

From English morpheme to symbol of Chinese ‘netizenship’: Exploring ‘ing’ in Chinese blogs

Copious research on code-switching illuminates various influencing forces on language choice in multilingual situations. Studies have examined code-switching in both spoken and non-electronic, written modes of communication. Kendall’s (2005) study on code-switching between Icelandic and English in an online message board is the first attempt, to the author’s knowledge, to examine code-switching in online discourse in a systematic manner.

Chinese-English code-mixing in online discourses is prevalent in mainland China and is regarded as a characteristic of 网络语言 (*wangluo yuyan, net language*) (Yin & Shi 2004). One of its many features is the use of a Chinese word with the English morpheme -ing (abbreviated as CHing henceforth) to convey a sense of continuity. An example is shown below:

高兴ing
Gaoxing-ing
Happy-ing

The earliest report of CHing is in Xing (2002), which also points to CHing as the only code-mixing feature on the syntactic level in mainland Chinese online discourse. It has also been observed that -ing is combined with Chinese words besides verbs, such as adjectives, as illustrated in the above example, nouns, and fixed expressions (*chengyu*, four character idioms), for example, 义正词严ing (*yi zheng ci yan ing*, speaking with justice and seriousness).

The current study investigates the discourse contexts and social factors conditioning the use of CHing in one particular type of online discourse, blogs (i.e. web logs, or individual online journals), and its social meanings. 136 blog entries (about 96127 words) from 10 individuals (5 females, 5 males) were downloaded. 87 tokens of CHing and its four Chinese counterparts, 着zhe, 中zhong, 在zai, 正zheng, were analyzed in the 27 entries which contain instances of CHing. Tokens were coded for a number of diverse linguistic and social factors, including time of events, location in the entries, gender and activeness of the user.

A quantitative analysis, including VARBRUL analysis, shows that the usage level of CHing is among the highest of the five variants in the data and that CHing is especially favored in parenthetical expressions and entry titles, as well as by female users. The quantitative findings are interpreted in conjunction with close analysis of exemplar entries and an interview with an active participant in online discourses in Shanghai regarding the usage patterns and social meanings of CHing.

The combined quantitative and qualitative analyses indicate that the English morpheme -ing has been transformed into an emblem of netizenship in Chinese blogs. It functions locally as a framing device to convey “playful solidarity”; it is also globally associated with the Discourse of *net language*, which features linguistic flexibility and creativity.

This study thus contributes to our understanding of the linguistic patterning and social functions of code-switching and -mixing in online discourse in mainland China. Further, it provides insight into how speakers in various types of discourses employ the increasingly diverse linguistic resources available to them to create localized and global social meanings.