

Investigation of Lexical Changes and Vocabulary Meanings of Slang in Millennial and Generation Z on Social Media

¹Muhamad Alif Sidqi, ²Sri Handayani, ³Tatu Siti Rohbiah

^{1,2,3}Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Maulana Hasanuddin Banten, Indonesia

¹221230055.muhamadalif@uinbanten.ac.id, ²221230047.sri@uinbanten.ac.id,

³tatu.siti.rohbiah@uinbanten.ac.id

ABSTRACT

The use of slang has undergone significant changes in line with the development of technology and social media. This article aims to investigate the lexical changes and shifts in meaning of slang vocabulary used by Millennials and Generation Z across various social media platforms. This study employs a literature review method by examining journals, scholarly articles, and other relevant sources that discuss the phenomenon of slang in the digital context. The findings reveal that slang vocabulary has not only expanded quantitatively but also experienced semantic shifts influenced by social, cultural, and digital technological factors. Furthermore, it was found that Millennials and Gen Z tend to create and disseminate new terms rapidly through social media, shaping group identity and user solidarity. This study is expected to contribute to the understanding of language dynamics in the digital era, particularly in the field of sociolinguistics.

Keywords: *Lexical change; Slang; Millennial generation; Z generation; Social media.*

INTRODUCTION

Language as a medium of communication, is never static. It continuously evolves in response to social, cultural, and technological changes in society. The advancement of information and communication technology, particularly the emergence and rapid proliferation of social media, has significantly influenced language practices. One of the most notable impacts of this phenomenon is the emergence and development of slang vocabulary, especially among the millennial and Generation Z cohorts (Dewi, 2025). These generations have grown and matured alongside the digital era and are recognized for their intensive use of social media platforms, making them key agents in shaping new linguistic trends in virtual spaces.

Slang as a form of non-standard linguistic expression, often reflects group identity, social intimacy, linguistic creativity, and responses to sociocultural shifts. The use of slang on social media extends beyond informal expressions or humor; it represents the dynamics of popular culture, contemporary issues, and the lifestyles of young people. In this context, platforms such as Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and messaging applications like WhatsApp and Telegram serve as primary mediums for both the dissemination and innovation of slang terms (Hijrah et al., 2024). This gives rise to fascinating linguistic phenomena in which vocabulary undergoes lexical and semantic transformations within relatively short periods.

Lexical changes in slang may include word shortening (clipping), acronym

formation, wordplay, or the creation of entirely new terms (neologisms) that are not found in formal dictionaries. Meanwhile, semantic shifts can involve generalization, specialization, pejoration, or amelioration of meaning. For instance, the Indonesian word *panik* (panic), which formally denotes a state of anxiety or fear, has acquired a new meaning among Gen Z social media users, describing exaggerated surprise or excitement in humorous or unexpected contexts. These shifts are often influenced by the communicative context, pop culture, and the spontaneous, fast-paced nature of digital interactions.

This phenomenon warrants in-depth study not only as a linguistic symptom but also as a reflection of broader social processes. Understanding the lexical and semantic changes in slang can offer insights into how language adapts to the communicative needs of its users and how it functions as a tool for negotiating identity and values within the digital society.

This study aims to investigate the lexical changes and semantic shifts in slang vocabulary used by millennials and Generation Z on social media. The method employed is a literature review, involving the analysis of academic publications, digital articles, and relevant linguistic documentation. This approach is chosen to obtain a comprehensive understanding of linguistic transformation in the digital context. Through this study, it is expected that theoretical contributions can be made to the fields of sociolinguistics and semantics, as well as to broader discussions about the role of language in the ever-evolving digital communication ecosystem.

METHODS

Subject of Research

This study adopts a qualitative approach utilizing the method of literature review. This methodological approach is deemed appropriate as its primary objective is the in-depth investigation and interpretation of theoretical and conceptual data derived exclusively from credible written sources. The subject of research is defined by the core linguistic phenomena under investigation: slang usage, lexical change, and semantic shift within the digital communication practices of Millennials and Generation Z in social media environments.

Instrument

The main instrument in this study is the researcher, who acts as the primary tool for identifying, selecting, interpreting, and synthesizing the theoretical data. The core material or secondary instrument utilized consists of a wide range of credible written sources, including academic publications such as books, peer-reviewed journal articles, theses, dissertations, and reliable digital documents. These sources serve as the data repository, focusing specifically on established theories and empirical findings relevant to digital slang, semantic evolution, and generational

linguistic patterns.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection process emphasizes the use of secondary data. This process involves systematically searching, locating, and retrieving academic publications pertinent to the subject matter. Relevant articles and chapters are selected based on their contribution to theoretical understanding and their empirical relevance. The data analysis employs content analysis and synthesizing techniques. The researcher analyzes the retrieved literature to establish conceptual frameworks, identify key themes, compare existing theories of lexical and semantic change, and synthesize the findings to construct a comprehensive understanding of how digital slang is formed and how its meaning shifts among Millennials and Generation Z. The final interpretation aims to draw cohesive conclusions regarding the dynamics of contemporary digital linguistic evolution.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Slang refers to informal lexical expressions typically used by specific social groups to signify identity, solidarity, and group affiliation. In linguistic studies, slang is categorized as a form of non-standard language that is dynamic, innovative, and often ephemeral. Slang comprises vocabulary that is informal and generally excluded from formal discourse, yet widely used in casual and familiar contexts, especially among peers. It frequently emerges as a linguistic response to standard norms, functioning as a tool for establishing in-group exclusivity.

Slang is characterized by the use of distinctive and unconventional words, semantic deviations from formal meanings, and rapid turnover of terms. In the context of social media, slang evolves rapidly, driven by algorithmic content dissemination, viral culture, and extensive digital interactions. Slang expressions on digital platforms are often derived from everyday speech, regional languages, foreign borrowings, abbreviations, as well as phonological and morphological modifications. Its constant evolution reflects not only linguistic creativity but also the socio-cultural dynamics of online communities.

Millennials, also known as Generation Y, refer to individuals born approximately between 1981 and 1996. This generation grew up during the transition from the analog to the digital era and experienced adolescence and early adulthood during the rapid development of information technology. Millennials are recognized for their adaptability to technology, their familiarity with the internet, and their active engagement with social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Generation Z or Gen Z comprises individuals born after the millennials, typically between 1997 and the early 2010s. Unlike millennials, Gen Z was born and

raised in a fully digital environment. They are often described as digital natives, having been exposed to digital devices and social media from an early age. Gen Z tends to be highly expressive and visual in their communication, favoring platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. Both generations play a significant role in the creation and dissemination of slang, particularly in online spaces. Their digital fluency and active participation in internet culture contribute to the emergence of new lexical forms that reflect the lifestyle, values, and communication trends distinctive to contemporary youth. These are some slang expressions that are commonly used by both generations.

Table 1. Semantic Change Analysis of Popular Slang Vocabulary in Social Media

Generation	Slang vocabulary	Initial Meaning	New Meaning (In Social Media)	Social Media	Type of Semantic Change
Millennial	Gaskeun	ayo jalan	<i>Lanjutkan atau Setuju</i>	Tiktok	Amelioration
	Sikat	benda	<i>hajar / melakukan sesuatu tanpa berfikir panjang</i>	Tiktok	Semantic shift
	Receh	Uang logam dengan nominal kecil	<i>Hal yang lucu tapi konyol (biasanya untuk lelucon)</i>	Tiktok	Pejoration
	Basi	Sudah tidak segar/rusak	<i>Sudah tidak menarik lagi</i>	Tiktok	Pejoration
	Ember	Benda	<i>“emang atau “iya bener”</i>	Tiktok	Semantic shift
Gen Z	Pick me	Pilih aku	<i>Julukan untuk orang yang mencari perhatian</i>	Tiktok	Pejoration
	chill	Dingin atau rasa dingin	<i>Tenang/santai</i>	Tiktok	Amelioration
	salty	Asin	<i>Kesal, ngambek atau tersinggung karea hal sepele</i>	Tiktok	Pejoration
	Ghost	Hantu/roh	<i>Menghilang tiba-tiba dari komunikasi tanpa kejelasan</i>	Tiktok	Metaphorical Extension
	Cringe	Mengerikan	<i>Sesuatu yang memalukan atau membuat tidak nyaman</i>	Tiktok	Semantic Shift

In today’s digital era, Millennials and Generation Z have emerged as the dominant agents of linguistic innovation, particularly through their extensive use of social media platforms. These platforms have become interactive and informal spaces where language is shaped, reshaped, and disseminated at an unprecedented pace. The use of slang among these generations is not merely a means of informal

expression, but also serves as a marker of group identity, solidarity, and even resistance against the perceived rigidity and limitations of standard language (Nur, 2016). One of the most salient features of contemporary slang usage is lexical change.

Young people demonstrate a high degree of linguistic creativity, constructing new words and expressions through various processes such as clipping, blending, acronym formation, and neologism. Words like *gabut* (a clipped form of *gaji buta*, meaning being idle or having nothing to do) and *japri* (short for *jalur pribadi*, meaning private message) exemplify how language is adapted for faster, more efficient communication (Hijrah et al., 2024). Furthermore, many slang expressions originate from or are influenced by foreign languages, particularly English, indicating a strong interplay between global and local cultures in the formation of contemporary lexicon. This phenomenon illustrates that slang vocabulary is not confined to local linguistic structures, but is instead a product of transnational interactions made possible by digital communication.

In addition to lexical innovations, semantic shifts also characterize the evolving nature of slang. Words that once had fixed dictionary definitions are often repurposed with entirely different meanings in digital contexts (Pendleton & Okolica, 2020). The term *healing*, for instance, has undergone semantic broadening—from its original association with psychological or physical recovery to a more colloquial usage referring to relaxation, vacations, or emotional release. Similarly, *receh*, which literally means "small coins," is now widely used to refer to jokes or trivial things that are amusing. Another example is *savage*, which originally carried negative connotations of brutality or wildness, but has been recontextualized as a compliment, describing someone who is bold, unapologetically honest, or assertive. These shifts reflect the ways in which meaning is negotiated and reshaped in accordance with evolving social and digital environments (Kustantinah et al., 2016). (Baghana, 2019)

The widespread use of slang is further amplified by the role of social media in accelerating linguistic change. The algorithmic nature of platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter facilitates the rapid spread of slang terms. Once a phrase gains traction through viral content, it is quickly adopted, replicated, and incorporated into everyday speech. Popular culture also plays a key role in legitimizing and disseminating slang, with celebrities, influencers, and public figures serving as influential language models. Terms like *gas*, *cringe*, *nolep*, and *auto* have transcended their digital origins and found a place in mainstream discourse, including advertising, broadcast media, and everyday conversations.

The adoption and adaptation of slang by Millennials and Gen Z highlight a linguistic culture that prioritizes speed, innovation, and expressive freedom. However, the ephemeral and contextual nature of slang presents unique challenges for linguistic documentation and language education. Slang tends to have a short lifespan, with terms rising and fading in popularity within brief periods, often in tandem with shifting cultural trends. Thus, studying slang is not only essential for understanding contemporary linguistic phenomena, but also for grasping broader cultural and social transformations. Through literature-based inquiry, it becomes clear that the lexical and semantic changes in slang used by Millennials and Generation Z reflect an accelerated evolution of language, driven by digital communication and shaped by the generational need for identity, connection, and authentic self-expression in the ever-changing digital landscape (Maghfira & Ariyanti, 2014).

The Dynamics of Lexical Change

Lexical changes in slang are evident through the emergence of neologisms (newly coined words), borrowings from foreign languages, word shortenings, and the creation of acronyms. For instance, the word "healing", which originates from English, has undergone semantic broadening in the Indonesian context to mean "engaging in enjoyable activities to relieve stress." Similarly, acronyms like "FYI", "OOTD", and "FOMO" have become part of everyday conversations, especially on platforms like Instagram and Twitter/X.

Generation Z tends to be more productive in creating and spreading slang through visual and audiovisual media such as TikTok and YouTube Shorts. The speed at which content goes viral on these platforms causes slang terms to evolve more rapidly than in previous generations. Slang is no longer only spread through text, but also through memes, short videos, and digital symbols that carry layered meaning.

Changes in Meaning and the Semiotics of Slang

In addition to word forms, slang meanings also undergo transformation. These semantic shifts may include: (1) Amelioration: a change toward a more positive meaning. For example, the word "gokil", which once had a negative connotation, is now used to express admiration or pleasant surprise; and (2) Pejoration: a shift toward a more negative connotation, as seen in the word "julid", which originally meant jealousy, but now refers to someone who criticizes or mocks others indirectly.

Ironic use: the use of words in a way that contradicts their literal meaning. For example, "santuy" (a playful alteration of santai, meaning relaxed) is often used ironically to describe extreme indifference or even despair.

These meanings function not only as tools of communication but also as social symbols loaded with identity, irony, and even implicit critique of established norms. In digital contexts, meaning is often multimodal—conveyed not only through words but also through emoji, tone, and visual cues. Therefore, interpreting slang requires sensitivity to the social and cultural background in which it is used.

The Role of Pop Culture and Social Context

Pop culture plays a central role in the emergence and dissemination of slang vocabulary among Millennials and Generation Z. Slang expressions often originate from entertainment contexts such as films, television series, music, reality shows, and influencer culture that thrives on social media. For example, the expression "I'm dead", which originally in Western contexts means literal death or emotional overwhelm, has been adapted in daily use by Gen Z Indonesians to express extreme amusement or surprise. This phenomenon is inseparable from the increasingly global nature of media consumption. Generation Z, in particular, has grown up in the internet age with access to various cross-cultural influences. They actively absorb, modify, and adopt language from global content into their local context. This process is referred to as linguistic glocalization, where global elements are localized creatively.

Beyond pop culture, slang is also shaped by social experiences and sociopolitical conditions. A striking example is the word "halu", originally a clinical term for "hallucination," which now informally describes someone who is delusional or fantasizing unrealistically. Such expressions often reflect a humorous response to daily struggles and serve as social coping mechanisms. Social contexts such as academic pressure, economic challenges, and relationship dynamics often lead to the creation of new expressions. In this sense, slang becomes an outlet for emotions and a medium for subtle social commentary. Studying slang, therefore, is not merely about language variation but also about understanding the underlying societal dynamics that shape it.

Differences in Usage Between Millennials and Generation Z

Although both generations are digital users, Millennials and Generation Z exhibit distinct characteristics in their use of slang. Millennials (born approximately between 1981–1996) represent a transitional generation that witnessed the shift from analog to digital technologies. They experienced the evolution from landline telephones to mobile devices, from print media to the internet, and from television to YouTube. Thus, the slang used by Millennials tends to be more stable and derived from early digital platforms such as forums (Kaskus), instant messaging apps (e.g., Yahoo Messenger, BBM), and the early stages of social media (Facebook, Twitter). (Baghana, 2019) Terms like "pertamax", "cendol gan", or "agan" are closely

associated with this digital era. In contrast, Generation Z (born approximately between 1997–2012) are true digital natives, having grown up with the internet, smartphones, and highly visual social platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Snapchat. Their slang changes more rapidly, is highly contextual, and often visual or audiovisual in nature. Expressions such as "gaskeun", "no debat", "cringe", or "slay" reflect Gen Z's linguistic creativity and tendency toward highly symbolic and short-lived language use. They also frequently use reaction terms—phrases used to instantly respond to a situation—such as "panik gak sih?" (aren't you panicking?), "valid banget" (very valid), or "auto insecure" (instantly insecure).

Generation Z also embraces multimodal communication, integrating text with visuals, audio, and even interactive elements. For this generation, language is not limited to words but also includes expressions, gestures, memes, and short-form video content. As such, understanding their slang requires broader knowledge of visual and cultural context.

Linguistic and Social Implications

The phenomenon of lexical and semantic changes in slang carries broad implications both in linguistic and social terms. Linguistically, it affirms the idea that language is dynamic, contextual, and adaptable to societal changes. Slang demonstrates how language users are capable of creatively forming new linguistic expressions suited to their daily communicative needs—even if these expressions fall outside the realm of formal or standardized language. In this sense, slang represents a form of linguistic innovation. From a semantic perspective, slang illustrates the creation of new meanings through processes such as generalization, specialization, and semantic shifts. These new meanings often include elements of irony, sarcasm, or hyperbole—phenomena not always addressed by traditional linguistic approaches. Socially, the use of slang plays a key role in shaping social and cultural identity among young people. Slang becomes a tool through which individuals express their belonging to certain groups—whether based on age, interest, or digital platform preference. It also often symbolizes resistance against formal structures such as academic norms, standardized language, or the authority of older generations (Rahman, 2018).

Furthermore, the widespread use of slang in daily life may blur the lines between formal and informal language. This presents challenges for education and linguistic policy, particularly in determining appropriate language standards for public domains. However, it also opens opportunities to develop more inclusive and responsive language curricula that reflect contemporary linguistic realities. In conclusion, lexical and semantic changes in slang are not merely casual linguistic

phenomena but rather reflections of how younger generations think, communicate, and navigate the complexities of the digital age.

CONCLUSION

Based on the literature study conducted, it can be concluded that lexical and semantic changes in slang vocabulary among Millennials and Generation Z represent a complex and dynamic linguistic phenomenon. Social media plays a major role as a space for language evolution, where slang functions not only as a means of communication but also as a symbol of identity, cultural expression, and a response to social change. Lexically, the emergence of neologisms, acronyms, and borrowings from foreign languages reflects a high degree of linguistic creativity influenced by technological development and global interaction. Semantically, slang undergoes various types of meaning shifts such as amelioration, pejoration, and ironic usage, enriching the diversity of meaning in digital communication. The differences in slang usage between Millennials and Generation Z reflect shifts in mindset, communication style, and the influence of different pop culture and media landscapes. Millennials tend to use more stable, text-based slang, while Generation Z shows a tendency toward rapidly evolving, visual, and multimodal forms of language. Overall, changes in slang vocabulary not only reflect the dynamics of language but also mirror the social, psychological, and cultural realities of the younger generation. Therefore, the study of slang cannot be separated from the surrounding social and technological contexts, and it plays a crucial role in understanding language development in the digital era.

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