The Study of Internet Language Functions from the Perspective of Language Variation and Change: Case Study of 2020-2021 Buzz Words

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Abstract: With the rapid development of Internet technology and social media, Internet language has been wide-spread and often used among individuals and groups. As a crucial part of contemporary culture, it is a significant tool to reveal and study the development and complexity of society. The application and blossom of Internet language is a double-edged sword. How to regulate and guide its development to benefit Chinese cultural construction needs further study. In this paper, the author aims to analyze the mechanism of Internet language change and spread from the perspective of language change and variation. Additionally, it makes an adaptive application of four functions mentioned in Sociolinguistics based on the characteristics of Internet language: youth culture, stratification, informational sign, emotional communication. Moreover, the paper illustrate four functions with four different cases to analyze the connection and relation between Internet language and its users.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

With the rapid development of Internet, Internet language has become wide-spread and often-used among individuals and groups. Based on report published by CNNIC in 2021, by the end of 2020, the total quantity of netizens has reached 989 million and the popularizing has achieved 70.4%. In addition, Chinese online video audience has reached 927 million, which is 93.7% of the netizens.[1]

Social media usage also promotes the spread of Internet language. According to report released in 2021, the average Chinese netizens spends 2 hours a day watching short videos. Take TikTok as an example, a rapid-developed short video and livestreaming platform,the daily active user reached 719 million.[2]

As a production of Internet and variation of language, Internet language has been developing for a relatively long time and has a considerably large quantity of users. In 2019, China Daily had

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published the first top 10 buzzwords which aroused people's attention to Internet language, which suggests that Internet language has developed from the introduction stage to growth stage. Up to now, the top 10 buzzwords in China have showed a different feature and composition of Internet language. It indicates the development of Internet language has moved to next stage.

1.2 Objective of the Present Research

The objectives of the paper can mainly divided into three parts.Firstly, it aims to make a concise and systematic literature review of language variation and change through literature reading. Secondly, it aims to figure out the mechanism of how the Internet language variation happens and spreads and conclude the main characteristics and reasons through case study. Thirdly, it aims to illustrate four functions of Internet language with case analysis.

1.3 Rationale of the Present Research[3]

Language varies in three major ways which are interrelated: over time, in physical space, and socially. Variation over time has its origins in spatial and social variation, the areas of which are most obviously in vocabulary and pronunciation. In addition, four basic functions of language are to mark social status, a signal of solidarity, to be informational and to be affective.

The spread of language change includes three parts: from group to group, from style to style and from word to word. Particularly, the wave-like spread model illustrate the mechanism of the spread of language change.

The factors causing language change including social status, gender and interaction, which also emphases that media plays a significant role in spreading language change. For linguists, apparent-time study and real-time study are two effective methods to study language change.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Introduction

With the development of Internet and cross-culture development, the code switching of different language or variation in a dialogue is nothing new now. (Wei Luyao, 2021) Internet language has exerted a remarkable influence in the behaviors, ideology and culture identity of netizens.

However, as a new language form, Internet language is a doubled-edged sword. On the one hand, it can promote and diversify the daily communication and can refer to certain social background and group characteristics. On the other hand, as a new language form, the Internet environment is hard to regulate and its negative effects apparently influenced Chinese culture and language identity. How to guide Internet language develop properly and promote Chinese culture development effectively needs further study.

2.2 Definition of Internet Language

Internet language is a special form in the network environment. The broad Internet language includes computer programming language, network terminology and netizen communication language. This paper focuses on the narrow Internet language that is ideographs including text, images and emojis created and used by netizens when communicating in cyberspace, which are

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[3] *From Sociolinguistics by Janet Holmes,published in 2011.*

widely spread in the way of Internet group communication and become the "jargon" among netizens. (Sui Yan, Li Yan, 2020).

2.3 Functions of Internet Language

In Sociolinguistics, four main functions includes: marker of social status, signal of solidarity, being informative, being affective. (Janet Holmes, published, 2011) Internet language, as a variation and language change, it basically has similar functions. However, the Internet language rooted in cyberspace, is a rapid, direct and sensitive reflection of the reality. Due to the particularity of the Internet, the actual contents it has differ from vernacular language illustrated in Sociolinguistics and it gives innovative connotation to four functions.

2.3.1 Youth Culture

As the Internet developing, the Internet language spread widely and becomes a popular phenomenon among young people and their groups. As a type of popular language, it stands for youth culture and becomes a sign to distinguish from the elder generation.

In fact, the rapid development of Internet technology has increased the efficiency of social learning and spreading. The cultural production, learning ability and initiative of chasing identify segmentation of the young people has been further reinforced (Zhao Chengchen, 2018). An obvious cultural gap between age groups has appeared.

2.3.2 Stratification

Birds of a feather gather together. People are likely to communicate with people of similar social status, experience or hobbies, which forms so-called stratification. In cyberspace, it is easier to connect with similar people and Internet products and service also create subdivision based on the rule. From groups to topics and to communities, the informational comfort zones have been built up as the cornerstone of people's internet communication.

Internet language, as a behavioral logic and cultural symbol of discourse system, such as Textspeak("火星文")in 2000s and Fans Stratification recently which has earned enough attention and caused certain hotpots in China(Zheng Xin, Zhu Qinyi, 2019). These internet circles are based on particular Internet language and stand for certain sub-culture. The spread of circle culture will exert an influence on interpersonal interaction of youth, the construction of life styles with the penetration of Internet from virtual space the real society. It may also influence the reconstruction of the Internet spread pattern and social relationship transition to some degree.

2.3.3 Informational Sign

International language are produced in changeable and complicated virtual cyberspace, which gets rid of limitation of time and space and gather various information together. Variations from previous language, the development of language change, the spread of the language change all illustrate the economical and political development such as "百年未有之大变局", the social mental status such as "躺平" and normality and variations in present society(Wei Luyao, 2021). It has profound meaning for us to study changes in society physically and psychologically.

2.3.4 Emotional Communication

Culture and language are important means of emotional construction. The Internet language with dual emotional genes at superficial and deep layers realizes group communication through meme

duplication. In this process, the Internet language has three effects: cohesive effect, which can promote deep emotional integration and form social opinion; transference effect, which can promote emotion conversion and guide public opinion with its superficial entertainment and game characteristics; and sediment effect, which can construct the social culture borne and maintained by the Internet language by accumulating social emotion climate and depositing social participation genes. (Sui Yan, Li Yan, 2020) Development of Internet technology and rich spreading methods have promoted the sharing and spreading of emotion in the form of language.

2.4 Summary

Four main functions of International language actually provide us with a new perspective to study the change and spread of language and reflect the applicability of previous framework with the great change of environment and way of communication.

3. Case Study

3.1 Youth Culture: Case of Language Gap

3.1.1 Case Description

Research Data on Internet Language Intelligibility of Undergraduate Students Parents[4]:

Researchers selected 92 typical words and sentences from Undergraduate Student Speech Community and did survey on intelligibility test of undergraduate students' parents. The result reveals that 13.2% can understand and perceive Internet language used by undergraduate students, while 53.4% of parents cannot understand it but it doesn't influence communication. However, there are still 33.4% of parents cannot understand Internet language and the communication has been affected.

In sociolinguitics, it mentions that younger people tend to adopt new forms quickly than older people do and they use them more extensively (Janet Holmes, 2011). Internet language also verifies this viewpoint. In the process of appearance, improvement and spread of Internet language, young people play a necessary role. Its difference mainly manifests in language style, expression and usage of special words and sentences.

Words in intelligibility test for parents can be divided into three parts: first, those can be totally understood; second, those can be understood roughly with hints of morphemes and context; third, those cannot be understood at all.

Type	Phrase	Meaning	Origin
Understood totally	油腻	Disgusting	Literal Meaning
	扎心	Broken-heart	Literal Meaning
	佛系	Buddha-like youngsters	Extended Meaning
	宅	Stay at home	Extended Meaning
Understood roughly	打 call	Cheer up	Guess with context
	躺枪	Trouble involves the innocent	Guess with morpheme
	梗	jokes	Guess with context
Not understood	diss(怼)	disrespect	English direct usage
	lol	Laugh out loud	English abbreviation
	爱豆	Idol	Transliteration of English
	因吹斯汀	Interesting	Transliteration of English

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4 *Published in 2020, by Guangming Daily.*

3.1.2 Case Analysis

The phrases parents can understand mainly can be concluded from the meaning of morphemes. For example, both characters of"油腻"represents greasy and oily, though parents don't know its exact meaning, they can infer that it has a negative meaning like disgusting or not innocent when describing someone.

The phrases parents cannot understand directly but can understand with the help of context and morphemes. They are mainly newly-created word form or new meaning of previous phrases. For example, "躺枪"literally means that someone is shot when he or she lies down. The contradictory facts in the word that normally the bullet cannot shoot someone when he or she lies down to pretend to be dead conveys a meaning that trouble involves the innocent for some reasons. It contains a reluctant or annoying emotion which can be told in context, which is easy for others to infer the meaning.

The phrases parents cannot understand at all relate to its origins or forms, such as English words direct application, English word abbreviation, Pinyin abbreviation and numbers, which results in the loss of hints to connect the meaning and the form of words. For example, "diss", "lol(laugh out loud)", "爱豆(idol)" are all related to English words. For parents with relatively few knowledge about English, it's hard for them to come up with the correct meaning though in certain context.

From above, we can conclude that the usage of Internet language compared with parents, the difference in grammar are not obvious, and its difference mainly manifests in context, condition and emotion. Internet language are a mixture of buzzwords, foreign words and local words, and are highly recreational. Young people apply metaphor, metonymy, homophonic, inflexion, abbreviation and so on methods to create new phrases. During the creation process, young people hold a recreational attitude and greatly related to context, which reflects social values and preference of certain age.

3.2 Stratification: Case of Fan Circle Language

3.2.1 Case Description

Type	Phrase	Meaning	Origin
Homophonic	蒸煮	正主,the one	Economical input method
	空瓶	控评,control the comments	Economical input method
	靴靴	谢谢,thanks	Dialect homophonic
Transliteration	安替	Anti	English transliteration
Monogram	battle	Argue	Direct quotation
	pick	Like,support	Direct quotation
	repo	Report	Logogram
	ju	Judge	Logogram
	cp	Couple	Abbreviation of English
	nbcs	Nobody cares	Abbreviation of English
	ky	Japanese, 空気が読めない (kuukigayomenai), warning of inappropriate behaviors or speech	Abbreviation of Japanese
	wuli	Korean, 우리,ours	Abbreviation of Korean
	zqsg	真情实感,sincere	Abbreviation of Pinyin
	bbl	球球了-ball ball 了, please	Abbreviation of English and Chinese
Shortened words	实红	实力走红, get famous with strength rather than others	Chinese shortened words

Combined words	C 位	People at center place	Combination of Chinese and English
	打 call	Support,コール	Combination of Chinese and Japanese
Metonymy	本命	The only idol, Japanese	Japanese metonymy
	大触	Master in some field, ACG	Japanese metonymy
metaphor	墙头	A person someone will like for a short time	Chinese metaphor
	画饼	Set up impractical goals	Chinese metaphor
Exaggeration	彩虹屁	Compliments for idols	Positive exaggeration
	吊打	Overwhelming strength	Negative exaggeration

With the development of social media and leisure industry, Chinese local fans culture sprouted in 2005 with the appearance of talent show and simultaneously Korean culture spread all over the country. At this time, fan circle becomes to pay attention to language spread in group and group identity recognization, so the existence of proper language in fan circle help them to distinct from other group.

3.2.2 Case Analysis

In sociolinguistics, the changes in language are two parts: pronunciation and forms. Since in the cyberspace, text communication are more frequent than audio communication, the changes in forms are of great obviousness.

With the influence of globalization, Internet language used in fan circle absorbed words and phrases from different countries and English, as the international language, has the biggest language. Due to the geographic relationship and fan culture popularity, Korean and Japanese cultures bring a lot changes to it. "ky" and "wuli" are two representative examples of it. The combination of different language also stands for the influence of international cultural communication, such as "打 call" and "C 位".

On account of rapid, convenient and complicated Internet and application of input method, the language variations of Internet language tend to be more simplified and time-saving, such as abbreviation and shortened phrases of Chinese and English. One example of this is "空瓶" which means to control the comments in Chinese. When someone input pinyin of "控评",the word "空瓶" stands first. Based on economical theory, if the word can be understood, the users tend to choose the first word to use.

The use of particular words in fans circle will provide the group members a sense of solidarity and isolation, in other word, a sense of identity cognition. Besides fan circle, people from the same platforms (e.g. TikTok or Bilibili), with the same hobbies and interests (e.g. jk dress or lolita) all have their own circles, buzzwords they apply in communication constitute the Internet language. However, language in stratification are informal and lack of regulation, which is sometimes contradictory to our goal of cultural construction.

3.3 Informational Sign: Case of Top 10 Buzzwords in 2021[5]

3.3.1 Case Description

Word	Meaning	Background
百年未有之大变局	Profound changes unseen in a century	Opportunities and threats coexist in the 21st century

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[5] From 《ruminate upon a subject》,2021.

小康	Moderately prosperous society	Chinese developmental goal
赶考	Stand the test of time	Education status
双减	Ease the burden of excessive homework and off-campus tutoring for students undergoing compulsory education	Changes in educational policies
碳达峰 碳中和	Carbon neutrality; Carbon emission peaking	Consensus agreed world-wide on environmental protection
野性消费	Crazy/irrational consumption	Changes in consuming pattern
破防	Overwhelmed	Events happened in 2021
鸡娃	fired-up kids/overloaded kids	Education status
躺平	Couch potato/ lying flat	Psychological status of youth
元宇宙	Metaverse	Name change of Facebook

In December, 2021, Yaowenjiaozi has published Top 10 buzzwords in 2021, with which one can tell the changes and trend of a year.

3.3.2 Case Analysis

Internet language, as a symbol of pop culture, is a significant tool of individual socialization and a virtual reflection of psychological status and demand in real society. Network society is extension of structure, environment and space of interaction in real society. Network society depends on real society and is another kind of society (Wang Shiyong, 2016) As a result, Internet language can be useful resource to study the trend of time which carry implied information.

Language change stands for changes in social environment economically and politically. The frequency of words usage is a sign of social attention. Take "百年未有之大变局" as an example, in December, 2017, President Xi first quoted this word in his speech and mentioned for a lot times in important events and conferences. It suggest that China are now facing unprecedented opportunities and challenges. The 100th anniversary of the Founding of Party and the corona-virus typically show the present situation. And another example is "躺平", which can reveal the exact psychological status of young people under great pressure and anxiety. Words like "佛性", "咸鱼" are of the similarity.

In a conclusion, Internet language is the product of internet development and carry information about characteristics of society and individual.

3.4 Emotional Communication: Qing Dao Prawn Case

3.4.1 Case Description

In October, 2015, Mr. Xiao was having dinner in No.92, Leling Road, Qing Dao City. Before dinner, Mr. Xiao asked about the price precisely and confirmed whether 38¥ for a dish or a prawn. However, after dinner, the restaurant owner claimed that ¥38 was for one prawn.

Once Mr. Xiao posed the issue with an unverified account in Sina and mentioned PSB and Price Bureau on the internet, it aroused netizens' attention and became the heated topic. It got about 3,000 comments and was forwarded for more than 5,600 times the next day.

Mr. Xiao is a common tourist in reality and used an unverified account in the internet, which are both the weak with few social resource. However, thanks to the openness and connection of the internet, individual can get rid of limitation of space, and build connection with media and key opinion lead directly or indirectly in the Internet and conveyed his complaints with their influence.

3.4.2 Case Analysis

Social constructionism supposes that language plays an important role in emotion formation.(Sui Yan, Li Yan, 2020) language conveys information and simultaneously express emotional feeling impliedly. As a special ideograph of Internet culture, internet language has diversified emotional meanings. Compared with daily speech, the expressions of Internet language are more popular and recreational.

After the case, netizens will use "Qing Dao prawn" to express their dissatisfaction of exploitation of tourists and the low efficiency of some governmental department. And they also take place "胖" for "月半" just to express a sense of humor of body shame. Recreational language humor can promote the transition of emotions from deep layer to superficial layer and to some degree prevent negative results with accumulation of emotions.

Those deep emotion are actually comments and reflection of society. The superficial emotion is an attractive cover for profound connotation. In this case, Internet language has a high speed of spread with entertainment forms and can attract large quantity of attention of society with its concerns contained. With meme duplication, the three effects of Internet language can magnify the emotions through its spread and affect the whole society, which can be positively or negatively.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, the author first reviews the structure and system of Sociolinguistics about language variation and change. With particularity and sophistication of Internet and users, to apply the theory into Internet language study, it needs restricted scope and adoptive changes.

Internet language is apparently crucial part of contemporary society which provide us significant source to study changes of physical and psychological world. Four functions of Internet culture manifest that it is a developing, stratified, informative and epidemical language which will have great power in virtual cyberspace and make a difference to individuals and environment directly or indirectly.

However, in China, the Internet language are still beyond regulation and affected the cultural construction to some degree. More study and research should be taken to provide more knowledge about how Internet language apply in speech and develop in the future.

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