

A Study on Internet Buzzwords in the Last Four Years Based on Conceptual Integration Theory

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Internet buzzwords, as distinct forms of language, consist of short sentences yet carry rich meanings and spread rapidly. To better study this intriguing and unique linguistic phenomenon, this paper employed conceptual integration theory for its powerful explanatory capabilities to analyze the origins, composition, and emergence of meanings of internet buzzwords over the past four years. These 40 internet buzzwords can be categorized into five types: semantic derivation, generalization, abbreviation, metonymy, and compounding. Furthermore, this paper conducted cognitive analysis from different conceptual integration network perspectives, elucidating specific cognitive operations involved in the construction of meanings and revealing the emergence process of layered meanings in recent internet buzzwords over the past four years.

Keywords: conceptual integration theory, internet buzzwords, meaning construction, mental space

Introduction

Internet buzzwords refer to forms of language that have emerged with the development of the Internet. They are widely accepted by netizens and popularize across online platforms (Wang, 2014, p. 110). Known for their concise language, rich connotations, and humorous characteristics, internet buzzwords can quickly become popular on major new media platforms such as TikTok and Weibo. The rapid development of online media today further facilitates the dissemination of these internet buzzwords. Increasingly, Chinese scholars have paid attention to this unique linguistic phenomenon, conducting studies on specific constructions of internet buzzwords such as “X (得) 很好, 下次不要 (X) 了,” “X 刺客,” “肝+ N,” and others (Cai, 2023; Chen, 2023; He, 2023; Lu, 2023; Lv, 2023). Lei (2024) analyzed the internet buzzword “X 刺客,” exploring its compositional elements, semantic features, and suggesting its generation is related to cognitive metaphors. Additionally, numerous scholars have studied various internet buzzwords from different perspectives including cultural linguistics, social linguistics, and cognitive linguistics (Yao, 2021; Wang, 2022; Chen, 2022; Peng, 2023), aiming to analyze their mechanisms of generation, semantic construction, motives of dissemination, and cultural characteristics. For instance, Zhu (2024) analyzed the grammar, semantic features, and generation mechanism of “一把子VP”, discussing reasons for its popularity. Some scholars explore values, social motives, and the online ecology reflected in internet buzzwords. Zhang (2023) analyzed and pointed out that internet

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buzzwords over the past 15 years reflect the “three major changes”: changes in online ecology, changes in public opinion ecology, and changes in group mentality, all of which interact with each other.

After conducting a literature review, it was found that domestic research on internet buzzwords mainly focuses on specific constructions of internet buzzwords, the semantic construction and generation mechanisms of them, and exploring the values reflected behind them. However, Chinese scholars rarely use conceptual integration theory to analyze the semantic emergence process of annual top internet buzzwords from a cognitive perspective in recent years. Conceptual integration theory, as a crucial component of cognitive linguistics, provides a mature theoretical framework for language research. According to Fauconnier & Turner (2003, p. 1), conceptual integration is a basic mental ability that plays an important role in the construction of meaning in everyday life. Therefore, this paper employs conceptual integration theory, utilizing the four sub-networks within conceptual integration networks, to explore the semantic emergence process and cognitive motivations behind the top ten annual internet buzzwords in recent years.

Conceptual Integration Theory

Conceptual integration theory was initially proposed by Fauconnier in 1997 in his work “Mappings in Thought and Language.” This theory represents a development beyond conceptual metaphor theory and mental spaces theory, aiming to explain phenomena that these theories cannot fully account for, such as the appearance of emergent structures (Evans & Green, 2006). The relationship between conceptual integration theory and mental spaces theory is particularly close, with some cognitive semanticists explicitly considering it an extension of mental spaces theory (Evans & Green, 2006). Thus, mental spaces are the basic units of cognitive operations in conceptual integration theory (Zhang, 2019, p. 247), enabling dynamic semantic construction online using this theory.

In our processes of thinking and communication, mental spaces are crucial for constructing conceptual packets needed to facilitate current understanding and actions (Fauconnier & Turner, 1998). Mental spaces are constructed by space builders, linguistic units that prompt the construction of a new mental space or shifts attention between previously constructed mental spaces (Evans & Green, 2006, p. 371). Langacker (2008, p. 59) also referred to them as the current discourse spaces which include all assumptions assumed to be mutually understood by the speaker and listener, forming the foundation for discourse at a specific moment.

In conceptual integration theory, an integration network is a multi-space entity typically composed of input space 1, input space 2, generic space, and blend space. There are partial cross-space mappings between input spaces, linking corresponding counterparts within each space (Fauconnier & Turner, 1998, p. 137). Generic Space maps into each input space, containing shared components from both input spaces. Finally, the blend space gives rise to emergent structure: information that is absent in both input spaces. The appearance of emergent structure in the blend space involves three cognitive operations: composition, completion, and elaboration (Fauconnier & Turner, 1998). The initial phase involves organizing elements from different input spaces, followed by schema induction, and concluding with online processing to generate unique emergent structure in the blend space (Evans & Green, 2006). Similar structures and shared information from two input mental spaces are projected into the generic Space, while input spaces are selectively mirrored, matched, and cross-space mapped into the blend space (Zhang, 2021, p. 96). In accordance with Yu (2021, p. 67), counterparts from two

input spaces are interconnected, forming stable mapping relationships, whereas mappings between input spaces and generic space or blend space are selective. According to Fauconnier and Turner's co-authored work "The Way We Think," conceptual integration networks generally encompass four sub-networks: simplex networks, mirror networks, single-scope networks and double-scope networks. In summary, conceptual integration theory represents the development of mental space theory, offering explanations for phenomena such as concept generation, semantic construction, and the emergence of new meanings in language (Wang, 2006; Yu, 2021; Zhang, 2019).

Analysis of Annual Internet Buzzwords

Sources of Internet Buzzwords

Analysis of the different sources of internet buzzwords reveals three main categories: native internet expressions, hot events, and mass media (Fu, 2019). Internet-native buzzwords primarily refer to language widely circulated in internet, including categories such as user-created terms and dialect adaptations. In the top ten internet buzzwords of 2021, terms like "破防", "鸡娃" and "躺平" fall into this category. These buzzwords are often coined by netizens during online conversations, used for satire, expressing opinions, and conveying attitudes. In terms of dialect adaptations, the buzzword "搭子" (partner) in the top ten internet buzzwords of 2023 belongs to this category.

Hot-event buzzwords refer to the major hot events that happened in that year, which triggered extensive discussion on the whole network, and the word can represent the event itself (Zhang, 2021). And this type of internet buzzwords is often closely related to national policies and guidelines, such as "人民至上, 生命至上", "碳达峰, 碳中和", "中国式现代化" etc. Most of these buzzwords are taken from important speeches delivered by general secretary Xi Jinping. The mass media buzzwords refer to terms that are directly derived from mainstream media such as movies, TV dramas, anime, and even short videos like TikTok. These words essentially transfer from mass media directly into the online sphere. For example, terms like "打工人", "雪糕刺客" and "元宇宙" fall into this category.

The Clarification of Internet Buzzwords

Building upon Fu (2019) and Zhang's (2021) classifications, this study categorizes these 40 internet buzzwords as follows:

(1) Semantic Derivation

Such internet buzzwords refer to previously existing words that were already familiar to the public but have been given new meanings through the fermentation of hot events, resulting in the phenomenon of semantic derivation. For instance, the term "烟火气" originally referred to the smell of cooking food, but after acquiring a new connotation, it now signifies a vibrant and warm lifestyle atmosphere. Similar examples include "赶考" (a new journey toward realizing the second centenary goal), "双向奔赴" (two-way efforts), "躺平" (lie flat), "天花板" (ceiling), and "神兽" (mythical beast), among others.

(2) Generalization

It refers to a word formation method that compresses the content of a specific event into a single word (Fu, 2019, p. 22). To facilitate and enhance transmission speed, such words are often concise in form but contain rich connotations waiting to be explored. Similar examples of such internet buzzwords include "碳达峰, 碳中

和” (carbon emission peaking and carbon neutrality), “百年未有之大变局” (profound changes unseen in a century), “小康” (moderate prosperity), and “双循环” (dual circulation).

(3) Abbreviation

For the sake of convenience in reference, words are systematically abbreviated to form a concise linguistic unit. For instance, “村超” stands for “乡村足球超级联赛” (Rural Football Super League). Due to its lengthy components that are inconvenient for memorization and reference, people compress it into the word “村超”.

(4) Metonymy

The method of using a prominent part or characteristic of a person or event to represent the entire entity is known as metonymy. For example, during the 2022 pandemic, the term “大白” (Big White) became popular. Many nurses, doctors, and volunteers wore white protective suits, creating a respected and endearing image in the eyes of the public. Consequently, people affectionately referred to them as “大白”, acknowledging and praising their contributions.

(5) Compounding

The method of combining two words, each with their own meanings, to create a new meaning is called compounding. Similar examples include “野性消费” (irrational consumption), “精神内耗” (mentally exhausted), “新质生产力” (new quality productive forces), and “打工人” (worker).

Semantic Construction of Internet Buzzwords under Conceptual Integration Theory

Simplex Networks

Simplex networks contain two input spaces, one that contains only values and another space contains frames with roles. The values in input space 1 populate the frames in space 2 to produce a blend containing structure that is not present in either input space (Evans & Green, 2006, p. 426). In the case of “特种兵式旅游” (special forces-style tourism), input space 1 contains values such as “special forces” and “on a mission”, which can provide behavioral characteristics of a subject, including semantic elements such as “high training intensity, high efficiency, excellent physical fitness”. Input space 2 is a tourism frame that contains the roles of “tourist” and “activity”, which implies the characteristics of this activity, and the behavioral mode: going from one location to another to check-in at a tourist attraction. The elements and frames in the input space are projected to the generic space (e.g., subject, behavior), and the integration network compresses the tourism frame in the input space 2, so that the “special forces”, “performing tasks”, etc. of input space 1 are worth filling the frame. The value “special forces” fills the role “tourist”, and the value “perform tasks” fills the role “activity”. Emergent structure in the blend space is generated through cognitive operations such as composition (semantic association: the way the subject behaves), completion (high intensity and efficiency are elevated to the characteristics of an activity), and elaboration (the characteristics that an activity possesses). Thus, the emergent meaning “to see as many places as possible in as little time as possible” emerges. Similar examples include “irrational consumption”, “Chinese modernization” and “new quality productive forces”.

Mirror Networks

In this type of network, input space 1 and input space 2 provide the same frame but different elements. The generic space contains a similar abstract frame mapped by the two input spaces (Yu, 2021, p. 68). The

similar frames and different elements are blended and projected into the blend space, from which the emergent meaning forms.

Taking “two-way efforts” as an example, this term originally referred to the relationship between people, emphasizing that both individuals sincerely contribute, reflecting equality between each other. But in November 2023, President Xi Jinping quoted this word to describe the relationship between China and America. Input space 1 contains the human relationship and activates the frame of the relationship between two parties, which contains the key elements of “sincerity”, “equality” and “mutuality”. Input space 2 contains President Xi Jinping’s speech, which also activates the relationship frame with key elements such as “relationship between China and America”, “people”, “friendship”, and “mutual”. The two input spaces contain the same frame, which is the “relationship” frame. The semantic components of input spaces are projected into the blend space, and the similar elements of the two input spaces are projected into the generic space (relationship), and then into the blend space. Through cognitive operations such as composition (semantic association: the state of the relationship between two parties), completion (the state of interpersonal relationship upgraded to the state of the relationship between the two countries), and elaboration (the characteristics of the relationship between two countries). Therefore, the scope of use of “two-way efforts” has been further expanded from use for individuals to use for nations. Similar examples include “emotional value”.

Single-Scope Networks

In this network, both input spaces have different organizing frames, but only the frame from one input space is projected to organize the blend space. The organizing frame in the blend space extends from the organizing frame in one of the input spaces (Fauconnier & Turner, 2008, p. 126). For example, consider the phrase “ice cream assassin.” In input space 1, “ice cream” activates a transactional frame, including elements like goods, prices, consumers, and sellers. In input space 2, “assassin” activates a subject-action frame related to someone secretly attacking others, including elements like agent, patient, and weapons. The semantic features emphasized here are “covert” and “sudden.” However, only the action frame is projected into the blend space and continues to operate there. The elements from input space 1 (ice cream, price, and consumer) fill in the subject-action frame. Through semantic associations (alluding to a specific action), cognitive operations like completion (elevating assassin behavior to transactional features) and elaboration (transactional behavior under assassin features) lead to the emergent meaning: “sky-high-priced ice cream,” emphasizing the shock felt by the buyer upon learning the ice cream’s price. In this context, “assassin” emphasizes the harm caused by the action. Similar examples include the phrase like “赶考”.

Double-Scope Networks

In a double-scope network, two input spaces contain different organizing frames and elements which are selectively projected into the blend space, resulting in emergent structure. Let’s elaborate the meaning of “凡尔赛文学” (versailles literature) with this network. The popularity of “versailles literature” originated from a verified writer on a microblogging platform. She used understated language to document her noble lifestyle, which led to many netizens mocking her. Interestingly, the term “versailles” originally comes from the Japanese manga “The Rose of Versailles,” which meticulously depicts the extravagant lives of nobles in the

late 18th century at the Palace of Versailles in France. Consequently, “versailles” has come to symbolize opulence and luxury.

In the double-scope network, input space 1 corresponds to “The Rose of Versailles,” encompassing elements like “nobility,” “luxury,” and “literary work.” Input space 2 represents the microblog posts of the user, containing elements like “nobility,” “plain language,” and “contrast.” The mutual mapping of elements from both input spaces completes the cognitive operation of composition. The generic space includes “lifestyle.” During the completion phrase, background knowledge is activated: the user’s description of her luxurious life aligns with the portrayal of noble life in “The Rose of Versailles,” emphasizing their shared “nobility.” Consequently, “versailles” becomes a defining feature of the user’s life. Finally, in the elaboration phase, the contrast between “noble lifestyle” and “plain language” emerges. Through these cognitive operations, the blend space reveals the emergent meaning of “show off in a low-key way.” Similar examples include the term like “mythical creatures.”

Conclusion

This article analyzed the meaning construction of the top ten internet buzzwords from 2020 to 2023, as published by the editorial department of “Yao Wen Jiao Zi.” New words and internet buzzwords reflect specific cultural contexts, serving as reflections of social and linguistic phenomena during particular periods (Dong, 2019, p. 132). Studying internet buzzwords from a given era helps us better understand the associated social culture and appreciate the close relationship between culture and language. Ultimately, internet buzzwords represent users’ reflections and emotional expressions related to human cognition, the objective world, and societal culture. Their emergence result from combinations of situational factors, individual influences, and emotional contagion mechanisms (Guo, 2022, p. 166). While internet buzzwords serve as quick and lively ways for users to express their viewpoints, emotions, and stances, they also reflect the cultural backdrop and attitudes of the current generation. Responsible supervision and guidance are essential for ensuring positive outcomes in the dissemination of internet buzzwords.

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