

Language Contact and the Emergence of the X Meng Construction in Contemporary Chinese

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Abstract

This study investigates the emergence of the X meng ("X 萌") construction in contemporary Chinese, focusing on the case of *choumeng* ("ugly-cute"). Although *choumeng* has generally been treated as a loan translation of the Japanese expression *kimokawa(i)* ("gross-cute"), the mechanisms that enabled its successful integration into Chinese remain underexplored. The study argues that the emergence of *choumeng* can only be fully understood by considering the interaction between language contact, morphological productivity, and changing sociocultural practices.

The analysis draws on the 2026 version of the BCC Corpus. Tokens instantiating the *X meng* construction were retrieved through corpus searches and supplemented with the established form *daimeng* ("adorably clumsy"), yielding a dataset of 983 tokens. The study examines both the productivity of the construction and the linguistic and social conditions that facilitated the diffusion of *choumeng*.

The findings show that *choumeng* did not emerge in isolation but was licensed by an already productive *X meng* construction in Chinese. High-frequency forms such as *daimeng* ("adorably clumsy") and *ruanmeng* ("soft-cute") indicate that the construction had become entrenched before *choumeng* gained widespread currency, providing a productive morphological schema into which new lexical items could be incorporated. Meanwhile, the growing popularity among China's Generation Z of aesthetically unconventional yet emotionally appealing characters, such as Labubu and "ugly dolls", created a demand for new evaluative expressions. For speakers familiar with Japanese popular culture, adapting an existing Japanese expression into Chinese was therefore more accessible than coining an entirely new lexical item.

From the perspective of morphological extravagance, *choumeng* combines semantically incompatible elements to produce a novel evaluative meaning, thereby departing from conventional patterns of word formation. Its apparent violation of semantic expectations enhances its expressive force while resonating with the preference for linguistic novelty characteristic of youth culture. The study argues that the successful conventionalization of loan translations depends not only on language contact but also on the existence of productive morphological constructions and the communicative needs of the recipient speech community. More broadly, it demonstrates how lexical borrowing, constructional productivity, and sociocultural change jointly shape the emergence of new evaluative expressions in contemporary Chinese.