



Language Inflation: A Research on the Abuse of “Meme Culture” on Short Video Platforms

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Abstract. By the end of 2025, China’s short video users reached 1.074 billion. The rapid spread of digital subcultures has fundamentally changed language norms, triggering a phenomenon of language inflation. This study explores the formation and abuse of memes on short video platforms, as well as the multi-layered impacts of this abuse on individuals, social interactions, and the language ecosystem, and analyzes potential governance strategies from various stakeholders. Using a qualitative approach combining content analysis and in-depth interviews, the study finds three language inflation characteristics of memes and that while meme culture provides media massage and emotional resonance for teenagers, its mechanical repetition leads to expressive aphasia, semantic value devaluation, and the erosion of mainstream values. The study concludes that mitigating the negative impacts of language inflation requires a collaborative governance model, including platform algorithm optimization, improved government regulation, and targeted ideological and theoretical education to enhance public media literacy.

Keywords: Language Inflation, Meme Culture, Short Video Platforms.

1 Introduction

With the rapid development of internet social networking, people’s communication methods have shifted significantly, while language, as the core tool of communication, has also presented new features. According to the 57th Statistical Report on Internet Development in China, by December 2025, China’s internet user base reached 1.125 billion, with short video users accounting for 95.4% (1.074 billion). The internet has become an indispensable part of people’s lives. At the same time, with the development of the internet, internet slang has emerged in endless streams, while people’s language is constantly evolving. In order to satisfy the social needs of the public, various novel expressions have emerged in the social circles of young people, thus forming the popular internet “meme culture”. They cater to contemporary social needs, but also contribute to a degree of “language inflation”, leading to the “devaluation” of words.

In terms of economics, inflation typically refers to a sustained and widespread rise in prices due to an excess of money supply relative to actual demand over a period of time.

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Language inflation does not occur suddenly but gradually forms through the subtle and subtle use of words. This phenomenon is an inevitable product of internet development. The constant emergence of new things gives rise to new words, while some old words lose their original meaning, gradually evolving into new words accepted by the public through innovation and repeated use. Sun defines language inflation as semantic hollowing caused by high-frequency use in the Internet age [14], while Li Anzhai approaches it from the perspective of dynamic mechanism, comparing it to currency devaluation, pointing out that language will expand when it can no longer carry the thoughts and feelings it conveys [16]. Short video platforms, characterized by their short, concise and fast nature, rely on content with strong emotions and high resonance to attract traffic, with memes becoming the core carriers of dissemination due to their simplicity and ease of imitation. However, the platform's algorithm bias towards popular memes has led to the overuse of numerous repetitive and exaggerated memes such as “绝绝子” (“Simply the best”) and “泰裤辣” (“Cringe”), spreading from specific scenarios to all contexts, diluting their original emotional expression function [7]. This is precisely the inflation phenomenon of “language failing to reflect thoughts and emotions” that Li refers to.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Language Inflation

Current research mainly focuses on the generalization and devaluation of language semantics and their impact on language ecology and social psychology. Overall, there is little relative research on language inflation at present. The phenomenon lacks a clear definition, with more descriptions than theoretical analyses. This phenomenon is categorized into three types: phonetic alienation, lexical repetition and exaggeration, and degrammaticalization [14]. From a semiotic perspective, its representation can be summarized as the overload and collapse of the semantic system, the cycle of emotional devaluation, and the cycle of social currency devaluation, which is a process of semantics establishing new connections and reorganizing [8]. When studying the formation mechanism and evolutionary laws, some scholars point out that word meanings are malleable. For example, Dahl uses the example of “ladies and gentlemen” in English changing from an aristocratic reference to a common title to demonstrate the generalization of word meaning [3]. Baes et al. analyze how cultural change can cause words to expand their referential scope or weaken their meaning over time through the semantic evolution of the word “trauma” [1]. Meanwhile, research suggests the existence of psychological drivers. According to Xu, the lack of nonverbal information in online communication prompts people to use repetitive words and interjections to reinforce emotional expression [15]. Chen further points out that “verbal pleasing syndrome” is an inevitable cause of language inflation, as people unconsciously erode the original meaning of words in their pleasing behavior [2]. The negative impact of language inflation leads to extreme expressions becoming the new normal, suppressing language diversity [8], while also weakening the original emotional expression ability due to semantic erosion [2].

2.2 Memes

The term “Geng (梗 in Chinese)” is essentially very similar to the concept of “meme” proposed by Richard Dawkins [12]. Currently, research on memes has emerged both in China and abroad, mainly focusing on the formation mechanism, social function, and coping strategies of memes. The evolution of memes follows the principle of “spreading”, constantly changing and deconstructing its own structure, exhibiting a random characteristic and becoming contextualized discourse [6]. In terms of formation mechanism and dissemination path, memes originate from details of daily life or current hot topics, which are highly consistent with the lives of young people and resonate with them [5,18]. At the textual level, memes generate contextualized semantics through word creation and appropriation, recreating and spreading the meme [9]. In terms of dissemination, the low barriers to entry, intelligent algorithms, and commercial operations of social media have greatly improved the efficiency of meme dissemination [4,8]. The “emotion-meme-action” closed-loop model [19] and the “dialogue-driven mechanism” [11] reveal how memes can achieve breakthroughs across different user groups through collective co-creation. From the perspectives of social function and psychological motivation, researchers hold different views on the motivations behind memes. A positive perspective suggests that memes serve a “media massage” function, regulating emotions and promoting discussion on public issues [20]. A negative perspective suggests that this reflects youth’s “group loneliness” and a sense of powerlessness in the face of social relationships [6,9]. Furthermore, political memes are seen as a form of “soft resistance to power”, helping normalize political participation [17]. Regarding the negative impacts and governance strategies, the overuse of memes can lead to expressive aphasia, value deviations, and language inflation [10,13]. Therefore, Zhang suggests that the government and platforms should strengthen screening and guidance to prevent the impact of irrational culture, and that education should improve the media literacy of young people to achieve a positive interaction between subculture and mainstream values [18].

3 Research Questions

RQ1: How does the phenomenon of language inflation on short video platforms originate and become abused?

RQ2: What impact does the abuse of these memes have on people?

RQ3: From the perspectives of platforms, users, regulatory agencies, and education, how should we address the abuse of meme culture?

4 Methodology

4.1 In-depth Interviews

This research employed in-depth interviews. Firstly, an interview outline was designed based on the research questions, and a preliminary survey was conducted with two

individuals on November 25th. The interview outline was then revised based on the results of the preliminary survey to better align with the research questions and make it easier for the respondents to understand. Subsequently, a total of 12 people were interviewed from November 28th to December 4th based on the revised interview outline. Table 1 below displays the basic information of all interviewees.

Table 1. Information of interviewees

Interviewees	Date	Place	Gender	Age	Major
A	2025.11.25	Online	Female	21	International education of Chinese
B	2025.11.28	Offline	Female	20	Media and communication
C	2025.11.28	Offline	Female	20	Cinema and television
D	2025.11.28	Offline	Female	21	Cinema and television
E	2025.11.30	Online	Female	20	Chemistry
F	2025.11.30	Online	Female	19	Special education
G	2025.11.30	Online	Female	21	Sociology
H	2025.12.1	Offline	Female	20	Cinema and television
I	2025.12.2	Online	Male	20	English
J	2025.12.2	Online	Male	20	Agronomy
K	2025.12.2	Online	Male	20	Computer science and technology
L	2025.12.4	Offline	Female	20	Media and communication

4.2 Content analysis

Since lists of memes could not be found, this research collected and compiled a list of the top ten most popular internet slang terms from 2020 to 2025 published by Editorial Department of Yaowenjiaozi (2020, 2022-2025), China National Language Resources Monitoring and Research Center (2021) and Language and Writing Weekly (2022). The research filtered the lists from three different organizations based on whether the popular internet slang terms in the lists had shifted into memes. By analyzing whether the meanings of these terms have changed compared to their original meanings and in what ways, it was determined whether there has been language inflation. Furthermore, the criteria of language inflation were divided into three categories, including exaggerating the facts, defining a phenomenon that did not exist before and enhancing the emotional expression.

5 Findings

5.1 Language inflation characteristics of memes in 2020-2025

By compiling the top ten internet slang terms of 2020-2025, this research find 21 popular memes that have experienced language inflation, including “飒” (“Slay”—Cool, fierce and confident (usually for women)), “神兽” (“Mythical beasts”—naughty kids home from school), “内卷” (“Involution”—toxic, hyper-competitive rat race), “凡尔赛文学” (“Versailles style”—subtle, humble-bragging), “YYDS” (“Eternal God”—the G.O.A.T. (Greatest of All Time)), “破防” (“Defense broken”—emotionally overwhelmed or touched), “绝绝子” (“Simply the best”—an intense superlative), “躺平” (“Lying flat”—rejecting competition for a simple life), “天花板” (“The Ceiling”—the absolute peak or gold standard), “拿捏” (“Pinched”—having perfect control or mastery over something), “栓Q” (“Sarcastic ‘thank you’”—expressing speechlessness or annoyance), “小镇做题家” (“Small-town exam expert”—high-achieving student from humble roots), “xx刺客” (“Price assassin”—unexpectedly expensive hidden costs), “特种兵式旅游” (“Special-forces style travel”—high-speed, low-budget travel), “显眼包” (“Attention-seeker”—a lovable, goofy “show-off”), “多巴胺xx” (“Dopamine style”—bright, high-saturation colors for mood-boosting), “City不City” (“Is it City?”—Is it prosper and urban?), “硬控” (“Hard control”—being totally captivated or stunned), “班味” (“Work smell”—the exhausted aura of a corporate grind), “小孩哥/小孩姐” (“Little Big Bro/Sis”—surprisingly talented kids) and “活人感” (“Living person vibe”—raw, authentic). As shown in Table 2, they inflated in three different ways. Among them, 10 memes exaggerated the facts, 9 enhanced emotional expression (“xx刺客” combined both) and only 3 defined a phenomenon that did not exist before.

Table 2. Source of each meme and how it inflated

Memes	How
2020 (By Editorial Department of Yaowenjiaozi)	
“Slay” (“飒”—Cool, fierce and confident (usually for women))	Describing someone as handsome, neat, and dashing, enhancing the emotional expression
“Mythical beasts” (“神兽”—naughty kids home from school)	Referring to the children taking online classes at home during the pandemic, exaggerating the facts
“Involution” (“内卷”—toxic, hyper-competitive rat race)	Defining a phenomenon that did not exist before
“Versailles style” (“凡尔赛文学”—subtle, humble-bragging)	Defining a phenomenon that did not exist before
2021 (By China National Language Resources Monitoring and Research Center)	
“Eternal God” (“YYDS”—the G.O.A.T. (Greatest of All Time))	An abbreviation for “永远的神” (Yong-yuandeshen), exaggerating the facts
“Defense broken”(“破防”—emotionally overwhelmed or touched)	Describing intense sadness and exaggerating the facts

“Simply the best” (“绝绝子”—an intense superlative)	Praising something, enhancing emotional expression
“Lying flat” (“躺平”—rejecting competition for a simple life)	Defining a phenomenon that did not exist before
2022 (By Editorial Department of Yaowenjiaozi)	
“The Ceiling” (“天花板”—the absolute peak or gold standard)	Emphasizing that something is top-tier, exaggerating the facts
“Pinched” (“拿捏”—having perfect control or mastery over something)	Highlighting the simplicity and ease of something, enhancing the emotional expression
2022 (By Language and Writing Weekly)	
“Sarcastic ‘thank you’” (“栓Q”—expressing speechlessness or annoyance)	The shift enhancing the emotional expression
“Small-town exam expert” (“小镇做题家”—high-achieving student from humble roots)	Exaggerating the facts by portraying people from small towns who gain admission to big cities through the national college entrance examination
“Price assassin” (“xx刺客”—unexpectedly expensive hidden costs)	To describe something as unexpectedly expensive at checkout, exaggerating the fact and enhancing the emotional expression.
2023 (By Editorial Department of Yaowenjiaozi)	
“Special-forces style travel” (“特种兵式旅游”—high-speed, low-budget travel)	Exaggerating the facts, and is an exaggerated description of the short duration and numerous attractions visited during the trip.
“Attention-seeker” (“显眼包”—a lovable, goofy “show-off”)	Describing a funny, attention-seeking person, enhancing the emotional expression
“Dopamine style” (“多巴胺xx”—bright, high-saturation colors for mood-boosting)	The description of highly saturated colors and vibrant, bright combinations, exaggerating the facts.
2024 (By Editorial Department of Yaowenjiaozi)	
“Is it City?” (“City不City”—Is it prosper and urban?)	Using “City” to refer to the vibrancy of a city enhances the emotional expression
“Hard control” (“硬控”—being totally captivated or stunned)	Exaggerating the facts; the phrase exaggerated the level of excitement.
“Work smell” (“班味”—the exhausted aura of a corporate grind)	Describing the fatigue of someone who has been working long hours, enhancing the emotional expression
“Little Big Bro/Sis” (“小孩哥 / 小孩姐”—surprisingly talented kids)	Adding a child’s generation and emphasizes the child’s capabilities, exaggerating the facts.
2025 (By Editorial Department of Yaowenjiaozi)	
“Living person vibe” (“活人感”—raw, authentic)	Using the phrase to describe those who are energetic and vibrant enhances the emotional expression

5.2 Interviewees’ cognition and perception of meme culture

Interviewees held various attitudes towards the impact of the popularity of meme culture. Interviewee L said, “Memes allow the other person to quickly understand what

you want to express and the emotions you want to convey”. Some interviewees believed that using memes could reduce social costs and resonate with everyone, while some others also believed that “different groups have different memes that are unique to them, which could lead to isolation for others and create communication barriers” (A) and “not understanding a meme requires asking the other person, which increases communication costs” (B).

The reasons for the popularity of memes were varied, but they were mainly due to their simplicity and ease of dissemination. 50% of interviewees believed that popular internet memes were popular because they were simple and easy to imitate, while interviewee E thought that “memes were popular because of their diverse application scenarios”. Some also pointed out that memes with familiar backgrounds were more likely to become popular (H, I and J) (e.g., interviewee J thought “丝瓜汤” (Luffa Soup) was popular because it satirized the conflicts within Chinese families). Interviewee B and L considered that memes were popular because they were catchy as well.

Most interviewees believed that the overuse of internet memes had a negative impact on individuals, but the specific negative impacts varied. Some interviewees felt that the overuse of popular internet memes led to a lack of vocabulary and a decline in language skills (E and G), while interviewee L found herself subconsciously using memes to express emotions, diluting genuine emotional expression and making it difficult to convey true feelings. Some others did not mention the impact on themselves, but pointed out that the overuse of popular internet memes could affect the values of teenagers, because their values are not yet fully formed, leading to the greater negative impact (C and D).

Interviewees had different opinions on the impact of meme abuse on the linguistic ecosystem on short video platforms. Interviewee F and G mentioned that the overuse of the meme “Tang” (Down’s syndrome—mocking stupid behavior) could lead to discrimination against patients, while some believed that meme abuse weakens and solidifies emotional expression, as a single meme can sometimes express multiple emotions, and it’s difficult to determine the true emotion behind a meme as pure text (A, B and F). Interviewee A, C and D believed that meme popularity is cyclical, becoming valuable only after the current cycle, and some felt that overly entertaining memes lacked meaning, and excessive meme use could trivialize serious matters. However, some interviewees believed that memes make emotional expression stronger and more accurate (e.g., interviewee L felt that using “破防了” (Defense broken—emotionally overwhelmed or touched) expressed greater sadness than “好难过” (So sad)).

6 Discussion

Through analysis and summarization, it can be found that popular internet memes mainly exhibit language inflation through exaggerating the facts and enhancing the emotional expression. Based on previous research and interview findings, the main reasons can be concluded that the lack of nonverbal cues in online communication prompts people to use memes to enhance the emotional expression, and that “verbal pleasing syndrome” causes people to unconsciously erode the original meaning of

words in the process of flattery, thus necessitating the use of memes to exaggerate the facts. Those utilizing defining a phenomenon that did not exist before are relatively rare because memes are used to quickly convey the message and emotion, reducing social costs and resonating with the audience. However, in practice, those who do not understand the memes need to ask, which actually increases social costs. In addition, while memes enhance the emotional expression and lead to linguistic inflation, some argue that their overuse weakens the emotional expression, prompting further reflection on this phenomenon. Therefore, meme culture is a double-edged sword. When used properly, it can liven up the atmosphere, improve communication efficiency and resonance, and promote social interaction. However, its abuse can also lead to communication barriers due to differences in social circles.

There is a variety of specific strategies for addressing the misuse of memes. Over half of interviewees specifically mentioned the need to strengthen proper guidance for primary and secondary school students and other minors, as well as to ensure individuals are mindful of the frequency and form of meme usage. Platforms should strengthen review and screening processes and improve their push notification mechanisms. Short video platform creators should also focus on creating high-quality memes and providing proper guidance.

Young generation especially college students are now the main force on short video platforms. Because of their active minds, ability to imitate and love of communication, college students are more likely to use popular internet memes [21]. However, they should also be aware of the potential negative impacts of meme culture, and use more positive and constructive memes while avoiding their misuse, which could affect the formation of their values.

7 Conclusion

In recent years, as short video platforms have become an increasingly popular form of entertainment, meme culture has also flourished on these platforms due to its simplicity, ease of dissemination and diverse applications, but it also contributes to a degree of language inflation. Based on this context, this study delves into the phenomenon of language inflation, focusing on specific scenarios such as mainstream short video platforms in China. It analyzes the abuse of meme culture, characterized by significant language inflation, in people's social activities on short video platforms from 2020 to 2025. The study primarily examines how memes exhibiting language inflation on short video platforms are formed and used, their impact on people and how to cope with them, combining the theory of language inflation with meme culture to enrich the research on language alienation from a theoretical perspective.

By compiling the top ten internet slang terms of 2020-2025, language inflation can be summarized into three ways, including exaggerating the facts, defining a phenomenon that did not exist before and enhancing the emotional expression. In-depth interviews revealed various impacts of the popularity of meme culture, while the overuse of memes has greater negative consequences. Therefore, short video platforms, individual

users, content creators and educational institutions all need to develop different strategies to address the overuse of memes and provide proper guidance.

Compared to previous studies that primarily focused on the phenomenon itself, this research examines how language inflation occurs and how memes are formed and used, providing clear defining criteria.

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