

Semantic Generalization of the Buzzword "Involution" from the Perspective of Cognitive Metaphor

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Abstract. Originally an academic term in the socio-economic field, "involution" refers to "the development of internal refinement in the face of external constraints", but with the spread of new media, the term has quickly become popular in "academic circles" and is widely used by the general public. In this process, its semantic meaning has also changed. This paper takes a cognitive-metaphorical perspective to sort out the process and metaphorical mechanism of its semantic generalization and further analyzes the causes of its semantic generalization to explore the cultural phenomenon and social psychology behind the Internet buzzword.

Keywords: Involution; Internet Buzzwords; Metaphors; Semantic Evolution.

1. Introduction

Language is a true reflection of social life. As an essential part of language, vocabulary development is more rapid than phonology and grammar. It better reflects the emotional expressions of users and changes in social life. With the advent of the Internet era, highly developed online media has given rise to new concepts and forms of linguistic expressions, namely Internet buzzwords. 2020 has seen the term 'involution' rise from academic circles and appear frequently on domestic online social media, where it has been named one of the top ten Internet buzzwords. The term "involution" has also received much attention from academics, who have used the concept of involution to describe research in some disciplines, including political science, economics, education, and sociology [1]. In linguistics, Guo Haiyang was the first to focus on the value of the term "involution" as an Internet buzzword and analyzed it from the perspectives of syntactic-semantic features and reasons for its popularity [2]. Yang Jieying et al. take the buzzword "involution" as an entry point to examine the metaphorical features of its linguistic presupposition and point out that semantic generalization and the economic principle are the two primary cognitive motives contributing to the metaphorical nature of the linguistic presupposition [3]. Huang Yangyu et al. discuss the socio-cultural motives for the change from "involution" to "lying flat" from the perspective of the word "involution" and its pragmatic function [4]. Ma Ruohong et al. describe and explain the characteristics of the new usage of "involution". They point out that the expansion of the usage domain, the development of rhetorical meaning, and the development of new media are the main reasons for the popularity of the new usage [5]. The above discussion has, to varying degrees, deepened the research on the "involution" of Internet buzzwords and is a reasonable attempt by scholars.

Although the linguistic community has explored the term "involution" from the perspectives of semantic features, semantic evolution, and the motivation for its popularity, less research has been conducted on the process and mechanism of the semantic generalization of "involution". Underneath the metaphorical expression of 'involution', linguistic laws are worth exploring. Examining the evolution of this Internet buzzword from the perspective of cognitive function will help us observe language life more profoundly and guide language use in a more standardized manner. Therefore, this paper attempts to analyze and discuss the semantic generalization process of the 2020 Internet buzzword "involution" and its influence mechanism from the perspective of cognitive metaphor, further analyze the causes of its generalization based on cognitive metaphor theory, and explore the cultural phenomenon and social psychology behind the Internet buzzword.

2. The origin and evolution of the semantics of "involution"

2.1. Semantic origin

The term "involution" first appeared in Kant's Critique of Judgment and was mainly applied in the context of philosophy. In this book, Kant defines "involution" as a concept opposite to "evolution" and considers involution and evolution as two different ways of evolution [6]. Later, the American anthropologist Gordon Weiser used the term 'involution' to describe a cultural pattern that shifts in the direction of complexity within itself but in which the entire socio-cultural pattern remains stagnant [7]. On this basis, the anthropologist Geertz proposed the concept of 'agricultural involution' through a summary of agricultural systems in Java, i.e., the process of increasing the labor force entering agricultural production in the face of the limited land area [8]. This concept has attracted the attention of Chinese scholars. Huang Zongzhi introduced the concept of "involution" in 1985 to describe the intensive agricultural production model and defined "involution" as "growth that actually ceases to develop" [9]. Borrowing from and developing Goertz's definition of involution, Douzanzi applied it to the analysis of state power, suggesting that "involution of state power" was used to describe the phenomenon that the Chinese government of the late Qing Dynasty had a large number of bureaucracies. Still, the state's grassroots administration and social services capacity did not increase [10]. What "agricultural involution" and "regime involution" have in common is the description of a state in which "external development is stagnant while internal development is refined". In 2020, a photo of a Tsinghua University student riding his bicycle and using his computer on his way to and from class hit social media sites. This student was quickly featured on Weibo with the nickname "Tsinghua involution king", and the term "involution" was then used in various areas of social life. The term "involution" was also named one of the top ten Internet buzzwords of the year [11]. At this point, the meaning of "involution" changed from "restricted externally to refine internally" to "irrational competition without development".

2.2. Three stages of semantic generalization of "involution"

Semantic generalization plays a vital role in the evolution of language, and as part of the evolution of language, Internet buzzwords are also heavily influenced by semantic generalization. Semantic generalization is a phenomenon in which words continue to decrease in their original semantic features. At the same time, new semantic-pragmatic spaces are expanded, and more and more objects are included in their denotative range [12]. Under the influence of both objective and internal linguistic factors, "involution" undergoes three stages of semantic generalization under the mechanism of metaphor: semantic metaphor, semantic abstraction, and semantic ambiguity.

2.2.1. The first phase characterized by semantic metaphor

The first stage of semantic generalization of "involution" is manifested in the form of semantic metaphors. Metaphors consist of a source domain and a target domain. People map relatively unfamiliar, less familiar target domains (metaphors) through the familiar, concrete, and experienced source domain (ontology). This process is the essence of metaphor [13]. Before and after the semantic shift, the term 'involution' contains the semantic meaning of 'low return without development'. Before the semantic shift, the semantic meaning was mainly in the socio-economic domain; after the semantic shift, the state of "low return, no development" becomes the source domain, and the target domain is the situation where people's contribution is not proportional to their return when the total amount of social resources is limited. The metaphorical relationship between the academic and practical meanings of "involution", the historical and realistic phenomena, is that the phenomenon of involution in the rural economy is used to understand the phenomenon of involution in other fields.

2.2.2. The second phase characterized by semantic abstraction

Social media intervention has broken the limits of the semantic dissemination of academic terms. Under the influence of metaphorical mechanisms, the term "involution" has become closely associated with contemporary social life phenomena through the exchange and discussion of online

media. People's awareness of the original metaphorical relationship gradually fades, even missing the link to the original meaning and directly recognizing the metaphorical meaning of 'involution'. At this stage, people pay more attention to the two common semantic meanings of 'low reward and no development' than to the original meaning and gradually abstract it to the 'low reward and no development' behavioral characteristic of 'fierce competition'.

2.2.3. The third stage characterized by semantic ambiguity

At the height of buzzword development, it seems to be used everywhere, regardless of the context or object, which inevitably leads to the meaning of the term becoming ambiguous to refer to a broader range of objects or things [14]. For example, the term "involution" is used to describe "irrational competition in which the actor's input is not proportional to its return", but it appears in such terms as "vaccine involution" and "college dormitory involution" to describe objectively attractive competition. The semantics of 'irrational' and 'non-developmental' in "involution" become ambiguous.

2.3. The semantic shift of "involution"

After the term entered the public domain from the academic field, the lexical and grammatical meanings of the term 'involution' have changed, mainly in terms of its referential subject, separation of meanings, sememe, lexical nature, colorful sense, and grammar.

In the first stage, the referential subject of "involution" began to change. In socio-economics, the original meaning of "involution" referred to China's rural economy or small-peasant economy. However, after it developed into a social buzzword, the scope of the term "involution" was further expanded. The object of description changed to words discussing competition in other areas of modern society, such as "university involution" and "workplace involution".

In the second phase, the meaning of 'involution' changes regarding the separation of meanings, sememes, and colorful senses.

According to the separation of meanings, the original meaning of 'involution' is the stagnation of external development into a state of internal refinement. The term was used in the fields of political science and economics. Later, two new meanings emerged, gradually replacing the original meaning as the basic meaning used more frequently in everyday communication.

① Irrational internal competition

Example: *I had to roll when everyone else was rolling.*

② The phenomenon of disproportionate pay and reward

Example: *Many people in the company are rolling the number of hours they work, comparing who comes in first and leaves last, but the actual salary has not increased.*

In terms of meaning, the term 'involution' can be divided into four meanings, namely [involution] = [+ academic term] [+ fierce competition] [+ low reward] [- development]. An analysis of the term "involution" reveals some differences between the original meaning of "involution" and the new meaning of the term:

Involution 1 - [+academic terminology] [-fierce competition] [+low returns] [-development]

Involution 2 - [-academic terminology] [+fierce competition] [+low returns] [-development]

In a colorful sense, "involution" was initially a neutral term to describe an objective phenomenon. For example, *"the empowerment of small farmers through the household contract responsibility system and the 'hidden agricultural revolution' have to some extent contributed to the de-involvement of the smallholder economy"*. In the second phase, the term 'inward-looking' was used in a pejorative sense, as in the phrase *"the high effort, low return," overloaded kids' are also a kind of 'inward-looking' "*.

In the third stage, the referential subject of "involution" has further changed, and the colorful meaning has become more complex, while the grammatical function has also changed.

In terms of the referential subject, words such as "exam involution", "workplace involution", "vaccine involution", and "Zibo barbecue involution" appear on the Internet platform. "It can be seen

that in the third stage, the term "involution" involves more diverse subjects, and the scope of its use has expanded compared to the first stage.

In terms of the colorful sense, the word "involution" has a positive meaning in specific contexts, such as "Zibo barbecue involution" which refers to the barbecue business through various ways to improve the quality and level of diners dining in the attractiveness of a competition. The "underground station involution" refers to the underground transportation hardware and software facilities and services that are getting better and more convenient. At the same time, in specific contexts, "involution" is still a neutral word, such as "*Huawei released a sub-10,000 yuan folding screen phone, folding machine market accelerated involution*".

In short, the shift in the meaning of "involution" reflects its objectivity, generality, and ethnicity. "It reflects the objective change in the reality of the situation, namely the increase in social competition and the prevalence of anxiety. As a linguistic symbol, the meaning of "involution" is a convention that meets the needs of people to express irrational competition. At the same time, "involution" has a strong ability to generalize, using the economy of language to generalize from the phenomenon of "involution" in different fields to the same meaning of "growth without development under irrational competition". At the national level, 'inward-looking' has a Chinese character, recording the phenomenon of 'inward-looking' that is unique to China.

3. Analysis of the semantic generalization mechanism of "involution" in the perspective of metaphor

The term "involution" has been semanticized, and its meaning has changed. It is now more commonly used in the sense of "growth without development in the face of irrational competition". In essence, this change results from cognitive mechanisms, mainly in the areas of the cognitive subject, metaphorical path, and metaphorical type.

3.1. The metaphorical cognitive subject of "involution"

Cognitive linguistics emphasizes the subjectivity of the human being and is based on the principle of 'humanism' [15]. Therefore, both parties involved in social interactions are cognitive subjects. The two parties form a common perception during the interaction, and based on this consensus, metaphors are created. The number of cognitive subjects in the "involution" is large and widely distributed, mainly young people who are active on the Internet. The multifaceted interactive communication environment constructed in cyberspace makes their communication mode often take the form of one-to-many, and the audience of a single message may be millions of Internet users. This communicative environment determines their ability to generate cognitive consensus in their interactions, thus promoting the occurrence of metaphors.

3.2. The metaphorical path of "involution"

The essence of metaphor is to understand and experience an event or experience in terms of another event or experience, a structural mapping from one domain of categories to another, i.e., a mapping from the 'source domain' to the 'target domain' [16]. In everyday life, people often perceive and think about intangible or hard-to-define concepts concerning familiar, tangible, and concrete concepts, thus forming a way of perceiving the interconnectedness of different concepts. The concepts that can be mapped to the target domain are not arbitrary; metaphor is possible when some aspect of metaphor and ontology satisfies 'sameness', i.e., when the subject generalizes the communal features of objects with different appearances [17], and when the cognitive subject can establish a proper connection between the two conceptual domains.

In terms of the metaphorical mechanism, the reason why the 'involution' metaphorical mapping is possible is because of the similarity between its source and target domains. The initial conceptual meaning of the term "involution", applied to the socio-economic domain, refers to "the process of growing labor force entering agricultural production in the face of limited land area", which is

concrete and figurative and is set as the origin domain. The new meaning of 'irrational undeveloped competition' is abstract and imperceptible and is set as the 'target domain'. The mapping mechanism between the two domains is similar and is illustrated in Figure 1.

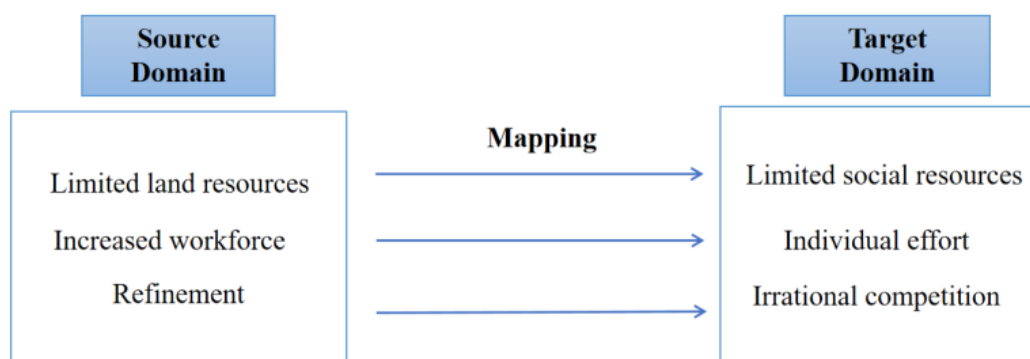


Figure 1. Schematic representation of the source and target domains of the "involution" metaphor.

In the semantic generalization process of 'involution', the structure of the source domain system corresponds to the structure of the target domain system. "limited land resources" corresponds to "limited social resources"; "increased workforce" corresponds to "individual effort". In the case of limited external expansion, the process of continuous labor input to the internal refinement of production is a process in which individuals give much and receive little in the face of irrational competition. Whether the former is neutral or the latter negative, the similarity between psychological feelings and physical reality evokes the state of 'involution' in people's minds, and this is where the 'involution' metaphor implies homogeneity. Metaphor theory provides the basis for the formation and understanding of this process. The realization of the 'involution' metaphor results from mapping the concrete behavioral domain to the abstract mental domain. This metaphorical mapping, internalized in the term 'involution', has led to a gradual outward expansion of the meaning of 'involution' and a deepening of its abstraction, which has led to its use in various fields.

3.3. Metaphorical types of "involution"

In terms of the type of metaphor, "involution" fits the characteristics of a container metaphor. In this metaphor, "social competition" is a large container, and "competition" is seen as a bounded, discrete entity existing in a particular space and time. There is a distinction between inside and outside the container and between inside and outside social competition. When the total amount of resources outside society is stagnant, the actors shift from outside to inside, forming a "container entry" pattern. The whole competition can only take place inside, thus leading to the fruitless development of internal competition. Therefore, we can use the term 'involution' to express 'competition without development' through the container metaphor. For example, the "employment involution" and the so-called "devaluation of diplomas" are the result of the lack of external employment resources and the forced influx of highly educated workers into the workplace, leading to a situation where "qualifications are becoming less and less valuable." And because the essential container metaphor of 'competition as a container' is a common one, it can easily be applied to various fields, industries, and contexts. This is the underlying logic behind the rapid spread of the term "involution" and the explosion of the Internet.

4. An analysis of the causes of the semantic generalization of "involution" from a metaphorical perspective

"Semantic generalization is not a simple imitation; it must involve the creative efforts of language users. Such creative attempts can only be undertaken with greater mental effort if certain social factors are more pressing and powerful." [18] In this section, we will analyze the causes of the semantic generalization of 'involution' in terms of internal and external linguistic factors.

4.1. Intralinguistic factors

4.1.1. Strong linguistic economics

When people use language for communication, they seek to be efficient and concise while ensuring the communicative task is completed. Compared to the phrase "irrational competition", "involution" is catchy, economical, and concise. At the same time, the semantic ambiguity makes the complex connotation of "involution" further blurred and simplified in the process of communication, thus allowing for a more concise summary of the irrational internal competition between industries, following the principle of economical and efficient language use and meeting people's need for streamlined expressions.

4.1.2. Pragmatic function deepening

Discursive function refers to language's important role in a specific linguistic context. Internet buzzwords are an aggregation of group identities using language as a ticket and a collective emotional outpouring using discourse as a weapon. They are an essential part of contemporary opinion ecology [19]. In most contexts, "in-roll" is a pejorative term in terms of sentimentality, so it has a communicative function and a discursive function of description and evaluation, catharsis, and flirtation.

(1) Description and evaluation

Language is a reflection of social life. As society evolves, people need to create and use more words to describe and refer to increasingly complex social phenomena. The original meaning of the word "involution" is based on the metaphorical term "irrational internal competition", which is used to describe an objective social phenomenon in which "the payoff is not proportional to the reward". This phenomenon is present in almost every industry: education involution, housing price involution, mobile phone involution, service involution, etc. Whether it is the claim that "everything can be in involution" or the inner narrative that "I can't be in involution anymore, I just want to lie flat", all of them are context-specific depictions of the act of "involution", triggering empathy and increasing recognition.

(2) Catharsis and flirtation

Language plays an expressive role. The metaphor of "involution" is a downward negative catharsis of emotions in an environment of fierce competition, where the rewards do not meet the expectations of inputs. On the one hand, people use "involution" to express their verbal resistance to the irrational competition of the group in the general social environment; on the other hand, they also flirt with their helplessness of being "forced to be in involution".

4.2. Extralinguistic factors

4.2.1. Increased social competition

Language emerges from a specific social environment, and the emergence of Internet buzzwords inevitably reflects a particular social phenomenon. Modern society is an "accelerated society", and the acceleration of social operations has amplified people's anxiety. Everyone devotes more time and energy to achieving work goals or meeting performance requirements. Even if they do not want to actively join the "involution", they will unconsciously "involution" due to the group coercion effect. This law of survival forces young people to participate in "involution" faster to reach their goals more quickly. In fact, "involution" evokes thoughts of the plight of people competing for limited resources in all walks of life. People are willing to use it to express themselves and find a way out, which further contributes to the popularity of "involution".

4.2.2. Driving force behind the Internet and social media

As a vast platform for exchanging information, new media has become an integral part of people's daily lives due to its interactivity, timeliness, and breadth, and is one of the most critical ways "involution" can spread rapidly in a short period of time. The spread of mobile social media has further lowered the threshold for information dissemination and opinion expression, allowing

everyone to share information and interpret it online [20]. As a result of the media, people feel a common pressure to "involute" and seek an outlet for it online, accelerating the spread of "involution" and making it popular.

5. Conclusions

Language reflects social life, and Internet buzzwords, as part of language, reflect the emergence and expansion of certain social phenomena. This article examines the buzzword "involution", sorting out its semantic evolution from the perspective of semantic generalization and semantic transformation and further analyzing its metaphorical cognitive mechanism to explore the cultural phenomenon and social psychology behind its semantic generalization.

In fact, due to a lack of resources and irrational competition, "involution" is an inevitable bottleneck of development in an era. From 'growth without development' to 'repeated investment under fierce competition', 'involution' completes the metaphorical process under the mapping of the source and target domains. With the realization of this process, the discursive function of 'involution' is further deepened, expressing dissatisfaction and helplessness under the social reality of fierce competition.

It is foreseeable that the term 'involution' will not decrease in popularity as long as the phenomenon of 'involution' exists in society. It is, therefore, useful to explore the semantic generalization of the term 'involution' from the perspective of cognitive metaphor to study the semantic evolution of other buzzwords.

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