Pragmatic Study of the Internet Buzzword "Huaxizi" From the Perspective of Memetics

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This article based on memetics aims to reveal the communication mechanism and pragmatic function behind the spread of internet buzzword "Huaxizi". The term "Huaxizi" became popular due to an online live sale on September 10th, 2023, and received widespread discussion. This paper analyzes online comments through the method of discourse analysis, and summarizes that the linguistic meme "Huaxizi" is affected by situational context, cognitive context of netizens, and surrounding social context, reproduced and transmitted through the four stages of assimilation, memorization, expression, and transmission, to possess pragmatic functions of questioning, self-mockery, and encouraging. This study helps to discover the development and changes of language itself, to understand the specificity and complexity, as well as universality and difference of language use. Besides, we can improve the online communication environment and guide Internet users to form a positive cognitive psychology, to promote the healthy dissemination of language.

Keywords: Internet buzzword, memetics, pragmatic function

Introduction

In recent years, Internet buzzwords have attracted widespread attention to be used by netizens, to be the focus of discussion among many scholars. They are means of expression often used by Internet users in communication (He, 2014). Some scholars, such as Jin Ling, Huang Guangfang, and Zhu Dongjiang (2023), have provided research perspectives on internet buzzwords through online communication research; some scholars use construction to analyze the semantic structure and use of internet buzzwords, such as He Bohui (2023); some scholars have diversified research methods including critical discourse analysis method, such as Liao Zhongming (2023). However, there are still shortcomings in current research on the dissemination mechanism and pragmatic functions of internet buzzwords.

The term "Huaxizi" originated from a live streaming sale of Li Jiaqi. When faced with a question from a viewer about high price of the eyebrow pencil he introduced on September 10th, 2023, Li Jiaqi said, "Is it expensive? How hard a national brand is! Maybe you can also look for your own reasons. Have your wages risen in these years? Have you worked hard?" Li Jiaqi's illocutionary act was to advise viewers to work hard for the life they want. However, this statement was warmly discussed by netizens to rush to trend ranking immediately. Many hold that the reason why they cannot afford Huaxizi is not that they did not work hard, but that even if they did, their wages would still not rise. The strong contrast between the languages and the facts made the netizens get a huge psychological gap. Some people expressed skepticism and ridicule, and some mocked themselves.

Later, many derivative words, such as "Huaxizibi" were created and spread widely, and "Huaxizi" then became one of the annual Internet buzzwords in 2023. Therefore, this paper takes "Huaxizi" as an example to study Internet buzzwords from the perspective of memetics theory, including: (a) factors affecting the reproduction and dissemination of Internet buzzwords; (b) mechanisms of reproduction and dissemination of Internet buzzwords; and (c) pragmatic functions of Internet buzzwords.

Different Research Paths of Internet Buzzwords

In recent years, relevant research has mostly adopted network communication, construction grammar, and critical discourse analysis research paths to reveal the language model of online buzzwords, the construction of speakers' online identities, and the characteristics of online speech acts.

The study of online communication provides a new perspective for the study of Internet buzzwords. For example, Wu Qian (2021) thought that through the study of the construction of youth identity in Internet buzzwords, it is believed that there are three types of identity patterns in the discourse practice interaction process: "resistance", "negotiation", and "identification". Therefore, through the language warning of Internet buzzwords, the symptoms of poor youth identity can be alleviated. Chen Jie, Lin Zhongxuan, and Luo Wei (2022) hold that Internet buzzwords can achieve people's self-construction, group construction, and social construction.

Construction reveals the semantic characteristics of internet buzzwords under different language structures. For example, Xing Qiuhong and Liao Guangrong (2023) thought that the motivation for the abstract expression of meanings in Internet buzzwords mainly comes from their semantic orientation, contextual and pragmatic suppression. Ma Suyang and Lei Li (2022) hold that by exaggerating and highlighting, the speaker aligns the cognitive mechanism of internet buzzwords with people's perception of the world's "figure background" psychological model and people's social cognitive pragmatic mechanism of language use.

Critical discourse analysis provides effective research methods for the study of internet buzzwords. For example, using critical discourse analysis methods, Cai Qi and Zhao Jiayue (2022) discovered that not only is network language a mirror image of social change and the development of media technology, but also the positive social concepts behind it are implicitly disciplining individuals. Besides, under the help of critical discourse analysis, Zhou Yan (2019) believed that Internet buzzwords are not only a product of the language recreation of netizens, but also their profound cultural expression value and social significance that deserve people's full understanding.

The above researches analyzed the semantic characteristics of internet buzzwords and discussed the significance of buzzwords in the construction of identity in online communication and the impact of buzzwords on speech acts in online communication. However, there is insufficient explanation of the dissemination mechanism and pragmatic function of Internet buzzwords. Therefore, this article intends to analyze the dissemination mechanism and pragmatic function of the internet catchphrase "Huaxizi" from the perspective of memetics.

Language Memes and the Dissemination Mechanism of "Huaxizi"

Formation of Language Memes

Memetic theory holds that language memes have a strong ability to copy and have a considerable speed of dissemination, which is closely related to social pragmatics (He, 2014). Meme is a "cultural transmission unit" that plays a role similar to genes in biological evolution. The study on memes and their variant forms is beneficial for people to understand and grasp the rule of language development, and explore the structure of language ecological civilization.

The triggering context of memes includes situational context, cognitive context, and social context (van Dijk, 2008). That is to say,

> Element that only had memetic potential representational information originally, is psychologically linked to each other by the speaker due to contextual relationships, causing them to replicate themselves into various representations with different forms or variations in content; once the information is disseminated, it becomes a language meme or a language meme variant. (He, 2007, pp. 157-161 & 153)

According to the Figure 1, to successfully replicate memes into dominant memes, they must go through four stages: assimilation, memory, expression, and transmission.
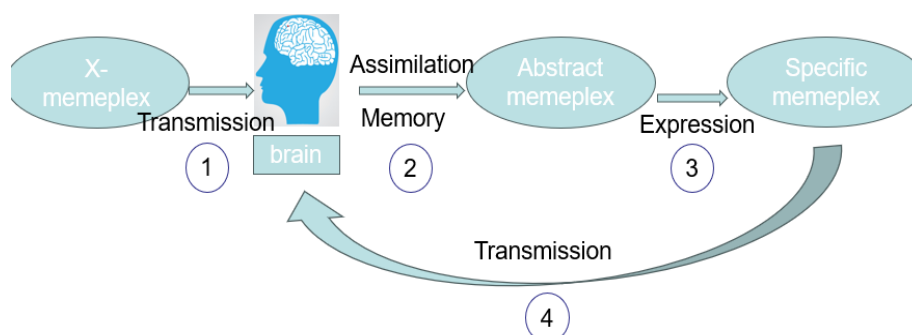

Figure 1. The process of linguistic modality transmission.

At the same time, it also needs to have some characteristics, such as attentiveness, comprehensibility, and acceptability in the assimilation stage, invariance, and exclusion in the memory stage, persuasiveness and dissemination in the expression stage, and public attention in the transmission stage (Heylighen, 2000).

The spread of language memes is related to the combined effects of internal and external factors. Internal factors mainly come from memes themselves; external factors can be divided into subjective and objective factors, with subjective factors including psychological and physiological factors, and objective factors including the acceptability of memes and the physical factors of the objective world (He & Chen, 2014).

The propagation of language memes can be divided into two types:

1. Genotype transmission mechanism: The so-called "genotype transmission" refers to the transmission phenomenon of linguistic meme, such as inherent idioms, familiar sayings, proverbs, quotations, and poems which are reproduced in their original form. It can be "direct transmission of the same information", i.e., "copying and transmitting the model through direct quotation without changing any content, including direct quotations, paraphrases, as well as quotations and aphorisms quoted in daily conversations". Besides, it can also be "vertically progressive transmission of the same information".

2. Expressive communication mechanism: Three language association methods are used to express new semantics through similar language structures: homophonic horizontal grafting, homophonic association grafting as well as isomorphic horizontal grafting.

Internet buzzwords can develop into language memes in online communication and undergo a process of evolution (Liu, 2023). In the basic meaning stage, language has limitations in terms of its applicable objects and scope. Due to its limited replication and widespread dissemination through various channels, it is not yet sufficient to constitute a language meme. In the replication stage, due to the increase in the number and frequency of users, language has shifted from online address forms to daily communication address forms, and the scope of

application has also expanded, gradually becoming a language meme. In the analogy stage, language memes often create new meme variants through the mechanism of analogy. To meet new communication needs, people imitate known language structures and replicate a meme variant with new content through isomorphism and analogy.

In summary, language expressions are processed by language users in specific contexts. And they undergo rapid and widespread replication through assimilation, memory, expression, transmission, and mutation.

Propagation Mechanism of Language Meme "Huaxizi"

"Huaxizi" itself in Li Jiaqi's discourse is the internal cause of memes, which, together with situational, cognitive, and social contexts, triggers the generation of language meme "Huaxizi" (Li & He, 2014). Situational context refers to the specific scene condition of an event, including the time, place, and all other status when the event occurred. Cognitive context is the result of the situational context processed by the speaker, which is their accumulated experience in different situational contexts. Social context refers to real or imagined cognitive schemas, such as greetings, speeches, discussions, etc., which is a kind of cognition, a situation, and also a special category of situational context (He, 2014).

Due to the freedom and inclusiveness of online communication platforms, netizens can freely express their personal demands. The term "Huaxizi" conforms to the psychological demands of netizens and has quickly become a popular term in online communication. For example:

1. Is Huaxizi expensive or not? And is Huaxizi worth it or not?

花西子到底贵不贵？花西子到底值不值？（新浪微博）

In Example 1, netizens repeat the word "Huaxizi" and question the value of Huaxizi on an open and free online communication platform, conveying language information about the value of goods. "Huaxizi" has the structural and semantic characteristics of a popular internet slang: short and concise, easy to understand and remember. The language meme "Huaxizi" spreads in different contexts with a high replication rate, showing strong language meme characteristics.

2. The person that Huaxizi would like to thank at most is Zhiyin.

花西子最想感谢的人，是知音。（新浪微博）

In the news headline of Example 2, the media uses "Huaxizi" instead of "Huaxizi Company", which is vivid and easy to accept, indicating that traditional media has begun to officially use the internet buzzword "Huaxizi". So far, due to the fact that speakers mainly use direct repetition or adaptation of language memes such as "Huaxizi", although they have created various "Huaxizi" based on their own needs and communication context, the mode of transmission of this language meme still belongs to genotype transmission

3. Three pounds of flower sienna can buy a suite.

三斤花西子可以买一套房。（新浪微博）

4. Payday! 54 Flower Saiko…

发工资啦！54个花西子……（新浪微博）

In Example 3, house dealers imitate Li Jiaqi's words based on the existing cognitive schema in their minds, directly applying his tone and replicating the meme of communication language, "Huaxizi". In Example 4, netizens use the language meme "Huaxizi" to express their dissatisfaction with the high pricing of products, low salaries as well as the current economic environment.

5. How much Huaxizibi does it cost to wear like the Boss of Huaxizi?

花西子老板的穿搭需要花费多少花西子币？（新浪微博）

In Example 5, netizens compare the transformation from "Huaxizi" to "Huaxizibi", emphasizing the semantic change from "product" to "currency", indicating that the language meme "Huaxizi" is influenced by the cognitive factors of the host of meme.

Pragmatic Function of "Huaxizi"

The language meme "Huaxizi" is activated by situational, cognitive, and social contexts in specific situations, expressing different communicative intentions of speakers. The study shows that the Internet buzzword "Huaxizi" mainly has three pragmatic functions: questioning and mocking social negative phenomena, self-mocking, and encouraging.

Questioning and Mocking Negative Social Phenomena

In the process of replication and dissemination, buzzwords often carry a strong personal emotion. Netizens often use the buzzword "Huaxizi" to question and mock some negative social phenomena, such as:

6. Did you work hard? Did your salary go up? Could you afford Huaxizi?

努力工作了吗？工资涨了吗？买得起花西子了吗？（新浪微博）

In Example 6, netizens question Li Jiaqi's sale language, which makes "Huaxizi" an objective of struggle to ordinary people under the background of introducing Huaxizi eyebrow pencil. Its illocutionary act is to give questioning about the value of the product.

7. The capitalist's unit: a small goal; the high-income unit: a shuang; the laborer unit: a Huaxizi.

资本家的单位：一小目标；高收入的单位：一爽；打工人的单位：一花西子。（新浪微博）

In Example 7, netizens question capitalists mocking the value of ordinary people.

Self-mockery

Following the popularity trend of online language, netizens have copied "Huaxizi", mocking themselves to reveal their own situation and personalized life values. For example:

8. Good noon! Earned 2 Huaxizi today.

中午好！今天挣了2个花西子。（新浪微博）

In Example 8, for ordinary people, going to work can earn living expenses, but it becomes illogical to use Huaxizi to express salary. People use the contrast between Huaxizi and salary to make self-mockery that their salary cannot keep up with the rise of prices. In addition, the self-mockery "Huaxizi" often produces exaggerated and humorous effects in the dissemination process, such as:

9. For 0.5g of Huaxizi, I'm getting dizzy at work.

为了0.5g花西子，上班上得都快晕了。（新浪微博）

In Example 9, netizens compare 0.5g of "Huaxizi" with 39.5 yuan of salary, deliberately distorting the original meaning of the word "Huaxizi" to highlight the exaggerated exploitation methods of capitalists. This contrast between the communicative meaning and the original meaning of the words makes the discourse more exaggerated and humorous.

Encouraging Traditional Brands

Personal emotion is always replicated together with daily language as potential memes, and spreads to form new meme variants to generate encouraging meme effects in communication. For example:

10. Bee & Flower hair conditioner is only 0.12 Huaxizi!

蜂花护发素只要0.12个花西子哦！（新浪微博）

Example 10 is an advertising slogan used to promote Bee & Flower hair conditioner. In order to attract mass consumers, the slogan utilizes the thrifty state of mind in ordinary people's consumption habits to activate the potential encouragement language information of "Huaxizi", thereby improving the marketing effectiveness of domestic brands.

In short, specific contexts constantly trigger the meme potential of "Huaxizi", and the great number of netizens endow "Huaxizi" with different pragmatic meanings in communication.

Conclusion

This study based on memetics conducts a pragmatic study on the dissemination mechanism of the internet buzzword "Huaxizi". Through discourse analysis, we believe that the pragmatic functions of "Huaxizi" in online communication include questioning and mocking social negative phenomena, self-mocking, and encouraging. The results of this study contribute to studying the dissemination and variation of language in society, as well as better utilizing the online credibility of public figures to spread positive social energy and create a good public opinion atmosphere. The drawback of this article is that it did not conduct in-depth research on Internet buzzwords from the perspectives of cognition and public psychology. The next step will be to deepen the research theory and explain the psychological and cognitive mechanisms hidden behind online discourse.

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