

# Chinese Internet language: A sociolinguistic analysis of adaptations of the Chinese writing system

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## Abstract

This paper examines the adaptations of the writing system in Internet language in mainland China from a sociolinguistic perspective. A comparison is also made of the adaptations in mainland China with those that Su (2003) found in Taiwan.

In Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC), writing systems are often adapted to compensate for their inherent inadequacies (such as difficulty in input). Su (2003) investigates the creative uses of the writing system on the electronic bulletin boards (BBS) of two college student organizations in Taipei, Taiwan, and identifies four popular and creative uses of the Chinese writing system: stylized English, stylized Taiwanese-accented Mandarin, stylized Taiwanese, and the recycling of a transliteration alphabet used in elementary education.

According to Coupland (2001; cited in Su 2003), stylization is “the knowing deployment of culturally familiar styles and identities that are marked as deviating from those predictably associated with the current speaking context”. Within this framework and drawing on the data in previous publications on Internet language and online sources, this study identifies five types of adaptations in mainland China’s Internet language: stylized Mandarin (e.g., 漂漂 *piāopiāo* for 漂亮 ‘beautiful’), stylized dialect-accented Mandarin (e.g., 灰常 *huīcháng* for 非常 ‘very much’), stylized English (e.g., 伊妹儿 *yīmèier* for ‘email’), stylized initials (e.g., bt 变态 *biàntài* for ‘abnormal’; pk, short form for ‘player kill’), and stylized numbers (e.g., 9494 *jiùshì jiùshì* 就是就是 ‘that is it’).

The Internet community is composed of highly mobile individuals and thus forms a weak-tie social network. According to Milroy and Milroy (1992), a social network with weak ties is often where language innovation takes place. Adaptations of the Chinese writing system in Internet language provide interesting evidence for the innovations within a weak-tie social network.

Our comparison of adaptations in mainland China and Taiwan shows that, in maximizing the effectiveness and functionality of their communication, participants of Internet communication are confronted with different language resources and situations, including differences in Romanization systems, English proficiency level, and attitudes towards English usage.

As argued by Milroy and Milroy (1992), a weak-tie social network model can bridge the social class and social network. In the Internet community, the degree of diversity of the stylized linguistic varieties indexes the virtual and/or social status of its participants: the more diversified one's Internet language is, the higher is his/her virtual and/or social status.

## 1. Introduction

With the rapid popularization of Internet use, recent years have witnessed numerous studies on Internet language or Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). Crystal termed Internet language as “displaying features that are unique to the Internet, and encountered in all the above situations [internet], arising out of its character as a medium which is electronic, global, and interactive” (2001: 18). Modern linguistics has taken spoken languages as its essential object of study and treats writing only as a speech surrogate, “merely a way of recording language by means of visible marks” (Bloomfield 1933: 21). However, when it comes to CMC, specifically online chatting, the boundaries between writing and speaking become so fuzzy that some writers called Internet language “written speech” (Crystal 2001: 25). Davis and Brewer (1997: 2) commented that “electronic communication written on keyboards and read on computer screens has many characteristics of both speech and writing”. Biber pointed out that “there is no single, absolute difference between speech and writing in English, rather there are several dimensions of variation, and particular types of speech and writing are more or less similar with respect to each dimension” (in Davis & Brewer 1997: 4). In online communication, the spoken communication is conducted via the medium of writing, which makes it carry both the features of writing and speaking. To accommodate the inadequacies of a writing system as well as in the invisibility of each other's visual and audio gestures, writing systems will be accordingly adapted. Crystal (2001) gave a very detailed description of the “unique features” of English Internet language, including the hybrid combination of written and spoken features, among others.

Chinese, as a logographical language, will surely resort to different strategies in accommodating the Internet language. Su (2003) investigated the creative uses of writing systems *Language@Internet 2/2007* (www.languageatinternet.de, urn:nbn:de:0009-7-11425, ISSN 1860-2029)

on electronic bulletin boards (BBS) of two college students' organizations in Taipei, Taiwan, and identified four popular creative uses of the Chinese writing system: the rendering in Chinese characters of the sounds of English, Taiwanese, and Taiwanese-accented Mandarin, and the recycling of a transliteration alphabet used in elementary education. Drawing on Rampton's and Coupland's concepts of stylization (Su 2003), which is defined by Coupland (2001) as "the knowing deployment of culturally familiar styles and identities that are marked as deviating from those predictably associated with the current speaking context" and which is considered as operating "in a specific mode of social action, performance in the strong, theatrical, and quasi-theatrical sense of that term", Su named the first three creative uses as "stylized English", "stylized Taiwanese-accented Mandarin", and "stylized Taiwanese". Gao and Yuan (2005) discussed the linguistic construction of modernity in Computer-Mediated Communication, mainly in Mainland China. They argued that the use of Chinese Internet language is "not only to serve the purpose of information communication, but also, perhaps more importantly, to construct a modern identity." Gao (2006) discussed language contact and convergence in Computer-Mediated Communication in Mainland China. He examined samples of Chinese Internet language, represented at the lexical, sentential, and discourse levels and argued that the impact of English upon Mandarin Chinese, coupled with the ever increasing use of Computer-Mediated Communication in Mainland China may have implications for change in Chinese.

There are numerous studies about Chinese Internet languages in Mainland Chinese in recent years (He & He 2003; Lin 2002; Wu 2003; Yao 2005, among many others). However, few studies, if any, have gone beyond the mere description to link the discussion of Internet language with sociolinguistic analysis. The present study aims to make up for this gap in Internet language studies conducted in Mainland China. Efforts are firstly made to reorganize the adaptations of the Chinese writing system in Chinese Internet language. Then these adaptations will be socio-

linguistically analyzed and comparisons and contrasts will be made between Mainland's adaptations and Taiwan's adaptations before discussing the implications of these adaptations.

Questions to be addressed are as follows:

1) In comparison with what Su (2003) has discovered about the creative uses of Chinese writing systems in Taiwan, what are the differences between Mainland China and Taiwan?

2) What are the explanations for the above differences, if any?

3) How do the adaptations of writing systems correlate with the identity of online chatters?

Is what Gao and Yuan (2005) found about modern identity corroborated?

4) Do network strengths account for the innovations of Chinese writing systems on the Internet, as argued by Milroy and Milroy (1992)?

## **2. Theoretical background**

### *2.1 Weak-tie network model*

Social network studies of language variation and change typically define a network through contacts of friendship and kinship in a shared territory, in which a higher frequency of contact tends to mean a greater multiplexity of social ties. (Paolillo 2001: 186)

Milroy and Milroy (1992) stressed the importance of the concept of close-knit territorially-based networks. These groups are important in that they can provide a focal point for stigmatized urban vernaculars and other non-legitimized linguistic norms. These close-knit networks have the capacity to maintain and even enforce local conventions and norms, including linguistic norms, and provide a means of opposing dominant institutional values and standardized linguistic norms. Between different close-knit social networks, there can be either strong ties or network ties. Milroy and Milroy agreed with Granovetter (1973, 1982; Milroy & Milroy 1992) in arguing that "it is the weak ties between relatively close-knit groups through which innovation and influence

flow that lead to an overall social cohesion capable of balancing the fragmentation and conflict associated with strong ties”.

Paolillo (2001) employed the weak-tie social network model in analyzing the language variation on IRC (Internet Relay Chat) and concluded that there is a definite relationship between tie strength and linguistic variation. Paolillo pointed out that

the preponderance of weak ties is in part a property of the IRC medium and the social contexts in which it is embedded. The relative mobility of participants, by hopping from IRC channel to channel, by changing servers within an IRC network and by connecting to different networks, even at the same time, means that any given IRC participant will develop more weak ties than strong ties. Moreover, weak ties may connect participants to overlapping, potentially conflicting centers of powers, each of which may contribute its own linguistic norms. Thus, an IRC channel exists at the nexus of a multiplicity of influences offering competing linguistic variants, most of which are associated with weak ties. It is in this context that the notion of a standard variable as belonging to the ‘legitimized’ code becomes problematic. (Paolillo 2001: 208)

In Granovetter’s model (1973; Paolillo 2001: 209), the numerous smaller groups of a society, while internally bound by strong ties, are bound to one another by weak, not strong ties – the cohesiveness of the larger society is manifest through these inter-group weak ties. In this sense, weak ties enforce norms just as strong ties do, but at a level which represents an individual’s belonging to a large society, rather than a local neighborhood group. This perspective suggests a sense of “standard” meaning which is held in common through the cohesion of a larger social group. For such a standard, its legitimization is in its widespread use – in its acceptance as currency by members of a larger social group, rather than by a power elite.

## *2.2 Language and identity*

Language does not merely function to convey ideas; it equally presents the image or identity of speakers. Under different circumstances, individuals might alter their language to reflect their particular identities accordingly. An individual may have multiple and dynamic identities as suggested by Gao and Yuan (2005: 68) that identities shall be viewed “as not merely reflected in *Language@Internet 2/2007* (www.languageatinternet.de, urn:nbn:de:0009-7-11425, ISSN 1860-2029)

but also, more importantly, deliberated and actively constructed by the use of language”. LePage and Tabouret-Keller (1985) argued that people make conscious as well as subconscious choices regarding their linguistic behaviors in accordance with their orientation towards, or away from, certain social groups (in Gao & Yuan 2005: 68). Gao and Yuan (2005) argued that the creation of Chinese Internet language serves to create a modern identity for netizens.

### **3. Discourse adaptations of writing systems in Internet language in Mainland China**

The present research focuses on the adaptations of Chinese writing systems in Internet language. Therefore, only innovations at lexical levels will be discussed. As a matter of fact, even though Gao and Yuan (2005) and Gao (2006) mentioned that Chinese syntax is also undergoing some changes in the Internet language, as in 我看书在图书馆 (‘I read books at library’), for which the sentence order in standard Chinese should be ‘I at the library read books’, meaning that ‘I was reading books at the library’ (Gao & Yuan 2003: 71), I suspect that structures of this type will be prevalent or finally transform Chinese syntax. Actually, structures of the like have long been existing in song lyrics or poems. Unless there is otherwise more convincing evidence, I would take a doubtful attitude toward this possibility.

Su (2003) adopted Rampton’s (1995) and Coupland’s (2001) concept of “stylization” in classifying the creative uses of writing systems in Taiwan for two reasons: on the one hand, those creative uses are “marked-choices on the Taiwan-based Internet, and their use carries a strong sense of playfulness and performs an online persona”; on the other hand, these “online practices they denote carry with them the social meanings of English, Taiwanese-accented Mandarin, and Taiwanese from more familiar daily contexts”. She argued that the everyday meanings of these languages and dialects are borrowed and reproduced online, creating a unique mode of communication.

As mentioned in the introductory part, there have already been numerous studies regarding Chinese Internet languages. Therefore what I am doing here is to draw on the previous research and reorganize it according to the types of adaptation of the Chinese writing systems.

With respect to the similarities between Taiwan and Mainland China in language and culture, Su's model of Stylization is to be employed here so that the comparison and contrast between adaptations in Taiwan and Mainland Chinese will be facilitated. Five adaptations are identified in Mainland Chinese Internet chat language.

#### 1 Stylized Mandarin:

This category constitutes the majority of the previous literature. Why it is named "stylized Mandarin" is because these lexical items either did not exist in Mandarin before or have totally different references in Internet language. Most of Gao and Yuan's lexical examples (2005) fall within this category. Some examples are cited as follows:

- a) *Jiajie* 假借 ('borrowing')<sup>1</sup>, e.g., *mao* 猫 cat 'modem'; *guanshui* 灌水 (in standard Chinese, it means 'to fill something with water', as in "I filled the bottle with water") irrigate-water 'posting many (low-quality) articles on BBSs (for example: Lucy asks me "what are you doing?" I answer: "I am guanshui+ing" which means that I am asking or answering questions online in a BBS)", etc. Words in this subcategory are already in the Mandarin vocabulary but are borrowed into Internet language to refer to something totally different, even though there may be some metaphorical relationship between them;
- b) *Shuoming* 说明 ('explanation'), e. g., *wangchong* 网虫 net-insect 'people addicted to Internet'; *wangba* 网吧 net-bar 'Internet pub', etc. These words are mostly compounds which are coined to refer to the new concepts related to the Internet;
- c) *Cisuchongdie* 词素重叠 ('morpheme repetition'), e.g., *piaopiao* 漂漂 beautiful-beautiful 'beautiful'; *huaihuai* 坏坏 bad-bad 'bad'; *papa* 怕怕 afraid-afraid 'fearful', etc. Words in this group are usually used by children and the youth (mostly female). They are used in Internet language to create a sense of playfulness;
- d) *Yinjingzhaizhao* 音近改造 ('near homophonization'), e.g., *banzhu* 斑竹 speckle-

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<sup>1</sup> When an example is given, pinyin (a system representing Chinese sounds in the Roman alphabet) is given first, followed by Chinese characters, an English literary translation as well as an English equivalent, and possibly illustrations of its usage, if necessary.

bamboo ‘person in charge of a BBS topic’, etc. In this subcategory, tones of words are played around so that a sense of humor is created;

- e) *Jiucixinjie* 旧词新解 (‘semantic shift’), e.g. *ouxiang* 偶像 (idol) idol-picture ‘disgusting persons’ (It is often used to express a sense of humor or satire); *konglong* 恐龙 (dinosaur) scary-dragon ‘unattractive but extremely active female online’, etc.

## 2 Stylized dialect-accented Mandarin:

There are various dialects of Mandarin in Mainland China. The popularity of the Internet enables people speaking different dialects to interact with each other. Coupled with the impact of mass media, it is inevitable that Internet language will be impacted by different dialects. Some examples are cited as follows<sup>2</sup>.

- a) *ou* 偶 for *wo* 我 ‘I, me, my’: In Ningbo and Taiwan dialects, ‘I’ is pronounced like *ou*. Although it is not sure whether *ou* comes from the Ningbo dialect, this expression has become rather popular in Internet language, especially, among young people;
- b) *kao* 靠<sup>2</sup> (It means “to curse somebody”. It is not only used on the Internet, but also in the speech of young people), which is borrowed from the Minnan dialect in Taiwan, and is used to express dissatisfaction or anger;
- c) *xiao pi hai* 小屁孩, from Northern Mandarin, refers to young people who are not well acquainted with the Internet or ignorant, with despising tone;
- d) *huichang* 灰常 for *feichang* 非常 ‘very much’, which is very likely borrowed from the Min dialect; and 淫 for 人 which comes from Northeastern Mandarin;

Not only Chinese dialects are adapted to Internet language, some other languages are also appealed to. One example from Japanese is given below (English adaptations will be separately discussed).

- e) *de shuo* 的说, which is from the Japanese structure “……と いいます”, meaning ‘to think’. One example is 似乎他态度强硬的说 ‘it seems that his attitude is very sturdy.’

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<sup>2</sup> Most examples in this section are from the following websites:

<http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E7%BD%91%E7%BB%9C%E8%AF%AD%E8%A8%80>

[http://forum.taobao.com/forum-27/show\\_thread---7219656-.htm](http://forum.taobao.com/forum-27/show_thread---7219656-.htm)

[http://www.cuc.net.cn/Article\\_Show.asp?ArticleID=3330](http://www.cuc.net.cn/Article_Show.asp?ArticleID=3330)

<http://blog.csdn.net/huyoo/archive/2004/11/13/179733.aspx>

### 3 Stylized English:

Many people in Internet communication are English literate; therefore, it is evitable that stylized English will be frequently used. There are two major subcategories. One is the transliteration of English phrases with Chinese characters. Some examples are as follows:

- a) *heike* 黑客 ‘hacker’
- b) *ku* 酷 ‘cool’
- c) *yimeier* 伊妹儿 ‘email’
- d) *fensi* 粉丝 ‘fans’
- e) *boke* 博客 ‘blog’
- f) *fente* 分特 ‘faint’
- g) *xiu* 秀 ‘show’

Another subcategory, though not many in number, is also in popular use. One example is given below:

- h) .....*ing*, denoting being in a continuous state, e.g., *wuxian yumen ing* 无限郁闷*ing*, ‘extremely depressing’.

### 4 Stylized initials

Of all the adaptations of writing systems in Chinese Internet language, this category is predominant, which corresponds with what has been found about English Internet chat (Blakeman 2004). Without the knowledge of this category, it would be difficult for one to understand Chinese Internet language. Two subcategories are identified, namely Pinyin initials (a Chinese transcription system of sounds with the Roman alphabet) and English letter initials.

Pinyin initials refer to the adoption of the first pinyin of each character in a Chinese phrase. Some examples are given below:

- a) *mm* (from *meimei* 妹妹 ‘girls’ or ‘girlfriend’), *gg* (from *gege* 哥哥 ‘boys’ or ‘boyfriend’), *plmm* (from *piaoliang meimei* 漂亮妹妹 ‘beautiful girls’);
- b) *rpwt* (*renpin wenti* 人品问题, ‘problem of personality’. It is usually used to kid somebody. For example: A: Why can I not open this door, while others can? B: It’s your *rpwt*.) *fb* (*fubai* 腐败 ‘to eat big meals’), *bt* (*biantai* 变态 ‘abnormal’), *bs* (*bishi* 鄙视 ‘to despise’).

These Pinyin initials are mainly derived from popular, and in most cases humorous Chinese phrases, which are constrained by temporary factors. It is predictable that many of these initials will disappear as time elapses, but also that many others will appear.

English letter initials refer to the adoption of the first letter in an English phrase or sentence (in that sense, it may also be argued that it is code-mixing, instead of adaptations in Chinese Internet language). Some examples are given below:

- c) *gf* for ‘girl friend’, *bf* for ‘boy friend’
- d) *re*, short form for ‘regarding’
- e) *lol*, short form for ‘laugh out loudly’
- f) *pk*, short form for ‘player kill’; (It is usually used in the competition between two people, e.g., we say A PK B)
- g) *cu*, short form for ‘see you’.

In Blakeman (2004), initials of this type are the majority in English IRC. As argued by Blakeman, it is understandable that to compensate the inefficiencies of manually inputting sentences, Internet chatters prefer to use initials in communicating.

- 5 Stylized numbers: This category is the result of the prevalence of pagers a decade or so ago. Due to the convenience, the number initials are transferred to Internet language. Some examples are given below:

*555*: denoting pretended sorrow, crying; *7456, qisi wo le* 气死我了 ‘indignant’; *9494, jiushi jiushi* 就是就是 ‘that is it’; *748, qusi ba* 去死吧 ‘go to hell’; *8147, buyao shengqi* 不要生气 ‘do not be angry’; *886, baibai la* 拜拜拉 ‘see you’; *521, wo ai ni* 我爱你 ‘I Love You’

#### **4. Comparison and contrast of adaptations of Chinese writing systems between Taiwan and Mainland China**

Great differences are found between adaptations in mainland China and those in Taiwan discussed in Su (2003). Firstly, Su merely discussed the creative uses of Chinese writing systems with respect to the stylized representations, namely the use of Chinese characters to represent linguistic varieties other than Mandarin. Thus she only identified three types of stylized representations. However, the use of Chinese characters to represent non-Mandarin linguistic varieties is not the only adaptation of Chinese writing systems. I argue that the adaptation of Mandarin itself in Internet language should also be included. That is also the guiding principle in summarizing the above adaptations in Mainland China. As Blakeman (2004) found in his study of English, Internet language is fraught with initializations. However, both Wikipedia and Zhang and Dai (2006) indicated that stylized initials and stylized numbers are very rarely used in Taiwan. The fourth and *Language@Internet 2/2007* (www.languageatinternet.de, urn:nbn:de:0009-7-11425, ISSN 1860-2029)

the most popular type of creative use of writing systems in Su (2003) is “Zhuyin wen” (注音文).

One example she gave is cited below:

<i>Zhuyin Wen</i>	—	ㄍ	ㄏ	ㄗ
<i>Pinyin of Zhuyin Wen</i>	i	g	h	z
<i>The Intended Character</i>	—	個	盒	子
<i>Pinyin of the Intended Character</i>	yi	ge	he	zi
<i>Phrasal Meaning</i>	“a box”			

Because in “Zhuyin wen” the complete phonetic representation of a character is reduced to a consonant (or less commonly, a vowel), readers have to figure out the missing vowels. This creative use is gaining popularity as well as criticism in Taiwan. The above example shows that, even though taking different forms, “Zhuyin wen” are equivalents to Pinyin initials, which suggests that adaptations are constrained by the available language resources.

It is hard to understand why there is a lack of English letter initials. Considering the general higher level of English proficiency in Taiwan than in mainland China, there are only two possible explanations, one being that there are more code mixings between Mandarin and English and the other being that in Taiwan one tends to transcribe English words in Taiwanese or Mandarin characters. Su (2003) gave two examples of stylized English in Taiwan, 奥买尬 for ‘Oh, my god’ and 古耐 for ‘Good night’. Even though these two examples are understandable to people in Mainland China if associations are made with English, I at least, have never seen people use such examples in Internet chat in mainland China. Another example is from Zhang and Dai (2006), 辜狗 for ‘google’, which is not used in Chinese Internet language, either.

Therefore, I argue that different language environments in Taiwan and Mainland China lead to a different treatment of English words. Also netizens in Taiwan tend to use Mandarin characters to transcribe English words much more often than in Mainland China. In Mainland China, only those really popular English words are transcribed this way and have been

incorporated into Chinese lexicons. For other English words, netizens in Mainland China prefer to use the initials to represent them.

In comparison with mainland China, Taiwan generally has a higher level of English proficiency and a higher percentage of English speakers. A glimpse of any Taiwan TV show will encounter situations where people code-mix Mandarin and English. And the mixing of Mandarin and English is not considered unfavorable in Taiwan. By contrast, in mainland China, to mix Mandarin and English is usually thought of as showing off and is unconsciously discouraged. Even though the virtual Internet community greatly reduces the limits in the physical community, those constraints still hold true online. Therefore there are fewer stylized English lexicons in mainland China and those which are actually used are merely those which have been incorporated to the Chinese lexicon. However, the nature of Internet chat and the trouble in inputting Chinese characters, coupled with the fact that many participants in Internet communication are well-educated, contribute to the wide use of English words in Internet communication. The use of English is not within the scope of the present discussion. However, to improve Internet communication, many English words or phrases, even sentences are truncated or shortened and become initials. Strictly speaking, English initialization is not adaptation of Chinese system, but at most a complement to Internet language. However, they are so widely used that they have become an integral part of Chinese Internet language.

Meanwhile, different from stylized Taiwanese and stylized Taiwanese-accented Mandarin, there are more stylized Mandarin words in Mainland China. As discussed above, there are also examples of stylized dialect-accented Mandarin used in Mainland China; however, their proportion is rather small. These divergences can be understood by examining the linguistic situations in Taiwan and Mainland China. In Taiwan, both Mandarin and Taiwanese are widely spoken, together with some other dialects whereas in Mainland China, Mandarin is the major language spoken, along with many other dialects. Therefore, in adapting to the Internet language,

netizens in Taiwan would appeal to both Taiwanese and Mandarin whereas in Mainland China, Mandarin is often the only language to appeal to. Another possible factor is the population of netizens in Taiwan and Mainland China. As there are many more netizens in Mainland China than in Taiwan, there are accordingly more innovations in terms of stylized Mandarin.

The differences between the adaptation of writing systems between Taiwan and Mainland China reflect the different language situations confronting netizens across the straits. As netizens are innovating their Internet language, they are inevitably constrained by the linguistic resources available to them. As Blakeman (2004) said that people

used a combination of their knowledge of language combined with their innate creative abilities to write an existing language in new and original ways. They are using the limitations of a keyboard to invent a new online lexicon, taking the best features from certain aspects of the written language and combing them to create a new variety of language best suited to the chat room environment. (Blakeman 2004)

#### **4. A sociolinguistic analysis of adaptations of writing systems in Internet language in Mainland China**

To analyze the sociolinguistic connotations of the adaptations of writing systems in Chinese Internet language entails a better understanding of the Internet community. The Internet community is composed of highly mobile individuals. Because individuals are involved in various sub-communities online, they are not attached to any particular group. In this sense, individuals on the internet have weak ties with the whole Internet community. According to Milroy and Milroy (1992), social network composed of weak ties is where innovation takes place. Different from the physical world, where highly mobile individuals innovate their language according to their particular motivations, such as conforming to the standard language; individuals in cyberspace innovate their language in accordance with the particular nature of the Internet communication, such as the nature of written speech, the trouble of input and so on. On the other hand, the large number of individuals online will inevitably form some close-knit social networks as well and enforce the existing language innovations or adaptations. Even though there exist only weak ties

between various close-knit strong-tie groups, the necessity of expedient communication online will sooner or later shape the formation of the “standard” Internet language, which is different from the real standard language in the physical world. And late comers have to converge to the “standard” language to become involved in the internet community. In this sense, Internet language is more or less similar to jargons in a particular field.

Milroy and Milroy (1992) proposed a weak-tie network model in order to link the macroscopic social class with the microscopic social network. Our discussion above attests to the importance of weak-tie networks in the formation of Internet language. Then is there class distinction in the Internet community? Common sense tells us that in the physical world of mainland China, the language hierarchy in terms of prestige is English > Mandarin (Putonghua) > dialects. When it comes to the Internet language, is the same order maintained? It makes sense if we say persons who initialized the use of stylized English may enjoy high prestige and persons who initialized the use of stylized dialects may enjoy lower prestige. However, one of the typical features of Internet language is playfulness or a sense of humor (see Su 2003), which blurs the boundaries between different classes. It is very likely that a person with high prestige may intentionally use stylized dialects in order to be playful or display his/her sense of humor. And it is also likely that another individual with lower prestige may use some stylized dialect items for no reason other than that that is his/her usual way of speaking. In this sense, Internet language does not index individuals’ social status.

However, does it mean that participants involved in Internet communication have a uniform status or identity? The existence of a large amount of newbies online implies that there is still a hierarchical structure on the Internet. The more one knows about Internet language, the higher one will be in the hierarchy. Even though the hierarchy does not directly link with social status or class, they have similar connotations. From another perspective, those who can initiate new uses of Internet language will also hold a high position in the Internet community.

On the other hand, even though all these stylized adaptations are available to Internet participants, different varieties are not equally valued and used. For many people who are not well educated, they are constrained in their stylized Internet language. And it is very likely that stylized English is not often used in their chatting. For those highly-educated individuals, they can manipulate their stylized Internet language and freely choose any variety they like. In this sense, the diversity of stylized varieties used in Internet language also indexes one's social class or status. The more diversified one's language is, the more likely his social status will be.

## **6. Conclusion**

The present study discussed the adaptations of Chinese writing systems in Internet language. There are many differences between adaptations in Mainland China and those in Taiwan. I argued that when adapting to the internet, netizens are constrained by the available language resources, which might account for the differences between Taiwan and Mainland China.

Gao and Yuan (2005: 76) argued that young and educated Chinese netizens construct modern identities through the use of Internet language, namely, a fashionable and cool identity, an interesting and entertaining identity, an unconventional and even rebellious identity, an internationally oriented or transnational identity, and a knowledgeable or technologically advanced identity. These so-called modern identities are conveyed by the innovations or adaptations of Chinese writing systems. However, in the seemingly democratic Internet community, there exists the hierarchy of class and status as well. The degree of diversity of stylized varieties in Internet communication indexes the virtual and/or social status of its participants in the Internet community: the more diversified one's Internet language is, the higher is his/her virtual and/or social status.

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