

A Study of Internet Buzzwords from the Perspective of Language Variation Theory

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Abstract: With the rapid development of the Internet and the great popularity of social media, as a new phenomenon of language variation, Internet buzzwords have become an important symbol of modern language by virtue of their unique generation mechanism and transmission path. Based on the language variation theory, this paper studies the variation characteristics and manifestations of Internet buzzwords from four aspects, including vocabulary, phonetics, grammar, and semantics. This paper also explores their generation mechanisms and social impacts, providing theoretical references for regulating the culture of contemporary youth. Studies have found that the variations of Internet buzzwords in terms of vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and semantics all contain different forms, and the variation of Internet buzzwords is an inevitable manifestation of the orderly and heterogeneous development of language. Meanwhile, it not only injects new vitality into the modern Chinese vocabulary system and expression patterns, but also poses challenges to traditional language norms and education. The study on the language variations of Internet buzzwords not only provides a better understanding of the changes and developments of Internet buzzwords, but also holds significant theoretical value and practical guiding significance for the healthy, innovative development of the modern Chinese language in the new era.

Keywords: Language variation; Internet buzzwords; Variation types; Factors; Influence

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1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of digitalization, Internet buzzwords have risen rapidly and spread widely as a unique language phenomenon, and to a certain extent, it also reflects the development of social culture. Additionally, the change of language is a key focus of sociolinguistics, and the rapid evolution of Internet buzzwords is a vivid manifestation of the development and change of language^[1]. Meanwhile, many linguists have conducted certain research on the generation and evolution of Internet buzzwords. These research results can help people better explore the language variation phenomenon of Internet buzzwords. However, a systematic analysis of Internet buzzwords based on language variation theory is still insufficient. Therefore, based on the

language variation theory, this study investigates the generation, variation types, and influences of Internet buzzwords, which not only provide a new theoretical perspective for the study of Internet buzzwords but also offer references for language norms and language ecological construction.

2. Theoretical foundation

The language variation theory was founded by sociolinguist William Labov. It is the core theory in sociolinguistics for studying dynamic language phenomena. It breaks the limitations of traditional linguistics, which focuses on static and standardized language research, clearly stating that language variation is an inherent essential attribute of language ^[2]. Meanwhile, language is not an absolutely unified static system; it varies systematically in form at the levels of vocabulary, phonetics, grammar, and semantics according to differences in communication contexts, media, and social group circles. Such variation is not a language disorder, but a normal manifestation of orderly and heterogeneous development of language.

At present, some scholars have applied this theory to Chinese studies, forming a research system with three dimensions, including society, region, and individual. They have also called for the advancement of localization by incorporating emerging phenomena like online language ^[3]. Additionally, the language variation theory states that language variation at the synchronic level will solidify into language habits and drive the diachronic language evolution after circular dissemination and long-term use. Meanwhile, the characteristics of online communication, such as immediacy, fragmentation, and segmentation, have broken through traditional written language norms, giving rise to multiple variations in vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and semantics. These variations are widely spread through social media and have become an important component of contemporary Chinese synchronic variation. At the same time, the language system possesses a self-selection mechanism. The positive variations that conform to the development laws and mainstream values will be absorbed by the Chinese language system, while the vulgar and deviant variations will naturally be eliminated ^[4].

3. Types of language variation in internet buzzwords

Internet buzzwords arise with the development of the times, so they are dynamic rather than static, and they change in various forms. Internet buzzwords are rich in sources and channels, resulting in their differences in language form, semantic connotation, and cultural significance ^[5]. Compared with modern Chinese, Internet buzzwords possess many differences in terms of external form and internal structure. Therefore, from the perspective of the basic components of words, the language variation of Internet buzzwords mainly includes four aspects: lexical variation, phonetic variation, grammatical variation, and semantic variation.

3.1. Lexical variation

In the language system, vocabulary is the most active and easily variable element. In a network environment, the limitations of the expression mode of the traditional language system developed by netizens, as well as the contradictions of the thinking space, provide netizens with the motivation to transform the existing characters ^[3]. Therefore, Internet buzzwords often break the boundaries of traditional words to create concise and creative words that can quickly attract people's attention and resonance. The lexical variation of Internet buzzwords mainly includes abbreviations, overlaps, and affixes.

Firstly, an abbreviation reflects the ultimate pursuit of linguistic economy in online communication; it can be divided into several forms. The first form is the pinyin acronym, which takes the first sounds of a group of words and recombines them into new words, such as “yyds”, which is the phonetic initial of “永远的神”, and “nsdd” refers to “你说得对.” The second form is the loanword abbreviation, which refers to the first letter of each word being combined, or the original word being shortened to form a new word. For example, the word “emotional” is shortened to “emo”, which is used to refer to feeling depressed, and it has become a common emotional label in the modern era. The third form is an extreme abbreviation of Chinese characters, which is a special form of creating words. People often use some one-word phrases to convey rich information, such as “典” means “stereotypical or ridiculous”, which complete form is “经典”; “绝” means “amazing or wonderful”, which complete form is “绝妙.”

Secondly, overlap is a traditional means of word formation in Chinese. It mainly refers to the repetition of certain syllables or characters in the vocabulary. It is mainly divided into pure overlap and affixed overlap. At first, pure overlap uses repeated words to soften the harshness of the expression as well as to create a relaxed and lively atmosphere or to express pettiness, such as “睡觉觉” and “发说说.” The affixed overlap adds a de-emphasized suffix to the overlapping root, becoming unique expressions of the young people on the Internet, such as “绝绝子” and “美美哒.” The overlap variation does not alter the original meaning of the words. Instead, it merely achieves a more colloquial and cute transformation in form and is an important means for expressing emotions in Internet language.

Thirdly, affix variation is based on traditional Chinese affixes and gives rise to a large number of derivative affixes. Through the combination of fixed prefixes, suffixes, and free roots, a large-scale network vocabulary is formed. For instance, “XX族” refers to a group with common characteristics, such as “低头族” and “月光族.” The suffix “族” metaphorically transforms the concept of blood relationship into a social identity label. Moreover, prefix variations like “云”(云逛街、云开会) have generalized the original vocabulary and endowed them with new online connotations. In addition, affix variation has distinct social stratification features, which are that different age groups, occupations, and subcultures have preferences for different affix patterns. For instance, fan circles prefer terms like “XX粉” or “XX担”, while in the “e-sports circle”, people prefer terms such as “XX怪” or “XX王.” These variant suffixes constitute an important identifier of the online social dialect.

3.2. Phonetic variation

Phonetic variation mainly relies on homophones, near-homophones, and cross-linguistic phonetic similarities in Chinese, breaking the norms of Mandarin pronunciation, and forming playful expressions through phonetic substitution and sound transformation.

The first variation is the phonetic variation of Chinese characters, which refers to changing the original word into another Chinese character with the same or similar pronunciation, such as “蓝瘦香菇”, which refers to “feeling extremely sad and about to cry”, “亚历山大” refers to “extremely stressful.” And by using colloquial rhymes, it softens serious emotions and adds a sense of humor. The next is the numerical homophones variation. Numbers are similar in pronunciation to Chinese characters, and they are easy to understand and vivid in image, so there are many numerically homophonic words or phrases in Internet buzzwords. For instance, “520” represents “I love you”, and “88” represents “bye bye.” They are easy to input, subtle and tactful, and have been popular in online social interactions for a long time. In addition,

Chinese and foreign language homophony is also an important type of variation. In Internet buzzwords, Chinese and foreign language homophony generally refers to a form that converts foreign language vocabulary into Chinese characters according to their pronunciation. For example, “栓 Q” borrows the pronunciation of the English word “thank you” to achieve cross-language speech integration, “瑞思拜” means “respect”, and “奥利给” refers to “fighting” in Japanese. Finally, there is reduplication, generalization, and tone weakening. Online spoken language deliberately lengthens syllables and weakens standard tones to align with the casual characteristics of instant online oral communication, like “泰酷辣” and “谁懂啊.” The phonetic variation is linked by auditory associations, breaking free from the constraints of the literal meaning of the words.

3.3. Grammatical variation

The grammatical variation of Internet buzzwords breaks through the grammatical rules of traditional Chinese, adjusting and changing the grammatical structure of the language by means of word order recombination, word class variation, and zero-form syntax. These variations mainly adapt to the characteristics of colloquial, concise, and vivid Internet language.

Firstly, the zero-form syntax is the most distinctive variation feature of network grammar. It relies on the context to omit core syntactic components such as the subject, predicate, and object, achieving complete meaning expression through incomplete syntax and resulting in a large number of elliptical sentences and non-subject sentences. Traditional written Chinese requires complete syntactic components and rigorous logic, whereas online communication relies on conversational context and shared cognition, allowing communication to be completed without complete sentences. Common expressions like “包的”, “就这”, “笑死”, and “太顶了”, which entirely lack core subjects and modifiers, and their meanings depend on contextual cues. This zero-form syntactic variation follows the language economy principle, significantly simplifying the sentence structure, weakening grammatical integrity, and focusing on emotional expression rather than logical narration.

Secondly, word order reconstruction manifests as deviations from the traditional Chinese word order and unconventional arrangements, representing the creative variation of Internet buzzwords at the syntactic level. It often does not adhere to the traditional grammar rules or norms, but pays more attention to the personalized expression and emotion, and it uses reconfiguration methods such as inversion, post-positioning, and pre-positioning to form distinctive expressions. Unlike traditional standard sentence structures, Internet buzzwords often place emotional adjectives and evaluative words at the beginning. For example, expressions like “炸裂般好看” and “离谱到家” prioritize the transmission of the core evaluative meaning and stress the emotional attitude.

Thirdly, active use of word categories is the most common form of grammatical variation in Internet buzzwords. It breaks the fixed grammatical functions of nouns, verbs, and adjectives in modern Chinese, enabling flexible usage of word categories. The most typical example is the verbalization of nouns, which breaks through the constraints of traditional grammar and challenges the boundaries of standard grammar with a new language form^[6]. For example, expressions like “百度一下” and “CPU you” transform static nouns into dynamic actions, illustrating the influence of the utilitarian mindset of the Internet on linguistic structure. Additionally, the adjectivization of nouns is also quite common. For instance, expressions like “很网红” and “city不city” utilize the concrete attributes of nouns to enhance the evaluation effect and convey humor.

3.4. Semantic variation

Semantic variation refers to the expansion and narrowing of words in different contexts or historical stages. In the network environment, such variation is often accompanied by the development of culture and society. Characteristics like regional environment and cultural differences can predict and promote the intensity of semantic variation in the same or different communities^[7]. There are two main aspects of the semantic variation of Internet buzzwords, including semantic expansion and semantic narrowing.

Firstly, semantic expansion refers to the extension of the original meaning of a word to cover a wider range of situations or concepts. For example, the term “凡尔赛” has evolved from the name of a French palace to describe a behavior pattern of showing off in a low-key manner, and its meaning has expanded from a specific architectural reference to an abstract social strategy. In addition, the expression “敬自己一杯” originally referred to a behavioral description, but later it was adopted by young people as a form of self-mockery and self-tribute, with its meaning expanding from behavior to attitude expression.

Secondly, semantic narrowing means that the scope of a word's meaning becomes narrower in a specific context, and the original broad meaning is restricted to a specific situation. For example, “佛系” refers to a peaceful and tolerant attitude, but in the specific network context, it is often used to refer to a casual and indifferent attitude towards life. The expression “佛系追剧” refers to casual viewing without much concern for plot continuity or the number of episodes, and this meaning is usually only applicable in a particular entertainment culture. Another example is the term “拿捏”, whose original meaning refers to the concrete grasping and controlling action. But in the network, only the abstract meanings of “controlling emotions, grasping the situation” are retained. The physical action meaning has completely disappeared, forming an exclusive network expression paradigm.

4. Factors affecting the generation of internet buzzwords

As a new and special language, the generation of Internet buzzwords is not accidental, but influenced by many factors. Some scholars held that the generation and dissemination of Internet buzzwords are related to the language attributes of Internet buzzwords, user demands, and the availability of social media^[4]. Others proposed that Internet buzzwords are the product of the development of current communication subjects and changes in the power pattern of social discourse^[8]. Therefore, the multi-dimensional variation of Internet buzzwords is the result of the internal system adjustment of language and the interaction of various external social factors.

4.1. Internal factors

The principle of language economy is the core internal driving force behind the variation of Internet buzzwords. Online communication is characterized by immediacy, fragmentation, and high-frequency interaction. However, traditional lengthy and rigorous written expressions cannot meet the needs of fast-paced chatting, so the language system spontaneously adopts variation forms, such as lexical abbreviations, phonetic simplifications, and syntactic omissions to improve expressive efficiency. Secondly, the Chinese language system is inherently open and error-tolerant, capable of accepting new word formation patterns, phonetic usages, grammatical habits, and semantic connotations. In addition, the self-selection mechanism of the language system will naturally eliminate the variant forms that are ambiguous in meaning or violate language logic, while retaining the benign variations that conform to the development laws, thus achieving

the dynamic balance of the language.

4.2. External factors

The first factor is that it is driven by social culture and the mindset of the times. In contemporary society, the pace of life has accelerated, and young people are under multiple pressures, such as academic studies, career development, and daily life. Internet buzzwords have become a language medium through which the public can convey their attitudes towards life and reflect social hotspots. Expressions like “打工人”, “躺平”, and “内卷” accurately reflect the living conditions and social mentality of contemporary youth and are the direct reflection of social and cultural changes in the language domain. The second factor is the driving force of media technology dissemination. Social media plays a very important role in the Internet era; it is a catalyst to promote Internet communication^[9]. The popularity of short videos, social platforms, and self-media has broken the time and space limitations of language dissemination^[10]. An Internet buzzword can spread across the entire network within a short period of time, accelerating the dissemination of variations in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and semantics, as well as providing a technical platform for the evolution of Internet buzzwords.

Thirdly, it is the identity construction of a youth subculture. The youth group is the core entity in the creation and dissemination of Internet buzzwords. From Labov’s sociolinguistic perspective, language variation is an important way for youth to achieve identity construction^[8]. For example, “I person or E person” can quickly indicate an introverted or extroverted personality, thereby reducing the barrier to communication in the initial interaction. Moreover, young people are able to define the boundaries of their social circles and strengthen their sense of group belonging by using exclusive abbreviations, reduplicated words, and homophonic popular expressions. Young people actively create and use variant language, becoming the core force driving the variation of Internet language.

5. The influence of internet buzzwords

As an emerging language phenomenon, Internet buzzwords have had a great impact on society. Among them, the influence on social culture and language norms is the most obvious.

Firstly, the variations of Internet buzzwords have injected vitality into modern Chinese. It not only enriches the vocabulary and expression methods, enhances the efficiency and emotional capacity of language expression, but also promotes the deepening of grammar research and prompts the academic community to re-examine the dynamic nature of language norms. Furthermore, people can accurately grasp the social mentality characteristics at different stages by analyzing the variations of Internet buzzwords. For instance, the buzzword “躺平” in 2021 reflected the reflection of the youth on excessive competition, “情绪价值” in 2022 reflected the public’s emphasis on spiritual needs, and “搭子” in 2023 reflected the preference of contemporary people for lightweight social interaction. Therefore, the changes in Internet buzzwords record the changes of the times and hold unique cultural archival value.

However, the emergence and mutation of Internet buzzwords also have some negative effects. The primary issue is the challenge of language standardization. For instance, homophones like “绝绝子” and “emo”, grammatical violations like “一整个爱住”, and semantic ambiguity like “搞抽象” can easily mislead the language acquisition of teenagers and undermine the language standardization education^[4]. Furthermore, the long-term use of fragmented and minimalistic variations in expression will weaken the

public's logical thinking and written expression skills. Some negative and ironic popular phrases will also spread negative social attitudes, thereby damaging the healthy ecological environment of Internet language culture.

In a word, the influence of Internet buzzwords on language norms and social culture is complex and multifaceted. People need to guide the healthy development of Internet buzzwords through various efforts, so that they can not only enrich the language expression, but also maintain the standardization and purity of language as well as social order.

6. Conclusion

Based on Labov's language variation theory, this paper analyzes the language variation characteristics of Internet buzzwords from the four dimensions, including vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and semantics. Overall, the variation of Internet buzzwords is the result of the language system's self-adjustment in accordance with economic principles, as well as the joint driving force of social culture, media technology, and youth identity construction. It combines the vitality of language innovation with potential norms. In addition, benign variations in online language can enrich the modern Chinese expression system and meet the communication needs of the new era. However, unregulated language chaos will undermine traditional language norms and affect the language acquisition of people. Meanwhile, Internet buzzwords will continue to undergo new variations and evolutions in the digital age. Therefore, it is crucial to grasp the forms of variation and influence of Internet buzzwords, reasonably guide their development direction, protect the vitality of language innovation, and build a healthy online language ecosystem. This is also an important issue in language research and governance in the digital era.

Disclosure statement

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