On the Features and Meaning-Forming Mechanisms of the Internet-based Expressions: A Cognitive Perspective

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Abstract: The recent several years have witnessed a boom of the Internet-based expressions including words, phrases abbreviations and syntactic structures. This paper is intended to make a brief summary of the features of such expressions and to examine their meaning-forming mechanisms from the point of view of cognitive grammar. We found that the meaning of such newly-coined expressions is largely motivated and logically analyzable, and the meaning-forming processes are characteristic of a mechanism of conceptualization and integration. Moreover, the mechanisms are of innate interest of people to interact with the world and develop their mentality.

Keywords: Internet-based expressions, features, meaning, conceptualization, mentality.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It is universally recognized that the Internet has been playing an enormously important role in our daily life. And with the enhancement of Internet-related technology and of the awareness of how significant the Internet can be, increasing numbers of people are and will be involved in the miraculous world supported by the Internet where they are rendered a virtual space to communicate with other net loggers, and at the same time they are to find themselves lost in the vast sea of "novel" expressions—fresh identifications, fresh abbreviations, fresh word-building patterns, fresh sentence structures and so on. All of these are eventually concerned with the issue of the meaning and the cognition of meaning because, on the one hand, no communication is possible to be conducted if deprived of meaning represented and arranged by language or any other language-like systems, and on the other hand, all the newly built expressions, no matter how complicated or unpredictable they may be, are inherently connected with meaning of language, more precisely, language in specific domains[1]. In this sense, it will become desirable to launch a systematic investigation into this special language domain, that is, it is important to figure out some shared features out of these dazzling phenomena. Moreover, we are also supposed to investigate the existing differences between the language for our daily use and that for the Internet-supported communications and endeavor to examine how the Internet-based expressions are accepted in the virtual world as an

emerging feat of human mentality [2].

2.   FEATURE OF INTERNET-BASED EXPRESSIONS

As is mentioned above, the virtuality of the Internet makes it possible for online users to build a new language world for their own based on their conceptualization grounded in the universality of cognitive operations, namely, online users are always likely to utilize a set of special ways to deal with language usages in their internet-based communications. The very set of ways, which is embodied by online users' utterances, displays some certain distinctive features as the following examples manifest:

2.1 Relatively random applications of symbols

Defined as a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication, language itself is characterized of the arbitrariness between meanings and sounds (symbols) [3]. In the language use of internet-based environment, however, the nature of arbitrariness reaches a higher degree hence from many cases the evidences of random uses can be easily traced. Generally speaking, the random applications can be divided into the following categories:

2.1.1 Contraction or coinage (more often than not) based on the identical sound

In order to reduce the time span consumed by typing to the minimal, many online users prefer to adopt the abbreviation of an existing word by converting the source word to a shortened form. It is true that a language may allow the contraction of words in some certain ways, but the methods utilized by online users seem to be more original and creative without much concern for what the contracted form will be like. To conduct contraction based on the identical sound is one of the common ways they prefer:

Eg.   Before----$\rightarrow$ b4

To be or not to be -$\rightarrow$ 2B or not 2B

Sometimes, for the same purpose mentioned above, online users will even coin some new words or expressions in the same manner:

Eg.   Are you …? --$\rightarrow$ R u …?

Of course, the words and expressions online users adopt are not merely confined to those invented by themselves, some well-recognized ones are still in use on the Internet and the building mechanism of them is certainly stemmed from those established methods such as compounding, blending, deviation and the like.

Eg. Internet Phone -$\rightarrow$ IP   Compact Disc-$\rightarrow$ CD

A/S/L? ---$\rightarrow$ age? /sex?/location?

2.1.2 Use of extra-linguistic symbols to represent meanings and emotions

For the most parts, communications through the Internet are of the property of interactivity, that is, the Internet serves as a preferable place where online users are allowed to express

themselves uninhibitedly. In this sense, online users are likely to add their on-the-spot emotions to what the "speak" so as to enrich what they intend to convey to their partners. In their eyes, powerful as a language can be, it seems to lack the potential to manifest subtle feelings: therefore, they shift their attentions to some extra-linguistic symbols and achieve striking success.

Eg. Smiling --→ :)　　angry---→ : (

Some websites even offer special services (emoji, for example) to facilitate the uses' actions by designing a list of emotion cartoons:

Eg. ☺　☹

2.1.3 Combination of symbols of different languages

This seems to be fashionable trend for teenagers who are intoxicated with the phenomena of bilingualism (or multi-lingualism if they are capable), seeking to make a full use of the advantages of different languages to figure out a concise and identity-manifest way to relay ideas. More specifically, the combination can be further divided into three major sorts:

a. E见钟情　———— combination based on the identical sound

b. …玩着最in的游戏，写着最cool的摇滚，过着最happy的日子…

--------- combination according to the identical meaning

2.2 The erosion of motivation in composing utterances---Wulitou phenomenon

Wulitou phenomenon, one of the most fashionable and favorable topics for many net dwellers, is stemmed from the enormous influences of the movies of Stephen Chow, a famous Hong Kong actor, who, staring several successful comedies, is reputed and also criticized for his exaggerated performance and illogical language uses in his films. In this sense, Wulitou became the focus of many heated discussions concerning the re-understanding of the feasibility of language uses, but it's true that it has scrambled to many aspects of our daily life as if there is no escape at all.

In many Internet-supported chat rooms or APPs, we find a great number of utterances composed by online users which apparently violate some certain rules imposed on a certain language or lack logic cohesiveness between lines. The fact, however, is that more and more utterances with the similar characters are being printed onto internet day by day. What makes it an attractive activity to produce such Wulitou languages ? And what are these utterances like? According to a rough summary, three major features are worth mentioning:

2.2.1 Wrong spellings of (English) words and (Chinese) characters

The wrong spelling of words is actually inevitable for everyone and the internet online users are no exception. As to the reason why we will make mistakes in spelling, many people are to mention the pressure of time or work or the carelessness of their own. This explanation also applies to the wrong spelling on the Internet.

Eg. 版主----- 斑竹

Such wrong spellings are quite common in Chinese net users who prefer to use a Pinyin-to-Chinese character method to type on their computers. This method serves as a desirable alternative to many people who are reluctant to trouble themselves with a complex task of memorizing the one-to-one correspondence between strokes and characters, but, at the same time, brings its users to a new task to choose the proper characters out of all the nominated which share the same sound. Due to the carelessness in choosing the correct characters, many 版主----- 斑竹 like expressions emerged, which, instead of being promptly corrected, became a major stream of fashion and quickly took hold in the virtual world.

2.2.2 Emotion-Centered pattern of language uses

By investigating the expressions by online users, we can make a rough conclusion that most of the language output, violating established rules or seeming fresh in form, can be regarded as the result of an emotion-centered rather than logic centered pattern. Namely, in composing their utterances, online users pay much attention to the way how he or she reveal their emotions to their counterparts, considering it rather unnecessary to spend much time optimizing their expressions. Moreover, this pattern is also typical of so-called individualism, that is, online users take internet as an ideal environment to display their differences from other people and they deliberately outline these differences by means of using "original" and "distinctive" expressions.

Eg. Tony: I am burning in this burning Valentine.

Rena: u r burning? No, u get burned.

(The two speakers claimed to be net-lovers in the yahoo chat room on the day of February, 14. And they decided to meet the never-met partner on the very day. ---assumed situation)

This conversation reflected quite well the emotional situations of the two speakers. Tony felt extraordinarily excited at the thought of seeing Rena, thus he was "burning", and so the whole day for him is "burning", too. This is a wonderful use of rhetorical devices— pun and hyperbole, however, it seems somewhat difficult to understand. As to the word "burned" by Rena, to be frank, it took quite a long time for the writer (who was also in that chat room) to work out its meaning. This word may indicate that Rena was more excited and possible to get Tony "burned" in her boundless excitement. Their utterances, focusing on their emotions only, ignored whether they were understandable, and Tony had to pose a question:

Tony: What u mean? "burned"?

This is just a simple example that shows the emotion-centered pattern, along with many other similar cases, this method booms in the Internet-based language usages.

3.   COGNITIVE ANALYSIS OF INTERNET-BASED EXPRESSIONS

As is mentioned above, more and more Internet-based expressions are being used online and even many magazines and TV shows are becoming addicted to the online fever. Nobody can

take a bind eye to such a flourish phenomenon. Hence several questions rise to our agenda: In what way is this kind expressions understood by the online users other than the word/expression maker himself? Will they eventually invade our well-established framework of language use? Will it be possible that every one of our speech community accept these methods of making utterances?

It is true that these expressions are quite understandable to lots of net dwellers, as if some invisible clues are embedded in the seemingly illogical words. And the clues, in most cases, seem magically available only to those who have communicated with each other and are inclined to "know" each other [4]. This phenomenon draws our attentions to the cognitive science, which, as an applicable tool, is supposed to contribute a great deal to our proper understanding. A cognitive perspective to investigate human activities is primarily characterized by two theoretical assumptions. The first one is conceptualization. Viewed as a fundamental means for humans to make sense of the world, it is central to the working out of meaning of every object and experience concerned with day-to-day life. More precisely, meaning is considered the result of conceptualization [5]. Another assumption, going further from conceptualization, is to state that meaning is encyclopedic. This statement implies that we cannot understand the meaning of any entity without considering the encyclopedic knowledge related to it [6]. From the perspective of the embodiment philosophy (a philosophical foundation of cognitive linguistics), encyclopedic knowledge is the knowledge system constructed by the continuous interaction between human beings and the natural world as well as human societies. The knowledge system, including both the perceptual and rational cognition of a human body, alters and accumulates with the change of interactive space and time, thus forming and shaping the shared intellectual base of humans across nations and races. This way, it is clear that the newly-coined language uses to a large degree represent the conceptualization process of the online users during which they select, modify and transform concepts associated with meaning and emotions before the render their new inventions in new conceptual structures.

Therefore, it is safe to say that the Internet-based expressions are enjoying an unlimited popularity, and, provided people have the desire to express themselves unconventionally, chances that such expressions will become well-recognized by more members of our speech community are tangibly good.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper roughly summarized some major features of the Internet-based expressions and briefly examined their acceptability. The author is not intended to make a rather profound analysis on this issue due to the limitation of relevant knowledge and the immaturity of research methods. Anyhow, as an inseparable element from our daily life, the Internet is bound to appeal to more and more academic attentions and the research of the Internet-base language, technical or non-technical (eg. Online users' expressions), is also bound to be updated.

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