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Pragmatic Functions of Translanguaging Practices in *Tucao* Discourse

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Abstract

This paper investigates the multifaceted pragmatic functions of translanguaging practices in *Tucao* discourse within the context of social media. Drawing on data from popular Chinese comedy shows such as *Roast* and *The King of Comedy*, the research combines the theoretical frameworks of Rapport Management and Translanguaging Practices theory to categorize and analyze instances of code-switching and the integration of other semiotic resources in humorous speech. The findings identify two major types of *Tucao* discourse, namely self-mocking and other-criticizing, and show that translanguaging plays a crucial role in identity construction, face management, and meaning negotiation. These practices not only enhance the humorous effect of *Tucao* discourse but also construct multilayered interpersonal relationships among participants, reflecting subcultural communication styles among Chinese youth. The research in this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the linguistic construction of *Tucao* discourse and provides new perspectives for the study of translanguaging practices in social media contexts.

Keywords

Tucao discourse; Translanguaging practices; Pragmatic functions; Internet stand-up comedy

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of social media and increasing intercultural communication, the term "*Tucao*" has drawn growing public attention and evolved into a distinctive linguistic phenomenon. Li Shuangshuang (2015) defines "*Tucao*" as "identifying loopholes or keywords in the language or behavior of the other party as an entry point, and sending out feelings or questions with a tone of flirtation or teasing". However, with the frequency and deep dive of communication, the meaning of *Tucao* has expanded beyond its surface-level connotation. In specific contexts, it often undergoes semantic shifts, functioning as a discursive strategy that speakers use to fulfill particular communicative intentions (Zhang, 2019).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition and Characterization of *Tucao* Discourse

Research on *Tucao* discourse mainly focuses on three aspects: *Tucao* culture, features of online *Tucao*, and its pragmatic strategies. Among these, the analysis of discourse strategies is the most developed and constitutes the core focus of this study. On one hand, researchers examine the humorous effect of *Tucao* discourse through the lens of violation of the Cooperative Principle and politeness maxims. In 1967, H.P. Grice pointed out that in order to ensure

verbal communication like conversation to progress successfully, both the speaker and the listener must abide by basic principles, especially the "cooperative principle". However, in *Tucao* discourse, Li Meng (2020) argues that by deliberately violating the principle of cooperation, roasters can more easily draw listeners' attention to the implied meaning. When the listeners understand this meaning, they will also understand the humorous effect of the discourse, which suggests that the violation of the principle of cooperation is beneficial to expressing humor in *Tucao*.

On the other hand, researchers investigate the ways *Tucao* serves as a means of identity reconstruction. For instance, Chen Xinjie et al. (2016) analyze the case of Papi Jiang, a popular online influencer known for her candid and humorous satire. They suggest that her pragmatic identity as a "sober-minded" speaker is constructed through her performative discourse, which distinguishes her from other online personalities and contributes to her popularity as a "*Tucao* celebrity".

2.2 Studies on Translanguaging Practices

Translanguaging is viewed as a dynamic and fluid process rather than a fixed linguistic system. It challenges the traditional boundaries between named languages and emphasizes their flexible use in context. As a key concept in applied linguistics, translanguaging highlights the ways multilingual speakers draw on their entire linguistic repertoire to make meaning.

Li Wei and Shen Qi (2021) emphasize that bilingual or multilingual individuals do not merely process different languages structurally, but also bring with them sociocultural, historical, and ideological awareness tied to these languages. This heightened "linguistic awareness" reflects not only grammatical knowledge but also the embedded cultural and political dimensions of language use. Consequently, translanguaging practices are inherently characterized by dynamic meaning-making, cross-cultural negotiation, multimodality, and multilingual symbolic resources.

Translanguaging strategies are also ways to manifest translanguaging in social media. For example, on the social media platform Weibo, Chinese young people generally consider the use of translanguaging practices in self-praise to be appropriate in social media (Ren et al., 2022).

While existing studies of *Tucao* have examined its pragmatic features, there remains a gap in connecting *Tucao* discourse with the sociolinguistic framework of translanguaging. This paper bridges that gap by analyzing *Tucao* as a form of translanguaging practice, exploring how such practices serve multiple pragmatic functions and produce specific communicative effects within social media contexts.

3. Theoretical Framework

The function of identity reinvention in *Tucao* discourse is closely tied to the concept of pragmatic identity. According to Chen Xinren (2013, p. 27), pragmatic identity refers to "the contextualized self- or other-identity consciously or unconsciously adopted by the language user, as well as the identity of social individuals or groups mentioned by the speaker or writer in discourse." This suggests that pragmatic identity is dynamic and context-sensitive, allowing speakers to reshape how they are perceived in interaction.

Face management theory, proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987), also provides a useful framework for analyzing *Tucao* practices. Face is divided into positive and negative one, with positive face referring to the desire to be recognized and praised by others, and negative face referring to the right to autonomy without coercion or interference from others (He & Ran, 2009). In *Tucao* discourse, speakers often engage in positive face-threatening acts, either toward themselves or others, in order to generate humorous or satirical effects.

In terms of meaning reconstruction, Zheng Yongyan and An Ning (2022) argue that current translanguaging research emphasizes linguistic universals and human communicative instincts, highlighting the equal significance of linguistic and non-linguistic resources in meaning-making and interpersonal communication. From this perspective, meaning reconstruction is not only central to translanguaging practices but also crucial to understanding the layered pragmatic functions in *Tucao* discourse.

4. Pragmatic Functions of Translanguaging in *Tucao* Discourse

A total of 43 corpora were collected in this study. The selected corpora ranged from 2017 to 2024. The basis for the identification and division of the corpora was: (1) The translanguaging language cues in the teasing words, such as code-switching and code-mixing, etc. (2) The directionality of *Tucao* remarks; (3) Feedback from the audience and the guests present.

4.1 Identity Reinvention

Speakers often utilize speech acts to reshape the linguistic identity of themselves or others, thereby achieving specific communicative goals. In *Tucao* discourse, this identity transformation is frequently realized through satirical or humorous commentary aimed at the target.

To enhance clarity, the original texts (ST: Source Text) have been included in the Appendix, while the English translations (MT: Modified Translation) are presented and analyzed in this section. ST and MT will be used consistently across all examples.

Example 1 (MT)

> But actually, Coach Zhang is now very dedicated to doing basketball commentary. However, he always likes to add one or two English words in his commentary to show off his English. I, a master's degree holder in economics from the University of Victoria in Canada, hear those simple English words of yours like this: "Kobe is at the three-point line, jumps up, shoots a three-point ball! Missed! But it doesn't matter! Because his teammate grabbed the blue board! I praise you, my favorite sport! Basketball! You can also call it basketball!"

In this example, the roaster intersperses a lot of seemingly "unnecessary" English in a part that could have been expressed in Chinese, but this is just the speaker's way of spitting out the words, and this substitution allows the third-party listener to be aware of the "unnecessary" nature of the basketball narration by recognizing the "unnecessary" nature of it. The speaker, while interspersing Chinese and English, also jumps up and down with some excited facial expressions that sports commentators often have, making the original noble and highly educated status of the person being trolled reconfigured into a pejorative image of some "artifice" and "showing off".

4.2 Face Management

In *Tucao* discourse, translanguaging practices often serve as a strategy for managing face, particularly in high-stakes or potentially awkward moments. Speakers may use foreign language insertions, humorous shifts in tone, or playful exaggerations to maintain their own positive face or to mitigate face threats toward others. Such strategies allow speakers to navigate delicate interactional dynamics, easing tension and enhancing audience engagement. The following example illustrates how the speaker uses a playful English opening to sustain their own positive face while simultaneously reducing the social awkwardness of a self-promoting act.

Example 2 (MT)

> Hey yo what's up, ladies and gentlemen you good? Wow, let's have some fun, ok? I think it will be very difficult to advance if we don't do some fancy tricks. Do you know that?

A series of English opening words, is of redundancy suspicion solely in the effect of lightening atmosphere, but in *Tucao* discourse, the speaker maintains his own positive face, and through the opening greetings, the audience successfully interact with the audience whose response make the speaker looks less wretched, thus relieving himself of the awkwardness of hoping to advance through "the whole stunt work", and successfully achieving the effect of warming up the floor.

4.3 Meaning Reconstruction

As mentioned in the previous section that the process of translanguaging practices is often accompanied by the reconstruction of meaning, it is also often a central device in *Tucao* discourse, where the speaker is able to flexibly change the original meaning of the discourse and attach a new, valid meaning.

Example 3 (MT)

> Li Chen also has his own trendy brand, MLGB. Well, it's not what you thought. It is said that this customer wore this dress. MLGB, MY LIFE is GETTING BETTER. They all couldn't help saying this, "MLGB. That's exactly what you mean at this moment."

In this example, the brand acronym *MLGB* is initially interpreted as the English phrase "My Life's Getting Better," conveying a positive meaning. However, the roaster deliberately reinterprets the acronym in a humorous and subversive way by invoking its homophonic resemblance to a vulgar Chinese curse. This shift from an uplifting interpretation to a profane one exemplifies a strategic reconfiguration of meaning for comic effect.

4.4 Translanguaging Play

Translanguaging play is a more playful use of bilingualism, often producing effects like humor. In addition, the form of the speaker's *Tucao* may not be limited to the semantics of the bilingualism itself, but may even go beyond the language to the culture associated with the bilingualism itself.

Example 4 (MT)

> Your English must be very good too, but you dare not say it. I understand. Because as soon as you see foreigners, your first reaction is (pretending to be ugly). Just like this, what's your name? Foreigners pretend not to understand you because you are not confident enough. When they see you, sorry I can't understand. What are you talk about man? After training, it's completely different. My dad said, "Fu Hang, go!" I said "yes sir" (making the gesture of a boxer fighting) (The audience laughed).

In this example, the roaster first explains the situation that everyone who has learned English for many years but is still mute in English, and then introduces his own experience of communicating with foreigners. When he replies to his father's request to talk to the foreigners, he says "yes sir", making the audience to recall the cultural scenario of obeying his "superior" within the phrase, and when he makes a boxer's gesture, he successfully shifts to the context of the "boxer who responds to a fight", which hyperbolizes the "fierce battle" of communicating with foreigners, vividly conveying humor with this translanguaging practices.

5. Conclusion

Although pragmatic studies on *Tucao* discourse are relatively extensive, existing research remains insufficient in accounting for the complexities of *Tucao* through the lens of translanguaging practices. This paper seeks to bridge that gap by integrating the theory of translanguaging with Spencer-Oatey's rapport management framework, offering a new analytical perspective for understanding *Tucao* discourse as a form of translanguaging play.

Using data from the popular *Tucao* show *Roast*, this study examines how speakers creatively employ foreign languages, particularly English, to achieve humorous effects, express criticism, or construct identities. These instances of cross-linguistic play highlight the strategic use of multilingual resources to manage interpersonal relations and enhance discourse expressiveness.

However, this study also has limitations. It primarily focuses on verbal discourse and lacks a comprehensive multimodal analysis that incorporates visual, paralinguistic, or performance-based elements. In addition, the study emphasizes translanguaging practices among Chinese speakers using English, without broader cross-linguistic comparisons.

Future research could expand on this work by exploring more diverse multimodal features and investigating how translanguaging operates across different language pairs and cultural settings within *Tucao* discourse.

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Appendix

1. ST (source text) of Example 1

可是其实现在张指导他很用心地在做篮球解说，但是解说总是喜欢加一两个英文的单词，在里面秀英语。本人，加拿大维多利亚大学，经济硕士，你那些简单的英文单词在我听起来就是这样：“科比在 three 分线，jump 起来，射了个三分 ball！没进！但没关系！因为他的队友抢到了 blue 板！我赞美你我最爱的运动！basket 球！你也可以叫他篮 ball！”（源自于辰亦儒《吐槽大会》20181209）

2. ST of Example 2

Hey yo what’s up, ladies and gentlemen you good? Wow, let’s have some fun, ok? 我觉得再不搞一些花活儿很难晋级了你知道吗。（源自于豆豆突围赛）

3. ST of Example 3

李晨还有自己的潮牌 MLGB。嗯，不是你想的那个意思。据说这个顾客把这件衣服穿在身上，MLGB，MY LIFE’S GETTING BETTER。他们都不由自主地这么说，MLGB，这个时候才是你想的那个意思。（源自于《吐槽大会》20170305）

4. ST of Example 4

你的英文肯定也很好，但是你不敢说，我懂，因为你们一见到外国人第一反应就是，（扮丑像），就这样，what’s your name? 外国人因为你不够自信，故意装听不懂，看到你，sorry I cannot understand, What are you talk about man. 经过培训的，就完全不一样，我爸说付航，上！我说 yes sir（做出拳击手迎战的动作）（观众大笑）。（源自于《喜剧之王单口季》付航第一场）