

# The Application of Cross-Linguistic and Cross-Semiotic Practices on RedNote: A Case Study of “Crazy Literature”

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## Abstract

“Crazy Literature” is a form of online language that has gained popularity on the Chinese internet since 2021. Characterized by disorganized sentence structures, chaotic punctuation, and the unstructured use of emojis, it serves as a medium for users to express emotions. This study aims to investigate the use of emojis and punctuation in “Crazy Literature” from a cross-linguistic perspective. Drawing on the metafunctional approach to multimodal analysis, the author collected 194 relevant posts from the social media platform Rednote. The findings reveal that users engage in two types of cross-linguistic practices involving punctuation, and two types involving emojis. The study concludes that through the creative use of punctuation and emojis, internet users participate in cross-semiotic practices, transforming these conventional non-verbal elements into cross-linguistic cues. As a result, these extralinguistic resources become essential components in the meaning-making process of digital communication.

## Keywords

Translanguaging, cross-semiotic, pragmatic function, emoji, punctuation marks.

## 1. Introduction

With the rise of social networking, online communication has become increasingly popular and widespread. However, due to the absence of facial expressions and bodily gestures in digital interactions, it is often difficult for interlocutors to perceive each other’s emotional states. The emergence of emojis and punctuation marks helps to compensate for this lack of nonverbal cues and has found wide application [1].

Emoji, originally from Japan, are colorful pictographic icons used online. The term “emoji” derives from Japanese, meaning “picture character,” where “e” stands for “picture” and “moji” for “character.” Emojis not only represent facial expressions but also convey abstract ideas, body parts, gestures, animals, plants, and everyday objects. They can be used as standalone symbols to express emotion or embedded within text in messages, emails, posts, and other media [1]. Emojis are also a form of creative visual art. Unlike regular stickers or emoticons, emojis are simple, diverse, and often mimetic, giving them a playful character that facilitates rapid and wide dissemination [2].

Although research on emoji functionality is developing, it remains at an early stage overall. In recent years, scholars have explored the diverse functions of emojis. These symbols can add humor and individuality to interactions, clarify intentions and tone, attract attention, and help build relationships. They can also amplify or soften the impact of messages, or add layers of sarcasm, humor, and positive emotion [3].

Danesi [4] classifies emojis into phatic (relational) and emotive (emotional) functions, suggesting that they help convey friendliness. Herring and Dainas [5], analyzing a dataset of Facebook comments, found that emojis serve purposes beyond expressing emotions—they can interpret referenced content, respond to previous messages, indicate gestures, or show narrative sequence.

In China, recent studies on emoji use on Sina Weibo [3] show that emojis serve both pragmatic and rhetorical functions, such as expressing speech acts, highlighting text, and offering evaluations—functions usually associated with spoken language. Another Chinese study found that in specific cultural contexts, the emoji representing a “face covering with hands” is often associated with laughter in real-life interaction [6].

As a traditional metalinguistic tool, punctuation has undergone significant transformation in online environments, becoming a pragmatic marker. For example, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, parentheses are mainly used to provide explanations or additional information in text. In today’s online communities, however, parentheses carry expanded meanings. Scholars have examined Chinese netizens’ use of parentheses and found them to serve various pragmatic functions, including annotation, self-mockery, and expressing both public and private voices [7]. Researchers observed that users employ parentheses to explore diverse emotional expression within a single grammatical structure. Moreover, Zhang Yi and colleagues [8], using data from multiple social media platforms, analyzed the pragmatic features and functions of parentheses, summarizing their roles in indirectly conveying intentions, easing embarrassment, enacting self-deprecation, and creating humor.

These findings suggest that such symbols not only retain their traditional expressive roles but also acquire new meanings and functions in the digital age, providing fertile ground for the emergence of novel language phenomena.

In recent years, a digital textual form known as “Crazy Literature” (发疯文学) has rapidly gained popularity on Chinese social media platforms. This “literature” is not traditional literature per se, but rather a distinctive form of online expression [2]. Emerging around 2021, it was created by younger generations who express intense and exaggerated emotions through disorderly or extreme word choices, punctuation, and emojis.

One of the most prominent features of “Crazy Literature” is its creative and frequent use of emojis and punctuation marks. However, most existing studies have focused on the conventional functions of emojis and punctuation in digital discourse, paying less attention to the innovative uses observed in new forms such as “Crazy Literature.”

Based on this, the present study takes “Crazy Literature” as an entry point to investigate the following questions:

- (1) What types of innovative uses of emojis and punctuation exist in Chinese social media’s “Crazy Literature”? What are their characteristics?
- (2) What communicative functions are reflected in the innovative use of emojis and punctuation in “Crazy Literature” on Chinese social media?

## 2. Research Methodology

### 2.1. Data Collection

The data for this study were sourced from RedNote, a text-centered social media platform highly popular among Chinese youth. This networking platform allows the third party to freely access users’ public posts. The data collection process consisted of two steps. The first part is to collect blogs which contain the hashtag #CrazyLiterature. The hashtag #CrazyLiterature can be seen as an illocutionary force-indicating device (IFID) [9], which puts the illocution on record and explicitly states the intention of the blog. The second step is to find posts in which innovative adoptions of emojis and punctuation marks are presented. After careful reading, the following types of posts were excluded: (1) posts which only contain hashtag #CrazyLiterature but do not with any creative use of emojis or punctuation marks; and (2) duplicate posts from the same user. Ultimately, a total of 194 posts published between 2022 and 2024 were collected, all of which demonstrated novel functions of emojis and punctuation.

## 2.2. Data Analysis

This study adopts the coding framework and metafunctional analysis approach proposed by Zhang Yi et al. [8]. According to their research, cross-linguistic practices encompass various “cross-” phenomena, such as cross-semiotization, cross-modality, and cross-script usage. The metafunctional approach examines communicative phenomena from three perspectives: representational, interactive, and compositional.

For the analysis of creative punctuation use, this study draws on the typology used to categorize parenthesis usage by Weibo users, which includes the following four categories:

- (1) Cross-scenario usage to dramatize the text;
- (2) Cross-semiotization to create new punctuation symbols;
- (3) Cross-modal usage to embellish emojis;
- (4) Illocutionary use of parentheses to indicate speech acts.

These categories provide a useful framework for analyzing how punctuation is innovatively employed in “Crazy Literature,” and how users utilize such symbols to perform specific communicative functions.

For emoji analysis, the study adopts the metafunctional framework as well. Beginning with the representational function, the visual-semantic features of individual emojis are examined. The interactive function of emojis is analyzed in terms of their emotional affordance and their potential to facilitate social bonding [10]. Finally, the compositional dimension addresses the co-occurrence of emojis and text, focusing on visual coherence and the patterns of integration that emerge in the construction of meaning. This metafunctional approach offers a systematic lens through which the creative use of emojis in “Crazy Literature” can be understood and interpreted.

## 3. Result

This section presents the types, features and communicative functions of translanguaging and trans-semiotic practices in Crazy Literature on Rednote. As shown in table 1, the majority of the collected data use the creative adoption of punctuation marks. The detailed content will be discussed in the following part.

**Table 1.** Types of translanguaging and trans-semiotic practices in Crazy Literature on Weibo and Little Red Book.

Type	Token
Punctuation Marks	107
Emojis	87
Total	194

### 3.1. Punctuation Marks

#### 3.1.1. Trans-scenarios for Dramatizing Texts

According to Zhang and his colleagues [8], parentheses can be used to create drama-like text that allows online users to indicate a series of actions performed by a presumed character and/or to provide written cues that communicate emotions, actions, and manners of movement. Just as in the creation of a theatrical play where parentheses are used to indicate stage directions, digital communicators convert textual messages into a form of action and setting. This transformation allows the person expressing themselves to vividly portray a scene, encouraging the audience to deduce the implied practical actions and the imagined context of the scenario being depicted [11]. In this way, the practice of transcending scenarios enables

online users to portray a multimodal scene that has been observed and/or experienced offline within the confines of text-based online communication. This allows for a transcendence of the barriers that traditionally separate online and offline contexts. As for the manifestation of these trans-scenario practices, they may be encapsulated within a single set of parentheses or a pair that encloses a description of a gesture, action, and/or mode of movement within phrases and/or sentences. Here is one typical example in Crazy Literature:

Example 3:

Chinese	original	version:
考上什么大学并不重要，反正毕业了也是在校门口卖手抓饼（放面糊）（抹匀）（打蛋）（抹匀）（涂肉酱）（撒豆角）（撒葱花）（放火腿肠）（放脆脆）（放生菜）（打横卷起来）（切一切）（打竖切两段）（叠起来装进纸袋）（装进塑料袋）（递给学弟学妹）（自信）（继续摆摊）（被学生投诉）（慌张）（带车逃离）（去另一个学校门口摆摊）		

English translation version: What university you get into doesn't really matter, because after graduation, you might end up selling hand-grabbing pancakes right at the school gate (pouring the batter) (spreading evenly) (cracking an egg) (spreading evenly) (applying meat sauce) (sprinkling beans) (sprinkling scallions) (adding ham sausage) (adding crisp) (adding lettuce) (rolling horizontally) (cutting into pieces) (cutting vertically into two parts) (stacking and putting into a paper bag) (putting into a plastic bag) (handing over to juniors) (with confidence) (continuing to set up the stall) (being complained about by students) (panicking) (fleeing with the cart) (going to set up a stall at another school gate).

In Example 3, the user makes extensive use of parentheses to present a sequence of progressive actions in order to construct meaning, rather than adhering to standard grammatical rules. By evoking imagery from familiar real-world scenarios and nonverbal behaviors, the user employs each pair of parentheses and its enclosed content to represent a single action. Multiple sets of parentheses are used to break down and detail the behavior of a street vendor. In this context, parentheses transcend their conventional grammatical function and take on a performative role, providing additional linguistic cues that situate the described events within a specific offline setting.

This series of actions constructs a scene in which someone sells jianbing (Chinese pancakes) at a school gate after graduation, implicitly expressing the helpless sentiment: Even after getting into university, you may still struggle to find a job and end up street vending.

Moreover, beyond such uses that involve specific characters, dialogues, and behaviors, there exists another usage pattern in which multiple sets of parentheses are used to indicate a variety of actions that collectively form the text. Unlike Example 3, the content within these parentheses does not necessarily need to depict coherent actions, a specific scene, or a particular persona. Instead, they are employed to convey a shared emotional theme—such as in Example 4:

Example 4:

Chinese	original	version:
（尖叫）（扭曲）（阴暗的爬行）（爬行）（扭动）（阴暗地蠕动）（翻滚）（激烈地爬动）（扭曲）（痉挛）（嘶吼）（蠕动）（阴森的低吼）		

English translation version: (Screaming) (Twisting) (Crawling in the dark) (Crawling) (Writhing) (Squirming in the dark) (Tumbling) (Crawling intensely) (Twisting) (Convulsing) (Roaring) (Writhing) (Sinister growling)

The actions outlined within the parentheses, as in the previous example, are more about expressing the users perspective than depicting real actions. To be precise, the user's sentiment is portrayed in an exaggerated manner by using a combination of verbs with negative connotations, such as “screaming” and “twisting,” within the text. These parenthetical

expressions seem designed to push the reader to go beyond the conventional understanding of coherent written language and into the disjointed, bracketed scenes, all the while creating a dramatic impact that reflects and intensifies the user's intense feelings of frustration.

### 3.1.2. Trans-semiotizing for new punctuation marks

In Crazy Literature, there is also innovative use of punctuation marks beyond parentheses. Trans-semiotizing in this category is demonstrated as the fluid meaning and structure of parentheses as a punctuation in realizing different actions [12] in text-based communication. The following Example 5 can illustrate it.

Example 5:

Chinese original version: 我精神状态挺好的呀没关系精神稳定一分钟也很厉害了没关系精神稳定一分钟没精神关系稳定\$^...一分钟也很厉害了没\*#@#精定神稳一分钟也厉很害了没关系精稳①分钟也很厉\*+了没关系shsbbsjajqksnnx精神稳定

English translation version: My mental state is quite good, it's okay, mentally stable for a minute is also quite good\$^..., it's okay, mentally stable for a minute\*#@#, stability for ① minute is also quite good

In this passage, none of the punctuation marks are used in their conventional sense (for instance, "\$" is not used to denote dollars). Instead, they are presented as a form of visual gibberish, intended to simulate the effect of a deteriorating mental state leading to typographical chaos. In this way, punctuation marks are adopted as a translingual cue whose meanings, forms, and functions are remarkably fluid, requiring the audience to interpret them in conjunction with other linguistic and extra-linguistic resources.

## 3.2. Emojis

### 3.2.1. Visual-semantic Features of Emojis

Analyzing the blog posts that constitute the "crazy literature" corpus and include the use of emojis, it is evident that emojis are typically interspersed throughout the text. The presence of emojis can take the form of a solitary emoji, a series of the same emoji repeated consecutively, or a combination of various different emojis, which together constitute what is referred to as an "emoji grouplet." These grouplets can be positioned at the beginning (onset), in the middle (inset), or at the end (final) of the text, or they may be interspersed throughout the text in multiple locations.

The terms "single," "replicated," and "mixed" are utilized to classify the composition of an emoji grouplet, while "onset," "inset," "final," and "multiple" describe the placement of these grouplets within the text. A contingency table (Table 2) encapsulates the specific frequencies of these different emoji grouplet types and their respective positions across various text categories. The "Multiple (occurrences)" category features units with more than one emoji grouplet, whereas other categories contain just a single grouplet. The dataset comprises a total of 486 emoji grouplets. Generally, the distribution favors the final positioning of emojis and the occurrence of single emojis. When users insert multiple emojis as a grouplet, there is a preference for repeating the same emoji rather than mixing different ones.

A prevalent pattern observed is "text followed by emoji(s)" within the co-occurrence units, indicating that text remains the primary vehicle for conveying information in these posts, with emojis adding an extra layer of meaning to the preceding text. This aligns with previous research suggesting that emojis serve to complement or supplement the meaning of accompanying textual content [13].

**Table 2.** Number of emoji grouplets of different types and in different positions

Type of emoji grouplets	Position of emoji grouplets				
	Onset	Inset	Final	Multiple	Subtotal
Single	0	0	0	0	0
Replicated	0	10	0	14	24
Mixed	2	27	3	31	63
Subtotal	2	37	3	45	87

### 3.2.2. Emoji in Social Interaction

Emojis play a crucial role in performing speech acts, helping to facilitate smoother communication. At times, emojis convey meanings that go beyond their literal surface, with such meanings often derived from the semantic context of the accompanying text. For example, in Example 6, a series of nose-dripping emojis appears throughout the text. In the broader context, the author uses exaggerated expression to convey sadness about the end of a holiday. Thus, these emojis communicate a sense of heartbreak and contribute to the overall implied meaning of the post.

#### *Speech Acts*

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Example 6:

我的假期 我的假期 我的假期回来吧🤧 我每天都生活在痛苦中🤧 对自己的惩罚中🤧 对你情不自禁🤧 对你言不由衷🤧 对自己身不由己🤧 有一天我一定会告诉你一切🤧 但也许那是你爱我的最后一秒🤧 我就不是你心里那个纯粹的我了。

**Figure 1.** “Crazy Literature” that expresses a refusal to the end of the holiday

#### *Subjective Interpretation*

Within posts related to the theme of “Crazy Literature,” there are numerous examples of the innovative use of emojis that rely on subjective interpretation. As shown in Example 7, the emojis used in the comments do not convey their surface-level meanings. Instead, they are selected based on the phonetic similarity between the emoji names in Chinese and certain words or phrases, thereby constructing a semantically coherent passage.

Example 7:



Figure 2. Expressing Chinese poetry in “Crazy Literature”

#### 4. Conclusion

This study focuses on the use of punctuation and emojis in “Crazy Literature” on the Xiaohongshu platform, exploring their characteristics as cross-linguistic and cross-semiotic practices. Chinese internet users creatively redefine and expand the conventional usage and pragmatic meanings of these textual features. The findings reveal that online users not only transcend the boundaries of traditional linguistic encoding, but also fully integrate symbolic resources and socialized experiences within the digital space. Such practices blur the lines between written text, images, and other modes of expression, producing a vivid communicative style that resembles offline spoken interaction.

The study yields the following key insights:

First, users creatively exploit the polysemous and constructive functions of punctuation, thereby engaging in distinctive forms of digital literacy. While the form of punctuation remains consistent, its function dynamically evolves with context, exhibiting complex semiotic properties that extend beyond its original communicative intent. As a nonverbal pragmatic resource, punctuation works in tandem with other meaning-making elements to achieve communicative synergy.

Regarding emoji usage, this study adopts a multimodal metafunctional framework for systematic analysis. Based on frequency, positional distribution, and combination patterns within individual posts, it is found that the “hybrid, multi-positional emoji display pattern” is most prevalent. The analysis shows that emojis, through their dual visual and semantic nature, can perform speech acts, express subjective stances, and create informal pragmatic tones—thus significantly enhancing the emotional expressiveness and communicative effectiveness of online messages.

The study concludes that the symbolic practices of punctuation and emojis exhibit a trend of dynamic evolution. The introduction of new symbols, reinterpretation of existing ones, and innovative uses of emojis continuously expand the pragmatic dimensions of digital communication and drive the ongoing renewal of the symbolic ecosystem in the digital age. In the future, such multimodal symbolic practices may have even more profound implications for enhancing communicative efficiency and reinforcing emotional expression.

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