Chapter 28
The Semantics of Human Interaction in Chinese E–Communication

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ABSTRACT
The current study investigated typical, everyday Chinese interaction online and examined what linguistic meanings arise from this form of communication – not only semantic but also, importantly, pragmatic, discursive, contextual and lexical meanings etc. In particular, it set out to ascertain whether at least some of the cultural values and norms etc. known to exist in Chinese culture, as reflected in the Chinese language, are maintained or preserved in modern Chinese e-communication. To do all this, the author collected a sample set of data from Chinese online resources found in Singapore, including a range of blog sites and MSN chat rooms where interactants have kept their identities anonymous. A radically semantic approach was adopted – namely, the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM) model – to analyze meanings that arose from the data. The analyses were presented and compiled in the way of “cultural cyberscripts” – based on an NSM analytical method called “cultural scripts”. Through these cyberscripts, findings indicated that, while this form of e-communication does exhibit some departure from conventional socio-cultural values and norms, something remains linguistically and culturally Chinese that is unique to Chinese interaction online.

INTRODUCTION
Wierzbicka (1991: 1) began her influential book with the statement that “language…is a tool of human interaction. [There are] various kinds of meanings which can be conveyed in language... – meanings which involve the interaction between the speaker and the hearer”. This statement is testament to the fact that linguists no less semanticists are greatly interested in human social interaction and discourse behavior. While there is ample research into everyday human interactions in Chinese Mandarin (‘Chinese’ hereafter), comparatively little has been discussed in everyday human interactions...
through computer-mediated communication (CMC hereafter) or e-communication in Chinese, even less different kinds of meanings that get conveyed between speakers and hearers in Chinese e-communication (e.g. pragmatic meanings, discursive meanings, contextual meanings, lexical meanings etc.). Having said this, there is no valid reason for putting off a discussion on the current trends and issues in everyday Chinese e-communication, since, after all, millions of users of Chinese have become increasingly dependent on modern technology through electronic means in an attempt to communicate with each other and to express their ideas and thoughts, meanings and even emotions etc.

This chapter presents some preliminary findings from human interaction and the kinds of meanings that it conveys in everyday Chinese e-communication, as reflected by Chinese CMC in Singapore, with the main impetus being finding out whether certain cultural norms, values and practices can (or cannot) be and are (or are not) attested/preserved in everyday electronic discourse behavior and e-communication. To be precise, using concepts guanxi lit. ‘network(ing), connection, relationship’, xiao wo ‘the smaller self’, da wo ‘the greater self’, shu ren ‘an old acquaintance’, sheng ren ‘a stranger’, ziji ren ‘an insider’, wai ren ‘an outsider’ and mian zi ‘face’ as a benchmark, it can be established whether certain Chinese cultural norms, values and practices encapsulated in these concepts have been preserved (or not) in Chinese CMC.

BACKGROUND

What, Who and Which Were Studied, and Where and When

Given the myriad of CMC sources especially those available in the Chinese language, a decision was made to confine the current study to only selected Chinese CMC in Singapore so as to make the project manageable. Human interactions and discourse behavior in typical e-communication from 112 Chinese blog sites and MSN chat rooms were extensively examined. In light of the fact that electronic resources are constantly being updated by its users (e.g. regular website maintenance, bloggers adding new posts etc.), it is useful to know that the data – which I often refer to as the ‘sample dataset’ in this chapter – were all collected during the first few months of 2009 (mainly between January and May 2009). Keeping track of ‘when’ the data were collected is also important to contemporary Chinese linguistics, since new words etc. have been entering into the Chinese language at an amazing rate. At the time the sample dataset was accessed, there were 1,506 participants i.e. bloggers and chat room users. Most, if not all, of the participants had kept their real identities anonymous. There were a total of approximately 33,507 words or 1,523 sentences collectively tallied from all the original posts (that is, if an online discussion did indeed originate from someone’s post). Within the 112 blog sites and MSN chat rooms, 2,082 posts in reply and subsequent to the original post were recorded. There were an estimated 111,432 words or 5,972 sentences collectively tallied from 2,082 posts.

One of the great advantages using data from Singapore is that it sits at the crossroads between the East and the West and is a fascinating melting pot of Chinese, Anglo, Malay and Indian cultures, with Chinese predominating both linguistically and culturally. Indeed, the Chinese language as it is spoken in modern Singapore has captivated the interest of experts, not least linguists, if for no other reason than to see how the language has or has not transformed in this very much multilingual and multicultural environment. But does this make Singapore Chinese any less of a ‘Chinese language’ than Chinese spoken elsewhere? To my mind, no. The reason is that no one Chinese-speaking region and/or community can claim to have remained monolingual without any external linguistic influences, such as influences from