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Analysis of the Meaning Construction of Internet Buzzwords from the Perspective of Conceptual Integration Theory

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Abstract: With the rapid development of the Internet, Internet buzzwords have emerged as distinct language variants that play a significant role in social media and daily conversations. These buzzwords reflect the current trends and can often represent the key social topics and issues that capture widespread attention at a given time. This paper conducts a quantitative analysis using a corpus collected from the annual buzzword list of the authoritative White Paper "Language and Writing Weekly" from 2010 to 2022. By applying conceptual integration theory — specifically the four network models: Simplex, Mirror, Single-Scope, and Double-Scope — this study explores how Internet buzzwords are generated, how their meanings are constructed, and interprets the dynamic cognitive processes involved. This research offers fresh insights into the cognitive mechanisms underlying the formation of Internet buzzwords.

Keywords: conceptual integration theory; Internet buzzwords; meaning construction; cognitive mechanism

1. Introduction

Internet buzzwords refer to popular terms on the Internet that are created or used in online communication. They can include combinations of letters, punctuation, symbols, pinyin, icons, and text, often carrying specific meanings in particular online contexts. As a distinctive language variant in the digital age, Internet buzzwords are characterized by their wide dissemination and rapid evolution. They reflect particular social and cultural phenomena of a given time and can reveal public attitudes toward various aspects of life.

Conceptual integration is a fundamental cognitive operation and a core feature of human thinking and imagination. Since it builds upon established conceptual structures, it has been used to explain certain linguistic phenomena.

Many studies have employed conceptual integration theory to analyze the dynamic semantic construction of various types of Internet buzzwords. Although the application of this theory in the Chinese context began relatively late, after 2010, scholars began to explore its application in understanding the dynamic meaning construction of Internet buzzwords. However, much of this research has focused on the explanation and construction of individual words. This study uses a corpus collected from the annual buzzword list published in the journal *Language and Writing Weekly* for quantitative analysis. By applying conceptual integration theory (Conceptual Integration/Blending Theory), this paper explains the generation and meaning of Internet buzzwords, explores people's dynamic cognitive processes, and offers fresh perspectives on the cognitive mechanisms underlying the formation of Internet buzzwords [1].

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2. Literature Review

Conceptual integration theory provides a cognitive framework based on "mental spaces", which helps explain how buzzword meanings emerge and relate to other concepts, revealing the underlying integration processes. The theory suggests that people possess rich imagination and innovative thinking, enabling them to acquire concepts and understand meanings. It also posits that the meaning construction of words is achieved by integrating and mapping different concepts. Conceptual integration theory offers an effective way to explain the polysemy, symbolism, and metaphor of buzzwords [2].

At its core, conceptual integration theory is a cognitive theory that explains how humans create new meanings and understandings by integrating different concepts through various mental spaces. This theory has proven to be an effective tool for explaining how the meaning of buzzwords is constructed and how people's dynamic cognitive processes operate [3]. It has greatly advanced cognitive linguistics research by revealing the dynamics of meaning construction, the infinity of mental spaces, the connectivity of conceptual space mappings, and the activation of meaning generation.

International and Chinese scholars have explored various aspects of conceptual integration theory. Researchers have discussed how mental spaces interact in meaning construction and the role of conceptual integration in generating new meanings. Some studies have focused on how buzzwords function as cognitive shortcuts and examined the operational mechanisms of conceptual integration, particularly in the context of advertising and everyday language. Recent research has expanded on the interaction between buzzwords and visual elements in advertising, highlighting the multimodal aspects of conceptual integration and meaning construction. Other studies have clarified how new meanings and interpretations arise through the integration of mental spaces, offering valuable insights into how new conceptual structures and meanings emerge, which can indirectly inform the understanding of buzzword formation [4].

Research on the meaning construction of Internet buzzwords is still limited, and a systematic analytical method that summarizes the general rules of buzzword generation has yet to be established. Existing research lacks the explanatory power necessary for a comprehensive understanding of how buzzwords are constructed in terms of meaning.

Conceptual integration theory has been regarded as a cognitive framework for meaning construction, characterized by dynamics, adaptability, and initiative. Some studies have applied conceptual integration to explain the innovation of word meanings, focusing on the integration of concepts and the re-creation of spatial information under established frameworks [5]. Other research has explored the impact of cultural factors on meaning construction within the conceptual integration theory framework. Although some scholars have systematically elaborated on the dynamic process of lexical meaning construction using conceptual integration theory, the application of this framework to Internet buzzwords has been limited [6].

Much of the existing literature on Internet buzzwords has focused on individual buzzwords or small sets of buzzwords, with most studies addressing the cultural connotations and deeper meanings of these words. However, comprehensive analyses of how Internet buzzwords construct meaning through conceptual integration theory remain scarce. Some recent attempts at dynamic meaning construction have been made, but these studies generally lack a sufficient corpus analysis or classification of the data.

Despite the growing body of research on Internet buzzwords as a new phenomenon in communication, there is still a lack of systematic inductive methods. The current research predominantly focuses on individual buzzwords, rarely linking their cognitive characteristics to broader event contexts [7].

In conclusion, while there is some research on the dynamic meaning construction of Internet buzzwords, particularly through the lens of conceptual integration theory, there is a need for more systematic studies that classify corpora and provide a more thorough

explanation of the meaning construction process. Further research should explore the integration of theory with empirical data to advance understanding in this area [8].

3. Corpus Selection and Theoretical Framework

3.1. Corpus Selection

The rapid growth of the Internet has led to the continuous emergence of Internet buzzwords. Since 2012, netizens have annually selected the top ten buzzwords, which have been compiled in the authoritative White Paper Language and Writing Weekly. This trend began around 2010, when a surge in Internet users led to the creation of expressions reflecting social realities and public sentiment. To ensure a comprehensive and accurate dataset, this study includes the top ten Internet buzzwords from 2010 to 2022 as the research corpus, providing a wide range of expressions that reflect linguistic creativity, cultural attitudes, and social trends.

3.2. Classification of Internet Buzzwords

Based on the origins of buzzwords, the following classification can be made:

- 1) Originating from Common Topics
- 2) Emotional Relaxation (used as jokes or gimmicks)
- 3) Precise Expression (to better understand new events or changes)
- 4) Leaving a Deep and Vivid Impression
- 5) Imitation of Celebrity Speech
- 6) Slogans or Advertising Words

Some buzzwords, such as "Scared to Death Baby" and "You City People Really Know How to Play", express current moods and emotions, while others, like "Mainly Look at Temperament" and "Primordial Power", are linked to celebrity culture. The desire for precise expression or creating a lasting impression often leads to the formation of new words. For example, terms like "Meng Meng Da" and "Protect the Country's Stock Market" are new but not necessarily tied to summarizing novel ideas or intentionally creating buzz.

Several scholars have also classified Internet buzzwords. For instance, some have categorized them into newly created Internet language, abbreviated language, digital language, and symbolic language. Other classifications include metaphor, homophony, parody, irony, and superposition. This study combines previous research and divides buzzwords into five categories: coined words, borrowed words, metonymy, letter words, and homophony.

1) Coined Words

Coined words are typically created by netizens and did not exist before. These words, often derived from unusual real-life occurrences or creative ideas, are rapidly adopted and spread across the Internet. Many netizens, especially younger people with open minds and rich imaginations, contribute to the creation of new words that become widely used.

2) Borrowed Words

With the diversification of Internet development, foreign words have gradually entered the Chinese language and culture. These borrowed words often adapt their meanings to fit the local context, creating new expressions in the process. For example, the term "Yujie", originally a Japanese word referring to strong, mature women over 165 cm, has been adopted into Chinese with a similar meaning. Similarly, many English expressions like "long time no see" or "people mountain people sea" have been integrated into Chinese Internet slang. These borrowed words not only help to convey ideas concisely but also add a layer of sophistication or flair to the language.

3) Metonymy

Metonymy words, also referred to as transferred words, are derived from existing words through processes of transformation, splitting, and recombination. These words

acquire new meanings, evolving into entirely new words, yet they may still appear familiar. In communication, these terms often take on a completely different meaning. For instance, the term "landlord" in online forums refers to the person who initiates a post, while those who reply are called "first floor", "second floor", etc., with the original poster being the "landlord" at the top. This new use of "floor" emerges as a way to distinguish the order of posts. Similarly, "KFC", which commonly refers to the famous American fast-food chain, has also become a metonym for the brand itself in online discourse.

4) Letter Words

Letter words arise from the need for efficiency and brevity in communication, shortening lengthy words and phrases. These abbreviations are generally categorized into two types: Chinese pinyin abbreviations and English letter abbreviations. Pinyin abbreviations involve using the first letter of each Chinese character in a word. Chinese is a language with many polyphonic characters, so a single letter can stand for several meanings. For example, "BB" can refer to "baby", "poop", or "confession". English letter abbreviations are formed from English phrases or words. For example, "OMG" stands for "oh my god", and "LOL" for "laugh out loud". The use of letter words helps make online communication more efficient, but they can create ambiguity. Understanding these abbreviations often requires context, as the same letters can have different meanings.

5) Homophony

Homophonic words often create ambiguity due to their similar pronunciation. These words generally stem from various dialects, and input method ambiguities can also give rise to many homophonic words. However, sometimes netizens find these words novel, which leads to their widespread use. For example, the phrase "blue thin, fragrant mushroom" meaning "sad, want to cry" became popular in October 2016 after a man from Nanning, Guangxi, recorded a video following a breakup. In the video, he uses a dialect, which introduces some accents, and his expression "sad, want to cry" sounds like "blue thin, fragrant mushroom". The combination of Mandarin and dialect made this new word go viral across the country. Many imitations of the video appeared on the Internet, further spreading the term.

Another example is the term "cup", derived from a homophone for "tragedy", though it conveys a broader range of meanings than just "tragedy". The term became popular after being featured in memes and quotes such as, "Life is like a kitchen, holding a comedy in the left hand and a tragedy in the right hand." Homophony, in this case, refers to using the same pronunciation with different characters to express the same meaning. Homophonic words are dynamic and expressive, with a wide range of forms, making them concise and effective for communication.

Homophonic words can be categorized into Chinese character homophony, digital homophony, and English homophony. Chinese character homophony often arises from errors caused by pinyin software input, where characters coincidentally appear during the input process. Over time, these coincidences become accepted as part of online language. Another feature of Chinese character homophony is the intentional change of the original meaning by replacing characters with similar-sounding ones. Additionally, dialects play a role in homophony, as the spread of dialects through the Internet introduces new and interesting terms.

Digital homophony, such as "886", "521", and "66", is widely used for its simplicity, saving time while clearly conveying meaning. English homophony combines simple English letters with Chinese pinyin to create new words that don't exist in English, often with a playful or teasing element. Overall, homophonic words are concise and lively, adding fun to online language and making them popular among netizens in today's fast-paced society.

3.3. Theoretical Framework

3.3.1. Theoretical Framework of Conceptual Integration

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is based on conceptual integration theory, a mental space network structured by frames. Frames are constructed based on the speaker's background knowledge. A complete conceptual integration network includes four conceptual spaces: Input Space I, Input Space II, Generic Space, and Blended Space.

The process through which individuals acquire a concept is gradual. It typically follows these steps: first, by roughly composing the surface-level elements; second, by completing the initially acquired materials within the knowledge framework; and finally, by elaborating the completed concept through refined processing and integration. After these three interconnected cognitive activities, an emergent structure is formed, leading to the creation of an innovative concept.

- 1) Composition: This step involves combining the projected elements from the input spaces to generate new relationships that do not exist in either of the separate input forms.
- 2) Completion: During this phase, the cognitive and cultural background knowledge is projected onto the structure that has been built, and a larger structure is activated within the integration itself. This secondary structure further refines the integration process.
- 3) Elaboration: In this final step, the structure within the integration can be further refined, a process that continues as part of "continuous integration". This includes cognitive behaviors within the integration based on the emergent logic.

In summary, the process of acquiring a concept is not immediate but occurs in stages. Initially, a rough impression is formed, followed by completion through cultural and cognitive processing within a knowledge framework, and ultimately refined and integrated into a fully developed concept. This "trilogy" of conceptual integration represents the continuous process by which humans understand the world and generate new conceptual products.

3.3.2. Basic Types of Conceptual Integration

After an in-depth exploration of the basic types of conceptual integration, analyzing Chinese examples, the integration process can be broadly divided into two categories based on the relationship between the integrated elements:

- 1) Blending Integration: This involves integrating two similar things that may not necessarily be related, where the focus is on their similarities.
- 2) Splicing Integration: This type connects two elements that are related but not similar in nature, emphasizing their relationship.

The first type, "blending integration", can be likened to twisting two strands of rope into one, while "splicing integration" resembles tying two sections of rope together. "Blending integration" is related to the concept of metaphor, where one concept is used to describe another similar concept. Thus, "blending integration" is often referred to as "metaphorical integration". On the other hand, "splicing integration" is akin to metonymy, where one concept refers to another related concept. For instance, the expression "honking the horn behind" refers to "warning the person in front". Therefore, "splicing integration" is also known as "metonymic integration".

Below, we explore the mechanisms and processes of these two types of integration.

3) Blending Integration

Blending integration is a prevalent form of conceptual integration, typically involving the fusion of two similar events to produce a new conceptual meaning.

Example:

"Those buildings are piles of tofu dregs."

This sentence brings together two domains: one is "a completed building", and the other is "a pile of loose tofu dregs". The commonality lies in both being "piles of things" with "height" and "form". However, while the building is "solid", "tall", and "structured", tofu dregs are "loose", "broken", and "incoherent". The integration of these two unrelated concepts produces the new meaning: "those buildings are of low quality".

Zhang categorizes "blending integration" into four types, each with varying degrees of "emergent meaning" [9]:

- 1) Simplex: In this case, one input domain provides a frame, and the other supplies the elements, resulting in a straightforward connection. For example, in the statement "Old Wang is Wang Mian's father", the emergent structure transforms the abstract concept of a "frame + role" into a concrete relationship.
- 2) Mirror: This type occurs when both input domains offer similar frames, but with differing elements. For example, in "Under Feng Youlan's questioning, Kant was speechless", both Kant and Feng Youlan share a frame of opinion expression, but the individuals differ. The emergent meaning suggests that "Feng Youlan is superior to Kant" within the context of their debate.
- 3) Single-Scope Blending: In this type, two input domains with distinct frames are involved, with the emergent structure deriving from one domain and the elements from the other. For instance, in "Lenovo strikes Dell with a heavy punch", the boxing domain provides the frame, while the business war domain supplies the elements (Lenovo and Dell), leading to the emergent meaning that "Lenovo effectively implemented competitive actions unfavorable to Dell".
- 4) Double-Scope Blending: This occurs when both input domains provide distinct frames, which may even conflict, leading to an innovative emergent structure with significant meaning. An example is the expression "You are digging your own grave", which combines the domains of grave digging and mistakes leading to failure. The conflict between the two frames results in the emergent meaning "You are seeking your own demise", which conveys a high level of creativity and interpretation.

4. Research Questions and Methodology

4.1. Research Questions

- 1) How can Internet buzzwords be classified?

This question seeks to explore the different ways buzzwords on the internet can be grouped based on their semantic characteristics, usage contexts, and social impact.

- 2) Which theoretical framework is most appropriate for analyzing Internet buzzwords?

Here, the study will determine the most suitable theoretical model to analyze the cognitive and cultural processes that shape the emergence and evolution of these buzzwords.

- 3) How does Conceptual Integration Theory contribute to understanding the meaning construction of Internet buzzwords?

This question investigates how Conceptual Integration Theory (CIT), with its focus on cognitive blending, can be applied to study the dynamic creation and adaptation of meaning in internet buzzwords [10].

4.2. Methodology

This research employs a multi-faceted methodology to ensure a comprehensive analysis of Internet buzzwords. The methodology is organized into three key components:

- 1) Data Collection:

A diachronic research method is used to gather a corpus of Internet buzzwords. The data will be sourced from the annual buzzword list featured in the authoritative White Paper Language and Writing Weekly from 2010 to 2022. This method allows the study to

track the evolution of buzzwords over time, providing insight into changing trends and societal shifts [11].

2) Data Classification:

Buzzwords will be categorized based on whether they stem from specific events or have a broader, more generalized background. The classification will be divided into two primary categories:

- a) Event-Related Buzzwords: Buzzwords that are tied to specific events or phenomena.
- b) Non-Event-Related Buzzwords: More abstract buzzwords that represent ongoing social trends.

These categories will then be subdivided into five distinct types for further analysis:

- a) Abstract Concept Buzzwords: Words that embody broad or theoretical concepts.
- b) Specific Concept Buzzwords: Words that describe particular, concrete ideas or events.
- c) Social Interaction Buzzwords: Terms related to communication, relationships, and social behavior.
- d) Media Culture Buzzwords: Words that emerge from or are popularized by media or online culture.
- e) Online Social Buzzwords: Words that are predominantly used in digital or online social interactions.

3) Data Analysis:

Conceptual Integration Theory (CIT) will be the core framework for analyzing the meanings of Internet buzzwords. By examining how meanings are constructed and adapted through cognitive processes like blending, the research will explore how these buzzwords evolve across different social and cultural contexts. CIT provides a structured way of understanding how elements from different mental spaces combine to form new meanings, making it ideal for studying the dynamic nature of online language [12].

5. Conclusion

Internet buzzwords are a distinctive form of language that carry significant social and cultural meanings. By applying conceptual integration theory, this study shows that buzzwords are created by condensing essential concepts into compact forms, generating new meanings through cognitive processes. These buzzwords often emerge from various relationships, such as causal, temporal, spatial, identity, and part-whole connections. Through examining the cognitive mechanisms behind their meanings, we gain a deeper understanding of how these words are formed and understood in society, reflecting the creative nature of internet language.

The study classifies buzzwords into five types: abstract concepts, specific concepts, social interaction, media culture, and online social buzzwords. This classification provides a systematic approach to studying buzzwords, offering a fresh perspective on their cognitive processes, societal attitudes, and trends. Buzzwords are products of social development, meeting communication needs while reflecting societal changes. They offer wit, humor, and conciseness that transcend time and demographics. However, they often break traditional language rules, requiring a balanced approach to ensure their healthy development by retaining their essence while avoiding excess.

While the research contributes significantly to the understanding of buzzwords, there are some limitations. The scope of the study is narrow, and a broader cognitive framework is needed. Additionally, the research could benefit from more diachronic data collection and less subjective classification. Comparative studies would also enhance the understanding of internet buzzwords. Future research could explore buzzwords using multimodal theory or identity construction, examining how they function in communication and their pragmatic effects. Further studies could focus on metaphorical roles of con-

ventionalized buzzwords, using systemic functional linguistics for deeper insights. Expanding data collection and improving corpus organization would also strengthen future research. Lastly, comparing domestic and international buzzwords could offer valuable cross-cultural insights into meaning generation.

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