



FROM STREETS TO SCREENS: YOUTH SLANG AS A DRIVER OF LANGUAGE CHANGE IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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ANNOTATION

This article examines youth slang as a dynamic force driving language change in the digital era, focusing on the transition of informal expressions from street-based interaction to online communication platforms. With the rapid expansion of social media, messaging applications, and digital communities, youth slang has gained unprecedented visibility and influence, accelerating processes of lexical innovation, semantic shift, and pragmatic change. Drawing on sociolinguistic and discourse-analytic perspectives, the study explores how young speakers creatively manipulate language to construct social identity, signal group membership, and negotiate meaning in digital spaces. Particular attention is paid to the role of multimodality, including emojis, abbreviations, and hybrid language forms, in reshaping contemporary slang usage. The article also discusses how digitally mediated youth slang contributes to the diffusion of non-standard forms into mainstream language, challenging traditional norms of correctness and standardization. By analyzing authentic examples from online discourse, the study highlights the interaction between technological affordances and linguistic creativity. The findings suggest that youth slang functions not only as a marker of generational identity but also as a significant catalyst for ongoing language change, reflecting broader social, cultural, and technological transformations in modern communication.

Introduction. Language is a dynamic and constantly evolving system that reflects social, cultural, and technological transformations within society. Linguistic change does not occur randomly; rather, it is closely connected to social practices, identity formation, and patterns of communication among speakers¹. One of the most influential agents of language change across time has been youth language, particularly youth slang. Traditionally associated with street culture, peer-group interaction, and informal spoken discourse, youth slang has long functioned as a marker of generational identity, creativity, and resistance to established linguistic norms². In the digital era, however, the nature, spread, and impact of youth slang have undergone profound transformation. With the rapid expansion of social media platforms, instant messaging applications, and online communities, youth slang has shifted from localized, face-to-face contexts to global, digitally mediated environments. This transition from streets to screens has intensified the role of youth slang as a significant driver of contemporary language change.

Youth slang can be broadly defined as a set of informal, non-standard lexical, semantic, and pragmatic features predominantly used by young speakers to express social alignment, group membership, and identity. Unlike stable linguistic varieties, slang is characterized by rapid innovation, short life cycles, and strong sensitivity to social trends. Sociolinguistic research has consistently shown that young speakers play a central role in introducing linguistic innovations, especially in the domains of vocabulary and discourse practices³. However, the emergence of digital communication has fundamentally altered the mechanisms through which slang is created, circulated, and institutionalized. Digital platforms allow for instantaneous interaction, mass exposure, and wide-scale dissemination, enabling slang expressions to cross geographical, linguistic, and cultural boundaries with unprecedented speed⁴.

The digital era has also blurred the traditional boundaries between spoken and written language. Youth slang increasingly appears in written digital forms such as social media posts, comments, captions, and private messages, where features of spoken interaction

are creatively adapted to textual environments⁵. Non-standard spelling, abbreviations, acronyms, and phonetic representations are commonly employed to simulate speech-like immediacy and emotional expressiveness. These practices challenge conventional assumptions about writing as formal, standardized, and norm-governed. As a result, youth slang in digital communication contributes to the reconfiguration of written language norms and expands the expressive resources available to contemporary speakers.

From a sociolinguistic perspective, youth slang functions as a powerful tool for identity construction. Identity is not a fixed attribute but an ongoing social process that is performed and negotiated through linguistic choices⁶. Young people use slang to index social belonging, distance themselves from older generations, and construct in-group solidarity. In digital spaces, identity performance becomes even more complex, as linguistic practices interact with visual elements, platform-specific conventions, and audience design. Slang expressions often convey stances such as humor, irony, intimacy, or resistance, making them essential pragmatic resources in online interaction⁷. The public visibility of these practices on social media amplifies their influence, allowing youth slang to reach audiences far beyond its original communities of use.

A distinctive feature of youth slang in the digital age is its multimodal nature. Unlike traditional street slang, which relies primarily on spoken interaction, digital slang integrates textual, visual, and symbolic modes of communication. Emojis, gifs, reaction images, and memes often function as pragmatic markers that modify or reinforce linguistic meaning⁸. Memes, in particular, represent a form of collective creativity in which language, image, and cultural knowledge are combined to produce shared meanings. This multimodality reflects broader shifts in communicative practices and challenges linguists to expand analytical frameworks beyond purely verbal language⁹.

Globalization and digital connectivity have further transformed youth slang into a transnational phenomenon. English-based slang terms, internet abbreviations, and meme-related expressions are frequently borrowed and adapted by young speakers of other

¹ Labov, W. (2001). Principles of linguistic change, Volume 2: Social factors. Blackwell.

² Karimova, O. (2024). Linguopragmatic study of phraseological units with a somatic component in English and Uzbek languages. *Actual Problems of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(9), 327-338.

³ Mamatqulova Marhabo. (2020). DEVELOPMENT OF THE CATEGORY OF MODALITY IN PHILOLOGY AND THEIR COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS. *CURRENT RESEARCH JOURNAL OF PHILOLOGICAL SCIENCES*, 3(01), 40-45. <https://doi.org/10.37547/philological-crjps-03-01-08>

⁴ Androutsopoulos, J. (2014). Mediatization and sociolinguistic change: Key concepts, research traditions, open issues. *Sociolinguistic Studies*, 8(2), 259-293. <https://doi.org/10.1558/sols.v8i2.259>

⁵ Crystal, D. (2011). *Internet linguistics: A student guide*. Routledge.

⁶ qizi Karimova, O. A. (2025, July). Linguistic, Cultural, and Pragmatic Challenges in Translating Idiomatic Expressions from English to Uzbek. In *International Conference on Global Trends and Innovations in Multidisciplinary Research* (Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 34-36).

⁷ Tagliamonte, S. A. (2016). *Teen talk: The language of adolescents*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139514769>

⁸ Karimova, O. (2025). A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF POETIC DEVICES: ALLITERATION, ASSONANCE, AND ENJAMBMENT IN ENGLISH AND UZBEK POETRY. *QO'QON UNIVERSITETI XABARNOMASI*, 14, 192-194. <https://doi.org/10.54613/ku.v14i.1161>

⁹ Marhaboxon, M. (2025). "Intercultural Communication and Linguo-Cultural Specificity in Film Texts: Uzbek and Western Cinematography". *Advances in Science and Education*, 1(5), 16-18. <https://doi.org/10.70728/edu.v01.i05.006>

languages, resulting in hybrid forms, code-mixing, and translanguaging practices¹⁰. This process highlights the role of youth slang as a site of language contact and cultural exchange. At the same time, it raises critical questions about linguistic dominance, cultural homogenization, and the local appropriation of global linguistic resources. Youth slang thus reflects the tension between global digital culture and local sociolinguistic identities.

The role of youth language in driving linguistic change has been widely discussed in sociolinguistic theory. Variationist approaches emphasize that language change often originates in informal speech communities, where normative constraints are weaker and innovation is socially valued. Ethnographic studies of youth communities further demonstrate that linguistic variation is closely tied to social meaning and identity work¹¹. In the digital era, these processes are accelerated by technological affordances such as algorithmic visibility, influencer culture, and viral circulation. A slang term used by a small peer group can quickly gain widespread recognition through digital networks, illustrating how technology reshapes traditional pathways of linguistic diffusion.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to digital discourse, youth slang remains underexplored in terms of its long-term structural impact on language. While many slang expressions are short-lived, others become entrenched in general usage, gradually losing their association with youth identity and informal contexts. Words and expressions that were once considered substandard increasingly appear in mainstream media, advertising, and public discourse. This process challenges traditional distinctions between standard and non-standard language and raises questions about linguistic authority and normativity in the digital age.

The growing presence of youth slang in educational contexts has also sparked debate among linguists and educators. Some argue that extensive exposure to informal digital language may negatively affect learners' academic writing and formal communication skills. Others contend that youth slang demonstrates linguistic creativity, adaptability, and pragmatic competence rather than linguistic decline. From this perspective, understanding youth slang is essential for developing more realistic and inclusive approaches to language education that acknowledge the realities of contemporary communication.

This article aims to contribute to current linguistic research by examining youth slang as a driver of language change in the digital era. Adopting a sociolinguistic and discourse-analytic framework, the study explores how slang emerges, functions, and spreads within online environments. By analyzing authentic digital data, the article highlights the interaction between linguistic innovation, identity construction, and technological mediation. Particular attention is given to the ways in which youth slang challenges traditional linguistic norms and participates in broader processes of language evolution.

The significance of this study lies in its attempt to integrate classical sociolinguistic theories of youth language with recent research on digital communication. By conceptualizing youth slang not as a marginal or ephemeral phenomenon but as a central mechanism of language change, the article calls for a reconsideration of established models of linguistic variation and change. In doing so, it positions youth slang as both a reflection of contemporary social realities and an active force shaping the future of language in an increasingly digital world.

Literature review. Research on youth language has occupied a central position in sociolinguistics for several decades, particularly in relation to language variation, identity construction, and linguistic change. Early variationist studies, most notably those by Labov, established that linguistic change often originates among younger speakers, whose speech exhibits higher levels of innovation and variability compared to older generations. These studies demonstrated that youth play a crucial role in the diffusion of new linguistic forms, especially in informal communicative settings.

Building on variationist foundations, ethnographic approaches to youth language have emphasized the social meanings attached to linguistic practices. Eckert's work on adolescent communities highlights that youth language cannot be understood solely in terms of age, but must be analyzed in relation to social categories such as peer groups, lifestyles, and identities. From this perspective, slang functions not

merely as a set of lexical items but as a symbolic resource through which young speakers construct and negotiate social belonging.

Slang has traditionally been viewed as a peripheral and unstable component of language, characterized by rapid change and limited social prestige. Scholars such as Allan and Burridge describe slang as a form of expressive vocabulary that thrives in informal contexts and often resists institutional regulation. Despite its marginal status, research has shown that slang frequently serves as a precursor to broader linguistic change, with certain expressions eventually entering mainstream usage.

With the rise of digital communication, sociolinguistic research has increasingly turned its attention to online discourse. Studies of computer-mediated communication (CMC) have demonstrated that digital platforms blur the boundaries between spoken and written language. Crystal argues that internet language represents a hybrid mode of communication, combining features of speech and writing in innovative ways. In this context, youth slang has found fertile ground for expansion, as digital environments encourage creativity, speed, and informality.

More recent research specifically addresses youth slang in social media contexts. Androutsopoulos emphasizes that online platforms provide new spaces for identity performance, where linguistic choices are shaped by audience design, platform norms, and multimodal affordances. Youth slang in digital spaces is not only written but also visually and symbolically enriched through emojis, memes, and gifs, which function as integral components of meaning-making.

The globalization of digital communication has further influenced the development of youth slang. Several studies highlight the widespread borrowing of English-based slang and internet abbreviations by speakers of other languages, leading to hybrid forms and code-mixing practices. Pennycook's work on global Englishes and linguistic hybridity illustrates how global linguistic resources are locally reinterpreted and adapted, rather than simply adopted. Youth slang thus emerges as a key site of linguistic contact and cultural exchange.

Despite the growing body of research on digital discourse, gaps remain in the systematic analysis of youth slang as a long-term driver of language change. Much of the existing literature focuses on descriptive accounts of slang usage or platform-specific practices, while fewer studies examine how digital youth slang contributes to broader processes of linguistic standardization, norm-shifting, and institutional acceptance. This gap underscores the need for research that integrates classical sociolinguistic theories with contemporary digital discourse analysis.

In addition, debates persist regarding the impact of youth slang on language education and standard language norms. While some scholars express concern about the potential negative effects of informal digital language on academic literacy, others argue that youth slang reflects advanced pragmatic competence and linguistic creativity. Understanding these dynamics is essential for developing more nuanced perspectives on language change in the digital age.

Methodology. This study adopts a qualitative research design to investigate youth slang as a driver of language change in the digital era. A qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for exploring the social meanings, pragmatic functions, and identity-related dimensions of slang, which cannot be adequately captured through numerical analysis. The methodology is grounded in sociolinguistics and discourse analysis and focuses on naturally occurring digital language use. To ensure depth and interpretive richness, the study employs four qualitative methods: digital discourse analysis, qualitative content analysis, sociolinguistic interpretation, and multimodal analysis.

Digital Discourse Analysis. Digital discourse analysis is used as the primary method to examine how youth slang is produced and negotiated in online environments. This method focuses on language as it is used in authentic digital contexts, such as social media posts, comments, and online interactions. The analysis pays close attention to lexical choices, informal expressions, pragmatic markers, and interactional patterns characteristic of youth slang. By examining discourse within its communicative context, this method allows for an interpretation of how slang functions in meaning-making processes and how it reflects broader patterns of language change in digitally mediated communication.

¹⁰ García, O., & Wei, L. (2014). *Translanguaging: Language, bilingualism and education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

¹¹ Eckert, P. (2000). *Linguistic variation as social practice: The linguistic construction of identity in Belten High*. Blackwell.

Qualitative Content Analysis. Qualitative content analysis is employed to systematically categorize and interpret slang expressions appearing in digital texts. Rather than counting frequency, this method focuses on identifying recurring themes, patterns of usage, and semantic innovations within youth slang. Slang items are grouped according to their communicative functions, such as expressing solidarity, humor, irony, or evaluation. This approach enables the researcher to trace how meanings are constructed and transformed across different digital contexts, highlighting the creative and adaptive nature of youth slang without relying on statistical measurement.

Sociolinguistic Interpretation. Sociolinguistic interpretation is applied to examine the social meanings and identity-related functions of youth slang. This method draws on established sociolinguistic theories of identity, style, and language variation to interpret how slang indexes social belonging, generational identity, and stance. The analysis considers factors such as in-group versus out-group communication, peer alignment, and resistance to linguistic norms. By situating slang within its social and cultural context, this method reveals how youth language both reflects and shapes social relations in the digital era.

Multimodal Analysis. Given the multimodal nature of digital communication, multimodal analysis is used to examine the interaction between linguistic and non-linguistic elements in youth slang. This method explores how emojis, gifs, memes, and visual symbols function alongside verbal language to convey meaning and pragmatic intent. Multimodal analysis allows for a more comprehensive understanding of how youth slang operates beyond text alone, demonstrating how visual and symbolic resources contribute to identity construction and language innovation in online spaces.

Results. This study examined youth slang in digital communication and its role as a driver of language change. Analysis of social media posts, messaging apps, and online comments revealed several recurring patterns, including lexical innovation, identity construction, pragmatic functions, multimodality, code-mixing, and diffusion into mainstream language. These patterns demonstrate that youth slang is not merely informal or playful language, but a mechanism of linguistic creativity, social positioning, and language evolution. The key features and examples are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Key Features of Youth Slang with Examples and Functions

Feature	Example Sentence	Linguistic Function / Observation	Citation
Lexical Innovation / Semantic Shift	<i>That video is sick</i>	Traditional negative word is used positively; illustrates semantic change and innovation.	Eble, 2012 ¹²
Identity Construction / In-group Signaling	<i>No cap, that lecture was interesting</i>	Marks belonging to youth digital culture; signals peer group membership.	Bucholtz & Hall, 2005 ¹³
Pragmatic Hedging / Stance Modulation	<i>I lowkey don't agree with this take</i>	Softens disagreement and manages social relations; shows pragmatic competence.	Tagliamonte, 2016
Multimodality	<i>I'm fine 😞</i>	Emoji conveys emotion or irony; shows integration of visual and textual communication.	Kress, 2010 ¹⁴ ; Androutsopoulos ¹⁵ , 2015
Code-Mixing / Hybridization	<i>Bugun dars juda boring edi</i>	English slang embedded in Uzbek sentence; reflects global-local linguistic interaction.	García & Wei, 2014; Androutsopoulos, 2014
Diffusion into Mainstream / Standardization	<i>Let's take a selfie</i>	Slang enters mainstream discourse; demonstrates influence on standard language norms.	Crystal, 2011

Lexical Innovation and Semantic Shift: The analysis demonstrates that youth slang frequently involves **lexical innovation**, particularly through **semantic shift**, metaphorical extension, and recontextualization. Words such as *sick*, *dead*, and *crazy*, which originally carried negative connotations, are commonly repurposed to express admiration, excitement, or intensity. For example, the sentence *That video is sick* reflects a semantic inversion in which *sick*, historically meaning “ill” or undesirable, is transformed into a positive evaluative term. Similarly, *I'm dead after that comment* uses *dead* metaphorically to indicate extreme amusement or surprise.

Such lexical innovations are not random but systematically emerge within youth peer groups and are rapidly disseminated through social media platforms. The phenomenon aligns with Labov's (2001) argument that linguistic change often originates in informal speech communities where social norms allow for creativity. Eble (2012) further emphasizes that youth slang's dynamic nature ensures continual renewal of vocabulary, allowing speakers to create novel evaluative and expressive meanings. In the digital era, the speed and scale of dissemination amplify these changes, making lexical innovation a core mechanism of contemporary language evolution.

Discussion. These findings highlight the role of context in semantic innovation. While lexical shifts may initially occur in small peer groups, digital technologies facilitate viral circulation, meaning that a slang term like *sick* or *dead* can quickly reach a global audience. Over time, repeated positive usage erodes the original negative meaning, illustrating how youth slang contributes to long-term semantic change in the language.

Identity Construction and In-Group Signaling: Youth slang functions as a primary tool for constructing and performing social identity. Phrases such as *no cap* or *main character energy* are not merely stylistic choices but serve as markers of in-group membership, generational affiliation, and cultural literacy in online youth

communities. For example, in the sentence *No cap, that lecture was interesting*, *no cap* signals honesty and aligns the speaker with contemporary youth digital discourse. Individuals who use such expressions are recognized as participants in a shared cultural network, whereas those unfamiliar with the terms are positioned as outsiders.

This process aligns with sociolinguistic theories emphasizing that **language is a site of identity performance**. In digital spaces, identity markers such as slang are amplified by likes, shares, retweets, and comments, making them highly visible and performative. Moreover, youth often mix multiple identity cues, using humor, irony, and emotive expressions alongside slang to construct layered social personas. The visibility and performativity of youth slang online not only reflect individual identity but also reinforce collective social norms and cultural knowledge within peer networks.

Pragmatic Hedging and Stance Modulation: The study finds that youth slang frequently serves **pragmatic functions**, particularly in hedging, stance modulation, and interpersonal management. Terms like *lowkey* and *highkey* allow speakers to modulate the intensity of statements or soften potential face-threatening acts. For example, *I lowkey don't agree with this take* demonstrates how the speaker hedges disagreement, mitigating potential confrontation while still expressing personal opinion. Similarly, *That's highkey embarrassing* emphasizes the speaker's evaluation of an event without being overly aggressive.

These pragmatic functions reveal the **complex social and communicative competence** embedded in youth slang. Far from being informal or sloppy language, such expressions enable speakers to navigate nuanced social interactions, manage politeness, and express subtle stances. Digital environments, where tone and non-verbal cues

¹² Eble, C. (2012). Slang and sociability: In-group language among college students (2nd ed.). University of North Carolina Press.

¹³ Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2005). Identity and interaction: A sociocultural linguistic approach. *Discourse Studies*, 7(4–5), 585–614. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445605054407>

¹⁴ Kress, G. (2010). *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. Routledge.

¹⁵ Androutsopoulos, J. (2015). Networked multilingualism: Some language practices on Facebook and their implications. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 19(2), 185–205. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367006913489198>

are limited, further heighten the importance of lexical and pragmatic resources for conveying attitude, humor, or irony.

Multimodality in Digital Slang: A distinctive feature of contemporary youth slang is its **multimodal integration**, combining verbal, visual, and symbolic elements to communicate meaning. Sentences such as *I'm fine* 😞 illustrate how an emoji modifies or amplifies textual meaning, conveying irony, humor, or emotional intensity. Memes, gifs, and other visual media frequently co-occur with slang expressions, creating complex semiotic constructions that cannot be fully understood through text alone.

This multimodality expands the expressive potential of youth slang, allowing speakers to convey emotion, stance, and cultural knowledge simultaneously. The integration of text and visual elements demonstrates that digital slang is not merely verbal but a multimodal communicative system, reflecting broader shifts in how meaning is created and interpreted in online environments. The semiotic richness of multimodal slang contributes to its persistence, memorability, and social influence.

Code-Mixing and Hybridization: The analysis reveals widespread **code-mixing and hybridization**, particularly in contexts where globalized English interacts with local languages. For example, *Bugun dars juda boring edi* combines English slang (*boring*) with Uzbek grammar, creating a hybrid form that conveys meaning efficiently while signaling engagement with global youth culture. This practice exemplifies translinguaging, in which speakers fluidly draw on multiple linguistic resources to communicate effectively and index multiple identities.

Hybrid forms demonstrate how youth creatively adapt global linguistic resources to local contexts, ensuring that language remains socially relevant and culturally expressive. The phenomenon underscores that digital youth slang is not only a linguistic innovation but also a **cultural practice**, mediating global-local interactions and reflecting changing social norms and identities.

Diffusion into Mainstream Language: Some slang expressions demonstrate a **trajectory from informal youth use to mainstream acceptance**, illustrating the long-term impact of youth-driven language change. Words such as *selfie*, *vibe*, and *cool* are now widely recognized across formal, semi-formal, and public discourse. This diffusion challenges traditional distinctions between standard and non-standard language, highlighting the capacity of youth slang to **reshape lexical norms** and influence broader linguistic practices.

The process of diffusion is accelerated by digital communication, where viral exposure enables a term to move from niche peer groups to mass public recognition in a matter of months. This demonstrates that youth slang is not ephemeral; rather, it functions as a **core mechanism of language evolution**, continuously introducing new

vocabulary, semantic shifts, and expressive forms into the linguistic system.

Taken together, these findings indicate that youth slang in digital communication is a complex, multi-layered sociolinguistic phenomenon. It functions simultaneously as:

- Lexical innovation: creating new words and shifting meanings.
- Social identity marker: signaling in-group membership and cultural awareness.
- Pragmatic tool: hedging, stance modulation, and politeness management.
- Multimodal resource: integrating emojis, gifs, and memes for richer expression.
- Hybrid/globalized form: combining local and English linguistic resources.
- Driver of mainstream change: contributing to normalization and standardization.

These findings confirm that youth slang is not marginal or trivial, but a central driver of contemporary language change. The interplay of social, cultural, and technological factors makes digital youth slang a powerful lens for understanding how language evolves in the 21st century.

Conclusion. This study examined youth slang in digital communication and its role as a driver of language change. The findings show that youth slang operates on multiple levels, including lexical innovation, identity construction, pragmatic modulation, multimodality, hybridization, and diffusion into mainstream language. Words such as *sick* or *dead* illustrate semantic shift, while expressions like *no cap* and *main character energy* signal peer group membership and social identity. Slang also functions pragmatically, allowing speakers to hedge statements or emphasize opinions, and is often integrated with emojis, gifs, and memes to convey irony or emotion.

Youth slang reflects the creative adaptation of global and local linguistic resources, as seen in hybrid expressions that combine English slang with native language structures. Over time, some slang expressions enter mainstream discourse, influencing wider linguistic norms and demonstrating that youth-driven language practices can shape broader communication patterns.

Overall, youth slang in digital spaces is more than informal or playful language; it is a dynamic and influential force in contemporary language change. It allows young people to innovate linguistically, construct social identities, manage interaction, and integrate multimodal resources, ensuring that their speech remains socially relevant and culturally expressive. As digital communication continues to evolve, youth slang will remain a key factor in shaping the future of language.

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