*Original Paper*

# A Semantic Analysis of the Top Ten Network Buzzwords of China in 2020 from the Perspective of the Prototype Theory

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*Abstract*

*With the further development of the Internet and the rapid growth of the number of netizens, there are always new network buzzwords appearing during online communication. Most of these buzzwords don't come out of nowhere but are variants of the extant words or expressions. They inherit, extend or sometimes overturn the original meanings. To some extent, these semantic variations not only influence the language system, expanding the semantic category of words, but also reflect people's cognition and emotions. Therefore, based on the prototype theory, this paper aims to analyze the semantic variations of the top ten network buzzwords of China in 2020 from three aspects: horizontally, the extension of meanings of the basic-level words; vertically, the emergence of new subordinate-level words; and the combination of the two ways of variation. The analysis of these words shows complex emotions of people, including positive life attitudes, nostalgia to the past and helplessness under huge pressures in real life.*

*Keywords*

*prototype theory, network buzzwords, semantic analysis*

## 1. Introduction

With the arrival of the We-media era and the increasing number of netizens, more and more online buzzwords are created and even used by people offline. Most of these buzzwords happen to be popular due to some hot social issues (Zeng & Liu, 2017). In fact, as part of the network language which is regarded as a new social dialect due to its relatively stable speech community and the constantly enriched and developed contents (Kuang & Jin, 2000), some network buzzwords themselves are

variants of previous words or expressions. Generally speaking, variations of language exist in every level of language. The network buzzwords are no exception. Variation can be in the phonetic aspect, such as homophonic words; mostly, it can be in the semantic aspect. Here in this paper, the focus will be on the semantic variation of these words.

Among the many network buzzwords, the top ten network buzzwords of China are published by many media each year. Although evaluation criteria are different among these media, most of the top ten network buzzwords are usually the same, since they are selected through recommendation, voted by people and assessed by experts. Therefore, the latest top ten network buzzwords of China publicly published on Language Weekly in 2020 are selected to be analyzed in this paper. It's worth noting that there are few papers related to the Chinese network buzzwords in 2020 (Tian, 2020; Lu & Zhang, 2021; Wang & Chen, 2021).

The emergence and development or further variation of the network buzzwords can be related to the basic views of the prototype theory, which holds that categories are constantly expanding through family resemblance based on prototypes (Wang, 2007). Prototypes are also called the basic-level words. Most of the buzzwords don't come out of nowhere but are variants of the extant words or expressions. Whether they inherit, extend or sometimes overturn the prototypes' meanings, most of them remain part of meanings of the prototypes. These variants can also be regarded as the subordinate-level words. This paper aims to analyze the semantic variation of the top ten network buzzwords of China in 2020 from three aspects: horizontally, the extension of meanings of the basic-level words; vertically, the emergence of new subordinate-level words; and the combination of the two ways of variation.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Previous Studies on the Prototype Theory

The prototype theory grows out of criticism of the classical theory of categories proposed by Aristotle. The main views of the classical theory of categories are that a category is defined by using sets of necessary and sufficient conditions shared by the members of it, there are clear boundaries between different categories and members within the same category have the same status (Wang & Li, 2003). However, Wittgenstein (1953) put forward in his book *Philosophical Investigation* the concept of family resemblance, which offered a basis for the establishment and development of the prototype theory. The representatives of this theory are Rosch and Labov. Rosch (1973) referred to prototype as the most typical and representative members of a category. According to this theory, there are no common features between members belonging to the same category. Instead, they have only family resemblance. For example, chess and playing cards are both games, but they have nearly nothing in common. Besides, the boundaries between different categories are not that clear. A typical example is the classification of colors. In addition to that, the statuses of different members within the same category are not equal. There are central or typical members of a category and then shading off into less

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typical or peripheral members.

The prototype theory was first introduced into China in 1980s. In the following two decades, the focus was on the development of it (Peng, 2005) and discussion of the fuzziness of categories. Xu (1995) explored the semantic fuzziness of semi-modal words such as "be able to". Zhang (2002) discussed the advantages of the prototype theory and how it was used to define words. These discussions offered a good basis for the following studies combining different levels of language with the theory. For example, Zhang (2003) used the theory to analyze the English tense to help language teaching. Many scholars used it to semantic research, many of which were related to the meanings of words, especially polysemy and the extension of meanings of words (Jiang, 2006; Dai, 2009; Su, 2016). These studies may provide some implications for second language words acquisition.

With the development of the Internet, studies using the prototype theory to analyze the network buzzwords become popular. Yang (2014) analyzed the mechanisms behind the popularity of some network buzzwords based on the prototype theory. Zeng and Liu (2017) explored the development of the top ten network buzzwords of China in 2016. And Zhou (2019) used the same method to analyze the top ten network buzzwords in 2018. Studies of the buzzwords in every year can reveal the social concerns and development, which are of great significance.

*2.2 Previous Studies on Network Buzzwords*

In China, studies on network buzzwords began from 2001. At that time, the network buzzwords were something new. Scholars began to analyze the types, features, consequences they brought and attitudes we might take towards them (Peng, 2001; Wang & Li, 2001; Yin & Yang, 2001; Zheng, 2001). In the following years, more and more scholars studied on network buzzwords from different perspectives such as linguistics, sociology, communication, psychology, pedagogy and so on (Wang, 2012; Liu & Ge, 2019).

From the perspective of sociology and psychology, many scholars analyzed the netizens' minds of using buzzwords (Sheng, 2008; Chen, 2010; Wang, 2011). From the perspective of linguistics, some scholars appealed to using network buzzwords according to language norms based on the eco-linguistic analysis (Zhang & Xiao, 2008; Yang & Zhang, 2015); some scholars explained the rules and features of the spread of network buzzwords based on the theory of memetics (Xun, 2009; Zhang & Jiang, 2011; Liao, 2012; Zeng & Wei, 2016; Zhang & Duan, 2020); some other scholars explored the process of semantic evolution of network buzzwords based on the prototype theory (Zhao & Zeng, 2012; Guo, 2014; Zeng & Liu, 2017; Xia, 2019; Wang & Li, 2019; Chen, 2021).

In this sense, the analysis of network buzzwords based on the prototype theory seems not to be something new. However, it's still worth studying, since the network buzzwords are constantly changing and developing. To analyze the semantic variation of the latest buzzwords with the prototype theory can help us better understand them. Besides, rarely studies have been done on the top ten network buzzwords of China in 2020. Lu and Zhang (2021) made a comparative analysis of the top ten

network buzzwords published by different media, in order to predict the buzzwords of the next year. And Wang and Chen (2021) in their paper analyzed and summarized the features of their spreading and functions. However, both of them haven't analyzed deeply the semantic variation and their structures but just summarized the general features of all the network buzzwords, which are not specific to the words studied. Therefore, it's of great importance to analyze them with the prototype theory.

All in all, the present study on the top ten network buzzwords of China in 2020 from the perspective of the prototype theory is necessary since they can reflect the social trend and people's cognition and emotions at present.

## 3. Analysis

The rules of production and variation of network buzzwords are consistent with the basic ideas of the prototype theory, which holds that members of the same category all have part of the prototype meanings and that they extend the meanings of the prototypes from different directions. Among the buzzwords to be analyzed in this part, some of them add new meanings to the basic-level words, which can be regarded as "horizontal" semantic variation; some of them have generated new subordinate-level words, which can be regarded as "vertical" semantic variation; and some other not only extend the meanings of the basic-level words, but also generate new subordinate-level words, which will be called "mixed" semantic variation in this paper. According to this, the top ten network buzzwords of China in 2020 can be classified into three types and will be analyzed in the following three sections.

**Table 1. Three Types of Semantic Variations of the Network Buzzwords**

| Types | Network buzzwords |
| --- | --- |
| "Horizontal" semantic variation | "逆行者", "后浪", "你品,你细品", "内卷", "社会性死亡" |
| "Vertical" semantic variation | "爷青回", "有内味了" |
| "Mixed" semantic variation | "甩锅", "打工人", "凡尔赛" |

*3.1 The Extension of Meanings of the Basic-level Words ("Horizontal" Semantic Variation)*

From Table 1 we can see that there are five buzzwords classified to the type of "horizontal" semantic variation.

The original meaning of the first word "逆行者" in Chinese refers to those who walk in the opposite way in the road and disobey the traffic rules. Obviously, it's a basic-level word and a derogatory word. But in 2020, it has some special meaning. The COVID-19 was rampant at that time, but a large amount of medical workers, policemen and other representatives of all walks of life volunteered to come to the frontline, trying to protect people's life, regardless of their own lives. The buzzword "逆行者" was then used to refer to them, those who fought against the COVID-19 to save the life of others, at the risk of

their own safety. Therefore, in this sense, the original meaning of the word is extended and even overturned. It becomes a commendatory term and a title. This word ranked number one among the top ten buzzwords in 2020, reflecting people's praise to these selfless people.

Another word "后浪" literally means rising waves, but it's usually used as a metaphor to refer to the young people. Generally, the extended meaning rising waves emerges with the original meaning. Therefore, this word is not something new to us, but it went viral again in 2020 for a video called "后浪" released by Blibili, a video website. Inside the video, the speaker used the word "后浪" to refer to the young people fighting against the COVID-19, praising them and showing his expectations to them. To some extent, the meaning of the basic-level word "后浪" was extended, since its range of use was narrowed down under the special social environment.

The third buzzword or popular expression is "你品,你细品". Its original meaning is to ponder over something carefully. But it is kind of sarcastic when used on the Internet. When a speaker says this to a hearer at the end of their topic, it seems to mean that the speaker knows some other meaning behind the topic they are talking about. This expression became popular on the Internet since the fast speed of the spread of the funny videos. But different meaning has been added to it.

The next buzzword "内卷" is still popular this year. It is "involution" in English and a term used by an American anthropologist in his paper to explain why the agrarian society has no major breakthrough for a long time. In this sense, its usage range is rather restricted. But on the Internet, its meaning has been generalized as the irrational internal competition or inefficient infighting in any industry that consumes each other and produces no value. This becomes rather popular on the Internet and our real life. "Involution" reflects the cruel competition at every aspect of the society and the uneasiness of this generation.

The final buzzword "社会性死亡" literally means a death known to relatives, friends and neighbors. This buzzword was widely used after the hot issue that a Tsinghua senior mistakenly accused another boy of sexual harassment, resulting in his "social death". Hence on the Internet, it is used to describe the dilemma of the interruption of social contacts and social reputation of individuals who suffer from online violence. But later, its meaning was further extended, it can be used to refer to someone who lose face in public and thus are ashamed to show up in public.

By and large, we can see that these five buzzwords all add new meanings to their literal meanings or extend the meanings of their basic-levels words horizontally as sequences of different hot social issues.

*3.2 The Emergence of New Subordinate-level Words ("Vertical" Semantic Variation)*

There are two buzzwords that derive new subordinate-level words. The first one is "爷青回", which is an abbreviation of "爷的青春回来了", meaning that someone is happy to see the things in the past again. After the popularity of this buzzword, another expression "爷青结" came out, an abbreviation of "爷的青春结束了", which has the opposite meaning with the former one. So it can be seen as a new subordinate-level word of "爷青回". Both of these two buzzwords show people's nostalgia.

Another buzzword "有内味了" originally belongs to north China's dialect, which means something gives people some kind of feeling that is tacit to them. After it became popular due to the frequent use in short videos, it evolved into the fixed structure "有…内味了", in which any content can be added according to the speaker. And its tone was flexible with the added content. This reflects people creativity and the inclusiveness of language.

The emergence of the new subordinate-level words suggests that buzzwords are not always something in the past and become popular again. They can be totally new with hot issues and then generate more words based on the prototypes.

*3.3 The Combination of the Two Ways of Semantic Variations ("Mixed" Semantic Variation)*

The last three buzzwords not only extend and enrich the basic-level meanings, but also generate some other subordinate-level words, which can be referred to as mixed semantic variation.

"甩锅" in its literal meaning means to throw the pan, but in fact, it is used to refer to someone who shifts responsibility to others. It originates from another word "背锅", which means taking the responsibility that doesn't belong to oneself. Both of them are subordinate-level words from "锅". "锅" here means the responsibility that doesn't belong to oneself, which has totally nothing in common with its original literal meaning. Therefore, on the one hand, from the prototype meaning of pan to the extended meaning of the responsibility that doesn't belong to oneself, the meaning of "锅" has been enriched horizontally; On the other hand, from "锅" to "背锅" and "甩锅", we can see the vertically development of subordinate-level words.

The next word "打工人" has been widely used by people online and offline for a long time. Its prototype meaning is the literal meaning—workers, especially those who do manual work and have a lower social status. But due to the wide spread of some short videos, this word is used by people of all walks for self-mockery. Its prototype meaning is extended and generalized. Now "打工人" refers to all the workers. Besides, the inferiority it used to suggest is replaced by some more positive connotations. "打工人" now reflects those ordinary workers who are struggling for their better lives. Everyone who is called "打工人" is respectable. In addition to the horizontally extension of meaning, "打工人" also derives many other buzzwords, for example, "干饭人" and "尾款人", though they are not as popular as it is. These words can be seen as the vertical semantic variations of the prototype "打工人". The popularity of "打工人" and a series of words it derives shows the power of the media and people's positive attitude towards life.

The last buzzword "凡尔赛" used to refer to Versailles, a grand palace in France. But it went into our sight and became famous for another reason, a comic containing the same name as Versailles, in which the luxury of the palace was shown to readers. Hence originally Versailles equals to luxurious life. However, on the Internet, it's used to refer to people who deliberately or accidentally show off their high-grade and luxurious life in the way of reverse statement. The word can either be used to tease or to disdain those who show off. For example, when someone who is rich says he can never use up his

money and thus feels troubled, others will think he is "凡尔赛". Besides, many other words derive from it has emerged and goes viral. "凡学大师", "入门凡" and "高级凡" are used to refer to people with different levels of showing off. These are all subordinate-level words of the prototype "凡尔赛".

All in all, from the above analysis, we can see that buzzwords not only inherit their prototype meanings, but also generate more new meanings and new subordinate-level words.

## 4. Conclusion

Through analysis of the top ten network buzzwords of China in 2020 from the perspective of the prototype theory, we can see that the emergence and evolvement of these buzzwords are consistent with the basic ideas of the prototype theory. Based on prototypes or the basic-level words, the meanings are extended from different directions. Horizontally, the meanings of the basic-level words are enriched, generalized or narrowed. Vertically, many subordinate-level words are created on the basis of these words. The semantic variations of these words benefit from the rapid development of the Internet and are the outcomes of creative netizens.

The semantic variations of buzzwords are not only linguistic phenomena but also cultural phenomena (Tan & Sun, 2010). They can reflect people's concerns and attitudes towards some social issues. Analysis of the semantic variations of the buzzwords in 2020 show complex emotions of people, including positive life attitudes, nostalgia to the past and helplessness under huge pressures in real life.

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