

Original Paper

The Semiosis of Sound Signs in Romance Audio Drama from a Peircean Semiotic Perspective: A Case Study of The Early Spring

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Abstract

Romance audio dramas take the development of characters' emotional relationships as an important part of their narratives. Based on Peirce's representamen-object-interpretant triadic framework, this study focuses on the audio drama The Early Spring and systematically analyzes the semiosis of sound signs. In specific narrative contexts, voice, music, and sound effects refer to character relationships as their objects through iconic, indexical, and symbolic mechanisms, while listeners interpret and further extend these meanings. From this point of view, the semiosis of sound signs in romance audio dramas constitutes a dynamic chain linking sound signs, character relationships as objects, and interpretants generated by listeners. This study further expands the application of Peircean semiotics to sound media and provides a new analytical perspective for understanding meaning-making through sound signs.

Keywords

Peircean semiotics, romance audio drama, sound signs, The Early Spring

1. Introduction

The development of digital technology continues to promote the transformation of the production and dissemination of cultural products. China's *14th Five-Year Plan for the Publishing Industry* clearly stated that digital technology should be integrated into all aspects of the publishing industry chain to respond to the increasingly significant mobile, intelligent, and personalized trends in cultural life in the digital era, and to develop new products, services, and business models in the field of digital publishing (National Press and Publication Administration, 2021). At the same time, China's *14th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Development* also encourages cultural and creative activities based on online platforms,

supports cultural products such as online literature, online audiovisual content, and digital publishing, and promotes the multi-level development of original online works (The General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council, 2022). Against this background, online literature is no longer limited to its textual form. Audio drama has become an important form of audio adaptation of online literature.

Romance fiction is one of the most widely consumed genres of online literature and occupies a central position in the audio drama market (Feng et al., 2025). Its narratives both depend on and seek to construct intimate relationships, centering on the emotional ties between protagonists and, in particular, on the development of romantic relationships between male and female leads (Fekete, 2022). Scholarship on the genre has increasingly examined romantic narrative patterns, gendered power relations, female subjectivity, and related issues (Zhou & Huang, 2023; Ma et al., 2024; Zou et al., 2025; Du, 2026). When romance fiction is adapted into audio drama, however, emotional relationships previously conveyed through textual description must be reconstructed through sound signs. Existing research has nevertheless focused largely on textual and visual forms, leaving sound as a medium comparatively underexplored. Meanwhile, although scholarship on audio drama has expanded from discussions of production techniques to sound-based narration, most studies continue to emphasize the general narrative functions of sound elements, platform and industry issues, and community dynamics, with relatively little attention to how sound signs refer to their objects and generate meaning at the micro level (Yan, 2022; Ge, 2025; Deng, 2026).

Adapted from a popular work of online literature, the audio drama *The Early Spring* has accumulated more than ten million plays since its release in 2024 and continues to rank among the top three on the daily and weekly romance charts on Maoer FM, a leading audio platform. The series has developed a relatively stable space for listeners' discussion on Weibo. The main line of the narrative revolves around the evolving relationship between the protagonists, Luan Nian and Shang Zhitao, depicting their progression from the distance created by their workplace roles to emotional intimacy, conflict, and eventual reconciliation. This trajectory reflects a typical pattern of relationship development in romance fiction. Under the framework of Peircean semiotics, this study analyzes the semiosis of sound signs in *The Early Spring* from three interrelated dimensions: sound signs as representamens, character relationships as objects, and interpretants generated by listeners.

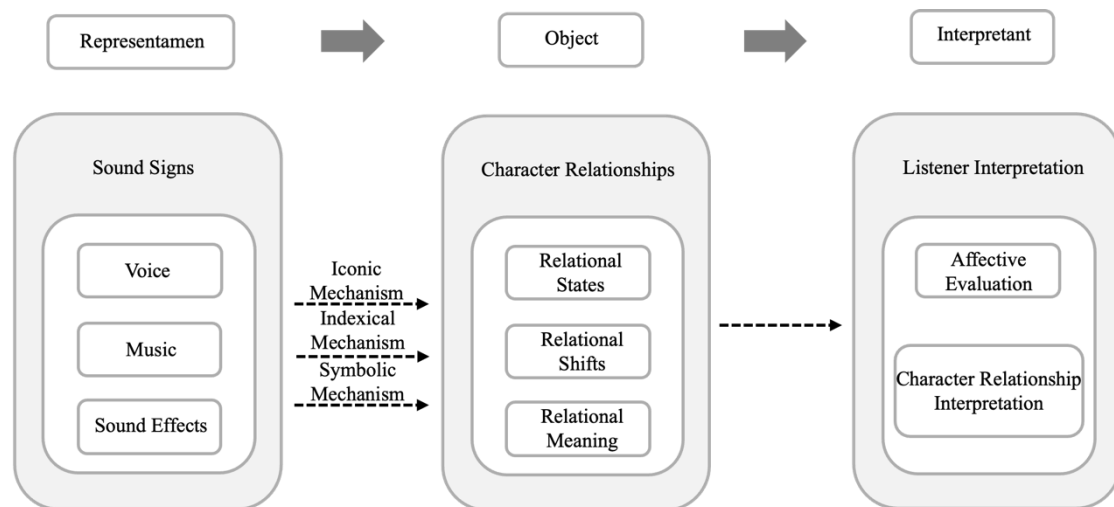
2. Peircean Semiotics and Its Relevance to Sound Signs in Audio Drama

Unlike the closed, binary, and relatively static conception of the sign associated with Saussure, Peirce regards the generation of meaning as a dynamic process. In Peirce's theoretical framework, a sign is by no means a simple reference to an object; on the contrary, semiosis is based on the inseparable triadic relation among the representamen, object, and interpretant. Once the representamen refers to an object and thus gives rise to an interpretant, signification occurs (Zhao, 2017). On this basis, Peirce divides

signs into three categories—icons, indices, and symbols—according to the ways in which they relate to their objects: icons establish a representational relation by virtue of their similarity to their objects at the level of sound, form, or structure; the meaning of an index comes from the actual or causal connection between it and its object; symbols rely on conventions formed through long-term social practice to be understood. In view of the abstract nature of symbolic relations, interpreters must rely on their familiarity with the relevant context to understand what a symbol signifies.

Peirce believes that any form that can be perceived by an interpreter can function as a sign when, within a specific relation, it refers to an object beyond itself (Ji, 2014). Audio drama uses sound signs to organize narrative, engage listeners' auditory perception, and evoke their imagination through sound. These sound signs, through the deliberate arrangement and design of creators, not only construct specific narrative scenes but also refer to objects such as characters, character relationships, and specific plot events, and finally enter processes of listeners' understanding and interpretation. Scholars who discuss Peircean semiotics also point out that anything that exists independently, can establish a relation with something else, and can be understood can function as a sign (Lu et al., 2013). Accordingly, the semiosis of sound signs in audio drama can be understood as a dynamic process involving sound signs, their reference to objects, and listeners' interpretation.

The audio drama *The Early Spring* takes the sound sign as the “representamen”, takes the emotional relationship development of the hero and heroine as the “object”, and the affective evaluation and relational understanding formed by listeners during the listening process as the “interpretant”. Among them, the representamen further establishes an expressive connection with the character relationship as its object through iconic, indexical, and symbolic mechanisms; interpretation is meaning. Different people can give the same representamen different meanings, which ultimately relies on the interpretation activities of a specific person at different times and in different situations (Guo, 2004). This also shows that the understanding of the meaning of audio dramas is open and pluralistic, and listeners can further extend the meaning and produce new signs. Based on Peirce's triadic theory of “representamen-object-interpretant”, this article forms an analytical framework for the semiosis of the sound signs of romance audio dramas from sound presentation to object and then to meaning interpretation, as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1. Analytical Framework for the Semiosis of Sound Signs in Romance Audio Drama
Based on Peirce's Triadic Theory of Signs**

3. Representamen: The Composition of Sound Signs in Audio Drama

In Peirce's triadic semiotic system, "representamen" refers to a carrier that can be perceived and is the basis for the emergence of all meanings. When describing a relationship, the original novel takes written language as the carrier. Readers can understand the changes in the relationship between the lines through reading, while the audio drama replaces the carrier of the media sign and transforms the textual narrative into a sound sign perceived by the ear. The sound signs in the audio drama *The Early Spring* can be divided into three categories: voice signs, music signs, and sound-effect signs, each of which has its basic form and basic narrative functions.

3.1 Voice Signs

Voice signs are the most basic and intuitive carriers for shaping character images and presenting character relationships. Because the audio drama does not have visual images, listeners cannot rely on visual information to obtain the external physical characteristics of the characters. Voice actors need to customize distinctive vocal qualities according to the character's personality, plot characteristics, and emotional characteristics to achieve a match between vocal timbre and character settings (Wang & Xing, 2025). Voice can be divided into verbal forms and paralinguistic forms. Verbal voice signs are accompanied by rich tone detail design, and the system of address has distinct attributes of interpersonal hierarchy. Different forms of address for the same person can reflect the differences in social status and the degrees of intimacy and distance between the characters. In *The Early Spring*, the heroine's forms of address for the hero define the relationship between the two very well. When the heroine calls the hero by his English name "Luke", this usually happens in the workplace environment, which is a sign of the superior-subordinate relationship between the two; while the heroine's use of the hero's Chinese name "Luan Nian" is the embodiment of the intimate relationship between the two. At

the same time, the dialogue content between characters carries the basic functions of plot promotion and interpersonal interaction presentation. Paralinguistic vocalizations refer to nonverbal sound signs composed of the human voice (Zhao, 2020). The vocal details beyond spoken dialogue, such as sighs, breathing, sobs, laughter, etc., designed in the audio drama *The Early Spring* do not carry specific information, but can supplement the emotional states beneath the characters' surface speech and enrich the auditory layers.

3.2 Music Signs

Music signs are the key elements to coordinate the narrative atmosphere and pave the emotional tone. In terms of narrative content, audio drama music can be divided into background music and theme songs (Liu, 2023). According to incomplete statistics compiled by netizens, there are 111 music tracks used in the audio drama *The Early Spring*. Different pieces of music need to be designed according to different plots and scenes to build the right emotional atmosphere for character interaction scenes and help listeners establish an affective frame. The background music that connects different plots is called transition music. It serves the transition of the plot and signals the switch of narrative scenes. The theme song is a highly recognizable music sign that contains the core of the story, which can be said to be the "representamen" of the whole story. For example, the theme song *An Xiang* (《暗香》 Dark Fragrance) in the classic TV series *The Story of a Noble Family*, with a calm and atmospheric music style, coupled with the singer's high-pitched and gloomy voice, injects soul into the television drama. To this day, the prelude can pull listeners back to the sad love story full of love and hate (Xu, 2021).

3.3 Sound-Effect Signs

Sound-effect signs undertake the functions of constructing narrative space and representing character actions. They make up for the lack of visual scenes in audio drama, mainly including action sound effects and environmental sound effects. Among them, environmental sound effects can be subdivided into natural environmental sound effects and social environmental sound effects. In the audio drama *The Early Spring*, natural environmental sound effects include the sounds of insects, rain, wind, etc.; social environmental sound effects include flight announcements that build an airport space, keyboard sounds that build a busy workplace space, and noisy traffic sounds that build a street environment. The sound design creates characters' spatial orientation and spatial distance according to the spatial localization function of the human auditory system (Lü & Yao, 2022), which is often reflected in the distance and proximity of the voice, spatial reverberation, and volume levels. These signs provide concrete auditory scene support for character interaction, and different processing methods help listeners distinguish the spatial distance between the characters at the physical level, so as to enhance the realism of the plot.

4. Object: Character Relationships Constructed through Sound Signs

Voice, music, and sound effects constitute the perceptual basis for the semiosis of sound signs in romance audio dramas, but the sound signs themselves are not equivalent to meaning. Only when these sound signs enter a specific narrative situation and establish a semiotic relation with a specific character relationship can they refer to that relationship as their object.

4.1 Iconic Mechanism: Reproduction of Relational States

The iconic mechanism relies on the inherent similarity between sound forms and real-life interpersonal experiences. Audio dramas lack visual images, and listeners' perception of the relationship can only be established by relying on the auditory details of vocal quality, tone, speech rate, and acoustic space. Abstract relationship characteristics such as intimacy, opposition, and status hierarchy in *The Early Spring* are not directly written into the lines. The creator transforms them into auditory feelings that the human body can intuitively capture, relying on the communicative experiences accumulated in listeners' daily lives to complete empathic interpretation.

In the workplace scenes, the auditory characteristics of the two characters form a sharp contrast. As a boss who holds the discursive authority, the hero's vocal quality is dignified and imposing, and his speech is brief and even, occasionally accompanied by paralinguistic vocalizations to express emotional displeasure, such as "hm" and "heh"; while the heroine is a new employee who has just entered the workplace, her vocal quality is clean and full of a girlish feeling, and her vocal tone is always in a tense state. Each answer has a short pause. From the voice, listeners can feel the heroine's caution and tentative sense of measure. The difference in the vocal states of the two characters intuitively externalizes the hierarchical power relationship.

As the emotional relationship develops, the auditory order begins to reverse. The near-ear vocal positioning first builds a narrow and private acoustic space, and the perceived distance between the hero and heroine is greatly reduced. In the scene where they are alone at the bar on the top of the mountain, the hero's tone loses the "sharpness" of the workplace. The voice actor interprets the dialogue with a gentle vocal quality, and the heroine also speaks in a slow and relaxed manner. When the topic turns to mocking the hero's impulsive fight, the heroine's tone becomes lighter, and her sentences become more fluent. This kind of auditory change is highly consistent with the vocal state when people are in a secure intimate relationship. Later, the quarrel over the heroine's failure to be promoted once again reproduces the unbalanced auditory structure. When the heroine's emotions are out of control, her voice becomes louder, her tone becomes urgent, and her volume is continuously raised to vent her emotions; but the hero maintains a restrained and tight voice throughout the whole process, and the steady and low-volume response forms an auditory contrast with the heroine's vocal expression, so that the hierarchical distance of the workplace period reappears in the intimate conflict. The voice reproduces not only the current dispute but also the long-standing imbalance of power in this relationship. The three scenes are laid out along the auditory trajectory of "hierarchical

distance–intimacy–conflictual imbalance”. The combined changes in vocal quality, tone, speech rate, and acoustic space correspond to the relational states of the characters at different stages. Relying on the iconic mechanism, listeners can feel the underlying relationship structure through sound by intuitively perceiving the differences in auditory texture and sound details.

4.2 Indexical Mechanism: Marking Relational Shifts

The connection between the index and the object comes from the way sound points to a specific event. Peirce summarizes this connection as the real and dynamical relation between signs and individual objects. Audio dramas cannot visually present the movement of characters and spatial transitions, and changes in action sound effects, environmental sounds, and background music become auditory evidence of actions and narrative shifts, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Indexical Mechanisms of Sound Signs in *The Early Spring*

Sound Signs	Sonic Presentation	Immediate Function	Relational Signification
Action Sounds	Simulated sounds synchronized with characters' actions	Indicate character actions and scene transitions	Indicate spatial movement and changes in the spatial setting of emotional interaction
Emotion-Emphasizing Sound Effects	Brief, crisp sounds with bright overtones	Highlight momentary emotional reactions	Signal shifts in emotional attitudes and relationships
Background Music	Changes in musical style	Match the emotional tenor of the current narrative	Establish an affective frame and mark stages of the emotional relationship states
	Changes in volume	Track changes in narrative focus and emotional intensity	Highlight key moments in relational interaction
Environmental Sounds	Weather forecasts and other environmental sounds	Establish the real-world setting of the narrative	Provide contextual buildup and foreshadow changes in character relationships

In the audio drama *The Early Spring*, the disintegration of the hierarchical distance between the hero and heroine unfolds through a series of action sound effects. After the end of the annual meeting, the sound of traffic, the sound of lazy footsteps, and the sound of tableware colliding appear in chronological order. The auditory cues lead the two people from the workplace environment to the private space of the hero, and the movement across the spatial boundary also reduces the distance between the two. In this clip, although the hero does not have much dialogue, a series of emotion-emphasizing sound effects are designed for him. Such sound effects are short and crisp, with bright overtones, such as “metallic overtones”, which hint at the change in the hero’s emotional attitude towards the heroine. The sound records where the character goes and what he does, and also quietly indicates the loosening of hierarchical barriers in the workplace.

Background music also plays a narrative role. The music style changes with the development of emotional relationships. When the relationship is sweet, the background music is soothing and romantic. When the characters are quarreling, the background music is tense and sharp, which establishes the affective frame for listeners and also constitutes an emotional development clue that can be heard. In addition to the music style, the volume design of the background music is also indexical. For example, when the hero and heroine are alone, the lyrical melody adjusts its prominence according to the narrative content. In the intimate interaction scene in which the hero hugs and comforts the heroine after she is harassed in the workplace, the dialogue between the two is the primary narrative content, so the background music is lowered and placed beneath the dialogue between the hero and heroine. In daily communication, it completely gives way to everyday action sound effects. When the plot reaches the climax, the melody is brought to the foreground until it occupies the entire acoustic space. The arrangement of background music in the audio drama *The Early Spring* goes beyond the auxiliary role of enhancing the atmosphere and becomes an implicit narrative framework for marking stages of the emotional relationship and emotional intensity.

Like the narrative style of literary works, the audio drama *The Early Spring* also uses “foreshadowing” in the narrative, using environmental sounds to indicate turning points in the relationship. The heroine’s entry scene at the beginning of the story is accompanied by the continuous sound of rain, which not only shows the natural environment but also hints at the twists and turns of the subsequent workplace relationship and emotional development. In terms of social environmental sounds, the design of weather broadcasts runs through the whole audio drama, foreshadowing changes in the emotional relationship between the hero and heroine through changes in the weather. For example, on the eve of the collapse of the relationship between the hero and heroine, the weather broadcast reports in a steady voice that “the violent cooling of Beijing this week is rare. Today is the first time in the second half of the year that the highest temperature has dropped to freezing” and “This week will be the coldest week in Beijing in the past 30 years”. This seemingly objective social environmental sound design foreshadows the subsequent conflict. The cold temperature corresponds to the emotional relationship

that is about to break, thus forming an index. Comments such as “it is also the freezing point of your relationship”, “the sad scene” and “love is about to cool down” in the real-time bullet comments also show that listeners can quickly capture the connection between the environmental sound and the relationship of the characters. Different types of auditory cues perform their respective functions and refer to their objects through causal associations.

4.3 Symbolic Mechanism: The Accumulation of Relational Meaning

There is no sensory similarity or causal relationship between symbols and objects. The connection between the two in the audio drama *The Early Spring* relies on the construction of a stable narrative context. The symbol in the sense of Peirce not only relies on social conventions but also on gradually formed interpretive habits (Nöth, 2010). Only when a sound appears repeatedly within a stable narrative framework can it develop into a distinctive auditory sign that carries the complete emotional journey. The audio drama *The Early Spring* constructs symbolic signs through the characters’ inner monologues and plot-based ending songs. The monologue serves to clarify the object. After being matched with the plot at a particular stage, it conveys the current state of the emotional relationship between the hero and heroine. Therefore, the monologue first links the auditory emotion to a specific relational meaning, and at the same time, it repeatedly gives the ending song a stable narrative context and accumulates stable symbolic meanings layer by layer.

There are four main ending songs in the audio drama *The Early Spring*, which have the function of emotional reinforcement. Their lyrics use metaphors or images to distill the emotional relationship of the characters. Multiple sign forms repeatedly point to the same object, which strengthens listeners’ understanding of the relationship between signs and objects. In the early stage of the drama, the theme song *Luokong* (《落空》 Fall Through) was used as the closing music, and the ending monologue was delivered by the heroine alone. During this period, although the two got along closely, they could never reach a mutual consensus on love. The hero deliberately maintained a blurred relational boundary, and the heroine was aware of the difficulties but still held expectations. The lyrics revolve around the emotional core of chasing and falling, which closely matches the emotional situation of the heroine’s “sober sinking”. Its repeated use in the early stage makes the melody gradually become associated with ambiguity, unequal expectations, and emotional insecurity. The melody thus becomes the auditory background of the imbalance in the early relationship.

Entering the stage of the breakdown of the character relationship, the ending songs change rapidly. The melody and text of *Guodu Huxi* (《过度呼吸》 Hyperventilation) focus on anxiety, depression and emotional exhaustion, describing the heroine’s dilemma of workplace frustration and the collapse of trust; *Yiming Ganqingguan* (《佚名感情观》 An Anonymous View of Love) moves away from intense emotion and looks back on the persistence in the emotional relationship from the heroine’s self-deprecating and calm perspective. These reflections and emotional pain announce the heroine’s “grand retreat” from this relationship. The three songs follow the sequence of failed expectations,

emotional collapse, and the dissipation of love, and advance the narrative of relationship breakdown layer by layer.

In the later stage of the story, *Be the Right One* appears together with the hero's monologue. The perspective changes to present the hero's sense of guilt and active efforts to recover the relationship after losing the heroine. The lyrics are full of the desire for long-term companionship and also symbolize the final reconciliation of the characters' relationship. When separated from the narrative scene, messages such as "May Luan Nian and Shang Zhitao always be happy" still emerge on the music platform, which shows that the song has formed a stable symbolic meaning. When the melody sounds, it is associated with the happy ending in which the two people move toward each other after twists and turns. Therefore, the ending song is not just an emotional embellishment, but also an abstract auditory trajectory of the development of the characters' emotional relationship, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Selected Pairings of Ending Songs and Monologues across Relationship Stages in *The Early Spring*

Ending Song	Key Lyrics	Corresponding Monologue
<i>Luokong</i>	Love is a cliff.	People are always tempted to expect more after receiving even the smallest taste of sweetness. The truest desires within you will always take you by surprise. If they are not frightening enough, perhaps they are not real enough. But do you truly dare to face them? Is losing control a sign of falling in love with someone? You know perfectly well what the rational choice is, yet you deliberately go against it. To lose control while remaining fully aware of it—perhaps that means there is no cure left.
	You know full well that everything is wrong, yet you still refuse to turn back.	
	You remain clear-headed, while I insist on losing myself in it.	
<i>Guodu Huxi</i>	Don't let anxiety sweep over your senses again.	There is never absolute fairness in this world. The workplace and love are no different. People often say that what matters is winning or losing, but there will always be a few who care about the process—about whether they can feel that they are truly in sync with
	Am I speaking nonsense, or crying out for help, waiting for someone to ask what is wrong?	
	Are you a Freudian theory, or the faith I hold on to?	

<i>Yiming Ganqingguan</i>	None of it has an answer. Yet he never learns from his mistakes, and still tells me to love. To love until I have nothing left to lose, and still say that losing was worthwhile. Perhaps the ending is not so bad after all.	someone. Leaving someone and ending a relationship leaves behind an enormous void. The only person who can fill that void is yourself; otherwise, it becomes an endless vicious cycle from which you can never rebuild.
<i>Be the Right One</i>	Every time, when you close your eyes. Kisses fall like a butterfly. I will be in your sight. Being the right one by your side.	Time may shatter and reshape everything, yet there is always someone who stubbornly remains in your heart, resisting the passage of time and never truly fading away. We will all grow old someday, and time is never especially kind to anyone. Yet we do not fear its passage because some things endure beyond time itself. After the cold winter comes <i>The Early Spring</i>, and summer will soon arrive—the most vibrant season of life. May everything be well with us.

5. Interpretant: Listeners' Interpretation of Signification

Peircean semiotics emphasizes the dynamic generation of meaning. Semiosis is a continuous process based on the interpreter's open understanding and interpretation of signs. Listeners' interpretation is not limited to the preset semiotic framework of audio drama creators, and their subjective cognition can expand the connotation of the object. Listeners of the audio drama *The Early Spring* interpret sign meaning at two levels: one is the Interpretant of Affective Evaluation formed through embodied experience, and the other is the Interpretant of Character Relationships formed through cognitive engagement.

5.1 Interpretant of Affective Evaluation

Audio dramas rely on the auditory medium to form embodied communication. The embodied perspective holds that human auditory perception can communicate with the external environment, and the embodied experience of auditory perception breaks the sense of distance. Sound creates an all-round sense of immersion for the subject and connects the subject with the surrounding environment (Wu, 2022). The narrative of audio drama stimulates listeners' senses with voice, music, and sound

effects, so that listeners become immersed in the narrative and inadvertently complete the empathic experience that fits the characters' situations. At this stage, bodily senses lead listeners to form direct affective evaluations. Most of these feelings are expressed through instantaneous bullet comments, and the expression style is short and concise. Listeners of the audio drama *The Early Spring* often empathize with the heroine who is at a disadvantage in the relationship. In the corresponding plot bullet comments, there are often "crying" emojis or "wuwuwu" (weeping) and other onomatopoeic emotional expressions. The immersion and empathy brought by hearing accumulate an affective foundation for listeners' reception of signs. Some listeners accept the development of preset character relationships along the narrative path built by the sound signs and complete the dominant decoding expected by audio drama creators. A typical form of this is the editing of relevant clips for online circulation, which further strengthens the original emotional relationship narrative of the work.

5.2 Interpretants of Character Relationships

When listeners associate their own experiences with the content, interpretation moves beyond emotional expression and enters the stage of rational thinking with personal judgment, forming a more complete interpretation of relational meaning.

The first layer is the interpretation of relationship patterns. There are differences in the views on marriage and romance, values, social experiences, etc., of different listeners. These long-term cognitions naturally become reference points for interpreting the objects of signs. In the audio drama *The Early Spring*, the temporary intimate relationship established by the hero and heroine on the basis of unequal status and physical companionship becomes the main object of listeners' collective criticism. Although listeners recognize the predestined love between the hero and heroine and accept their final reconciliation, they are also dissatisfied with the unhealthy emotional relationship between the hero and heroine. Listeners form reflective evaluations based on real-life intimate relationships, such as "If it is reality, this relationship is really terrible. Fortunately, it is just a novel", "Everyone must pay attention to imagination and reality! The ideal hero does not exist at all, and no one has such overflowing feelings and long-term waiting", and "The heroine puts herself in too low a position and is too humble". From these comments, it can be seen that listeners place greater value on equality in emotional relationships and individual self-worth. Listeners do not completely deny the character relationship built by the creator, but only supplement the original narrative with their personal cognitive judgments.

The second layer is the interpretation of relational logic. Listeners no longer simply explain whether the relationship is good or not, but further focus on the psychological motivations and practical factors behind the development of the relationship. Based on the characters' personality traits and conceptions of intimacy, listeners of *The Early Spring* believe that the relationship conflict stems from the inner conflict between the heroine's desire for emotional prioritization and the hero's arrogance and avoidance of emotional expression; at the realistic level, from the perspective of the power structure, they believe that the conflict comes from the ambiguity of the emotional boundaries within the

superior-subordinate social relationship. In addition, listeners actively move beyond the narrative framework of intimate relationships, explore the characters' personality traits beyond love, and then expand the original scope of signification of sound signs and complete the extension of meaning. For listeners of *The Early Spring*, the heroine Shang Zhitao dares to love and hate in emotional relationships. In the workplace, she is tenacious, brave, and fearless. Listeners take her as a reference point for self-development. The name "Shang Zhitao" has gradually become a symbolic sign with meanings beyond romantic relationships. Many listeners commented that "Becoming Shang Zhitao is my ideal of heroism as a teenage girl." The signification originally built around the romantic relationship has been given a new connotation of inspirational growth, and the new sign of "Shang Zhitao" has been formed.

6. Conclusion

Taking the triadic relation of Peircean semiotics as the framework, this article systematically analyzes the semiosis of sound signs in the romance audio drama *The Early Spring*. The analysis shows that the semiosis of sound signs in romance audio dramas is not the direct transmission of the established meaning of sound signs. It involves the continuous participation of representamens, objects, and interpretants in the semiotic process, presenting a chain of semiosis from sound signs and character relationships as objects to interpretants generated by listeners. Voice, music, and sound effects first constitute perceptible auditory representamens; however, there is no fixed correspondence between sound and objects. After the representamens enter a specific narrative situation, they need to refer to character relationships as objects through iconic, indexical, and symbolic mechanisms, so that the emotional states and relationship changes between the characters can be expressed in an auditory way; listeners form affective evaluations and relational understandings in the process of listening and complete a key link in semiosis. This article no longer focuses on the classification of sound elements and the discussion of general narrative functions. It further examines how sound signs refer to character relationships as objects in a specific context, and how meaning is generated and extended through listeners' interpretation. Follow-up research can broaden the range of genres and integrate multiple research methods such as quantitative textual analysis and listener interviews to explore the mechanisms by which different listener groups receive, negotiate, and reproduce the meaning of sound signs in audio dramas.

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