

“(scream)(wriggle)(dismally crawl)” - Parentheses as semiotic resources for creative linguistic practices on Chinese micro-blogging

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Abstract

While extensive research has explored translanguaging practices online in relation to named languages (e.g., Author, 2022a), dialects (e.g., Author, 2022b), semiotic resources (e.g., Li & Zhu, 2019) in China, conventional written signs and symbols, such as punctuation, are often under-researched despite their creative, multifunctional and playful potential in online communication. Contributing to creative linguistic and translanguaging practices, this study investigates the use of a particular type of punctuation – parentheses – on a Chinese micro-blogging site, Weibo. Inspired by previous studies on creative adoptions of parentheses online (e.g., Xie, Tong & Yus, 2020), this paper explores how online users harness parentheses - brackets originally used to provide additional information in the text – to realize various pragmatic functions and how creative adoptions of such semiotic resources facilitate the translanguaging practices featured with playfulness, multi-functionality, and trans-boundary communication.

Data were collected using an automatic data crawler programmed in the Python language with keywords “parenthesis literature” - a cyberliteracy in which parentheses are often used in a way that deviates from its conventional usages, along with manual data collection using salient topics emerged from the initial data collection via the search engine on Weibo, yielding 500 posts for analysis. Following a ground theory approach in pragmatic inquiry, the analysis identified five types of pragmatic functions of parentheses, including stage directions parentheticals, annotation, ellipsis, backstage voice, and stylizing emojis. Online users adopt parentheses to imitate dramaturgical scripts, frame a self-mockery tone, mitigate possible face-threatening utterances, stage backstage voices, and more. Instead of treating semiosis and language codes as distinctive entities, we argue that online users create space for innovative transcending linguistic practices via the fluid control of semiotic resources, during which they turn conventional punctuation into pragmatic markers, rendering extra-linguistic resources equally important components in meaning-making in the multilingual world.

Keywords: parentheses; translanguaging; trans-semiotizing; pragmatics; Weibo

References

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