

Exploring Language Variation in Internet Buzzwords: A Case Study of the Phrase "Officially Diagnosed as XX"



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ABSTRACT: Internet buzzwords, characterized by their interactivity and permeability, serve as indicators of the shifting emotional landscapes and emotional appeals of netizens within distinct temporal contexts. However, these buzzwords remain far from stagnant, continually undergoing linguistic variations influenced by the psychological dispositions of users and the ever-shifting environmental backdrop. In this case study, a comprehensive exploration of linguistic variation within internet buzzwords is undertaken, focusing intently on the dynamic phrase "officially diagnosed as XX" and its profound reflection of prevailing social mentalities and linguistic motivations. Guided by the conceptual framework of eco-linguistics, which offers a lens for comprehending the economic underpinnings of language and rationalizing the phenomena of internet buzzwords, this study delves into an intricate analysis. By meticulously dissecting online datasets and user commentary, the study unveils the multifaceted employment of "officially diagnosed as XX" as an instrument to articulate an array of emotions and cognitive states, ranging from humor to frustration and even self-deprecation. Through the prism of language evolution in the digital era, the study engages in a scholarly discourse on the intricate phenomenon of linguistic variation within the realm of internet discourse. Ultimately, this research not only illuminates the intricate dynamics between language, society, and technology in the contemporary age but also advances our comprehension of the profound interplay between language, emotion, and human communication within the digital realm.

KEYWORDS: language variation; Internet buzzwords; social mentality; language motivation

I. INTRODUCTION

Internet language refers to various forms of language used by netizen in online communication, and with the increase in the number of users, the phenomenon of linguistic variation has occurred in Internet language. Internet buzzwords are a special phenomenon in the development of Internet language (Liu, 2023). In the Internet era, it is an inevitable trend that the language of Internet buzzwords and popular phrases changes and mutates in the process of use. From the familiar "Tang Ping", "Nei Juan", "666" to the recently emerging "be officially diagnosed as XX", these Internet buzzwords and catchphrases are widely sought after. "Diagnose" is a medical term meaning a definitive diagnosis, and has been widely seen in recent years in connection with the Covid-19. Recently, "be officially diagnosed as XX" has been modeled and used by netizen, who use the buzzword not to say that they have been diagnosed with some disease, but to express their mental state and emotions through metaphorical means, in order to arouse some kinds of associations, concerns, and thoughts among the audience. At this point, "be officially diagnosed as XX" has undergone a linguistic variation, which is netizen' innovative use of "diagnose". Internet buzzwords are communicative discourses that carry common social mentality, emotion and cognition, reflecting netizen' concerns and feelings about social life (Li et al., 2020). The variation of this Internet buzzword also implies the social mentality and emotional needs of netizen. Therefore, this paper will analyze the recently widely circulated "be officially diagnosed as XX" from the perspective of language variation, and explore the linguistic motivation of its variation and the social mentality of netizen who are willing to imitate and continue to create this buzzword.

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II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Definition of Language Variation

Language variation is an important branch of sociolinguistics, and scholars hold different views on the definition of language variation. Shi (1999) pointed out that language variation refers to the changes in the structural elements and their relationships of linguistic phenomena and language systems with the changes in communicative requirements and structural functions. According to Chai (2005), language variation refers to the changes in language caused by language users who deliberately deviate from the linguistic norms and use language creatively under specific occasions or linguistic environments. According to Guo (2006), language variation is the difference in the use of language by communicators due to the constraints of non-linguistic elements, i.e., exogenous factors, and homogeneous linguistic elements, i.e., endogenous factors, in verbal communication activities. You and Zou (2016) believed that language variation refers to the change of a certain linguistic phenomenon in the actual use of the language. The above scholars have defined language variation from different perspectives, but they all point out that the essence of language variation is the recreation of language. In the process of language use, the phenomenon of language variation is ubiquitous.

2.2 Research on Internet Buzzwords

Internet buzzwords are forms of language that are imitated, copied and used by netizen when they communicate on the Internet (Zhang & Jiang, 2011), and this form of language is widely recognized and used by netizen. Many scholars have conducted research on the English translation, the translation strategies and the motivation of Internet buzzwords, and the characteristics of their dissemination. Hu (2019) summarized the main viewpoints of buzzword research in the past decade and explored its research content and basic stance from the perspectives of linguistics, translation, sociology, and pedagogy. Li (2022) used the three-dimensional transformation method (linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions) to study the English translation of 2020 Internet buzzwords under the guidance of the theory of Eco-translatology. Similarly, Guo (2018) also focused on the translation research of Internet buzzwords, and explored the translation strategy of translation of Internet buzzwords under the perspective of memetics. Although the translation of Internet buzzwords has been paid attention to by many scholars, research on the extension of the meaning of network buzzwords still should be improved. Guided by the principle of recognition, Tian and Wang (2022) focused on the network buzzwords based on old words, summarized the main problems of the current new translation of old words, and discuss the translation strategy of such buzzwords. Tian (2020) analyzed the external motives such as social factors and communicative functions that generate Internet buzzwords from the perspective of eco-linguistics, explores the internal mechanisms such as the economic principle of language, and argues that we should treat Internet buzzwords rationally. Li and Huang (2022) used Goffman's Framework Analysis Theory to analyze the Internet buzzwords of 2018-2020 and explored the communication characteristics and social functions of Internet buzzwords.

At the same time, specific research on Internet buzzwords is also in progress. Many scholars have studied a specific network buzzword that was more popular at that time. For example, Zhu et al. (2022a) used the "Little Triangle" Theory to explore the three-dimensional dynamics of the Internet "X-ren" and found that "X" has the strongest word formation function when it is bisyllabic. From the perspective of cognitive metaphor, Zhu et al. (2022b) also explored the semantic generalization process and the metaphorical mechanism of semantic generalization of the network buzzword "lie flat". Based on the perspective of cognitive linguistics, Yang (2022) analyzed the representative words of "X-ren" structure and "X-jing" structure based on metaphor theory, so as to help people understand the connotation of words and master the usage of such words. Xi (2022) studies and analyzes the network buzzword "Shi Chui" from the three perspectives of metaphor, conceptual synthesis and category theory under the theory of cognitive linguistics, which should be helpful to understand the mechanism of word meaning and the cognitive law of people's understanding of things. Chen (2023) found that the existing research on the "XX Da" format is not deep enough, and the analysis of related causes needs to be further deepened. Therefore, he reanalyzed the "XX Da" format and tried to analyze the pragmatic motivation of this type of structure from the perspective of pragmatic memes.

2.3 Research on Language Variation and Internet Buzzwords

Language variation has received extensive attention from Chinese scholars. Scholars have studied the variation of Internet buzzwords and pointed out that metaphor and metonymy play an important role in the process of Internet language variation. Wu (2016) studied the variation of Internet language from the perspective of cognitive linguistics, pointing out that the variation

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of Internet language is the result of the interaction of various factors, such as people's cognitive style, psychology and social environment, and that metaphors and metonymy can contribute to the variation of Internet language. Lu and Chang (2022) took the annual "Top Ten Buzzwords" released by the editorial office of YAOWEN-JIAOZI from 2016 to 2020 as an example, and analyzed the buzzwords in the new media era from the perspective of language variation, exploring their basic forms of variation, motivation and social mentality that caused the variation. After the variation of buzzwords, people can easily understand, accept and apply them in their personal communication, mainly because the mechanism of metaphor and analogy is in line with human cognitive style.

Language variation is categorized in different ways from different perspectives. According to the scope of variation, language variation can be divided into four kinds: individual language variation, partial people imitation variation, partial group imitation variation and speech community variation (Ding, 2000). The popularity of language forms is a characteristic of Internet language. By creating, forwarding, commenting, imitating and recreating a certain language form, netizen end up with a language that attracts widespread attention on the Internet and is used in actual communication, that is, Internet buzzwords. The generation of Internet buzzwords is inextricably linked with language users, gradually transforming from an individual's to some people, some groups, and finally to that of the whole community. Therefore, this paper will start from the scope of language variation, analyze the recent widespread use of "be officially diagnosed as XX" by netizen, and sort out the linguistic motivation of its variation and the social mentality of netizen' willingness to imitate and use this phrase.

III. ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE VARIATION OF “BE OFFICIALLY DIAGNOSED AS XX”

3.1 Origin of the buzzword

Recently, "Diagnostic Literature" has been widely used by netizen to emulate the format of a diagnostic letter, and then borrow the character traits of movie and TV characters to express their current state or emotions, or to tease others about their attitudes or opinions. "Diagnosis" is a term used in the medical field, when a person is diagnosed with a certain disease during a physical examination. The Internet buzzword "be officially diagnosed as XX" is an expression that is usually used in a playful, exaggerated or humorous context. Its core structure is "be officially diagnosed as XX", followed by a specific word XX, which represents a particular identity, trait or state. This expression is characterized by the announcement of "be officially diagnosed as XX" to express a "pathological" characteristic, but is not actually a medical diagnosis. On July 7, the topic of "Xi'an people are officially diagnosed as Shen Meizhuang" hit the Weibo trending. A Xi'an citizen explained: "There are tourists everywhere. I just want to hide at home." This state is like Shen Meizhuang in the "*Empresses in the Palace*" (a very popular TV series in China, audience like to use the content of the TV series to create). I am too lazy to go out and unwilling to see people. "Diagnostic Literature" has attracted netizen to continue to imitate, and people have begun to "self-diagnose" and release their emotions by labeling themselves. "Be officially diagnosed as XX" has spread rapidly on the Internet, and everything can be substituted. From the beginning of the popular film and television drama "*Empresses in the Palace*" to other memorable classic films, television dramas and animations, celebrities, food, animals, etc. For example, a netizen claimed that he was officially diagnosed as a potato because his belly are round and he likes "Tang Ping", being like potatoes.

3.2 Linguistic Motivation for Language Variation

One of the important reasons why people can easily understand, accept and apply the variant catchwords to personal communication is that the variant thinking of metaphor is in line with human cognitive style (Lu & Chang, 2022). The buzzword "be officially diagnosed as XX" reflects metaphorical thinking. Not all variations will be permanently spread, just as the hot words of the network in previous years have disappeared. The language community variation of a Internet buzzword needs to be widely imitated and disseminated to the extent that most people in a language community use it unconsciously. "XX" has not yet been used by the whole speech community. Therefore, this article will start from three aspects: individual language variation, partial people imitation variation, partial group imitation variation, and combine metaphors to sort out the context of the network language variation.

3.2.1 Individual Language Variation

Individual language variation refers to the variation in the language of an individual that does not conform to the standard form of language. Due to the relatively scattered distribution, most individual language variations do not cause others to respond

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(Ding, 2000). Based on the keywords of "be officially diagnosed" in Little Red Book (Xiaohongshu), Weibo and Douyin (TikTok), the main social software in China, it is found that the variation of the network language occurred on July 1, and most of them were diagnosed as the characters in the "Empresses in the Palace". At this time, "be officially diagnosed as XX" is still used by a small number of netizen who love "Empresses in the Palace".

A. "I am officially diagnosed as Huanbi"

"I am officially diagnosed as Huanbi" means that "I" has the same characteristics as Huanbi. Huanbi is the maid of the heroine in "Empresses in the Palace". She is also the female lead's half-sister, so she always holds high and step down, narrow-minded, dislike others, and like to use words to depreciate others." I just can't see her like that" is the most frequent sentence in the play. The netizen says that she's "officially diagnosed as Huanbi" does not mean that she is such a person as Huanbi, but conveys that there are some people she hates in the real and online world and that she is not in a good mood through the use of this buzzword.

B. "I am officially diagnosed as Su Peisheng" & "I am officially diagnosed as Consort Duan"

In addition to venting emotions, the buzzword can also convey the importance of one's own state of "mental exhaustion". Also being the characters in "Empresses in the Palace", Su Peisheng and Consort Duan have different meanings when they are the objects of "be officially diagnosed as". "I am officially diagnosed as Su Peisheng" is a cry for help under the fatigue of work, "groveling and being careful in front of the boss every day", which speaks of the state of mind of repressing oneself and swallowing one's anger. He served the emperor as much as he could, and sometimes he was reprimanded by the emperor for doing something bad. The netizen see Su Peisheng as if they see themselves in the workplace. They work hard every day and try their best to do their own work, but the boss still pricks sometimes, and feels that you are not doing well here, and there can be done better. What's more, the boss in front of you praise your good job, but in the back he says to your colleagues that your work is in a mess, infinitely demeaning you. Therefore, the buzzword "be officially diagnosed as Su Peisheng" vividly expresses the frustration of the workers, and also implies that they hope to be more considerate and caring in the workplace.

"Be officially diagnosed as Consort Duan" also conveys the mental state of many netizen who lose their vitality and exhaustion under the pressure of life. Consort Duan is one of the emperor's concubines in "Empresses in the Palace". Because poisoned by the emperor's favorite princess, so she was physically weak and mentally ill every day, but she was still living hard in order to avenge herself. The character image of Consort Duan is consistent with the life of many people in society. There are a lot of burdens on them. They may have elderly people in their families to support, or have children to go to school and interest classes, or both. They have also suffered a lot of grievances in the workplace. But they still have to live strong, for themselves and for their families. The buzzword "be officially diagnosed as XX" may not only vent bad emotions, but also appeal to people for care.

3.2.2 Partial people imitation variation

Partial people imitation variation refers to the fact that individual linguistic variation affects and is imitated by others, which leads to the emergence of partial person mimicry variation (Ding, 2000). The characters in "Empresses in the Palace" began to resonate with more netizen, and some of them began to imitate and recreate confirmatory literature, and so the objects that could be confirmed were extended to other deeply popular movies and TV dramas, cartoons, plants and animals, and so on.

A. "Be officially diagnosed as Lazy Sheep"

"Be officially diagnosed as Lazy Sheep" began to be widely used by netizen. Lazy Sheep is a sheep in the Chinese animated cartoon *Pleasant Goat and Big Big Wolf*, who likes to eat and sleep, doesn't like sports, and has no money. He always says he is a noble sheep born for sleeping. "Be officially diagnosed as Lazy Sheep" is used by a large number of netizen because the image of Lazy Sheep is very suitable for them, and the life of Lazy Sheep is the life they are living now, and even netizen who don't have this kind of leisurely life are still envious of this kind of life. Now this society is full of competition pressure, many people do not want to work hard just to have a lot of money to spend, the result may be at the expense of their physical health. In fact, there are a lot of such people who have money but their physical state is not good anymore, so they send their personal experience to the Internet to exhort everyone to work in moderation. It may be that the netizen have seen the deeds of these people, or they just want to live a dull life, so they like and yearn for Lazy Sheep's life. They even feel that their monthly salary is just enough to be able to support themselves, and it's a blessing to be able to eat and sleep on time. The buzzword "be officially diagnosed as

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Lazy Sheep" expresses netizen' derision of their own contentment with a dull life and lack of mental energy, but also their envy of the lazy goat's state of life.

B. "Be officially diagnosed as Jellyfish"

This is a more abstract way of expression, getting rid of the shackles of human identity and liberating nature in the name of animals. The "be officially diagnosed as jellyfish" is used to express that they have the same characteristics as jellyfish and are more vulnerable. Jellyfish contain 100% water, no brain nor heart, and will prick the object that hurts it when feeling hurt. In reality, many people are just like jellyfish, relatively simple, fragile, and not good at communicating with others. Such people are vulnerable, but because they have jellyfish-like characteristics, they will not fight back hard, but will shed tears on their own, alone to digest the harm caused by others. The netizen who say "they are officially diagnosed as jellyfish " uses obscure and rambling language to analyze its poor sociability and simple fragile personality, and also attracts other netizen to watch and decipher and hold together for warmth.

3.2.3 Partial Group Imitation Variation

Partial group imitation variation refers to the further linguistic variation that occurs on the basis of partial mimicry variation, i.e., the expansion of mimicry from a small number of people to a larger number of people, and the formation of a certain number of group mimicry (Ding, 2000). In early July, after the topic of "Xi'an people are officially diagnosed as Shen Meizhuang" hit the Weibo trending, many provinces began to follow the trend due to the weather, and topics such as "Beijing people are officially diagnosed as Nezha", "Fujian people are officially diagnosed as Sun Wukong", and "Cantonese are officially diagnosed as Yiping", also rushed to the Weibo trending. At this point, "be officially diagnosed as XX" has already been imitated and used by a certain number of groups.

A. "Beijing people are officially diagnosed as Nezha"

"Beijing people are officially diagnosed as Nezha" expresses the fact that due to the recent high temperatures in Beijing, people are traveling to work as if Nezha is on Wind Fire Wheels. Nezha, an important character in Chinese mythology and ancient Chinese literature such as *Fengshen Yanyi* (or *Investiture of the Gods*) travels not on foot but on wind and fire wheels. Beijing people feel like they are stepping on fire when they go out due to the high ground temperature, just like Nezha who travels on his Wind Fire Wheels.

B. "Fujian people are officially diagnosed as Sun Wukong"

Fujian netizen are self-diagnosed as Sun Wukong, also because of the high temperature, the locals feel as if Sun Wukong stay in the alchemy furnace. Sun Wukong is a character in the famous novel *Journey to the West*. He was once put into the alchemy furnace where the temperature is extremely high by Lord Laozi, which can reach thousands of degrees. The temperature in Fujian rose sharply, and staying in Fujian was like staying in a alchemy furnace, which was very hot.

C. "Cantonese are officially diagnosed as Yiping"

"Cantonese are officially diagnosed as Yiping" expresses the feeling of Guangdong netizen that Guangdong is affected by typhoon and often has torrential rains, which are as heavy as the rain on the day when Yiping, the female protagonist of the television drama *Deep Feeling in the Drizzle*, asked her father for money, so Guangdong netizen jokingly claim that they are diagnosed as Yiping.

IV. SOCIAL MENTALITY OF THE BUZZWORD USERS

As a popular language expression, Internet buzzwords can reflect or imply the social situation and social mentality of netizen (Wang , 2016). Social mentality is a macro social state of mind that pervades the whole society or social group over a period of time, and is expressed through the fads, fashions, public opinions of the whole society as well as the social life feelings, confidence in the future, social motives and social emotions of the members of the society (Yang, 2006). The creation and widespread dissemination of "be officially diagnosed as XX" reflects the social psychology of the general public from two sides. One is to seeking resonance and identity, and another is to relieve pressure in a self-deprecating way.

4.1 Seeking resonance and identity

The reason why Internet terms become popular is mainly due to the imitation, creation and use by Internet users. When netizen resonate with a certain Internet language, they will be willing to use and re-create it, which will lead to the rapid spread

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of the Internet language. The economic principle of language is reflected in the popular phrase "be officially diagnosed as XX", which uses movie and TV characters to accurately imply their mood and state of mind, which can only be understood but not conveyed in words, so that netizen with the same state of mind can clearly perceive the meaning behind it and take part in this culture, and have to put a label on themselves, bringing them closer to each other. The labeling of the Internet users has brought them closer to each other and aroused their emotional resonance. For example, netizen call themselves "She Kong", a label that reflects more of an identity and role-playing (Cai & Zhao, 2022).

4.2 Relieving pressure in a self-deprecating way

Internet buzzwords express netizen' general concerns and opinions about the current state of society as well as a way for netizen to vent their emotions (Wang, 2011). In today's rapidly developing economy and society, everyone has to face difficulties and pressure in life, study, work and interaction, and will have different degrees of emotions. Internet buzzwords fulfill netizen' psychological needs to release pressure and emotions. Therefore, through the use and imitation of Internet buzzwords, netizen give vent to their inner emotions and pressures that cannot be expressed to others directly in social life, and self-deprecation has become a common phenomenon in Internet buzzwords, such as the widespread use of "She Kong", "Fo Xi", "Ge You-esque lying" and other Internet buzzwords are widely used by netizen. Jiang (2021) points out that today's young generation, under the pressure of changing times, is more likely to use self-deprecating language to relieve and escape from the pressure of reality, presenting a self-examining spirit of entertainment. In the past, we did not like to mention one's illness and receive treatment, but now we self-diagnose and use exaggerated language to convey our heartfelt demands. "Be officially diagnosed with XX" uses simple and humorous language to allow people to label themselves to convey their moods and states, and to relieve the bitterness of facing high temperatures, pressures, and all kinds of unsatisfactory things in life. For example, a netizen jokingly said, "I am officially diagnosed as An Lingrong (A character in *Empresses in the Palace*) because I am really tired," expressing his/her sense of exhaustion.

V. CONCLUSION

In the Internet age, network buzzwords have become a real-time signal that can reflect people's emotional state and appeals in a certain period of time. This paper finds that netizen initially diagnosed themselves as familiar film and television characters to express their emotions. Subsequently, other netizen began to imitate and innovate, and diagnosed themselves as all kinds of things in the world, such as "potatoes" and "jellyfish". Finally, because of the weather conditions of the place of residence, netizen have posted that they have been officially diagnosed as "Nezha", "Yiping", etc., which has aroused the resonance and praise of netizen, making it a hot topic at Weibo. "Be officially diagnosed as XX " shows a strong inclusiveness. Every netizen can find their own "symptoms", so as to realize the needs of emotional resonance and identity. At the same time, this way also allows netizen to release the pressure and emotions in social life through self-mockery.

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