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# Semantic Construction of Internet Buzzwords from the Perspective of the Prototype Theory

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**Abstract:** In recent years, internet buzzwords have attracted increasing attention from researchers. However, there is currently relatively little research on the semantics of buzzwords. By organizing the development trends of prototype category theory at home and abroad, this article provides a theoretical basis for semantic analysis in the following text. Based on the analysis of some 2022 Chinese internet buzzwords in terms of prototype meaning, new meaning, and semantic construction process, this article believes that the semantics of internet buzzwords are derived from new meanings through metonymy, metaphor or phonetic metaphor, irony metaphor, and other means of prototype meaning, and some prototype constructions will also emerge. Its semantic construction is a process centered around the prototype and constantly expanding its scope.

**Keywords:** Prototype Theory; Internet Buzzwords; Metaphor/Metonymy; Semantic Construction.

## 1. Introduction

Internet buzzwords refer to buzzwords that are created almost simultaneously on the Internet along with the occurrence of real social news events, rapidly become popular on and off the Internet, and are extremely powerful in a short period of time but do not last long (Chen, 2008). They exert a strong influence on the network society and the real society, and have attracted attention from all walks of life. Buzzwords and Internet language are reflecting the aesthetic experience, spirituality and psychological characteristics of people in society, reflecting the material production and spiritual life of society, expressing people's colorful emotions, and bringing into play people's innovative ability of language (Qi, 2002).

## 2. Domestic and Foreign Research on Internet Buzzwords

Foreign research on Internet language and Internet buzzwords started relatively early. In 1997, the World Language Research and Resource Center at the University of Hartford hosted a symposium on "The Internet and Language". The conference invited internationally influential linguists to discuss online languages, the status of English as a lingua franca, and the teaching of languages based on the Internet.

In 2001, British linguist David Crystal, based on the complexity of the development of Internet languages, made a distinction between Internet languages and some similar concepts in his book *Language and the Internet*, summarizing the commonalities and differences between different forms of Internet terms that appear in various Internet contexts. The book also predicts the future development of Internet languages, arguing that the linguistic innovations brought about by Internet technology, i.e., the ever-changing Internet language, have to some extent curbed the extinction of languages (Crystal, 2001).

With the development of the Internet and more people participating in online communication, online language and buzzwords have had a great impact on language life and thus have received more and more attention. In 2002 and 2003, the research results of internet language and buzzwords were frequently published in *Language* and *ELT journal*. And the study of Internet language and Internet buzzwords has attracted a great deal of interest. In 2003, the first International Conference on Internet Language Research was held in Spain. This was a truly international symposium on "the Internet and Language". This marked the beginning of a worldwide interest in the study of Internet languages in linguistics.

The domestic research on Internet language and Internet buzzwords began in the late 1990s. Yu Genyuan's (2001) *Introduction to Internet Language* and Liu Haiyan's (2002) *Internet Language* systematically discussed the classification and characteristics of Internet language and the causes of Internet words. Zhang Ping (2011) took the Internet buzzword "躲猫猫(Peek-a-boo)" as an example and discussed the production and dissemination process of Internet buzzwords of news events. Wang Xie Zhijun and Yang Yuehua (2015) studied online buzzwords from the perspective of cognitive linguistics and proposed the basic principles of cognitive online buzzwords. Yu Pengliang (2018) explored the causes of the formation of Internet buzzwords from the perspective of linguistics, and proposed that the main factors for the production of Internet buzzwords are the principle of linguistic convergence and the principle of labor-saving.

It can be seen that the current academic community is paying increasing attention to online buzzwords, especially in the past decade. Initially, scholars' research on internet buzzwords mainly focused on their concepts, characteristics, and collection and organization. With the development of internet buzzwords, scholars have continuously deepened and expanded their research, and started to study their composition and norms. With the further development of internet buzzwords, scholars have become increasingly interested in their research and have stepped out of the scope of previous studies to study the impact, value, and production mechanism of internet buzzwords.

Although there are many related research results, there are also many problems, for example, there are not many research results about the semantics of Internet buzzwords. There are few papers on the topic of "Semantics of Internet Buzzwords" searching on CNKI. Most of the papers focus on the semantics of a particular Internet buzzword, while a few

papers investigate the semantics of Internet buzzwords as a whole. These studies reveal the relevant features of the semantics of Internet buzzwords, but they lack systematization. Therefore, here comes the question. What are the semantic origins of Internet buzzwords? And what kind of semantic changes have they undergone? Why did such changes occur? They are the research questions to be explored in this paper, so this paper will take the "Top Ten Chinese Internet Buzzwords" of 2022 published by the *Language and Character Weekly* as an example from the perspective of the prototype theory to explore the semantic construction mode of Internet buzzwords.

# 3. The Prototype Theory

Aristotle was the first scholar in the history of Western philosophy to give a systematic account of philosophical categories. In the book *Categories*, Aristotle systematically discusses the theory of categories. Aristotle's metaphysics distinguishes between essential and non-essential properties. He believed that the class of concepts originates from the established categories in the objective world, independent of the subject of categorization, and that the attribution of categories is determined by the essential properties of concepts. The classical theory of categories contains the following basic assumptions: categories are defined by a set of sufficient and necessary features; category features are binary; categories have clear boundaries; all members of a category have equal status (Taylor, 2001).

The famous Russian philosopher of the 1950s, Wigentstein, was the first to discover the flaws in the classical theory of categories. He found that the category of games does not fit into the classical category model. Some games are of purely recreational nature, some are played to win, some are played by luck, some by skill, while others have two or more properties. They do not have a common unifying feature. The boundary of the category is not fixed, and with the appearance of new things, it can be expanded. Moreover, the status of category members is not equal as the classical category says, but there are central members and non-central members. In his *Philosophical Investigation*, Wigentstein argued for the ambiguity of category boundaries, the distinction between centers and edges, and the difference in affiliation, and proposes the famous theory of "Family Resemblance": all members of a category are connected to a set and bound together by a complex and overlapping similar network. The resemblance here is sometimes a general similarity, sometimes a detailed one. (Wigentstein, 1953).

The concept and theory of cognitive categorization in turn involves the concept and theory of prototypes. The study of prototypes began with the category of color. The anthropologists Berlin and Kay (1969) investigated 98 languages and found that there are basic colors in different languages, that is, basic category color classes. And people use these representative colors as positioning reference points, namely, the focal color. People segment and categorize colors according to the focal color.

In the 1970s the American psychologist Rosch extended the study of focal colors to the study of other objects. It was found that prototypes are not only found in the category of colors, but also in other objects; they are universal and play an important role in the formation of categories and in the different stages of children's language acquisition. The prototype is the best and most typical member of the category. Other members have different degrees of typicality. The category has a hierarchical, radial character. The cognition of a category is based on the prototype as a cognitive reference point, and its boundaries are extended outward according to the degree of typicality of the members of the category, forming a larger category whose boundaries are difficult to determine (Rosch, 1973).

Later, Lakoff proposed "idealized cognitive models" (ICMs) and used them to interpret prototypical category models (Lakoff, 1987). According to different structural principles, ICMs are divided into the following four types: propositional model, which indicates the relationship between concepts; image-schematic model, which involves shape, movement, and spatial relationships; metaphorical model, which projects a proposition or imagery pattern from one cognitive domain to the corresponding structure of another cognitive domain; and metonymic model, which builds on the above patterns and makes one component of them relate to another component. Idealized cognitive models greatly enhance the explanatory power of prototype theories. In Lakoff's view, the use of ICMs to analyze conceptual categories reveals an encyclopedic wealth of knowledge in the categories. This analysis reveals many linguistic phenomena that cannot be accounted for by traditional category and semantic theories, demonstrating the important application of prototype theory to the study of the ambiguity and polysemy of semantic categories.

As mentioned above, in order to know the world and learn language, people must first understand the "prototypes". Internet buzzwords also have prototypical meanings, but it is difficult to understand their connotation from the perspective of the buzzwords themselves. Starting from prototypical meaning, it can help us understand the reasons for the emergence of them and the meaning behind them.

# 4. Prototype and Semantic Construction of Internet Buzzwords

## 4.1. Combination of Metaphor and Metonymy on the Basis of the Prototypical Meaning

The term "嘴替 (take the words right out of one's mouth)" refers to a person who can express his or her thoughts instead of the general public. The netizens have opinions and attitudes about certain matters, but they often fail to express their opinions because they are too eloquent or have too many worries. Some people are good at capturing and summarizing the common thoughts of a certain group or class of people, and can express them in a concise manner that resonates with everyone. So netizens use the "嘴替" to express the affirmation of these wonderful words and praise for those who dare to speak. For example: the woman cut in line and did not listen to persuasion behind the customer with a cell phone playback audio as a "嘴替".

The construction of the semantic meaning of the Internet buzzword "嘴替" has actually undergone two kinds of changes. The first is the metonymy of replacing the whole with the part. Metonymy is the substitution of one salient thing for another in the same cognitive domain, for example, the mutual substitution between part and whole, container and its function or content (Zhao, 2001). From the prototypical meaning of "a substitute for the mouth" to "a person who replaces the mouth", "嘴替" has undergone a metonymic transformation from a part to a whole. The second is the mapping from the specific physical domain "mouth" to the

abstract domain “eloquent”, that is, metaphor. Metaphor involves two conceptual domains, the origin domain and the target domain, and metaphor refers to the mapping from the origin domain to the target domain (Lakof & Johnson, 1980). The word “嘴 (mouth)” in the phrase “嘴替”, because of its function of “speaking”, can be extended to mean “a person who speaks well”, which in turn means “a person who can express his or her heart instead of oneself”.

From the part to the whole, from the concrete to the abstract, these are the processes of forming the term “嘴替 (take the words right out of one’s mouth)”. Whether it is metaphor or metonymy, it is based on the prototypical meaning and the continuous expansion of the category in order to construct the existing meaning.

## 4.2. Phonological Metaphor and Irony Metaphor on the Basis of the Prototypical Meaning

The word “栓 Q (thank you)” originated from Liu Tao, a 70-year-old farmer in Yangshuo County, Guilin, Guangxi, who introduced the landscape of Yangshuo, Guilin, in both Chinese and English. And after translating the phrase “Guilin's landscape is the best in the world, and Yangshuo is known as Guilin”, he said “Welcome to Guilin, welcome to Yangshuo. thank you (栓 Q)”. The phrase “栓 Q” is a homophonic derivative of the pronunciation of the English phrase “thank you”, which originally meant “thank you” in English. Because of its funny pronunciation, the word has attracted the attention of the whole network, and has quickly become a popular online word across the network. Later, it was widely used to express one’s feelings of being very speechless and particularly annoying about something. For example: 栓 Q, why is this thing so expensive; I forgot to punch in at work today, I really 栓 Q, etc.

The semantic construction has gone through the following process. First of all, from the prototypical meaning of “thank you” in English to the Chinese homonym “栓 Q” for “be grateful for somebody or something”, this process has gone through phonological metaphor. Because semantic units and phonemic units cannot be separated, phonological metaphor is not a simple conversion between sounds. It is actually a cross-domain mapping between “signified” and “signifier”(Deng, 2012). Then, it extends from the prototypical meaning of “be grateful for somebody or something” to the completely opposite meaning of “nothing to say or speechless”, that is, it is thankfulness on the surface, but it is actually to express your dissatisfaction with ridicule, or irony. Irony involves the projection between two sub-cognitive domains (categories) in the same cognitive domain (category), while metaphor is a structural mapping from one cognitive domain to another, that is, from "source domain" to "target domain", so irony can be regarded as a special case and sub-item of metaphor (Sun & Hu, 2016). Therefore, from “be grateful for somebody or something” to “nothing to say or speechless”, “栓 Q” has gone through the change of irony metaphor.

## 4.3. Metaphor and Metonymy of the Prototypical Meaning of Multiple Words

The full name of “PUA” is “pick-up artist”, which originated from the United States and refers to the pickup experts and pickup artists. Previously, it referred to the behavior of men to continuously improve their emotional intelligence through systematic learning. Later, it generally refers to men and women who are very attractive to the opposite sex. However, in recent years, on the domestic network, because of its deep understanding of women’s thoughts and psychology, “PUA” began to develop abnormally, and was used as emotional deception and psychological manipulation, becoming bad “PUA”. Therefore, it now refers more to the emotional control of one party to the other through mental repression. After that, in a video of online interview, the interviewees mistakenly said “PUA” as “CPU”. The netizens found it interesting and began to intentionally say “PUA” as “CPU” or “KTV, PPT, ICU”. In addition to their own meanings, “CPU, KTV” and other words are often used as derivatives of “PUA” on the Internet, which means that mental control leads to self-denial and loss of confidence. For example, wake up and smell coffee, your boyfriend is actually trying to PUA you!

In fact, it has undergone two changes: firstly, the prototypical meaning of “PUA” “pick-up expert” was extended to the existing meaning of “emotional control through mental suppression”, in which the source meaning of the word was metaphorically derived; secondly, the meanings of “CPU” and “KTV” were metaphorically transformed, initially because “PUA” and “CPU” are both three-letter abbreviations with similar composition and the latter is more familiar to Chinese people, so they were associated with a variation of “PUA” to mean the same word, and finally gradually evolved into other words composed of three initials and familiar.

This increases the spread of “PUA” concept on the one hand, and reduces the difficulty of using “PUA” on the other hand, making it easier for people to describe and raise such unreasonable phenomena in their lives. In addition, there are also “campus PUA”, “family PUA”, “workplace PUA” and other "×× PUA" structures used in more common and not easily noticeable scenarios.

## 4.4. The Prototypical Construction After Metaphor

As a popular sentence that can be directly nested, “刺客 (assassin)” originates from the term “雪糕刺客 (ice cream assassin)”, which refers to those who lie in the refrigerator with ordinary ice cream in plain packaging, but often give consumers a “fatal blow” at a far higher price than expected at the time of checkout. For example, OMG, I just bought the “ice cream assassin” on impulse.

People use “刺客 (assassin)” to describe the expensive ice-cream, which is related to cognitive metaphor. The prototypical meaning of “刺客 (assassin)” refers to “a person who uses weapons to assassinate”, which is characterized by seemingly unattractive and hidden, lurking aside and waiting for the opportunity to assassinate someone. These features are similar to high-priced ice-cream. Although they will not cause life danger, they will hurt consumers’ wallets and mental feelings.

Subsequently, the phrase “×× 刺客 (×× assassin)” was imitated on the Internet, and a large number of phrases with “assassin” as the constant and “××” as the variant were derived, such as “fruit assassin”, “plum assassin”, “fudge assassin”, etc. In this sentence form, the word “刺客 (assassin)” is the prototype of the sentence form, and the nouns are mostly connected in front of it, and the majority of

netizens create and simulate it based on the prototype “刺客 (assassin)” by combining various hot phenomena in life. The “×× 刺 客 (×× assassin)” highlights the stimulation and discomfort of things, and also reflects the change in the mindset of the public: to say “no” to the “刺客 (assassin)” and to resist.

# 5. Conclusion

This paper takes the “Top Ten Chinese Internet Buzzwords” of 2022 published by the *Language and Character Weekly* as the research text, and selects typical Internet phrases as the research object to analyze them, which can be seen that these words are given new meanings, some of which are even far from their original meanings. However, a comprehensive comparison shows that all the Internet buzzwords are basically extended around the prototypical meanings of the words themselves, and their production is a process of expanding the category centered on the prototypes, which illustrates the view of the ambiguity of the category boundary. On the basis of the prototypical meaning, the meaning of Internet buzzwords is derived by special means such as metonymy, metaphor, phonological metaphor, or irony metaphor, and there will also be some prototypical constructions. Their semantic constructions can be cross-linguistic or combined with multiple means. Some words are so similar to the prototypical meaning today that they are easy to understand, while others are so far removed from the prototypical meaning of the word that one needs to understand the meaning behind it in order to understand the meaning of the word.

There are still shortcomings in this paper, for example, only the semantic construction process of a few Internet buzzwords has been analyzed and briefly summarized from individual to general, but the semantic situation of Internet buzzwords as a whole has not been explored in depth, so in order to have a more comprehensive understanding of the semantic construction of Internet buzzwords, it is necessary to expand the number of research subjects and make an overall generalization based on factual data.

In short, the category of Internet words will continue to expand in accordance with social development and change. From the results of analysis, the emergence of new words is often based on the derivation and expansion of prototype theory, and follows the rules of prototype theory. However, the study of word meaning cannot be separated from cognition, social politics, economy, culture and the interaction between cognitive subjects. And Internet buzzwords reflects social changes and is the result of human-computer interaction in the current network era. Therefore, new Internet words are constantly produced with the changes of society. And language, as a mirror reflecting society and human life, work and learning status, can basically reflect the development and changes of our world.

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