

Semantic Changes in GEN-Z Vocabulary: A Comparative Study of TikTok Language Use

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Abstrak

Studi deskriptif kualitatif ini menyelidiki proses perubahan semantik (perubahan makna) yang cepat dalam kosakata Generasi Z, khususnya yang dipicu oleh lingkungan sosial platform TikTok. Penelitian ini dirancang untuk membandingkan secara sistematis makna asli dan yang telah mapan dari suatu kata dengan penggunaan digital barunya, mengatasi celah penting dalam studi-studi saat ini. Menggunakan sampel purposif dari komentar publik TikTok, penelitian ini menerapkan tinjauan deskriptif, membandingkan makna kamus dari kata-kata kunci (misalnya, slay, cap, rizz, glow up) dengan penggunaan kontekstualnya untuk mengkategorikan perubahan berdasarkan mekanisme linguistik yang telah ditetapkan. Hasilnya menunjukkan secara jelas bahwa kosakata Generasi Z mengalami perubahan yang signifikan. Tinjauan ini mengonfirmasi empat kategori utama perubahan: Perluasan (perluasan makna, misalnya Slay dan Glow Up), Penyempitan (spesialisasi, misalnya Rizz), Perbaikan (pergeseran positif atau lebih ringan, misalnya Cap dan Clingy), dan Perluasan Metaforis (pergeseran ke penggunaan figuratif, misalnya Peak). Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa TikTok bertindak sebagai mesin yang kuat dalam evolusi bahasa, mempercepat penyebaran perubahan semantik ini. Kecepatan ini didorong oleh kebutuhan fungsional Gen Z akan kata-kata yang sangat ekspresif, efisien, dan secara jelas menandai identitas sosial mereka secara online.

Kata Kunci: Sociolinguistik Digital, Perubahan Semantik, Gen Z, TikTok, Perluasan, Perbaikan, Variasi Sociolinguistik

Abstract

This qualitative descriptive study investigates the rapid process of semantic change (meaning change) within Generation Z's vocabulary, specifically driven by the social environment of the TikTok platform. The research was designed to systematically compare a word's original, established meaning with its new digital use, addressing a key gap in current studies. Utilizing a purposive sample of public TikTok comments, the research applied a descriptive review, comparing the dictionary meanings of key lexical items (e.g., slay, cap, rizz, glow up) with their contextual usage to categorize the change based on established linguistic mechanisms. The results clearly show that Gen Z vocabulary is changing significantly. The review confirmed four primary categories of change: Broadening (expansion of meaning, e.g., Slay and Glow Up), Narrowing (specialization, e.g., Rizz), Amelioration (positive or lighter shift, e.g., Cap and Clingy), and Metaphorical Extension (shift to figurative use, e.g., Peak). This research concludes that TikTok acts like a powerful engine for language evolution, accelerating the diffusion of these semantic change. This speed is driven by Gen Z's functional need for words that are highly expressive, efficient, and clearly mark their social identity online.

Keywords: Digital Sociolinguistics, Semantic Change, Gen Z, TikTok, Broadening, Amelioration, Sociolinguistic Variation



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INTRODUCTION

Contextualizing Language Dynamics in the Digital Era

The modern digital world has completely changed how language develops. Interaction among people on the internet has created new ways of using language, from single words to

combinations of words, sounds, and visuals. This fast-paced environment has caused significant lexical changes, including semantic change in how existing words are used. The internet connects people from many different backgrounds and ideas, meaning new words and new meanings are constantly possible. This constant flow creates a conflict with old language rules, highlighting the necessity for specialized studies that track how digital platforms speed up these linguistic transformations.

The Rise of TikTok as a Specific Linguistic Environment

TikTok is recognized as one of the most popular social media platforms among Generation Z. This platform is known for words and phrases whose meanings move away from their original definitions, thereby showing the quick dynamics of language in the digital era. Communication on TikTok often uses multiple elements (words, pictures, sounds), amplifying the expressive possibilities. The platform serves as an influential site for informal language learning where youth not only use but actively shape language trends. Semantic change, typically a slow historical process, is subjected to TikTok's algorithmic speed, which dramatically reduces the time needed for a new word or meaning to become widespread. This speed, along with Gen Z's need for distinctive in-group language, pushes words to adapt rapidly.

Statement of the Problem and Research Gap

Despite the clear importance of TikTok in modern communication, few studies have specifically looked at the semantic changes happening in Gen Z vocabulary on the platform, showing a significant need for focused research in this specific area. While some existing studies identify and group various types of modern slang, they often neglect the rigorous, systematic comparison between a word's new, contextual digital meaning and its original, established conventional meaning. This omission represents a clear gap in research that systematically describes and reviews the exact ways like Broadening, Narrowing, or Amelioration (the scientific terms) that specific word meanings change because of their use on the TikTok platform. This research aligns with previous studies by O'Keefe and Russell, which examined how slang helps create digital subcultures. Based on this gap, the research aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify words or expressions used by Gen Z on TikTok that have undergone semantic change.
2. To compare the new contextual meanings of these words with their previous conventional meanings.

Defining Semantic Change and Sociolinguistic Foundations

Semantic change refers to how word meanings change over time. This study relies on established linguistic categorization to review the changes observed in Gen Z vocabulary. The primary mechanisms include: Broadening (expansion of meaning), Narrowing (specialization), Amelioration (more positive or less severe meaning), and Metaphorical Extension (shift to an abstract or figurative sense). These changes are functional and are understood as direct results of a language community's need to express new concepts, attitudes, or specialized information efficiently. William Labov's Variation Theory states that language change is linked to social groups and contexts, suggesting that Gen Z users on TikTok are the specific "social group" driving the current language innovation. Furthermore, Trask established that word meanings change as a direct reflection of underlying social and cultural changes. For example, the expansion of the word *slay* beyond mere stylish appearance to encompass high competence is a reflection of Gen Z's cultural focus on confidence and achievement in the digital sphere. Finally, Chambers argued that language change is fundamentally important to the

establishment and reinforcement of a community's identity. A specialized lexicon, like the evolution of a term like rizz (charisma narrowed to flirting skill), reinforces social closeness and defines the digital subculture.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Approach

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach to study the semantic changes (meaning changes) in Gen Z vocabulary. This methodology is well-suited for interpreting specific language data and explaining the mechanisms by which common meanings are shifted into new, contextual meanings in online interaction. The review focused on words that clearly show observable semantic change, including slay, cap, glow up, rizz, peak, bussin', and clingy.

Data Sources and Purposive Sampling

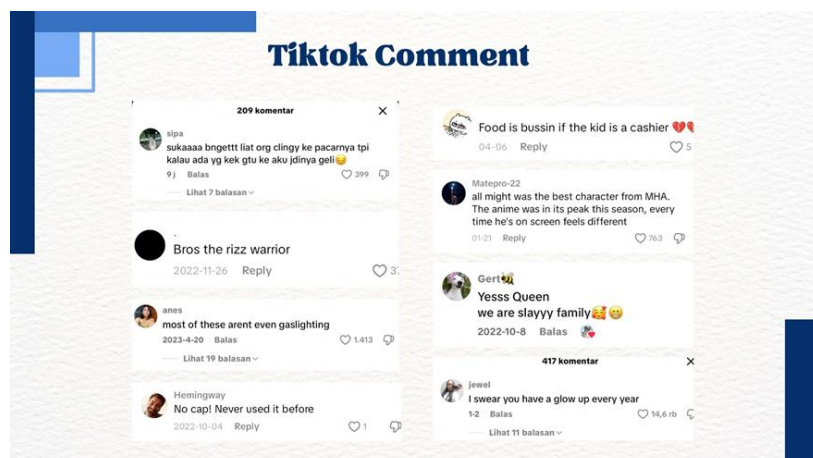
The data were sourced exclusively from public TikTok comments that contained identifiable Gen Z vocabulary. A purposive selection strategy was employed to ensure the data was highly relevant and strong. Researchers focused on collecting screenshots of comments found under videos featuring active discussions that highlighted the targeted Gen Z vocabulary, ensuring the collected data were contextually rich and maximized the likelihood of finding clear evidence of semantic change.

Data Sources and Purposive Sampling

The research procedure followed a systematic four-step process:

1. Data Collection: Screenshots of TikTok comments containing the specific target vocabulary were collected.
2. Data Transcription: The comments from the screenshots were transcribed into text, giving critical attention to keeping the original spelling, emojis, and punctuation. Preserving these elements was necessary for accurately determining contextual usage and shifts.
3. Identification: Lexical items reflecting Gen Z vocabulary were identified within the transcribed comments.
4. Categorization: The identified items were categorized by rigorously contrasting their established conventional (dictionary) meanings with the new contextual meanings observed in the TikTok comments.

The data were subjected to a descriptive qualitative analysis. The core of the analysis involved comparing each word's dictionary meaning with the semantic shift evident in its TikTok usage, demonstrating how users assign new contextual meaning in online communication.



Picture 1. Screenshots of the TikTok Chosen Comments

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The review of the TikTok comments shows that the Gen Z vocabulary have a clear and systematic semantic changes, predominantly categorized using the established mechanisms of Broadening, Narrowing, Amelioration, and Metaphorical Extension.

Table 1. Comparative Semantic Shifts of Gen Z Vocabulary on TikTok

Gen Z Word	Previous Meaning	Gen Z/TikTok Meaning	Types of Semantic Changes
Slay	Stylish (Appearance compliment)	Universal compliment for confidence, performance, or expression.	Broadening
Cap	Lie (Serious false statement)	Casual slang for "not true"; less intimidating dismissal.	Amelioration
Glow Up	Simple improvement/Self-improvement	Total transformation (often physical), visualized through trends.	Broadening & Metaphorical Extension
Rizz	Charisma (General attraction/influence)	Flirting skill; ability to charm someone specifically.	Narrowing
Peak	The best (Highest quality in ranking)	Ultimate example of a quality/situation; used in emotional or situational contexts.	Metaphorical Extension
Bussin'	Delicious (General positive food adjective)	Incredibly flavorful and satisfying; enthusiastic, immediate reaction	Intensification/Broadening
Clingy	Needy (Negative connotation)	Partner/friend who always wants to stay close (can be neutral or playful).	Amelioration
Gaslighting	Manipulation (Coercive behavior)	Specific psychological manipulation (causing self-doubt).	Narrowing/Specialization

A significant trend was Broadening, where terms like Slay expanded from a stylish compliment to a universal compliment for performance or success. Conversely, Narrowing was observed with Rizz, which specialized the general concept of "Charisma" to the specific ability to charm and attract someone romantically. Amelioration shifted terms like Cap and Clingy away from serious or strictly negative connotations to a lighter, more playful context. Finally, Metaphorical Extension moved Peak from a literal rank to an affective descriptor for the ultimate example of a situation or quality.

Interpretation of Semantic Processes and Cultural Alignment

The documented semantic changes are interpreted as a direct language response to the culture of Generation Z, which emphasizes authenticity, strong emotional expression, and self-expression. The heavy use of semantic broadening and amelioration shows a practical language choice for being inclusive and non-confrontational, supporting Trask's assertion that language change reflects underlying social value. For instance, the specialization of rizz and gaslighting are micro-lexical creations necessary for discussing specific, shared social dynamics with precise efficiency, thereby reinforcing in-group identity as proposed by Chambers.

TikTok as an Accelerator of Lexical Innovation and Digital Cohesion

The findings strongly support the conclusion that TikTok acts as a powerful accelerator of language changes. The platform's inherent features—short-form content, rapid-fire commentary, and algorithmic virality—radically reduce the timeframe needed for a semantic

change to become fully established, functioning like a fast-track life cycle for meaning change. As Keidar et al. explain, “semantic change in slang is often accompanied by shifts in frequency, where words with broadened or repurposed meanings gain rapid popularity before stabilizing or fading”. This quickening explains why intensification mechanisms are so frequent, where words must rapidly establish and signal their high-impact value before being made obsolete by the next emerging trend. The observed semantic changes are strong indicators of the linguistic creativity of Gen Z, serving not only as linguistic creativity but also as a marker of digital identity and group belonging. As Marpaung and Damanik point out, “semantic innovation in Gen Z’s slang serves not only as linguistic creativity but also as a marker of digital identity and group belonging.” By repurposing existing, known English words (e.g., cap, slay) rather than relying exclusively on new formations, Gen Z ensures immediate comprehension within their community while simultaneously ensuring that the terms retain an element of contextual obscurity for non-Gen Z users. This communication difficulty for “non-Netizens” helps strengthen the boundaries of the digital subculture.

CONCLUSION

This research successfully employed a qualitative descriptive approach to confirm that Gen Z vocabulary utilized on TikTok has undergone systematic and rapid semantic change. The analysis identified four major mechanisms of change: Broadening (slay, glow up, bussin’), Narrowing (rizz, gaslighting), Amelioration (cap, clingy), and Metaphorical Extension (peak). These changes are not random but functionally driven by the need for expressive efficiency and in-group identity marking. The findings clearly show that TikTok is a powerful force that speeds up linguistic change, reflecting both the inherent creativity and the distinctive identity formation processes of Generation Z in the digital landscape. The study’s scope is limited because its qualitative and purposive design means the findings cannot be fully applied to the entire population or used to make statistical claims regarding frequency and spread rates. Furthermore, the analysis focused primarily on the written word, leaving the full impact of multimodal context (e.g., associated video and sound cues) largely unexamined. Future research should use quantitative methods to measure how often these semantic changes happen and how fast they spread, potentially linking diffusion speed directly to the platform’s algorithmic dynamics, thus applying Labov’s models [1] in a high-velocity digital context. Longitudinal analysis is also recommended to track the semantic path of these terms over time, determining which Gen Z terms achieve stability and eventually integrate into the mainstream dictionary.

Expression of Gratitude

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