The Intermediate Status of Superposed Chinese Sequences (SCS): An Ecolinguistic Perspective

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Abstract

This paper explores a special type of Chinese linguistic phenomenon used very popularly on the Internet, i.e., the superposed Chinese sequence (SCS), such as 又双叒叕 as in 我们又双叒叕要换首相了 (we are going to have a new Prime Minister ONCE AGAIN!). Different from emoticons or emojis, SCS uses normal Chinese characters, but these characters do not totally observe the phonetic, lexical, and syntactic rules in standard Chinese. While emphasizing the pictographic features of SCS, which are typical of Chinese, the correlation between SCS and the environment is explicated from the perspective of ecolinguistics. It is pointed out that many factors in the environment are affecting the creation and popularization of SCS. With the proposition of the classification of stable and dynamic factors, four major intermediate statuses are presented, which an examination of whether SCS might develop into a standard Chinese usage or just disappear when it gets out of date.

Keywords: superposed Chinese Sequence (SCS), intermediate status, ecolinguistics, pictographic language, alphabetic language

1. Introduction

On the evening of December 17, 2012, Asahi Shinbun, one of the major Japanese news media outlets, released online a piece of news in Chinese entitled 我们又双叒叕要换首相了 (we are going to have a new Prime Minister ONCE AGAIN!). What is special about this headline is not what it intends to express but how it is expressed. In standard Mandarin, the above sentence would be expressed as 我们又要换首相了, in which 又 (again) is used only once. Even if we want to emphasize the fact that the Japanese Premier has been changed quite frequently, we can normally highlight the word 又 in ways that

are visually emphatic, such as underlining 又 with a straight line or a dot, italicizing 又, or repeating the character 又 several times. In whatever way we use, every single character must be pronounced in the officially prescribed style, i.e., /yòu/ in Chinese *pinyin* (the official romanization system for Standard Chinese in mainland China). However, though 双, 叒 and 叕 have original pronunciations and specific denotations respectively, they are all deprecated here, and a single new pronunciation with a single new sense is adopted, i.e., the same pronunciation and sense as 又. For the sake of convenience, in what follows we shall call the type of structure realized with the 又双叒叕 sequence a *superposed character sequence*, or SCS.

Since this novel word sequence emerged, an extraordinary sensation among netizens has swept through cyberspace. With a competition of coinages on display, more and more similar expressions have been invented, such as[1]:

(1) 限购限贷又双叒叕来了。
   ("Purchase and loan constrains have come back, ONCE AGAIN!" 又 literally means "again".)

(2) 福州又火炎焱燚了！又是全国第一！
   ("Fuzhou is getting HOT again! It's No.1 in China, again!" 火 literally means "fire", but here metaphorically means "hot" or "exciting".)

(3) 你这句话太水氺淼㵘了。
   ("Your words contain little substantial content." 水 literally means "water", but here metaphorically means "not much valuable content".)

(4) 麻麻再也不用担心我剁手之后吃土圭垚了！
   ("Mom never has to worry about me having nothing to eat after I gave up net-shopping." 土 literally means "dirt", and the phrase 吃土 (eat dirt) metaphorically means "have nothing to eat".)

(5) 设计师太牛牪犇了。
   ("The designer is so FANTASTIC." 牛 literally means "ox" or "bull", but metaphorically means "fantastic" or "amazing".)

To date, Tao and Wang (2016) have conducted the first and most likely the only research to tackle this issue from an academic perspective in print media. They have presented a couple of coinages derived from 又双叒叕, and analyzed their graphic features and emphatic functions. It is pointed out that this novel and special type of structure can only be understood in an integrated style with the first character maintaining its original acoustic as well as semantic property, and all of what follow are affected and strengthened by the initial element. The obvious and serious deviation from such norms as grammar and pronunciation has made it a unique linguistic phenomenon that can only exist in online web situations. This is reminiscent of some similar linguistic and nonlinguistic phenomena that have been and are still popular among netizens, such as emoticons, emojis, or "the language of Mars"[2]. While quite a lot of research has been

conducted on emoticons (e.g. Derks et al., 2007; Huang et al., 2008; Kaye et al., 2016; Vidal et al., 2016), emojis[3], and "the language of Mars" (e.g. Chen, J. X., 2008; Chen, L. Z., 2011; Li, 2014), little attention has been paid to the study of SCS. However, it is not solely the scarcity of research that motivates our pursuit; what is more important is the exhibited graphic combination of form, function, and the interaction with the social context. In "the language of Mars", as well as with emoticons and emojis, expressions are presented in the form of visual images, linguistically or nonlinguistically. In the same vein, SCS gains its impact with the clever use of superposed structure. What distinguishes SCS from other graphics-based dialects is that SCS adheres to the use of the standard Chinese character, manipulating the relationship between sound, form, and sense of word in a unique way. As all languages exist in certain contexts, social, historical, psychological, and the like, SCS has to be interpreted together with its context. This is the fundamental reason why we adopt an ecolinguistic perspective in this study; we believe that the relationship between a language and the context where it is created and used is similar to that between living beings and the ecological environment where they survive.

This paper will first delineate the formal features of the superposed word structure in individual Chinese characters and SCS, explicating the significance of using pictographic words. Then with ecolinguistics as a framework, it will summarize some intermediate statuses about SCS.

2. Chinese Superposed Character Sequence

In contrast to alphabetic languages, Chinese makes the best use of people's mental faculty in processing visual signals; "Chinese is a perfect visual language" (Zhang, 2011, p. 5). In terms of the origin of Chinese, it has been canonically described as a pictographic language. Its basic words, such as 日 (sun), 月 (moon), and 人 (person), in the early days of the Chinese creation vividly imitated the visual images of objects in the world. Though now most Chinese words can hardly remind people of what they refer to with the visual messages on the character, the traces of reference remain. The superposed structure is a case in point.

As we know, in English, while many words are free morphemes, such as *dog*, *table*, and *apple*, words that are composed of two or more morphemes are much more popular. For example, *undesirable* consists of three morphemes, i.e., *un-*, *desire*, and *-able*, with each having a specific meaning. Morpheme, a term which was originally created for describing the meaningful componential elements in alphabetic languages, bears two fundamental features, one being phonologically perceptible and the other being morphologically perceptible. It is true that the phonological property of any Chinese character cannot be deconstructed into smaller parts for the simple fact that every Chinese character corresponds to one syllable. However, in terms of morphology, more specifically the visual and meaningful construction, we do frequently perceive the componential effect. For example, 品 is pronounced as /pǐn/ with one syllable only according to Chinese *pinyin*, but in visual form 品 is composed of three 口's, which is pronounced as /kǒu/ and

means mouth. In other words, 品 is morphologically composed of three mouths. This kind of single character's superposed form is very popular in Chinese.

Diagram 1. Single character's superposition[4]

Number of components	Patterns	Examples
Undecomposed		木，人，车，火，水…
Two superposed	Up-down	炎，圭，吕，昌，叒…
	Left-right	林，枞，皕，牪，狀…
Three superposed	Triangle	鑫，森，焱，矗，猋…
	Left-right	巛，甡，譶，喆，孖…
	Up-down	三，彡，畕，叒…
	Others	唱，炏，棥，厵…
Four superposed	Square	叕，众，沝，燚，犇…
	Others	亖，垚，楙，磊…
Five superposed		嚚

By repeating the same form in one single character, the superposed word predominantly denotes an increase in degree or quantity based on the semantic meaning of the base word. For example, the word 木 means wood, 林 refers to an area with a lot of trees, and 森 refers to a much larger area with many more trees. 火 means fire, and 炎 suggests more fire, and metaphorically means hot. 金 means the expensive metal of gold, so 鑫 suggests a lot of gold, meaning very rich. Many Chinese prefer to use the word 鑫 in their personal or company names to denote the sense of getting rich in the future. Although many multi-superposed Chinese characters are no longer or rarely used in modern Chinese, and cannot be recognized in terms of their pronunciation or basic sense delimited in the dictionary, people can still guess their meaning more or less correctly on the basis of what the base word denotes. Since a higher degree or larger quantity can be expressed by means of superposing the base word in one single character, it is no wonder that much more emphatic effect is achieved by juxtaposing several superposed characters.

As far as the single superposed character is concerned, it does not involve much grammar which is to be understood in its traditional sense. Grammar usually takes effect when two or more linguistic elements are juxtaposed to form a meaningful sequence. If we do want to analyze the single superposed structure in terms of grammar, we have to consider how the word is used in the linguistic context. SCS, as we defined it in the above section, is a sequence of words that are not only superposed inside single characters but in a linear pattern. The grammatical structure of an SCS can be explicated within and across the sequence itself. Let's see more examples of SCS collected from the Internet:

(6) 神药板蓝根怎么变得这么<u>火炎焱燚</u>。
   ("How can the magic medicine Banlangen become so POPULAR?!")
(7) 教你如何伪装成<u>呆槑</u>纸。

("I'll show you how to look like an IDIOT." 呆means "dumb" or "silly".)

(8) <u>又双叒叕</u>！京津冀明起雾霾再现。

("ONCE AGAIN! Tomorrow Beijing, Tianjin, and Hebei will witness a new round of hazy weather.")

(9) 安化县万人空巷 <u>人从众仦</u>场景再现。

("Thousands of people in Anhua County are rushing onto the streets; the scenes of huge crowds of people are back." 人means "person".)

(10) 冠军的恩爱只有自己秀的来 王皓<u>叕</u>怒

("The champion's love can only be made public by himself; Wang Hao is outraged AGAIN.")

(11) 这队真<u>犇</u>！皇马被虐巴萨也曾被爆

("This team is AMAZING! They have crushed Real Madrid, as well as Barcelona." 牛 literally means "ox" or "bull", and metaphorically means "magnificent" or "amazing".)

In most cases, the use of an SCS does not change the original grammatical structure in cases where only the base word is used. Like in (6), 火炎焱燚 as a whole is used as an adjective and acts as predicate in the sentence, as is the base word 火 when used without the superposed words of 炎焱燚. Also, 火炎焱燚 in the sentence can be read aloud by prolonging the sound of 火 (/huǒ/). That is to say, disregarding the internal abnormal structure of 火炎焱燚, this SCS fits into the sentence properly and observes standard grammar. It is the same case for (7), though 呆 (dāi) is one part of the compound of 呆纸 (a two-syllable word), while 火 is simply a one-syllable word. In (8), standard grammar is violated, because 又 in Chinese is typically used as an auxiliary and followed by a verb (e.g. 又来了 [come back again]); it cannot be used independently in a sentence. It is wrong or meaningless to write 又！on its own. It should be noted that the reason why 又双叒叕 is translated into ONCE AGAIN is that 又双叒叕 as a sentence fragment functions as an adverb, but we can't thus infer that the single word 又 can be used in the same way. What is more ungrammatical is the use of 人从众仦 in (9), in which either 人从众仦 or the single word 人 cannot properly fit into the grammatical structure of the sentence; both seem to be something totally alien, and one cannot even read it based on the pronunciation of 人 (/rén/). The only way to make sense of 人从众仦 in this particular sentence is "to look at it to see what it suggests". It is similar to, but not the same as, emoticons or emojis, which denote something based on its visual image but do not usually fit into the grammar of the sentence (if they are part of a sentence) in which they are embedded. Although 人从众仦 are four Chinese characters, they should not be treated as words or a word cluster in the understanding of this sentence; they are used as a trigger, which activates or creates a scene with quite a lot of people. It is this scene that acts as a grammatical unit and goes together with other linguistic elements. How can a "scene" play the role of a linguistic or grammatical unit? A scene is a visual image that one has perceived, and is a mental representation of the outside world. In language, a scene often exists as an entity, which is often expressed as a noun or a nominal structure, which, in the

case of (9), is something like 拥堵 (*crowdedness*) or 人山人海 (literally meaning *people mountain and people sea*, and metaphorically meaning *huge crowds of people*). There will be no any grammatical problem to write or say 安化县万人空巷 拥堵/人山人海场景再现 (Thousands of people in Anhua County are rushing onto the streets; the scenes of huge crowds of people are back). We can now rightly say that in (9) it is the scene created by the linguistic elements that is internally coherent, but in terms of grammatical structure in relation to the lexical semantics, the clause 人从众众场景再现 is totally unacceptable.

The particular usage of SCS in (6) through (9) suggests that an SCS may fit into the grammar in which it is embedded, assume a new grammatical function, or simply create a scene where the word cluster of the SCS has no explicit grammatical relationship with the linguistic context. The creative usages of SCS do not simply exist at the linear sequential level, because, as (10) and (11) show, a single superposed word may develop the same function. According to Tao and Wang (2016), the novel use of SCS must assume a multi-word structure, with four, three, or at least two characters used in a row. On the other hand, though single superposed characters are rather popular in Chinese, they are just used in line with what Chinese dictionaries have prescribed, whether semantically or phonetically. But the new facts as reflected in (10) and (11) are changing the established assumptions. A single superposed word may function in the same way as SCS. We can take the single superposed structure as a compressed or condensed form of SCS. By saying so, we mean that it is on the basis of understanding SCS that we can better comprehend the meaning of the single superposed character. It is true that even without the knowledge of SCS, the meaning of 叕 in (10) and 犇 in (11) is still intelligible, because the reading of meaning in both cases is based on the same kind of mechanism, i.e., the superposed structure, which is characterized by the visual features of the words.

3. The Visual Nature of Chinese

The significance of visual perception has long been noticed and emphasized in various fields of academic studies. What is called visual thinking or picture thinking is a phenomenon where people think through visual processing. According to Wikipedia, "(v)isual thinking has been described as seeing words as a series of pictures. It is common in approximately 60%-65% of the general population". Rudolf Arnheim, in his well-known monograph *Visual Thinking*, states that in mental activities, the reason why visual images are a superior kind of media is that they can provide equivalent structures for all the properties of objects, events, and relations. The biggest advantage of this kind of media is its capacity to reproduce forms of the world in two and three dimensional patterns, much more advantageous than one dimensional or linear language media (Arnheim, 1986, p. 341). So visual thinking is not only the way most people think, but also an advanced way of processing information. As is known to all, Chinese characters developed from ancient hieroglyphs; it is a typical pictographic language. Though modern Chinese is quite different from the ancient one, pictographic processing of language

remains a major approach and has already taken root in the Chinese way of thinking.

Every Chinese word is an integration of form, sound, and meaning, in which form plays a much more significant role than that in alphabetic languages. The graphics of Chinese characters are even regarded as the "meta-writing of the Chinese nation", and the "map" of Chinese culture (Luo, 2016). The creation of Chinese words was based on the inspiration derived from graphics that are directly or indirectly related to the signifieds. In the same vein, the Chinese people are more used to thinking in images instead of abstract generalizations. By saying so, it does not mean that Chinese characters are direct imitations of the world's entities, or that Chinese people always think in terms of concrete images. If it were the case, the words would be affected by simplicity and lack of diversity, and the Chinese people would become simple-minded for the lack of advanced generalization capacities. Regarding modern Chinese as hieroglyphic has been a long-held misunderstanding among many scholars, because modern Chinese characters are also the result of generalizations; this is related to a more advanced way of thinking, i.e. the way of creatively extracting the essential properties of concrete images (Luo, 2016, p. 153). If characters are deemed a part of grammar (as they are), then this grammar is no doubt "fossilized experience", and "can be seen as a repository of past experience, as the outcome of a very long process of adaption to specific environmental conditions" (Mühlhäusler, 2003, p. 120).

In ancient times, when the Chinese language could hardly rely on a limited number of pictographic words to address the countless things in the world, people found a clever way of associating characters with particular sounds. This is what is traditionally called "borrowing". This "borrowing" does not mean the borrowing of words in one language from other languages. What it actually means here is the assigning of a particular sound to a certain Chinese character. Take 叕 for example. According to the widely accepted practice in the use of this word, or the prescription in Chinese dictionaries, this word has specific pronunciations (which are zhuó, yǐ, lì and jué in Chinese *pinyin*), and denote four quite different things. At the outset, 叕 was nothing but a symbol, which was later assigned a pronunciation. When necessary, people assigned another pronunciation to it to mean a different thing. So for this particular character, people could refer to very different things by relating the same character to different pronunciations. The graphic form of the character and the specific pronunciation determine the signified, employing both visual and audio clues. This has been regarded as an extremely significant event in the development of the Chinese language. Characters become phonetic symbols, and we recognize words by associating the character with its pronunciation. This particular feature is unique in pictographic languages, and reveals the most essential nature of language (Sun, 2012).

Since we can assign four different pronunciations to the single character of 叕 to mean four different things, it is not difficult to assign one more pronunciation to it to mean another thing. Though the relationship between character and pronunciation is mostly arbitrary, the setting up of the relationship is unquestionably motivated. In other words,

there must be a reason or reasons for setting up the relation. In the clause 王皓叕怒 ("Wang Hao is outraged AGAIN"), 叕 should be pronounced as /yòu/, the sound inherently attached to the character 又, only because 叕 is rather conspicuously perceived as being constituted by four 又's. There is an inclination to read an unknown character according to some part or parts of the character that are familiar to them. For example, 炽 (/chì/) is often wrongly read as /zhì/ because the component 只 as a word is always pronounced as /zhī/. Similarly, 莘 (/shēn/) is often wrongly pronounced as /xīn/ because this is 辛's pronunciation. So, the visual image of Chinese characters, either the overall image of a certain character, or a part or parts of the character, can greatly affect one's perception or recognition of the word. And once a certain character is pronounced in a certain way, the meaning that is inherently attached to the particular sound is be transferred to the character. So the meaning of 叕 in 王皓叕怒 is the same as the meaning of 又, though expressed in an emphatic manner.

The alphabetic language also depends on the visual feature of word to associate sound with meaning, but this visual feature is just an array of letters based on phonological rules. The same sequence of letters almost always corresponds to the same standard pronunciation in a speech community. As pronunciation changes, the letter sequence changes and meaning accordingly shifts. It is not a common thing for the alphabetic language to have a specific letter sequence, i.e., a word, to mean different things by being pronounced in very different ways[5]. In Chinese, however, this is quite common. The visual feature of Chinese characters contains rich phonetic and semantic information. Once the visual features take precedence or are highlighted, they may surpass the word's original semantic meaning or phonological properties to mean something directly related to what this feature suggests.

4. Language and Environment

Language exists in time and changes over time.

With the rapid development of Internet technology, language has evolved a new form called Internet language, or Web language. Internet language itself can be generally divided into two types, one referring to the repertoire of web-related technical terms or specific expressions, such as *broadband*, *virus*, *mouse*, *brewer*, *blog*, *netizen*, *hacker*, etc., and the other referring to the language used for communication by netizens in BBS, Chatrooms, and the like. In our analysis, we focus on the latter one only.

Internet language is based on ordinary language, but quite different from it in a lot of aspects, such as vocabulary (which may include symbols, numbers, punctuation marks, and even a combination of diversified things that may mean something), or grammar (which is frequently violated as long as meaning can be specified). We can describe Internet language in such a way that if all abnormal or unusual uses of word-level components and grammatical structures were eliminated, then all the things left would belong to ordinary language. The preference for abnormal or unusual expressions is a typical characteristic of the young people in the Internet era, because they are often

defined by the philosophical or social trend of postmodernism that developed in the late 20th century and is still prevailing in the arts, architecture, criticism, and so on. Postmodernism is often defined by "skepticism or distrust toward grand narratives, ideologies, and various tenets of Enlightenment rationality, including the existence of objective reality and absolute truth, as well as notions of rationality, human nature, and process…it asserts that knowledge and truth are the product of unique systems of social, historical, and political discourse and interpretation, and are therefore contextual and constructed"[6]. In a certain sense, Internet language is rebellious in nature, an outcome of a general social environment.

In 1970, American linguist Einar Haugen put forward the concept of "language ecology", which is defined as "the study of interactions between any given language and its environment" (Haugen, 1972, p. 225). This marks a new field of linguistic study called ecolinguistics. Ecolinguistics places its emphasis on the environment in which language exists, and the influence of environment on language itself. According to Blackledge (2008, p. 27), "Haugen saw the value of the language ecology model in the requirement to describe not only the social and psychological situation of a language, but also the effect of this situation on the language itself". In a classification made by Steffensen and Fill (2014, p. 7), four strands of language ecologies are presented:

- Language exists in a *symbolic* ecology, which investigates the co-existence of languages or "symbol systems" within a given area.
- Language exists in a *natural* ecology, which investigates the relationship between language and the biological and ecosystemic surroundings.
- Language exists in a *sociocultural* ecology, which investigates the relationship between language and the social and cultural forces that shape the conditions of speakers and speech communities.
- Language exists in a *cognitive* ecology, which focuses on the cognitive capacities that give rise to organisms' flexible and adaptive behavior.

The distinction between different strands of language ecology is not at all rigid; they are interrelated or overlapped, and they may not cover every environmental factor that exerts influence on language. Somewhat different from the four strands of language ecology, Couto (2014, p. 123) proposes three types of environments that are analogous to natural ecology. The first one is the *natural environment* of language, which refers to the world where all kinds of interactions take place, such as interactions between people and the world, in the neural connections of the brain, between language and society, etc. In this view, language is treated as a network of interactions, an activity, but not a thing. The second one is the *mental environment* of language, which holds that the use of language is a mental activity, that is to say, "language exists only in the minds of its users" (Couto, 2014, p. 123). So the brain or the mind constitutes the mental environment. The third is the *social environment* of language, which has been emphasized by Haugen (1972, p. 325)

as "the true environment of language". The social environment is the area of research that is traditionally focused on by sociolinguistics or even by discourse analysis. The distinction between *natural environment* and *social environment* lies in that the former emphasizes the basis on which language is used, or on external factors that support the existence of language, while the latter is mainly concerned with how the external factors exert their influence on the use of language. Disregarding their different foci, they are overlapped to a great extent. A similar endeavor for explicating the environmental factors can be found in van Lier (2004, p. 4f), who thinks that the environment should cover "all physical, social, and symbolic affordances that provide grounds for activity".

The essence of various ecolinguistic views is that language, like plants, grows with its legitimately structured internal mechanism, and out of a fertile external environment. In terms of SCS, legitimacy does not simply refer to the standard grammatical requirements, but, more importantly, to the rules of structuring linguistic components that have been formulated and accepted in a specific speech community. With SCS treated as a relatively independent entity, its production, evolvement, and understanding must be subject to various external factors, which can be social, psychological, and so on.

However, while ecolinguistics or sociolinguistics places much emphasis on the classification of internal and external factors and their interrelations, a rather crucial distinction has rarely, if not never, been noticed, that is, the distinction between *stable factors* and *dynamic factors*. By stable factors, it is meant that, since language exists in time, there must be a lot of rules or properties in phonetics, phonology, lexicology, syntax, text or discourse, even punctuation, etc., that guarantee the basic functioning of the language. They maintain stability for quite a long stretch of time and are the basic fabric of language. Though in the long run, minor changes may happen to them in various forms and degrees, this does not change the fact that they represent a series of well-established norms that can be taught and learnt by teachers and language learners. The representation of these stable rules and properties is what we know about the standard language, including standard pronunciation of words, standard graphic forms, standard collocations, even standard linguistic or nonlinguistic contexts where a certain word or expression is used. The so-called dynamic factors refer to those that can directly or indirectly affect the representation of the stable rules and properties. They are in general the part of social factors that are closely related to a particular period of time, a certain group of people, a certain trend of ideology or social movement, or a specific kind of media. They are the most active factors, shaping quite a lot of parts of the world we live in, including the language we use. Influenced by the dynamic factors, the part or parts of language that have been affected would take up some dynamic features, which can later on be repeatedly intensified and consequently become well-established, joining in the store of norms of language. The stable factors are conservative, holding things in place, while the dynamic factors are active, always meant to change. It is within the interaction of the two opposing powers that language can maintain its long-standing form, while developing in accordance with current communicative needs.

When both stable and dynamic factors exert their influence on the specific linguistic phenomenon of SCS, we can find a lot of intermediate states concerning various properties of this usage.

5. The Intermediate Statuses

SCS is a special kind of linguistic form that only exists in Chinese. The reason why it has been easily accepted and widely replicated and imitated is that some of its properties are simply derived from standard Chinese. In other words, the creation, as well as the use of, SCS was based on well-established linguistic rules; it is a rule-based linguistic innovation. On the other hand, SCS does not seem to be able to take root in the standard Chinese system right now because some of its properties can hardly be tolerated by the language users and then assimilated into the standard system. Two opposing forces seem to be pulling SCS into diametrically different directions. It is a bit early for us now to determine which force will take the upper hand, or in which direction SCS will ultimately develop. What we can see now is that several major aspects of SCS are situated in intermediate states, pressed by both stable and dynamic factors.

Written or spoken. By written or spoken, we mean the degree of formality in the expression of something in printed or written words. SCS has some written features, because (a) the words used in SCS are all standard Chinese characters that can be found in Chinese dictionaries, in sharp contrast with emoticons or emojis, which are typical nonverbal signs; (b) when treated as a single linguistic unit, most SCS observe normal grammatical rules; (c) except for extra emphasis, many SCS simply function in the same way as the first character as regards pronunciation and meaning, as seen in 又双叒叕, 火炎焱燚, and 水沝淼㴆 in the examples mentioned above. They are perceived as a single word with a fixed and standard pronunciation, form, and meaning; (d) single superposed characters are very popular in Chinese, and their meanings are to a large extent related to what the component means. Even though one may have never learnt the words 叕, 燚, or 㴆, with the knowledge of 又, 火, or 水, one can more or less correctly figure out the meaning of the superposed words, especially when context is involved. Common sense greatly facilitates the reading of SCS, making it an easily accepted structure. Behind all these written features of SCS are the long-standing lexical and syntactic rules that constrain the correct use of words and expressions.

"Spoken" is characterized by non-standardness, instability, irregularity, or ungrammaticality. It is something in language that can only be expressed or understood by a relatively small speech community; it is something that can distinguish a certain group of people from other groups. When all the speakers of a certain language use certain words or expressions, even if these words and expressions are considered either not acceptable, or less acceptable in formal situations, they can still be regarded as belonging to spoken language. While some SCS exhibit certain written features, other SCS (or some parts of them) can hardly fit into what standard lexical or syntactic rules have prescribed.

The spoken features mainly include: (a) in SCS the original pronunciation and sense of each of the characters following the initial character have dropped out, and these characters have taken on the pronunciation and meaning of the initial character in an exaggerated degree. We know that in standard Chinese, every character has a specific pronunciation and a specific meaning in a context, and it is unacceptable to have a character that means something but cannot be legitimately pronounced. Emojis, such as ☺ or ☹, always mean something, but they cannot be pronounced. They are recognized by what they look like or suggest, and not by the sound-meaning correlation. SCS are to some extent like emojis, which are not linguistic symbols in their strict sense but pictographic images that relate to what they suggest. The reading of SCS does not follow the well-established phonetic or lexical rules. On the contrary, it is subject to the preference or language-using conventions popular nowadays among young people. Both SCS and emojis would have been regarded as abnormal or absurd in the pre-Internet era, and as technology and modes of communication evolve, they may disappear in the future. Another possibility is that some forms of SCS may enter into the vocabulary of standard Chinese, especially one with a single superposed character, such as those in (10) and (11), to mean and to be read the same as when the components are independently used. But before that happens, SCS is best treated as a kind of expression bearing conspicuous spoken features. (b) Besides the pictographic features in SCS that impacts addressees' understanding, SCS is also characterized by its phonetic peculiarity, which is the prolonged pronunciation in both the single superposed character and the multi-superposed characters. Although written words are also pronounced in the same way as conventionally prescribed, the flexible phonetic manipulation that deviates from norms can only occur when spoken. There are various ways of pronouncing a certain SCS, such as using a shorter, longer, or much longer pronunciation, or a lower or higher loudness or pitch, all of which are up to the reader. Anyhow, there are currently no fixed rules to guide the reader in pronunciation. (c) Presently, SCS are only used in the context of the Internet, and the users are the group of people who prefer novel, anti-conventional uses of language. The Internet is the natural or social environment which allows the creation and popularization of brand-new uses of language. However, this environment is not that stable. While it facilitates the breeding of varied new creations, the passion for them fade away very easily. No one knows how long the phenomenon of SCS can last, but one thing is certain, that when people are tired of this kind of usage, it is possibly time for it to disappear.

Accepted or rejected. SCS are typically used as word clusters, with four, three, or two superposed characters to express some strengthened force. The more superposed words are used, the greater the force seems to be. Most of the coinages have observed this rule. However, recently more single superposed words are being used in the style of SCS. For example:

(12) （一个游戏）改编成电影之后又<u>燚</u>了起来。

   （"[A play] became very POPULAR again after it was adapted to the screen."）

(13) <u>叕</u>来虐狗什么意思

("Why torture us dog-like singletons AGAIN?!")

(14) 网上还能收一个，单机交易的太尛了。

("[we] can accept one in online transaction, but the stand-alone transaction is too SMALL." 小 literally means "small" or "little".)

(15) 你脑子进淼了。

("How SILLY you are!" 水 literally means "water", and 脑子进水 is a set phrase, literally meaning "have water in one's brain", and metaphorically means "silly".)

(16) 有惢去爱，却无力经营

("[You] have a STRONG DESIRE to love, but cannot manage it." 心 literally means "heart", and有心 literally means "have a heart", and metaphorically means "intend to".)

This single superposed usage should not simply be regarded as a shortened form of the multi-superposed structure, because it is very likely to be accepted in standard Chinese, while it is not possible for the multi-superposed structure to be accepted. It is very common for a single Chinese character to have several different pronunciations and mean several different things. For example, according to 在线汉语词典 (Online Chinese Dictionary), 叕 has four different meanings and four different pronunciations which are respectively / zhuó/, /yǐ/, /lì/ and /jué/ in Chinese *pinyin*. In (13), as well as in other SCS containing 叕, the character has gained a new pronunciation, i.e., /yòu /, totally different from its original pronunciation, and means AGAIN with a stressed sense of the word. At the outset of creating a new word, only one sense and one pronunciation can exist. But over the course of language development, when a certain need comes in, a different sense and pronunciation can be assigned to the same character. This is an extremely important way that Chinese has been able to adapt itself to an ever changing society. Quite different from English or other alphabetic languages, which can very easily create new words by putting letters together, it is almost impossible for modern Chinese to put different strokes together to create new characters; the process of creating new Chinese characters ceased quite a long time ago. So if we now do have the need to include single superposed words of the SCS type to the dictionary, we can find no excuse to reject them.

Productive or non-productive. Since the first SCS was created in 2012, four years have passed. Compared with the long history of language development, this period seems to be too short to see any significant change in language. However, in the case of SCS, a considerably large number of repeated uses of certain examples and various coinages can be easily found on the Internet. For example, a search for 又双叒叕 in Baidu's search engine brings about 1,710,000 results (on Oct. 10, 2016), and for 火炎焱燚 about 781,000 results. What is equally noticeable is that a lot of new SCS have been created, such as 人从众 , 水氺淼 , 土圭垚 , 呆槑, and the like. The original four-word pattern has been reformed into three, two, and even one word patterns, which allows more words to meet the requirements of SCS. Besides, as has been mentioned, Chinese contains a rather large vocabulary of superposed characters, which theoretically provides an unlimited source for making new SCS. Considering all of the above, it is rightful to say that SCS is a very

productive linguistic pattern.

However, the creation of SCS is also constrained by some factors. First, only superposed characters are allowed in the SCS structure. Second, SCS can only be used in the context of the Internet, especially in popular media platforms dominated by young people who tend to use it for fun or express some feelings or emotions that can hardly be expressed with standard language. SCS still stays outside the domain of academic researches. Third, the difficulty of typing the complex superposed characters is a big and very realistic problem for the more widespread use of SCS structure. For most Chinese netizens, the *pinyin* input method is the primary or even only way of typing Chinese characters. As most superposed characters are obscure or rarely-used in modern Chinese, very few people can pronounce them correctly, and thus do not know the correct *pinyin* to input in order to get the desired character; consequently, they might give up on this novel structure. To express oneself in strengthened force in the form of SCS is highly context-dependent, closely related to the mental situation of the addresser. It is up to him or her to choose what expressive strategies to take.

Standard Chinese or the language of Mars. SCS are situated at the borderline between standard Chinese and the language of Mars, emoticons, or emojis. As the language of Mars has a much broader sense than emoticons and emojis, we just take it as an umbrella term that covers all kinds of non-linguistic, printed forms used for Internet communication (including emoticons and emojis). The language of Mars is special in that it employs various non-linguistic symbols in the expression of meaning. Even when linguistic symbols are used, they are used in non-standard ways. For example, CU is used to mean "see you", TKS means "thanks", MM means "sister" (because 妹妹 [sister] in Chinese is pronounced as /mèi mèi/), and the unusual collocation of 酱紫 (literally meaning "jam purple") stands for the standard Chinese 这样子 (so to say), the latter being a phonetic imitation of the former. So the language of Mars does not exclude linguistic symbols, but the point is that when linguistic symbols are used, they are used in abnormal ways.

In SCS, standard Chinese characters are also used in abnormal ways, which are reflected in the unusual ordering of several superposed characters and the unusual use of words that do not stick to their original pronunciation and semantics. Another major feature that renders SCS more like the language of Mars is the predominant role played by graphic images. It seems that they both follow the rule of "what you see is what you get". It's the visual picture of the symbol that directly activates certain associative meanings. Considering this, the characters in SCS are more like the language of Mars. But on the other hand, these characters are actually authentic Chinese words and are very often restricted by well-established lexical, collocational, and even syntactic rules.

6. Concluding Remarks

Though SCS has been recognized as a novel use of language, and become very popular in the context of the Internet, their close ties with long-standing linguistic rules makes it

possible for them to be a part of accepted language. The meaning shift that happens with SCS is not an obstacle, especially in the case of single superposed characters, in their entering into standard Chinese usage, because every Chinese character has the potential to go through certain kinds of shifts in meaning. This is the way modern Chinese adapts itself to an ever-changing social environment. The fact that a certain Chinese character is not pronounced as it should be does not exist only for SCS. For example, 囧 was once an ancient Chinese character derived from another more ancient character 冏, meaning "brightness", but both words' original pronunciations have been totally forgotten. As 囧 looks very much like a person's facial expression denoting "embarrassment", people ingeniously assigned a new pronunciation to it, i.e., /jiǒng/, which corresponds to the character 窘 (embarrassed). That is to say, the pronunciation of 窘 together with its inherited meaning was borrowed and transplanted onto 囧.

Even in English, some expressions may not be pronounced as they ought to be. For example, although people know that "i.e." is an abbreviated form of a Latin word *id est*, it is not often pronounced that way. Some people prefer to read it as /ˌaɪˈiː/, or "that is". The same is true for "e.g.", which is often read as "for example" instead of /ˌiːˈdʒiː/.

Another piece of evidence that may indirectly show the possibility of including SCS in standard Chinese is the use of alphabetic letters in Chinese. With more and more foreign technology, products, and concepts imported into China, as a result of no appropriate counterparts in the Chinese language, or for the sake of convenience, many alphabetic words and abbreviations are being used in Chinese written language, even in the official media. The status of lettered words in standard Chinese has long been hotly debated. Those who disapprove of the adoption of lettered words hold that Chinese and English are two totally different language systems, and the purity of Chinese must be maintained by keeping it from being contaminated by alien languages. However, it seems most Chinese scholars are holding an open attitude towards this issue. In 2012, the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (6th edition), the most authoritative and most influential Chinese dictionary in China, included for the first time 239 lettered words as an integral part of the entire Chinese vocabulary. This event has triggered widespread dispute. Five distinguished Chinese scholars were invited to make comments on this issue and their talks were published in *Modern Linguistics*, a Beijing-based linguistics journal. While unanimously acknowledging some negative impact of lettered words on the pictographic system of Chinese, they all advocate a restricted inclusion of lettered words in the dictionary and adoption of them in the general use of Chinese. Jin (2012, p. 89), for example, states that we now can hardly find a language in the world that maintains its "original ecological" linguistic forms, including Chinese. Diachronically, the change of a language is a norm, "the force that drives a language to move forward is the persistent pursuit of the language users for language expressiveness", which mainly comes from "linguistic visualization and artistry, and the economy of expressions". Pan (2012, p. 93) holds that, though letters are not Chinese characters, we can still take lettered words as a part of Chinese, because the scope of Chinese is larger than that of Chinese characters.

SCS have an advantage over lettered words in terms of entering into the Chinese system, and this has much to do with the characteristics of Chinese characters. Since we are optimistic in acknowledging the official status of lettered words in Chinese, there is no excuse for us to doubt the promising future of SCS. Internet language, no matter what peculiar characteristics it possesses, is not a language that is isolated from standard written language. Many stable factors that exist in standard written language, such as lexical or syntactic rules, also take effect in one way or another in the Internet-mediated language. Even for some dynamic or Internet-specific rules or conventions, as long as they function properly and persistently, there will be a great chance for them to be accepted as part of official language. Just as our life cannot resist the influence of Internet technology, the so-called "pure" Chinese language cannot remain pure.

Notes

1   All the following instances were found in Baidu, a major Chinese search engine. (accessed on Oct. 10, 2016)

2   "The language of Mars" is a literal translation of the Chinese expression 火星文, which refers to a special type of social dialect created by Chinese-speaking young people on the internet. In this language, various numbers, letters, punctuations, symbols, and strokes taken from Chinese characters, etc. are used as meaningful components to form "sentences" that can only be understood in their community. For example, 3Q (meaning thank you); and 1切斗4幻Jj, ↓ b倒挖d! (The equivalent standard Chinese is 一切都是幻觉，吓不倒我的, which means "Everything is just an illusion, and I am not scared!") (Li, 2014, p. 64; Chen, J. X., 2008, p. 41).

3   Both emoticons (emotional icons) and emojis (derived from a Japanese word 絵文字 or えもじ) are pictographs or symbols that are "basically abstractions of facial expressions or bodily gestures, which have been developed to help communicating emotions or mood in computer-mediated communications" (Vidal et al., 2016, p. 120). Emoticons and emojis may refer to different types of pictographs, with the former referring to typographic displays created by alphanumerical characters, such as :) for happy and :(for sad; and the latter referring to purely graphical images, such as ☺ for happy and ☹ for sad. However, in most cases emoticons are used as cover words to subsume both cases mentioned above. In need of distinction, emoticon can be further divided into text-based emoticons and graphics-based emoticons (equivalent to emojis in the narrow sense) (Huang et al., 2008).

4   The contents of this diagram are mostly derived from http://wk.baidu.com/view/cbcce8a6102de2bd97058841.html (accessed on Oct. 10, 2016)

5   The change of stress on the syllable of word may alter meaning to a certain extent, such as in 'record (noun)/re'cord (verb), or 'increase (noun)/in'crease (verb), but this kind of semantic shift is mainly concerned with word class, and the basic meaning of the two varieties remain the same. But there do exit some words in English, very small in number, such as *wind* [wind]/*wind* [waind], *tear* [tiə]/*tear* [tɛə], *wound* [waund]/*wound* [wu:nd], etc., each of which bear the same form but different pronunciations and mean different things.

6   Cited from the entry of "postmodernism" in Wikipedia, accessed on Oct. 10, 2016.

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(Copy editing: Curtis Harrison)

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