

An Analysis of the Top Ten Buzzwords of 2024 from Sociolinguistics Perspective

Yongling Kong

College of Foreign Studies, Guilin University of Technology, Guilin, Guangxi, China

Abstract: Driven by the wave of digitization, the rapid development of the Internet has greatly expanded the space for online entertainment, giving rise to a large number of Internet buzzwords. These buzzwords have gradually infiltrated people's daily communication and quietly changed the habits of language expression. In 2024, the editorial board of YAOWEN JIAOZI, the National Language Resources Monitoring and Research Centre, the editorial board of Shanghai YUYAN WENZI ZHOUBAO, and other authoritative institutions announced the top ten buzzwords of the year respectively. These buzzwords come from a wide range of sources, have complex causes, and are used in different scenarios. But all of them reflect the social opinion and reality of the time from different angles. This paper will analyse the linguistic variation of buzzwords and the reasons behind them from the perspective of sociolinguistics.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics; Buzzword; Variation.

1. Introduction

According to the latest Statistical Report on Internet Development in China[1] released by China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), as of December 2024, the number of Internet users in China reached 1.108 billion, an increase of 16.08 million compared with December last year. And the Internet penetration rate even reached 78.6%. This shows that with the popularization of digital services, more and more people are relying on the Internet for information, entertainment and socializing. Internet slang is widely used because of its fun and humor. A buzzword is a word (or "meaningful string of words") that is created at a certain point in time and spreads rapidly within a certain range for a period of time [2]. As an important form of Internet slang, Internet buzzwords, to a certain extent, have a very keen reflection on the ups and downs of the economic situation, the dynamics of the political situation, the direction of the cultural trend, as well as all kinds of sudden events. Therefore, it is particularly important to carry out in-depth research on Internet buzzwords and explore the hidden social phenomena and meanings behind them.

Sociolinguistics, as a fringe discipline, first appeared in the United States in the 1960s. It is a combination of linguistics and sociology, aiming at exploring the relationship between language and society, and examining the social function of language and the change of language structure in the social environment. American linguist Labov proposed in 1972 that sociolinguistics is a discipline focusing on "the linguistics of the real society". In his view, the core of sociolinguistics research focuses on the two key areas of language variation and language evolution. The ultimate goal of this discipline is to explore and clearly reveal the inextricable links between the phenomenon of language variation or evolution and the social environment, social psychology and other elements, so as to promote the continuous development and improvement of linguistic theories. Chen Yuan, in *Sociolinguistics*, believes that; "language is a social phenomenon", "language is produced along with the formation of human society", "changes in social life give rise to the variation of language, grammar and vocabulary"[3]. Internet slang as a language

variant, its emergence must have its background and reasons. Internet slang is not only a language phenomenon, but also a complex social phenomenon.

Therefore, this paper will analyze in-depth the forms of linguistic variation of the top ten Internet buzzwords of the year 2024 and the formation reasons behind them from the perspective of sociolinguistics.

2. Types of Internet Buzzwords

The top ten buzzwords for 2024 announced by the editorial board of YAOWEN JIAOZI [4]are: digital intelligence; AI for Good; future industries; city or not city; hard control; shiny and fresh; smell of toil; effortless ease; silver hair power; kid boss. The top ten buzzwords for the year 2024 announced by the National Language Resources Monitoring and Research Center[5]are: new quality productive forces; Black Myth: WuKong; AI+; the worth is still on the rise; city or not city; smell of toil; to make a good showing; reserved or stoic people; laid-back or chill; brand manager. The top ten buzzwords of the year 2024 announced by the editorial board of Shanghai's Language and Literature Weekly[6]are: thief vibes; makeshift theatre troupe/the world is a huge makeshift theatre troupe; smell of toil; so what; (just so) shiny and fresh XX; Ancient Greek god in charge of XX; city or not city; for sure; burn up; do abstract things. It can be seen that the top ten buzzwords of the year announced by the three major organizations have overlapping parts, such as smell of toil; city or not city, but more still do not overlap. These buzzwords will be categorized by different types below.

2.1. Old Words with New Meanings

The new meaning of old words refers to the use of existing words to express completely new meanings. Analyzed from the perspective of sociolinguistics, this kind of phenomenon mainly stems from language variation. Language is the mirror of society, and its variation to a certain extent intuitively reflects the dynamic changes of society. Therefore, by studying the process of social change, we can gain a deeper insight into language variation. In today's culturally inclusive social environment, the new generation of young people, with their strong sense of innovation, has become the main force

of Internet usage. They give full play to their creativity by reshaping some of their words on the broad platform of the Internet, giving new connotations to old words and making them spread rapidly and become popular in cyberspace.

For example, the word “abstract” in the buzzword “do abstract things” originally refers to the process of extracting common and essential features from a large number of things and discarding their non-essential features. In network culture, “abstract” is often used to describe some kind of expression, behavior or things that deviate from conventional logic and reality, and the style is absurd, exaggerated and nonsensical. For example, some “abstract videos” may contain a variety of strange editing, unrelated scene splicing, unexpected sound effects, etc., which make people puzzled but impressive. The term “brand manager” was originally used to refer to the owner or professional manager of a trendy brand, but later young entrepreneurs in different industries or fields also called themselves “brand manager”. The emergence of the “brand manager” is a reflection of the rise of the individual, personal display, emphasizing personal talent and ability. The term “makeshift theatre troupe” originally referred to a troupe with a small number of staff, simple props, and mobile performances in the countryside, and is also used as a metaphor to describe a group that is not of a high standard and is put together on an ad hoc basis. The phrase “the world is a huge makeshift theatre troupe” describes a team or organization that lacks normality and order, and is characterized by changing forms, loose management and chaotic procedures. Describing the “world” as a “makeshift theatre troupe” is not meant to be derogatory or ironic, but rather a means of reducing internal conflict and relieving anxiety in a contemporary world under multiple pressures. There are many other words in this category, such as “effortless ease”, which generally refers to a state of mind that is able to cope with pressure without panic or anxiety, and “effortless ease”, which refers to a state of mind that is able to cope with pressure without panic or anxiety. The term “burn up” is used to describe the state of people's faces heating up and turning red because of emotional excitement. “The ancient Greek god in charge of XX” is used to describe someone who has excellent performance, professional ability or authority in a particular area. “Thief vibes” is used to describe a person who is cautious, subjectively unwilling to receive too much attention from others and afraid of misunderstanding. Shiny and fresh refers to a state of youthfulness and vigor.

2.2. Linguistic Simplifier Words

Linguistic simplifier words in Internet buzzwords are mainly rooted in language contact. This kind of contact covers not only language exchanges between different countries, but also the mutual influence of different dialects. In the context of economic globalization, different nationalities are frequently interacting with each other, exchanging and learning from each other, and their languages inevitably come into contact with each other to varying degrees. This makes it impossible for any language to exist in isolation, and it always develops and evolves in interaction with other languages.

For example, “city or not city” first originated from a short video by American blogger BaoBao Bear, in which he and his sister are walking around saying, “Is Shanghai city or not city?” “It's so city!” The phrase, which is neither Chinese nor foreign, has been accepted by net citizens for its visualization, formatting and simplicity. And has attracted a large number

of bloggers to imitate it. The word “city” in the dialogue refers to foreign style and modernization, as well as a feeling of excitement and joy. “City or not city” means “foreign style or not foreign style”, “modernization or not modernization”. After Baobao Bear's video went viral, “city or not city” became a super popular phrase. Since China's implementation of the 144-hour visa-free transit policy, more and more foreign friends come to China for sightseeing and tourism, and China travel videos have become the “traffic code” of many overseas bloggers. The beautiful scenery and food, high-speed rail travel and the warm hospitality of the Chinese people have made foreign friends praise “city!” The word “what” in “so what” is a northern dialect, which is widely used in the northeast and north China. The “so what” comes from a short video “Refuse internal conflict, be true to yourself”, the idea behind this short response is to promote the concept of self-feeling as the main focus, and not to be swayed by the opinions of others. With the wide spread of the phrase “so what” in daily communication and online contexts, it has given rise to a variety of new uses. First, when a speaker wants to express his disapproval of another party's opinion, he will use “so what” as a rhetorical question to refute the other party while further affirming his own behavior and viewpoints; second, when he encounters an awkward situation of having nothing to say in the process of communication. Second, in the process of communication, when encountering an awkward situation with nothing to say, “so what” can be used as a response to help alleviate the dilemma in the interaction; third, if the speaker is not interested in the current conversation. “So what” can also be used as a perfunctory answer to imply that he/she doesn't care about the specific content of the conversation. However, this phrase is more often used to express a state of mind and optimistic attitude towards life that is not internally consumed and is not swayed by other people's opinions. In the dialects of Henan and other places, “for sure” means “guarantee, certainty”. The Internet buzzword “for sure” first originated in the comment section of a game blogger. Due to the economy of language, “for sure XX” can be directly used as “for sure” to express the speaker's extreme confidence or certainty that something will happen or be accomplished.

2.3. Industry Buzzwords

Industry buzzwords refer to the popular vocabulary formed by the wide dissemination of new industry terms or concepts in society. In sociolinguistics, language is viewed as a dynamic system, and the emergence and popularity of industry buzzwords reflect this dynamic change. In addition, the process of industry buzzwords spreading from within the industry to the society at large is in line with the general law of language diffusion in sociolinguistics. They are usually created and used in specialized fields first, and then gradually known and used by a wider group of people through media, social networks, industry exchanges and other channels.

For example, “digital intelligence” is a fusion of digitization and intelligence, i.e., on the basis of digitization, the introduction of intelligent advanced technologies, such as autonomous learning, decision-making optimization, predictive analysis, etc. So as to improve production efficiency, optimize resource allocation, and enhance the level of management and innovation capacity. Digital intelligence is a distinctive feature of new industrialization and an important way to form new quality productivity. “AI for good” means that the development of AI must be

conducive to better enhance the well-being of human beings, not only to promote industrial change and economic development, but also to make society better and achieve sustainable development. “Future industries” refers to forward-looking emerging industries driven by cutting-edge technologies that are strategic, leading and disruptive, including new tracks such as future manufacturing, future information, future materials, future energy, future space and future health. “AI+” refers to the deep integration of AI with other industries to promote the transformation and upgrading of various industries. In recent years, breakthroughs have been made in “AI+Education”, “AI+Medicine” and “AI+Manufacturing”, providing new momentum for high-quality development. The “new quality productive forces” is an advanced productivity mode that is characterized by high technology, high efficiency and high quality, in line with the new development concept, and is free from the traditional economic growth mode and productivity development path, with innovation playing a leading role.

2.4. Creating New Words by Intention

Language has distinctive social attributes, and it is like a mirror that clearly reflects people’s ideological concepts and psychological state in the social context of the new era, as well as the dynamic transformation of these aspects. Through language, we can see the changes in people’s value orientation and emotional demands in different periods, and witness the evolution of ideas driven by the wave of the times.

For example, the term “silver hair” is used to refer to the elderly, and the term “silver hair power” refers to the force generated by the elderly group in various areas of society that cannot be ignored. Nowadays, more and more elderly people are involved in volunteer services, cultural education and other activities, injecting a steady stream of “silver hair power” into social development. The word “silver hair” has also been developing and expanding, such as “silver hair market”, “silver hair economy” etc. The term “kid boss” refers to children who are talented in some way. They are young, but they have extraordinary talents, and adults are so impressed that they add the honorific “boss” after “kid”, and call them “boss”. Nowadays, society is paying more and more attention to the development of children’s personalities and comprehensive quality training, and children are given more opportunities to realize their potential, as well as more support and affirmation. The words “reserved or stoic people” represent two different personality traits: “reserved people” are passionate, social and expressive, while “stoic people” are calm and introverted and enjoy being alone. In reality, everyone can recognize and accept themselves. The emergence of this group of concepts reflects society’s awareness of and concern for the diversity of individual personalities. In a diversified social environment, people begin to use more detailed categorization to describe different personality types. It also reflects the tolerance of social values. Whether it is the warmth and exuberance of the “reserved people” or the subtlety and introversion of the “stoic people”, they are all regarded as normal expressions of character, with no absolute distinction between good and bad.

3. The Causes of Internet buzzwords

3.1. Internal Factors of Language

Language, as the key carrier of human thought, has always been in an active and continuous dynamic development

process. Tracing back to its origins, language is the crystallization of social evolution and the wisdom of human thinking. No language can exist in isolation from the society, therefore, various variations of language are bound to be influenced by social factors to different degrees [7]. The profound changes in the political, economic and cultural dimensions of the society will inevitably lead to changes in people’s ideological concepts. And this ideological innovation will be intuitively reflected in the actual use and expression of language. Within the language system, phonology, vocabulary, grammar and other subsystems are intertwined and interact with each other. These subsystems are always in a dynamic state of development, and the elements within the system interpenetrate and interact with each other, continuously breaking the old equilibrium, and then constructing a new equilibrium based on the new elements. This is a continuous cycle, which provides a constant impetus for the continuous development of the language system. In this long process, language meets the needs of the society through the development of its various forms of variation, and constant variation is an inherent characteristic of language structure itself, which plays an important role in the continuous evolution and development of language as well as the balance of the structure, and the variation itself is the internal power of language development [7].

It should be emphasized that the evolution of language is not an overnight or sudden break, but is characterized by a clear hierarchy and a gradual progression. Within a specific spatial and temporal context, language is relatively stable and adheres to its own structure and rules. However, as the scope of use expands and the environment changes, each element of the language accumulates quantitative changes and maintains its vitality through continuous self-innovation in order to adapt to the changes in the external environment. As a tool for communication, the language system must be dynamically adapted to the new environment and needs in order to ensure smooth communication. The phenomenon of affixes in Internet buzzwords is a vivid example. By virtue of association, people expand the content of accidentally formed linguistic combinations through analogical reasoning, and then construct a series of words with relatively fixed structure and partially identical components, such as “for sure XX”, “shiny and fresh XX”. The emergence of this kind of affixes not only greatly enriches the form of language expression, but also highlights the strong self-renewal and adaptability of language in the process of social development.

In addition, the emergence and popularity of Internet buzzwords are also in line with the modality theory of language. Language and modality have a very close relationship. On the one hand, each language unit survives by copying and spreading with the help of modality, and modality is the inherent driving force for language to spread. On the other hand, in the process of copying and spreading, linguistic modality generates more alternative linguistic units and their means of expression through deformation, merging and other mutations, thus promoting the enrichment and development of language. It can be seen that linguistic modality reveals the law of language propagation and language evolution [8]. The buzzword “city or not city” is in line with the theory of linguistic modality. With modal potential, “city or not city” forms a trigger point in a specific context that conforms to the potential modal message. Linguistically, “city or not city” is a linguistic modalization

using the phrase "... or not ...". The syntactic structure of "city or not city" realizes the functional variation of "city" from noun to adjective in usage, and netizens expand the scope of its semantic use in the process of applying and disseminating it [9].

3.2. External Factors of Society

The birth and rapid development of the Internet have become the key driving force for the birth and spread of Internet buzzwords. The wide application of the Internet has fundamentally reshaped people's social life pattern. And made the communication between people break through the limitations of time and space. In the network context, the changes in the mode of interpersonal communication and communication methods have directly triggered the innovation and changes in the expression forms of network terms. The rich and diversified information conveyed by the network world and the rapid changes, coupled with the high degree of freedom in the network language writing environment, have prompted the language expression of Internet users to gradually evolve in the direction of simplicity and humor. This trend not only meets the demand for efficient online communication, but also adds a unique charm to online culture. We are living in an era where the social environment shows strong inclusiveness and openness, which undoubtedly provides fertile soil for the flourishing development of Internet buzzwords. The tolerance of the whole social and cultural environment encourages different cultural forms to collide and exchange with each other and bloom freely. Under such an environment, Internet buzzwords, as an emerging cultural phenomenon, have been able to grow and spread rapidly.

In addition, the recognition and support of Internet buzzwords by traditional media and official websites have also given a strong impetus to their development. Take YAOWEN JIAOZI as an example, this traditional magazine has released the top 10 Internet buzzwords every year since 2008, which has triggered widespread attention from all walks of life. At the same time, institutions and platforms such as the National Language Resources Monitoring and Research Center, the Commercial Press, People's Daily Online, and Weibo also publish the top 10 Internet buzzwords every year, further promoting the dissemination and popularization of Internet buzzwords. The participation of these authoritative media and platforms not only enhances the social influence of Internet buzzwords, but also lays the foundation for their dissemination at a broader social level.

4. Conclusion

Through the analysis above, it is found that the top ten buzzwords on the Internet in 2024 mainly have four types: old

words with new meanings, language simplifier words, industry words and intentionally new words, and both the internal factors of language and the external factors of the society have a great influence on the formation of buzzwords. Buzzword is not only a language phenomenon, but also a social phenomenon. Popular words are often characterized by great influence and fast updating, and most of them will gradually disappear from people's lives as the heat fades. However, it is undeniable that Internet buzzwords play an indispensable role in social and linguistic life. They highly reflect people's social and linguistic life in a vivid and vivid manner. These Internet buzzwords have not only greatly enriched the form of social language expression, added more color and vitality to people's communication, but also become an important window for us to gain insight into the real society and grasp the social changes. Through in-depth analysis of Internet buzzwords, we can more clearly understand the development of society and feel the pulse of the times, so as to better read and understand the changes and development of Chinese society.

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