A Study on the Variation of Network Language

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ABSTRACT

With the development of the Internet, network language has received more and more attention. As a language variant, network language has its own characteristics different from traditional language, such as simplicity and interest. This study aims to explore the characteristics, reasons and social functions of network language variation. From the perspective of sociolinguistics, this paper finds that the characteristics of the variation of network language involve three aspects: vocabulary variation, grammar variation and pragmatics variation. Besides, this study also finds out the social reasons and personal psychological reasons that lead to the variation of network language. Finally, three social functions of network language variation are discussed: marking function, entertainment function and commercial function.

Keywords: Network language; Variation; Sociolinguistics

Introduction

The popularity of the Internet has not only greatly changed people's lives, but also brought about a change in language. A specific form of language variation under the Internet background—network language emerged. The network language comes from the virtual network community, making it easy to break away from the conventional language form. Given that language variation has always been one of the research focus in sociolinguistics, this study on the network language based on the language variation theory is necessary.

1.1 Language Variation

1.1.1 Definition

The study of language variation got popular in the 1960s and gradually developed into a new field of sociolinguistics. William Labov, the founder of the study of language variation, believed that language variation means that there are different versions of the same thing (Zhu Wanjing, 1986). Each language includes multiple systems, and each subsystem (variants) is a relatively self-contained language system (Zhan Ju, 2015). Labov's classical definition has been more specifically interpreted or supplemented by foreign and domestic sociolinguistic researchers. For example, Hudson (2000: 22) defined language variation as "a form of language expression commonly used by people with the same social characteristics in the same social environment". Ferguson believes that language variation is a human speech model with the same nature (Wardhaugh, 2000:30). In domestic research, Zhu Wanjing thinks that language variation refers to the changes and differences in the use of language, which are manifested through the use of different language varieties (1986:7). Zhanghui holds the belief that language variation refers to the language form that breaks away from linguistic norms (1995). Based on the above points of view, this study believes that language variation refers to the same language deviating in form or structure due to the influence of its environment.

1.1.2 Types of Language Variation

There are various forms of the linguistic variation, and they can be categorized from different angles. According to Geoffrey Leech, a famous British linguist, linguistic variation can be classified into eight forms which are commonly used, namely phonological deviation, lexical deviation, grammatical deviation, semantic deviation, graphological deviation, deviation of register, dialectal deviation and deviation of the historical period (Leech, 1983). This method of classification is widely used in the

field of linguistics and this paper will adopt it in the following analysis. Language variation can also be divided into conscious variation and unconscious variation. If a language user consciously wants to use form A but fails to use standard A, it belongs to unconscious variation. Obviously, conscious variation refers to the deliberate use of a variety of language (Ding Chongming, 2000).

1.2 Network Language
1.2.1 Definition
With the emergence of network language, scholars have put forward different views on its definition. In 2001, the first network language book, *Language and the Internet* written by linguist David Crystal proposed that the network language is a language variant in the special network environment, which is a manifestation of human creativity. This book has brought a new perspective to many linguistic scholars. Qin Xiubai believes that network language is composed of three language components: Professional terms of computer and network technology; Terms related to network culture; Special terms used in CMC communication (BBS, online chat, etc.)(2003). Dai Qingxia regards network communication as jargon and divides it into two categories. The first is the computer industry terminology and computer professional terminology. The other is some special forms of language expression or information symbols created and used by netizen during online chatting. This category is called "network language" (2004). This study takes the special terms and symbols used by netizen to communicate in online communities as the research object.

1.2.2 Variation of Network Language
Qin Xiubai believed that "Network language is a functional variety of language and has become a language variety used by specific groups" (2003). Xu Zhongning thought that network language is not a new language but a variant of a social dialect influenced by contextual factors (2004). The variation of network language is mainly caused by the special context factor of Internet communication, the language concept factor and psychological factors of netizen. Network language is not fixed but in constant change, so it can be regarded as a kind of linguistic variation resulting from the variation of traditional language. In the virtual network, because of various factors, some network languages have deviated from the conventional language forms and have changed in pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, special symbols, style, etc.

1.3 Research Purpose and Research Significance
This paper aims to study the characteristics of the variation of network language, the reasons behind the variation of Internet language and the social functions of network language variation. Theoretically, this study can further improve the sociolinguistic theory. Practically, the study of network language variation can provide suggestions for people on how to better express their views and communicate with others in the network environment so as to improve their online social ability.

2. Characteristics of Network Language Variation
The basic elements of language are phonetics, grammar and vocabulary. On the Internet, people exchange information mainly via keyboard instead of voice. So the variation of network language is mainly reflected in vocabulary and grammar. Besides, the pragmatic principles of network language also deviate from our conventional pragmatic principles. Therefore, in the following part, we will explore the variation of vocabulary, grammar and pragmatics in network language.

2.1 Variation of Vocabularies

Lexical variation is the creation of new words. In order to pursue interest and innovation, netizen have created many new words. These new words seem to have become a kind of jargon, which can only be understood by young people who often surf the Internet. Vocabulary is a combination of sound, form and meaning, and the variation of vocabulary in the network is mainly reflected in "form" and "meaning". Next, we will discuss the variation of vocabulary from three aspects: word form and word meaning.

2.1.1 Variation of Word Form

To sum up, there are four variation types of word form.

(1) Extensive use of abbreviations. In order to achieve simple and efficient communication, netizens often use some abbreviations in their chat, including abbreviations of English letters and Chinese pinyin. Here are some abbreviations of English letters, such as HE (happy ending), BE (bad ending), BF (boy friend), OMG (oh my god) and so on. The emergence of English acronyms, on the one hand, is due to the high cultural level of Internet users, who often use some simple English words and phrases (abbreviations) in online communication; On the other hand, it is for quick and interesting purposes. Here are also some examples of pinyin abbreviations, such as xswl (笑死我了）, yyds (永远的神）, plmm (漂亮美眉）and so on. The use of these abbreviations is the result of people's pursuit of convenient, concise and fast communication in the network age.

(2) Use the homophonic sound of numbers to form phrases, such as 886 (再见），678（录取吧），1314（一生一世）, etc. Besides, there is another situation where the numbers are used, that is, a mixture of English letters and numbers, such as B4 (Before), 3Q (Thank you), F2F (Face to face), etc. The use of numbers has greatly facilitated the chatting of netizens.

(3) Use symbolic words, such as ":-)" (smile); ":-D" (laugh); ":-("(sad or angry); ":-X" (keep secrets), etc. With the popularity of emoji, however, people seldom use these symbolic words because emoji is more convenient.

(4) Use homophone of Chinese characters, such as"雨女无瓜"（与你无关），"夺笋"（多损），"芜湖"（呜呼），"鸭梨山大"（压力山大），"表"（不要）, etc. These Chinese homonyms sound interesting, which can not only convey information accurately but also make the chat atmosphere more relaxing.

2.1.2 Variation of Word Meaning

When you enter the network world, you will find that many seemingly familiar words have become so strange. If someone on the Internet calls you "genius", you should be careful to understand the connotation. Because in the network vocabulary, "genius"（天才） often refers to "born fool"（天生蠢材）. There are two kinds of variations of word meaning, involving the expansion of word meaning and the transfer of word meaning.

(1) The expansion of word meaning. It refers to the expansion of the scope of the objective things the words refer to. For example, "Positive energy" is originally a physical term. Richard Wiseman, a British psychologist, compared the human body to energy fields. Trust, open-mindedness, joy and enterprise are the positive energy inside the body. Since 2012, all positive, hopeful and powerful people and things can be called "positive energy". In the dictionary, "capricious" means "change suddenly and quickly", With the popularity of "有钱就是任性" on the Internet, the word "capricious" has become a hot word. Internet users use "capricious" to describe rich people who "let their own nature go unconstrained" when buying things.

(2) The transfer of word meaning. Lu Jianming believed that the so-called word meaning transfer refers to the transfer of names caused by similar associations, that is, the transfer of the scope of meaning caused by the use of metaphor and metonymy (Lu Jianmin, 2012). Recently, the word "内卷", has been very popular on the Internet. It originally refers to the phenomenon that there is no way to stabilize it or transform it into a new form after a certain kind of cultural model has reached a certain final form, but it can only become more complex internally. Nowadays, many people use it to refer to irrational internal competition among peers for limited resources by making more efforts. We can see that there is a similar association between its original meaning and new meaning.

2.2 Variation of Grammar

Grammar is the structural rules of language. Grammar determines how people use words and collocations to form sentences. Whether words can be collocated and how they are arranged follow certain rules (Xing Fuyi & Wang Guosheng, 2011). Grammar stipulates how people combine sentences, on the other hand, it indicates how people understand sentences. Therefore, in daily verbal communication and written works, we should use language correctly. However, in the special environment of network language, people will deliberately use incorrect grammar to attract others' attention. Here are three types of grammar variation.

2.2.1 The Use of Mixed Sentences

Influenced by foreign languages, many Chinese sentences and phrases are mixed with English in the network language. Here are two examples, "我已经 out 了", "她很 man". Because the objects of communication in the virtual space are not restricted by modern Chinese Putonghua, netizen love their own dialects so that dialects with certain characteristics in economically developed coastal areas such as Guangdong and Shanghai are more concerned by people. The linguistic and grammatical formats in these areas are copied in a large number, which leads to the mixing of dialects and Putonghua. Here are three examples, "就酱紫", "好家伙,你怎么就放假了", "我真是一个纯纯的大冤种".

2.2.2 Abnormal Collocation of Words

In traditional Chinese grammar, the adverbs "很" and "非常"are used to modify adjectives, while generally they do not modify nouns. But in the network language, the "adverb+noun" structure can be seen everywhere. For example, "很西方", "很现代", "很女人". Except for the abnormal structure "adverb+noun", there are many other abnormal collocations in the network language. For instance, "你唱得真好听，我的耳朵都快怀孕了". This abnormal collocation of words can easily catch people's eyes and leave a deep impression in their minds.

2.2.3 Abnormal Sentence Patterns

Under the network environment, there are some languages different from conventional sentence patterns. They are usually simple in structure, randomly collocated and combined. They cater to the psychological needs of young people who are innovative and pursue their own individuality. Here are some examples. The first one is "......的说", such as "毫不夸张的说", "这家饭店很难吃的说", etc. This sentence pattern is equivalent to a modal particle, which has no practical meaning in the sentence. The second popular one is "....子", such as "绝绝子", "美女子", "宝子", etc. The third one is the mix of Chinese and English grammar. This English suffix "ing" indicates that the action is in progress. Netizens like to use it with Chinese verbs, such as "高兴 ing", "难受 ing", "激动 ing", etc.

2.3 Variation of Pragmatics

In 1983, Leech proposed the politeness principle of conversation, which involved tact maximum. It advised communication participants to let listeners suffer as little as possible and benefit as much as possible (Leech, 1983). However, in online comments, netizens not only violate the principle of appropriateness in daily conversation but also take "inappropriate" words to pursue ridicule or sarcasm. However, people who follow the principle of ridicule are not malicious to the hearer. Here is an example. Recently, there was a news on Weibo, which mentioned that a father was infected with COVID-19, and his son ran away very quickly after laying food at the door. Netizens commented in a ridiculous tone, "有点亲情，但不多". Actually, this kind of ridicule is not criticism, but to produce a humorous effect. The so-called sarcasm principle means that the speaker attacks people by means of metaphor, exaggeration, irony, etc. in order to achieve the goal of sarcasm.

3. Reasons Behind the Variation of Network Language

The variation of network language is the result of the interaction of many aspects. On the one hand, the variation of language is driven by external factors, such as the development of society and the contact of different languages. On the other hand, the variation of network language is determined by individual internal factors, such as the psychology of netizen in pursuit of trends.

3.1 External Factors

Language comes into being and develops with the emergence and development of society. To understand language and the law of its development, we must closely link language with the history of society and the history of the people who created and used it. The word conversion in network catchwords is the result of the rapid development of the social economy. For example, "正能量", "光盘" and "格局" originally belong to the professional field. With the development of society, the meaning of these words has become popular, and they have been transferred to other fields and even industries, which have produced new meanings on the Internet. In recent years, there have been a lot of network buzzwords about social hot events, such as "拼爹", "栓 Q", "逆行者" and so on. Besides, the contact of different languages also creates new words. For example, "让我康康" originates from the Fujian dialect. Local people like to say "康" to replace "看", so netizen borrowed this word to make their words sound more lovely. Many foreign words also have been introduced into the online vocabulary. Many English and Chinese words are mixed, such as "我真的栓 Q", "hold 住", "别忘了 Q 我". The transliteration of English words appears in large numbers, such as "轰趴(home party)", "狗带(go die)", "脱口秀(talk show)", etc.

3.2 Internal Factors

Language is a reflection of social psychology. The first one is innovative psychology. The main force in creating network catchwords is young people. They advocate innovation and are keen to transform old things into new things. Therefore, young netizens frequently use new words to pursue new feelings. The second one is conforming psychology. In online communication, if you can't understand the online language or don't use the online language at all, you will be regarded as a "Martian" and be separated from the group. Internet users use some expressions that violate the daily form just because others are using them. The third one is entertainment psychology. With the increase of social competitive pressure, netizen often releases psychological pressure and their emotions through online communication by using some humorous network language.

4. Social Functions of Internet Language Variation

Sociolinguistics believes that language variation should have certain social functions, and the emergence of new language varieties should have social significance and social value. As far as network language is concerned, this new language variety has its unique social function. From the perspective of its extensive effects on society, the social functions of network catchwords are as follows.

4.1 Marking Function

In the process of interpersonal communication, the spoken words can reflect a part of the "personal information" of the speaker, such as where the person comes from, occupation, age, personality, hobbies, etc. This information comes from the language variation phenomenon in the speaker's speech. Therefore, we can say that the variation forms that appear when the speaker uses language in actual discourse communication mark some personal information (such as nationality, native place, occupation, age, etc.) of the speaker himself. Besides, language variation is related to netizens' own knowledge structure and life experience. Internet users can hide their own professional, ethnic and other external social characteristics, but their knowledge structure and life experience will be subconsciously reflected in their online behavior. This subconscious behavior is reflected in that Internet users are selective when publishing content on the Internet. Internet users have their own degree of recognition of these language variations. Each Internet user has different degrees of recognition for different types of language variations (including those from dialects, foreign languages, numbers, letters, symbols, etc.) according to their own knowledge and experience. In other words, the type of variation that netizens choose corresponds to their own knowledge and experience.

4.2 Entertainment Function

The main users of this function are young people, who face a lot of pressure in life and use network catchwords to tease life. The use of network language in daily communication can make the dialogue humorous. For example, "鸭梨" is a homophone for "压力". Someone intentionally or unintentionally changed "压力" into "鸭梨", and then countless people imitated him. Funny and strange network catchwords are highly sought after by young people, which also brings more fun to their lives.

4.3 Commercial Function

Some media companies or marketing manufacturers take advantage of the powerful charm of network catchwords to seize the psychology of people. For example, a popular saying on the Internet in 2012, "快到碗里来", shows that you basically belong to me. Especially between young men and women, they use it to joke with each other. Then the Internet catchphrase "快到碗里来" appeared in MM's chocolate bean advertisement. This advertisement for MM's chocolate bean took "快到碗里来" as the slogan. On the one hand, it means MM's chocolate bean is delicious; On the other hand, it indicates that "you are doomed to be mine, come to my bowl soon", which is a pun that perfectly combines the core meaning of network buzzwords with the product concept, and is unique and eye-catching. Another example is the popular online buzzword "The world is so big, I want to see it" a few years ago, and the same city of 58 put up the slogan "The world is so big, I want to see it, stand on this platform, and let you see the world". Many businessmen have taken this opportunity to promote their products.

5 Conclusion

This paper mainly discusses the characteristics, causes and social functions of network language variation. Through the research, we find that there are mainly three types of network language variations: lexical variation, grammatical variation and pragmatic variation. The reasons that lead to the variation of network language include both external social reasons and internal psychological reasons. The variation of network language mainly has three social functions: marking function, entertainment function and commercial function. This study also has shortcomings. First of all, there is no interdisciplinary in-depth research combined with communication, cognitive psychology and other disciplines. Second, this study is based on discussion and lacks quantitative research. Future studies can do more comprehensive research combining the corpus or questionnaires. In conclusion, network language is a variation of the language in the specific context. Many unimaginable changes will take place in the network language in the future. We do not need to worry too much about whether the network language will destroy the purity of language. What we should do is conduct a more in-depth study of it, find the law of its development, and then objectively guide the development of network language.

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