

# A Sociolinguistic Study on the Word Features of Fandom Language from the Perspective of Social Identity—A Case Study of D&E Fans

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**Abstract**—The development of the Internet has promoted the rapid spread of Korean entertainment culture in China. The “fandom culture”, one of its representatives, has gradually aroused widespread discussion in China in recent years. On the one hand, as one of the important ways of communication between fans, the fandom language has been paid more attention by the vast number of netizens because of its uniqueness. On the other hand, fans in the fandom, as the main body of the creation, are also affected by it to a certain extent, thus forming a sense of identity and belonging to their own identity. This paper focuses on a specific fan group (D&E) and explore its word features and social identity reflected by language through the research method of online ethnography combined with corpus tools.

**Index Terms**—Fans, fandom language, social identity, Hallyu culture

## I. INTRODUCTION

With the popularity of Korean entertainment culture (K-pop), one of the Hallyu cultures, and the trend of sweeping the world [1], Chinese K-pop fans have shaped their identity through endogenous and external factors in the first 15 years of the 21st century, and formed “fandom” and “fandom culture” in the era of data [2]. “Fandom” is the collective name of fans for their star-chasing groups, and “fandom culture” is also a modern star-chasing culture. When carrying out star-chasing activities on social networks, fan groups will use specific network languages when communicating with each other. From the perspective of sociolinguistics, as a language variant, it is a tool for fan groups to communicate in order to adapt to the environment of social networks. It can also be regarded as an “argot” belonging to fan groups. With the progress of Internet technology, fans can interact with each other through social media such as Weibo, WeChat groups, etc. to generate new emotional connection, and gradually transform from weak to strong. Fans can use these network platforms for language communication and information sharing. Inside, fans distinguish between “I” and “others” through a series of exclusive languages or symbols. In this way, fans’ internal identity and sense of belonging are strengthened, and at the same time, they are separated from the outside world.

Fans in the “fandom” are also divided into many types, among which “CP fans” are a new type of fan group that is

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gradually refined with the development of the “fandom” culture. This kind of fan groups are not formed because of chasing a certain star or idol, but groups that are gathered because of the interaction between two stars or two members of an idol group. As an important part of the fan economy in today’s era, many entertainment capitals carry out marketing work from the perspective of CP (couple). As the main force under this economic type, it is necessary to study CP fans language in depth. The data of this paper comes from a WeChat fans group of D&E, a team composed of Donghae & Eunhyuk. They are also members of the Korean idol group Super Junior. The author acquires the data by deeply going into their fans’ WeChat group, hoping to further find out the linguistic characteristics of this group through the research method of ethnography, so as to further explore the issues related to the social identity of fans in this group.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Definitions of Keywords

#### 1) Fans, fandom and fandom language

Originated from the word “fanatic”, “fans” means “fanatics” and “enthusiasts”. In the book *Textual Poachers*, a famous book in the field of fan culture, “fans” is defined as “people who enthusiastically participate in ball games, commercial or entertainment activities and are infatuated with, admire or worship film and television singers or sports stars [1].” “Fandom” is a gathering circle of fans of a certain idol. These people are often active in the super topics on Weibo, form groups to list idols, and also exchange as well as introduce idols’ albums and works. They are more specific and disciplined, and have a stronger sense of group; “fans” represent individuals, mostly individual behaviors, without organization. In this article, “fans” are only fan groups of popular idols and film stars. “Fandom language” is the language used by fans in a particular fan circle.

#### 2) Identity

The word “identity” originated from the Latin word “idem”, which means “the same”, and later developed into the word “identity” in English. It has multiple interpretations. Scholars generally believe that identity has two interpretations, “the same” and “the unique”, revealing the two-tier relationship between “similarity” and “difference”; the different and similar comparisons between individuals and others or other groups constitute the position of individuals in the social network, thus determining identity [3].

### B. Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory was founded and developed by Henri

Tajfel and his disciple John C. Turner and others. It was put forward in the process of studying intergroup behavior and relationships. Tajfel defines social identity as “an individual’s cognition that he/she belongs to a specific social group, and that group membership has emotional and value significance for him/her”. In other words, social identity is the self-definition of being a group member [4]. “We can assume that when certain groups contribute to the positive aspects of individual social identity, individuals tend to maintain the membership of the group or pursue new group membership” [5]. Social identity theory holds that social identity is realized by three processes: Social categorization, social comparison and positive distinctiveness [6]. Social categorization believes that people will automatically classify things, so when they classify others, they will automatically distinguish between inner groups and outer groups; social comparison is a group comparison that satisfies the individual’s need for positive self-evaluation through the principle of positive distinctiveness; Tajfel [7] believes that the principle of positive distinctiveness is that if the advantages of one’s own group can’t be recognized or the disadvantages can’t be denied, members will tend to seek to join another group with higher status through social mobility to gain higher social recognition and self-esteem. The theory of social identity can be used to explain how the membership of the group where an individual belongs affects the individual’s social perception, social attitude and social behavior. It is the most influential theory in the study of group relations [8].

### *C. A Brief Review on Related Literature*

In the field of sociolinguistics, researchers represented by Labov have found that the change of the speakers’ language behavior is related to his specific identity, and people can change their language behavior according to their own needs, so as to achieve the expression or formation of different identity [9].

At present, research on “fandom” in China mainly focuses on the reasons for the rise of “fandom” culture, fans behaviors, “fandom” structural characteristics (gender differences, age differences, etc.), and the public’s attitude towards “fandom” [2]. However, there are relatively few studies focusing on “fandom” language. Ma [10] analyzed the nature and source of fan online terms, explored the dissemination of high-frequency words, the herd behavior of fan groups, rebellion and resistance and other social psychology, and explored the identity of fan group psychology. Yang *et al.* [11] explored the types and characteristics of “fandom” words and their impact on Chinese. They believed that the development of “fandom” words reflected the development of “fandom cultures” to a certain extent, and the development of fandom language would also affect the network context to a certain extent. Therefore, the “fandom” group should standardize their language awareness and jointly create a good fandom language environment. Qin [12] analyzed the fan circle and the “fandom” thinking in the “fandom culture” through some words of “fandom”. At the end of the article, she talked about the attribute of fan group psychological identity, but did not discuss it in depth.

## III. METHODOLOGY

### *A. Research Design*

This research is conducted through nethnography, guided by the following two questions:

- (1) What are the linguistic features of fandom language?
- (2) How does the fandom language reflect the social identity of fans?

Nethnography comes from ethnographic research, and ethnographic research comes from field research. The participant observation proposed by Malinowski is an important feature of field research, that is, the process of learning by participating in daily or routine activities in the research scene. “Participation” refers to the researcher’s presence and interaction in the scene of an ongoing activity or event; “observation” refers to the content seen by the researcher’s eyes. Kozinets [13] regards nethnography as a kind of “pure” ethnography, which uses internet to study people’s behavior on the internet.

### *B. Data Collection*

The data of this study is from the WeChat group of D&E fans. This group is spontaneously established by the fans in the Weibo’s super topic “Eunhae”. The total number of people in this group reaches 500 at the most. The members in the group are highly active and the chat record data is sufficient. The author followed their Weibo’s super topic in October 2019, and then posted and reposted relevant blogs according to the rules in their super topic. When the researcher’s level in their super topic reaches LV8, the researcher joined the WeChat group in the early 2020.

This study intends to select and collect the chat records from December 2021 to March 2022 as the data source. All the records were collected through chat history of the chat group and stored with text version on computer for the convenience of segmentation and extraction of high-frequency word statistics in the later process. During the whole observation and participation process, the researcher mainly focuses on observation in the group. Even if participating in chat, the researcher does not induce or guide the direction of chat. Therefore, this research has satisfied with the conditions of “participation” and “observation” of nethnography defined by Cao *et al.* [13], which has been mentioned in the previous part. Excluding video, voice, emoticons and other non-text chat contents, according to statistics, within the above-mentioned time range, there are 5226 pieces in the corpus written in text form of chat records in the group, including 45,674 words in total.

### *C. Research Instruments*

All collected data will be collated with the help of corpus tools. The original corpus is first sorted out using Text Editor; since the corpus comes from chatting of a WeChat group, and the language of this group communication is mainly Chinese, ICTCLAS 2012 will be used for corpus segmentation and extraction of high-frequency word statistics. Due to the particularity of the chat form, most of the high-frequency words with high weight are function words. Therefore, the final high-frequency keyword extraction will screen out 20 words with a weight greater than 5 and individual words with a weight less than 5 but also more typical through manual screening for subsequent analysis. See the Table I below:

TABLE I: WORDLIST OF HIGH-FREQUENCY/WEIGHT BASED ON THE CORPUS

No.	Words	Weight
1	回归 (The activity that idols officially come back with a new album)	29
2	礼盒 (A nick name of Eunhyuk)	23
3	砖 (The simplified form of translation of album)	21
4	SS (The abbreviation of <i>Super Show</i> )	20
5	赫海 (The abbreviation of Chinese names of Eun Hyuk and Donghae)	13
6	团粉 (The fans of a certain idol group)	12
7	pb (The abbreviation of <i>photobook</i> )	12
8	下班 (The activity of going off work)	11
9	kkk (An expression transliterated from Korean meaning laughing)	11
10	老公 (Husband)	9
11	年末 (The end of the year)	8
12	二代 (The second generation of K-pop idols)	7
13	太太 (The creators in the second dimension)	7
14	站子 (The name of fans for star official website, fan club etc.)	6
15	家族 (Idols of the same corporation)	6
16	韭菜 (Fans that pay bills for corporation)	6
17	yyds (Chinese Pinyin abbreviations for appraisal)	5
18	四胎 (Nickname for the fourth album)	5
19	磕 (The activity of appreciating the behavior idols, indicating a psychological state of being too addicted)	5
20	考古 (the behavior that fans search for the previous deeds, performances or works of their idols on the internet)	5

#### IV. RESULTS

##### A. According to Word Formation

###### 1) Alphabetic symbols

###### a) Chinese Pinyin abbreviation

Chinese Pinyin abbreviations, that is, Chinese words are replaced by initials in pinyin. Generally, the initials of Chinese syllables are abbreviated into several English letters in the form of letters, for example, yyds = 永远的神, wb = 微博, ch = 超话 etc.

###### b) Abbreviation in English

This means using the first letter combination of English words or phrases to replace the meaning of the word or short sentence itself. For example, CP is the abbreviation of the word couple. In addition, Pb is the abbreviation of the word photobook, indicating the photo collection sold. There are other common abbreviations, such as SS = Super Show, be = bad ending, he = happy ending, etc.

###### c) English letters

This means using English letters to express a kind of state or sound. For example, *emmm* simulates a state of having no words to say. Similar usages include *kkk*, *Bobo* and other words, which are transliterated from Korean and mean laughing and kissing respectively.

###### 2) Chinese characters

###### a) Homophonic characters

In order to entertain in their own circles and reduce the possibility of being searched by people in other fields, fans will frequently use homophony instead when posting blogs. After being widely used in larger social platforms such as Weibo, the communication within WeChat group also follows the usage of relevant words. For example, 砖=专,

which is the simplified form of translation of album (专辑) in Chinese 迪恩亿=D&E, which is the English pronunciation of the combination name directly represented by Chinese characters.

###### b) Figurative words

It is a rhetorical device, which describes or explains A with B that shares similarities to A. For example, 墙头 means that a fan has several different idols at the same time.

###### 3) Others

In addition to using the various types of words mentioned above, fans in the group will also use emoji, punctuation etc. in their daily chat. In this group, fans usually use the emoji of the “tiger” to refer to Lee Donghae, and the emoji of the “gift box” to refer to Eun Hyuk; or use the symbol \* to represent dirty words, etc.

##### B. According to Word Meaning

###### 1) Nouns

站子: It is the name of fans for star official website, fan club etc.

四胎: Fans’ nickname for the album, here it refers to D&E’s fourth album.

太太: It refers to the creators in the second dimension. In this group, it refers to the writers of Donghae and Eun Hyuk’s fan fictions.

###### 2) Verbs

磕: It means to appreciate the behavior and dynamics of idol stars, or to pay attention to the interaction between two idols, indicating a psychological state of being too addicted to them.

考古: It refers to the behavior that fans search for the previous deeds, performances or works of their idols on the internet.

割韭菜: It is the behavior of idols’ companies who produce duplicate or low-quality materials under the name of idols, trying to make fans pay money to buy them.

###### 3) Transliteration words

皮球龙卡机嘛呀: It is a Korean transliteration of the song *비처럼 가지마요*, which is composed by Donghae.

Naga: It is a transliteration of Korean *나가*. It’s a commonly used word in the interaction between Donghae and Eun Hyuk. In order to make fun of it, fans directly spell it in pinyin instead.

##### C. The Analysis of Fandom Language

From the perspective of vocabulary sources, it can be divided into three parts. First, it comes from the words said by idols themselves or their related works. Idols are the central figure of fan groups. Their words and deeds have attracted the attention of fans, which will have a great impact on fans to a certain extent, and their words are easy to be imitated by fan groups. Second, it comes from the popular words of other circles. Fandom language is an integral part of network language. Therefore, it will naturally absorb some components of network language, and be affected by the overall environment of social network. Third, out of the principle of labor saving, the fan group will add a large number of words created by themselves. In order to communicate efficiently on internet, simplification has become a major feature of fandom language. This highly

concentrated vocabulary can facilitate fans to obtain the desired content quickly and accurately. At the same time, it is also conducive to rapid dissemination and memory.

## V. DISCUSSION

The communication and interaction between fans are based on the formation of a common understanding of language symbols [10]. Since the user of language is human, language and identity are always in a mutual influence and constraint relationship, and the reason why fans gather in the community is to obtain social identity. Wang [13] view on social identity is that “social identity is the common identification of a group. It emphasizes the similarity between people and believes that group members are connected due to some similarities and common characteristics. And some of the common characteristics within a group are usually accompanied with differences compared to other groups.” Each fan group takes its own idol as the core. In the process of long-term exchange or collection of idol information, it will form its own language of its group. With time going by, fan groups with different speech characteristics will imperceptibly form their identities. Based on the observation of the chat of fans in WeChat group and the above analysis of the characteristics and origins of fan words, combined with the context of these words in WeChat group, the identity of fan words can be analyzed from the following three aspects.

### *A. Fandom Language and Social Categorization*

With the growing popularity of entertainment culture and the rapid development of domestic entertainment industry, the love for different stars, idols, groups and so on makes it easier for their audiences or fans to gather together. Usually, the identity undertaken by the actors’ fan groups is only on the level of audience, which means they just need to appreciate the drama or films produced by actors; while for idols or idol groups, their fan groups not only bear the identity of the audience, but also need to shape or show their fan identity by “Da Tou<sup>1</sup>” or consuming the “Zhou Bian<sup>2</sup>” of various idols/idol groups. Because of different preferences, different individuals are attracted to different groups. With a tendency to categorize, we can quickly find and classify these groups. For example, all fans of this group have followed and joined the WeChat group because they loved the CP of the D&E combination derived from the Super Junior. In the WeChat group, words such as “礼盒”, “四胎” and “虎子” would not appear in other non-D&E fandom. In other words, these words not only classify fans cognitively, but also provide all members of their circle with a sense of belonging.

### *B. Fandom Language and Social Comparison*

Social categorization is followed by social comparison. First of all, the complex information environment faced by fan groups enhances the possibility of meeting or communicating among various fan groups. In terms of the nature of Weibo, the content release of its users is targeted at the whole platform. Correspondingly, different fan circles face a wider range of fans and even passers-by. Therefore,

how to attract new blood for their own groups and stand out from the many circles, social comparison came into being. For example, in the context of January 5, 2022, some fans used the word “四胎”. One of them said that her friend had expressed curiosity about their use of the word “四胎”, saying that they had never heard of it in other fan groups, praising the creativity and kindness of the word. At the same time, they were introduced to some classic materials (“考古”) of the CP, and were eventually attracted to be one of D&E’s fans. As the second stage of social identity theory, the fandom language can also make its circle stand out among the many circles and become more popular through social comparison to a certain extent, so as to enhance the sense of belonging and identity within the group.

### *C. Fandom Language and Positive Distinctiveness*

Social identity theory mentions that an individual needs to improve his self-esteem by seeking the positive uniqueness of the social group to which he belongs or thinks he belongs. Through social categorization and social comparison, the language of fandom provides the basis for the principle of positive distinctiveness, the final stage of identity establishment within the fandom. As mentioned in the previous two stages, under the influence of the spontaneous efforts of individuals in the circle for their idols and the particularity of the language or vocabulary used in the circle, each circle makes itself in sharp contrast with other circles. The next stage (positive distinctiveness) determines how to stabilize the fans, in other words, how to solidify the fans. For example, given that two members of D&E are also members of Super Junior, fans in the WeChat group will also pay attention to the group’s super topic on Weibo. Moreover, because the composition of fans in this super topic is relatively complex, when the content released by fans in this group is of high quality and contains words such as “赫海” and “四胎”, if the feedback given in the comment area is positive, it will meet the self-esteem of fans to a certain extent, making them hold the view that their circle is different and distinct (on a positive level). So far, the final stage of the establishment of fan identity in the fandom has been completed, and the construction of social identity in the fandom has also been completed.

## VI. CONCLUSION

To conclude, new words and catchwords are constantly derived almost every day in fandom. These words have become the objects known and used by various fan groups. This process reflects the changing process of fans’ thinking. Fans create a variety of new words through imitation and simulation and association with other things. The fandom language includes the agreed expression forms of each group, which virtually reflects the individual’s sense of identity and belonging to the whole group. It is like a pass that can be used to show their identity in front of their peers. In the process of star chasing, using the fandom language will strengthen the cohesion of this group. On the contrary, the social view of the

<sup>1</sup> Its character is “打投”, which means to improve the ranking of idol works in some lists through a lot of efforts or money.

<sup>2</sup> Its character is “周边”, which means other physical cultural products derived from idols/groups.

carnival within the fan group coexists with praise and criticism, which will also be accompanied by various criticisms and accusations. Then, how to balance the recognition of the fan group or fan circle from the outside world still needs to be explored.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Yuting Zhang conducted the research and wrote the paper; Junhong Dong offered many suggestions and helped revise the paper. All authors had approved the final version.

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