Chapter 18
Language 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 linguistic 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 has diffused rapidly in 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

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