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Analysis of Community of Practice Discourse Characteristics--A Case Study of *Ipartment* Bullet Chat

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Abstract: With the rapid development of network and bullet-screen technology in recent years, bullet chat has been active in various videos as a new form of Cyber language. Audiences can be able to display discourse of views, meanwhile these languages will appear on the screen and float on the surface of the video, which shows extraordinary engagement and entertainment. Based on the theory of community of Practice, this article analyzes the characteristics of bullet chat discourse from the perspective of rhetorical features about the fifth season of China TV series *Ipartment*. Besides, this article also explores the relationship between the behaviour of typing bullet chat and the particular community of practice characteristics.

Keywords: Bullet Chat Discourse; Community of Practice; Rhetorical Features; Stylisation

1. Introduction

With the emergence and development of curtain and Internet technology, the bullet chat comment is active in all kinds of video as a new form in the cyber language. It appears when the audience communicates with each other in the use of network language to make track for a TV series on the social network^[1]. To some extent, it can be considered as 'argot jargon' which belongs to specific audiences.

According to Bethan Davies's opinion, a community of practice will be formed when a group has extraordinary engagement, a shared repertoire, and a joint enterprise^[2]. So a community of practice has been established when audiences who are fond of this series type bullet chat on the Internet to interact with other viewers. This community of practice is automatically formed by audiences, its characteristics are that members share common interests and they can use specific terminology freely to discuss the plots of TV series within this community of practice, all of these are beneficial to professional communication.

Besides, the spread or understanding of specific terminology or jargon is realized by the stylisation. Style refers to the wide range of strategic actions and performances that speakers engage in, to construct themselves and their social lives^[3]. In this situation, speakers draw on their social beliefs and understandings of language differences to make social meaning in their talk (Coupland, 2014: 292) and someone who is not a member of this community will not understand the real meaning. The situation of bullet chat is similar in that it is difficult for people who are not part of the audience community, or who are not familiar with this TV series to understand the meaning of the bullet chat expression.

Bullet chat is a language product that reflects a specific time or a specific video (Liu, 2021). The distinctiveness of the bullet chat discourse has been summarized by: phonetic homophone, diversity of vocabulary sources, and fragmentation of syntax uses (Xiao 2016). In terms of combining bullet chat with concrete group discourse analysis, Yu applied it to clarify the characteristic of subculture audiences' speech, which found the specialty of subculture audiences regarding homophones, fixed jargon, simplifications, and communication functions (Yu 2017). And these features are easy to be found among audiences equally, who are significantly innovative when it comes to stylising online discourses to demonstrate identity and creativity (Chen, 2014; Yuan, 2011).

This article chooses the popular China situation comedy *Ipartment* to do the case study. It mainly tells the story of

seven young men and women living in a love apartment in the modern city of Shanghai and reflects their views on life, love, and friends. By the end of the season five series broadcasting year, the total number of views per episode reached 1.614 hundred million which shows great popularity. This article takes on the qualitative method which selects 50 most popular contents for targeted analysis from the perspective of rhetorical features.

2. Theoretical notion

Bethan Davies's opinion about the community of practice is chosen by this article to define the audience group that extraordinary engagement, a shared repertoire, and a joint enterprise constitute an audience COP. This notion offers a framework within which to explore the specific social meanings that linguistic variables carry and the interactional goals they serve (Ben Rampton, 2010). The main focus of identity and the interaction among people can help this article to explore the relationship between the behavior of typing bullet chat and particular discourse communities' characteristics.

The community that membership type bullet chat on the Internet here mainly refers to audiences who comment on the video player application 'iQIYI'. Because the rise of bullet chat discourse is inseparable from the rapid development of the Internet along with the popularity of mobile video player software in recent years. Besides, the audience group in this article is not the 'all audience' in the broad sense, which does not include anti-fan, politicians, writers, and so on. It is just the narrow sense of 'audience group', which only refers to the fans or supporters of the TV series in China.

3. Data and methodology

This analysis is qualitative which is based on the selected comments from the entire corpus. Due to the difficulty to get the exact number of bullet chat comments because the total number is dynamic and is constantly growing along with time, so the data collection time is restricted from November 2021 to December in 2021. In total, 50 comments with the highest 'likes' were selected which were identified by the use of the rhetorical device and associated features for targeted analysis. After summarizing these comments' features, the following conclusions were drawn.

4. Results

Although bullet chat discourse is limited by the number of words stipulated by the system and the language usage is nonstandard, it still has certain rhetorical characteristics in some aspects. It is through the use of rhetorical devices that comments have better expressive effects. Several rhetorical features were identified from the data. Audiences of Ipartment in 'iQIYI' video player take on homophony, pun, abbreviation, repetition, irony, allusion and so on devices to stylise their comments. The rhetoric of bullet chat discourse is different from the normative rhetoric of literary language, therefore, it is only accepted and understood by some audiences in the current context and community of practice but not necessarily by all audiences^[4]. In the following subsections, I will discuss each device with examples.

4.1 Homophony

Homophony is the most frequent rhetorical device in bullet chat discourse. That is audiences take some similar pronunciations to create another sentence with similar pronunciation for a joke effect. The homophony has a great appeal to the membership of audiences. The reason is that this kind of discourse can make them feel sympathetic and get a sense of belonging because someone else who received and reacted to this message is their partner. For example, 'ci bu ci', 'duang', 'si mi da' and other languages are homophonic from what were originally very common words.

Extract 1:

ci bu ci, chi bu chi

Do you want to eat?

The pronunciation of ‘ci bu ci’ is similar to ‘chi bu chi’ and the real meaning is the same ‘Do you want to eat ?’. The origin of this homophony is the wrong pronunciation of people from Fujian province who can not tell ‘ci’ and ‘chi’ retroflex. The majority of girls who are fond of AGCN (Animation, Comic, Game, Novel) tend to use this homophony to show how cute they are.

This bullet chat appeared on the screen when the leading actress is tasting delicious Italian food and the audience who typed this content was confused by choosing what for lunch just right. So the audience types the idea ‘ci bu ci yi da li cai ’ (How about eating Italian food ?) to make decisions. Furthermore, the next bullet chat is the other audience’s answer to this question ‘ci’ (eat) to help the former audience to strengthen the decision.

Extract 2:

gan en si mi da

Thanks a lot!

The pronunciation of ‘si mi da’ is borrowed from the Korean honorific ‘습니다’. It is a modal particle that is used as an honorific without any meaning at the end of a declarative sentence. Recently, almost all Chinese people have heard of it even though they did not learn Korean before. This expression has become a kind of understanding of Korean among Chinese people and sometimes a common vocabulary for making fun of Koreans.

In the example above, this comment is to express gratitude. Sometimes there will be some warm prompts in bullet chat such as ‘qian fang gao neng’ (There will be something scary happens in the future) if some horrific plots will come up with in the following teleplay. The example here is this kind of hint, so the audience typed ‘gan en si mi da’ (Thanks a lot) to express gratitude.

Extract 3:

Wai, Yao Yao ling ma?

Hello, is this the police station?

In extract 3, the pronunciation of ‘wai’ is similar to ‘wei’ and the ‘yao yao ling’ refers to ‘110’ which shows a high level of enjoyment. A numerous of these comments flood the screen when the bad guy Xiaohei in the TV series is doing bad things but the leading characters didn’t notice his crimes even treat him as an intimate friend. On one thing, this homophony use is conventionalized due to the frequent re-appearance in the bullet chat comment. On the other thing, all Chinese letters type reduce the trouble of switching the input method from letters to numbers.

4.2 Pun

The use of puns usually happens in a specific situation and the audience can read “between the lines” according to the context. This line occurs relatively frequently in the series and the audience were impressed deeply, so they will type it in the bullet chat when appears relevant plots.

The sentence ‘Do you think I still have a chance?’ is the representative line from a family mystery TV series The Bad Kids. This line was talked by Zhang Dongsheng to his father-in-law and the ostensibly meaning is about whether he has the chance to learn photography under the guidance of his father-in-law. The real meaning behind the words is about whether he has a chance to stay with his wife who wants to divorce him. After speaking this line, Zhang Dongsheng throws his in-laws off a cliff with a strange smile. Due to this unexpected scary plot, audiences were impressed by this line and used it as a pun frequently in different TV series comments.

Extract 4:

ni kan wo hai you ji hui ma ?

Do you think I still have a chance?

This line in the above example has two-fold meanings too. Firstly, the male actor wants to know whether he can eat lunch with the actress and the other meaning is conveying the requirement about further appointments. The character of this leading male actor is too introverted to miss a lot of opportunities to express love to the leading lady, so the audience's attitude towards the man is regretful and worrying. The reaction of them after seeing the man's initiative for the further step was excited and delighted, so they repeated this line for bullet chat comment to express the agreement and joy. When the first barrage appeared on the screen, others like it appeared in succession which showed group identity.

4.3 Abbreviation

The abbreviation is another interesting rhetorical method that fits the transient feature of bullet chat. In recent years, Internet words such as 'lei jue bu ai' and 'cheng hui wan' can well reflect that bullet chat discourse is short but easy to understand which shows a reworking of the original meaning. For example, when the audience watches something that can bring back the memory, they will type 'ye qing hui' to express 'My youth time memory has come back. And the other abbreviation '2333' is used to express belly laughter from the heart.

Extract 5:

ye qing hui,

My youth time memory has come back.

The total Apartment TV series was split into five seasons and gained a huge hit among young generations. This TV series continues to be updated for a long time from the first season in 2009 to the ending in 2020 which can be seen as a childhood memory that grew up with the post-90s. What should be mentioned is that there was a six-year gap between the fourth and fifth seasons, so all viewers have high expectations for the latest episode. Almost all the viewers typed down the pop-ups of 'ye qing hui' to recall their memories and huge enthusiasm about the childhood memory when the latest episode aired in 2020.

Extract 6:

2333, er san san san,

A belly laugh.

'233' is another regularly used abbreviation that is popular among audiences. This string of numbers stands for the prototype of a belly laugh emoji on Mop website in the beginning. It's a dynamic icon that can not be used in the mobile application, so the users replaced it by typing code '233' and this code gradually became a tacit agreement over time. Besides, the more numbers of '3' in the last indicate the more laugh of the audiences. This expression form not only meets the economic principle of bullet chat discourse but also shows the emotion change vividly. When something funny plots appear on the TV series, the audience always type '233' to express vivid belly laugh. This comment is the most frequent in Apartment due to the funny character of a situation comedy.

4.4 Repetition

Extract 7:

yi fei niu bi niu bi niu bi,

Yifei is very awesome.

Repetition refers to the repeated use of a word or a sentence deliberately, such as 'yi fei niu bi niu bi niu bi' to express strong emotions. The listed example is the high praise for the main actress Hu Yifei by repeating 'niu bi' unremittingly. The

characteristic of Hu Yifei in the TV series is doughty and omnipotent, and she often shows exceptional persistence in unexpected things such as the fondness of using the chopper as a mirror. In this plot, someone who lived in the department together got into some tricky trouble, and nobody else could help him to deal with it except for Hu Yifei. Almost all audiences repeated ‘niu bi’ in bullet chat to express heartfelt admiration for her, after seeing the simple but efficient ways of solution. Besides, the use of repetition is just for short terms and very simple sentences instead of long and difficult sentences. The reason is that simple and easy-to-understand content can be quickly grasped by the audience.

4.5 Irony

Extract 8:

Zhang Wei: wo zui cong ming.

ZhangWei: I and the smartest guy in our apartment.

The use of irony often happens in a situation that the outcome is the opposite of what you would expect. And it is often used to highlight the negative or opposite image of specific actors in TV series. For example ZhangWei is a character who is too innocent to be tricked, so the audience wants to comment on his foolishness by praising his cleverness. This line was spoken by ZhangWei himself in the series to demonstrate his self-deprecating humour about the foolishness. Then this same comment flooded in the screen when ZhangWei was cheated by the same person for the third time to show the sympathy and regret from audiences.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This article combines stylisation with discourse characteristics to analyse bullet chat discourse distinctions and gives a complex analysis of bullet chat discourse characteristics from a rhetorical features perspective. While the former study just focus on bullet chat discourse characteristics from a linguistic dimension instead of treating it as a group product. The finding is that typing bullet chat does have an impact on group discourse expression distinctions in the rhetorical perspective.

The Internet technology provides the best environment for the creation of emerging online language symbols. Internet users can continuously create language forms with distinctive personality characteristics in the online world to a certain extent. The stylisation of audiences is also an important source of exporting emerging linguistic symbols. Bullet chat is a representative newly emerging language whose instantaneous, interactive, and entertaining characteristic allows the community of practice to gain a strong identity as a subject when tying comments on the chatbox^[5]. The bullet chat discourse shows incomparable superiority compared with other language forms when comments contents are admired by other viewers and lead to various kinds of interaction or entertainment worship. Audiences co-act by using the strategies of creativity and criticality to build their comments from those of others exist. Through this, the audiences co-construct an opinion on the issue about plots. The former adoptions of the rhetorical device by audiences mentioned in the result analysis can be conceptualized as a process of discourse ‘appropriation’. In this process, audiences re-adapt and re-interpret theoretical features to stylise local communication.

Bullet chat has its own unique culture so most content of bullet chat is born according to the characteristics of videos. To a certain extent, the emerging online language symbols in the bullet chat discourse have formed a group norm. After the normative language or vocabulary is understood and used by a small group of people, it is spread through video comments and online media in a short period. The language or vocabulary is understood and used by a small group of people thereby forming different circles. The most significant characteristic about these emerging online language symbols is created and accepted for specific groups.

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