online to expose and ridicule official government positions on similar incidents and social issues.

Example 4

为什么一到关键时刻，某些机构总是和我们“猫猫”?  
(Translation: Why is it when it is time for truth, some government agencies always “play hide and seek” with us?)
Such popular online phrases often feed back onto the official discourse in the mainstream media. In fact, it is not uncommon to find such phrases appearing in mainstream news reports. In 2009, for example, “hide and seek” was on lists of popular online expressions compiled by the mainstream media outlets such as people.com, xinhuanews.net, Beijing Evening News, and Southern Metropolis Weekly (e.g., Xinhuanet.com, 2009; People.com.cn, 2009). Researchers argued that such online discourse was often less about resistance to official discourse than the accommodation and appropriation of it. Zhou He (2008), however, points out that such communication nonetheless granted online users semiotic power and a sense of being equal participants in political discourse therefore facilitated political involvement of the online public.

**Language Use on a Multilingual Internet in the Greater Online Global Context**

Research on language use on the Internet has focused almost exclusively on linguistic practices in English, although about two-thirds of the world’s online populations communicate in other languages. Only until recently have we begun to see serious efforts devoted to the analysis of online communication in non-English languages – efforts that reflect the true face of a multilingual Internet (Danet & Herring, 2007). Emerging research on the multilingual Internet covers a number of interesting and important questions including concerns about linguistic imperialism by the English language, the outlook of a global "netspeak," and the prevalence of code-switching in bilingual or multilingual online communication (Crystal, 2001, 2006; Danet & Herring, 2007)
As the Internet becomes a platform that allows people living in different linguistic and cultural regions to come into contact and communicate with each other on an unprecedented scale, the questions to address becomes how does online communication affect and how is it affected by offline socio-cultural environments. Additionally, how much linguistic and cultural diversity does the Internet truly reflect? Before we can provide generalized answers to these broad questions, we first need to do more research on how people actually communicate on the multilingual Internet using languages from their local socio-cultural contexts.

The analysis presented here is one such effort. This analysis is aimed at providing a general and a comprehensive picture of how people in a particular yet vast cultural/linguistic region communicate online. In the analysis, we get a general look into some important questions including how women from a traditional culture take part in online communication and how the general tendency toward informality in online communication interacts with local norms regarding status differences (Danet, B., & Herring, 2007). More importantly, this study constitutes an effort to embed the observed online linguistic practices of Chinese Internet users into China’s broad socio-cultural environment in order to achieve a better understanding of both the linguistic practices and the socio-cultural environment.

The current study employs discourse analysis, a qualitative and ethnographic approach, to examine the sociolinguistic research questions. The discourse analysis in this study goes beyond linguistic details of the texts and focuses on the mutually constitutive relationship between discursive practices and their situational and societal contexts (Fairclough, 1995, 2000; van Dijk, 1997). This approach has proven effective
and powerful in many similar studies on online sociolinguistic practices in other cultural contexts (see Danet & Herring, 2007; Herring, 1996, 2004). Although the currently study focuses on one singular linguistic and cultural region, the results can be compared with relevant findings in other socio-cultural contexts.

For instance, the current study investigates code switching, which is a common online language practice and a major topic of research on bilingual and multilingual conversation (Crystal, 2001, 2006; Danet, B., & Herring, 2007). In the Mainland Chinese context, code switching is a useful means for free expression in the context of discreet in-group communication (as in the Romance forum) and in the context of restrictive political censorship (as in the Int’l affairs forum). As a comparison, Su (2007) found that the key to understanding code-switching/mixing practices in two college BBS forums in Taiwan is the popular perceptions associated with the multiple linguistic systems in contemporary Taiwan. For example, English is often seen as potentially arrogant, and the transliteration alphabet is often viewed as simple-minded. However, Su (2007) found that these associations are superseded in the environment of the BBS where playful code-switching practices often generate metalinguistic awareness and cleverness. Additionally, Koutsogiannis & Mitsikopoulou (2007) adopted a similar critical discourse-analytic perspective to study code mixing between English and Greek. They found that such a practice was often viewed as a threat, brought about by globalization, to the Greek language and cultural heritage. Such comparisons across multiple socio-linguistic contexts are the key to the understanding of a multilingual and multicultural Internet.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION
This discourse analysis reveals three dominant themes of language use on the Chinese Internet. Online users employ highly contextualized lexicons and discourse styles for community identification. As shown in the case of the Romance forum, linguistic practices that mark writer and reader identities and their close affiliation with the community are a part of the construction of group identity for forum participants (Cassell, Huffaker, Tversky & Ferriman, 2006).

Chinese Internet users also actively employ various language strategies to manage their online interactions. Forum participants create phrases to mark spatiotemporal orders that help them navigate through and carry on discussions in the rather disorienting communicative environment of BBS forums. Moreover, hierarchical structures, such as the kind found in the Int’l affairs forum, are made salient by the use of unique terms to facilitate and maintain orderly online communication.

Finally, these unique discourse characteristics are examples of authoritarian deliberation in the segmented discourse universes of China’s political communication. In the restrictive online environment, China’s Internet users have found creative ways to express their opinions. In both the Romance forum and the Int’l Affairs forum, discussions of sensitive topics, individuals rely on lexicons and discourse strategies unique to the forums to avoid censorship and scrutiny from the authorities. While such public deliberation is authoritarian because the state actively shapes and defines the boundaries of the discourse, it is unmistakably deliberative because citizens do participate in public conversation on issues they are concerned about (Jiang, in press).

Media texts are sensitive barometers of social change (van Dijk, 1997). The dynamic and creative discourse practices on the Chinese Internet, in turn, reflect the
currently fluid, unstable, and shifting socio-political environment in China. The unprecedented development of the Internet has been accompanied by other adjustments of the state-society relationship. As a result of the three decades of economic and social reforms, the party-state can no longer monopolize the distribution of social resources and has to allow greater civic and political speech freedom for its own legitimacy and survival (D. Yang, 2004). “Increasingly (albeit cautiously), Chinese are speaking truth to each other, and by doing so in a widely accessible manner, are speaking truth to power” (Esarey & Qiang, 2008, p. 735).

In summary, this critical discourse analysis goes beyond the traditional forms of descriptive linguistic analysis that focuses on lexical, semantic, and grammatical features of a homogeneous “Internet language.” It instead employs a user-centered perspective to highlight language use as social practice embedded in communicative and social environments (Herring 2004; Androutsopoulos, 2006). The analyses of online texts on two distinct BBS forums shed light on how contextual parameters shape and are evoked in online discourse in China’s changing social environment.

REFERENCES


KEY TERMS

**Authoritarian deliberation:** Public political discussions that take place within the boundaries sanctioned and prescribed by the party-state.

**Bulletin board system (BBS):** Online forums consisted of topically related threads of sustained discussions on shared interests.

**Code-switching:** The linguistic practice of alternating between English and other forms of coded words and other languages.

**Discourse analysis:** Ethnographic analyses of the mutually constitutive relationship between discursive practices and their societal contexts.

**Internet language:** Online expressions with unique lexical and discourse features that differ from those of natural languages.

**Netspeak:** A broad term for a homogeneous online language as distinguished from the standard natural language

**Online community:** Online groups with group-specific identities and norms to organize interaction and maintain desirable social climates.
Table 1. Online Language Use for Community Identification in the Romance Forum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online Language</th>
<th>Original Meaning</th>
<th>Appropriated Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NP</td>
<td>“N” is the mathematical notation for an unknown but large quantity. “P” stands for “people”</td>
<td>A multi-party romantic relationship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HE</td>
<td>Short for “happy ending”</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BL</td>
<td>Short for “boy love”</td>
<td>Gay romance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Sexual scenes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BT</td>
<td>short for “变态(biàn tài)”, perverse, abnormal</td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table 2. Online Language Use for Interaction Management in the Two Forums**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese Internet Language</th>
<th>Original Meaning</th>
<th>Online Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>楼 (lóu)</td>
<td>A storied building; a tower</td>
<td>A thread consisting of many postings on a BBS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>楼上 (lóu shàng)</td>
<td>Upstairs</td>
<td>The immediately previous posting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>顶 (dǐng)</td>
<td>To prop up; to carry on the head</td>
<td>A short supportive reply in an effort to make the thread appear and stay on the front page of the entire forum for better visibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>歪楼 (wāi lóu)</td>
<td>To tilt</td>
<td>To discuss issues that are not relevant to the main topics (i.e., digress), which may cause the thread to lose its focus thus the attraction to participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>拍砖 (pāi zhuān)</td>
<td>To hit with bricks, to stone</td>
<td>To critique constructively or to attack maliciously a comment or a thread</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>灌水 (guàn shuǐ)</td>
<td>To water; to flood</td>
<td>To post frequently irrelevant or non-substantive replies, often to bond with other members of the community, which may cause to slow communication if in excess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>潜水 (qián shuǐ)</td>
<td>To submerge under the water</td>
<td>To lurk (read without contributing)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 楼主  
(lóu zhǔ) | The owner of the building | The original author of the thread, who is very often the main contributor of the postings, thus the person with the most discursive power |
| 斑竹  
(bān zhú) | The administrator | The person who has the administrative rights to the postings such as deleting inappropriate posts or expelling unruly discussants, thus the person with the most management power |
| 小白  
(xiǎo bái) | Newbie; novice | Someone who is new or knows little about the topics being discussed |
Table 3. Online Language Use for Authoritarian Deliberation in the Non-Official Discourse Universe

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chinese Internet Language</th>
<th>Original Meaning</th>
<th>Meaning online</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MZ</td>
<td>Shorthand for “mín zhǔ (民主)”</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TD</td>
<td>Shorthand for “táí dú (台独)”</td>
<td>Taiwan independentists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ZD</td>
<td>Shorthand for “záng dù (藏独)”</td>
<td>Tibet independentists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TG</td>
<td>Shorthand for “tǔ gòng (土共)”</td>
<td>The Chinese Communist Party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>毛子 (máo zǐ)</td>
<td>俄罗斯 Russia; Russians</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>米国 (mí guó)</td>
<td>美国 America; Americans</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>五毛党 (wǔ máo dǎng)</td>
<td>50 cents party member</td>
<td>Discussant who posts favorable comments in support of government policies and action. The label originated from the rumor that these people are in fact secret online commentators</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
hired by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to manipulate public opinion in its favor. These commentators are said to be paid 50 cents for each post they publish.

| 网特 (wǎng tè) | Short for “网络特务,” “online infiltrator” | Discussant who posts comments critical of the government and the CCP. The label originated from the rumor that these discussants are in fact online infiltrators from hostile forces to disseminate incendiary comments with the goal of undermining China’s development and the communist political system. |