

A Memetic Study on Number Three

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Abstract

Based on the concept of memetics and the life cycle of memes, this paper analyzes the phenomenon of a typical number Three in its cultural connotation and the evolution of its meaning in both English and Chinese as meme. It further explores the motivation and mechanism of its successful meme and provides the extensive usage of numbers by replication and transmission.

Key words: Memetics; Meme; Number Three; Connotation

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INTRODUCTION

What is meme? As a newly coined word, meme is an originally sociobiological term which was first used by Richard Dawkins in his book *The Selfish Gene* (1976, p. 192) and was defined as simply a unit of intellectual or cultural information that survives long enough to be recognized as such, and which can be passed from mind to mind. Later, different experts from different countries gave further explanations or illustrations on it, such as Glenn Grant (1990), H. Keith Henson (1987), Peter J. Vajk (1989), Langrish, J. Z. (1999) and Lee Borkman (1998); they explain the meme from various aspects and spread it in the social, metaphorical and technical field. Among them, Glenn Grant emphasizes the transmitting method of meme, and declares all transmitted knowledge

is memetics; Dawkins illustrates the meme a living structure by applying a vivid metaphor, that is, “when you plant a fertile meme in my mind, you literally parasitize my brain, turning it into a vehicle for the propagation in just the way that a virus may parasitize the genetic mechanism of a host cell”. While Peter J. Vajk made a distinction between meme and gene and told the meme can be transmitted but cannot be encoded. In China, some domestic scholars and linguists have probed into the theory of memetics and studied its instructive functions on some linguistic phenomena. Among them, some distinguished representatives are professor He Zirang (2003, 2005), Chen Linxia (2006), He Xuelin (2003), Han Jianghong (2004), Wang Bin (2004). They have studied the occurrence of this new term and its significance on linguistics and culture. Though memetics has not been an independent discipline, it has really aroused a new interest in academic field.

1. MEMETICS AND THE LIFE CYCLE OF MEMES

Many scholars and experts are probing and studying this new branch of science and the concept of meme is somewhat slippery to define and there is a multitude of definitions ranging from the very wide to the very narrow. But it is generally accepted that meme is a unit of replication and it can be passed from mind to mind. Besides, it can also be inherited like a gene and be spread as a virus. So memetics can be defined as the theoretical and empirical science that studies the replication, spread and evolution of memes. According to Heylighen (1998), to be replicated, a meme must pass successfully through four subsequent stages, thus form a life cycle: 1) assimilation by an individual who thereby becomes a host of the meme; 2) retention in that individual's memory; 3) expression by the individual in language, behavior to another form that can be perceived by others;

4) transmission of the thus created message or meme vehicle to one or more other individuals. The last stage is followed by the first stage thus closing the life cycle of memes. At each stage, there is selection, meaning that some memes will be eliminated.

Memetics and the life cycle of memes reveal the law of development and evolution in language and culture and it also highlights the existence of some present language phenomena, thus further serves people creating powerful memes with some useful hints and references.

2. NUMBER THREE WITH ITS CULTURAL CONNOTATIONS IN BOTH ENGLISH AND CHINESE AS MEME

Generally speaking, numbers describe the quantity and are used in mathematics as one of a series of symbols of unique meaning in a fixed order that can be derived by counting. In fact, numbers endowed with non-quantitative meanings become an important component in language study. In other words, the numbers have represented not only the calculating, but also some cultural connotations influenced by a nation's religious beliefs, psychology, worship of language and some other factors. Among them, some have owned the same connotations in both Chinese and English culture and have the potential capability of a meme such as Three, Seven, Nine and so on.

The number Three gains great respect in both English and Chinese and represents divine completeness and perfection. It is the most universal symbol of the triad. The Holy Trinity, three persons in one God, was probably the most well-known of all triads. The Bible definitely teaches that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Westerners think that the world is composed of the Earth, the Ocean and the Sky. Man's nature is of three folds: spirit, soul and body. Three kingdoms embrace our ideas of matters: mineral, vegetable and animal. Therefore, Three is the divine number in the west. Actually in ancient time, many concepts are related to the number Three. They also regarded three as a mystic number and held it dear. There are three creators of the universe, governing heaven, world and hell. Number Three is also used to avoid evil and the ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras once considered it to represent the three stages of a process, namely, beginning, middle and completion. There were trios of women: three graces, three fates, three witches, three furies, three sirens and the three goddesses who aroused the Trojan War in the desire of possessing a golden apple inscribed "to the Fairest". Even Appollo's Pythia sat on a three-legged chair and Cerbrus was a three-headed dog. For ancient Chinese, number Three donates the three parts of the universe: heaven, earth and man. In "Laotzu", Laozi expressed that one produced two, two produced three, and three produced everything. From it, number Three does not only represent a sequence of

counting but a beginning of creation. In Taoism, there is a saying of "三清" (three qing), namely "yuqing", "taiqing" and "shangqing". In Chinese, some idioms with number Three are extensively used, "三生有幸", "三魂七魄" with the connotations of three spirits inside one's body. When surfing the idioms with the word Three, you can get three hundreds or more.

3. MOTIVATION AND MECHANISM OF NUMBER THREE BECOMING A SUCCESSFUL MEME

According to the memetics and the lifecycle of memes above, as a successful meme, it should have a powerful potential ability of transmitting and experienced four stages and then be spreaded and replicated. As a number, Three first presents its property as a unit of counting following number two and exerts its function on calculation. Number One is single, Two is double or pair, Three is the literal beginning of counting leading to a large sum or amount. This property is accepted and stored in the mind of hosts. From then on, the number is not only a number, it has been transmitted into a visible element which can be felt and expressed if in need. This process is the third stage of expression which is the most effective method. Therefore, many expressions such as "三五成群, 三番五次, 三令五申, 三朝五日, 三差五错, 三环五扣, 三贞五烈, 三清四白, 三江五湖" etc. are used widely and in such structures, number Three or Five does not only mean the exact times but to show a kind of frequency or repetition and this structure accompanying with another different number has the power to be replicated. Any parallel words or phrase can be put into the structure and form a new expression spreading widely. Thus complete an enclosed circle of life. In our daily lives, we often use this digital structure to emphasize, to show frequency or for special purpose.

Secondly, except for its frequency concept, number Three has also been endowed with some cultural connotation. As discussed above, this is closely associated with some historical, psychological, religious factors and so on. Many expressions such as "三顾茅庐", "三足鼎立", "三魂七魄", "三宫六院", "三徙成国", "三户亡秦" ect. are in the case. In such expressions, number Three has lost its literal meaning but as a fixed signal in the idioms. While in such expressions, what is transmitted and spreaded is not the number itself but a kind of culture. Take "三顾茅庐" as an example, in order to invite Zhu Geliang to help him as a military adviser, Liu Bei paid three visits to the thatched cottage without complaints. After learning about the original legend, we get the metaphorical meaning of this idiom is to repeatedly request somebody to take up a responsible post. "Maolu" does not stand for the thatched cottage and number three is also not only a numerical code. Maybe

three times, four times, five times or even hundred times will only be symbolized by three. Each time when people express a repeated action or conception, number Three will be employed and spreaded quickly. And in such fixed idioms, we understand and employ the meaning as a whole and in expressions; this idiom has been a meme and been accepted widely accompanied with its cultural connotation.

Therefore, based on the studies above, the reason that number Three has a strong mechanism to be a meme lies as following:

1) Popularity: In this digital world, number is more and more popularly used in each field. We can find love letter all in numbers and computer languages are spoken in numbers. Numbers are the common accepted language among the people and it avoids misunderstanding with its fixed and accurate meaning.

2) Simplicity: In communication, the principle of economics is adopted and especially in China where people communicate in high context, so number will meet the demand of people and be expanded and spreaded in many fields and even take the place of some complicated expressions.

3) Novelty: Number has gone beyond the boundary of mathematics and become one element of free expressions. This really meets the psychological demand of people and encourages people to innovate some new and novel expressions. We have learned a lot of ways of codes expressed by numbers and it still has great potentials in many unknown fields. That is the innovation for numbers to a meme in the developing language.

CONCLUSION

As a new method of linguistic study, memetics has provided us a new insight of language development and transmission. Some phrases and expressions can be accepted, duplicated and transmitted easily and popularity as a meme, which is closely related with people's

psychology, countries' cultural background and social development. Just as the evolution of nature, language has its own life circle and this view can guide us to understand every new language phenomenon comprehensively. And as a meme, it has a strong power to be duplicated and transmitted. This potential power is one of its natures and property. Therefore, when in demand, it will exert its influence on linguistic expressions.

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