

# On the English Translation of Internet Buzzwords From the Perspective of Memetics

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**Abstract:** The development of language is closely related to the society. Changes in people's daily life would be reflected in the language. Internet buzzwords are used to express netizens' opinions and describe social events. The spread of Chinese Internet buzzwords provides cultural exchanges between countries, thus making the translation necessary. This essay takes the memetic theory as a guide, analyses the translation of Chinese Internet buzzwords, and summarize the feasibility and strategies of C-E translation of Chinese Internet buzzwords based on the theory of memetics, which are conducive to better cross-cultural communication.

**Keywords:** Internet buzzword translation; Characteristics of Internet buzzword; Memetics

## Introduction

China has experienced rapid economic development, an increasingly prominent international position and growing cultural influence in recent decades. The Outline of the 13th Five-Year Plan for Cultural Reform and Development (2017) states that it is necessary to implement the strategy of "going global" for culture, organise translations of outstanding academic results and cultural masterpieces, and improve the country's cultural soft power and international competitiveness.

Language is the mirror of society. A growing amount of new words and expressions about social development, economy, culture, science, and technology fill up the deficiency in the past vocabulary to illustrate the new concepts, especially the occur of Internet buzzwords. Internet buzzwords are used to express netizens' opinions and describe new events. They are now enriching the Chinese vocabulary and exert significant influence on every aspect of society, especially how people communicate. Nowadays, a significant number of foreigners would like to learn Chinese to have a better understanding of Chinese culture. Chinese Internet buzzwords have typical Chinese cultural characteristics. Appropriately translating Chinese Internet buzzwords into English into acceptable and understandable versions to foreign readers has become an issue worth exploring.

## 1. Chinese Internet Buzzwords and Memetics

### 1.1 An Introduction to Chinese Internet Buzzwords

Internet buzzwords are more affected by social development and culture compared with daily expression and written language. Internet buzzwords are a form of communication language transforming from social dialect to common social language. With the increasing amount of Internet users and the improvement of Internet technology, the form and the number of Internet buzzwords nowadays have increased dramatically. From the emoticons and abbreviations in the early stage to the current various forms. Internet buzzwords now include words, phrases, sentences, numbers, alphabets, and even emojis. For example, "–P" for sticking out the tongue, single word "高富帅", and sentence "你幸福吗" can all be seen in the communication.

Internet buzzwords are also epoch-oriented. Internet buzzwords come into being with the occurrence of a particular event or social phenomenon and decay with the rising of other events. For example, in 2012, the TV series *Mad Detective Di Renjie* was popular among all age groups. In the play, Detective Di Renjie, always asks his assistant, "Yuan Fang, what do you think?" every time they have a case. This interrogative sentence makes Detective Di look like a naive officer, entirely depending on his subordinates' advice. Later in 2012, when netizens posted their opinion online, they started with "元芳你怎么看?". As time went by, people seldom use this expression nowadays.

### 1.2 Translation Memetics

Memetics is a new theory explaining the law of cultural evolution based on the new Darwinian theory of evolution. Richard Dawkins put forward the term meme in his book *The Selfish Genes*. Dawkins believes that social culture can be spread because of a replicator of genes similar to biological inheritance, namely "meme". A meme is the parallel or horizontal transmission of cultural factors among individuals.<sup>[1]</sup> Later, Blackmore pointed out the transmission characteristics of memes, which are replicated and transmitted through imitation and are carriers of human cultural transmission ideas.<sup>[2]</sup> Language itself is a meme, and the meme is also contained in language. Translation is a necessary condition for integrating linguistic memes with the world. In *Memes of*

Translation: The Spread of Ideas in Translation Theory, Chesterman stated, "The concepts and viewpoints related to translation itself and translation theories are collectively referred to as translation memes, and a large number of translation memes, translation meme variants or translation meme complexes exist in the translation meme library."<sup>[3]</sup>

However, every meme of Internet buzzwords contains its social background or related events, so we cannot blindly pursue the translation of the source language meme into the target language, which will make it difficult for target language readers to decode the source language cultural meme, resulting in the transmission difficulty. Meme is the unit of cultural transmission and exerts a great effect on language. Therefore, methods and process of reproducing memes are of vital importance. According to He Ziran, there are two ways to replicate and transmit language memes. The first is memetic genotype which means the same content with various forms. The other is memetic phenotype which means the same form with different content".<sup>[4]</sup> In what follows, the source and the target texts will be discussed via meme genotype and phenotype in translation memetics.

## 2. Application of Memetics in the English Translation of Internet Buzzwords

Memes are generated because information is copied and spread so buzzwords become popular. The information arouses people's resonance, so people are willing to process and imitate the information, then the information becomes widespread. Dawkins summarized three characteristics of successful memes :copying-fidelity, fecundity and longevity. The characteristics of Internet buzzwords meet these conditions, so these words can be known and spread by the public. Due to cultural differences and other factors, there are still certain problems in the English translation of Internet buzzwords, thus making the study of applying the memetics to the translation of Internet buzzwords necessary to explore more potential for the translation and provide more theoretical basis for translators.

### 2.1 Genotype

Genotype is the equivalent conversion of original information between the source and target texts and retain cultural connotation and content to a great extent. Thus, the translation strategies of literal translation and transliteration correspond to the characteristics of meme genotype.

#### 2.1.1 Literal translation

According to memetics, literal translation maximally approximates the form of the source language and maintains the structure, image and cultural connotation of the original text. Although the source and the target languages are unique, sometimes similar memes in the source language culture can be found in the target language culture to produce similar infection and pragmatic effects on the host. In this case, literal translation can be adopted to translate the meme, that is, to retain the referential meaning of Chinese Internet buzzwords as much as possible and find equivalent memes from the target language meme database. Literal translation can preserve the Chinese language style, and be easy for English readers to understand, which helps to recognize the source language memes.

Example 1:

Source text: 觉醒年代(one of the 2021 top Chinese Internet buzzwords )

Target text: The Age of Awakening

This expression is a heated Chinese TV series in 2021 which traces the founding process of the Communist Party of China and delivers a vivid recreation of the great changes in China's modern history. The translation sticks to the mode of meme genotype transmission and successfully achieves the equality of information of two memes between the source meme and the target meme. Moreover, it preserves the core of the source text and facilitates the target readers to understand the original meaning. The word "awakening" fits the theme of the TV series perfectly.

#### 2.1.2 Transliteration

Transliteration memes are phonemic translation memes. In short, it translates directly into the target language according to the pronunciation of Mandarin. China has a long history. Many things or concepts are unique. There is no equivalent concept in other cultures, so directly transliteration can realize the effective cultural transplantation. Transliteration memes mainly include people's names, place names, material names and abstract names.

Example 2:

Source text: 土豪(one of the 2013 top Chinese Internet buzzwords )

Target text: Tuhao

"Tuhao" represents a tongue-in-cheek satire of China's breakneck pursuit of material affluence in the get-rich-quick era. It also heralds a future where face-driven materialism will be less paramount in consumption." Citizens believed that the meaning behind this word was meant to be funny and tongue-in-cheek. This word reveals the open-mindedness of Chinese and a sense of humor about themselves. Therefore, transliteration applied in this example conveys the original meaning and form without destroying the features of the source text, which correspondingly reflects the core of meme genotype.

## 2.2 Phenotype

Phenotypic Internet buzzword translation memes are mutated memes, which retain the core content or part of the source language meme and undergo mutational replication and transmission from the source language meme to the target language. Free translation, amplification and omission belong to this category of translation memes.

### 2.2.1 Free translation

Chinese rich cultural connotations bring with the difficulty of interpreting the inner meaning via literal translation. In this case, free translation can be applied to explain the information hidden in the source text. It is impossible to find matching words in English directly. Free translation can flexibly convey the meaning of the source language meme, copy the core meme of the original language, and make the generated English meme and Chinese meme synergize to achieve an equivalent cognitive effect. Therefore, translators need to figure out the true meaning of the buzzword when using free translation, find an English meme suitable for the reading habits of the target language readers, and then paraphrase it properly.

Example 3:

Source text: 我也是醉了(one of the 2014 top Chinese Internet buzzwords)

Target text: Are you kidding me?

This phrase is used to express frustration and the feeling of depression and speechlessness, especially when people can't have a smooth conversation with the other person. It also expresses people's speechlessness when they can't reach the agreement with each other. China Daily translated this sentence into "Are you kidding me?" which is often used in daily conversation by native English language speakers. In the target language, "Are you kidding me?" means "I'm surprised that you just said that". It is used for saying that you do not believe or agree with what someone is saying. The translator translates it into a corresponding target meme by assuring to reserve the source meme's content to the greatest extent, even though they are not equivalent. However, the genetic content of the source meme is still conveyed and perceived by the target audience.

### 2.2.2 Amplification

Amplification refers to the adding of certain words, phrases or sentences in the translation process, according to the differences in source and target language habits and expressions, as well as differences in contextual logic to more accurately express what is contained in the source text.

Example 4:

Source text: 双减(one of the 2021 top Chinese Internet buzzwords )

Target text: "double reduction" policy (ease the burden of excessive homework and off-campus tutoring for students undergoing compulsory education)

"双减" is an abbreviated form representing an educational policy in China that was published in 2021. In the source text, its word-formation process is shortened, which consists of reducing of a word to one of its parts while the meaning of the word remains. The translator changes the content of the target meme by adding the hidden points and detailed explanation in the gene of the source meme, which makes the target meme "double reduction" policy thoroughly explained and completes the transmission of meme phenotype in order to reduce misunderstanding of the target readers.

## Conclusion

Through the analysis of Internet buzzwords and the corresponding translation, it can be noted that the translation process is a process of meme replication and transmission. The assimilation and memory of memes are regarded as the input of language, and the output of language is achieved through genotype memes and phenotype memes. The input is the basis of the output, and the output realizes the whole language learning process.

From the perspective of English recipients, they have their expectations for text type, vocabulary, sentence pattern selection and collocation, language style, which requires translators to abide by professional norms and expected norms. Network buzzwords belong to strong memes. To translate Chinese network buzzwords into language memes in English countries requires translators to use their professional knowledge to select appropriate translation strategies and authentic words for translation.

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