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NETWORK BUZZWORDS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF MEMETICS

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Abstract

With the development of science and information technology, computer-mediated communication is rising, and gradually plays an important role in people's daily life. As a prominent feature of online language, network buzzwords are an important language and social and cultural phenomenon. This paper analyzes four-character network buzzwords in terms of memetics, and classified three types of word formation through the analysis of data: abbreviation, homophony and meaning transfer. Besides, nearly all buzzwords have become popular through re-imitation and re-creation, and have been accepted and widely used by the majority of netizens.

Keywords: CMC, four-character buzzwords, memetics

1. Introduction

Network buzzwords, generally speaking, are the language widely spread and used on the network, and are the most active part of network language. Due to the individuality and novelty pursued by young people, newly created network buzzwords often present unique features. The morphology of many emerging network popular words is different from that of natural language, even the seemingly normal words have different meanings from natural language. Zhang Wanting (2016) pointed out that Internet buzzwords were characterized by novel semantics, rapid dissemination and strong entertainment. As a common linguistic phenomenon in today society, network buzzwords have been widely concerned by Chinese linguistic and sociological researchers in recent decades.

Memetics is a newly developed theory that aims to account for the evolutionary mechanism of culture from a Darwinian perspective. In 2014, He Ziran introduced the theory of memetics and combined it with pragmatics, and showed its applicability in discourse analysis. The key concept of Memetics is meme, a term coined by Dawkins (1976), who believed that meme was an unit of information in the brain which played an important role as a mutating replicator in cultural evolution, just like genes (Dawkins, 1982). In the view of He Ziran (2014), language itself is a meme expressed in words, phrases or contexts. Language meme not only includes its form, but also includes what is behind it, such as thoughts, beliefs or intentions, etc. Given that the core feature of meme is always imitation and replication, which is in line with the essence of language transmission, memetics have strong

adaptability in explaining the popularity of network buzzwords.

2. Buzzwords

On the whole, there are relatively few basic researches on the definition of network buzzwords at present. Most researchers roughly describe the characteristics of network buzzwords according to their own professional perspective, and then strengthen some of them to obtain the definitions of network buzzwords. For example, Tang Meiyang (2010:76) mentions in *New Exploration of Network Language* that network buzzwords are an influential group in network and a special form of spoken language. Such definitions are defined from the subject and spatial attribute of network buzzwords. Chen Yimin (2008), on the other hand, defines it from the perspective of space and time attribute as well as generation and dissemination field, and believes that network buzzwords refer to the hot words that come into being almost simultaneously on the Internet with the occurrence of real social news events, become popular quickly both inside and outside the Internet, and have extremely strong vitality in a short time, but do not last long. Nevertheless, in here it is sufficient to know that network buzzwords are, in essence, a social language phenomenon generated with the emergence of Internet users, a new social variation of modern Chinese which is created and disseminated by Internet users through the network.

As for the classification of network buzzwords, scholars hold different opinions. From the perspective of linguistics, Xie Yajun (2009) believes that there are several types of network buzzwords, such as acronym, number homonym, symbolic language, Chinese homonym, code mixing and semantic transfer. He believes that the word-formation methods of the network buzzwords listed above are all creative simplifications to achieve the optimization of speech configuration. On the other hand, Tang Meiyang (2010) divides network buzzwords into simple buzzwords and format buzzwords. In her opinion, buzzwords in the form of complete words are simple buzzwords; Popular words in a certain language format are format

popular words, which mainly come from online works, best-selling books, popular songs, movie dialogue, etc. In addition, some researchers classify buzzwords into interest appeal buzzwords, emotional catharsis buzzwords and value pursuit buzzwords according to their different meanings.

Moreover, some scholars also study network buzzwords from the perspective of sociology and psychology. Most of them believe that network buzzwords witness social changes and reflect people's social mentality in the process of changes and netizens' self-realization, conformity, novelty seeking, questioning and criticizing, entertainment, catharsis and release psychology. He Baiyu (2007) proposed that network buzzwords are a slice that records the process of material life and concept change of Chinese people, and a reflection of social change and social psychology in language. Through psychological analysis of language, the general mentality of current Chinese youth can be deeply revealed, and it is the best entry point to analyze the social psychology of contemporary young people. On the other hand, Wang Qingjie (2011) believes that network buzzwords are generated and prevalent in the psychological demands of catering to the subversion of tradition, pursuing new and novelty, relieving pressure and catharsis, and highlighting individuality. They express the general concern and basic judgment of netizens on social phenomena, and reflect the alternative expression and emotional catharsis of netizens on social status. Therefore, seemingly simple network buzzwords often contain deep social and cultural background and reflect complex social psychology.

All in all, the progress made by these scholars in the past has undoubtedly improved the theoretical system and expanded the scope of application. Therefore, reviewing the literature that has made great contributions to linguistics in the past decades will undoubtedly help us better understand this linguistic phenomenon.

3. The word formation of four-character network buzzword

3.1. Abbreviation

Compared with a traditional acronym which abbreviates the initial letter, the abbreviation in four-character network buzzwords is more likely to contract a sentence, as shown in the following two examples :

(1) 人艰不拆 (Life is already hard, so don't expose the truth!)

(2) 不明觉厉 (Admiration arises despite my incomprehension of what you said.)

In example (1), the phrase "人艰不拆" comes from the song *Lying* by the Chinese singer Yoga Lin. There's a verse in the song that goes like this: "人生已经如此的艰难, 有些事情就不要拆穿." (Life has been so difficult that some things needn't to be exposed.) Since then, the term has been widely quoted by netizens on post bar and rage comics, thus giving rise to the current term "人艰不拆". In example (2), "不明觉厉" comes from the dialogue in the movie *God of Food*. The superficial meaning is used to express the admiration of a novice for a technical expert, and the extended meaning is used to mock the other person for being too esoteric and unintelligent, or as an excuse to disguise one's deep knowledge. When an expert expresses a professional and reliable opinion of something, it is used to express the admiration of an expert by a novice. However, when a non-expert expresses a professional but unreliable opinion about something, the term is used to mock his exaggerated language and lack of understanding of what is being said.

The "人艰不拆" in example (1) is actually a kind of phenotype. It has the same form as the original lyrics, but it has different contextual meanings after being copied and spread by netizens. The lyrics of the original song express the bitterness of being frustrated in love, but as a popular phrase on the Internet, "人艰不拆" expresses a humorous sense of self-deprecation. The same is true of "不明觉厉". After being imitated and quoted, it has a

richer meaning based on the original word. As language memes, the two first attracted the audience's attention, and then were successfully retained in people's memory after being infected and quoted in various ways.

3.2. Homophony

The second is to make words through homophony. In Chinese, there are a large number of words with the same or similar pronunciation, which provides conditions for the creation of homophonic words. In view of the fact that the medium of Internet communication is text, in order to make the Internet communication more relaxed and vivid, netizens intentionally or unintentionally colloquial words and use homonyms to achieve humorous and unique linguistic effects. For example:

(3) 火钳刘明 (Leave a message/comment before it becomes a top/ hot tweet)

(4) 耗子尾汁 (Mind your own business)

"火钳刘明" in example (3) is an Internet buzzword and a homonym for "火前留名". The word comes from the post bar. When people try to type the word "火前" on the keyboard, they got "火钳" instead due to the input software, thus they employ "火钳刘明" for convenience. It mainly refers to leaving a name before a post gets hot, hoping to chase its clout, and their ID can also become famous. "耗子尾汁" is a homonymous buzzword of the idiom "好自为之". This word has the same meaning as "mind one's own business" and are used in the context of admonishing others. The phrase comes from a short video by Ma Baoguo, a Chinese Internet celebrity, in which he describes how he got hurt while competing with a young man. "劝这位年轻人好自为之" (Advise the young man to behave himself) which he spoke as "耗子尾汁" due to his accent. Later, it became popular on the Internet and a large number of emoticons were created based on it.

Homophonic words are used to convey the same information in different forms. They belong to memetic genotype. Netizens create a large number

of similar words by imitating them, but the core content of the words remains the same. The words in the two phrases "火钳刘明" and "耗子尾汁" are not necessarily related to each other, but are linked together due to the characteristics of homophones in Chinese and the different regional accents, and finally combined into the current network buzzwords. This kind of homophonic word-making makes the simple text communication show a special linguistic effect, semantic expression becomes more vivid and interesting. In addition, homophonic words in a certain contextual context can also make the utterance produce the implication and convey a richer semantic meaning, therefore, it has been copied and widely used by netizens.

3.3. Meaning transfer

Meaning transfer is one of the important ways to create network buzzwords. This method is to give new meanings to the original words and form new network buzzwords. With the development of society, many words have gradually deviated from their original meanings in the process of actual use, and netizens have combined current events to make new interpretations of these words. Some of the new definitions are extensions of the original meaning, while others are completely irrelevant, as in the following two example sentences :

(5) 梅开二度 (Brace)

(6) 万物起源 (Origin of all things)

In Example (5), the phrase "梅开二度" was originally an idiom, referring to the successful completion of the same thing twice. When the video uploaders cause duplicate content in the video due to negligence or intentional muddle through videos, or similar scenes occur for other reasons, the audience will display "梅开二度" in the bullet screen, indicating that the content has been seen twice in the same video. The "万物起源" in Example (6) was originally the name of a foreign authoritative work, but now it is used as a popular network buzzword to ridicule the views of those who are narrow-minded, that is, to identify a thing as the origin of other things of the same type, with a strong irony. The origin of this meaning comes from the saying that "一切网络上流行的梗都来自 6324 直

播间" (Everything that's trending on the Internet comes from 6324) , which is popular on the Internet. Therefore, 6324 is called the origin of online popular culture. As some followers often say that words from other sources also come from 6324, the word gradually takes on a satirical meaning.

It is obvious that the new words created through meaning transfer are all memetic phenotypes that convey different meanings in the same form. The form and meaning of the above two words have not changed much, but their application scope has become wider, and they express different emotions in various contexts. The original meaning of "梅开二度" is to express the admiration or praise for a thing's success twice, but nowadays it is mostly used for ridicule to achieve a humorous effect; "万物起源" was originally a word for objective statement, but now it has an ironic meaning. The original meanings of these words still exist, but in the network communication, their new meanings are widely used and spread, which makes people's original impression of them change. Over time, the network popular words with new meanings have been successfully retained in people's memory.

4. Conclusion

This paper studies the categories of four-character buzzwords popular on the Internet. It is found that there are three types: abbreviation, homophony and meaning transfer. Through the analysis of these words based on memetics, it can be seen that although the network vocabulary is numerous and diverse, a large number of words of the same type will be imitated immediately after the popularity of one style of words, and these words all have the same word-making mechanism. The emergence of a hot word on the Internet is contingent to a certain extent. It is either out of momentary inspiration, careless mistake or intentional behavior, but when it is quickly accepted and employed by the audience on the Internet, it may become a template for people to create new words, and then a large number of words of the same type will emerge. From the perspective of memetics, these network buzzwords are generated and widely spread through imitation and transformation in the process of language

transmission. In this era of vigorous development of network language, apprehending the generation mechanism and principle of propagation of network buzzwords is undoubtedly conducive to forming a more comprehensive understanding of network buzzwords, so that correct and objective measures can be taken.

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