

The Study of Catchwords Published in YAO WEN JIAO ZI (2020-2024) from the Perspective of Sociolinguistics

Yueping Liao

School of English Studies, Xi'an International Studies University, Xi'an, 710128, China

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Abstract: Language, as an important tool for human social communication, can also record social changes and have distinctive characteristics of the times and rich sociological and linguistic values. From the perspective of sociolinguistics, this study takes the annual ten network catchwords published by YAO WEN JIAO ZI magazine from 2020 to 2024 as the research object to deeply analyze the sources, semantic connotations, language variant phenomena, and their causes of these annual hot words and to reveal the relationship between language variants and social development. It shows that the catchwords mainly come from six original fields, including news events, network lines, national terminology policy, movies and TV, games, and other sources. And there are mainly five types of language variation in these catchwords, that is, neology, borrowing, contraction, accent stylization, and code-mixing. The language variations of the annual network catchwords are mainly influenced by social culture, social psychology, and language itself. This study hopes to provide new perspectives and ideas for research and practice in related fields.

1. Introduction

Network catchwords refer to emerging words that are mainly used frequently on the Internet. They emerge in a particular age and are given a specific meaning. They can truly record the new things that appear in social life and reflect the changes in people's psychological concepts. Network catchword is an important symbol of the development and language variation in the new era. As an authoritative publication in the field of Chinese language and writing, the annual ten network catchwords selected by YAO WEN JIAO ZI have strong representativeness and influence, which can keenly capture the hotspot events in social life, popular trends of thought, and new trends in language use.

From the perspective of sociolinguistics, this study takes the annual ten network catchwords published by YAO WEN JIAO ZI magazine from 2020 to 2024 as the research object with quantitative and qualitative methods to study the following three questions: (1) What is the source and semantic connotation of the catchwords? (2) What are the linguistic variation characteristics of the catchwords? (3) What are the causes of the linguistic variation in them? What is the impact on the development of the language? With the continuous progress of technology and society, the impact of Internet hotspot words on linguistic research and its own evolution trend are still worthy of expectation and research.

2. Literature Review

Network catchwords is a field that has attracted the attention of many linguists. The related research on network catchwords began earlier abroad than in China. As for the study of network catchwords, Bolter (1991) devoted himself to the study of hypertext and the characteristics of hypertext discourse[1]. Jacobson (1996) sheds light on the contextual structure in cyberspace and the dynamics that contextualize communication and interaction[6]. Gibbs and Krause (2000) explored Internet language styles in his book[4]. He analyzes the unique language and culture of the Internet. Crystal and Ebrary (2001) explained the phenomenon of online language use in his book *Language and the Internet* and attempts to illustrate all the relevant issues from a linguistic perspective[2]. He argues that every property on the Internet has an impact on the type of language spoken on the web. Based on the above research, it can be seen that the research on online language in Western countries is very extensive.

The author searches the keyword “network buzzwords” in the CNKI database, and a total of 332 papers of network catchwords published in core journals were retrieved. According to the results, domestic research on network catchwords began in the early 21st century, and the research continued to rise since 2008. The research on network catchwords covers many aspects, including the characteristics, classification, generation and communication mechanism, relationship with social and cultural psychology, impact on education and language norms, and guidance and governance (Guan Chunyu 2023; Li Juxing, Qin Ling, and Dong Jiayi 2025; Xue Huimin 2015) [5] [8] [10].

3. Theoretical Foundation

Language variation is an important topic discussed in sociolinguistics. American sociolinguist William Labov is the representative of the school of sociolinguistic variation. Labov (1972) conducted in-depth research on language variation, exploring the correlation between language variation and corresponding categories in social research, developing a set of research methods for investigating language communities, collecting language materials, and conducting quantitative analysis, which laid the foundation for language variation research[7]. He argues that linguistic variation should be studied from a sociocultural perspective. Peter Trudgill (1974) looks at language variation from the perspective of gender differences[9]. In addition, she also focuses on language variation from other perspectives, such as nation, race, class, social community, geography, etc. J. A. Fishman (1970) argues that the focus of language variation should be on different fields and social classes[3]. J.R. Firth, the founder of the London School of Linguistics, developed a number of theories about language variation and argued that language variants should be discussed in a specific context. Based on the above perspective, we can find that there are many factors that may influence language variation. The corresponding research on linguistic variation has attracted the attention of many scholars.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 The sources of the catchword from 2020-2024

According to the research, I find that the catchwords are mainly from the following six original fields, including news events, network lines, national terminology policy, movies and TV, games, and others, as shown in Table 1. Below, the author will give some examples to analyze these six sources of the catchword.

Table 1 Sources of the catchwords in YAO WEN JIAO ZI (2020-2024)

Sources of the catchwords	Number	Percentage
National terminology policy	14	28%
News events	12	24%
Network lines	7	14%
Movies and TV	1	2%
Games	2	4%
Others	14	28%
Total	50	100%

4.1.1 The catchwords come from national terminology policy fields

According to the data in Table 1, the catchwords of the year from 2020 to 2024 are mostly politically sourced, accounting for 28%. Different from the traditional political discourse with toughness and seriousness, the emerging Internet buzzwords in the political field are in line with the democratization pursuit of modern politics, stimulating the people's enthusiasm for political understanding and participation, so as to achieve the communication effect of politics.

(1) Dual circulation

“Dual circulation” refers to a new development pattern with the domestic circulation as the main body and the domestic and international circulations mutually promoting each other. On May 14, 2020, the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee proposed for the first time to “build a new development pattern that promotes mutual promotion of domestic and international dual circulations.” And this new development pattern was again proposed by the Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in “The Proposal of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on Formulating the 14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development and the Long-Term Goals for 2035”. With the gradual advancement and implementation of this policy, the “dual circulation” has shifted from a strategic concept to a widespread catchword in society.

(2) Carbon emission peaking, carbon neutrality

“Carbon emission peaking” means that the carbon dioxide emissions no longer grow and begin to decline after reaching the peak; “carbon neutrality” means that enterprises, groups, or individuals offset their own carbon dioxide emissions through afforestation, energy conservation, and emission reduction, etc., to achieve carbon dioxide “Zero Emissions”. On September 22, 2020, at the 75th United Nations General Assembly, it claimed that China strives to peak carbon dioxide emissions by 2030 and strives to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060. At the 2021 NPC and CPPCC sessions, “carbon emission peaking” and “carbon neutrality” were written into the Government Work Report, which once again attracted widespread attention.

4.1.2 The catchwords come from news events

With the development of traditional and digital media, more and more people begin to discuss news and events and hot issues that happened in society. Some hot issues and news that happened will reflect towards the catchwords. There are 24% of the catchwords come from the news and events fields (2020-2024).

(3) Special forces-style travel

This new type of tourism is to enjoy as many tourism resources as possible at the lowest possible cost. In other words, tourists spend the least amount of time, spend the least expense, visit the most scenic spots, and learn the most about the history, culture, and customs in the tourist destination, as if they are performing special tasks. “Special forces” are a general term for the technical arms that

perform certain special tasks. Using “special forces” to modify “travel” is to use the characteristics of “special forces” to empower a special type of tourism.

(4) Irrational consumption

This catchword refers to unfettered consumption. In July 2021, Henan suffered a catastrophic flood. A domestic sports brand donated 50 million yuan of materials for Henan. Netizens were deeply moved by this event, and they poured into the brand’s live broadcast room to consume and express their support for caring enterprises. It shows the action of netizens’ love.

4.1.3 The catchwords come from network lines

In the information age of media, communication between people has become more convenient. More and more people communicate through online social media, and netizens have more rights to speak and share life freely. There are 14% of the catchwords come from network lines fields (2020-2024).

(5) Class clown

A “class clown” is a person whose external image or personality traits are striking. Originally, it had a bit of a negative. Now, the negative meaning has gradually dissipated. “Class clown” is very popular because it is “different”, which is people’s recognition of personalized and diverse expression. Moreover, “class clown” can also refer to those things that stand out from the crowd. For example, the vivid and joyful cultural relics in the museum are also known as “class clown”.

(6) Smell of toil

“Smell of toil” refers to a state that people showed fatigue, haggard faces, and unkempt appearances after work due to heavy tasks, difficult conditions and complex relationships. It comes from the online article “Once you have been to work, your temperament will change”: “As long as you have been to work, you will be infected with the smell of toil and will never be removed.” Therefore, “smell of toil” has resonated with many netizens.

4.1.4 The catchwords come from movies and TV

While bringing joy to the audience, movies and TV shows also subtly influence people’s language expression. New linguistic phenomena in the movie and TV shows will always attract the audience’s attention. Based on the data collected, we found the catchword “doubt, understand, become” comes from the TV series iPartmnt. In iPartmnt, Lin Wanyu, a character, rejected her boyfriend’s proposal and decided to pursue her dream. At first, the audience did not understand this plot and blamed Lin Wanyu. After a certain experience, some audience members started to understand Lin Wanyu. Some even said that they were Wanyu herself. After “doubt Wanyu, understand Wanyu, become Wanyu” spread on social platforms, “doubt..., understand..., become...” gradually became a sentence-making format that was widely popular.

4.1.5 The catchwords come from games

According to the data collected, there are two catchwords that come from games.

(7) Overwhelmed

“Overwhelmed” was originally used in online games, which refers to the effect of breaking enemy defenses by using special physical damage. In the Internet environment, it refers to that psychological defense line having been breached. There are two kinds of results of “overwhelmed”: one is the sadness and pain after the heart is hurt, and the other is the resonance and emotion after the heart is touched.

(8) Hard control

The term “hard control” first originated in gaming, referring to a type of skill that prevents a

gamer from controlling his or her character for a certain period of time. Nowadays, the use of the term “hard control” has gradually expanded to a broader social context to describe something or a phenomenon that appeals to someone so strongly that they can’t take their eyes off of it or pay attention to it.

In addition to the above sources, there are other sources of the catchwords of the year from 2020 to 2024. For example, “Versailles literature”, which comes from the Japanese manga “The Rose of Versailles”, refers to a mode of discourse that shows off in a modest way. What’s more, the catchword “dopamine dressing” comes from color psychology. Due to space constraints, this article cannot list all the source types of all these catchwords.

4.2 The language variation of the catchword from 2020 to 2024

As the rapid dissemination of social information, the online language has always affected our language use. And language variation emerges in an endless stream, which deserves our attention. In the collection of annual catchwords from 2020 to 2024, this paper found that 37 catchwords belong to common standard Chinese, and 13 annual catchwords experience language variation. According to their linguistic variation characteristics, these catchwords are divided into five types, including neology, borrowing, contraction, accent stylization, and code-mixing.

4.2.1 Neology

Neology refers to the use of an established word in a new or different sense. There are some examples.

(9) Lie flat

The word “lie flat” originally meant to lie down and was extended to mean to rest. Nowadays, it refers to an attitude of “inaction”, “non-resistance”, and “non-effort” in life.

(10) Cooking smoke

The original meaning of “cooking smoke” is the smell of cooking food. Nowadays, the catchword “cooking smoke” refers to the vibrant and energetic atmosphere of life.

(11) Emotional value

Emotional value is a marketing concept that refers to the difference between the emotional benefit and the emotional cost perceived by the customer. It can concretize the emotional experience that products and services bring to consumers, which is a kind of non-material added value. Nowadays, “emotional value” is a description of a relationship that refers to a person’s ability to influence the emotions of others. The more comfortable, pleasurable, and stable emotions a person brings to others, the higher his emotional value becomes; conversely, his emotional value is lower.

4.2.2 Borrowing

It means an item is “borrowed” from one language to become part of the other language. Catchwords in the category of borrowing are items borrowed from foreign languages and become part of Chinese. Take “involution” as an example. The word is borrowed from English “involution”. It is a sociological term that refers to the phenomenon of a social or cultural model that stagnates after a certain stage of development or is unable to be transformed into a higher model. Now, “involution” refers to irrational internal competition.

4.2.3 Contraction

Contraction is a shorter form of a word or words. It can be divided into two types—contraction

of Chinese and contraction of English. Take “village super league” as an example of a contraction of Chinese, the corresponding complete sentence of which is “Village Football Super League”.

4.2.4 Accent stylization

This category can be divided into accent stylization of Chinese and accent stylization of English. Accent stylization of Chinese refers to the imitation of various Chinese dialects. Take “escort” as an example. It comes from Chinese dialects, which originally referred to people who play cards together, that is, partners in playing cards. Later on, the scope of use was expanded. The companions who engaged in certain activities together were generally called “escort”. In today’s life, “escort” reflects a new type of social relationship. Because of the interest in the same hobbies, “escorts” will spend a satisfying and comfortable time together and do not interfere with each other in other aspects.

4.2.5 Code-mixing

Code-mixing refers to the use of multiple languages in one expression. Take “city or not city” as an example. The phrase is a mixture of Chinese and English, which means that something is fashionable or not fashionable, and modern or not.

4.3 The causes of language variations in the catchwords

The annual catchword is a kind of linguistic and social phenomenon. The linguistic variation of catchword is a product of social development in the Internet age. From the perspective of sociolinguistics, this study analyzes the collected catchwords and finds that there are three main reasons for the linguistic variation.

Firstly, socio-cultural factors. Language is one of the important components of culture, and the symbol system of language records the characteristics of culture all the time. Conversely, cultural characteristics also have an impact on the characteristics of language and the way in which it is used. Because many new things and new cognitions have emerged, the original language expression can no longer meet people’s needs, and people have to create new ways of expression. For example, catchwords such as “Chinese modernization”, “new productive forces”, and “profound changes unseen in a century” originate from the development of society, politics, and culture; “digital intelligence”, “large-scale AI model”, “metaverse”, etc., were born because of great changes from the continuous progress of science and technology to people’s lives and production methods.

Secondly, psychosocial factors. In the context of the rapid development of science and technology, increasingly fierce social competition, and the faster pace of life, people’s spirits have always been in a state of high tension. Cyberspace provides a platform for people to relieve their psychological stress. Internet catchwords provide people with an effective way to express their pressure in a humorous, concise and vivid form, which is a direct reflection of people’s social consciousness and psychology. For example, “smell of toil” and “laborers” resonated with netizens about work; “overwhelmed” and “lie flat” vividly reflect the psychological state of many netizens.

Thirdly, the linguistic factor. Due to the particularity of online communication, netizens can only communicate virtually and cannot have more detailed and real face-to-face communication. Therefore, people have developed the Internet language into a short, accurate, fast, and convenient expression, which has greatly improved the appeal of the language through strong empathy, making this kind of language gradually become a popular register variant.

5. Conclusion

This study takes the annual ten hottest lines from 2020 to 2024 (five years) as the research object from the YAO WEN JIAO ZI Magazine, aims to make a detailed analysis about the sources, meanings, and language variation of the annual network catchwords. Based on the above analysis, three findings can be drawn. Firstly, according to the analysis of the above-mentioned, the catchwords mainly come from six original fields, including news events, network lines, national terminology policy, movies and TV, games, and others. Among them, the network catchwords derived from national terminology policy account for the largest proportion. Secondly, there are mainly five types of language variation in these 50 catchwords, that is, neology, borrowing, contraction, accent stylization, and code-mixing. And language variation of neology occurs more frequently. Thirdly, the language variations of the annual network catchwords are mainly influenced by social culture, social psychology, and language itself.

Based on the above findings, it implicates that network catchwords are not only a special language phenomenon but also a kind of social phenomenon. It's full of diversity and can reflect the social value of contemporary people. However, there are still limitations in the study. Firstly, there are a large number of catchwords on the Internet; therefore, the 50 catchwords are not big enough to fully reflect the modern words. Secondly, due to the different selection mechanisms, the catchwords selected by this magazine may be different from those selected by others. Therefore, the catchwords selected by this magazine cannot fully represent all network catchwords. Further studies could enlarge and change the data sources and take a more objective research approach to improve the result of the study.

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