

Original Paper

A Linguistic Memetic Account of Identifiable Features of Online Rumors

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Abstract

In the era of information explosion, online rumors have become a global issue that urgently needs to be addressed. Within the framework of linguistic memetics, this article delves into the content, form, and process of the dissemination of online rumors, aiming to uncover their recognizable features. The study finds that online rumors are highly relevant to the lives of the hosts in terms of content, exhibit formulaic features that are easy to replicate in form, and demonstrate periodic recurrence in their disseminating process. This research could not only enrich the theoretical perspectives of rumor studies but also provide practical guidance for the identification and prevention of online rumors.

Keywords

online rumors, identifiable features, linguistic memetics, China

1. Introduction

The history of rumors can be dated far back to ancient times and is among the oldest forms of mass communication (Kapferer, 2008). Throughout the progress of human civilization, rumors have accompanied society as a phenomenon, often termed the “goddess of rumors” due to their mysterious, elusive nature and enormous impact and harmfulness (Neubauer, 2004). With the boost of network technology, rumors have become increasingly rampant, and their influence on society cannot be ignored. Only through systematic research and analysis of online rumors can we identify appropriate

countermeasures and methods to promote the construction of a harmonious internet and a harmonious society. This study, from the perspective of linguistic memetics, attempts to summarize the identifiable features of online rumors concerning the content, the form, and the process of dissemination, aiming to reveal the transmission laws of online rumors, provide a new perspective for rumor research, and offer valuable references for effectively identifying and preventing online rumors.

2. Research on Rumors

Rumor is a complex phenomenon that is difficult to define. To understand this intricate social phenomenon, academia has proposed more than twenty definitions of rumors from various perspectives, including some classic and famous interpretations. The most frequently cited classic definition in the field of rumor research comes from the pioneering studies of American psychologists Allport & Postman. In their 1947 book “The Psychology of Rumor”, they proposed that a rumor was a propositional statement related to an event, passing along from person to person, with the intention of being persuasive but without specific data to confirm its truth (Allport & Postman, 1947, p. 3). This insightful definition has provided a beacon for subsequent rumor researches. Another widely accepted interpretation came from Difonzo & Bordia, who defined rumors from three perspectives (2007, p. 13), namely, context (rumors arising in specific environments or psychological demands), content (revealing potential threats in the environment), and function (raising people’s awareness of their surroundings). They argued that rumors were unverified yet widely disseminated pieces of information, with uncertain content that implied potential threats in the environment and can heighten people’s vigilance. French scholar Kapferer’s definition is also influential which deemed that rumors were information that arose and circulated in society without official confirmation or had been officially refuted (Kapferer, 2008, p. 15). Despite the different definitions in rumor research, they share some commonalities. In essence, rumor lacks hard evidence and are unverified; in terms of content, they are generally related to current events and people’s interests or concerns; in terms of purpose, rumor aims to persuade others; and in terms of origin, a multitude of factors contribute to the emergence of rumors.

In terms of the content and perspectives of researches on rumor, scholars mainly study the characteristics of rumors, mass psychology, mechanisms of influence, coping strategies, and the interactive relationship between individuals and society from sociological, psychological, historical, and communication perspectives. This body of researches involve theories such as Collective Memory theory, Collective Behavior Theory, Cognitive Dissonance Theory, and Social Change Theory from sociology and communication studies. More specifically, the social psychology perspective mainly focuses on the generation and spread of rumors; the communication perspective discusses the communication process, effects, and coping strategies from the angles of communication studies, public opinion studies, psychoanalysis, and functionalism; the historical perspective is primarily about

the relationship between rumors and history and the historical value of rumors. These studies propose the stages of rumor dissemination and analyze the reasons for the emergence and spread of rumors from social, psychological, and historical aspects. They also propose responding strategies such as understanding the patterns of rumor dissemination, providing sufficient information, and guiding public psychology.

Overall, these rumor studies cover a wide range of fields, focusing not only on the inherent characteristics of rumors and rumor control strategies but also examining the characteristics of rumor dissemination in the new media environment. They provide a strong theoretical basis for understanding the essence of rumors and have certain enlightening significance for this article.

3. Linguistic Memetics

Based on the theory of Darwinian evolution and the concept of genes in the biological field, the renowned British zoologist and behavioral ecologist Richard Dawkins put forward the concept of meme and the fundamental ideas of Memetics in 1976 to explain cultural evolutionary phenomena.

Interpreted from the perspective of Memetics, cultural communication is achieved through the self-replication of memes, which are the units of cultural transmission and the cultural replicators that spread through imitation in interpersonal communication. Memetics posits that successful memes share common characteristics including longevity, fecundity, and copying-fidelity. This means that memes persist for a long time in written form or in the human mind, have a strong ability to produce and replicate, and maintain a high degree of fidelity during the replication process (Dawkins 1976: 197). Moreover, successful memes are often practical and convey a strong expressive need of the host or align with the host's psychological tendencies, and the background events that give rise to them often receive significant social attention.

After its emergence, Memetics was quickly applied in various fields of study, such as psychology, criminology, architecture, anthropology, and linguistics. Linguistic memetics is a set of views or propositions about language use that absorbs the tenets of Memetics, aiming at explaining the mechanism of cultural evolution. It has evolved from Darwinian cultural evolution to memetics and then to linguistic memetics. Mr. He Ziran was the first in China to apply Memetics to the study of language use phenomena, prompting a group of scholars to conduct research on various language topics (Chen, 2017), demonstrating the powerful explanatory power of linguistic memetics. For instance, He Ziran (2005; 2008; 2023) has analyzed the practical application of language in social life using meme theory, explaining many interesting linguistic phenomena in everyday life. Other scholars have used a memetic perspective to analyze various linguistic phenomena, such as rhetoric (He, 2008), internet slang (Lin, 2022; Wang & Liu, 2024), advertising language (Yang & Wang, 2017), and news language (Zhou & Shi, 2022).

These research achievements have made a significant contribution to the promotion and development of Memetics in the Chinese academic community, especially in the field of linguistics. They fully demonstrate that Memetics can provide a reasonable and sufficient explanation for the replication and transmission of language and should also offer new avenues and perspectives for analyzing and studying online rumors, providing some theoretical support for explaining the regularities of the occurrence and development process of online rumors. Therefore, based on the views and understandings mentioned earlier, this study uses linguistic memetics as the theoretical basis to analyze the content, form, and process of the spread of online rumors, aiming at revealing their identifiable characteristics.

4. Features of Online Rumor Memes

Based on the perspective of linguistic memetics, we analyze the content, form, and process of online rumor dissemination to uncover their identifiable features. Utilizing a corpus of officially debunked online rumors from authoritative platforms, search engines, news websites, and instant messaging tools, the research reveals several key characteristics: high host relevance in content, focusing on daily life concerns and hot topics; reproductivity of dissemination forms, featuring clear structures and keywords; and periodic recurrence in the dissemination process, with certain rumors persisting and reemerging over time.

4.1 Host Relevance in Terms of the Content of Dissemination

For a meme to be successful, it must be capable of infecting new hosts and entering into their memory. One essential condition is notability, meaning that the meme must have sufficient salience to attract the attention of new hosts, be adaptable to the cognitive structure of potential hosts, and the new hosts must be willing to believe the meme (Heylighen, 1998). Driven by data, we arrived at a content-based categorization of online rumors. Among which, social life-related rumors have the highest proportion (constituting 54%), followed by public crisis-related rumors (17%) and public management-related rumors (16%), with rumors about public figures accounting for 6% of the total.

4.1.1 Close Association with Hosts' Daily Lives

Among the most prevalent types of online rumors, those related to social life are particularly striking due to their direct connection to public concerns.

Firstly, food safety has become a major focus of online rumors. According to a statement made by Yan Jiangying, a spokesperson for the State Administration for Food and Drug Regulation at a seminar on food rumor management on April 17, 2017, data shows that food safety information accounts for 45% of online rumors. The Reporting Center Cyberspace Administration of China, in collaboration with the China Association for Science and Technology's Publicity Department, released the "2024 First Half of the Year Social and People's Livelihood Domain Online Rumor Refutation List", which still highlights

food safety as a high-incidence area of rumors and misconceptions in the public's concern for social and people's livelihood issues. This indicates that the governance of food safety rumors is an ongoing process that requires joint efforts and supervision from various sectors. Rumors such as "meat buns stuffed with paper", "cotton meat", "plastic instant rice", "low-sodium salt being lethal" and "crayfish being small insects" have repeatedly shocked the public, affecting their confidence in food safety and disrupting their consumption decisions.

Secondly, with economic development and rising incomes, people's expectations for health and quality of life have increased, which also to a proliferation of online rumors related to health and wellness. For instance, rumors emerged about the "pregnant mode" introduced by routers branded as 360, claiming to reduce radiation intensity and protect the health of pregnant women; rumors stating that "breastfeeding infants requires sterile water", claiming that it is produced using world-class sterile production techniques and meets infants' special needs for drinking water; and rumors that "placing a phone next to the pillow while sleeping can cause infertility, premature aging, or even cancer". Similar cases happen with topics about the climate. As abnormal climate changes have brought inconvenience and harm to people's lives and health, it led to a series of online rumors, particularly those related to haze. Examples include false forecast information about "Chengdu experiencing its most severe haze in over 2,000 years, with the AQI expected to exceed 700 and some areas possibly reaching the lung cancer threshold of 800"; and online articles titled "China is secretly burning a dirtier fuel than coal" and "Haze and High-Sulfur Petroleum Coke", claiming that China imports over 10 million tons of petroleum coke annually, which is the cause of severe air pollution; and rumors about the harms of haze, such as "haze cannot be expelled from the body and lungs" and "children inhale more haze than adults".

Lastly, with the increasing normalization of online communication, there has been a surge in rumors related to internet usage and cybersecurity. Rumors such as "China's internet surveillance is undergoing a cleanup, requiring WeChat group members to change their profile pictures to real ones, or else their groups will be locked and their phone numbers controlled"; and "from November 11th, QQ and WeChat profiles, nicknames, and other information can only be modified five times in a year" have sparked heated discussions among netizens. Some rumors about internet security even masquerade as debunking information, such as a rumor circulating around the "Army Day" that the Peoples Daily app's H5 work "Military Uniform Photo" is a scam, claiming that the photo's IP address is on a server in Canada, and it is just a new scam method by a fraud company posing as the People's Daily app to obtain citizens' personal information. This message has raised the vigilance of many WeChat users, leading them to stop participating in "Military Uniform Photo" displays and even discourage friends from doing so. In response, the People's Daily had to issue a statement confirming the security of the program and also pointing out the deceptive nature of the "debunking" information.

4.1.2 Reflecting Hosts' Interests in Contemporary Hot Topics

Firstly, natural disasters and sudden accidents often trigger a series of rumors due to their sudden and impactful nature. Rumors centering on the “MH370 Missing Flight” incident consist a typical example. During the initial period, from March 8 to March 29, 2014, Xinhua News Agency’s “Truth Seeking” column collected 48 debunked online rumors, focusing on important information such as the cause of the accident, location, and outcome. The content covered a wide range of aspects, including predictions of location and cause, accountability supervision, and hearsay (Luan, 2015). Nearly ten years later, the release of the Netflix aviation documentary “MH370: The Plane That Disappeared in March 2023 once again stirred up rows of rumors including conspiracy theories about “where the plane went”. Similarly, the super heavy rain on July 20, 2021 in Henan province triggered a series of rumors, such as “truck drivers from other places drowned in Dengzhou”, “Luying Town in Wolong District suffered severe damage, and helicopters conducted rescues”, and “heavy rain in Nanyang caused a three-story building to collapse”. What’s more, during the COVID-19 pandemic, a myriad of rumors related to the epidemic situation, prevention and treatment methods, and other aspects emerged.

Secondly, major meetings, events, and sports competitions also provide a fertile ground for the emergence of rumors. For example, before the G20 Hangzhou Summit, rumors circulated widely on social platforms like WeChat Moments and Weibo, with security-related rumors being the most prominent, including traffic control (such as “no entries but exits only in highways 1-5”, “Hangzhou Passenger Transportation Center Station to be closed during G20”, “all logistics trucks banned from entering Zhejiang” etc.), security checks (such as “a driver was required to open and drink from each of his 20 bottles of mineral water”, “no liquid or powder parcels allowed in and out of Beijing within 300 km of Hangzhou”, etc.), stability maintenance (such as “most gas stations in Hangzhou to be closed during the G20 Summit”, “no open flame cooking allowed in the West Lake scenic area, all meals to be delivered by the police”, etc.), and financial expenditure (such as “each security police officer receives a subsidy of 100,000 yuan”, “a budget of 16 billion yuan for G20 Hangzhou Summit”, etc.). Before the “Belt and Road” International Cooperation Summit Forum, rumors under the disguise of “arrangement notices” about rests and holiday adjustments for central and state organs, institutions, social groups, and related units in Beijing. Additionally, around major sports events, there is also the spread of online rumors, such as “Syrian national football team wins China, leading to the announcement of 48-hour ceasefire”, “U.S. flag falls at the Rio Olympics” and “an Olympic athlete wearing Chinese-made clothes got nearly naked”.

Scholars have observed that the language memes selected for dissemination are those that can capture and sustain public attention, primarily due to their compelling content (He & Chen, 2014, p. 10). The content of online rumors, which serves as a vehicle for these language memes, is crucial in their ability to resonate with the audience. Online rumors that pertain to everyday life, trending topics, and public

figures have a high degree of relevance to the public, thereby exerting a strong pull on their attention. As a result, these types of online rumor memes are more readily embraced by the public and tend to spread more extensively compared to other types of content. This highlights the significance of content representation in the success of language memes within the competitive landscape of information dissemination.

4.2 Reproductivity of Syntactic Forms

A successful meme, as emphasized by He Ziran and colleagues, must possess the quality of replicability to ensure its ongoing spread (He et al., 2007, p. 132). This attribute of being easily replicated is pivotal for the functional linguistic expression of online rumors. Focusing on the case of online earthquake rumors, it becomes evident that the majority of these rumors are anchored around the “forecast” of an impending earthquake event. This is often seen in the precise and detailed nature of the information presented in these rumors. For instance, a post that gained widespread circulation online claimed that “Nanjing will have a 7-8 magnitude earthquake on June 13”. This case illustrates the compelling and specific details that such rumors often include, which are designed to make them easily shareable and believable among the public. The format and content of these rumors are crafted in a way that they can be quickly understood and disseminated, highlighting the importance of meme replicability in the spread of online misinformation.

Example 1. “The National Earthquake Bureau issued a level nine emergency earthquake defense notice at 7:27 today: there will be a 6.5 to 7.2 magnitude earthquake centered on Baotou (a city in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region of China) at 13:19 Beijing time on April 15th.”

After the 7.1 magnitude earthquake in Yushu (i.e., Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, China) on April 14, 2010, rumors began to circulate online about impending earthquakes in Beijing, Baotou, Langfang and Xingtai in Hebei province (with example 1 as one of them). As shown in the above example, the information conveyed in online earthquake rumors typically includes specific sources of information, location and time of the happening, and the exact magnitude, implying the accuracy of the “forecast”. However, due to the limited technological capabilities, successful earthquake forecasts are extremely rare, and it is not possible to predict earthquakes with such precision. In fact, global earthquake forecasting is still at a low level of exploration, and the view that earthquakes cannot be predicted is the mainstream opinion of the scientific community in the United States, which is also recognized by most scientists around the world. China’s successful short-term forecast of the offshore earthquake in 1975 is the only one internationally recognized, mainly because the pre-earthquake signs were too obvious:

Example 2. “During the first half of 1976, the Songpan, Maowen, Heishui area might experience an earthquake of magnitude 6 or above, and attention should be paid to strengthening monitoring.” (From the 1976 Sichuan Earthquake Situation Conference held in November 1975)

Comparing Example 2 with Example 1, we can see that the official forecast also includes time, location, and magnitude elements, but the official forecast uses less certain language like “might”, with approximate numbers for time and magnitude, and suggests strengthening monitoring. On the other hand, rumors assert that the earthquake will definitely occur with precise magnitude numbers. In summary, the syntactic form of online earthquake rumors is typically expressed in a “meme schema”, consisting “source of information + clear time + specific location + precise epicenter, magnitude, and extent of damage”. This operational convenience and high fidelity reflect the typical characteristics of language memes. Similarly, the form of online rumors is characterized by simplicity, ease of understanding, and ease of imitation, which facilitates the realization of the widespread dissemination.

4.3 Repetitive Occurrence in the Dissemination Process

The replication of online rumor content is a phenomenon that is particularly noticeable in trending topics, often resurfacing at regular intervals, as highlighted by Fearn-Banks in 2013. This pattern of recurrence is not limited to new rumors; it extends to those that have been circulating for years or even decades, which continue to make periodic appearances on the internet. These rumors exhibit a transient yet recurring nature in their dissemination—they may fade from public view after a period of incubation and spread, only to reemerge when circumstances align. This intermittent visibility suggests that such rumors do not vanish completely but lie dormant, ready to be reignited by opportune conditions. Once the right context presents itself, these rumors are prone to resurface, capturing the public's attention anew and potentially leading to multiple cycles of renewed interest. This cyclical pattern can be distilled into two primary scenarios, which will be further explored in the subsequent discussion. It is this very recurrence and the ability to recapture attention that underscores the resilience and impact of certain online rumors, making them a persistent feature of our digital landscape.

4.3.1 Repetition of the Meme Prototype with Unaltered Content

During the dissemination of online rumors, certain core meme prototypes, due to their strong spreadability and influence, can repeatedly appear in different times and spaces, almost without any change. These meme prototypes typically contain concise and powerful information that can quickly attract the public's attention and often touch people's emotions, whether it be fear, anger, or sympathy, creating a strong resonance in social culture and prompting people to forward the information without thinking.

The “Rumor Smashing Machine” on Guokr.com found that some rumors with “tough” vitality would spread every now and then, some even for over ten years, and sorted out top ten pieces of online misinformation. Our credibility survey results show that they are still approved to varying degrees by the hosts. Over 50% of the audience believes in the two online rumors of “the lunar crescent on nails is a health indicator” and “rat urine on Coke cans spreads a lethal virus”. These messages continue to appear, constantly reinforcing the public's memory and opinion. Additionally, the People's Daily

“Seeking Truth” column also collected a batch of rumors with a “vintage” feel but still active. These examples illustrate the persistent nature of certain rumors and their ability to resurface with minor alterations, despite repeated debunking. This includes “outsiders from Sanya(a city in Guangdong province) stealing children”. After investigation by the Shijiazhuang Internet Police in Hebei Province, it was found that the source of information dissemination can be traced back to the “emergency notice” spread in a WeChat group of parents in a certain primary school in December 2016. In essence, it was a targeted malicious slander against others. Later, it was repeatedly denied by the Internet Police of Quanzhou (a city in Fujian province), Internet Police of Guiyang (a city in Guizhou province), and Public Security of Heze (a city in Shandong province). Despite of all these efforts, the rumor resurfaced in 2024 with variations like “children kidnapping in Dalianfa supermarket in Qingdao(a city in Shandong province)” , “human traffickers disguised as crab vendors kidnapping children” and “human traffickers openly stealing children on a street in Nanning (a city in Jiangsu province)”.

These rumors caused widespread panic among parents and had negative social impacts. The repetition and variation of these rumors highlight the challenges in controlling their spread. Even when old rumors are debunked, new versions with slightly altered details can continue to circulate, often exploiting people’s fears and vulnerabilities. This underscores the importance of continuous education and vigilance in combating misinformation and the need for effective communication strategies to counteract the spread of such rumors.

These rumors, as noted for their persistence and impact on society, often lead to widespread panic and significant social repercussions, particularly among vulnerable groups such as parents. The recurrence of these rumors underscore the formidable challenge in managing their dissemination. Despite efforts to debunk old rumors, they can resurface with slight modifications, preying on people’s fears and vulnerabilities.

4.3.2 Repetition of Meme Variants with Renovated Content

Many rumors are often old news that has been debunked before, renovated and reheated on the internet to create a new round of dissemination, which is referred to as “old rumors with new spins”. In the high-incidence area of food safety, there are many such cases. Rumormongers use food safety events as the background, trimming and renovating what has already happened, repeatedly attracting attention and misleading the hosts’ information consumption.

In December 2015, Guokr.com’s “Rumor Smashing Machine” set a mini-list “How could it be you again?” for the session of classic old rumors, and “inedible crayfish” was one of them. The series of rumors about crayfish can be considered as “evergreen” in the rumor circle. Observation of the corpus shows that the rumors about crayfish convey the same message, the inedibility of crayfish, through various angles, such as the conspiracy theories of crayfish being introduced to China as “a biological weapons” or “genetically modified”, the dirty environment in which they grow, and their extremely

unhealthy physical characteristics. Over time, new representations of “abnormal” crayfish keep emerging. For example, on May 3, 2018, a video titled “Crayfish Accident! Just Look and You’ll Know!” was circulated on WeChat, claiming that a girl in Suzhou (a city in Jiangsu province) coughing up blood and had a fever was diagnosed with paragonimiasis, possibly due to the consuming of unclean crayfish. By May 8, when the “Shanghai Rumor Refutation Network” debunked the rumors, the video had been viewed over 1 million times. This “crayfish case” took a different angle, warning people about the “severe consequences” of eating crayfish, reinforcing the same message: it’s not safe to eat crayfish. Despite continuous debunking, rumors about crayfish resurface every peak season, prompting debunking efforts from media outlets like the Paper in 2024.

Whether the content remains unchanged or is repackaged, these online rumors are repeatedly hyped up, which is inseparable from their tenacious memetic vitality.

5. Conclusion

This study, based on linguistic memetics, has conducted an in-depth analysis of the content, form, and process of the spread of online rumors, revealing their identifiable characteristics. It is found that online rumors demonstrate a high degree of host relevance in terms of their content, display a programmatic feature that is easy to replicate, and exhibit a periodic recurrence in their dissemination process.

Firstly, this study examined how online rumors are closely related to the daily lives of their hosts, with a significant portion of rumors being related to social life, public crises, and public management. These rumors tap into public concerns about everyday issues and current events, making them more likely to be accepted and spread by the public. Examples include rumors about food safety, health and wellness, and major incidents like natural disasters and large-scale events, which resonate with the public’s interests and fears.

Secondly, about the reproductivity of syntactic forms, this paper discussed the syntactic forms of online rumors, as particularly represented by those related to earthquake predictions. These rumors often include specific details, such as the source of information, time, location, and magnitude, which make them easily shareable and believable. The format of these rumors is simple, clear, and easy to imitate, facilitating their widespread dissemination.

Thirdly, the paper discussed the recurring nature of online rumor content, especially in trending topics. Rumors that have circulated for years or even decades continue to resurface periodically on the internet. These rumors may fade from public view after spreading but can reemerge when conditions are right, capturing public attention once again. This pattern is seen in two main scenarios: the repetition of meme prototypes with unaltered content and the repetition of meme variants with renovated content. The persistence and impact of certain online rumors highlight the challenges in controlling their spread and the need for continuous education and effective communication strategies to combat

misinformation.

Although these characteristics do not have absolute sufficiency, they provide valuable references for identifying online rumors. Through this study, we have not only enriched the theoretical perspective of rumor research but also provided practical guidance for the identification and prevention of online rumors. We hope that these findings will enhance the ability of online communicators to recognize and counteract rumors, offering predictive advice for official entities to effectively reduce the spread of online rumors, their probability, and intensity. Future research can further delve into other characteristics of online rumors, such as their variability during the dissemination process and the interpersonal strategies and contextual factors that contribute to their widespread dissemination. Through continuous research, we can better understand the complexity of online rumors and provide a more solid theoretical foundation and practical guidance for building a harmonious online society.

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