

Language Change in Progress: Evidence from Computer-Mediated Communication

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With its ever increasing popularization, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become a progressively well documented research area (e.g., Baron 1984, 1998a, 1998b, 2000; Crystal 2006; Danet & Herring 2007; Herring 1996). The linguistic aspects of CMC in the Chinese context have also been examined (e.g., Gao 2006, 2007; Yu *et al* 2001a, 2001b). In this paper, I present an analysis of emergent language usages in CMC in Chinese, which covers the lexical, syntactic, as well as the discourse dimension. Applying the construct of apparent time change (Labov 1963, 1966), I argue that some of the online usages may stay as part of the Chinese language. In other words, the use of Internet expressions in the Chinese CMC may signify language change in progress.

1. Introduction

Since the Internet became available, particularly since the worldwide Internet service was officially launched in the U.S., computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become increasingly widespread throughout the world, partly thanks to the rapid development of the computer technology, especially the networking know-how (Yu *et al* 2001a). In mainland China, since the Internet service started in 1994, it has been developing very rapidly. According to the report by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) (<http://tech.sina.com.cn/roll/2003-07-21/1559211800.shtml>), as early as October 1997 there were around six hundred and twenty thousand Chinese netizens.¹ And approximately thirty hundred thousand computers were connected with the Internet (<http://tech.sina.com.cn/i/c/2003-07-21/1655211851.shtml>). Also according to CNNIC (<http://tech.163.com/07/0123/15/35HH760S000915BF.html>), in January 2007 there were approximately 137 million netizens in mainland China. Around 59 million computers were connected with the Internet. And China had about 843 thousand web sites. It is apparent from these statistics that there has been tremendous growth of the Internet network in China over recent years.

In addition, the Internet has penetrated various spheres of Chinese people's lives (<http://news.163.com/08/0118/15/42GFQGLT000120GU.html>). When online, Chinese

¹ In mainland China, a 'netizen' is currently defined as a person older than six who surfs the web for at least one hour per week.

netizens often do such things as listening to and downloading music, chatting, watching and downloading movies, reading news, searching for information, playing online games, and emailing. And entertainment is the most important purpose for most online activities. The Internet has been so pervasive in China that the sentence *Shangwang le meiyou?* 上网了没有? 'Have you been online [recently]?' has currently become one of the most commonly uttered greetings when Chinese people, especially city dwellers, meet on the streets (Lü 2002).

The rapid development of Internet communication in mainland China has created huge impact on the Chinese language. Researchers have documented that CMC has helped give rise to a new variety of Chinese, which they generally term the Chinese Internet language (CIL) (Yu *et al* 2001a). According to Yates (1996), a new medium of communication such as the Internet not only draws upon existing linguistic practices, but also generates new forms of practice. This partly explains why there has emerged CIL in China's Internet communication. CIL is not only represented by different lexical usages, but also by unique syntactic, and even discursive features (Gao 2006; Yu *et al* 2001b; Zhang 2007). As for the demographics of the netizens in mainland China, approximately thirty-eight percent are aged between eighteen and twenty-four, most of whom are studying either in senior high schools (31.3%) or at two- or four-year colleges (51.6%) (<http://big5.china.com.cn/chinese/zhuanti/zghlw/923610.htm>). Over ninety percent of netizens are below the age of 35. In other words, Chinese netizens can be roughly categorized as young people.

This paper discusses the impact of the emergence and use of CIL in CMC on the Chinese language. Applying the construct of apparent time change (Labov 1963, 1966) and based on a variety of other considerations, it argues that some of the CIL usages employed by young Chinese netizens in CMC may start to be used by people belonging to other age groups and also outside of the electronic media. In other words, the appearance and use of the CIL may represent a case of language change in progress. In so doing, this paper demonstrates that electronic communication indeed provides rich data for linguistic analysis, which therefore warrants serious attention from linguists.

The paper first provides the theoretical framework that guides the argument for the possible change of the Chinese language prompted by the use of CIL online. It then presents objective linguistic data, viz., online words, sentences, and paragraphs. In the following, the paper discusses what types of CIL usages are likely to be incorporated into the Chinese language. The paper concludes with a highlight of the need for a real time study to corroborate its argument.

2. The Theoretical Framework

This study is primarily guided by the apparent time construct (Labov 1963, 1966). It also takes into consideration other theoretical as well as practical assumptions.

2.1 The Apparent Time Construct

In the study of language variation and change, Labov (1963, 1966) distinguished between apparent time and real time changes. The underlying idea of the apparent time change is that age stratification of linguistic variables can not only reflect change in the individual as he or she moves through life (age grading), but also historical change in the speech community as it moves through time. In other words, some of the variables used by one age group, usually young people, may spread through the entire population and consequently slowly change the language. Using the apparent time construct, Labov (1963, 1966) demonstrated in his study of the social stratification of English in New York City that it is quite possible to analyze language change in progress by comparing the speech of older and younger speakers from the same community. Within this theoretical framework, this study considers the CIL as variables of standard Mandarin Chinese, which are used primarily by young and educated Chinese, as is aforementioned.

Meanwhile, it is worth noting that the disambiguation of age-stratified data (change in apparent time) in linguistic change versus age-grading is a complicated matter. To get an apparent time reflection of language change in progress, the individual's linguistic behavior would have to remain stable throughout his or her life, or at least changes during his or her life course would have to be systematic and regular. In other words, caution should be taken that without real time evidence, it is virtually impossible to determine whether age-stratified patterns of change reflect language change in progress or are simply a matter of age-grading.

2.2 Other Considerations

In the following, the paper discusses other theoretical as well as practical assumptions, which also help to support the argument that the emergence and use of CIL in Chinese CMC indicates language change in progress.

2.2.1 The Prestige of CIL

Given that CIL is used mostly by educated young Chinese and that it is associated with many desirable personal identities such as being modern and being able to keep up with social and technological developments, it is generally considered a prestigious linguistic variety, especially among young people (Gao 2007). The emergence of such a distinctive language variety has significant sociolinguistic implications for the change in Chinese.

As Chambers (1995: 185) puts it, “variability in language often indicates instability” and hence linguistic change. Moreover, according to variationist sociolinguists (e.g., Labov 1972, 2000), the language variety with high social prestige, be it overt or covert prestige, is likely to show its impact upon people's language use and to be emulated by people who seek prestige. If this is true, CIL may exert its influence upon the linguistic behavior of those who do not have access to computer-mediated communication and/or those who do not belong to the young and educated group but wish to.

2.2.2 The Likelihood of Cross-Modality Influence

As is noted in Baron (1984), cross-modality linguistic influence is quite possible. Take English as an example, many instances of usage clearly show that speech and writing, two different modalities of communication, have been influencing each other. In terms of speech affecting writing, there is, for example, written use of contractions like “haven’t.” Concerning writing influencing speech, there is, for example, professorial talk like “But it is now widely recognized that we must make a distinction between the formal objects licensed by a grammar and feature descriptions used to impose constraints on these structures.” Likewise, CIL, language employed in online communication, may also gradually spread to the domain of non-electronic communication, both spoken and written, and consequently lead to the change of the Chinese language.

2.2.3 The Role of Youths in Linguistic Change

As Wardhaugh observes, “the young are usually in the vanguard of most [language] changes” (1998: 202). This observation, which is underpinned by his experience, constitutes another piece of support for the potential impact of CIL on the Chinese language and hence its change. As is mentioned earlier, users of CIL are predominately young people in their late teens or early twenties up until this stage (http://tech.sina.com.cn/focus/cnnic_12/index.shtml). One more piece of supporting evidence is that the electronic language used by young Chinese netizens is usually more dynamic, vivid, and rich in creativity than non-electronic language. Generally speaking, such a vibrant variety of language is contagious; people are not very resistant to the use of such an innovative variety of language.

3. The Data

The data for this study consist of Chinese Internet lexical items, sentential expressions characteristic of Chinese Internet discourse, and paragraphs from the Internet, which feature the use of CIL terms, sentences typical of Chinese Internet discourse, and/or discursive practices typical of China’s Internet communication.

The data were collected primarily from five Internet situations – online BBS’s, chat rooms, Internet literature, personal e-mails, and other posts at public web sites, such as news and advertisements. Among these sources, BBS’s and Internet relay chat rooms were the major ones. To ensure that the data collected and examined are representative of CIL, I gathered them from posts on a variety of topics, including recreation, sports, school life, education, career, politics, marriage life, and economics. In addition, from October 2002 through December 2007, I collected samples of CIL from the five Internet situations on a weekly basis.

3.1 The Lexical Usages

Based on the source code, the Chinese Internet lexicon may be divided into three main categories. They are 1) words solely composed of Chinese characters, 2) words that

only consist of pinyin alphabets, English letters, Arabic numbers, or paralinguistic symbols, and 3) words of mixed sources. Each type may then be further subcategorized. For words that only contain Chinese characters, they can be further divided into those coined in the following different ways:²

- 1) *Jiajie* 假借 ('borrowing'), e.g., *mao* 猫 cat 'modem,' *guanshui* 灌水 irrigate-water 'posting low-quality articles on BBS's'
- 2) *Hecheng* 合成 ('compounding'), e.g., *dianduidian* 点对点 point-face-point 'computer to computer,' *xiezai* 卸载 unload-carry 'download'
- 3) *Fangni* 仿拟 ('analogy'), e.g., *diaoxia* 钓虾 angle-shrimp 'females chasing males' (cf. *diaoyu* 钓鱼 angle-fish 'males chasing females'), *hantu* 汉托 Chinese-TOEFL 'Chinese TOEFL--HSK' (cf. *tuofu* 托福 hold-happiness 'TOEFL')
- 4) *Yijie* 译借 ('calquing'), e.g., *qiate* 恰特 exactly-special 'chat,' *ku* 酷 cruel 'cool,' *bensan* 笨三 stupid-three 'Pentium III'
- 5) *Bini* 比拟 ('metaphor and personification'), e.g., *daxia* 大虾 big-shrimp 'Internet expert,' *konglong* 恐龙 scary-dragon 'unattractive but extremely active female'
- 6) *Yinbian* 音变 ('phonological fusion'), e.g., *jiangzi* 酱紫 sauce-purple 'this way' (from *zheyangzi* 这样子 this-form-Suffix 'like this'), *biao* 表 watch 'don't' (from *buyao* 不要 no-want 'don't'), *niangzi* 酿紫 brew-purple 'that way' (from *nayangzi* 那样子 that-form-Particle 'like that')
- 7) *Shuoming* 说明 ('explanation'), e.g., *wangchong* 网虫 net-insect 'people very fond of visiting the Internet,' *wangba* 网吧 net-bar 'computer site open to the public'
- 8) *Cisuchongdie* 词素重迭 ('morpheme repetition'), e.g., *piaopiao* 漂漂 beautiful-beautiful 'beautiful,' *huaihuai* 坏坏 bad-bad 'bad'
- 9) *Yinjingaizao* 音近改造 ('near homophonization'), e.g., *banzhu* 斑竹 speckle-bamboo 'person in charge of a BBS topic,' *junnan* 菌男 germ-male 'unattractive guy'

² As is observed by researchers (e.g., Zhang 2007; Zhu 2008), Chinese netizens often frequently use local varieties of Chinese in online communication, such as the use of *ou* 偶, 'me', a Taiwanese usage, for *wo* 我 'me', and *xiami* 虾米 'what', a southern Fujian usage, for *shenme* 什么 'what'. Since neither the written form nor the meaning of these expressions has changed in CMC, the use of dialects is not treated as a way in which online words are coined.

- 10) *Jiucixinjie* 旧词新解 ('semantic shift'), e.g., *ouxiang* 偶像 idol-picture 'a disgusting person,' *tiancai* 天才 sky-material 'a born dumb person', *danbaizhi* 蛋白质 egg-white-quality 'an idiot and neurotic', *ding* 顶 hold something on one's head 'support', *fubai* 腐败 decay-failure 'eating out or participating in recreational activities'
- 11) *Xizi* 析字 ('word decomposition'), *lanjie* 蓝介 blue-introduce 'awkward' (from *ganga* 尴尬 'awkward'), *zouzhao* 走召 walk-summon 'super' (from *chao* 超 'super')

Examples of words that only consist of pinyin alphabets, English letters, Arabic numbers, or paralinguistic symbols are given in 12). In 12), *JS* consists of pinyin alphabets, *E*, *ICQ*, *cookies*, and *banner* are in English, *668* and *886* are in Arabic numbers, and the components of *:-)* and *^0^* are only paralinguistic symbols.

- 12) *JS* ('shrewd businessmen,' from *jianshang* in pinyin), *E* ('electronic'), *ICQ* ('I seek you.'), *cookies* ('small file saved on a computer hard disk'), *banner* ('advertisement that props up across the width of a computer screen'), *668* ('Let's chat.'), *886* ('Bye-bye.'), *:-)* ('smile'), *^0^* ('laugh out loud')

Examples of words of mixed sources are given in 13). In 13), *^B* and *^K* both consist of a paralinguistic symbol and an English letter, *b2b*, *b2c*, *f2f*, and *MP3* are each composed of English letters and an Arabic number, and *BIG5* 码 is a mixture of English letters, an Arabic number, and a Chinese character.

- 13) *^B* ('to say good bye with tears'), *^K* ('to kiss stealthily'), *b2b* ('business to business'), *b2c* ('business to customer'), *f2f* ('face-to-face'), and *BIG5* 码 ('the big 5 code')

3.2 The Sentential Features

One of the most conspicuous features of web sentences is that they are usually relatively short and are used to express meanings in a concise and straightforward manner. It is particularly so in regard to language used in chat rooms and on BBS's. An excerpt from an online chat in 14) below exemplifies this characteristic. Among the ten sentences in this sample, there is only one complex sentence, 如果有机会我一定送花给你 ('If I have a chance, I'll surely send you flowers.'). In addition, eight out of these ten sentences consist of six or fewer words.

- 14) 欢迎进入中华网聊天室!:) ('Welcome to the chatroom at www.China.com.')
- A: I think so.
- B: 上网明天能休息。 ('If I go online, I can take a rest tomorrow.')
- C: 叹了口气, 不知道哪里不对了。 ('Sigh. [I] don't know what's wrong.')
- D: 混古起? ('Excuse me?')
- D: 你哪的? ('Where are you from?')
- E: 在? ('Preposition, indicating time, place, etc.')
- F: 如果有机会我一定送花给你。 ('If I have a chance, I'll surely send you flowers.')
- G: 你在吗? ('Are you there?')
- H: oh.
- I: 最好有伊妹儿。 ('[You'd] better have an e-mail.')

Web sentences also involve novel usages, which are usually represented by 1) a change in sentence word order, 2) the use of sentence-final redundant words, 3) a change in word category, 4) the use of an unusual sense of a word, and 5) the use of bound morphemes as free morphemes. Some examples are given in 15-23) below. The sentences in 15-16) involve a change in sentence word order. The sentences in 17-18) feature the use of semantically superfluous expressions. The sentences in 19-20) represent a change in word category. The sentence in 21) exemplifies the use of a very uncommon sense of a word. And the sentences in 22-23) are characterized with the use of usually bound morphemes as free morphemes.

In 15), the adverbial prepositional phrase *zaitushuguan* 在图书馆 Preposition-picture-book-place 'in the library' was moved from before the verb phrase *kanshu* 看书 look-book 'to read books' to after it. In 16), the adverbial time phrase *mingnian* 明年 following-year 'the following year' was moved from before the verb phrase *qumeiguo* 去美国 go-U.S. 'to go to the U.S.' to after it.

- 15) 我 看 书 在 图书馆。
I look book Preposition library
'I was reading books in the library.'
- 16) 我 去 美国 明 年。
I go U.S. next year
'I am going to the U.S. the next year.'

In 17), the expression *deshuo* 的说³ Auxiliary-talk ‘say’ is semantically redundant. Similarly, in 18) *diao* 掉 fall ‘Result’ is redundant, although it is true that *sidaole* 死掉了 die-fall-Aspect ‘die’ by itself is a perfectly grammatical usage in Mandarin Chinese.

- 17)– 去 哪儿?
 go where
 ‘— Where are you going?’
 – 回 家 的 说。
 return home Auxiliary talk
 ‘— Going home.’

- 18)我 要 高 兴 死 掉 了。
 I will happy die fall Particle
 ‘I’m extremely happy.’

In 19), the noun *dian* 电electricity ‘call’ was used a verb, meaning ‘to call’. And in 20), the proper noun CNN was used as an adjective, meaning “behaving like CNN”.

- 19)有 事 电 我。
 have thing call I
 ‘Call me if you need anything.’

- 20)做 人 不 能 太 CNN。
 do people not Auxiliary too CNN
 ‘A person cannot be like CNN too much.’

In 21), an atypical usage of the expression *feichang* 非常 not-ordinary ‘very; unusual’ in the sense of ‘unusual’ was used.

- 21)她 是 非 常 宝 贝。
 she be unusual treasure
 ‘She is an extremely lovely girl.’

Finally, In sentence 22), the bound morpheme *ju* 巨big ‘extremely’ was used as a free morpheme. Analogously, in 23) the bound morpheme *chao* 超exceed ‘super’ was used as a free morpheme as well.

³ The usage *deshuo* 的说 Auxiliary-talk ‘say’ is a translation of the Japanese sentence-final expression: Object marker + say.

22)小 王 巨 怕 辣。
 little Wang gigantic afraid spicy
 ‘Little Wang is extremely afraid of spicy food.’

23)这 场 球 赛 超 没 意思。
 this Classifier ball game super not meaning
 ‘This ball game was extremely boring.’

3.3 The Discursive Level

In many cases, China’s Internet discourse is marked by 1) Chinese-English code-switching, 2) a written spoken style, and 3) a joking style, which is represented by the use of, among other things, overly concise and straightforward language, unusual and sometimes even grotesque homophones, enigmatic folk similes, and other rhetorical devices.

3.3.1 A Bilingual Code

Guo (1999) points out that bilingualism or multilingualism is an inevitable occurrence in the modern society, where people speaking different languages find themselves frequently interacting with each other. It is particularly so with computer-mediated communication, which is itself a product of modern technology that expedites the process of globalization. According to Danet and Herring (2007) and Melchers and Shaw (2003), Internet communication is recurrently characterized by the mixing of two or more languages.

In 24) below is an excerpt from the web novel, *Zuiaishini* <<最爱是你>> ‘My most beloved is you’ by *Meiguitianshi* 玫瑰天使 ‘Rose Angel’ (<http://www.16167.com/wenxue/sanwen/03.htm>). In this excerpt, English items include the expression “bbs” and the greeting “hi.”

24) 布谷很少主动给别人打招呼，没人理的时候，她就到bbs上看帖子。那天晚上，布谷心情实在有些压抑，所以见谁给谁打招呼，深夜了，聊天室也没几个人，布谷就遇见了阿民。

布谷：hi!

阿民：你好！

布谷：还没睡？

阿民：你也是啊。

(‘*Bugu* normally seldom initiates communication with others. When people ignore her, she will read posts on BBS’s. That night *Bugu* felt depressed indeed, so she said hello to whomever she met. It was late in the night and only a few people were still chatting. At this time, *Bugu* met *Amin*.)

Bugu: Hi.
Amin: Hi.
Bugu: Still awake?
Amin: You too.’)

In 25) below is an excerpt from the web novel, *Huodexianggerenyang* <<活得像个人样>> ‘To live like a human being’ by Niepan 涅槃 ‘Nirvana’ (<http://www.16167.com/wenxue/xiaoshuo/huo.htm>), in which the English word “kiss” was employed.

25)很长的一封信,看得我累的不行,大概意思就是她芳心甚悦,情意绵绵,仍想见我一面。最后居然写了个kiss。我觉得很滑稽。琢磨一下她肯定是鼓起全身勇气写了个这么脸红心跳的字句。
(‘A very long letter. I was exhausted reading it. Her main idea is that she was happy and had affection for me too. Also, she would still like to see me one more time. She even ended her mail with the word “kiss.” I felt very funny. I figured that she must have gathered up all her courage to have used this bold expression.’)

3.3.2 A Written Spoken Style

Much CIL discourse features a written spoken style. On the one hand, CIL maintains the characteristic of a written mode. On the other, CIL is marked by an oral style on most informal occasions.

The fact that CIL is partly marked by a written style has at least four reasons: 1) most people still have to use a keyboard to communicate online, 2) that the Internet is a public arena, 3) that most Chinese netizens are educated, and 4) that language used on China’s Internet is first and foremost Putonghua.

Generally speaking, communicating via the Internet is not as fast as people desire. Meanwhile, in China today Internet service is still relatively expensive. Customers are usually charged based on the amount of time that they spend online. In order to offset these limitations, when engaged in electronic communication, people frequently utilize such usages as abbreviated words, subjectless sentences, and single-word sentences. Such practices provide CIL with features of a spoken style. Moreover, cyberspace is essentially a communication arena in which there is few, if any, formal censorship. As a result, when interacting via the Internet, people are likely to use a spoken style, which tends to be more vivid than a written style, to voice their opinions about hot socio-cultural and political issues in China, among other things.

The following dialogues in 26) below, which were gathered from an Internet relay chat room, clearly demonstrate the spoken style of much CIL discourse. More significantly, these expressions are even more concise than the oral language found in daily interaction.

- 26)A: 哪? ('Where are you from?')
 B: 深圳, u? ('Shenzhen. And you?')
 A: 扬州。认识你很高兴! ("Yangzhou. Good to know you!")
 B: me2! ^o^ ('Me too!')
 A: 家? ('Are you at home now?')
 B: 单位。 ('No. At my working unit.')
- A: M or F? ('Are you a male or a female?')
 B: M! 我有事, 走先! 886! ('Male. I need to take care of something. I'm leaving now. Bye-bye!')

The passage in (27) below, which is from the web novel *Yingxiongshidai* <<英雄时代>> 'The age of heroes' by Mikko, is also characterized by an oral style. In this excerpt, the expressions *tamadi* 他妈的 he-mother-Auxiliary 'goddamn' and *zhunaozi* 猪脑子 pig-brain-Suffix 'stupid person,' which are used to swear and to describe a foolish person respectively, are primarily used in spoken discourse, but they were used in this passage. Moreover, the expressions *sa* 仨 three 'three' and *dawan-banshangr* 大晚半晌儿 big-evening-half-period-Rhotacization 'in the dead of the night' are almost used exclusively in spoken discourse, but they also appeared in this excerpt.

- 27)“真他妈的都是猪脑子!”我苦于说不出话,气得一个眼珠乱转。“我又不是有病!大晚半晌儿的,一个人找人家仨持刀的见义勇为?我脑子又没进水!没常识!!”这时去现场的警察走了进来,几个人低声地交谈了一会儿,证实了现场情况和小小的陈述基本一致。(Mikko 2000)
- ('“Stupid!” I was too upset to be able to talk but just moved one of my eyeballs frantically. “Was I insane? I myself alone fighting against three hooligans with knives in the dead of the night? I'm not that stupid! I don't lack common sense!” At this moment, several policemen walked over, who had been to the crime scene. They whispered for a while and confirmed among themselves that what they found out at the scene was basically consonant with *Xiaoxiao's* statement.')

3.3.3 A Joking Style

A large proportion of China's Internet discourse features a joking style, which is usually achieved through using overly terse and straightforward language, unusual homophones, enigmatic folk similes, and other metaphorical devices. The following passage from the Holy Writ of Love in 28), which originated in the movie series Chinese Odyssey (Quoted from Klinkner 2003) and is now an integral part of CIL, illustrates this joking style. In this

case, the joking effect lies in the straightforwardness of language use. In the traditionally reserved Chinese culture, such a direct discursive style is striking and even hilarious.

28)曾经有一份真诚的爱情放在我面前
我没有珍惜
等我失去的时候我才后悔莫及
人间最痛苦的是莫过于此
如果上天能够给我一个再来一次的机会
我会对那个女孩子说三个字
我爱你
如果非要在这份爱上加上一个期限
我希望是一万年

(‘Once somebody sincerely loved me, but I didn’t take that love preciously. I started to regret only when it was gone. This is the most miserable thing in life. If God gave me another chance, I’d say three words to that girl, “I LOVE YOU!” If I must place a deadline to this love, I hope it is TEN THOUSAND YEARS.’)

4. Possible Types of Linguistic Changes⁴

Language is constantly in the process of evolution. The change is either caused by language-internal factors (e.g., Anttila 1989), which is exemplified by the first Germanic consonant shift known as Grimm’s Law, a consequence of the language-internal pressure, or various language-external or social forces (e.g., Bright 1997; Labov 2000), exemplified by the simplification of the Chinese writing system in Mainland China (Cheng 1979). According to Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog (1968), language, especially the vocabulary of a language, is closely entwined with diverse social cultural dimensions of the society in which it finds itself. When the society changes, language as a sign that mirrors the reality of that society will also undergo transformation. It is then no wonder that the arrival of the digital age in China, one of whose representations is the beginning of computer-mediated communication, and recent dramatic social, economic, and political changes that have taken place in China should lead to a change in the Chinese language.

4.1 Lexicon⁵

Vocabulary is usually the most active component of a language, which constantly changes to accommodate the needs of speakers. The question then arises: what types of CIL lexicon is likely to stay as an integral component of the Chinese language? Generally

⁴ Gao (2006) specifically examines the impact of English on the Chinese language.

⁵ Elsewhere, Ma (2002) also discusses the spread of the CIL vocabulary to the non-CMC context, particularly people’s everyday life.

speaking, in addition to the words that must be used to refer to new Internet technologies, those that conform to the convention of the Chinese language have the highest possibility of survival, which would include new coinages that follow the rules of Chinese word formation. This would probably cover at least two groups of CIL words: 1) some of those borrowed from foreign languages, such as *zaixian* 在线 at-line ‘online’, and *ku* 酷cruel ‘cool’, and 2) some of those formed by phonological fusion, e.g., *biao* 表 (from 不要) watch ‘don’t’, for borrowing and phonological reduction are two active word formation processes for the Chinese language.

The matter of the fact is that some of the CIL usages have already been used by the general public and beyond the modality of CMC. Two examples (underlined) are given in (29-30) below, which are quoted from Jiao (2003). In (29), the CIL expression *tiezi* 帖子 paste-Suffix ‘online post’ is used, and in (30) *dongdong* 东东 east-east ‘stuff’ is used.

(29)昨天 还 整理 了 网友们 的 帖子。(陆幼青:<<生命的留言>>)
 yesterday still sort Aspect web friends Auxiliary Post
 ‘Yesterday I also sorted out the posts by (my) Internet friends.’

(30)生活中,我为自己的 很多 东东 而 无比 惊喜。
 (<<大众电影>>, 2002:18).
 life in I for self Auxiliary many east east Conjunction extremely happy
 ‘In my life, I am extremely pleasantly surprised by so many things I have.’

According to Li (2002), the following passage in (31) appeared in a composition by an elementary school student, which also features the use of many CIL expressions (underlined). In this case, although the use of CIL vocabulary is still confined to adolescents, it has gone beyond the CMC modality.

(31)昨天晚上,我的GG带着他的恐龙GF到我家来吃饭,饭桌上,GG的GF一个劲的向我妈妈PMP,那酱紫真是好PT, 7456,我只吃了几口饭,就到QQ上打铁去了。
 (‘Yesterday evening my brother brought his unpleasant-looking girlfriend home for dinner. At the dinner table, this girl kept flattering my mother. Her behavior was so abnormal. I was really fed up with it. I only ate a few mouthfuls before I left to post messages via the caller machine.’)

Furthermore, at least the three CIL expressions given in (32) below have been collected by the *Xiandai hanyu cidian* <<现代汉语词典>> ‘A modern Chinese dictionary’ (Chao and Han *et al* 2005), one of the most authoritative dictionaries on the

modern Chinese language, which marks the official completion of the lexical change prompted by CMC.

(32)*yimeier* 伊妹儿 her-sister-Rhotacization ‘email’, *ku* 酷 cruel ‘cool’, *heike* 黑客 black-guest ‘hacker’

4.2 Grammar

Compared with lexical items, grammatical categories of a language, including its sentence structures, are more stable and hence less easily subject to change, even though such changes do occur. In the following, the paper discusses two possible types of grammatical changes regarding sentence word order and word category respectively. It should be noted that the discussion here is rather speculative in nature. The discussion is also intended to be illustrative rather than exhaustive.

4.2.1 Word Order

The issue of the Chinese sentence word order has been broadly discussed. According to Greenberg’s Word-order Correlation (1963), the order of all types of modifiers in relation to their heads follows the same order as that of the verb and its direct object. In other words, if the direct object follows the verb, then modifiers of the verb tend to follow the verb. If this is the case, then examples in (15-16), which are given below in (33-34) for convenience’s sake, apparently help to support the argument that Chinese is moving towards more an SVO language, which is different from the suggestion in Li and Thompson (1981) that the Chinese language may be experiencing a transformation from an SVO to an SOV sentence word order.

33)我 看 书 在 图书馆。
I look book Preposition library
‘I was reading books in the library.’

34)我 去 美国 明 年。
I go U.S. tomorrow year
‘I am going to the U.S. the next year.’

4.2.2 Change in Word Category

As a result of the influence from the use of CIL in CMC, the part of speech of some Chinese words may undergo changes. A potential candidate is the use of nouns as adjectives, as is illustrated by the usage of *cai* 菜 vegetable ‘weak; incapable’ in (35) below. For one thing, the use of nouns as adjectives has already been documented in the *Xiandai hanyu cidian* <<现代汉语词典>> ‘A modern Chinese dictionary’ (Chao and

Han *et al.* 2005), as is shown in 36) below, where the noun *yangguang* 阳光 sun ‘healthy and optimistic’ is used as an adjective.

35) 这 个 人 太 菜。
 this Classifier person too vegetable
 ‘This person is too incapable.’

36) 她 是 一 个 阳光 女孩。
 she be one Classifier sun girl
 ‘She’s a very healthy and sanguine girl.’

4.3 Discourse

The discourse structure of a language is even more unlikely to change, which is tightly intertwined with the way of thinking of the people that speak that language. Nevertheless, as is documented in Baron (2000), the styles of English writing have continuously evolved along with the invention of new media of communication. If this is the case with English, then it is not completely out of the question that the Chinese language may also undergo discourse transformation as a result of the new electronic and the word processing medium that are used to produce the language.⁶

5. Concluding Remarks

In light of the apparent-time construct, this paper argues that some CIL usages by young netizens in CMC may spread to other age groups and beyond the CMC modality and consequently lead to changes in the Chinese language. In this sense, some of the CIL usages may represent language change in progress. This being said, as is noted earlier, not all age-related variation is indicative of change in progress. Instead, it may simply be an age-graded variation. That is to say, the applicability of the apparent-time hypothesis should be confirmed by real-time evidence, which may be gathered from a longitudinal study of a population over an extended period of time.

⁶ The distinctive features of Chinese CMC discourse have been documented (e.g., Jin 2000). If these features persist, they may influence the non-CMC discourse structures of Chinese, just as they do with the Chinese lexicon and syntax.

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