Original Paper

The Translation and Cognitive Interpretation of the Rhetorical Devices in Internet Hot Words from 2012 to 2025

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Abstract

Previous studies have shown that research on internet hot words from cognitive linguistic perspective has mostly focused on exploring their metaphorical nature. However, there are not many studies that discuss the translation and analyze the linguistic phenomena via employing theories in cognitive linguistics. In view of this, this study draws on to cover two aspects: the translation of the internet hot words; the conceptual blending analysis of the rhetorical devices of internet hot words. Firstly, the annual internet hot words during the fourteen years from 2012 to 2025 have been collected. Secondly, the internet hot words that involve using of rhetorical devices have been identified, categorized, and analyzed. Thirdly, the translation of two typical internet hot words has been analyzed. Finally, two typical internet hot words with the employment of rhetorical device have been selected and interpreted cognitively based on the conceptual blending theory. It was found that the phenomenon of using rhetorical devices in internet hot words is extremely common, especially with more metaphors, hyperboles, and metonymies. In addition, the translation of the internet hot words with the employment of rhetorical devices should take cultural elements into consideration. The conceptual blending theory can well explain the rhetorical meaning embodied in internet hot words.

Keywords

internet hot words, conceptual blending theory, translation, rhetorical devices

1. Introduction

Internet hot words refer to words that spread rapidly, prevail and are characterized by proliferation, timeliness, locality and density in a certain period of time on internet or in a certain online community. The National Language Resources Monitor and Research Center for Network Media, which belongs to the Scientific Research Center of National Language Commission, has been releasing the top 10

internet hot words of the year for 14 years now, with a total of 140 internet hot words since 2012. In terms of research content, previous studies on internet hot words are mainly characterized by the following features: first, most studies only categorize and discuss the internet hot words simply (Zhuo & Zhao 2021); second, some overall studies on internet hot words have been conducted from the perspectives of cultural communication and cross-cultural communication (Hu & Xue 2019); third, some studies research on the translation of certain internet hot words based on different translation theories (Li 2023; Li & Liu 2024); fourth, sporadic studies conduct concrete analysis on internet hot words in a certain year or a certain internet hot word in a certain year from the perspective of linguistics (Xie & Zhang 2025); Specifically in cognitive linguistics, studies analyzing internet hot words have focused on exploring the metaphorical nature of the hot words (Cai Ti Zhao Xue, 2022; Li Juxing; Qin Ling; Dong Jiayi, 2025). In terms of research method, basically, the qualitative research method is adopted, which first displays the definition and characteristics of internet hot words, and then categorizes them, or finds a few typical examples to analyze from different angles such as word formation, culture, etc. Overall, fewer studies have been conducted on the rhetorical devices of internet hot words based on cognitive linguistic theories. In view of this, this study attempts to investigate translation of the internet hot words that involve rhetorical devices on the one hand, and also investigate the rhetorical devices of internet hot words based on the conceptual blending theory of cognitive linguistics on the other hand. In the following, firstly, the rhetorical devices employed in the 140 annual internet hot words released by the National Language Resources Monitoring and Research Network Media Language Center from 2012 to 2025 are statistically analyzed. Secondly, the translation of two typical internet hot words is discussed. Thirdly, the conceptual blending theory is introduced, and finally, the internet hot word Jinli as well as wo-man is taken as examples for cognitive elucidation based on the conceptual blending theory.

2. Rhetorical Devices of Internet Hot Words from 2012 to 2025

First of all, 140 internet hot words have been collected, which are released with ten annually in the official website of the National Language Resources Monitor and Research Center for Network Media from 2012 to 2025. Second, the rhetorical devices involved in the internet hot words have been identified and categorized. It was found that 80 internet hot words employ the use of certain rhetorical devices, which occupy 57% of the total. Specific statistics are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

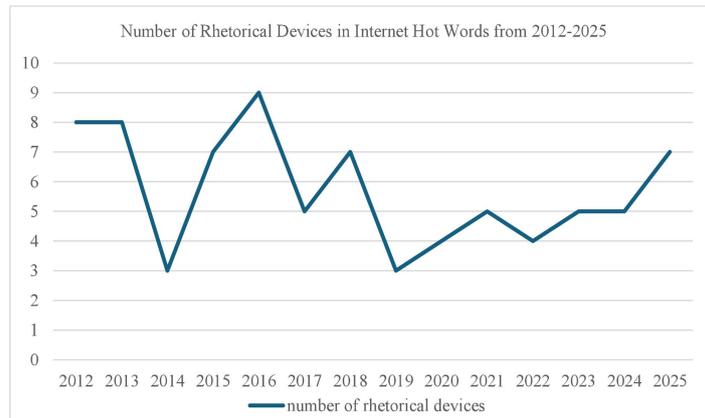57% of the total. Specific statistics are shown in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1. Overview of the Number of Rhetorical Devices in Internet Hot Words from 2012-2025
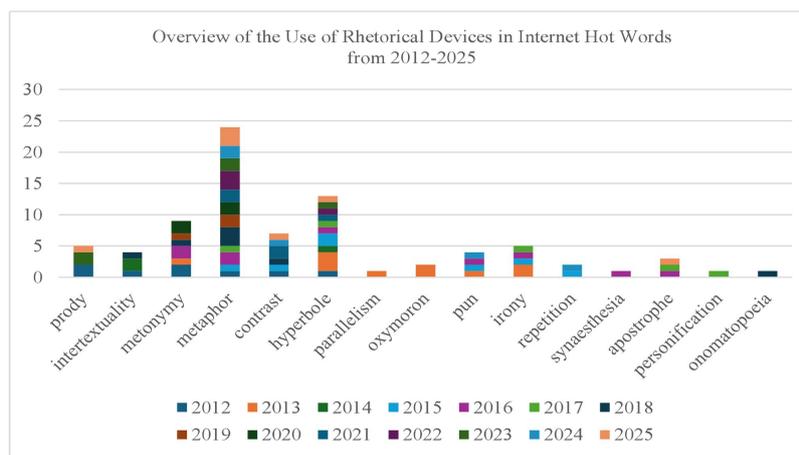

Figure 2. Overview of the Use of Rhetorical Devices in Internet Hot Words from 2012-2025

Figure 1 shows that different numbers of rhetorical devices appear in internet hot words each year from 2012 to 2025. Comparatively speaking, slightly more internet hot words employ rhetorical devices in 2016, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2017 and 2025. To be specific, eight internet hot words reflect the use of rhetorical devices respectively in 2012 and 2013. Following that, there is a sharp drop in 2014. However, it quickly picks its peak in 2016. Although fluctuations exist in the data from 2017 to 2024, it is easy to see that more rhetorical devices are involved in 2025 again. Figure 2 indicates that altogether 15 types of rhetorical devices are employed by the internet hot words. Among them, metaphor dominates in number, following by hyperbole and metonymy. The rest 12 types are relatively small in number. Since metaphor has been used most, one of them will be selected to illustrate the conceptual blending interpretation of internet hot words, which is Jinli. In addition, oxymoron is not used in high frequency but very interesting. Thus, one example Nvhanzi (wo-man) is also selected to provide conceptual blending analysis.

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3. The Translation of the Internet Hot Words Jinli and Nvhanzi

Traditionally, the word Jinli dated back to koi fish, which is common in China. Since it has been embedded in some positive expression such as "liyu yue longmen" which means carp leaping over the dragon gate to show success, it is associated with good fortune or good luck. In addition, Jinli is different from koi fish by functioning as a kind of fish for appreciation rather than providing food. As a fish for appreciation, Jinli has no direct link with good fortune or good luck. To some degree, it is its charming colorful appearance that catches people's eyeball easily and gifted it the symbolic meaning of good fortune or good luck. Due to these two reasons, Jinli owns metaphorical usage as an internet hot word too.

Jinli is one of the top ten internet hot words released by the National Language Resources Monitor and Research Center for Network Media in 2018. Its rapid popularity on the internet is tied to two events that happened back then. Specifically, in 2018, in "Produce 101", a network variety show, participant Yang Chaoyue, who had no influential background and relatively low ability. In addition, she was easily crying in the programme. However, maybe because of her emphasis that she worked very hard, she was lucky to win the debut with the third place without difficulty. As a result, people have been teasing Yang Chaoyue as a lucky Jinli, reposting her photos on the internet in anticipation of good luck. Later, the term Jinli gained wider popularity online after Xin Xiaodai became the sole winner of the Alipay sweepstakes. In October 2018, Alipay posted a sweepstakes tweet that would draw one lucky winner. This lucky winner will end up with great prizes worth over a million Chinese RMB in total. Weibo netizen Xin Xiaodai was very lucky enough to be drawn and leap to become the Chinese Jinli. Netizens then began to discuss about it enthusiastically, and words like Chinese Jinli and other related terms made it stand on the Weibo hot search list and quickly became prevalent on the internet. Netizens have been frantically forwarding Jinli in hopes of getting lucky. On this occasion, the meaning of Jinli, as an appreciable carp, began to generalize and it became a symbol of good luck, referring to anyone or anything associated with good fortune. The internet has also set off a craze for forwarding Jinli, which reflects people's desire for a better life and is also a way for them to relieve stress. In the following, we will first provide a detailed introduction to the conceptual blending theory, and then make a cognitive interpretation of the meaning of the internet hot word Jinli based on it.

For the translation of Chinese internet hot words. Fully understanding of sever elements are important, which are the linguistic characteristics, cultural connotations, and the specific context in which the internet hot words arise. These words are inseparable with the society. All these factors increase the level of difficulty for translating the internet hot words.

The word Jinli refers to a kind of fish, specifically, means brocade carp, which now has evolved into an internet hot word that symbolizes good luck, fortune, and often refers to an individual who experiences extraordinary good luck or wins multiple prizes in a competition, or an object or event that can bring luck. In effect, this meaning is deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture, where the carp is pertinent with perseverance, abundance, and success, particularly in expression like carp jumping over the

dragon gate, which metaphorically referring for overcoming challenges to achieve success. Developing into an internet hot word, Jinli expands its meaning from a kind of fish to representing a person, object or event that connects with good fortune or embodies luck itself. When translating it into English, these factors should be taken into account.

The internet hot words Jinli can be translated into different terms, such as brocade carp, lucky charm, lucky star, winning streak person, koi fish, Jinli. Comparatively speaking, brocade carp is a direct, word-for-word translation, which is linguistically appropriate but embed no meaning pertinent to luck or luck person, luck event, luck object. Thus, it sounds inappropriate. For lucky charm, lucky star, winning streak person, they fail to capture the traditional cultural meaning as well as the internet meaning embedded in Chinese since they either only underscore person or object but not both. For Jinli, the strategy transliteration is employed. Explanation might also be considered to add to the form of transliteration. In this way, on one hand, Jinli maintains the culture factors, on the other hand, is conducive to help those who are unfamiliar with Chinese culture to understand the Chinese internet hot word.

Nvhanzi (Wo-man) is one of the top ten Chinese internet hot words released by the National Language Resources Monitor and Research Center for Network Media in 2013. It has been translated into different versions appearing online like the China daily website, including manly girl, tough girl, tomboy, and wo-man. Among these versions, the former three emphasize more on the link or similarities between the female's appearance and the male's appearance. They either stress that the females look physically strong, big or behave like a man, which is not matching the meaning of it as an internet hot word. For the translating version wo-man. The form is special by separate the word woman from the two letters wo and the three letters man with a hyphen. On the one hand, this separation indicates the difference between woman and man. On the other hand, the difference goes beyond the appearance by aligning the similarities between certain women and men with the character of strong will, independence and capability. In this way, the female's appearance and some of the positive characters of the male have been combined and reflected on some females which are corresponding to its meaning as an internet hot word.

4. The Conceptual Blending Analysis of the Internet Hot Words Jinli and Wo-man

4.1 Conceptual Blending Theory

Conceptual Blending Theory was put forward by Fauconnier and Turner (1998; 2002). It reflects the most fundamental and significant aspect of human experience. Conceptual blending theory has been widely used, not only for explaining linguistic phenomena, but also non-linguistic phenomena. The process for it to explain different types of phenomena is to integrate part of the elements and structure of the input spaces to an emergent structure in the blended space. Specifically, it is a model of conceptual projection across at least four spaces which have different roles (Turner and Fauconnier, 1995). The four basic spaces are the two input spaces, the generic space and the blended space. There

are elements in each of the input space. Some elements are corresponding ones that can do cross-space projection, but others are not. This indicates that the cross-space projection of the input spaces is selective. When the corresponding elements are mapped onto each other from one input space to the other, the process is called partial cross-space mapping. A structure which can be applied to both inputs and consists of the common elements of the inputs exists in the generic space. When the elements are selectively projected to the fourth space which is the blended space and it is characterized by not only containing something that exists in the two inputs, but also containing something that is absent from both inputs, which is the emergent structure developed during the process of blending. The emergent structure is unique for the blended space because it does not belong to the input spaces or the generic space either. Three operations are involved in the conceptual process of blending for the appearance of the emergent structure. According to Grady's (2000) explanation about the three operations put forward by Turner (1996), and Fauconnier and Turner (2002), composition is the simplest that is related to combining some materials of the inputs into one imaginatively. In other words, in the process of composition, "blending can compose elements from the input spaces to provide relations that do not exist in the separate input" (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002: 48). Completion happens when partial representations enter the blend to form other materials, particularly "when structure in the blend matches information in long-term memory" (Coulson and Oakley, 2000: 180). Elaboration takes place when we strive to fill in some details in the blend. Next, the conceptual blending theory will be taken to interpret the meaning of the internet hot word Jinli and Wo-man.

4.2 The Conceptual Blending Analysis of Jinli

Based on the conceptual blending theory, the internet hot word Jinli is analyzed. Two input spaces can be identified in the metaphorical internet hot word Jinli, one of which is where the kind of fish Jinli is situated and the other in which certain person, object or event is situated. The details can be seen from figure 3.
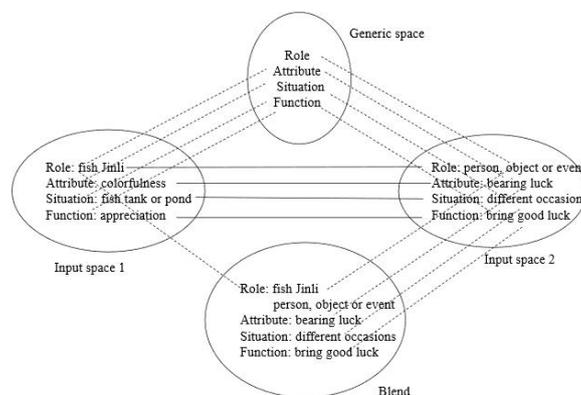

Figure 3. Jinli

Figure 3 displays that there are some elements in both inputs, which are role, attribute, situation and function. The corresponding specific elements are illustrated subsequently. For example, the space that contains the Jinli has the elements of the fish Jinli, corlorfulness, pond or fish tank, and appreciation. The space that contains certain person, object or event has the elements of person, object, or event, bearing luck, different occasions, and good-luck bring ability. When the counterparts of role, attribute, situation and function are projected into the generic space, these counterparts convey the idea that something imposes negative influence upon people, because it is the common points of both inputs. When elements of role in the Jinli space and the elements of person, object, or event, luck, different occasions, and good-luck bring ability in the person, object or event space are projected into the blended space, a new image of the Jinli which can bring good luck on different occasions is formed in the emergent structure. This new image in the blended space combines certain elements from both spaces to endow certain person, object or event brings good luck like Jinli. Therefore, the internet hot word has been embedded with positive meaning.

4.3 The Conceptual Blending Analysis of Wo-man

Based on the conceptual blending theory, the internet hot word wo-man is analyzed. Two input spaces can be identified from the internet hot word wo-man which employs the rhetorical device oxymoron, one of which is where the woman is situated, and the other in which the man is situated. The details are displayed in figure 4.
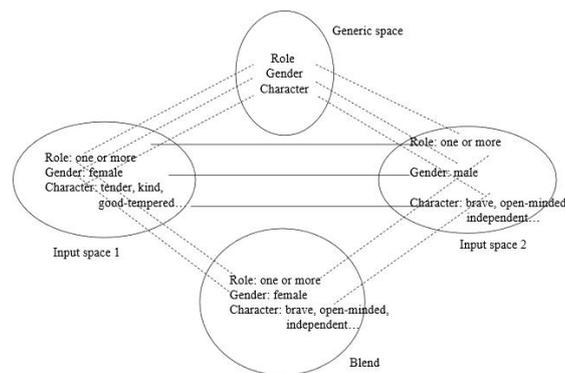

Figure 4. Wo-man

Figure 4 displays that there are some elements in both inputs which are role, gender and character. The specific information is as the following. For example, the space that contains the woman has the elements of one or more women, female in gender, kindness, tenderness, good-temperedness. The space that contains the man has the elements of one or more men, male in gender, bravery, open-mindedness, independence. When the counterparts of role, gender and character are projected into the generic space, these counterparts convey the idea that something imposes positive influence upon women, because it is the common points of both inputs. When elements of role and gender in the

woman space and the elements of role and character in the man space are projected into the blended space, a new image of the woman with gender of the female and character of the male is formed in the emergent structure. This new image in the blended space combines certain elements from both input spaces which implies the meaning that certain women bear positive characters of men. In other words, these women lack no positive characters of the female, but at the same moment also share positive characters of men, which enables such group of women to become different from other women, arresting people's eyes. Thus, the blend has been running imaginatively to indicate positive meaning to women.

5. Conclusion

The 57th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China shows that by December 2025, the number of internet users, i.e. netizens, in China has reached 1.125 billion, and the internet penetration rate has exceeded 80% for the first time. In this context, internet language, as an important carrier of digital life, continues to increase its dissemination and influence, and the cognitive research on it has important theoretical value and practical significance. Taking the annual internet hot words during the fourteen-year period from 2012-2025 as the corpus, this study not only discusses the translation of certain internet hot words with the employment of rhetorical devices, but also systematically analyzes their rhetorical phenomena from a cognitive linguistic perspective with the help of conceptual blending theory. The results show that: first, rhetorical devices appear frequently in internet hot words, especially metaphors, hyperboles, and metonymies, which reflect the cognitive preferences and expression strategies of the netizens; second, the translation of internet hot words involve rhetorical devices should consider the cultural elements; third, the conceptual blending theory is capable of effectively explaining how the internet hot words realize semantic compression and layer-created meaning generation among multiple mental spaces, which provides a powerful cognitive tool for understanding the dynamics and creativity of internet language.

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