

A Pragmatic Study of Internet Buzzword

LI Sen

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

Internet buzzwords are a significant linguistic phenomenon in the digital age that capture both the distinctive linguistic communication techniques and the ever-changing social culture. Based on H. P. Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) and G. Leech's Politeness Principle (PP), this paper examines the pragmatic function and generation mechanism of Internet buzzwords using the Top 10 buzzwords of 2024 as reported by the editorial departments of *Language and Literature Weekly* and *Excessive Wording*. The study examines how Internet buzzwords are generated and their practical purpose. It is found that Internet buzzwords often violate the maxim of manner of the CP. To achieve the effect of humor, exaggeration, or euphemism, at the same time, they also follow or adjust the PP, in order to maintain the social relationship between both parties. The discussion in this paper not only helps to understand the pragmatic logic of Internet language, but also provides a new observation perspective for sociolinguistic research.

Keywords: Internet buzzwords, cooperative principle, politeness principle, pragmatic analysis

Introduction

In the digital age, network buzzwords have become a common phenomenon in all areas of communication. The employment of buzzwords, such as “showstopper” (绝绝子), “yyds” (永远的神), and “office worker” (社畜) serves not only to mirror the dynamic nature of language, but also to serve as a reflection of contemporary society. These neologisms are often coined in response to current events, cultural trends, or the creative output of Internet users, and rapidly disseminated across online platforms.

Dai (2019) analysed memes from interpersonal and pragmatic ecological angles, finding they have diverse functions and mixed impacts on language. Li and Liu (2022) conducted a positive discourse analysis of the identity constructs behind 2022 Internet buzzwords, revealing the positive significance of the Internet. In Internet buzzword research, scholars have explored from multiple perspectives. Gao (2025) used cognitive and sociolinguistic views to study the metaphor processes and social reflections of buzzword. However, there is a scarcity of research on how the principles of cooperation and politeness affect many Internet buzzwords. This paper analyses the pragmatics of Internet buzzwords with the help of the cooperative principles (CPs) and politeness principle (PP).

Theoretical Foundations

Cooperative Principle

The CP was developed by the philosopher H. P. Grice (1975) to serve as a theoretical framework for understanding how conversational participants achieve effective communication. Grice proposed that speakers and listeners adhere to four basic maxims:

LI Sen, Master student, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

- (a) Maxim of quantity: Provide as much information as required, but not more.
- (b) Maxim of quality: Do not say what you believe to be false or lack evidence for.
- (c) Maxim of relation: Be relevant.
- (d) Maxim of manner: Be clear, brief, and orderly.

Grice (1975) observed that while these maxims are often observed, speakers sometimes flout them to convey implied meanings (conversational implicatures).

Politeness Principle

Building upon Grice's work, Leech (1983) proposed the PP to account for social considerations in communication. The PP consists of six maxims:

- (a) Tact maxim: Minimize cost to others, maximize benefit.
- (b) Generosity maxim: Minimize benefit to self; maximize cost.
- (c) Approbation maxim: Minimize dispraise of others; maximize praise.
- (d) Modesty maxim: Minimize praise of self; maximize dispraise.
- (e) Agreement maxim: Minimize disagreement; maximize agreement.
- (f) Sympathy maxim: Minimize antipathy; maximize sympathy.

Leech (1983) argued that politeness often overrides the CP in social interactions, as maintaining harmonious relationships frequently takes precedence over strict truthfulness or efficiency in communication.

Research Method

This study adopts qualitative analysis method, combining corpus analysis method and pragmatics theory analysis method, to conduct a systematic research on the Top 10 Internet buzzwords released by *Language and Literature Weekly* and *Excessive Wording* in 2024. The specific research methods are as follows.

A small corpus was built with the official "Top 10 buzzwords" released by *Language and Literature Weekly* and *Excessive Wording* in 2024 as the object of study. For the purpose of this study, five buzzwords will be selected at random.

Combined with the actual use of social media Tiktok, we input relevant buzzwords into the search box of Tiktok, screen out the Top 10 videos, and collect relevant cases from the comment section to verify the spread of buzzwords and their typical contexts.

Specific Analysis of the "Top 10 Internet Buzzwords" in 2024

班味 (Office Stench/Job Burnout)

This term summarizes the weary appearance of workers—pale complexion, loose clothing, tired expressions, and lack of energy—stemming from discussions around the trending topic, "Once you start working, your vibe changes". "班味" (office stench/job burnout) playfully highlights the pressures of work while subtly reminding people to strive for work-life balance and healthier lifestyles.

Example 1

A: 本来很有精神的猫现在满眼是班味

B: 光打工不给钱怨气能不大吗?

A: The cat that used to be so energetic is now full of the "job burnout".

B: How can you be so angry when you don't get paid for your work?

This conversation in Example 1 comes from a video of a cat at the Xiyuan Temple in Suzhou, which has become popular for giving high fives to people, and is suspected of being emo (in a depressed, melancholic state) due to the number of tourists giving high fives to the cat. The netizens commented that the cat had a “班味” (office stench/job burnout). The ingenious use of the word “班味” to anthropomorphize the cat as a worker violates the maxim of manner of the CP (unconventional use of words), but establishes a new and reasonable association through humorous personification. It perfectly follows the sympathy maxim of the PP, the comedic image of a cat working as a laborer not only provokes laughter, but also alludes to the exhaustion of contemporary workers, provoking emotional resonance.

那咋了? (So What?)

Originating from a short video themed “Reject Overthinking, Be Your True Self”, this succinct response promotes prioritizing personal feelings over others’ opinions. With widespread use, “那咋了?” (So what?) has evolved into other applications: It can express disagreement (as a rhetorical retort), serve as a filler response to awkward interactions, or dismiss uninteresting topics. Overall, its current popularity primarily reflects a lighthearted, non-overthinking attitude and optimistic outlook.

Example 2

A: 你一点也不优秀!

B: 那咋了?

A: You’re not excellent at all!

B: So what?

In Example 2, B’s response to the negative comment with the buzzword “那咋了” may seem to violate the maxim of relation of the CP (by not responding directly to the topic), but in fact, it cleverly follows the agreement maxim of the PP—defusing the conflict in a non-confrontational way, maintaining poise, and preserving self-esteem at the same time. This response establishes a psychological alliance through the use of Internet buzzwords familiar to both parties, transforming a potentially confrontational conversation into lighthearted banter, and typifies the use of Internet buzzwords by contemporary young people as a form of social communication wisdom: using language games to dissolve negativity, and group consensus to buffer personal attacks.

水灵灵 (Vibrant/Sparkling)

This meme originated from LE SSERAFIM member Hong Eun-chae, who described herself in a group photo as “我就这么水灵灵地在中间，周围都是可怕的姐姐” (just sitting dewy fresh in the middle, surrounded by scary unnies). The Korean term “뽐망뽐망” means “vibrant/sparkling” but Chinese translators rendered it as “水灵灵”. After fans adopted it playfully, the phrase spread widely. Later, its usage expanded to describe unexpectedly impressive actions.

Example 3

A: 我们什么时候能拍出这种水灵灵的照片?

B: 肯定能拍出来的。

A: When will we be able to take this kind of gorgeous picture?

B: I’m sure we will.

Although the innovative use of “水灵灵” mentioned by A in Example 3 violates the maxim of manner of Grace’s CP, expanding the original word describing a person’s appearance to describe the effect of a photo, it

ensures the possibility of comprehension through the specific context, which is a typical example of the out-of-the-box creativity of online language. At the same time, B's response perfectly complies with the "approbation maxim" of the Leach's principle of politeness—B's response not only gives positive encouragement with "肯定能", but also establishes a relaxed and tacit communication atmosphere through the common use of this buzzword.

古希腊掌管XX的神 (The Greek God of XX)

In a gaming discussion, a netizen used an image of the Egyptian deity "Medjed" (a subordinate of Osiris) as a meme, captioning it "The Ancient Egyptian God of XX". Due to Greek mythology's broader recognition and richer pantheon, "Ancient Egyptian" morphed into "Ancient Greek" during dissemination. The phrase now humorously praises someone's exceptional skill in a niche area, though it often carries playful or sarcastic undertones.

Example 4

A: 她是古希腊掌管美貌的神!

B: 直接拿捏.

A: She was the ancient Greek god of beauty!

B: She really nailed it.

This conversation in Example 4 typifies the unique complimentary style of contemporary young people through the combination of two Internet buzzwords, "the ancient Greek god of beauty" and "she really nailed it". Although the extreme exaggeration of the "god praise" clearly violates the maxim of quality of the CP, this kind of out-of-the-box expression precisely follows the approbation maxim of the PP. Not only does it achieve the highest degree of beauty recognition through the mythological analogy, but also transforms the praise into a light-hearted and humorous interactive game by using the dialectal slang like "拿捏" (nail it).

City不City (City or Not City)

After China's 144-hour visa-free transit policy, foreign tourists flooded in, and "City不City" emerged from U.S. vlogger "保保熊" clip where he asks, "上海city不city啊?" His sister replies, "好city啊!" The quirky, repetitive cadence went viral, with "city" adjectivized to mean "modern", "trendy", or "exciting".

Example 5

A: 上海city不city啊?

B: 好city啊!

A: Is Shanghai fashionable?

B: Yes, it is!

In Example 5, A violates the maxim of manner by unconventionally using "city" as an adjective, defying standard grammar rules. However, it effectively adheres to the Agreement Principle. Speaker B's mimicry of Speaker A's creative phrasing "好city啊!" establishes instant rapport through linguistic synchronization. The playful adjective conversion transforms a noun into a shared evaluative marker, allowing both parties to co-construct meaning while signaling in-group membership through innovative language use that celebrates urban modernity.

Socio-cultural Motivations

Youth Identity and Linguistic Innovation

Online linguistic expressions reflect the diverse and dynamic language practices of youth, serving as markers of generational identity. By adopting nontraditional language patterns, young people intentionally deviate from

dominant norms to establish exclusive communication codes, reinforcing in-group cohesion and cultural boundaries (Guan, 2023).

Subversion as Coping Mechanism

Contemporary Internet slang functions as a psychosocial response to systemic pressures, transforming structural anxieties into shared comedic relief. The flattened hierarchy of digital networks disrupts mainstream cultural monopolies, enabling marginalized voices to thrive—Where platform algorithms further incentivize linguistic subversion, accelerating its evolution (Zhang, 2024).

Anti-normative Democratization

This phenomenon embodies an anti-prescriptivist playfulness that challenges institutionalized language hierarchies. By valuing organic, grassroots expressions over formal standards, it represents a democratizing impulse in digital discourse, resisting rigid knowledge systems while fostering collective cultural ownership.

Conclusion

This study investigates the generative mechanisms and pragmatic functions of the most prominent Internet buzzwords of 2024, employing Grice's CP and Leech's PP as theoretical frameworks. The analysis indicates that these buzzwords frequently violate the maxims of manner under the CP to achieve humorous, exaggerated, or euphemistic effects, while strategically adhering to the approbation and agreement maxims of the PP to foster social harmony and group identity. The findings underscore the dualistic nature of internet slang, which functions as a stress-relieving agent in late capitalist societies and a marker of generational identity, thereby reinforcing in-group bonds through the medium of playful language. This study underscores the flexibility of linguistic evolution in the digital age, offering insights into the dynamic interplay between language, society, and technology. Subsequent research endeavors may extend the scope of the existing corpus to investigate cross-cultural variations in the utilization of internet slang.

References

- Dai, C. (2019). A Pragmatic study of Network-buzzword memes (Doctoral dissertation, Jinan University).
- Gao, B. (2025). Analysis of internet buzzwords from a linguistic perspective. *JinGu Creative Literature*, 6(16), 118-120.
- Grice, H. P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole and J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics 3: Speech acts* (pp. 41-58). New York: Academic Press.
- Guan, C. Y. (2023). Youth mentality and subcultural evolution in internet buzzwords. *Youth Journalist*, 83(8), 107-109.
- Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of pragmatics*. London: Longman.
- Li, X. Q., & Liu, J. Q. (2022). Research on the identity construction of Internet buzzwords from the perspective of positive discourse analysis. *Culture Journal*, 17(2), 28-31.
- Zhang, Q. H. (2024). Research on Douyin internet buzzwords from the perspective of youth subculture (Doctoral dissertation, Shanghai International Studies University).