

Study on the Formation, Popularity and Characteristics of the Internet Buzzwords “(X) Ma Le”

Yanqi Ma¹

¹ Minzu University of China, Beijing, China

ABSTRACT

With the rapid development of Internet language, “Ma Le”, “Wo Ma Le”, “Ying Ma Le” have swept the Internet platform. “(X) Ma Le” has a certain base of Mandarin and dialect usage, in which “X” can be a noun, verb, adjective, personal pronoun, etc. The popularity of this construction is closely related to the economic principle of language, the theory of meme replication and the psychology of popular culture. In terms of grammar, “(X) Ma Le” is predominantly trisyllabic, with four main types of constructions. In terms of semantics, “Ma” reflects semantic metaphor, while “X” shows semantic value-added. In terms of pragmatics, “(X) Ma Le” is highly productive but unstable, highly subjective, and has not yet formed a strict collectivization statute. After the popularization of “(X) Ma Le”, it has played a role in reflecting the psychology of popular culture, but it also has the effect of challenging the language norms and other aspects.

Keywords: Internet buzzwords, “(X) Ma Le”, Memetics, Morphology (linguistics), Semantic generalization.

1. INTRODUCTION

The origin of “Ying Ma Le” is the description of “winning to numbness” by Baidu Post Bar users in the game, and the exact source is difficult to verify; “Wo Ma Le” expresses slight helplessness, depression and other emotions. In addition to the two most common uses of “Ying Ma Le” and “Wo Ma Le”, “Ren Ma Le” and “Zhuan Ma Le” are also used. However, few papers have been written to study this linguistic phenomenon in depth. Based on this, this paper searches the corpus in CCL, BCC, WeChat, Weibo, Xiaohongshu, PostBar and other platforms, and through the sort and analysis of the corpus, we further summarize the formation and popularity factors, as well as the grammatical, semantic, and pragmatic features of “(X) Ma Le”.

2. REASONS FOR THE FORMATION OF THE BUZZWORDS “(X) MA LE”

2.1 The Basis for the Use of Modern Chinese Mandarin and Local Dialects

2.1.1 The Basis for the Use of Modern Chinese Mandarin

In the Modern Chinese Dictionary, “Ma” has the meaning of “uncomfortable feeling like a leg or arm being pressed”, “senselessness or loss of sensation”¹. In Mandarin, “(X) Ma Le” mainly has the semantic meaning of “numbness of a body part” and “so many times that one feels disorganized”, such as “Tui Ma Le”, “Guan Ma Le” and “Zhen Ma Le”, as follows(1)(2)(3). In buzzwords, “(X) Ma Le” inherits the form of “(X) Ma Le” in modern Chinese, but it may generate different meanings depending on the context, such as “Wo Ma Le”,

1. Lu Shuxiang, Ding Shengshu: The Modern Chinese Dictionary, The Commercial Press, November 2021.

“Zhuan Ma Le”, “Mei Ma Le”, as follows (4) (5) (6).

- (1) When his tui ma le, a monk came in, carried a cup and mouthed the words, then sprinkled two drops of water on the Buddha that each person had invited. (WeChat-2010-12)
- (2) Be sure to take care to keep recognizing the leader's accomplishments and his position of leadership, and not after the Eric is completely guan ma le. (Baidu Post Bar-2012-06)
- (3) I bought a new MI today, but the most agonizing thing is that as soon as I plugged it in, the speakers buzzed, or heavy bass, and my ears zhen ma le. (Weibo-2019-08)
- (4) Wo ma le, lost power for two days, and had a cold for a few days. (Bilibili-2022-08)
- (5) Some big Internet celebrity anchors earn pit fees to zhuan ma le. (Weibo-2024-04)
- (6) Mao Xiaotong's red dress at the CCTV Spring Festival Gala was mei ma le! (Xiaohongshu-2024-02)

2.1.2 Basics of Local Dialect Usage

In the Sichuan and Chongqing dialects, there is “Nao Ma Le”, which describes the incessant loud noises². “From upscale hotels to ordinary restaurants to hot pot stores, listen to it, nao ma le. This is the habit of Chongqing people, just afraid of not lively.” (WeChat-2014-12) “Chengdu Wangfujing Shopping Center, the first floor to do activities, nao ma le, has been in the microphone roar 'the last 15 minutes! The last 15 minutes!’” (Weibo-2012-07) The dialect “Nao Ma Le” means to make a lot of noise, and the meaning of “to the extreme degree” is common to the use of “(X) Ma Le” in Internet buzzwords, such as “Feng Ma Le” and “Suan Ma Le”, as follows (7)(8). The use of such forms in the dialect can reflect the fact that “(X) Ma Le” had a certain base of language use before it appeared, and could be accepted by a part of the population, which provided the conditions for its formation.

- (7) Transfer five days on one day on one day I actually think it's okay? Leave it alone probably feng ma le. (Weibo-2024-04)

2. Lu Shuxiang, Ding Shengshu: The Modern Chinese Dictionary, The Commercial Press, November 2021.

- (8) Linear algebra to solve, really suan ma le.....in the end where the wrong!!!! (Xiaohongshu-2024-04)

2.2 Being Influenced by the Mechanism of Analogy

“Analogy” means “analogical reasoning”, Saussure pointed out that “an analogical form is a form modeled on one or several other forms and constituted according to certain rules.”³ Modern linguist Bussmann defines analogy as “the process and result of changes in grammatical and lexical forms under the influence of some other regular pattern of language.”⁴ It can be seen that both of them consider analogy and analogical reasoning as one of the forms of word production and variation. At the same time, analogy has become one of the main word-making mechanisms for Chinese neologisms due to its powerful productivity, and the generation of Internet buzzwords is naturally affected by the mechanism of analogy. The method of constructing new words by utilizing semantically identical or opposite morphemes is more common, and this way is also directly related to analogy⁵, “(X) Ma Le” is also an analogy using semantics analogies. For example, “marriage” and “divorce” in “flash marriage” and “flash divorce” are a pair of semantically opposite morphemes. The new words created by analogy naturally have opposite semantics; and “hand” and “face” in “hand-judger” and “face-judger” are also related to human appearance. and “hand” and “face” are similar morphemes related to the shape of the human body, and the words formed by analogy are also closely related semantically. There are also many words in the family of “(X) Ma Le” which are generated by semantical analogies, such as “Ying Ma Le” and “Shu Ma Le” are antonymic analogies, as follows (9)(10); and Although “dao” and “nve” do not belong to the same lexical category, they contain the same emotional color, so “Dao Ma Le” and “Nve Ma Le” are synonymous analogies, as follows (11) (12).

- (9) Quickly come to Beijing to play ah! The Houhai is ying ma le! (Xiaohongshu-2024-02)

3. Saussure, A Course in General Linguistics, The Commercial Press, November 1980.

4. Bussmann, A Dictionary of Language and Linguistics, Shanghai Rhetoric Publishing House, August 2000.

5. Sun Yan, Trying to Discuss the Role of Analogy Mechanism in the Construction of Chinese New Words, Journal of Northwest Normal University, February 1998.

- (10) Overseas student compete to see who is worse, homeless shu ma le ~ (Weibo-2024-01)
- (11) “Wind Chase” finale really dao ma le (Weibo-2024-03)
- (12) “Snow Drop Flower” nve ma le, the last episode I dare not watch. (Xiaohongshu-2023-11)

3. THE POPULARITY FACTORS OF THE BUZZWORD “(X) MA LE”

3.1 *The Economic Principle of Language*

The principle of economy of language refers to the fact that people always seek to express as much information as possible with as few linguistic symbols as possible when communicating, in order to obtain the best communicative effect. Formally, “(X) Ma Le” is a trisyllabic word, which is concise and clear. Semantically, “(X) Ma Le” is rich in meaning and expressive, and can be adapted to different usage scenarios to express a variety of psychological activities or emotions, such as extreme shock and surprise, extreme happiness or sadness, or being very speechless about something, all of which can be expressed by “(X) Ma Le”, such as “Lei Ma Le” and “Juan Ma Le” in examples (13) and (14). “(X) Ma Le” can even be abbreviated to express the meaning of the whole sentence, for example, “It's so hot today, I can't stand it anymore” can be replaced by “Re Ma Le”. In short, “(X) Ma Le” has adapted to the requirements of the network development on the increasing efficiency of information transmission, so it can be widely popular on the network.

- (13) I went to the sea for two days in a row, and I lei ma le my family! (Weibo-2024-01)
- (14) Spend two months interview access to Zijie, really juan ma le. (Xiaohongshu-2024-04)

3.2 *Memetics*

Richard Dawkins (1976) believes that the original unit of biological evolution is the gene, and the ancestor of life is the replication factor, and the two constantly through the replication and competition in order to survive and reproduce, In the field of cultural communication, there is also something similar to genes, which he calls “meme” the unit of cultural communication can be reproduced and transmitted like genes. Moreover, he pointed out that linguistic representations such

as buzzwords, trendy words, and catchphrases commonly used by media programs and public figures are typical examples of memes⁶. Therefore, language is also modality. He Ziran (2005) suggests that “any part of language can be regarded as a ‘linguistic meme’ as long as it can be reproduced and transmitted through imitatio.”⁷ According to He Ziran (2007, 2013), there are two classifications of strong linguistic memes, stable and variable, with stable strong linguistic memes mainly referring to the basic vocabulary and grammatical structure of the language, and variable strong linguistic memes including the hot words and strong phrases of a particular period⁸. In the case of “(X) Ma Le”, it undoubtedly belongs to the variable strong linguistic memes. Among the strong linguistic memes of the variable type, there are two modes of transmission: genic transmission with the same content and different forms, and expressive transmission with the same forms and different content.⁹ The former includes various quotations, addresses, slogans, etc., such as “Beng Bu Zhu Le”, “Kong Yiji De Chang Shan”, “E Ren / I Ren”. The expressive memes have different contents as needed with the same forms, such as the buzzwords “XX CiKe”, “XX DaZi” and “XX WenXue”. as follows (15) (16) (17).

- (15) “Traveling DaZi” have become a new trend in vacation trips: no need to accommodate each other. (QQ-2023-10)
- (16) In Chengdu, where street photography and photo shoots have made numerous appearances, “photo DaZi” are slowly emerging. (JinGuan News - 2023-09)
- (17) Four pairs of twins enter WHU! They're the coolest “study DaZi”. (China Youth Daily-2023-08)
- The spread of “(X) Ma Le” is an expressive transmission with the same form and different contents. From “Ying Ma Le” to “Kan Ma Le” “Shuai Ma Le” “Ren Ma Le”, The structure and form of “(X) Ma Le” remain unchanged, but different “X” enters the construction to

6. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, CITIC Press, November 2018.

7. He Ziran, “Memes in Language”, *Language Science*, November 2005.

8. He Ziran, “Memetics Interpretation of the Popularity of Popular Words”, *Shandong Foreign Language Teaching*, October 2013.

9. He Ziran, Xie Chaoqun, Chen Xinren: “Three Theories of Language Use: Correlation Theory, Conformity Theory, and Memetics”, *Shanghai Education Press*, December 2007.

produce different memes with different contents, as follows (18) (19) (20). So “(X) Ma Le” belongs to the horizontal grafting with the same form and different contents.

- (18) Although the news of layoffs has been Kan Ma Le, I'm still a bit surprised by JPL's layoffs. (Weibo-2024-02)
- (19) 5cm thick-soled shoes! They look Shuai Ma Le ! (Xiaohongshu-2023-12)
- (20) Just let nature take its course, I've been so tired lately a whole Ren Ma Le..... (WeChat-2023-06)

In summary, based on the potential effect of the memes and contexts, the Internet buzzword “(X) Ma Le” has been generated and started to be copied, and the different psychological intentions of the communicators have driven “(X) Ma Le” to be copied into various meme variants that are easy to imitate and memorize.

3.3 Media Promotion and Public Acceptance

The rapid development of the Internet and new media has become one of the important driving forces for the popularity of new words, and many netizens share their personal opinions through social software such as Weibo and WeChat. The structure of “(X) Ma Le” can spread exponentially with simple network interactions, and the emerging network media provides a material carrier for the popularity of “(X) Ma Le”.

Language is influenced by society and changes constantly according to the development of society. Contemporary young people are in an era of rapid development, it is difficult to release the pressure of school, work, life and other aspects of the pressure. To a certain extent, “Ying Ma Le”, “Lei Ma Le”, “Shuang Ma Le” can exaggerate the emotional experience, so that young people can express their inner thoughts more strongly; at the same time, the structure of “(X) Ma Le” is humorous and figurative, which is in line with the psychological needs of the public, and is easy to be accepted and further spread.

4. GRAMMATICAL FEATURES OF THE BUZZWORD “(X) MA LE”

4.1 The Morphology of “(X) Ma Le”

Li Yuming (1999) put forward the concept of “morphology (linguistics)”, which can form word

clusters by generating new words in bulk. He pointed out that a morphology consists of two parts: the “mold slot” and the “mold label”, in which the “mold label” refers to the words that always remain unchanged in the morphology, the “mold slot” is the empty space in the morphology. If the mold slot is in front of the mold label, it is the “front-empty” morphology, on the contrary, it is the “back-empty” morphology, and there is a mold label before and after the mold slot of the “middle-empty” morphology¹⁰. The buzzword “(X) Ma Le” is the “front-empty” morphology, The words “Wo”, “Ren” and “Luan” in “Wo Ma Le”, “Ren Ma Le” and “Luan Ma Le” are all words located in the mold slot, and “Ma Le” is the mold label. The word “X” in the modal slot of “(X) Ma Le” is mainly monosyllabic, and There are very few two-syllable cases as “ZheTeng Ma Le”, “LaChe Ma Le”, as follows (21)(22).

- (21) She changed my clothes three times today and covered me with all kinds of jewelry!!!! I'm really ZheTeng Ma Le. (Weibo-2024-03)
- (22) After picking up the pieces all the way through, I pulled and tugged on my left hand and LaChe Ma Le. (Xiaohongshu - 2023-11)

4.2 Structural Types of the Popular Buzzword “(X) Ma Le”

“(X) Ma Le” belongs to the phrases, except for the case of “Ma Le” alone, “(X) Ma Le” has the following four main structural types:

- ①“verb + Ma Le”: “Ying Ma Le”, “Nve Ma Le”, “Kan Ma Le”, “Zou Ma Le”, “Shu Ma Le”
- ② “adjective + Ma Le”: “Re Ma Le”, “Feng Ma Le”, “Shuang Ma Le”, “Zui Ma Le”, “Le Ma Le”
- ③“noun + Ma Le”: “Ren Ma Le”, “Mao Ma Le”, “Xin Ma Le”
- ④“personal pronoun + Ma Le”: “Wo Ma Le”, “Ta Ma Le”, “Ni Ma Le”

① and ② are the centerific complement structure, belonging to the predicative phrase, “Ma Le” to the verb or adjective in front of the complementary role, roughly contains the semantics of “some kind of feeling to the extreme”;

10. Li Yuming, “A Face-to-Face View of the Characteristics of the Chinese Language and Culture”, Beijing Language and Culture University Press, March 1999.

③ and ④ are the subject-predicate structure, including two kinds of noun or predicative phrase, “Ma Le” and the preceding noun or personal pronoun is a declarative relationship, mainly indicates that the pronoun refers to the person or thing is in a very numb state.

5. SYNTACTIC FEATURES OF THE BUZZWORD “(X) MA LE”

As a predicative and noun phrase, “(X) Ma Le” can serve as a variety of components in a sentence:

The first is as the predicate. In phrases of the “(X) Ma Le” construction, both noun phrases and predicative phrases can act as predicates of the sentence, for example:

- (23) A mouthful of white wine Guan Ma Le. (QQ-2024-01)
- (24) This movie is Shuang Ma Le. (Douban-2024-02)
- (25) Today Wo Ma Le. (WeChat-2023-12)

The second is as the object. For example: I didn't pour the cat food before going to work in the morning, and I didn't realize that my Mao Ma Le until I got home. (Weibo-2024-04)

The third is as the attribute. For example: my roommate explained to me the meaning of C Ma Le in the evening. (Weibo-2023-08)

The fourth is as the complement. For example: Housemates, the group variety show “The Fall of Eleven Teenagers” makes me Le Ma Le. (Xiaohongshu-2022-12)

6. SEMANTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BUZZWORD “(X) MA LE”

The traditional meaning of “Ma” is relatively simple. As a verb, it originally means to lose consciousness, which can be derived as “not sharp in thought”; as an adjective, it has the meaning of “numerous and messy”, “rough and uneven”¹¹. After the emergence of the buzzword “(X) Ma Le”, “Ma” has further realized semantic generalization.

6.1 Semantic Generalization of “Ma”

According to Liu Dawei (1997), “Semantic generalization refers to the fact that words are

constantly generating new ways of use while maintaining fewer and fewer of their original semantic features, and more and more objects are included in the scope of their own referents.” Semantic generalization consists of three stages: semantic metaphor, semantic abstraction and semantic ambiguity¹².

The word “Ma” in “(X) Ma Le” was firstly used to refer to the sensation of loss of consciousness and numbness of a body part, while people cognition tends to transform similarity into the same relationship, when people find that a series of speechlessness, tiredness, depression and other emotions in their life due to people and things, are related to the bodily sensations of the body, So the “Ma” of “(X) Ma Le” is derived from semantics such as “numbness of psychological feeling”, and a new meaning is formed through metaphor, which is “numbness of psychological feeling”.

With the excessive use of the semantic metaphor “(X) Ma Le”, the public's awareness of this metaphorical relationship gradually fades, and they can't help to think that mental numbness can be expressed by “Ma”, which can gradually be used without a mark. As a result, when the new meaning of “Ma”, which used to be attached to the original meaning of “Ma”, obtains a more independent status, people will pay more attention to the common features among different meanings, which further leads to the merging and abstraction of different meanings of “Ma”. Whether it is the paralysis of physical sensation or the numbness of psychological sensation, it implies an extreme state of “unconsciousness”. Thus, in the second stage of semantic generalization, “Ma” derives the abstract meaning “to the extreme degree”. The first popular and used by the public “Ying Ma Le” has a strong semantic color of this kind, which can express the meaning of “winning to the point that there is no longer any feeling of excitement”.

The culmination of semantic generalization is semantic ambiguity. It is “always on people's lips”, but “(X) Ma Le” has not achieved a high degree of popularity in the real sense, and has not yet become the existence of the public's catchphrase, so it has not entered the stage of semantic ambiguity at present, whether or not it will enter this stage remains to be seen.

11. Lu Shuxiang and Ding Shengshu, Modern Chinese Dictionary (7th Edition), The Commercial Press, November 2021.

12. Liu Dawei, “The Metaphorical Semantic Generalization of Popular Words”, Chinese Language Learning, April 1997.

6.2 The Semantic Value-added of “X”

The semantic value-addedness of some “(X) Ma Le” occurs, and the expression of semantic content exceeds the scope of “X”, that is the value-addedness of information capacity occurs. For example, the nouns “Cai” and “Dao” in “Cai Ma Le” and “Dao” no longer express their own meanings, but extend the meaning of “inferior” and “tormenting”, as in (31) below. The “C” in “C Ma Le” is not just the noun “Center”, but is more inclined to express the predicative semantics such as “be the center” and “carry the whole scene”, as follows (32).

- (31) Every once in a while, when my hands get itchy, I want to play Wangzherongyao, but every time, I am Cai Ma Le by my own vegetables and unloaded. (Weibo-2024-04)
- (32) Yesterday that game really looked like I was going to have a heart attack, the fourth Xiaozhi really C Ma Le. (Xiaohongshu-2023-12)

7. THE PRAGMATIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BUZZWORD “(X) MA LE”

Firstly, as a network buzzword, “(X) Ma Le” is highly productive and easy to imitate, copy and spread; however, it is not stable, and not most of the words can be in the position of the mold slot, and some of the words can only sporadically enter into the construction.

Second, “(X) Ma Le” is highly subjective. Comparing “Wo Men Ying Le” and “Wo Men Ying Ma Le”, the former is more objective in describing the established result of victory without additional emotional coloring, while “Wo Men Ying Ma Le” implies the meaning of “feeling numb from too many victories or a great degree of victory”, which can more strongly and graphically express the user's emotional state, and is therefore easy to be accepted by young people and spread.

Thirdly, “(X) Ma Le” mainly appears in new social media such as Weibo and WeChat, and rarely appears in traditional paper media and written language, and is mostly used by young people, whose boundaries of use have not yet been eliminated, and a strict collectivization statute has not yet been formed. Therefore, the use of the buzzword “(X) Ma Le” should be in the appropriate language and context, and its future development remains to be seen.

8. CONCLUSION

The popularity and spread of each network language is not triggered by chance, nor is it driven by a certain factor alone, but is the result of the interaction between inevitable and accidental factors, the internal structural characteristics of the language and the external social environment. Whether a buzzword can be popular for a long time and continue to develop and mature depends not only on whether it conforms to the law of language development, but also on whether it can adapt to the psychology of popular culture and social communication context. As an emerging Internet buzzword, “(X) Ma Le” was formed on the basis of modern Chinese Mandarin and local dialects, and became popular because it conformed to the principle of linguistic economy and possessed strong productivity. It is characterized by high public acceptance, new media promotion, simple and clear form, strong word formation, rich semantics and humorous colors. The main users is young, and the field of use is diversified and daily. However, due to the emerging nature of “(X) Ma Le”, the phrases and sentences under this formula have not yet formed a strict collective statute. The future development of the buzzword “(X) Ma Le” needs to be actively promoted and dialectically viewed, so as to minimize its negative impact on the language norms and at the same time bring into play its positive impact on the innovation of language.

REFERENCES

- [1] Lu Shuxiang, Ding Shengshu: Modern Chinese Dictionary (7th Edition), Commercial Press, November 2021.
- [2] Saussure: A Course in General Linguistics, Commercial Printing House, November 1980.
- [3] Bussmann: A Dictionary of Language and Linguistics, Shanghai Rhetoric Publishing House, August 2000.
- [4] Sun Yan: “Trying to Discuss the Role of Analogical Mechanism in the Construction of New Chinese Words”, Journal of Northwest Normal University, Feb. 1998.
- [5] Dawkins, The Selfish Gene, CITIC Press, Nov. 2018.
- [6] He Ziran: “Memes in Language”, Language Science, Nov. 2005.

- [7] He Ziran: “Memetics Interpretation of the Popularity of Buzzwords”, Shandong Foreign Language Teaching, October 2013.
- [8] He Ziran, Xie Chaoqun, Chen Xinren: “Three Theories of Discourse: Correlation Theory, Conformity Theory, and Memetics”, Shanghai Educational Press, December 2007.
- [9] Li Yuming: “The Face to Face View of Chinese Legal Features”, Beijing Language and Culture University Press, March 1999.
- [10] Liu Dawei: “The Metaphorical Semantic Generalization of Popular Words”, Chinese Language Learning, April, 1997.