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The Emergence, Evaluation and Interpretation of Buzzword Construction 'X+Sha' in Mandarin Chinese

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Abstact

The buzzword "X+Sha" construction is multifunctional, encompassing referential/person, modal limitation, effect evaluation, and degree quantification, with form overlap. The variable "X" retains its semantic components without change and exhibits aggregative characteristic. By traversing corpora and websites, a total of 299 "X+Sha" formats were collected and scrutinized. This construction has undergone a process of change from "referential truncation" to "semantic foregrounding" and then to "subjectification", with the affective polarity of "Sha(kill)" shifting towards the positive end and neutral semantics. The driving forces behind the construction include media creation and register variation. The "X+Sha" construction has strong contextual characteristics, with semantic interpretation exhibiting both normal and anomalous patterns.

Keywords

X+Sha construction; Buzzword; Semantic evolution; Emotional shift;Construction generation

1 Introduction

The verb "Sha" (杀), which originally denoted 'to kill' or 'to cause to die,' has undergone significant semantic and functional extension in modern Mandarin, particularly in online contexts.The following examples illustrate this usage:

(1) " 那些年我们玩过的狼人杀，现在变成怎样一种游戏了？ " (What kind of game has the werewolf kill we used to play become now?) (Baidu Encyclopedia)

(2) " 你见过这种 ' 抱头杀 ' 的粘人的猫咪吗？ " (Have you seen this clingy cat doing a "hug-head kill?") (NetEase, 2018-01-21)

(3) " 张雯机场随拍，绽放甜美 ' 笑容杀 '" (Zhang Wen's airport candid shots, blooming with a sweet "smile kill") (Global Times, 2019-05-30)

(4) " 用充满悬疑元素的剧本杀开辟一条科普的新路径 !" (Using the script kill filled with suspense elements to pave a new path for popular science!) (News Morning Post, 2024-08-28)

In these examples, the relationship between " 杀 (kill)" and the X position is not derivable. In examples (1) and (4), " 狼人杀 " (werewolf kill) and " 剧本杀 " (script kill) served a referential function, representing a truncated reference to a kind of games. Example (2)'s " 抱头杀 " (hug-head kill) possessed a manner-limit-

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ing function, which can refer to either a killing action or the speaker's positive evaluation of the intimacy action—hugging head. Example (3) embodied an evaluative function, expressing an extreme degree and belonging to a highly abstract effect evaluation construction.

Research by Wan Shuping (2017) and Wang Yayu (2019) has analyzed "X +Sha" through the lens of its formal composition and semantic transparency. Yao Zhaopu (2019) approached it from the perspective of Chinese suffixation, positing that " 秒杀 " (Sec-kill) participates in word formation, establishing a popular format with "Sha" as a suffix. Li Yumei (2022) reviewed the semantic evolution of "Sha" from ancient to modern times, asserting that "X+Sha" represents a nominal construction derived from Japanese loanwords. Previous studies have overlooked the fact that "X+Sha" when truncated, merely constitutes a semantically neutral construction stating facts, yet when abstracted, it transforms into a highly subjective effect evaluation construction. Importantly, there are significant semantic differences within it which cannot be generalized. To objectively and scientifically elucidate this issue, this study traversed the corpus and exhaustively searched the internet and mobile applications to compile a generated word list of "X+Sha", analyzing the sources, generation, and interpretative paths of the construction.

2 Categorization

It become evident that significant semantic differences exist, which can be categorized into four semantic functions(Table 1) .

Table 1

Construction Type	Semantic Function	Example	Emotion	**Subjectivity**
Truncation Construction X_{object} +$Sha_{truncate}$	reference	狼人杀 (werewolf kill), 三国杀 (three-kingdom kill), 背影杀 (Silhouette Kill), 颜值杀 (face-score kill)	Neutral	Medium
Manner Construction X_{manner} +$Sha_{determiner}$	Manner determiner	开门杀 (open-door kill), 抱头杀 (hug-head kill), 掐脖杀 (choke kill)	Negative	Weak
Evaluation Construction $X_{object/phenomenon}$ +$Sha_{evaluation}$	Evaluation	西装杀 (suit kill), 温暖杀 (warm kill), 怀旧杀 (nostalgia kill)	Positive	Strong
Degree Construction $X_{attribute}$ +Sha_{degree}	Extreme Degree	萌杀 (cute kill), 帅杀 (handsome kill), 美杀 (beauty kill)	Positive	Strong

These types were distinguished by their semantic functions. For instance, the construction with a referential function, represented as Xobject+Shatruncate, has a linear meaning between "X" and "Sha," merely representing a truncated expression due to omission. This format can be expanded by adding components after "Sha(杀)" such as " 狼人的猎杀游戏 " (Werewolf Killing Game), " 背影杀手 " (Silhouette Killer), " 颜值杀手 " (face-score Killer), among others. The Xmanner+Shadeterminer construction was an abbreviated expression that include actions like hugging and neck-grabbing, which are lethal methods.

However, this type of construction was context-dependent due to the specific needs of speakers, necessitating contextual linkage for accurate interpretation. For example, in example (2), " 抱头杀 " (hug-head

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kill)possessed characteristics of an evaluation construction, reflecting the strong psychological stimulation elicited by the "hugging" action from the observer's perspective. The evaluation construction X phenomenon + Shaevaluation and the degree construction Xattribute + Shadegree represented highly abstract schematic structures, where the semantic components entering the "X" position automatically become the evaluated object of "Sha", with the evaluation content being the strong psychological stimulation caused by "X" . In terms of speaker evaluation and degree, the semantic relationship between "X" and "Sha" cannot be simply deduced from the component semantics.

3 Generation Process

The "X+Sha" construction can be conceptualized as a small constructional network structure, with the aforementioned four types of examples viewed as subconstructions of "X+Sha" . Its constructional meaning could be integrated as "depicting and evaluating the shape, appearance, body, state attributes, and behavioral situations of things or phenomena" . The subconstructions were formed by a collection of frequently used examples, most of which originated from the innovative expressions of speakers and have become fixed as specific constructions. The frequency of use is a significant characteristic of formation, and the developmental trend of the "X+Sha" construction was obtained through exhaustive searches of modern Chinese corpora and online platforms. See Table 2:

Table 2

Period	Year	New Words (Quantity)	Proportion
Germination Period	2005-2012	16	5.4%
Development Period	2013-2016	108	36.1%
Maturity Period	2017-2020	153	51.2%
Stability Period	2021-2022	22	7.4%
Total	2005-2022	299	100%

The statistics indicated that during the initial seven years, only 16 types emerged, with low usage frequency, suggesting that this format was not widely recognized by the public for a significant period. The peak period occurred from 2013 to 2020, with an average of 38 new words added annually after 2020. On January 1, 2008, a desktop game called " 三国杀 " (Three-Kingdoms Kill) was officially launched. The game's popularity spurred various game names ending with " 杀 " , such as " 水浒杀 " (Water-Margin Kill) ", 西 游杀 " (Journey to the West Kill)", 大学杀 " (University Kill)", 鹅鸭杀 " (Goose-Duck Kill), etc. This format can be expanded to "a killing game based on "X", and through truncation, it denoted "game" in word formation. Under the influence of analogy and imitative innovation, the "X+Sha" structure expressed the psychological stimulation caused by the event or behavior subject, reflecting a positive emotional response to the desired outcome.

Furthermore, high-frequency usage in official media has accelerated the transition of online slang into everyday vocabulary. For example:

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(5) “ 羽生结弦对金博洋上演 ’ 戴帽杀 ’ 回顾二人 ’ 友好互萌 ’” (Yuzuru Hanyu performed a “hat-kill” against Jin Boyang, reviewing their “friendly mutual cuteness”) (Beijing News, 2018-11-04)

(6) “ 吊环冠军刘洋回应 ’ 歪头杀 ’：让全世界都看到我们中国人的态度！ ” (Rings champion Liu Yang responded to the “head-tilt kill”: Let the whole world see the attitude of Chinese!) (China Youth International, 2021-08-06)

(7) “ 今天，复兴号上的这波 ’ 温暖杀 ’ 值得刷屏 ” (Today, this “warm kill” on the Fuxing EMU is worth flooding the screen) (Guizhou Transport Radio, 2022-05-09)

High-frequency usage is a crucial factor in stabilizing the construction of slang terms. Taking the high-frequency word “ 回忆杀 ” (Recalling Kill) as an example, its search frequency on Baidu exceeded 100 million times, while terms like “ 摸头杀 ” (Head-Pat Kill), “ 可爱杀 ” (Cuteness Kill), and “ 温暖杀 ” (Warmth Kill) exceeded 10 million times. The variable “X” in “X+Sha” can replace different words or phrases, and the range it described was also broadening.

4 Analysis

In the emerging “X+Sha” slang construction, the variable “X” and “Sha” exhibited a loose semantic relationship with unclear causality. The constructional meaning raised from the semantic framework expansion following the integration of the two components and the foregrounding and subjectification of the old semantic features of “Sha” . The following sections will explore the evaluative sources that contribute to the meaning of the “X+Sha” construction.

4.1 Truncation

The formation of the “X+Sha” format is closely linked to online games. Examples include “ 水浒杀 ” (Water-Margin Kill), “ 西游杀 ” (Journey to the West Kill), “ 狼人杀 ” (Werewolf Kill), “ 剧本杀 ” (Script Kill), “ 大学杀 ” (University Kill), and “ 鹅鸭杀 ” (Goose-Duck Kill). This format can be expanded to “a game with killing” action characteristics based on or with clues from X” . Due to the semantic evolution of “Sha” which primarily means action from the Song and Yuan dynasties and (Shuai Zhisong, 2011), and “Sha” acquired a referential function through truncation (Qiu Xuemei, Li Baojia, 2015). Under the influence of analogy and imitative innovation, online novels have also introduced titles like “ 红颜杀 ” (Beauty Kill), “ 江湖杀 ” (Jianghu Kill), “ 破镜杀 ” (Broken-Mirror Kill), and “ 秋风杀 ” (Autumn-Wind Kill). This type of construction was predominantly referential, with a neutral emotional tone.

4.2 Foregrounding

The prominence of the emotional semantics of “Sha” in the “X+Sha” was triggered by the foregrounding of its traditional semantic features. The meaning of “X+Sha” encompasses not only evaluative attitudes but also the degree of psychological stimulation, which can be interpreted from the lexical meaning.

For instance, the 7th edition of Modern Chinese Dictionary defines “Sha” as “ 使失去生命；弄死 ” (to cause death; to kill), with semantic features of [+cause][+death] reflecting the negative outcome of an action. This semantic characteristic has a strong psychological impact, easily activated by cognitive process-

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es, Consequently, it foregrounds the cognitive meaning of “the characteristics of a thing or phenomenon reaching a strong stimulation degree”, which expresses the speaker’s subjective evaluation of effects. This construction frequently appears in positive evaluative contexts such as exclamation, positive affirmation and appreciation，highlighting its characteristics. For example:

(8) “ 最近捧脸杀的动作真的是太太太火爆了 " (The "cupping face kill" action has been really too explosive recently) (Bilibili, 2018-05-21)

(9) “ 这些女星的绝美旗袍杀有没有惊艳到你呢？ " (Have these popular actress’ stunning cheongsam kill amazed you?) (Sohu , 2019-10-23)

(10) “ 她身穿宝蓝色露肩装上演 ’ 锁骨杀 ’，甜美动人 ...” (She wore a powder blue off-shoulder dress to perform the “collarbone kill,” sweetly charming...) (Global Times, 2020-05-01)

By entering the “X+Sha” construction, cognitive processing and inferential association activate the potential semantic features of “Sha” allowing for clear evaluation or interpretation.

4.3 Framework Expansion

“Sha” can express the semantic function of “losing life” in an omitted state (Shuai Zhisong, 2011), resulting in “death” . However, when used as an evaluative construction, the meaning of “death” disappears. For instance:

(11) “ 最近捧脸杀的动作真的是太太太火爆了 " (The "cupping face kill" action has been really too explosive recently) (Bilibili, 2018-05-21)

(12) “ 这些女明星的 ’ 西装杀 ’, 成功帅到我了 …” (These female stars’ “suit kill” has successfully made me swoon...) (GFashion, 2020-10-13)

(13) “ 线下观影怀旧杀 -- 引观众欢乐爆笑感动落泪 !” (Offline viewing nostalgic kill--bringing audience joy, laughter, and tears!) (Reading China, 2022-09-13)

From an etymological perspective, words entering the “X” position in the “X+Sha” construction typically describe ordinary behaviors or physical characteristics. In traditional contexts, there exists a normal causal correlation between “X” and “Sha” . Here, “Sha” is roughly synonymous with death, not representing an action but a result (state) (Jiang Shaoyu, 2003: 5), emphasizing the agent’s behavioral state. For example, in the traditional use of " 笑杀 " (meaning ‘laugh to tears’), “ 笑 ” (smile) serves as the cause, while " 杀 " (kill) signifies the ultimate result of “ 笑 ”, conveying the utmost intensity of the emotional state. However, in contemporary buzzwords, the relationship between “X” and “Sha” lacks this traditional causality. The reason for this shift is that “X+Sha” expands the traditional semantic framework by incorporating not only the [agent + verb + patient] structure but also the experiencer role and a judgment on X. This can be described

as [agent/theme + verb + (patient) + experiencer + evaluation]. After this expansion, it primarily condenses and summarizes a high degree of evaluation and appreciation regarding the psychological stimulation caused by a certain phenomenon or behavior from the experiencer’s perspective. This linguistic construc-

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tion captures both the cause-and-effect relationship and the subjective experience, providing a concise yet comprehensive way to express intense emotions or reactions.

4.4 Subjectification

When narrating an event, the speaker often forms a potential comparative value based on prior experience, considering the comparative relationship between the quantities involved and making pre-positioning or judgments (Liu Chengfeng, 2014). The "X+Sha" construction triggers a comparative relationship between the actual and potential propositions. Before determining whether the evaluated object is ordinary or exceptional, individuals already possess a comparative baseline, which is the evaluative information contained in X. For instance, " 摸头杀 " (head-pat kill) utilizes the ordinary behavior of " 摸头 " (patting the head) as the basis for comparison, where the action carries implicit intimacy, allowing for a degree of comparability. The comparative information coalesces into a specific structure, forming a subjective judgment of the evaluated object. Subjectivity is pervasive in language use; any discourse carries some degree of self-expressive imprint (Zhang Guoxian, Lu Jian, 2014). As previously noted, the speaker serves as the experiencer and does not enter the encoding layer of language, yet they create an invisible subjective perspective for evaluative expression on a cognitive level. This zero-form subjective evaluation is thus more pronounced than the subjective perspective of the agent, albeit more concealed.

5 Reasons for Popularity

In virtual social contexts, buzzwords are more prone to semantic and grammatical mutations (He Tianqi, Liu Meijun, 2024). Furthermore, the creative motivation based on expressive needs also drives the continuous expansion of "X+Sha" . Analysis reveals that it appears significantly more frequently in article reading sections than in comment sections. From article titles to content, "X+Sha" has become an essential lexical tool for attracting attention in various media and Weibo. For creators, the title plays a critical role in determining whether a large number of readers will engage with the content. Consequently,, the prevalence of "X+Sha" in news headlines tends to favor powerful buzzwords that can generate greater traffic.

Moreover, the role of register is significant. As language use exhibits register differences (Li Baojia, 2007), The "X+Sha" construction frequently appears in the entertainment sector, producing a plethora of language combinations characteristic of celebrity worship. This is evidenced by the dominance of terms related to facial features, expressions, physical characteristics, and intimate behaviors, which account for 87% of the overall data. This prominent feature peaked in 2016. A fundamental issue with these collocations is whether the semantics of the co-occurring words can be reasonably interpreted in both the real and imagined worlds, while still adhering to linguistic principles (Wang Yin, 2014). Fundamentally, the rise of "X+-Sha" is inseparable from the need for emotional expression in reality and the individual's re-recognition and appreciation of phenomena.

6 Conclusion

The transition encompasses two key aspects: a shift in the perspective of expression from the [agent+-

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causative verb+patient] semantic framework to the [agent+patient+causative+verb+experiencer] framework; and a shift in the focus of expression from degree polarity to the attitude and evaluation of the degree polarity by the experiencer semantic role.

The process has been achieved through mechanisms: truncation, foregrounding of semantic features, semantic framework expansion, and subjectification. As a result, the stable constructional meaning has demonstrated powerful productivity and analogical extension. There are other Chinese word patterns similar to "X+Sha" that involve substituting a variable "X" to create new online slang such as "X 党 " (party), "X 姐 " (sister), "X 控 " (fan), "X 狗 " (dog), and "X 哥 " (brother). This transformation has enriched the expressive capacity of the Chinese language and provides a vivid case for studying linguistic dynamism and adaptability.The ability to create new constructions through analogical application or imitative innovation demonstrates the flexibility of language in responding to cultural and emotional needs. This evolution not only enhances communication but also reflects broader societal trends and individual emotional expressions within the language.

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