

# Research on the Dissemination of the Internet Buzzword “破防” From the Perspective of Memetics

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This paper analyzes the Internet buzzwords from the perspective of memetics, and explains the replication and transmission process of the word “破防” in the Internet buzzwords according to the meme cycle theory proposed by Heylighen. By discussing the process of assimilation, retention, expression, and transmission of the word “破防”, the pragmatic value of it as a strong meme is analyzed, such as economy, fashionability, and novelty, so as to further understand the meme.

*Keywords:* memetics, Internet buzzwords, meme cycle theory

## Introduction

On December 6, 2021, according to network data and other paths, the National Language Resources Monitoring and Research Center released the “Top Ten Cyberwords in 2021” at the end of the year, which includes a word used to express emotional changes: “破防”. The word “破防” was also selected into the “Top Ten Buzzwords in 2021” selected by the editorial department of the “quibble” magazine. The word “破防” is both a cyberword and a buzzword, which shows its high frequency of use.

The meanings expressed by Internet languages are not only the literal meanings of the words themselves. Nowadays, the meanings they express far exceed the literal meanings of the words themselves, and they have become synonymous with certain attitudes and views of netizens towards social phenomena, giving traditional language brand new meaning. To a certain extent, this aspect reflects the vitality of the society and the innovative consciousness of the people, and it also shows that people are trying to express their rich inner world in this shorter language. The emergence of text-based communication has opened up a new space for the development of linguistics (Zhang & Jiang, 2011).

At present, many scholars in our country have paid attention to and discussed the phenomenon of Internet language from different perspectives. Luo and He (2015) analyzed the evolution principles and motivation of Internet buzzwords. Wang (2020) explained the metaphorical phenomenon of Internet vocabulary by using conceptual metaphor theory. Jin and Yang (2022) discussed the generation and interaction process of online language violence from the perspective of critical discourse analysis. Memetics, which explains the laws of cultural evolution based on Darwin’s theory of evolution, provides a new perspective for the study of Internet language. Therefore, this paper will use the memetics in pragmatic theory to analyze the origin, meaning, reproduction, and dissemination process of the word “破防”, and what pragmatic value it has as a strong meme.

## Memetics and Memes

“Memetics” is a new theory that explains the laws of cultural evolution based on Darwin’s theory of evolution. It studies the laws of cultural evolution and attempts to interpret the essential characteristics of culture’s inheritance (He, 2005).

The most central term in memetics is meme (He, 2005). The term “meme” as a cultural evolutionary unit first appeared in Rich Dawkins’ book *The Selfish Gene* in 1976 (Dawkins, 1976). Rich Dawkins thought of memes as cultural imitation units, which were later considered as information units stored in the brain and replicators in the brain. Dawkins’ student Blackmore believes that the basic criteria for judging “memes” are “imitation”. Any piece of information (a word, a sentence, a song, a fashion, a style of house building) can be called a “model” as long as it can be “replicated” through a process called “imitation” in the broadest sense (Blackmore, 1999).

Mr. He, a Chinese scholar, believes that memes are thinking viruses, which can infect the brains of other people, and once a person is infected by this “virus”, they will parasitize in his mind, and in the years to come, this person will spread this “virus” to other people or to his next generation. This virus will change the behavior of the infected, and make them focus on promoting this model, and then through the imitation and dissemination, it forms the meme phenomenon of echoing what others say and do (He, 2005).

## Internet Buzzwords and Meme Cycle Theory

Internet buzzwords are a special kind of Internet language. It is the most active language symbol used spontaneously by netizens mainly in the Internet field within a certain period of time. It has a fermentation function and special meaning, and often has an impact on social reality (Wang, 2014). Internet language also follows the rules of meme, and the formation and development of Internet buzzwords largely benefit from the power of memes (Zhang & Gao, 2010). At the same time, memetics provide a new tool and a new perspective for analyzing the replication, change, and development of language.

Mememes make us realize that the propagation of language is the reproduction and propagation of mememes (Chen, 2008). In memetics, the person who carries the meme is called the host, and the host continues to carry the meme, and the process of spreading is called replication. The advancement of a culture requires the transmutation of replicating its own mememes and advanced alien mememes. Heylighen argues that from being selected by a new host and being passed on, a meme goes through four distinct cycles:

1. Assimilation: It means that the presented meme is noticed, understood, and accepted by the host. Notice means that the meme carrier is significant enough to attract the host’s attention; understanding means that the host can incorporate the presented meme into its own cognitive system. The host will subconsciously filter out or accumulate mememes that are different or consistent with traditional culture.

2. Retention: Mememes must stay in memory; otherwise they cannot be called mememes. The longer a meme remains in a host’s brain, the more likely it is to spread and affect other hosts.

3. Expression: In order to be widely disseminated, the meme must be transformed from a memory pattern into a tangible body that the host can perceive. This process is “expression”. Words are the most prominent means of expression.

4. Transmission: The expression of mememes requires tangible carriers or media. Memetic carriers can be books, photographs, artefacts, CDs, etc. During transmission, the meme is transferred from one host to one or more potential hosts in a process called replication.

The above four stages, going round and round, form a loop of meme replication, with selection at each stage, and some memes being eliminated during the selection process (Yin, 2005).

### Replication and Popularity of “破防” as a Language Meme

#### The Origin and Meaning of “破防”

At present, it is known that the word “破防” has the following sources: First, the word “破防” is regarded as a temporary usage. According to the database search of “Chaoxingyu Publishing Periodicals”, the abbreviated form “破防” first appeared in *China Business News* on September 6, 2010: “英特尔破防移动互联”. However, in the following three years, this abbreviated form did not appear again, which can be regarded as a temporary usage. Second, the word “破防” is used as a polysyllabic word, which first appeared in *Journal of Xinyu University* in the first issue of 2014: “而从长江上游的四川一带破防则路途太远，由此可见淮河一线的重要作用”. It means to break through the defense of the other side in the war. After 2014, the term “破防” has been widely used in military, competitive sports competitions and other fields. In general, the term “破防” appeared earlier, but before 2021, it was used less frequently and in a relatively small range.

“破防” is a shorthand for “破除防御”. Parts of speech are adjectives and verbs, and can be used as predicates and attributives. In the early military field, it was used to refer to breaking through the enemy’s defenses and achieving victory. It also applies to competitive sports games. “破防” also applies to virtual online games, which means breaking through the opponent’s defenses, destroying game equipment, game skills, and similar skills, making them lose their defense effects. However, the term “破防” is now used in the online environment, and the meaning expressed is slightly different from the original meaning. The breakthrough is not equipment or skills in the game, but refers to breaking people’s psychological defense. Any emotion can make people “破防”, such as anger, sadness, embarrassment, touching, and even happiness as we know it. The word has become a buzzword used by contemporary young people to express their feelings.

#### The Replication and Dissemination Process of “破防”

The replication and dissemination of the word “破防” also went through four different cycles. The continued replication and dissemination of the meme “破防” depends on whether its own representational content can compete for and retain people’s attention. Although there are two origins of the word “破防”, its appearance is mostly in the field of network or military, for example, “英特尔破防移动互联” and “而从长江上游的四川一带破防则路途太远……”. The word “破防” gradually came out of its original meaning, and now it is mostly used to indicate the breaking of the psychological defense line. Therefore, the application fields of the word have also increased accordingly, and the groups of users have also become diversified. And the word is relatively short: The concept of “破防” can be expressed in only two words, which is easily understood and accepted by the host and triggers an assimilation reaction.

For novel words, the majority of netizens are more inclined to use such words to highlight their uniqueness. They emphasize freshness and distinctiveness, while the use of the word “破防” makes them shine. They believe that if they apply words applied in the military field or in the network field to their online communication, they will definitely be different. Since the majority of netizens pursue novelty, the “破防” meme will be transmitted multiple times to infect more hosts and then remain in people’s memory.

With the popularity of the word “破防” in 2021, the word “破防” was widely used. In addition to appearing in people’s daily communication or online communication as a word, sometimes in the form of pictures, more specifically said, it is presented in the form of emoticons. Both pictures and words can be used as means of expression, allowing memes to spread widely. The official media also used the “破防” meme. For example, CCTV News Weibo posted this sentence, “被孔子和弟子的感情破防了”. It is also because of the use of the word in the formal media that people choose to be assimilated, so that the meme is transmitted from one host to more potential hosts, completing the process of transmission of the meme.

### **The Pragmatic Value of “破防” as a Powerful Meme**

Blackmore believes that memes evolved under enormous selection pressure (Zhang & Jiang, 2011). Memes are similar to genes, they are in a competitive relationship, memes desperately seek to enter another medium, the human brain or books, and the results determine our cultural and psychological structure. People have an unconscious choice for memes. The vitality of language as a meme depends on its ability to be recognized during use, and thus to be widely copied and disseminated. Memes that are widely copied and disseminated are often powerful memes (Zhang & Jiang, 2011).

The term “破防” fully fits the characteristics of a strong meme, which has strong replication ability and wide spread. Therefore, from the perspective of memetics, it is essentially a language-strengthening meme. The reason why it can become a powerful meme is inseparable from its own pragmatic value in addition to the factors of network propaganda. Its pragmatic value mainly includes the following points.

1. Economy: The economic principle means that the speaker uses the least amount of language to achieve the best communicative effect. The use of abbreviations, numbers, special symbols, and code-switching by communicators conforms to economic principles (Wang, 2010). In the special informal communication environment of the network, the convenience and speed of information transmission are very important. To communicate most effectively in the shortest possible time, information must be delivered quickly, saving time for both the speaker and the hearer. Therefore, the input of network language is required to be convenient and fast.

The word “破防” is expressed in a concise form and is easy to be remembered by people in a short period of time. “破防” as a polysyllabic word shortens the four-syllable structure into a two-syllable for easy communication by refining two representative morphemes “破” and “防”, omitting the other two structural components (Li, 2022). While simplifying the surface syntactic structure, the number of chunks in the sentence is reduced, but the meaning and grammatical function of the original sentence are still preserved. This kind of refinement reduces the difficulty of understanding the original sentence and conforms to the principles of language economy.

2. Fashionability: The synonym of fashion is avant-garde, which refers to what is trendy and fashionable, which is the so-called “popularity”. The fashion of language means that the way of expression of language conforms to the characteristics of the current era and meets the psychological needs of the public. If the language is fashionable, innovative, and the form of expression is different, people will unconsciously use and imitate, so that it can be widely copied and spread, forming a strong language meme (Du, 2012).

Entering 2021, the word “破防” has an extended meaning. In addition to referring to breaking the opponent’s defense or the player’s psychological defense line being broken in online games, it will also appear on video barrage and Weibo. It refers specifically to being emotionally impacted and deeply touched.

There are many groups of users of Internet language, and the post-00s generation, as one of them, has their unique characteristics. “Post-00s” college students seek spiritual support for richness. The “post-00s” college students with strong independence will inevitably feel a sense of loneliness. Coupled with the special growth background of some “post-00s” college students’ single-parent families, left-behind families, and “nanny” families, they are more eager for emotional love (Xiang, 2019). Therefore, the word “破防” frequently appears in the online communication process of post-00s generation, and it is very fashionable.

3. Novelty: In the process of language use, people always have a mentality of seeking new and different, and they always try to pursue novel and unfamiliar expressions. This is a potential psychology of people in the process of language use (Yang, 2008). The main body of using the Internet is young people. They are curious, have a strong ability to accept new things, show their individuality, have the courage to break the routine, and are full of innovative consciousness. The network languages show their characteristics. The appearance of the word “破防” is in line with their pursuit of fresh fashion terms, and caters to the public’s mentality of keeping up with the times. The novel word “破防” also appears in many mainstream media websites, for example, “一再破防反映民心所向” (*Liberation Army Daily*, July 14, 2021), “读懂“破防了”背后的国家情怀” (*Anhui Daily*, December 7, 2021).

### Summary

This paper analyzes Internet buzzwords from the perspective of memetics. And the paper explains the popularity and spread of Internet buzzwords based on the four cycles of meme communication, then discusses the process of its replication and spread through the study of the word “破防”, and analyzes its pragmatic values as a strong meme. By analyzing the replication and transmission process of Internet buzzwords, we can understand the replication and transmission process of strong memes and deepen our understanding of memes.

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