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Grammatical and Translational Features of English Loanwords in Chinese Internet Discourse

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This study examines the grammatical and translational characteristics of English loanwords in modern Chinese, with a focus on their usage in Internet discourse. Drawing on 30 popular English-derived terms collected from Internet platforms, such as the *Language Weekly* and the *Chinese Inventory*, this study investigates changes in parts of speech, pluralization patterns, and translation forms. Results show that most English loanwords undergo grammatical transformation, especially shifts in parts of speech to align with Chinese syntactic norms, and the number of English noun phrases is used randomly. Meanwhile, a significant portion of English loanwords are retained in their original form, with a trend of non-translation, and some even present untranslatability. The distinct differences between English and Chinese account for the grammatical changes of English loanwords in Chinese Internet discourse. At the same time, the lack of equivalent and appropriate meaning in Chinese contributes to the untranslatability of some English loanwords. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of linguistic adaptation in multilingual contexts and provide pedagogical insights for language learning and teaching.

Keywords: English loanwords, Internet discourse, grammatical change, translation, Chinese language, sociolinguistics

Introduction

Globalization and the proliferation of digital media have intensified language contact, particularly between English and Chinese. In the Internet era, this contact manifests most vividly through the emergence of English loanwords in Chinese online discourse. Terms like “slay”, “citywalk”, “PUA”, and “emo” have become ubiquitous in social media, daily communication, and youth culture. While some loanwords retain their original forms and meanings, others undergo a significant grammatical and semantic transformation: “emo”, for instance, shifts from an English adjective to a verb in Chinese (“我emo了”), and “flag” in “立flag” abandons English plural rules to function as a fixed singular form. These adaptations reflect the dynamic interplay between linguistic systems and cultural trends, making them a critical focus for understanding contemporary language evolution.

Loanwords, as a natural outcome of language contact and cultural exchange, have long been a focus of linguistic research. Scholarly discussions on their definition have evolved to encompass both narrow and broad perspectives. In the narrow sense, loanwords are equated with “transliteration”-borrowing terms based on phonetic similarity, such as “咖啡” (kāfēi) for “coffee” (Pan, 2020). In the broader context, it includes broadening,

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including translation, nations, and combinations, adapting or redefining foreign terms (Zhuang, combinations of loanwords, a language that encompasses not only transliterations like “克隆” (kèlóng) for “clone”, but also free translations like “虚拟现实” (xūnǐ xiànshí, “virtual reality”) and hybrid forms like “宝马” (Bǎomǎ, “BMW”), as well as directly borrowed terms like “slay” and “PUA” that retain their original spelling.

Translation strategies for loanwords have been categorized into distinct paradigms. Liu (2022) highlighted transliteration as a primary method, where terms are rendered phonetically, to preserve their original phonetics for foreign brand names, or culturally specific concepts, such as “沙发” (shāfā, “sofa”). Wei (2008) emphasized free translation, which prioritizes semantic equivalence over phonetics, as seen in “电子邮件” (diànzǐ yóujiàn, “email”); this method fosters cultural integration but may lose nuance, as when “暗恋” (ànliàn) fails to capture the fleeting intensity of “crush fully.” Beyond these, scholars identify additional strategies: explanatory translation (clarifying cultural or contextual meanings, e.g., “代沟” (dàigōu, “generation gap”) with supplementary notes), hybrid translation (blending phonetic and semantic elements, such as “啤酒” [píjiǔ, “beer”]), and transference (direct adoption of the original term, as with “PUA” or “emo”) (Yang, 2002). These strategies reflect a balance between linguistic accuracy and cultural accessibility.

The rise of Internet communication has further shaped the trajectory of loanword adoption. Jin (2023) noted that new media language, in the era of media convergence, is marked by innovation, brevity, intimacy, and multimodality—traits that accelerate the spread of loanwords. An (2023) added that Internet buzzwords, including English loanwords, exhibit universality (cross-group recognition), entertainment (playful or ironic tones), and simplicity (conciseness for rapid sharing). This digital ecosystem prioritizes speed and novelty, making the direct adoption of English terms (e.g., “citywalk” and “gap day”) more common than elaborate translation. Such trends underscore the need to study loanwords not just as linguistic artifacts, but as products of contemporary communication practices.

Existing studies have laid the groundwork for understanding loanword formation and translation, but gaps remain. While Pan (2020) and Zhuang (2010) defined loanwords broadly, to the best of our knowledge, few studies have focused on grammatical shifts, such as part-of-speech changes or plural neutralization in Internet-specific contexts. Similarly, while Liu (2022) and Wei (2008) outline translation methods, they do not fully address why some terms with Chinese equivalents (e.g., “flag” in “立flag”) are retained in English, or why others (e.g., “emo”) resist translation entirely. For students, understanding these loanwords enhances their ability to navigate multilingual online environments, improves cross-cultural communication skills, and allows for more precise expression of emerging concepts, many of which lack established Chinese equivalents. For teachers, integrating these loanwords into curricula bridges classroom learning with real-world language use, helping students grasp the fluid relationship between English and Chinese grammar and semantics. For professionals, mastery of these terms ensures accurate communication in international workplaces, where terms like “PUA” and “GDP” (though translatable) are often retained in English for brevity and precision.

Above all, this study aims to illuminate how linguistic adaptation and cultural negotiation shape modern Chinese discourse by examining 30 representative loanwords from sources, such as the *Chinese Inventory* and *Language Weekly*. Specifically, the current study focuses on the following two research questions:

1. What are the grammatical features of English loanwords in modern Chinese Internet discourse?
2. Why are some English loanwords untranslatable into Chinese?

Methodology

Data Collection

Definition of the loanwords. Based on previous studies, loanwords are defined as lexical items borrowed from one language into another, arising from cultural exchange. For the need to express new concepts, and in this study, English loanwords are defined explicitly as terms originating from English that have emerged or risen to prominence in the Internet era, integrated into Chinese vocabulary through widespread use in online communication, including directly borrowed English terms (e.g., "citywalk" and "emo") used without translation, hybrid forms combining English and Chinese elements (e.g., "立flag" and "被diss"). English terms are assigned new meanings within the Chinese linguistic system (e.g., "social" used as a verb in "我要去social了"), which ensures focus on loanwords that reflect the dynamic, Internet-driven interaction between English and Chinese, excluding archaic or rarely used borrowings.

Materials

The dataset consists of 30 English loanwords collected from authoritative sources tracking Internet language trends, ensuring representativeness and recency, including *Report of Internet Buzzwords (2023)*, which documents annually emerging online terms, *Chinese Inventory (2022)*, a collaborative project by the National Language Resources Monitoring and Research Center and the Commercial Press highlighting culturally significant words of the year, *Language Weekly*, a publication specializing in linguistic trends and new vocabulary, and curated lists of *Network* catchwords over the years from major platforms covering popular terms from before 2022 to 2024, with the 30 loanwords selected to span different periods and usage contexts as shown in Table 1 to capture long-term patterns in loanword usage.

Table 1

Thirty Loanwords Collected From Various Sources

2024	i人/e人, NPC, MBTI, XX已经next level, strong
2023	citywalk, gap day, crush, 卡皮巴拉, AI, KTV
2022	元宇宙, 被diss, OOTD, CPU, 村BA
Before 2022	好嗨, hold住, 好low, freestyle, 立flag, social, slay, 嗑CP, get到了, 狗die, PUA

Data Analysis

Analysis of grammatical features. The loanwords were examined for grammatical adaptation into Chinese, with a focus on two key dimensions. The first dimension is part-of-speech change, which involves comparing the original part of speech in English (e.g., emo as an adjective) with its actual usage in Chinese (e.g., emo used as a verb in "我emo了"). Loanwords were classified as the same part of speech if they retained their original grammatical category (e.g., "citywalk" used as a noun in both English and Chinese) or as a different part of speech if a shift occurred (e.g., PUA changing from a noun to a verb in "他经常PUA女性"). The second dimension concerns the number in noun phrases, which explores how plural forms in English are treated in Chinese usage. This includes the neutralization of plurality, where singular forms are consistently used regardless of quantity (e.g., "flag" in "立flag" is never pluralized as "flags"). The retention of plural forms, although theoretically possible, was not observed in the dataset. However, this possibility is noted for comparative purposes. To ensure the analysis was grounded in authentic language use, over 50 instances of each loanword were extracted from Chinese social media platforms (e.g., Weibo and Rednote), allowing the identification of stable grammatical patterns in real-world contexts rather than relying on isolated or anecdotal examples.

Analysis of translational features. Loanwords were categorized according to their translational forms in Chinese, with a particular focus on why certain terms resist translation. Three main types were identified: original forms, mixed forms, and translated forms. Original forms refer to English words used directly in the Chinese language. They fall into two subtypes—those with existing Chinese equivalents (e.g., "crush" *vs*. "暗恋", or "flag" in "立flag" *vs*. "旗帜"), where the English term is retained despite the availability of a native alternative, and those without precise Chinese equivalents (e.g., "emo" and "diss"), which are preserved due to semantic specificity or cultural resonance. Mixed forms involve hybrid constructions combining English and Chinese elements (e.g., "立flag" and "被diss"), where part of the term is adapted while the rest remains untranslated. Translated forms, such as "元宇宙" for "metaverse", represent the least common pattern in the dataset. To account for these patterns, a qualitative analysis was conducted considering linguistic factors (e.g., the brevity and expressiveness of English terms), cultural factors (e.g., associations with youth culture or Western subcultures), and contextual factors (e.g., the informal, playful tone of online discourse that favors non-translation). Quantitative data—such as the proportions of original, mixed, and translated forms—were visualized using pie charts to illustrate overall trends. Meanwhile, case studies of key terms (e.g., "crush" and "emo") provided deeper insight into issues of untranslatability and sociolinguistic motivation. This integrated analytical approach enables a more systematic understanding of how English lexical items are localized in Chinese, connecting empirical observations to broader linguistic and sociocultural dynamics.

Results

Grammatical Features

The analysis of 30 English loanwords reveals substantial grammatical adaptation to Chinese linguistic norms, particularly in terms of part-of-speech shifts and the neutralization of plural markers. These patterns reflect not only the structural flexibility of Chinese syntax, but also the pragmatic needs of online communication, where brevity, creativity, and cultural resonance often take precedence over strict adherence to English grammatical conventions.

Regarding part-of-speech variation, English loanwords in Chinese Internet discourse display two major patterns: retention of the original grammatical category and functional shifts into new grammatical roles. The latter is notably more common. Approximately 30% of the examined loanwords retain their original English parts of speech, most frequently nouns or verbs that align with existing Chinese syntactic slots or convey culturally specific concepts lacking succinct Chinese equivalents. For example, "citywalk" remains a noun in expressions like "周末去citywalk" (Going for a citywalk on the weekend), as the term encapsulates a lifestyle concept not readily captured by a single Chinese word. Similarly, slay retains its verbal function in contexts, such as "她的表演slay全场" (Her performance slays the audience), mirroring its English use in popular culture to describe impressiveness or dominance. The adjective strong is also preserved in form but undergoes semantic extension to mean "pretentious" in Chinese Internet slang (e.g., "他太strong了" [He's so pretentious]), demonstrating how lexical borrowing may involve both syntactic preservation and semantic innovation.

In contrast, approximately 70% of the loanwords undergo part-of-speech shifts to fit Chinese communicative preferences, which tend to favor flexible, context-driven expression over rigid grammatical categories. For instance, emo, originally an English adjective denoting a musical or emotional subculture, is used as a verb in Chinese to express entering a melancholic emotional state (e.g., "考试没考好，我emo了" [I failed the exam, so I was feeling emo]). Likewise, "social" is an adjective in English, but it is truncated and repurposed as a verb in

Chinese (e.g., “今晚要去social一下” [I need to socialize tonight]), facilitating brevity and aligning with colloquial Chinese discourse. PUA, an acronym for “Pick-up Artist”, functions as a noun in English but is reanalyzed as a verb in Chinese (e.g., “他总喜欢PUA女生” [He always likes to PUA girls]) to describe manipulative behavior, emphasizing action over identity and reflecting the functional economy of Chinese in verbalizing concepts from nominal forms.

Moreover, the neutralization of plural markers is a salient grammatical feature in the adaptation of English loanwords. Unlike English, which relies on inflectional morphology to mark number, Chinese indicates quantity contextually through numerals and classifiers, resulting in the consistent use of singular forms regardless of actual referent count. A prime example is the flag, which remains singular in the widely used expression “立flag” (to make a boast or prediction that may backfire). Even when multiple instances are implied—e.g., “他今天立了好几个flag” (He made several boasts today)—the noun flag does not take a plural form. This pattern is driven by three interrelated factors: (a) fixed phrase formation, as “立flag” has become a lexicalized expression in Internet slang where flag functions as an idiomatic unit rather than a countable noun; (b) semantic abstraction, as flag in this context represents a symbolic act or concept rather than a tangible object, reducing the necessity for number marking; and (c) cultural adaptation, whereby speakers favor linguistic economy and consistency in informal settings, making the singular form more practical and acceptable in online communication.

Translational Features

The analysis of translational patterns reveals a strong preference for retaining English loanwords in their original form even when Chinese equivalents exist, a trend shaped by linguistic economy, cultural identity, and the unique semantic nuances of the loanwords themselves.

The analysis of translational patterns reveals a strong preference for retaining English loanwords in their original form, even when Chinese equivalents are available. This tendency reflects the combined influence of linguistic economy, cultural identity, and the unique semantic nuances inherent in the borrowed terms. Among the 30 loanwords examined, 15 (50%) appear exclusively in their original English form, 12 (40%) take the shape of hybrid constructions (e.g., “立flag”, where the Chinese verb “立” [to set up] is paired with the English noun flag), and only three (10%) are fully translated into Chinese (e.g., “元宇宙” [yuán yǔzhòu] for metaverse). This dominance of untranslated and hybrid forms underscores a broader linguistic trend in Chinese online discourse, where conciseness, stylistic innovation, and international relevance are often prioritized over linguistic “purity” or fidelity to native expressions.

Some loanwords are retained in English despite the existence of well-established Chinese equivalents. For instance, crush—which can be translated as “暗恋” (secret love) or “短暂而强烈的喜爱” (a short-lived intense fondness)—is commonly used in its English form in online contexts due to its precision in capturing fleeting, casual infatuation, a nuance not fully conveyed by its Chinese counterparts. Its usage also signals alignment with global youth culture and digital vernaculars. Similarly, “flag”, as in “立flag”, is preferred over its literal translation, “旗帜”, as the latter fails to encapsulate the metaphorical connotation of a self-declared prediction or boast, particularly in contexts where failure is anticipated. The combination of the flag with the Chinese verb “立” results in a culturally specific set phrase unique to Internet slang.

Other loanwords remain untranslated due to the lack of satisfactory Chinese equivalents, both semantically and culturally. For example, emo expresses a complex intersection of mood (sadness, melancholy, and existential angst) and identity (rooted in subculture, music, and fashion), which cannot be fully captured by phrases like “情

绪低落” (low mood) or “emo风” (emo style). Its adoption as-is in contexts, such as “深夜容易emo” (Late nights make one feel emo) reflects its indispensable role in capturing a nuanced emotional and cultural state. Likewise, diss, originating from the concept of disrespect, refers to a form of pointed public insult or provocation often found in hip-hop and online arguments. While it could be loosely translated as “侮辱” (insult) or “批评” (criticism), such translations fail to retain the confrontational, performative edge embedded in the English term, as in “他在歌里diss了对手” (He dissed his rival in the song).

Three primary factors influence the choice between retaining, hybridizing, or translating loanwords. First, linguistic economy plays a crucial role: English terms, such as “crush” and “slay” are shorter and more efficient than their Chinese equivalents, making them well-suited for fast-paced digital interactions. Second, cultural identity influences lexical preference, as the use of English borrowings—particularly among young users—serves as a marker of global engagement and modernity, with terms like “emo” and “citywalk” reinforcing connections to international trends. Finally, semantic nuance often necessitates the preservation of the original term, especially when the loanword encodes culturally specific meanings that resist direct translation (e.g., PUA, referring to manipulative behavior). These findings underscore the intersection of language, culture, and identity in shaping translational practices in contemporary Chinese digital discourse.

In summary, the grammatical and translational features of English loanwords in Chinese Internet discourse reflect a dynamic interplay between linguistic adaptation and cultural negotiation, with grammatical shifts aligning loanwords with Chinese syntax and translational choices prioritizing brevity, cultural relevance, and semantic precision, ultimately shaping a new hybrid linguistic landscape in online communication.

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore the dynamic interplay between linguistic adaptation and cultural negotiation in the integration of English loanwords into Chinese Internet discourse. The grammatical transformations and translational choices observed across the 30 analyzed terms not only reflect structural contrasts between English and Chinese, but also mirror broader sociocultural currents, particularly among digitally native youth.

Notably, the high frequency of part-of-speech shifts (70%) illustrates the inherent flexibility of Chinese as a recipient language. In contrast to English, which is morphologically constrained by inflections and rigid syntactic roles, Chinese emphasizes semantic function and contextual adaptability. This structural openness enables loanwords to shift categories with ease, as seen in “emo” transitioning from an adjective to a verb (“我emo了”) to represent an emotional experience, or “social” being reappropriated as a verb (“去social”) instead of “socialize”, thereby enhancing communicative efficiency in digital contexts (Jin, 2023). Moreover, the neutralization of plural forms—exemplified by “flag” in “立flag”—reflects Chinese reliance on context or quantifiers for plurality, allowing such terms to assimilate syntactically while preserving symbolic resonance, consistent with Zhuang’s (2010) notion of “cultural reframing” in lexical borrowing.

Equally significant are the translational choices made by speakers, where the dominance of untranslated or hybrid forms (90%) reflects not only a pursuit of semantic precision and linguistic economy, but also the performance of cultural identity. Many loanwords, such as “crush” and “flag”, persist in their original English forms despite the existence of Chinese equivalents, primarily due to the inadequacy of translations to capture the precise, often ephemeral meanings embedded in the original. For instance, “crush” denotes a fleeting, emotionally light infatuation that terms like “暗恋” or “短暂喜爱” fail to fully convey (Wei, 2008), while “flag” resists literal

translation, because “旗帜” lacks its metaphorical association with prediction or challenge. In the fast-paced, brevity-driven environment of online interaction, short English terms like “slay” or “PUA” are also favored for their communicative efficiency, aligning with Jin’s (2023) observation that online language prizes innovation and minimalism. Furthermore, retaining English forms, such as “emo” or “citywalk” functions as a marker of global cultural capital, signaling affiliation with international youth culture and specific subcultural identities (e.g., emo music and urban exploration). In this sense, such terms are not simply linguistic imports but semiotic resources for self-positioning in transnational digital spaces. As Pan (2020) noted, loanwords often fill “cultural voids”, serving communicative needs that local equivalents cannot meet, particularly when tied to domains like hip-hop (“diss”) or emo culture, which lack robust native parallels in Chinese.

These patterns reflect a broader trend toward linguistic hybridization, wherein English and Chinese increasingly co-construct novel expressions in response to the communicative demands of a globalized, digitally mediated environment. Rather than viewing loanwords as mere borrowings, this study demonstrates how they are grammatically reshaped and culturally recontextualized to enhance expressive capacity and identity construction. In particular, youth-driven usage plays a critical role in this process: Young speakers not only adopt and adapt loanwords more readily, but also facilitate their eventual mainstreaming, as seen in the standardization of earlier borrowings like “克隆” (kèlóng, “clone”) or “沙发” (shāfā, “sofa”) (An, 2023). These shifts challenge purist ideologies by positioning lexical contact as a site of innovation, rather than contamination.

Nonetheless, the findings also point to important nuances. Hybrid constructions, such as “立flag” or “被diss” suggest that the boundary between foreign and native forms is porous and fluid, with speakers strategically blending linguistic elements to achieve stylistic or pragmatic effects. In some cases, full localization still occurs, as seen in the adoption of “元宇宙” for “metaverse”, demonstrating that loanword retention is neither inevitable nor uniform. Factors, such as conceptual familiarity, community uptake, and frequency of use all influence whether a term is preserved, adapted, or replaced. In sum, the grammatical and translational behavior of English loanwords in Chinese Internet discourse reflects a sophisticated negotiation among structural features, communicative efficiency, and cultural alignment, ultimately contributing to the emergence of a more fluid, adaptive, and globally interconnected linguistic landscape.

Conclusion

This study systematically examines the grammatical and translational features of 30 English loanwords in Chinese Internet discourse, drawing on data from authoritative sources, including the *2023 Report of Internet Buzzwords*, the *2022 Chinese Inventory*, and *Language Weekly*. By analyzing part-of-speech changes, pluralization patterns, and translation choices, the research addresses two core questions: the grammatical adaptation of loanwords in Chinese and the causes of untranslatability. The findings not only confirm the dynamic nature of language contact in the digital age, but also shed light on the interplay between linguistic structure and cultural context.

Firstly, “grammatical adaptation” is a defining feature of English loanwords in Chinese Internet discourse. Most loanwords (70%) undergo part-of-speech shifts to align with Chinese syntactic norms: Adjectives like “emo” and “social” are reclassified as verbs (“我emo了”, “去social”), and nouns like “PUA” are repurposed as verbs to describe specific behaviors (“他PUA女生”). Additionally, English noun phrases largely abandon plural markers, with singularity becoming the default (e.g., “flag” in “立flag” remains singular regardless of quantity). These

changes stem from three key factors: structural differences between English (inflection-dependent) and Chinese (context-dependent), the pragmatic need for brevity in online communication, and cultural adaptation to align with Chinese usage habits.

Secondly, "translational trends" reveal a strong preference for retaining English loanwords in their original form or as hybrid combinations (90% of the dataset). Half of the loanwords persist in English despite existing Chinese equivalents (e.g., "crush" over "暗恋", "flag" in "立flag" over "旗帜"), while others (e.g., "emo", "diss") resist translation entirely due to the absence of semantic or cultural equivalents in Chinese. This resistance is driven by semantic precision (loanwords conveying nuance lost in translation), linguistic economy (shorter English terms fitting the brevity of online communication), and cultural identity (untranslated terms signaling alignment with global youth culture).

These findings carry practical implications for language learning, teaching, and cross-cultural communication: For students, understanding these patterns enhances proficiency in multilingual online environments, as recognizing how "emo" functions as a verb or why "crush" resists translation helps navigate real-world language use, improving accuracy in expressing emerging concepts and cultural references; for teachers, integrating loanwords into curricula bridges classroom learning with contemporary discourse, and analyzing "立 flag" or "PUA" as case studies can illustrate grammatical flexibility and cultural context, fostering students' ability to decode hybrid language forms; for professionals, mastery of these loanwords ensures effective communication in international or digital workplaces, as terms like "citywalk" and "diss" are increasingly used in global contexts, and familiarity with their adapted forms prevents misinterpretation.

While this study offers insight into loanword adaptation, its findings are limited by the relatively small dataset of 30 terms. Future research could expand the corpus to include newer or regionally specific neologisms, thereby revealing broader trends. Additionally, while this study focused on grammatical and translational aspects, further investigation into semantic shifts (e.g., "strong" evolving to mean "pretentious") and pragmatic functions (e.g., the ironic use of "slay") would enrich our understanding of how these loanwords function in discourse. Exploring the diffusion of Internet-born loanwords into mainstream language across media platforms and generations also presents a promising direction for future work.

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