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## A Pragmatic Study on the Conversational Functions of Internet Catchwords

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### Abstract

In recent years, Internet catchwords have been widely used as a new form of language in daily communication. The paper makes an analysis of the functions of Internet catchwords in the process of conversation from the perspective of pragmatics. It is found that when using Internet catchwords according to the five kinds of interpersonal relationship and the content of conversation, people violate the cooperative principle to make conversational implicature so as to strengthen or shorten the pragmatic distance between the conversation makers, guarantee the smooth ongoing of the conversation and maintain a harmonious interpersonal relationship. The study may help people to have a better understanding of the function of Internet catchwords in the process of conversation.

**Key words:** Internet catchwords; Cooperative principle; Pragmatic distance; Conversational function

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### INTRODUCTION

The third wave of technology revolutionizes human society in many aspects and greatly influences the development and change of language. Along with this trend, Internet catchwords come into being and widely spread. Internet catchwords are among those netspeaks which are characterized by novelty, epidemicity and have specific meaning. (Yu, 2001)

So far, scholars have made researches on Internet catchwords from different aspects such as semantic characteristics (Ding, 2004; Sun, 2010; Zhao, 2013; Wang, 2016), syntactic generation (Jiang, 2005; Li & Li, 2011; Lu, 2013), pragmatic value (Yang, 2008; Ju, 2012; He, 2014), translation mode (Yin, 2009; Gao, 2011; Huo & Ru, 2016), social influence (Yang, 2002; Jiang, 2005; Dang, Wang, 2016) and communication mechanism (Zhao & Liu, 2009; Wang, 2013; Yan, Qiu, 2015), etc., which are based on static language. Different from them, this paper aims to explore the function of Internet catchwords in the process of dynamic conversation.

### 1. COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE

American linguist Herbert Paul Grice puts forward the theory of Cooperative Principle (CP) in the book *Logic and Conversation* in 1975, which aims at describing what actually happens in conversation. Grice tries to formulate a rough general principle that participants will be expected to observe, that is “make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged” (Grice, 1975:45). To further illustrate Cooperative Principle, Grice (1975) introduced four categories of maxims as follow:

#### QUANTITY

a. Make your contribution as informative as is required. (for the current purpose of the exchange)

b. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

**QUALITY**

Try to make your contribution one that is true.

a. Do not say what you believe to be false.

b. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

**RELATION**

Be relevant.

**MANNER**

Be perspicuous

a. Avoid obscurity of expression.

b. Avoid ambiguity.

c. Be brief. (avoid prolixity)

d. Be orderly. (p. 45-46)

The meanings of Internet catchwords are not equivalent to their literal meanings. People violate the maxims of Cooperative Principle when using the Internet catchwords in the process of conversation.

## 2. PRAGMATIC DISTANCE

Politeness is the basic principle that people should obey to make a conversation smooth. Since 1970, politeness has been an important research issue. Leech (1983) came up with the Politeness Principle, while Levinson (1983) and Brown & Levinson (1987) referred to face-management theories. However, Leech's politeness principle is too absolute (He, 1989, 2000; Gu, 1990; Fraser, 1990; Xu, 1992; Mey, 1993; Wang, 1998). Though Brown & Levinson brought in the social factors so as to reduce the absolutization, they did not make a clear distinction of the relation between social distance and relative power (Matsumoto, 1988; Gu, 1990; Kasper, 1990; Fraser, 1990; Mao, 1994; He, 2000). Wang Jianhua (2001) first came up with pragmatic distance based on the theories of Politeness by early researchers.

He divided politeness into linguistic politeness and utterance politeness. Linguistic politeness is the polite sentence literally, while utterance politeness is the appropriateness of linguistic politeness to the pragmatic distance between participants. It is characterized by fluidity and negotiability. (Wang Jianhua, 2001:26).

Pragmatic distance is the degree of intimacy between the participants in a particular communication and can be described by the intimacy degree of pragmatic distance. Pragmatic distance can be divided into initial pragmatic distance and ongoing pragmatic distance. Initial pragmatic distance is the intimacy degree that a speaker and a hearer respectively perceive before the communication and it is decided by the self-concept, other-concept and the experiences of the participants. While ongoing pragmatic distance is the intimacy degree both parties perceive according to the partner's utterance.

Wang (2001) also comes up with five kinds of interpersonal relationships: stranger relationship, work relationship, friendship relationship, family relationship and romantic relationship. The initial pragmatic distance is greatly decided by different kinds of relationships. With the upgrading of these relationships, the intimacy degree improves. Pragmatic distance differentiates from interpersonal relationship. In a specific context, the interpersonal relationship will not change during the conversation, however, the pragmatic distance changes with the exchange of information. Interpersonal relationship is decided by social factors while pragmatic distance is formed during the process of conversation and it is negotiable (Wang Jianhua, 2001:27). Interpersonal relationship is connected to the initial pragmatic distance.

## 3. AN ANALYSIS OF INTERNET CATCHWORDS FROM THE PRAGMATIC PERSPECTIVE

Conversations based on five types of interpersonal relationships are taken as examples for the analysis of how people shorten or strengthen the pragmatic distance by reasonably using Internet catchwords in conversation.

### 3.1 Stranger Relationship

Stranger relationship refers to the relationship between two persons who do not know each other. Generally speaking, in the conversation based on this kind of relationship, as the participants are strangers, they share less knowledge background about each other. The intimacy degree is low and the initial pragmatic distance is large, so it requires a high degree of politeness. When communicators are strangers, the intimacy degree can be enhanced and the pragmatic distance can be shortened by the use of Internet catchwords, making the conversation natural and polite.

Example 1:

A: 为什么今天只有你一个人呢?

B: 因为今天大熊请假了, 说有喜事.

A: 啥喜事?

B: 咱也不知道, 咱也不敢问。

This conversation is from a talk show. There are usually two comperes to host the radio show, and the audience often discuss some issues with them. This time, only one of the comperes talked much with the audience, without the presence of the other. So one of the audience asked the comperer about the other one. The comperer told the audience that her partner, Da Xiong, had asked for leave because of some happy event. When the audience asked what happy event it was, she replied "I don't know, and I never dare to ask". When the communication was limited within the discussion of some issues, they could freely exchange their ideas. However, when the audience went further to ask for some more information

about Da Xiong's personal affair, she didn't give more information. It is obviously a violation of the maxim of quantity. According to Grice (1975), people should make the contribution as informative as is required. In this conversation, although the compere and the audience often interact with each other, they are still strangers in real life, as they may know nothing about each other actually. Therefore, when the compere was asked some personal affairs about her colleague, she didn't want to give some detailed information. As is known, it is not polite to refuse others directly especially when it is stranger relationship which requires for much more politeness. The compere employs the Internet catchword “咱也不知道，咱也不敢问” to humorously refuse to say anything more. In the conversation, the audience and the compere are strangers in real life, but they often have a good talk on the radio and that makes the audience make a prediction that they are already friends. As a result, the pragmatic distance between them reduces and the conversation goes smoothly which makes him ask about Da Xiong's personal affairs. People of course know it is impolite to ask about one's personal affairs when it is stranger relationship, but as the conversation goes, the ongoing pragmatic distance changes, his behavior is understandable. By using the Internet catchwords “咱也不知道，咱也不敢问”，the compere keeps their shortened pragmatic distance by violation of the maxim of quantity, and gives the audience a good reply without destroying the good feeling of the audience.

#### Example 2:

During the second session of the 12th CPPCC, Cui Yongyuan, was interviewed by the reporter of *New Culture*. Their conversation went like this:

《新文化》记者：那您如何评价央视？这个我们可以报的。  
崔永元(停顿几秒钟)：你懂的，两会期间不说这个。

Mr. Cui gave detailed answers to the first few questions raised by the news reporter, but when being asked about his viewpoint about CCTV, he didn't respond directly. According to Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, when conducting a conversation, both communicators of the conversation need to first recognize that they are carrying out the conversation with a common goal. “你懂的” is Cui's answer based on the question of the news reporter, but it is not direct to the question. It is apparently the violation of the maxim of quantity—do not make your contribution more informative than is required. He can just say “we don't talk about it”. By adding the Internet catchword “你懂的”，he intends to say something more which is known to both of them. However, “你懂的” can be interpreted as the refusal of giving the specific answer to the question. In this conversation, the two participants are interviewer and interviewee, which is the most alienated relationship in interpersonal relationship.

Generally speaking, it is impolite to refuse a stranger's question. Cui Yongyuan cleverly employed the Internet Catchword “你懂的” to make the conversation go on smoothly, and at the same time, he made his refusal natural and polite. The understanding of “你懂的” is based on their common knowledge. The common ground greatly reduces the pragmatic distance between them. Now they are not strangers, but workmate or even friend who engage in the same job. In this way, the intimacy degree is improved.

### 3.2 Work Relationship

Work relationship refers to a kind of relationship formed for the completion of a certain work, including the relationship among colleagues, classmates, teachers and students, superiors and subordinates, etc. Under this condition, the mutual knowledge of the participants increases, but the intimacy degree and the pragmatic distance are still at a low level. Although the participants have a certain tacit understanding, the requirement for politeness is still at a high level. In this context, the intimacy degree can be enhanced and the pragmatic distance between the communicators can be reduced by the use of Internet catchwords.

#### Example 3:

A: 马上要做季度报告了，准备怎么样了？

B: 我是梅西，我现在慌得一比。

A and B are colleagues, so they have mutual knowledge of each other and the intimacy degree has increased. However, as is known that colleagues are often competitors. As a result, their knowledge of each other is limited and there is also a high requirement for politeness. In this conversation, A asked something about the work process of B, B answered with the Internet catchword “我是梅西，我现在慌得一比”，which means “I am Messi. I am more than flustered”. There are two possibilities for it. First A and B are competitors, or B's work is confidential. B doesn't want to tell A any details about his work. In this condition, he violates the maxim of quantity—make your contribution as informative as is required. But social rule for politeness does not allow him to refuse directly. So he used the Internet catchword “我是梅西，我现在慌得一比”。In this way, he humorously gives A some information of his feeling to avoid the increase of the pragmatic distance. Another possibility is that they are partners. A is showing his concern for B. B may perceive the initial pragmatic distance, and gives back some information actively. He avoids the maxim of manner—avoid obscurity of expression. He is not Messi and “一比” doesn't mean anything. As they are partners, the intimacy degree increases. When he uses the Internet catchword “我是梅西，我现在慌得一比”，it is more like two friends are talking about their recent situation, and thus the pragmatic distance between them shortens.

#### Example 4:

A: 经理, 听说今天要加班。

B: 官宣, 今天按时下班。

In this conversation, one of the clerks asked the manager about the rumor that all of the staff would work overtime. He meant to know whether or not they would work overtime. B was expected to give an exact answer. However, he not only answered that everyone could leave on time, but also gave some extra information by using the Internet catchword “官宣” which meant official announcement. It is the violation of the maxim of quantity-- do not make your contribution more informative than is required. “官宣” was once used by the Chinese actor, Feng Shaofeng and actress, Zhao Liying to declare their relationship. Since then it has been widely used. By using “官宣”, B wanted to let the clerk believe that his message was true. In the meantime, the two participants here are manager and clerk. Their different status makes both communicators pay more attention to politeness. And the pragmatic distance is relatively large. By means of the use of the Internet catchword “官宣”, B makes the contribution humorous which is like a conversation between friends. The pragmatic distance between the two participants is shortened and the intimacy degree increases.

### 3.3 Friendship Relationship

Friendship relationship includes “friends” and “bosom friends”, etc. In the conversation based on friendship relationship, the background knowledge of both participants of communication increases greatly, the degree of intimacy reaches a relatively high level, the initial pragmatic distance is short, and the requirement for politeness is low.

Example 5:

A: 刚才我妈给老班打电话了, 估计我作弊的的事兜不住了。

B: 一首凉凉送给你。

This conversation is between two classmates. A told B that his mother called the head teacher, and he worried that his mother might know his cheating in the exam. B replied with the Internet catchword “一首凉凉送给你” which meant “I present you a song Liangliang”. It avoids the maxim of relation — be relevant. In this conversation, the relationship between the two participants is friendship relationship which has a low requirement for politeness. And they share more information. When A told B about his worry, B must know what A meant. But he replied with the Internet catchword which seemed to have nothing to do with the conversation. However, he really meant something. “凉凉” is the theme song of a TV series which is about a sad love story. When people say “一首凉凉送给你”, it always indicates that someone will suffer from something bad. A initiates the conversation according to the friendship between them. B’s response is based on the perception of A’s ongoing pragmatic distance. The pragmatic distance between them is relatively close. It is

not right to cheat in the exam. So when B heard what A said, even though he was sorry for what A might suffer, he still thought he deserved it. Their close relationship makes B tell his true thought. By using the Internet catchword, he drops the criticism to the least.

Example 6:

A: 我现在每天都吃好多, 这不, 正加餐呢, 可还是不胖。

B: 呦, 吃的还挺丰盛, 家里有矿吧!

In this conversation, the two participants of the conversation are friends. They have a higher degree of intimacy and a shorter pragmatic distance. Therefore, the conversation between them is more casual. A complained that he ate a lot but not get fat. B was surprised by A’s big late-night meal and was sorry for A’s failure in getting fat. But he did not want to make the conversation go to dark. So he used the Internet catchword “家里有矿吧” which meant A is from a extreme rich family. It avoids the maxim of quality — do not say what you believe to be false. B knows A is not very rich. However, in this way, he avoided referring to something bad, and kept the conversation amusing. Of course, the use of the Internet catchword “家里有矿吧” is also the result of their close relationship.

### 3.4 Family Relationship

Family relationship refers to the kinship relationship between mother and son, father and daughter, brothers and sisters, etc. The participants in family relationship share a higher degree of intimacy and closer pragmatic distance. Under this condition, communication can be casual and the requirement for politeness drops much.

Example 7:

女儿: 妈, 今天外面可冷了, 帮我把最厚的羽绒服拿出来

妈妈: 行了, 你皮糙肉厚的, 冻不死。

女儿: 确认过眼神, 亲妈。

In this conversation, the daughter asked her mother to take out her down jacket because it was really cold outside. The mother refused her daughter’s request and further stressed her shortcomings — your skin is so rough that you will never be frozen to death. In return, the daughter replied “I have confirmed through the eye. You are my dear mother”, which indicates that she was unhappy with the attitude of her mother. However, according to the maxim of quantity, people should make the contribution as informative as is required. She didn’t say much about her unhappiness. But by simply using the Internet catchword, she expressed her feeling and at the same time avoided a direct quarrel or fight. It is very impolite to point out one’s shortcoming directly and people usually avoid talking like that. However, due to their close relationship, the requirement for politeness is low. Therefore, in this conversation, both of them express their views in a very direct way. Of course, as the mother constantly points out and strengthens her daughter’s



shortcomings, the pragmatic distance between the two is constantly changing, to be exact, it is increasing. In order to express her unhappy mood, the daughter used the popular Internet phrase “确认过眼神” and “亲妈”, which further increased the pragmatic distance between mother and daughter. The relationship between the two is still mother-child relationship, but the pragmatic distance increases in the process of conversation. It is worth noting that even in this case, the mother-daughter conversation is not inappropriate, but rather very amusing, which is precisely the result of the speaker's skillfully use of the Internet catchword.

**Example 8:**

父亲：我和你妈这几天出去旅游了。

女儿：什么？

父亲：你自己在家好好吃饭，早点回家

女儿：好吧，我已经被你们安排得明明白白了。

The father was going to travel with the mother. Before they set off, the father told the daughter to have meal on time and go back home early. The daughter didn't know their travel plan beforehand, so she was surprised and unhappy to be left at home. But her parents didn't give her a chance to go with them. Although the father told her to eat on time and go home early, they actually did not prepare something for her. So the daughter used the Internet catchword “我已经被你们安排得明明白白了” which meant she had been well planned by them. According to the maxim of quality, people should not say that for which you lack adequate evidence. There was no evidence that the parents had settled everything for her. They didn't tell her beforehand or prepare some food or so. By the violation of the maxim of quality, she showed her anger of being not told their travel plan and not being considered. It is clear that the father is showing his apology by telling the daughter to be careful of some trivial matters. Although family relationship demands a low level of politeness, inappropriate behavior may also result in a quarrel or fight. So knowing that she can't change anything, the daughter used the Internet catchword to express her unhappiness, and at the same time to show her thanks for father's care. In this way, the Internet catchword helps to keep harmonious family relationship.

### 3.5 Romantic Relationship

Romantic relationship refers to the heterosexual relationship including the relationship between husband and wife, and that between lovers, etc. In this kind of relationship, the participants share the most information. The intimacy degree is the highest and the requirement for politeness drops to the least. Therefore, participants in romantic relationship usually make a conversation in a more direct way, and often do not very much follow the rules of interpersonal communication. This may be well illustrated in the following conversation between husband and wife.

Example 9:

老婆：最近皮肤不太好，是不我该买点燕窝吃吃？  
老公：我跟你讲，燕窝的主要成分是蛋白质，其功效相当于你多喝牛奶.....

老婆：（打断老公）你赢了。

In this conversation, the wife thinks her skin is not good and so she wants to buy some bird's nest. She meant to get a positive answer from her husband, however, after the husband heard what his wife said, he began to explain the ingredient of the bird's nest. She was annoyed, so she interrupted the husband with the Internet catchword “你赢了” which meant you won. It seems that her answer had nothing to do with what the husband said. It is the violation of the maxim of relation—be relevant. Since this conversation occurs between a couple which is the most intimate romantic relationship, the pragmatic distance is the smallest and the requirement for politeness is the lowest. In the meantime, they share the most information of each other. At the very beginning of the conversation, the husband did not realize what his wife really meant, so he explained some knowledge about bird's nest to his wife which she already knew,. This further made her annoyed. But she did not want to make it clear, or get obviously angry which may lead to a quarrel or fight. So she interrupted her husband and used the Internet catchword “你赢了”. It seems that she is praising him. Actually both of them know there must be something wrong. It seems that the husband had turned a romantic conversation into a science class. It is clear that they share a short pragmatic distance, as the conversation goes, the wife uses the Internet catchword to avoid the increase of the pragmatic distance.

Example 10:

老婆：老公，你觉得我美吗？

老公：游泳健身了解一下。

老婆：滚！

In this conversation, the participants are also husband and wife, and the relationship between them is obviously the closest in interpersonal relationship which is romantic relationship. The initial pragmatic distance between them is the shortest. In the conversation, the wife first perceived the initial pragmatic distance based on their relationship and asked whether she is beautiful. The implication is that she wants to be recognized and praised by her husband. After receiving the message from his wife, the husband perceived the pragmatic distance between them according to what his wife said. He replied with the Internet catchword “游泳健身了解一下”. By using the ads. of gym, he means that her wife is not in good shape. It is the violation of the maxim of manner—avoid obscurity of expression. Since it is not polite to point out one's shortcomings directly, even in the closest relationship, a direct answer will lead to unhappiness. However, as they share the most information of each other, the wife realized her husband's insinuation that her figure was not good, and she was dissatisfied. However, their love relationship makes the conversation naturally appropriate

and polite. Because in intimate relationship, sometimes paying too much attention to polite language might make the conversation appear impolite. In the process of the conversation, the communicative pragmatic distance between the two participants changes with the ongoing of the conversation, but the type of interpersonal relationship between them remains unchanged.

## CONCLUSION

Through the above analysis, it is clear that people violate the cooperative principle so as to obey some social rules and make some conversational implicature. The overall rhythm of a conversation is first determined by the initial pragmatic distance between the two participants of the conversation. By using Internet catchwords in conversation, the pragmatic distance can be strengthened or shortened so as to better express emotions such as pleasure or dissatisfaction, to promote the smooth progress of conversation, and maintain the harmonious interpersonal relationship and achieve the expected communicative effect. This study helps people better understand the role of Internet catchword in conversation.

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