



# An Analysis of the Formation and Evolutionary Path of the Internet Buzzword 'Versailles'

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**Abstract.** Since 2020, 'Versailles literature' has been popular on the Chinese Internet with its unique style of speech. Countless netizens have imitated this trend, giving the word 'Versailles' a new connotation. In the same year, the famous periodical Bite the Words named the term 'Versailles Literature' as one of China's top ten buzzwords for the year 2020. This article takes 'Versailles', the core meaning of the term 'Versailles Literature', as the object of the research, exploring the different discourse backgrounds and pragmatic features of the formation of this word from a linguistic perspective and analyzing the path of the evolution of the meaning and grammatical function of it, as well as exploring the rationale for its formation and evolution from the cognitive perspective. The research reveals that the meaning of the word 'Versailles' has evolved from 'architecture' and 'high-profile extravagance' to 'low-profile ostentation'. The pragmatic function of this word has become increasingly abundant, and its grammatical function has also changed from a single noun to an adjective. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, the formation of the internet buzzword 'Versailles' is a process in which the architectural domain activates the attribute domain and then activates the psychological domain. The transformation of the three cognitive domains provides conditions for the evolution of the word, which in turn enriches the application field of it.

**Keywords:** Vernacular; internet language; pragmatics

## 1 Introduction

In 2020, 'Versailles Literature' as a cyberspeak style became popular in cyberspace and attracted widespread attention. 'Versailles Literature' has the characteristics of first suppressing and then raising, self-questioning and self-answering, and double-meaning expression, which is a unique language style that highlights high-profile connotations with a low-key discourse. In the same year, 'Versailles Literature' was named as one of the most popular words of the year 2020 in Bite the Words. With the popularity of social media and the development of the Internet, more and more people followed this trend and used it frequently. The core meaning of 'Versailles Literature', 'Versailles', had constantly evolved and enriched its pragmatic meaning and gram

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mathematical functions. Currently, most of the existing research mainly focuses on the style and reasons for the popularity of 'Versailles Literature', but there is a relative lack of research on the evolution of the word 'Versailles'. As we all know, Internet buzzwords have special pragmatic effects and enrich the vocabulary of modern Chinese. Meanwhile, compared with other Internet buzzwords, the use of the word 'Versailles' is almost independent of the background context of the crowd, with a wider range of dissemination, which to a certain extent promotes the iteration and renewal of the language, and is therefore of great value for research. This article explores the different discourse backgrounds and pragmatic features of the formation of the word 'Versailles' from the perspective of linguistics, analyses the evolution paths of its meaning and grammatical functions, and explores the rationale for its formation and evolution from the cognitive perspective, so as to reveal the formation and evolution patterns of the word in the Chinese language system. In this way, the application characteristics and popularity basis of this word will be further clarified so that the Internet buzzword 'Versailles' can be able to grow and remain on 'Chinese soil' for a long time.

## **2 The formation and characteristics of the Internet buzzword 'Versailles'**

### **2.1 Context of formation**

The word 'Versailles' was originally the name of a place located in France, which was once the administrative centre of the French Third Republic. The Palace of Versailles was built during the reign of Louis XIV. In the seventeenth century, Versailles was enlarged, and its architectural style was a blend of Baroque, Rococo and other styles, making it a very representative classical building. Therefore, originally, most people in China were more likely to think of this magnificent building when they mentioned the word 'Versailles'.

In the 1970s, the Japanese manga Versailles Rose caused a sensation. With the French Revolution as the background and the love story of Louis XVI and Queen Mary as the main line, the comic vividly showed the aristocratic lifestyle and spiritual world of luxury and hedonism in the Palace of Versailles. Under the influence of this work, the word 'Versailles' had become a symbol of nobility, high class, and other noble things, and it was also a synonym for 'high-profile extravagance'.

In the 21st century, driven by social values such as consumerism, the word 'Versailles' had been re-introduced to the stage of the times and triggered an Internet boom in the form of 'Versailles Literature'. The founder of Versailles Literature is a blogger named 'Little Milk-ball' who conceptualizes Versailles Literature. She believed that 'Versailles Literature' was not simply about showing off but was, in fact, a modest way of expressing one's disdain for the expensive and luxurious things one already owned, thus getting rid of the 'pretense' element to a certain extent. In her pioneering Versailles Open Class, the blogger also identified three important elements of Versailles, which included: 'first suppression, then praise, explicitly derogatory and implicitly positive; self-questioning and self-answering; and flexible use of the

third-person point of view'. In this Internet craze, the connotation of the word 'Versailles' has taken a new leap forward, as it has been given the meaning of 'camouflaging emotions' and has been more widely used and disseminated.

## 2.2 Pragmatic features

Nowadays, the word 'Versailles', an Internet buzzword, has a distinctive linguistic profile. As far as linguistic context is concerned, the term can be used in a variety of linguistic contexts. The word 'Versailles' is usually used in informal conversations, such as everyday pleasantries, chats, family conversations, and more. However, as the term itself contains the semantics of Chinese words such as 'showy, low-key, euphemistic' and is in line with the principle of economic simplicity of language, it also appears frequently in some formal occasions such as debates, speeches and receptions [1]. On the Internet, many media outlets use the word 'Versailles' as a headline to make their news more concise. At the same time, the use of the word 'Versailles' is almost independent of the background context of the crowd, and it can be used in almost any field. As the saying goes, 'Everything can be Versailles'. Compared with other Internet buzzwords, which are confusing to people without a background in secondary anime or Internet stargazing. The word 'Versailles' itself as a place name or building does not limit the cognitive group, and the new connotation is also in line with people's cognitive habits of extending old knowledge to new knowledge, so it is easier to be used and popularized by the public.

In terms of the style features, the word 'Versailles' is usually used in colloquial form to describe the behaviour of a person or a situation, and the language is usually figurative and emotional, so it is less frequently used in many serious and formal political, scientific and technological written languages. Meanwhile, the use of this word shows a distinctly contemporary and expressive style. As mentioned above, influenced by the 'Versailles literature', the word 'Versailles' frequently appears in such scenes as 'self-hatred' or 'trolling', which to a certain extent meets the emotional transmission of modern people and has a strong style of the times. In addition, the word 'Versailles' contains the meanings of a number of words, such as low-key, euphemistic, and showy, which supplements the gaps in the Chinese vocabulary, and it is also attached to the social attributes of humour, lightness, and innuendo so that the vocabulary has a very expressive style.

## 3 Evolution of the term 'Versailles'

### 3.1 Semantic evolution

As mentioned above, the meaning of the word 'Versailles' has been enriched with the changes in the context of the times. At first, the word 'Versailles' entered the Chinese lexicon as a phonetic translation of a foreign word, for example:

(1) The terms of the Peace of Versailles stipulated that a small piece of territory formerly belonging to Germany, the Saar Basin, which was rich in coal mines and had an important iron and steel factory, should be subjected to a referendum in fifteen

years' time to allow the inhabitants to decide for themselves whether they wished to revert to Germany. (CCL/Modern Chinese/Contemporary/Translated Works)

Obviously, the semantics of Versailles in example (1) is very simple, just a common noun used as a place name in the name of the article.

Nowadays, there is a boom in the Internet terminology called 'Versailles Literature', which refers to modes of discourse that express the effect of being superior, pampered and luxurious by means of a special modification, often in the reverse direction <sup>[2]</sup>. For example:

(2) It's hard to believe that I missed the Sydney Opera House performance! Because my boyfriend had to drag me to pick out a house. It's just an ordinary villa at the foot of Thousand Buddha Mountain. Why is he in such a hurry? Why does he buy a house just when he's just got a job? It's so sad. (Twitter, 17 May 2020)

Example (2) seems to be complaining about missing a performance at the Sydney Opera House, being very reluctant to choose a villa and thinking that it is rather hasty to buy one just after getting a job. However, in fact, it is through the expression of 'an ordinary villa at the foot of the Thousand Buddhas Mountain' and 'buy a house just when he's just got a job', inadvertently revealing the reality that 'I live in a villa' and 'My boyfriend earns a very high income', and thus achieving the purpose of showing off the richness on the surface of a grudge.

As the use of 'Versailles Literature' increased, its core meaning gradually fell on the word 'Versailles', and 'Versailles' was gradually used independently of 'Literature'. For example:

(3) Nowadays, Liang Pan's students often say 'Versailles' to the people around them. He and his students 'change their destiny through skills', 'Winning the world championship has a lot to do with my students'. (People's Daily, 5 September 2022)

The word 'Versailles' in Example (3) is no longer used as a place name but has been given a new meaning on the Internet. Here, it refers to the behavior of Liang Pan's students showing off themselves in a humorous and low-key way.

In summary, the Internet buzzword 'Versailles' mainly inherits the semantic features of luxury, high-ranking and superiority in the original meaning of the word and is used to refer to those who are in a superior condition but do not want to show off in a high profile. Moreover, its core semantics are similar to that of the word "show-off", with the additional semantic features of euphemism, inadvertence, and sarcasm <sup>[3]</sup>. In addition, as the cohesion between the root of the word 'Versailles' and the word 'literature' that represents a certain discourse pattern decreases, the adaptability of the word 'literature' also increases, forming the format of 'XX literature'. It expresses a discourse pattern centered on the root of the word 'XX', such as 'crazy literature', 'dominant literature', 'nonsense literature', and so on <sup>[4]</sup>.

### 3.2 Evolution of grammatical functions

As the meaning of the word has evolved, its grammatical functions have also changed <sup>[5]</sup>. The grammatical functions of the Internet buzzword 'Versailles' in current popular language are divided into the following categories:

### 3.2.1 Act as subject or object.

The Internet buzzword 'Versailles' as a noun can be used as the subject or object in a sentence, preceded by a quantitative phrase or modified by a definite article. For example:

(4) However, there are also netizens who do not think so, but also came a wave of 'Versailles': this is the daily operation of the Tianjin media, and the locals do not think there is anything. (People's Daily Online, 12 January 2022)

(5) Under this sense of superiority of 'taking the postgraduate entrance examination at Versailles', the introduction of learning experience and methods is often empty. (People's Daily Online, 9 April 2021)

In Example (4), 'Versailles' is used as the object of the verb 'came'. There is a modification of the quantitative phrase 'a wave of' in front of it. The original meaning of 'a wave of' refers to a certain event or phenomenon with obvious changes in China. For example, 'this wave of sudden rainstorm makes everyone confused', which usually indicates the culprit of a certain phenomenon. However, in this sentence, the words 'a wave of' are used to modify 'Versailles', and the discourse pattern of 'Versailles' is compared to a certain phenomenon so as to highlight the number of 'Versailles' remarks of Tianjin netizens and emphasize the semantic characteristics of showing off.

In example (5), 'taking the postgraduate entrance examination at Versailles' is a subordinate phrase, and 'Versailles' is used as the subject center. Here, 'taking the postgraduate entrance examination' can also be replaced with other words, such as workplace and learning. The 'Versailles of postgraduate entrance examination' refers to the use of sharing experiences and learning methods to show off the achievements of the postgraduate entrance examination.

In addition, the use of pre-plus attributives and quantitative phrases presented in the above two examples also solidify the nominal function of the word 'Versailles'. When 'Versailles' has the general function of a common noun, the position of this word in the modern Chinese vocabulary system will also be more stable [2].

### 3.2.2 Act as a determiner.

'Versailles' as a modifier can be placed in front of a noun as a determiner, and its function has gradually transitioned from a noun to an adjective. For example:

(6) Naming a plant by the name of a friend is the most Versailles friendship of botanists. (China Youth Network, 4 May 2023)

In example (6), 'Versailles' is used as a determiner of the noun 'friendship'. When 'Versailles' is used as an attributive, it can be added in front of the noun to form an attributive-head structure or directly combined with the noun. From its beginnings as a mode of discourse, 'Versailles' has gradually acquired new semantic features. Using 'Versailles' to describe the friendship of botanists, the 'Versailles' here is not only a low-key show-off but also a series of emotional states such as yearning and longing for what people have but can not reach. At this time, the semantics of 'Versailles' tend to be an emotional expression of the listener. In addition, the word 'friendship' can also be replaced by other words, which shows that the word 'Versailles' as a determiner is very flexible in terms of its functional combination.

As the nominal and adjective usages of 'Versailles' become more and more extensive, the pre-emptive and post emotive emerged with 'Versailles' as the core meaning, namely 'Versailles XX' (such as 'Versailles Academic' and 'Versailles Food') and 'XX Versailles' (such as 'Study abroad Versailles' and 'Food Versailles'), in this case, 'XX' usually stands for a certain field or aspect <sup>[6]</sup>. Although these two structures and 'Versailles Literature' are both attribute-center structures, 'Versailles Literature' refers to a single mode of discourse, whereas these two structures highlight the superiority expressed in a certain field or aspect, adding the semantic feature of field or aspect.

### 3.2.3 Act as a predicate.

The adjective 'Versailles' has the phenomenon of verbalization, which can be used as the predicate or the predicate center of the sentence. For example:

(7) In response, some netizens expressed understanding, some netizens expressed envy, and some netizens called the poster in 'Versailles'. (China News, 8 June 2022)

In example (7), the word 'Versailles' is preceded by the preposition 'in', which serves as a predicate in the sentence, highlighting the state of action and the situation in which the actor makes the statement. In fact, as the adjective attribute of the word "Versailles" increases, so does its verb attribute, which means that the Internet buzzword "Versailles" can be used as an adjective as well as a verb in Chinese. When 'Versailles' is used as a verb, the word is usually preceded by the preposition 'in', the auxiliary 'will', the adverb of time 'has', and followed by the auxiliary "has", and so on.

### 3.2.4 Act as a gerund.

The adjective 'Versailles' can sometimes be used as an adverbial, followed by the adverb 'ground', which is placed in front of the verb and modifies the verb predicate. For example:

(8) Nearby residents did not understand, and the staff at the Drum Tower also shook their heads, 'Versailles' said this was 'sweet trouble'. (CCTV news client, 9 March 2023)

In example (8), 'Versailles' is used as an adverbial, and the verbal verb 'said' is collocated with it to express the state of the speaker when he utters the speech or the implied meaning of the speech content. In addition to being placed before the verb, the word 'Versailles' can also be placed independently at the beginning of the sentence like as an adverbial, becoming a topic to be highlighted in the whole sentence, like 'Versailles, I'm only convinced by the Olympic champions.' (Weibo, August 13, 2021)

## 4 Evolutionary Conditions of the Term 'Versailles'

As can be seen from the foregoing, the word 'Versailles' has gone through two stages of evolution. In the first stage, the word was introduced in English as a proper name for a place. In the second stage, the word was gradually derived from the phonetic translation of the word to the present-day Internet buzzword. There are three ways to

derive Internet buzzwords, namely, neologisms, old words with new meanings and foreign language borrowings [7]. The Internet buzzword "Versailles" is based on a borrowed word, which has gradually developed a new meaning under the influence of multiculturalism. This form of evolution of "borrowed words" is not only in line with the principle of linguistic economy but also with people's cognitive habits.

#### 4.1 Metaphorical Cognition

Firstly, from proper nouns to adjectives characterizing something, as mentioned earlier, in people's existing knowledge, 'Palace of Versailles' in the early stage is 'Versailles' refers to, and the Palace of Versailles has gorgeous, noble characteristics, so people often use 'Versailles' characteristics to further highlight the characteristics of the thing itself. This lexical change takes advantage of people's inertia, which involves the thinking basis of metaphorical cognition, i.e., the speaker will find or deliberately imagine the similarity or proximity between the object and the metaphor [8]. When seeing something signed with 'Versailles', people tend to think that the thing itself is similar to the splendour and nobility of the Palace of Versailles, or people subjectively believe that they can get infinitely closer to the quality of splendour and nobility. In short, this stage of lexical evolution is driven by people's habitual way of thinking. In this process, the lexical focus of 'Versailles' shifted from the name of the building to its attributes, and the attributes of 'magnificent and noble', which used to be the implicit meaning, became explicit [9].

Secondly, the characteristics of the avatars activate the living conditions of the real characters. The Palace of Versailles was a gathering place for the upper-class aristocracy, and the comic strip *The Rose of Versailles* was based on it, depicting the extravagant life of French aristocrats in the Palace of Versailles. Nowadays, netizens try to use the word 'Versailles' to mock those who are materially superior. This change also captures the similarity between characters in virtual fiction and real people, i.e., both groups of people are materially well-off. At this point, the group of people with similar characteristics to the aristocrats strengthens the lexical focus of the word 'Versailles', while the original meaning of the name of the building is weakened accordingly [10].

#### 4.2 Mapping of cognitive concepts

The evolution of the term 'Versailles' involves three main shifts in the cognitive domain. Firstly, there is the first stage of metonymy. Metonymy is one of the ways in which human beings know and understand things, and it is also a cognitive mechanism. Lakoff and Turner pointed out that metonymy mainly has a referential function, which is to use one thing in the objective world to refer to another thing, and the source and target concepts are cognitive equivalents linked through proximity relations [11]. The architectural domain of 'Palace of Versailles' or 'City of Versailles' represented by 'Versailles' is the source concept, and the attribute domain of 'magnificence and nobility', which characterizes the palace, is the target concept; the link between these two concepts activates the characteristics of 'magnificence and nobility' in

people's mind, and the name of the building becomes the semantic starting point of the word 'Versailles' to be highlighted, and 'magnificence and nobility' is the semantic focus of the corresponding semantics.

Secondly, there is the second stage of metaphor, where 'metaphor is a projection from one cognitive domain to another' <sup>[12]</sup>, by exploiting the similarity between the 'Versailles aristocracy' and the 'privileged', the characteristics possessed by the small group of 'aristocrats' are projected onto the wider group of modern, privileged people, and thus the characteristics of this group of people come to the forefront in what the word 'Versailles' represents.

Finally, the current popular discourse model of 'Versailles' focuses on the psychological state of people when they express their words and the cognitive domain shifts from the domain of human attributes to the domain of human psychology. The word 'Versailles' in popular parlance is mainly concerned with the speaker and the listener. For the speakers, they want to show off but at the same time want to make it less blunt, so they choose to show off 'secretly' and 'unintentionally' or show off through other people's mouths, which shows a moderately modest or vain mentality; For the hearers, they will be full of expectation and longing for the things described by the speakers, or question the speakers, showing certain envy or mockery of the psychology, the lexical focus will rise from the people to the psychological state of the people, highlighting the psychological emotions of the two sides.

In fact, both metonymy and metaphor are cognitive activities in which one cognitive domain activates another cognitive domain, from the architectural domain to the attribute domain, and from the attribute domain to the psychological domain, and the word "Versailles" goes through several cognitive transformations to achieve the generalization and expansion of its meaning <sup>[13]</sup>.

## 5 Conclusion

In summary, the formation and evolution of the Internet buzzword 'Versailles' is influenced by the Palace of Versailles, the comic strip *The Rose of Versailles* and 'Versailles literature'. The meaning of the word has evolved from a single place or a building name to 'high-profile extravagance' and finally to 'low-profile ostentation'. It has distinctive linguistic features and a variety of linguistic environments and is often used in colloquial speech with a strong contemporary and expressive style. Furthermore, the grammatical function of the word is becoming more and more comprehensive, from only serving as subject and object to determiner, predicate, and gerund. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, the formation and evolution of the Internet buzzword 'Versailles' is in line with people's cognitive habits, which is the process of activation of the attribute domain by the architectural domain and the mental domain by the attribute domain, and the three shifts of the cognitive domain provide the conditions for the evolution of the word, which enriches the application field of the word.

Although this article has reviewed a large amount of literature and corpus during the writing period and categorized the materials by means of excerpts and notes, there



are still some limitations in this article due to the factors of time, funds, and strength. First of all, the scope and sample of the corpus of this article are insufficient. Due to the limitation of investigation ability, this study has not been able to find all the corpus related to the word 'Versailles'. Therefore, there might be a lack of research on its pragmatic features, grammatical functions, and more. Moreover, the theoretical innovation of this paper is insufficient, and it fails to discover more innovative theoretical support for the formation and evolution of the term. Accordingly, it is hoped that future research can fully explore the corpus, further search for linguistic justifications, and improve the system of the formation and evolution of the buzzword so as to deepen the knowledge of its application in modern Chinese and to promote the iteration and renewal of the Chinese language.

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