

***Kěài* ‘cute’ in Mandarin: Its meanings, uses, and changes
in Internet communication**

[中文「可愛」的語意、用法及其在網路通訊的改變]

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Abstract

The word *kěài* in Mandarin is semantically rich. However, little research has been devoted to examining its meanings and uses, let alone possible innovative usage following the popularity of social media platforms. Hence, this study aims to examine in detail (a) the descriptive range, meanings and functions of *kěài*, and (b) possible changes of its usage in Internet communication. To achieve these goals, a total of 800 tokens of *kěài* were collected and analyzed—400 from the Sinica Corpus and 400 from two widely used social media platforms, representing the data before and after social media platforms became popular. Our major findings are as follows: First, although human beings and non-human objects are what *kěài* mostly describes, its descriptive range is shifting to more abstract entities for much higher percentages of Abstract Entity and Event are found on the social media platforms. Second, the influence of age and gender factors has weakened. Third, although most of the non-human cases are described as *kěài* due to their external features, most of the human cases in the Sinica Corpus are called *kěài* for their external features while on the social media platforms, for their non-external features. Fourth, *kěài* conveys positive meanings most of the time, and the three most frequently found meanings of *kěài* in the Sinica Corpus are different from those on the social media platforms. Fifth, *kěài* is found to serve as hedges in both sets of data, but it is also used to show surprise on the social media platforms.

Keywords: *kěài* ‘cute’, descriptive range, meaning, function, social media platform, language change

關鍵詞：「可愛」、描述範圍、語意、用法、社交媒體平台、語言變化

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