

Taiwan's Bulletin Board System – PTT – as a medium of communication

Abstract

Social media applications have been constantly changing, adding new features with every update. As a result, both mobile applications and the web version often have a sleek, sophisticated layout. However, there is a platform popular with the Taiwanese, which features an old-school layout. The site is Professional Technology Temple (PTT), known as 批踢踢 (*pi1ti1ti1* a homonym for PTT), a bulletin board system (BBS) created by National Taiwan University for their own students. According to its introductory website, PTT has more than 1.5 million registered users. (批踢踢, 2005) PTT has about numerous boards (看板 *kan4ban3*, look boards) covering various topics such as gossip, politics and sports. This essay will show how PTT has played a key role in the creation or spread of Internet neologisms in Taiwan and how it has affected communication. It will also briefly discuss both the positive and negative effects PTT has had on Taiwanese society. David Crystal's seven features of communication will be used to assess PTT's similarity with speech and text.



Some of the interest boards available

Introduction

BBS functioned as an electronic board where users could share messages with each other. It was popular during the dial-up Internet era in the 1990s. (Edwards, 2016)

PTT was created in 1995 by students in National Taiwan University. Despite its old-fashion look, PTT remains popular with a section of Taiwan society. It has been used to discuss everything under the sun, from politics, to sports and even personal topics like sex. Every

day, it is said that 20,000 new posts are uploaded. (Lin) With the large of volume of information available there, people can find both news and opinions on PTT. In addition, the site is not strictly moderated. This will prove to be a double-edged sword as it has both led to a proliferation of fake news and has also saved lives, most notably vis-à-vis the Covid-19 pandemic. Interestingly, the Chinese Communist Party had allowed PTT past its Internet firewall in 2017. (Taiwan News, 2017) This has changed the dynamic of PTT. A post on PTT can be upvoted (推 *tui1*) meaning to push, or downvoted (噓 *xu1*) meaning to be shushed.

Summary of literature

Various sources have acknowledged the influence PPT has on Taiwanese society. Magistry even stated that PPT should be considered an extension of the Taiwanese modern society. (Tsun-Jui Liu, 2013) Seeing as too how about 150,000 users are online during peak hours and more than 20,000 new posts are added daily, this site definitely has the potential to influence events. PTT is so popular in Taiwan that a movie was made based on it, showing both how it has helped. (Taiwan Today, 2010)

It has been suggested that BBS can allow for authentic communication and that possibility *“lie[s] between the formality of traditional writing and the spontaneity of speech”* (Wang, 2003) This can be observed in the replies to posts through comments that can be left in real time, where users can include pauses by typing ellipses, speech particles like 啦 (*la*). The Taiwanese also make use of Bopomofo symbols to express laughter, hesitation and more (Mair, 2013), resulting in a multiscript sentence.

Taiwan’s multilingual background is also taken into consideration – since social media users will write in line with the way they would speak. One can describe the average Taiwanese speech as Taiwan Mandarin peppered with the Minnan dialect, or what Singaporeans call Hokkien.

How PTT has affected the language used to communicate

PTT plays a part in the proliferation of memes – mostly punchlines and catchphrases from videos that the villagers – a term for PTT users - deem funny. This has led to the creation of neologisms unique to Taiwan. For example, the line 丁丁是個人才 (*ding1ding1 shi4ge4ren2cai2*), meaning “Tinky Winky is a talent” originated from a edited meme, but eventually became a way to insult someone (迷因維基) Common sayings or reactions can also become memes, like saying “Mum, I’m on TV!” since some journalists will use PTT posts for stories. (PTT 鄉民百科)

Other than neologisms, pre-existing words that seem common can also take on additional meanings and functions. For example, the word 說 (*shuo1*, say) can be used to reference speech in a “he says/told him” manner. In the study, Wang concluded that *shuo* was undergoing a semantic shift – it is now not only used to relay information but can also be used to convey the speaker’s attitude towards the conversation topic. (Wang, 2003) Semantic extension has been observed in other Mandarin words like 耍 (*shua3*, play). (Hsueh-ying Hu, 2016) Definitions accepted by the Ministry of Education and dictionaries are to play, make fun of, to show a negative emotion. However, online users have given a new

meaning – to use unscrupulous means to achieve something, for example, by throwing one’s weight around. (耍威风 *shua3wei1feng1*)

BBS, of which PTT is Taiwan’s most popular BBS, has also created cultural trends for youths, including the *kuso* trend where wordplay plays a huge role. Originally a Japanese swear word, *kuso* eventually became a category for parodies. (Liu, 2010) They are produced with a “misheard” effect – 空耳 (*kong1e3* empty ear), where typically Korean lyrics are re-interpreted into words familiar to the Taiwanese.

PTT users also can type in Taiwan-accented Mandarin, and also in Stylised English, for example, by saying 噢买尬 (*ou1mai4ga1*), the way Taiwanese would say Oh my God. Taiwanese Mandarin has local prestige and gives of a friendly image. (Su, 2006) Similarly, they can also code-switch.

Different boards have different word limits, which will affect the length of posts.

New kinds of communication enabled by PTT

PTT users have made use of the BBS format to create aligned art.



Aligned art celebrating PTT’s 25th birthday



Aligned art celebrating Chinese New Year

Comparisons with Speech and Text using Crystal's features

Speech-like		Text-like	
Time bound	Yes	Space bound	Yes
Spontaneous	Varying extent	Contrived	Varying extent
Face to face	No	Visually decontextualised	Yes
Loosely structured	Varying extent	Elaborately structured	Varying extent
Socially interactive	Yes	Factually communicative	Varying extent
Immediately revisable	Varying extent	Repeatedly revisable	Yes
Prosodically rich	Varying extent	Graphically rich	Yes

Text on PTT is spontaneous to a limited, though this spontaneity might present itself in a different way than it will through text. For example, it is possible for typographic errors to occur if the person keys in the right pinyin but selects the wrong word. Users can express their hesitation towards something by typing 呃 (e4), similar to how a speaker can use “uh” as a filler. However, the post can be revised before it is uploaded and thus the final spontaneity is limited.

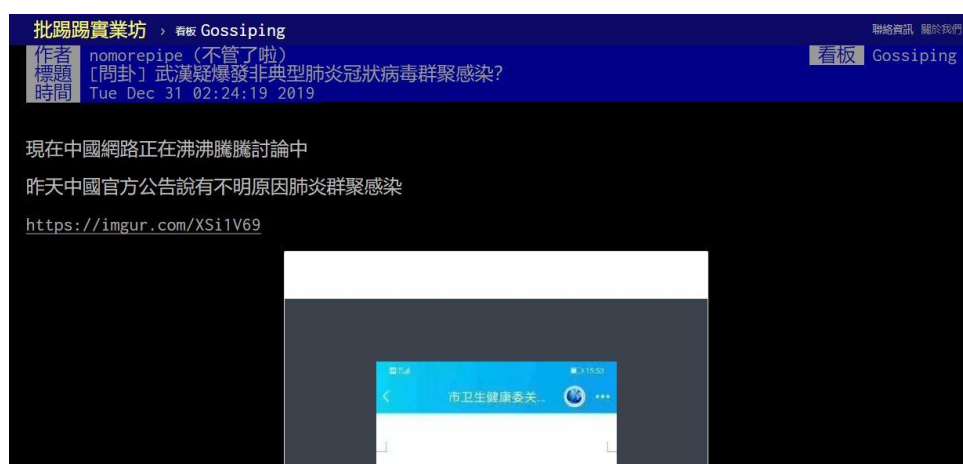
Given that Mandarin is a tonal language, its written text will be interpreted with tones as well. The Taiwanese are also fond of using auxiliary words in text to indicate different moods, just like how they would express themselves in speech. However, it is difficult to show stressing in tone, other than using punctuation to indicate a pause, for stress. While it is possible to use a full stop after each character for emphasis on a word but cannot emulate the various ways where speech can be paused. Furthermore, the text cannot fully emulate the speaker's intonation until the end where the user may use punctuation to indicate a question or a mood. The intonation can be interpreted by the readers. Thus, it is prosodically rich to a limited extent.

Posts can be edited. However, comments cannot be edited unless the commenter requests the original poster to edit them.

General effects on society

PTT's influence has been both a bane and boon to Taiwanese society. Due to the anonymity PTT provides, users can post opinions that they would never say in real life. Without proper fact-checking on the reader's side, rumours can easily be taken as fact. This has happened before in the aftermath of Typhoon Jebi in 2018. Rumours started spreading online, accusing the director of Taiwan's representative office in Osaka, Mr Su Chii-Cherng, of not doing enough to help affected Taiwanese. The mounting criticism allegedly pushed Mr Su to take his own life. Eventually, the original post which sparked off the rumours was traced to a well-known Democratic Progress Party supporter. In response to this, PTT banned her from the platform, deeming her an "unwelcome user". (Everington, 2019)

However, it has significantly aided Taiwan at the same time. Before the Covid-19 pandemic took over the world, Dr Luo Yi-jun had noticed users on PTT discussing cases of pneumonia in Wuhan. (陳偉婷, 2020) This was on 31 December 2019.



"This is being hotly discussed on China's internet. Yesterday, Chinese officials stated there was a spread of pneumonia caused by unknown reason"

The post included screenshots of a conversation of the late Dr Li Wenliang, who was known to be the whistle-blower who exposed the situation in the epicentre of the pandemic. Dr Luo alerted his colleagues and by 5 Jan, Taiwan's Center for Disease Control were screening all arrivals from Wuhan.

It is also important to note that PTT can also exert significant political influence. During the Sunflower Movement in Taiwan, the youths who spearheaded the movement took to PTT to start discussions and mobilise other groups. (Chao, 2014) PTT's potential as a political tool has attracted China's attention. In 2019, Taipei Times reported that China's "50 cent" army - netizens who sing praises of the Chinese Communist Party - were infiltrating Taiwan's social media platforms, including PTT. China has specialists who are knowledgeable on Taiwan's social issues who leave divisive comments. (Chung Li-hua, 2018) PTT's formal legal counsel also added that in 2015, there were many fake accounts lurking on PTT too. (Rebecca Lin, 2019)

Conclusion

To conclude, in its 25 years of history, PTT has become an influential platform that can sway public opinion. PTT is also a site where users can congregate according to their specific interests and discuss topics relevant to them. PTT's neologisms are also not limited to the platform itself can be seen on other platforms popular with Taiwanese, such as Facebook and Youtube. In addition to new catchphrases and memes, PTT users have also used words that have underwent semantic extension. PTT, a text-based platform, has many similarities to speech due to the tonal nature of Mandarin and the Taiwanese' usage of particles. However, it is not completely identical to speech due to the anonymity.

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