

# Title: Vernacular Creativity in Online China English Discourses: A Decolonial Imagination from Mainland China

## Research Overview (50 words)

Debates over China English's legitimacy expose competing language ideologies in Chinese online communities. Recently, multimodal social media content employs playful semiotic practices to deconstruct binaries between native and local English varieties, representing grassroots creativity challenging colonial language hierarchies in informal, digital learning contexts across contemporary China.

## Research Purpose

This study examines how Chinese social media users co-construct public discourses on English language learning through multimodal practices through a decolonial lens. Specifically, it seeks to: (1) identify characteristics of discourses about English language learning online, with special attention to China English (operationalized as localized varieties distinct from stigmatized "Chinglish"); (2) analyze how grassroots users employ multimodal resources—including memes, videos, images, and sound—to reproduce, negotiate, or resist linguistic hierarchies and coloniality of power; and (3) explore whether these playful, tactical digital practices carry decolonial affordances when Western-centric epistemic hegemony could be questioned or even subverted in non-post-colonial contexts.

## Methods

This study employs a two-phase nested design grounded in Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) and decolonial epistemology. Data comprise 140 user-generated posts and associated comment threads (~40,000 words) collected from five major Chinese social media platforms (Douyin, Kuaishou, Sina Weibo, Xiaohongshu, Zhihu) between January 2025 and January 2026. A funnel sampling strategy refined the corpus to 15 representative multimodal artifacts selected based on engagement thresholds (top 10% likes/shares), platform representation, and thematic saturation. Phase I utilizes open and axial coding to map discursive patterns and distill core ideological themes. Phase II applies Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2006) visual grammar to examine how ideologies are semiotically realized through representational, interactive, and compositional metafunctions. An iterative validation process cross-checks thematic mappings against multimodal mechanisms, with bilingual translation verification conducted by two researchers using back-translation protocol.

## Results/Discussion

Analysis reveals three dominant discursive patterns positioned on an interconnected continuum of agency within coloniality. First, 41% of posts construct English as intrinsically superior through claims of logical transparency and lexical honesty, naturalizing linguistic hierarchies via multimodal congruence between aspirational imagery and comparative textual arguments. This demonstrates that English-privileged ideologies are not merely external pressures but have been internalized as commonsensible truth. Second, 29% exhibit "patriotic pragmatism," framing English learning as national self-strengthening rooted in historical humiliation narratives—a hybrid subject position demonstrating limited agency within hegemonic structures without achieving epistemic delinking. These practices ultimately reinforce the instrumental value of the hegemonic language, reflecting how netizens remain trapped within coloniality of power.

Most significantly, 30% employ humor, testing, and creative formats carrying decolonial affordances: counter-questioning English honesty through immanent critique (e.g., the "beef" meme), positively representing China English as globally influential, and testing Westerners' comprehension to reverse traditional power dynamics. These practices do not create stable counter-ideologies but generate critical moments of destabilization when naturalized hierarchies are briefly disrupted. Such memetic practices effect a short-circuiting of colonial binaries, aligning with decolonial calls to think with the subaltern.

## Implications

These digital practices suggest that critical digital literacy curricula should scaffold learners' existing multimodal repertoires rather than suppress them. Rather than viewing learners' digital practices as distractions, educators should transform them into resources for cultivating critical language awareness. The multimodal ecology of social media—interplay of text, images, and emojis—provides rich material for reconfiguration and decolonial imagination. Teacher education programs should integrate such vernacular practices to foster critical pedagogy. Future research should explore retaining and expanding decolonial potential through participatory action involving critical digital literacy pedagogy, and conduct comparative studies examining similar vernacular practices in other non-Western digital publics.