

On The Semantic Change Of The Internet Buzzword "X-mén" From The Metaphorical Perspective

Xinrui Li *

Department of Foreign Language, Nanjing University of Posts and Telecommunications, Nanjing,
210000, China

* Corresponding Author Email: 1728953624@qq.com

Abstract. The suffix "mén" is used to refer to schools or sects in the traditional context, and recently "X-mén" has become a buzzword on the Internet which refers to groups who share common affection. To figure out the reasons for semantic change, this paper adopts a corpus-based method to analyze the linguistic characteristics and high-frequent collocation words of "X-mén". The analysis shows that the old and new meanings of "X-mén" have a lot of similarities in terms of the collocation of words. Using co-occurrences and metaphor theory, this paper explains the mechanism of semantic change about how new meanings are generated from the old ones.

Keywords: buzzword, metaphor, co-occurrence, semantic change.

1. Introduction

Since 2023, there have been various kinds of "X-mén" emerging on the Internet. They refer to the group that likes or adore certain people or things, such as "mài-mén" (MC-group) referring to those who like eating McDonald's and "shùì-mén" (sleeping-group) referring to those who like sleeping. The buzzword "X-mén" swept the Internet and was named one of the top ten Internet popular words by the Editorial Department of *Shanghai Language and Character Weekly*. However, it was not the first time it became prevalent across the country. Back to the 1970s, "X-mén", has become popular due to the "Watergate scandal", meaning a scandal or an event. Obviously, the recent buzzword "X-mén" doesn't mean scandals but is used to express new meanings of fandom. And fandom means a group of fans who share a common obsession with someone or something. Thus, we mark fandom as the new meaning of the recent buzzword to differ from the old ones. So, what are the characteristics of the new meaning of the buzzword "X-mén"? And how is the new meaning generated from the old ones? Previous scholars have written extensively on the characteristics and causes of network language. Qin Xiubai [1] and Shi Chunhong [2] believe that network language is a new type of social dialect that emerges on the basis of the Internet platform and media and has unique stylistic features different from other languages produced by media. Qi Wei [3], Wang Shiyong [4], and Chen Jianhua [5] believe that the popularity of buzzword on the Internet is originated from their tight connection with social events and phenomena, being able to reflect the changes of social life and cognitive thought. Moreover, previous papers on "X-mén" are mainly about the old meaning of scandal which are published from 2013 to 2006, and the research on the new meaning of fandom is emerged after 2024 mainly. In the study of the "X-mén" referring to the scandal, Liu Yajiang[6], Liu Fei, Zhang Hongqian[7], and Zhang Yasan[8] explore the derivation path and rhetorical motives of the "X-mén" through metaphorical and metonymical theory to re-conceptualize; Song Pingrun[9], Chen Shuangyu[10], Liu Zongbao[11], and Li Ying[12] suggest the grammaticalization process of "X-mén" as a quasi-affix; You Yuxiang[13] analyzes the semantic features and cognitive formation of "X-mén" from the perspective of Construction Grammar; Wu Dan[14] and Lin Bin[15] use the meme theory to analyze the reasons for the popularity of "X-mén"; Zhang Qiang[16] define and distinguish the two different types of "X-mén" and study its grammatical phenomenon. Among the studies on the "X-mén" of new fandom meaning, Zhang Sixtian[17] and Zhang Jiaxuan[18] are the most representative. Both authors focus on the grammatical features, syntactic functions, and common collocations of "X-mén", and they also explore its motives from the perspectives of conceptual metaphor theory, psychology, linguistic economy, and meme theory.

However, in these studies, only a few focus on the new meaning. For example, what are the grammatical characteristics of X in "X-mén"? How to distinguish the old meaning from the new fandom meaning through collocations? How is the new meaning generated through metaphorical and metonymical mechanisms? There are many worthy research methods and ideas that can be learned from the previous literature, such as studying and analyzing based on corpus-driven methods, using collocations to distinguish the two different semantic meanings, and explaining and discussing the change of meaning by using metaphor theory. Many scholars have adopted corpus-driven research methods. For example, Huang Churen et al. [19] use the Chinese Gigaword Corpus and CNKI to group co-occurring words for target words; Liu Meichun et al. [20] classify and discuss the grammatical, lexical, and semantic features of verbs based on real corpus data; Xu Jiajin [21] explores the word meanings of the translated texts by utilizing the lexical semantic resources of the MRC database. The corpus-based method is based on the theory of Firth [22] and his contextualism, which holds that the "meaning" determined by "context" is the focus of linguistic research, and the relationship between collocations and meaning is interdependent and inseparable. Besides, Lakoff and Turner believe that metaphor is not only a linguistic expression but also a mapping from one conceptual domain to another [23]. Many scholars have analyzed the target domain and source domain using the theory of conceptual metaphor, such as Qi Zhenhai and Qin Xiugui [24], who used Chinese and English corpus to analyze and study the semantic expansion and categorization of the "heart"; An Changguang [25] studied the metaphor of "hope" based on the COCA corpus, examining the primary constituents of its source domain.

It can be seen that analyzing words based on corpora, discussing and analyzing collocation components, and using metaphor theory to explain the mechanism of semantic change is a reliable and effective research approach. This paper will describe the linguistic phenomena of "X-mén" on the basis of previous studies and summarize the causal laws of the variation and development of "X-mén" to have a more comprehensive understanding of the meaning of the buzzword "X-mén".

2. The Constituent Elements of "X-mén"

2.1. Basic Characteristics

First of all, this paper analyzes and describes the basic characteristics of "X-mén" based on the self-built corpus. This paper collected a relevant corpus of "X-mén" from the new media platforms *Sina Weibo* and *The Red Book* using the Houyi collector (Houyicaiji.com). After selecting manually, there were a total of 1287 effective sentences, which were used to construct the "X-mén" corpus. Among them, there were 224 types of words, with a type-token ratio of approximately 5.7:1.

"X-mén" is a derivation word composed of the root "X" and the suffix "mén". It has a high productivity. In detail, "X" is composed of linguistic symbols and emoticons. The format includes morphemes, words, and phrases, such as "tuō-mén" (slipper-group), "zhū-liǔ-dàn-mén" (Sussage-Muffin-with-egg-group), and "fǎnshù-mén" (anti-math-group). Especially, there are also very few "X" special emoticons. Moreover, "X" can also be English words, such as "girl-men" referring to the female group by using the corresponding English word "girl".

From the perspective of phonetic composition, the main components of "X" are monosyllabic morphemes, such as those who like potatoes are usually called "dòu-mén" (potato-group) or "tǔ-mén" (potato-group), and less commonly called "túdòu-mén" (potato-group); those who like to wear slippers are called "tuō-mén" (slipper-group), and less commonly called "tuōxié-mén" (slippers-group). However, there are also a few "X" composed of disyllabic or polysyllabic words or phrases, such as "fǎnshù-mén" (anti-math group) referring to the group of people who oppose or dislike learning math, and "suānnǎi-mén" (yogurt-group) referring to the group of people who like yogurt. According to the data, we can find that monosyllabic morpheme take up a bigger part of "X-mén", accounting for 86%.

- (3) a. [luǒ-mén] yǒngcún jīnqīzuò de zuìxǐhuan de měijiǎ
 ‘The nude color group never dies. It is my favorite manicure done recently’ (from Sina Weibo)
 b. xǐhuan bòhé hé mǒchá [lǜ-mén] yǒngcún
 ‘I like mint and matcha. Green-group never dies’ (from Sina Weibo)
 c. dānyán dàn rén [dàn-mén] yǒngcún
 ‘A light make-up, an introverted person, the light-group never dies’ (from Sina Weibo)

In (3a), "luǒ-mén" means a person who likes or suits nude makeup; in (3b), "lǜ-mén" indicates a person who likes green objects; The "dàn-mén" of (3c) indicates a person who prefers or suits light make-up or has introverted character.

2.2.4 X as an onomatopoeic word

The onomatopoeic words are used to denote something or someone, indicating a group that likes the referring things or is accustomed to using these words. It can be represented by the structure of "like+(using)+X". For example, "miē-mén" (baa-group), "hā-mén" (hā-group), "miāo-mén" (meow-group), "wàng-mén" (wang-group).

- (4) a. [miē-mén] [miē-mén]!! [miē-mén] de xìntú zài nǎlǐ!!!!
 ‘Baa-group Baa-group!! Where are the baa-group’s believers!!!!’ (from Sina Weibo)
 b. [miāo-mén] yǒngcún, yuàn xìntú yǎnmíngxīnliàng
 Meow-group never dies, may believers have clear eyes and wise minds (from *The Red Book*)
 c. rúguǒ nǐ yǒu yí gè xǐhuan “hāhāhā” de péng you, nàmo ta huòxǔ jiùshì “[hā-mén]” yìyuán.
 ‘If you have a friend who likes to send "ha ha ha ha", then he or she is probably a "ha-group"’
 (from *The Red Book*)

(4a) "miē-mén" refers to a person who likes lambs; (4b) "miāo-mén" means a person who likes cats; (4c) "hā-mén" refers to a person who likes to send "ha ha ha" in text.

2.3. Semantic Features

Generally, the "X" in "X-mén" always selects the morpheme having a more effective effort to distinguish from others to refer to a certain type of thing or a certain type of group, for example, "gāng-mén" (piano-group) is selected rather than "tán-mén" (playing-group) or "qín-mén" (keyboard-instrument-group). The "X" does not refer to the literal morpheme meaning, but as the abbreviation of the group reduction word meaning, so it is relatively dependent on the context. For example,

- (5) a. māoyǎn niúbi! [māo-mén] yǒngcún
 ‘Cat’s eyes are friggig awesome! Cat-group never dies!’ (from Sina Weibo)
 b. [māo-mén] yǒngcún! zhǐyǒu xiǎomāo huì wútiáojiàn ài nǐ
 ‘Cat-group never dies! Only kittens will love you unconditionally (from Sina Weibo)

In (5a), "māo-mén" refers to a style of manicure called cat’ eyes, and in (5b), "māo-mén" refers to the animals cats ;

- a. shéi gěi shuǐtún qímíng kǎpíbālā de?! xiàosǐ wǒ le, [tún-mén] yǒngcún

‘Who named the capybara kapibala? ! Laugh me to death, the capybara-group never dies’ (from Sina Weibo)

- b. húxià, gǔxīlā zhǎngguǎn qīngchàng de shén, diyíwàncì gǎntàn [tún-mén] yǒngcún

‘Hu Xia, the ancient Greek god in charge of singing without music. This the 10,000th time I marvel that the dolphin-group never dies’ (from Sina Weibo)

In (6a), "tún-mén" refers to the animal capybara; In (6b), the "tún-mén" refers to the singer's dolphin sound.

In short, the paraphrase formats of "X-mén" can be summarized into the following types as is shown in the following Table 1.

frequencies are: "X-mén xìntú"(X-group's believers,483), "X-mén zhùjīngbàn"(X-group's resident office in Beijing,2) "X-mén zhánglǎo" (X-group's presbyter,1). For example:

(11)a.yīnián guò hǎokuài! yīrán shì [mài-mén] zhōngshí xìntǔ

A year has gone by so fast! I am still a devoted MC group's believer. (from *Sina Weibo*)

b.[shuì-mén] chánglǎo qǐng qiú bàodào

Sleeping group's presbyter requests reporting! (from *Sina Weibo*)

The above collocations can be summarized in the following Table 2:

Table 2. Collocations of "X-mén "

syntactic function	frequency	collocations
subject	517	X-mén+ yǒngcún(never die, 491)/jíhé (assemble,6)/wànsuì(long live,5)/ bǎoyòu(bless,2)
object	99	jiànrù/bàirù (join in,61)/(bù)bèipàn(don't betray,5)/ tuì/zhúchú(be out of/be expelled from,4)/ wèi/gěi (for,4)/ wéiyǒu(only,2)/ bǎohù(protect,2) +X-mén
attribute	519	X-mén's+ xìntú(believers,483)/ zhùjīngbàn(resident office in Beijing,2) dàqí(banner,2) /liánmíng(co-brand,2) /dizǐ(students,2) /huìyì(meeting,1) /zhánglǎo(presbyter,1)/ xīnpǐn(new product,1)/ róngguāng(glory,1) /shèngshòu(saint beast,1)

4. The Semantic Change of "X-mén"

4.1. The traditional meaning of "X-mén"

"mén"(gate) was a pictographic character at the beginning, with its original meaning being the entrance device of a palace or room. Afterwards, its meaning was expanded based on this. Within one door was a family that lived in, so it was used metaphorically to refer to "family" or "clan". Afterward, it was extended to the meaning of "masters' home gate". Subsequently, it gradually moved from a specific spatial term to an abstract term to refer to "academic or intellectual school", and was generalized to mean "category" at last [26]. In the seventh edition of the *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, the sixth, seventh, and eighth definitions of "mén"(gate) are as follows [27]:

(6) An old term referring to a feudal family or a branch of a feudal family, now referring to a general family: Madam Wang from Zhang Family| Eldest Son of the Eldest Family | All Family | Double Happiness Arrive at the Family.

(7) Religious or academic/intellectual school of thought: Confucius School | Buddhist School | Indign or Indecent Sect.

(8) Traditionally referring to something related to one's teacher: Disciple | Students Studying in the Same School | Master's Disciple.

From this, we can see that the traditional meaning of "X-mén" includes meanings such as family, school of thought, and teacher. For example, "lǐ-mén" can refer to the family and the teacher whose last name is Li; "rú-mén" refers to the Confucian thought school.

4.2. Collocations of the Traditional Meaning of "X-mén"

With the traditional meaning, 598 "X-mén" collocations were collected from the CCL corpus(http://ccl.pku.edu.cn:8080/ccl_corpus/). The traditional meaning "X-mén" can function as the subject, object, or attribute in sentences. The high-frequency collocations of the collected corpus were classified and statistically analyzed, and the results are presented in the following Table 3:

Table 3. Collocations of "X-mén" with Traditional Meaning

syntactic function	frequency	collocations
subject	43	X-mén+ guǎngdà (is spacious,4)/ dànbó(is indifferent with fame and money,3)/ bùxìng(is unfortunate,2)
object	131	guī/guīyī(being converted to,29)/(yī/jìn/tóu/bài) rù (le) (joining in,23)/ chóngfǎn(returning to,6)/ lìshēn/chūshēn(being born in,6)/ dùn/bì rù(taking refugee in,5)/ zài/lǐ (in,5)/ fǎnbàn/pànchū(betraying,2) /cóng(from,2) +X-mén
attribute	406	X-mén's+ dìzǐ/zǐdì(students,120)/ shèngshì(great event,32)/ gáoséng(eminent monk,7)/ wǔgōng(kungfu,6)/ shèngwù(relic,6)/ fǎqì(instruments,4)/ chuántǒng(tradition,3)/ jīngyì(essential,2) /dàshī(master,2)/ shàndì (great land,2)

4.2.1 "X-mén" as subject

In general, the collocations when it serves as subject are scattered, and the relatively common ones include "X-mén guǎngdà"(X-sect is spacious, 4), "X-mén dànbó" (X-school is indifferent with fame and money,3), "X-mén bùxìng"(X-family is unfortunate,2), expressing the characteristics of a certain sect or school, such as:

(12) a. Xuáncí dào, "Shīxiōng zhǐdiǎn dé shì. Dàn [fó-mén] guǎngdà, héchù bùkě róng shēn?"

'Xuanci said, "Brother, you are right. But the Buddhist-sect is spacious, where can't one find a place to stay?"'

b. rúhé zài jiēshòu le "[rú-mén] dànbó" zhèyī kèguān shìshí de qiántí xià, chóngxīn rènshì.lǐjiě.tǐhuì, bìng jìnyībù fājué...

'How to re-recognize, understand, appreciate, and further explore...in the premise of accepting the objective fact of "the Confucius-school is indifferent with fame and money"'

4.2.2 "X-mén" as object

Common collocations include expressions of joining or leaving a certain sect, such as "(yī/ jìn/ tóu/ bài) rù (le) X-mén"(joining in X-school,23), "chóngfǎn X-mén"(returning to X-school,6), "dùn/bì rù X-mén"(taking refugee in X-sect,5), "guī/guīyī X-mén"(being converted to X-sect,29), and "fǎnbàn/pànchū X-mén"(betraying X-school,2); expressions of someone belonging to or coming from a certain sect, such as lìshēn/chūshēn X-mén(being born in X-school,6) ; expressions of restoring and protecting a certain sect, such as "zhěngsù X-mén" (rectifying X-school,1) and "bǎohù X-mén" (protecting X-school,2); and there are some collocations with spatial prepositions expressing coming from a certain sect, such as "cóng X-mén"(from X-school,2), and "zài X-mén/X-mén lǐ" (in X-school,5). For example:

(13) a.duōme qiánchéng, rú guīyī [fó-mén] de jiàotú;

'How devoted, she seemed to have taken refuge in Buddhist-sect;'

b.jiūmózhì tàndào: 'lǎonà suī zài [fó-mén], zhēngqiánghàoshèng zhī xīn què bǐ chángren yóushèng'

'Dunmo Chi sighed, "Although I am in the Buddhist-sect, my competitive spirit is even stronger than that of ordinary people."'

4.2.3 "X-mén" as Attribute

Common phrases include expressions of belonging to a teacher, school, or family, such as "X-mén dìzǐ/zǐdì"(X-school's students,120), "X-ménY-shì"(Madam-Y from X-family,2); expressions of religious, academic, and intellectual traditions, rules or ideology, such as "X-mén chuántǒng"(X-school's tradition,3), "X-mén jīngyì"(X-school's essential,2); and expressions of important figures, events, objects, or places for a religious or academic school of thought, such as "X-mén dàshī"(X-

school's master,2), "X-mén shàndì"(X-sect's great land,2), "X-mén shèngwù"(X-sect's relic,6), "X-mén fāqì"(X-sect's instruments,4), "X-mén shèngshì"(X-sect's great event,32), "X-mén gāosēng"(X-sect's eminent monk,7), "X-mén wǔgōng"(X-school's kungfu,6). For example,

(14) a.xíngjiǎn shì [lǐ-mén] déyì dìzǐ, zǎozài xuéyuàn yǐ huà fēn kē shí, jiùbèi xuǎn zuò miáozi zhuāngōng shānshuǐ huà, shì gé jǐshí...

‘Xingjian is a proud student of the Li-school, and he was chosen as a promising student to specialize in landscape painting even before the college divided subjects by genre. It has been more than...’

b.[rú-mén] chuántǒng yuānyuánliúcháng, shēnsuífùzá, tā zhúyī jiǎnshì, chílùnjīngzhěn, líng rén xīnzhé

Confucius-school's tradition has a long, deep, and complex origin, and he examines it one by one, holding his views carefully and deeply, which makes people convinced.

4.3. Similarities between the Traditional Meaning and the New Fandom Meaning

In terms of the collocation words of "X-mén" as the subject, the collocations of traditional meaning and the new fandom meaning have less similarity. The traditional "X-mén" collocation is relatively scattered and rich in meaning, and the relatively concentrated collocations express the characteristics of the school or sect. The "X-mén" collocations of the new fandom's meaning is mostly to express love, praise, worship, or prayer for a certain thing, with relatively strong emotional colors. In terms of the collocations of "X-mén" as the object, there are more similar ones between the "X-mén" of them, such as "bàirù X-mén" is the relatively common collocation of the two. In addition, both of them have many collocations with similar meanings. Although the collocations are relatively scattered in the traditional meaning, most of them express similar meanings, such as "guī/guīyī X-mén", "dùn/bì rù X-mén", "chóngfǎn X-mén"; In the new fandom meaning, there are also a large number of collocation words to express joining, such as "jiārù/bàirù X-mén". The traditional meaning has several collocations to express leaving, such as "fǎnbàn/pànchū X-mén", and the new fandom meaning also has the collocation to express leaving, such as "tuìchū X-mén", "zhúchū X-mén", and "bèipàn X-mén". It deserves to be mentioned that both old and new meanings of "X-mén" as the object can be combined with prepositions. The traditional meanings use spatial prepositions such as "zài X-mén/X-mén lǐ", and "cóng X-mén", while the new meanings use prepositions such as "wèi/gěi X-mén" that cause the agent of action. As for the words used as attributives, the old and new meanings of "X-mén" are mostly found in the modifier-head construction or as the premodifier of a certain word, and they also have the same collocations. For example, there are expressions like "X-mén dìzǐ/zǐdì" and "X-mén xìntú" to indicate the students of a certain school or group. And some similar collocations are found to express the objects, people, or places belonging to a certain school or group, such as "X-mén gāosēng", "X-mén shèngwù", "X-mén shàdì" in traditional meaning and "X-mén chánglǎo", "X-mén liánmíng", "X-mén shèngshòu" in new fandom meaning.

To sum up, the collocations of the traditional meaning and the new fandom meaning of "X-mén" is similar, and they can be used in similar syntactic environments and have similar meanings.

4.4. The metaphorical mechanism of the semantic change of "X-mén"

According to metaphor theory, metaphor is not only a rhetorical phenomenon in language, but also a cognitive phenomenon of human beings. As a product of cognition, metaphor can reflect the way of thinking of human beings. It is conceptual and context-dependent [28]. Lakoff describes the nature of metaphor as follows: "The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another." [29] There is a mapping of meanings between two different things, people recognizing and understanding abstract and unfamiliar concepts through concepts which are already existed and cognized. And this mapping includes the interaction of two cognitive domains, that is, the source domain and the target domain. Source domain is concrete and is known already. On the contrary, target domain is abstract and difficult to understand. So, people always understand and express target domain through source domain. There are similar features between things in the two cognitive domains, which is the basis of this mapping relationship no matter is existing or newly

created [30]. Semantic generalization refers to the continuous creation of new ways of using words to bring more and more objects into their scope of predicate while maintaining less and less original semantic features. This phenomenon is relatively common and concentrated in some buzzwords, because it has an open semantic meaning which will create more new reference relationships [31]. And "X-mén" is this kind of buzzwords. The "X-mén" with traditional semantic generalized through the mechanism of metaphor, and finally formed the new meaning of fandom.

People always put two similar things into the same category, using the word for the former known thing to refer to the latter unknown thing, and this similarity is hidden under the language [31]. Therefore, the similarity and identity between the source domain and the target domain are the basis of the metaphorical mechanism, which make the traditional meaning of family, academic or intellectual school generate into new meaning of the fandom. Spatial metaphor is the basis of metaphor and the concept of space originates from human body's perception of the external world. The traditional "X-mén" and the "X-mén" in the meaning of new fandom both refer to groups that belong to or within a certain spatial range. The traditional "X-mén" means that people of the same family live under the same roof because of bound of blood, and students or believers of the same teacher, academic or religious school seek instruction or receive instruction in the same place because of sharing common ideological concepts. "X-mén" is an identification with a common identity and ideological value. The "X-mén" of the new fandom meaning also refers to the group that belongs to a certain space. Although this space is different from the concrete space of reality, it is the abstract Internet, but the same, individuals gather in different network communities because of similar interests and preferences. In this way, "X-mén" is also a kind of identification with common preferences and identities. Because of this similarity, people have extracted the abstract concept of belonging to a certain group in the traditional meaning of "X-mén" and mapped it into other domain, referring to network groups with common preferences. The specific process can be referred to the Table 4 below:

Table 4. The Metaphorical Mapping Process of "X-mén"

source domain	collocations of source domain	similarity	target domain	collocations of target domain
somebody joins in a school or religion	to join in/ take refuge in X-school	somebody becomes the member of a group	somebody joins in the group having common affect to some persons things, or objects	to join in X-group
somebody defies and renounces the ideology and identity of a school or religion	to betray X-school	somebody leaves a group	somebody doesn't like some persons, things or objects anymore	to betray/be out of X-group
a students of a school or religion	X-school's student	people who have common beliefs or affect	people who like someone or something together	X-group's believers
Important figures or events of a religious or school	X-school's great event/ eminent monk	A place, people or objects belonging to a group	The identity or things that belong to a group	X-group's cor-brand/presbyter

5. Conclusion

This paper uses corpus-based research methods to describe and analyze the linguistic phenomenon of the Internet buzzword "X-mén", and uses the co-occurrence theory and metaphor theory to explain its mechanism in semantic change. It is found that the core meaning of the Internet buzzword "X-mén" is a group that likes something together, and it is a way for different Internet communities to express their identity. It is a new meaning generated from the traditional "X-mén" to express family, academic, or religious schools through semantic generalization and metaphorical mapping, having strong generating and spreading ability.

Most of the previous studies on the evolution of meaning using metaphor theory focused on the ancient and modern meanings of words, but this paper expands the application of metaphor theory to the field of Internet buzzwords, exploring the change of network words' meaning. This paper uses the collocations of "X-mén" to analyze the similarity of the old and new meanings, in order to make the conclusion be more objective and precise. All these provide a new perspective for the evolution of buzzwords from the perspective of metaphor theory. Yet, this paper needs to be further improved, for example, the number of corpora collected is limited and the statistics of high-frequency collocation words are incomplete.

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