

Social Indexicalization in Media Discourse: The Case of the Chinese "Zhè Jiè" Construction

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Abstract

Digital communication drives rapid grammatical innovation, yet how newly coined forms acquire durable social meaning remains poorly understood. This paper investigates the Chinese buzzword *zhe jie* (这届, 'this cohort') as a case study of how a conventional classifier evolves into a subjective evaluative construction. Building on Construction Grammar and subjectification theory, we show that the pattern *zhe jie* + NP + VP/AP has become an established evaluative construction whose subjectification operates through three mechanisms: proximal deictic empathy, holistic group labeling, and counter-expectation pragmatics. Moving beyond a purely cognitive account, we integrate social-indexical theories to show that its constructionalization is simultaneously an enregisterment process, indexing the speaker's social positioning as a digitally literate, critically engaged commentator. We synthesize these trajectories into a single process we term social indexicalization, in which grammatical constructionalization and the crystallization of social meaning mutually reinforce one another. Bridging cognitive and social perspectives, the framework demonstrates that social meaning is not a pragmatic add-on but a constitutive component of constructional representation—reframing *zhe jie* as evidence for a cognitive-sociolinguistic account of rapid language change in the internet era.

1. Introduction

Language is not a static entity but a dynamic system that is constantly in flux (Bybee 2010). Its evolution is manifested not only in the diachronic changes of phonology and morphosyntax but also, more profoundly, in the continuous negotiation and emergence of meaning within the use of specific lexico-grammatical units. In recent years, the Chinese language within online contexts has exhibited vigorous changes, providing valuable linguistic data for observing the real-time process of language evolution. Among these, "*zhe jie*" (这届, lit. "this cohort") has rapidly evolved from a neutral demonstrative-classifier phrase into a highly productive and widely used construction expressing specific subjective attitudes, making it a highly representative case of linguistic innovation. For example:

(1) a. 这届学生都毕业了!

b. 这届妈妈!

1. a. This cohort of students has graduated successfully!
2. b. This cohort of moms is too competitive!

In (1a), "*zhe jie* graduates" serves as an objective description. "Graduates" has a specific referent, typically defined by an internal division based on the temporal unit "year," and stands in referential opposition to "previous graduates." In (1b), the referent of "*zhe jie* moms" is relatively abstract, primarily because "moms" cannot easily be subcategorized by year. It represents the speaker's collective way of referring to this group, and the whole sentence conveys the speaker's subjective evaluation of this specific group of "moms." The transition from (1a) to (1b) reflects the semantic extension of "*zhe jie*" from a domain-specific term in the educational field to a more generalized reference to specific social

groups. This semantic shift endows (1b) with a distinct affective coloring. Through its labeling function and collective evaluative capacity, it becomes an efficient vehicle for expressing emotion and seeking solidarity. It is a highly productive emerging linguistic structure, here termed the “*zhe jie*” construction.

Some scholars have interpreted this phenomenon from a sociolinguistic perspective (Zhang Shu 2020; Tong Mei 2017), while others have approached it from a cognitive-linguistic angle. Yet research on the underlying mechanisms of its linguistic evolution remains insufficient. More importantly, both approaches share a critical limitation: the sociolinguistic approach treats “*zhe jie*” as a sociolinguistic marker without explaining the cognitive mechanisms that drive its grammatical evolution; the cognitive-linguistic approach, focused on subjectification and constructionalization, fails to systematically account for the social-indexical meaning that the construction carries. This paper argues that neither perspective alone is sufficient: the evolution of “*zhe jie*” is simultaneously a cognitive process (subjectification and constructionalization) and a social process (enregisterment and social indexicalization), and the two are mutually reinforcing.

We therefore propose a socio-cognitive linguistic framework that integrates Construction Grammar (Goldberg 1995, 2006; Traugott & Trousdale 2013) and the theory of subjectification (Traugott 2024) with the social-indexical theories of Silverstein (2003), Eckert (2008, 2012), Du Bois (2007), and Bucholtz & Hall (2005). This framework is situated within the broader commitment of cognitive sociolinguistics (Geeraerts 2016; Kristiansen 2008; Morin et al. 2024). It allows us to trace the complete trajectory of “*zhe jie*”—from a freely combined phrase to a highly schematic subjective evaluative construction, and from a neutral classifier to a socially indexical stance marker—thereby revealing how cognitive generalization and social enregisterment constitute a single, integrated process of change. The framework thus offers a glimpse into the distinct characteristics of rapid structural innovation and high subjectification that mark language in the internet era.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 analyzes the formal representation of the “*zhe jie*” construction. Section 3 traces its diachronic evolution through three stages, and Section 4 examines the cognitive mechanisms of subjectification along with their social dimensions. Section 5—the core innovation of this paper—introduces the socio-cognitive framework and analyzes the social indexicalization of “*zhe jie*.” Section 6 then discusses how constructionalization and enregisterment mutually reinforce each other in digital media. Section 7 concludes the paper.

2. The Formal Representation of the “Zhe Jie” Construction

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The “*zhe jie*” construction is a semi-fixed, partially open schematic structure, representable as “*zhe jie* + NP + VP/AP.” It conveys the speaker’s subjective evaluation of the behavior or attributes of the NP group. Because of its structural simplicity and strong pragmatic effect, the construction is frequently used in media headlines to capture readers’ attention. In terms of form, it exhibits the following characteristics:

2.1 “*Zhe jie*” serves as the fixed element of the construction

It is a lexicalized unit that has evolved from a demonstrative phrase indicating a specific cohort (“*zhe*” + “*yi jie*”) into a highly grammaticalized modifier (Fang 2002). The construction typically does not allow separation; for instance, the alternative form “*zhe yi jie de qingnian*” (This cohort of young people is cutting family ties) is rarely used. As a modifier, “*zhe jie*” displays strong boundedness and cannot stand alone outside the construction. For example, the brief reply in (2a) below is generally unacceptable:

(2) a. — *zhe jie*

— *zhe!*

b. *zhe 00 jie*

'a. — Which young people are not buying houses? — This cohort! (unacceptable)

b. That cohort of the post-00s generation is starting to reform the workplace.'

Although “*zhe jie*” originates from the hierarchical concept inherent in the lexical item “*jie*” (Xu 1963) (such as school grades or competition batches), within the construction this bounded, hierarchical sense is blurred and generalized. It no longer refers to a strictly defined category with clear start and end points; rather, it serves as a generic reference to a group that is “under discussion” or “currently active.” Consequently, paradigmatically related expressions such as “*na jie*” (that cohort) or “*shang yi jie*” (the previous cohort) cannot appear in this construction, as shown in (2b). The systematic exclusion of “*na jie*” is not merely a syntactic constraint but carries social-indexical significance: “*zhe jie*” has become the conventionalized form precisely because proximal deixis indexes empathetic involvement and evaluative stance, whereas distal “*na jie*” cannot bear this indexical load.

Functionally, “*zhe jie*” serves as an attributive modifier within the construction, imposing an indiscriminate categorical frame and exerting constructional coercion (Michaelis 2004) on the following NP, thereby treating the modified NP as a homogeneous whole. For instance, “*zhe jie mama*” refers to all the “moms” within the contemporary period under discussion. This categorical coercion, as we shall argue in Section 5, is simultaneously a cognitive operation (holistic categorization) and a social act (group essentialization indexing the speaker’s critical evaluative stance).

2.2 The variable NP is typically a bare noun

The variable NP is typically a bare noun and rarely takes modifiers. It usually denotes a social group (e.g., *zhe* “moms,” *zhe* “young people,” *zhe* “migrant workers,” *zhe* “netizens”)—typically nouns with fuzzy boundaries, which makes them amenable to holistic labeling by “*zhe jie*.” The NP carries the semantic features [+animate, +collective], which enable the group reference of “*zhe jie*” to function. However, as the construction becomes more schematic, even non-collective nouns can be coerced into the

construction, e.g., “08届” (this cohort of phones), where “届” is metaphorically treated as a collective agent. This expanding productivity of the NP slot reflects increasing constructional schematicity (Traugott & Trousdale 2013), which in turn expands the social domains in which the construction can be deployed as a stance-taking resource.

3. The Diachronic Evolution of the “Zhe Jie” Construction

3. The Diachronic Evolution of the “Zhe Jie” Construction

The evolution of “zhe jie” can be divided into three stages, each characterized by distinct formal, semantic, and social-indexical properties (Table 1):

Table 1
Three stages of diachronic evolution of the “zhe jie” construction

Stage	Core Structure	Typical Example	Subjectification	Social Indexicality
Pre-constructionalization Period	Numeral + jie +Education/Conference Noun	“08届” (Class of 08 graduates)	No subjectivity; referential only	No social indexicality; institutional register only
Construction Formation Period	Zhe jie + Social Group Noun	“这届球迷素质真高” (This cohort of sports fans has high quality)	Referential generalization; evaluation dependent on specific modifiers	1st-order indexicality: collective reference; informal register emerging
Construction Solidification Period	Zhe jie + X +Evaluative Expression	“点外卖在这届民工中很流行” (Ordering takeout is popular among this cohort of migrant workers.)	Evaluative schematization; built-in emotion; counter-expectation	2nd/3rd-order indexicality: evaluative stance +speaker identity; internet register marker

3.1 Pre-constructionalization Period

In this stage, “jie” functions as a conventional classifier meaning “batch” or “session,” and it primarily combines with nouns from educational or conference contexts (e.g., “08 jie biyesheng”—the class of 2008 graduates). “Zhe” and “jie” combine freely, and the phrase carries no subjective or evaluative meaning. The referent is precisely defined by institutional temporal boundaries, so the phrase is used purely referentially within formal, institutional registers. Socially, it is not indexical of any particular speaker identity; rather, it is available to any speaker, in any register, who needs to refer to a bounded cohort.

3.2 Construction Formation Period

The critical shift occurs when “*zhe jie*” begins to combine with social group nouns beyond the educational domain (e.g., 球迷 “sports fans,” 网民 “netizens”). Two changes take place simultaneously. Cognitively, the referential scope of “jie” generalizes from temporally bounded cohorts to any socially salient group, and the evaluation becomes dependent on the specific modifier (the VP/AP) rather than inherent in “*zhe jie*” itself. Socially, the construction begins to carry first-order indexicality (Silverstein 2003): it signals a shift from institutional register to informal, media-influenced register, thereby indexing the speaker’s orientation toward colloquial, group-labeling discourse. The semantic generalization of “jie” is thus inseparable from this social re-registering: it becomes schematic as a classifier precisely because it is being repurposed as a social-indexical resource.

3.3 Construction Solidification Period

At this stage, “*zhe jie*” has become a fixed constructional component with entrenched evaluative schematization. The construction now conventionally invites an evaluative reading: “*zhe jie* + NP” pragmatically conveys that the NP group merits comment, typically carrying a counter-expectation (Jing-Schmidt 2007) or an affective charge. Crucially, this is also the stage at which social indexicality intensifies: the construction has become enregistered (Agha 2003) as a marker of internet discourse and youth culture, indexing not just an evaluative stance but a specific speaker identity—digitally literate, critically engaged, and affectively expressive. This enregisterment is not incidental but constitutive: the construction’s meaning is partly shaped by its association with particular discourse contexts and speaker positions.

4. Cognitive Mechanisms of Subjectification and Their Social Dimensions

The subjectification of “*zhe jie*” operates through three interconnected cognitive mechanisms. We argue that each mechanism possesses both a cognitive dimension—well-established in literature—and a social dimension that, though overlooked in purely cognitive accounts, is essential for a full understanding of the construction’s evolution.

4.1 The Empathetic Effect of Proximal Deixis

The demonstrative “zhe” (这, this) inherently carries proximal deixis, thereby creating an empathetic effect that positions the speaker as close to the referenced group. This proximity is not merely spatial or temporal but affective: “*zhe jie*” implies that the speaker has intimate knowledge of or direct experience with the group under discussion. The empathetic effect of “zhe” thus serves as the affective foundation for the construction’s evaluative function. The metonymic mechanism at work is PROXIMAL DEIXIS FOR EMPATHETIC INVOLVEMENT: the spatial-temporal closeness denoted by “zhe” metonymically activates the affective closeness of the speaker to the referenced group (Gärdenfors & Paradis 2025; Herrero-Ruiz 2020).

However, this empathetic effect is not purely cognitive. As Silverstein (2003) argues, deictic elements are prototypical indexical signs—they point to aspects of the speech event, including the speaker’s social position. The proximal deixis of “zhe” in the “*zhe jie*” construction does not merely create psychological closeness; it indexes the speaker’s social position as someone who is “in the know” about the current social landscape. The shift from “zhe yi jie” (这一届, this one cohort, with contrastive focus) to “*zhe jie*” (这届, this cohort, with empathetic-evaluative focus) is simultaneously a case of subjectification (the meaning becomes more speaker-centered) and indexicalization (the form begins to carry social meaning about the speaker’s epistemic authority). The exclusion of “na jie” (那届, that cohort) from the construction is not merely a syntactic fact but is also social-indexical: distal deixis cannot carry the empathetic-evaluative indexical load that the construction requires. We formalize this proximal-deixis indexicalization as the first-order layer of the framework in Section 5.1.

4.2 Holistic Cognition and Group Labeling

The “*zhe jie*” construction treats the NP group as an undifferentiated whole, activating holistic cognition (Lü Guochen 1984). The classifier “jie” originally functions to partition a domain into bounded units; in the construction, this partitioning function is weakened, and “jie” instead serves as a group-labeling device that homogenizes internal diversity. This holistic reference is reinforced by the cognitive operation of CATEGORY FOR SALIENT DEFINING ATTRIBUTES metonymy (Ruiz de Mendoza 2011): the group label “*zhe jie* + NP” metonymically activates the salient defining attributes of that group, enabling the evaluative VP/AP to predicate over these attributes rather than over individual members. The semantic shift of “jie” from a bounded unit (“bounded”) to a holistic label (“unbounded”) mirrors Shen Jiaxuan’s (1995) “bounded vs. unbounded” distinction.

The social dimension of this holistic cognition is equally significant. Group labeling is not a neutral cognitive operation but a social act of categorization that carries ideological weight (Bucholtz & Hall 2005). When a speaker says “这届年轻人” (this cohort of young people), the holistic framing does not merely simplify cognition; it enacts a social positioning that treats an entire generation as a monolithic social object, which is itself an ideological move. The “*zhe jie*” construction thus operates at the intersection of cognitive simplification (holistic categorization) and social positioning (group essentialization), and the two are inseparable. This aligns with Eckert’s (2012) third-wave insight that linguistic variation does not merely reflect social categories but constructs them. We formalize these essentializing and third-wave dynamics through the indexical-field and identity principles in Section 5.1.

4.3 The Counter-Expectation Mechanism

The evaluative force of “*zhe jie*” is closely tied to a counter-expectation mechanism. The construction pragmatically implies that the NP group’s behavior or attributes deviate from what is expected or normative. This counter-expectation aligns with the negativity bias documented in cognitive psychology (Baumeister et al. 2001) and linguistic pragmatics (Jing-Schmidt 2007; Jing 2024): the most frequent and salient uses of “*zhe jie*” carry negative evaluation (e.g., “这届年轻人” — this cohort of people is not okay), which is pragmatically more informative than confirming expectations. When speakers use “*zhe jie*” with

negative evaluation, they position themselves as critics, authorities on social norms, and members of a community of shared evaluative stance.

The social dimension of counter-expectation lies in its indexing of the speaker's stance as an evaluator with epistemic authority: the speaker claims to know what is "normal" for the NP group and identifies the deviation. As Du Bois (2007) argues, stance-taking involves three components: evaluation (assessing the object), positioning (locating the self relative to the object), and alignment (calibrating the relationship with other stancetakers). The counter-expectation mechanism of "*zhe jie*" activates all three components of the stance triangle: evaluation (the NP group deviates from norms), positioning (the speaker as an authority on norms), and alignment (the audience is expected to share the evaluation). This stance triangle is not a mere cognitive inference but a social act that constructs the speaker's identity as a critical social commentator. We formalize this stance-taking reading through Du Bois's stance triangle in Section 5.1.

Figure 1 presents the cross-tabulation of referent type and evaluation polarity, showing the distribution patterns across categories.

As shown in Fig. 1, person-denoting nouns (e.g., "*niánqīng rén*") are associated with both neutral and negative evaluations, reflecting their role as primary targets of media framing. Object nouns, in contrast, tend to co-occur with neutral descriptions, suggesting that the construction's evaluative force is strongest when applied to human social groups. This pattern supports the argument that the *zhè jiè* construction primarily functions as a tool for constructing and evaluating social identities.

Diachronically, *zhè jiè* has undergone three stages of development: from a neutral classifier in educational contexts (e.g., "*08 jiè xuéshēng*", 08级, the Class of 2008), to a generalized group label in social commentary (e.g., "*zhè jiè qíumí*" for sports fans), and finally to a fixed evaluative construction with built-in stance marking (e.g., "*zhè jiè māmā tài juǎn le*"). This trajectory from objective reference to subjective evaluation constitutes a process of constructionalization (Traugott & Trousdale, 2013), in which the form-meaning pairing has become increasingly conventionalized through repeated media use.

5. From Subjectification to Social Indexicalization: A Socio-Cognitive Framework

The preceding analysis has established that the evolution of "*zhe jie*" involves subjectification—the cognitive process by which meaning becomes increasingly grounded in the speaker's perspective and attitude (Traugott 2024). However, we argue that a purely cognitive account of subjectification is incomplete. The subjectification of "*zhe jie*" is not merely a shift from propositional to speaker-centered meaning; it is simultaneously a shift from non-indexical to indexical meaning—that is, from meaning that says nothing about the speaker's social identity to meaning that constitutively indexes it. We term this dual process social indexicalization.

5.1 Synthesizing a Unified Socio-Cognitive Framework

Section 4 showed that each subjectification mechanism of “*zhe jie*” carries a social dimension—proximal deixis as indexicalization (Section 4.1), holistic group labeling as essentialization (Section 4.2), and counter-expectation as stance-taking (Section 4.3). To consolidate these observations into an explanatory framework, we integrate four canonical social-indexical theories spanning the cognitive and the social:

(1) Silverstein's Indexical Order (2003)

Section 4.1 invoked Silverstein's theory to argue that the proximal deixis of “*zhe*” is not merely a cognitive mechanism but an indexical sign operating at multiple levels. Building on this, Silverstein (2003) proposes that a first-order indexical points to some aspect of the speech context; a second-order indexical points to a social stereotype associated with that contextual feature; and an *n*th-order indexical presupposes an *n*th-order ideological schema. Applied to “*zhe jie*” (see Table 2):

Table 2
Indexical order of “*zhe jie*”

Order	Indexical Content	Manifestation in “ <i>Zhe Jie</i> ”
1st Order (Referential-Deictic)	Collective reference; proximal deixis	“ <i>Zhe jie</i> ” signals a currently relevant social group
2nd Order (Evaluative-Stance)	Evaluative stance; counter-expectation	“ <i>Zhe jie</i> + NP + VP/AP” expresses the speaker's critical assessment
3rd Order (Identity-Register)	Speaker identity type; register membership	Using “ <i>zhe jie</i> ” indexes the speaker as digitally literate, critically engaged, youth-identified

The progression from 1st to 3rd order is not linear but layered: each use of “*zhe jie*” potentially activates all three orders simultaneously, with different orders being foregrounded in different contexts.

(2) Eckert's Indexical Field (2008, 2012)

Section 4.2 drew on Eckert's third-wave variation theory to show that group labeling through “*zhe jie*” does not merely reflect social categories but constructs them. This insight is formalized in Eckert's concept of the indexical field (XXX 2008, 2012): linguistic variables do not carry fixed social meanings but possess a constellation of ideologically related meanings that are activated in context. The “*zhe jie*” construction's indexical field can be represented as in Table 3:

Table 3
Indexical field of “zhe jie”

Indexical Field of “Zhe Jie”	Ideological Association
Internet-savvy	Digital nativity; online discourse competence
Youth-identified	Generational consciousness; cohort solidarity
Critically evaluative	Epistemic authority; social commentary
Affectively expressive	Emotional engagement; solidarity-seeking
Counter-hegemonic	Questioning norms; challenging authority
Group-essentializing	Treating social categories as monolithic

The meaning activated from this field depends on the specific context of use. In a political context (e.g., “网络”) , the counter-hegemonic meaning is foregrounded. In a parenting context (e.g., “网瘾”), the affectively expressive and group-essentializing meanings are foregrounded. This context-dependent activation is consistent with Eckert's (2012) third wave of variation study, which treats variation as constituting a social-semiotic system rather than merely reflecting social categories.

(3) Du Bois's Stance Triangle (2007)

Section 4.3 used Du Bois's stance triangle to demonstrate that the counter-expectation mechanism of “zhe jie” is not merely a cognitive inference but a social act of stance-taking. Du Bois (2007) proposes that stance is constituted by three components: evaluation, positioning, and alignment. The “zhe jie” construction is a stance-taking device that simultaneously activates all three (see Table 4):

Table 4
Stance triangle components in “zhe jie”

Component	Operation in “Zhe Jie”	Social Consequence
Evaluation	NP group is assessed as deviating from norms	Establishes the speaker's normative framework
Positioning	Speaker claims epistemic authority and social distance	Constructs the speaker as a critical evaluator
Alignment	Invites audience to share the evaluation	Creates or reinforces in-group solidarity

The stance triangle reveals that “zhe jie” is not merely an expression of subjectivity (a cognitive phenomenon) but a social act of stance-taking that positions the speaker in a specific social role and seeks alignment with an audience. This is the social dimension that pure cognitive accounts of subjectification systematically miss: subjectification is not only about meaning becoming more speaker-centered, but about meaning becoming more socially positioned.

(4) Bucholtz & Hall's Identity Principles (2005)

Section 4.2 introduced Bucholtz & Hall's insight that holistic group labeling is an ideological act of categorization. Their framework (2005) proposes five principles for analyzing identity in interaction that operationalize this insight. Applied to “*zhe jie*” (see Table 5):

Table 5
Identity principles applied to “*zhe jie*”

Principle	Application to “ <i>Zhe Jie</i> ”
Emergence	“ <i>Zhe jie</i> ” does not simply reflect a pre-existing identity; it produces the identity of “critical social commentator” in the moment of use
Positionality	The construction positions the speaker both at the macro level (digitally literate youth) and the micro level (momentary evaluator of a specific group)
Indexicality	Using “ <i>zhe jie</i> ” indexically links the speaker to the social type of “internet-savvy critical commentator”
Relationality	The construction creates relational meaning through distinction from institutional language (“ben jie” vs. “ <i>zhe jie</i> ”) and alignment with internet discourse
Partialness	The identity indexed by “ <i>zhe jie</i> ” is ideologically partial: it presupposes a critical stance toward social norms and an identification with youth culture

5.2 The Social Indexicalization Process

Integrating the four theoretical modules, we propose the following model of social indexicalization for “*zhe jie*” (Table 6):

Social indexicalization is the process by which a linguistic form, through repeated use in specific social contexts, acquires layers of social-indexical meaning that become constitutive of its constructional representation. It parallels and mutually reinforces subjectification and constructionalization:

Table 6
The social indexicalization process of “*zhe jie*”

Process	Cognitive Dimension	Social Dimension	Interaction
Subjectification	Meaning becomes more speaker-centered	Evaluative meaning acquires social-indexical force	Subjective stance → socially indexical stance
Constructionalization	Form-meaning pair becomes conventionalized	Construction becomes enregistered in a register	Constructional schema → enregistered construction
Social Indexicalization	Indexical layers accumulate on the construction	Construction indexes speaker identity type	Cognitive generalization + social enregisterment = social indexicalization

The key insight is that constructionalization and enregisterment are not separate processes but two sides of the same coin. As “*zhe jie*” becomes conventionalized as a construction (cognitive process), it simultaneously becomes enregistered as a marker of internet Chinese (social process). The constructional schema [*zhe jie* + NP + VP/AP] carries not only semantic-pragmatic specifications (evaluative, counter-expectation, holistic) but also social-indexical specifications (internet register, youth identity, critical stance). These social specifications are not “pragmatic add-ons” but constitutive components of the construction, consistent with Morin et al.'s (2024) argument that social meaning is a constitutive subcomponent of construction pragmatics.

5.3 Media as the Rhetorical Strategy

The social indexicalization of “*zhe jie*” operates primarily through media discourse as a rhetorical strategy for agenda-setting and the reproduction of group stereotypes. Media outlets leverage this construction to frame social phenomena in particular ways, constructing group identities that serve specific communicative purposes. The frequent association of “*zhe jie nianqing ren*” with negative evaluations such as “*tai nan*” (too difficult) or “*tai juan*” (excessively competitive) reproduces the stereotype of contemporary youth as a generation facing unprecedented challenges. Similarly, the association with lifestyle choices such as “*duan qin*” (severing kinship ties) or “*bu jie hun*” (not marrying) reinforces narratives of generational divergence from traditional norms.

This rhetorical function operates through three interconnected strategies. First, categorical framing treats internally diverse groups as homogeneous collectives, enabling media to make broad generalizations about “the youth” or “the workers” without addressing internal variation. Second, evaluative loading repeatedly pairs the construction with affectively charged predicates (e.g., “too competitive,” “not up to par”), gradually conventionalizing the evaluative component as an inherent property of the construction. Third, ideological alignment invites readers to share the implied stance, positioning them as co-evaluators who recognize the described behavior as deviating from social norms.

Crucially, this media-driven process of social indexicalization is not merely descriptive but performative: by repeatedly applying the “*zhe jie*” label to specific groups, media discourse actively constitutes the social types it purports to describe. This aligns with Bucholtz & Hall's (2005) emergence principle, which holds that identity is produced in discourse rather than merely reflected by it. The construction thus functions as an institutionalized device for the mass production of social stereotypes, compressing complex social realities into digestible, emotionally resonant labels.

6. Mutual Reinforcement of Constructionalization and Enregisterment in Digital Media

The internet era has profoundly altered the ecology of language evolution (McCulloch 2019; Baron 2008; Jackson 2023; Li 2016). For “*zhe jie*,” the digital media environment serves as both accelerator and shaper of its constructionalization and enregisterment.

6.1 Acceleration of Subjectification and Enregisterment

The internet's high-frequency, high-density dissemination environment accelerates the subjectification of “*zhe jie*” in two ways. First, the demand for concise, attention-grabbing expressions in online discourse favors constructions that pack evaluative meaning into a compact form. “*Zhe jie*” provides exactly this: a single fixed element that triggers an evaluative reading, making it highly functional for headline-style online posts. Second, the informal nature of online communication lowers the register threshold, allowing subjective and emotional expressions to spread more rapidly than in formal contexts. The negativity bias (Baumeister et al. 2001; Jing-Schmidt 2007) further amplifies this effect, as negative evaluations using “*zhe jie*” attract more attention and replication than neutral or positive ones.

The same digital ecology accelerates the enregisterment of “*zhe jie*” as an internet construction. The replicative nature of online discourse—where expressions are rapidly copied, imitated, and adapted across platforms—creates the conditions for Agha's (2003) enregisterment: a linguistic form becomes associated with a specific social register through widespread and recognizable use. The “*zhe jie*” construction, initially spreading through political satire (e.g., “囧囧囧囧”), was rapidly replicated across social domains (parenting, workplace culture, consumer behavior), each replication reinforcing its association with internet discourse and critical social commentary. In online communication, the boundary between information transmission and emotional expression becomes blurred (Osgood et al. 1957; Quintilian 2001), and “*zhe jie*” capitalizes on this blurring by packaging referential group-labeling and evaluative stance into a single constructional unit.

6.2 The Mutual Reinforcement Loop

Constructionalization and enregisterment form a mutual reinforcement loop in the digital environment:

As “*zhe jie*” becomes more constructionalized (schematic, productive, evaluatively saturated), it becomes more functional as a social-indexical resource, which in turn drives its further replication and enregisterment.

As “*zhe jie*” becomes more enregistered (associated with internet register, youth identity, critical stance), it becomes more salient and more likely to be selected by speakers who wish to index these social meanings, which in turn drives its further constructionalization.

This loop is characteristic of what we call social indexicalization: the process by which a construction's cognitive properties (schematicity, productivity, evaluativity) and social properties (register association, identity indexing, stance marking) co-evolve through mutual reinforcement. The constructionalization of “*zhe jie*”—its evolution from a freely combined phrase into a schematic, evaluatively saturated construction—is inseparable from its enregisterment as a marker of internet discourse. These are not two independent processes but two dimensions of a single integrated process.

7. Conclusion

This paper has traced the evolution of “*zhe jie*” from a neutral demonstrative-classifier phrase to a highly productive subjective evaluative construction, and has argued that this evolution is fundamentally a process of social indexicalization—the co-evolution of cognitive generalization (subjectification and constructionalization) and social enregisterment (the acquisition of register-specific and identity-indexical meaning). The key findings are:

The subjectification of “*zhe jie*” operates through three cognitive mechanisms—proximal deictic empathy, holistic group cognition, and counter-expectation—each of which has a constitutive social dimension that has been overlooked in purely cognitive accounts. The empathetic effect of proximal deixis simultaneously indexes the speaker's epistemic authority; the holistic cognition of group labeling simultaneously enacts social essentialization; the counter-expectation mechanism simultaneously activates Du Bois's stance triangle of evaluation, positioning, and alignment.

The social indexicalization of “*zhe jie*” proceeds through Silverstein's indexical orders: from 1st-order collective reference, to 2nd-order evaluative stance, to 3rd-order speaker identity. The construction's indexical field (Eckert 2008) includes meanings such as internet-savvy, critically evaluative, affectively expressive, and counter-hegemonic, which are context-dependently activated across different discourse contexts and media registers.

The construction functions as a stance-taking device (Du Bois 2007) that simultaneously evaluates the NP group, positions the speaker as an epistemic authority, and seeks alignment with the audience. This stance-taking produces the speaker's identity (Bucholtz & Hall 2005) as a critical social commentator in the moment of use, consistent with the emergence and indexicality principles.

Constructionalization and enregisterment are mutually reinforcing in digital media: as “*zhe jie*” becomes more constructionally schematic and evaluatively saturated, it becomes more functional as a social-indexical resource; as it becomes more enregistered, it becomes more salient and more likely to be selected for social-indexical purposes. This mutual reinforcement loop constitutes social indexicalization.

The social meaning of “*zhe jie*” is not a pragmatic epiphenomenon but a constitutive component of its constructional representation, consistent with Morin et al.'s (2024) argument that social meaning is a constitutive subcomponent of construction pragmatics. The construction's deployment across media registers confirms that its social meaning is differentially activated depending on discourse context, still it remains potentially present across varied uses.

More broadly, this study demonstrates the necessity and productivity of a socio-cognitive linguistic framework (cf. Wang 2025) for analyzing language evolution. The case of “*zhe jie*” shows that cognitive processes (subjectification, constructionalization) and social processes (enregisterment, identity indexing) are not separate domains that happen to co-occur but are two dimensions of a single integrated process. Geeraerts' (2016) sociosemiotic commitment—the requirement that cognitive linguistics account for social variability and intersubjective meaning—is not an optional extension but a

theoretical necessity for any adequate account of language change. We propose that social indexicalization, as a theoretical construct, provides the bridge between the cognitive and the social in language evolution, and that the “*zhe jie*” case offers robust evidence for this bridge.

More broadly, the evolution of zhè jiè is not merely a Chinese-specific phenomenon; rather, it exemplifies a universal pattern of language change in the digital media age. Across languages and cultures, the high-density, rapid-circulation environment of online media accelerates the constructionalization and enregisterment of evaluative expressions. The case of zhè jiè demonstrates how digital media institutions function as powerful engines of linguistic conventionalization, compressing processes that might previously have taken decades into years. This mechanism—the institutionalized mass production of subjective evaluations through fixed constructional patterns—represents a fundamental dynamic of language evolution in the global digital ecosystem.

Future research may extend this socio-cognitive framework to other Chinese internet constructions and investigate whether social indexicalization is a universal feature of constructionalization in digital media environments, or whether it is specific to certain linguistic and cultural ecologies. The integration of corpus-based quantitative methods with ethnographic approaches would further strengthen the empirical foundation of this framework and test the social-indexical predictions generated by the socio-cognitive model.

Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical statements

This study analyzes publicly available textual data and does not involve human-subject experimentation; therefore, ethical approval was not required.

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Author Contribution

G.L. and J.L. conceived and designed the study. G.L. performed data collection, data analysis, drafted the initial manuscript, and prepared the tables and figure. J.L. contributed to the theoretical framework,

result discussion, and manuscript revision and editing. All authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

Data availability

The textual data analyzed in this study were collected from publicly accessible Chinese social media platforms, news websites, and online forums (e.g., Weibo, news headlines). Representative examples are cited in the main text; the full dataset is available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Figures

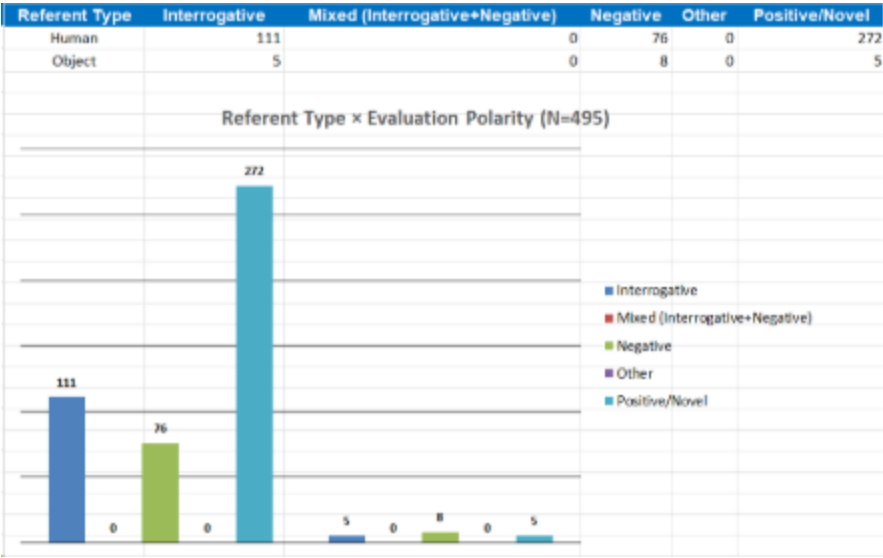


Figure 1

Referent Type and Evaluation Polarity Cross-tabulation

Supplementary Files

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- [zhejiecorpus.xlsx](#)