

Study on Campus Slang from the Perspective of Semiotics

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Abstract—In recent years, campus slang has gradually gained the concerns of the scholars. Campus slang, as one language form on campus, has always been the subject of semantics, pragmatics and systemic-functional linguistics. The domestic and foreign scholars mostly focused on the description and explanation of the characteristics, development tendency and pragmatic effects of campus slang, but few has been done in the field of its characteristics from the perspective of semiotics. Considering the shortage of the previous studies on campus slang, attempts are made to use specific examples of campus slang as samples to complete the research system of campus slang by giving a broader view and re-interpreting the phenomenon of campus slang from the perspective of semiotics.

Index Terms—semiotics, campus slang, signifier and signified, characteristics, psychological causes

I. INTRODUCTION

With the fast development of economy and society all over the world, a great number of campus slang has emerged and the phenomenon has also aroused increasing attention of scholars at home and abroad. In order to study how campus slang is generated and transmitted, an attempt is made to study campus slang from the perspective of semiotics.

Many countries, such as America, Japan, and China have begun to collect campus slang and give a study on campus slang from different perspectives of semantics, pragmatics and systemic-functional linguistics. The domestic and foreign scholars mostly focused on the description and explanation of the characteristics, development tendency and pragmatic effects of campus slang, but few has been done in the field of its characteristics from the perspective of semiotics.

II. DEFINITION OF CAMPUS SLANG

In Chinese, popular words are called “*Liuxingyu*”(流行语), which can also be called vogue-words, catchwords, fashionable words, buzzwords, and popular phrases in English. Thus, there are many different concepts of popular words.

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* (2002), catchword is defined to words or phrases that are placed where it will be popular with someone and be attractive. Yang Wenquan(2003) claims that campus slang are words generally used in a certain period of time and a certain area, which are usually spoken language with features of dialect and which are mutual products of politics, economy, culture, context and mental activities in a given period of time. With the help of the mass media, they are prevailing in all kinds of forms, such as words, phrases, and sentence patterns.

Though there are various concepts of campus slang, yet some common features of campus slang can still be summed up. The most important feature of the campus slang is popularity. That is, campus slang are closely related to the society and used frequently in a certain period of time and a certain area.

1. Relevant Studies on Campus Slang

In the modern western linguistics system, campus slang is also described. According to the classification in Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* (2001), the diachronic developments of linguistics are the external drive of campus popular expression, that is, campus popular expression will change with the development of the society, and at the same time the changes reflect the society's development. Alimi and Arua (2008) define slang from the social function perspective. They say that slang is the informal and highly expressive product of students' creativity, which is used to describe their cultural, academic and social lives.

After the mid-twentieth century, Some research on campus slang has been conducted in China. Campus popular language arouses the strong interest of domestic scholars of pragmatics, systemic-functional linguistics. For example, all the subjects reveal the characteristics and nature of campus slang from different perspectives. In recent years, Yang Wenquan and Xu Yanhui (2003) and Shao Juan (2009) did a lot of studies on campus slang. They studied characteristics, sources or causes of campus slang.

Nowadays, scholars both in western counties and in China have paid more attention to the studies on semiotics. The theory of semiotics also probes into several different fields, such as sociology, psychology, philosophy, pedagogy, linguistics and so on. Some research on campus slang has been conducted in China. Yang Jianguo (2004) argues that

popular words are those that succeed in competing with other words and have the ability of self-transmission and self-replication. So to some extent, popular words can be regarded as a type of strong words. Han Ximing (2004) analyzed campus slang in the article *The Observation and Thinking on Campus Fashion Words*, and analyzed the effect of campus slang on students and their development. The active interventions may need to be carried out, Wu Xibin (2010) analyzed campus slang in his article on the types and the characteristics and studied their causes.

Campus slang is attractive, productive, simple and authoritative. Some popular words are chosen by some news headlines to attract people's attention and enter their mind. The news with campus slang as headlines has more chances to be spread and transmitted than the common vocabulary. In short, the theory of semiotics provides new ideas not only for studies on language but also for campus slang study.

III. CONCEPTS OF SIGNIFIER AND SIGNIFIED

Contemporary sign research comes from two sources: one is Swiss linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) who is regarded as the origin of semiological trend, and the other one is an American philosopher, Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914) who is regarded as the origin of the semiotic trend. Different people like using different terms in that they want to show respect to the one who they admire most. Peirce's and Saussure's conditions for thinking are different, in spite of their difference, both of them play an important part in modern sciences.

Saussure (2001) pointed out that language is a symbolic system of the concept, each symbol has its two properties: signifier and signified. Here signifier refers to the symbol itself, the sound image of language sign; signified refers to the concept of symbols or connotation, namely the symbol content. According to Saussure, the connection between signifier and signified of language symbols is arbitrary. The greatest contribution of Saussure is the dichotomy of the language symbols, that is signifier and signified, but he found the two principles of linguistics: arbitrariness and convention. The establishment of arbitrariness by Saussure is the first principle of language sign, the so-called arbitrariness is to point out there is no natural and necessary connection by the combination of signifier and signified, in particular, the sound of the word is not a clear object to its image.

Saussure pointed out in the *Course in General Linguistics* (2001):

A linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern. The sound pattern is not actually a sound; for a sound is something physical. A sound pattern is the hearer's psychological impression of a sound, as given to him by the evidence of his sense. This sound pattern may thus be distinguished from the other element associated with it in a linguistic sign. This other element is generally of a more abstract kind: the concept (Saussure, 2001, p.66).

For Saussure, the linguistic sign is an indissoluble pair or couple composed of a concept and acoustic image or later called signifier and signified.

Culler, J. (1976) said Ferdinand de Saussure who is the founder of the Continental School in Europe gave the definition of the linguistic sign as "a two-sided psychological entity" (Saussure, 2001, p.66). Saussure said that a linguistic sign is not a link between a thing and a name, but between a concept and a sound pattern. He employed sign in representing the object and used signifier and signified to substitute for the concept and sound. What he held was very important because it gave the meaning of semiotics. The meaning of sign (signified/signifier) implies all the conception produced in sign-function. Definitions of sign made by Saussure have made a revolution in ideological history (Peirce, C., 1966). All in all, his definitions on sign have separated from the traditional epistemology conflicts, which have supplied a more proper and practical way for the research of meaning. For Saussure, the linguistic sign is an indissoluble pair composed of a concept and acoustic image or later called signifier and signified.

IV. CHARACTERISTICS OF CAMPUS SLANG FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SEMIOTICS

Linguist Saussure pointed out, symbol consists of two components: signifier and signified. Symbol is referred to the whole connection of signifier and signified. Saussure thought, symbol consists of two elements, signifier refers to the physical form that we can feel, signified refers to the concept of objects in the heart.

The campus slang is the process when symbol users create the connection between the signifier and the signified of symbols. Whatever a symbol is, once it enters the process to be transmitted or the course of the exchange, it will inevitably generate meanings, that is, there will always be connotation between the signifier and the signified.

As a special language form and special phenomenon, campus slang is closely related to the society and culture. Though campus slang is so different from common words in many ways, most of the campus slang still has the following common characteristics of popular words: high-frequent, dynamic, creative and productive. From the perspective of semiotics, the characteristics of campus slang can be summarized by the following: innovation, economy, vividness and humor.

A. Innovation

Significant revolution of using campus slang is innovation. From the perspective of semiotics, two aspects can be concluded to the following: one is to create new symbolic form (signifier), and give new content (signified), the other is borrowing from the old symbolic form (signifier), and create with new contents (signified). Symbolic form (signifier)

and symbolic content (signified) have been enriched greatly by campus slang.

College students have the ability to choose a certain amount of stylistic elements of words, so it can provide them with more space for the imagination and creativity. They want to highlight themselves and create new words out of the old meaning or create new words. For example, the new meanings of old words “天才”(genius) : here refers to a born fool; “偶像”(idol): here refers to the object of vomiting, new word “校草”refers to the most handsome boy in the university or college; “晒月亮”means fall in love in the moonlight.

As we can see, according to semiotic theories, the referential meanings of the popular words have been changed. Take “偶像”(idol) for example, the referential meaning of idol is an image worshipped as a god or someone or something admired or loved too much. While the pragmatic meaning of “偶像” is “呕吐的对象”(someone disgusting)

B. Economy

Seeing from the characteristics of symbols, without invariance, language will not follow regular rules, and may not develop; without variability, language does not have the life force, and is impossible to exist forever. In terms of economy, campus slang, for example, “十动然拒”(be deeply moved, but still rejects him), “城会玩”(You townsfolk truly know how to live it up.) “菜”(means weak, poor), “爽”(means cool enjoyable, aggressive) and “火”(refers to popularity), still try to break through the limitations of the original written symbols, change certain words form, and create a new conventional combination of sound, shape and meaning, such as, some letter words, digital words, and graphic symbols, the richness of which is far more than that of traditional words, because it not only creates new symbolic form, but also bring new contents, and conveys the rich connotation of thoughts and feelings from these simple symbols, of which, three common forms are:

(1) English letters: for example, IC (I see. Full spelling is I see); TKS (Thanks); GF(girl friend); MM (Mei Mei, initials of Chinese pinyin).

(2) digitals: which is a cluster of digital harmonics or digital password, for instance, “9494” means I agree with you ; “886” means bye-bye; “5201314” means I love you for the whole life.

(3) Mixture of English letters and digitals: V5 which means powerful, mighty

(4) Emoji or some graphic symbols: for example, “:-)” means smiling face; “^_^” means smiling; “Zzzzz” ... means sleeping, or falling asleep.

The economy characteristic meets the psychological requirements of the college students, because on campus they seek for simplicity and convenience, the reason why they use the campus slang in this way is to save a lot of time.

C. Vividness

Xijie,W(2000) claims that words have the characteristics of the dynamic balance, words are created to be used, and then... more than that, limited symbols and the infinite objective world are apparent contradictions, and the main way to solve this contradiction is to search the potential ability of words, ... The potential ability of words, to a large extent, is depending on its rhetorical function. The overall properties of word symbols can refer to the linear and nonlinear relationship. For the combination form of words and sound, word symbols are linear, not involving the relationship between signifier and signified. But for the polymerization relations, word symbols are nonlinear, it involves the relationship between signifier and signified.

Campus slang uses much figure of speech. First, the use of metaphor, for example, “孔雀开屏”(the peacock shows its tail) here refers to some self-sentimental people; “恐龙”(dinosaur): here refers to an ugly girl, and second, the use of paronomasia, for example, “大虾” and “大侠”(which means the skilled netizens); “特困生”: students who love sleeping especially in class, but not the student who has a poor family (Honglian, C:2010).

D. Humor

Humor is another characteristic of campus slang which is more attractive to be used and spread. Saussure (2001) said that the linguistic sign is a two-sided entity, a dyad. In fact, all the messages, the meanings, the representatives of the concept and stimulated relationship of the symbols exist only in both hearts of the ones who use the symbols in the communication. Young students, in order to adjust to the boring life on campus, and to add some lubricants to human interaction with other students, help campus life bring out more funny things. When they are bored, they will painstakingly conceive of many interesting and rebellious campus words which are against the mainstream, building an easy reading atmosphere.

For example, “野人”(savage) represents “a student who studies very diligently, a meritorious student”, such as, He is a savage, and incredibly got 91 points in English test. Another example, “半夜鸡叫”(chicken sang at the midnight) refers to “the mobile phone rang at night” (Zhang Xuehui, 2008). Take this one for example, the Chinese character “鸡”and “机” have the same pronunciation, the students just use the similarity to make it humorous.

V. PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF CAMPUS SLANG

Campus is a special small society. Speaking popular words is the effective way by which the young students living in the campus seek for self-release. The youth on campus are in the process of identifying their roles, they will gradually

alienate the authority of the parents, seek more social independence, and hope to get away with imprisoned personality from constraints in the adult society, longing for the holy land belonging to their own (Yang Jianguo, 2004). Only in various kinds of information communication among peers can they freely release themselves.

In addition, Campus slang is the same vocabulary on expression exchange, which gives young students some kind of identification and belonging from psychology, thus helping these student groups increase tacit understanding.

From the point of view of cognitive psychology, symbols record experience and reality, involving the icon, brain and the world. Semantic layer of campus slang is the connection of the continuous external world and the continuous word symbols, and the connection is realized through the people's cognitive process of psychology. That is to say, this kind of connection is closely linked to the subjective dynamic role of the brain.

Language is like a mirror and is a reflection of social life, likewise, campus slang reflect the campus life. Campus is a special small society, there is a group of extremely youthful young people in it, three-one-life living style makes them desire to show their uniqueness in order to make individual characters public. With constant interaction between the outside world and the campus environment, they form their own specific campus life style. They create and use their own unique words, that is, campus slang.

This symbolic phenomenon is one of the most representatives which can manifest the life state and psychological features of the students. Behind this phenomenon there are profound cognition and psychological reasons (Yang Wenquan and Xu Yanhui, 2003). And we found that these reasons can mainly be summarized as four:

A. *Self-defense*

As to the reasons of creation of new campus slang, on the one hand, now the students' learning burden is heavier, from the psychological analysis, when a person is in a great pressure, it is easy to come up with all kinds of way-outs, campus slang is actually such a kind of self protection; according to the theory of psychoanalysis, this is a psychological self-defense which can take this opportunity to make the psychological tense easy and relaxed. Such as, instead of saying “逃课” (drop class) but “翘课” (skip class); instead of saying “反应慢” (slow) but say “大脑短路” (the brain is short circuit, the brain anoxia); instead of saying “说句不好听的话” (words are not pleasant to hear), but say “乌鸦嘴” (crow mouth) (Wang Yong and Zhao Xiaoguang, 2010).

The college students on campus have a clear understanding that some of their classmates are sensitive, they should not hurt others and should not be hurt, so when they talk or chat with other students, they just manage not to hurt others or let others feel embarrassed. Otherwise, one unsuitable word or sentence will weaken the friendship between classmates, which is not what they want to see (Wang Yan, 2010). A good relationship will enhance the cooperation and communication with others, most of all, they themselves will feel good and ease when they stay on campus. Using some campus slang will help them have a harmonious atmosphere.

B. *Gregariousness*

Though the young people are full of confidence to the future, the materialistic and competitive society makes them both narcissistic and humble, and they still feel there is no future. (Chen Yuan, 2000). This ambivalence and the future role that they could not locate make them not only want to remain his unique individual character, but also hope to get people's attention. So using these words in his own particular group, they feel the tacit understanding of each other, such as “裸考” (refers to take exams without preparation and cheat sheet), “来电” (refers to boy students and girl students have good impressions at the first sight), “灌水” (nonsense in the BBS) and “FT” (abbreviation of English word faint, meaning dizzy, shocked, discontent, and incredible emotion). The college students almost stay in the dormitory on campus and seldom go outside, so they expect to be loved and liked by other students. The personal character of gregariousness depend on the good interpersonal relationship between students, so if the college students want to communicate with others, cooperate with others, he has to talk to others and discuss with others, so the first important thing is to speak one common language, that is, campus slang. Take “裸考” for example, some students don't prepare for the exams until the exams are coming. So these students have the great pressure before the exams, they use this word to relax themselves and also want to have the echo from other students.

C. *Novelty*

Gregariousness is a common psychological state of the college students, which helps popular words spread in the community, this is the social trend, but hunting for novelty is the reflection of curious psychological personality.

For the college students who are full of modern consciousness and in pursuit of novelty, they can give full play to their own unique creative genius and show unique personal charming in the language world. Such as the boring mood or when they feel extremely bored, college students don't say “很烦, 很无聊” (very vexed, boring), but say “郁闷” (depressed); When someone is opposed to the others' opinions or wants to express strongly against something he dislikes, dissatisfied, “我吐” (I vomit) will be used. This innovation makes the campus slang give a person a kind of new feeling, and also constantly enriches our new vocabulary (Zhang Xuehui, 2008).

The college students want to show their difference, special characters, in addition to the hairstyle and fancy dresses, they manage to speak some popular words to have others' attention. Some of the referential meanings of the campus slang have been changed so as to show their novelty.

D. Imitation

Although they pursue individual and extraordinary characters, college students would not yet be conscious to produce a representative of psychology in front of the various popular wind in society, which is especially reflected by the movie, TV and web, and the newspaper. For example, “花痴”(spoony) everywhere, campus is filled with “帅呆了”(extremely handsome), “酷毙了”(cool), “靠”(one vulgar word), “伤自尊了”(hurt in self-esteem), “恶心”(aweful), “狂; 巨”, “有没有搞错”(Are you sure it's ok); “像我这样的人已经不多了”(There are few people as good as me) (Jin Zhiru, 2009). At a time, these words are becoming high frequency “focus discourse”, some even became the campus slang.

During the process of the semiotic analysis of campus slang, recognition among signifier and signified was found in this thesis, in order to realize the meaning of symbolic and psychological representatives, people need to activate the brain about Chinese characters, and cultural knowledge of psychological imprint. As pragmatic meaning is generated by the relation between signs and the users of signs, it is capable of revealing information about the sign users, such as age, social status, geographical location, education background, attitude and personality, etc. Pragmatic meaning can betray the speaker's real intention regardless of the linguistic form of text (Yong, W. & Z. Xiaoguang: 2010).

VI. CONCLUSION

To study campus slang from the perspective of semiotics can help understand how to achieve the aim of communication with signs, and understand what makes it a kind of unique media. An increasing number of campus slang has been created and spread in articles, newspapers and daily life. To some extent, the development of society and language can be tracked from campus slang.

Campus slang has its own characteristics from the perspective of semiotics, as is discussed, innovation, economy, vividness and humor. Many complicated factors influence the formation of campus slang, including internal factors and external ones. Factors which can influence the formation of campus slang are from three aspects: psychological factors, social factors, and linguistic factors. As a symbol itself, campus slang also has their own features which include innovation, economy, vividness and humor. People especially the students on campus are attracted because campus slang is novel, vivid, humor and special in their forms or meanings. Not only does campus slang contain the information to be conveyed but also reflects the psychological states of students.

With the great development of science, technology and the faster increase of international communication, more new ideas and new thoughts will be exchanged in many different areas, counties and cultures. The sources and formations of campus slang will be more diverse.

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