

An Exploration and Analysis of Cyber Abbreviations

ZHANG Jia-ying, QU Li-li

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

With the continuous development of the Internet, cyber abbreviations gradually form a system in people's communication. After distinguishing the meanings of abbreviations, this paper analyzes the classification, causes, characteristics, and effects of cyber abbreviations. The purpose of the paper is to understand the cultural connotation and era characteristics of cyber abbreviations, keep up with the current situation of language development, and provide a reference for the study of network neologisms and language.

Keywords: cyber abbreviation, classification, cause, characteristics, effects

Introduction

Over recent years, the exponential growth of the Internet and people's improved living standard have led to an increase in the number of netizens. Various kinds of cyber abbreviations have become commonplace in social media platforms, such as WeChat, Weibo, and TikTok. Despite the yearly emergence of a plethora of Internet buzzwords in cyberspace, individuals can always decipher their meanings with contextual clues. However, in recent times, a significant proportion of these buzzwords, being comprised of abbreviations, have become difficult to interpret without the help of search engines. For instance, abbreviations, such as "ggmm (哥哥妹妹)" and "plmm (漂亮美眉)", which were previously popularized through non-mainstream cultures, have gradually vanished from public discourse. Nevertheless, with the trending emergence of the abbreviation "yyds" (praise to the TV series *Awakening Era*) in Weibo, cyber abbreviations have once again become a topic of interest.

Currently, various scholars have conducted research on internet buzzwords, phonetic abbreviations, and alphabetic abbreviations. However, researchers have not differentiated between abbreviations and acronyms in their works. Furthermore, researchers have not comprehensively summarized cyber abbreviations. The current study sets out to investigate the classification, causes, and effects of cyber abbreviations in light of the two perspectives, aiming to keep pace with the evolution of language and provide references for individuals interested in researching new words and language on the internet.

Classification of Cyber Abbreviations

Existing Studies Into Abbreviations

The present study first delves into the definitions and distinctions between abbreviations and contractions in both English and Chinese languages, in response to questions, such as "What exact types of abbreviated forms can be referred to as an abbreviation?" and "What is the difference between abbreviations and acronyms?".

ZHANG Jia-ying, M.A., College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.
QU Li-li, Ph.D., associate professor, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

Therefore, efforts are made herein to review the existing studies into abbreviations in both English and Chinese, and thus clarify the definition and classification of cyber abbreviations.

The classification of abbreviations is varied, as pointed out by Lu (2015), who integrated the viewpoints of domestic and foreign scholars on English abbreviations, which include acronym, initialism, clipping, shortening, abbreviation, blend, and contraction. Nuances exist among these terms according to their definitions, and sometimes allowing overlaps. Acronym, where new words are formed by retaining the initial letter of each component word in the phrase, is used for the abbreviation of organization and country names. Initialism has the equivalent connotation as acronym and is used for abbreviating personal names, such as Eugene A. Nida. The difference between the two lies in their pronunciation. The newly formed words abbreviated by the former are spelled according to the rules of pronunciation, such as COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019), while the latter is pronounced letter by letter in the order of the vocabulary, such as BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation). Clipping and shortening are translated as truncated words. One or more syllables of a word are removed, which can be at the beginning, middle, or end of the word, without changing the meaning of the word but altering its pronunciation. Examples include “ad” (advertisement) and “flu” (influenza). Blend combines two or more words and abbreviates them, such as smog (smoke + fog) and guesstimate (guess + estimate). Contraction combines two words and omits an unpronounced letter, often used in spoken language, such as won’t (will not) and what’s (what is). Abbreviation, defined by the Webster Dictionary as “a short form of a word or phrase” and by the Cambridge Dictionary as “to make a word (sentence, book, etc.) shorter”, encompasses most of the other forms of abbreviations. Lu (2015) also proposed to use the term “abbreviation” to conceptualize all the words formed in such ways.

When it comes to Chinese abbreviations, Wu (2005) posited that the economy principle of language is honored through the abbreviation of longer and relatively fixed linguistic units into shorter ones such as phrases or words, which carries the message of the original units. This phenomenon is referred to as an “abbreviation”. Meng (2011) further identified three types of Chinese abbreviations: contraction, truncation, and substitution. The process of contraction involves extracting morphemes from words and amalgamating them to form a new abbreviation, for instance, “科技” from “科学技术” or “北大” from “北京大学”. Truncation entails preserving the core part of a word, for example, “解放军” from “中国人民解放军” or “清华” from “清华大学”. Substitution involves abbreviation and substitution and is often used for persons’ names, locations, and scientific terms, where the abbreviated form of a word is unrelated to the original word. For instance, “上海” is abbreviated to “沪” or “习近平总书记” to “习总书记”.

In summary, Chinese and English abbreviations differ in the units that are extracted and their internal composition. However, they share similarities in their word formation and expression. Additionally, abbreviation and contraction are both means of constructing abbreviations, but abbreviation is a more general term for this category. Cyber abbreviations encompass both Chinese and English expression forms and can be divided into four categories based on their construction: Chinese abbreviations, English abbreviations, pinyin abbreviations, and homophone abbreviations.

Classification of Cyber Abbreviations

The Chinese language exhibits three types of abbreviations, each with unique characteristics. The first type involves extracting representative morphemes from multiple words to form new abbreviated words. Examples of this type include “高大上” (高端、大气、上档次) and “喜大普奔” (喜出望外、大快人心、普天同庆、奔走).

相告). The second type employs original Chinese words with altered connotations, such as “可爱” (可怜没人爱) and “贤惠” (闲在家里什么也不会). Most of the words within this category are negatively and deliberately misinterpreted from their original positive meanings. The third type involves using phonetic similarities to abbreviate words through pinyin, such as “表” (不要) and “吃藕” (丑).

In English, abbreviations frequently employ the initial letters of each word to form combined abbreviations, such as “btw” (by the way) and “YOLO” (you only live once). The second type involves the employment of portions of each word and combines them based on pronunciation, such as “nbc” (nobody cares) and “thx” (short for “thanks”).

Pinyin abbreviations, influenced by English abbreviations, create combined abbreviations with the pinyin initials of each component word. Among celebrity fan clubs, fans use abbreviated forms to refer to specific celebrities, such as “hg” (Hu Ge, 胡歌). Network generic words often employ the second type of pinyin abbreviation, with common examples including “ssmy” (short for “Shengshi Meiyao”, 盛世美颜) and “zqsg” (short for “Zhenqing Shigan”, 真情实感). Some special forms combine pinyin and English or numbers, such as “nznd” (for “no zuo no die”) and “u1s1” (Youyi Shuoyi, 有一说一).

Homophone abbreviations present a relatively unique approach, using letters, numbers, or symbols with similar pronunciation to the original word to create combined abbreviations, such as “IC” (I see), “3Q” (thank you), and “+U” (加油). The second type involves replacing the original word with pure numbers with a similar pronunciation, such as “520” (我爱你).

Lastly, a special type of network pictogram, not technically an abbreviation, employs Chinese characters or English letters to convey a particular meaning. The popular “orz” originates from the Japanese emoji, representing the state of body flexion and resembling a frustrated kneeling figure. It is used to describe feelings of being defeated or depressed, while also conveying admiration and worship. It has a similar meaning to the Chinese character “囧” (meaning awkwardness), which became popular due to its resemblance to the face of an awkward person.

Causes of Cyber Abbreviations

How did cyber abbreviations become popular buzzwords of the day? The reasons behind deserve an in-depth analysis. And do cyber abbreviations have certain values? Will its effects lead to crises to the Chinese language? All these questions are worthy of consideration.

Social Identity

To investigate the causes of cyber abbreviations, it is imperative to identify the groups responsible for their creation and usage. The establishment of the Internet in the United States in 1969 and China’s official connection to the global network in 1994 marked a turning point in the widespread use of the Internet. The first person to invent cyber abbreviations for online communication remains unknown, but the first cohort of teenage Internet users, specifically those born in the 1980s and 1990s, unquestionably played a crucial role in their emergence. At that time, abbreviations, such as “PLMM” (漂亮美眉) and “SQGG” (帅气哥哥) gained popularity among this group, and the post-2000 generation then followed suit by utilizing similar codes to express themselves in diverse professional contexts. This phenomenon reflects the importance of social identity as individuals must possess a strong sense of group belonging to sustain a subjective sense of well-being (Cai, 2017). On the one hand, many individuals strive to stay up-to-date with emerging trends and continuously innovate, thus

popularizing cyber abbreviations to express their distinctive style of individuality and identity. On the other hand, like-minded individuals convene online to create their own cultural spheres, utilizing coded language exclusive to the group to express personal preferences and dislikes, earn recognition, and fulfill their desire for group identification. This tacit form of communication also allows individuals to assert their psychological superiority over others from different groups.

Some people believe that using cyber abbreviations while chatting signifies a herd mentality to adapt and conform to the language habits of the communication partner, to adjust the linguistic means according to the demands of the communicative context, to enter the discourse system utilized by the other party, and to promote a congenial atmosphere while enhancing the sense of intimacy.

Adolescents' Pursuit of Subcultures

A large group of individuals who seek social identity with a greater degree of freedom is teenagers. They seek specific cultural groups in cyberspace, establishing boundaries through their enigmatic language. They prioritize the attitude conveyed through words, disregarding whether their expressions are understood or not. Through this idiosyncratic approach, teenagers express their desire to avoid casual observation by adults. Subcultures as opposed to mainstream culture are subordinate cultures that challenge the dominant culture through stylized and alternative symbols and thus establish identity (Deng, 2015). Whether it is those who were born in the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, or those in the later 2010s, 2020s, etc., the Internet serves as a platform for teenagers to mask their true identity, vent their emotions and stress, and promote their rebelliousness and individuality. Due to its bizarre forms and maverick nature, cyber abbreviations represent a cultural symbol and discourse system crafted entirely by teenagers, wherein they relish in the jubilation of self-importance.

Principle of Linguistic Economy

One of the primary factors that have contributed to the proliferation of cyber abbreviations, which represents a deviation from mainstream language, is the unique character of this mode of communication, which is characterized by an emphasis on linguistic economy. The principle of linguistic economy, also known as the principle of Least Effort, is predicated on the idea that people naturally gravitate towards utilizing the minimum number of symbols necessary to effectively convey their intended message while ensuring comprehension on the part of the recipient. As Wei (2010) noted, the economy of cyber abbreviations is readily apparent in the minimal number of words and the availability of prompt input, which enable their swift and facile deployment in various communication scenarios once their meaning has been internalized. Furthermore, the use of these abbreviations does not result in any diminution of the original word's meanings, but rather allows for additional potential meanings to be appended, thereby satisfying the emotional and expressive functions of language to an even greater extent. In today's fast-paced world, the use of simple and effortless language is highly valued, as it serves to expedite communication and enhance its efficacy.

The Promotion of New Media and New Rules

The advent of new media platforms, such as Weibo, TikTok, and Xiaohongshu, has provided additional impetus for the development of online abbreviations. The emergence of new technologies inevitably necessitates the formulation of new rules, and this in turn has engendered the intermingling of online abbreviations with community subcultures. Such platforms have engendered implicit rules that exist outside of formal regulations, and which are aimed at specific individuals within subcultural groups. The utilization of abbreviated forms of communication enables members to conduct internal-only communication without arousing undue attention. For

instance, a member of a celebrity fan base on Weibo indicated that “instead of typing their full names, they use abbreviations in order not to give heat to their own rivals, and secondly, they will not be found out if they speak bad words, reducing arguments with each other’s fans”. Additionally, since Weibo incorporates a weight indicator, it is not feasible to post comments featuring certain sensitive words, as doing so will result in a reduction in weight and preclude them from occupying a prominent position among the hottest comments. Thus, in order to communicate effectively, the use of abbreviated words is the only viable option. These concepts, such as “weight”, represent new rules that have been formulated. By deliberately evading these new rules through the utilization of cyber abbreviations, subcultural groups are able to master new discourses that serve to subvert traditional structures and enhance their standing within the group. In other words, cyber abbreviations are a tool that has been innovated by subcultural groups as part of their organic efforts to establish a group discourse system in response to the new rules introduced by new media.

Characteristics of Cyber Abbreviations

Simplicity

The principle of linguistic economy is a determining factor in the simplicity of cyber abbreviations. This allows individuals to employ a few basic characters to express a speech act in a succinct manner, thus saving time and space. Additionally, most cyber abbreviations are informative and their abbreviated form may convey different meanings, enhancing the efficiency of language communication. Cyber abbreviations serve as a form of media for cross-cultural communication, with their free, diverse, and prolific characteristics. In today’s society, where individuals are open-minded and quick to accept novel concepts, cyber abbreviations can swiftly gain popularity among cultural groups in disparate nations. For instance, the Chinese phrase “jk uniform” derives from Japanese kana, and the term “gg” in Korea refers to “good game” or “give up the game”.

Ambiguity

Despite their high communication efficiency, the multiple meanings and homophones associated with cyber abbreviations tend to be exclusive to individuals within a particular group with shared interests or knowledge, which may cause communication ambiguity for those outside the group. For example, although most people interpret “yyds” as meaning “永远的神”, certain individuals recognize it to mean “永远单身”. Similarly, while “nsdd” is recognized as “你说得对”, celebrity Yang Yang, during an interview on a program, was unaware of its meaning and conjectured various literal interpretations, such as “你是单身” and “你是弟弟”.

Euphemism

As aforementioned, cyber abbreviations are employed by devotees of various groups to express their discontent, in order to avert unnecessary disputes, reflecting the euphemistic nature of cyber abbreviations. The Chinese population is known for placing great emphasis on peace, and hence, people employ this covert method to evade conflicts. Furthermore, the Chinese exhibit an inclination to avoid verbosity, exemplified by their bashfulness towards the word “death”. Cyber abbreviations are able to dispel such apprehensions to a certain extent and appeal to this euphemistic quality, such as *biss* (必死) and *xswl* (笑死我了). In addition, platforms often filter comments and articles that contain sensitive words, leading to the use of euphemisms in cyber abbreviations related to sensitive topics, such as “gj” for “国家” in politically sensitive discussions, and “tmd” for vulgar or unseemly words. Additionally, certain words linked to sexual behavior, such as “rf” (乳房) and “yd” (阴道), are used as part of cyber abbreviations.

Exclusivity

Due to the idiosyncrasies of different subcultural groups, deciphering abbreviations can often feel like participating in a cyber-code-breaking contest. For instance, the abbreviation “jk uniform” (jyoshi koukousei seifuku, in Japanese) is used to refer to the school uniform worn by Japanese female high school students, but is typically only known by Japanese language learners and Otaku fans with a penchant for such clothing. Similarly, the abbreviation “yygq” (阴阳怪气) originated in the gaming fan clubs, where it was used to attribute blame to a poorly-performing player, but has since evolved to mean the act of not directly expressing one’s inner thoughts. Meanwhile, the abbreviation “kswl” (磕死我了) is used among celebrity fan clubs to express excitement at seeing one’s favorite on-screen couple interact. The exclusivity of these cyber abbreviations creates an opaque barrier for those outside the group, rendering their online experience less enjoyable.

Periodicity

The evolution of cyber abbreviations reflects the changing characteristics and trends of each era. For example, in the past, Internet users would use the abbreviations “GG” (哥哥) and “MM” (妹妹) to foster a sense of intimacy, whereas today, users are more likely to use “xjj” (小姐姐) and “xgg” (小哥哥) to address one another. This shift not only reflects changes in conversational norms, but also reflects the dynamic evolution of the industry. “Lingual C”, for instance, is a term that refers to “lingual cosplay”, which involves online interpretation and role-playing based on the manipulation of language. This abbreviation reflects the rapid development of the dubbing industry, which has gained wider acceptance in China than ever before. While many cyber abbreviations have fallen out of use over time, some have become widely accepted and have entered into the lexicon of conventional words. For instance, the abbreviation “VIP”, which stands for “very important person”, continues to be used these days. Additionally, “WIFI” (Wireless-Fidelity) has replaced the term “wireless network” and is now widely used across industries and age groups.

Effects of Cyber Abbreviations

In Terms of Individual Development

According to Wei (2010), the principle of economy in the language is similar to tailoring a piece of clothing—It only makes sense to be frugal with language if it fits the situation. Otherwise, the result is a disjointed and awkward expression. The primary purpose of language is to convey emotion and meaning, and to prioritize economy over these essential elements can result in “losses in language forms and meanings”. Currently, in various areas such as social media platforms like Weibo and TikTok, as well as in areas such as food, beauty, and movie reviews, etc., the use of simple abbreviations like “yyds” has become a norm. Although one may argue that these abbreviations can express emotions and feelings in one word, they actually hinder an individual’s development by limiting their sensory expression and obscuring the unique characteristics of things, thereby hindering the richness of linguistic expressions. Over time, this leads to a lack of linguistic acuity, causing linguistic attrition and leaving others with a poor impression. In contrast, ancient poets described the beauty of the world in detail, using expressive language to paint vivid pictures for the reader.

In addition, if individuals continue to rely on cyber abbreviations for their communication, they will inevitably encounter communication problems when interacting with those who are unfamiliar with this style of writing. This can create a communication barrier, which can lead to alienation and even misunderstandings. As

a result, the overuse of cyber abbreviations not only limits an individual's expression, but also causes issues in interpersonal communication.

In Terms of Promoting the Development of Chinese Language

Despite the widespread popularity of niche “secret words”, the 2021 publication *Yaowen Juezi* refused to include these gamified western letters in its annual list of buzzwords. This decision was made by the editor-in-chief, Huang Anjing, who believes that these online abbreviations lack linguistic value, as they are not pure Chinese symbols and do not adhere to typical Chinese word formation rules or grammatical norms. Undeniably, the use of cyber abbreviations has had an impact on traditional Chinese language and culture. Some scholars view it as a negative influence, arguing that it may undermine the structure of Chinese and impede its development. Others are more tolerant, seeing it as an innovative and enriching element that can contribute to the cultural content of the Chinese language and promote its advancement.

Mo Yan, a renowned writer, has offered a literary perspective on this issue, stating that “Internet literature is replete with Internet language, but such language follows the law of language development and change. Grammar changes slowly and is quite solid, while vocabulary is like a pool of living water, with new words arising and dying out, and obsolete words being eliminated or activated. Internet language adds a fresh and contemporary flavour to literature”. Hence, the advantages and disadvantages of cyber abbreviations for the development of Chinese language remain subject to the test of time.

In Terms of Cross-Cultural Communications

The emergence of Chinese abbreviations reflects, to some extent, the influence of cross-cultural communication. Abbreviations can facilitate the communication of cultures, reducing the risk of misunderstandings due to different cultural backgrounds (Xu, 2019). As the English alphabet and Chinese pinyin share some similarities, similar expressions can be produced in Chinese. English abbreviations, as an epigraphic script, can concisely convey the meaning of the original language. Although Chinese is an ideographic script, learning pinyin can also be helpful in mastering Chinese characters. As China's international influence continues to grow, foreign students may become interested in these characters while surfing the web, better understanding Chinese culture and connotations, and promoting cross-cultural exchange and communication.

Attitudes Towards Cyber Abbreviations

The phenomenon of cyber abbreviations elicits varying degrees of subconscious concern, indifference, or interest among individuals, indicating a mixed attitude towards these expressions. Comparable to the term “Language of Aliens on Mars (火星文)”, cyber abbreviations represent a distinctive, fleeting period in the history of written Chinese. The buzzword “Language of Aliens on Mars”, once popular among those who were born in the 1980s and 1990s, is a unique amalgam of symbols, traditional Chinese characters, Korean and Japanese characters, clipped Chinese characters, and other non-formalized symbols that render it unintelligible to the uninitiated. Today, it only exists in people's memories, and its persistence is reasonable. As such, the emergence and popularity of cyber abbreviations warrant rational treatment, despite their advantages in facilitating communication and saving input time. However, their use should be regulated, as they are predominantly utilized in informal or entertainment-related contexts, as opposed to authoritative or serious settings. Their vagueness and exclusivity, therefore, serve to enhance their entertainment value and render them inappropriate for standard written language. Their appearance is rare on authoritative platforms, and few writers will employ them in news writing outside of the entertainment industry.

Zhang Taofu, a professor from the School of Journalism, Fudan University, believes that the impact of such cyber abbreviations on Chinese expressions does not necessitate excessive concern. The emergence and dissemination of Internet buzzwords are chiefly based on the internal circulation of small groups, and thus, most of them are transitory linguistic drifts that do not impact the fundamental structure of social language use. Whether cyber abbreviations, such as “yyds” can be adopted as commonly agreed-upon words and persist over time will require a broader social choice.

Conclusion

As society advances and progresses, novel concepts, phenomena, technologies, and accomplishments are becoming increasingly numerous and rapidly emerging. The Internet, a vital communication medium in modern society, is assuming an increasingly prominent role in conjunction with societal development. A burgeoning cluster of new words is first disseminated and proliferated through the Internet. Although employing cyber abbreviations once symbolized adherence to contemporary trends and fashion, today an overwhelming number of such abbreviations are propagated at an alarming rate with a correspondingly high rate of obsolescence. Therefore, individuals must approach these developments in a manner that adheres to the principles of “tolerance, research, guidance, and regulation”.

References

- Cai, J. F. (2017). Identity and its research purpose—Discussion on the multiplicity of identity and the plurality of identity. *Social Sciences Review*, 32(6), 73-78.
- Deng, X. X. (2015). Deconstruction and reconstruction of youth subculture in the network perspective. *Youth Exploration*, 33(4), 16-21.
- Lu, S. L. (2015). Existing problems and reflections in the study of English abbreviations. *Journal of Tibetan University (Social Science Edition)*, 30(2), 171-178.
- Meng, C. Y. (2011). A comparative study of Chinese-English abbreviations (Master thesis, Heilongjiang University, Heilongjiang, China).
- Wei, X. B. (2010). Reflections on the principle of language economy. *Journal of Harbin Institute of Technology (Social Science Edition)*, 12(5), 97-100.
- Wu, C. Q. (2005). Abbreviations and their relationship with the original words. *Social Sciences in Guangxi*, 21(3), 147-149.
- Xu, Z. Y. (2019). The linguistic research value of cyber abbreviation culture. *Northern Literature*, 70(32), 264+266.