Online Language Phenomena in Modern Mandarin: A Linguistic Study of Popular Expressions and Digital Neologisms

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ABSTRACT

The rapid growth of digital technology and social media has significantly transformed global communication, including the use of Mandarin. Platforms WeChat, Douyin, and TikTok have accelerated linguistic change and fostered the emergence of Mandarin internet language. This study examines its main linguistic characteristics, formation processes, sociocultural drivers, and implications for academic, social, media, and educational contexts. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, data were collected from the three platforms and analyzed through phonological, morphological, semantic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic perspectives. The findings reveal distinctive features such as pinyin-based abbreviations, numerical homophones, phonological wordplay, morphological innovation, and expressive hyperbole. Digital neologisms are shaped by linguistic mechanisms, meme culture, and social media virality, while their rapid spread is influenced by youth dominance, social competition, globalization, and online community identity. The study concludes that Mandarin internet language represents a natural linguistic evolution rather than degradation, reflecting cultural, technological, and generational changes in contemporary China.

Keyword: *Mandarin online language, digital neologisms, internet linguistics, digital sociolinguistics.*

1. Introduction

The development of digital communication technologies over the past two decades has brought about a major revolution in the ways humans interact, communicate, and disseminate information. This transformation has not only influenced social, economic, and cultural aspects, but has also exerted a significant impact on language development (W. Zhang, 2022). Language, as a living and dynamic symbolic system, continually evolves in response to changes in the social environment in which it is used. In the context of modern China, the emergence of the internet, social media, and digital-based technologies has created a new communicative space that transcends traditional linguistic boundaries (Q. Zhang, 2022). This new space has given rise to what is known as Mandarin internet language or 网络语言 (wǎngluò yǔyán).

Mandarin internet language represents a form of linguistic evolution shaped by online interactions, user creativity, and digital culture. With an estimated more than one billion Mandarin speakers and over 1.07 billion internet users in China, the emergence of online language is unavoidable (Huang, 2022). Mandarin internet language should not be understood merely as slang, but rather as a new linguistic system that has organically developed across platforms such as WeChat, Douyin, and TikTok. This dynamic and expansive digital ecosystem enables the creation of new forms of linguistic expression that previously did not exist in standard Mandarin.

Mandarin internet language encompasses various types of linguistic innovation, including new vocabulary (新词 xīncí), abbreviations (缩写 suōxiě), popular expressions (流行语 liúxíngyǔ), numerical acronyms (数字暗语 shùzì ànyǔ), phonological-based memes and puns (谐音梗 xiéyīn gěng), creative sentence structures, emotional symbols, as well as hybrid forms influenced by foreign languages, particularly English (Zhou, 2020). These phenomena demonstrate the flexibility of Mandarin in adapting to the communicative needs of younger generations living in an increasingly fast-paced environment.

Several popular expressions reflect the social and cultural dynamics of contemporary Chinese society. For example:

- **"内卷" (nèijuǎn)**, referring to social involution caused by intense competition in education and the workplace;
- **"躺平" (tǎngpíng)**, expressing passive resistance toward exhausting work cultures;
- **"996" (jiǔ-jiǔ-liù)**, describing the extreme work schedule of 9 a.m.–9 p.m., six days a week;
- **"夺笋呐" (duósǔnnà)**, a humorous phonological pun meaning "that's too much" or "so outrageous."

These expressions are not only popular, but have also become cultural symbols reflecting shifts in the mindset of China's younger generations. Thus, Mandarin internet language is not merely an informal linguistic variation; it serves as an indicator of social change and a reflection of tensions between younger generations and dominant sociocultural narratives in China.

Linguistic Transformation in the Digital Era

Mandarin internet language exists within an intensely visual, rapid, and interactive digital ecosystem. Platforms such as Douyin and Bilibili, for instance, allow the emergence of new vocabulary derived from short videos, sound effects, visual reactions, and live comments (Peng, 2022). Unlike earlier eras that relied heavily on written text, digital media enables multimodal linguistic phenomena that integrate text, images, memes, audio clips, and pop culture codes into unified meanings.

This signals a major shift in how language is used. In traditional linguistics, language change typically takes decades or even centuries. In contrast, within modern digital environments, a new expression can spread globally within hours. In other words, the internet functions as an accelerator of linguistic change. Consequently, Mandarin internet language has become a highly relevant subject of study in contemporary linguistics (Hu, 2020).

The Interrelation Between Language, Technology, and Youth Identity

China's youth particularly those born after 1995 and members of Generation Z constitute the primary users of digital media. This group is characterized by:

1. intensive use of technology,
2. strong need for self-expression,
3. a culture of humor and digital irony,
4. a tendency toward linguistic creativity, and
5. forms of social resistance expressed through language.

Internet language has become a crucial medium for constructing group identity and shaping communication styles distinct from previous generations (Liu, 2020). Expressions such as **"打工人"** (modern laborer) and **"社恐"** (social anxiety) are used to convey life realities humorously yet critically. Thus, internet language functions not only as a communication tool but also as a medium for representing personal and social identities.

The Significance of Academic Study on Mandarin Internet Language

Why is this phenomenon worth scientific investigation?
First, internet language has become an integral part of everyday communication in China, and it has even begun to enter academic, media, and political domains. *Second*, the emergence of Mandarin digital neologisms reflects a complex interplay among language, culture, technology, and society. *Third*, understanding these dynamics is crucial in modern linguistics, particularly within subfields such as digital sociolinguistics, internet pragmatics, contemporary semantics, computational linguistics, and digital culture studies. *Fourth*, in the context of teaching Mandarin as a foreign language, teachers and researchers must understand contemporary linguistic trends to ensure relevant learning processes (Hu, Y., & Sun, 2021).

Therefore, this study holds strong academic urgency as it provides a comprehensive understanding of how Mandarin evolves rapidly within the modern digital ecosystem.

**2.	Research Questions**

Based on the aforementioned background, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the main linguistic characteristics that shape Mandarin online language?
2. How are digital neologisms and popular expressions formed within online communication?
3. What sociocultural factors drive the rapid emergence and spread of Mandarin internet language?
4. What are the implications of these linguistic phenomena for the use of Mandarin in academic, social, media, and educational contexts?

**3.	Research Objectives**

This study aims to:

1. Describe and examine the phenomenon of digital neologisms in modern Mandarin.
2. Analyze the linguistic structures that constitute Mandarin internet language, including phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics.
3. Identify the social, cultural, and psychological values embedded in popular expressions used by Chinese youth.
4. Provide a comprehensive overview of how digital media and internet culture shape the evolution of contemporary Mandarin.

4.   **Literature Review**

Studies on Mandarin internet language have been conducted by several scholars, although they generally focus on specific aspects. For example:

1. **Xiao (2021)** highlights the phenomenon of 谐音梗 (phonological puns) as a form of phonological creativity in online communication (Xiao, 2021).

   Studies on Mandarin internet language have been conducted by several scholars, though most tend to focus on isolated linguistic features rather than providing a comprehensive framework. Xiao (2021), for instance, highlights the phenomenon of 谐音梗 (phonological puns) as a prominent form of phonological creativity in online communication. Drawing on theories of language play and phonological manipulation, this study demonstrates how homophony is strategically exploited to create humor, euphemism, and indirect expression in digital interaction. However, Xiao's analysis is primarily limited to the phonological level and does not extend to broader sociolinguistic or pragmatic implications.

2. **Hu & Feng (2020)** examine numerical language, particularly the use of numbers such as *520* or *666* as emotional symbols (Hu, J., & Feng, 2020).

   Hu and Feng (2020) examine the use of numerical expressions such as 520 and 666 as emotional symbols, interpreting them through the lens of semiotics and symbolic interactionism. Their findings show that numbers function as compressed emotional signs shaped by platform affordances and collective online conventions.

3. **Chen (2022)** investigates social media neologisms and their relation to digital consumerism (Chen, 2022).

   Chen (2022) explores social media neologisms in relation to digital consumerism, emphasizing how linguistic innovation is intertwined with market logic and online consumption culture.

4. **Zhang (2023)** studies the role of internet language in shaping the identity of Chinese youth (W. Zhang, 2023).

   Zhang (2023) further situates Mandarin internet language within youth identity construction, drawing on sociolinguistic and identity theories to show how online language indexes group belonging and generational values.

However, these studies remain partial and do not provide a comprehensive overview of the interconnectedness between digital neologisms, internet culture, social context, and linguistic evolution in modern Mandarin. Few studies integrate linguistic, sociocultural, and technological perspectives in a holistic manner.

Moreover, most previous research was conducted before digital platforms such as Douyin and Bilibili reached peak popularity between 2020 and 2024. Linguistic trends generated by short-video platforms and livestreaming environments today are far more rapid and complex than in earlier years. This creates an urgent need for academic studies capable of documenting and analyzing the latest developments in Mandarin internet language.

For these reasons, this article is designed to fill the academic gap by providing a comprehensive analysis of modern Mandarin online language phenomena from integrated linguistic, sociolinguistic, and digital cultural perspectives.

RESEARCH METHODS

1.   Research Approach

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research approach to provide an in-depth depiction of linguistic phenomena based on empirical data drawn from digital platforms. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for examining language as a socially situated practice, as it allows researchers to capture patterns of meaning, forms of expression, and contextual nuances that emerge in naturally occurring communication. By focusing on authentic digital discourse, this approach facilitates a comprehensive understanding of how Mandarin internet language is produced, circulated, and interpreted in online environments.

In line with (Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, 2014) descriptive qualitative research emphasizes the systematic organization, condensation, and interpretation of complex qualitative data. Rather than testing hypotheses, this study aims to identify recurring linguistic features and usage patterns through iterative processes of data collection and analysis. The qualitative framework allows for flexibility in interpreting linguistic forms while maintaining analytical rigor through transparent and traceable procedures.

Furthermore, Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) highlight that qualitative analysis involves three concurrent flows of activity: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. These principles guide the analytical process of this study in examining phonological, morphological, semantic, pragmatic, and sociolinguistic aspects of Mandarin internet language. By grounding the research approach in this established qualitative methodology, the study ensures methodological credibility while offering a nuanced and empirically grounded account of linguistic innovation in digital communication.

2. Data Sources

This study employs a corpus-based content analysis approach. The research combines corpus methodology and qualitative content analysis. The corpus approach is used to systematically compile authentic linguistic data from digital platforms (WeChat, Douyin, and TikTok), while content analysis is applied to categorize, interpret, and explain the linguistic patterns and neologisms identified within the corpus.

1. Sampling Technique
The study uses purposive sampling. The sampling was not random; instead, data were selected based on specific linguistic and contextual criteria aligned with the research objectives.

The sampling criteria include:
- Linguistic relevance: expressions must demonstrate characteristics of Mandarin internet language (网络语言) or neologisms (新词).
- Frequency of occurrence: expressions that appeared repeatedly within the six-month observation period.
- Social distribution: expressions used by diverse online communities.
- Linguistic creativity: words showing new morphological processes, acronyms, hybridization, semantic shifts, or phonological wordplay.

This approach ensures that only linguistically significant and socially influential expressions are included in the dataset.

2. Data Size and Collection Process
Data were collected over a six-month period to capture dynamic linguistic trends.
The corpus consists of:
- 50 expressions from WeChat (including group chats, Moments, and Official Accounts),
- 50 expressions from Douyin (comments, captions, viral phrases),
- 50 expressions from TikTok (Mandarin-language videos and multilingual comment sections).
In total, 150 linguistic units were compiled and documented.

Data collection techniques included:
- Manual scraping of public posts and comment sections,
- Documentation of trending hashtags and viral expressions,
- Cross-verification with Chinese internet slang dictionaries (互联网热词词典),
- Comparative tracking of expressions across platforms.

All data were organized into a categorized database including word form, context of use, frequency, and platform origin.

3. Data Analysis Procedure
The analysis was conducted in several stages:

- Data reduction: filtering irrelevant or duplicated expressions.
- Coding and categorization: grouping data based on morphological, phonological, semantic, and pragmatic characteristics.
- Interpretation: analyzing linguistic processes such as word formation, semantic shifts, hybridization, and digital pragmatics.
- Cross-platform comparison: examining how expressions evolve and spread between Douyin and TikTok.

The analytical frameworks applied include:

- Lexical and morphological analysis,
- Phonological analysis (sound-based puns),
- Semantic analysis,
- Digital pragmatic analysis,
- Sociolinguistic analysis.

4. Ensuring Data Validity
To ensure validity and reliability, the study applies several strategies:

- Triangulation of sources: comparing data across three different platforms.
- Frequency verification: confirming that expressions appear repeatedly within the observation period.
- Dictionary cross-checking: validating expressions using recognized internet slang databases.
- Clear coding criteria: applying consistent classification guidelines.
- Transparent documentation: recording all sources and contexts of data extraction.

These measures reduce bias and strengthen the credibility of the findings.

5. Avoiding Subjective Interpretation
To minimize subjective opinion:

- Interpretation is grounded in observable linguistic features rather than personal judgment.
- Each claim is supported by textual evidence from the corpus.
- Analytical categories are based on established linguistic frameworks.
- Comparative analysis is used instead of impressionistic evaluation.

Findings are presented descriptively, focusing on linguistic structure and usage patterns rather than personal evaluation of language quality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
        This section presents the research findings based on the analysis of data collected from WeChat, Douyin, and TikTok. The discussion focuses on four main aspects: (1) the core linguistic characteristics that shape Mandarin online language, (2) the processes through which digital neologisms and popular expressions emerge, (3) the sociocultural factors influencing the spread of

internet language, and (4) the implications of these phenomena for Mandarin usage in academic, social, media, and educational contexts.

1. **Core Linguistic Characteristics Shaping Mandarin Online Language**

The phenomenon of Mandarin online language (网络语言 *wǎngluò yǔyán*) exhibits distinctive linguistic features that differentiate it from Standard Mandarin (普通话 *pǔtōnghuà*). These characteristics are shaped by user creativity, technological constraints, and the communicative dynamics of digital spaces. Analysis of the data reveals five major linguistic traits.

1.1 Use of Digital Acronyms and Numeric Codes (缩略语 + 数字语言)

Acronyms, abbreviations, and number-based codes are among the most prominent features of Mandarin internet language.

1) Pinyin-based abbreviations

Examples:

- **"XSWL"** *xiào sǐ wǒ le* (笑死我了) "I'm laughing to death."
- **"YYDS"** *yǒngyuǎn de shén* (永远的神) "The best ever."

These abbreviated forms allow users to type quickly while signaling digital nativeness and in-group identity.

2) Homophonic numeric codes (数字谐音梗)

Examples:

- **"233"** loud laughter.
- **"520"** *wǒ ài nǐ* (我爱你), "I love you."
- **"88"** *bābā* (拜拜), "bye-bye."

These forms rely on Mandarin's rich homophony system, turning numbers into expressive digital symbols.

1.2 Phonological Play and Homophones (谐音词)

Mandarin's abundance of homophones enables extensive sound-based wordplay.

Examples:

- **"躺平 (tǎngpíng)"** literally "lying flat," now metaphorically used to resist overwork culture.
- **"内卷 (nèijuǎn)"** "involution," used as social critique.

Homophonic play generates humor, sarcasm, and social commentary within online discourse.

1.3 Morphological Creativity (构词法创新)

Mandarin internet language displays innovative word-formation patterns, including:

- clipping (缩写),
- compounding (复合词),
- slang suffixation such as "-话" or "-化."

Examples:

- **"杠精 (gàngjīng)"** someone who argues for the sake of arguing.
- **"全网黑 (quánwǎng hēi)"** someone hated "across the entire internet."

Such forms emerge organically and spread rapidly through comments and viral content.

1.4 Dramatic and Hyperbolic Expressions (夸张性表达)

Douyin users frequently employ dramatic expressions for emotional impact and visibility.

Examples:

- **"绝绝子!"** extremely amazing.
- **"好家伙!"** an expression of shock or admiration.

This style prioritizes emotional resonance over literal precision.

2. Processes Behind the Formation of Digital Neologisms and Popular Expressions

Digital neologisms (网络新词) emerge through interconnected linguistic and sociotechnological mechanisms. The analysis identifies four major processes.

2.1 Phonological Mechanisms: Homophones and Sound Associations

Given Mandarin's homophonic richness, users exploit sound similarity to coin new terms. Examples:

- **"yyds"** from *yǒngyuǎn de shén*.
- **"duang"** a nonsensical sound that became viral from a Jackie Chan advertisement.

Sound-based neologisms function as humor, critique, and even political satire.

2.2 Morphological Mechanisms: Shortening and Semantic Compression

Neologisms are formed through:

- acronymization,
- clipping,
- blending.

Examples:

- **"自媒体 (zìméitǐ)"** self-media, personal content platforms.
- **"佛系 (Fóxì)"** Buddha-like, meaning relaxed or indifferent.

These condensed forms reflect fast-paced digital communication.

2.3 Semantic Mechanisms: Extension and Shift of Meaning

Many traditional words acquire new meanings in digital contexts. Examples:

- **"吃瓜 (chīguā)"** from "eating watermelon" to "watching drama/gossip."
- **"打工人 (dǎgōngrén)"** now a humorous/critical label for exploited modern workers.

Semantic shifts are driven by meme culture on Douyin and TikTok.

2.4 Pragmatic and Interactional Mechanisms

Many neologisms arise from:

- viral comments,
- fandom culture,
- trending videos.

Example:

- **"你品，你细品"** an introspective cue originating from a viral video.

The formation process is largely *bottom-up*, driven by ordinary users rather than official linguistic authorities.

3. Sociocultural Factors Driving the Emergence and Rapid Spread of Mandarin Internet Language

Digital linguistic phenomena are closely tied to contemporary Chinese sociocultural conditions. The study identifies several key contributing factors.

3.1 Dominance of Youth in the Digital Ecosystem

Post-2000 (00后) and post-2010 (10后) generations dominate Douyin and WeChat. Their creativity, spontaneity, preference for humor, and inclination toward brevity heavily shape online linguistic innovation.

3.2 Meme Culture and Viral Dynamics (梗文化)

"梗文化" (meme culture) is a major force driving linguistic change. Viral Douyin trends generate millions of derivative comments and expressions. Viral circulation accelerates lexical diffusion across platforms.

3.3 Contemporary Social Dynamics in China

Many neologisms reflect societal pressures, including:

- academic competition (内卷),

- overwork culture (**996**),
- youth disillusionment (躺平),
- economic anxiety.

Online language becomes a creative and safer channel for social expression.

3.4 Globalization and Language Contact

TikTok facilitates:

- the global spread of Mandarin internet slang,
- borrowing into non-Mandarin speech communities,
- hybrid language formation.

Examples:

- **"OK了"**
- **"安排一下"**
- **"冲鸭"** (blending characters with nonstandard phonology)

This global exchange extends Mandarin slang into international digital culture.

3.5 Online Communities as Identity Spaces

Neologisms serve as markers of group identity.

Communities such as:

- fandoms,
- gamers,
- university students,
- young office workers,

develop their own sublexicons, reinforcing digital in-group cohesion.

4. Implications of Linguistic Phenomena for Mandarin in Academic, Social, Media, and Educational Contexts

The rise of Mandarin internet language has extensive implications.

4.1 Academic Implications

1) Challenges to linguistic norms

Internet language often violates:

- grammatical rules,
- conventional morphology,
- standard semantics.

This disrupts traditional linguistic expectations.

2) New objects of inquiry

Digital neologisms have become key areas in:

- digital sociolinguistics,
- evolutionary semantics,
- internet discourse analysis.

Scholars now view digital platforms as laboratories for contemporary linguistic change.

4.2 Social Implications

1) Changing patterns of intergenerational communication

Older generations often struggle to understand:

- acronyms such as **"yyds"**,
- numeric codes like **"233"**,
- new metaphors such as **"佛系"** or **"内卷"**.

This creates linguistic gaps across generations.

2) Language as a medium of social critique

Terms like **"躺平"** and **"社恐"** reflect social anxieties and resistance. Internet language functions as a semi-formal channel of public opinion.

4.3 Media and Public Communication Implications

Media outlets increasingly adopt internet slang to appeal to younger audiences. However, this entails risks:

- misinterpretation,
- misinformation through memes,
- oversimplification of complex issues.

Internet language amplifies attention-driven communication with emotional and hyperbolic expressions.

4.4 Implications for Mandarin Language Education

1) Need for adaptive curriculum

Teachers face challenges such as:

- students understanding slang but lacking mastery of standard structures,
- habitual use of abbreviations.

Curricula must balance standard Mandarin with digital linguistic realities.

2) Internet language as a motivational tool

Popular expressions can enhance:

- vocabulary learning,
- cultural awareness,
- student engagement.

3) Risks of linguistic deviation

Teachers must emphasize that slang is inappropriate in formal contexts and that stylistic awareness (语体) is essential.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine the phenomenon of Mandarin internet language by addressing four central research questions concerning its linguistic characteristics, formation processes, sociocultural drivers, and broader implications. Based on the qualitative corpus analysis of 150 expressions collected from WeChat, Douyin, and TikTok over a six-month period, several key conclusions can be drawn.

First, regarding the main linguistic characteristics that shape Mandarin online language, the findings demonstrate that Mandarin internet language is characterized by high levels of creativity, compression, multimodality, and emotional expressiveness. The most prominent features include: (1) digital acronyms and numeric codes (e.g., "yyds," "520"), (2) phonological wordplay and homophonic puns (谐音梗), (3) morphological innovation through compounding, clipping, and suffixation, (4) semantic shifts and metaphorical extensions (e.g., "吃瓜," "打工人"), and (5) dramatic and hyperbolic expressions that enhance visibility and emotional impact. These features distinguish internet Mandarin from Standard Mandarin and reflect adaptation to the speed, interactivity, and visual orientation of digital communication.

Second, in response to how digital neologisms and popular expressions are formed, the analysis reveals that their emergence is driven by interconnected phonological, morphological, semantic, and pragmatic mechanisms. Phonologically, Mandarin's rich homophony enables the creation of humorous and coded expressions. Morphologically, users employ acronymization, blending, and lexical compression to accommodate fast-paced typing and platform constraints. Semantically, many traditional words undergo meaning extension or recontextualization within meme culture. Pragmatically, viral content, fandom discourse, and interactive comment sections function as incubators for new expressions. Importantly, the formation process is predominantly bottom-up, generated by ordinary users rather than institutional authorities, demonstrating a democratization of linguistic innovation in the digital era.

Third, concerning the sociocultural factors driving the rapid emergence and diffusion of Mandarin internet language, the findings confirm that youth dominance in digital spaces plays a central role. Generation Z users actively shape online discourse through humor, irony, and symbolic

creativity. Meme culture (梗文化) accelerates lexical circulation, while contemporary social pressures such as academic competition, overwork culture, and economic anxiety motivate the creation of terms like "内卷," "996," and "躺平." In addition, globalization and transnational platforms such as TikTok facilitate hybridization and cross linguistic borrowing, extending Mandarin internet slang beyond national boundaries. Thus, Mandarin internet language serves not only as a communicative tool but also as a sociocultural mirror reflecting generational identity, social critique, and collective emotions.

Fourth, regarding the implications of these linguistic phenomena, the study highlights multidimensional consequences. Academically, Mandarin internet language challenges traditional linguistic norms while opening new avenues in digital sociolinguistics, semantics, and discourse studies. Socially, it contributes to intergenerational linguistic gaps but also provides a semi-formal channel for expressing social concerns. In media contexts, internet slang increases relatability and engagement but may also encourage exaggeration and simplification. In educational settings, these developments necessitate adaptive pedagogical strategies that balance the teaching of Standard Mandarin with awareness of contemporary digital usage. Internet language can serve as a motivational and cultural resource, yet students must be guided to maintain stylistic appropriateness across formal and informal contexts.

Overall, this study concludes that Mandarin internet language is not merely a collection of ephemeral slang expressions, but a systematic and dynamic linguistic phenomenon shaped by the interaction of language, technology, youth culture, and social transformation. It represents an accelerated model of linguistic evolution in the digital era. By integrating linguistic, sociocultural, and technological perspectives, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how contemporary Mandarin continues to evolve within rapidly changing digital ecosystems.

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