

## The Diminished Online Persona: A Semantic Change of Chinese Classifier Mei on Weibo

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**Abstract :** This study investigates a newly emerged usage of Chinese numeral classifier mei (个) in the cyberspace. In modern Chinese grammar, mei as a classifier should occupy the pre-nominal position, and its valid accompanying nouns are restricted to small, flat, fragile inanimate objects rather than humans. To examine the semantic change of mei, two types of data from Weibo.com were collected. First, 500 mei-included Weibo posts constructed a corpus for analyzing this classifier's word order distribution (post-nominal or pre-nominal) as well as its accompanying nouns' semantics (inanimate or human). Second, considering that mei accompanies a remarkable number of human nouns in the first corpus, the second corpus is composed of mei-involved Weibo IDs from users located in first and third-tier cities (n=8 respectively). The findings show that in the cyber community, mei frequently classifies human-related neologisms at the archaic post-normal position. Besides, the 23 to 29-year-old females as well as Weibo users from third-tier cities are the major populations who adopt mei in their user IDs for self-description and identity expression. This paper argues that the creative usage of mei gains popularity in the Chinese internet due to a humor effect. The marked word order switch and semantic misapplication combined to trigger incongruity and jocularity. This study has significance for research on Chinese cyber neologism. It may also lay a foundation for further studies on Chinese classifier change and Chinese internet communication.

**Keywords :** Chinese classifier, humor, neologism, semantic change

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