Linguistic Violence and Online Political Communications in China: The Example of 鸡的屁（Ji Di Pi）as an Ironic Spoof of GDP (Gross Domestic Product) in Online Debates around Environmental Issues

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Abstract

This paper discusses the function of linguistic violence in online political communication in China, by using the specific example of 鸡的屁 (pronounced ‘ji di pi’). It first reviews previous studies of online political communication and censorship in China and, in particular, discusses how online discourse and online linguistic violence are defined and analyzed in the literature. It then introduces the example of 鸡的屁 being used as an ironic metaphor for GDP. By using a combination of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) and critical discourse analysis (CDA) as its methodologies, the paper demonstrates that the term is linguistically violent, and analyzes the ways in which the term is used in online discussions. It reveals that the term 鸡的屁 is used to represent GDP but also means ‘the fart of a chicken’, and is thus used to show disagreement with and disdain towards the government’s GDP-centric policies. The paper concludes that linguistically violent terms such as 鸡的屁 demonstrate Chinese net-users’ creativities in online discourses and their use of language to resist government policies that fail to serve their interests. However, the paper also shows the limitations of linguistic violence of this kind in that, despite the fact that net users criticize and attack the government linguistically by using this and other terms, such criticism has not changed the environment of censorship surrounding online discourse and has not led to changes at policy level.

Key words: Online political communication, China, linguistic violence, environmental debates, GDP

Introduction

Statistics from the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) show that by the end of 2016 53.2% of the Chinese population used the Internet (CNNIC, 2017). With half of the population now being online, the Internet is used as a space where individuals are not only entertained but also gather and express their opinions on political issues and public affairs in order to challenge and communicate with the Chinese government. Zheng and Wu (2005: 553) state that the Internet is increasingly used by Chinese net-users in political communications ‘as a new battlefield where the state and social groups fight for power and interest’, and so occasionally can influence state politics and policy practices. Other academic studies also explore political communications in this ‘battlefield’ by investigating how members of the Chinese public use the Internet to communicate their needs and fight for their rights, and how the Chinese government controls, censors and engages with the public through the Internet (Zheng, 2008; Zhang and Lin, 2014; Mou, Atkin and Fu, 2011; Lewis, 2013). The study of online political communication in China is important because it not only
contributes to our understanding of new media formats, namely whether the new media can empower the public to communicate with the government or not, but also to our understanding of the changing dynamic of political communications in China, namely the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of debate between net-users and the government. Recent studies demonstrate the sense of dynamic as well as struggle for the communications in taking place in the Internet arena. Some show that government control over the Internet has been increasing, with various policies, methods and mechanisms having been put in place to ensure political control over the online space (King, Pan and Roberts, 2013; Li, 2010; Tai, 2014). In contrast, others explore the emergence of online public debates and opinions within the controlled online environment in China, looking at the issues, events, and topics discussed and at the interactions between Chinese net-users and the government (Yang, 2003; Zheng and Wu, 2005; Yang, 2009; Meng, 2010).

This paper shares academic interests with these studies in examining the political communications taking place in this online ‘battlefield’ between Chinese net-users and the Chinese government. However, the focus of this paper is more specific, in that it investigates the use of linguistic violence in online political communications within the censored environment in terms of how it is used and what it means for political debate. Academic interest in language usage in online political communications in China is growing (Meng, 2011; Sullivan, 2012; Xu, 2012), reflecting the status of such language as an indication of public discourses which demonstrate the dynamics and creativities of public debate. Such study can also offer insights into the nature of relations and interactions between the government and the public in online political communications. This research contributes to emerging research around language usage by questioning the nature of the political meanings and effects of online linguistic violence in China’s online communications. It argues that linguistic violence has been widely applied in online political communications, primarily in the format of attacking other users and the government through direct swearing and the use of humiliating terms. A well-explored example is ‘grass mud horse’ (cao ni ma 草泥马), a term which implies the meaning ‘fuck your mother’. Scholars including Wallis (2015), Meng (2011), and Sullivan (2012) have analyzed how this ironic and rhetorical term has been used by Chinese net-users in political discussions to attack their government’s censorship of online language. This paper expands on their studies by identifying a similar example of this kind: 鸡的屁 (ji di pi), a term that implies GDP (Gross Domestic Product). In China’s online discussions around environment issues, this term is widely used by users who wish to criticize the Chinese government’s GDP-centric policies and the environmental damage they cause. The term 鸡的屁 is chosen to answer the research question, not only because it is widely used, but also because its emergence and use have occurred in online discussions around environmental issues, which are among China’s most debated online public concerns. By studying 鸡的屁, this paper not only references a popular term that many Chinese net-users have chosen to use in online debates, but it also addresses an area of concern with which many people have chosen to engage.

To outline the above argument, this paper will firstly define the context for political communication in China in terms of the current situation of online political debate and censorship. It will then discuss how online language and discourse in China have been studied, by looking at what has been revealed so far and what further work can be done. It will then illustrate the empirical example of 鸡的屁. To study this term, this paper will first discuss its context, namely the widely engaged environmental debates in China’s online platforms and the creation of 鸡的屁 within this context. It will then select an exemplary text containing 鸡的屁 for analysis, using SFL and CDA as methods for discussing its political
meanings and effects. The paper argues that terms like 鸡得屁 display the creativities of Chinese net-users and their criticisms of China’s online political communications. The purposes of users in employing such a term are to ridicule the Chinese government’s policies and to express public anger and contention. The political effects it creates are the demonstration of public opinion and the development of ways to express critical opinions through the Internet.

**Online Political Communication and Censorship in China**

Foster (2010:1) argues that the ‘central theme’ when studying political communication is ‘how politicians seek to communicate their political messages’. For this research the idea of political communication is more than this. It refers to the exchange of political messages between politicians and the public, but it also identifies that political messages are not only delivered from the government to the public, but also from the ordinary public to the government, in seeking to pass on their political messages. It is this exchange process that this research refers to as ‘political communication’; both the public and the government express their opinions and are heard while interacting with each other. In the case of China, because of the one-party political system, the sense of individual ‘politicians’ is much weaker than is the sense of a strong, single-party government. Thus, political communications often occur between the one-party government (the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime) and the Chinese public. In this process, the Chinese government delivers its political messages through official documents, party media, regulations, and policies, and then the Chinese public reacts to these messages. But the ways in which the public can react to the government are few, since protests, public talks, campaigns and petitions, and information regarding such public behaviors, are still carefully controlled in China (Ho, 2001; Li, 2010; Zhang, 2011). Under such circumstances, online political communication, namely individuals using the Internet as their primary platform to debate political issues, communicate with others about their political opinions, and challenge and criticize the Chinese government, has become one of the most important ways for the public to react to the government (Yang, 2009). By studying the topics of content and the discourse used in online communications it is possible to map the political messages passing from the public to the government, in terms of the nature of their interests, needs and concerns.

The public opinions generated by Chinese net-users in reaction to their government’s political messages, and the linguistic violence they use when expressing such opinions, are the primary focuses of this paper, but before discussing them it is necessary to understand the political messages delivered by the Chinese government. Such messages are countless, and they relate to all aspects of the political, social, and cultural lives of citizens, and to the current affairs of the country. Among these messages, political control and censorship are contextual in nature, in that, by controlling online public debates and discourses that threaten the core interests of the CCP government, the Chinese government, through regulations, policies, and censorship, creates the context for online political communications in the country. The Chinese government has established a regulatory framework to control the physical structure of the network, and thus access to the Internet network can only be provided by government-approved companies. It also regulates and controls online service

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1 Of course, Chinese governments have different ministries, organs, officers and local governments; but unlike in the party politics of the West, all these players will need in principle to follow the party line of the central government. They may have autonomy to make policies and regulations, but this autonomy is controlled within the one-party system.
providers, including Internet business companies and website administrators, so that only approved service providers can establish online sites, and net-users can only access such sites. In addition, it regulates, constantly monitors, and censors online information (China Business Review, 2016). If opinions published through certain websites are regarded by the monitoring bodies as sensitive or harmful to the regime, they are removed, and access to the websites can be blocked and accounts on those websites closed down (Goldsmith and Wu, 2008; Wang and Hong, 2010; Harwit and Clark, 2001; Ji, 2014; Lee and Liu, 2016). Within this framework, all service providers, websites and individual net-users are also encouraged to self-censor the content generated online. Through such a framework, the political message the Chinese government intends to deliver is that it encourages the development of information technology and the economic benefits it brings, but it discourages political resistance expressed through online debates (Kalathil and Boas, 2003; Qiu, 2004; Zheng, 2008). It informs the Chinese public that, when they are debating political issues or reacting to other political messages delivered by the Chinese government, their discussions, opinions, and language are monitored by the government, and their opinions and language can be censored if the monitoring body regards them as sensitive or challenging to the political agenda of the CCP.

But what remains unclear is what the Chinese government and monitoring bodies define as ‘sensitive information’ and how they come to such definitions; the government does not specifically define what will and will not be censored, but rather the monitoring and regulatory bodies have the power to make case-by-case subjective judgments on control and censorship. It could be the case that monitoring and regulatory bodies regard all online debates that criticize and challenge the government’s behaviors and policies as sensitive, and thus remove them. However, it could also be that these bodies decide to be more relaxed in their control, allowing some level of alternative opinions and political discussions that question certain government behavior and policies to remain on online platforms.

Online Political Communication in China and Linguistic Violence

In clarifying the existence of the censored environment, this research does not see censorship itself as the only aspect of online political communication in China that is worth discussing; rather, its intention is to draw this context clearly. Once the censorship environment is clarified it is possible to study the online debates generated by Chinese net-users within the following contexts: those topics and events that can still be discussed by them, the language that is used, and their political effects and significance. In addressing this, Yang (2009: 1) argues that there are ‘misleading images of the Chinese Internet’ in which ‘because of governmental Internet control, Chinese net-users do nothing but play’. Such a misconception largely ignores the ‘real struggle’ of Chinese people. In fact, online political communications in China happen on a daily basis, and Yang (2009: 2) describe them as ‘participatory’ and ‘contentious’. In terms of their being ‘participatory’, he emphasizes that it is the active engagement and participation of individual users that creates the dynamic of online political communication. He observes that, by using the Internet as their central medium, users can participate in collective activism, such as online protests (which potentially can develop into offline protests), campaigns and petitions, and they can also engage in online social and political discussions (Yang, 2009). So, although political control is the contextual message, online political communication has not been totally disabled because of it. When observing the nature of online political communication, Yang suggests that it is ‘contentious’, with the roles and behaviors of the government as the primary sources of contention. As the Chinese
government is constantly demonstrating its political interests, opinions and concerns through its policies, decisions, party media, and other actions, such information and behaviors are seen, reacted to and then debated by net-users. The purpose of such reactions and discussions is not necessarily to seek consensus with the government or to express consensual ideas to praise the government. Rather, contentious political interests, needs, and agendas are expressed and discussed in online platforms to announce the existence of conflicting interests and needs to those put forward by the government. Contention can be expressed through activism, such as protesting against certain government policies, or in more ‘daily’ (Yang, 2009:3) way through online political discussions. By using language as a medium, messages are delivered through words, phrases, and sentences to express what Chinese net-users do not like, do not agree with, or do not need. In this way, online political communications become the process by which members of the public can react to the government’s political messages and express their own views.

Academic studies have also been conducted to study the dynamic, participatory, and contentious nature of online political communication in China. Among these, many scholars have focused on the events, topics, and issues that have been discussed by Chinese net-users. For example, a number of scholars (Yang, 2009; Wong, 2003; Yang and Calhoun, 2007; Stalley and Yang, 2006; Huang and Yip, 2012) find that environmental issues, for example, pollution and overconsumption of natural resources, are among the most debated and communicated issues in China’s online debates. Such issues are both political and contentious because they often involve strong criticism of the Chinese government’s environment-related policies and actions. They argue that the government’s actions are environmentally unfriendly and damage the living conditions of Chinese people, and that they fail to meet their needs for a cleaner environment. Debates of this kind are what Meng (2010: 501) describes as ‘diverse activities taking place in Chinese cyberspace… which contribute to a more inclusive communication environment without pursuing overt political agendas’. By saying that overt political agendas are not being pursued, Meng means that debates such as those around environmental issues do not aim to totally oppose the CCP regime, but rather are aimed at expressing concerns within the political system, and hoping to discuss them with other users and gain government responses. But the fact that they do not aim at changing the political regime in China does not reduce their political significance. Debates of this kind are still participatory and contentious and concerns and interests debated in them are close to the publics’ daily lives and immediate worries. They highlight a range of diverse issues that are of concern to the Chinese public, and which they are actively pursuing in order to communicate with the government.

Besides studying topics and events that are discussed by Chinese net-users, focus has also been put on online discourses in terms of the language used when expressing contentious opinions and their political effects. Studies of this kind are fewer in number than those focusing on topics and events, but are gaining increasing attention. This is because more and more scholars have realized the importance of online discourse. As Xu (2012:15) suggests: ‘[T]oday, public netizen discourse has become a source for effecting change, personally, socially, and legislatively’, and ‘[O]nline discourse has become so popular even the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has begun to listen to the comments, suggestions, and complaints put forward by their netizens’. This means online discourse not only forms opinions and arguments that net-users generate around certain topics and events, but that the discourse itself, and the language that constructs the discourse, also contains political messages, and thus is equally important as a topic for study. Xu identifies typical examples of online discourse in China, such as ‘pantomime, parody, and satire’, which ‘aim at undermining the
efficacy of authoritative discourse’ (Xu, 2012:18). There is also ‘newspeak’, by use of which Chinese net-users ridicule the ‘official discourse by the government’ that is ‘quite cliché[d], procedural, and seriously divorced from reality’ and then ‘abuse’ it with ‘contempt and derision’ (Xu, 2012:19). By using these discourses, language becomes the medium through which Chinese net-users’ creativities and contentions can be displayed, as they organize or reorganize language to create new meanings for discourses that are different from, or even opposite to, the official ones used by the government. In this way, official communications from the authorities are targeted and undermined and abused by online discourses. Xu’s studies demonstrate that when Chinese net-users disagree with official discourses or see them as problematic, they express their disagreement not only through discussing the events or behaviors associated with them, but also by playing with the discourses themselves. It is therefore important to study the language and discourses closely, as they offer new perspectives for understanding online political communications in China.

When observing online discourses in China, a phenomenon that has been specifically identified by scholars is appearance of major online linguistic violence. Such violence refers to behavior that uses language in online discussions as a weapon to attack, humiliate, or harm others (Jackman, 2002; Andersson and Trudgill, 1990). The most common way to commit linguistic violence is through swearing at other net-users in debates where conflict occurs or through swearing at the government when unhappy about government behaviors. By these means, other net-users and the government are attacked through words, phrases, or sentences and the emotions of disapproval, hatred, and contention are broadcast. When analyzing linguistic violence, scholars like Yang (2003: 473) argue that ‘online discourse can be very uncivil’, while Li (2010:73) believes that such communications have the ‘tendency to sensationalism nurtured by plebeian curiosity and parochial imagination’. It is clear that these two scholars see online linguistic violence as problematic, by stating that by using linguistic violence, online discourse becomes ‘uncivil’; and when online debates involve linguistic violence, they display ‘sensationalism’, ‘plebeian’, and display ‘parochial imaginations’.

However, not all scholars share the same agenda as Li and Yang. For example, Meng’s (2011) study of the use of ‘grass mud horse’ (cao ni ma, 草泥马) reflects a different perspective. She identifies the term ‘grass mud horse’, widely used by Chinese net-users in debates, and finds that this word represents a type of animal but is pronounced as ‘cao ni ma’, which is very similar to the Chinese pronunciation of 操你妈 (‘fuck your mother’). Thus ‘grass mud horse’ is a form of linguistic violence, because although it can be used to refer to a kind of animal, it can also be a very humiliating term; when users apply the term in such a way they are using it as a ‘weapon’ to attack and harm. By this process of attacking through the use of a humiliating word, violence is committed linguistically. However, rather than regarding ‘grass mud horse’ as uncivil or plebeian, Meng studies the causes of its use and the political meanings behind it. She finds that the appearance of the word used in such contexts occurred under circumstances of tightened government control of online political communications, when a campaign against ‘low and vulgar practices on the Internet’ was announced in 2009 (Meng, 2011: 44). This campaign located humiliating words like 操你妈 (‘fuck your mother’) and removed them from online spaces because they were regarded as vulgar, and as polluting the online environment. To resist such censorship, the word ‘grass mud horse’ was introduced to replace 操你妈, with the intention of ridiculing the government’s intention of ‘cleaning’ the online environment by stopping individuals from freely choosing their own language. By using the written word for ‘grass mud horse’, it becomes harder for the state monitoring body to detect it and treat it as a vulgar term, since it can have alternative meanings, one ‘innocent’, the other abusive. The meaning of the word is
entirely related to the context of the expressions and debates around it, which the monitoring mechanisms used may not be able accurately to identify. Rather than totally denying the value of linguistic violence as other studies have done, Meng’s study shows that it is both possible and necessary to study it in terms of its political meanings and effects, and similar examples can be found in Sullivan (2012). Humiliating terms like ‘grass mud horse’ and the use of it for the purpose of violent attack, are used by Chinese net-users to react to and ridicule government censorship, to show their understanding of such vulgar words, and to demonstrate their creativity in online communications. Terms of this type may be vulgar and unpleasant to read and may create violence and chaos but this does not reduce their political significance, and thus they are worth examining.

The research detailed in this paper agrees with Meng and Sullivan’s approach, which does not see online linguistic violence forms as ‘uncivil’ discourses, but rather argues that it is necessary to study the political context behind the appearance of online linguistic violence in order to understand its meanings in online political communication. To further develop and contribute to such an approach, this research introduces and analyzes the term ‘鸡的屁 (ji di pi)’, which is a similar to ‘grass mud horse’ in its significance, and which will offer new perspectives for the understanding of the use of linguistic violence in China’s online platforms.

鸡的屁 and Online Political Communications around Environmental Issues in China

The example of ‘grass mud horse’ is used by scholars to discuss how net-users react to the Chinese government’s censorship of online language. Their primary objective is to demonstrate the Chinese government’s intention to control online political communication and net-users’ reactions towards and resistance to such control. Their studies reflect the contextual message of political censorship and control in China, which this research has already identified. But as also suggested, censorship is not the only political message being delivered by the Chinese government, nor is it the only political message that Chinese net-users react to. The issue around censorship attracts much academic attention because of its contextual nature, but this does not mean that studies should be limited to it. The dynamics of online political communication in China mean that discussions are not restricted by or to the issues of censorship, but are more widely oriented towards many other issues, including the environment. Thus it is necessary to conduct further academic studies to explore the political meanings and effects of other examples of online linguistic violence in China: those that react to other political messages and are meaningful but have not yet been discussed. The example this research illustrates, as already introduced, is the term 鸡的屁. The following section will explain the context behind the term and by applying discourse analysis will discuss its political meanings and effects.

In her study of the use of ‘grass mud horse’ Meng (2011:43) argues that the appearance of the term occurred ‘spontaneously; nobody knows who coined the term first’ but, once it appeared, it was quickly adopted and spread by other net-users. The same situation applies to the term 鸡的屁. It is not possible to trace the first appearance of the term, but this does not prevent it from being widely used. The word 鸡的屁 in writing refers to ‘the fart of a chicken’, while in pronunciation it is equivalent to the English pronunciation ‘ji di pi’ or ‘GDP’ (gross domestic product), the ‘main measure’ of ‘economic growth based on the value
of goods and services produced during a given period’ for a country (National Statistics of the UK: 2016). Therefore, when  is used it may refer to the fart of a chicken but can also refer to the growth of GDP. The context of the text in which it is used determines the meaning. When the word refers to GDP, the pronunciation of ‘ji di pi’ is heard or implied, but its meaning has been redefined to present GDP as the fart of a chicken, and in this way it ridicules the public authorities’ GDP-driven policies and decisions.

The term  is often used in debates related to environmental protection in China. The context for the creation of the word is that, for a long time, economic growth in China has been central to the government’s domestic development policies, and increasing GDP, as the crucial measurement of economic growth, has become a crucial aim of the authorities. But placing GDP at the center of government policy has been at the expense of the environment, since it leads to the over-consumption of natural resources and to pollution (Edmonds: 1999; Wong and Chan 1996; Chen, 2010). As demonstrated in Ho’s study (2001: 899), in the years since economic reform in China the country’s economy has achieved rapid growth but has also created ‘rapidly increasing air, water, and noise pollutions’. Chinese citizens, he argues, have taken to stating their ‘environmental complaints’, because ‘environmental problems affect their lives directly’. In the 16 years since Ho’s observations, debates around the struggle between the environment and economic growth have continued to constitute a major aspect of China’s political communications. This is primarily because, although the Chinese government has introduced many regulations and installed various mechanisms to protect the environment, economic development still has priority over environmental protection, and thus the environment is still being damaged. As a result, and as more and more people’s daily lives are or will be affected by worsening environmental problems, public attention is increasingly drawn to such issues and the way in which they conflict with economic development policy. Thus the environment remains one of the areas of public discussion that attracts most attention, and around which people wish to express their opinions. Attention from both the government and the public means that debates about environmental issues are of public interest in China. Moreover, since Ho’s 2001 study, the spread of the Internet has meant that debates of this type have moved online and became both more visible and more frequent. By using the Internet as the platform for debate, formerly occasional and private environmental discussions have become daily and public. The public are constantly being fed information about new environmental problems in China and are being exposed to the opinions of others about these problems, and access to the internet means that they are now able to engage simultaneously in discussions around these issues. The public’s interests, together with the availability of online platforms, make online debates around environmental issues a significant part of daily online political discussions (Yang and Calhoun, 2007; Stalley and Yang, 2006; Sima, 2011).

The emergence of the term  in online discussion around environment issues has occurred in this context. The application of  is not aimed at avoiding censorship, because GDP is not normally seen as a sensitive term; rather, it is aimed at the government, which places GDP at the center of its policies, and its GDP-centric polices which conflict with the public’s desire for a cleaner environment. Associating GDP with the fart of a chicken undermines and ridicules the notion of GDP, intimating that it is as meaningless as a fart. In this way, a concept that the government has defined as crucial to its policy (GDP) has been problematized and redefined through a humiliating label. Such a label and its application can be characterized as linguistically violent in nature because by calling GDP a chicken’s fart a strong intention to humiliate and attack is indicated, showing that the users of the term label the pursuit of growth in GDP as inhuman, filthy, stinking and insignificant.
Such an aim becomes clear by analyzing the term within a text. To conduct the analysis, the following text is selected from a Sina microblog comment posted to discuss the building of an oil-refining industrial plant in the city of Kunming, Yunnan province, the products of which include paraxylene. The context is that, in 2013, local people in Kunming were informed that an oil refinery and industrial plant was about to be built in the local area, following a decision made by central and local government. The Chinese government used party newspapers to inform the public that it saw the plant as a part of its national resource strategy aimed at addressing the country’s resource shortage and transportation problems. The plant contained pipelines that would bring oil and gas from Burma to Kunming to be refined locally to supply petrol to meet demand in the south-west of China. The local government regarded the plant as economically beneficial for Kunming’s local GDP growth, since it would produce not only petrol, but also byproducts, such as paraxylene (Kunming Daily, 2010; Li, 2013; Shen, 2013; Li, 2012). But at the same time the public was informed by an article entitled ‘Why Does Kunming Move in Reverse?’ published by two non-party media2 through their Sina microblog accounts (Sina is the biggest interactive site in China3), which suggested that potentially the plant would be environmentally unfriendly. It was stated that the industrial discharge from the oil-refining process and the toxicity of the paraxylene production process would damage local waterways and air quality, and that the plant would affect the local environment and people’s health. This reported potential environmental damage caused huge public concern about the plant. In order to react to the government’s decision to build the plant, as well as to express and communicate public concerns and needs, online political communications were engaged under the microblog posts, through the comments posted in reply, and through ‘retweets’. The debate was huge at the time, and was significant in China’s environmental debates, not only because it was engaged in by a great number of contributors, but also because it grew to such an extent that the Chinese government had to admit the importance of the issue. The China Environment Report (2014), the national official newspaper owned by China’s Ministry of Environmental Protection, named the Kunming case as one of the ten landmark events of 2013.

A text posted on Sina says:

Totally against, we do not need 鸡的屁, we need healthy environment, those people who are in powers, (fuck) your mother, you ruined and harmed the next generation of our Yunnan people for your own careers.’

In the posts, comments, and retweets in the two accounts, the term 鸡的屁 appeared 49 times, and its first appearance was in the above-mentioned text. To analyze this text, this research applies a methodological approach which combines SFL and CDA. The reason for using this combination is that it offers a comprehensive tool which ‘begins with SFL, and is extended by CDA’, and demonstrates ‘the roles that language plays in exerting, reflecting and reinforcing power’ (Young and Fitzgerald, 2006: 23). SFL helps to explain power in discourse and is conducted before CDA to offer a more ‘objective’ approach to the analysis of particular discourses (Young and Fitzgerald, 2006: 16). SFL identifies the ‘actors, goals, processes, and circumstances’ in a discourse, so that ‘who and what is involved in different … actions and different states’ (Young and Fitzgerald, 2006: 16) can be indicated. The

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2 The two non-party media which reported the environmental damage of the oil refining plant are ‘China Capital Reports Net (CCRN)’, an account belonging to a non-party news website established by Beijing Chuang Ye Zhi Cheng Management and Consultation Limited Liability Company and ‘21st Century Economy, belonging to a non-party newspaper owned by Gunagzhou 21st Media Ltd.

3 Statistic from Alexa (2016) showing that Sina microblog is the most visited interactive in China.
‘actors’ are those participants who are ‘doing action’ in the discourse, and the ‘goals’ are those who are ‘being acted on’. The actions taking place between actors and goals are referred to as ‘processes’, and the term ‘circumstances’ describes the ‘when, where, and how of process’ (Young and Fitzgerald, 2006: 16). By identifying these aspects, SFL offers a description of the discourses being analyzed by showing how the term 鸡的屁 is involved in the expressions. It can reveal whether the term is used to refer to actors or goals, is a process, or has some other function. Following this analysis, CDA is used to question what the discourse means for the debated topic, namely the discussions around the oil-refining plant and public concern about potential environmental damage. This combined approach will enable the interpretation of the functions and effects of the term.

Chart 1 SFL Analysis of the Retweet in Sina Microblog Containing the term 鸡的屁

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actors</th>
<th>we, we, those people who, you</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Processes</td>
<td>totally against, do not need, need, are in, fuck, ruined, harmed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>鸡的屁, healthy environment, power, your mother, the next generation of our Yunnan people, for your own careers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Circumstances</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In this text there are two camps of actors, one being ‘we’ and the other being ‘those people’ and ‘you’. The actions and relations (processes and goals) associated with ‘we’ are ‘do not need 鸡的屁’ and ‘need’ for a ‘healthy environment’. The actions and relations constructed for ‘you’ are ‘in power’ and ‘ruined’ and ‘harmed’ the ‘Yunnan people’, for their ‘own careers’. By establishing these two camps and ascribing to each a position and behaviors, this text clearly shows that ‘we’ and ‘Yunnan people’ are opposite to ‘those people’ who are ‘in power’. What ‘we’ need and what ‘those people’ need is totally different. Of the two camps, ‘those people’ are constructed with more power than ‘we’, because ‘our Yunnan people’ is the goal of ‘those people’s’ actions of ‘ruin’ and ‘harm’, which suggest ‘we’ are the victims of ‘those people’, while ‘we’ has not been constructed with the power to have ‘those people’ as their goals. In other words, ‘those people’ can have power over us, but ‘we’ are not given such powers. Instead, the power ‘we’ have is to rebel against ‘those people’s’ behaviors by expressing what ‘we’ think about their behaviors, particularly by stressing that ‘we’ ‘need’ a ‘healthy environment’, but ‘do not need 鸡的屁’. In this text, the term ‘鸡的屁’ appears as a goal for the actor ‘we’ through a process of ‘do not need’, which clearly shows that ‘鸡的屁’ does not belong to the ‘we’ camp. This puts ‘鸡的屁’ on the same side as ‘those people’, because both are what ‘we’ have argued against through this text.

By bringing CDA into the analysis it can be seen, within the context of the whole debate, that what this text suggests is that by building the Kunming oil refinery the government in power is being driven by GDP and is thus ruining the environment and harming the interests and needs of the people of Yunnan and the next generation. What Yunnan people need is a healthy environment, not the GDP that is created by industrial development. In this debate, the opinions that are expressed through the use of this term challenge an unquestioned area, defining as they do the government’s role as having a negative impact on the public and clearly opposing the government’s decision regarding the oil refinery. The function of 鸡的屁 is not only to express the opinion that the Kunming locals ‘do not need’ the plant, but also to
create a sense of disdain towards it. In addition, the use of this linguistically humiliating term raises the level of skepticism towards GDP-driven actions, thereby enhancing individual problematization and the expression of self-determined needs and concerns.

However, it should be noted that, although individuals use the term 鸡的屁 to ridicule and attack the government’s GDP-driven policy which lies behind the Kunming plant, it is still the government that is construed as having the power in these discourses. In this case, the power is negative, since it harms people, and it remains the case that they have the power to negatively impact on people’s lives. In contrast, ‘our people’, were not construed to have the power to impact the decision of the government. Thus, although individuals problematize the GDP as the fart of a chicken, this text still construes the people as being harmed by the public authorities and as not being able to do much to change the situation other than humiliating the government through their use of language. The public communicated what they needed and did not need, but did not actually act or suggest any actions to oppose the government’s harmful decision. While outside the discourse, although large scale online political communications have been created which criticize and argue against the government’s decision over the plant, as well as its economy-first, environment-second polices, the decision was still not changed and the building of the plant was carried out despite the disagreement. What was worse, in August 2015 the public were informed by a non-party newspaper that the plant had been fined by China’s Ministry of Environmental Protection because it had not put in place the environmental protection measures it had promised (South Urban Post: 2015). Moreover, the fine imposed was negligible and the plant continued to operate without any environment-protecting measures being put in place. The public’s environmental concerns have not been responded to, and worries over the environment only continue. This shows the limitations of problematization: individuals can attack the government linguistically, but such attacks do not have much influence on how the government treats the public.

Discussions and Conclusion

This paper aims to study the political meanings and effects of linguistic violence in China’s online political communications. By using the term 鸡的屁 as an example, this paper finds that linguistic violence is not only used online to attack the government’s intention to censor online discourses as suggested by academic discussions of the term ‘grass mud horse’. Such linguistic tactics can also appear in the format of ironic spoofs used by net-users to express and reinforce their disagreements with government decisions and actions. The term 鸡的屁 in particular has been associated with online environmental debates in China, this being one of most debated and crucial topics in the country’s online political communications. By using the term, Chinese net-users attack the Chinese government’s GDP-centric approach, an approach that sees environmental protection as less important than economic development. By analyzing this term, it is possible to identify the strong emotions of disapproval and disdain about the government’s GDP-based policies which are felt by users of the term. And by analyzing 鸡的屁 within a text, the users’ intentions to attack, humiliate, and ridicule the Chinese government’s policies and actions become clearer and more obvious.

Although there is no evidence to show that by using the term 鸡的屁 Chinese net-users have been able to influence the government to make real changes at policy level, the research does present a vivid illustration of the public’s opinions, and provides evidence of ways in which net-users react to the Chinese government’s political messages. This paper thus concludes that online linguistic violence is politically meaningful and can create effects within China’s
online political communications. It is a mechanism that Chinese net-users employ to express their political concerns, to display their emotions, and to indicate their interests and needs. Such expressions involve swearing, attacking and humiliating, but in an environment where political debates can be censored and controlled, these expressions are powerful demonstrations of the existence of political communications in China’s online environment.

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