

A Study of Chinese Young Netizens' Usage of *Diē wèi* Discourses from the Perspective of Pragmatic Identity

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Abstract:

This study investigates the phenomenon of Chinese young netizens using “*Diē wèi*” discourses (fatherly-style lecturing) on social media from the perspective of Pragmatic Identity Theory. “*Diē wèi*” refers to a speech style characterized by a paternalistic, didactic, and condescending tone, imitating the authority of the older generation. The research aims to explore how young netizens dynamically construct their pragmatic identities through such discourses and analyze the underlying motivations and pragmatic functions. Data were collected from posts and comments on Chinese social sharing platforms Xiaohongshu and Weibo. Qualitative analysis reveals that young netizens strategically construct a hybrid pragmatic identity by parodying the naming conventions (e.g., “AAA+Industry+Surname”) and discursive styles typical of middle-aged groups. This practice serves not only as a form of deconstruction and humorous expression against traditional authority but also as a significant communicative resource. It functions as an illocutionary resource to enhance persuasiveness and as an interpersonal resource to negotiate relational distance and conduct intergenerational identity work. This study integrates the local internet buzzword into the theoretical framework of pragmatics, offering fresh insights into online language variation, identity construction, and generational interaction in the digital age.

Keywords:

Pragmatic Identity, *Diē Wèi* Discourses, Online Discourse, Identity Construction, Social Media

1. Introduction

In recent years, “*Diē wèi* discourses” have become a noticeable linguistic phenomenon among young Chinese netizens. The term describes a speech style that mimics the paternal, authoritative, and often condescending tone of the older generation, marked by lecturing and a sense of superiority. Young internet users actively employ this style, often for purposes of humor, irony, or in an attempt to construct an authoritative persona. Grounded in Pragmatic Identity Theory, this study

approaches “Diē wèi discourses” as a dynamic practice of identity construction. This theory posits that communicators do not merely bring fixed identities into interaction but dynamically select and construct specific identities based on the immediate context and communicative goals, which are then enacted through discourse.

This research seeks to address two main questions: (1) How do young netizens use Diē wèi discourses to construct their pragmatic identities online, and what are the linguistic features of these discourses? (2) What motivates their choice to use such discourses, and what kinds of pragmatic identities are they aiming to achieve?

2. Materials and Methods

This section outlines the core materials, analytical framework, and procedural details adopted in the study. It aims to clarify how data were collected and analyzed to address the research questions, ensuring the rigor and replicability of the research process.

2.1. Data Collection

The corpus utilized in this study primarily comprises posts shared on the Chinese social sharing platforms Xiaohongshu and Weibo, along with a selection of comments accompanying these posts. Additionally, the corpus includes summaries of Diē wèi discourses compiled from netizen discussions. The focus of the corpus centers on instances of “Diē wèi” discourses encountered by young users in their everyday lives, as well as their own adoption of these discourses as “unexpected users.”

To safeguard user privacy while preserving the integrity of the analysis, certain usernames from both platforms have been intercepted and slightly modified. The utilization of these usernames has also been subjected to analysis as part of the corpus.

2.2. Analytical Framework

This study adopts Pragmatic Identity Theory as the core analytical framework. Rooted in Social Constructivist Theory, Pragmatic Identity Theory emphasizes that identity is dynamically constructed through communicative interactions rather than being a fixed preexistence [1]. According to Chen [2], pragmatic identity refers to the specific identity that communicators strategically select and construct to adapt to the current communicative context, serving as a key resource for achieving communicative goals.

The analysis focuses on three core dimensions derived from the theory:

- (1) How the construction of specific identities affects the generation and understanding of linguistic meaning in context;
- (2) How identity construction fulfills the communicative needs of young netizens;
- (3) How identity construction influences the expression and understanding of interpersonal meaning.

Qualitative analysis is employed to decode the linguistic features of Diē wèi discourses, the strategies of pragmatic identity construction, and the underlying motivations. Specifically, the analysis includes two key parts: the characteristics of Diē wèi-related usernames and the linguistic and pragmatic features of Diē wèi discourse content.

Key terms and their abbreviations are defined as follows for clarity:

- Diē wèi Discourses (DW Discourses): 爹味发言, a speech style characterized by a paternalistic, didactic, and condescending tone imitating the older generation.

- Pragmatic Identity Theory (PIT): 语用身份理论, the theoretical framework guiding this study.

Abbreviations such as IEEE, SI, and MKS follow the convention of not requiring definition, and no unnecessary abbreviations are used in titles or headings.

3. Results and Discussion

This section presents the key findings derived from data analysis and discusses their theoretical and practical implications. It connects the observed phenomena of Diē wèi discourses to Pragmatic Identity Theory, addressing the research questions and contextualizing the results within existing scholarly discussions.

3.1. Characteristics of Diē wèi Usernames

3.1.1. Naming Convention Features

The analysis reveals that young netizens constructing Diē wèi-related pragmatic identities primarily adopt the naming convention of “AAA+Industry+Surname+Title”, a format originally prevalent among middle-aged businesspeople on WeChat. WeChat arranges usernames alphabetically, so middle-aged individuals use this format to ensure their names appear at the top of friends’ lists, facilitating business promotion. (Figure 1)

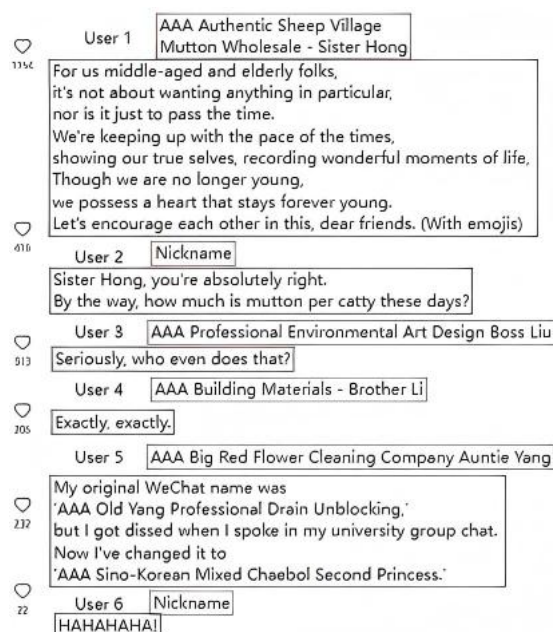


Figure 1. Screenshot indicating the Naming Convention Features.

On Xiaohongshu, this convention has evolved into a “Quick ‘AAA Family’ Account Establishment Method” widely shared by netizens. Typical features of such usernames include:

- Structure: Composed of “AAA + Industry + Surname + Honorific Title” (e.g., “AAA Professional Environmental Art Design Manager Liu”, “AAA Building Materials Brother Li”);

- Supporting elements: Avatars often feature large selfies, flower or scenery photos; text may include typos, special punctuation marks, or homophones (e.g., “红女且” instead of “红姐”, “羊内” instead of “羊肉”), which are attributed to handwritten input habits;
- Content orientation: Posts mainly include daily greetings, inspirational messages, and personal reflections, forming a standardized “AAA family” persona.

3.1.2. Pragmatic Meanings of Username Construction

From the perspective of Pragmatic Identity Theory, the adoption of “AAA+Industry+Surname+Title” usernames by young netizens serves multiple pragmatic purposes:

Meaning Generation and Interpretation: By selecting specific industries, surnames, and titles, young netizens convey symbolic meanings such as “professionalism”, “maturity,” and “authority”. Some intentionally use humorous professional descriptions (e.g., “AAA Free KFC Taster,” “AAA Biscuit Hole Puncher”) to form a contrast between a “mature template” and “childish content.” This contrast reflects the identity awareness of Generation Z, who seek to break free from the preaching of middle-aged individuals by appropriating their linguistic symbols.

Fulfillment of Communicative Needs: On one hand, this identity construction helps young netizens establish a communicative connection with middle-aged groups, including their parents at home, reducing intergenerational communication barriers. On the other hand, the distinctive “middle-aged” persona easily attracts attention and recognition on social media, satisfying young netizens’ socialization needs and allowing them to share the cultural experience of “being influenced by Diē wèi words” with peers.

Expression of Interpersonal Meaning: By integrating usernames with specific avatars, typos, and punctuation, young netizens construct a standardized “AAA family” persona, through which they express emotions, values, and daily experiences via greetings, inspirational stories, and life reflections. Data shows that “Diē wèi speech” supported by the “AAA” format has garnered over 10 million reads on Xiaohongshu, with many young people integrating it into family groups, forming a unique “one set of words, two kinds of expression” communication landscape.

3.2. Linguistic and Pragmatic Features of Diē wèi Discourses

3.2.1. Linguistic Characteristics

Analysis of the corpus (Examples 1-3) identifies the following core linguistic features of Diē wèi discourses:

Example 1:

“You have to listen to me just because I am your FATHER. I am the ruler of the family.”

Example 2:

“Let me ask you a question...(usually he or she assumes you may not know the answer)”

Example 3 (Other examples of “Diē wèi Discourses”:

Let me ask you...

Tell you what, you must have no idea about this...

When I was at your age...

Your generation is too...

You will know..... in the future.

You should behave like those who are good at your age...

You will know about this when you get into the real world.

I have more life qualification and experiences than you.

I am saying for you good...

Tone, lexical choices, and discourse structure are core dimensions of linguistic feature analysis, directly reflecting the essence of Diē wèi discourses. The following is a detailed breakdown of these three aspects based on corpus examples:

- Assertive, condescending, and authoritative, with a strong didactic tendency. Speakers often assume a superior position, emphasizing their own experience and wisdom while belittling the other party's cognition.
- Frequent use of first-person pronouns (“我”) to highlight the speaker’s subjectivity; employment of age- or experience-based contrastive expressions (e.g., “我吃过的盐比你吃过的米都多,” “我在你这个岁数啊”); use of imperative or persuasive language (e.g., “你听我的,” “你回去好好想想,” “我劝你一句”).
- Lack of interactive turn-taking, with the speaker dominating the conversation; frequent use of narrative fragments (e.g., “想当年”) and predictive statements (e.g., “你以后就知道了”) to strengthen the sense of authority; tendency to interrupt, deny, or divert the topic, weakening the other party’s right to speak.

3.2.2. Pragmatic Functions of Diē wèi Discourses

Example 4 (shared by a female netizen) further illustrates the dual pragmatic functions of Diē wèi discourses as a resource for identity construction:

Example 4:

I truly recommend all women learning to speak in a Diē wèi style. I was super stressed in social contexts because I was not Diē wèi at all. But now I have become a "Female Diē". People somehow respect me a little.

Young netizens utilize Diē wèi discourses to construct an identity marked by authority, knowledge, and experience, which serves as an illocutionary and transactional resource to enhance the persuasiveness of their utterances. As illustrated in Example 5, the female netizen adopts Diē wèi discourse to transform her marginalized position in the workplace and gain others’ respect. This indicates that young people believe adopting a didactic tone similar to that of middle-aged individuals can boost their credibility, enabling them to more effectively influence others’ perceptions and behaviors^[3], thereby achieving communicative goals such as conveying values, guiding actions, or securing recognition.

Diē wèi discourse also acts as an interpersonal resource for negotiating relational distance. On the one hand, imitating the discourse style of middle-aged individuals helps young netizens establish emotional resonance with the older generation, shortening psychological distance and facilitating intergenerational communication [4]. On the other hand, constructing a “mature” and “authoritative” identity allows

young people to set boundaries with specific communication partners, maintain an appropriate distance from those who do not align with their identity, and adjust the intimacy of interpersonal relationships through identity performance—consistent with the dynamic identity negotiation perspective emphasized by scholars [5].

3.3. Motivations for Young Netizens to Adopt Diē wèi Discourses

Synthesizing the above results, the motivations for young netizens to use Diē wèi discourses can be summarized into three core dimensions:

- By parodying the authoritative discourse style of the older generation, young netizens deconstruct the traditional paternalistic power structure, expressing their resistance to rigid preaching and their pursuit of equal communication. The humorous contrast between “mature templates” and “childish content” in usernames and discourses embodies this deconstructive tendency [8].
- Diē wèi discourses have become a cultural symbol of online youth subculture. Participating in this discourse practice allows young netizens to gain a sense of group belonging, express their unique Generation Z identity, and achieve socialization through shared linguistic symbols [6].
- As a strategic communicative tool, Diē wèi discourses help young netizens achieve specific pragmatic goals, such as enhancing persuasiveness, gaining attention, improving interpersonal status, and mediating intergenerational relationships. Example 5 clearly shows that Diē wèi discourses can be used as a resource to obtain social recognition and reduce social pressure [7].

4. Conclusions

This section synthesizes the key findings of the study, clarifies the contributions of the research to the field of pragmatics and sociolinguistics, and acknowledges the limitations while proposing directions for future research. It aims to provide a concise and comprehensive summary of the study’s implications for understanding online identity construction and language practice.

This study investigates the phenomenon of young Chinese netizens using Diē wèi discourses from the perspective of Pragmatic Identity Theory, with the following key conclusions:

First, young netizens construct a hybrid pragmatic identity by adopting the “AAA+Industry+Surname+Title” naming convention and imitating the didactic tone of the older generation. This identity integrates the symbolic elements of middle-aged authority with the rebellious spirit of youth, forming a unique identity performance characterized by “parody” and “deconstruction.”

Second, Diē wèi discourses exhibit distinct linguistic features, including an authoritative and didactic tone, experience-based lexical choices, and a speaker-dominated discourse structure. These features serve dual pragmatic functions: as an illocutionary and transactional resource to enhance persuasiveness, and as an interpersonal resource to negotiate relational distance.

Third, the motivations for young netizens to adopt Diē wèi discourses are multifaceted, including deconstructing traditional authority, expressing youth identity, and achieving specific communicative goals [2]. This practice reflects the dynamic and

strategic nature of identity construction in online communication, as well as the adaptive changes of youth language in the digital age [9].

This study enriches the application of Pragmatic Identity Theory in the field of online discourse research, integrating the local internet buzzword “Diē wèi” into the pragmatic theoretical framework and providing new insights into the interaction between language variation, identity construction, and intergenerational communication in the digital era. The connection between “Diē wèi” and “mansplaining” also draws on the foundational discussions of Solnit [10] and Steinmetz [11] on authoritative discourse in cross-cultural contexts.

Limitations of this study include the relatively limited scope of the corpus and the lack of quantitative analysis of the reception of Diē wèi discourses among different groups. Future research could expand the corpus to include more diverse online platforms and user groups, and combine quantitative and qualitative methods to further explore the cross-cultural applicability of Diē wèi discourses and their long-term impact on language change.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, P.X.; Methodology, P.X.; Investigation, P.X.; Formal Analysis, P.X.; Data Curation, P.X.; Writing – Original Draft Preparation, P.X.; Writing – Review & Editing, P.X.

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