

“Diagnosed as an Egg Tart”: A Cognitive Linguistic Study of Metaphor and Multimodal Discourse in Internet Memes

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Received: 10 April 2025; Accepted: 5 May 2025; Published: 22 May 2025

Abstract:

This study explores the metaphorical mechanisms and cultural significance of the internet meme “Diagnosed as an Egg Tart” within the framework of George Lakoff’s Conceptual Metaphor Theory and multimodal discourse analysis. By analyzing the mapping between the source domain (medical diagnosis) and the target domain (personal state or behavior), the research reveals how this meme creates a humorous and absurd metaphorical expression through the incongruity between the seriousness of medical diagnosis and the mundane characteristics of egg tarts. The humor arises from the mismatch between the two domains, while the meme’s dissemination and variations reflect the creativity and dynamism of internet language. Furthermore, the application of multimodal discourse analysis highlights how the meme leverages images, videos, and text to enhance its metaphorical impact and spread. Case studies of multimodal content, such as image-text posts on Weibo and animated videos on TikTok, demonstrate how visual and auditory elements amplify the meme’s humor and cultural resonance. The study also examines how the meme reflects contemporary youth’s attitudes toward self-identity and social pressures, serving as a form of collective expression in digital culture. Overall, this research provides a cognitive linguistic perspective on internet language phenomena and offers new insights into the application of metaphor theory in the context of online communication. It underscores the importance of multimodal forms in the dissemination of internet memes and their role in shaping contemporary cultural discourse.

Keywords:

Conceptual Metaphor Theory, Internet Meme, Multimodal Discourse Analysis, Cultural Deconstruction

1. Introduction

In contemporary internet culture, the forms and content of linguistic expression continue to evolve. As a unique linguistic phenomenon, internet memes (热梗 *règěng*) not only reflect the creativity of online communities but also demonstrate the vital role of language in cognition and social interaction. In recent years, the phrase

structure “被确诊为 XX” (“diagnosed as XX”) has proliferated across social media, with the variant “被确诊为蛋挞” (“diagnosed as an egg tart”) gaining rapid popularity due to its absurdly humorous delivery. By combining the gravitas of medical diagnosis with the mundane traits of everyday food, this meme constructs a distinctive metaphorical expression that resonates with netizens while functioning as a form of social language within internet culture.

As a cognitive tool, metaphor has long held a pivotal position in linguistic research. George Lakoff’s Conceptual Metaphor Theory posits that metaphor is not merely a linguistic device but a fundamental mode of human cognition, facilitating the understanding and articulation of abstract concepts by mapping source-domain knowledge onto target domains [1]. Internet memes, as emergent linguistic phenomena, often exhibit highly creative and contagious metaphorical mechanisms, warranting in-depth analysis from a cognitive linguistics perspective.

This study adopts Lakoff’s Conceptual Metaphor Theory as its framework, examining the meme “diagnosed as an egg tart” to explore its metaphorical mechanisms and underlying cultural significance. Specifically, it addresses the following questions: (1) How does the expression “diagnosed as an egg tart” embody conceptual metaphor mapping? (2) How does this metaphor evoke netizens’ resonance through humor and absurdity? (3) How do the meme’s dissemination and variants reflect the characteristics of contemporary internet culture? By investigating these questions, the study aims to provide a cognitive linguistics-based interpretation of online linguistic phenomena while revealing the unique role of internet memes in modern socio-cultural contexts.

2. Literature Review

2.1. *George Lakoff’s Conceptual Metaphor Theory*

In their seminal work *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), George Lakoff and Mark Johnson proposed the Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which revolutionized traditional linguistic understanding by asserting that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device but a fundamental cognitive mechanism. Lakoff argued that metaphors facilitate the comprehension and articulation of abstract concepts by mapping the conceptual structure from a source domain onto a target domain. [1] For instance, in the metaphor “Time is money,” the scarcity and exchangeability of money are mapped onto time, shaping people’s perception of temporal resources.

The theory further categorizes metaphors into three types: structural metaphors (e.g., “Argument is war”), orientational metaphors (e.g., “Happy is up, sad is down”), and ontological metaphors (e.g., “concretizing abstract concepts”). These metaphors permeate not only language but also profoundly influence human thought patterns and behaviors.[2] In recent years, Conceptual Metaphor Theory has been widely applied across disciplines such as literature, politics, and advertising, serving as a robust theoretical framework for linguistic analysis.

2.2. *Internet Language and Metaphor Studies*

With the proliferation of the internet, online language has emerged as a distinct linguistic variant, attracting scholarly attention. Characterized by high creativity, interactivity, and virality, internet language often employs metaphorical mechanisms that diverge from conventional usage. For example, internet memes (热梗 *règěng*)

subvert linguistic norms to generate novel metaphorical expressions, enhancing linguistic playfulness while reflecting the cultural psyche of netizens. [3] Recent studies increasingly adopt multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) to examine internet language. Zhang (2009) integrated MDA framework offers new insights into how metaphors are conveyed through the interplay of text, images, and sound. [4] Additionally, online metaphors typically exhibit: Creativity: Fusing seemingly unrelated concepts to produce innovative expressions; Humor: Employing exaggeration or absurdity for comic effect; Virality: Facilitating rapid dissemination through replication and adaptation. [5] These features position online metaphors as a critical lens for studying linguistic evolution and socio-cultural dynamics.

2.3. Cultural Significance of Internet Memes

As a pivotal component of internet language, memes transcend linguistic phenomena to embody cultural practices. Their dissemination relies on specific socio-cultural contexts, mirroring netizens' values, emotions, and social needs. [6] For instance, the “diagnosed as XX” template juxtaposes the gravitas of medical diagnosis with mundane life details, generating humor while subtly critiquing modern stressors. Shi's (2021) review of China's two-decade MDA research highlights how memetic metaphors leverage multimodal formats (e.g., image-text hybrids, videos) to amplify expressive and propagative power. [7] Scholars also note that memetic metaphors often desacralize authoritative discourses, empowering grassroots expression (Milner, 2016), and foster collective identity through memetic propagation. [8]

2.4. Research Gap and Contributions

Despite extensive studies on internet language and metaphor, systematic analyses of specific memes—particularly “diagnosed as an egg tart”—remain scarce. Existing research predominantly focuses on dissemination mechanisms and cultural implications, overlooking the cognitive functions and cultural deconstruction enabled by such metaphors. Moreover, while MDA gains traction, integrating it with metaphor theory to decode memetic mechanisms constitutes an underexplored frontier. This study bridges these gaps by employing Lakoff's framework to dissect the metaphorical architecture and cultural meanings of “diagnosed as an egg tart.”

3. Research Design

The research employs a qualitative methodology, drawing upon George Lakoff's Conceptual Metaphor Theory to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the internet meme “diagnosed as an egg tart.” The study is structured into three key phases: data collection, metaphor identification, and cultural significance analysis.

During the data collection phase, relevant textual data was systematically gathered from major Chinese social media platforms including Weibo, Douyin, Bilibili, and Xiaohongshu. The dataset comprises 500 user-generated posts and comments containing the key phrases “diagnosed as an egg tart” and “egg tart meme,” collected over a ten-month period from January to October 2024. This time frame ensures the inclusion of the meme's complete lifecycle from emergence to peak popularity.

The metaphor identification phase applies Lakoff's theoretical framework through a rigorous three-step analytical process. First, metaphorical expressions are systematically extracted from the collected texts. Second, the underlying conceptual domains are classified, with medical diagnosis identified as the source domain and

personal states/behaviors as the target domain. Finally, the mapping relationships between these domains are carefully examined to reveal the cognitive mechanisms at work.

The cultural analysis phase adopts a multi-dimensional approach to interpret the meme's broader significance. This involves examining the linguistic strategies that generate humorous effects through incongruous juxtapositions, analyzing how the meme reflects contemporary netizens' psychological states and social needs, and investigating how its various adaptations and derivatives exemplify characteristic features of internet culture. The qualitative methodology is particularly suited to this exploratory study, allowing for in-depth examination of both linguistic patterns and cultural meanings. By combining metaphor theory with cultural analysis, the research design enables a holistic understanding of how this particular meme functions as both a linguistic innovation and a cultural phenomenon.

4. Analysis and Discussion

The popularity of the internet meme “diagnosed as an egg tart” exemplifies the creativity and humor inherent in contemporary online metaphorical expressions. Drawing upon George Lakoff's Conceptual Metaphor Theory, which posits that metaphors facilitate the understanding of abstract concepts by mapping structures from a source domain onto a target domain, this meme operationalizes “medical diagnosis” as the source domain and “personal states/behaviors” as the target domain. [9] For instance, a February 2024 Weibo post by user @循环的圆 stated: “Today I was diagnosed as an egg tart—my body is crispy, my shape is round, my core is yellow, and I crumble under pressure.” This comment humorously merges the gravitas of medical terminology with the physical attributes of egg tarts (fragile crust, soft filling, brittleness), creating a vivid self-deprecating analogy. The incongruity between the authoritative source domain (medical diagnosis) and the mundane target domain (egg tart) generates absurdist humor. [10]

The meme's comedic effect stems primarily from the dissonance between domains. Medical diagnoses typically concern serious health matters, whereas egg tarts represent trivial culinary items. This mismatch subverts linguistic norms to produce absurdity. [11] A April 2024 Xiaohongshu comment by @多好运 amplified this effect: “My doctor diagnosed me as an egg tart and advised more sun exposure—otherwise I'd turn crispier.” Here, fictional “medical advice” exaggerates the metaphor's humor through heightened contrast between diagnostic seriousness and tart fragility. Cognitively, this aligns with Lakoff's “conceptual blending,” where source/target domains fuse into a novel mental space, enhancing both entertainment value and shareability.

Beyond humor, the meme reflects key characteristics of internet culture. Firstly, it exemplifies the deconstruction of seriousness—medical authority is playfully undermined by juxtaposition with food, reflecting netizens' irreverence toward institutional discourses. Secondly, it metaphorically externalizes emotional states (e.g., vulnerability as “crumbliness”), offering cathartic relief through collective laughter. [12]

During dissemination, the meme spawned creative variants adapting its core metaphor. A Xiaohongshu post by @都说有点璇 (April 2024) declared: “Diagnosed as a ‘crispy-skinned college student’—threw out my back changing clothes,” replacing “egg tart” with a student archetype to critique academic pressures. Another by

@Aurora (October 2024) reimagined the target domain as “paper-shell walnut”—“seemingly tough but collapses when squeezed”—satirizing social anxiety. These adaptations demonstrate the metaphor’s dynamic cultural adaptability, per Lakoff’s framework. [13]

Zhang’s (2009) Multimodal Discourse Analysis (MDA) further elucidates the meme’s propagation. [4] MDA highlights how meaning is co-constructed through text, images, and audiovisual elements. On Douyin, user @四喜丸子 dramatized the meme via video, solemnly “announcing” their “egg tart diagnosis” while pantomiming fragility—enhancing humor through performative exaggeration. Shi (2021) notes such multimodal expressions leverage platform interactivity (likes, shares) to accelerate spread. A Weibo post by @我重生了 featuring a handheld egg tart photo captioned “Officially diagnosed today” sparked derivative memes (e.g., “crispy students,” “paper walnuts”), showcasing participatory culture’s role in metaphorical evolution. [14]

5. Conclusions

This study employed George Lakoff’s Conceptual Metaphor Theory to conduct an in-depth analysis of the internet meme “diagnosed as an egg tart.” The findings demonstrate that this meme constructs an absurd yet humorous metaphorical expression by mapping the source domain (medical diagnosis) onto the target domain (personal states or behaviors). The comedic effect arises from the incongruity between these domains, while the meme’s dissemination and variations highlight the creativity and dynamism inherent in internet language. Beyond its linguistic novelty, the meme reflects netizens’ tendency to deconstruct serious topics while simultaneously expressing contemporary youth’s emotional states and social needs. It has evolved into a significant form of social language within internet culture.

The cognitive function of metaphor in online discourse is particularly noteworthy. Not only does it facilitate the understanding and articulation of complex emotions, but it also alleviates modern-life pressures through humor and absurdity. This metaphorical mode of expression embodies young people’s unique attitudes toward self-identity and societal stressors, serving as a vehicle for collective expression.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The data were primarily drawn from Chinese social media platforms, suggesting the need for future cross-cultural comparisons involving memes from different linguistic contexts. Additionally, subsequent research could integrate other linguistic theories (e.g., memetics, pragmatics) to further examine meme propagation mechanisms and conduct cross-cultural analyses to identify universal patterns versus culture-specific variations.

In summary, this study provides a cognitive linguistics perspective for understanding internet language phenomena while offering new research pathways for applying metaphor theory to digital contexts. It underscores the importance of metaphorical thinking in shaping online communication and cultural expression in the digital age.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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