

Enregistering Guoyu in Chinese Social Media: Indexicality, Stance, and Mediatization

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This article examines the semiotically mediatized formation of Guoyu, a newly emergent Chinese internet phonolexical style. Originating in grassroots live-streaming, Guoyu underwent the process of enregisterment, through which it gained metapragmatically formulated indexical meanings. Analyzing social media posts, I show how, based on Guoyu's stereotypically labeled vulgarity, young users further reflexively construct its laminated orders of indexicality, such as gayness, humor, and authenticity, and deploy its tokens to manipulate their identity projections and interactive agendas. Analyzing how a group of young friends employed fragments of Guoyu style in offline interactions through stance-taking, I show how they dynamically mediate their social relations based on the tokens' interior and exterior indexical meanings. Despite the inevitable indexical bleaching during the circulation of this style, especially after the style's iconic speaker was banned by the Chinese government, Guoyu's internet-charged indexical lifespan has extended along the mediatized speech chain at different social locales.

In post-variationist sociolinguistics, the focus has gradually moved to converge with linguistic anthropologists' interests in the discussion of style for its integral role in the dynamic processes of social meaning-making through contextualization (Eckert, 2003; Moore, 2020; Mortensen et al., 2017). In particular, the significant role played by media in social life poses a challenge for sociolinguists, as the main object of study has expanded enormously, making it difficult to conceive how internet-mediated styles have facilitated language change and ideologically transformed people's everyday interactions (Androutsopoulos, 2016; Herring, 2010). The emergence of new genres of verbal arts on new media platforms, which also could be seen as performance arts (Bauman, 1975), has created an inexhaustible source of linguistic heterogeneity.

Due to the hybrid combinations of institutional and participatory discourse and new opportunities for digital circulation (Androutsopoulos, 2016), the so-called "new media" equips such creative discursive practices with more potential to break the old participation frameworks for further circulation. During this process, these styles are differentiated from other possible styles as part of a system of distinction with contrasting underpinned social meanings (Irvine, 2001). Therefore, sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists have paid great attention to how speakers use stylized features to voice their personae. They have done this by analyzing socially regulated metapragmatic typifications through the lens of enregisterment, which was defined by Agha (2007) as "the process whereby one register formation comes to be distinguished from other modes of activity, including other registers, and endowed with specific performable values" (p. 4). While many scholars also use the term "register" in their literature, I mainly use

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“style” to refer to the targeted research subject, Guoyu. Although many scholars use the two notions interchangeably, this specific wording mainly attempts to align with the recent orientation in the field of sociolinguistics since the third wave of variationism, which is towards “more ethnographically informed and interpretive approaches that seek to address the indexical function(s) of variable forms of speech and speakers’ own (ideologically mediated) understandings of these” (Eckert 2003, 2008, 2012, as cited in Moore 2020, p. 19).

Sociolinguistic research related to the media’s influence on language has, in recent years, gradually shifted emphasis from mass media to digital media. Mass media was once a vast topic among discourse analysts in terms of its diverse textual structures and authoritatively represented social realities (Spitulnik, 1993), yet the burgeoning popularization of digital media leading to language change across different social domains has become a force to be reckoned with in this field. In this analysis, I demonstrate how Guoyu, a unique internet speech style originating in a Chinese grassroots vlogger’s live stream that was eventually banned in China, has been ideologically enregistered as vulgar, authentic, or gay speech through metapragmatic models and has constructed composite interactional effects in offline use.

In what follows, I first provide background on Guoyu and its inventor, a streamer known as Teacher Guo. Then I explore the process of enregisterment during which Guoyu gained its sociocultural values through the analysis of social media posts. Based on the data analysis, I argue that competing valorizations caused by asymmetric sociological fractionation play a significant role in enregisterment of Guoyu, when the scheme of revolting values associated with Guoyu, especially held by the marginalized groups, arose to resist the overwhelming mainstream social values in China. Such contrastive models not only give rise to ideological tensions during the style’s formation, but also serve as a major stimulation for users’ further reflexive acts to attach stereotypical properties to its linguistic items, therefore tropically constructing their new personae as subversive against the mainstream and the standard. Then I provide a conversation analysis of conversation extracts among friends wherein participants use Guoyu to show how the use of it could dynamically achieve certain interactional effects via stance-taking. Lastly, I discuss Guoyu’s socially charged life by situating its occurrence in a longer chain of mediatized speech events, and therefore contend that however long the chain could be, its indexical meaning is always lingering.

Background and Method

Live streaming is a new genre of verbal arts demonstrating increasing popularity in digital media. As a highly influential streamer, Teacher Guo gained her indelible cultural impact due to not only her enormous fan base on Chinese TikTok but also the language she invented, “Guoyu” “Yu” (语), a Chinese morpheme meaning language, was combined with her last name, “Guo” (郭), to become a new language name with seemingly equal legitimate status to English (yingyu) and French (fayu). Teacher Guo originally created a set of semiotic repertoires with a distinctive personal style but varied from standard Mandarin during live streaming on TikTok. The subsequent chain of imitations and co-creations from other influencers and even celebrities further resulted in her and Guoyu’s

immense popularity. While many people hated her “disgusting and vulgar” style of speaking (as stated in the social media comments), the streamer accumulated numerous loyal fans who said they appreciated her “authenticity,” which turned her into a new gay icon.

The wide dissemination of Guoyu both online and offline has gradually constituted a carnivalesque space (Bahktin, 2004) in which speakers are free to use this style and release themselves, as they claim. In September 2021, Teacher Guo was officially and permanently banned by the Chinese government from appearing on any Chinese platform because of her controversial reputation and potential negative social influence. However, although the iconized speaker and inventor of Guoyu disappeared, the online and offline circulation of this style continues.

As the heteroglossic nature of media discourse, in the Bakhtinian sense, has been widely acknowledged by scholars (Androutsopoulos, 2016), the attention of sociolinguists has come to focus on users’ active uptake and employment of media resources in their interactions. Different usages of internet-mediated styles in hierarchically ordered spaces contribute to the formation of orders of indexicality (Androutsopoulos, 2014; Busch, 2006), through which we could “relate the micro-social to the macro-social frames of analysis of any sociolinguistic phenomenon” (Silverstein, 1996, p. 194). As Silverstein (1996) defined, the cultural construal of n-th order indexical tokens, also seen as the manifested ideological engagement of users, could further entail or motivate creative effects based on the presupposed context.

Squires (2010) explored the enregisterment of internet language based on metadiscursive analysis from different sites and existing standard English ideology, calling for further investigations into the indexical social values of such language. The urgent need to develop new analytic tools also lies in the continuously emerging multimodal genres of digital media representation with inexhaustible discursive practices across different participation frameworks. As Heyd (2014) argued in her discussion of the enregisterment of emphatic quotation marks, visual symbols – in her case in folk-linguistic photo blogs – play a significant role in grassroots prescriptivism.

Indeed, the formation of a linguistic style needs to explicitly distinguish its discursive items and features from other repertoires and therefore explore what stereotypical evaluations of speakers’ indexed personae could be made. My inquiries into the enregisterment of Guoyu take departure from the perceivable metapragmatic data that “evaluate the pragmatic properties” of Guoyu expressions (Agha, 2007, p. 154).

For the first part of my analysis, my dataset mainly consists of metapragmatic comments on Weibo, one of the most widely used social media platforms in China. The selected data analyzed are part of the search results for the keyword “Guoyu.” With excerpts from news articles included as another data source, these materials are interpreted with the assistance of self-reports in interviews with three Guoyu speakers. I draw on Silverstein’s (2003) understanding of orders of indexicality, demonstrating how the first order of the indexicality of Guoyu as vulgar and abnormal has been performatively effectuated in the public sphere, and how a transcendent overlay of possible distinct contextualization has been built up through culturally laden metapragmatic engagements as the second or

third order of indexicality. In this case, for example, many gay people consciously use the Guoyu style based on its presupposing vulgarity as a competing force of valorization against mainstream “elegant” social values and standard Mandarin. While Boellstorff (2004), in his analysis of Bahasa gay language, concluded that gay speech in Indonesia has been enregistered as a style of national belonging, I believe that the Chinese gay community’s Guoyu performance indexes their self-exoticization as part of their efforts for subversion. It is the fact that their voices belong to a weaker social fraction in the competing model that further dialectically enhances their willingness to deploy the repelled style and marks the style through metadiscursive behaviors.

The second part of my analysis focuses on the entextualized tropes of Guoyu’s indexical meanings and their role in social interactions. With both the origin and the front end of the circulation situated in digital media, Guoyu has largely lived an internet-charged life. Applying De Fina and Blommaert’s (2016) notion of chronotopic identity, I explore how speakers have formulated such identities through their enactments of its stylized features in the bounded cyber configuration. While most research on internet-mediated styles still pays close attention to their online circulation, I attend to scenarios in which they are implemented in offline interactions as part of interlocutors’ communicative repertoires, a term used by Rymes (2014) to refer to the semiotic resources speakers use to express who they are in dialogue with others. I recorded and transcribed a conversation among a group of friends in which Guoyu was involved. To better illustrate the dynamics during the naturally occurring conversation, I apply the concept of stance to investigate how orders of indexicality of Guoyu impacted the interlocutors’ language use and therefore their fluid role alignments in an immediate conversation. Kiesling (2009) proposed a hypothesis that stance-taking in everyday interaction is “where indexicality in variation begins” (p. 3). I draw on his metaphorical distinction between interior and exterior indexicality in my analysis.

The affordances of digital media make extreme rapidity and breadth of information dissemination possible. Yet, they also lead to the fragmentary circulation of styles that Agha (2007) observed before and in turn, the fragmentary nature of style usage. It remains unclear how the indexical links between internet-mediated style tokens and their social values are maintained or transformed along their circulating trajectory across varied contexts. For example, Fine (2019) discussed the formation of indexical links during circulation by examining how anti-Trump practitioners applied the affordances of online platforms to empower a piece of viral ritual and to form an intertwined relationship between American Witchcraft and leftist political stance. Squires (2014) coined the term indexical bleaching as an analogy of semantic bleaching to illustrate how the innovative phrase “lady pond” from mass media gradually lost its prior indexical link during its popularization on Twitter. Androutsopoulos (2014) used the term intertextual bleaching to refer to the same process, defined as “decreasing interactional relevance of the fragment’s intertextual link, so that its media origin is made ever less relevant in the actual instance of recontextualization” (p. 23). Both concepts captured media-originated linguistic tokens’ unavoidable loss of their original indexical meaning when detached from the original text and recontextualized in diverse contexts. However, both focused on the mechanism of dissemination. I contend that such reductions are insufficient for investigations into the increasingly

complicated circulations of internet styles, which require a systemic inquiry by situating those “bleaching” moments in a long chain of mediatization under the influence of its sociohistorical background.

Enregisterment of Guoyu during its lifespan

Guo Beibei, a young woman from the Chinese countryside called “Teacher Guo” by her fans, started her career in live-streaming in 2017. At the end of 2019, one of her short videos went viral across the Chinese internet. In the video, she dramatically pronounced and typed “猕猴桃” (mihoutao, meaning kiwi, the fruit) as “迷hotel” (mi hotel). Besides the improvised phonological variations of the linguistic token from standard Mandarin and the code-switching written form to address the altered pronunciation, she used other non-linguistic signs, including exaggerated tones and gestures, to contextualize the special “Guoyu” style. The instant hit of “迷hotel” attracted many vloggers on TikTok to post their impressions of Teacher Guo’s iconic stylized behaviors, which further fostered the wider dissemination of the style. Her popularity reached a climax during the mass quarantine in 2020, when people stayed at home and relied on the few available entertaining activities, including watching short videos and live streams. However, her luck ran out abruptly in September 2021 as she was banned, at which time she had accumulated over 700 million followers on Chinese TikTok.

Unlike other Chinese influencers, Teacher Guo is widely regarded as an inventor of a “language.” In other words, “Guoyu” has become a major property attached to Teacher Guo’s style. With corresponding translations below the original texts, I present four separate metapragmatic posts from Weibo that construct a legitimate status of Guoyu as a language:

Excerpt 1:

@宽仔宽面: 我以后找工作面试官问我第二外语我说郭语行不
“If HR asks about my second foreign language in a job interview, can I just say Guoyu?”

Excerpt 2:

@whaleeater: 如果言语考的是郭语 我想我一定是满分
“If the language test is of Guoyu, I believe I can get a perfect score.”

Excerpt 3:

@Wxxxxyyy: 妈的 听这个英语听力真的觉得自己又聋又瞎滚啊 我去 好想去国外教中文 整一个郭语听力报复一把
“Damn. The English listening test makes me feel like I’m deaf and blind. Screw it. I want to teach Chinese in foreign countries and make a Guoyu listening test for revenge.”

Excerpt 4:

@每天都要喝草莓奶昔: 我不会因为抖音刷到太多美女自卑, 会因为马上2023年了, 我郭语还没毕业而陷入深深的自卑中
“I won’t be self-deprecating after seeing so many beautiful women on TikTok. But I will deeply feel so because 2023 is coming, and I am still not qualified to graduate from Guoyu school.”

What stands out from these posts is that regardless of Guoyu’s entertaining nature, they are attempting to rhetorically legitimate their ability to speak Guoyu

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as a foreign language skill by situating it in an official setting, such as job interviews (Excerpt 1) and language tests/schooling (Excerpts 2-4) – situations where English has great status. Although Putonghua, also known as standard Mandarin, once gained its symbolic dominance in Chinese society, it gradually became standard among citizens after institutional prescriptive actions (Dong, 2010). After a process of commodification, English has gained greater symbolic capital in the Chinese labor market through the investment in which learners can acquire a wider range of material and cultural resources (Norton, 1995; Heller, 2010). Studying English and taking English tests have become a shared nightmare among new Chinese generations. By teasingly comparing Guoyu to a foreign language, Guoyu users implicitly express their feelings of pressure to acquire English skills and challenge the universal language ideology of English's superior status by imagining using Guoyu as a symbolic weapon to take revenge on native English speakers.

In addition to (teasingly) granting Guoyu the status of an important language, posters also label it as vulgar. However, the detachable words and expressions invented by Teacher Guo are just amorphous variations from standard Mandarin, which do not contain the property of vulgarity. It is the co-text signs, including her topics, her body gestures, her scruffy appearance, her dynamic reactions when communicating with her followers during live-streaming, and even others' stereotypical perceptions of her identity as a grassroots uneducated woman from the countryside, that work together to generate the sensorial effects of obscenity. The following posts from Weibo metapragmatically evaluate it as vulgar: Discourses and comments on social media used pronouns, for instance they, their, and those people, to refer to new members with refugee backgrounds and "us" when referring to existing members of the sovereign power (Sutkutè, 2019, p. 41). These pronouns choices strike a distinction between refugees and members of the dominant culture. The associated, common presumption that refugees who are accepted by host countries need to assimilate to the norms and values of the hegemonic culture reflects a belief that privileges the inner group's culture over that of the new members, who are thus viewed as outsiders (Jarratt, 2020; Sutkutè, 2019).

Excerpt 5:

@刘晨婷: 女孩子居然能说出来郭语。网上流传的郭语太恶臭了, 郭老师在直播间说一些三观不正的俗套话, 想起来就很反胃。尤其对于三观还没有完全成熟的孩子来说, 如果把负面的信息当作人生价值, 那可不算祖国的花朵了

"How could a girl speak Guoyu? Internet-circulated Guoyu is too disgusting and vulgar. Teacher Guo always says this gross stuff against correct values during live streaming, it makes me sick. Especially for those immature kids, if they take those negative things as their living standard, they cannot count as the flower of our country (metaphor meaning the future of the country)."

Excerpt 6:

@TTTina20: 虽然我天天说郭语, 觉得她挺有趣, 但她大火之后的直播我一次都没看过, 觉得变得恶心又恶俗, 搞不懂她这样的火是因为大家都喜欢猎奇口味吗, 封了挺好, 直播圈也早该整治。

"Though I speak Guoyu every day and think she (Teacher Guo) is amusing, I never watched her live-stream after she went viral. I think it's gross

and vulgar. I don't understand why she is popular, because everyone likes to go nuts? It's wise to cancel her. Live streaming should have been regulated earlier."

Excerpt 7:

@ChunYingMengWan: 听我室友放爱豆的视频，他们说三句加一句郭语，我听着难受死了。我对我爱豆搞土味唯一的要求就是，别说郭语
 "Listening to my roommate playing the video of her idols. They add a sentence of Guoyu every three sentences, it is killing me. My only request for my idol if they want to be down to earth is not to speak Guoyu."

In Excerpt 5, there are three underlying presuppositions. The commenter thinks that girls should not speak Guoyu because it is vulgar, implying that there are different speaking standards for different genders. Second, Guoyu is vulgar because it goes against a set of correct and standard value systems. But what are the correct values that contrast to Guoyu, and who defined them? By presupposing the existence of correct values, the comments upscale the vulgarity of an internet language to the level of education and even the future of the country.

In Excerpt 6, the comment was posted after Teacher Guo was banned. The contradictory point here is that although the commenter hated Guoyu and approved of the ban, they admitted to their own interest in and frequent deployment of this style in their communicative activities. By drawing a boundary between when she was not very popular and the period after she gained uncountable followers, the commenter was actually separating themselves from the "vulgar and blind" masses.

Excerpt 7 provides an example of the effects of exemplary speakers, which is defined by Agha (2007) as the most prototypical "member of the class for the population sampled" (p. 122). Many idols and celebrities spoke Guoyu as a strategy to close the distance between themselves and their fans. By utilizing the "vulgar" Guoyu in their interviews or variety shows, these "decent" stars manipulated their "tropic identities" to attract more fans (Agha, 2007, p. 161). Chaoyue Yang, one of the most famous Chinese idols, rewarded Teacher Guo in her live streaming with tips. Caijie Guo, a movie star, sued a blogger who used iconic Guoyu expressions to comment on her, as she regarded the use of Guoyu as an assault.

The last metapragmatic model of Guoyu's vulgarity I analyze is from political discourse. It is this set of discourses that decided the destiny of Teacher Guo to be banned, therefore should be differentiated from the last section from normal netizens. The Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China issued an announcement on carrying out Comprehensive Governance Work in the Field of Entertainment (《关于开展文娱领域综合治理工作的通知》) in 2021, aiming to effectively curb the bad tendencies of the industry and clarify the atmosphere in the field of entertainment, solidifying socialist core values as support. This announcement directly led to a series of actions to suppress controversial influencers' participation on the internet. Due to her huge fan base, Teacher Guo's live stream was defined as part of the "bad tendencies" and seen as contamination of the internet atmosphere. In the following months, all the platforms on which she was active blocked her accounts and deleted all the content that she had posted. Teacher Guo and her fans were dissatisfied with such "mistreatments," as they claimed in their later Weibo posts, so she attempted to register new accounts and continue her live streaming secretly. However, her risky actions brought stricter

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cancellations. The following paragraph is quoted from a news article published in 2021, by People's Daily Online, affiliated with People's Daily, the official newspaper of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China.

Excerpt 8:

劣迹网红被封禁，没有一个值得同情。近年来，直播行业繁荣，圆了很多草根的明星梦。但个别网红却倒行逆施，把圈子搅得乌烟瘴气。著名的“郭老师”堪称网络审丑界的“顶流”，被网友吐槽：“装疯卖傻”“低俗营销”“误人子弟”

Those notorious influencers who are banned do not deserve any sympathy. In recent years, the live-streaming economy has been prosperous and made many grassroots dreams come true. But certain influencers made retroaction and contaminated the environment. The famous “Teacher Guo” deserves the title of the top of the trend of appreciation of ugliness on the internet. She was criticized by internet users as “playing dumb,” “vulgarly marketing,” and “misleading (the young).”

This name-and-shame announcement from the most authoritative institution in China sentenced Teacher Guo to death in cyberspace. Despite the seemingly vague instructions about what exactly should be done about her, the subsequent chain effects were hugely detrimental to Teacher Guo. All media platforms took tougher actions to ban her. In this piece of news, the author used reported speech, or what Tannen (2007) more aptly calls “constructed dialogue,” that was claimed to be uttered by mass internet users to criticize Teacher Guo. The manipulative comment adopted a double-voiced tone, which, in Bakhtin’s (2010) terms, is that two voices are presented together, so that the speakers’ standing could be protected by preempting others’ thoughts. Such a rhetoric made banning her appear as the common aspiration of the people. By December 2022, the trend of “Teacher Guo is banned from all platforms” on Weibo had gained 870 million views, 89 thousand follow-up comments, and 30 thousand participants.

Higher Order of Indexicality

The metapragmatic consensus on the vulgarity of Guoyu constructed the schematic value of Guoyu, also seen as its first order of indexicality. However, the fact that Guoyu is controversial implies that while it is spurned by many netizens, there are a great number of people who appreciate it. In other words, based on the shared first-order indexical value, certain populations comprised unified social domains, with the shared second- or higher-order indexical stereotype diverging from the first (Agha, 2007). During the formation of the Guoyu style, people following mainstream social values formulated their dominant system of normativity to contrast with Guoyu, marginalizing it as an intolerable style. The ideological base for so-called mainstream social value has gone through a prescriptive process. In 2016, a set of core socialist values was advanced in the 19th Communist Party of China by the president as the fundamental guiding principles for the country’s future development. Since then, these values have been closely related to national belonging, and are the presupposed standard values mentioned in Excerpt 5, in which Guoyu was criticized as “gross stuff against correct values” of the nation.

However, Chinese gay people are a marginalized group and occupy a weak position in society. They tend to implicitly resist mainstream social norms and public aesthetics through the employment of counter-culture styles. In this sense, Teacher Guo became a symbol of authenticity who was not restricted by social norms. However, gay people are situated in a disadvantaged status in the competing model of language valorizations. To make their voices heard, their strategic and repetitive usage of Guoyu became a force of counter-valorization against the standard and normally accepted speaking style. It represents a dialectic and ideological process in which they made efforts to mark and enregister this speech as gay and authentic, and such stereotypic values stimulated gay people's widespread use of it, thereby expanding Guoyu's social domain of users. The enregisterment of Guoyu by people who identify as gay, and thereby are already marked as deviants from domestically promoted social values, reflects their tendency toward self-exoticization. The metapragmatic posts below evoke Guoyu an important emblem for a man's homosexual orientation.

Excerpt 9:

@kuki睡不着: 首先直男不会翻白眼, 其次直男不会说郭语, 最后直男不会拍脚和白袜。#男同干的#
 "First, straight men won't roll their eyes. Second, straight men won't speak Guoyu. Third, straight men won't take photos of feet and white socks. #what gays do#"

Excerpt 10:

@dhdbbrbjsjeb: 男同性恋真的很好分辨, 本来我还在思考一个肌肉男主播是gay还是单纯的爱健身跳舞的直男, 他张嘴一句“老铁”(郭语版)瞬间分辨出来了。
 "It is really easy to recognize a gay. I was thinking about whether a muscle streamer is gay or just a straight man who likes fitness and dancing. But the moment he said, "homies" (Guoyu version), I could immediately tell (that he is gay)."

Excerpt 9 lists three traits that heterosexual men supposedly do not have (that gay men do have, as indicated explicitly by the hashtag "what gays do"), and one of the three traits is speaking Guoyu. In Excerpt 10, the use of a Guoyu term has been interpreted as an index of gay identity. In addition to marking gayness, using Guoyu has also become some speakers' strategy for impression management, which constructs its higher orders of indexicality based on vulgarity. In the three posts below, speakers strategically take on Guoyu to present a complicated persona.

Excerpt 11:

@BOspecial-: 哪有美女不喜欢看郭子的? 我身边的大多数美女(百分之九十)私下郭语都6的飞起?
 "Is there any pretty girl who doesn't like Teacher Guo? Most of the beautiful girls around me (about 90 percent) speak very fluent Guoyu in private."

Excerpt 12:

@神勇旋风: 我还是喜欢郭子, 甚至感觉她就是我自己。她是我内心深处永远不敢表现出来的那一面。我最难过的时候想的是看看她让自己快乐点。郭门永存, 郭语永远年轻。

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"I still like Teacher Guo, I even think she is me. She is the deepest side of me that I never dare to reveal. I watched her videos to cheer myself up during my saddest moments. School of Guo never dies. Guoyu always stays young."

Excerpt 13:

@AurdErainla: 我感谢抖音的各种郭语文学, 让我交到了喜欢的朋友们哈哈哈哈哈真的开心的哈哈哈哈哈释放自己的感觉 很疯

"I appreciate all kinds of materials about Guoyu on TikTok. It helped me make good friends hahahahaha I'm so happy hahahahaha feels like releasing myself, so crazy."

In Excerpt 11, Guoyu's usage indexes the personae of beautiful girls (who are not expected to speak Guoyu) and the deeply hidden self; Excerpt 12 and Excerpt 13 also connect Guoyu to the idea of private selves ("the deepest side of me that I never dare to reveal" is created and Guoyu provides a way of "releasing" oneself). When beautiful girls who are expected to behave in image-conscious and elegant ways use vulgar Guoyu and imitate Teacher Guo in private, their performances and stereotypical properties seem to be incongruent. But even when they are uttering Guoyu expressions, they never fully replicate the way Teacher Guo speaks when live-streaming. These girls only insert certain Guoyu tokens into their speech, and through multimodal and paralinguistic signals, including their exquisite makeup and awkward laughter after the imitation, their use of Guoyu repertoires becomes entextualized. The incongruence modifies and partially cancels the stereotypic vulgarity of Guoyu and generates "contrary-to-stereotype effects" (Agha, 2007, p. 161). Therefore, these girls are inclined to use Guoyu for other present interlocutors' construal of their intended performable personae in a specific context, being down to earth, humorous, and even more attractive. Their willingness to reveal their true selves and to be authentic by using Guoyu in private prepares the ground for co-membership and friendship building. Certain stylized forms of Guoyu become indexicals for people to recognize like-minded people and adjust their role alignments.

The analysis above shows that the precipitation of stereotypical values via reflexive semiotic activities about Guoyu is endless. It is the first order of its indexicality of vulgarity that makes new indexical values possible, including gayness, authenticity, and spiritual liberty. As Agha (2007) notes, the recursive iterations, with their laminated stereotypical sedimentation, "yield new forms of interpersonal expression and social being" when speakers strategically project their identities in interactions (p. 171). I have shown how Guoyu is used this way.

Stances Marked by Interior and Exterior Indexicality

Unlike most internet-originated slang, Guoyu was formed in a new genre of performance. The multimodal nature of live-streaming is the premise for it to be uttered in real life, rather than only being circulated as textual forms in online messages. Therefore, it has moved offline and has great potential to be articulated in everyday conversations. However, it is necessary to adopt a different lens to examine Guoyu's use in face-to-face interaction, for it has clipped its chronotopic roots for circulation. For example, when it is used in an immediate discussion on Weibo with the hashtag #Guoyu#, the specific time-space configuration

presupposes the appropriateness of its use. The mobility of Guoyu tokens during circulation makes them possibly anchored in another recontextualized setting with different indexical valuations. Blommaert (2017) described this as “indexical restratification” (p. 96).

To investigate the non-static nature of the indexical meanings of Guoyu and the different roles it plays in offline conversations, I recorded a conversation among my friends. In this interaction, the most iconic Guoyu form, “Yasi,” was iterated as a modal particle for exclamations. I suggest that the expression “Yasi” functioned as a mitigating device in compliment speech acts and as an indexical to speakers’ social relations. The background information of this conversation is as follows: Rui, Aiden, and Lucy are roommates. Jake is Rui’s close friend, but he is unfamiliar with Aiden and Lucy. Rui (a straight woman) and Jake (a gay man) are Teacher Guo’s loyal fans and frequently speak in Guoyu style with each other. Aiden and Lucy (both heterosexual) are merely able to recognize Guoyu repertoires without using them. In my subsequent interviews with these interlocutors, Jake metapragmatically claimed that he only felt comfortable using Guoyu with close friends and was concerned that he might sound indecent or inappropriate. Aiden and Lucy felt that Guoyu was too dramatic and weird and was therefore not “their style.” The recorded conversation occurred while Aiden, Lucy, and Rui were sitting on the sofa. Jake arrived to visit Rui, and Rui and Jake greeted each other at the door.

Excerpt 14:

- | | | |
|---|-------|---|
| 1 | Rui | Wo di ya suar(.) [↓Ahhh] YEH(.) \$Zen me ze me hao kan? \$
“OH MY Yasuar (.) [↓Ahhh] YEH(.) \$Why do you look so good? \$” |
| 2 | Jake | [heheheheh]
You bing ba. [Halo?]
“What’s your problem. Hello?” |
| 3 | Aiden | Hi; |
| 4 | Jake | [hello?] ((toward Lucy)) |

In line 1, Rui passionately greeted Jake with “My yasuar,” a varied version from “Yasi” in Guoyu. Jake, Lucy, and Aiden used the “normal” way to greet each other (i.e., versions of hello). According to my long-term observations and interviews with them, the use of Guoyu between Jake and Rui has been ritualized after recurring interactions. Its use also indicates the degree of intimacy and solidarity between them. In line 3, although Jake did not use a “yasi” form back to Rui and even used a “blame” tone, he tacitly consented to Rui’s style use in this adjacency pair by using a common joke between close friends: “What’s your problem.” It could be that Jake’s sudden switch from a dramatic interactive style to a formal and polite style also indexed the social distance between him and the other two participants.

Kiesling (2004) elaborated that “dude” indexed the stance of cool solidarity. Borrowing this concept, I contend that “Yasi” can index a stance of humorous solidarity. However, Kiesling’s illustration was based on the pragmatic function of “dude” to address the same kind of person in a group of young men. “Yasi” is

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a special modal particle from Guoyu's repertoires, but its use tests the listener's ability to encode it as innovative internet slang and their acceptance of its indexical vulgarity. As discussed in the last section, the tropic cultural meanings of Guoyu based on its first order of indexicality include being humorous and authentic. Therefore, "Yasi" in offline interactions potentially constructs a stance of humorous solidarity, that the interlocutor is not only able to recognize its source and meaning but is also willing to deploy it to show that they are humorous and down to earth. In this scenario, Rui's use of "yasuar" indexed her stance of humorous solidarity with Jake, which Aiden and Lucy did not share. Her initial utterance implicitly voiced her grouping with Jake to make him feel comfortable with the presence of two unfamiliar people. For this reason, I suggest that Jake's response, "What's your problem," did not mean that he refused to build solidarity but represented a friendly and polite stance to Aiden and Lucy by not excluding them by using a term that he was not sure whether they would recognize.

In the next extract, the use of Guoyu plays a role in the speech act of compliment as a response. In line 8, Aiden compliments Jake.

Excerpt 15:

- 8 Aiden: [ei ni zhe ge feng yi] zhen hao kan
" [Oh your trench coat] looks so nice."
- 9 Rui: wo ↑ya si,=
"oh ↑ya si,"=
- 10 Jake: =wo ya- hehehehe
="my ya ((his "yasi" was not finished))-hehehehe"
- 11 Rui: jin tian-jin(h) tian(h)- ta jin tian na ge geng hao kan
"Today—to(h)day(h)—that one today looks better."
- 12 Ta jin tian [na ge xin] de yi fu geng hao kan
"That cloth [he got today] looks better."
- 13 Jake: [ya si]

In line 9, Rui used the dramatic "Yasi" to mediate Jake's potential awkwardness after Aiden directly complimented his coat. As barely acquaintances, Jake may have been embarrassed to directly accept Aiden's praise, particularly because of Chinese compliment culture. Neither would he use "yasi" directly to Aiden for his concern of appropriateness. In line 10, Jake built on Rui's mediation and took on a stance of humorous solidarity by repeating in Guoyu to indirectly respond to Aiden's compliment non-referentially. The fact that he did not finish "yasi" but laughed implies that he was still deciding whether to articulate in Guoyu style. In line 13, Jake replied "yasi" to Rui's next compliment without the self-interruption of laughter, which shows a higher degree of comfort when the compliment was uttered by a closer friend. Although his stance still retains solidarity, it could also be interpreted as enacting another indexical meaning, that of being gay. This interpretation is based on the widespread stereotypic values linked to "yasi" and the obvious contrastive speech styles between Aiden and Jake. Kiesling (2009) made a distinction between interior and exterior indexicality. In this case, the interior indexicality of Guoyu bounded in this speech event is related to Rui's and Jake's humorous and dramatic style, therefore establishing their stance of

solidarity. However, the exterior indexicality of gayness and potentially the sense of authenticity points to the grander social context, which is transportable to other speech events and time-space configurations. In other words, in this very interaction, the use of “yasi” as an iconic item from Guoyu style could create authentic selves for Rui and Jake, while part of Jake’s authentic self is being gay.

In this example, all present participants were familiar with Guoyu’s forms and indexical meanings (though Jake might not have realized this at first). In fact, it is this precondition that contributes to the maintenance of the orders of indexicality originating from the internet in an offline context. Based on the four interactants’ shared presupposition of its vulgarity and distinctiveness, Rui and Jake relied on Guoyu’s entailed meanings of being humorous, authentic, or gay to build their co-membership and solidarity, resulting in two groupings in the interaction, which are Rui and Jake, “versus” Lucy and Aiden. However, when Guoyu is completely detached from the original context and recontextualized in a new setting, online or offline, its prior scheme of indexicality could be restratified with a risk that its original indexical meanings might not be recognized.

Discussion: Bleaching during mediatization? “School Guo Never Dies”

Although Guoyu style contains a rich set of repertoires, only some of them have been disseminated extremely widely, such as “yasi,” “迷hotel,” and “jimei.” Particularly when these tokens are decontextualized from the genre of live-streaming and used on platforms other than TikTok or in offline interactions, the uses of them are fragmentary. When Guoyu, which is normally deployed in entertaining online scenarios, is employed fragmentarily in other contexts, its use could “confer some legitimacy upon its speaker, particularly when the target audience is unfamiliar with authentic uses of the source register” (Agha, 2007, p. 165). Therefore, Teacher Guo’s fans are able to use unrecognizable Guoyu forms strategically to make social groupings with those who are unable to identify them, so that a line to differentiate in-group speakers and out-group listeners is drawn. The official ban was a heavy blow to Guoyu’s further dissemination, but the moment Guoyu was involved in the internet’s semiotic chain of circulation, it began its immortal socially-charged life. The imbricated webs woven by its connections with other utterances and its entanglement with ongoing everyday discursive practices (Hanks, 1996) helped Guoyu find its way into every possible context.

For example, “jimei” (集美) is phonologically varied from “jiemei” (姐妹), an address term meaning “sisters.” Teacher Guo once used it repeatedly to call her followers to show intimacy during her live-streams and short videos. It was then adopted widely by her fans to refer to each other within her fan community. This term is used to address both women and gay men. After a period of circulation, “jimei” has become a common internet-mediated address term used in contexts that are unrelated to Teacher Guo or Guoyu. It is more pragmatically functional and indexically opaque than “yasi” and “迷hotel,” so it has more potential to be recontextualized and diffused. It is common for someone who utters “jimei” to have no idea about its origin or indexical value.

Squires (2014) defined this process, whereby “a feature retains its semantic meaning and pragmatic force but loses its social meaning,” as “indexical bleaching”

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(p. 43). Through a corpus-based analysis, she concluded that indexicality is interpretive and negotiated in different cases, and that “indexical strength catalyzes uptake, but indexical loss facilitates diffusion” (p. 58). Androustopoulos (2016) used a similar concept, “intertextual bleaching,” to describe a fragment’s loss of relation to its media origins during its incorporation into people’s repertoires. While both concepts conform to the features of Guoyu’s fragmentary circulation, I argue that the indexical value situated in the grander socioeconomic and cultural reality always plays a role in the dissemination of internet-mediated language, despite its seeming lost during the recontextualized use.

First, although the circulation and dissemination of Guoyu are symbiotically related to the powerful and intricate intertextual fabric, they follow a regular pattern rendered by the chain of mediatization. The term “mediatization” was defined by Agha (2011b) as institutional practices linking processes of communication to commodification. In this instance, mediatized institutions, such as the TikTok and Weibo platforms, linked the discursive practices of Guoyu to economic profit. As a result, the proliferating differentiated uptake formations occurred in the expanding scale of Guoyu’s circulation with individual participation. While Bourdieu (1991) misrecognized the valorization of registers as “involving macro-social market principles” (Agha, 2007, p. 167), Squires (2014) and Androustopoulos (2016) narrowed their scope on the micro-mechanism of circulation. The analysis of internet-mediated language requires a combination of both perspectives.

The increasing expansion of Guoyu’s social domain is fueled by the thriving digital media economy under contemporary sociohistorical conditions. As a newly emergent digital-space-dependent communication pattern, live-streaming has been on the rise in China since 2016. The artifacts provided by client technology created a virtual reality platform for grassroots streamers to perform, create content, and interact with an audience. The popularity of live streaming in China reached a climax in 2020 during the mass quarantine when people’s means of entertainment were limited and offline sales experienced a severe downturn. Chinese live commerce largely boosted consumers’ enthusiasm for live-stream shopping, so live-streaming gained great support from platforms and the country.

Such a favorable climate prepared a perfect medium with approbative affordances for Teacher Guo and Guoyu to become a hit across the Chinese internet. As she claimed, she could earn 200 thousand RMB a month as net income for her live stream without promoting products. Other vloggers immediately captured the profitable properties of Guoyu performance. Their imitations and participatory conduct attracted followers while further contributing to Guoyu’s popularity. However, the ban on Teacher Guo did not sever this chain of interest. Since Teacher Guo is the only influencer of the “Guoyu Empire” to be named in the announcement, hundreds of her imitators continue deploying Guoyu style to arouse her fans’ nostalgia. Three of her major imitators accumulated 1.8 million, 5.5 million, and 3.1 million followers on TikTok. Thus, Guoyu has been commodified through the chain of mediatization.

According to Agha (2011a), through the recontextualized activities of fragments of commodity formulations, these fragments gradually come to be treated as common culture. While Guoyu was initially a niche product, the subsequent mediatized discursive practices made it a polarizing topic in the public sphere and attracted the attention of official institutions. Thus, I suggest that the

overwhelming circulation of internet-mediated language is not only evidence of the heteroglossic nature of language (Spitulnik, 1996), but also evidence for the shadow of commodified pop culture.

Furthermore, I argue that the indexical value of Guoyu can never be fully bleached. In other words, the ideologically formulated indexical meaning always lingers on its recontextualized articulations. The subsequent uptake and deployment of Guoyu tokens are not fully autonomous but largely conform to certain social regularities. On the one hand, the deployment results from the audience's selected exposure to the stylized speech, which is decided by the institutionally mediatized semiotic chain. Who is more likely to be exposed to Guoyu? Who is at the tail end of the semiotic chain with less ability to recognize its original meaning? Internet users' exposure to certain content depends on their subjective attention to specific topics, their passive intake from the accounts they follow, and the platforms they view frequently. Social media algorithms impose varied content on users based on the traces of their prior interests. For example, a person with an interest in Chinese gay culture is very likely to be exposed to Guoyu repertoires if they view related content on the internet, regardless of whether they know or like Teacher Guo or not.

At the same time, even the unconscious usage of the Guoyu repertoire cannot be isolated from the micro and macro schemes of ideologically formulated stereotypes. In his discussion of the values of slang repertoires, Agha (2015) argued that the values of enactable signs are closely related to certain social regularities and are reflected in the "interactionally projected acts of self vs. other positioning" (p. 312). Despite the opaque social meaning of Guoyu, straight men are far less likely to use "jimei" or use it only in an ironic way. In short, prior mediatized exposure to Guoyu makes subsequent usage possible, but the choice to use it as involved in identity projection mainly depends on its sociocultural surroundings rather than its pure pragmatic function.

Conclusion

In this analysis, I first used posts of Weibo users and excerpts of institutional (more specifically, governmental) discourse as metapragmatic data to analyze the enregisterment of Guoyu. Originating from grassroots live-streaming, this collaboratively formulated style gained its socially charged vitality from interdiscursive practices. Based on its first order of indexicality of vulgarity, the further constructed higher orders of indexicality serve as varied regularities to develop subgroups of the social domain. By legitimizing its status as a language, Chinese netizens ironically revealed their anxiety about the prestige of English and dissatisfaction with current language ideologies. The gay community ideologically makes use of Guoyu style to conduct nontransparent subversion against the mainstream value system, along with the spirit of self-exoticization, because of their disadvantaged social status. Guoyu has also become a semiotic resource for users' manipulation of interactive agendas and personal impression management, gaining the indexical meanings of humor and authenticity.

To consider offline interactions involving Guoyu, I first analyzed a naturally occurring conversation, looking into dynamic textual composite effects. The strategic deployment of Guoyu indexes certain intended social personae and

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serves as a semiotic device to build role alignments. Both the exterior and interior indexicality of Guoyu had effects on interlocutors' stance-taking and the construction of social relations. The congruent relationship between the online and offline orders of indexicality reaffirmed the profound social effects of internet-mediated styles under the regulation of ideologically shaped stereotypical configuration.

In my account of the indexical bleaching phenomenon, I showed how the dissemination of Guoyu conforms to the regularity of a mediatized chain. Guoyu is not just a cultural product, but a commodified semiotic product formulated by institutional power under sociohistorical conditions. Additionally, my analysis suggests that Guoyu has lost very little of its indexical meaning during diffusion. Its semiotically-constructed circulation and the audience's uptake of its discursive tokens and stereotypical meanings are under the influence of general ideological regularities as a snapshot of sociohistorical reality.

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APPENDIX

1. Parts of Guoyu multimodal repertoires

Linguistic Signs in written forms	Iconic tokens	Food Lexicon based on phonological variation	Fruits	迷hotel,粗莓,火龙gu,香居,盲果儿, etc.	
			Snacks	油za,鸡米wa, xunnai旋沟, etc.	
		Modal Particles	亚斯莫拉, 雅思, 亚耶, 不寄丢, etc.		
		Addressing Terms	家人们, 集美, 老铁, etc.		
		Intonation		Frequent ups and downs, normally with a rising intonation at the end of a sentence	
		Topics		Sexual desire, excreta, etc.	
Non-linguistic signs	Facial expressions		Squinting eyes, flicking tongues, slanting mouth, etc.		
	Body gestures		Dangling hands in front of the chest, etc.		

2. Transcription Conventions

^ rise-fall intonation

. terminal intonation

? question intonation

↑ ↓ pitch movement

... long pause

.. medium pause

() specified pause (with seconds)

[] overlap

= latched utterances

: prosodic lengthening

(h) laughter within speech

(()) speaker action or directed speech uncertain transcription