An Analysis of the Semantic Generalization of Internet Buzzwords from the Perspective of Conceptual Metaphor: A Case Study of "Caotai Banzi"

Junxin Long

School of Foreign Language and Literature, Chongqing Normal University, Chongqing 400000, China

Abstract: "Caotai Banzi" (Grass-Roots Troupe), originally a term in traditional opera, rapidly gained traction in online spaces in late 2023 and emerged as a landmark internet buzzword in 2024. Its semantic meaning has undergone significant generalization in frequent use, adhering to inherent laws of the linguistic system. From the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this paper systematically explores the semantic generalization path of "Caotai Banzi" as an internet buzzword—its extension from the original context to diverse scenarios and the derivation of rich semantic connotations in this process. This study intends to provide new case support for semantic research, deepen the understanding of internet language phenomena, and reveal the underlying social and cultural implications through its communication context.

Keywords: Conceptual Metaphor; Internet Buzzwords; Semantic Generalization; "Caotai Banzi" (Grass-Roots Troupe)

Introduction

Amid the deep penetration of digital communication technologies into social life, the instantaneity and interactivity of social platforms have significantly lowered information transmission thresholds while spurring demand for expressions adapted to online contexts. Against this backdrop, internet buzzwords—by accurately capturing specific group emotions and social phenomena—have rapidly gained popularity driven by group identity, emerging as a key linguistic landscape of the digital age. Originating from specific contexts, most such terms rely on conceptual metaphor as a cognitive bridge, transforming abstract collective consciousness and complex social phenomena into tangible expressions to facilitate cross-group understanding and resonance. With increased usage frequency and expanded application scenarios, their semantics often transcend original boundaries, displaying prominent generalization characteristics. This dynamic evolutionary process not only reflects the adaptability of the linguistic system itself but also mirrors profound socio-cultural shifts, attracting sustained academic attention.

As a typical internet buzzword enduringly popular among youth in recent years, "Caotai Banzi" (Grass-Roots Troupe) has distinctive popularity and generalization traits: initially employing metaphor to visualize the societal contradiction between "formal regularity and substantive looseness," it embodies young people's psychological appeal to demystify authority and has gradually evolved into a symbol reflecting the transformation of contemporary mentality and cultural perceptions through online dissemination. Accordingly, this study takes "Caotai Banzi" as the research object. Based on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, it systematically investigates the internal mechanisms and evolutionary paths of its semantic generalization, and deeply interprets the underlying socio-cultural implications. This research aims to provide a new cognitive perspective for understanding the generative logic and social functions of internet buzzwords, while enriching academic studies on internet language phenomena.

1.Chapter 1 Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the Semantic Generalization of Internet Buzzwords

1.1 Overview of Conceptual Metaphor Theory

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) pioneered the foundational proposition in Metaphors We Live By that metaphor is not merely a linguistic rhetorical device but a core mode of human cognition: abstract thinking is concretely constructed through the systematic mapping of structural features from a source domain to a target domain.

Extending this theoretical framework, Zhao (1995) emphasized that such a cognitive mechanism is deeply embedded in human bodily experience and socio-cultural contexts, constituting the core of the thinking system and illuminating metaphor's transcendence from a linguistic phenomenon to a cognitive essence. Conceptual metaphors are categorized into three fundamental types within this paradigm: orientational metaphors, which draw on spatial orientations (e.g., up/down) as the source domain to conceptualize abstractions (e.g., "falling into trouble"); ontological metaphors, which reify abstract entities as perceptible substances (e.g., "time is a resource") to facilitate quantification and manipulation; and structural metaphors, which map the full conceptual structure of one domain onto another (e.g., "love is a journey"), organizing target domain cognition via the logical framework of the source domain. The "Caotai Banzi" (Grass-Roots Troupe) examined in this study is classified as a structural metaphor.

1.2 Characteristics and Mechanisms of the Semantic Generalization of Internet Buzzwords

As a typical manifestation of language variation in the internet age, the semantic generalization of internet buzzwords exhibits multidimensional characteristics and specific operational mechanisms. In terms of characteristics, the generation and dissemination of internet buzzwords are highly contingent on specific social events or cultural phenomena, endowing them with strong timeliness. Expressively, most achieve efficient meaning transmission through homophony, metaphor, abbreviation, and other linguistic devices—reflecting the pursuit of conciseness under the principle of linguistic economy while expanding from specific contexts to broader scenarios via analogy mechanisms, thereby forming replicable usage patterns (Tan, 2010). Semantically, these buzzwords are not static but evolve dynamically in group interaction; some even transcend online circles to integrate into daily discourse systems, demonstrating a trajectory from circle-specific markers to public expressions. This aligns with Liu's (1997) definition of semantic generalization: as words retain fewer and fewer original semantic features, new usages are developed to encompass additional referents, characterized by the gradual fading of original semantic traits and the continuous expansion of reference scope to include previously unrelated objects. In terms of mechanisms, metaphor plays a pivotal role in driving semantic generalization. Liu (1997) proposed three progressive stages: first, semantic metaphor, wherein original semantics are projected to new target domains through cross-domain mapping, with connections established based on similarity; second, semantic abstraction, wherein specific contexts and details are stripped from metaphorical meanings to form a more generalized semantic core; and third, semantic mixing, wherein abstracted semantics are integrated with new contextual elements to generate compound meanings that retain traces of the original while acquiring new referential characteristics. The progression of these three stages constitutes a typical pathway through which internet buzzwords achieve semantic generalization under the influence of metaphor.

2.Chapter 2 "Caotai Banzi" Functioning under the Metaphorical Mechanism

The concept of "Caotai Banzi" originated from ancient folk opera performances. During the Qing Dynasty, local operas flourished but faced discrimination from the feudal scholar-bureaucrat class, which excluded many troupes from urban performance venues. These troupes were thus confined to mobile performances in villages and small towns, using temporarily erected simple stages—earning them the name "Caotai Ban" ("grass-stage troupe"), later standardized as "Caotai Banzi". Gaining traction in online contexts in late 2023, the term evolved into a structural metaphor: its original denotation refers to tangible folk opera troupes with rudimentary facilities, but when applied to describe loose teams or unregulated systems, it essentially leverages the structural attributes of "Caotai Banzi" to construct and interpret the operational logic and inherent characteristics of these abstract organizations. Core connotations include temporariness, disorganization, simplicity, and functional orientation.

3.Chapter 3 The Metaphorical Semantic Generalization of "Caotai Banzi"

Metaphor's operation is inherently intertwined with lexical semantic change, and metaphorical meaning constitutes one of the core pathways for semantic generation (Zhang, 2025). With the frequent use of "Caotai Banzi" and its alignment with social development dynamics, its reference has long transcended its original scope. In broader

social contexts, its metaphorical connotations continue to expand, as illustrated intuitively by the following examples of this semantic generalization process.

3.1 Characterized by Semantic Metaphor

The first stage of "Caotai Banzi's" semantic generalization is characterized by semantic metaphor: starting from its original literal meaning, specific attributes are mapped to new referents through similarity-based associative thinking, forming metaphorical usages. At this stage, generalization remains dependent on distinct "points of similarity," with clear semantic orientation.

Example 1: "Today, in Shizi Village, Cuizhai Town, Jiyang County, as a 'Caotai Banzi' performed vulgar erotic dances, the Jinan Cultural Inspection Brigade rushed to investigate and punish the troupe upon being notified" (Qilu Evening News, December 21, 2004).

In this example, "Caotai Banzi" is used in its literal sense, referring to itinerant old-time opera troupes with few performers, rudimentary equipment, and high mobility. The term vividly describes the vulgar performance group, implying poor performance quality and a lack of professional standards. As a metaphorical depiction of a specific real-world performance troupe, it enables readers to quickly associate such groups with shoddy performance environments and unqualified personnel, reinforcing a negative stance toward the group and its behaviors. Essentially, the metaphor transfers the term's inherent negative attributes to the new referent, forming a concise, critical evaluation of the specific phenomenon.

3.2 Characterized by Semantic Abstraction

As internet buzzwords undergo semantic generalization, users' cognitive sensitivity to metaphorical mechanisms diminishes, with metaphorical meanings gradually converging with original lexical meanings—no additional markers for metaphorical features are required, and semantic boundaries become blurred due to repeated cross-domain mapping (Yang & Cheng, 2006). Specifically, the term's metaphorical scope expands from concrete referents to more abstract concepts, systems, or phenomena, transcending specific groups or entities to denote broader, more generalized categories. At this stage, semantics shift from "specific similarity" to "abstract essential connection."

Example 2: "People are increasingly recognizing that the so-called arbitration tribunal is merely a cobbled-together 'Caotai Banzi' (Grass-Roots Troupe). The absurdity of its actions has destined this 'award' to become an infamous travesty in the history of international law" (Economic Daily, July 15, 2016).

The ad hoc arbitration tribunal in this example is not a traditional performing arts troupe but a temporary institution in international justice. Referring to it as "Caotai Banzi" abstractly invokes the term's core attributes: temporary assembly, unprofessionalism, and lack of authority and standardization. Unilaterally initiated by the Philippines, the tribunal featured an unreasonable personnel composition, unfair procedures, and numerous flaws in evidence and fact-finding—its operations and professional standards diverged sharply from those of formal judicial arbitration bodies, resembling a hastily assembled, unqualified "Caotai Banzi." This abstract extension of the concept from concrete performing arts groups to complex phenomena in international political and judicial arenas profoundly reveals the tribunal's irrationality and absurdity. It enables readers to quickly grasp the tribunal's "pseudo-formality" within the international judicial system through the familiar imagery of "Caotai Banzi," while implicitly warning against the "manipulation of international rules." Consequently, the term's critical value transcends the specific event, acquiring broader social significance.

3.3 Characterized by Semantic Ambiguity

As a term's semantic generalization deepens, the boundaries of its original core meaning blur (Liu, 1997), with usage becoming more flexible—even integrable into fixed syntactic structures. Semantics yield diverse interpretations contingent on context, losing a single definitive reference. At this stage, the term functions more as a

"semantic framework," whose specific meaning is contextualized.

Example 3: "This 'symphony orchestra' is operated by Guangdong Huanya Xingchen Culture Communication Co., Ltd. Reporters contacted the company for details about the Liuzhou performance but received no response. Music critic Gege noted that the domestic market is flooded with 'huo tuan' (gig-based groups): 'Such entities are temporary "Caotai Banzi" (Grass-Roots Troupe) that borrow the name of established orchestras for promotion. Their competence varies drastically, and without adequate rehearsal and coordination, repertoire quality suffers'" (Guangming Net, January 13, 2024).

In this example, "Caotai Banzi" carries ambiguous semantics: while referring to a temporarily formed performance group, it provides no explicit clarification on specific attributes (e.g., whether members are fully ad hoc or equipment is rudimentary). Readers' understanding hinges on descriptions like "name borrowing for promotion" and "variable competence," with interpretations of the term's concrete imagery and problematic scope differing based on individual experience and cognition. "Caotai Banzi" has thus evolved into a critical "universal label," embodying language's dynamic self-renewal in social practice. It conveys negative attitudes concisely while leaving room for contextual interpretation, balancing expressive efficiency with the need to describe complex social phenomena. In essence, the semantic evolution and usage of "Caotai Banzi" not only epitomize language's inherent development but also vividly reflect socio-cultural mentalities, value orientations, and practical contradictions.

4.Chapter 4 Social and Cultural Factors of the Semantic Generalization of "Caotai Banzi"

The semantic generalization of "Caotai Banzi" (Grass-Roots Troupe) stems from the interplay of multiple socio-cultural factors. From the perspective of online social interaction and communication characteristics, the Internet's instant interactivity provides a pivotal context for its semantic expansion. Tan's (2010) principle of linguistic economy is evident here: compared with cumbersome expressions like "a temporarily cobbled-together low-quality organization," "Caotai Banzi" conveys meaning concisely, and this pursuit of coding efficiency has facilitated its rapid popularization in fast-paced online communication. Meanwhile, the analogy mechanism—through netizens' imitation and application (e.g., extending from "film crew Caotai Banzi" to "workplace Caotai Banzi")—constantly broadens its applicable scenarios, with social media's viral dissemination further accelerating this process, transforming it from a sector-specific evaluation into a cross-domain symbol of social criticism (Guo & Duan, 2023).

The term's generalization embodies collective resonant emotions, reflecting social psychology and the demand for emotional expression. Liu (2004) notes that metaphor is a key means of emotional expression in online language; by mapping complex feelings of social disorder onto a tangible organizational form, "Caotai Banzi" has become an emotional vehicle for ridiculing phenomena such as rule deficiencies and incompetence. For instance, the popular expression "the world is a massive Caotai Banzi" not only vents emotions of deconstructing idealized social perceptions but also reinforces intergroup cognitive resonance (Yang, 2022).

Additionally, its semantic expansion reflects the underlying contradictions of contemporary society. Against the backdrop of professionalism and standardization as mainstream values, the frequent use of "Caotai Banzi" implies affirmation of efficiency and order, while also mirroring the acute perception of organizational operational flaws in a transitional society. This generalization is essentially the linguistic projection of cultural values: it not only reflects the public's expectation for professionalism but also exposes the helpless acceptance of social operational complexity (Peng, 2022).

5.Conclusion

Taking "Caotai Banzi" (Grass-Roots Troupe) as a case study, this paper employs Conceptual Metaphor Theory to reveal the path, mechanism, and significance of internet buzzwords' semantic generalization: originating as a traditional opera term, it first undergoes semantic metaphor—extending "simplicity and temporariness" to specific irregular groups via similarity mapping to enable precise criticism of targeted phenomena; in the abstraction stage, it

detaches from specific contexts to generalize "systematic looseness"; and in the ambiguity stage, it evolves into a flexible semantic framework that accommodates diverse interpretations of complex social phenomena, demonstrating language's expressive vitality. Throughout this process, conceptual metaphor acts as a core link: it facilitates the dissemination of buzzwords in line with the principle of linguistic economy and analogy mechanism, while endowing them with collective expectations for professionalism and helplessness toward social contradictions, thus becoming a symbolic carrier of cultural mentalities.

This confirms that Conceptual Metaphor Theory effectively explains the evolution of internet buzzwords. Future research could focus on the real-time evolution of buzzwords in specific events and compare generalization differences across contexts to deepen understanding of the language-society relationship. In essence, the semantic generalization of internet buzzwords results from the interplay of cognition, communication, and culture, offering a unique linguistic perspective for observing contemporary societal changes.

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