

An Analysis of the Pragmatic Characteristics of "Jiong" in the Internet Era

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Abstract: With the Internet and technological developments, innovative communication methods and emerging new media have spawned rich cultural symbols in various forms. At the same time, they have created conditions for the rebirth and return of some long-dormant ancient Chinese characters, and "Jiong (囧)" is one of them. Previous researchers have made some progress in the evolution of the semantic meaning of "Jiong" from ancient times to the Internet era and have obtained a relatively clear timeline. However, there is still a certain research gap in the academic circle on the specific pragmatic use of "Jiong" in the Internet era and how its pragmatic use is affected by a variety of factors in the Internet era. Therefore, from the perspective of pragmatics, this study first analyzes the usages of "Jiong" in different contexts with specific examples and then uses data statistics and theoretical analysis to finally find that the pragmatics of "Jiong" are influenced by the network context, the homophone "embarrassment (窘)", the Chinese pinyin of which is also "Jiong", and the mass media.

Keywords: Jiong, Network culture, Pragmatics

1. Introduction

When typing the word "Jiong (囧)" into an Internet search engine, researchers will get about 100 million related results. There are also countless newspaper articles, marketing advertisements, films, and television programs with the title of "Jiong". These examples show that "Jiong" has shown strong communication ability and economic potential in today's world. As described by some commentators as "the most impressive Chinese character in history" [1], the popularity of "Jiong" with unique expression effect on the Internet began in the year of 2008. Since then, the academic circle has greatly increased its interest in the study of "Jiong", and linguistic studies on "Jiong" have also emerged, most of which focus on the tracing or the comparison of ancient and modern meanings of "Jiong". Typical achievements, such as the article of Zhu Shengjie, start from the interpretation of the ancient meaning of "Jiong" and the new meaning on the Internet and finally focus on the relationship between the ancient and modern pronunciation, shape and meaning of "Jiong" [2], which is logical and innovative.

No matter in the peak period or the trough period in recent years, the research on "Jiong" rarely involves the pragmatic characteristics of "Jiong" in the current Internet era. Charles Morris defines pragmatics as studying "the relationship between symbols and their interpreters" [3]. Based on this, from the perspective of pragmatics, this study enumerates the expression effects of "Jiong" in

different contexts, combined with data statistics and theoretical analysis, and tries to find multiple factors that affect the way interpreters interpret "Jiong" in the Internet era. It is of enlightening significance for researchers to further understand the pragmatic characteristics of "Jiong" and the deep reasons for their popularity on the Internet.

2. Different Usages and Examples of "Jiong" Today

The word "Jiong" can be traced back to the Yin and Shang dynasties. As an ancient hieroglyphic, the oracle-bone inscriptions of "Jiong (囧)" are a circle with three strokes in the middle, like the hollowed-out form in the middle of a window. Today, the shape of this character no longer has the characteristics of the window that can be universally recognized. However, on the Internet, another pictographic feature of "Jiong" is more accepted by the public: the square border of "Jiong (囧)" is seen as a person's face, the "eight (八)" in the box is like strongly furrowed eyebrows, and the square below represents an open mouth. The whole shape of "Jiong" is like a vivid and exaggerated expression of a person's surprise, helplessness, panic, embarrassment, and other emotions. In his book *Introduction to Pragmatics*, He Ziran defines descriptive pragmatics as "describing the various usages that emerge when a language is combined with a specific situation" and "taking charge of explaining the various factors that the word and structural meaning in a sentence or discourse is subject to contextual constraints" [3], which reveals that descriptive pragmatics can help people to effectively use and correctly understand different meanings and sentence structures of language in different contexts. Therefore, according to the definition of descriptive pragmatics, this study will explain the different parts of speech and usages of "Jiong" in different contexts.

2.1. Adjectives

"Jiong" in the following three examples are all adjectives, but they show different usages in different contexts. The three examples can be interpreted respectively as embarrassment and helplessness at one's behavior, funny and weird feelings at an object, and description of one's embarrassment and bewilderment. Therefore, as an adjective, "Jiong" can be used to describe people's different emotions and different feelings about objects and events, and in most cases, it expresses a helpless and embarrassing emotion or feeling.

Example 1

A student was on his way to school when he remembered that he had unfinished homework, and then he was being harshly criticized by his teacher, so he posted the following on social media: "This is so Jiong."

Example 2

At a solemn dinner party, a man arrived wearing a T-shirt and shorts. One of the guests took a picture of him and sent it to a friend with the message: "This is so Jiong."

Example 3

A candidate, after a bad interview, texted a friend: "This is so Jiong."

2.2. Verbs

"Jiong" in the following two examples is a verb. As can be seen from the two examples, firstly, the usage of "Jiong" as a verb means "to make someone feel Jiong", and the meaning of "Jiong" is basically consistent with the above meaning as an adjective, which is a feeling of embarrassment. Secondly, the sentence in which "Jiong" is used as a verb is usually expressed by the recipient; that is, the speaker is the object of "Jiong".

Example 1

A guy sends a friend a picture of himself trying on something, but the friend thinks it doesn't match him and replies, "You Jiong me."

Example 2

A pair of friends are texting, one tells the other a bad joke, and the other replies, "You Jiong me."

2.3. Independent Expression

"Jiong" absorbed the emerging network character culture in the development process and, at the same time, integrated with the Japanese network hieroglyphics "Frustrated body forward bending Orz", resulting in diversified forms such as "Jiong rz (囧 rz)". "Jiong" and its variants are often used as a separate "meme" in online chats to concisely reply to others' messages and express a variety of emotions in a specific context. In the following two examples, "Jiong", as an independent expression, has different explanatory spaces in different contexts. In the first example, "Jiong" indicates panic and embarrassment. In the second example, "Jiong" not only means embarrassment but also plays an explanatory role.

Example 1

One day, student A slept late and did not go to class, but the teacher called him, so after class, student B sent A a message that the teacher had found him absent. A replied with a meme: "Jiong."

Example 2

A wanted to send a message to a friend but sent it to B by mistake. After realizing his mistake, A sent B a meme: "Jiong", to explain the situation and relieve the embarrassment.

3. The Current Pragmatic Characteristics of "Jiong"

3.1. Symbol Interpreters in the Network Context

As a network symbol, "Jiong" needs interpreters who are in a specific environment and master a specific language to play the expected role. Scholar Chen Jing has made an analysis of "Jiong" characters and believes that "Jiong" is untranslatable in the aspect of language and culture [4]. Firstly, the Chinese character form of "Jiong" greatly affects the way it is interpreted today. When the public, as symbol interpreters, try to explain the expression effect of "Jiong" in a specific context, they generally rely on the font shape of "Jiong", which contains "furrowed brow" and "wide mouth". "Jiong" lost its original font structure when it was translated into foreign words such as "embarrassed". Similarly, in daily communication, when people say the word "Jiong" orally, its expression effect will be weakened because the font of the word "Jiong" is not visible. Therefore, interpreters use the emotion-like appearance of "Jiong" to match a series of extended emotions, such as helplessness, embarrassment, and depression, rather than a specific or direct meaning. It can be seen that when the interpreter is detached from the background of Chinese characters or unable to recognize the font of Chinese characters, the pragmatic vividness and vitality of "Jiong" as an emotional symbol will be greatly weakened.

Secondly, as a Chinese character re-active in the Internet era, the specific pragmatics of "Jiong" are embodied in a specific communication environment, that is, the Internet. Netizens seek the sense of identity and participation in the community using personalized emotional symbols. At the same time, in the fast-paced information age, the "principle of least effort" embodied by "Jiong" means that speakers tend to use the fewest words to express all the meanings they want to express [5], and at the same time make listeners spend the least effort to obtain the maximum context effect [6], so that "Jiong" can fully adapt to the needs of network communication and be active on the Internet. At the same time, it also limits the scope of the context in which "Jiong" is applicable to a certain extent. Due to the short development and dissemination time on the Internet, the meaning and parts of speech

of "Jiong" are not completely clear. Most of the time, it is only used in entertainment or informal contexts, and there is still a long distance between it and the formal context. The mutual selection between symbol and symbol interpreter, symbol and context makes "Jiong" need symbol interpreters in the network environment in order to play the expected expression effect.

3.2. Homophone Phenomenon of "Embarrassment"

"Jiong" is a homophone with "embarrassment (窘)", the Chinese pinyin of which is also "Jiong", in line with the general cognitive law "sound proximity means meaning proximity". Wang Xijie pointed out in Chinese Rhetoric that homophony is an active use of homophone phenomenon [7]. In recent years, there has been an endless stream of homophonic memes on the Internet, which He Ziran defines as "homophonic mimicry memes" [8]. The essence of harmonic mimicry memes is to create new information by copying the speech of the original information, which mainly includes two factors: copying the speech and innovating the information. The homophone phenomenon between "Jiong" and "embarrassment" conforms to the above two characteristics and belongs to a homophonic stem. On the one hand, the word "Jiong" is the same as "embarrassment (窘)" in Chinese pronunciation, which is a copy of the original message. On the other hand, in addition to the basic meaning of the character "embarrassment (窘)," which is "poverty" and "dilemma", the word "Jiong" uses an emoji-like appearance to convey innovative information, which is the irony and sense of humor derived from the appearance of itself. As an online homophone, the frequent occurrence of the word "Jiong" makes the homophone relationship between it and "embarrassment (窘)" repeatedly mentioned. At the same time, the feelings derived from the appearance of "Jiong" overlap with the meaning of the word "embarrassment" to a certain extent, which makes the use of the word "Jiong" not only a copy of the Chinese pronunciation of the word "embarrassment (窘)", but also a part of the meaning of the original information "embarrassed", providing a certain basis for the public to understand "Jiong" through the cognitive law from "sound proximity means meaning proximity".

As for why "Jiong" stands out among the many homophonic Chinese characters with "embarrassment (窘)", the reason is that the embarrassing expression of "Jiong" can vividly express the semantic meaning of "embarrassment", which is in line with the tendency of audiovisual characters in the information age. Today, marketing methods such as "eyeball economy" and "large layout, high status", and public psychology place great emphasis on vision. Therefore, media and businesses use color-changing, artistic characters, increasing body and expression to affect the way people interpret text symbols, trying to make text achieve the unity of audiovisual sensory experience so as to enhance the expression effect of language. Thus, the advantages of "Jiong" in the wave of audiovisual characters appear: the innate advantage of homonym with "embarrassment" makes use of people's common cognitive psychology of "sound proximity means meaning proximity". At the same time, at the visual level, people's imagination can be used without complex processing to achieve the effect of "vision-based" rather than the general "text-based" [9], which has become a typical example of audiovisual characters.

3.3. The Promoting Role of the Mass Media

The mass media helps "Jiong" show its adaptability and vitality at the pragmatic level. Mass media, including newspapers, books, movies, and many other forms, directly face the public, mainly undertake the functions of disseminating information, educating the public and entertaining the public, and are important tools to guide public opinion [10]. There are two main reasons why the mass media favor "Jiong". Firstly, the rise and development of network language provides material and reference for the creation of many media. In order to cater to the aesthetic orientation of the public and conform to the trend of the times, absorbing popular network language has become an important means for

mass media to maintain its own development. As one of the most popular symbols on the Internet in China in the 21st century, "Jiong" has a certain reference value [11]. Secondly, the audiovisual characteristics of "Jiong" make it have vivid expression effects. Therefore, the use of "Jiong" by mass media can bring certain attraction and economic benefits, such as sales volume and box office.

According to incomplete statistics, since 2008, there have been more than 25,000 Chinese newspaper articles and nearly 1,500 Chinese books containing the word "Jiong". Compared with newspapers and books based on text, movies, as a new form of visual culture that emerged in the past two hundred years, have a stronger ability to attract the public and create public opinion by using perceptual images and videos. Between 2008 and 2016, there were more than 50 Chinese-language films with "Jiong" in their titles. Among the most famous films with "Jiong" as a discourse, "Lost on Journey (Ren Zai Jiong Tu, as the Chinese name in Pinyin)", directed by Xu Zheng has grossed a total of about 3 billion yuan and triggered a wide range of social discussions, with the public providing richer explanations for "Jiong" based on the films. For example, the ironic encounters of Wang Baoqiang and Xu Zheng's characters on their travels can be interpreted as "Jiong", Wang Baoqiang's funny looks in the film can be interpreted as "Jiong", the different dilemmas faced by the elites and ordinary people in the film can also be interpreted as "Jiong". This has developed the expression function of "Jiong" in different contexts, to a certain extent, so that it has a more extensive extended meaning.

To sum up, "Jiong" has certain characteristics at the pragmatic level. Firstly, driven by the "principle of least effort", the language with economic expression is more favored by netizens. Therefore, the context in which the font of "Jiong" can extend a series of emotions are mainly concentrated on the Internet. As can be seen from the above examples, "Jiong" is applicable both in the public space of the network, such as social media platforms, and in the private space, such as the private chat of a few people. Secondly, no matter as an adjective, verb, or independent expression, "Jiong" is mainly interpreted as an emotional experience of embarrassment, awkwardness, and helplessness. The main reason is that "Jiong" is associated with the meaning of "embarrassment" by taking advantage of the public's understanding of the psychology of "sound proximity means meaning proximity". Finally, as a very flexible network symbol, "Jiong" has close communication with mass media, reflecting different pragmatics in different contexts of various media and showing strong vitality.

4. Conclusion

By studying the pragmatic characteristics of "Jiong" in the current Internet era, this study finds that, in the specific Internet context, the subtle relationship between the Chinese pronunciation and meaning of "Jiong" and "embarrassment", as well as the expression function of "Jiong" in different contexts developed by the mass media in order to appropriately reflect the public life. All of them have promoted the development and spread of "Jiong", an ancient and novel cultural symbol. From the perspective of pragmatics and communication, combined with specific examples and data, this study analyzes the factors that affect the relationship between "Jiong" and its symbol interpreters, which, to a certain extent, is conducive to deepening the understanding of the expression effect and function of "Jiong" in different contexts through multi-disciplinary perspectives in the study of network language. Finally, the process of the rise of "Jiong" on the Internet and the development of their meaning is still shallow in this study. Meanwhile, the reasons for the gradual withdrawal of "Jiong" from the popular language on the Internet are not analyzed. In the future, further research can be carried out in related research fields in order to help in-depth discussion of "Jiong", a typical symbol of the wave of network language in different disciplines of the multiple features.

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