Original Paper

An Analysis of Chinese Young People's Code-Switching in Online Communication from the Perspective of Pragmatic Identity Theory

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Abstract

Existing studies on code-switching have mostly focused on the study of linguistic features and social functions, and few studies have paid attention to the relationship between the use of code-switching and identity construction and psychological states in different contexts. Based on Pragmatic Identity Theory, taking Wechat moments as an example, this study adopts a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to explore Chinese young people's use of code-switching to construct multiple pragmatic identities in different contexts and their underlying psychological motivations. By analyzing 216 pieces of the Wechat moments' data, it is found that code-switching mainly fulfills the three functions of academic communication, hobby exchange and daily sharing. The study found that with strategic code-switching, Chinese young people constructed five non-conventional pragmatic identities in Wechat moments: academic help-seekers, hobby enthusiasts, hobby critics, life sharers and high-end sharers. This study analyzes the role of code-switching in pragmatic identity construction of Chinese young people, thus offering a new research perspective for understanding the social psychology and identity construction of contemporary youth.

Keywords

code-switching, pragmatic identity construction, Wechat moments, Chinese young people

1. Introduction

Under the background of globalization and the rapid development of instant information, language use presents diversified characteristics. The phenomenon of young people's use of code-switching on major social platforms has become a hot research topic today. Wechat moments, as one of the main ways of communication and sharing among Chinese young people, has also received widespread attention. Nowadays, Chinese young people's use of code-switching in Wechat moments has become a common linguistic phenomenon (Yang, 2017; Zhang, 2016). Recent studies have made useful explorations in terms of pragmatic functions, social identity and intercultural communication, which have contributed to the understanding of contemporary Chinese young people's social psychology and identity construction. However, most studies have focused on the linguistic features and social functions, and few studies have explored the deep connection between code-switching and the identity construction and psychological state of young people in specific contexts. This study analyzes the code-switching behaviors of Chinese young people in different contexts based on the real data of Wechat moments, focusing on the types of words/phrases they tend to use. It also explores the role of code-switching in the construction of non-conventional identities, and then further explores the psychological motivation behind the phenomenon. This will not only help to understand Chinese young people's language use across multiple contexts, but also provide new theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence for the study of pragmatic identity construction.

2. Literature Review

Code-switching, as a common phenomenon in language contact, has long received extensive attention in the fields of linguistics, sociolinguistics and pragmatics. Nowadays, the research mainly focuses on four aspects, namely, context-driven, communication motivation, social norms and the intrinsic value of the code, in order to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the code-switching phenomenon.

In the context-driven aspect, code-switching is regarded as an adaptive response to specific contexts. In the early 1970s, Gumperz (1972) first categorized code-switching into situational code-switching and metaphorical code-switching theory. In situational code-switching, he suggested "a direct relationship between language and social situation". This type of code switching emphasizes the contextual changes in situation, conversation object and topics. Later, the term conversational code-switching replaced the original metaphotical code-switching. This type emphasizes the speakers' tone, emphasis, or role change more than the extemporaneous type of factors. To understanding this form of transcoded linguistic information, attention should be paid to the conversation itself.

Code-switching, in turn, is often driven by specific communicative motives. Speakers will adjust their language or register to please or alienate the other in the form of convergence or divergence (Verschueren, 1999; He, 2011). This theory explains code-switching from the perspective of communicative motivation and emphasizes the strategic function of code-switching in interpersonal

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interaction.

Code-switching is categorized into unmarked choice and marked choice according to whether it conforms to social norms (Mayers Scotton, 1989). The former conforms to social norms and indicates that the speakers hold the same view as the listeners; while the latter deliberately deviates from existing or expected relations of rights and obligations. This theory reveals the strategies of code-switching in social interaction, suggesting that speakers uphold or challenge social rules through code-switching.

The function of code-switching is reflected not only in the communicative situation, but also in the intrinsic value of code. The code value theory proposed by Zhou (1995) analyzes code-switching from the perspective of the intrinsic code value, which he divided into semantic value, relational value, affective value and stylistic value, and argued that code-switching responds to the communicator's rational meaning, interpersonal relationship, affective expression and stylistic features. This theory compensates for the shortcoming of earlier researches that overlooked the intrinsic value of the code, and provides a new perspective for code-switching study.

However, current studies often focus on general interpersonal communication and lack attention to the features of code-switching in specific platforms and social media contexts. Therefore, this paper takes Wechat moments as an example to explore how a vatiety of contexts influences Chinese young people to choose different code-switching when posting their moments (Yang, 2017; Zhang, 2016). Based on Gumperz's situational code-switching, this paper provides an in-depth analysis on the code-switching used in posting content in moments, and analyzes the lexical tendency of Chinese young people's moments to use insertional code-switching due to situational switching.

3. Pragmatic Identity Theory

Identity has always been a hot topic in the humanities and social sciences, and an important topic of research in pragmatics, sociology, communication and other disciplines. Since the twentieth century, the theory of pragmatic identity construction has been developing continuously, and related studies have analyzed a more complete understanding of this theory.

Identity construction research continues to develop, and the theory of pragmatic identity construction has undergone a major transformation. In the early days, traditional essentialism regarded identity as static and a priori, with fixed social attributes, such as age, gender, occupation, etc. (Hall, 1996; Kellner, 1986). Stryker (1987) and Hechtetal (1993) regarded identity as a division of social roles, emphasizing the social inheritance and stability. Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) further views identity as an individual's tendency to identify with a community, and sees identity as an important means by which an individual maintains self-esteem in society. With the rise of social constructivist thinking, identity research has gradually shifted to a dynamic constructive perspective. Social constructivism argues that identity is dynamically constructed in the communicative process and is provisional, mutable and context-sensitive (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005; De Finaetal, 2006，Gergen, 1985). The concept of "pragmatic identity" proposed by Chen (2013), which emphasizes that identity is a

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contextualized self or other identity chosen by language users intentionally or unintentionally, has further promoted the study of identity construction.

With the rise of constructivism, pragmatics has begun to study identity construction, Chen (2014) systematically elaborated five major paths in the study of pragmatic identity, namely, identity as an interpretive resource, a performative resource, an interpersonal resource, elaborative resource and evaluative resource. He pointed out that identity is not only the background of communication, but also a resource that communicators actively choose to achieve specific communicative goals. This view has been widely validated and applied in subsequent studies.

Verschueren (1999) argued that identity as an interpretive resource is regarded as a contextual factor that influences the interpretation of discourse. The communicator should convey a specific pragmatic meaning through choosing a specific identity. As a performative resource, identity is a tool for communicators to achieve specific communicative goals. For example, teachers enhance their teaching effectiveness by choosing "authoritative (权威型)" identities (Zhang, 2022). Spencer Oatey's (2008) view is based on the idea that identities are seen as interpersonal resources, and that identities can be a tool for communicators to manage interpersonal relationships. By choosing different identities, communicators can draw closer or alienate their relationships with others. As an elaborative resource, Bucholtz & Hall(2005) pointed out that identity is a tool for analysts to interpret discourse. By analyzing identity constructs in discourse, researchers can reveal communicative intentions and strategies of communicators. As an evaluative resource, Tracy (2002), on the other hand, argues that identity is a criterion for evaluating the relevance and appropriateness of discourse. Whether a communicator's choice of a particular identity conforms to contextual norms directly affects the communicative effect.

With the depth of research, academics began to study the multiple paths of identity construction (Chen, 2018; Cao, 2014). Chen(2018) further deepened the theoretical framework of identity construction and proposed five major resourcefulness of identity construction. He argues that identity is not only a tool for communicators to interpret discourse, but also an important means for them to realize their communicative goals. For example, identity as a performative resource can help communicators realize specific acting needs; identity as an interpersonal resource can help communicators manage interpersonal relationships.

And there are various research methods for identity construction such as discourse analysis method, critical pragmatics path, experiment and cognition (Chen, 2018; Yuan, 2023; Tajfel, 1981). Through empirical research, Li and Ran (2017) explored the dynamic process of identity construction in argumentative conversations. It was found that communicators achieved control of the argument topic and refutation of the opponent's viewpoint by choosing different identities during the argument process. Tan (2016) explored the diversity and complexity of identity construction from a rhetorical perspective. He pointed out that identity construction is not only the result of language choice, but also the embodiment of rhetorical strategies, and communicators construct different discursive identities by

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choosing different rhetorical means.

On the basis of existing research, some scholars have further explored the future directions of identity construction research within the field of pragmatics. Ran et al. (2016) explored the impact of technological development on the research methods and topics of pragmatics. He pointed out that with the development of science and technology, pragmatics research methods will become more diversified and identity construction research will focus more on interdisciplinary and intercultural perspectives. Xu and Chen (2015) also proposed the direction of future identity construction research. They argued that future research should further explore the motivational mechanisms of identity construction and its intrinsic effects on interpersonal relationship management, as well as expand the research object to cover more communicators with different cultural and occupational backgrounds.

The shift in identity construction research from essentialism to constructivism reflects a deeper academic understanding of identity dynamics and context sensitivity. Previous studies have provided a systematic theoretical framework and empirical support for identity construction, and future studies should further expand the research object and research methodology to deeply explore the motivational mechanism and communicative function of identity construction. In addition, previous studies have mostly focused on the linguistic features and social functions of code-switching, but rarely explored its deeper connection with identity construction and psychological state in specific contexts, especially for the group of Chinese young people. Therefore, this study takes WeChat moments as an entry point, collects a large amount of data for empirical analysis, and according to the theory of pragmatic identity construction, tries to analyze the different types of non-conventional identities constructed by young Chinese people through the expression of their identifications with different contexts and topics in the process of communicating in WeChat moments, as well as analyze the psychological factors behind the speakers, and mainly answer the following questions:

1) What types of word/phrase insertional code-switching(noun/verb/adjective) do Chinese young people tend to use in different contexts(academic communication/hobby exchange/daily sharing)?

2) How does code-switching help young Chinese people construct different pragmatic identities and realize specific pragmatic functions in different contexts?

3) What are the core motivations that drive Chinese young people to use code-switching to construct pragmatic identities?

4. Data Description

This study adopts the survey method, focusing on the three core keywords of "code-switching" (mixed use of Chinese and English), "identity construction" and "psychological motivation" for analysis. The steps of the study are mainly divided into data collection, data labeling, and analyzing methods.

The data was selected from the WeChat moments of the researchers and members of their direct social network, using a sampling method, and WeChat users aged 19-25 were invited to voluntarily provide screenshots of their moments (the parts involving personal information were anonymized), and were

screened according to the criteria for data collection, in which code-switching was determined as follows: 1) at least one non-Chinese vocabulary word/phrase is included (e.g., "deadline", "presentation"); 2) Chinese syntactic structure embedded in foreign language expression; 3)provider's self-reported intention of cross-language expression. Based on the number of years of account registration(≥5 years), the content theme (topics of young people such as students who need to take postgraduate entrance exam, job hunting, etc.), and the first 6 digits of the provider's ID number for triple age verification, a total of 216 valid samples were obtained in order to analyze the types of grammatical transformations that Chinese young people tend to use in their Wechat moments, as well as the psychological state of the transformation and the effect of the transformation.

When annotating the data, the linguistic features of code-switching in different contexts are analyzed to explore how code-switching constructs non-conventional identities through specific word classes or phrases. Using Python, we focus on labeling high-frequency real words, such as nouns (e.g., "offer", "DDL"), verbs (e.g., "share", "punch") and evaluative words such as adjectives (e.g., "fancy") and adverbs (e.g., "literally"), and label different types of identity constructs according to different contexts. The identity constructs were labeled according to different contexts. For example, professional identity based on the use of jargon (e.g., "proposal"), community identity based on subcultural vocabulary (e.g., "yyds"), or emotional expressions (e.g., "emo") to determine emotional identity, etc. Qualitative analysis was conducted by comparing the differences in word distribution in different scenarios.

Finally, based on the psychological classification of the research data, the emotional tendency of the research subjects is used as the keyword for statistical data to analyze the psychological state reflected in the identity features constructed by Chinese young people using code-switching nowadays.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Linguistic Representation of Code-Switching

Research indicates that the language habits of Chinese youth vary with context, leading to corresponding changes in the effects of code-switching (Myers Scotton, 1988). Through qualitative analysis of the linguistic data, the following conclusions were drawn:

Statistical analysis of part of speech revealed the grammatical preferences and pragmatic functional differentiation in the code-switching practices of contemporary Chinese youth, reflecting their strategies for identity construction across different contexts. As shown in Table 1, Chinese youth tend to use nouns or noun phrases as insertional code-switching in academic communication contexts, involving specialized terms, like "Creative writing" or "Python", thereby demonstrating their professionalism in academic exchanges. In hobby exchange contexts, the frequency of noun usage remains significantly higher than other word categories. However, compared to academic communication, adjectives, such as "happy" or "amazing" are more frequently used in hobby-related exchanges, effectively conveying the positive emotions experienced in these situations. In daily sharing contexts, Chinese youth exhibit a richer variety of word categories when posting code-switched content

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on WeChat Moments. In addition to the highly frequent use of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs are also utilized to meet diverse expressive needs, enabling more natural and vivid descriptions of facts or emotions.

Table 1.

Context　　　part　　of	Nouns	Verbs	Adjectives	Adverbs	Others
Academic Communication	17%	17%	12%		54%
Hobby Exchange	4%	13%	22%		61%
Daily Sharing	11%	8%	30%	5%	46%

5.2 Categories and Functions of Pragmatic Identities

Based on the analysis of 216 collected posts, this study, grounded in Chen's (2020) pragmatic identity theory, reveals that Chinese youth strategically construct the following types of pragmatic identities in three primary contexts: academic communication(15%), daily sharing(63%), and hobby exchange(22%).

5.2.1 Academic Communication Context

Academic Help-seekers construct their identity through a discourse formula of academic background information + specific questions. They offer specialized background or identity details related to the academic field and pose targeted questions to shape an identity as an Academic Help-seeker. While emphasizing academic professionalism, they also send signals for assistance to knowledgeable peers in their WeChat Moment. For example:

Example 1: 等一下 Listen and speak up 的 individual speech 是不是这周就要讲了? (Is the individual speech for Listen and speak up due this week?)

According to this example, the speaker first mentions the course named Listen and speak up as shared knowledge to activate collective memory(e.g. shared course experiences) and then poses a specific question about individual speech. The use of English reduces the directness of the inquiry, aligning with Leech's (1983) Politeness Principle. This approach demonstrates familiarity with the academic context while precisely targeting potential helpers, successfully constructing an academic help-seeker identity.

5.2.2 Hobby Exchange Context

Hobby Enthusiasts build their identity through a discourse formula of shared hobby background + personal experience. They introduce background information about the hobby and combine it with personal reflections, not only expressing their feelings but also attracting the attention of fellow enthusiasts for further interaction. For example:

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Example 2: 每次看到 Paul Celan 都会内心一动，毕竟是最爱的德国诗人。(Every time I see Paul Celan, my heart skips a beat—after all, he's my favorite German poet.)

Here, the speaker uses the original German name Paul Celan instead of its Chinese translation, precisely referencing a specific cultural symbol while implying familiarity with German literature or modern poetry. This activates collective memory within literary circles (e.g. Celan's works like Atemwende or Fadensonnen), efficiently filtering an audience of fellow poetry enthusiasts. Subsequently, by using emotional expressions such as "内心一动" and "最爱的", the strategy of self-expression brings the psychological distance with the audience closer and creates an emotional image; the qualification of "德国诗人" also includes emotion within the framework of expertise and avoids generalisations. In the context of sharing hobbies, this Moment not only implies the speaker's literary qualities, but also provides an opportunity for discussion among peers, successfully shaping the image of a Hobby Enthusiast.

Then, Hobby Critics construct their identity through a discourse formula of negative evaluation + condemnation. They critique specific hobbies or others' preferences, posting negative assessments on their Moments to express disapproval to shape their identities. For example:

Example 3: Apex 真是会搞比赛的。MOBA 游戏全局 bp 还是挺正常的，fps 游戏也搞全局 bp 真的是长见识了。还是你会玩啊 ea。(Apex really knows how to organize tournaments. Global BP is normal for MOBA games, but applying it to FPS games is something else. Way to go, EA.)

From this, the speaker uses the abbreviation bp (Ban/Pick) instead of the full Chinese translation, directly referencing a core mechanic in MOBA/FPS gaming communities. The sarcastic tone, such as "真是会搞比赛的" and "长见识了", softens the direct criticism, in line with Leech's (1983) Irony Principle. At the same time, "还是你会玩啊 ea" is an anthropomorphic way of addressing the game maker. This expression not only shows the speaker's familiarity with a certain game field, but also clearly conveys his personal opposition, successfully constructing the image of a Hobbyist Critic.

5.2.3 Daily Sharing Context

Firstly, Life Sharers build their identity through a discourse formula of shared life background + personal experience. They usually do not directly point out the context in their communication, but default to being in the context of daily sharing. These young people will tend to share their personal life experiences and daily status so that their friends can understand their lives and at the same time act as confidants. For example:

Example 4: 来 UIC 的第三周快变成 Social 达人了谁懂一些长沙人基因里的社牛 P.S.在 Library 发的这条所以现在继续练习我的哑巴韩语。(Three weeks at UIC, and I've practically become a Social 达人. Who gets the Changsha genes for being a social butterfly? P.S. Sending this from the Library, so now back to practicing my mute Korean.)

Here, the speaker uses UIC (Beijing Normal University-Hong Kong Baptist University United International College) without elaboration, activating shared knowledge among the educational community. This choice of acronym suggests familiarity with the international campus culture, and

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predetermines the audience as students of the same university or those who are interested in Chinese-foreign co-operation. While "基因里的社牛" ostensibly emphasises innate determination, it suggests the malleability of identity through the "第三周快变成". The phrase "Social 达人" highlights social achievements, while "哑巴韩语", referring to reading/writing proficiency but lacking speaking skills, introduces self-deprecating humor, creating a balanced and relatable persona. The language style of networked expression like "谁懂" and "P.S." is highly consistent with the narrative strategy of "大学生日常 vlog" on platforms such as RedNote and Weibo, which reduces the threshold of content consumption through fragmented and emotional expression, thus effectively constructing the image of a daily sharer with great affinity and growth.

High-End Sharers construct their identity through a discourse formula of high-end lifestyle background + personal experience. Unlike ordinary life sharers, they focus on sharing high end experiences (e.g. travel, luxury goods, niche activities) to project a refined and sophisticated image. For example:

Example 5: 也是一个游乐场 珍珠岛游乐天堂 我更喜欢 Universal studios 但是这个也还不错。

(Another amusement park—Pearl Island Paradise. I prefer Universal Studios, but this one's not bad.)

From this, the speaker directly uses the English name Universal Studios instead of its Chinese translation "环球影城", invoking collective memory among global theme park enthusiasts. The phrase "也还不错" downplays Pearl Island's appeal, indirectly elevating their own consumption level. The adverb "还" and "不错"softens the critique, adhering to Leech's Tact Maxim to maintain social harmony. This approach balances the display of high-class symbols with an exploratory spirit by phrase "珍珠岛", fitting the high-end sharer identity.

In summary, contemporary Chinese youth demonstrate a high level of identity construction awareness on social media, flexibly selecting pragmatic identities based on context and communicative needs. The diversity of pragmatic identity construction reflects the complex social demands faced by Chinese youth and their proficient pragmatic skills in the digital age.

5.3 Psychological Motivations

In the social media practices of Chinese youth, code-switching is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but also an external manifestation of internal psychological needs. Gardner and Lambert (1972) categorized language learning motivations into two types: instrumental motivation (language as a tool for practical goals, e.g., securing high-paying jobs) and integrative motivation (language as a means to integrate into target cultures). This framework provides a theoretical basis for understanding the psychological drivers behind code-switching.

Analysis of the WeChat Moments data reveals that Chinese youth employ code-switching strategies to construct contextually appropriate social identities. These linguistic choices are not random but driven by complex psychological factors, including self-identity construction, social relationship adjustment, expression of existential anxiety, and affirmation of self-worth. This phenomenon aligns with the sociopsychological mechanism that views language as both a communicative tool and a resource for identity construction (Gee, 2000).

Classic motivation theory presents that linguistic choices are driven by the interaction between individual needs and external environments. Accordingly, we examine the motivations behind code-switching from instrumental, cultural and situational perspectives.

From an instrumental perspective, language choices are closely tied to practical objectives. In contexts like job hunting, academic advancement or cross-cultural communication, Chinese youth deliberately use target languages to access resources or enhance competitiveness. For instance, frequent use of English terms like "Listen and speak up 的 individual speech" in academic discussions not only facilitates professional exchange, but also reinforces the speaker's professional identity, which providing psychological security in uncertain environments.

Cultural motivations reflect Chinese youth's exploration and integration of multifaceted identities in the globalized era. Unlike traditional integrative motivation, which emphasizes assimilation into a single culture,contemporary youth seek dynamic balance between native and target cultures. For example, mixing "Kafkaesque" with local internet slang on social media showcases cultural capital while positioning the speaker as both locally grounded and globally engaged.

Situational motivations highlight the social adaptation mechanisms behind linguistic choices. Using jargon in academic circles strengthens community belonging, while employing gaming terms like APEX in hobby groups reinforces the gamer identity. This acute contextual awareness is an essential skill for digital survival.

In conclusion, code-switching is not just a linguistic phenomenon but a concentrated reflection of the complex psychological motivations of Chinese youth. It integrates mechanisms like self-identity construction, social relationship maintenance and impression management. Understanding these motivations not only deciphers the linguistic behaviors of contemporary youth but also provides theoretical support for research in sociolinguistics, cross-cultural communication and youth culture.

6. Conclusion

In the era of social media, language use is no longer merely about information transmission but has become a key tool for Chinese youth to construct their identities, connect with others and explore the world. By analyzing code-switching phenomena in their WeChat Moments, we can discern the diverse psychological motivations behind each linguistic choice and identity construction.

The study found that in three primary contexts—academic communication,hobby exchange and daily sharing—Chinese youth strategically construct five non-conventional pragmatic identities through insertional code-switching: academic help-seekers, hobby enthusiasts, hobby critics, life sharers and high-end sharers. These identities reflect not only the contextual sensitivity of code-switching but also the complex emotional needs of contemporary Chinese youth in digital social interactions. The study elucidates the role of code-switching mechanisms in identity construction, offering new theoretical perspectives for research on identity and the social psychology of Chinese youth.

However, this study has limitations. The relatively small data may not fully represent Chinese youth

across different educational backgrounds, occupations or age groups. Moreover, as social media continues to evolve, pragmatic identity construction will undoubtedly exhibit richer dynamics, warranting further exploration. Future research could expand the scope of study and incorporate cross-platform and cross-cultural comparative analyses to comprehensively reveal the dynamic relationship between language and identity construction in the digital age.

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