

Cognitive Sociolinguistic Perspective on the Semantic Construction and Deconstruction of *Tangping*¹

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Abstract

Internet buzzwords, on the one hand, embody a new demand for language expression with the change of China's online media, and on the other hand reflect the history of social transformation in China. Studies on buzzwords can not only trace the changes and development of language itself, but also perceive social life and the representation of the mindsets of large numbers of netizens behind language phenomena. From a cognitive sociolinguistic perspective, the study draws on a corpus-based qualitative approach using online and media discourse from 2021 to 2024, and, by integrating conceptual metaphor theory, frame semantics, and conceptual blending theory in cognitive linguistics, as well as applying ideology and discourse analysis, reveals the dynamic mechanism underlying the semantic formation of *Tangping* (lying flat; 躺平). The research finds that the semantic meaning of *Tangping* evolves through a metaphorical change from body posture to social attitude, forming a multi-tiered meaning network in concrete social contexts. Rather than emerging by chance, *Tangping* developed through the interaction of structural social pressures, pre-existing discursive resources, and accumulated affect, eventually taking shape around a core meaning of cognitive resistance. Under the circumstances of semantic deconstruction by mainstream media and the acceleration of online environments, *Tangping* ultimately forms a semantic compound with inner tension, and its meaning varies with the speaker's stance and contextual changes.

Keywords: Cognitive Sociolinguistics, *Tangping*, Semantic Construction, Semantic Deconstruction

¹This article draws in part on the author's PhD dissertation, *A Study of Chinese Internet Buzzwords from the Perspective of Cognitive Sociolinguistics*. The dissertation lays the groundwork for the literature review, analysis, and discussion developed in the present study.

1. Introduction

Language originates from society. It is both a social and psychological phenomenon, that functions as a mediator connecting human subjective cognition with external objective society, and as a necessary means of understanding human beings themselves and the outside world (Ye & Xu, 2010, p. 5). Language evolves and diversifies throughout the long history of social development. As a result, it is essential to analyze language from different perspectives in order to reveal its complex attributes and explore its internal laws of development.

In April 1994, China entered the Internet era when it officially joined the Internet, promoting the deep integration of language and the Internet, and boosting language diversity and enrichment. Following rapid development, “Internet language” has emerged and produced significant influence on traditional language. *The Modern Chinese Dictionary* (7th Edition) defines Internet language (网络语言) as special words and symbols, habitually used by netizens in online chatrooms and BBS forums. We believe that these forms are social dialects as well as variants of common Chinese language in the Internet space (Ling, 2022, p. 12). Buzzwords, as part of Internet language, are a kind of linguistic symbol. They are generally used by netizens spontaneously in online spaces during a particular period due to their highly dynamic nature. They possess the function of fermentation, and have a significant impact on social reality through special meanings (Wang, 2016, p. 52).

As part of Internet language, buzzwords keep changing the language expressions over three decades of development, which not only embody new demands for language expression with the change of China’s online media, but also reflect the history of social transformation in China. Viewed from a social perspective, the formation and dissemination of internet buzzwords are closely interconnected with the media ecology and social affection of particular historical periods. It is in this context that the term *Tangping* (lying flat; 躺平) entered the public discursive space.

Starting from online communities and anonymous forums, the expression first emerged around 2021 and gradually took shape through spontaneous discussions among young netizens, and then was rapidly disseminated across social platforms such as Baidu Tieba (Chinese online forum; 百度贴吧), Zhihu (Chinese question-and-answer platform; 知乎), and Weibo (Chinese microblogging platform; 微博). In terms of social context, the popularity of *Tangping* is closely interconnected with large numbers of young people, who are experiencing intensified employment pressure, limited class mobility, and highly intense competition. Most of the users are highly educated urban young people and digital natives. Beyond reflecting

middle-aged and young people's collective psychology and value orientation, it also carries emotional responses to social realities.

Based on the above discussion, the paper focuses on the following three questions:

- 1) How is the semantic meaning of *Tangping* generated and developed within cognitive mechanisms?
- 2) How do different social groups construct and reinterpret *Tangping* through discursive practice under the dual influence of cognitive processing and social context?
- 3) How is the semantic meaning of *Tangping* shaped and deconstructed by ideology during its dissemination?

As a popular internet buzzword, its semantic meaning extends beyond literal interpretation, becoming a symbol of social mentality and ideology. Although the framework of cognitive sociolinguistics has been well established, existing studies on *Tangping* have tended to focus on its sociological or economic dimensions, paying relatively little attention to how its meaning emerges through the interplay between cognitive mechanisms and social context. Much of the previous research has concentrated on macro-level issues such as structural pressure and collective sentiment, while offering limited discussion of how these social factors are processed cognitively, enter linguistic expression, and are subsequently manifested and reshaped in actual discursive practices.

Against this background, the present study adopts a “society–cognition–language” triadic framework and examines the semantic construction and evolution of *Tangping* from a cognitive sociolinguistic perspective, with the aim of addressing the lack of integration between cognitive processes and discourse-level analysis in existing research. The significance of this study lies not only in deepening our understanding of *Tangping* as a form of internet language, but also in shedding light on the cognitive and ideological shifts of digital natives within specific social contexts. By adopting a cognitive sociolinguistic perspective, the study further demonstrates that the meaning of internet buzzwords cannot be reduced to a purely linguistic phenomenon; rather, it is the outcome of ongoing interaction among language, cognition, and social forces.

In addition, the analytical framework proposed here offers a more workable approach to the study of internet buzzwords, particularly in contexts of rapid social change, where meanings are continuously negotiated and reconstructed. In this sense, the study also aims to provide a methodological reference for future research in this area.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Core Theory of the Study: Cognitive Sociolinguistics

In 2007, the 10th International Cognitive Linguistics Conference was held in Kraków, Poland, at which cognitive sociolinguistics was formally established as a branch of cognitive linguistics. The term “social turn of cognitive linguistics” was first introduced by Peter Harder of the University of Copenhagen during the conference entitled “Language, Communication and Cognition” jointly organized by the British Academy of Social Sciences and the UK Cognitive Linguistics Association and hosted by the University of Brighton.

The first symposium volume, *Cognitive Sociolinguistics: Language Variation, Cultural Models, and Social Systems*, published by Kristiansen and Dirven in 2008 clarified the scope of cognitive sociolinguistics (Zhu & Liu, 2011, p. 143), and showed that cognitive sociolinguistics has formally attracted the attention of the mainstream academic community (Li, 2014, p. 115). The publication of *Advances in Cognitive Sociolinguistics*, co-authored by Geeraerts, Kristiansen and Peirsman in 2010, further consolidated the theoretical framework and methodological approaches of this emerging discipline (Wang & Wang, 2012, p. 44).

Cognitive sociolinguistics was formally established under the cognitive sociolinguistic perspective and the social turn in cognitive linguistics. It is necessary to clarify the relationship between cognitive linguistics and sociolinguistics so as to understand the theoretical nature of cognitive sociolinguistics. Scholars generally agree that cognitive sociolinguistics is a new interdisciplinary field, a combination of cognitive linguistics and sociolinguistics (Wang & Wang, 2012, p. 44).

Directly originated from cognitive linguistics and sociolinguistics, cognitive sociolinguistics is considered an inevitable outcome of theoretical and methodological development in cognitive linguistics, representing a new phase in its development (Zhang & Zhou, 2010, p. 36). As Li (2014) argues, cognitive sociolinguistics enjoys inherent connections with both cognitive linguistics and sociolinguistics, but it is not a simple addition of the two.

On the one hand, we find that cognition is a kind of social phenomenon during research in cognitive linguistics. The manifestation of language is not only physiological but also socially contextual (Liang & Chen, 2016, p. 5). People live in a complex sociocultural environment, so during the process of language cognition and interpretation, it is indispensable to reflect on the social dimensions. As a result, the social turn of cognitive linguistics is inevitable. The development of cognitive linguistics brings new perspectives and trends for linguistic research with “the social turn” and “the quantitative turn” as its two most distinctive orientations (Wen, 2019, p. 293).

On the other hand, taking “language use” as a research object, sociolinguistics realizes the importance of human cognition as major factor in “language use”. However, few scholars have integrated cognitive and social perspectives in sociolinguistics research. A representative example is Hudson (2007) who explicitly illustrated the necessity of incorporating cognitive dimensions into sociolinguistic approaches.

In summary, by organically integrating cognitive linguistics and sociolinguistics, a more comprehensive study has been carried out on human language variations and their relationships with social environments, cultural patterns, and political and economic aspects.

2.2 Review of Previous Studies on *Tangping*

Through literature review and analysis, research on *Tangping* mainly focuses on three aspects: 1) the cause analysis of the *Tangping* phenomenon; 2) linguistic analysis of *Tangping*; 3) analysis of the influencing factors of *Tangping*. The relevant studies can be summarized as follows:

2.2.1 The Cause Analysis of *Tangping* Phenomenon

Regarding the cause analysis of the *Tangping* phenomenon, scholars have conducted research primarily from perspectives of sociology, communication, and psychology. Of course, the emergence of *Tangping* is closely interconnected with another phenomenon titled *Neijuan* (involution; 内卷). As a new form of subculture, “*Tangping* culture” represents an irrational selection in response to the increasingly competitive and stressful society; it also metaphorically reveals the real dilemma experienced by young people in competitive society, reflecting their psychological anxiety and sense of powerlessness under social pressures (Xiang, 2021, p. 146). Many scholars believe that *Neijuan* and *Tangping* are interrelated, and that *Tangping* is a form of resistance against excessive competition and severe *Neijuan* (Lin, 2023; Xiang, 2021; Zhang & Mo, 2022).

There exists a deep structural root for excessive competition and severe *Neijuan* in contemporary society. Zhang (2025) argues that, from the perspective of *Triadic Reciprocal Determinism*, the *Tangping* phenomenon among young people results from the interaction of environment, individual cognition, and behavior, in which a high degree of interdependence between the “individual” and “society” is revealed. Social competition mainly includes the conflict between mainstream culture and youth subcultures, as well as the pressures transmitted from group competition in education, occupation, and social life (Zhu & Wang, 2018; Xiang, 2021; Zhang & Shi, 2022). These changes in the social environment influence collective psychology, boosting the emergence of the *Tangping* phenomenon.

2.2.2 Linguistic Analysis of *Tangping*

Linguistic analyses of *Tangping* mainly interpret its connotation, semantic mechanism, and pragmatic features from the angle of semiology and linguistics. Xu (2021) conducts research on the symbolic coding and meaning representation of *Tangping* from the perspective of cultural codes. In the dual context of real life and online media, when the *Tangping* phenomenon emerges as a lifestyle with social mentality through the recombination of the signifiers *Tang* (lie; 躺) and *Ping* (flat; 平), it has surpassed the conventional meaning indicating body posture or object state in contemporary Chinese language.

The semantic expansion of *Tangping* has both metaphorical and metonymic characteristics, and its semantics are the result of focalization of different semantic points (Zhang, 2023, p. 94). In addition, Mao (2024) has discussed the usage of *Tangping* and the cause of its popularity, as well as its semantic meaning. Liu and Fan (2025), meanwhile, examine the syntactic functions and semantic features of five representative members of the “Tang-X” lexical category—*Tangqiang* (be hit while uninvolved; 躺枪), *Tangying* (win without effort; 躺赢), *Tangzhuàn* (earn effortlessly; 躺赚), *Tangping* (lying flat; 躺平), and *Tangshi* (remain inactive idle; 躺尸)—and argue that their popularity is consistent with principles of linguistic economy and analogical extension, while also reflecting the stylistic characteristics of their contemporary context.

In addition to research on the “Tang-X” lexical group, scholars have also examined *Tangping* in conjunction with closely related terms such as *Neijuan*, giving up, decadence, and Buddha-like attitude in order to investigate the discursive properties of *Tangping* and the semantic relationships among these expressions (Xu, 2024; He, 2024; Sun, 2023).

2.2.3 The Analysis of Influencing Factors of *Tangping*

Following the emergence of the *Tangping* phenomenon, scholars have paid considerable attention to whether its impact on online communities is positive or negative. Based on data from *China Youth Online*, Lin (2023) examines the critiques and discursive correction on *Tangping* in official narratives. He believes that the official discursive regulation of *Tangping* experienced a process of swaying between positive and negative connotations before ultimately adopting a negative stance. This process advances the gradual integration of *Tangping* into mainstream discourse, softening its resistant features while injecting it with new vitality.

Most scholars argue that *Tangping* reflects young people’s social mentality characterized by anxiety, pessimism, and compromise, which goes against the cultivation of a positive, harmonious, and stable cultural environment and social order (Xu, 2021, p. 141). They emphasize the need to care about young people’s demands and living conditions, and to alleviate their anxiety

by means of education and institutional reform, thereby addressing the stagnant phenomenon caused by *Tangping* (Song & Bie, 2022; Qiu, 2019; Wang et al., 2021; Peng & Yu, 2023).

To conclude, such studies focus on the social consequences and normative meanings while paying little attention to its multiple semantic functions in online discursive practices and its meaning shifts in different contexts. There is still room for more detailed analyses of *Tangping* from the perspective of linguistics and discourse.

2.3 Limitations of Previous Studies and the Theoretical Orientation of the Present Study

To sum up, existing research has systematically examined the *Tangping* phenomenon from the perspectives of sociology, communication, psychology, and linguistics, laying a solid foundation for understanding its social causes and development. However, many studies on *Tangping* have been conducted from sociological or ideological perspectives, emphasizing its relationship with *Neijuan*, structural pressure, and anxiety, in which language is often regarded as a passive reflection of social reality, ignoring its active role in the construction of social meaning. Although linguistic studies have described the semantic meaning, metaphorical features, and constructional extension of *Tangping*, less attention has been paid to the dynamic process of activation, negotiation, and reconstruction within concrete network contexts. Moreover, when evaluating *Tangping*'s social influence, scholars tend to adopt normative judgments, oversimplifying the complex semantic layers and discourse functions.

In response to the above-mentioned limitations, the study adopts a cognitive sociolinguistic perspective and integrates conceptual metaphor theory and frame semantics to analyze *Tangping* phenomenon. The paper argues that *Tangping* is not only a label for a social attitude but also a cognitive–discursive practice. It needs to be continuously reconstructed and reshaped within particular social contexts. Through examining its metaphorical mechanism, semantic frame, and discourse interaction, the study aims to reveal how *Tangping* in online spaces shapes and adjusts young people's social experiences and cognitive modes, thereby offering a more detailed analysis of the relationship between internet catchwords and social mentality.

3. Research Design

3.1 Corpus Sources

The paper takes *Tangping* as the research object, and the data cover the period from 2021 to 2024. Relevant data were retrieved via online and media sources through keyword searches, rather than being compiled into a fixed-size corpus. Online data include posts and comments from Weibo (Chinese microblogging platform; 微博), Zhihu (Chinese question-and-

answer platform; 知乎), Bilibili (Chinese video-sharing platform; 哔哩哔哩), and Douban (Chinese interest-based social networking platform; 豆瓣), while media data contain reports from official outlets such as *People's Daily* (人民日报) and *China Youth Daily* (中国青年报). In the process of the research, systematic classification and organization are carried out, and representative cases are selected for analysis.

3.2 Research Objectives

Under the framework of cognitive sociolinguistics and grounded in previous research findings, together with corpus data in the digital environment, the study aims to pursue the following objectives:

- 1) To analyze the generation and evolution process of the semantic meaning of *Tangping* within cognitive mechanisms.
- 2) To explore how different social groups construct and reinterpret *Tangping* through discursive practice under the dual influence of cognitive processing and social context.
- 3) To discuss the influence of ideology in shaping and deconstructing the semantic dissemination of *Tangping*.

3.3 Research Methods

3.3.1 Literature-Based Research Method

After specifying the research objectives, the study collects materials on cognitive sociolinguistics and buzzwords both domestically and internationally from related books, academic databases, websites, and news reports, and then classifies them after careful reading. Then the theoretical foundation of the study is established. After summarizing the previous findings and research gaps, the study proposes its innovation and contribution to future research.

3.3.2 Discourse Analysis Method

As an internet buzzword, *Tangping* possesses interdisciplinary features with rich connotations. The study applies critical discourse analysis (CDA) proposed by Norman Fairclough to put *Tangping* into a three-dimensional structure (micro–meso–macro), namely the text level of discourse, the contextual level of discourse, and the social practice level of discourse. It then employs multiple perspectives to analyze the relationships among internet buzzwords, discourse forms and structures, social and cultural contexts, social structures, and power relations, thereby exploring the discourse characteristics of internet buzzwords.

3.3.3 Netnography

This study employs a netnographic approach through online platforms such as Baidu Tieba and Sina Weibo to trace the generation, development, and dissemination of internet buzzwords. The analysis focuses on how buzzwords emerge from public emergencies and

hot issues, how they develop interactive features, and how they experience dissemination and variation in the process of interaction. This method ensures the acquisition of first-hand and genuine internet buzzword corpus data, enabling understanding of internet buzzwords from their origin.

3.4 Research Procedure

To make the research process more transparent and replicable, this section outlines the analytical procedure building on the data sources and methods described above.

(1) Data Collection

Using *Tangping* as the primary search term, a corpus of online and media discourse from 2021 to 2024 was compiled. The collected data were then screened to remove duplicates and irrelevant entries, ensuring both the validity and representativeness of the dataset.

(2) Data Organization

The data were then organized and categorized in accordance with both the temporal progression of semantic change and salient discursive features. On this basis, the corpus was structured into three stages: pre-discourse, hotspot discourse, and post-discourse, which together provide the analytical framework for the subsequent discussion.

(3) Data Analysis

The analysis was carried out from a cognitive sociolinguistic perspective. On the one hand, attention was given to cognitive mechanisms such as prototype categorization, conceptual metaphor, and conceptual blending, in order to trace the emergence and extension of the meaning of *Tangping*. On the other hand, approaches from ideology and discourse analysis were employed to examine how different social actors participate in the processes of meaning construction and reinterpretation, as well as how these processes interact.

(4) Result Integration

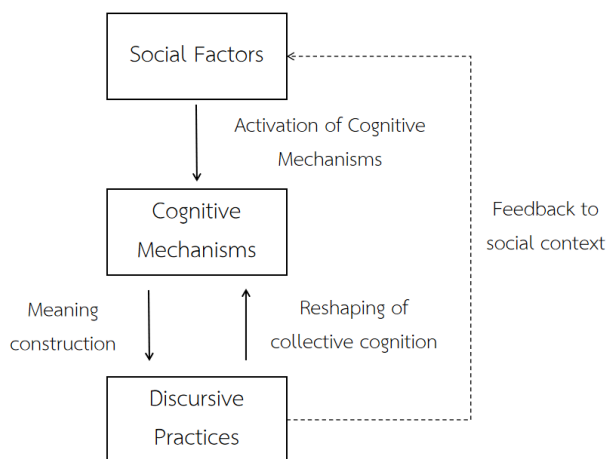
The findings from each stage were brought together and interpreted in an integrated manner. By drawing on the interplay among social context, cognitive processes, and linguistic expression, the study offers an overall account of the dynamic mechanism underlying the semantic development of *Tangping*.

4. Research Findings

This section goes beyond a straightforward, linear account of the semantic evolution of *Tangping*. Building on the research procedures and methods outlined in the previous sections, it explores how the term's meaning emerges and transforms through the interaction between social context and cognitive mechanisms from a cognitive sociolinguistic perspective.

In particular, the section focuses on how social conditions give rise to and activate cognitive processes such as metaphor and conceptualization, and how these processes, in turn, shape discursive practices and collective understanding. Based on this discussion, a cognitive sociolinguistic model is proposed, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1
A Cognitive Sociolinguistic Model of Semantic Construction and Deconstruction of *Tangping*



From this perspective, the model draws attention to the interplay between social factors, cognitive mechanisms, and discursive practices. In concrete terms, external conditions, including structural social pressures, pre-existing discursive resources, and the accumulation of shared emotions, first act upon the cognitive systems of individuals and groups, activating mechanisms such as metaphor, prototype categorization, and conceptual blending. These mechanisms then participate in the process of meaning construction, giving rise to and shaping the discursive expressions and semantic connotations associated with *Tangping*.

Meanwhile, discursive practices should not be seen as merely derivative outcomes. Through processes of circulation, reinterpretation, and competitive use, they contribute to the ongoing reshaping of collective cognitive models. With the intervention of mainstream media and the amplification effects of online platforms, the meaning of *Tangping* is repeatedly reframed, leading to shifts in its evaluative orientation and semantic boundaries.

Taken together, the evolution of *Tangping* is best understood not as a linear, unidirectional trajectory but as a dynamic, co-constructive process, in which social factors and cognitive mechanisms interact in complex ways, with discursive practices providing ongoing feedback.

Building on this understanding, the study conceptualizes the semantic development of *Tangping* in three stages: pre-discourse, hotspot discourse, and post-discourse, corresponding respectively to the initial activation of cognitive mechanisms by social forces, the construction of meaning through cognitive processes, and the reflexive reshaping of collective cognitive models through discursive engagement.

Generally speaking, hotspot discourse has two types. The first type emerges when speakers intentionally employ innovative expressions, which are reproduced with high frequency or disseminated expansively in a speech community, and then they begin to be popular. The other type arises when speakers unintentionally use innovative expressions that trigger massive attention and widespread acceptance in the speech community, leading to large-scale circulation and eventual popularization (Fang & Li, 2023, p. 113).

In order to comprehensively explore the semantic construction process of *Tangping*, the paper draws on the viewpoints of the two above-mentioned scholars. Taking the publication of the long essay *Tangping Philosophy* as the hotspot discourse and using it as a reference point, the study conceptualizes the “pre-discourse” and “post-discourse.” The former refers to the related discourses appearing before *Tangping Philosophy* as either accidental, inevitable, prophetic, or illustrative; the latter refers to those appearing after *Tangping Philosophy* and those that are recontextualized, reanalyzed, redescribed, and reused.

By situating the phenomenon of *Tangping* into the dynamic process of pre-discourse, hotspot discourse, and post-discourse, the study illustrates its semantic construction and deconstruction as follows:

4.1 Pre-discourse: The Social Psychology and Discourse Environment Conducive to the Popularity of *Tangping*

Before *Tangping* became a hotspot discourse, its social context and discursive resources upon which the concept depended for formation and dissemination have already existed. The study of pre-discourse helps us to comprehensively understand the reasons for the appearance of *Tangping* and its popularity.

4.1.1 Structural Social Pressures

Tangping is a unique way adopted by young people to resist intense competition, class solidification, and perceived inner emptiness. This group exhibits value orientations that diverge from mainstream norms, demonstrates weak achievement motivation, shows affiliative subcultural identification, and prefers spiritual consumption. The popularity of *Tangping* is closely correlated with social structural pressures, such as high living costs, fierce competition in the labor market, intensified class solidification, and the generalization of *Neijuan*. These structural

pressures do not directly produce the expression *Tangping*; instead, they activate a set of underlying cognitive schemas such as constraint, fatigue, and withdrawal that later provide the conceptual grounding for metaphorical construction.

4.1.2 Both Existing Discourse Resources and Emotional Accumulation

The direct cause leading to the *Tangping* phenomenon is *Neijuan*, while “hollow heart syndrome” constitutes the ideological soil in which *Tangping* takes root; the logic of capital, in turn, is the root cause (Li, 2022, p. 145). Originally translated from the term “involution”, *Neijuan* is highly associated with *Tangping*. The so-called “theater effect” is a canonical illustration frequently invoked to explicate *Neijuan*: when one audience member stands up to gain a better view of the screen, others must follow suit to avoid being obstructed. The outcome is that everyone ends up standing, even though, for any individual viewer, standing offers no real advantage over sitting. What ensues is a form of competition that is ultimately devoid of substantive meaning.

In 2020, an excellent student was using a computer while riding a bicycle, and his image was widely spread online, so he was called “King of *Neijuan*”, after which the term received highly frequent usage until now (Zhang et al., 2023, p. 152). Represented by the “996” work mode, regimes of prolonged and high-intensity labor have become normalized in certain sectors. Escalating living costs make the young generation feel a sense of powerlessness. In this context, *Neijuan* is employed to describe excessive and disordered competition, from which anxiety arises.

In addition to *Neijuan*, a series of internet buzzwords such as *Bailan* (give up / passive surrender; 摆烂), *Foxi* (Buddhist-style detachment; 佛系), *Sangwenhua* (doom culture; 丧文化), and *Pofang* (emotional breakdown; 破防) form a discursive sequence, a kind of reflection, alienation, and resistance against the mainstream narrative of “striving for better”, all of which offer an affective foundation and semantic connection for the emergence of *Tangping*. The prototypical meaning of *Tangping* does not emerge all at once; rather, it takes shape gradually through repeated discursive use. Over time, shared social experiences become cognitively entrenched, giving rise to a relatively stable semantic core.

4.2 Hotspot Discourse: The Ignition Trajectory and Semantic Contestation of *Tangping*

4.2.1 The Ignition Trajectory of *Tangping*

(1) The Trigger for the Popularization of *Tangping*

On April 17, 2021, a user named *Haixin de Lǔxíngjiā* (literally “Kind Traveler,” also referred to as Zhong Ge; 忠哥) posted a series of messages on Baidu Tieba—*China Population forum* (中国人口吧)—claiming that “*Tangping Is Justice*” (躺平即正义), “*Tangping Is Movement for*

Wise Man” (躺平是智者运动), and “*I Choose Tangping, so I No Longer Feel Fear*” (我选择躺平, 我不再恐惧), in which the author described his *Tangping* lifestyle, saying that he was jobless for over two years, and ate only two meals a day with monthly expenses under CNY 200. He asserted that only by *Tangping* could human beings become “the measure of all things” (Baidu Tieba, “*Tangping* Is Justice”).

Following the publication of these posts, spontaneous imitation and reinterpretation quickly emerged among internet users. The discourse resonated particularly strongly with young netizens, who began to adopt *Tangping* as a key expressive resource. Expressions such as “I choose *Tangping*; you may do as you wish” (我躺平, 你随意), “As long as I lie flat enough, no one can take advantage of me” (只要我躺得够平, 你们就割不到我), “You pursue your own struggle; I follow my *Tangping*” (你卷你的, 我躺我的), and “To lie flat is to win by lying flat; perseverance itself is victory” (躺平就是躺赢, 坚持就是胜利) proliferated rapidly. Against this backdrop, what came to be termed “*Tangping* philosophy” appeared almost overnight (Xu, 2021, p. 140).

It is evident that the trigger for the popularity of *Tangping* originated in an individual’s self-mocking portrayal of personal life circumstances. This unintended expression, by virtue of its high degree of abstraction and vivid imagery, activated widespread imitation and creative reappropriation among netizens.

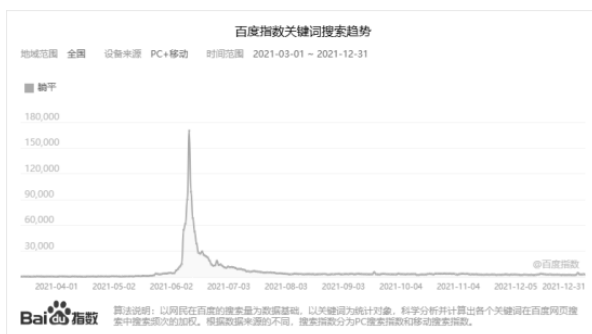
(2) The Momentum Behind the Spread of *Tangping*

Once triggered by what may be described as an instance of “unintentional articulation,” *Tangping* spread rapidly across online platforms. According to *Baidu Index*² data, with *Tangping* as the target keyword, a nationwide search range, and a time frame from March 1 to December 31, 2021 (a span of ten months), the trend exhibits a sharp rise following April 2021, reaching its peak in early June of the same year (see Figure 2).

²A data analytics tool developed by Baidu that measures the relative popularity of specific keywords based on weighted search query volumes over time, widely used for tracking public attention and online discourse trends in China.

Figure 2

Baidu consulting index about the network buzzword *Tangping*



Note. Data retrieved from Baidu Index with *Tangping* as the keyword, nationwide search, March 1 – December 31, 2021.

In the same year, as released by the editorial office of *Report on the Status of Language Life in China*, *Chinese Language Review*, *Yaowen Jiaozhi* magazine, and *Language and Character Weekly*, *Tangping* was included in the list of the “Top 10 Internet Buzzwords of 2021”.

After *Tangping* gained popularity, attention from online communities such as Douban and Weibo continued to escalate. Commercial media outlets, including *The Beijing News* (新京报) and *China Youth Daily* (中国青年报), produced in-depth coverage, while official media such as CCTV.com and Xinhua Net engaged in discursive regulation and guidance. Together, these layers of media participation propelled the dissemination of *Tangping* to a more complex and far-reaching level.

4.2.2 The Semantic Construction of *Tangping*

(1) The Construction of the Literal Meaning of *Tangping*

From a lexical perspective, *Tangping* is a supplementary compound including two morphemes. *Tang* (to lie) is a verb, indicating the action of a body or an object lying on the ground or on other objects (Modern Chinese Dictionary, 7th ed., p. 1275). *Ping* functions either as a verb meaning there are no ups and downs on the surface, or as an adjective indicating no difference when two entities are compared; it also contains the meaning of fairness, stability, and ordinariness (Modern Chinese Dictionary, 7th ed., p. 1005). When combined, these two morphemes form the causative verb *Tangping*, which represents the opposite concept to the normative state of uprightness; it can also express a state of stillness or rest.

Within the dual context of real life and the virtual network, when *Tangping* emerges as a lifestyle imbued with social-psychological mentality, it has employed a process of symbolic

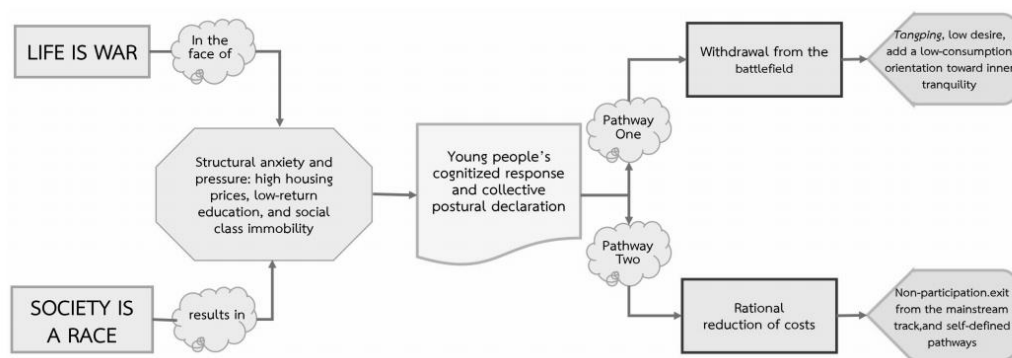
recombination and signifier recoding in *Tang* and *Ping* to depart from the conventional referents in modern Chinese meaning body or object postures (Xu, 2021, p. 140). Through sustained fermentation and dissemination, its literal meaning has gradually reduced, and it has been endowed with multiple meanings from the negative connotations of “abandoning struggle” and “refusal to cooperate” to positive ones of “rational reduction of consumption” and “the pursuit of genuine life.”

(2) Metaphorical Mechanisms and Cognitive Responses of *Tangping*

The prototypical meaning of *Tangping* does not emerge all at once; rather, it takes shape gradually through repeated discursive use. Over time, shared social experiences become cognitively entrenched, giving rise to a relatively stable semantic core. The semantic prototype of *Tangping* is the refusal of competition. It is a “cognitive response” produced by young people in the face of social structural anxiety. It is a collective postural declaration adopted by the younger generation when confronted with structural pressure. They begin to understand individual dilemmas from a structural level by the deconstruction of mainstream narratives, rather than simply attributing them to insufficient hard work.

This shift in cognition represents a powerful psychological defense mechanism as well as an expression of agency, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3
The “Metaphor-Response” Model of *Tangping*



The metaphor “Life is War” has a long history. It describes a world picture with limited resources and fierce competition, in which the winner takes all. Within this narrative, individuals are forced to defeat their opponents through great challenges so as to obtain living materials, social status, and personal values. It is a state of high-intensity and high-pressure conditions,

commonly described as *Neijuan*. When the younger generation realizes that despite the great effort they have made, success remains out of reach, the continuous “combat” causes psychological exhaustion and value disillusion. Thus, *Tangping* emerges as a response.

“Society Is a Race” is another powerful social metaphor, highlighting linear progress, fast speed, high efficiency, and satisfying ranking. So life is described as a fixed track on which all individuals run from the same starting line leading to the same destination. During the race, this metaphor produces widespread “anxiety of falling behind” and obsession with “shortcuts.” In response, the younger generation chooses to quit the race in which they will never win. Quitting the race is believed to be a radical questioning and a rational option against the rules of the game.

(3) The Proliferation of Derived Meanings and Spiritual Subjectivity

Within the online context, the concept *Tangping* has been repeatedly used and disseminated, leading to a series of rich peripheral meanings. A kind of dynamic tension forms between derived meanings and core semantic meaning. They both extend the signifying practices of the *Tangping* signifier chain, creating a semantic group with internal negotiation.

The first peripheral meaning is “self-care”, which can be considered as an intra-categorical shift of *Tangping*. Persistent competition leads to widespread psychological exhaustion, occupational burnout, and emotional numbness. While *Tangping* highlights a withdrawal from excessive social expectations, it turns psychological energy and attention toward individual physical and mental health as well as emotional tranquility. It thus functions as a mode of spiritual salvation and self-healing.

The second peripheral meaning is “spiritual independence”, a more constructive dimension of the *Tangping* semantic framework, which means that there is no need to place excessive emphasis on personal value based on external indicators such as income, position, or consumption, instead pursuing an inner value system, whose emphasis is put on exploring diversified possibilities for “life scripts” and re-confirming the subjectivity.

In conclusion, the core semantic prototype of *Tangping* is the refusal of competition, and its fluid peripheral meanings are self-care and spiritual independence, both of which construct semantic ambiguity. Its ambiguity does not weaken the term’s influence; instead, it makes *Tangping* a rich signifier and a strong adaptive buzzword by strengthening interpretive flexibility, pragmatic safety, and communicative re-productivity.

Looking across the discussion so far, it becomes clear that the meaning of *Tangping* cannot be traced back to a single source; rather, it takes shape through the interplay of multiple factors. In this sense, the process is best understood as bidirectional: social conditions

inform cognitive representations, while these representations, in turn, shape how discourse is produced and interpreted.

4.3 Post-discourse: Semantic Deconstruction and Ideological Contestation

4.3.1 Semantic Deconstruction in Mainstream Media Discourse

In the process of public construction of *Tangping* discourse, mainstream media have played a vital role as discursive “disciplinarians.” After discourse retrieval on *Tangping* from official media such as *China Youth Online* (中国青年报), *People’s Daily Online* (人民日报), and *Guangming Daily* (光明日报), the author finds that these media did not directly give negative judgments, but offered value attribution and ethical regulation of *Tangping* through a systematic process of semantic deconstruction and reframing. In doing so, they can maintain the mainstream discourse ethic while incorporating or dispelling its potential resistant meanings.

- a. More and more younger generations endowed with high expectation choose to “let themselves off” in a time of striving. (*People’s Daily Online*, 2022).
(越来越多被寄予厚望的年轻人, 在本应不懈奋斗的青春里选择了放过自己。)
- b1. Passive *Tangping* is temporary and passive, a way of recharging (*China Youth Daily*, 2022).
(被动式躺平, 是临时性、被动性的, 躺平是为了充电。)
- b2. Nominal *Tangping* is just for those repeated saying *Tangping*, a way of releasing their dissatisfied emotion (*China Youth Daily*, 2022).
(名义性躺平, 嘴上喊着躺平, 完全只是作为情绪宣泄。)

As illustrated above, sentence (a) is a critical judgment of *Tangping*. The concept is constructed as the absolute other of “striving,” as individuals opt out of striving at a stage of life conventionally associated with it, thereby evading the essential issues concerning the nature and goals of striving. By contrast, sentence (b) offers a different interpretation, a way of emotional guidance, explaining young people’s helplessness and emotional release.

4.3.2 The Acceleration of Semantic Deconstruction in Online Environments

Online discursive environments affect the usage of internet buzzwords and shape users’ world perceptions (Fang & Li, 2023, p. 118). The online context provides an unprecedented dynamic mechanism for the semantic deconstruction and dissemination of *Tangping* with its high speed, decentralization, and dense intertextuality.

First, with the replication and dissemination of internet memes, the semantics of *Tangping* are deconstructed at a fast speed. The following popular online emoticons and

image macros highly simplify complex resistant emotions into a visualized and resonant posture, stripping away the theoretical interpretation and retaining the emotional core.

Figure 4
Internet Memes Related to the Tangping Phenomenon



Note. The image was retrieved from Baidu Images on November 16, 2025.

Second, those arguments and confrontations triggered in online communities have enriched its core and peripheral meanings by continuously endowing *Tangping* with opposed definitions. Two attitudes confront each other during discussions of *Tangping* on Zhihu, Weibo, and Baidu Tieba. Proponents argue that “*Tangping* is not laziness, but a form of nonviolent resistance against distorted rules,” whereas opponents contend that “*Tangping* is sheer decadence and a variant of ‘despondency culture’”. Every user clearly expresses their attitude in the internet semantic field during discussion, which therefore speeds up the public deconstruction and personal internalization of *Tangping*.

To sum up, in the online context, the concept *Tangping* achieves deep semantic deconstruction and reconstruction in a short period by means of meme dissemination and community confrontation, transforming from a descriptive body posture to a super symbol condensed with complex mentality among young people, reflecting the tension-filled relationship between individual and structural pressure.

5. Summary and Discussion

5.1 Summary of Major Findings

After examining the semantic construction and deconstruction of the buzzword *Tangping* from the perspective of cognitive sociolinguistics, the study finds that the process of semantic construction of *Tangping* is also a typical process of conceptual integration. The meaning generation of *Tangping* is not accidental, but gradually constructs “cognitive resistance” as its core meaning with combined effects from social structural pressure, existing

discourse resources, and emotional experience. The process suggests that the semantic generation of buzzwords involves not only individual cognitive activity, but also correlates with particular social structures and discourse contexts.

Building on this, the semantic development of *Tangping* can be understood as a staged process, moving from pre-discourse to hotspot discourse and eventually to post-discourse. At the initial stage, structural social pressures, together with existing discursive resources, provide the basic conditions for meaning formation and activate a set of underlying cognitive schemas, such as stagnation and withdrawal. As the expression enters the phase of hotspot discourse, cognitive processes, including metaphor, prototype categorization, and conceptual integration, are brought into play within specific social contexts, which facilitates the rapid construction and expansion of meaning. In the subsequent post-discourse stage, the involvement of mainstream media and the dynamics of online communication further contribute to the reconfiguration and reframing of its meaning, leading to ongoing adjustments in its semantic boundaries and evaluative orientation.

Under the combined influence of cognitive processing and social context, different social groups participate in the construction of *Tangping* through discursive practices. In the processes of expression, circulation, and reinterpretation, both individuals and groups not only articulate their own social experiences and affective stances, but also, through interaction, reinforce or reshape existing cognitive representations. In this way, *Tangping* gradually develops into a widely shared semantic prototype and a recognizable cultural sign.

Meanwhile, the role of ideology becomes particularly evident in the process of semantic circulation. Through discursive regulation and value-oriented framing, mainstream media seek to recontextualize *Tangping* and reshape its social evaluation and interpretive direction. At the same time, the diverse forms of expression and mechanisms of reproduction within online communities continue to negotiate and rework its meaning, resulting in a semantic field characterized by the interplay of multiple discursive forces.

This study contributes not only by examining *Tangping* as a case in point, but also by exploring the processes that underlie semantic change in internet buzzwords from a cognitive sociolinguistic perspective. The results indicate that the development of meaning in such expressions cannot be explained purely through linguistic analysis; instead, it emerges from the continuous interplay of social influences, cognitive processes, and patterns of discourse. In this respect, the “society-cognition-discourse” framework proposed here provides a practical approach for understanding language variation and meaning-making in fast-evolving digital environments, and it may offer a useful reference for future investigations.

5.2 Discussion

This study mainly explores the semantic construction and deconstruction of the buzzword *Tangping* from the perspective of cognitive sociolinguistics. Nevertheless, certain limitations remain: 1) The corpus is primarily drawn from online platforms during a specific time frame, which may not fully capture the long-term evolution of the term's meaning; 2) The platforms themselves have inherent constraints, and differences in discourse ecology across platforms could influence how semantic construction is manifested; and 3) This study mainly relies on textual analysis, lacking empirical investigation of audience cognition and attitudes, which somewhat restricts the direct validation of cognitive mechanisms.

In light of these limitations, future research could proceed in several directions: 1) Expand the temporal scope of the corpus to examine the long-term dynamics of semantic evolution in internet buzzwords; 2) Incorporate multi-platform data, enabling comparative analysis of discourse differences across different media environments; and 3) Combine empirical methods such as interviews and questionnaires to provide direct evidence of cognitive mechanisms, thereby further enhancing the explanatory power of analyses from a cognitive sociolinguistic perspective.

In addition, comparative research can be carried out between *Tangping* and related social phenomena such as “low-desire society” in Japan or “N-po generation” in South Korea, which would contribute to a deeper understanding of how distinct socio-cultural mental models shape similar low-desire cultures. Therefore, a more comprehensive understanding of the interactions among language, cognition, and social structure can be achieved.

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