

A Sociolinguistic Research of an Internet Meme “shushu (mousie)”

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Abstract: An internet meme “shushu (mousie)” went viral in Chinese social media platform. A sociolinguistic research based on two internet social media platforms for young people: Little Red Book and Bilibili was carried out with the aim of figuring out the formation, manifestations and applications of the internet meme “shushu”. Memetics was applied for a qualitative study and a questionnaire survey was adopted for a quantitative study as a complement. With linguistic preconditions and people’s demand for expression and group identity, young people constructed a positive and humorous virtual identity through internet meme “shushu”, and the most application of the meme “shushu” nowadays is for fun. Additionally, through a diachronic discussion about the formation of “shushu”, a deviation between the original use and people’s real application nowadays has been recognized, demonstrating the change of language meaning through interaction. Hope this article could bring some implications for the study of internet meme and human online behavior.

1. Introduction

In the last two years, a sentence structure “shushu wo ya (the speaker calls himself a little mouse)” went viral that many netizens used the word “shushu (mousie)” to call themselves and some pictures of a cute little hamster serving as Biaoqing were spread widely on the Chinese internet. The expression “shushu” has become an internet meme that is imitated and spread through internet communication and language practice by netizens. In order to better understand this phenomenon, the author carried out a sociolinguistic research to study the formation, manifestations and applications of the internet meme “shushu”.

2. Literature Review

In order to study the transmission and development of ideas across societies, some scholars introduce the concept of “meme”, first mentioned by Dawkins in 1976^[1]. Many scholars tried to explain human behavior, giving birth to a new theory called memetics, which explains the law of cultural evolution based on Darwinian theory of evolution. It refers to an idea that is imitated and transmitted from person to person in the cultural sphere and passed down from generation to generation. Internet meme is an item that is quickly disseminated by netizen including an idea expressed through a written text, an image or other cultural units^[2] and it is regarded as an internet

fad or trend that has been repeatedly modified and shared by netizen which is usually transmitted in a virulent manner ^[3]. Yus and Dynel discussed the pragmatic usage of memes on internet through interaction ^{[4][5]}. Lu and Blommaert believed that the Biaoqing, one of the manifestation of memes popular in Chinese social media, is a result of historical and cultural influence of Chinese social media ^[6].

However, there are not so many studies focusing on a specific meme spreading through internet and imitated by netizen from the view of sociolinguistics. This paper aims to fill this gap to make more contributions to the study of memetics, and try to understand more about the Chinese network ecology.

3. Data and Methodology

Since the young are regarded as the main force of new fashion, the author decided to choose Little Red Book and Bilibili, two online media platforms where the users are mostly young people, as the main resource for this study.

The concept of meme and memetics introduced in previous chapter was adopted as the explaining tool and a tangible researching unit for studying human behavior. A diachronic description of the formation and manifestations of the meme “shushu” was employed and the questionnaire survey was used to find the applications of “shushu” nowadays. After online observation, the author has formed basic knowledge about the meme “shushu” and had some predictions about why people use “shushu”. Since the contents picked up in literature research for qualitative analysis were mostly from Bilibili and Little Red Book, the author released the questionnaire on these two online social media platforms and 304 questionnaires were collected. Relevant questions and options in the questionnaire are showed in the appendix.

4. Research Result

4.1 The Formation of Internet Meme “shushu”

4.1.1 The Linguistic Precondition

The sentence structure “shushu wo ya” has its internal conditions: the learnability and vitality of the sentence structure.

The babytalk expression of “shushu” adopts the word formation of reduplication, creating a clear rhythm, which is easy to remember and imitate. Additionally, the pronunciation is harmonious with a clear rhythm, conveying emotions and meanings. The overlapping sounds are usually associated with being funny and cute, and depicts a weak but lovely image of the user, which can arouse other people’s feelings of compassion. In this way, it acts not only as the self-reference, but also the construction of one’s visual identity: a cute little mouse.

4.1.2 Demand for Expression and Group Identity

He argued that the reason why a certain language unit obtains the social community’s imitation and transmission is the psychological demand of expression, reflecting a collective emotion with individual self-reference ^[7]. Netizens’ desire to show and express their mental states for group identity is one of the greatest motivations of forming the meme.

The widely use of “shushu wo ya” was first brought from netizen’s mockery about Bilibili, a youth trendy cultural internet community.

The original sentence structure “shushu wo ya(The speaker calls himself as Uncle X. In Chinese, the word ‘mousie’ and ‘uncle’ have the same place and manner of articulation but different tone)”

was a line used by a negative role in a TV show. He used this sentence structure when committing crime. Since many community members didn't receive the response after suggesting a thorough overhaul of the internet culture in Bilibili, these angry young men started to imitate the sentence structure "shushu voya" to make comments under the video clips in Bilibili and employed the sentence "shushu voya like money the best." as the title of their publicly released video or articles in order to satirize that the executives of Bilibili have lost their original intention of building a friendly community platform for young people for the sake of money. To enforce the irony of this expression, some people use "shushu(mousie)" to replace the word "shushu('uncle' in English)", serving as a mild resistance to the harsh reality that Bilibili is not as the same before. They have formed a small community of practice, aiming to express their dissatisfaction of Bilibili through using this sentence structure. However, they still need the internet community Bilibili created because they could vent their emotions in the platform, and only when a netizen was familiar with Bilibili could he or she know the pragmatic meaning of their expressions. They chased for the group identity through interaction with other members who also applied the sentence structure. Such twisted and a bit of desperate attitudes towards Bilibili added a little self-deprecating feature to this expression.

The characteristics of learnability and vitality enable people to have more possibilities to use this sentence structure. With the little sense of self-degrading, some people started to use "shushu voya" at the beginning of their speech. They regard themselves as a weak and helpless mouse who are suffering. But the relaxed tone and the overlapping word "shushu (mousie)" weaken the pessimism in the whole words while inject a sense of optimism and humor. Netizens use this expression so that they could talk about their stress and pain in a much easier way. People try to take a positive attitude in facing difficulties and seek group identity for comfort and encouragement. In this way, they form a larger community of practice. Such optimistic attitude is identified by more and more people, and people who resonate with this feeling adopt this expression, which in turn spread the sentence structure. The information of staying positive to handle hardship have been replicated through language practice in network social interaction.

With linguistic preconditions and the demand for expression and group identity, a positive attitude in facing difficulties is formed and inherited through the expression "shushu voya" and "shushu".

4.2 Manifestations of Internet Meme "shushu"

Besides the sentence structure "shushu voya", people also use "shushu" to replace the first person and the second person, and even use "shushu" or "shushu men(plural form of mousie)" to refer to netizens so that they could asking for group identity and showing comfort. The following dialogue was collected from a post in Little Red Book, the social platform for young people.

"Netizen A: Shushu voya was tortured to death by senior thesis. I didn't know what I was writing. My head was going to explode.

Replied by Netizen B: It doesn't matter shushu, I believe you can get through it.

Replied by Netizen C: Shushu men, if you pay attention to the framework of the paper and try to learn from some excellent studies, it will be alright.

Replied by Netizen D: Shushu voya haven't started yet.

Replied by Netizen E: Don't be upset shushu! Read papers and practice more."

The blogger was expressing her confuse about undergraduate thesis. Some enthusiastic netizens also used "shushu" to call themselves or address the blogger to show comfort. People also create some still images as Biaoqing used in virtual internet world, which mostly contains a cute little hamster with loving eyes, such as the following Figure1-4. With a pink pointy little mouth and a furry ball-like body, the image of a cute little hamster who can easily arouse others' desire of protection has gradually become an associative entity of the meme "shushu". In this way, the funny and lovely

features are becoming salient through the addition of the image in the identity constructed by the meme “shushu”. And some vloggers also combined the above two physical manifestations of the meme “shushu” with a slow and sad music added in the background. They formed a community of practice to express their feelings to comfort each other. In this way, they made others believed that they were undergoing the same difficulties and they shared the same faith.

All these multi-modal information units serving as the communication channels in turn facilitate the transmission of the idea.



Figure 1-4: Examples of Biaoqing “shushu”

4.3 The Applications of Internet Meme “shushu”

The results of the questionnaire are showed in Figure 5-8 as follows, illustrating the applications of “shushu” nowadays. In the questionnaire, the first two questions were set to research the prevalence of “shushu” and select the right one to answer the following two questions. The last two questions were set to research the application of “shushu” nowadays.

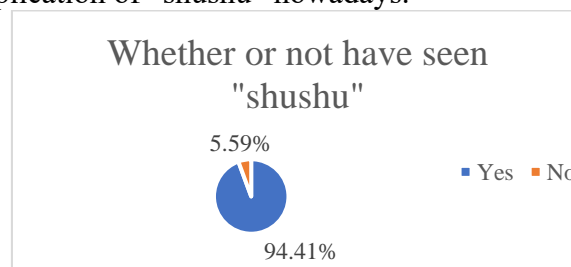


Figure 5: Result of Question 1

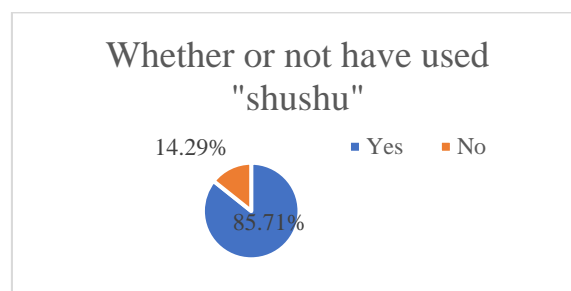


Figure 6: Result of Question 2

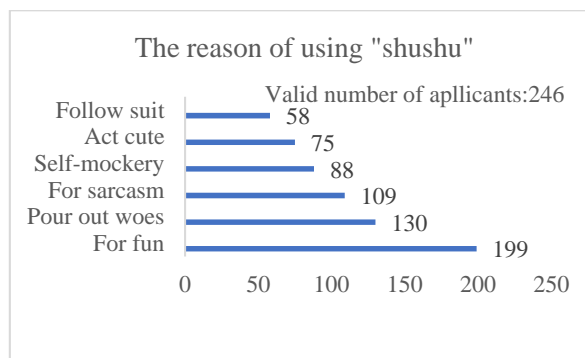


Figure 7: Result of Question 3

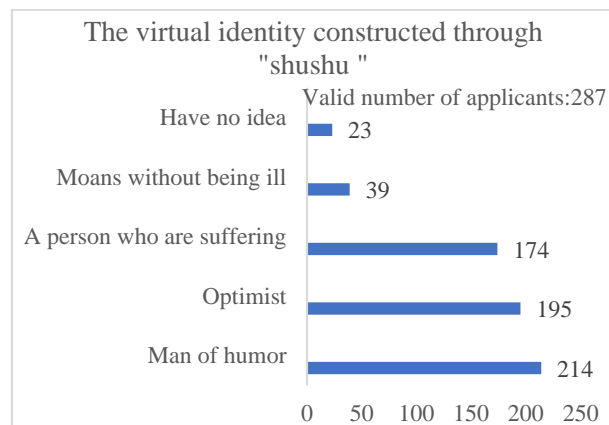


Figure 8: Result of Question 4

304 questionnaires were collected in all. As is shown in Figure 5 and Figure 6, it is clear that nearly 95% netizens have seen people used the internet meme “shushu”, and more than 85% netizens have adopted “shushu” for different expression and group identity, illustrating a strong transmitting power provided by multimodal transmission channels. Figure 7 showed that nearly 200 people chose the option of using the meme for fun. The second largest proportion is contributed by the choice of pouring out woes, which presents about 52 percent. Figure 8 showed people’s impression on the one who adopted the meme “shushu”. 214 netizens regarded those who use “shushu” as a humorous person. 195 netizens believed they are optimistic and 174 netizens consider the fact that they may be in some trouble. These three choices present a relatively higher proportion in determining the virtual identity constructed through “shushu” in the social media platform. And the choice of “Man of humor” takes up a great proportion. However, there are a small group of people who chose the option of moans without being ill, demonstrating a fact that some people cannot show comfort even recognizing the meme “shushu”. In this way, they did not form a community of practice with netizens who are aimed at asking for support and understanding.

Therefore, it’s reasonable to draw a conclusion that the young people tend to use the internet meme “shushu” for fun in most conditions and constructed a strong and optimistic virtual identity in the face of difficulties in online social platform nowadays.

After the research about internet meme “shushu”, it’s obvious that the most applications about “shushu” is people’s demand for expressing entertainment, which is different from its original meaning. A small group of young people first selected the ironic feature to change the expression of “shushu(uncle)” into “shushu(mousie)”, and then selected the helpless emotion in telling sad stories and ask for group identity. With more and more people using “shushu” to show comfort and encouragement, a positive figure of internet identity was constructed. In addition, the multimodal manifestation, the Biaoqing of a cute little hamster, strengthened the humorous tone in the idea of the meme “shushu” and expanded the applications of this meme. Finally, the meme “shushu” we used nowadays is formed and people apply the meme “shushu” for fun in the most conditions. According to He^[7], memes are selective. The ludic and optimistic nature is selected and maintained. In other words, with different power of communication and replication, some of the information is remembered and passed on through different presentations and then form a meme.

5. Conclusion.

In this paper, the author figured out the formation, manifestation and application of the internet meme “shushu” based on memetics with a questionnaire survey as a complement. The author found that due to the linguistic precondition and people’s demand for expression and group identity, an

internet meme “shushu” was created. The construction of an internet virtual identity, an optimistic guy trying to use a humorous tone to talk about the suffering and to seek empathy, acts as the motivation in forming and spreading “shushu”. And the most application nowadays is people’s demand for fun and optimism, which is different from the original use of “shushu” after a diachronic study of it. The author believes that through more interactions between netizens, the meme “shushu” may have new meanings or even experience the loss of influence, which is inconclusive due to change of language use. This paper will help people better understand the internet language and network society.

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Appendix

Question 1. Have you ever seen the meme “shushu” on the internet including related Biaoqing and videos?

A. Yes B. No.

Question 2. Have you ever followed other netizens to use “shushu” and related Biaoqing and videos? (Presented When “A” was chosen in the first question.)

A. Yes B. No.

Question 3. Why did you do that? (Presented when “A” was chosen in the second question.)

A. Follow suit. B. For fun. C. For sarcasm. D. Pour out woes. E. Act cute.

Question 4. What kind of impression did you have of the one who used “shushu”?

A. A humorous person. B. Someone in trouble. C. An optimistic guy. D. Someone who is complaining about imaginary problems. E. Have no idea.