



A Study on Language Variation and Internal Characteristics of Adolescents

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Abstract. With the rapid development of Internet technology and new media, adolescents' daily verbal communication has been greatly influenced, accompanied by obvious and widespread language variation phenomena. This study focuses on the current situation, formation causes and internal linguistic characteristics of adolescent language variation, systematically analyzing its individualized expression, circle-based differentiation, innovative iteration and colloquialism. On this basis, the paper clarifies the positive value of such language variation in promoting linguistic innovation and constructing adolescent identity, as well as the existing problems such as uncivilized expressions and the weakening of standard language ability. Finally, it puts forward targeted guidance strategies for families, schools and society, aiming to help the public view adolescent language variation rationally and guide young people to form a good habit of civilized and standardized language use.

Keywords: adolescents; language variation; internal characteristics

1 Introduction

Adolescence is a critical stage for students' physical and psychological development as well as language acquisition. With the advancement of information technology and changes in social and cultural contexts, the forms and expressions of language used by adolescents have changed significantly. Their social language is increasingly expressed through online language and symbols, becoming richer, more diverse, and innovative. Adolescent language variation is a prominent linguistic phenomenon in the digital era, shaped by online communication, subculture and peer interaction. It presents distinctive internal features, including the extensive use of Internet buzzwords and popular expressions, circle-based lexical differences, strong creativity and fast updating speed, as well as obvious oral and informal styles. For adolescents, language variation is not only a daily communication tool but also an important way to pursue individuality, construct identity and enhance a sense of belonging. While promoting linguistic vitality and innovation, it also brings problems such as vulgar expressions, non-standard usage and weakened standard language competence. Therefore, it is necessary for families,

schools and society to understand its characteristics correctly and guide teenagers to use language in a civilized and standardized manner.

2 Research on Adolescents' Language Variation

2.1 Research Status

Adolescent “language variation” refers to the phenomenon in which language users differ from conventional language in oral or written expression due to the influence of social, psychological, and communicative contexts, or to adapt to specific situations. The study of Language Variation and Change was initiated by Labov through his phonetic experiment on the centralization of diphthongs on Martha's Vineyard, in which age was regarded as one of the important social factors influencing variation. Labov's main purpose in investigating Martha's Vineyard was to explore the causes of language variation. He found that the island's economy relied on tourism. To preserve local culture and resist external influence, residents, especially those in Chilmark, showed the strongest centralization of vowels, aiming to emphasize their identity as native owners. The study demonstrated that language variation on the island served to maintain local identity.

By combining linguistic structure with social characteristics, Labov opened a new chapter in linguistics. He held that language is constantly and endlessly changing, proposing the idea of “change in progress”. Labov defined language variation as “different linguistic expressions for the same entity”. Through empirical research from a social perspective, he revealed the evolutionary law of language: variation–selection–diffusion, consistent with biological evolution.

“Adolescent language variation” focuses on the adolescent group. Adolescents mainly interact in family and school contexts. Studies on adolescent language variation are relatively limited and can be roughly divided into three categories: campus language, online popular language, and regional dialects. Later studies further explored adolescent language from the perspectives of social networks, identity construction and subculture, represented by Eckert and Milroy. At present, most studies focus on online popular language, campus slang and subcultural jargon, analyzing their innovation, informality, group orientation and rapid dissemination. However, existing research still needs further exploration on the internal linguistic rules and standardized guidance strategies of adolescent language variation.

2.2 Analysis of the Causes of Language Variation

Influence of Linguistic Environment.

Adolescents have a unique linguistic environment. They are highly interactive and mutually influential, less affected by social class, and quite different from adults in thinking and behavior. Their linguistic environment is relatively simple, mainly consisting of family and school(Tang,2024).

In the early stage of domestic language variation research, Ding (2006) regarded language variation in campus speech as a branch of age-related variation, spread from

individuals to groups rather than the entire speech community. In recent years, with faster information transmission and a stronger campus linguistic atmosphere, research on campus language has gradually shifted to the whole student group. Studies show that language variation often starts among a small number of adolescents and spreads rapidly within the community.

Campus language usually originates from social popular expressions but is not simply copied. Adolescents screen, adapt, and recombine popular terms with dialects and argots within the school context. They coin new words or assign new meanings to old ones based on teachers' and peers' characteristics, recent events, or interesting classroom moments, which then spread within small groups, classes, or even the whole school.

The family linguistic environment significantly influences adolescents' language development. Interaction and linguistic modeling within the family shape their expressions. If family members frequently use online buzzwords, adolescents will gradually adopt them. Catchphrases and dialects used by family members also exert a subtle influence. Many adolescents are cared for by elders who mainly use dialects, leading to their speech being dominated by Putonghua but mixed with dialectal pronunciation, intonation, and vocabulary.

Influence of Online Language

Online language is a special linguistic form created by netizens for efficient communication and information sharing in the digital age. It reflects the social expressions and cultural characteristics of the Internet era, and gradually forms a unique online cultural atmosphere. Online social language attaches great importance to practicality and interaction, highlighting the social functions of network discourse, and is mainly spread rapidly through social media, short-video platforms and other online channels.

As the main group of Internet users, adolescents are highly active on various online platforms and social media. They pay close attention to social hot topics and current trends, and are quick to accept and use popular online expressions in both online and offline communication. They frequently use a large number of Internet buzzwords, emojis and even self-created emoticons to express their emotions and attitudes. A well-known international empirical case study on online language was conducted by Sali Tagliamonte, a two-year investigation focusing on young people in North America. She found that internet language use showed no sign of grammatical degeneration. On the contrary, young people's daily computer-mediated communication represents a blend of formal and innovative styles, and they are fluently mastering and employing a new, complex register (Li,2024).

3 Internal Characteristics of Adolescents' Language Variation

Adolescents pursue individuality and independence, so their language variation is characterized by individualization and innovation, full of energy and in line with their age.

Eckert (1989) proposes that adolescent language variation is not simply a passive reflection of fixed social class, but an active practice of constructing social identity and group belonging within local social contexts, especially in high school settings. In her classic study *Jocks and Burnouts*, Eckert identifies two contrasting peer groups that structure adolescent social life and linguistic behavior.

3.1 Use of Online Popular Language and Buzzwords

Influenced by the environment of online software, various social media and short videos, teenagers are exposed to and widely use internet slang in their daily communication. When adolescents use these popular phrases, they can express their emotions more efficiently and directly, with less effort and stronger imagery. Adolescents' words and behaviors on social networks are often influenced by factors such as group psychology and conformity. To integrate into a certain group or follow fashion trends, adolescents may imitate others' linguistic styles or use popular online expressions. The existence of such psychological factors promotes the spread and variation of online language (Li, Y. H., & Zhao, P. 2024)). In online and offline interactions, they frequently use a large number of Internet-generated words and phrases, such as "baode", "juejuezi", "YYDS", and "pofang le". Such linguistic forms reflect their pursuit of individuality and sense of group identity, thus forming distinctive language usage patterns in the youth group.

3.2 Circle-Based Differentiation

Adolescents form diverse communities based on differences in interests and hobbies, such as fan circles, gaming communities, Gu circles, and ACG circles. Each community possesses unique popular expressions, giving rise to exclusive slang that is difficult for outsiders to comprehend, thereby creating linguistic barriers within these groups. Such language variation strengthens the cohesion within each group. Language within the same circle is highly convergent. These forms of language variation have changed the original meanings of the words and given them new connotations. For instance, in the ACG community, "OC" refers to an original character created by fans, "tui" means to support and promote a favorite character, and "shangtou" describes a strong feeling of obsession or addiction toward a character or story. It is evident that language is not merely a tool for daily communication, but also an important means of identity construction and group identification. The choice of vocabulary and discourse styles serves as proof of the members' group identity (Ma, 2025).

3.3 Innovation and Rapid Iteration

In online communication, adolescents actively create new words, abbreviations, homophonic forms and mixed Chinese-English expressions. They flexibly use these language variants to express their thoughts and emotions. A large number of words are given brand-new meanings in online contexts. The term "tuhao" originally referred to the exploiting class in old society. However, it is used to describe people who are wealthy, fond of showing off, but lack taste. Some words have undergone shifts in their

affective meaning. Qipa originally referred to rare and beautiful flowers, but it is used to describe people in particular who think differently from ordinary people. Adolescents are active and open-minded. They constantly create new words and memes, keeping up with social hot topics and changes in their own lives. These expressions evolve with the times, change rapidly, and are often short-lived, adapting to the fast-paced development of society and the times.

3.4 Informality and Orality

Language variation among adolescents primarily occurs in informal settings, commonly observed in daily verbal communication and online interactions. They extensively employ slang and popular phrases to express exaggerated emotions, conveying personal feelings and attitudes through emotionally charged vocabulary. Deviating from the norms of traditional written language, their word choice is more casual, relaxed, and entertainment-oriented. They also use homophonic substitutions instead of original words. Typical examples include “shuanQ” (Thank you), “jimei” (sisters), and “banwei” (worker’s vibe).

4 Value and Problems of Adolescents’ Language Variation

4.1 Value

Lapov refuses to regard language as an isolated symbolic system; instead, he insists on examining language within the context of social relational network. His investigation on Martha’s Vineyard is of extraordinary significance in sociolinguistic studies. Labov’s study demonstrated that language variation on the island was motivated by the desire to maintain local identity. Similarly, language variation among adolescents also serves to assert their unique identity as young, fashionable, and distinctive individuals. Therefore, adolescent language variation is not merely a means of communication, but also an important way for them to express themselves and explore identity. Through unique linguistic forms and symbols, they gain a sense of belonging and recognition, release stress, and express their individuality.

Adolescents use internet slang to achieve better social integration. Only by mastering its usage and understanding cultural references can they integrate into peer groups, avoiding social exclusion and isolation. Moreover, most internet slang is humorous and witty, creating a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere for verbal communication, thereby alleviating academic and life pressures among adolescents.

4.2 Existing Problems

Some online popular expressions carry negative, vulgar, violent or inappropriate connotations, which may exert adverse impacts on adolescent language use and psychological development. Adolescents are in a critical stage of forming worldviews, values

and moral judgments, and their ability to distinguish right from wrong is relatively weak. Long-term exposure and use of uncivilized online language may gradually influence their thinking patterns, easily leading to extreme attitudes, excessive self-centeredness, and a lack of respect for others.

In daily communication, using inappropriate network slang when talking with parents, teachers or elders often causes comprehension obstacles and emotional alienation, widening the generational gap. Moreover, over-reliance on simplified, non-standard network expressions may gradually weaken adolescents' mastery of standard language. This can result in insufficient vocabulary, irregular grammar, wrong character usage, and non-standard expressions in formal writing. It is commonly claimed that Internet language is filled with non-standard linguistic features, which has something to do with the bad grammar of the youth language. As stated in news articles about Internet language and young people, adolescents' frequent use of abbreviations and truncated language will cause a threaten of literacy(He, 2024). Typical examples include non-standard usages such as "jiangzi" (like this) and "huichang" (very), which seriously affect the accuracy and standardization of language expression.

5 Guidance for Civilized Language Use Among Adolescents

Zhang (2020) argues that adolescent online language is essentially a social dialect in the digital age. Its features of Chinese-English code-mixing, symbolic expression, and circle-based use reflect both the demand for communicative efficiency and identity expression in online contexts, as well as adolescents' process of constructing social identities and drawing group boundaries through linguistic practices. The meme-driven diffusion of online language enables its rapid spread among adolescent communities, bringing both linguistic innovation and challenges such as vague expression and weakened standard language use, requiring a dialectical perspective on its dual impacts.

From the perspective of linguistic norms, adolescents can use standard national spoken and written language efficiently in oral communication but still face problems such as improper collocation and ungrammatical structures in writing. They also accept alphabetic terms widely, which may affect linguistic purity. In terms of pragmatic norms, many adolescents hold a neutral attitude toward verbal violence and use substitute swearwords (Xu, 2025).

Adolescent language variation is inevitable and has both positive and negative effects. Therefore, families, schools, and society should provide scientific guidance. Parents and teachers should not simply reject all online language but learn popular expressions to reduce the generation gap. Meanwhile, they should set clear boundaries: insulting, discriminatory, and violent language must be prohibited. Standard language should be used on formal occasions, with elders, and in public. Teachers should require standard language in class and cultivate healthy linguistic aesthetics. Guidance should focus on the emotions and meanings behind adolescents' language rather than mere criticism.

6 Conclusion

Language variation of adolescents is a new linguistic change shaped by the online environment, social development, and cultural trends. It includes innovative expressions, yet also involves uncivilized and non-standard usages. We should adopt an attitude of inclusiveness toward innovation, combining guidance and regulation. Adolescents should be guided to use language in a civilized, rational, and standardized manner.

In conclusion, adolescent language variation is an inevitable linguistic product of the Internet age and social development. It is characterized by innovation, informality, group identity, and rapid updating, reflecting the unique thinking patterns and emotional needs of young people. This linguistic phenomenon not only promotes language diversity and creativity but also brings challenges such as non-standard usage and uncivilized expressions. Therefore, families, schools and society should adopt an objective and tolerant attitude toward adolescent language variation, strengthen positive guidance, and help teenagers establish correct language awareness. Only in this way can adolescents make reasonable use of network language while mastering standard language, so as to achieve healthy and civilized language communication.

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