

Analysis Semantic Change of the Slang Evolution 2020-2025 in Social Media

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze changes in the meaning of English slang used on social media from 2020 to 2025. Social media has become the primary space for everyday language, especially among younger users. In this context, slang functions not only as informal communication but also as a marker of identity and group belonging. Platforms such as TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram accelerate the spread of slang, often leading to shifts in meaning driven by digital interaction, viral trends, and online communities. This research adopts a descriptive qualitative method by analyzing 21 slang terms that have undergone notable semantic shifts. Each term is examined based on its original meaning and its current use in digital contexts. The findings identify four types of semantic change: amelioration, pejoration, narrowing, and broadening. For instance, *dope* and *queen* now carry more positive meanings, while *chopped* has taken on a negative tone. Words like *ghost* and *main character* reflect narrowing, whereas *tea* and *cooked* represent metaphorical expansion. These findings suggest that changes in slang are influenced by the need for self-expression, humor, and group identity in digital environments. Thus, slang meaning shifts are both linguistic and cultural phenomena. This study contributes to semantic and sociolinguistic discussions on how language evolves in online spaces.

Keywords: *Semantic change; Slang; Social media.*

INTRODUCTION

Language is the most important means of communication in human life, is dynamic, and is always changing states that language reflects the way the human mind works (Chomsky, 2000). He sees language not only as a means of communication, but also as a reflection of human thinking abilities. According to him, everyone has an innate language ability called universal grammar, which is a set of basic rules that enable a person to understand and creatively construct new sentences. Smith & Culbertson (2025) add that language is naturally designed to make communication efficient—that is, to convey messages clearly, but without excessive effort on the part of the speaker. An example of this can be seen in the Differential Case Marking system, where grammatical markers are only used if the meaning of a sentence cannot be understood from the context. This shows that language developed out of a real need for communication. Meanwhile, Tran (2025) explain that language is not only learned through practice, but also through a conscious understanding of how language works. By understanding the structure and function of one's native

language, one can more easily learn other languages. Thus, language can be understood as a complex system that not only functions for communication, but also reflects thinking abilities, ways of learning, and adaptation to social environments and situations.

Linguistics is a field of study that examines how language is formed, used in everyday life, develops over time, and plays a role in human life. This science combines approaches from the humanities, social sciences, and cognitive sciences, viewing language as a system of symbols used by humans to convey complex thoughts (Jassim, 2025). Linguistics is frequently referred to as the science that explores how humans use various means such as speech organs in spoken language or hands in sign language to communicate and structure their thoughts. This field also considers both abstract elements and physical aspects involved in language use.

Semantics is a field of linguistics that focuses specifically on meaning and is at a higher analytical level than language pronunciation (phonetics and phonology), word form (morphology), and sentence structure (syntax) (Chen, 2024). Semantics can be understood as a branch of linguistics that deals with meaning, particularly in the context of the relationship between linguistic symbols and the meanings they represent. The main focus of this study lies in how linguistic symbols are associated with meaning, rather than simply studying meaning as a standalone entity (Feist, 2022).

Semantic change refers to the evolution of a word's meaning over time, influenced by a number of linguistic processes, such as expansion, reduction, and refinement (positive change), negative influence (negative change), and the use of metaphor and metonymy (Asri, 2024). Semantic change is seen as a type of linguistic renewal that alters the lexical meaning of a word, and this change contributes significantly to the formation of different semantic structures within a language (Chen, 2024). In addition, semantic change is recognized as a universal linguistic phenomenon that has been extensively studied by linguists. One of its most relevant social forms is the reinterpretation of old words with new meanings, reflecting changes in social norms, cultural values, and public discourse (Gao, 2024). Thus, semantic change can be viewed not only as a linguistic process, but also as a reflection of the way language adapts to the evolution of thought, culture, and human communication. Language changes indicate changes in the social, cultural, and technological aspects of society. In the field of linguistics, semantics is the part that studies meaning in language, including how the meaning of words can change or develop over time.

One of the vital elements in semantics is semantic change, which is the shift of a word's meaning from its original meaning to a new meaning. This type of change

can include amelioration (better meaning), pejoration (worse meaning), narrowing, extension, as well as the use of metaphor and metonymy. This process is often influenced by social factors, culture, and the ever-changing communication needs of society.

The growth of digital technology, particularly through social media, has accelerated the process of language change. Social media such as Twitter, Instagram and TikTok have become new places to interact, allowing users to create and spread informal language, including slang terms. Slang is commonly used by certain groups as a way to express identity, familiarity and close social relationships. In the digital environment, slang evolves quickly and often undergoes changes in meaning influenced by trends, algorithms and group culture in cyberspace.

Slang refers to informal and unconventional language marked by inventive and casual expressions that mirror current social, cultural, technological, and media developments (Yusuf et al., 2023). Slang refers to informal words or expressions commonly used in specific contexts, especially among members of certain social groups (Muzani & Lotfie, 2024). Furthermore, Slang consists of widely recognized, up-to-date vocabulary that tends to be viewed as less refined compared to both formal language and polite informal speech. It's often employed to reinforce group identity, break conventional grammar rules, and signal casual or non-formal communication. More than that, slang highlights how language constantly evolves and reflects human creativity in expressing ideas through new forms (Syafaah & Haryanto, 2024). Slang is a dynamic, creative form of informal language that is influenced by social and technological changes. It is not only a means of expression, but also a marker of group identity.

Social media encompasses a range of digital platforms that enable users to exchange thoughts and information with one another (Aichner et al., 2020). Social media functions as a tool for exchanging messages and sharing information, and it has integrated into the daily routines of people across all segments of society (Indra & Marhamah, 2024). Social media consists of various digital platforms and has become an integral part of people's daily lives, not only facilitating the exchange of ideas and information. Therefore, social media plays a decisive role not only as a communication tool but also as a space where social interaction, information flow, and daily routines are increasingly formed and influenced.

Several studies have shown dynamic meaning change in the use of slang on social media. Rafikovna found that slang used on Twitter undergoes various meaning changes, including pejoration, metaphor, and narrowing, and is influenced by users' emotions (Rafikovna, 2023). Meanwhile, Rahman et al. showed that meaning change is the most common type of alteration in internet slang. They

emphasized the significance of morphosemantic analysis in understanding the relationship between form and function in digital languages (Rahman et al., 2022). Research conducted by Zhang et al. shows that the spread of slang terms on social media is now not only influenced by famous figures (influencers), but also by the collective involvement of ordinary users (crowd) (Zhang et al., 2016). This suggests that the popularity of a term is highly dependent on its widespread use in online communities, and not on the social status of users.

In the context of the younger generation, Ayu & Haryanto examined the use of slang on TikTok and found that the meaning of slang on the platform is often performative, multimodal, and influenced by humor, visual expression, and repetition (Syafaah & Haryanto, 2024). This finding is in line with Eckert view that language is a form of social practice, where meaning is indexical - indicating users' attitudes, identities, and social positions (Eckert, 2019).

While these studies make important contributions, most still have limitations. Some only focus on a single platform such as Twitter, or use data samples that are limited in number and time period. In addition, there are not many studies that specifically examine changes in slang meaning with a systematic semantic approach based on classifications such as amelioration, pejoration, narrowing, and broadening, and consider socio-cultural aspects and digital characteristics in the 2020 to 2025 timeframe, a highly dynamic period due to the pandemic, the online cultural revolution, and changes in global communication patterns.

This research aims to answer this void by analyzing the meaning changes in English slang used on social media, especially Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok during the period 2020 to 2025. In addition to semantically classifying the types of meaning changes, this research will also explore the sociocultural factors that influence the transformation of slang meaning in the digital era. Thus, this research is expected to contribute to the fields of digital semantics and sociolinguistics, as well as become a reference for language learners and observers of contemporary popular culture.

METHODS

Subject of Research

The subjects of this research were linguistic data in the form of user-produced content taken from three major social media platforms: Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. These platforms were chosen because they are actively used by young people and serve as dynamic spaces for the creation and spread of new slang vocabulary. The data collected consisted of captions, comments, hashtags, short video narratives, and other textual or spoken expressions that contained English slang. The time span of the data collection covered the years 2020 to 2025,

representing a period of active slang development in digital communication.

Instrument

The main instrument in this study was the researcher, who functioned as the primary observer, data collector, and meaning analyst throughout the process. Supporting instruments included digital documentation, such as screenshots, video excerpts, and text samples from relevant social media posts. To strengthen the interpretation of slang meanings, several online slang dictionaries including *Urban Dictionary* and previous linguistic studies (e.g., Ulfah, 2021) were used as reference materials. This qualitative descriptive method was applied to provide an in-depth understanding of meaning change within authentic contexts of language use. As stated by Creswell (2014), qualitative research aims to explore and interpret the subjective meanings formed by individuals or groups toward social phenomena. Likewise, Wiles (2019) emphasized that qualitative studies rely on descriptive, non-numerical data to examine how people perceive and respond to different situations.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study were systematically collected using observation and note-taking techniques, focusing on documenting the emergence and usage of contemporary slang expressions within various online interaction platforms. The data collection process involved three sequential steps. First, the researcher concentrated on identifying slang terms that demonstrated high frequency or gained significant popularity during the research period. Second, the researcher proceeded to collect contextual examples of these terms, extracting them from posts, comments, or video transcripts to accurately illustrate their usage in genuine communicative settings. Finally, the selected data were meticulously documented using screenshots or detailed transcriptions to prepare the units for rigorous analysis.

For the data analysis, each identified slang term underwent a thorough semantic analysis. This analysis commenced by comparing the term's established, original dictionary meaning with its newly adopted meaning within digital communication discourse. The results of this comparison were then used to classify the semantic shifts into four distinct categories of meaning change: Amelioration (a shift toward a more positive meaning), Pejoration (a shift toward a more negative meaning), Narrowing (acquiring a more specific or limited meaning), and Extension (acquiring a broader or more general meaning). Furthermore, the analysis went beyond linguistic structure by considering the sociocultural factors that catalyzed these changes, such as expressions of group identity, the influence of viral trends, and communication patterns unique to specific online platforms. To ensure the

accuracy and consistency of the findings, triangulation was implemented by cross-referencing the collected data across multiple online sources and validating the semantic interpretations against existing established linguistic references.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results show that there are at least 20 slang words that are most used in 2020-2025 on social media, especially on the TikTok, Twitter and Instagram platforms. On the TikTok platform there are 13 slang words, on the Twitter or X platform there are 5 slang words and Instagram 2 slang words. From the analysis of the 20 slang words, it was found that the dominant types of meaning changes were Extension and amelioration. The complete data can be seen in the following table:

Table 1. Semantic Analysis of Contemporary Digital Slang

Slang	Old Meaning	New Meaning	Semantics Change	Platform
Cooked	Prepared (as in food)	Ruined, mentally exhausted, or messed up	Extension	Tiktok
Dope	Drugs; foolish person	Cool, impressive, excellent	Amelioration	Tiktok
FOMO	— (New acronym)	Fear of missing out on events or trends	Extension	Twitter
Savage	Brutal, uncivilized	Amazing	Amelioration	Tiktok
Spill the tea	To pour a cup of tea	To gossip or share juicy information	Extention	TikTok
Slay	To kill violently	To perform excellently, to look amazing	Amelioration	Instagram
Ghost	A supernatural spirit	To suddenly cut off communication	Narrowing	Twitter
Face Card	ID card with facial image	A person's physical attractiveness and social influence	Extension	TikTok
Drying	Ceasing to live	Laughing uncontrollably	Extension	Twitter
Chooped	Cut into pieces	unattractive or rejected	pejoration	TikTok
Core	The central or most important part	A style or TikTok aesthetic trend (e.g., cottagecore)	Extension	TikTok
FYP	For You Page (TikTok homepage)	A TikTok algorithm that defines popularity	Narrowing	TikTok
Skibidi	(nonsense phrase)	Absurd meme tren with uniwue style	Extension	TikTok
Rizz	From Charisma	The ability to attract or flirt smoothly	Narrowing	TikTok
Cap/No Cap	A hat/without a hat	Lie/not a lie	Extension	TikTok

Lit	On Fire	Exciting, lively, fun (esp. events or parties)	Amelioration	TikTok
Deadass	Informal slang term with no strong past use	Seriously, genuinely	Extension	TikTok
Queen	A female monarch	A strong, independent, and admirable woman	Amelioration	Instagram
Main Character	Protagonist in a story	Someone who feels or acts like the center of attention	Narrowing	Twitter
Caught in 4K	Captured in 4K video resolution	Clearly caught doing something bad or embarrassing	Extension	Twitter
Crush	To press or smash something wit force	A romantic attraction or admiration for someone	Extension	Instagram

Semantics Change Classification can be seen in the table:

Table 2. Classification Semantic Change

No	Semantics Change	Qty
1	Amelioration	5
2	Pejoration	1
3	Narrowing	4
4	Extention	11
Total		21

Language is a dynamic social phenomenon. The advancement of technology, especially the rise of social media, has become one of the primary catalysts for the emergence of new forms of linguistic communication. One of the most significantly evolving forms of language in the digital age is slang. Online slang not only enriches the vocabulary of a language but also becomes a highly active site for semantic change, the shifting of word meanings over time.

In the context of this study, The nature of semantic change varies depending on the type, and each type leads to different consequences. For instance, narrowing of meaning results in a reduction of quantity, as the word’s usage becomes more limited and specific. In contrast, broadening leads to an increase in quantity by expanding the scope of a word’s application to more referents. Meanwhile, pejoration, where a word’s meaning shifts toward a more negative connotation, causes a decline in its perceived quality. On the other hand, amelioration, which involves a shift toward a more positive meaning, enhances the word’s qualitative value. These distinctions illustrate how semantic change can impact both the scope and the evaluative nature of word meanings over time (Ullmann, 1962). Based on 20 examples of popular slang on platforms such as TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram, the following is an in-depth analysis of the types of semantic change identified.

Amelioration

Amelioration refers to a process in which a word takes on a more positive meaning than its original connotation (Traugott, 2007). Within the context of social media slang, this phenomenon is relatively prevalent and reflects a shift in social attitudes toward words that once carried negative or neutral meanings.

A notable example is the word *dope*, which historically referred to narcotics (especially heroin), bearing negative and dangerous connotations. However, in contemporary usage—particularly among youth on social media—*dope* has acquired a more positive sense, becoming synonymous with “cool” or “awesome.” A similar change can be seen in *savage*, which originally meant wild, uncivilized, or brutal, but is now often used as praise for someone who is bold, brutally honest, or impressively confident.

Likewise, *slay*, which literally means to kill, is now used to describe someone who appears outstanding, self-assured, or extremely impressive. Even the term *queen*, which once referred specifically to a female monarch, has taken on a new social function as a compliment toward women who are strong, elegant, and empowered. The word *lit*, formerly used to describe something that is ignited or burning, is now a synonym for an exciting or lively atmosphere or event. This process of amelioration shows how word meanings evolve to reflect the collective perception of digital society toward social expression and symbolic status.

Pejoration

In contrast to amelioration, pejoration is a process where a word acquires a more negative or derogatory meaning (Traugott, 2007). In the data examined, the term *chopped* exemplifies this clearly. Literally meaning “cut” or “sliced,” the word has evolved into a derogatory slang term used by young TikTok users to describe someone perceived as unattractive.

This shift illustrates how slang can contribute to the construction of new social values, including discriminatory or superficial judgments based on physical appearance. In this case, pejoration reflects social dynamics that are not always positive, as it reinforces narrow beauty standards and externalized evaluations.

Narrowing

Narrowing refers to the process in which a word’s meaning becomes more specific or limited than its original scope (Traugott, 2007). A clear example is the word *ghost*, which originally referred to a supernatural spirit or apparition. In the context of social media, however, it has taken on a highly specific social meaning: the act of suddenly cutting off communication in a relationship without explanation. This narrowed meaning is relevant only in interpersonal or romantic digital interactions.

A similar transformation occurs in the phrase main character. Initially used in literary and cinematic contexts to denote a protagonist, the term is now employed metaphorically—especially on TikTok—to describe someone who believes themselves to be the center of attention in real life. While its connotation can be positive or negative, the meaning has nonetheless narrowed from a fictional role to a specific social identity in digital culture.

This narrowing process reflects how slang adapts existing words to better fit the social and cultural conditions of today's media landscape, which emphasizes identity performance and self-expression.

Extension

Extension or broadening happens when a word's meaning grows to cover new situations that were not part of its original meaning (Traugott, 2007). This linguistic occurrence is particularly noticeable on social media, where language quickly changes due to user engagement, creativity, and cultural movements.

An illustrative example is the informal term "cooked." Historically, it described food that was made by applying heat. However, in the age of TikTok, this term has evolved to refer to someone who is mentally drained, physically exhausted, or emotionally overloaded. The phrase "Bro's cooked" now humorously refers to someone who is utterly exhausted or unable to go on.

Another expression, "deadass," did not have a significant formal history but has evolved through online conversations to signify "seriously" or "genuinely." For example, "I'm deadass tired" conveys a deep sense of sincerity, illustrating how casual phrases can acquire defined meanings through frequent social interaction.

In the same way, the term "dying" used to exclusively refer to the conclusion of life. On platforms such as Twitter, it is now frequently utilized to convey intense enjoyment, as seen in the phrase "I'm dying from laughter." This change demonstrates how intense phrases are adapted for comedic emphasis.

The expression "spill the tea" originally described the actual action of pouring tea, but it has since evolved to mean sharing gossip or disclosing intriguing news. This expression has become very popular on TikTok and Instagram, highlighting how common phrases are transformed into idiomatic expressions.

"Cap / no cap," which comes from references to hats, has also changed in meaning over time. Currently, the term "cap" refers to a falsehood, whereas "no cap" signifies honesty. This change shows the imaginative reallocation of language to convey truthfulness or falsehood.

The term "face card" originally referred to an official identification document that includes a person's photograph. On TikTok, it currently signifies an individual's appeal and standing. The phrase "her face card never declines" emphasizes

attractiveness and social standing, particularly within the realms of fashion and influencer culture.

Another instance is "core," which has traditionally referred to the central or most significant aspect of something. On TikTok, it has become a term added at the end to classify different styles or ways of living, including cottagecore, goblincore, and weirdcore. This demonstrates how digital environments foster language innovation related to personal identity and style.

The term "FOMO" (Fear of Missing Out), although a recently created acronym, has expanded in meaning to include various social anxieties associated with missing events, trends, or experiences. It is often utilized on Twitter to convey the unease of feeling left out in a highly connected environment.

The term "skibidi," which did not have any previous significance, has transformed into a popular meme trend that represents chaotic and absurd humor. Its expansion demonstrates that even meaningless words can acquire cultural significance through shared usage and the practice of remixing in culture.

Similarly, the term "crush" initially described the action of physically pressing or breaking something. Currently, especially on platforms such as Instagram, the term has been broadened to express romantic emotions or admiration, particularly among teenagers and young adults.

Finally, "caught in 4K" used to describe ultra-high-definition video quality. In contemporary social media language, it now refers to an individual being unmistakably caught in the act of doing something inappropriate, frequently employed in a humorous manner to reveal falsehoods or shameful actions.

These instances of expansion highlight the ability of language to be flexible and adaptable in the digital era. Words are not restricted to their initial meanings anymore; rather, their definitions are influenced by cultural context, how communities use them, and their social roles on the internet. According to Traugott (2007), this type of widening in meaning shows how speakers reassess words to meet emerging communication requirements—an occurrence that is particularly heightened in quickmoving, meme-focused spaces such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter.

Changes in slang meaning on social media do not occur randomly. There are a number of social and cultural factors that are the main drivers in this process, including:

Digital Platform Dynamics

Every social media platform possesses a unique culture of communication. For instance, TikTok highlights visual and expressive performances, resulting in the creation of words such as *slay*, *rizz*, or *main character*, which indicate the portrayal

of identity and desired aesthetics. Conversely, Twitter emphasizes social commentary and critique, leading to the emergence of derogatory labels such as Karen or simp (Zhang et al., 2016). These differences emphasize the impact of platform-specific features like TikTok's algorithm-based content distribution or Twitter's limited character count on both user communication and the evolution of language. Therefore, changes in meaning frequently reflect the distinct communication values and opportunities offered by each digital environment.

Collective Identity and Community Culture

Communities such as feminists and youth subcultures (Gen Z) play a central role in redefining the meaning of language. They use language as a medium for expressing identity and solidarity. Terms like "queen," "slay," and "face card" reflect community values that emphasize self-affirmation and social performance (Eckert, 2019).

Virality and Algorithms

The power of virality is the primary driver of the spread and transformation of slang meanings. Social media algorithms accelerate the spread of phrases or trends, even those that initially had no meaning, such as "skibidi," turning them into cultural icons in a short time (Rahman et al., 2022).

Social Criticism and Collective Awareness

The pejorative nature of terms like "Karen" and "simp" reflects the dynamics of criticism toward social norms, gender, and racism. This demonstrates how slang language serves as a tool to voice inequality in a concise and easily spreadable form (Rafikovna, 2023).

CONCLUSION

This study is based on data from social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok and identifies several common English expressions whose meanings have changed between 2020 and 2025. During data collection and analysis, 21 common expressions were identified whose meanings have changed significantly. Social media users, especially the younger generation, often use these expressions in informal communication. These results show that social media plays an important role in shaping and spreading new forms of language, including slang. By comparing the old and new meanings, a clear semantic change can be seen. Many terms have been reinterpreted, expanded, or narrowed to meet the expressive and cultural needs of internet users. For example, the word "flex" originally meant "to show off one's muscles," but today it means "to brag" on social media. Similarly, the word "bet" was previously associated with gambling, but today it means "ready" or "okay" as a form of consent. The changes in meaning can be divided into four main categories: upgrading, downgrading, narrowing, and broadening. Each change

reflects the language's adaptation to changing social and cultural dynamics. Factors such as the spread of content, the use of humor, and slang as a collective identity marker influence the changes in meaning. Therefore, the changes in meaning in slang on social media are not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also an expression of the dynamic and changing social reality in the digital communication age.

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