The Study Of Vulgarisms In The Chinese Language And Their Linguistic And Cultural Specificity

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Abstract: This study examines vulgarisms in the Chinese language as a form of substandard lexis with significant linguistic, cultural, and social functions. Drawing on previous Chinese scholarship as well as the comprehensive comparative research conducted by Nguyen Phuong Thuy, this paper analyzes the structural and grammatical features of Chinese vulgarisms, including their syllabic composition and dominant grammatical patterns. Particular attention is given to the role of vulgarisms in spoken discourse, literary texts, film, and media, as well as their expressive and pragmatic functions, and their sociolinguistic context. The findings demonstrate that Chinese vulgarisms reflect deep-rooted cultural values, social attitudes, and psychological mechanisms, and that their accurate interpretation and culturally adequate translation are essential for cross-cultural communication and literary translation. The study highlights the growing relevance of vulgarism research in the context of contemporary Chinese literature, gender discourse, censorship, and digital communication.

Introduction: Vulgarisms constitute a category of socially restricted lexis and, as such, lie outside the norms of standard literary language. As they do not belong to the codified literary norm, they are typically classified as substandard vocabulary. Nonetheless, writers frequently employ vulgarisms in literary texts as stylistic devices. Due to their high expressive potential, such expressions predominantly appear in spoken discourse; in fiction, however, authors use them extensively to intensify emotional resonance, establish distinctive character portraits, and enhance the overall stylistic effect of the narrative.

Vulgarisms are marked by overtly negative evaluative meanings, often conveying attitudes such as disdain, humiliation, contempt, or insult. Their communicative value derives primarily from their connotative rather than their denotative content. [Yoldoshev, 2007]

Vulgarisms are attested across all languages of the world and constitute an integral component of natural language. Beyond functioning as lexical units, they serve as essential elements of spoken interaction, expressing strong emotions and encapsulating culturally grounded values, beliefs, and social norms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Historically, vulgarisms in China were perceived as the speech of impolite or socially unrefined individuals and were widely regarded as manifestations of linguistic indecency. Their public use was discouraged, and scholarly attention to them remained minimal. A notable shift occurred in the 1930s, when the influential writer Lu Xun (鲁迅), in his essay "On the Insult 'Your Mother'" ("论他妈的"), examined the origins, historical evolution, and societal significance of Chinese vulgarisms. His analysis focused primarily on the expression "他妈的" tāmāde ("your mother"), elucidating its usage patterns, historical trajectory, and distinctive semantic features. [鲁迅，1925]

Subsequent research broadened the scope of inquiry. Wen Mengjun (文孟君), in his 1998 monograph Vulgarisms ("骂詈语"), investigated vulgarisms from the perspective of sociocultural norms, offering detailed analyses of their meanings, classifications, functions, and the social conditions underlying their

emergence. [文孟君, 1998] Similarly, Liu Fugen (刘富根), in A Brief History of Vulgarisms ("骂詈语小史"), developed a historical chronology of Chinese insult vocabulary across six periods—Qin, Qin–Han, Three Kingdoms and Northern–Southern Dynasties, Sui–Tang, Song–Yuan, and Ming—elucidating their origins, semantic development, and linguistic forms, although his work does not address contemporary varieties. [刘富根, 2008]

In 2000, Zhousong (周松) contributed A Study of Vulgarisms in the Chinese Language ("汉语骂詈研究"), examining patterns of usage, expressive functions, and the relationship between vulgarisms and cultural customs. His work proposed a classification distinguishing between direct and indirect vulgarisms. [周松, 2000]

Later studies continued to explore the interplay between vulgarisms and cultural context. Guo Shenqing's (郭沈青) Chinese Vulgarisms and Their Cultural Foundations ("汉语詈语及其文化底蕴", 2002) differentiated between "脏话" zānghuà ("dirty words") and "辱骂的话" rǔmà de huà ("insulting expressions"), analyzing them through four cultural lenses: gender-neutral insults, curses and animal-based expressions, vulgarisms derived from moral expectations traditionally associated with women, and those rooted in folklore, superstition, spirits, and the supernatural. [郭沈青, 2002]

Jiang Mingxiu (姜明秀), in Research on Chinese Vulgarisms ("汉语詈骂语研究", 2007), approached vulgarisms through both historical-cultural and psychological dimensions, identifying key social factors that shaped their emergence and pragmatic functions. [姜明秀, 2007]

A noteworthy comparative perspective appears in Wang Xiaoli's (王小丽) study A Contrastive Analysis of Chinese and Japanese Vulgarisms. Using the Chinese and Japanese translations of Dream of the Red Chamber as her primary corpus, Wang categorised vulgarisms and analysed cross-linguistic differences. She argued that the principal distinctions between Chinese and Japanese vulgarisms lie in their semantic categories and gender associations, attributing these differences to three factors: divergent cultural attitudes toward objects and animals; contrasting sexual cultures; and variation in traditional values, particularly those related to filial piety and respect for parents. However, the study's corpus is limited to vulgarisms occurring within a single literary work and therefore does not encompass the full spectrum of vulgarisms in Chinese.[王小丽, 2008]

Overall, existing scholarship demonstrates that Chinese vulgarisms reflect complex interactions among linguistic structure, cultural norms, historical evolution, and social psychology. As substandard yet culturally meaningful elements of language, they offer rich material for cross-linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic research, as well as valuable insights into the expressive capacities of spoken Chinese.

A comprehensive and multifaceted study of Chinese vulgarisms is found in the doctoral dissertation of the Vietnamese scholar Nguyen Phuong Thuy, titled A Comparative Study of Vulgarisms in Chinese and Vietnamese. In this research, vulgarisms in both Chinese and Vietnamese are examined exhaustively, drawing data from everyday spoken communication, film and television dialogue, as well as literary works. Based on syllabic and phonological structure, the author identified and classified 1,036 vulgarisms, demonstrating not only their large number within Chinese lexicology but also their significant linguistic and cultural importance. Nguyen's analysis shows that Chinese vulgarisms occur in multiple syllabic patterns, including monosyllabic (笨 bèn — "stupid, dumb, idiot"; 鳖 biē — "bastard, despicable person" ; 屄 bī — "cunt"; 狈 bèi — "wretched, despicable, scumbag" ;操 cào — "fuck; to fuck (as an insult)" ; 臭 chòu — "stinky, filthy, damn (in curse expressions)"), disyllabic (笨猪 bèn zhū — "stupid pig; dumb pig" ; 白痴 bái chī — "idiot; moron; imbecile"; 败类 bài lèi — "scum; degenerate; disgrace; low-life" ; 变态 biàn tài — "pervert; freak; sicko" ; 罢软 bà ruǎn — "weak; spineless; soft loser";屄脸 bī liǎn — "cunt-face"), trisyllabic (阿物儿 ā wùr — "good-for-nothing; worthless piece of trash"; 腌臢人 yān zā rén — "filthy person; disgusting slob; dirty bastard"; 鳌老婆 áo lǎo pó — "ugly old hag; hideous old woman"; 败家子 bài jiā zǐ — "spendthrift; family-wrecking brat; wastrel"; 爆菊花 bào jú huā — "to anally rape; to fuck someone in the ass"), tetrasyllabic (爱慕虚荣 ài mù xū róng — "vain; obsessed with vanity; glory-seeking"; 暗室欺心 àn shì qī xīn — "to act dishonestly in secret; to have a guilty conscience; to do shameful things behind closed doors"; 腌臢的气 yān zā de qì — "filthy stench; disgusting aura; foul vibe"; 腌臢婆娘 yān zā pó niáng — "filthy woman; nasty hag; dirty bitch")pentasyllabic (笨得跟猪一样 — "as stupid as a pig; dumb like a pig";

把你妈一禽 — "fuck your mother"; 把你娘的牙都打掉 — "I'll knock all your mother's teeth out"), and polysyllabic forms. The study provides a detailed percentage breakdown for each category.

In her study, Nguyen Phuong Thuy also examines the similarities and differences in the grammatical structures of vulgarisms in Chinese and Vietnamese. She identifies four principal grammatical patterns of Chinese vulgarisms. The first consists of vulgarisms formed by a single vulgar lexical item. The second includes vulgarisms constructed as multi-word combinations or phrases. The third pattern is represented by sentence-level constructions, such as "我把你这个 + vulgar word" ("I'll deal with you, you [vulgar word]"), in which the entire sentence functions as a vulgar expression with an insulting or derogatory meaning. [Nguyen Phuong Thuy, 2015]

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Overall, vulgarisms in the Chinese language have been examined by various scholars from multiple perspectives, including their historical development, cultural and social significance, and structural typology. For a long period, however, vulgarisms were regarded as phenomena incompatible with the literary language and were treated as linguistically marginal. Scholarly attention to this category began primarily with Lu Xun's seminal essay "论他妈的" ("On the Expression 'Your Mother'"), in which the author focused on the vulgar expression "他妈的", a form frequently encountered in Chinese literary texts. Lu Xun sought to elucidate both its semantic structure and its stylistic function within literary discourse.

Subsequent researchers such as Wen Mengjun (文孟君), Liu Fugen (刘富根), and Wang Xiaoli (王小丽) further explored the origins of vulgarisms, their historical stages of development, and their roles within social and cultural life. Although their works contain valuable observations on modern vulgarisms, the coverage remains partial, with some studies limited to specific literary corpora.

To date, the most comprehensive and systematic account of contemporary vulgarisms is found in Nguyen Phuong Thuy's dissertation A Comparative Study of Vulgarisms in Chinese and Vietnamese, which offers a detailed comparative analysis of vulgarisms in both languages. The study classifies Chinese vulgarisms according to both syllabic structure and grammatical construction, providing a more complete picture of their linguistic organization and functional diversity.

CONCLUSION

Chinese vulgar and insulting expressions are not merely ordinary lexical items; rather, they constitute a phenomenon deeply rooted in social, cultural, and psychological dimensions. Having existed since ancient times, these expressions continuously transform in response to changes in society, shifts in gender relations, and technological development. Contemporary research increasingly approaches vulgarisms not only from a linguistic standpoint but also within socio-political, gender-related, psychological, and digital communication contexts.

In literary discourse, vulgarisms play a crucial role in creating emotionally charged dialogue and in shaping the psychological portraits of fictional characters. In the current era, as a growing number of Chinese literary works — many of which are rich in substandard expressions — are being translated, culturally adequate rendition requires a thorough understanding of these linguistic units. As a form of substandard lexis that encapsulates social practices, cultural values, and national traditions, vulgarisms remain insufficiently explored. Moreover, contemporary issues related to gender, censorship, and online verbal aggression further underscore the urgency of systematic research into vulgarisms as a significant and relevant linguistic phenomenon.

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