

# A Study of The Metaphor of The Internet Buzzword “corporate slave” in The Context of Semantics

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**Abstract:** From January 2022 to July 2022, the average daily Baidu search index for the term “corporate slave” was 2,266 times. Meanwhile, the search result of *Sina Weibo* for the term “corporate slave” was 1523880, and the search result of *Baidu* was 5510000. The term “corporate slave” originated in Japan and was later introduced to China, and within a short period, it caused widespread use and phenomenal discussions on the Internet. The explosion of this exotic word is not only accidental but also inextricably linked to the current Chinese society, Internet ecology, and young adults' thinking. Therefore, this paper analyzes the metaphorical meaning of the term “corporate slave” and the thoughts of young adults in China as reflected by its widespread use in the context of the current social development. The study of Japanese-derived vocabulary can not only promote the exchange between Chinese and Japanese cultures, but also learn more about the philological meaning of Internet buzzword.

## 1 Introduction

The generation and development of Japanese network hot words is an important part of network buzzwords in the new media era. In particular, the term “corporate slave” is not only the embodiment of the current network buzzwords, but also reflects the changes in the positioning and mentality of young Chinese and Japanese. In general, the analysis of the word “corporate slave” from the perspective of semantics can help us keep up with the trend of The Times and grasp the emotions of the young groups, which is of practical significance in linguistic research.

## 2 The Origin of “Corporate Slave”

The Japanese Internet buzzwords are an important part of the current Chinese Internet buzzwords, and the Japanese exonyms popular on the Chinese Internet today include not only “sweet style” and “salt style”, but also “buy in” and “platitude”. Among the many Japanese Internet buzzwords, the term “corporate slave” is the most widely discussed and prominent in society.

The term “corporate slave” originated in Japan, and the term “corporate slave” refers to employees who are squeezed by the company as if they were livestock. The meaning of the word has not changed much since it entered the Chinese language system, and it still refers to employees who are squeezed by the company as if they were livestock. Therefore, when analyzing the term “corporate slave” from the perspective of Chinese linguistics, the focus should be on the lexical nature. At the same

time, the metaphorical meaning of the word “corporate slave” is analyzed, to analyze the psychology of young people who call themselves “corporate slaves” nowadays.

In the 1970s, Japan's population was characterized by what researchers call the “Mass generation”, with a large working population, a high willingness to work, and significant overtime work. Although they will not die for work, they can give up many other things in life for work. The reason for this is also inseparable from the three pillars of Japanese management: lifetime employment system, annual merit sequence system, and intra-company combination. These three pillars support the Japanese people's continuous struggle for the company and their work.

In the 1980s, Japan was faced with a foamy economy, and amid the economic downturn, such as corporate bankruptcies and the financial crisis, the social problems of long working hours and overwork, commonly known as “death by overwork”, emerged and were difficult to solve properly. In this situation, the term “corporate slave” was coined to express the exhaustion of Japanese workers who work for companies.

With the development of the times and the continuous improvement of laws and regulations related to the Japanese labor system, the working environment of Japanese workers has changed to a certain extent, but the term “corporate slave” has been preserved and has become a professional identity and social label for contemporary Japanese youth. In 2018, the term “corporate slave” was introduced to China and quickly became a buzzword, quoted by the majority of young people to express their dissatisfaction with and self-deprecation of excessive work. Due to cultural differences, the term “corporate

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slave” is different from the Japanese word “company”, which is considered to be a contraction of society.

The term “corporate slave” also means “slave of society” in the Chinese context compared to the original Japanese meaning. Compared to Japanese youths who have a strong sense of belonging to a company, Chinese youths tend to think of themselves as subordinate to society and work for it.

### 3 The Study of “Corporate Slave”

As the term “corporate slave” has been introduced to China for a relatively short period, not much literature has been devoted to its study. In *“Cultural Orientation in the Mirror Image of Buzzwords”* Gubei explains the linguistic art of the term “corporate slave” in a more comprehensive way, arguing that compared to the near-synonymous terms such as “laborer” and “overtime dogs”, the term “corporate slave” is used to refer to both “society” and “livestock”, which is more powerfully demonstrates the coarseness of existence and is more apathetic in terms of language temperature.<sup>[1]</sup> Wen Xin and Lu Pengfei argue that the popularity of the term “corporate slave” is a sociological phenomenon, and its popularity among Chinese youth reflects the rise of youth as critics of the subject. The popularity of the term “corporate slave” cannot be arbitrarily attributed to the self-degradation of young people, nor can it be simply defined as the self-deprecation of young people, but should be examined from the perspective of the interaction between social structure and inter-subjective action in a mobile society.<sup>[2]</sup> Cheng Dexing and Ye Zihui incorporated the term “corporate slave” into the Internet buzzword, arguing that whether it is “corporate slave”, “laborer”, “bricklayer” “coder”, “programmer”, “or young teachers”, these are all terms used by young people in general or in specific industries to identify and define their professional identities and to describe themselves. These terms are used by young people in general or in specific industries to identify and define their professional identity and workplace status. To a certain extent, these terms reflect the career orientation and perception of young people nowadays, showing the structural confusion and lack of work access of contemporary youth.<sup>[3]</sup>

Turning back to Japan, where the term “corporate slave” originated, we find that the term “corporate slave” has rarely been studied in Japanese academia, but is more often discussed as a social issue. Du Xin believes that the birth of the term “corporate slave” is based on the traditional form of Japanese social organization. As a closely interdependent, extended family, this structure was transferred to the workplace, making the relationship between groups at work extremely intimate. As a result of lifetime employment, employees spend their entire lives in the same company and live in the company house. The result of this is an extremely strong sense of oneness between the company and the employee. Secondly, in Japan, one of the results of the seniority system is that older people exercise strict authority, love and protection, and younger people blindly show compliance, dependence, and loyal-

ty, which also gives young people a drive to compare themselves to “domestic animals”.<sup>[4]</sup> According to Kazuo Fujimoto, the working class, who are fed by the company and have lost their wild nature, are called corporate slaves, not livestock, because their hearts are centered around the company and they have no independence. The special thing about “corporate slaves” is that they are domesticated by the company and put the importance of the company before their desires. It is noteworthy that some members of the Japanese working class claim to be “voluntary corporate slaves”, slaves are a cultural expression of the prevalence of the “corporate slave” culture and the expression of discontent and self-deprecation, given the structural oppression of Japanese society as a whole.<sup>[5]</sup>

### 4 The Use of “Corporate Slave”

By analyzing the term “corporate slave” from both semantic and pragmatic perspectives, we can not only summarize the linguistic characteristics and metaphorical connotations of the term “corporate slave” more comprehensively but also explore the causes of its widespread.

#### 4.1 Meaning and Metaphorical Connotation of “Corporate Slave”

From the literal meaning of the word “corporate slave”, it is easy to see the self-deprecation, fatigue, exhaustion, and trolling contained in the word “corporate slave”. On the Chinese Internet, young people who have lost their rest time due to work and have been pressured by companies and forced to work overtime for a long time often use the term “corporate slave” to describe themselves.

The formation of Internet buzzwords can be divided into six modes: single metaphor, single metonymy, complex metaphor, complex metonymy, hidden metaphor, and direct description, mainly in terms of cognitive operations in the process of language formation.<sup>[6]</sup> As an example of the “metaphorical” model, “corporate slave” literally means “company’s livestock” and consists of “corporate” and “slave”, which is derived from the central concept of “toiling” and expresses the meaning of “being enslaved”, mainly for self-deprecation. The word “corporate” is mainly derived from the Japanese word, which has the connotation of “company”, and is also based on the attribute “enslaved” in the frame of “animal”. Based on the similarity of the attribute “being enslaved” in the frame of “animal” and the feeling of “work like a horse” is used as a metonymy for the whole attribute, The word “slave” refers to the “attribute” of being a hard worker. Finally, by combining “corporate” and “slave”, it is not difficult to get the meaning of “work like a horse”. After “corporate slave”, there are many variations, such as “corporate-meow” and “corporate-beast”.

To sum up, the linguistic variation of “corporate slave” in the network environment not only retains its original meaning but also adds sociality and realism, which can trigger the resonance of netizens. The term “corporate slave” is also often used in conjunction with

the terms “996” and “laborer”, all of which reflect the disgust and fatigue of young people with long hours of overtime and work.

#### 4.2 Linguistic features of “Corporate Slave”

When people use the term corporate slave, it is mostly sarcastic and self-deprecating, a phenomenon that is also closely related to the current culture of demotivation that is widely circulating among Generation Z. The so-called demotivational culture refers to the negative psychology of the new generation of young people due to employment pressure, unfairness in the workplace, high cost of living, and increased volatility in intergenerational relationships. It should not be underestimated that this is also a mirror reflecting the situation and mentality of contemporary youth. It looks hopeless and powerless, but in fact, it is also a different way for young people to express “I want to talk to the world”.

In general, the term “corporate slave” is mainly used as a noun, and is widely used by a large number of office workers on the Chinese Internet.

For example:

*“Corporate Slave” Youth and Sanhe Youth;*

*The Meaning and Myth of Harris’ Candidacy;*

*I want to say to my late-night self: as a social animal, I’m sorry.*

### 5 The Popularity of “Corporate Slave”

The prerequisite for Japanese-origin buzzwords to gain widespread attention on the Chinese Internet is inevitably the maturity of the Japanese language. To be precise, the maturity of a national language is marked by its ability to keep up with the times and innovate. A “modern” language as a nation-state should have at least the following characteristics.

1. universality: the national language must be accessible to the majority of the population, and the state must be obliged to educate them to eliminate the inequality of opportunity caused by language ability.

2. internationality: the ability to translate foreign languages, or to be translated by foreign languages (inter-translatability), so that it can cope with the further development of society.

3. diffusion: the ability to be used to teach new knowledge and to be able to discuss issues in the humanities and natural sciences; the ability to express new concepts that are constantly and increasingly emerging.

4. universality: the written and oral forms have greater consistency and knowledge transfer is not limited by the language medium.

As a foreign language of Japanese origin, the term “corporate slave” has been widely spread on the Chinese Internet for three main reasons. As the following three causes:

First, since a large number of words in Japanese originate from Chinese, the term “corporate slave” is easy to understand for native Chinese speakers, and comparing oneself to a “slave” is in line with the social psychology of teenagers in a subcultural context. The strong self-

deprecating meaning of the term “corporate slave” can evoke strong emotional resonance among teenagers and thus achieve wide dissemination.<sup>[7]</sup> Also, the Japanese writing of shachiku is almost the same as the Chinese writing. Therefore, in the translation process, the direct choice of translating with Chinese pronunciation enables native Chinese speakers to quickly understand the meaning of the words.

Meanwhile, in the social context, the pace of economic development in both Japan and China has been accelerating since 2000, which has made it difficult for a large number of young people to find jobs and to get rid of the overtime mechanism such as 996, so the emergence of the term “corporate slave” has well catered to young people’s desire to find their labels. Therefore, the term “corporate slave” has emerged to meet the psychology of young people who want to find their labels.

In addition, the popularity of the term “corporate slave” is also attributed to the convenient Internet, which allows the public to have their online social platform and to express their thoughts and disseminate information freely within the limits of legal and moral constraints. The freedom, anonymity, and virtual nature of the Internet have stimulated the desire of more people to express themselves, and the characteristics of Internet buzzwords such as “corporate slave” are also contributing to their spread. Internet buzzwords are economic. Life is a different drama every day and the sour, sweet, bitter, and spicy things that an ordinary person tastes are the ingredients that make up life. The workers’ life is extremely fast-paced, and they often face pressure and bondage in the working environment. Behind the simple and concise phrase “corporate slave” is the workers’ relief from the heavy work pressure and anxiety, as well as their enthusiasm for life and their longing for the future.

In the process of interpersonal communication, personal values have real value only when they fit each other’s ideas, and the same goes for Internet buzzwords, which can be recognized by the public only when they truly express the thoughts of netizens. The emotion conveyed by the sound of “social animal” is exactly in line with the psychological state of the Internet community in the era of information fragmentation. Without elaborate ideas and embellishments, a few simple words can express inner thoughts.

### 6 Summary

Besides its simplicity and efficiency, Japanese as a foreign language is very popular among young people today because of the demotivation culture and their dissatisfaction with overtime. Thus, linguistic analysis of foreign languages of Japanese origin helps understand young people’s social psychology and thoughts as well as their linguistic connotations.

The phenomenon that Internet words are widely circulated and extremely popular is a product of snackification, and Internet buzzwords have made language culture multi-layered, colorful, and diversified. However, while we use Internet words to enrich our lives, we should also pay attention to taking the essence of them and removing

the dress. Only by combining tradition and trend, combining excellent Chinese culture with foreign culture, and making both develop together, can we promote the prosperity and progress of Chinese culture.

Meanwhile, through the analysis of the term “corporate slave”, it is easy to see that pragmatics has not only gotten rid of its former status of “waste paper basket”, but also is gradually developing into a branch of linguistics with independent disciplinary status, systematic theoretical system, detailed disciplinary division of labor and scientific research methods, and has attracted more and more scholars’ research interests, all of which indicate that the twenty-first century will be the spring of the vigorous development of pragmatics.

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