

Pragmatic Marker Functions of Sentence-Final Parentheses in High-Context Online Communication Patterns

Jiayi He

*School of Liberal Arts, Jiangsu University, Zhenjiang, China
hjy15380730696@163.com*

Abstract. With the popularization of online social media, a linguistic phenomenon has emerged in Chinese online contexts where parentheses are appended to the end of sentences, which may contain text or remain blank. As a pragmatic marker, sentence-final parentheses primarily undertake two major functions: basic information compensation and upper-level pragmatic adjustment. They compensate for the lack of paralinguistic information in pure text communication and adapt to the communicative needs of face maintenance and emotional expression in China's high-context culture. The popularity of sentence-final parentheses reflects the self-adjustment of language itself to adapt to the new media environment, as well as the deep pursuit of emotional connection by online communities in virtual spaces.

Keywords: sentence-final parentheses, high-context culture, online communication, pragmatic markers

1. Introduction

With the popularization of online social media, a unique linguistic phenomenon has appeared in Chinese online contexts: adding one or half a parenthesis at the end of a sentence, with or without text inside. Expressions such as "You are right ()" and "I'm broken (" are commonly seen in the comment sections of platforms like Bilibili and Weibo. This kind of expression both ends the sentence and extends possibilities, and in fact carries rich pragmatic functions and social meanings.

The use of such sentence-final parentheses is marked, forming a "pragmatic marker" in the linguistic sense. In recent years, pragmatic markers have become a hot topic in linguistic research at home and abroad. Pragmatic markers generally refer to components that undertake metapragmatic functions in sentences, are prosodically independent, do not act as syntactic components, and do not participate in the composition of propositional meanings [1]. Its core feature is "non-truth-conditionality", that is, it does not affect the truth or falsity of the objective facts of the sentence. The parentheses or the content inside them provide an additional pragmatic framework for understanding the literal meaning.

Mr. Lü Shuxiang believed that the function of parentheses is "to indicate the explanatory parts in an article" [2]. The sentence-final parentheses discussed in this paper use the punctuation mark of parentheses as a whole as a pragmatic marker. That is, the parentheses themselves do not add the core semantics of the sentence, but only undertake pragmatic functions such as tone adjustment,

attitude implication, and information omission; while the text content inside the parentheses is a supplementary description that can convey additional information such as expressions, actions, and psychological activities. The two work together, making parentheses break through the traditional written language norms and become a stable form of pragmatic markers in online communication.

Therefore, this paper aims to analyze the pragmatic marker characteristics of sentence-final parentheses from a linguistic perspective, combined with the high-context online environment behind this phenomenon, and explore its generation mechanism and functions in online communities.

2. The linguistic environment for the emergence of the sentence-final parentheses phenomenon

In communicative activities, a very important factor that affects and restricts the expression effect is the linguistic environment. "Linguistic environment" is the most basic concept in modern rhetoric. It has special significance in rhetoric, generally referred to as "context" (context, or context of situation, or environment), and can also be called a "communicative field". The linguistic environment is the most important condition necessary for us to realize communicative acts. Therefore, before in-depth exploration of the pragmatic meaning of sentence-final parentheses, it is necessary to connect with the linguistic environment in which they are located [3].

2.1. The performance of high-context communication patterns in cyberspace

The concepts of high-context culture and low-context culture were first proposed by Edward Hall in his book *Beyond Culture* in 1976. Hall argued that in communicative activities in high-context cultures, more information is conveyed through social and cultural backgrounds and situations, or internalized in the thinking and memory of communicators, while relatively little information is carried by explicit codes. People are more sensitive to the subtle differences in the communicative environment. He classified most Asian cultures (with China being the most typical representative), Latin American cultures, and African cultures as high-context cultures, while classifying the cultures of the United States, Germany, Switzerland, and most Nordic countries as low-context cultures [4].

The "context" Hall talked about refers to the context of human communicative activities in traditional societies or the pre-Internet era, that is, the context of the real world. When new media technologies extend human communicative behaviors from the real world to cyberspace and new forms of communication adapted to this emerge, the context characterized by "immediacy" changes accordingly [5]. The social characteristics of the new media era are reflected in the mutual penetration of online and offline, and the deep integration of virtual fields and real life, which makes Hall's context theory still have reference value in the Chinese online environment. The Internet has spawned countless communities based on interests, identities, and values, such as fan groups, game teams, and subcultural circles. The origin of the use of sentence-final parentheses, the two-dimensional community, is also one of these communities. Unique "jargon", emoticons, memes, and specific communication rituals have gradually formed within these communities, constituting a typical high-context communication environment. To adapt to the instant and efficient characteristics of online communication, netizens have developed an extremely rich non-verbal symbol system to compensate for the missing paralinguistic clues such as tone, expression, and body language in pure text communication, and the use of sentence-final parentheses is one of them.

2.2. Metapragmatic awareness and pragmatic markers

Verschueren believed that the process of language use is a continuous process of choice. Before making a language choice, language users will consciously or unconsciously consider from various aspects what kind of language expression form can effectively achieve their communicative purposes according to the needs of context and communicative goals, adjust them accordingly, and finally make an appropriate language choice [6]. Therefore, people's consciousness plays a very prominent role in language choice. Since it occurs before making a language choice, it is called "metapragmatic awareness". All language choices are not made out of thin air; they are guided and regulated by the speaker's metapragmatic awareness to a certain extent. Pragmatic markers are speaker-centered. In other words, the information they carry is the speaker's subjective judgment, and their orientation is the speaker. This judgment can be either for the discourse proposition or for the semantic relationship between propositions [1]. Linguistically, sentence-final parentheses as metapragmatic markers are one of the clearest linguistic traces of metapragmatic awareness, indicating the speaker's monitoring and adjustment of their own discourse, with obvious subjectivity, such as the supplementary explanations inside the parentheses. That is, language is used to comment on the use of language itself, which is clear evidence of the participation of metapragmatic awareness.

3. Functional classification of the pragmatic markers of sentence-final parentheses

The use of sentence-final parentheses is mainly rooted in the annotation function of parentheses in traditional written language. Its pragmatic functions in online communication have gradually broken through the original grammatical norms, with complexity and hierarchy. It can be divided into basic information compensation function and upper-level pragmatic adjustment function, which can be realized separately or superimposed.

3.1. Basic information compensation function

As a function of information compensation for sentences, its core is to construct situations and present oneself. By supplementing information beyond words, it compensates for the lack of paralinguistic information such as actions, expressions, and manners in online communication, making the static text communication on the Internet produce a dynamic and vivid sense of communication in real life. This supplement is mainly divided into two types: one is to describe non-verbal behaviors and virtual presence, supplementing actions and expressions that cannot be conveyed by words; the other is to reveal inner monologues and externalize internal psychological activities.

(1) It's really hot today (wiping sweat) (Source: *Southern Weekly*, Weibo, June 13, 2023)

(2) I'm here (running over cheerfully like a puppy with its tail spinning into a propeller) (Source: Mu Ziqing, Xiaohongshu, July 17, 2025)

(3) I'm here (melting into a puddle of unknown creature and crawling gloomily on the ground) (Source: Mu Ziqing, Xiaohongshu, July 17, 2025)

"Wiping sweat" in the parentheses of example (1) is a typical description of non-verbal behavior. At the level of semantic expression, it is a visual corroboration and sensory reinforcement of the proposition "it's really hot", making the abstract sensory experience concrete and visible. In addition, it greatly enhances the sense of virtual presence, making both parties in communication feel that they are communicating synchronously, transforming one-way text statements into interactive

situations and narrowing the psychological distance between communicators. This is currently the most basic and extensive usage in online communication. Examples (2) and (3) are similar in usage to example (1), but with a more lively tone. They are often used in the comment sections of users' favorite bloggers' updates to express joy and excitement about the bloggers' updates.

In addition to the use of single parentheses, online users have realized cross-scenario practices by skillfully using parentheses and scattered linguistic resources. Example (4) places words representing different emotions and actions in multiple parentheses to form a text, constructing a series of coherent action sequences.

(4) Go work at Uniqlo! (seeing a customer enter the store) (Welcome to Uniqlo, please feel free to browse\)) (continuing to fold clothes with head down) (walking back and forth, walking back and forth) (walking back and forth with folded clothes in arms) (The fitting room is straight ahead and turn right\)) (Let me know if you need anything) (continuing to fold clothes) (dashing over) (Source: Famous Scenes ALL, Weibo, February 14, 2023)

This example vividly constructs the role-playing work scene of a Uniqlo employee through a series of parentheses, from the welcome speech ("Welcome to Uniqlo") to standardized operations ("folding clothes"), to guidance ("The fitting room is straight ahead and turn right") and standby state ("Let me know if you need anything"). Understanding this text requires shared extralinguistic knowledge: the audience must be familiar with the service process, standardized script, and unique work rhythm of fast fashion brands such as Uniqlo. Without this experience, the audience may find the text difficult to understand [7]. In this context, parentheses are more used to enhance the expression effect rather than just for syntactic purposes. Example (4) is more a form of "crazy literature" used to express strong emotions. Some users also take pleasure in creating such texts, producing a large number of similar works such as "Go work at McDonald's" and "Go work at Chayan Yuese", which to a certain extent reflects online users' observation of daily life.

(5) Okay, I will attend. (actually screaming for help in my heart)

"(actually screaming for help in my heart)" in this sentence is a revelation of inner monologue, which externalizes the speaker's internal psychological activities, making the receiver understand that I will attend, but I am actually a little nervous and uneasy inside. This expression maintains basic politeness in social occasions and avoids embarrassment, while conveying strong personal feelings through the supplement in the parentheses. Self-presentation refers to the expression of an image that meets others' standards through words or behaviors by individuals [8]. Social networks provide possibilities for users to present positive self-images or manage negative self-images. In online communication, this expression is especially favored by young people, because it allows communication to maintain a harmonious atmosphere while not losing individuality, aiming to show a sincere and lovely image.

3.2. Upper-level pragmatic adjustment function

Chinese society attaches particular importance to human relations and interpersonal harmony, and face is regarded as a measure of an individual's interpersonal influence and relationship harmony [9]. The use of sentence-final parentheses is precisely a reflection of this emphasis on face. In online communication, they are often used to adjust tone and avoid conflicts or discomfort that may be caused by overly direct expressions. This mitigation function mainly has three types: first, mitigating absolute assertions to make one's words not too firm and strong, thereby reducing communicative risks; second, softening the tone by appending parentheses after criticizing or rejecting the other party, so as not to arouse the other party's antipathy; third, appending parentheses after expressing strong emotions to avoid appearing overly emotional. There is also a more special

usage, that is, using empty parentheses to omit some words that may cause controversy, but at the same time allowing the receiver to understand the implied meaning.

(1) This is simply perfect! (at least in my opinion) (Source: Online user WeChat chat)

(2) Cantonese people wear slippers to work (not really) (Source: *Southern Weekly*, Weibo, June 13, 2023)

In example (1), "at least in my opinion" clarifies the judgment "simply perfect" as a personal evaluation by supplementing subjective limiting conditions. It not only retains the affirmative attitude towards things, but also provides room for different views from the other party, avoiding refutation or resistance caused by overly absolute assertions. "(not really)" in example (2) is a typical metapragmatic negation marker. It does not factually negate the aforementioned proposition "Cantonese people wear slippers to work", because this phenomenon exists to a certain extent. Instead, it makes a teasing retraction or correction to the proposition just stated. Its meaning is: "The generalization I just made may be a bit absolute or exaggerated, don't take it too seriously." This usage cleverly balances the psychological needs of expression: wanting to express a potentially offensive but interesting meme, while wanting to show that one has no malicious intentions, thereby avoiding communicative risks and maintaining harmonious relations, reflecting people's self-protection mechanism. In the Internet era, the generation and spread of buzzwords are extremely fast, which has also brought many negative impacts. People who are not in the same information cocoon may over-interpret another group due to incomplete information. Using "(not really)" can serve as a self-protection mechanism, indicating that one is not expressing a serious opinion or making a promise, thereby avoiding unnecessary disputes and troubles.

(3) I don't think this background matches very well () (Source: Online user WeChat chat)

Example (3) is a negative utterance. The speaker softens the originally direct and blunt critical tone by adding an empty parenthesis at the end of the sentence. The receiver can perceive the speaker's hesitation or euphemism from the empty parenthesis, and understand that it is not an absolute judgment, but a relatively mild personal opinion. This processing method leaves room for subsequent communication and helps maintain a good interactive atmosphere between the two parties. This way of appending parentheses after criticism and rejection buffers the threat to face and makes the transmission of negative evaluations more acceptable.

(4) I really want to find a truck to crash me into another world () (Source: Online user WeChat chat)

Example (4) is an expression of strong negative emotions, but appending parentheses after expressing strong emotions avoids appearing overly emotional. Here, "crash me into another world" is an Internet buzzword with exaggerated and playful connotations, expressing a desire to temporarily escape from reality. The use of empty parentheses subtly restrains this strong and somewhat absurd emotion, implying that the speaker does not really intend to take extreme actions, but just uses this to vent some pressure or exhaustion in the heart, making this seemingly outrageous expression not appear too heavy or abrupt.

There is also a special usage in the tone-mitigating function of parentheses, that is, using "(ry)", "()", "(" etc. to indicate omission. Example (5) is a typical case of this usage.

(5) The actors' acting skills in this movie are quite good () (Source: Online user WeChat chat)

Through the omission of the empty parenthesis in example (5), the speaker affirms the actors' acting skills while implying dissatisfaction or reservations about other aspects of the movie, but does not state it directly. The implied meaning may be that the actors' acting skills are good, but the plot is not good or the picture is not beautiful enough, etc., which actually expresses the intention of not recommending this movie.

However, when there is no text content and only empty parentheses, the same sentence contains multiple meanings, which may also lead to unsuccessful meaning expression. The receiver may not fully understand the speaker's intention, thus forming an obstacle to expression and causing pragmatic failure. It is generally believed that when a speaker uses a grammatically correct sentence in verbal communication, but speaks inappropriately, or uses an improper way of speaking, or expresses in a way that does not conform to habits, or does not consider time, space, the object of communication, the identity, status, and occasion of both parties, and violates the unique cultural values of the target language, resulting in the interruption or failure of communicative acts, obstacles to language communication, and the failure of communication to achieve the expected effect or perfect results, such errors are called pragmatic failures [10]. The premise for the speaker to use parentheses is that both communicators are based on the same cultural background and concepts, can understand the implied meaning, and the use should pay attention to the occasion, otherwise it is easy to be considered unsolemn. Example (6) reflects the phenomenon of pragmatic failure in the use of parentheses.

(6) A: Are you going to watch the sunrise tomorrow?

B: It's quite cold in the morning (

A: Just wear more clothes then.

B: Forget it, I don't want to go.

A: Then you could have just said you didn't want to go. (Source: Online user WeChat chat)

In this dialogue in example (6), speaker A did not understand the intention of not wanting to go omitted in speaker B's parenthesis, which led to a misunderstanding in expression and made the communication disharmonious. Therefore, the use of parentheses also needs to be prudent.

4. Mechanisms and motivations for the realization of the pragmatic marker functions of sentence-final parentheses

4.1. Interaction between high-context culture and online communities

"Language arises with the emergence of society, develops with the development of society, and will die with the death of society. Outside society, there is no language." [11] Language is a social phenomenon. The popularity of sentence-final parentheses relies on the society in which it is located, and unique social phenomena provide the basis for the realization of the pragmatic marker functions of sentence-final parentheses. Chinese culture itself is a typical high-context culture, and a large amount of information in communication relies on shared backgrounds, non-verbal clues, and tacit understanding. Online social interaction has not deviated from this cultural foundation, and has spawned diverse communities based on interests, identities, and values, such as the two-dimensional circle, fan groups, and game communities. Unique expression habits and cultural consensus have gradually formed within these communities, constituting a networked high-context environment. The use of sentence-final parentheses is precisely to convey paralinguistic information beyond words in this environment and achieve further communication. In addition, the popularity of sentence-final parentheses is community-driven. Just as Internet buzzwords spread rapidly among netizens with their concise format and emotional resonance, sentence-final parentheses have also formed a set of conventional usage norms through imitation, transformation, and re-creation within communities.

Therefore, the popularity of sentence-final parentheses is not an inevitable product of high-context culture, but the result of the combined action of three factors. This process also reflects the adaptive evolution of language forms to the ecology of online communities.

4.2. Emotional compensation needs in online communication

Internet buzzwords carry the public's love, hate, joy, and sorrow, and are an alternative national expression [12]. The use of sentence-final parentheses also stems from the deep psychological needs of netizens in communication.

In interpersonal communication research, Berger and Calabrese proposed the famous Uncertainty Reduction Theory in 1975. They believed that the development of interpersonal relationships is deepened through the reduction of uncertainty [13]. In layman's terms, when two strangers meet for the first time and are not familiar with each other, the uncertainty is very high. Then, in order for the relationship to go further, we will continuously and actively or passively show ourselves. In this process, we may also use various social strategies to get closer to each other. As we all know, face-to-face communication is a sensory composite process. Language only carries part of the information, and more meaning and emotion are conveyed through paralinguistic information, including intonation, speech rate, volume, facial expressions, and some body language. Language and paralinguistic information together express the subject's inner thoughts, and even so, there are often misunderstandings and inarticulate expressions. However, the basic interactive interfaces of mainstream online social platforms such as Weibo, Bilibili, WeChat, and Douyin are mainly text. Simple text communication loses the support of paralinguistic information, leading to a certain degree of emotional expression deficit. Simple statements alone may appear cold and alienated.

To make up for this defect, people have created many new social cues to express their emotions, which can be called "emotional compensation" [14]. Common methods include emoticons, kaomoji, Emoji, and the popular meme packs. The popularity of sentence-final parentheses is essentially the same as the birth of these symbols. It converts emotions, attitudes, etc. into textual supplementary explanations through parentheses, thereby providing richer interpretation clues for the receiver in online communication scenarios and effectively reducing understanding deviations caused by information loss. At the same time, this compensation mechanism also reflects netizens' pursuit of real emotional connection in the virtual environment. They hope that the Internet will make communication more convenient, but at the same time, they are unwilling to sacrifice the richness of emotional expression.

5. Conclusion

As a linguistic phenomenon in Chinese online communication, the emergence and popularity of sentence-final parentheses is a natural change of language to adapt to the new media environment under the background of high-context culture.

The evolution of sentence-final parentheses demonstrates the adaptability and creativity of language in community use. As a pragmatic marker, it enhances the vividness and authenticity of emotional expression by supplementing information such as actions, expressions, and psychological activities. In addition, the tone-mitigating function of sentence-final parentheses can maintain the face and harmonious relationship between communicators. The realization of these functions is inseparable from the deep influence of China's high-context culture and the tacit understanding and norms gradually formed by online communities. However, the ambiguity and openness of sentence-final parentheses may also lead to pragmatic failures, especially in cross-group or cross-cultural communication. Therefore, future research can further explore the usage differences and understanding mechanisms of sentence-final parentheses in different online communities, among different generations of users, and in cross-cultural communication.

In short, the phenomenon of sentence-final parentheses is a microcosm of language life in the Internet era. An in-depth understanding of this phenomenon from a linguistic perspective provides important enlightenment for understanding interpersonal interaction in online society.

References

- [1] Feng, G. W. (2004). Semantic and pragmatic analysis of Chinese pragmatic markers. *Modern Foreign Languages*, (1).
- [2] Lü, S. X. (2013). *Lectures on grammar and rhetoric* (p. 311). The Commercial Press.
- [3] Wang, X. J. (1996). On linguistic context. *Journal of Guangxi University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)*, (1).
- [4] Hall, E. (2010). *Beyond culture* (D. K. He, Trans., p. 82). Peking University Press.
- [5] Cheng, M. L. (2013). What is "new media context"? *Journalism & Writing*, (8).
- [6] Verschueren, J. (2003). Understanding pragmatics (G. L. Qian, Trans., pp. 217-219). Tsinghua University Press.
- [7] Zhang, Y., Zhang, L., Ren, W., & Liu, Y. (2024). "(scream)(wriggle)(dismally crawl)"—parentheses as semiotic resources for translanguaging and trans-semiotic practices on Chinese micro-blogging. *Social Semiotics*, 1-18.
- [8] Yao, Q., Ma, H. W., Yan, H., et al. (2014). Analysis of individual behaviors of social network users from a psychological perspective. *Advances in Psychological Science*, (10).
- [9] Li, J., & Song, Y. N. (2004). A study on face theory in Chinese culture. *Rhetoric Learning*, (2).
- [10] Sun, Y., & Dai, L. (2002). Studies on pragmatic failure in China. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, (3).
- [11] Stalin. (1953). *Marxism and problems of linguistics* (p. 20). People's Press.
- [12] Chen, Y. M. (2008). Interpretation of internet buzzwords from a linguistic perspective. *Journal of Central South University of Forestry and Technology (Social Sciences)*, (6).
- [13] Berger, C. R., & Calabrese, R. J. (1975). Some explorations in initial interactions and beyond: Toward a developmental theory of interpersonal communication. *Human Communication Research*, 1, 99-112.
- [14] Dong, C. Y., & Ding, Y. R. (2018). Lean media, rich usage: Emotional compensation in internet-mediated communication. *Journalism & Writing*, (9).