

A Comparative Study of Chinese and English Hot Words of the Year from the Perspective of Sociolinguistics — Taking 2024 as an Example

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Abstract: Language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols used for human communication. It can reflect the change and development of society. Today, people often use language to communicate in various ways subtly. Thus, each year's hot words may somehow reflect people's minds directly and indirectly, which also expresses some messages of the whole society. Moreover, the hot words of the year in diverse countries also reflect the social and cultural background of the country differently, through which people may find current and future trends around the world. Under these circumstances, this paper chooses hot words of 2024 as an example, mainly comparing the Chinese and English buzzwords through the aspects of sociolinguistics. The study attempts to analyze the connotation, characteristics, and political, social, and international background of hot words, and compares the hot words in different countries, to reveal the current social development trend and cultural differences of different countries, and even the direction of future development.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics; Hot words of the year; Comparative analysis; Communication; 2024

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1. Introduction

In this section of the paper, the research background and purpose will be shown. The study mainly discusses the importance of language and the combination of social phenomena and linguistics in today's research ^[1-3].

1.1. Research background

With the acceleration of globalization and the development of society in today's world, language, as a communication tool, is becoming more and more important for its expression of the rapid change of life ^[4]. At this time, new internet words, hot words, and other linguistic phenomena spread rapidly on social media and become the focus of public attention. These phenomena not only enrich the language system but also reflect the social culture, values, and people's way of thinking ^[5].

As an important part of the linguistic phenomenon, the hot words of the year show distinct characteristics of the times and cultural background. They not only reflect the social hot spots, cultural trends, and people's psychological states at that time, but also indicate the changes and development of language under different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, Chinese and English are the most common languages used in the world. Thus, with this broad user base, the comparative study of Chinese and English hot words of the year can be authoritative and convincing. In addition, China and most English-speaking countries play important roles in international affairs. And through this research, the researchers may deeply understand the mutual influence and integration of the two languages in the background of globalization ^[6].

1.2. Research purpose and structure

By comparing the hot words of the year in China and English in 2024, this paper aims to achieve the following goals:

First, it gives a detailed analysis of this year's hot words, from the aspects of meaning, origin, and extended meaning. Thus, the researchers can have a basic grasp of these words, and it is beneficial for later analysis.

Second, it mainly reveals the political, social, and international backgrounds behind each language, respectively. Through this study, the researchers can see how these hot words reflect current social trends, popular culture, and evolving language. When analyzing, this paper also makes a comparison and contrast of the hot words ^[7]. Through this, the researchers can improve the understanding of the two languages and promote the understanding between different language communities. Additionally, it can promote the understanding and integration between different cultures and provide effective guidance for cross-cultural communication. The whole process of analyzing also improves problem-solving skills.

2. Elaboration of sociolinguistics

Sociolinguistics is the study of language and linguistic behaviors as influenced by social and cultural factors. And it is an independent discipline that emerged in the 1960s. Sociolinguists are concerned with the role language plays in maintaining social characters within a community, and they strive to identify linguistic features that are used in specific situations and that signify various social relationships among participants ^[8].

With increasing social changes, closer interpersonal communication, and rapid technological advancements, language changes are accelerating, providing sociolinguists with numerous valuable topics for research. This discipline focuses on how language varies and changes in different social contexts, influenced by factors such as age, gender, education, occupation, race, and so on. For instance, an American English speaker might use different grammatical forms depending on their education level, social class, or the desired effect on their listener.

In summary, sociolinguistics offers insights into how language shapes and reflects social identities and cultural norms by examining the relationship between language and various social factors. As society continues to evolve, sociolinguistics will continue to play a crucial role in understanding and interpreting the ever-changing landscape of language and its social context ^[9].

3. Analysis of Hot words of the year

3.1. Introduction

3.1.1. Chinese Hot Words

The study chose “Hanyu Pandian 2024 (汉语盘点)” as the main source of Chinese hot words of the year. It

has gone through two stages of people's recommendation of words and experts' selection, which is popular and authoritative^[10].

The domestic character is “zhi (智).” It not only refers to the “wisdom” of artificial intelligence, but also represents the “wisdom” that people can understand and adapt to the trend of history in this period of scientific and technological revolution. The domestic word is “New quality productivity (新质生产力).” It is a new term that the chairman of the CCP first mentioned during his investigation in Heilongjiang Province in September 2023. Compared with traditional productivity, new quality productivity pays more attention to technology, innovation, and high efficiency. What is more, the international character is “change (变),” which means change. It can be explained from many aspects: the change of lifestyle, the change of social landscape, the change of international relationships, and so on. And the international word is “AI (人工智能).” Artificial intelligence is the study of how to make computers do intelligent work that only people could do in the past, and is considered one of the three cutting-edge technologies in the 21st century, which is widely popularized and applied in today's society^[11].

Other selected words are “wen (稳),” “low-altitude economy (低空经济),” “zhan(战),” “Paris Olympic Games (巴黎奥运会),” “banweier (班味儿),” and so on.

3.1.2. English hot words

The English hot words of the year in this paper are mainly chosen from three famous dictionaries: Oxford, Cambridge, and Collins Dictionaries.

First, Oxford Dictionaries has declared their word of the year is “Brain Rot.” The first recorded use of brain rot was found in 1854 in Henry David Thoreau's book *Walden*, which reports his experiences of living a simple lifestyle in the natural world. But now, brain rot is defined as “the supposed deterioration of a person's mental or intellectual state, especially viewed as the result of overconsumption of material (now particularly online content) considered to be trivial or unchallenging. Also: something characterized as likely to lead to such deterioration” (Oxford Dictionary).

Second, Cambridge Dictionary announced its hot word is “Manifest.” It is a quite common word meaning to show a feeling, attitude, etc. While it has a different meaning in this year, which means to use methods such as visualization and affirmation to help one imagines achieving something he or she wants, in the belief that doing so will make it more likely to happen. Definitely it turns into more positive and detailed.

Third, the hot word of the year in Collins Dictionary is “Brat.” Its original use is to describe children with bad behavior. However, it is newly defined in 2024 as characterized by a confident, independent, and hedonistic attitude. The shift was triggered by the release of the British singer Charli XCX's album *Brat*, which spawned the cultural phenomenon of “Brat Summer”, symbolizing a confident and slightly rebellious lifestyle and bold style of dress.

Other selected words are quishing, ecotarian, dynamic pricing, anti-tourism, delulu, and so on.

3.2. Comparison and contrast

3.2.1. Semantic aspect

Many hot words in 2024 have shown their different meanings than ever, and it is a trend under the circumstances of a rapidly developing world^[12].

The Chinese character “智” can be interpreted from many aspects. It not only refers to artificial intelligence but also means the wisdom of people solving century-old problems and the wise applications people used in

the technological revolution. In English, the word “brat” has turned from a negative word into a positive one. It reveals the confident and independent attitude of some young people in modern society. They are not tiresome children who play tricks without consideration, but are people with their own attitudes towards this disordered world. What is more, the word “manifest” also shows its different meaning than ever. According to the Cambridge Dictionary’s editors, “manifest” has been looked up 130,000 times, making it one of the most looked-up words of 2024. Many people are under the impression that the word “manifest” only means “to provide evidence for.” But in fact, the word mentioned in 2024 is a new use, which refers to a positive psychological suggestion method. It can be interpreted as believing in yourself when trying to do something.

“Through the development and the changes of time, words are given new meanings or new usages different from the original meanings” (Ran Liu, cited in Chen, S,2015). Above all, people can find that both Chinese and English words show an extended meaning in 2024, which has become a language trend.

3.2.2. Political aspect

New changes in modern society will inevitably bring new problems. National governance has become an important challenge for governments and officials around the world. The hot words in Chinese and English both reflect people’s attention on the current society and international situation.

For instance, the character “change (变)” can be interpreted from many aspects: turbulence in the world, such as regional conflicts and terrorism. In the face of many changes in international politics, China needs to seek opportunities, respond to challenges, and maintain strategic resolve and flexibility. Although the hot words in English do not reflect politics directly, people can dig out some information below the surface. The word “brain rot” seems to urge people to be alert and pay much attention to the political issues and rational judgment ability.

One subtle difference the researchers can notice between the hot words of the two languages is the underlying attitude. Chinese buzzwords tend to give positive affirmations and encouraging responses. They celebrate the right thing and provide exciting information. However, English buzzwords tend to criticize the current state of affairs, expose the ugliness and seriousness of things, and push people to do better. They are more likely to point out shortcomings and urge change ^[13].

3.2.3. Social aspect

Language is not only the carrier of culture, but also the witness of history. It faithfully records the year’s struggle, social changes, and the style of the times. Hot words in 2024, in particular, show people’s different attitudes towards life.

Another hot word selected in China is “banweier (班味儿)”, which means the characteristic of working people who dress in sloppy clothes and without makeup, and is a concrete representation of the daily commute. It expresses workplace anxiety and work fatigue in a helpless and humorous way. However, this tells people that if they cannot change the reality of the rush, they could try to defuse it with light humor. This word shows the reality of life exactly. Under the high pressure of the economy, many adults need to do more work than ever, which always makes one lose positive attitudes towards life. Moreover, it seems to be an urge for the government and enterprises to produce more beneficial policies to relieve working stress.

Moreover, in English, most words precisely express the true society and people’s viewpoint. In the past year, the use of “brain rot” has surged by about 230%. This reflects the public’s deep concern that excessive addiction to surface information and entertainment provided by the Internet may lead to intellectual decline. Its popularity also

arouses people's reflection on other internet phenomena: information cocoon and shallow reading. Social media and online video have indeed enriched life and brought convenience to information. However, people are gradually realizing that long-term immersion in low-level fragmented information will lead to a decline in concentration, memory, cognitive level, and ability to process complex tasks. It is unimaginable what will happen when people gradually lose logical thinking and systematic analysis ability, and become superficial and lazy.

Another word in English is "manifest." It was looked up more than 130,000 times on the Cambridge Dictionary website this year and is widely used in mainstream media. In the context of the global economic downturn and frequent mental health problems, "manifest" has become a source of spiritual comfort and support for many people. It encourages people to actively imagine the future, to draw the motivation to move forward in adversity.

All in all, the hot words of 2024 in two languages show the strict situation people are facing in this society. The coexistence of challenge and opportunity, pessimism and optimism, reflection and encouragement contributes to this colorful world. Although there are many uncertain and dark elements in the world, most people in different countries try their best to deal with wisdom and optimism spontaneously^[14].

3.2.4. International aspect

In addition to the above aspects, the differences between Chinese and English hot words are also reflected in the attention paid to international events.

For China, the international word of the year "AI (人工智能)" highlights the importance of technology popularized around, although it is not a new word anymore. The development and application of artificial intelligence technology are profoundly changing international politics, economy, culture, and other fields, becoming a new highland for competition among countries. At the same time, AI also brings ethical, security, employment, and other challenges, which require international organizations and countries to strengthen cooperation and jointly develop rules and standards. In addition, the international character "change (变)" also reflects the turbulence and instability in the international situation, such as regional conflicts, terrorism, climate change, and other global issues, which need all countries to work together to solve to maintain world peace and stability^[15].

For English, the three topic words of the year pay more attention to people's minds than international affairs. However, some words, such as "ecotarian", can reflect people's focus on the international ecology. The word refers to a person who only eats food produced or prepared in a way that does not harm the environment. In this age of environmental pollution, westerners call on actions to reduce harm to the Earth, which is also a reflection of their awareness of the world.

Today, under such an international situation, China tries to seek new development opportunities, cope with various challenges, and maintain strategic focus and flexibility. The international words reflect China's active participation in global affairs and its contribution to international peace and development. And western people also try to find problems from some aspects, and are willing to solve them together.

4. Conclusion

Language is one of the most direct ways to observe current situations and problems around the world. Through this detailed analysis of Chinese and English hot words of the year, it can be found that today people are facing many mental problems due to the pressure of society, which can be caused by the intense international competition and a downward economic trend. But people try to resolve them through positive psychological suggestions and an open

attitude. At present, people are in a century of great changes, rapid development of technology, and an uncertain political situation; what they can do is to grasp every opportunity and make themselves stronger. At a time when global conditions are deteriorating, stability is progress. Ordinary people in the world should give up fantasy, face reality, and relieve anxiety altogether.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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