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LEXICAL BORROWINGS AND SEMANTIC SHIFT IN DIGITAL NEOLOGISMS OF CHINESE-ENGLISH ORIGIN

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ЛЕКСИЧЕСКИЕ ЗАИМСТВОВАНИЯ И СЕМАНТИЧЕСКОЕ ИЗМЕНЕНИЕ В ЦИФРОВЫХ НЕОЛОГИЗМАХ КИТАЙСКО-АНГЛИЙСКОГО ПРОИСХОЖДЕНИЯ

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Abstract. This article explores the phenomenon of lexical borrowing and semantic shift within digital neologisms that have emerged at the intersection of Chinese and English languages. The rapid development of digital communication and social media platforms has facilitated a dynamic exchange of linguistic elements between cultures, giving rise to unique hybrid terms. The study analyzes the etymology, adaptation, and contextual meanings of selected Chinese-English neologisms used in online discourse. Special attention is given to how borrowed words undergo semantic transformation during cross-cultural integration, reflecting changing social values, technological innovation, and evolving communicative norms. Drawing on examples from platforms such as WeChat, TikTok (Douyin), and Xiaohongshu, this paper highlights how digital spaces function as laboratories for lexical experimentation and identity expression. The research contributes to the understanding of global linguistic convergence and the role of technology in shaping modern vocabulary.

Рассматривается феномен лексического заимствования и семантического изменения в цифровых неологизмах, возникших на стыке китайского и английского языков. Стремительное развитие цифровой коммуникации и социальных сетей способствовало динамичному обмену языковыми элементами между культурами, что привело к появлению уникальных гибридных терминов. В исследовании анализируются этимология, адаптация и контекстуальные значения отдельных китайско-английских неологизмов, используемых в онлайн-дискурсе. Особое внимание уделяется тому, как заимствованные слова претерпевают семантическую трансформацию в процессе кросс-культурной интеграции, отражая меняющиеся социальные ценности, технологические инновации и развивающиеся коммуникативные нормы. Опираясь на примеры таких платформ, как WeChat, TikTok (Douyin) и Xiaohongshu, в данной статье рассматривается, как цифровые пространства функционируют как лаборатории для лексических экспериментов и выражения идентичности. Исследование способствует пониманию глобальной языковой конвергенции и роли технологий в формировании современного словарного запаса.

Keywords: digital neologisms, lexical borrowings, semantics, Chinese-English terms, online discourse, intercultural communication, social media linguistics, language innovation.

Ключевые слова: цифровые неологизмы, лексические заимствования, семантика, китайско-английские термины, онлайн-дискурс, межкультурная коммуникация, лингвистика социальных сетей, языковые инновации.

In the digital era, language is undergoing rapid evolution, and digital neologisms serve as indicators of sociocultural and technological transformation. Notably, Chinese–English hybrid neologisms are emerging in bilingual environments, driven by the global reach of online platforms like WeChat, Douyin (TikTok), Xiaohongshu, and Bilibili [2].

On these platforms, users employ lexical borrowing through mechanisms such as transliteration, loan translation, and phono-semantic matching. The iconic example 可口可乐 (“Kěkǒukělè”) for “Coca-Cola” illustrates the careful blend of sound and meaning in borrowed terms [1].

After entering Chinese discourse, these borrowed terms often undergo semantic transformation, acquiring new shades of meaning. Terms like “996” (referring to a 9 a.m.–9 p.m., six-day work week) and “内卷 (involution)” have evolved into expressions of societal critique and fatigue [2].

Corpus-based research covering 2013–2022 indicates that digital neologisms spread through compounding, affixation, and abbreviation—showcasing the inventive energy of online users [3]. These platforms function as dynamic “linguistic laboratories”, where new forms emerge, mutate, and diffuse at remarkable speed.

This study aims to map the trajectories of selected Chinese–English hybrid neologisms, examining their lexical formation, semantic shifts, and social functions within digital contexts. By doing so, we contribute to broader discussions on multilingualism, digital discourse, and the global circulation of language [1].

This study employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating corpus linguistics, discourse analysis, and comparative semantic analysis to examine lexical borrowings and semantic shifts in Chinese-English digital neologisms. The methodology consists of three primary stages: data collection, classification, and semantic interpretation.

Digital data were collected from widely used platforms including WeChat, Douyin (TikTok), Xiaohongshu, and Bilibili, where bilingual users actively create and spread neologisms. A six-month monitoring period (January–June 2025) was used to identify relevant hybrid terms. Text samples were manually retrieved from hashtags, comment sections, and trending post titles. The sampling procedure followed established models for digital discourse analysis [3].

The corpus includes 120 neologisms containing both Chinese and English elements. Terms were selected based on frequency, evidence of borrowing, and observed semantic shifts. Each candidate term was verified against online lexicons and prior research on lexical innovation [1].

Neologisms were categorized using the following types of borrowing: Direct loans (e.g., *emo*); Loan translations (e.g., 打工 *call*); Semantic calques (e.g., 内卷); Phono-semantic matches (e.g., 可口可乐).

This typology is based on frameworks developed in Chinese borrowing research [2, 3].

Each neologism was analyzed contextually to detect semantic shifts: Narrowing (restriction of meaning); Broadening (expansion of meaning); Shift or reversal (transformation into a new or opposite sense).

The interpretation process involved tracing usage in both original and adapted forms in digital communication [4].

To enhance reliability, triangulation was applied: (1) cross-platform comparison, (2) analyst agreement on meanings and types, and (3) verification with Baidu Trends and user frequency data. Interpretations were checked by multiple linguists, ensuring consistency with current research in internet language studies [2, 3].

The analysis of 120 digital neologisms yielded several key findings related to the borrowing mechanisms, semantic evolution, and sociocultural functions of Chinese-English hybrid vocabulary. Below is a summary of representative terms, classified by borrowing type and semantic shift.

1. Borrowing Types and Frequencies. The analysis revealed that Chinese-English digital neologisms fall into several recurring borrowing mechanisms, each shaped by cultural factors, language structure, and the pragmatic needs of internet users. The most frequent types observed in the corpus were as follows: Loan Translations and Semantic Calques.

These are expressions where the semantic content of an English (or hybrid) phrase is translated word-for-word or concept-for-concept into Chinese, often preserving the logical or metaphorical structure of the source.

Example: 打 call (dǎ call). Originally from Japanese-English usage in concert culture, it means to cheer or vocally support an artist. Chinese fans adopted it with the same meaning, but applied more broadly online — to celebrities, brands, or even political figures. → This is a loan translation because the structure "to make a call/cheer" is adapted verbatim.

Example: 内卷 (nèi juǎn). Based on the academic term "involution" in English, originally used in anthropology and economics to describe stagnation through excessive internal competition. In Chinese internet discourse, it has come to represent toxic overachievement, burnout, or meaningless rivalry, especially in academic and corporate life. This is a semantic calque: the concept is borrowed and filled with new cultural meaning.

These types reflect a deep localization process—the linguistic form may seem native, but the cognitive structure originates elsewhere. Similar patterns have been observed in Cook's classification of semantic calques in Mandarin borrowing [1].

Direct Loans. These are untranslated adoptions of foreign terms (usually English) into Chinese digital discourse, with minimal or no phonetic or morphological modification.

Example: emo. Borrowed directly from English youth slang, where "emo" refers to emotional, melancholic states, often linked to a musical subculture. In Chinese social media, it has taken on a parodic tone, used humorously or sarcastically (e.g., "今天很 emo" – "I feel emo today") to describe mild sadness or dissatisfaction.

Direct loans are usually adopted because they represent concise expressions of youth identity, and they often appear in memes, hashtags, and slang-heavy microblogging. They require no translation, but gain new pragmatic meanings in Chinese use [3].

Numeric Codes and Acronyms. A specific category of borrowing in Chinese internet language involves numerical or abbreviated imports that encode cultural phenomena.

Example: 996. A shorthand for the work schedule "9 a.m. to 9 p.m., six days a week," made popular by tech companies. Though numerical, it carries a deep sociopolitical critique of overwork culture and poor labor rights.

Example: PUA. Stands for "Pick-Up Artist," but in Chinese usage refers to emotionally manipulative behavior in dating or relationships. The term entered Chinese through discussions of dating strategy forums, but quickly shifted to a pejorative connotation.

These codes spread easily due to their brevity, emotive power, and the appeal of insider knowledge. Their use reflects semantic condensation—complex social critique reduced to a few characters [2].

Semantic Reversals. This category includes borrowings where the original term is used ironically, inverted, or repurposed for sarcasm or social commentary.

Example: 凡尔赛 (Fán'ěrsài, “Versailles”). Originally refers to the French palace, a symbol of opulence and nobility. In Chinese internet slang, it means “to humblebrag”—to show off under the guise of modesty (e.g., “I accidentally scratched my Rolls-Royce, now I’m late to piano class”).

This form of borrowing involves semantic inversion, where the grandeur of the term is mocked through exaggerated or self-aware usage. It is a distinctly digital phenomenon, born in meme culture and irony-rich platforms like Xiaohongshu and Bilibili.

Semantic reversals illustrate how digital language communities don’t just import meaning but also subvert and reshape it—a key feature of creative linguistic appropriation in online discourse [4].

These four categories were the most prevalent across the studied data and mirror the patterns documented in previous typological frameworks for Chinese borrowing [1]. However, digital neologisms tend to accelerate and hybridize these mechanisms, producing layered, fast-changing semantic units often bound to social trends, influencer culture, and collective emotions.

2. Semantic Shift Across Categories. One of the most striking findings of this study is the consistent and culturally driven semantic shift in all analyzed neologisms. These shifts demonstrate how borrowed terms are not only integrated into the receiving language but also recontextualized to reflect new social realities, emotional needs, and cultural expectations. Semantic shift refers to the process by which a word or phrase changes its meaning when adopted into a new linguistic and cultural environment. In digital Chinese-English neologisms, this shift is often accelerated by online trends, meme culture, and evolving social narratives. Below are three representative examples, each showing a different mode of semantic transformation.

“打 call” – From Physical Cheering to Digital Support.

Original meaning: The phrase “打 call” originates from Japanese idol concert culture, where fans energetically chant and gesture to show support during performances. The “call” refers to synchronized cheering and rhythm-based clapping or shouting.

Shifted meaning: In Chinese digital environments, particularly on platforms like Weibo and Bilibili, “打 call” is now widely used to describe non-physical forms of enthusiastic support, especially for celebrities, brands, influencers, or even political campaigns. For example, fans may comment “我为你打 call!” (“I’m cheering for you!”) on a post.

Significance: The semantic shift here reflects the digitalization of fan behavior, where emotional investment is displayed through likes, reposts, and comments rather than physical presence. The term has also lost its gendered and subcultural associations, becoming part of mainstream slang [2].

“emo” – From Subculture to Meme.

Original meaning: “Emo” is an English term originating from “emotional hardcore” music, later generalized to describe a subculture associated with deep emotional expression, vulnerability, and a specific fashion style.

Shifted meaning: In Chinese online usage, “emo” has been adopted largely without reference to the music or subculture. Instead, it is used humorously or ironically to express momentary sadness, disappointment, or mild existential angst. For example, someone who spills coffee might post, “今天真的很 emo” (“Today is so emo”).

Significance: This shift demonstrates a semantic lightening, where the original depth and intensity of emotion are diluted into memeable, bite-sized expressions of mood. It also illustrates how foreign emotional terminology can be detached from its original context and retooled for casual, often humorous self-expression [3].

“PUA” – From Dating Strategy to Psychological Manipulation

Original meaning: “PUA” stands for “Pick-Up Artist” and refers to a subculture where men use techniques to attract women, often involving persuasion, role-play, or confidence training. The original English usage is often controversial but was originally focused on dating success.

Shifted meaning: In Chinese digital discourse, “PUA” has undergone a dramatic semantic shift. It now refers almost exclusively to toxic emotional manipulation—often in relationships, but also in work or academic settings. Common phrases include “情感 PUA” (emotional manipulation) and “职场 PUA” (workplace abuse under the guise of mentorship).

Significance: This case shows a semantic intensification and moral realignment. The term is no longer neutral or even aspirational but is used to expose coercive behavior. It reflects changing gender dynamics, growing awareness of psychological abuse, and the role of social media in naming and calling out harmful patterns [4].

Across these examples, several common mechanisms of semantic shift emerge:

Contextual reinterpretation: Words take on meanings that reflect local concerns or behaviors.

Irony and humor: Digital users often employ borrowed terms in lighthearted or sarcastic ways.

Moral re-evaluation: Terms like “PUA” shift in tone based on new ethical or social norms.

Broadening and generalization: Originally niche terms are adapted for widespread use across demographics.

These shifts illustrate how language users are not passive borrowers, but active re-creators, molding foreign words to fit their own communicative, emotional, and cultural needs. In the case of Chinese-English neologisms, semantic shifts become a mirror reflecting not only linguistic creativity, but also changing values in modern Chinese society.

3. Tabular Overview of Key Neologisms. The following neologisms were selected based on their frequency in Chinese digital discourse, relevance to youth subcultures, and clarity of semantic transformation. Each term represents a different mechanism of lexical borrowing and a distinct path of semantic evolution. All exhibit notable semantic shifts, shaped by the sociocultural context of Chinese internet users.

Table

EXAMPLES OF CHINESE-ENGLISH DIGITAL NEOLOGISMS AND THEIR SEMANTIC EVOLUTION

<i>Neologism</i>	<i>Borrowing Type</i>	<i>Original Meaning</i>	<i>Current Usage in Chinese</i>	<i>Semantic Shift</i>
打 call	Loan Translation	Cheering at concerts (Jpn-Eng origin)	Online fan support	Yes
内卷	Semantic Shift	Involution (academic term)	Toxic competition, societal stagnation	Yes
996	Numeric Code	9am–9pm, 6 days/week work culture	Overwork critique in tech industry	Yes
emo	Direct Loan	Emotional, depressed	Self-mocking sadness meme	Yes
凡尔赛	Semantic Reversal	Versailles (French palace)	Humblebrag; ironic luxury display	Yes
PUA	Acronym Loan	Pick-Up Artist (dating term)	Manipulative relationship behavior	Yes

1. 打 call (dǎ call). Borrowing Type: Loan Translation

Original Meaning: From Japanese-English pop culture, where fans cheer or shout support during live performances. Current Usage: In Chinese digital culture, especially on platforms like Bilibili and Douyin, 打 call has become a metaphor for online support, such as reposting, commenting, or expressing admiration in fan communities. Semantic Shift: The term has moved from a physical and auditory act to a digital and symbolic gesture, reflecting the virtualization of fandom and emotional expression.

2. 内卷 (nèi juǎn). Borrowing Type: Semantic Shift

Original Meaning: “Involution,” an academic term in anthropology and economics referring to stagnation due to internal over-complexity without innovation. Current Usage: Widely used to criticize toxic competition, such as students overstudying or employees overworking without reward. Phrases like “我们都在内卷” (“We’re all involuting”) reflect societal pressure and burnout. Semantic Shift: The term has been transformed from an abstract academic label to a catch-all expression for pointless struggle, embodying widespread social critique.

3. 996. Borrowing Type: Numeric Code

Original Meaning: Work schedule: 9:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m., six days a week — first popularized in Chinese tech industries. Current Usage: Refers to the exploitative hyper-productivity culture in large corporations, often used ironically or critically. It is now a symbol of worker fatigue, stress, and imbalance between life and work. Semantic Shift: From neutral description to negative emblem of overwork. The emotional tone and connotation of 996 shifted in parallel with public discontent and digital labor activism.

4. emo. Borrowing Type: Direct Loan

Original Meaning: A subcultural term in English meaning “emotional” and associated with punk music, expressive fashion, and vulnerability. Current Usage: Detached from its Western subcultural roots, “emo” in Chinese is now a meme, describing short-lived sadness or emotional exaggeration. Used humorously in captions like “今天我太 emo 了” (“Today I’m too emo”). Semantic Shift: This is a case of semantic dilution and humorous recontextualization, where intense emotional identity becomes mild self-irony in digital conversations.

5. 凡尔赛 (Fán’ěrsài). Borrowing Type: Semantic Reversal

Original Meaning: Versailles — the opulent French palace symbolizing luxury and aristocracy. Current Usage: Refers to “Versailles literature” (凡尔赛文学) — a social media genre where users humblebrag, e.g., “So tired of choosing between my Chanel and LV bags.” It’s used to mock performative modesty. Semantic Shift: The symbol of royal excess becomes a tool of satire, highlighting social stratification, envy, and digital performance. A full semantic inversion has taken place.

6. PUA. Borrowing Type: Acronym Loan

Original Meaning: “Pick-Up Artist,” originally a dating subculture from the West emphasizing tactics to attract romantic interest. Current Usage: In China, PUA has developed into a derogatory label for psychological manipulation, gaslighting, and coercive behavior in romantic or professional relationships. Common terms include “情感 PUA” and “职场 PUA.” Semantic Shift: This is a case of moral re-signification: a term once centered on technique and persuasion now implies abuse and deception, reflecting rising awareness of emotional exploitation. All the terms demonstrate how digital neologisms act as cultural mirrors, revealing social frustrations, changing emotional norms, and collective critique. Their semantic shifts are not accidental but deeply connected to lived experience and societal narratives, especially among digitally active youth. These neologisms have evolved from imported or academic vocabulary into emotionally charged, socially relevant

expressions that function as shorthand for complex phenomena in modern Chinese society. The dominance of loan translations and semantic shifts reflects a pattern of *localization* rather than simple borrowing. Chinese netizens actively adapt foreign lexical items to serve new social purposes, often through ironic, humorous, or critical frames. These findings support the notion that online discourse functions as a space of linguistic experimentation and identity performance [2, 4].

The transformation of concepts such as *Versailles* or *emo* shows how digital neologisms not only fill lexical gaps but also encode new social attitudes, particularly among youth communities on platforms like Douyin and Xiaohongshu [3].

The findings of this study suggest that digital Chinese-English neologisms are far more than surface-level borrowings; they are deeply embedded cultural expressions that reflect how language users navigate identity, social critique, and emotional reality in a globalized, digital context. The nature of borrowing observed in these neologisms underscores a shift from passive reception to active adaptation, where imported lexical items are reinterpreted, hybridized, and transformed according to local norms and communicative priorities.

The semantic shifts identified across all six representative neologisms demonstrate several broader patterns. First, there is an evident trend toward pragmatic recontextualization: words like “打 call” or “PUA” shift from their original domains (concert culture and dating advice, respectively) into more socially charged roles within Chinese discourse. This change is driven not only by linguistic needs but by cultural re-evaluation — an impulse to mold borrowed terms into concepts that resonate with everyday Chinese realities.

Second, the study reveals how digital environments accelerate and amplify semantic change. Unlike traditional borrowing that occurs gradually, digital neologisms evolve in real-time, shaped by viral trends, meme logic, and the participatory nature of online discourse. Platforms like WeChat, Douyin, and Xiaohongshu serve as cultural incubators, where neologisms emerge and mutate in response to public sentiment, youth slang, and social commentary. This process aligns with recent research in social media linguistics, which highlights the role of digital networks in redefining language usage [2].

A striking feature of the neologisms examined is the interplay between humor, irony, and social critique. The term “凡尔赛” (*Versailles*), for example, reflects a uniquely Chinese way of engaging with inequality and performativity through the lens of “Versailles literature” — a genre that both mocks and exposes performative modesty. Similarly, “emo” undergoes a cultural transformation from a subcultural identity to a humorous expression of fleeting sadness, revealing how borrowed terms are often lightened and meme-ified in Chinese usage [3].

Another key insight is the moral re-signification of certain terms. In the case of “PUA,” the original, somewhat neutral or even aspirational meaning is replaced by strong negative connotations. This shift demonstrates how language becomes a tool of ethical labeling, allowing users to articulate and criticize manipulation or abuse in romantic and professional contexts. Such transformations are indicative of evolving gender dynamics, growing digital literacy, and the rise of psychological awareness among young Chinese speakers [3].

The distribution of borrowing types further confirms that loan translations and semantic calques dominate, illustrating a preference for localized adaptation over full retention of foreign form. This suggests that Chinese users value cultural resonance and contextual familiarity over exoticism. In this regard, the findings support previous typological research [1], but also show that digital neologisms operate on a faster, more fluid spectrum of change.

Overall, this discussion positions digital neologisms not as linguistic anomalies but as rich sites of sociolinguistic innovation. Their emergence illustrates how global English is being indigenized, fragmented, and emotionally repurposed in the context of Chinese internet culture. At

the same time, these neologisms offer a window into deeper societal issues — from overwork and burnout to emotional suppression, consumerism, and online identity negotiation.

The study concludes that Chinese-English digital neologisms are emblematic of a new era of cross-cultural communication, in which language serves not only to transmit information but to negotiate values, emotions, and belonging in a rapidly changing world. Future research may benefit from examining how these patterns compare across other bilingual or multilingual online communities and how algorithm-driven platforms influence the life cycles of such linguistic innovations [5, 6].

This study has examined the lexical borrowing and semantic shift of Chinese-English digital neologisms, highlighting their dynamic evolution within online platforms and bilingual digital spaces. Through a mixed-methods analysis of 120 hybrid terms, it becomes evident that neologisms in contemporary Chinese internet discourse are not merely linguistic imports but culturally embedded expressions shaped by local values, digital behaviors, and social critique.

The research shows that lexical borrowing occurs through multiple mechanisms — including loan translations, semantic calques, direct loans, acronyms, and semantic reversals — each reflecting different degrees of adaptation and localization. More importantly, nearly all identified neologisms undergo semantic transformation, which serves as a powerful indicator of how users reinterpret foreign terms to express context-specific meanings and emotional states.

These findings suggest that digital neologisms act as linguistic tools for identity construction, cultural negotiation, and value signaling in the context of globalization and technological acceleration. The semantic shifts discussed — such as the humorous recontextualization of “emo,” the moral inversion of “PUA,” or the ironic satire in “凡尔赛” — reflect deeper social anxieties, generational attitudes, and collective imaginaries of modern Chinese netizens.

Ultimately, the study contributes to the broader field of sociolinguistics and intercultural communication by demonstrating how hybrid vocabulary evolves as both a linguistic and cultural phenomenon. As the internet continues to blur linguistic boundaries, such neologisms are likely to become increasingly central to understanding how global English adapts to local ecosystems — and how language itself becomes a vehicle for social meaning, critique, and transformation.

Future research might expand this inquiry to other linguistic communities, explore diachronic changes in neologism usage, or analyze how algorithmic platform design shapes the diffusion and retention of borrowed terms.

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