

The popularity of “X Gou”: Analysis of Internet buzzwords from the Perspective of memetics

Shuai Liu¹, Huixian Liu², Yanchen Zhang²

¹Institute of Linguistics, Shanghai International Studies University; ²University of Arizona

Abstract:

The structure “X Gou”, one of China’s top ten network buzzwords, no longer solely denotes traditional descriptions of animals or cursing people. Nowadays, it is more commonly employed by youth to express self-mockery on *Weibo* in China, thereby leading to a greater proliferation of rhetorical and interpersonal meaning. This study analyzes “X Gou” from the perspective of memetics, and suggests that the popularity of “X Gou” meme is influenced by the neoliberalism in China which features high intensity of social and work pressures, coupled with the influence of youth subcultures, promoting the dissemination of “X Gou” on Internet platforms.

Key words: “X Gou”; internet buzzwords; memetics; neoliberalism; linguistic model

1. Introduction

The relationship between language, culture, and society has undergone significant transformation with the advent of Internet technology (Crystal, 2001). The widespread availability of the Internet has sparked rapid social innovation, with the language used on the Internet spreading at an unprecedented speed and impacting people’s lives in significant ways. Internet buzzwords are the linguistic expressions that are readily accepted and used by a significant portion of netizens during a particular period on the internet, subsequently transforming into a commonly utilized communicative language in daily life (Liu, 2023). As a reflection of contemporary social psychology, buzzwords feature strong timeliness and high frequency of usage and can be expressed through words, phrases, sentences, or discourses. As Trillò & Shifman (2021) noted that Internet buzzwords are flexible enough to adapt to various social settings by carrying out numerous social roles and enhance social capital and collective identities, which also tap into social memory and a sense of belonging to serve various social functions in people’s lives.

Recently, a linguistic phenomenon, characterized by the structure “X+ Ge/Jie/Ye/ Nü/Gou (dog).”, has become a part of social reality and are widely used by people. These words are closely related to people’s lives and reflect their views and opinions on certain things. The different language environment has given these words new characteristics, and with the help of the Internet and mass media, their meanings have been widely spread among people, attracting the attention of many scholars.

In Chinese culture, the prevailing images of Gou remain negative and demeaning while there were certain totems and admirable positive qualities associated with “Gou” in ancient times (Sun, 2016). “Gou” is usually a pejorative term used to scold people, such as “*Zou Gou* (running dogs)” and “*Zhu Gou Bu Ru* (worse than pigs or dogs)”. However, under the influence of neoliberalism, people, especially youth, frequently utilize the linguistic model of “X + Gou” to describe themselves in a self-deprecating manner, which is mostly on account of the mounting pressures of life and the intense and competitive work they engage in. The phrase encompasses not only a sense of helplessness conveyed through self-mockery and mild struggle but also various psychological mechanisms of self-relief and empowerment. The widespread usage of X+Gou, such as “*Jiaban Gou* (the person who works overtime)” and “*Xiaonai Gou* (young and cute boyfriend)”, indicates that the character of “Gou” has undergone a radical change in meaning and warrants further attention.

There are more than 600 articles about Internet buzzwords at the time being, including systematic studies and monographs on master and doctoral papers. The first author retrieved 379 articles on “X Ge/Jie/Ye/ Nü/Gou” in the decade of 2012-2022, including academic journals, master theses and academic conferences. Most of the researchers are likely to start from the language ontology, analyzing the syllable pattern, lexical nature, semantic characteristics, diversity reasons and the cultural psychology behind the popularity of these words. Sun (2016) has

taken the perspective of cognitive linguistics to trace the origin of the use of “X Gou” and attempted to classify such words in a general way, highlighting the evolution of meaning in various online phrases during their usage. We can find that an objective and comprehensive evaluation of the usage of “X Gou” in our modern life and the reasons behind its popularity was lacking. To compensate this gap and promote people’s understanding of the word “Gou”, this paper collected data from *Weibo* with the hope of answering the following research questions:

- (1) How does the meaning of the word “Gou” evolve during the process of transmission?
- (2) What are the defining features of the “X + Gou” language meme?
- (3) What are the factors that contribute to the widespread imitation of the “X + Gou” catchphrase?

2. Language memes in the Internet Context

In the Internet era, memes, referring to a cultural unit of information that is transmitted from person to person and evolves over time (Dawkins,1976), are at once products and driving forces of social practices (Xie, 2020). Not only genetic information but also cultural information can be passed down and evolve through a process of copying and imitation, like genes in biological evolution. Memes can take many forms and evolve through processes of copying, variation, and selection, similar to genes in biological evolution, whereas language memes are an important type of memes, which are transmitted through language and play a crucial role in cultural inheritance and evolution (Drakett, 2018).

Since the inception of memetics, the concept of memes has evolved into a global genre and cultural form (Cheng & Chen, 2022), and numerous studies have been conducted to classify different language phenomena in daily life, particularly within network environments, from the perspective of memetics. An ethnographic study on *Biaoqing* which are emoticons used on Chinese social media finds that *Biaoqing* is a strong meme, shaped by the negotiation between two parties on Chinese social media and reflects the profound influence of Chinese social history and culture (Ying, L., & Blommaert, J. (2020). Xie et al. (2020) discussed the social bond and rhetorical function of language games in Chinese social media, using Chinese character meme carriers constructed on two major Chinese media social platforms. In contrast to previous studies, their research revealed that internet users tend to employ a variety of codes to express themselves and signal their community identity. These codes not only have a playful tone but also facilitate the exchange of ideas in a relaxed and informal context, thereby enabling users to build and maintain connections with online communities.

The study of Internet buzzwords has also been a focused area. Xia and Zhang (2014) collected more than 1,000 words with monosyllables, diphthongs, and trisyllables related to “*X Ge* (brother)”. They analyzed the syllable distribution and summarized the characteristics of part of speech of “*X Ge*” and concluded that the two-syllable words are, at least for the time being, the main forms of many new words, which are freer and richer in generalizing and condensing the ideas of social events. The vocabulary that collocates with “*Ge*” are mainly the following three types: nouns, verbs, and adjectives. This form not only conforms to the characteristics of double syllables in Chinese vocabulary, but also adapts to people’s cognitive rules, and could meet the needs of the current society for abundant expressions. Jiang (2013) explored the history of the semantic evolution of “*Ye* (grandfather)” and summed up the motives of the semantic changes among several meaning items of “*Ye*”, and further analyzed the changes in its pragmatic function and the cultural factors leading to the results in the linguistic function.

The widespread use of “X + Gou” in everyday language not only vividly and graphically portrays the experiences of contemporary youth, but also fosters a sense of belonging among them. However, the characteristics of “X + Gou” are rarely addressed. Sun (2016) examined “*Danshen Gou*” (bachelor), “*Banzhuan Gou*” (the brick-mover), “*Leicheng Gou*” (tired person), and “*Mangcheng Gou*” (work like a dog) from four perspectives: composition, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. The study suggests that the motivation for the formation of these structures includes the evolution of the meaning of the word “Gou”, the development and changes in related history and culture, the need for realistic communication and expression, people’s pragmatic psychology, and the role of network media in promoting these structures. However, Sun only uses individual case analysis as a starting point, which could not fully reflect the commonality of such language memes. Nonetheless, this approach provides a strong basis for further development of our research.

3. Data collection and description

In the current age of advanced information technology, online platforms for example *Weibo*, have emerged as one of the major fronts for disseminating public opinion in China. It provides a space for people, especially the youth to share ideas and exchange thoughts, thereby contributing to the evolution of language in the digital era. In many ways, *Weibo* can be considered as the main source and center of popularity for internet buzzwords. Accordingly, paying attention to popular vocabulary on this platform is crucial for creating a timely and effective corpus.

Therefore, the author intends to investigate the linguistic variation of “*X + Gou*” buzzwords by drawing upon the theoretical background of “memetics”. To achieve this goal, the author initially adopted the observation method to gather and organize sentences pertaining to “*X + Gou*” from posts made by netizens on *Weibo* between 2015 and 2020. Ultimately, a total of 185 items were obtained in an attempt to analyze the phenomenon of “*X + Gou*” buzzwords in online communication and explore the motivations behind their usage. Based on the preliminary classification and analysis of the gathered data, it can be observed that “*X*” is primarily employed as a noun, verb, or adjective (Table 1), and that, with the development of the internet, there has emerged a hybridization of Chinese and foreign loan words in their usage.

According to the collected corpus and its contextual analysis, we can broadly categorize it into the following categories: Firstly, in terms of grammatical collocation, buzzwords “*X + Gou*” is commonly used in combinations with other functional words. Its main collocation types are summarized as follows: (1) Noun + *Gou*, such as *Gaosan Gou*, *Huaxue Gou*, *Keyan Gou*, etc. (2) Verb + *Gou*, such as *Ganfan Gou*, *Shangfen Gou*, *Jiaban Gou*, etc. (3) Adjective + *Gou*, such as *Qiong Gou*, *Danshen Gou*, *Shuangbiao Gou*, etc. (4) English word + *Gou*, representing work situations (e.g., job title, position), such as *IT Gou*, *PC Gou*, etc. Secondly, in terms of syllable structure, “*X*” usually consists of two syllables, as seen in *Dagong Gou*, *Shantie Gou*, *Xueba Gou* etc. In rare cases, “*X*” may be a three or multi-syllable word, such as *Aerfa Gou*, *Yumaoqiu Gou* etc. From an emotional standpoint, “*X + Gou*” buzzwords are mainly derived from self-mockery and ridicule by netizens. Compared with previous Chinese phrases such as “*Goutuizi*(狗腿子)”, its derogatory connotation has weakened or even disappeared, and is subjectively judged as such. We will delve into this issue in further detail below:

Table 1 The classification of collected “*X + Gou*” corpus

X's part of speech	Nominal Phrases	Verbal Phrases	Adjective Phrases	Other Phrases
Quantity	76	62	39	8
Percentage	41.08%	33.52%	21.08%	4.33%
Examples	高三狗、化学狗、球鞋狗等	干饭狗、上分狗、加班狗等	穷狗、单身狗、双标狗等	PC狗、IT狗等

4. Findings

Language and writing do not directly reflect the objective world, but are a concept formed after people’s recognition of the objective world, and the formation of language and writing is the pattern of “objective world, human conceptual processing, language, and writing” (Xu, 1988: 62). This view underscores the importance of recognizing the role of human subjectivity in shaping linguistic and communicative practices and highlights the need for critical analysis and interpretation of language use in social context. As new concepts and phenomena emerge, people likewise create new words or meanings to describe them, in order to facilitate communication. This is not only indicative of the development of language itself but also a reflection of social advancement.

4.1 Diachronic evolution of “*Gou*”: From Negative to Inclusive

The word “*Gou*” has undergone a series of transformations and acquired multiple meanings throughout Chinese history. In traditional Chinese culture, the term “*Gou*” was often used in derogatory and contemptuous ways, and certain sayings or expressions containing this term were used to express negative attitudes toward others. However, it is also true that dogs have been and continue to be valued as faithful and reliable companions in

everyday life. During the nomadic period, “Gou” gained a positive connotation as a symbol of bravery. The Mongolians, for example, referred to Genghis Khan’s four bold and powerful generals as the “four mastiffs”. In the agricultural era, however, the image of dogs shaking their heads to their owners was associated with flattery and sycophancy, giving the term a derogatory connotation. Despite these different connotations, dogs were included in the Chinese Zodiac due to their loyalty and kindness. They are often regarded as trustworthy and friendly animals and are valued as pets and working animals in many cultures around the world. Therefore, depending on the context and historical period, the term “Gou” can have either negative or positive meanings, highlighting the complexity and fluidity of language and its social connotations (Drakett, et. al, 2018).

Entering the information age, we have seen a shift in the way that the term “Gou” is used in popular culture. More and more netizens are sharing their experiences with “Gou” as clever and loyal pets on social media, which has led to a more positive image of dogs in our collective consciousness. At the same time, however, the term “Gou” continues to be used in new and different ways to describe people’s behaviors or personalities (He, 2014). For example, people might use “*Qiuzhi Gou*” or “*Danshen Gou*” to describe themselves based on their profession or state of being, while someone who is obsessed with something might be called “*Meijv Gou*” or “*Riman Gou*”. Additionally, certain behaviors or actions may be referred to using terms like “*Chaoxi Gou*” or “*Daigou Gou*” to express disapproval or condemnation. Interestingly, the usage of phrases like “X + Gou” has led to a shift in the emotional color attached to the term “Gou”. While it may have previously been seen as pejorative or derogatory, it has now become a word that people are willing to use to claim certain aspects of their identity. This highlights the fluidity of language and how it can evolve over time to reflect changing social attitudes and practices (Ying & Blommaert, 2020). Initially a neutral term without any emotional connotation, it gradually acquired a derogatory connotation over time. However, with the rapid development of the Internet, new uses and meanings for “Gou” have emerged, which dissolve and neutralize the negative meaning of “Gou” and represent certain degrees and states of the current situation. Within the framework of “X + Gou”, although “Gou” may also be used in a derogatory manner, it is more commonly used as a neutral expression with a sense of humor.

4.2 Replication and Dissemination of the “X + Gou”

To achieve the goal of replication and propagation by spreading to more objects, memes must transition through four stages: assimilation, memory, expression, and propagation (Heylighen, 1998). The widely used internet buzzwords “X + Gou” can always be seen in *Weibo* posts. Through an analysis of related “X + Gou” buzzword items, we observe that the formation of “X + Gou” word families on the internet is flexible and ever-changing, characterized by many obvious features.

The Internet buzzword “X + Gou” differs from the traditional definition of “Gou”. As demonstrated in the previous part, the original meaning of “Gou” referred to a carnivorous mammal and was sometimes used derogatorily. However, the contemporary Internet phrase “X + Gou” is used to describe people as “dogs” or it can be used to describe a speechless attitude towards something. For instance, “*Xiaonai Gou*” originally referred to newborn puppies, but now it is used to describe gentle and affectionate boys. “*Xiaolang Gou*” used to consider a breed of dog, but today it describes handsome, cool, and dominant young men who provide a sense of security to their girlfriends, making them highly desirable. “*Danshen Gou*” can be traced back as the earliest application of the “X + Gou” meme, which initially was influenced by *A Chinese Odyssey to the West* in 2011, and then gradually gained popularity (Sun, 2016). As the term “*Danshen Gou*” is humorous and self-deprecating, a number of individuals use it to poke fun at themselves and express feelings of loneliness. With the widespread use of the term “*Danshen Gou*” on the Internet, and the simplicity and memorability of the “X + Gou” meme, more and more forms of “X + Gou” are being recognized and embraced by people, for example:

- (1) 科研狗没有周末全年无休。(Weibo, 2020)
- (2) 不想再当代码狗了, 想去摆摊炒粉烤串。(Weibo, 2019)
- (3) 假装自己是文艺狗。(Weibo, 2018)
- (4) 我变成了友谊中的“舔狗”, 只要别人对我释放善意, 立刻就能明显感受到我全身细胞都在积极回应。(Weibo, 2017)
- (5) 我可以很负责的告诉你, 我就是颜狗。(Weibo, 2018)
- (6) 真狗, 怎么涨的怎么跌回去, 哭笑不得。(Weibo, 2020)
- (7) 你是真的狗啊!(Weibo, 2019)

“*Keyan Gou*” in sentence (1) refers to individuals who are dedicated to scientific research. “*Daima Gou*” in (2) is a term used to describe those individuals who frequently write code. “*Wenyi Gou*” in (3) refers to young

people who are involved in literature. “Tian Gou” is used to describe individuals who have no dignity and will do anything to gain favor with others in (4). “Yan Gou” in (5) pertains to people who cannot resist anything that appears aesthetically pleasing. The phrase “Zhen Gou” in the (6) does not mean encountering a real dog, but rather conveys a speechless view of something. Similarly, in the (7), it also does not mean that one is a real dog, whereas in the context of the internet, it is used to describe someone as unreliable, absurd, or terrible. Due to the broad and diverse appeal of the “X + Gou” meme, which caters to varying social groups, the personification of dogs in various contexts has enabled the meme to maintain its strong status through continuous replication in the public sphere (Nissenbaum & Shifman, 2017).

As indicated above, it can be seen that “X + Gou” frequently originates from a particular event, in which a phenomenon within the event refers to objects possessing similar qualities, grouping them together and emphasizing their collective characteristics. As popular language usage becomes more prevalent, “Gou” as a component of frameworks has also assimilated numerous characteristic meanings attributed to popular events. Concurrently, through the application of personification, metonymy, and other techniques, “X” becomes more amusing and informal, without being restricted to specific distinguishing criteria, and places emphasis on satisfying the public’s desire for language that is both enjoyable and economical.

4.3 The spread type of “X + Gou”

Memes in online language come in various forms. When discussing the classification of meme transmission in language, Blackmore (2000) categorized meme transmission into two types: genotype and phenotype. In terms of language meme genotype, the content of replication remains the same but the form of replication differs. Conversely, with language meme phenotype, the form of replication is nearly identical while the content of replication varies. During the replication and transmission of memes, choices are made regarding the variation of communication types depending on different contexts. Based on research on different variants, the main transmission types of “X + Gou” include genotype and phenotype.

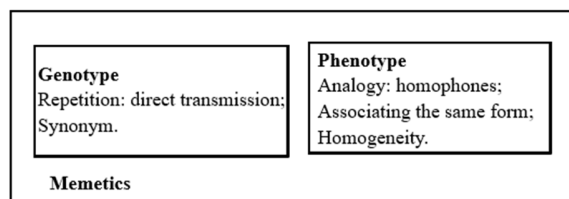


Figure 1 Blackmore’s memetic classification

4.3.1 Genotype of “X + Gou”

Genotype refers to the transmission of the essential prototype or identical information of a meme through variations in its form (Xie, 2020). In other words, the same information can be transmitted in different forms. Obviously, the “X” Gou genotype is primarily transmitted through the direct expression of the term “X”. The phrase “X + Gou” consists of “X” and “Gou”, with the latter term being limited by its semantic meaning, despite its widespread usage. Since “X + Gou” is often used as a noun component, it is frequently paired with decision verbs such as “Shi (是)”, “Zuo (做)”, and “De (的)”, appearing in constructions such as “Who/What is X + Gou”. This has resulted in the buzzwords “X + Gou” to have similar functions for referring to people as other likewise phrases. For example, saying “I am a Keyan Gou/Dang/Ren” carries the same meaning. Thus, in the construction of “X + Gou”, the term “Gou” has been “humanized” and has developed into a neutral expression with a humorous quality. When using “X + Gou” in online language, people do not typically alter the “X” or “Gou”, nor do they add any additional elements to “X + Gou”; this maintains the original “X + Gou” meme gene.

4.3.2 Phenotype of “X + Gou”

Phenotypic propagation involves the transmission of varying meanings for the same type of meme, which includes horizontal grafting of homonyms and heteronyms, homomorphic associative grafting, and isomorphic horizontal grafting (Chen et.al, 2019). Just as its name implies, these memes maintain their original forms but also adapt their content to new contexts. Regarding the popular term “X + Gou”, its usage varies depending on the part of speech of the term “X”. When “X” functions as a noun, it refers to a person who embarks on a particular job, and when “X” is a verb, it means someone who performs an action. Alternatively, when “X” serves as an adjective, it characterizes the traits or status of a certain group of people.

As demonstrated by the preceding discussion, “X + Gou” has emerged as a successful language meme in Chinese society. Particularly with the aid of new media, the pairing of “Gou” with additional linguistic memes has

propelled it beyond its initial role in social communication, expanding to convey more nuanced emotions (Dyrel, 2021). Thus, it is becoming increasingly prominent in daily life and is poised to play an ever-expanding role in shaping language and culture.

4.4 Characteristics of “X + Gou”

From the above analysis, it is evident that the usage of “X Gou” in the context of the Internet has undergone significant enrichment and expansion, incorporating numerous new semantic features as well. Therefore, it can be considered that this form is not an isolated occurrence but rather a language phenomenon exhibiting a trend of cluster development. He (2014) identified three key attributes of language memes: imitativeness, replicability, and propagation. Based on the analysis of our corpus, we have identified the following characteristics associated with these buzzwords.

4.4.1 Fresh Use of Old Words, and Semantic Generalization

The popularity of the term “X + Gou” is a tactile manifestation of the genotypic memetic theory (He & Chen, 2014). In other words, it is a kind of old words empowered fresh use. It is closely integrated with current events and social phenomena. Language memes are catalyzed by contextual and subject factors, and influenced by social factors during the process of replication and dissemination. Through this process, they become socially contextualized (Xie, 2020). When we use the word, its default context will be triggered off (Figure 2). Throughout history, the term “Gou” has been associated with derogatory meanings, such as lowliness, flattery, and badness, as seen in phrases like “Lang Xin Gou Fei” (to describe a person who is as cruel as a wolf). Most words incorporating “Gou” carry negative connotations. However, through the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures, people have developed a new understanding of the characteristics of dogs. As a result, “Gou” has acquired commendatory meanings like loyalty and cuteness, leading to an elevation in the status of dogs. The prevalence of the “X + Gou” meme is pivotal in reversing the negative connotations associated with “Gou”, providing a semantic basis for “Gou” to assert its status as beings worthy of respect. As the usage of “X” expands, the derogatory undertones of “Gou” will wane, and the negative connotations surrounding the “X + Gou” lexicon will dissipate over time.

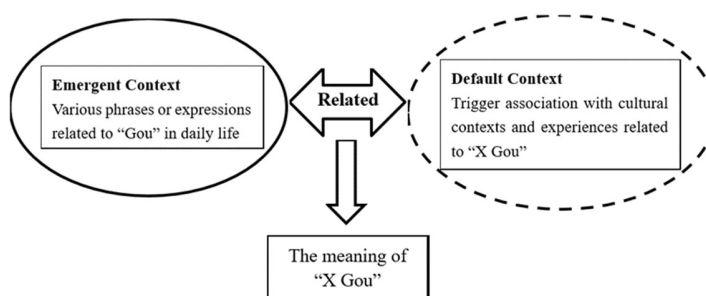


Figure 2 Understanding “X Gou” Memes in Emergent Contexts

4.4.2 Newfangled Language: Its Topicality and in Vogue

Online buzzwords serve as indicators of youth mentality, reflecting the social psychology and values of contemporary youth. As such, they are worthy of both synchronic and diachronic research (Xie & He, 2007). In this sense, buzzwords such as “X + Gou”, which first emerged at the end of 2011 and quickly gained popularity among netizens, provide insight into the zeitgeist of the times. Internet language, in particular, is a dynamic form of expression that constantly seeks new ideas and modes of communication. Originally taken as a noun and free morpheme, “Gou” had a versatile position in word formation. However, after being incorporated into the “X + Gou” meme, the word “Gou” becomes a postpositional morpheme that can only appear after “X”, and its format is fixed as “root + affix”. This illustrates how the semantics of “Gou” have evolved to become more generalized and virtualized (Chen & Zhu, 2010).

Besides, the “X + Gou” lexicon tends to have a relatively simple semantic function, and once we understand the meaning of “X”, it becomes easy to comprehend the meaning of “X + Gou”. Moreover, the development and evolution of the “Gou” meme have also given rise to its use as an adjective, such as the expression “Zhen Gou” in (6) to indicate a speechless attitude towards a person or thing. In the age of the internet, the ease-of-learning and the economic nature of language have enabled “X + Gou” to quickly gain popularity and widespread usage (Fu & Lu, 2010).

5. Discussion

In the previous section, we discussed the basic information of “*X + Gou*” based on our corpus, and explore its most popular features. Moving forward, we aim to investigate the factors underlying the popularity of these catchphrases, taking a language memetics approach.

As society advances and progresses, online catchphrases continually evolve to embody new connotations of the modern era, serving dual functions in interpersonal interactions and within the broader social context. The widespread dissemination of these catchphrases is the outcome of the interplay between three key factors: the linguistic attributes of online catchphrases, user demands, and the prevalence of social media platforms (Figure 3). Each feature of this buzzword represents a broad meme vector that enables internet users to swiftly comprehend its utility and incorporate it with some degree of variation into their online activities (Crystal & Ebrary, 2001). Due to the singular attributes of “*X + Gou*”, it is widely used across diverse contexts, which can readily lead to the expansion of its meaning.

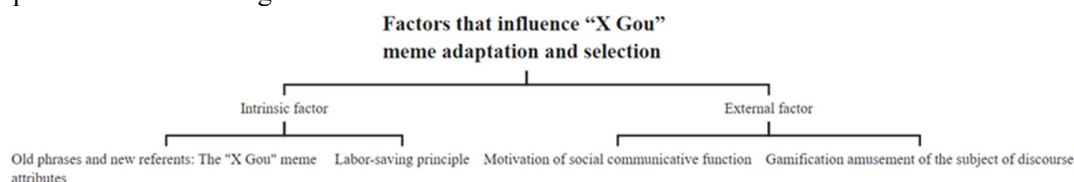


Figure 3 Factors That Influence “*X Gou*” Meme Adaptation and Selection

As the saying goes, “Put new wine into old bottles.” The sudden popularity of the term “*X + Gou*” can be understood as a phenomenon of reusing old words. Through the use of metaphorical language and rhetoric in the form of “*X + Gou*”, which is easily grasped by people due to its underlying cognitive structure, the new meaning has been able to gain wider acceptance among the public and enrich the expressive power of language. Furthermore, as He (2014) points out, the emergence and spread of buzzwords like “*X + Gou*” are influenced by both internal and external factors of language.

5.1 Internal Language Mechanism

5.1.1 Old Phrases and new referents

As society evolves, the original conceptual and textual systems no longer suffice to meet the growing demands of communication. In order to bridge this gap, various approaches are typically employed (Lin & Wen, 2022), which include: inventing new symbols, borrowing from other languages or dialects, creating symbolic expressions such as pictographs and onomatopoeia, establishing new expressions from existing lexical and grammatical structures, and extending the use of original expressions through analogy, metonymy, and metaphor (Xie et. al, 2020). The popularity of the term “*X + Gou*” can be attributed to the latter approach of re-purposing and adapting an existing language format. By diluting the original meaning of the word and imbuing it with new significance that reflects contemporary times, this term has become widely adopted among netizens.

Tohar et. al (2007) proposed that the along with the signified constitute the sign, which is only the first level of a semiotic ideographic system (Tohar et. al, 2007). When this sign is used as the signifier for a second ideographic system, a new signifier is produced. In other words, the speaker transcends the narrow definition of “*Gou*” and expands the meaning of “*X + Gou*” in both a longitudinal and vertical dimension, moving from a relatively confined domain (specific nouns) to a broader one (abstract nouns, adjectives, or verbs). This allows for the expression of the speaker’s understanding of a certain phenomenon in contemporary society.

5.1.2 Labor-saving principle

Nowadays, by virtue of the fast-paced lifestyle and the prevalence of convenient online communication, netizens increasingly favor communication that is timely, universal, and straightforward. Considering that the characteristics of information dissemination in the Internet age, there is a need for concise, clear, and easily memorable content that can be transmitted quickly and with minimal effort. As a result, research on popular vocabulary also takes into account the influence of the “labor-saving principle” (Chen, 1994). Some researchers (Wiggins & Bowers, 2015; Chen et al, 2019) attribute this preference for concise language to human inertia, making it a natural tendency dictated by the anatomical, physical, and psychological structure of human beings. Similarly, the corpus of “*X + Gou*” that we have collected consists mostly of three-character grammatical structures and Internet acronyms, which align well with the characteristics of the current online environment.

The economic principle of language dictates that language use must balance minimal language with maximum effect, while the mechanism of language requires maintaining the original language model and organizing it accordingly (Chen, 1999). It has to be noted that the most significant driving force of language change is simplification, evidenced by the transition from literary to vernacular Chinese due to its aptness for communication (Jiang & Vásquez, 2020). However, some linguists have raised concerns about the potentially destructive nature of extreme simplification. There is a risk that efforts to rebalance language may lead to unforeseeable changes that spiral out of control and propagate through the language chain like dominoes, ultimately leading to irreversible damaging effects on the language itself. As such, while language change is necessary, restraint and a cautious approach are required to prevent unintended consequences.

5.2 External Language Environment

5.2.1 Motivation of social communicative function

The evolution of language is closely intertwined with social needs in real life (Dyrel, 2021). When these needs change, language adapts accordingly, driven by its function. From a lexical perspective, the concept of “necessity” is crucial to language innovation, as words that are no longer needed fade away, while newly created internet buzzwords should serve a communicative purpose. As people strive to find the perfect context for a buzzword, it may become necessary to adjust its meaning or usage to encompass new objects or ideas (Page, 2012). This process is driven by our urgent desire to express ourselves effectively, and the buzzword becomes flexible in its ability to adapt to changing circumstances. Ultimately, this dynamic relationship between language and its users leads to constant innovation and adaptation over time.

In today’s online media environment, language has shifted from a previously serious and cautious style to a more humorous and lighthearted tone. For example, people now refer to themselves as “*Jiaban Gou*” when working overtime, adding a touch of self-deprecation and weariness that resonates with others in the online community. Despite the lack of complaints about the literal meaning of this phrase, its graphic effect is powerful in conveying an image of exhaustion and burnout. This illustrates how language can shape and convey emotions and attitudes in new and creative ways, reflecting the changing needs and experiences of its users in the digital age (Shifman, 2014).

5.2.2 Gamification amusement of the subject of discourse

On one hand, “game” refers to an activity in which the participant interacts with the main objective of obtaining pure pleasure. It is a cyclical, re-creative spiritual communication activity that involves the mutual participation and integration of the participant’s consciousness. The increasing popularity of “*X + Gou*” can be seen as a form of gamification of discourse that applies the “fun principle” to the generation and construction of discourse. In particular, the early use of the term “*Danshen Gou*” was characterized by ridicule and humor, creating a carnival-like atmosphere that attracted attention, increased the volume of discussion, and achieved a dissipation of the seriousness of traditional media discourse. This process also satisfied the public’s desire for idealized objectives (Ying & Blommaert, 2020).

On the other hand, Popular fashion represents a kind of cultural identity psychology that can easily influence language. This is because language contains certain restrictions that determine which elements are amenable to change and which are less susceptible (Xie, 2020). Chinese has proven to have a powerful assimilation and screening ability for foreign languages in any circumstance. It can filter out beneficial ingredients that are compatible with the Chinese language, while also eliminating unsuitable factors. The innate, idiosyncratic, and self-protective function of Chinese demonstrates the existence of a mechanism within the language that can automatically regulate language information, restore broken language patterns, and prevent fragmentation. Besides, the hidden mechanism of Chinese is essentially controlled by the people who use the language, because people have to organize and remember useful information in order to survive. When the “*X + Gou*” buzzwords have become a commonly accepted language form, it manifests that the generalized semantics of the word “Gou” has been accepted by people and conforms to the objective law of language development.

In summary, we can conclude that the catchphrase “*X + Gou*” is a powerful language meme that aligns with people’s cognitive characteristics. Additionally, the evolution of the word “Gou” in Chinese has made it popular in society, and owing to its ease of imitation, high productivity, and economic characteristics, “*X + Gou*” is particularly used as a reflection of the living conditions and mentality of young people.

6. Conclusion

Viewed through the lens of memetics, language memes elucidate the laws governing discourse transmission and language dissemination. The aim of language memetics is to analyze pragmatic phenomena from a memetic perspective, thereby promoting a deeper understanding of both familiar and unfamiliar languages and, by extension, of human beings themselves (He, 2014). The widespread adoption of the “X + Gou” catchphrase reflects the current self-deprecating mental state of the masses and the fast-paced, high-pressure nature of contemporary life. This catchphrase possesses certain advantages over traditional language, allowing it to quickly grab public attention and have a significant impact. Furthermore, the general herd mentality compels people to keep up with the latest fashion, leading to further acceleration in the spread and application of buzzwords.

In practice, significant progress has been made in empirical analyses of “memetics”, the emergence of “X + Gou” catchphrases can be attributed to both internal and external factors in language. By examining the lexical nature, and characteristics of these buzzwords, we can conclude that the word “Gou” has acquired new meanings when combined with other occupations, animals, adjectives, and abbreviated letter combinations in modern contexts. This vocabulary not only reflects the fast-paced nature of contemporary life but also satisfies people’s need for concise information, reflecting changes in social structure and mentality. Following the law of language development, this trend is likely to continue and give rise to similar word structures such as “X Ge”, “X Zu” and “X Jie”. The ability of language to serve people’s social lives confirms that language functions can determine language changes (Shifman, 2013). If language fails to accurately describe the current environment, it will naturally evolve to better reflect social needs. It is clear that after over a decade of transmission and development, the “X + Gou” catchphrases, which is very much characterized by their combining form and meaning, have become conventionalized symbolic units. These buzzwords convey figurative and emotional colors that attract listener attention, owing to contemporary associations between “Gou” and other morphemes that imbue them with a specific popular meaning. This kind of buzzword often conveys commendation, conveying an impression of broad-mindedness and optimism (Liu, 2023). However, it can sometimes reflect derogatory meanings as well.

To conclude, the theory of memes offers a compelling explanation for the development and changes in human language. Firstly, it interprets the evolution of human society and culture from a biological perspective, with language as a carrier of culture. Secondly, internet buzzwords follow the same pattern of emergence, evolution, and extinction as biological evolution, further corroborating the meme theory. Based on these premises, studying the replication and dissemination of language memes not only illuminates the evolutionary process of language but also has profound reference and guiding significance for the development and promotion of language via powerful memes. Future research could examine the intrinsic motivation and ideology of online users who utilize the “X + Gou” catchphrase by amalgamating the rhetorical meaning and effects of “Gou”. In addition, interviews may be employed to conduct a multidimensional validation analysis of language use in cyberspace from a multimodal perspective.

Reference

- Al Zidjaly, N. 2017) Memes as reasonably hostile laments: A discourse analysis of political dissent in Oman. *Discourse & Society*, 28(6), 573-594.
- Blackmore, S., & Blackmore, S. J. 2000. *The meme machine* (Vol. 25). Oxford Paperbacks.
- Chen Changlai & Zhu Yanxia. 2010. “Say the catchphrase ‘X Dang (党)’-- Also on affixation of human morphemes[说流行语“X党”——兼论指人语素的类词缀化]. *Contemporary Rhetoric* (03),64-70.
- Chen, Xinren. 1994. “试探‘经济原则’在言语交际中的运行 [Exploring the operation of Economy Principle in verbal communication].” *Foreign Language Research* (1): 8–12, 59.
- Crystal, D. & Ebrary, I. 2001. *Language and the Internet*. Cambridgeshire, London: Cambridge University Press.
- Dawkins, R. 2016. *The selfish gene*. Oxford university press.
- Drakett, J., Rickett, B., Day, K., & Milnes, K. 2018. Old jokes, new media—Online sexism and constructions of gender in Internet memes. *Feminism & psychology*, 28(1), 109-127.
- Dynel, M. 2021. COVID-19 memes going viral: On the multiple multimodal voices behind face masks. *Discourse & Society*, 32(2), 175-195.
- Fu Fuying & Lu Songlin. 2010. “An Analysis of the Features of Computer-Mediated Language—from the Perspective of Memetics[论网络语言的进化及特色——以模因论为视角]”. *Journal of Nanchang University (Humanities and Social Sciences)* (04),158-161.
- He Ziran. 2014. “流行语流行的模因论解读[Memetic Understanding of Language in Fashion]”. *Shandong Foreign Language Teaching* (02),8-13.
- He, Ziran and Chen Xinren et al. 2014. “语言模因理论与应用 [Linguistic Memes: Theory and Adaptation]”. Guangzhou: Jinan University Press .
- Heylighen, F. 1998. What makes a meme successful? Selection criteria for cultural evolution. In *15th International Congress on Cybernetics* (pp. 418-423).
- Liu Mengzhi. 2023.“网络流行语的演化迭代、言语实践与价值评判——以 2022 年度流行语为例[The Evolution, Speech Practice and Value Judgment of Internet Buzzwords——Taking the 2022 Buzzwords as an Example]”. *Culture Dimensions* (04),94-97.
- Nissenbaum, A., & Shifman, L. 2017. Internet memes as contested cultural capital: The case of 4chan’s/b/board. *New media & society*, 19(4), 483-501.
- Page, R. 2012. The linguistics of self-branding and micro-celebrity in Twitter: The role of hashtags. *Discourse & communication*, 6(2), 181-201.
- Wen Lin and Lingying Wen. 2022. “模因视角下“打工人”的传播与反思[The spread and reflection of ‘Dagong Ren’ from the perspective of meme]. *Meida* (19),90-92.
- Xie, C. 2020. Internet memes we live by (and die by). *Internet Pragmatics*, 3(2), 145-173.

- Xie, C., Tong, Y., & Yus, F. 2020. Bonding across Chinese social media: The pragmatics of language play in “精 (sang) 彩 (xin) 有 (bing) 趣 (kuang)” construction. *Pragmatics*, 30(3), 431-457.
- Xie Chaoqun & He Ziran. 2007. “Memes and Communication[模因与交际]”. *Journal of College of Chinese Language and Culture of Jinan University* (02),46-52+62.
- Xu Guozhang. 1988. “Is language a system of arbitrary signs? The theory reconsidered[语言符号的任意性问题——语言哲学探索之一]”. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research* (03), 2-10+79.
- Yang, X., & Liu, M. 2021. The pragmatics of text-emoji co-occurrences on Chinese social media. *Pragmatics*, 31(1), 144-172.
- Ying, L., & Blommaert, J. 2020. Understanding memes on Chinese social media: Biaoqing. *Chinese Language and Discourse*, 11(2), 226-260.