

Semantic Changes and Translation of Chinese Buzzwords of COVID-19 Pandemic

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As a unique cultural product of the pandemic era, the COVID-19 pandemic buzzwords fully reflect the characteristics of the time. The paper applies the prototype theory to classify the semantic changes of the pandemic prevention buzzwords into two types: semantic evolution and semantic variation, and briefly discusses the implications of the prototype theory for translating the pandemic prevention propaganda slogans based on understanding the semantic changes to help people further understand the pandemic buzzwords as well as related social realities.

Keywords: prototype theory, buzzwords, the COVID-19 pandemic, semantic change, translation

Introduction

All aspects of human life have been affected in one way or another since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, and many epidemic-related buzzwords have emerged, reflecting the unique social reality of the epidemic era. Prototype theory is a significant theory for analyzing the semantics of words. It also plays an important role in understanding the semantic changes of buzzwords and realizing the specific social phenomenon behind them, as well as guiding the translation of the pandemic buzzwords. In this paper, the author applies the prototype theory to explore the semantic changes in the COVID-19 pandemic buzzwords, discussing the implications of the prototype theory in translating the pandemic buzzwords, aiming to provide a certain reference for the analysis of semantic changes of buzzwords and their translation.

Prototype Theory

In 1973, the psychologist Rosch declared that there were prototypical colors, which were easy to remember and learn, and then she introduced the concept of *prototype*. In 1975, Rosch extended the scope of his study from colors to birds, toys, furniture, and so on, and then proposed the prototype theory. In contrast to the traditional Aristotelian categories, prototype theory considers that the boundaries of a category are ambiguous. The theory insisted that there are the most central member, which Rosch called it *prototype*, as well as peripheral members of a category. Peripheral members shared some attributes with the most prototypical one, but not every attribute.

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The prototypical member is the most typical and representative member of a category, and the closer a member has to the prototype the more features overlapped.

Chinese Buzzwords of the COVID-19 Pandemic from the Perspective of Prototype Theory

Since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, many changes have appeared in society. These changes also have given rise to a variety of buzzwords and all of them revolved around the pandemic. Some of these buzzwords are extensions of the prototypical meanings of words and have evolved semantically, while others have developed semantic variations, with their meanings differing significantly from the prototypical meanings. The author's analysis shows that in the case of semantic evolution, there are two main types of buzzwords: keywords combination buzzwords and old buzzwords with new meanings, while the buzzwords with semantic variation are mostly Chinese idioms with homophones, which can be subdivided into two types: original idioms with new meaning and idioms with partial morpheme homophones.

The COVID-19 Pandemic Buzzwords of Semantic Evolution

Semantic evolution refers to the fact that some words originally existed, but with social development, and other factors, their prototypical meanings have been further extended by people. Such semantic evolutionary buzzwords can be broadly divided into two types: keywords combination buzzwords and the old buzzwords with new meanings.

Keywords combination buzzwords

The need to control the epidemic has sometimes restricted traditional offline work and study, so remote working and studying have become the new trend, making the Chinese character “云” (i.e. Cloud) popular and applied by the media almost every day. It is easy to see that during the pandemic there were various words related to “云”, such as 云旅游 (cloud visiting) 、云选会 (cloud job fair)、云外交 (cloud diplomacy) and so on, presenting a keywords combination form as “*Cloud* + verb/noun”.

In the *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, *cloud* means “an object formed by a collection of water drops or ice crystals suspended in the air” as a noun, and “to talk” as a verb. These are the most widely used and most frequently used meanings of it. In recent years, the prototypical semantic meaning of *cloud* has been extended to “online” with technological advancements, often appearing in software names and technology reports. However, the application of the new meaning is limited in the field of the internet. In order to combat the pandemic, offline activities were strictly restricted while online activities gradually became the major form for people to join. Therefore, the new meaning of “云” was then widely employed by people.

The combination of the *cloud*'s online meaning with other offline-activity expressions, which were easy for people to understand that they are offline activities but in forms of online conducting, had achieved a good effect of easy-expressing and easy understanding, reflecting a different lifestyle during the special period. The term “云监工” (cloud supervision) refers to the actions that netizens watched the progress of the construction of the Huoshenshan Hospital during the epidemic prevention and control period in Wuhan through live streaming; “云毕业” (cloud graduation) is an online graduation method like composite graduation photo by photoshop technique. The word *cloud* can be combined with almost any word that has an offline-activity meaning to derive new online-activity expressions. The scope of the *cloud* is also greatly expanded.

Old buzzwords with new meanings

In addition to keywords combination buzzwords, there are many new meanings of old buzzwords emerged, which referred to special groups and special actions. “逆行者” is one of the “Top 10 Network Buzzwords of 2020”, which means “people who going in the opposite direction of the crowd” with a pejorative connotation. However, the phrase was employed as a positive term to refer to heroes who actively and selflessly combating the pandemic. They are going to the direction which is contrary to the crowd, reflecting the fearlessness in the context of the pandemic. Contrary to its basic meaning of “copying answers directly onto schoolwork through various methods”, “抄作业” refers to “the act of learning from and emulating China’s successful experience and efficient methods in combating the epidemic” in the context of the pandemic. It is widely used by netizens to call on national governments to take correct and efficient measures to curb the spread of the epidemic when they failed to do so, reflecting the pride of the citizens in the efficient implementation of China’s epidemic prevention and control measures.

The COVID-19 Pandemic Buzzwords of Semantic Variation

The semantic variation results in the gaps of buzzwords’ new meaning and prototypical meaning, and their field of meaning is also different from the prototypical field of employment. Most of buzzwords which have semantic variation were Chinese idioms with homophones at epidemic period. The author divides these words into 2 major categories, namely, original idioms with new meaning and idioms with partial morpheme homophones, to further analyze semantic variations of the epidemic buzzwords.

Original idioms with new meaning

In this classification of buzzwords, the characters of the idioms had not been replaced by their homophones. Instead of using idioms’ original meanings, netizens combined characters’ other meanings and gave idioms new meanings related to the COVID-19 pandemic, which were different from the original ones.

The original meaning of the four-character idiom “别来无恙” is “how is everything going since we separated?”, which is often used as greetings. In the context of the epidemic, however, the meaning has changed to “If you don’t come to my place for dinner, you will reduce my risk of being infected by the disease”. It is easy to see that the original meaning of “别” is “separate”, but its meaning changed to “do not” in the new meaning of the buzzword. By changing the meaning of “别” and taking into account the characteristics of the epidemic period, the meaning of “别来无恙” was then changed. The new meaning of the idiom is a unique and creative way to promote anti-epidemic activities and make propaganda more fun.

The prototypical meaning of “不约而同” is “have identical ideas without making an agreement in advance”. The meaning of “约” changed from “make an agreement” to “appointment” during the special period, while the idiom’s meaning was then changed to “people agree on the way of ‘no appointment’ during the outbreaks of the coronavirus”.

Idioms with partial morphemes’ homophones

In the category of idioms with partial morphemes’ homophones, some characters in the idioms were replaced by netizens to make the association between idioms and the epidemic. As the original morpheme was replaced by a new one, the old semantic meaning is also replaced by a new one, presenting a very different meaning compared to the original one. “一心一意” is one of the most commonly used Chinese idioms, which

means “put one’s whole heart into sth.”. While “一心移疫” has the same pronunciation as the former, the two have totally different meanings. By replacing the last two characters of “一心一意” with their homophones “移疫”, the meaning of the idiom changed to “all the people of China are united together to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic”, expressing the determination of Chinese people to conquer the difficulties during the epidemic wholeheartedly.

It is worth noting, however, that this kind of semantic variation of idiom with partial morphemes’ homophones has characteristics of high subjectivity and randomness. For their own needs, netizens can replace any morphemes of the idiom with homophones, and interpret them with any context. For example, some netizens have adapted the idiom “一心移疫” as previously mentioned into “毅心移疫”, which roughly has the same meaning, but the latter has the meaning of “make a concerted effort to overcome the pandemic” while the former didn’t.

It can be concluded that these buzzwords extend or expand from their prototypical meaning by the fuzzy of category boundaries. That’s the reason why it would be easier for people to understand the meaning of buzzwords from their prototypical meaning and why these buzzwords can be widely spread. These buzzwords further facilitate communication as well as enrich people’s linguistic expressions, adding a bit of fun to the epidemic era.

Implications of Prototype Theory for Translating Epidemic Buzzwords

With the help of the prototype theory, it is easy for people to understand the new meaning of buzzwords, and it also provides translators with a new idea for translating buzzwords. When translating an epidemic buzzword, the translator should first identify the prototype meaning of the source language, so as to understand the new meaning of the buzzword in the context of the times; secondly, after identifying the prototype meaning of the source language, the translator should conduct analysis to see whether or not there have similar prototype between the source language and the target language: if there is a corresponding prototype, the translator can adopt a direct translation strategy; if there is no corresponding prototype, the translator can adopt a translation strategy of free translation.

Take the buzzwords of keywords combination with “云” as an example, the character has the same prototypical meaning in both Chinese culture and English culture, and the new meaning of “online” in the character can be expressed in the English word *cloud*, and therefore the strategy of direct translation can be adopted. In a BBC report on China’s national self-quarantine measure, the term *cloud clubbing* was used as a translation for “云泡吧”. Based on the same prototypical meaning of *cloud* in both Chinese and English, the direct translation of “云泡吧” as *cloud clubbing* does not cause ambiguity. The translator can adopt a direct translation strategy when faced with such a situation where the semantics of the bilingual prototypes correspond perfectly, and if necessary, can appropriately transform the word formation to achieve the goal of semantic equivalence.

However, due to the cultural differences between Chinese and English, translators may find it difficult to find the same prototypical meaning in the target language. Translators should first analyze the exact meaning of buzzwords carefully and then adopt a related translation strategy of free translation to achieve the equivalent conversion of form and meaning as far as possible. The term “逆行者” is a special buzzword that appeared during the COVID-19 pandemic in China, which refers to heroes who selflessly devoted themselves to anti-epidemic

actions to protect people in China from virus infection. The collectivism of Chinese people is rarely seen in Western countries since they adhere to the principle of individualism. If a direct translation strategy is adopted, the reader of the target language may not be able to grasp the meaning as well as the spirit behind the buzzword; hence the approach of free translation should be adopted to reveal the core meaning of the buzzword directly, or to find a word that has a corresponding meaning in the target language. According to this translation strategy, the translation of “逆行者” into “heroes in harm’s way” will enable readers of the target language to understand the specific meaning of this buzzword.

Based on the theory of prototype, when translating epidemic buzzwords, the first step is to identify the prototypical meaning of the source language, so as to understand the new meaning of the buzzword, and then determine the corresponding meaning in the target language category according to the source language meaning.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed semantic changes in buzzwords that appeared during the COVID-19 pandemic era and divided them into 2 types: buzzwords of semantic evolution and buzzwords of semantic variation; and the buzzwords of semantic evolution can be subdivided into keywords combination buzzwords and old buzzwords with new meaning while the latter can be subdivided into original idioms with new meaning and idioms with partial morpheme’s homophones. The analysis of semantic changes in epidemic buzzwords based on the prototype theory can provide a new way of conducting the translation of these buzzwords. The translator can determine whether there is a corresponding prototypical meaning between the target language and the source language from the prototypical semantics so that he or she can adopt the two strategies of direct translation or free translation accordingly. It is hoped that the application of the prototype theory will deepen our understanding of the semantics changes of epidemic buzzwords and provide a new way of thinking about buzzword translation. However, the examples of buzzwords cited in the paper are not rich enough, some epidemic buzzwords with non-categorization phenomena are not considered, and the discussion of translation strategies is not specific and in-depth enough.

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