

The Characteristics of Network Language: A Semiotic Perspective

Qianli Chen*

Saengchan Hemchua**

Abstract

As the speed of new media dissemination becomes increasingly timely, more and more people are willing to participate in information creation. In this environment, the network language develops more rapidly and impacts the traditional language system. This paper discusses the Network language from the perspective of semiotics, mainly about its characteristics and the main reasons for its formation. Network language is characterized by novelty, simplicity, and individuality. These characteristics are primarily determined by the network subject's characteristics. Analyzing network language from the perspective of semiotics can facilitate the understanding of the network subject's interests and psychology, which are a new field and an urgent demand.

Keywords: network language; semiotic; network subject; linguistic signs

* School of Liberal Arts, Shinawatra University

** Advisor

Introduction

In the film *Ready Player One* released in 2018, the director Steven Spielberg depicted a scenario from the future: in the game, each player can have a new, virtual identity, and use this identity to communicate with others. This identity has nothing to do with real identity in real life, so everyone can participate in the virtual world more personally in the game.

In our current network environment, we cannot achieve the attractive 3D experience, such as the movie *Ready Player One*, but our participation in public information is much stronger than the era without the internet.

Since the Internet was born in the 1990s, it has changed our lives with incredible speed and strength. The former mass media has become a personalized two-way communication. The information is no longer “pushing” to the audience, but becomes the audience initiative to “pull out” the part what they want. As James Gleick (1954-, American author and historian of science) says:

Cyberspace is an engine driving change in the language. “I think of it as a saucepan under which the temperature has been turned up,” [...] Like the printing press, the telegraph and the telephone before it, the Internet is transforming the language simply by transmitting information differently. And what makes cyberspace different from all previous information technologies is its intermixing of scales from the largest to the smallest without prejudice, broadcasting to the millions, narrowcasting to groups, instant messaging one to one. (2006, p. 5).

In this context, a particular language with characteristics gradually forms in the network space and is accepted and used by more and more netizens. This is the network language.

From the perspective of semiotics, network signs are also a kind of “linguistic signs” to convey information of various sorts. “Creative information” must be transmitted by utilizing verbal and non-verbal signs in interpersonal communication. We put the network language and the traditional Chinese under the semiotic theory framework

to carry on the contrast, to deeply understand the intrinsic characteristic and the development rule of network signs.

Research Objective

This paper analyses the network language from the perspective of semiotics, mainly about its characteristics and the main reasons for its formation.

Literature Review

Semiotics is an enormously broad approach to understanding such matters as meaning, cognition, culture, and behavior, even life itself. Thomas A. Sebeok (1920–2001) proposes that semiotics lies “at the intersection of nature and culture;” Italian semiotician and novelist Umberto Eco (1932-2016) characterizes this field as “co-extensive with the whole range of cultural phenomena, however pretentious that approach may at first seem.” Moreover, for Peirce, all these apparently heterogeneous fields can be unified under the umbrella of their common dominator as sign systems.

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), the “father” of modern linguistics as well as semiology, proposes a dualistic notion of signs, relating the signifier as the form of the word or phrase uttered, to the signified as the mental concept. Saussure uses “signification” and “signal” to replace “concept” and “sound pattern” respectively and puts forward his theory of arbitrariness: the link between signal and signification is arbitrary. “The linguistic sign is, then, a two-sided psychological entity” (Saussure, 2016, p.66). Since we are treating a sign as the combination in which a signal is associated with a signification, we can express this more simply as: the linguistic sign is arbitrary, which was proposed as the “first principle of language” by Saussure.

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914), a noted logician who founded philosophical pragmatism, considered anything is a sign—not absolutely as itself, but instead in some relation or other. The sign relation is the key (1955, p. 100). Peirce’s 1897 definition of a sign is one of his best-known definitions of the sign: A sign, or representamen, is something that stands for something in some respect or capacity (CP 2.228). From this definition we can see, for a sign to act as a sign, it must enter into a relation with its

“object,” be interpreted, and so produce a new sign, its “interpretant.” It defines three roles encompassing: the sign; the sign’s subject matter, called its object and the sign’s meaning or ramification as formed into a kind of effect called its interpretant (a further sign, for example, a translation). It is an irreducible triadic relation, according to Peirce. The roles are distinct even when the things that fill those roles are not. The roles are but three; a sign of an object leads to one or more interpretants, and, as signs, they lead to further interpretants. The Peircean semiotic addresses not only the external communication mechanism, as per Saussure, but also the internal representation machine, investigating not just sign processes, or modes of inference, but the whole inquiry process in general.

Characteristics of Network Language

Network signs were born on the Internet platform, which is a variant of the modern language. Language can reflect the distinct characteristics of the Times, so is network language, which is deeply affected by changes of social life. And because of its arbitrariness and transmission speed, it responds more quickly to social phenomena than social language. Although the number of network languages is huge and the rules are confusing, some common features can be found after careful analyses of common network languages. Compared with traditional languages, network languages have the following characteristics:

1. Arbitrary and conventionality.

The arbitrariness of network language is different from that of traditional language. While he puts forward the idea of linguistic arbitrariness, Saussure also points out that arbitrariness does not mean the free choice of a sign by the speaker. Arbitrariness is closely related to the conventionality of language, by which we mean that all the members of a speech community agree to use a particular sign to refer to a particular signification. Once the relationship between a signal and a signification is established, it is not subject to any personal influence. The speakers of a particular speech community must follow to communicate with others and function in society.

Thus, to succeed in unifying language communication, it is necessary to conform to the rules of communication of the language used. That is to say, traditional language has the characteristics of conventionality under the influence of the commonly social and cultural background and the principle of language communication and cooperation.

However, for the network languages because of its unique features the correspondence between signifiers and signifiers of many terms in the network and the correspondence between signifiers and signifiers in our daily life or new concepts have emerged, so the network group has to find new signifiers. This also better illustrates that there is no “intrinsic connection” or “natural link” between signifier and signified. Sometimes it violates or breaks away from the rules of social language. It seems to be back to the beginning of the formation of linguistic signs, as Saussure said in his general linguistics course.” The relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary”.

The arbitrariness of network language is shown in the following aspects:

1.1. Icons

For example, in China’s Internet communication environment (*^▼^*) represents happiness, (☹—☹) represents sadness, and so on. Punctuation marks itself has no meaning, but because of their shape, they are given meaning by netizens. Furthermore, the Chinese character “囧” originally means “bright,” but because the shape of the character looks like a helpless and embarrassing face, it is given the meaning of “embarrassment” by netizens.

As Mr. Chen Yuan (1945-, a famous linguist in China) ever pointed out in “Sociolinguistics” that a special scene of modern social life cannot be used or is not satisfied with the use of language as a communication tool, often resorting to various kinds of sensory organs that can directly touch people. The signs replace the language to make it more direct and effective, and to respond more quickly. Icon signs such as emotion icon and pictures in chat have emerged (2000, p.157).

This level of expression is endowed with meaning from the category of icons. In the process of network communication, using these signs to express mood is more vivid and direct. According to Peirce’s theory, the icon is a kind of image. This kind

of signs has the substitution, replace the meaning of the written message with the image of the object. The manifestation mainly has graphic emoticons, animated emoticons, character drawing, and so on.

1.2. Abbreviations

The Abbreviations refer to the shortened form of words or phrases by usually shortening something or omitting parts of the word or phrase. However, the combination rules of abbreviations in the network language are very casual. The main reason for abbreviations is the way they are used in conversation to improve efficiency. When used for a long time, it becomes a specific linguistic meaning. These words are not only English abbreviations, but also composed of pure numeral abbreviations, Chinese + English, Chinese + numeral, and other combinations. For example, “886” stand for goodbye in Chinese netizens chatting because its pronunciation is similar to “bye-bye.”

However, the arbitrariness of network language is relative. Once these network signs are recognized, accepted, and widely used by the massive social groups in the process of communication, they have certain specifications and become new social language signs. For example, the words “给力” and “坑爹” are the network language at first, and used by more and more netizens. Finally, they even appear in the News language and become the social language of the established usage.

Therefore, although there are new arbitrary linguistic signs produced in the network communication, with the widespread use of these some network language signs will be eliminated and then disappeared, and some language signs will be retained because of the widespread use. So we can see that the arbitrariness and conventionality of network language signs coexist.

2. Timeliness and fuzziness

The content of these signs signified that sign can refer to, and it is the psychological reproduction of existence in the real world. Traditional language refers mainly to the rational meaning (conceptual meaning), color meaning, and associative meaning of language. These meanings are customized and shared by the whole national society

in a certain historical process. They are a historical and relative certainty. When people use and understand them, they must follow common rules and habits. Although the meaning of traditional linguistic signs varies with society, region and times, and to adapt to the changes in social life and the concept of the time, the development of traditional language still shows its relative stability.

Network language signs in a specific network time and network environment will point to a specific meaning, which is the timeliness of the network environment. Both parties in the special context and time of the network, thus achieving the purpose of communication, understand the signifier-directed meanings of these linguistic signs.

The timeliness of network languages is mainly aimed at the emergence of network vocabularies for some popular events or things that are quickly iterated. Some network languages have specific meanings in a particular period. This meaning is divorced from the meaning represented by signs in social languages. It often uses two or three words to metaphorize the truth behind a news event, and generally has a sense of irony. Both two sides of communication know the meaning when they express and receive it.

However, this meaning is not necessarily recorded in the social public language system. When it completes the present communicative task, and the event is forgotten, the word will be abandoned. When the time goes by, when we mention this network word again, many people will not understand the meaning of it, and lose the meaning of what he refers to, and will no longer have the sign function of that time.

Liu Shuxin (1934-2016, famous linguist) raises a meaningful argument about the appearance, maintenance, and disappearance of new terms in a language as follows:

A word or expression may be regarded as new not only if it appears from nothingness into existence, but also if it receives the general approval by the users, extensive use and has already been set up in the language vocabulary. When this kind of word has already existed in the language for a fixed amount of time, let's say for fifteen to twenty years, then the people use it with ease, and the freshness has been abolished. It starts to leave the scope of a neologism as it transforms into a commonly used word

(1990, pp. 283).

For example, “My father is Li Gang,” one of the popular Internet expressions in China in 2010, represents a hot news event. At that time, people who said this sentence during online communication expressed the meaning of “I am a person with strong background power. I can do whatever I want.” But not means that his father is named Li Gang (Li Gang is a Chinese official), and the information receiver will know the meaning well. However, now a few people will mention this phrase again. The event has been forgotten, and this famous network phrase has been eliminated and lost its communicative function at that time.

The timeliness and arbitrariness of the network language determine its limitations. The traditional language has accumulated historically and enriched and enriched the content, which makes its referential meaning more and more precise. However, the network language is produced along with the development of network technology. The combining form is arbitrary, and the meaning changes over time, pointing to ambiguity. In a broad sense, network language limitations are reflected between netizens and non-netizens. Some words and phrases are only used and understood by netizens, which can sometimes cause trouble for people to communicate face-to-face.

For instance, in the minds of non-netizens, the word “hehe” represents a polite and friendly smile, which is often used in online chat. But in the consciousness of senior netizens, the word does not mean friendly, but full of irony. If you do not know whether the communicating partner is a netizen, it may cause misunderstanding.

In a narrow sense, in the large environmental group of network language, there are some small netizens’ circles of network language. The limitations of network language are reflected in the closure between the netizens’ circles with different attributes. These small netizens’ circles have their proper nouns. In this netizens’ circles, they use these words that are theirs to communicate, often only they can understand it and feel very tacit. But for people outside of their small circles, it will be difficult to understand. For example, the active online group “Fans Girls” in China’s social media has many unusual abbreviations and symbols, such as ZQSG, Anti, SZD, and so on. Even a senior

netizen, if he has not been active in this circle for a long time, cannot immediately understand its meaning.

Cause of Characteristics Appeared

The formation and dissemination of network language are the results of a combination of factors. Based on the relationship among signs, signifier and signified, this paper aims to examine the asymmetry of meaning and form on the part of network language in terms of semiotics, intends to analyze its incentives from two aspects: the communicative subject's pragmatic psychology and identity ambiguity, and status equality.

1. The communicating subject identity ambiguity and status equality.

Network communication is carried out in a virtual space. The network anonymity system filters out many elements of the real context. It makes the communicator's identity blurred, status equal, and speech act and speech responsibility separate. To a certain extent, it weakens the binding force of context on the people's speech act, so the communicator can do it in this context. Give full play to the wisdom of individuals; blatantly carry out "innovation" and "variation" in the national language, striving to make their language expression novel and unique, full of personality, so that the network language has new and unique characteristics.

2. The communicative subject has unique, pragmatic psychology.

In the "Statistical report on internet development in China" released by CNNIC on February 28, 2019, there is a set of statistical data on the age level of Internet users: as of December 2018, the 10-39-year-old group accounted for 67.8% of the total Internet users, of which the 20-29-year-old users accounted for 26.8%.

This set of data shows that Internet users are a special group mainly composed of young people. As the creators and users of network language, their special pragmatic psychology has a great deal to do with the formation of network language characteristics. The special pragmatic psychology of netizens is mainly reflected in the following aspects:

Firstly, seek novelty and innovation. Young netizens dare to rebel against tradition, dare to innovate, and are willing to pursue individuality, which is reflected in the use of language to strive for novel and unique ways of expression. Therefore, in the virtual cyberspace, they try to make all kinds of variations in the national language, to weed out the old and bring forth the new, and achieve the effect of defamiliarization.

Secondly, group psychology. Young netizens are open-minded and active, not only taking the initiative to innovate, but also accepting new changes with an open mind. This means that as soon as new and different forms of expression appear on the Internet, they will compete with each other to copy them and make them popular in the online context. The role of Internet users' conformity psychology cannot be underestimated. It is precisely because of this psychology that the variety of variations in network language will not "flash in the pan."

Conclusion

Human language is both a sign system and a means of communication. The information transmission mode of network media has created a new and rich language world. Network language contains infinite possibilities of innovation. Netizens change their inherent thinking mode in traditional language, make infinite combinations of limited signs, and change the signifier form and signified meaning of the existing language.

Besides, humor, directness, fashion and other characteristics of network language allow netizens to show their feelings and ideas more quickly, so we can also understand their thoughts and trend of public opinion more deeply through network language signs.

This paper suggests applications that because of the high speed of network communication and the arbitrariness of network language, network language is full of vulgar, violent and pornographic linguistic signs. In the face of novel, free and virtual network space, it is even more necessary to establish some restriction mechanisms to maintain the purity of the network environment.

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