

A Pragmatic Study of the Internet Address Term “Love You, Lao Ji”

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Abstract

'Love You Lao Ji' emerged at the end of 2025, originating from a creative mishearing and adaptation of the line “Love you, Mom, see you tomorrow” from the game League of Legends. This paper explores the word formation innovation of 'Love You Lao Ji' and the social-psychological motivations behind this expression from a pragmatics perspective. The study finds that, at the lexical-semantic level, “Lao” has been grammaticalized into an emotional marker affix, while 'Ji' retains its semantic meaning; at the pragmatic function level, 'Love You Lao Ji' is interpreted as a self-directed relational management behavior, achieving three pragmatic functions: face management, redistribution of internal rights and obligations, and construction of harmonious self-relationships; at the social-psychological level, the popularity of 'Love You Lao Ji' reflects the safe expression of self-face and the value orientation of 'self-return' in the social environment.

Keywords

Lao Ji; pragmatic function; relationship management

1. Introduction

In December 2025, the term 'Love you, Lao Ji' quickly spread across Chinese cyberspace, becoming one of the most notable internet buzzwords of the year-end. This expression originated from a line spoken by a character in the game League of Legends: 'Love your mom, see you tomorrow.' Players misheard 'mom' as 'Lao Ji', and through secondary creation in online communities, 'Love you, Lao Ji, see you tomorrow' evolved into a new form of self-care expression. Users have spontaneously created “Lao Ji Literature”, which has quickly spread. This paper integrates lexical semantics theory and relationship management theory. At the lexical semantic analysis level, drawing on lexicologization research and affix bleaching research, it examines the lexical innovation and semantic reconstruction of 'Lao Ji'; at the pragmatic analysis level, drawing on Spencer-Oatey's three core concepts of face, social rights and obligations, and interaction purposes, it analyzes the pragmatic functions of 'Love you, Lao Ji.'

2. The Semantic Innovation in the Word Formation of 'Lao Ji'

2.1 The Grammaticalization of 'Old'

In the term '老己', the semantic attribute of '老' is key to understanding the entire expression. According to Dong Weiguang (2002), in his study of the grammaticalization process of the prefix '老', the affixation of '老' resulted from the convergence of different forms and paths of grammaticalization, which can respectively satisfy various expressive needs such as 'self-deprecation,' 'respecting others,' 'closeness,' and 'teasing.' Wang Haiying (2002) categorized the prefix '老' into four major types on a synchronic plane according to the degree of

grammaticalization, pointing out that the most highly grammaticalized '老' no longer carries any lexical meaning or semantic color, as in '老虎' (tiger), '老鹰' (eagle), '老鼠' (mouse), and other animal names. Guo Zuofei (2005) noted that the formation of the prefix '老' went through a process of lexical word grammaticalization, in which semantic generalization, syntactic positioning, and contextual effects together contributed to the evolution of '老' from a lexical word to an affix. Liu Yifei (2007) further pointed out that the grammaticalization process of '老' reflects the principle of grammatical divergence, that is, '老' underwent grammaticalization in two directions: on the one hand, from an adjective to a prefix, and on the other, from an adjective to a temporal adverb and gradually to a degree adverb. Wang Ningning (2010) systematically reviewed the grammaticalization process of the prefix '老,' arguing that the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties period was the budding stage of the development of the prefix '老,' the Tang and Song dynasties saw its formation stage, and the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties were its active period. She pointed out that in modern Chinese, '老' can function as both a prefix and a suffix, often carrying different additional meanings and expressing various emotional tones. Specifically, the character '老' in '老己' can have its semantic attributes analyzed from the following three dimensions:

First, rule out the literal meaning of 'old age.' Analysis of high-frequency corpora from popular topics on Weibo and Douyin during the period when 'Love You Lao Ji' went viral (December 2025) shows that users span across adolescents, young adults, and other age groups, with no semantic connection to 'old age.' Typical examples include:

- (1) Worked overtime until ten today, treated myself to a deluxe beef noodle, love you, Lao Ji, see you tomorrow.
- (2) I said I wanted to eat pomelo but didn't want to peel it, and after hearing myself, I immediately peeled it and gave it to myself. Love you, Laoji, see you tomorrow.
- (3) Lao Ji, you're the only one who'll spend every cent you have on me.

The users in examples (1), (2), and (3) are all young professionals or student groups, and their 'Lao Ji' does not refer to an 'aged self.' In these examples, 'old' has completely detached from the literal meaning of 'aging,' and its core function has shifted to emotional connotation.

Second, the increase in emotional function. Research by Dong Weiguang (2002) shows that 'lao' in forms of address can convey multiple emotional tones: intimacy, casualness, and seniority. Liu Yifei (2007) pointed out that the affix 'lao' semantically carries a meta-semantic feature of 'excessiveness,' which gives it a strong emotional tone of exaggeration and emphasis. Wang Haiying (2002), when classifying the affix 'lao' according to its degree of grammaticalization, noted that words with the semantic connotation of 'closeness, warmth, casualness' are usually used in kinship terms or quasi-kinship terms, such as 'laodi' (younger brother), 'laomei' (younger sister), 'laogong' (husband), 'laopo' (wife), etc.; words with a semantic connotation of 'ridicule' are newly emerged words in recent years, such as 'laoban' (boss) and 'laowai' (foreigner). The 'old' in 'Lao Ji' achieves the overlapping of the multiple emotional tones mentioned above. The term 'Lao Ji' applies a process of 'friendly naming' to the self, giving the abstract 'self' personalized traits. It sounds both like an intimate 'inner friend' and like an 'other' with whom one can converse.

2.2 Semantic Retention of '己'

As the core morpheme of the first-person reflexive pronoun, ji (己) has established the core meaning of “oneself, the self” in Classical Chinese. Regardless of the degree of grammaticalization of lao (老), the meaning of “self” in ji remains unchanged; for instance, lao ji (老己) and zi ji (自己) are semantically equivalent in interchangeable contexts.

Shuowen Jiezi • Radix Ji states: “Ji is the central palace. It depicts the curled form of all things hiding away.” Duan Yucai’s annotation: “Ji refers to oneself.” (Xu Shen, with Duan Yucai’s commentary, 1981) This core meaning has been fully preserved in Modern Chinese. Lao ji consistently refers to the core referent “oneself”.

In traditional expressions, “oneself” is an abstract, introspective referent; in lao ji, however, with the emotional coloring of lao, ji is transformed into a personified object that can be addressed and cared for. As one netizen commented: “Calling oneself ‘lao ji’ means treating oneself as an intimate companion, creating a slight psychological distance, and viewing one’s own difficulties from a calmer, outsider’s perspective.”

By shifting from self-reference to “friendly address”, and by employing the affective function of lao and the referential meaning of ji, lao ji adopts the pragmatic strategy of “self-objectification”, which turns ji from “a self that is thought about” into “an other that is cared for”.

3. “Love You, Lao Ji” from the Perspective of Relationship Management Theory

Spencer-Oatey (2008) proposed the theory of relationship management, which goes beyond traditional studies of face and politeness, explaining from the perspective of language output how people manage social relationships in verbal communication. The core concepts of this theory include face, social rights and obligations, and interaction goals. Essentially, it is a core theoretical framework for realizing meaning construction and relationship regulation through language symbols in social interactions, and its core concepts deeply align with the ontological features of Chinese, such as lexical delexicalization, pragmatic strategies, and self-reference reconstruction. This theory goes beyond the surface-level analysis of traditional face and politeness studies, explaining how individuals manage their social relationships with others and with themselves through language symbols from three dimensions: the encoding logic of language output, semantic reconstruction, and pragmatic adaptation. This theoretical framework provides a precise linguistic explanation path for analyzing the pragmatic functions of the new online term ‘爱你老己’ (‘Love you, Lao Ji’). Using this theoretical framework to analyze ‘爱你老己’, we can conduct an in-depth expanded analysis of its pragmatic functions as follows:

3.1 Face Management

From the perspective of linguistic ontology, the core of face management is the pragmatic adaptability of linguistic symbols, that is, the individual achieves a balance between face needs and communicative context through lexical choice, sentence construction, and referential transformation. The face management function of ‘lài nǐ lǎo jǐ’ (Love you, Lao Ji) essentially completes the pragmatic avoidance of face threats through the creative reconstruction of self-reference. This process spans three linguistic levels: lexical bleaching,

referential personalization, and pragmatic stance transformation. Face is always associated with people's emotional sensitivity traits, relating to personal self-worth, dignity, honor, and other emotionally sensitive characteristics. People usually regard themselves as individuals possessing certain traits or personalities. People generally expect others to give them positive evaluations rather than recognizing their negative traits. In traditional expressions like 'love oneself,' the speaker directly declares self-love, which can easily trigger others' negative evaluation of 'narcissism,' thereby threatening positive face. 'Lài nǐ lǎo jǐ' avoids face threat through two steps: the first step is transforming 'self' into 'lǎo jǐ,' a personified 'other' independent of 'I'; the second step is transforming 'love oneself' into 'love lǎo jǐ,' an emotional expression directed at the 'other.' After this transformation, the speaker's pragmatic stance shifts from 'I declare love for myself' to 'I care for my friend "Lao Ji"'. Through the creative use of Chinese lexical ontology, '爱你老己' ('Love you, Lao Ji') constructs a dual pragmatic avoidance mechanism, perfectly addressing the face-threatening issue associated with traditional expressions of self-love. First, the friendlier reconstruction of self-reference transforms the abstract self-denoting term '自己' ('oneself') into the emotionally warm '老己' ('Lao Ji ') by utilizing the grammaticalized function of '老' ('old'). As a typical emotional marker in Chinese, '老' adds an intimate and casual nuance to '己', turning it from an abstract 'self' into a personified 'inner companion'. This achieves an ontological transformation of self-reference from 'self-denotation' to 'friendly address', an innovation within the Chinese reference system that aligns with the evolutionary pattern of 'contextual reconstruction' in Chinese vocabulary. Second, there is an indirect transformation of pragmatic stance: the direct self-declaration '爱自己' ('love oneself') is converted into the indirect expression of care for oneself through others, '爱你老己' ('love you, Lao Ji '). By introducing the pronoun '你' ('you'), a bidirectional dialogue between 'I' and 'Lao Ji ' is established, shifting the speaker's stance from 'self-declaration' to 'care for another', which avoids the negative connotations of 'narcissism' while positively constructing face. From the perspective of language evolution, this face-management strategy is not accidental but a product of the combination of the Chinese 'politeness principle' and the 'innovation mechanism' of online language.

3.2 Management of Social Rights and Obligations

The management of social rights and obligations is, in essence, a process in which individuals use language coding to semantically define and pragmatically construct the relationship between self and self, and self and society. As a self-directed speech act, 'loving your Lao Ji ' primarily functions to achieve a semantic reconstruction of self-rights and obligations through the creative use of Chinese vocabulary and sentence structures, realizing the pragmatic coding of self-dialogue. This process reflects the 'subjectivity' and 'interactivity' characteristics of Chinese pragmatics and aligns with the core connotations of 'fairness rights' and 'reciprocal rights' in relationship management theory. Social rights and obligations are related to people's social expectations and express communicators' concerns about fairness, consideration, and appropriateness of behavior. In the expression 'loving your Lao Ji ', one grants oneself the right to 'be cared for,' as in 'the Lao Ji deserves to be treated this way,' and clarifies the obligation to 'give care to oneself,' as in 'the Lao Ji is tired, take her out for a good meal.' The rules under different perspectives are called social pragmatic communication rules, which include fairness rights and reciprocity rights. From the perspective of the linguistics of fairness rights, the pragmatic encoding of 'love your Lao Ji ' is actually a semantic confirmation of one's own 'right to be cared for.' In today's fast-paced society, many people mostly play the role of 'giver' in everyday social interactions.

Traditional expressions of self-love, such as 'take good care of yourself,' are mostly directive or advisory, without clearly defining the 'right to be cared for' that one possesses. 'Love your Lao Ji' is different. Through semantic suggestions like 'the Lao Ji deserves to be treated this way,' it transforms the self's 'right to be cared for' into specific verbal expression. With the emotional connotation attached to the word 'old,' the semantic attribute of 'Lao Ji' as 'an object worthy of care' is also reinforced. This is a precise adaptation of Chinese vocabulary semantics to social psychological needs. Because 'old' carries an intimate nuance, it makes the expression of 'being cared for' more reasonable and compelling, while also avoiding the stiffness that can arise when asserting one's own rights. From the perspective of reciprocity rights, '爱你老己' (love you, Lao Ji) also constructs a new type of self-directed pragmatic model, reinforcing the pragmatic expression of self-obligation. Traditional expressions of self-love are mostly silent and subtle psychological activities, lacking a concrete pragmatic medium to rely on. The emergence of '老己' (Lao Ji) provides a clear verbal object for self-dialogue. Through the two-way interaction of 'I—Lao Ji,' people can transform the 'duty of care' of the self into specific verbal actions and sentence expressions. For example, 'I only have this one Lao Ji, I have no obligation not to pamper!' (Example 4), the explicit use of the word 'obligation' turns self-care that was originally only at the psychological level into a pragmatic-level commitment; coupled with the exclamatory sentence structure, it further emphasizes the firmness of this obligation. Also, 'Lao Ji, it's the end of the year, this is how I love you' (Example 5), with a complete subject-verb-object sentence structure, constructs a pragmatic structure of 'subject, action, object,' making the expression of self-obligation more concrete and tangible. This pragmatic encoding, ultimately, is the adaptation of Chinese sentence structures to self-emotional needs. It not only reflects the 'interactive' characteristic of Chinese pragmatics but also accomplishes a semantic reconstruction of self-rights and obligations, ultimately achieving the pragmatic goal of managing social rights and obligations.

For example:

I only have this one Lao Ji, I have no obligation to not spoil it! I only have this one Lao Ji, what's wrong with indulging it a little!

The year is ending, and I love you like this.

3.3 Relationship Purpose Management

Relationship management theory points out that people always have certain purposes when interacting, including conveying information or expressing relational purposes. The purpose of interaction in 'Love You, Lao Ji' belongs to the latter, a relational purpose. It is not about conveying content to the outside world, but is directed towards oneself, constructing the relationship between self and self-harmonizing encouragement, achieving Internal emotional identification and emotional support. The emergence of the 'Lao Ji' provides a concrete object. Individuals create an 'internal partner' to whom they can confide, commit, and interact by othering the self. From the perspective of pragmatic strategies in constructing self-relationships, the core innovation of

For example:

Dear Lao Ji, you are already great.

Great, the second cup of milk tea is half price, Lao Zi (my own self) one cup, Lao Ji one cup.

4. The Social and Psychological Drivers Behind the Popularity of 'Love You, Lao Ji '

4.1 Safe Expression of Self-Face Needs

Brown and Levinson believe that many speech acts are inherently face-threatening and classify face-threatening acts as follows: speech acts that threaten the listener's face needs include those that threaten the listener's negative face needs and those that threaten the listener's positive face; and speech acts that threaten the speaker's face needs. Every typical person will seek certain ways to avoid these face-threatening acts or adopt certain strategies to mitigate the degree of threat posed by the speech act. Politeness is the effort to maximize the maintenance of both the listener's and the speaker's face. Positive face refers to the desire to be recognized, appreciated, and liked by others. In the context of traditional social culture, directly claiming 'I love myself' is easily interpreted as 'narcissism' or 'self-centeredness,' which can lead others to form a negative judgment of the speaker. Negative face refers to the desire not to be interfered with or imposed upon by others. Although 'loving oneself' seemingly does not involve others, when this expression enters the public discourse space, it is essentially announcing an attitude to the outside world. This announcement may provoke others' evaluations, doubts, or even ridicule, thereby interfering with the speaker's freedom of self-expression. Therefore, 'loving oneself' is a positive concept advocated by modern psychology, but in interpersonal interactions, it may bring face risks. This explains why many people feel that "saying 'I love myself' directly is awkward and cringey".

4.2 The Value Orientation of 'Self-Return' in the Social Environment

Contemporary society's singular definition of 'success' and high expectations for individuals have caused many people to fall into the dilemma of 'overexertion' and 'neglecting oneself.' The popularity of 'Love You, Lao Ji first' reflects a shift in the values of contemporary youth, moving from 'seeking external recognition' to 'focusing inward on oneself.' The competitive pressure, fast-paced life, and singular standards of success in contemporary society together form external incentives for individuals to 'neglect themselves,' and also provide the realistic soil for the rise of a 'value orientation of "self-return"' value orientation. In the context of modern society, 'success' is often simplistically equated with wealth accumulation, job promotion, and social status enhancement. This singular definition firmly ties individuals to the track of 'chasing external recognition,' forcing people to constantly give outwardly and overexert themselves. Gradually losing oneself. In the workplace, young people stay up late and work overtime for performance, overexerting their health, falling into a vicious cycle of 'involution', and even developing a cognitive bias of 'sacrificing oneself in exchange for work achievements.' In life, the prevalence of social networks intensifies the atmosphere of comparison. People pay excessive attention to others' lifestyles and evaluations, blindly pursue the 'perfect life' as seen by others, and continuously suppress their own real needs and emotional preferences in order to meet external expectations, ultimately falling into a state of physical and mental exhaustion. At the family and social level, traditional views of 'sacrificing oneself to benefit others' still have some influence. Many young people, under the pressure of family responsibilities and social expectations, habitually place others' needs above their own, long-term neglect their own feelings, and wrong themselves, further exacerbating the state of 'ignoring oneself.' This widespread living dilemma creates a strong emotional need for 'self-care' among individuals. The expression 'Love you, Lao Ji'—friendly, down-to-earth, and without a sense of distance—

precisely hits this pain point. It avoids the awkwardness of directly saying 'Love You, Lao Ji' while clearly conveying the concept of self-care, becoming an important emotional outlet for individuals to release and comfort themselves. Expressions in the corpus such as 'those who shortchange themselves never gain wealth, those who love themselves thrive' and 'taking care of yourself is the most important thing' vividly convey the value orientation of 'self-care.' Individuals begin to take the main responsibility for their own development, neither passively waiting for external recognition nor excessively belittling their own achievements. This shift in values provides a social basis for the spread of 'Love you, Lao Ji.'

5. Conclusion

This paper takes the buzzword of the end of 2025, '爱你老己' ('Love you, Lao Ji'), as the research object, exploring its word-formation innovation, pragmatic functions, and reasons for popularity. The study finds that in '老己,' the character '老' has been grammaticalized into an emotional marker suffix, which, combined with meanings of intimacy and casualness, personifies '己' into an internal companion that can be addressed, achieving the harmonious construction of the self-relationship. Using Spencer-Oatey's relationship management theory for analysis, this expression transforms 'loving oneself' into an other-directed care for '老己,' thereby avoiding face-threatening acts while reconstructing the cognition of one's rights and obligations, achieving harmonious construction of self-relationships. Moreover, the widespread use of '爱你老己' also reflects contemporary society's psychological needs, simultaneously satisfying the need for safe expression of self-face and aligning with the youth group's shift in value orientation from seeking external recognition to focusing on the self, becoming an internet language phenomenon with characteristics of the times.

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