

A Study on the Reasons for Vocabulary Variation of Internet Catchwords

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Abstract: Internet catchwords have emerged with the development of the information society, which has profoundly affected people's social life, and Internet catchwords are featured as a special variant of social dialects. In Internet catchwords, language variation is very common, mainly manifested as phonetic variation, word variation, grammatical variation, semantic variation, and so on. This article aims to analyze recent Internet catchwords and then conclude the vocabulary variation in Internet catchwords. The article finds that the vocabulary variation mainly includes two aspects: morphological variation and semantic variation. In terms of morphological variation, there are three types of variation: homophonic variation, abbreviation variation, and emoticon variation. As for the semantic variation, there are two types of variation in word meaning, they are manifested as the expansion of word meaning and the reduction of word meaning. Finally, the paper explores the reasons for the variation of Internet catchwords, in order to encourage netizens to establish a correct language perspective.

With the continuous development of modern information technology, the Internet has become an indispensable part of people's daily lives. American linguist W. Bright pointed out, "When social life undergoes gradual or drastic changes, language, as a social phenomenon, undergoes changes without hesitation with the pace of social progress."^[1]

Due to the unique characteristics of virtuality, equality, and interactivity of the Internet, various highly personalized internet buzzwords have also started to emerge. This type of Internet catchwords breaks traditional language rules, and to some extent, it causes changes in the signifier and referent between words, which is a special phenomenon of language variation. This article will mainly explore the causes of vocabulary variation in Internet catchwords by analyzing the types of vocabulary variation, and thus establish a correct language perspective.

1. Types of vocabulary variation in Internet catchwords

The Language is a social phenomenon, and the online environment is a special language community. Its existence and development depend on the communication and interaction between numerous netizens. Scholar Chen Songcen pointed out that language variation refers to the discourse situation of a certain language item in actual use.^[2] Vocabulary is the most closely related and sensitive part of language structure to social development and social changes. Correspondingly,

in the variation of online language, vocabulary variation is the component that becomes the fastest and most frequent. From the perspectives of word form and meaning, there are mainly several types of vocabulary variations in Internet catchwords.

1.1 Morphological variation

Homophonic variation. Chinese characters are ideographic characters with limited syllables. Due to the large number of homophones in Chinese, netizens use words and numbers with the same or similar pronunciation to replace the original words, which results in language variation. The increasing number of new synonyms generated by Internet catchwords through homophonic rhetoric is closely related to the widespread use of pinyin input methods. Online communication has the characteristics of efficiency and convenience. During chatting, netizens often quickly make choices among input method candidate words, which are words with the same pronunciation or similar but different meanings. Netizens often do not pay attention to the differences in meanings of words, and since there are specific online contexts as aids in understanding, they tend to make mistakes by using words that first appear in pinyin input methods, resulting in a large number of homophonic words. Homophonic Internet catchwords has the characteristic of colloquialism, making it easy to read and beloved by netizens. Internet catchwords extensively uses homophonic word formation, which makes the expression of Internet catchwords more convenient and greatly enriches the number of Internet catchwords. For example, “xiu gou”(repair a dog in English) means “xiao gou” (a puppy in English) , “zun du jia du” (“zun” refers to respect, “du” refers to a modal conjunction, “jia” refers to fake) means “zhen de jia de” (real or fake), “kang kang” (healthy in English) means “kan kan” (have a look in English), “ shuan Q”means thank you, all these belong to homophonic word formation methods. Some homophonic online vocabulary is caused by netizens accidentally typing wrong words, but since then, it has been imitated by more and more netizens.

Abbreviation variation. In the fast-paced online communication environment, there is a phenomenon of netizens using a large number of abbreviations. There are two main types of abbreviations in Internet catchwords: English letter abbreviations and Chinese pinyin abbreviations. Chinese pinyin abbreviations are mainly composed of the first letter of each syllable of a word or phrase in pinyin, replacing the corresponding Chinese characters. For example, YYDS (“yong yuan de shen” in Chinese, which means Eternal God), DRL (“da rao le” in Chinese, which means disturb), XSWL (“xiao si wo le” in Chinese, which means Laugh to death). This kind of pinyin abbreviations are mainly created for the convenience of text input and to improve communication speed. Usually, some Chinese abbreviations are represented by Chinese characters, such as Agricultural Bank (Agricultural Bank of China) and Banking Regulatory Commission (China Banking Regulatory Commission). Proper use of internet abbreviations can effectively shorten the length of characters and facilitate faster communication between both parties. However, in online catchwords, the formation of Chinese abbreviations has undergone changes, and netizens are more likely to use syllable abbreviations in Chinese Pinyin. Due to the large number of words corresponding to the letters of abbreviations in online vocabulary and the carrying of semantic content, abbreviations also have their polysemy and uncertainty.

Expression and numerical variation. The uniqueness of the internet environment makes Internet catchwords more focused on simplicity, speed, and convenience of communication, so numbers are also given unique meanings in Internet conversations. For example, 9494 (“jiu si jiu si” in pinyin)- that’s right, 7456(homophonic words of “qi si wo le” in pinyin)- I’m so angry, 778(homophonic words of “qi qi ba” in pinyin)- help yourselves, 886(homophonic words of “bai bai le” in pin yin)- goodbye. These digital Internet catchwords are similar to abbreviations in everyday language, making them more convenient, time-saving, and effortless to use, allowing for a more direct

expression of inner thoughts. Therefore, it is loved by a large number of netizens and widely used. During online chatting, netizens often use a large number of emoticons, which have the characteristics of being casual and simple, making language expression more diverse and colorful. For example, “haha” is represented by “O(∩_∩)O ~” to express that the speaker is very happy. While “O (>___<)” means “no”. Internet catchwords like Emoji have a strong sense of fun and playful style, which adds a lot of vitality to the widespread use of Internet catchwords.

1.2 Semantic variation

Word expansion. The expansion of word meaning in Internet catchwords refers to the extension of the concept represented by the word meaning, that is to say, the referential range of the changed meanings of Internet catchwords is greater than and includes the original semantic referential range. As a result, the conceptual range of the new meanings of Internet catchwords is larger than that of the original meanings. The expansion of online word meanings is mainly due to the continuous improvement of the cognitive level of netizens, the increasing scope of cognition, and the generalization and abstraction of specific concepts to recognize more things, forming a variation of word meanings from part to whole and from concrete to general. “Spitting blood” originally refers to the process of “blood spitting out from the mouth”, but netizens often use it to describe extreme depression. While showing the state of spitting blood, it also explains the reason for vomiting blood, so the extension has been expanded compared to the original semantics. The scope of application of some words has expanded, for example, “Xijing” originally metaphorically refers to a person who performs and acts very well. But now, through the evolution of netizens, a derogatory online definition has emerged, describing someone who likes to do things to attract attention and add drama to themselves in life. The usage range of this word is mixed, with positive meaning praising good acting skills and negative meaning liking to show off and excessively express oneself to win attention.

Word reduction. The reduction of word meaning refers to the fact that the scope represented by the ancient meaning is greater than that of the present meaning. In the context of online communication, it manifests as the process of Internet catchwords from general to specific, resulting in a smaller scope of new meanings than the original concept. If “look” originally means “look”, the semantic scope of “look” refers to that one can look at everything, but in forums, “look” means “browse posts in the forum”, and the semantic extension has been reduced. “Front row” generally refers to the position in front of a queue or seat, which can be either a person or an object. In a forum, it refers to posts with a higher order, narrowing the semantic scope and causing variation. From this perspective, after the reduction of the meaning of Internet catchwords, the reduced meaning is included in the original meaning, which means that the scope of objective things reflected by the reduced concept will become a subset of the original meaning.

2. The reasons for vocabulary variation in internet slang

There are two main factors that lead to vocabulary variation in Internet catchwords: the first one is internal factors which are the pressure within the language structure system. Ant the second one is the external factors which are the external influences from the language.

2.1 Internal factors

The variation of words in Internet catchwords is the result of the joint efforts of external and internal factors in language. Language is a rich system that includes three aspects: phonetics, vocabulary, grammar. The three are closely related to language elements and mutually restrictive. In

terms of phonetics, Internet catchwords has derived many similar words in the form of homophones between numbers and English, such as “9494”, “886”, “778”, “TMD”, etc. Numbers and letters follow the principle of homophonic abbreviation of the first letter of Chinese Pinyin, and thus different phonetic forms are introduced. In terms of vocabulary, netizens often use associative methods to introduce a series of concepts with the same internal structure, for example, “er huo” which means fools or cute someone, “gua huo” which means silly, “chi huo” which means foodies, “song huo” which means cowards, “shui huo” which means smugglers, “X huo” stands for a kind of people. While “ga X” word family consists of Internet words like “ga wu” which means awkward dance, “ga chang” which means awkward singing, and “ga liao” which means awkward chatting”, etc. These word families are the analogical results that occur when words with a certain type of feature are aggregated together. In terms of grammar, phrases such as “E me” means email me if necessary, “Q me” means find me through QQ if necessary, don’t forget to E me means don't forget to email me, “I Q you” means I send some information to you through QQ. All these are all transformed into verbs using abbreviations from communication tools. Similarly, netizens often encounter the phenomenon of verb simplification during conversations, such as “inverted”, “dizzy”, “sweating”, “spraying”, etc. These words are lexical variations caused by the use of results instead of causes, and are derived from the independent use of verbs, which have strong descriptive power.

2.2 External factors

The development of online media. The rapid development of the Internet has changed the way people communicate and spread information, adding more emerging ways of communication, such as websites, microblogs, WeChat, Tiktok, and so on. According to internet statistics, as of the end of 2023, the number of Weibo users in China reached 1 billion, with 605 million frequent monthly users using Weibo. WeChat and QQ, as instant messaging tools, have a user base of 1.047 billion and 693 million respectively. Tiktok has become one of the most popular short video platforms in the world, and its number of users is growing steadily every year. According to the latest data, the number of Tiktok users will exceed one billion in 2023. In 2023, the Language and Writing Weekly launched a campaign to select the top ten internet buzzwords, which went through three stages: reader recommendation, online audition, and expert evaluation. The results are as follows: The top ten internet catchwords are “i person/e person”, “eye-catching person”, “special forces tourism”, “X gate”, “far ahead”, and “dopamine XX”, “Kong Yiji Literature”, “Princess/Prince, please”, “You’re a kind person” and “Dig, dig, dig”. These online buzzwords are mainly spread and used by emerging channels such as Tiktok, WeChat, and Weibo. The number of relevant videos played and used on Weibo, WeChat, and Tiktok has reached hundreds of millions of times. It can be seen that the number of users of WeChat and Weibo is increasing, and online communication media is leading the development of Internet catchwords, making the audience of internet slang wider and spreading more quickly.

Social psychology. Language can reflect social and psychological conditions, and popular languages in different periods are records of the social style of a specific period. Through language, one can have a glimpse at the social and psychological aspects of a specific period. As one of the frequently used languages by netizens, Internet catchwords creates new words that have undergone variation on the basis of the original words, which is a deviation from conventional language and naturally reflects the psychological trends of netizens. Mainly manifested in four aspects: innovation psychology, time-saving psychology, conformity psychology, stress relief and entertainment psychology.

Language contact between dialects and Mandarin. Language contact refers to the language contact relationships caused by the interaction between different ethnic groups and social groups in

social life. Language contact is an important influencing factor of word variation in Internet catchwords. This type of language contact mainly manifests as the absorption of dialect words in the process of creating new words in Internet catchwords. People use Mandarin and dialects interact with each other, which helps some easily understandable dialect words have also emerged in the online communication platform. From the collected language materials, it can be seen that the mutated words in Internet catchwords mainly originate from contact with northern dialects, Min dialects and Xiang dialects. For example, the original form of the Internet catchphrase “pricked in the heart, Lao Tie” is “extremely sad, buddy”, which is a Northeast dialect. “Lao Tie” means buddy in the northern dialect, and “pricked in the heart” means that the heart has been greatly damaged and stimulated. Netizens have pushed this word with a strong Northeastern dialect to the cognitive perspective of the whole nation, and online communication generally carries a humorous connotation.

3. Conclusion

Through the analysis above, it is found that Internet catchword is short and concise, and its down-to-earth expression often produces humorous effects that go beyond ordinary language. But in daily life, there are also non-standard uses of online language, such as discriminatory “leftover men” or “single dogs” which all mean that laugh at single people, as well as other vulgar and obscene language. The ultimate goal of language is for communication, and internet language should be more so. Not only should it be beneficial for communication between netizens, but also for communication between netizens and non netizens. Faced with such a low-grade and vulgar tendency, we shouldn't give up using the Internet catchwords on account of some inappropriate usage, but we should have a correct view of internet slang.

The development of language cannot solely rely on its own self-improvement, but also requires external impetus. Language workers need to immerse themselves in language facts, investigate and research, and lead norms.^[3] On how to strengthen the standardization construction of online language, firstly, from the perspective of the country, it is necessary to attach sufficient importance to addressing internet slang and fully leverage its strengths to curb its negative impact. Secondly, the media plays the most important exemplary role in standardizing language and writing. Therefore, when using language and writing, the media needs to pay great attention to standardization and normalization. Finally, from a personal perspective, we cannot completely reject Internet catchwords. We need to learn to select the best among the many Internet catchwords. At the same time, netizens also need to strengthen their own quality construction, improve their self-cultivation, and be more conscious of self-restraint and reduce the use of uncivilized language in online communication. Internet language is generated through mutual communication between netizens, and improving the quality of netizens can effectively regulate internet language from the origin.

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