
RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Pragmatic Functions of the tilde “~” in China’s Social Media among Youth Groups

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ABSTRACT

China defines “~” (tilde, the wave sign) as punctuation, which serves as a grammar marker. However, as social media becomes popular in people’s daily life, the wave sign acquires another pragmatic meaning and function. Although this change is obvious, few studies have been conducted for a further view. This paper aims to explore the pragmatic meaning and function of “~” beyond its punctuation usage. With a qualitative and quantitative study, it’s found that the tilde “~” is usually popular among a specific group in social media, while it is widely used on both formal and informal occasions. Also, according to Searle’s illocutionary speech acts theory, it’s found that the tilde “~” is mainly used in three speech acts, which are directive speech acts, expressive speech acts, and representative speech acts, respectively. In this paper, the tilde “~” could be considered as a marker from the perspective of its functions: 1) it’s a symbol in multimodal communication that is capable of producing synaesthesia of visual and auditory; 2) it is usually a positive marker hinting a kind of pleasure emotion comparing with other punctuations; 3) it can be a tone modifier mitigating or enhancing the tone of an utterance. This study indicates that a small sign like “~” may enhance the effectiveness of language expression in social media and the need to embrace the dynamic and variety of language study.

KEYWORDS

Multimodal communication, speech acts, the pragmatic function of “~”, positive markers, tone modifier

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1. Introduction

The pervasiveness of social media like Facebook and WeChat in contemporary life promotes the multimodal development of language. Emoticons, facial characters, stickers and memes are used on various platforms of social media millions of times every day, which significantly contributes to the development of translanguaging. According to García and Li (2014), the content of translanguaging not only refers to the mixture of languages but also indicates the multimodal, multisensory and multi-semiotic resources available. Punctuation is considered one of the main parts of multi-semiotic resources. However, the tilde “~” doesn’t only work as traditional punctuation in social media. It also evolves into other usages that could be explained in a pragmatic way. Therefore, the paper is going to figure out the function of the tilde “~” in the WeChat communication with the method of literature analysis and data analysis. Firstly, the identification and function of punctuation will be presented, especially the conventional and unconventional functions of punctuation. This step is helpful in defining the tilde “~” and its function in computer medium communication (hereafter, CMC). Secondly, the analysis data from WeChat will be organized in a reasonable and systematic way in order to figure out the real usage of the tilde “~” in different contexts and target groups of people. The third point will consider the theoretical foundation of this paper, the illocutionary force, how it works to analyze the tilde “~”, and what kind of principles could be generalized in this research.

The research of the tilde “~” is necessary as it is very popular among youth groups on China’s social media like WeChat, Weibo and Tiktok, etc. As a part of punctuation, the tilde “~” can serve more pragmatic meanings and functions than its grammar ones in CMC, which means that the unconventional usage of punctuation is showing up due to the changes in language form and technology. These changes include the appearance of emojis, memes and other non-linguistic signs. Different from this, the tilde “~”, one of the punctuations, is inter-linguistics. However, it can serve the same function as an emoji, or a meme does. And in the field of linguistics, the tilde “~” can express more than a word does. What’s the tilde “~” actually? There are many studies focus on memes or emojis (Marcel 2017; Elena 2020) about their functions, and there are also many studies about punctuation (Geoffrey 1990; Robert 1991) like exclamation marks (!), question marks (?), ellipsis (...). However, there are few studies that mention the tilde “~”. Therefore, this paper is going to figure out the identity and function of a tilde “~” in social media by keeping the following two questions in mind.

- (1) What the tilde “~” is in CMC?
- (2) What the tilde “~” can do in CMC?

2. Literature review

Punctuation has different versions in different languages. But they share similar functions despite these differences. From the perspective of grammar, punctuation is usually used “to separate the units of grammar (sentences, clauses, phrases, words) from each other” (Crystal, 1987). Quirk(1985) first conducted systematic research on punctuation marks, and he believed that separation and specification are the two main functions of punctuation (Quirk et al., 1985). Halliday(1985) considered punctuations as a marker, and he divided punctuations into boundary markers, status markers and relationship markers from the perspective of functional grammar (Halliday, 1985). After that, many scholars have made different interpretations of the functions of punctuation marks from the aspects of classification, definitions and terms. However, they pay more attention to the grammatical functions of punctuation and rarely mention the pragmatic functions of punctuation. Nunberg listed two reasons why the pragmatic functions of punctuation are always ignored by people: 1) punctuation itself is difficult to describe with systematic standards, and research on it is marginal in the language system; 2) punctuations are ambiguous and subjective in interpreting tones while the tone of language is important in pragmatics (Nunberg, 1990). At the same time, the development of the network and social media has rapidly expanded the unconventional or pragmatic usage of punctuation while researches about it are too slow to catch up. It should be noted that the difference in network environment also makes the research contents at home and abroad significantly different.

Chinese scholars first noticed the variation of punctuation in China's network environment. Sun Youguo(2021) believed that the pragmatic function of punctuation is embodied in poetry. Punctuation could be a marker to make the feeling of poetry alive and the artistic concept of poetry specific in prompting, pausing, expressing and questioning, which greatly improve the expressiveness and appeal of poetry (Sun Youguo, 2021). Yuan Ying(2003) thought that punctuation has an emotional function, which helps the realization of such intentions as excitement, sadness, surprise and doubt (Yuan Ying 2003). In *the National Standard Punctuation Mark Usage of the People's Republic of China*, “~” is one of the connecting numbers to indicate the start and end of the numerical range (composed of Arabic numerals or Chinese characters). However, the usage of the tilde “~” is totally changed in social media. Chu Liang took a sociolinguistic method to focus on contemporary people's cognition of the punctuation mark “~” and concluded that the use of “~” has shifted into a marker, which is already beyond the rhetoric category (Chu Liang 2015). In terms of semantics and pragmatics, “~” can express the cadence and swaying of voice. It can also showcase the interlocutor’s intention and feeling like happiness, friendliness and flirting (Chu Liang 2015). However, there is little empirical research about the tilde “~” of focusing on the shift usage of special punctuation from a grammatical aspect to a pragmatic aspect. It’s a research gap needed to be further occupied.

3. Methodology

3.1 Theory framework

The illocutionary force was first put forward by British linguist Austin in his book *How to Do Things with Words* in 1962, which indicates that people's speech has the function of exerting behaviour in addition to transmitting information (Austin, 1962). Later, Searle subdivided illocutionary force into five types of illocutionary speech acts; they are representative, directive, commissive, expressive, declaration, and rogatives illocutionary speech acts (Searle, 1976). The classification of illocutionary speech acts is realized by performative verbs. For example, in the directive, illocutionary speech acts, requests, commands, inquiries, warnings, suggestions, recommendations, etc., all contain strong meanings of asking someone to do something through specific performative verbs like *ask*, *warn*, *suggest*, *advise* etc. However, the division of a specific speech act is not always clear. In real life, there will be utterances that can be considered as a community with multiple illocutionary speeches acts, but the manifestations

of illocutionary force of various speech acts are common. They are all expressed by performative verbs, emotional meanings, contextual information or syntactic structures. In this paper, the utterance data with the tilde “~” collected from WeChat will be identified into illocutionary speech acts according to the realization and manifestation methods of illocutionary force. This step provides the tilde “~” a language context, which could be analyzed and interpreted in a clear and systemic framework to deprive the true meaning and function of the tilde “~”.

3.2 Research design

The data is collected from WeChat (the most popular instant messaging software in China). Typing the tilde “~” through the search engine of WeChat, there are hundreds of chats with the tilde “~” from chatting groups or WeChat friends showing up. These chats naturally happen in real life. We finally collected 523 chats as language materials and divided them into three parts. In the first part, we found that the tilde “~” usually appeared in the main three illocutionary acts according to their performative verbs: the directive illocutionary speech acts, the expressive illocutionary speech acts, and the representative illocutionary speech acts, which the data would be shown in the following chart. All the chats and relative information are allowed to be put on the table after asking for participants' permission. Also, the information related to their privacy will be changed in some way.

表1带有“~”的言语行为分类

(Table 1: Classification of illocutionary Acts with “~”)

言语行为 (illocutionary acts)	数量 (quantity)	例句 (example utterance)
<p>通知命令 (command and order)</p> <p>指令类 (正式) (the directive) (formal)</p>	105	<p>1) 大家按时入会哦~ (Please attend the meeting on time oh ~)</p> <p>2) 咱们今年的入党积极分子进群咯~ (This year’s Party activists, please join the group oh ~)</p> <p>3) 就是说你们外地的搬寝室的给我反馈哈~ (That is to say, if you non-local guys who need to move to another dormitory, please tell me ha ~)</p> <p>.....</p>
<p>请求建议 (request and advise)</p>	46	<p>4) 噢~有人愿意和我通力合作吗? (oh~ Is there anyone willing to cooperate with me?)</p> <p>5) 然后看看有没有落下什么呀~大家发群里就行~ (And then check if there is anything left~ just send it to the group~)</p> <p>6) 拜托了~ (please~)</p> <p>.....</p>

(Ps: the words Chinese particles their	表达类 (正式) (the expressive) (formal)	回应 (response)	92	7) 好滴~~~ (ok~~~) 8) 收到~ (copy that~) 9) ok~	italic are modal and
		感谢 (thank)	68	10) 谢谢老师~ (Teacher, thank you~) 11) 大家辛苦啦~ (Thank you for working so hard la~) 12) 麻烦你了~ (Sorry to bother you and thank you for your help~)	
		主张意愿 (claim)	67	13) 我下午~ (I'd rather choose the afternoon~) 14) 我觉得应该快了吧~ (I believe it won't take a long time ba~) 15) 拜托~个人魅力~ (Think it over~ It's personal charisma~)	
阐释类 (非正式) (the representative) (informal)	其他 (others)	9	16) 手抓饼 : 3元一个~ (Hand-grab Pancake: 3 yuan each~) 17) 菲菲~ (Feifei~) (a nickname) 18) 小哥哥~ (a cute guy~)		
	transliteration in English)				

In the second part, this paper will trace the creators of the chats to get information about their gender and age. And conclude them in table 2.

Table 2; the background information of participants

Gender	Male	Female
The number of participants	4	37
age	Under 30	Under 30
The number of utterances with "~~"	12	511

In the third part, we will recognize the formal and informal occasions where the tilde "~~" is located in. The division is made according to the relationship between the participants and their counterparts and the name of the WeChat group. For example, the group of class students and teachers is thought of as a formal occasion, while the group of friends and families are believed as an informal occasion. The results are concluded in table 3 as follows:

Table 3: the occasion where the tilde “~” is located in

occasion	The directive illocutionary acts	The expressive illocutionary acts	The representative illocutionary acts
Utterances with “~” in formal group	124	93	11
Utterances with “~” in informal group	27	67	65

4. Findings

4.1 The usage of the tilde “~.”

4.1.1 The syntactic feature of “~.”

There are three syntactic features of “~” in CMC: 1) the tilde “~” mostly follows words at the end position of an utterance. It rarely shows up alone, meaning its main function lies in the modification of an utterance. The combination with the tilde “~” and words, especially the closet words to the tilde “~” will enhance the expression and interpretation power of an utterance; 2) the closet words to the tilde “~” according to the data are usually modal particles of Chinese. The collocation of modal particles and punctuations is a very common and conventionalized pattern in Chinese. Modal particles are always located at the end of an utterance and function to express the speaker’s attitude, opinion and intention towards the proposition (Peng, 2005). And the function of modal particles could be deepened and promoted when a punctuation marker follows at the end position. However, only a few punctuation markers could work to deepen the function of modal particles. They are question marker (?), exclamation marker(!), ellipsis (...) etc. (Nunberg, 1990). Now the punctuation “~” could be one member of this group, which its function will be illustrated later; 3) the tilde “~” could be used repeatedly in an utterance, most of them are consecutively repeated in three or more at the middle or end position of an utterance. The repeated tilde “~” mainly shows the extent of the voice and enhances the intonation of the utterance.

4.1.2 The pragmatic feature of “~.”

Three features could be recognized according to the above tables: 1) the tilde “~” is used most frequently in directive illocutionary speech acts with 151 utterances, according to Table 1. Most participants believe that the tilde “~” could mitigate the tone of a directive utterance, which makes the forcing words become more acceptable. In contrast, the tilde “~” in the representative illocutionary speech acts is much less than the other two as it makes the utterance more emotional, which is only a particular language habit to a particular group of people. 2) By tracing the gender and age of the chat records with “~”, the data of Table 2 could be analyzed in such a way. First of all, among thousands of chat records, only 523 chat records with “~” were created by 41 people, of which 37 women created 511 sentences with “~” and 4 men created 12 sentences with “~” respectively. This shows that the use of “~” is author-original, and the different habits and personalities of each person will lead them to choose different communication systems. Some people are accustomed to using emoticons, and some people love to use memes. People who use “~” as a communication sign are only part of it in a specific kind of group. At the same time, the data also shows that “~” has gender differences; women prefer to use “~” over men. All in all, the group who use “~” is relatively fixed, which is generally popular among young women group. 3) It can be seen from Table 3 that “~” is mainly used in the formal occasions defined in this paper, which is contrary to people’s conventional knowledge. In people’s knowledge, “~” as a non-verbal expression, similar to emoticons, is not appropriate for formal and solemn occasions. But it can be reasonable when the online office becomes popular. The language in social media is much more vivid and flexible with the help of emoticons, memes and so on. In a relatively formal online occasion like the work WeChat group, the assignment of work and communication between bosses and clerks, teachers and students tend to be polite and effective. The use of translanguaging, like the tilde “~”, could help to make the conversation finished in polite and effective way. For example, the tilde “~” used by a high power person like a boss or teacher would help to shape a friendly and nice image, which makes their forcing action of assigning the work to their clerks or students more acceptable. When the clerks or students use the tilde “~” to respond to their bosses or teachers’ assignments in their utterances, it could be more positive and polite, which shows that they are happy to accept this work. Therefore, the tilde “~” is more likely to be used in the work context, which is relatively formal compared to other contexts.

All in all, the employment of the tilde “~” is quite limited to a specific group and context. Young groups of people use more translanguaging signs like “~” than an older groups of people. Among the young group of people, women are more likely to use the tilde “~” than men, as online communication is much different from face-to-face communication. Translanguaging signs like emoticons and memes are also easy to be accepted on some formal occasions. The tilde “~” is surprisingly likely to appear in a work context where the power distance is far between people. That also can explain why the tilde “~” has a high frequency being used in the directive illocutionary speech acts as “~” could help to shorten the power distance in the assignment of work between the employer and employee. But how the small sign “~” could do this? The function of the sign “~” will be explained further in 4.2.

4.2 The function of the tilde “~.”

4.2.1 The translanguaging function of the tilde “~.”

The special wave-like shape of “ ~ ” following the word in an utterance could show the fluctuation of the sound, which makes people ‘hear’ the tone of the utterance when they see it in a text. The “~” could integrate the human visual and auditory senses. Visually, it destroys the solemn and neat style peculiar to Chinese characters with the “~” as a tail, which gives people a feeling of motion and free. Aurally, the wavy sign could represent a change and swaying of a voice, indicating the tone of the utterance. The integration allows the receiver to feel the attitude, tone, and emotion of an utterance in the text, which compensates for the loss of information (tone, emotion, reaction etc.) from speech to text. See the following example:

Example 1

A : @XX 水在门口哈

(A: @XX, the water is behind the door)

B : 要得, 谢谢学姐~

(B: Ok, thank you, senior sis~)

In face-to-face communication, B may have a smiling face with a soft and intimate tone to express his thank to A. But when speech is transcribed into text, the original attitude of expressing friendliness and intimacy may be lost. The “~” at the end of the utterance in Example 1 shows a soft tone, eliminating the stiffness and formality of appreciation, which makes B’s words more sincere and friendly.

The example shows us the translanguaging function of the tilde “~” through the integration of visual and auditory to express a more vivid and emotional feeling of the utterance when it transcribes into a text. And memes and emoticons can also serve the same function, which means the tilde “~” is much more like an emoticon or meme because of their special shapes and images in some way.

4.2.2 The “cute” prosody of the tilde “~.”

The written language falls short in representing prosodic aspects like the rise in the pitch, the accents, the pauses, the rhythm, the variations in voice quality etc., but it doesn’t mean that it is an impoverished form of language from which prosody is simply absent (Bolinger, 1975). Bolinger, Welty, and other scholars believe that there is a voice in our mind following the words we are reading, which means that writers, when they write, and readers, when they read, experience auditory imagery of specific intonations, accents, pauses, rhythms, and voice qualities, even though the writing itself may show these features poorly if at all. This is a kind of “covert prosody” Chafe claims that the initial attempt at writing language is to study the relationship between the prosody of writing and one device, and the device is the punctuation (Chafe, 1986). He found that most writing most the time does use punctuation in a way that respects the prosody of written language. But the tilde “~”, as a punctuation, is not the conventional prosodic end like a question marker and exclamatory mark; it can not even be used together with words in its conventional function. However, it is often shown at the end of a word in CMC. At this point, we view the tilde “~” as a prosodic end like question marker as it does reveal a kind of prosody of the utterance. Look at these examples:

Example 2

A : 我回去了。

(A: I’m back.)

B : 我回去了 !

(B: I’m back!)

C : 我回去了~

(C: I'm back~)

The periods in utterance A show a pause or an end of this utterance, which is difficult to match appropriate auditory imagery to it. It could be said in a falling pitch or another kind of tone, and it's also difficult to guess the emotion or attitude of the writer, for the comma is usually worked as a grammar function to mark the end of an utterance. Unlike the periods, the exclamatory mark and the tilde “~” could actually show the prosody of an utterance, which means they can be matched with some obvious auditory imagery. These auditory imageries will express some kind of emotions that the listener can tell. For example, the exclamatory mark “!” could be said in a rising pitch and a fast tone, which shows feelings of anger or excitement in some way. The prosody of the utterance with a “!” is much more specific than the comma, and the tilde “~” could even be more specific than an exclamatory mark. According to the survey of this paper, an utterance followed by the tilde “~” shows the wave of voice in a happy and relaxed way. Even in an utterance with negative feelings, it's still shown as an emotional, mostly an adorable emotional modifier with less solemn feelings. For example, the tilde “~” in Example 3 follows a crying onomatopoeia and a negative emotional word “sad” in a way that focuses more on how eager he/she needs comfort rather than how sad he/she is. The special shape of the tilde “~” makes everything it is following emotional, as the baby talks like “Mommy”, “poo poo” makes everything cuter. The utterance C in Example 2, “I'm back~”, shows the wave of choice and the cute auditory imagery could be matched when it is read. To some extent, the cute prosody of “~” shows a kind of positive emotion and attitude in the utterance; sometimes, it can also be viewed as a positive prosody marker. The data in Table 1 could prove this view as the three main illocutionary acts with the tilde “~” all show a positive feeling in response or thank utterance.

Example 3

呜呜呜~, 我好难过~

Wu Wu Wu (a crying onomatopoeia)~ I am so sad~

4.2.3 The solidarity function of the tilde “~.”

The tilde “~” is often used after the mood particle such as 啦 (La) , 滴 (Di) , 呐(Na), 嘛(Ma) etc., in Chinese. There are three functions of Chinese mood particles: 1) enhancing the expression of the emotion and feeling of an utterance, 2) marking the mood and tone of an utterance, and 3) marking a pause. The tilde “~” could be considered as a stretch of the mood particle, which makes its functions more effective. The appearance of “~” in directive illocutionary acts makes the threat or force of the utterance weaker, thus making the content of requests, commands or suggestions easier to accept. When the tilde “~” appears in expressive illocutionary acts of response or appreciation, “thank you”, “ok”, “copy that”, etc., are generally in response to previous directive illocutionary acts. By adding “~”, the tone of the response and gratitude expressed in the utterance becomes more strong and more sincere, which shows an active cooperation attitude and polite solidarity in the communication. In this way, a tilde “~” has the function of mitigating an utterance. However, it can also intensify the tone of an utterance by repeatedly adding it at the end of the words. In the representative speech acts, three “~” were added in Example 4, which expresses a strong wish and affirmation. The tone of the utterance is intensified as it becomes more convincing. The three tildes show the strong belief of the interlocutor that his partner could do a very good job. All in all, the tilde could be a tone marker to mitigate the tone of a relatively negative utterance and intensify the emotion or intention of a relatively positive utterance. Both mitigating and intensifying mainly work to enhance the solidarity of the whole communication and relationship between two interlocutors.

Example 4

A: 我能做得吗?

(A: Can I did it well?)

B: 当然啦~~~ 你最棒棒!

(B: Of course~~~ you are the best!)

5. Conclusion

Finally, we could define the tilde “~” as a translanguaging sign which mostly works in CMC. It functions to showcase “cute” prosody in people’s auditory imagery with its special shape. Thus, it’s useful to keep the solidarity between people by shorting the power distance and mitigating the tone of an utterance. However, the target group of people who use the tilde “~” is relatively fixed to young women in social media. Despite the fixed and small target group, it could be used on various occasions of social media. In a formal WeChat group, it usually shows itself in the directive, and expressive illocutionary speech acts to show the solidarity and smooth communication between high powers and low powers of people. The tilde “~” usually situates at the end of an utterance

and attempts to mitigate the threat and force in the directive illocutionary speech acts and show politeness and cooperation of thank and response in the expressive illocutionary speech acts. In an informal WeChat group, the tilde “~” mainly appears in the representative illocutionary speech acts, which work to intensify the emotion and mood of an utterance.

Although the problem of the subjectivity of this paper is analyzing the utterance still exists, the empirical data collected from real life language indicate that the appearance of the tilde “~” in an utterance in CMC shows the unconventional usage of it exists. It is already beyond the boundary of traditional punctuation and is endowed with more functions in pragmatics. The change in the employment of the tilde “~” shed light on the study of the dynamic and multimodality of language in the future. Also, it expands the perspective of language interpretation study from language units to semiotics, which means that small signs like the tilde “~” could make a big contribution to successful communication.

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