

**MA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER**

**Netspeak in China: Features and Impact on Standard Chinese Language**

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## Overview

During the past ten years use of Internet has spread quickly in Mainland China. According to the “14th Statistical Survey Report on the Internet Development in China” provided by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), by January 30, 2004 the total number of Internet users in China had reached 87.0 million, an increase of 27.9% over a 12 month period.<sup>1</sup> As a fantastic communication technology that can build information bridges between any place on the earth, the Internet opens a new window for Chinese people towards the whole world.

At the same time, whether and how the Internet has and will have influence on Chinese society and traditional Chinese culture has been one of the important questions concerning the development of Internet in China. The way of communication through the Internet is potentially more powerful than earlier communication media such as the telephone, television, or broadcasting since it can provide communication channels for people to communicate not only through “one-to-one”, or “one-to-many”, but also “many-to-many” model: people have more power to influence changes in language online than in any other medium, since they operate on both sides of the communication divide: as receivers as well as producers. For this reason people have relatively more opportunities to participate in the online communication process and at the same time be influenced by this process or bring influence in this process. Just as the CNNIC report suggests, the Internet “has pervaded each corner of Chinese people’s lives”. The way Chinese people communicate, study, work and play has been changed greatly as a result of the new technology. As early as the year 1994, the most authoritative academic institute in Mainland China, Chinese Social Science Institute, regarded the study about the

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<sup>1</sup> The report is available online: <http://www.cnnic.cn/download/2004/2004072003.pdf>.

impact of Internet on Chinese society, Chinese culture and the mass media as core research topics. (Min, 1999) With the process of the popularity of Internet in Mainland China, several new phenomena have been generated and several new topics were raised that need to be explored including linguistics issues.

## **Introduction**

In order to explore the impact of Netspeak on the modern standard Chinese language, this study investigates the features and sources of Netspeak and then examines two anxieties that prevail around Chinese society: (1) Can the English elements in Netspeak be regarded as a sign of “English Invasion” and destroy the purity of Chinese language or even blemish Chinese cultural sovereignty? (2) Can Netspeak confuse people’s perception of what standard Chinese language should be so as to have negative impact on Chinese language? Related literatures both in China and in the western countries are examined. Some linguistic theories are applied or verified. Quantitative research method is used to verify my hypothesis that Netspeak will not have a deeply negative impact on Modern Standard Chinese in the long run, although it has already become a popular social dialect in the China.

## **Background: Modern Standard Chinese Language and Netspeak**

### **I. Modern Standard Chinese Language**

Generally, Chinese is written with characters known as “hanzi”. The Chinese writing system is morphosyllabic: Each character has an inherent meaning and is associated with a single-syllable pronunciation. (DeFrancis, 1984) In Chinese each character has a pronunciation. Chinese differs from English which has a direct connection between the sound of each letter in the spelling. Hanzi is based on

ideograms that evolved from earlier pictograms and do not represent sounds but do indicate meaning. (Kratochvil, 1968) During the ancient period, Chinese characters were originally pictures of people, animals or other things. Since 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came into power in China, Chinese characters have gradually developed into a simplified version, and most of the characters have become increasingly stylized. In terms of the pronunciation, on February 6, 1965, the CCP committee arrived at the definition used in textbooks today that the standard language “is modeled on the pronunciation of Beijing, drawing on the Northern Chinese dialect, and receives its syntactic norms from exemplary works of vernacular literature.” From that time on the simplified version of Chinese characters with Mandarin pronunciation has been regarded as modern standard Chinese language in Mainland China. (Li, 2004) Usually simplified characters are still composed of two or three characters that indicate specific meanings. Figure-1 is an example of a typical Chinese character. This character means “the forest”, which is made up with three of the same characters meaning “a tree.” The pronunciation of this character is “*sen*”.



Figure-1

Within a language system made up of characters, neither the written nor the spoken language uses alphabets. At first traditional Chinese language had no alphabet. Since the early 1950s a system using the Latin alphabet, called *Pinyin*, has been developed in China. However, *Pinyin* is usually used as reference in order to introduce the correct pronunciation of Chinese characters and can never be used separately or been mixed with Chinese characters. Later when the computer came to

be used by Chinese speakers, most computer-input was based on *Pinyin*. The keyboard entry of Chinese will be described in detail later.

Generally there is also no frequent use of English terms in standard Chinese language. But English abbreviation appears in some special topics: for instance when talking about international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), or mentioning technical issues such as clone and CT<sup>2</sup>. Figure-2 is an example of a typical Chinese sentence. The meaning of this sentence is “We are Chinese People.”

**我们是中国人。**

Figure-2

## II. Chinese Netspeak

Netspeak is a special language that came into being from computer-mediated communication (CMC). I selected this term based on the research about language and Internet by Professor Crystal. According to Crystal, Netspeak is an alternative to “Internet language”, “electronic language”, etc. He points out that Netspeak is a type of language displaying features that are unique to the Internet, arising out of its character as a medium which is electronic, global, and interactive. Flexible orthography, English abbreviation, individual coinages, and the use of reaction signals are all popular in English Netspeak. (Crystal, 2001)

Currently there is also a special type of language popular among Chinese web users which I want to call Chinese Netspeak. Chinese Netspeak includes Chinese and English abbreviations, figures, English terms, some homophonic words directly transplanted from English words, digital symbols, and other short forms used by

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<sup>2</sup> CT is short for computed tomography.

Chinese people when e-mailing, sending instant messages, writing articles on BBS, or communicating in chat rooms. (Yu, 2001) Figure 3 is an example of a typical sentence of Netspeak.

|                           |   |
|---------------------------|---|
| Netspeak                  | Faint...55555....表酱紫..... Ok, 88.                                 |
| Pronunciation             | faint wuwuwu...biaojiangzi ok baba                                |
| English Gloss             | I feel dizzy, I am crying. Don't treat me like this. Ok, bye-bye. |
| Standard Chinese Sentence | 晕。呜呜呜呜。不要这样子。好吧，拜拜。   |

Figure-3

With the developing of the Internet communication, more and more Chinese people began to write in such a special kind of language in cyberspace. In June, 2001 the China Economic Press published a dictionary especially for Netspeak: *Chinese Netspeak Dictionary*. Thousands of Chinese Netspeak words including terms in the above sentence in Figure 3 are collected in this dictionary. Netspeak is not only used by people online but may also be used offline. According to the news reports, it is even used by some primary school students when writing their Chinese compositions<sup>3</sup>. Zhao and Chen found in their research that Netspeak has already appeared in certain magazines and newspapers in China. More and more people, especially the youth, have grasped this new language and are proud to use it, both as spoken language and as written language. (Zhao, 2000; Chen, 2001) The popularity of Netspeak in China has given rise to the attention of researchers and the education departments of the

<sup>3</sup> Some cases have been reported about it. For instance, in Aug 8, 2002, a journalist reported that in Guangdong province, China, a teacher found terms from Netspeak appearing in the assignments of her students. <http://www.southcn.com/news/gdnews/nanyuedadi/200208070537.htm>



Chinese government. In June 2002 the Chinese Language & Information Management Committee of the Ministry of Education in China began to regard the study of Netspeak as an important research project in a ten-year language research program<sup>4</sup>.

## Literature Review

The history of Internet communication covers a mere two decades. But within such a short period, there are already some western scholars critically exploring topics involving Netspeak such as the linguistic style of Netspeak, features of the language use in e-mail, or the nature of the impact that the Internet is making on language, (Baron, 1984; Baron, 1998; Murray, 2000; Crystal, 2001). Although there are also several researches about Netspeak in China, linguistic studies of computer mediated communication language are still in their infancy. Most of the research barely reaches beyond the realm of anecdotal observation and the topic is explored generally--describing the appearance and popularity of Netspeak or observing the composition of Netspeak -- as a new linguistic phenomena. (Jin and Lin, 2000; Zhong, 2001; Shen, 2001; Chen, 2001; Zhang, 2003) Only a few scholars exploring Netspeak from a specialized aspect such as that of a linguist, psychologist or educator. (Li, 2002; Liu, 2002; Zheng, 2003) Few observations about Netspeak have been measured with the traditional canons of scientific methodology.

### I. Three Books

Currently only three books primarily dealing with Netspeak have been published: one exploring English Netspeak and two exploring Chinese Netspeak. (Crystal, 2001; Yu, 2001; Liu, 2002).

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<sup>4</sup> According to the project list on the homepage of Ministry of Education in China:  
<http://www.moe.edu.cn/moe-dept/yuxin/index.htm>

In his famous book, *Language and the Internet* , Professor Crystal explores how Internet culture has affected English mother tongue. According to Crystal, we're on the brink of the biggest revolution in language ever. He argues that all domains of the Internet—e-mail, chatrooms, mailing list, the Web pages, chat groups and virtual worlds such as MUDs and MOOs — are introducing new styles and possibilities into the language. He compares Netspeak with ordinary speech and writing in English and then points out that Netspeak is different from each of the others. Unlike some other linguists, Crystal suggests that instead of taking Netspeak as a kind of illiterate language, we should regard it as a new species of interaction and embrace language change including the flexible orthography, grammar and style common to Netspeak. (Crystal, 2001)

In China Professor Yu Genyuan, the editor of the first Netspeak dictionary in China, first recognized the appearance and popularity of Netspeak. In 2001 he published the first academic book about Chinese Netspeak, *Generality of Netspeak*. In this influential book, Yu provides a general introduction to Chinese Netspeak, points out the importance of studying Netspeak, and compares the differences between Netspeak being used in Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao. He also compares Netspeak with language used in other communication media such as newspapers, radio and television and then points out how different this “new language” is. (Yu, 2001)

In her book *The Netspeak* Liu Haiyan , a professor of the Chinese Language Education Center in China Communication University, demonstrates the nature of Netspeak and analyzes the developing process of this new language from the year 2000 to 2002. Liu regards Netspeak as a special kind of “social dialect” and argues

that the main value of Netspeak study is to provide a new project for linguists' research work on language change in such a "digital age." In the last part of her book she points out that there exist some improper or puerile expressions in Netspeak and such phenomena is a result of the anonymity feature of the cyberspace. Based on her anxiety about such issues Liu outlines a draft linguistic regulation of Netspeak for Chinese web users in this book. (Liu, 2002)

It is interesting that both Crystal and Liu mention in their books the influence that the Netspeak may have on K-12 school students although their viewpoints are not the same. When talking about the language of e-mail as one part of Netspeak, Crystal had quite a positive attitude. According to him, it is not necessary for some language purists to be worried that the language of e-mails may introduce linguistic anarchy in the minds of school learners. He argues that e-mail has actually extended the stylistic range of language and made it interesting and playful. "We should regard the appearance of Netspeak as a great opportunity to revitalize language education instead of as a threat to it."(Crystal, 2001) On the other hand, Liu, drawing from news reports about how certain primary school students used Netspeak terms in their assignments, predicts that Netspeak may have a negative impact on Chinese students' learning of the Chinese language and claims it is necessary to find some way to regulate Netspeak.

## II. Theoretical Analysis

Besides the study results mentioned above, Netspeak has been approached through certain theoretical fields such as sociolinguistics and psychology.

### *Sociolinguistic Analysis*

As Wardhaugh points out in his book, different structures, vocabulary and the way men and woman use languages have become topics in the forefront of Sociolinguistic study in recent years. (Wardhaugh, 1992) In the West much research has been done in this area related to gender and Netspeak. Victor Savicki, Dawn Lingenfelter and Merle Kelley use content analysis to examine the gender language style and group composition in Internet discussion groups by focusing their study on group gender composition and the seeming relatedness between gender roles and group process functions. (Savicki, Lingenfelter, Kelley, 1998)

In terms of Chinese Netspeak, through content analysis, in her paper Li Dan explores gender difference in Netspeak chatting through instant messaging program. According to her analysis, men use more minimal responses, laughs, emotions and net culture words and expressions than women use. She argues that this result means that men have substituted for women in taking responsibility for facilitating conversations. (Li, 2001)

### *Psychological Analysis*

In her article, "Netspeak: Slang or Witticism?" Zheng Suzia explained the popularity of Netspeak from the psychological point of view. She argues that it is the psychological earmark of web users, especially of youths to evoke impulse in the use of Netspeak. According to Zheng's research, youths are always curious and tend to pursue novel and funny experiences. Even if they have the ability to type complete sentences, they still like to use "Netspeak", (Zheng, 2003)

## Composition of Chinese Netspeak

In China, from 2001 to 2004, several papers were written to describe their observation towards the composition of Chinese Netspeak. However, in most of the papers this topic was always explored from a trivial or disorderly way and there is seldom research providing a systematic exploration of the composition of Netspeak. Here I will do an integrated summary, based on several researchers' study results, so as to synthesize and update the composition of current Chinese Netspeak. This result will be used as reference to explore the features and sources of Netspeak and to do the quantitative study in the latter part of this paper.

### I. English terms

According to her statistics, Liu Haiyan found that there are 224 terms, among 1100 Netspeak terms in professor Yu's *Dictionary of Chinese Netspeak*, which come from English including both terms and abbreviations. (Liu, 2002) Referring to Qi's study, most of the English terms appearing in Chinese Netspeak are technological terms such as modem, homepage, html, cookies, chatroom, etc. (Qi, 2002) In other cases, English terms are used improperly concerning English grammar and the principle of usual usage. For instance, when Chinese web users want to express a modest attitude towards the praise of other people, s/he can say "where, where". In English the phrase "where, where" never means modesty. Indeed it is a traditional Chinese expression to imply "I am not as good as you described". It seems that these English terms were used based on Chinese grammar and a Chinese communication convention. (Jin and Lin, 2000)

## II. English abbreviations

English abbreviations are more popular in Chinese Netspeak than English terms. Generally there are two types of English abbreviations here: the relatively official ones such as BBS<sup>5</sup>, CEO<sup>6</sup>, IE<sup>7</sup>, ICP<sup>8</sup> (Zhong, 2001; Chen, 2002); and the informal ones such as B4<sup>9</sup>, BF<sup>10</sup>, BTW<sup>11</sup>, and CU<sup>12</sup> (Chen, 2004; Qi, 2002). To those new web users these abbreviations can be baffling, but once they get used to such abbreviations they will find that it will be an easy way to expedite communication by using them. (Yu, 2001)

## III. Stylized English

Some other terms in Chinese Netspeak are phonetic transcriptions: using Chinese characters to represent certain English terms with similar pronunciation. For example, “modern” is read like “猫” (the *Pinyin* of it is “mao”) in Chinese, while “猫” in Chinese means the “cat.” So currently in cyberspace most people call moderns “猫”: the “cat.” (Chen, 2004) Another instance is the pronunciation of the English word “homepage.” Figure 4 provides a clear contrast between English, Chinese and the Netspeak term concerning this instance. (He, 2003) In her study about the creative uses of writing systems on BBS, Su also found similar phenomenon among web users in Taiwan.<sup>13</sup> She uses a term “Stylized English” to describe the representation of

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<sup>5</sup> Short for bulletin board system.

<sup>6</sup> Short for Chief Executive Officer.

<sup>7</sup> Short for Internet Explore.

<sup>8</sup> Short for Internet Content Provider, such as a company that provides a Web-based service, such as a popular Web site.

<sup>9</sup> Short for before.

<sup>10</sup> Short for boyfriend.

<sup>11</sup> Short for “by the way”.

<sup>12</sup> Short for “see you”.

<sup>13</sup> Although Taiwan is a part of China, the definitions of standard language and Netspeak in these areas are different from Mainland China. In this paper I want to principally explore Netspeak in Mainland China and don't want to explore Taiwan issues.

English in Chinese characters based on pronunciations and points out that similar phenomenon also appear in other languages, such as English. (Su, 2003)

|                           |             |
|---------------------------|-------------|
| Intended Meaning          | Homepage    |
| Netspeak                  | 烘 焙 机       |
| <i>Pinyin</i> of Netspeak | hong-bei-ji |
| English meaning of 烘焙机    | The oven    |

Figure-4

IV. Abbreviations made of Chinese *Pinyin*

As mentioned above, Mainland China began to use an alphabet system called *Pinyin* based on Latin alphabet in the early 1950s. Similar to the way people coin English abbreviations, there are also some abbreviations made of Chinese *Pinyin* letters in Chinese Netspeak. For example “pretty girl” in Chinese *Pinyin* is spelled as “Piao liang mei mei,” so PLMM means pretty girl in Chinese cyberspace. (Zhong, 2001; Chen, 2002; Qi, 2002)

V. Figures

Figures in Chinese Netspeak are as popular as English abbreviations or *Pinyin* abbreviations. Generally figures are used as onomatopoeias in Chinese Netspeak. For example, “55555” sounds like someone is crying when it is read in Chinese. So web users apply it as onomatopoeia of crying in Netspeak. (Liu, 2002) In other cases figures are used as homophonic words that have the similar pronunciation with certain

Chinese terms or terms from a foreign language. For instance the pronunciation of “886” is similar to “bye-bye” in English. So when people want to say bye-bye online, they usually type out “886”. In my opinion it can be also called “Stylized English” as mentioned above but represented with figures. Similar instance is “7456” , which is read like “qi si wo le” in Chinese with the meaning of “I am angry”. For this reason when people want to express their angry feeling in cyberspace, they will say “7456”.(He, 2002; Huang, 2004) Figure-5 provides a clear illustration of the above instances.

|                  |           |              |
|------------------|-----------|--------------|
| Netspeak         | 886       | 7456         |
| <i>Pinyin</i>    | ba-ba-liu | qi-si-wu-liu |
| Intended Meaning | bye-bye   | I am angry   |

Figure-5

VI. Symbols

Besides the above compositions of Chinese Netspeak, Professor Yu in his book argues that there are also certain symbols in Chinese Netspeak. He gave some examples such as the smiling face “^o^”, and symbols representing voice and actions such as “]]]]]]]]” which means a kind of Chinese martial art. (Yu 2001) Other researches also raised some examples to take symbols as one of the important compositions in Netspeak. For instance the smile symbol “:)” is quite popular online throughout the world. (Huang, 2004) While “Zzzz.....” signifies the condition of sleeping. (Xie, 2002)



## VII. Traditional terms with new meanings

Many words used in Chinese Netspeak are taken from regular Chinese terms and applied to new ideas or protocols. For example, the novice was named “菜鸟”<sup>14</sup> and ugly girls were called “恐龙”<sup>15</sup>. (He, 2003; Qi, 2002) Concerning such kind of terms, professor Yu, Genyuan points out that most of them in Netspeak are created by web users just for fun. (Yu, 2001) In my opinion, most of such terms can be regarded as a new kind of metaphor. “菜鸟” means the bird, while the novice in cyberspace to some extent is similar to a little bird just learning to fly around the woods.

## VIII. Homophonic Terms in Chinese

In certain conditions homophonic terms in Chinese also appear in Netspeak. For instance, the term “邮箱” and “幽香” have the similar *Pinyin* -- both are read like you-xiang. “邮箱” means the mail box while “幽香” means fragrance. In Chinese Netspeak, it is quite popular to use “幽香” when the web users want to mention their mail boxes. (Chen, 2004) There are several related instances such as typing out “大虾”<sup>16</sup> when people want to mention “大侠”<sup>17</sup> since both of them read like “da-xia”. (Xie, 2002)

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<sup>14</sup> “菜鸟” means “little birds” in Chinese and read like “cai niao”.

<sup>15</sup> “恐龙” means “dinosaur” in Chinese and read like “kong long”.

<sup>16</sup> Means big shrimp.

<sup>17</sup> Means great knight-errant.

## IX. Reduplication Terms

According to the study of some researchers, terms in Chinese Netspeak are likely to appear as reiterative. For instance OICQ, a famous instant message software, is called QQ; while “东西”<sup>18</sup> is called “东东”<sup>19</sup>. (He, 2002; Jin and Lin, 2000) To clarify it is like an English speaker saying “tool tool.”

## Two Widespread Anxieties about Netspeak

From the above composition analysis we can find that Netspeak is quite a vivid language and has great differences from standard Chinese language. No matter what area researchers concentrated on, several scholars predicted a significant impact of Netspeak on web users in relation to traditional language, both in China and in Western countries. (Lingafelter, 1995; Crystal, 2001; Yu, 2001; Liu, 2002; Zhao, 2002; etc.)

Concerning the impact Netspeak will have on the standard Chinese language there are two widespread anxieties. Firstly, some scholars regard the appearance of English terms and English abbreviation in Netspeak as a dangerous signal of “English invasion”. They fear that if more and more English terms appear in Chinese Netspeak, little by little, the inviolate Chinese language and even Chinese traditional culture will be adversely affected. According to them, the appearance of English terms with Chinese characters is a sign of English invasion and will destroy the harmony and beauty of regular Chinese language. (Jiang, 2001; He, 2002; Peng and He, 2003; Du and Yang, 2003; etc) In July 2003, it was reported that the French

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<sup>18</sup> “东西” means things, reads like “dongxi”.

<sup>19</sup> “东东” has no meanings, reads like “dongdong”.

Ministry of Culture and Communications had put a ban on using the term "E-mail" in all government departments, documents, publications and Internet.<sup>20</sup> Just as Li (2004) points out,

“Like the French, the Chinese desire for control is rooted in language insecurity, and fear of loss of identity and image: insecurity due to the past glory of a historical empire and the nation’s present decline in power, reflected in part by the global domination of English, coupled with the feeling that the intrusion of English into the Chinese sphere implies loss of face, hurting the Chinese world image, and ultimately threatens the notion of ‘Chineseness’, in which the Chinese are supposed to take pride.”

Similar to the French case, some Chinese scholars have suggested the Chinese government carry out policies in order to prevent the “English invasion” and to protect standard Chinese since pure language is the symbol of state sovereignty, national dignity and culture. (Li, 2002; Du and Yang, 2003)

Secondly, many researchers feared that frequent use of Netspeak would make web users, especially teenagers, confused about the difference between standard Chinese language and Netspeak and use this online slang improperly in more formal situations. The case of the appearance of Netspeak in certain primary school students’ assignments was mentioned again and again in their research. According to them, if web users always use Netspeak they easily get carried away and start using it in everyday communication, even in formal occasions. (Chen and Sun, 2001; Cao, 2001; Shen, 2001; Li, 2002, etc) Shan points out that currently in China there are a lot of teenagers growing up with Internet. Maybe they will not know “standard Chinese language” as a result their frequent use of Netspeak and may gradually lose their ability to recognize correct Chinese usage. If Netspeak became the favored language in online communication and then become popular offline, both traditional written

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<sup>20</sup> According to news report in August2, 2003 on *People Daily* by Zhu, Yuzhen.

and spoken Chinese language would be destroyed or distorted. (Shan, 2000)

## **Approaches to Work**

It is interesting to find that since Internet and the computer-mediated language appeared much earlier in the west, anxieties about the negative impact of Netspeak on English also could be found when it first became popular. For instance, Baron made a prediction concerning the influence of computer mediated communication on both spoken and written English: although the use of language for logical sequencing may be improved, the use of language for description will “diminish or decline”. (Baron, 1984) However several western researchers found in their experimental studies that Netspeak has no significant negative impact on formal or standard language. (Crystal, 2001; Segerstad, 2002; Randall, 2002)

Just as professor Yu pointed out in his 2001 book, all the anxieties and debates about the impact of Chinese Netspeak are only predictions, which need critical exploration and confirmation in the future. (Yu, 2001) Although many Chinese researchers have noticed the linguistic changes emerging in online communication, few have studied this phenomena from its appearance until recent times -- 2000 to 2004-- in a clear and cogent manner, and fewer yet have explored the impact of Netspeak critically based on related theories and quantitative research methods.

According to Lingafelter's, tracking the development of online language is one interesting way of documenting the progression of the “Information Age” for linguists, “just as the language changes of Early America allow historical linguists to track the movements of our early ancestors.” (Lingafelte, 1995) Chinese Netspeak has been around for about five years. Whether it has had any deeply negative impact on standard Chinese language, as the anxieties mentioned above, is uncertain. In the

later parts of this paper, I will summarize features of Chinese Netspeak based on other researchers' study results and explore reasons for the development of different types of Netspeak terms to show that the appearance and popularity of Chinese Netspeak is inevitable during the process of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) in Mainland China. By placing these phenomena into a theoretical framework, opposite to the above two anxieties, I will argue that Netspeak's popularity is reasonable but that it will not have an appreciable impact on standard Chinese language over the long term. Finally I will use an online survey to examine whether the anxieties over the impact of Netspeak usage in China are as dire as some commentators suggest.

## **The Features and Sources of Chinese Netspeak**

### **I. Simple, succinct, and convenient for typing**

In my opinion the most obvious feature of Chinese Netspeak is its simple, succinct style for the purpose of convenient typing. What I mean by simple and succinct is that in Chinese Netspeak it would be quite difficult to find any terms made up of long and complicated lists of Chinese characters or English alphabets. Instead, English abbreviations, abbreviations made of Chinese *Pinyin*, digits, and homophonic terms in Chinese appear frequently in Chinese Netspeak.

There are two major reasons for the appearance of Netspeak with the above feature. The biggest one is that the speed of typing is quite an important issue in cyberspace. According to Yu's observation, most of the Netspeak terms were first coined during synchronous communication processes such as sending messages in chat rooms or instant messaging programs, that then go around in e-mail and BBS. (Yu, 2001) The web users need to send their messages as quickly as they can so as to fully express their ideas during synchronous communications. For this reason

more and more people use figures or Chinese and English abbreviations when communicating with each other online, especially during the synchronous communication process.

Another reason comes from the way Chinese people type Chinese into the computer. Since Chinese characters are totally different from the Roman alphabet and are far greater in number, entry of Chinese with alphabet keyboard requires special software programs that map each character onto two to five keys (letters) on the keyboard, generally based on the *Pinyin* of the character. That means only eighty keys are available for use to map several thousand Chinese characters or at least several hundred Chinese character parts and components. In their book, *Exploring Mass Media for a Changing World*, two scholars in western countries, Heibert and Gibbons, describe how Chinese people use the computer to type out Chinese characters, a kind of language totally different from English, but they must type on the keyboards invented for typing English. (Heibert, Gibbons, 2000)

“Today, in order to type on the computer in Chinese, one has to use Mandarin, or the national language, as the communists called it. To use Word Perfect for Chinese, one types in the romanized version of word (*sho, xiang, feng, etc*). After the first letter comes up, the computer starts anticipating the various choices of characters and their most common combinations. The more letters one inputs, the more likely an exact hit.... Changing the language in China and the Orient to make mass communication and computer use possible has already, in less than half a century, caused the greatest revolution in China’s long history.”

Since typing Chinese language into the computer is such a complicated process, it is not bizarre to find Chinese people using Netspeak term with above features online: through using Chinese and English abbreviations they can express their opinions easily and quickly. What is more, the order of Chinese words that the computer provides for selection is unreasonable. Some everyday expressions in

cyberspace are presented after words infrequently used. As Heibert and Gibbons described, the more letters one inputs, the more likely an exact hit. But for convenience and quicker typing some Chinese people tend to choose the first character that the computer provides instead of the exact one although that word may be incorrect in his sentence. That's why there are several homophonic terms in Chinese Netspeak.

Another issue needing mention here is that sometimes the use of homophonic terms online is not just for typing speed. There is a strict Internet control policy in Mainland China that several terms are prohibited to be typed out and published online from time to time. For instance, sometimes in certain BBS if people want to publish an article including the term “警察”, meaning “the policemen”, they will find that this article cannot be published successfully. That is because the government prohibited talk about this topic at that time. So when someone wants to mention this term on BBS, he/she chooses to use a term with the same pronunciations but different characters such as “惊诧” which has the same pronunciation with “警察” --“jing-cha”—but means “to be surprised” or use the abbreviation of the *Pinyin* of it: JC.

## II. Vivid expression

Another feature of Chinese Netspeak is its vivid expression. As is mentioned above, there are several symbols and onomatopoeia in Chinese Netspeak. Several symbols are used to construct icons that usually express web users' emotions such as “^\_^”. In my viewpoint they can be regarded as a kind of paralanguage similar to the way people communicate with each other offline—such as smiling—when talking

with other people. In Netspeak there are also a lot of onomatopoeia such as “55555”<sup>21</sup> which seems to make the computer-mediated communication process accompany vivid sounds.

Just as Wilbur points out, whatever else the Internet culture may be, it is still largely a text-based affair. (Wilbur, 1996) Cyberspace provides a broad space for Chinese people to contact each other interactively. However, because of technical limitations—online phones are not available among most of the people, web users generally can only express themselves with typewritten words: they are talking with each other by their fingers. If one cannot express oneself well in written language in a few minutes, during a few minutes, he/she would either learn more effective ways of communicating, or get lost in the shuffle online. In order to express their opinions online as lively as in offline communication, the web users create quite a lot of symbols and onomatopoeias. In other words, in Chinese Netspeak the features of face-to-face conversation are combined with explorations in interactive writing.

### III. Blended usage of Chinese and English

In Chinese Netspeak characters can appear together with several English terms in the same sentence. In my opinion, this is because originally certain technology terms coming from the western countries were so new to Chinese people that there is not yet a universally recognized translation for them. So the web users use the original English terms with other Chinese characters during their online communication. Another possible reason for this phenomenon is that web users want to make their conversation online funnier. So they use English terms in an improper way, usually based on Chinese grammar, such as the case of “where, where” that I

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<sup>21</sup> This is the onomatopoeia of crying, reads like “wooooooooooo...”



mentioned above.

#### IV. Childish

The last feature of Chinese Netspeak use is that certain terms are quite childish. In China generally only children like to use a monosyllabic word twice. For instance, Chinese children are likely to call “包”— meaning “a bag”— “包包”<sup>22</sup>. In Chinese Netspeak several terms are also used in a similar way such as has been mentioned above: OICQ is called QQ, “dongxi”<sup>23</sup> is called “dongdong”<sup>24</sup>. Web users who speak with such childish style online may successfully conceal their ages and make their conversation more interesting.

### **The Impact of Netspeak I: a Sign of English Invasion?**

There is an anxiety that Chinese Netspeak will become a sign of English invasion since it includes several English terms and abbreviation mixed with Chinese characters. (Jiang, 2001; Li, 2002; He, 2002; Peng and He, 2003; Du and Yang, 2003; etc) In this chapter, first, I will describe different viewpoints among Chinese linguists about the appearance of English elements in Chinese language system. Then I will explore some cases in the history of Chinese language evolution so that to argue that there is a process for Chinese language to digest and absorb foreign elements into its own language system, which is a process for the generation of loanwords --a traditional source providing new terms for Chinese language. For this reason, referring to Qi's study result (2002) that most of the English terms appearing in Chinese Netspeak are technological terms and relatively new, the anxiety about

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<sup>22</sup> “包” reads like “bao” while “包包” reads like “baobao”.

<sup>23</sup> “东西” means things, reads like “dongxi”.

<sup>24</sup> “东东” has no meanings, reads like “dongdong”.

English invasion is short of empirical evidence. According to the tradition of language selection and adaptation in the history, the current phenomena is likely another example of the evolution process of loanwords appearing in the Chinese language and not an English invasion.

#### I. English Elements in Chinese Language System: Current Debates

In fact nowadays English elements can be found not only in Chinese Netspeak but also in some news reports and advertisements in China. There are debates among Chinese linguists about the significance of this phenomenon.

Some linguists and state officials think that the appearance of English terms will destroy the purity of the Chinese language and even do harm to the national majesty — become a symbol of English invasion. Recently there were a series of academic interviews organized by China Education and Research Network, which intended to collect and explore Chinese linguists' opinions about the use of foreign language elements in the Chinese language. In these interviews some linguists argued that the use of English terms, no matter whether they were the complete word or an English abbreviation, would destroy the harmony of the language system and have a negative impact on the Chinese language. Such phenomena will blemish the purity of Chinese language and even blemish “the majesty of our nation”. (Fang, 2004; Han, 2004; Shang, 2004)<sup>25</sup> Some Chinese government officials have a similar opinion. In the fifth session of the ninth National People's Congress (NPC) 2002 Zui Chen, one of the congress committee members, pointed out that the use of English terms in Chinese language would destroy our national majesty. He argued that the Chinese people and government should pay more attention to this problem in the period of

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<sup>25</sup> According to the interview record titled *To Protect the Sovereignty of Our National Language* which is available online: <http://www.edu.cn/20040915/3115869.shtml>.

globalization and try to avoid using English in this way. According to him, the Chinese government should provide regulations to propose and require people to translate English terms into Chinese instead of using the original English terms directly.<sup>26</sup> Similarly and more intensely, one of the most famous linguists in China, Shuxiang Lü, also thinks the appearance of complete English terms will do harm to the Chinese language:

“Not only is the proliferation of English [in Chinese] unwholesome and impure, it is a sign of the revival of colonialism in the name of reform – it reminds one of how before the communist liberation of China, there were people who liked to use English to intimidate and swindle Chinese citizens. (Lü, 2000)

Several Chinese linguists differ from the above scholars and argue that those arguments are typical of xenophobic purism and people should have positive opinions toward the English elements appearing in Chinese nowadays. (Yu, 2002; Li, 2004; Zhou and Yu, 2004<sup>27</sup>; Tang, 2004; etc) In terms of the English abbreviation, they argue that it makes sense to accept and use English abbreviations as part of the Chinese language especially when those terms are technical and have complex meanings and originally came from the western world. Abbreviated English terms that are generally used throughout the world are simplified when compared with the relevant Chinese terms and therefore are much easier to be grasped by Chinese people. (Yu, 2002; Tang, 2004) As Tian points out several English abbreviations have been used by national propaganda such as China Central Television and by governors in their political lectures. Recently more and more English abbreviation terms such as

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<sup>26</sup> According to the news report of presentations in NPC which is available online [www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/7501/7513/20020311/684531.html](http://www.people.com.cn/GB/shizheng/7501/7513/20020311/684531.html).

<sup>27</sup> According to the interview record titled *To Protect the Sovereignty of Our National Language* which is available online: <http://www.edu.cn/20040915/3115869.shtml>.

CD, CT, UFO<sup>28</sup>, MBA<sup>29</sup>, etc have been accepted by the standard Chinese language system as new terms and collected into the Dictionary of New Terms in Modern Standard Chinese Language. Most of the terms accepted are technological terms, academic terms or special terms related to international organizations. (Tian, 2000)

Concerning the complete English terms used in the Chinese language currently, it is proper to examine this phenomena in the historical framework of Chinese language evolution rather than to criticize the popularity of certain English terms used by Chinese people in the past three or five years.

## II. Evolution of Loanwords in the Chinese Language System: a Historical Review

Just as Zhidong Zhang, a famous reform politician in the Qing dynasty argues in his book which was republished in 1997, "the Chinese learning should be regarded as the mainstay or the major principle so that the Western learning can be applied based on it. "(Zhang, 1997) When reviewing Chinese history we find that there is a tradition for Chinese people to apply new technology, including new terms and ideas, from foreign countries and alter them to Chinese concepts including changing them into Chinese terms. In the linguistic case, most of the foreign elements first appearing in Chinese language systems in the history were adapted to a Chinese pattern—being translated into Chinese characters based on their pronunciations or meanings-- and finally became a part of the Chinese language as loanwords. (Guo and Zhang, 2002; Jin, 2003) Currently without tracking the evolution process, people may not remember that certain terms are loanwords since they are written with Chinese characters – all the foreign contents have been reformulated in a typically Chinese way.

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<sup>28</sup> Short for "Unidentified Flying Object".

<sup>29</sup> Short for Master of Business Administration.

In the Han dynasty 138 B.C.E, when Emperor Han-Wu sent Qian Zhang to countries around Central Asia as an ambassador, both Zhang and the ambassadors who came from those countries brought back several products that had never been found in China. Although foreign names of those products were brought into the Chinese language at first, Chinese people got used to speaking them in the Chinese way and coined terms with Chinese characters instead of using their original terms. For instance Chinese people gradually called the grape as “葡萄” with the pronunciation “pu-tao”, although its original Bactrian<sup>30</sup> name was “bactra” when it was first brought to China. (Li, 2000)

In the Wei and Jin dynasty (220–420) when Buddhism entered into China from India, several Buddhist terms appeared in the Chinese language such as Bôdhisattva which means “a being that, while not yet fully enlightened, is actively striving toward that goal”<sup>31</sup>. But the Chinese people accepted the translated version of it—菩萨, with a similar pronunciation of “pu-sa”. (Pasierbsky, 1989) In modern China 菩萨 is still a common term in the Chinese language while it is difficult to find the term Bôdhisattva . According to the Dictionary of Loanwords in China, there are about 470 Chinese terms with Buddhist sources that came into being through a similar way. (Liang, 1994)

From the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries when more and more new notions, new technologies, western theories, and western products entered into China, quite a few foreign terms became popular among Chinese people such as

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<sup>30</sup> The name of one of the countries in Central Asia.

<sup>31</sup> According to the definition from online encyclopedia <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bodhisattva>.

"democracy", "science", "technology", etc. When some Chinese people began using those original English terms in their articles or conversation, others began to use translated words in Chinese characters based on their pronunciation: they called democracy as "德先生" which means Mr. democracy with the pronunciation "De-Xiansheng"<sup>32</sup>. Similarly, science began to be called "赛先生" which means Mr. science. Much later all of the above terms were translated by Chinese people into a much shorter pattern—"民主"<sup>33</sup> and "科学"<sup>34</sup>-- based on its meaning instead of its pronunciation and are accepted as standard Chinese language nowadays. (Li and He, 1996)

Until today when Chinese people use terms like 葡萄 or 民主 during communication, they don't necessarily know that those terms came from other countries and once had foreign spellings patterns. From the above history we can find that there is a process for the foreign terms to enter the Chinese language system and then be translated, adapted and absorbed. Loanwords were generated and absorbed into the language as a result of this process. Indeed in more recent years there were 700 new loanwords accepted by Chinese language every year during the 1980s and about 400 every year during the 1990s. (Ren and Zhao, 2002)

### III. English Elements in Chinese Netspeak

In light of the language evolution process mentioned above, three issues regarding Netspeak should be kept in mind. First of all, Netspeak includes Stylized

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<sup>32</sup> Xiansheng means Mr. in Chinese.

<sup>33</sup> Means democracy.

<sup>34</sup> Means science.

English that has been mentioned earlier in the chapter exploring the composition of Netspeak, which are quite similar to pronunciation-based loanwords: original English terms are adapted to Chinese characters with similar pronunciation. Although the pattern of several stylized English terms are not stable, they can be regarded as embryonic form of loanwords coined by web users themselves. Once most people accept a certain pattern of a Stylized English term, it can be regarded as a loanword.

Second, different versions of new words compete to be selected in a language. What is different from the above historical cases is that, Netspeak is influenced by a greater number of people knowing the original English term than the number of people exposed to new terms in ancient times. From this point, one could argue that accepting Chinese adapted terms rather than the original foreign terms happened because in the past a few scholars decided to translate the original into Chinese and introduce them to others. But during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century there was also a similar period in which both the original English terms and the translated version competed with each other and the latter version won. (Li and He, 1996)

Currently we can find everything mixed together in Chinese Netspeak: complete English terms, Stylized English as the embryo of loanwords, and English abbreviations that have been accepted by Chinese dictionary as part of standard Chinese vocabularies. Most of the English terms found in Chinese Netspeak are about technological issues and are relatively new to Chinese people. There will be a process for Chinese people to select between original foreign terms and their translated versions; and a process for them to select which version of translation can be accepted as loanword. As professor Yu argues in his book, all new terms or elements in the Chinese language will undergo a process of natural selection and those that cannot be accepted by most of the users will disappear or be adapted years

later. (Yu, 2001) While according to the study result of some linguists, since Chinese written language is based on characters, its nature and structure will not be destroyed even when foreign elements appear in this system. Chinese people may accept some English abbreviation terms into their permanent language system since those terms are both simplified and easier to remember. It is less likely that people will accept a long English term if a more concise and precise term is available in the Chinese language. (Shi, 1998; Jiang and Dai, 2003; Wei, 2004) Referring to the tradition of the Chinese people's tendency concerning foreign language acceptance, today's Chinese web users will be used to employing loanwords instead of English terms gradually. I find that several Stylized English terms have been coined and used instead of the original English terms that were popular in earlier years. For instance, in Qi's study about Netspeak in 2002, he found that people were using the original English terms such as "modem" and "homepage" online. (Qi, 2002) In 2004, Chen pointed out that more web users have begun to use the Stylized English term with Chinese characters instead of the original English term "modem". (Chen, 2004)

Third, according to the reports of the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC)<sup>35</sup>, 84% of web users in China before 2000 had an educational background higher than a collage diploma. While by July 2003, 44.8% of web users in China had an educational background lower than a high school diploma. When more and more users online have relatively little knowledge of English, it is quite possible that the English terms and abbreviations will be used less frequently and that English components in Chinese Netspeak will gradually disappear or turn into Chinese characters as a kind of loanword. If more and more people select to use the stylized English term rather than its original pattern, the latter will disappear in Chinese

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<sup>35</sup> The state network information center of China, which provides investigation reports about the development of internet in China every year since 1997 on their homepage <http://www.cnnic.net.cn/>.



Netspeak similar to the fates of “bactra” or “Bôdhisattva” in the above examples.

That will be a process of “natural selection” mentioned by Yu. Whenever a stable version of a Stylized English term is used by a majority of people, it will become a new loanword in the Chinese language. For the above reasons, the anxiety that Netspeak with English elements will become a sign of English invasion is not merited by the evidence. According to the peculiarity of Chinese characters and the Chinese tradition over the past thousand years of accepting new terms, the role of foreign elements in Chinese Netspeak must properly be regarded as enriching the Chinese language rather than undermining it.

### **The Impact of Netspeak II: The Loss of Perception of What Standard Chinese Language Should Be?**

Regarding the anxiety about the loss of judgement about standard Chinese --- the loss of perception of what standard Chinese language should be --- this chapter will apply the linguistic theory concerning the ecology of language evolution and language adaptability. I will then analyze whether Netspeak will be confusing since web users may lose track of what is standard Chinese and what is not which may have a negative impact on standard Chinese.

#### **I. The of Ecology of Language Evolution**

In his influential book the American sociolinguist Mufwene provides a new way to explore the development of language: to approach language evolution from a ecological perspective. Based on his research on a wide range of examples of changes

in the structure, function and vitality of several languages and his review of other linguists' study results, Mufwene points out the significance of treating languages by analogy with living species. According to Mufwene, since the nineteenth century languages have been regarded as living entities. Languages are like parasitic species, and the biological human specie-- the speakers of the language—are the hosts. Referring to Hagege and Keller's theory, and to practitioners of the accommodation theory, Mufwene emphasizes that the agents of language evolution are individual speakers. As the life and vitality of a parasitic species depends on its host, the fate of the language depends on the language users. A language does not exist without speakers, just like parasites do not exist without hosts. He also argues that there are some points in which a language is not fully like a parasitic species. For instance, speakers are not only a language's hosts but are also its creators. From this viewpoint, the language users are central to the process of language change or development. There are also several ecological factors that have influence on a language: features of other parasitic systems hosted by the same individuals such as culture, rather than the physical features of its speakers. Mufwene also points out that a language may fall into disuse if the language users are relocated to an environment where another language must be spoken as the vernacular. (Mufwene, 2001)

To summarize, according to Mufwene, the development and fate of a language depends on the language users. At the same time language users will adopt another language as a result of the requirement of a new environment.

## II. Language Adaptivity Theory

In his study concerning how written language is used during the process of computer-mediated communication, Segerstad found that even in computer-mediated communication there are different linguist environments and the language styles being used there have some differences. There are several important elements during this process which need to be considered: whether communicators know each other, the nature of their relationship, and the goal of their communication. Why people choose to use a certain mode of communication over another depends on the relationship between communicators and the particular goal of the message. At the end of his study Segerstad proposes a “linguistic adaptivity theory” : language behaviour is related to the set of variables and related to the rational behaviour which is part of the human ability for communication. Situation or activity, aims of communication, medium for communication are all related to rationality. Indeed humans have the ability to be flexible and adapt their rational behaviour in different communication conditions. Concerning Netspeak, Segerstad argues that language uses in computer-mediated communication can be taken as evidence of the uniquely human ability to adapt language according to the interdependent variables of a given situation, level of synchronicity, means of expression, rather than as evidence of a new language that erodes formal language. From this viewpoint language uses in cyberspace are variants of usage, just like any other language used by the same group of people on other occasions. It is important to notice that “One variant does not necessarily exclude other variants, and we do not lose the ability to adapt because we communicate via computer-mediated communication” . (Segerstad, 2002)

Based on his research Crystal points out that the readiness with which people do adapt language to meet the needs of new situations is at the heart of linguist evolution. (Crystal, 2001) There are several western researchers providing specific instances in

their research which can also support Segerstad's theory. (Gain, 1999; Murry, 2000, Randall, 2002) Similar to Segerstad's notion, in her research about language change, Aitchison also points out that language users, even school students, have the ability to alter their speech to fit the casualness or formality of the occasion. One of the cases Aitchison cites concerns a London schoolboy, who used casual language style in informal situations while he used correct language in an interview with his headmaster. According to Aitchison, it is normal for language users to "have a variety of different forms in their repertoire, and to vary them according to the needs of the occasion". Variations are found not only in pronunciation, but also in syntax and vocabulary. (Aitchison, 2001)

### III. Concerning Chinese Netspeak

According to the ecological theory of language evolution and language adaptivity theory, the kind of language that is used depends on the language users and, secondly, people will not have trouble using the proper style of language in different linguist situations. Humans have the ability to grasp, distinguish, and use different styles of language in different environments. Although one mode of language is popular or occupies dominant status in certain communication situations, it doesn't mean other modes of language that were suited to other occasions will be undermined. From this point of view web users will not forget what is "standard language" even though they use Netspeak frequently.

In terms of the impact of Chinese Netspeak, the popular anxiety of some Chinese scholars that people, especially youths, may be confused by Netspeak and lose their judgment about standard Chinese language are also possibly wrong. First of all, according to the above analysis, we can see that within Netspeak the new graphic

conventions involving emotions and the use of figures are all features of communicative activity that could only have emerged in the special communication process through electronic media. Referring to Mufwene's notion that language users will use another language as a result of the requirement of a new environment, it is the possibility of the anonymity of text-only communication and the process of typing Chinese language with keyboard that foster such an informal use of language. Like western Netspeak, that is regarded by Segerstad as one of the variants, Chinese Netspeak can also be taken as a language variation especially which came into being with computer mediated communication. Another issue worth noting is that, although several environments permit the use of Netspeak or similar informal conversation, even during the computer-mediated communication there are quite a lot of occasions in which the standard Chinese language is required, for instance business communication such as business email, academic communication such as a virtual school class, political communication such as e-government conferences, etc. During those occasions, will the majority of the web users still use Netspeak? In other word, although Netspeak is quite popular in cyberspace among Chinese web users, the standard Chinese language is still the major stream on several occasions in computer-mediated communication.

Indeed, Chinese people have always had the ability to be flexible and adapt their language in different occasions. Although there is only one mode of standard language in Mainland China --- the modern standard Chinese language as mentioned above --- there are several different dialects throughout the country and several different written languages used by the minorities. No matter what dialect and written language a Chinese person uses at home, he or she is usually required to learn standard Chinese language at school and to use it in several formal communications.

According to the results of some educational experiments concerning linguistic adaptation ability, most students can use both the standard language and their dialect properly.<sup>36</sup>

Based on the above analysis, I wish to propose that the anxieties of some Chinese scholars mentioned above about the negative impact of Netspeak on Chinese language is overstated. Chinese Netspeak will not have a terribly negative impact on standard Chinese through blurring the boundary between Netspeak and standard language, or even make people lose their ability to judge what is the standard language. No matter whether they are adults or teenagers, Chinese web users have the ability to adapt their language on different occasions and will not lose their intuition towards standard language, notwithstanding the popularity of Netspeak among them. Although some cases of primary school pupils using Netspeak in their school assignments were reported, it is quite possible that they knew what formal language should be and used Netspeak just for fun.

Referring to the theory about the ecology of language evolution provided by Mufwene, the development and fate of a language depends on the language users. At the end of his article Xiao also points out that the web users are both the creators and the users of Netspeak. It is only the Chinese web users themselves who can provide an authoritative answer towards to the questions such as who they are and whether Netspeak has a negative impact on their intuition or judgment regarding standard Chinese, etc. (Xiao, 2002) For this reason, in order to examine whether my hypothesis mentioned above is correct I have conducted a survey online of Chinese Internet users to find out whether Netspeak has adversely affected standard Chinese

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<sup>36</sup> According to the introduction about the content and practice of minority language policy in China, which is published in *China Minority Newspaper*, Oct 1, 2001.

language in the way that some scholars fear.

## **Online Survey Research**

### **I. Methodology**

#### *Instrument*

In order to explore the impact Netspeak will have on standard Chinese language, I did an online survey<sup>37</sup>, as described in this paper, through Tencent Instant Messaging (TIM). Generally, the instant messaging program presents web users with the opportunity to see easily whether other web users are connected to the Internet and, if they are, to exchange messages with them. It differs from ordinary e-mail in the immediacy of the message exchange and also makes a continued exchange simpler than sending e-mails back and forth. A text-based message through TIM people allows users to send out different formats of documents to each other such as word documents, pictures or even films.

Since this project was designed for the web users, it was reasonable to do the survey online. There were several reasons for me to choose TIM to do my survey research. First, by using TIM I could check who was online at that moment and try to find the potential subjects and ask their permission to receive the questionnaire and to fill it out. Second, TIM is the most popular instant messaging program among Chinese web users. According to information that tencent.com provided on their homepage, up to April 2003, there have been more than 170,930,000 users registered for this instant messaging and an average of 16,084,000 web users online and using it

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<sup>37</sup> This is a survey under approval by the Research Ethics Board (REB) at Ryerson University.

every day.<sup>38</sup> Chinese people throughout the country and even some Chinese abroad are using this instant messaging. So by choosing random samples, the survey research results could reflect the impact of Netspeak on Chinese web users all over the country. Third, through TIM it was relatively easy to communicate with respondents whenever they had problems with the questionnaires. Finally, one researcher already used this media to do her content analysis research — to check who was online and ask them to respond with personal information such as their age and gender as well as to send part of their chatting records. The rate of response in this research was more than 40%. (Li, 2002) In order to increase the rate of response in my study, I informed the web users in my cover letter that, every responder would be given two dollars of “Tencent money,” with which people can enjoy several entertainments served online for free, such as using it through the homepage of Tencent (www.qq.com) to play several online games, or to buy electronic birthday cards. Since it is research about Chinese Netspeak and I wanted to explore how Chinese web users use this new language, this survey was initially written in Chinese and then translated into English.

### *Subjects*

According to the argument of Anders Hansen in *Mass Communication Research Methods*, students researchers without funding may be able to work with a sample of 100 to 300 respondents. So in this survey I selected 300 web users as the potential subjects and sent out my cover letter. As mentioned above, this survey was made through Tencent Instant Messaging (TIM) program. This program has a function of providing a list of the online TIM users’ information. All TIM users have the right

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<sup>38</sup> According to the investigation report by Tencent.com. <http://www.tencent.com/adver/shou.shtml#2-3>



to get information from that list about who is online, what nickname he or she has, how old he/she is and can contact them. I selected potential participants randomly from this list. Since people may have different habits about when they use the instant message program online, I chose three periods: 10:00 a.m on December 10, 2004, 3:00 p.m on December 18, 2004 and 9:00 p.m on Dec 20, 2004 to find respondents. Each time I used random sampling methods to find potential respondents through the online list of TIM: I chose web users numbers 1,5,10 until I reached 200, so that after three days I found 300 potential subjects in total who were sent my cover letter.

First of all, a cover letter was sent to those people requesting their voluntary participation. Since the subjects were recruited randomly, Chinese people of all ages and both genders were likely to be selected. Everyone who was selected and agreed to participate in the survey research was a proper respondent in my research so there was no special selection criteria. Children younger than 18 years of age were also recruited if they happened to be selected and how they had been influenced by the use of Netspeak was also important to my research.

Each subject who replied to my request through TIM and agreed to participate in the survey accepted a self-completion questionnaire, which included 18 questions and took approximately 12 minutes to complete. In this survey most of the questions are objective questions to be answered yes/no or by multiple choice and only a few questions elicited open-ended written answers to let respondents explain their choice of "other reasons" for certain questions. Since this was a one step online survey, what the subjects needed to do was to fill out the questionnaire and then sent it back to me online. In the cover letter the respondents were also informed that if they are interested to know the result of my survey research, they have the right to acquire it by sending an e-mail or a short message to me by the end of January 2005.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

All the finished questionnaires were collected by myself. Not all of the subjects that I selected and sent cover letters to replied and agreed to participate in the survey research. Some of the subjects refused to participate at first but finally agreed to fill out the questionnaires after confirming that they would get TIM money as compensation. Few web users replied to me with hostile messages during the process of sending cover letters and collecting data.

After the questionnaires were filled out and sent back, the process of coding and counting the data was done by myself. Microsoft Excel was the statistical analysis software used for the data analysis. I then described and summarized the frequency of responses to the questions and explored how Netspeak affected the web users in the way they speak and write online and offline, to find out the impact of the Netspeak on standard Chinese language, so as to test the predictions and address the anxieties some researchers have about Chinese Netspeak.

## **II. Results**

A total of 300 cover letters were distributed and one hundred and ninety-seven valid responses were sent back in succession. As a result of the compensation and incentives, the rate of response in this research was about sixty-five percent, which was higher than that in Li's research.

The first four questions asked for general information from the respondents. As shown in Table 1, of the 197 respondents, 108 (54.9%) of them were male and 89 people (45.1%) were female. 107 people (54.3%) were between the ages 22 to 25, 32 people (16.2%) were between the ages 19 to 21, 25 people (13%) between the ages

26 to 31, 9 people (4.5%) between the ages 13 to 15, 6 people (3%) were younger than 12 years old, and 5 people (2.5%) were between the ages 16 to 18. Only 13 people of the 197 respondents were older than 32 years old: 8 people (4%) were older than 42 years old, 3 (1.5%) were between 32 to 36, and 2 (1%) were age 37 to 42.

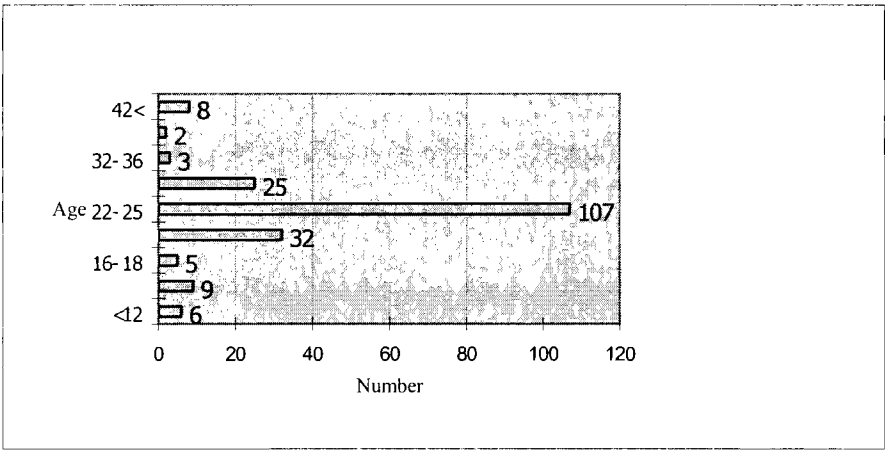


Table 1. Age of the Respondents

Of the 197 respondents, 81 people (41.1%) have used the Internet for more than 5 years; 79 people (40.1%) have used it more than 3 years but less than 5 years; 25 people (12.6%) have used it more than 2 years but less than 3 years. Only 9 people (4.5%) have used the Internet more than 1 year but less than 2 years and 3 people (1.5%) have just used the Internet for less than 1 year. During the past one year, 117 people among the 197 (59.4%) used the Internet on average more than 3 hours every day. 38 people (19.3%) used it on average less than two hours but more than one hour every day. 31 people (15.7%) used it on average less than three hours but more than two hours every day. Only 11 people (5.6%) used the Internet on average less than one hour a day recently.

The fifth to the ninth question explored how K-12 students were using Netspeak. According to the results of this survey, of the 197 respondents, only 27 people (13.7%)

were K-12 students. Among those students, 9 (33.3%) were primary school students, 9 (33.3%) were students in a professional high school or a polytechnic school, 7 (26%) were high school students, and 2 (7.4%) were middle school students. In terms of the use of Netspeak of these students, only 10 (37%) among the 27 students have ever tried to use Netspeak in their assignments or compositions. Twenty students (74.1%) have used Netspeak in the conversations with their friends or classmates. Only 11 students (40.7%) have used it during the conversations with their parents or teachers.

The tenth and eleventh questions asked how web users use Netspeak online. When being asked whether they can correctly explain the typical Netspeak term “菜鸟”, of the 197 respondents 173 said they could and only 24 people (12.2%) didn’t know the meaning of that term. As shown in Table 2, of the 197 respondents, 174 people (88.3%) have used Netspeak in online chatting, 125 (63.5%) have used it in online forum, and 119 (60.4%) have used it when writing e-mail to friends. Only 54 people have ever tried to use Netspeak in their e-mail to workmates, the boss, or teachers; 25 people (12.7%) have used it in online classes; and 20 people (10.2%) have used it in online conferences.

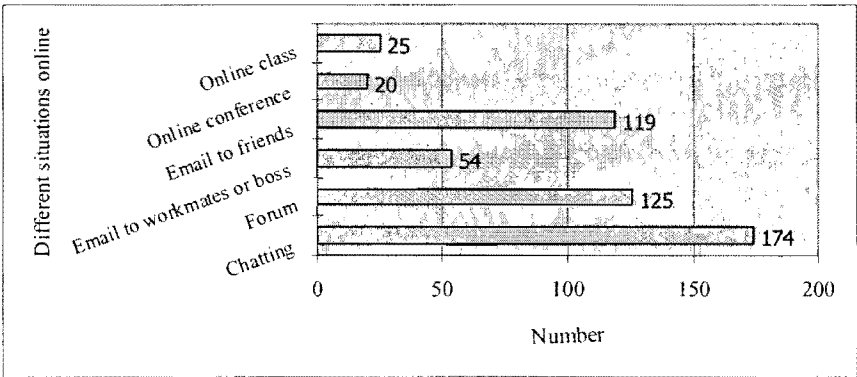


Table 2. The use of Netspeak online

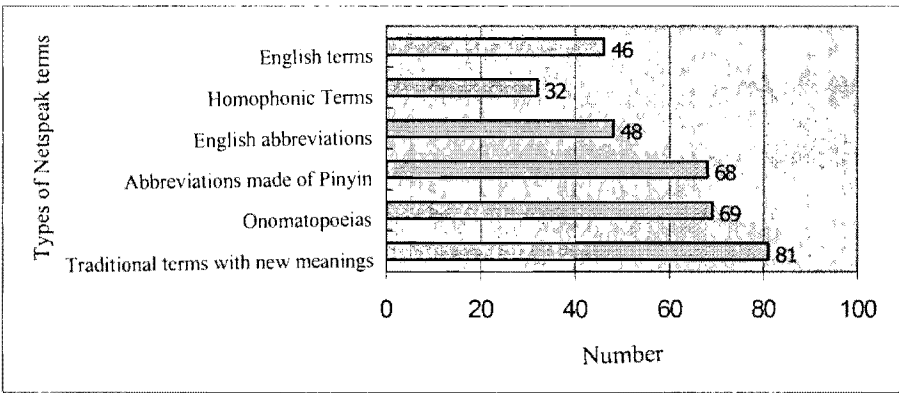


Table 3 Types of Netspeak terms being used offline

The twelfth to the fifteenth questions asked how web users use Netspeak offline. According to the survey result, 136 respondents (69%) have tried to use Netspeak in their everyday life and 61 respondents (31%) said they have never used Netspeak offline. When being asked what kinds of Netspeak terms they have used offline, as shown in Table 3, 81 respondents (59.6%) have tried to use traditional terms with new meanings such as *dinosaur*<sup>39</sup>; 69 (50.7%) have tried to use onomatopoeias such as 555555, 68 (50%) have tried to use abbreviations made of Chinese *Pinyin* such as *PLMM*, 48 (35.3%) have tried to use English abbreviations, 46 (33.8%) have tried to use English terms, and 32 (23.5%) have tried to use Homophonic Terms in Chinese such as 酱紫.

When asked their reason for the use of Netspeak offline, 60 people (44.1%) said they use it just for fun, 58 people (42.6%) said they used it because they have been used to doing so, 18 people (13.2%) said they used it because it is very popular. There were eight people (5.9%) with other reasons for answering this question but only two people explained their particular reasons in detail: One of them said he used Netspeak because it allows him to put sentences into the computer quicker, another

<sup>39</sup> In terms of the explanations of the types of Netspeak with several examples in detail, please refer to the related earlier chapter in this paper.

respondent said he used Netspeak when other people who chatted with him used it.

The sixteenth to eighteenth question asked for the web users' opinion about the use of Netspeak. When being asked whether they will lose judgment about standard Chinese language by using Netspeak, 151 of the 197 respondents (76.6%) said they don't think Netspeak would have a negative impact and only 46 people (23.4%) said the use of Netspeak would make them lose judgement of what standard Chinese language is. As shown in Table 4, 144 of the 197 respondents (73.1%) said whether it is proper to use Netspeak in everyday communication depends on he different communication situations, 28 of them (14.2%) said it is proper to use Netspeak offline, 21 (10.7%) said it is not proper to do so, and 4 (2%) people have no idea about this issue.

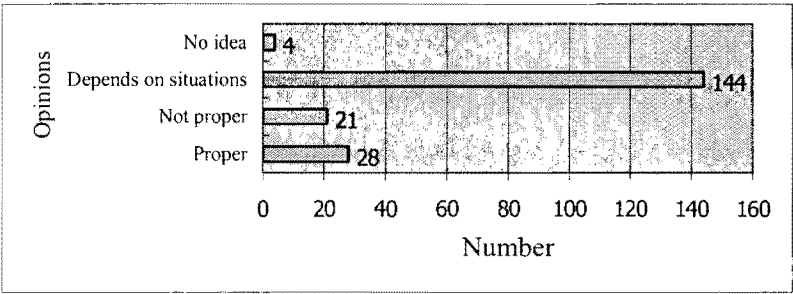


Table 4. Web users' opinions about the use of Netspeak offline

III. Findings and Discussion

*Characteristics of Respondents*

According to the survey result, more than 83.2 percent of the respondents were young people with the age around 19 to 31. And there were more male respondents (54.9%) than female respondents (45.1%). It is not odd to find these characteristics among the respondents because they are also characterizes of most Chinese web users

that has been previously pointed out in study results of other scholars. For instance, according to the survey report about the general situations of current web users in Mainland China, 56% of them were male and 44% were female. 80% of the Chinese web users were young people from age 17 to 34.<sup>40</sup>

What is more, according to this survey result, most of the respondents have used the Internet for a long time and used it frequently during the last year: One hundred and sixty respondents of the 197 (81.2%) have used the Internet more than three years. In my opinion this result is attributable to the instrument I used in this survey research: most of the web users found on the TIM program have been familiar with Internet for a relatively long time. Few Internet beginners have the ability to get TIM software and register as users. However, I don't believe this issue will have had an influence on the objective result of my survey research since I wanted to explore how Chinese web users use Netspeak and determine whether this new language has negative impact on web users' ability to judge the use of standard Chinese language is. Internet beginners who have used Internet for a short period are not ideal representatives in terms of this survey research.

#### *The use of Netspeak among K-12 Students*

We need to pay attention to the fact that there are only 27 (13.7%) K-12 students among 197 respondents. This may be because I did the survey during a period when K-12 students in China were preparing for their final examinations. Referring to the survey data, only a few students (37%) have tried to use Netspeak in their assignments as was reported in certain news items mentioned above. Among those

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<sup>40</sup> According to the survey research report of *The use and impact of Internet in the 12 main cities in China in 2003* which was done by China Social Science Institute. The report is available online [http://tech.sina.com.cn/focus/internet\\_R/index.shtml](http://tech.sina.com.cn/focus/internet_R/index.shtml).

who have used Netspeak offline, 18 students (67%) chose the reason for using Netspeak as “Just for fun”, 6 students (22%) chose the reason “I think it is very popular”, and only 3 students (11%) said they use Netspeak offline because they have gotten used to using it. What is more, students as respondents in this survey much prefer to use Netspeak in conversations with their friends or classmates (74.1%) rather than with parents or teachers (40.7%).

Referring to the above data, the anxiety that many researchers have that the frequent use of Netspeak would make Chinese teenagers confused about the difference between standard Chinese language and Netspeak is not born out by the evidence. Most of the K-12 students have ability to distinguish Netspeak from the standard Chinese language and know Netspeak slang can only be used in communication with friends or classmates, which is similar to the finding in Aitchison’s study as mentioned above. (Aitchison, 2001)

#### *The Popularity of Netspeak among Chinese Web users*

The survey result confirmed what several scholars had argued in their studies, namely, that Netspeak has already become very popular among the Chinese web users. (Zhao, 2000; Chen, 2001) One of the typical Netspeak terms, “菜鸟” was known by a majority of the respondents: More than 87.8% of them could correctly explain its meaning. Many web users have used Netspeak when chatting (n=174), e-mailing (n=179), and posting articles on online forums (n=125).

People not only like to use Netspeak online, but also like to use it offline. According to the survey result, 69 percent of 197 respondents (n=136) have tried to use Netspeak in their everyday lives and 29.4 percents (n=58) of the respondents said they are accustomed to using Netspeak to express themselves. In terms of the



composition of Netspeak, the survey result demonstrated that most of the components of Netspeak that I explored and summarized above were popular among the respondents and have even been used by them offline: such as traditional terms with new meanings (n=81), figures being used as onomatopoeias (n=69), and abbreviations made of Chinese *Pinyin*.

### *The Impact of Netspeak on Standard Chinese Language*

According to the survey result, notions of language adaptivity as explored in the above chapter were proved to be correct in the case of Chinese Netspeak. Chinese web users do have the ability to distinguish Netspeak and standard Chinese language and use them in different environments. Seventy-three percent (n=144) of the 197 respondents said that the use of Netspeak in offline communications should depend on the different communication situations. Even online most of the people use Netspeak only in some informal situations such as chatting (88.3%) and writing on online forums (63.55%); and few people tried to use it in formal situations online such as in the e-mail to workmates or a boss (27.4%), or in an online conference (10.2%) and for an online class (12.7%). Although 42.6 percent of the respondents claimed that they used Netspeak offline because they have been used to doing so, referring to the survey result, the mass of respondents (76.6%) don't think they would lose their ability to judge what standard Chinese is because of the use of Netspeak. As shown in the survey result, 136 respondents (69%) of the respondents have tried to use Netspeak in their everyday life, but 122 of them (89.7%) used it only in informal situations and only 14 people (10.3%) have tried to use it in formal situations offline.

From this viewpoint, the appearance and popularity of Netspeak merely provides a new dialect for Chinese people to use on specific occasions. And the anxiety some Chinese scholars have voiced that Netspeak would make web users lose their

judgment about the standard Chinese language having a negative impact on the Chinese language is not correct. Formal Chinese language is still the most important language both offline and online, and still has its unshakable status even among Chinese web users who also use Netspeak frequently in some situations.

The survey results also show something about the use of English terms and English abbreviations in Netspeak. More people prefer to use Chinese terms when they also know the English term with the same meaning. When being asked the question that, “If you know both the English version and the Chinese version of the same term, which version do you prefer to use as Netspeak online”, 114 respondents (57.9%) said they prefer to use the Chinese version and 83 respondents (42.1%) said they prefer to use the English version. This can be regarded as evidence that during the process of natural selection in language evolution, as Yu explored in his research, in Chinese Netspeak the translated versions of English terms with Chinese characters are more acceptable by users than the original English terms. (Yu, 2001) The major tendency is the acceptance of Stylized English terms using Chinese characters, as I explored in the above chapter. From this survey result the anxiety of some scholars that the English term used in Netspeak is a sign of English invasion into the Chinese language is unfounded.

#### IV. Limitations and Future Research

Generalizations of the finding obtained from this survey study are limited by the following:

1. Due to limitations of time to search for respondents, only 300 cover letters were distributed and there were fewer respondents than would be ideal. In the future, it would be ideal to conduct the survey from a larger sampling of

Chinese web users.

2. Since this was an anonymous survey through the TIM program online, the survey methodology used assumed that the instrument was reliable and valid, and the respondents answered honestly.
3. Since this was a survey choosing subjects randomly, control of the persons responding was impossible, so the number of K-12 student respondents was lower than my anticipation and the survey result about their use of Netspeak may not be representative of most web users who are K-12 students. In the future a particular survey of the use of Netspeak among the K-12 students in Mainland China would be beneficial.

## **Conclusion**

As mentioned earlier, to many Chinese scholars, the rapid emergence and popularity of Netspeak in Mainland China is a new phenomena which challenges Chinese standard language. Several anxieties have come to the fore regarding the impact of this new language. In this paper, the composition and features of Netspeak were explored on the basis of other Chinese scholars' research. From the analysis of the major features of Netspeak, it is inevitable that these features will stay popular in computer-mediated-communication (CMC) in Mainland China.

The survey result in this paper revealed that Netspeak is popular among Chinese people both online and offline. However, referring to the related linguist theories that I explored earlier and the data of survey research in this study, the anxiety of some Chinese scholars --- that Netspeak will confuse people's perception of what standard Chinese language should be and have a negative impact on Chinese language--- is unfounded. According to the ecological theory of language evolution,

the language users are the host of a language and central to the process of language change or development. While both the language adaptivity theory and the result of the online survey demonstrated that Chinese web users, the host of Chinese language and also the host of Netspeak, will not be confused by frequently using of Netspeak and do not lose their judgment about standard Chinese. Most people only use Netspeak as an novel dialect in certain informal situations and can differentiate between standard Chinese and Netspeak; they know how to use different languages under different conditions.

Concerning the anxiety of some Chinese scholars that English elements in Netspeak will become a sign of “English Invasion” and destroy the purity of Chinese language, the survey result in this paper shows that current web users much prefer to use Chinese terms rather than use English terms with the same meanings. While as I argued earlier we should put the use of English terms in the Chinese language into the historical framework of language evolution, rather than to explore the popularity of certain English terms used in Netspeak during a period of only three or five years. It is argued that whether the appearance of English terms in Chinese Netspeak would become a sign of English invasion of the Chinese language needs a longer period of observation and exploration in future studies. What we can do presently is to try to refer this issue with the historical tendencies of Chinese language development. The historical tendency of Chinese language evolution was explored in this paper. From a historical perspective, over the past thousand years, there has been a process through which foreign terms have entered the Chinese language system and then be translated, adapted and finally absorbed as loanwords — as part of standard Chinese language. Form this point of view the role of foreign elements in Chinese Netspeak is properly regarded as another example of the evolution process of loanwords rather than as the

sign of an English invasion.

In conclusion, as a new social dialect has come into being from computer mediated communication, Netspeak has become quite popular among Chinese web users. My study results indicate that Netspeak does not have a negative impact on standard Chinese language as certain Chinese scholars predicted in their studies. Following several case studies done by other scholars during the past few years, I hope this study --- a study using quantitative research methods which examined how language users use Netspeak and historical analysis of Chinese language development --- can provide a useful and current reference for future studies on related topics.

## Appendix-1

### Cover Letter

Dear friend,

In order to explore how the web users use the Netspeak and how this new language has impact on the standard Chinese language, I designed this questionnaire and hope you can help me by filling out the questions so as to achieve my research goal. Each responder will be given two dollars of “Tencent money”. The study results of this survey will be available by the end of January 2005. If you want to have a copy of those results or have any questions about this questionnaire. please contact me through the instant messaging or through sending an email to:

qq: 134211

Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Yours sincerely

Yiying Chen

Definition: Chinese Netspeak includes Chinese and English abbreviations, figures, some homophonic words directly transplanted from English words, digital symbols, etc. Examples: “88”, “520”, “cat”(modem), “PLMM”, “faint”, etc.

## Appendix-2

### Questionnaire about the Use of Netspeak

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Please choose the appropriate codes that represent your answer.

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1. Your gender: \_\_\_\_ a. Male b. Female
2. Your age: \_\_\_\_
  - a. Under 12 years
  - b. 13-15
  - c. 16-18
  - d. 19-21
  - e. 22-25
  - f. 26-31
  - g. 32-36
  - h. 37-42
  - i. Above 42
3. You have used the Internet for \_\_\_\_
  - a. More than 5 years.
  - b. More than 3 years and less than 5 years
  - c. More than 2 years and less than 3 years
  - d. More than 1 year and less than 2 years
  - e. Less than 1 year
4. The time you took online during the past one year is \_\_\_\_
  - a. On average more than 3 hours a day
  - b. On average more than 2 hours and less than 3 hours a day
  - c. On average more than 1 hour and less than 2 hours a day
  - d. On average less than 1 hour a day
5. Are you a K-12 student now? \_\_\_\_
  - a. Yes b. No

If the answer is “No”, please go to question 10. If the answer is “Yes”, Please keep on answering the following questions.
6. You are studying as a \_\_\_\_
  - a. Primary school student
  - b. Middle school student
  - c. High school student
  - d. Student in a professional high school or a polytechnic school
7. Have you ever tried to use the Netspeak in your homework or composition?  
\_\_\_\_ (For the definition of Netspeak please refer to the definition provided in the

cover letter.)

- a. Yes
  - b. No
8. Have you ever tried to use the Netspeak during a conversation with your parents or teachers? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Yes
  - b. No
9. Have you ever tried to use the Netspeak during a conversation with your friends or classmates? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Yes
  - b. No
10. Can you correctly explain the Netspeak term “菜鸟”? (Answer will be provided at the end of this questionnaire.) \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Yes
  - b. No
11. During which of the following online situations will you use the Netspeak (Multiple choices allowed) \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Online chatting
  - b. Online forum
  - c. In emails to workmates, boss, or teachers
  - d. In emails to friends
  - e. Online conference
  - f. Online class
12. Have you ever tried to use Netspeak in your everyday life? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Yes
  - b. No

If the answer is “No”, please go to question 16. If the answer is “Yes”, Please keep on answering the following questions.

13. Which types of Netspeak terms do you like to use **offline**? \_\_\_\_\_ (Multiple choices allowed)
- a. Traditional terms with new meanings such as *dinosaur*
  - b. Onomatopoeias such as 555555.
  - c. Abbreviations made of Chinese *Pinyin* such as *PLMM*.
  - d. English abbreviations such as FT.
  - e. Homophonic Terms in Chinese such as 酱紫
  - f. English terms such as homepage
14. You like to use Netspeak in which of the situation **offline**? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Informal situations such as chatting
  - b. Formal situations such as in a conference or a class.
15. The reasons for you to use Netspeak offline are: \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Just for fun
  - b. I have been used to using Netspeak to express myself



- c. I think it is very popular
  - d. Other reasons (Please explain) \_\_\_\_\_
16. Do you think the use of Netspeak will make you lose your ability to judge what standard Chinese language is? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Yes
  - b. No
17. If you know both the English version and the Chinese version of the same term, which version do you prefer to use as Netspeak online: (For instance, Internet and 互联网, modem and 猫, homepage and 主页) \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Chinese term
  - b. English term
18. Do you think it is proper to use Netspeak in everyday communication? \_\_\_\_\_
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. It depends on the different communication situations
  - d. I have no idea about this issue

Please fill out and return this questionnaire to me Online as soon as you can.  
Thank you again.

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