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**Elder Biaoqing: investigating the indexicalities of memes on Chinese social media**

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**Abstract:** This paper adopts a digital ethnographic approach to analyze concrete communicative practices with Elder Biaoqing, a type of graphic semiotic resources comparable to emojis and memes, typically designed for and used by older people on Chinese social media. Following Silverstein’s theorizing, it reveals the emergence of multiple indexicalities of Elder Biaoqing that are a result of several social factors: the growth of an older population online, people’s reflections on their communicative needs engendered by specific social facts, and people’s ethno-metapragmatics. The study of Elder Biaoqing reveals users’ agency in creating semiotic resources, the inequality between digital natives and digital migrants, and age anxiety in Chinese society. The findings invite a re-imagination of social facts – the existence of an online–offline nexus and a re-thinking of theories for sociocultural research in a digital era – ontological perspectives on multimodal resources and digital infrastructures, developments of the theoretical perspective of indexicality, and a total-semiotic-fact approach to digitally mediated social interaction.

**Keywords:** digital ethnography; ethno-metapragmatics; online–offline nexus; semiotic resources

## 1 Introduction

On Chinese social media, emojis, in addition to smileys, also include emoticons, stickers, and memes, which are collectively named Biaoqing (表情, literally meaning ‘facial expression’). Biaoqing featuring a certain figure or theme often come in a set, known as a Biaoqing package (表情包).

Biaoqing is a relatively new phenomenon that came into being with the popularization and development of smartphones, cellular networks, and social media, especially instant messaging apps (Wang 2016; Zheng 2016). Biaoqing fall in the...
category of graphic semiotic resources. The majority of studies on Biaoqing regard them as reflections of certain problems becoming manifest in Chinese society, such as the growing anxiety and feelings of insecurity of young people (Jiang and Li 2017), lack of political participation (Zhang 2016), and growing inequality (Zheng 2016).

Current research on online graphic semiotic resources shows a number of shortcomings. First, many studies take Biaoqing per se as their topic, and consequently are mainly confined to textual analysis on the micro level (e.g., De Seta 2018; Ge and Herring 2018) or to a simplistic mapping of characteristics of Biaoqing to social issues on the macro level (e.g., Jiang and Li 2017; Zheng 2016). Second, many graphic resources are regarded as static and non-polysemic (e.g., Jiang et al. 2015; Miller et al. 2017). Third, the dynamism or meaning-uncertainty of graphic resources is often not considered (e.g., Ptaszynski et al. 2010; Walther and D’Addario 2001). Fourth, user practices with graphic resources are not given due empirical attention (e.g., Davison 2012; Park et al. 2014). Fifth, the role and function of users’ agency in the development and change of social meanings of semiotic resources are underexposed (e.g., Duque 2018; Stark 2018). There are, of course, studies that do deal with the above lacunae – see, for example, Highfield and Leaver (2016) on meaning-making uncertainty, Wiggins and Bowers (2015) on user activities, and Graham (2019) and Stark and Crawford (2015) on creativity and agency of users – but the general conclusion has to be that there is a considerable lack of studies exploring the dynamics (or uncertainty) of the social and cultural meanings of graphic resources from an ethnographic stance, which, according to Blommaert (2015a), is currently a most suitable approach to explore the operation of sociolinguistic systems in a superdiverse digital era where uncertainty has become a norm. This contribution will attempt to fill this gap through an in-depth sociolinguistic-ethnographic analysis of the case of Elder Biaoqing, a type of graphic semiotic resources comparable to emojis and memes, typically designed for and used by older people on Chinese social media.

2 Theory and method

This section provides a detailed illustration of the concept of indexicality, which underlies the analysis of communicative practices with Elder Biaoqing. It then introduces the approach adopted – digital ethnography – and provides an overview of the data collection and the resulting data in this study.

2.1 Indexicality

Indexicality is a central concept in sociolinguistic analysis. As observed by Labov (1963), by pronouncing “time” and “house” in a specific “islander” way, certain
groups of inhabitants of Martha’s Vineyard not only could say referentially that they owned a house or wanted to know the time but also, not necessarily consciously, indexed their belonging to the island and their not necessarily positive attitude toward tourists from the mainland who pronounced these words in a “mainland” way.

According to Silverstein (2003), through indexicality we can see how micro-social values embody macro-social categories. This means, in Labov’s example, the realization of a specific pronunciation gives away a speaker’s position to a specific societal phenomenon and the people involved – here, mass tourism to Martha’s Vineyard. As such, indexicality is part of creative chronotopic identity work: using language or, more generally, semiotic signs in a specific place and time in a specific way reveals one’s identity, in other words, who one is or wants to be and what one thinks of others (see Kroon and Swanenberg 2020).

Silverstein (2003) argues that regular indexicality – or what he calls n-th order indexicality – is not enough to capture the _ethno-metapragmatics_ of n-th order usage, or the creative realization of the ideological engagement with the n-th order indexicality. Such ethno-metapragmatic processes are our object of study, i.e. the total linguistic (or rather semiotic) fact – “unstable mutual interaction of meaningful sign forms, contextualised to situations of interested human use and mediated by the fact of cultural ideology” (Silverstein 1985: 220). In addition to n-th order indexicality, says Silverstein (2003: 194–195), we also need n + 1st, n + 2nd, etc. orders of indexicality to understand the “indexical ‘appropriateness-to’ at-that-point autonomously known or constituted contextual parameters: what is already established between interacting sign-users, at least implicitly, as ‘context’ to which the propriety of their usage […] appeals” and the “indexical ‘effectiveness-in’ context: how contextual parameters seem to be brought into being […] by the fact of usage of the indexical […] sign […] itself.” Appropriateness and effectiveness relate to “indexical presupposition” (what signage fellow sign users expect in a given context) and “indexical entailment” (what signage becomes inescapable in a given indexical context). According to Blommaert (2010: 33), “the two directions of indexicality (presupposing – the retrieval of available meanings – and entailing – the production of new meaning)” underlies the achievement of mutual understanding in communication.

Silverstein’s (2003: 227) argument boils down to the fact that “all macro-sociological cultural categories of identity, being manifested micro-sociologically […] as indexical categories, are to be seen as dialectally constituted somewhere between indexical n-th- and n + 1st-order value-giving schemata of categorization, wherever we encounter them.”

Biaoqing, used by hundreds of millions of people in Chinese society, need to be approached as a structural phenomenon. Each instance of usage is a one-time practice of individuals, and at the same time points to “socially and culturally
ordered norms, genres, traditions, expectations” (Blommaert 2010: 33), i.e. the indexicality of semiotic resources which points to their social meaning and valuation that are invested with authority, control, and evaluation. In this contribution, we will follow netizens’ communicative practices and agency to explore the indexicality of Biaoqing, i.e. we will follow the total semiotic fact of Biaoqing.

2.2 Digital ethnography

Ethnography, emerging from anthropology as a field concerned with the description and analysis of culture (Blommaert and Dong 2020), is not just a complex of methods and techniques for data collection and analysis, but also a scientific apparatus with specific ontological, epistemological, and methodological perspectives on semiotic resources and communication (Blommaert 2007; Hymes 1996). The aim of ethnography is to “learn the meanings, norms, patterns of a way of life” (Hymes 1996: 13), which in essence is obtaining comprehensive knowledge of the society under study and revealing the social structure underlying communicative practices and social life.

Digital ethnography is the application of an ethnographic approach to the exploration of culture and society as shaped by digital technologies (Varis 2016). It does not entail the exclusion of offline data, but emphasizes the epistemological implications of digitalization for communication (Varis and Hou 2020), for instance how the internet influences and changes the essence and people’s perception of communicative practices. In what follows, the aspects most relevant for this research will be introduced.

Ontologically, Biaoqing are semiotic resources on Chinese social media, and their understanding cannot be detached from the society and culture which they are part of. This means the analysis of Biaoqing should not be confined to the textual level, but should be done with the whole society and culture as background.

Epistemologically, users’ communicative actions with Biaoqing will be taken as the lens to scrutinize the indexicality of Biaoqing. The reason for this is twofold. First, for researchers the lack of physical co-presence and mutual monitoring in online spaces leads to highly incomplete knowledge of who the users under investigation are. As a consequence, the study of online identities needs to resort to concrete communicative actions. Although online communication is greatly complicated by the uncertainty and unpredictability of user behavior (Skalski et al. 2017), what remains observable is interactional actions (Blommaert et al. 2021; Blommaert and Maly 2019). Second, interactional actions are conducted by participants to achieve mutual understanding, which is the process of creating recognizable orders for participants (Garfinkel 2006). In other words, through the lens of actions we are
observing the social facts and social orders that render the actions meaningful (Blommaert 2018). To depict a clear and holistic picture of people’s communicative practices with Biaoqing and their indexicality, this contribution will take communicative action, i.e. what people do with Biaoqing, as its unit of analysis.

Methodologically, researchers need to enter the life-worlds of participants and follow their locally situated experiences in online spaces (Varis 2016). The first author of this paper, Ying Lu, has spent four years following and observing people’s practices with Biaoqing. This data collection experience makes her a connoisseur of Biaoqing, and her insider knowledge provides a reliable reference for selecting and analyzing cases. Since we are aware, however, of the potential pitfalls of being an insider, we applied researcher triangulation by combining Lu’s Chinese perspective and Sjaak Kroon’s Dutch perspective, i.e. insider and outsider perspectives, in the data analysis.

The validity of this research, which lies in the accurate understanding of the meanings of norms and institutions, is ensured by the ethnographers’, i.e. the authors’, familiarity with and knowledge of the society under investigation; the discipline of the scholarly scientific community of ethnographers; and the ethnographers’ self-correction in the process of systematic inquiry (see Hymes 1996).

2.3 Data

Data collection took place between September 2015 and January 2019 on various Chinese social media platforms (Sina Weibo, WeChat, Douban, Baidu Post Bar, Baidu Knows, bilibili.com). The result is a 4,398-item corpus (1.72 GB) of Biaoqing-related data, including posts, chat records, blogs, Q&A threads, news reports, and webpage articles.

There are numerous Biaoqing sharing many similarities. They mostly have one or more of the following characteristics: Cute, Mischievous, Decadent, Dirty, Violent (Jiang and Li 2017; Zheng 2016). These characteristics are endorsed as indexes to certain personalities, identities, or ideologies (Zhang 2016) (see Figure 1).

Among our data, we observed an increasing number of Biaoqing, however, that did not even come close to reflecting any of the above characteristics. We therefore decided to take this type of Biaoqing, referred to as Elder Biaoqing, which are specifically and primarily designed for and used by older netizens, as the object of our study. In order to further pin down these Elder Biaoqing, we resorted to WeChat, the most popular social media platform in China, with one billion daily active users by 2019, and therefore an optimal forum to observe Biaoqing usage.

On WeChat Biaoqing Open Platform, which regularly updates the ranking of the recently most used Biaoqing packages, we checked all the Biaoqing packages that had
been ranked top 10 between September and November 2018. Among these 74 are Cute, 10 are Mischievous (of which five are Cute at the same time), and three are Violent (of which two are Cute at the same time). In addition, three are Chinese-character-based and seven are Elder style. Our WeChat observations confirmed what we had already observed on social media: Elder Biaoqing is a rising style.

The usage of Elder Biaoqing by older netizens qualifies or indexes them as belonging to a distinct category of older netizens, i.e. those who are abreast of fashion and have a young mentality. We also observed frequent usage of Elder Biaoqing by and between users who do not or only indirectly belong to the category of older netizens, for instance their children or grandchildren, the practice of whom is incongruous with and leads to problems in the field of the abovementioned indexicality presuppositions (why do young users send Elder Biaoqing to their peers, i.e. what indexical meaning do they convey?) and in the field of entailments (how do Elder Biaoqing meet the needs of young users, i.e., again, what indexical meaning do they convey?). The indexicality of Elder Biaoqing therefore cannot simply be understood by referring to an $n$-th order indexicality but is dialectically connected to that order at an $n + 1$st order indexicality level. There is, in other words, more to be detected around young netizens’ usage of Elder Biaoqing as a sociolinguistic phenomenon than just the fact that such Elder Biaoqing do not fit their social media interaction normativity. The ambition of this contribution therefore is to unravel the $n + 1$st and further order indexicalities of Elder Biaoqing usage.

To achieve this end, five posts and headers of the seven Elder Biaoqing packages that we found on WeChat are taken from the corpus on the basis of Lu’s deep knowledge of Biaoqing. Table 1 presents the information on the data used for analysis in this contribution.

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1 All the text data in this article have been translated from Chinese into English by Ying Lu, and Biaoqing texts are placed in square brackets.
3 Communicative practices with Elder Biaoqing

The Chinese name of Elder Biaoqing packages – 中老年表情包 – refers to middle-aged and older people. In this context, middle-aged and older, instead of being a demographic demarcation, is a general grassroots description for older netizens who are not familiar with online culture and whose aesthetic taste for Biaoqing is drastically different from that of young people (Du 2016). This description is proposed by and takes the stance of the young generation.

In what follows, through the analysis of Biaoqing-related actions in our data sample, the emergence of Elder Biaoqing and the morphing of their indexicality to various values, identities, and sociocultural facts will be unraveled.

3.1 Avoiding misunderstanding

With the growing presence of a senior population on social media, there is an increasing number of funny stories of this population’s misunderstanding of the Mischievous, Dirty, and Violent Biaoqing popular among young people. For instance, in Figure 2, after a mother inquires about her son’s work, the latter uses a Biaoqing as

Table 1: Biaoqing data collection overview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WeChat Biaoqing Open Platform</td>
<td>September to November 2018</td>
<td>Headers of 7 Biaoqing packages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Douban</td>
<td>November 2018</td>
<td>1 post about Biaoqing usage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sina Weibo</td>
<td>November 2018; January 2019</td>
<td>4 posts about Biaoqing usage</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Misunderstanding caused by Biaoqing between mother and son (retrieved from https://www.douban.com/note/599431525/, 13 November 2018).
a joke – the frog with the exaggerated text “I’m so scared that I wet my pants,” a Biaoqing which might be used humorously and jokingly to express one’s fear or concern or ironically to express one’s indifference or contempt. But his mother takes the text on the Biaoqing literally and completely fails to pick up the intended humor. This misunderstanding originates from the mother’s “wrong” interpretation of the Biaoqing used by her son, which is an example of the Mischievous, Dirty, Violent Biaoqing dominantly used by young people. The meanings intended by youth usage of Biaoqing are not always predictable from the composing images and/or texts, and it often requires specific knowledge of online popular culture to understand them.

Elder Biaoqing gradually came into being as a remedy for avoiding such misunderstandings. Such Biaoqing, as presented in Figure 3, usually feature positive expressions with bright colors and/or positive images, such as young people, flowers, butterflies, a national flag, natural scenes, etc. (GeFM 2017). A further characteristic of Elder Biaoqing is that the expressions and images are to be taken at face value (Huang and Pan 2017).

One of the top Biaoqing packages in September 2018 was an Elder one, the highest ranking of which was number two on WeChat Biaoqing Open Platform. In the header of this Biaoqing package, the designer Mr. Modo directly stated that this Biaoqing package is “specifically designed for your senior relatives,” which indicates that it is meant for young people to use with their elders (see Figure 4).

![Figure 3: Examples of Elder Biaoqing.](image)

![Figure 4: The header of an Elder Biaoqing package.](image)
Most of the Elder Biaoqing packages are made by members of the younger generation who take into consideration their elders’ (traditional) aesthetic taste, their (inadequate) knowledge of neologisms, and their unfamiliarity with popular online culture (Huang and Pan 2017). The original purpose of Elder Biaoqing is to avoid misunderstanding during online communication between young people and seniors. The emergence of Elder Biaoqing packages on Chinese social media is a result of the young generation’s reflection on their communicative need to use Biaoqing with seniors. This reflection simultaneously shapes the indexicality of Elder Biaoqing, that is to say, they are for older people with little or no grasp of popular online culture. This indexicality points to age and cultural differences between the younger and older generations, and is tinged with young people’s superiority, teasing, or joking regarding older people (Huang and Pan 2017, 2018).

### 3.2 Appreciation by older users

Older people are exposed to Elder Biaoqing through online communication, and they appreciate these Biaoqing. For instance, a father, as reported by his daughter, thinks Elder Biaoqing are practical (see Figure 5).

In this example, the father encounters Elder Biaoqing in a WeChat group. Regarding them as handy and useful, he asks his daughter how to send Biaoqing. Obviously the father and the daughter have different perceptions of and experiences with Biaoqing. For the father, the Elder Biaoqing he encountered are effectively all that he knows about Biaoqing, and he has no idea how to access them. For the daughter, however, Elder Biaoqing is only a trivial part of her Biaoqing repertoire, as indicated by the palm-over-face laughing-crying Biaoqing, which is typically used in reaction to a funny embarrassing story, in the final line of her post and the fact that she shared this incident in a joking tone with her peers on Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter. The user base of Weibo, 411 million by March 2018, is much

![Figure 5: A senior’s opinion of Elder Biaoqing (retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/2121087914/H9GAVwNy?refer_flag=1001030103, 7 January 2019).](https://www.weibo.com/2121087914/H9GAVwNy?refer_flag=1001030103)
smaller than that of WeChat, but the user group is much younger than that of WeChat (Tencent 2018).

There are many seniors who are fond of Elder Biaoqing and have become very resourceful with them. As a consequence, a young person in a WeChat group where the majority are middle-aged people might feel pressed to use Elder Biaoqing, as in Figure 6.

The examples in Figures 5 and 6 reflect that older netizens identify with Elder Biaoqing, eagerly access them, and enthusiastically use them. As using Biaoqing is a typical online communicative practice of young people, for older users, this practice is related to being chic (Zhou et al. 2017). In the eyes of seniors, Elder Biaoqing are not only practical in a pragmatic sense (as stated in the example in Figure 5), but also evaluated as indices of their chicness and desire to participate in online culture. Elder Biaoqing, for older netizens, have acquired the indexicality of being modern and/or having a youthful mentality, both highly positive valuations in contemporary China.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>混迹在中老年购物群的我</th>
<th>Mingling in a WeChat shopping group for elders, I'm in urgent need of Biaoqing. What should I do to make myself not alien in this group?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>急缺表情包🙏</td>
<td>[Good people will be happy] [Good morning] [Happiness be with your forever]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>怎么样才能显得我不是另类 求教</td>
<td>[It is freezing] [Cold] [Please take care]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>天寒地冻 请多珍重 南宁</td>
<td>[Good morning] [Good health] [Good mood] [Everything will be good]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6: Weibo post regarding older netizens’ usage of Elder Biaoqing (retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/2133789377/H9JA296AS?refer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment#_rnd1546870404529, 7 January 2019).
3.3 Usage of Elder Biaoqing between younger and older people

Although Elder Biaoqing respond to the aesthetic taste of older users, they are designed mostly by young people, which makes it advantageous for young people to further rationalize novel ways of interpreting, using, or modifying them. Based on the insider knowledge of Biaoqing ecology in Chinese society held by Lu, a representative example is how young people use Elder Biaoqing with their (grand)parents or aunts/uncles with a hidden feeling of superiority. In Figure 7, showing a screenshot of the chat between a son and his mother, the mother uses an Elder Biaoqing, after which the son replies with another one. In this exchange, out of pragmatic considerations, the son uses Elder Biaoqing to be on the same page as his mother so that their communication takes a smooth course.

However, this is only half of the story. After this chat exchange, the son posted the chat record headed by a short text on Weibo (see Figure 8) in order to share this experience with his peers. In the text message of the post, the son frames the practice of replying to his mother’s Elder Biaoqing as a competition in Biaoqing resources – a perspective the mother is unaware of – and underlines the fact that he, a millennium youngster, is resourceful in Biaoqing, even when it comes to niched Elder Biaoqing.

![Figure 7: Chat record between a son using Elder Biaoqing with his mother (retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/5863930010/GEwkc2etS?refer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment#_rnd1541337852791, 4 November 2018).](https://www.weibo.com/5863930010/GEwkc2etS?refer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment#_rnd1541337852791)
In doing so, on Weibo he is highlighting his identity as a member of the young generation who is aware of his elders’ use of a different type of Biaoqing, and as a person who has sufficient Biaoqing resources for various scenarios, including responding to his mother, who uses Elder Biaoqing, with the same type of Biaoqing. In this example, the son conspicuously ascribes a different status to Elder Biaoqing compared to that of the Biaoqing he usually uses. Such practices of the young generation are de facto a reflection of the two indexicalities discussed above. Young people, by using Elder Biaoqing and “problematizing” such communicative practice on a meta level, distinguish themselves from their elders in terms of Biaoqing competence. As a result, Elder Biaoqing become indices to Biaoqing gurus and online culture-savvy persons, which is in essence a reflection of social status. Note that this indexicality has currency mainly among young people and not among older users.

### 3.4 Usage of Elder Biaoqing among young people

Building on the indexicalities discussed above, a further step of reflection on the part of the young generation takes place, namely, the use of Elder Biaoqing for communication with their peers, mostly in a light-hearted play, as illustrated in the conversation between two young women in Figure 9.

The young woman’s practice of using Elder Biaoqing with her peer as shown in Figure 9 forms a contrast with her own identity as a young person. In their chat exchange, her friend says in a joking way that the previous stretch of communication, polite and imbued with positive energy, made her feel disgusted, causing her to switch to the Cute and/or Mischievous type of Biaoqing which young people usually use (see the Biaoqing with “hahaha” in Figure 9). However, in their last exchange, both use an Elder Biaoqing to end the conversation.

The two friends in this example are not middle-aged, yet they enthusiastically used Elder Biaoqing with each other. They are, in other words, fully aware of the above-discussed indexicalities of Elder Biaoqing and tacitly reached an agreement to use Elder Biaoqing with each other, which is premised on their shared perception and knowledge of Elder Biaoqing. This practice highlights their “sameness,” i.e. their shared identities as Biaoqing gurus and members of the young generation.

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**Figure 8:** Text in the Weibo post of the son.

| 中老年表情包？？00后永不认输 | Elder Biaoqing? As a person born after the millennium, I won’t surrender. |

82 Lu and Kroon DE GRYYER
Note that in this communicative event, both participants endorsed the Biaoqing-related behavioral trait of older users, i.e. using Biaoqing that uphold positivity. They also tacitly followed the norm that the texts on Elder Biaoqing are to be understood.

Figure 9: Elder Biaoqing usage among young people (retrieved from https://www.weibo.com/5019193461/GDCuTvYUG?refer_flag=1001030103_&type=comment&_rnd1547044070505, 4 November 2018).
literally. For instance, they took the “再见” (bye-bye) on the Elder Biaoqing as a polite farewell, instead of as an expression of contempt, dissatisfaction, and irony, which is a result of nonlinear transformation (Blommaert 2015b) of the indexicality of “再见” on Chinese social media through the collective negotiation (or ethnometapragmatics) of (young) people (Lu 2020). This example is an instance of reflection on the characteristics of Elder Biaoqing. Since it has been widely accepted that the texts and images of Elder Biaoqing are to be taken literally, this characteristic is collectively and tacitly accepted as a reference for interpreting Elder Biaoqing even when they are used between young people, and it has become a usage norm of Elder Biaoqing.

When we go through the Elder Biaoqing packages, we find that all the Elder Biaoqing are very simple phatic expressions for conviviality (see Figure 10). As Elder Biaoqing are palpably different from the currently dominant Cute, Mischievous, Dirty, and Violent ones, this difference in form is enough to index the intended uptake of Biaoqing purposefully designed in Elder style. The established form-norm configuration of Elder Biaoqing is employed by young people to revitalize the expressive power of daily mundane phatic expressions which have been eclipsed by the currently dominant Biaoqing, and to rescue simple phatic expressions from being interpreted as perfunctory and insincere. This is the result of people’s reflection on the usage and interpretation characteristics typical of Elder Biaoqing.

Taking this argument a step further, one could suggest that the style of Elder Biaoqing is employed to make Biaoqing packages specifically for young people to use. This claim is based on four observations. First, among one billion WeChat users (Tencent 2018), the proportion of users above 50 years old (80 million, 7.4%; Zhou 2019) is too small to make Elder Biaoqing packages reach the top 10. This means it is mainly young people who are using them. Second, among the seven Elder Biaoqing packages ranked top 10, only one includes “senior” in the title, two mention “senior” in the header, and the other four do not mention “elder” or “senior” at all. Third, on

![Figure 10: Examples of Elder Biaoqing.](image)
many webpages, using Elder Biaoqing is tacitly regarded as the practice of young people. For instance, an article on Sohu\(^2\) describes Elder Biaoqing as a powerful resource in Doutu, literally a ‘fight using images,’\(^3\) a typical practice of young people: “When you are losing the upper hand in Doutu, Elder Biaoqing often can help you miraculously. They not only strike back on your opponent, but also have the ironic effect of ‘hehe,’\(^4\) helping you win the fight without really fighting.” Fourth, anecdotal evidence gathered by Lu suggests that many young people in their twenties use Elder Biaoqing with their peers. That is to say, Elder Biaoqing are no longer solely for use with older netizens, but for people, both young and senior, to use for their own sake, as shown in the headers in Figures 5 and 11.

The result of this reflection is the resementization (Iedema 2003; Leppänen et al. 2014) of Elder Biaoqing: they are extracted from previous frames and inserted in new contexts for communication. This reflection brings about new usage norms for Elder Biaoqing – to be taken at face value, and new resources to Biaoqing repertoires – Biaoqing for polite greetings. A corollary of this process is the new indexicality of Elder Biaoqing, i.e. polite and friendly phatic expressions for conviviality.

The example of Elder Biaoqing usage between two young women (see Figure 9) was collected from a Weibo post, the text of which is presented in Figure 12. Apart from the reflection embodied in the communicative practices per se, there is another layer of reflection embodied in this post.

The text of the post indicates that the poster was sharing the practice of using Elder Biaoqing as a joke. She also jokes that the next step for her would be to engage in square dancing, a typical activity of seniors in China.\(^5\) In so doing, she intentionally connects a typical offline activity of older people to Elder Biaoqing. That is to say, the offline practices of seniors are also added to the indexicality bundle of Elder Biaoqing.

The poster does not use Elder Biaoqing purposefully to mock older people. It is more about her own identity. As indicated in her post, she is aware of her age difference with older netizens, but she is using Elder Biaoqing, and ironically suggests she might later go a step further and take up the dancing pursuits of seniors. On the surface, she is mocking her actions, which are out of character with her age; on a deeper level, her post is a reflection of age anxiety in Chinese society, the

\(^3\) Doutu (斗图) literally means ‘fight using images.’ In this case, the image refers to Biaoqing. Doutu is a new form of online communication where interlocutors reply to each other using Biaoqing as a ludic competition to show off the Biaoqing resources they possess.
\(^4\) “Hehe,” an onomatopoeic representation of laughter, is used by many Chinese netizens as an expression of contempt, disagreement, or irony (Luo 2017; Nie and Lu 2018).
\(^5\) In China, square dancing is an activity participated in mostly by retired people in public squares and plazas as a form of exercise.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elder Biaoqing package profile</th>
<th>Translation</th>
<th>Highest ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>花好月圆合家欢</td>
<td>Blooming flowers, full moon and happy family</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>家庭表情</td>
<td>Family Biaoqing</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>甜蜜情话</td>
<td>Honey words</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>亲爱的好想你</td>
<td>My dear I miss you so much</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>我爱我家我爱你</td>
<td>I love my family I love you</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>玫瑰爱心问候</td>
<td>Greetings with rose and love</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 11:** Headers of six Elder Biaoqing packages (September–November 2018).
understanding of which requires some degree of sociocultural background information. In modern Chinese society, the traditional Confucian doctrine “to stand firm at thirty”\(^6\) is still quite influential in evaluating the integrity of individuals, even though it is not really applicable anymore. Nowadays it is not so easy for people to build a family and have a successful career at such a young age (Zhang 2017). Caught between the stress of the Confucian criterion and such social facts, young people are experiencing age anxiety – the fear of getting old before achieving life goals and being left behind (Wang 2017) – which is the social origin of the oxymoronic neologism “middle-aged teenage girl” (中年少女) to refer to young women born in the 1990s (Weixiaobao 2017). In this case, Elder Biaoqing happen to be the media that reflect such anxiety. Consequently, Elder Biaoqing by chance become indices of age anxiety in Chinese society. Note that this indexicality is conspicuously different from the previous ones in the sense that it is deeply rooted in people’s subconscious reaction to the precariat state of educated young people in China (Du 2016), and that it might not be distinctly felt, not even by young people who use Elder Biaoqing this way.

### 4 Discussion

Elder Biaoqing were originally created by young people for the sake of older users. The indexicality of Elder Biaoqing is continuously morphing: indexing youth mentality and chicness for older people; indexing the age of target recipients and Biaoqing guru identity for young people; indexing polite and friendly conviviality; reflecting age anxiety among young people in Chinese society. Each of these indexicalities is a result of collective negotiation and construction of meanings and norms on the basis of people’s reflections on their communicative practices, the process of which constitutes what Silverstein (2003) terms ethno-metapragmatics. The emergence and development of multiple indexicalities does not entail dialectic, fixed, or

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exclusive relations among them. Different indexicalities might co-exist in the same instance of Elder Biaoqing usage for different participants or target audiences, as illustrated in the example of Elder Biaoqing usage between a mother and her son in Figures 7 and 8.

The emergence and popularity of Elder Biaoqing is one of the trends in the Biaoqing landscape. This trend, resulting from multiple factors, reflects a number of concrete social facts that point to new perspectives for approaching online phenomena.

First, the emergence of Elder Biaoqing is caused by the growing presence of older users online, which is premised on the accessibility and affordability of the digital technologies that have become part of the social structure underlying communicative practices. Different from the young generation of “digital natives” growing up with digital media, these older users are “digital migrants” (Prensky 2001: 1–2). When they go online, they bring with them their semiotic resources and exert influence on the social media they use through their semiotic practices and aesthetic tastes. The emergence of Elder Biaoqing was catalyzed by older digital migrants’ ignorance of online popular culture, especially their lack of knowledge of the Cute, Mischievous, Decadent, Dirty, and Violent Biaoqing young digital natives use. Elder Biaoqing per se have become part of the forever-changing online culture. This is in essence a reflection of the dynamics of the Biaoqing landscape, the dynamics of online semiotic resources.

Second, although Elder Biaoqing are designed for the sake of older users, they are free for everyone to use. The meager number of older netizens in comparison with young netizens renders them a minority. What is more, older digital migrants are usually much less efficient in making use of the affordances of social media, such as the WeChat Biaoqing Open Platform. An inevitable consequence of this is that young digital natives have a great deal more capacity to construct the meaning and usage norms of Elder Biaoqing on their terms. This in turn brings about e-inequalities between digital natives and older digital migrants.

Third, communicative practices with Elder Biaoqing are based on people’s engagement with established indexicalities, or their presupposition of usage appropriateness in that context. In communication, people demonstrate such engagement yet simultaneously reflect on it, which leads to the moderation of communicative practices or the entailment of creativity and effectiveness fitting in that context (Silverstein 2003). For instance, young people use Elder Biaoqing as a reaction to the aesthetic taste of the senior generation, a possession of valuable resources, a claim of superiority in the online world, a creation of new communicative resources, a reaction to their stress. People’s reflection on their communicative practices brings about the interplay between presupposition and entailment of Biaoqing usage, wherein new norms are established and new higher order
indexicalities are constructed and precipitated, the process of which Silverstein (2003) terms ethno-metapragmatics.

Fourth, ethno-metapragmatic practices exist in an “online–offline nexus” wherein both zones shape each other in complex ways, resulting in new practices of social interaction (Blommaert 2020: 391), which therefore must be seen as one inseparable field, instead of one space mirroring the other.

Fifth, the establishment of the norms and indexicalities mentioned so far is materialized in the process of the widespread of specific ways of using Elder Biaoqing. Through repeated reproduction of certain communicative practices, people collectively and tacitly precipitate specific indexicalities on Elder Biaoqing. User agency/creativity and the communicative potentials and social-cultural effects of Elder Biaoqing as manifested in this study are concrete empirical evidence that graphic semiotic signs, or in general multimodal semiotic signs, are the results and reflections of unfolding social processes, and therefore should be of focal concern for sociolinguistic and sociocultural research.

5 Conclusion

This research borrowed the concept of “indexicality” from Silverstein (2003) and applied it, with different epistemological and methodological perspectives, to the study of online culture, which is highly dynamic and rapidly changing. The analysis reveals a picture of active and intensive ethno-metapragmatic practices by (young and old) Elder Biaoqing users driven by a variety of communicative needs, the results of which are the multiple indexicalities of Elder Biaoqing that were shown in our analysis, and the process of which reveals the complicated interplay between semiotic resources, their users, and Chinese society.

Different from indexical order where “n-th and n + 1st order indexical values are, functionally, in dialectic competition one with another” and “n + 1st order indexicality would tend to supplant or at least to blend with such n-th order value” (Silverstein 2003: 194), the multiple indexicalities of Elder Biaoqing, instead of coming in an ordinal degree and in dialectic relation with each other, co-exist in the reservoir of semiotic resources, and there is no clear-cut ordinal sequence of the emergence of the indexicalities. Elder Biaoqing used by different people in different communicative situations index drastically different identities and values. Their multiple indexicalities are not equally available or accessible to all users, as illustrated in the case of the communication between a mother and her son in Figures 7 and 8. In other words, people’s capacity to deploy Elder Biaoqing is highly differential, and the multiple indexicalities of Elder Biaoqing are stratified.
Different from indexical order, which demonstrates the dialectic competition between orders of indexicality mediated through "formal variation as different ways of saying 'the same' thing" (Silverstein 2003: 216), the application of the indexicality analysis to communicative practices with semiotic resources on Chinese social media reveals a picture of the coexistence of multiple indexicalities reflected in different actions performed with the same semiotic resources.

The differences discussed above reflect in essence the differences between phenomena in the non-digital era and phenomena nowadays omnipresent online. What is more, these online phenomena cannot be simplistically viewed as mirroring the offline, but are the result of the complex interaction of online and offline factors, including but not confined to the affordances of digital infrastructures, people’s creativity and agency, social ethos, and culture. In this sense, this research on the one hand expands the understanding of “indexical order” (Silverstein 2003: 193) and thereby enriches the toolkit to describe, analyze, and understand semiotic phenomena and society, and on the other hand invites a re-imagination of social facts – the existence of an “online–offline nexus” (Blommaert 2020: 391) and a re-thinking of theories for sociocultural research in a digital era – ontological perspectives on multimodal resources and digital infrastructures, developments of the theoretical perspective of indexicality, and a total-semiotic-fact approach to digitally mediated social interaction.

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