Social Dimensions of Reduplicatives in Chinese Netspeak

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Abstract: In the Chinese internet context, netspeak is constantly being created, transformed, and disseminated in real time. Among various forms of netspeak, reduplicatives have emerged as a common and stylistically distinctive linguistic pattern. However, despite their widespread presence, the use of netspeak reduplicatives has rarely been examined through empirical research, particularly in terms of their usage patterns across different social groups. To address this gap, the present study investigates the use intention and patterns of ten selected netspeak reduplicatives from a multidimensional perspective, considering key demographic variables such as age, gender, and intensity of internet use. Data were collected through two structured questionnaires and analyzed using SPSS. The results indicate that among the examined social variables, only age had a statistically significant impact on the use intention of netspeak reduplicatives. Specifically, younger participants demonstrated a higher intention to use these forms, while older participants were less inclined to adopt them in their online communication. These findings highlight a generational divide in the acceptance and integration of evolving linguistic forms within the digital space.

1. Introduction

In today's efficiency-driven era, reduplicative expressions may seem redundant—especially for computers, where repeated code yields identical outcomes. However, in human language, reduplication goes beyond mere repetition; it adds aesthetic value and vividness to communication. In Chinese linguistics, reduplication has long been a key area of study and is now an integral part of the language.

With the rise of digital communication, the internet has given birth to netspeak—a dynamic linguistic form. In Chinese cyberspace, netspeak has gained widespread attention; an annual poll for each year's most popular terms attracting millions of participants. Media focus has further increased its integration and spread into everyday life [1].

Over the past two decades, Chinese internet culture has generated a wealth of reduplicatives. Yet, few studies have addressed this cyber variant, and those that do often rely on outdated examples. As the most burgeoning way of communication at present, netspeak can provide a new perspective to explore the reduplication area. This paper examines ten recent Chinese netspeak reduplicatives to explore how social factors shape their use.

2. Literature Review

Reduplicatives have been extensively studied since the mid-20th century, with foundational works like the syntactic transition, structural analysis or semantic transformation by Fan, Liu and Zhou [2-4]. In recent decades, research has continued, with a focus shifting toward translation issues and reduplication in netspeak.

Crystal described netspeak as a fundamentally new linguistic medium [5]. Building on this, Jurida emphasized that "-speak" encompasses elements of writing, speaking, listening, and reading, which revealed that netspeak can be analyzed from not only written level but also spoken level [6]. Duan summarized netspeak as brief, symbolic, digitized, and visual in form, while its content tends to be innovative, colloquial, coarse, and up-to-date [7].

Research on netspeak reduplicatives is still emerging. Jiang analyzed the "AABB" pattern and its functions in Chinese internet discourse [8]. Sui categorized netspeak reduplicatives into three lexical classes [9], which Huo further examined in detail [10]. However, there remains a lack of quantitative research examining how social factors influence the intentional use of netspeak reduplicatives across different user groups. This study aims to address that gap by conducting an experimental investigation into how social variables—such as age, gender, and internet use attitude—affect the usage intention of Chinese netspeak reduplicatives.

3. Methodology

To investigate the effects and relationships between social factors and use intention of netspeak reduplicatives, this study conducted an experiment. This section introduces the main participants and research instruments, including the selected lexical items, user groups, and the questionnaires utilized.

3.1. Lexical Items for the Experiment

The ten netspeak reduplicative items selected for this study are drawn from the "Cyber Words of the Year" lists of the past decade and are categorized into two groups: dialectal and non-dialectal. Table 1 lists these ten items along with their International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) transcriptions and glosses. Among them, R1 and R9 are onomatopoeic expressions originating from the Chinese dialect, while the remaining eight items are classified as non-dialectal.

Table 1: Word List of Ten Netspeak Reduplicatives with IPA Transcriptions and Glosses.

Label	IPA Transcriptions	Glosses
R1	[kʰu˥kʰu˥]	**Adverb.** An onomatopoeic expression describing hurried movement
R2	[tɕyɛˊtɕyɛˊ tszˇ˩]	**Adjective.** An expression conveying admiration or approval
R3	[puˇ ɕi˥ɕi˥]	**Adjective.** An expression describing a disapproving attitude, suggesting a sudden emotional shift from joy to frustration
R4	[ʂweɪˇ˩ liŋˊliŋˊ]	**Adverb.** An expression conveying youthful energy, often with a sarcastic or self-deprecating tone
R5	[məŋˊməŋˊ ta˥]	**Adjective.** An expression meaning cute or lovable
R6	[kʰaŋ˥kʰaŋ˥]	**Verb.** A playful or softened variant of the verb meaning "to look"
R7	[yˇyˇ]	**Verb.** A playful or softened variant of the verb meaning "to feel sad or depressed"
R8	[mɔ˥mɔ˥ta˥]	**Interjection.** An onomatopoeic expression mimicking the sound of a kiss to convey affection
R9	[tɕʰy˥tɕʰy]	**Verb.** An onomatopoeic expression meaning "to gossip" or "to chat informally"
R10	[ʂuˇ˩ʂuˇ˩]	**Noun.** A self-deprecating term used with dark humor by marginalized or overworked individuals to refer to themselves

Among these ten items, only R1 and R9 exemplify linguistic forms with dual identities, functioning simultaneously as expressions of dialect and as elements of netspeak. Netspeak swiftly occupies the digital communication space of online communities, akin to how dialects circulate among speakers in geographically bounded regions—revealing a shared mechanism of transmission. Both R1 and R9, originally onomatopoeic terms from the Northeastern Chinese dialect, have been widely adopted in digital discourse. Their transition from regional dialect to digital speak form highlights how traditional linguistic forms integrate into contemporary internet language.

3.2. Participants

This study surveyed 32 participants of varying genders, ages, and levels of internet use intention. The gender distribution included 16 males and 16 females. In terms of age, one participant was under 18, 13 were aged 18–25, two were 26–30, four were 31–40, five were 41–50, and seven were 51–60. Overall, 16 participants were under the age of 30, and 16 were over 30.

3.3. Instruments

To examine use intention of netspeak reduplicatives, a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire adopted and refined from Zhang were employed [11]. The participants' basic information includes age and gender were also collected by this questionnaire. Moreover, participants were asked to finish a self-designed 5-point Likert scale questionnaire simultaneously, measuring internet use intention. In total, 64 effective questionnaires are collected. All quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 27.0.

4. Results

This section presents the statistical results analyzed using SPSS to address the following research questions: First, whether there are significant differences in use intention of netspeak reduplicatives among groups with different levels of internet use intention, gender, and age. Second, what correlations exist between age and use intention of netspeak reduplicatives.

4.1. Group Differences in Use Intention of Netspeak Reduplicatives

In this section, independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine whether significant differences in use intention of netspeak reduplicatives existed across groups categorized by age, gender, and internet use intention.

Table 2 shows that the p-values (labeled as "Sig.(2-tailed)" in SPSS) for R1, R3, R4, R6, R9, and R10 are all below 0.05, with some even below 0.01, indicating significant differences in the usage of these six netspeak reduplicatives across different age groups. Conversely, the p-values for R5, R2, R7, and R8 exceed 0.05, suggesting no significant differences in use intention among different age groups.

R5 and R8 are two netspeak reduplicatives that have been used for the longest time. When they were created, the middle-aged in this study might still be the young. Hence age is a less influential factor in the usage. Meanwhile, R7 was primarily created and used by users under 20 on platforms such as TikTok. Given the limited representation of younger participants in this study, no significant differences were observed in the usage of R7 across age groups. Furthermore, R2 and R7 have been criticized as symbols of linguistic deficiency and even as a proof of the regression of human language expression [12]. Consequently, these two words are less frequently used across all age groups, leading to no significant differences in their usage among different age groups.

Table 2: Independent Sample Test among Different Age Groups.

		t-test for Equality of Means				
		t	df	Sig. (2-taile d)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
R1	Equal variances assumed	3.294	30	0.003	0.938	0.285
	Equal variances not assumed	3.294	27.823	0.003	0.938	0.285
R2	Equal variances assumed	-0.343	30	0.734	-0.125	0.364
	Equal variances not assumed	-0.343	25.149	0.734	-0.125	0.364
R3	Equal variances assumed	2.828	30	0.008	0.688	0.243
	Equal variances not assumed	2.828	26.311	0.009	0.688	0.243
R4	Equal variances assumed	2.493	30	0.018	0.938	0.376
	Equal variances not assumed	2.493	25.67	0.019	0.938	0.376
R5	Equal variances assumed	-1.923	30	0.064	-0.687	0.358
	Equal variances not assumed	-1.923	27.714	0.065	-0.687	0.358
R6	Equal variances assumed	4.399	30	<0.001	1.25	0.284
	Equal variances not assumed	4.399	28.465	<0.001	1.25	0.284
R7	Equal variances assumed	1.513	30	0.141	0.375	0.248
	Equal variances not assumed	1.513	27.181	0.142	0.375	0.248
R8	Equal variances assumed	-0.333	30	0.741	-0.125	0.375
	Equal variances not assumed	-0.333	29.154	0.741	-0.125	0.375
R9	Equal variances assumed	3.612	30	0.001	1.313	0.363
	Equal variances not assumed	3.612	29.999	0.001	1.313	0.363
R10	Equal variances assumed	2.366	30	0.025	0.625	0.264
	Equal variances not assumed	2.366	25.809	0.026	0.625	0.264

In contrast, the independent samples t-test comparing gender and use intention of netspeak reduplicatives yielded p-values above 0.05 for all ten items, indicating no significant gender-based differences in use intention of any of the netspeak reduplicatives analyzed.

According to internet use intention, the sample was divided into two age groups: participants who are positive to internet usage (labeled "< 4" in SPSS) and participants who are negative to internet usage (labeled "≥ 4" in SPSS). Given the limited sample size, the homogeneity of variance cannot be assured. Consequently, the analysis will rely on results derived under the assumption of unequal variances.the variances may not be equivalent. Therefore, the statistics will also be taken as the result when the variances are assumed not equivalent. In Table 3, the p-values for R1, R2, R3, R7, R9, and R10 are all below 0.05, with some even below 0.01, indicating significant differences in the usage of these six netspeak reduplicatives across groups with different attitudes towards internet usage. Conversely, the p-values for R5, R4, R6 and R8 exceeds 0.05, suggesting no significant differences in their usage among groups with different attitudes towards internet usage.

R5, R8 and R6 have been used for more than a decade, which makes people familiar with them in daily life, hence attitudes have a very limited influence on their usage. Moreover, R4 possesses not only a netspeak meaning but also a daily expression meaning which is much easier to be accepted compared with other netspeak reduplicatives. These situations may result in no notable differences in use intention among groups with different attitudes towards internet use.

Table 3: Independent Sample Test among Groups with Different Internet Use Intention Levels.

		t-test for Equality of Means				
		t	df	Sig(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std Error Difference
R1	Equal variances assumed	1.142	30	0.263	0.767	0.672
	Equal variances not assumed	4.490	29	<0.001	0.767	0.171
R2	Equal variances assumed	1.464	30	0.154	1.067	0.729
	Equal variances not assumed	5.757	29	<0.001	1.067	0.185
R3	Equal variances assumed	1.020	30	0.316	0.567	0.556
	Equal variances not assumed	4.011	29	<0.001	0.567	0.141
R4	Equal variances assumed	0.589	30	0.560	0.500	0.849
	Equal variances not assumed	0.919	1.4	0.489	0.500	0.544
R5	Equal variances assumed	0.384	30	0.704	0.300	0.781
	Equal variances not assumed	0.295	1.08	0.815	0.300	1.018
R6	Equal variances assumed	-0.089	30	0.930	-0.067	0.753
	Equal variances not assumed	-0.066	1.07	0.958	-0.067	1.017
R7	Equal variances assumed	0.890	30	0.381	0.467	0.524
	Equal variances not assumed	3.500	29	0.002	0.467	0.133
R8	Equal variances assumed	0.781	30	0.441	0.600	0.768
	Equal variances not assumed	1.119	1.32	0.426	0.600	0.536
R9	Equal variances assumed	1.499	30	0.144	1.300	0.867
	Equal variances not assumed	5.896	29	<0.001	1.300	0.221
R10	Equal variances assumed	1.027	30	0.313	0.600	0.584
	Equal variances not assumed	4.039	29	<0.001	0.600	0.149

4.2. Age and the Use of Use Intention of Netspeak Reduplicatives

Since the p-values of six reduplicatives (R1, R3, R4, R6, R9, and R10) showed the most significant differences across age groups, a correlation analysis was conducted to examine the relationship between internet use intention and use intention of netspeak reduplicatives. Table 4 presents the correlation coefficients between age and use intention of each reduplicative. All coefficients show positive correlations ($r > 0$, $p < 0.05$), most of which are around 0.5, suggesting that age has a moderate influence on use intention. It is important to note that in this study, use intention was reverse-coded: a higher score indicates lower intention. Thus, positive correlations suggest that older participants tend to have lower use intention for netspeak reduplicatives, whereas younger participants demonstrate higher intention.

Table 4: Correlation between Age and Use Intention of Six Netspeak Reduplicatives.

Items	Mean	Standard deviation	Age	R1	R3	R4	R6	R9	R10
Age	3.63	1.72	1						
R1	4.28	0.92	0.56**	1					
R3	4.47	0.76	0.51**	0.59**	1				
R4	4.03	1.15	0.48**	0.42*	0.54**	1			
R6	4.06	1.01	0.64**	0.77**	0.63**	0.50**	1		
R9	3.78	1.21	0.50**	0.69**	0.53**	0.35*	0.62**	1	
R10	4.44	0.8	0.43*	0.74**	0.76**	0.41*	0.60**	0.47**	1
*p<0.05**P<0.01									

Moreover, the correlation coefficients among these six reduplicatives are all positive and statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), indicating a strong positive relationship in their usage patterns. This suggests that these netspeak reduplicatives—most of which emerged in recent years—may share a common user base or be used within overlapping online communities.

5. Conclusion

This study used two questionnaires to evaluate the effect of social factors—age, gender and internet use intention—on use intention of netspeak reduplicatives. The results demonstrate significant differences in the use intention of netspeak reduplicatives across age groups; in contrast, gender shows no significant effect on use intention. To some extent, internet use intention appears to influence use intention of netspeak reduplicatives; however, in this case, the variance of this factor was not equivalent, which may limit the robustness of this finding. Notably, age demonstrated a moderate effect, with older participants generally showing lower levels of use intention, whereas younger participants were more inclined to use netspeak reduplicatives. This study revealed the relationships between social factors and use intention of netspeak reduplicatives from an innovative quantitative perspective, thereby enriching the research field with empirical data. Furthermore, it highlights generational differences in language use within digital contexts, offering valuable implications for future sociolinguistics research.

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