

From: **Understanding the Chinese Language: A comprehensive linguistic introduction**
by Chris Shei (2004, Oxon UK and New York: Routledge).

Weibo is itself a giant machine for creating neologisms. A famous sentence, 我和我的小伙伴们都惊呆了 ‘I and my little companions are all terribly shocked’, appears in a weibo in 2011, originally posted as part of the handwritten and photographed text composed by a primary school student. While the original form is still widely used for its idiomatic essence and comic value, netizens quickly developed a compact form 我伙呆 ‘I-companion-dumb’, which is an abbreviated version of the original expression. At the application stage, related expressions using the core elements appear, each with some additional elements nonexistent in the original construction, for examples, 我伙已呆, 我伙彻底呆了 and so on.

6.3.5 Abbreviations

Abbreviation as a method for creating new terms has become fashionable recently. The prototypical process is to collect a group of 3-4 words or phrases, and take one character from each word or phrase to form an acronym. For example, the new term 喜大普奔 ‘happy, big, general, run’ is extracted from the set (喜闻乐见、大快人心、普天同庆、奔走相告) taking the first character from each quadrisyllabic unit. Sometimes the process is reversed, and an existing term is given a new interpretation. For example, 蛋白质 ‘egg-white-material (protein)’ has been reinterpreted by some netizens as an acronym extracted from the set of three words (笨蛋、白痴、神经质) ‘stupid-egg (fool), *white*-mad (idiot), *nerve-material* (apprehensive)’.

Another method in this strand is to take a longer phrase or sentence and select a subset of characters from it to represent the phrase or sentence. 我伙呆 mentioned in 6.3.4 is an example. Other examples include 人干事 ‘human-do-matter’ abbreviated from 这是人干的事吗? ‘Is this something that a person is capable of doing?’ and 细思恐极 ‘detailed-think-horrible-extreme’ for 仔细想想, 觉得恐怖至极 ‘If you think about it carefully, you will feel extremely terrified’. For these new terms, it is almost impossible for the novice reader to derive their meanings independently without referring to the original expression.

Some new phrases can be expanded into full sentences, such as 火钳 刘明, or more accurately 火箭留名 ‘fire-prior-leave-name’, being interpreted as 在帖子变火前留下姓名 ‘leave my name (in the comment region of a promising post) before it gains widespread popularity (so my name will be noticed too)’. However, unlike 人干事 or 细思恐极, the term itself can be understood without referring to the fuller expressions, therefore it is an original term rather than an abbreviation.

6.3.6 Orthographical play

Many Chinese characters are put together by radicals and other basic characters. For example, 明 ‘bright’ is composed of 日 ‘sun’ and 月 ‘moon’. 李 ‘plum’ comprises a ‘wood’ character on top of 子 ‘son’. This aspect of Chinese writing is taken advantage of by the netizens to create novel orthographical representations in a fun way. For example, 强 ‘strong’ can be rewritten as 弓虽 and 神 ‘god’ as 礻 申. The new dual-character representation takes double space and confounds the reader not used to reading this layout, achieving the desired effect. This is also said to be a deliberate tactic to defeat the Weibo censorship when certain keywords become politically sensitive and are included in the black list.

6.4 Conclusion

We have examined around 150 new words and expressions in this chapter, with an extensive range of real examples selected from Weibo to illustrate how the new terms are used in context. New words are being invented and disseminated every day, and new ways of creating new words and expressions discovered every now and then. By familiarizing ourselves with the current neologisms and the different machineries for creating them, we are one step closer to the future Chinese language which may look even more different from traditional Chinese in 100 years' time.

As the main source of new words discussed in this chapter (i.e. the Sina Weibo social networking website) only came into existence in 2009, the work here is of a highly pioneering nature. Therefore, the classification method is tentative and the inclusion of new words is by no means exhaustive. In 10, or even as short as five years' time, some of the new words and expressions discussed here will have gone out of fashion. Some will stand the test of time, while still more neologisms will be invented. The Chinese language is evolving at an accelerated speed with the help of the internet... More subtle and long-lasting changes in syntax and morphology may also be happening which are worthy of further investigation.