

Semantic Shift of English Loanwords in Youth Slang: A Modern Sociolinguistic Study

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ABSTRACT

The development of social media among Indonesian youth has created a new communication ecosystem that accelerates the emergence of slang and reshapes the meanings of English loanwords. This phenomenon shows that language use is no longer limited to its lexical dimension but is strongly connected to identity formation, the circulation of popular culture, and the communicative practices that characterize digital interaction. Although English loanwords are increasingly used across various platforms, studies examining the mechanisms of semantic change within youth slang remain limited and have not fully mapped the sociocultural factors that shape these shifts. This study aims to analyze the changing meanings of English loanwords in youth slang and to explain the social and digital processes that influence these transformations. A qualitative approach using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis was employed to examine digital secondary data drawn from posts and public conversations on several social media platforms. The findings indicate that widely used terms such as cringe, flex, insecure, gaslighting, and random experience various forms of semantic change, including narrowing, expansion, generalization, and amelioration. These changes emerge through discursive reproduction shaped by virality, platform algorithms, patterns of user interaction, and the expressive tendencies of contemporary youth. From a sociocultural perspective, these evolving meanings reflect the formation of hybrid linguistic identities that align with global popular culture while adapting to local communication norms. This research contributes to the development of digital sociolinguistics and provides a deeper understanding of how language continues to evolve within an increasingly connected and algorithm-driven society.

Keywords: Semantic Shift, Loanwords, Youth Slang, Digital Sociolinguistics

INTRODUCTION

The development of slang among Indonesian teenagers is growing rapidly, as social media dominates as their primary platform for interaction. Platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have become not only platforms for sharing content but also birthplaces for new linguistic expressions that reflect the linguistic creativity of the younger generation. Research shows that terms like "Btw," "Ultah," and "Gemoy" have evolved from the dynamic digital interactions of teenagers and have become an integral part of their communication practices (Lestari & Risnawaty, 2025). This phenomenon demonstrates how slang has become a means of building closeness and social solidarity within the youth community.

In addition to the development of local slang terms, social media has also encouraged the transformation of English loanwords, which have undergone adjustments in meaning. In various digital conversations, terms like *cringe*, *flex*, and *gaslighting* have become commonplace. *gaslighting* has undergone a shift in meaning that differs from its original meaning in English and is more adapted to the experiences, perceptions, and



social practices of Indonesian youth (Saputra et al., 2023). This trend helps strengthen group identity, but at the same time raises concerns about the decline in the accuracy of formal Indonesian language use if not managed wisely (Bardi et al., 2024; Ndraha et al., 2024). Therefore, the balance between linguistic creativity and the preservation of the national language needs to be continuously considered (Fadilla et al., 2023).

semantic *shift* in loanwords occurs through intense digital interactions. Teenagers often modify the meaning of English words to adapt to the emotional expressions, communication patterns, and social contexts they experience in digital spaces. This process of meaning change can take the form of narrowing, broadening, pejoration, amelioration, metaphorization, or functional shifts, as seen in a study of Generation Z on the Threads platform, which found loan-shifts in online interactions (Fajrina & Irawan, 2024).

The shift in the meaning of these loanwords not only influences the linguistic domain but also reflects how Indonesian youth construct their social identities within contemporary digital culture. The new meanings that emerge often function as markers of group membership, indicators of alignment with global popular culture, and tools for negotiating social relations within online communities. Within these digital spaces, language becomes a medium of interaction, evaluation, and self-expression that continuously adapts to the cultural values, aesthetic preferences, and communicative norms circulating among young users (Agustiana et al., 2024.) Such processes demonstrate that semantic shift is deeply intertwined with sociocultural dynamics, revealing how global linguistic influences are localized, reinterpreted, and embedded into everyday communication practices. These adaptations highlight the fluid nature of youth identity, where linguistic creativity serves as a means of asserting belonging, expressing individuality, and responding to the evolving cultural landscape of digital environments.

Despite the increasing prominence of this phenomenon, research examining the shifting meanings of English loanwords among Indonesian youth remains limited. Most existing studies have focused on compiling vocabulary lists or describing code-mixing practices without connecting these linguistic developments to broader sociolinguistic factors such as identity construction, the role of popular culture, and the impact of digital interaction (Saputra et al., 2023). Furthermore, research that employs digital secondary data from social media where meaning is negotiated, disseminated, and normalized in real time remains relatively scarce, even though these platforms constitute the primary arena in which semantic innovations occur. To address this gap, the present study analyzes semantic shifts in English loanwords within Indonesian youth slang by drawing on digital secondary data, aiming to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the forms, trajectories, and social conditions that shape these evolving meanings. This approach not only enriches the empirical basis of linguistic studies on youth language but also offers deeper insight into the cultural and technological forces that drive contemporary language change.

METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis method to examine the changing meanings of English loanwords in youth slang. This approach is considered relevant because *semantic shifts* reflect not only lexical changes but also the social and cultural dynamics that shape the language practices of young people in the digital space. The research data sources consist of 120 digital data excerpts collected purposively *from* posts, comments, and public conversations on the platforms TikTok, Instagram, Twitter/X, and YouTube. All data are presented in the form

of synthetic excerpts arranged based on authentic usage patterns and anonymized to maintain digital research ethics without reducing the representativeness of the phenomenon being studied.

The analysis process followed three main stages in Fairclough's framework. The first stage was text analysis, focusing on identifying forms of meaning change, such as narrowing, broadening, generalization, and amelioration. The second stage was an analysis of discourse practices to understand how meaning is produced, disseminated, and normalized through digital interactions involving commentary, algorithms, and user creativity. The third stage was an analysis of sociocultural practices, linking meaning change to the construction of adolescent identity, the influence of popular culture, and the dominance of English in the digital ecosystem. The validity of the findings was strengthened through source triangulation involving online slang dictionaries, popular culture articles, and relevant scientific studies.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion in this section begins with an exploration of the linguistic characteristics that emerge in the use of English loanwords by teenagers on social media. Variations in the use of certain terms demonstrate that changes in meaning do not occur simply, but through a process of adaptation influenced by expressive needs, linguistic creativity, and diverse contexts of use. Using Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, the analysis focuses on how shifts in meaning manifest at the textual level, including patterns of narrowing, expanding, generalizing, and shifting pragmatic functions related to the communication practices of the younger generation in the digital space.

The discussion then expands on the dimensions of interaction and social dynamics that shape and stabilize these new meanings. Social media serves as a space that allows meaning to be produced, maintained, and transformed through mechanisms such as content virality, repeated use of terms, and legitimation processes within online communities. The resulting linguistic findings are then placed within the broader socio-cultural landscape to examine how adolescent identity, popular culture, and digital values contribute to the formation of semantic shifts. This approach provides a comprehensive overview of how new meanings emerge from the intersection of language practices, digital interactions, and the socio-cultural conditions surrounding the lives of contemporary adolescents.

1. Text Analysis: Patterns of Meaning Change in Loanwords

The text level analysis demonstrates that the semantic shifts of English loanwords in youth slang occur in a systematic manner and are closely connected to patterns of interaction on social media. These changes develop alongside the ways adolescents communicate, especially through platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. TikTok, with its rapid flow of algorithm driven content, accelerates the creation and disappearance of slang terms and produces a noticeably shorter life cycle for many expressions. Instagram, in contrast, provides a more stable environment in which certain terms can last longer and eventually become part of the everyday communicative repertoire of younger users. This observation is consistent with big

data studies that reveal significant variation in how each platform influences linguistic innovation (Budiasa, 2021; Nurhidayah, 2025).

In this digital landscape, the formation of slang becomes increasingly rich and diverse through the creation of acronyms, clippings, phonetic modifications, and other playful alterations that reflect the dynamic linguistic practices of adolescents. These creative processes demonstrate how young people actively reshape and fine tune linguistic forms to fulfill their expressive needs, signal membership in particular peer groups, and construct identities that align with the aesthetic and communicative norms of online spaces. Such linguistic innovation is not random but emerges from continuous interaction within algorithm driven environments where trends circulate rapidly, encouraging users to experiment with new forms and reinterpret existing ones in ways that resonate with their social experiences. This phenomenon is closely aligned with research indicating that the structure of social media interaction, including the immediacy of feedback, the visibility of peer networks, and the participatory nature of digital platforms, significantly shapes the linguistic creativity and stylistic preferences of adolescents (Harahap et al., 2024).

The meaning changes identified in the data reveal several distinct patterns. The term *cringe* is used as an evaluative marker for behaviors considered embarrassing. This usage represents an expansion of its original meaning, which referred mainly to feelings of discomfort, and transforms it into a tool for assessing social norms. The term *flex* demonstrates amelioration because it gains positive associations as an expression of personal achievement within digital culture. The word *insecure* shows semantic narrowing since it is now used more frequently to describe discomfort related to physical appearance, especially in the context of adolescent visual culture. The term *gaslighting* exhibits generalization of meaning because it is applied to various forms of interpersonal manipulation that do not necessarily match the psychological definition. The term *random* expands its function to describe irrelevant or unexpected behaviors in everyday interaction (Agustiana et al., 2024; Muhammad, 2025).

These patterns indicate that adolescents do not simply adopt English loanwords but actively reshape their meanings to suit their communicative experiences. New meanings develop through social negotiation that takes place naturally within digital communities. This process is supported by research demonstrating that the linguistic creativity of adolescents is increasingly shaped by the structure of social media interaction and the participatory culture that surrounds it (Amilia et al., 2022; Herlina et al., 2024). The digital sphere thus becomes a setting in which meanings are collaboratively created, contested, and transformed, reflecting the dynamic interplay between global linguistic resources and local communicative practices.

2. Discourse Practice Analysis: Dissemination, Reproduction, and Normalization of Meaning

Analysis of discourse practices shows that social media is a primary arena for the formation of new meanings in youth slang. The spread of meaning occurs through intense public interaction, including comments, captions, short videos, and widely

circulated memes. When a term is used in content that receives significant attention, other users tend to repeat it in similar contexts, thereby reinforcing the function of that meaning. This process constitutes a form of discursive reproduction that relies on active user participation to maintain certain meanings within the community (Agustiana et al., 2024; Akaka et al., 2022; Ndraha et al., 2024).

The normalization of meaning is evident through the process of social legitimacy, which occurs when certain terms are considered commonly used to assess or comment on behavior, styles, or situations. The use of terms like *cringe* or *flex* in viral content reinforces social classifications of what is considered appropriate and inappropriate within youth groups. This normalization is shaped by patterns of classification, distinction, and stigmatization in digital discourse, aligning with the concepts of pre-legitimacy and social legitimacy identified in the meaning management literature (Akaka et al., 2022).

Influencers and popular content creators play a crucial role in accelerating the adoption of new meanings through communication styles that are easily followed by other users. Creative content such as short videos and memes expands the reach of new terms and supports the rapid spread of meanings (Qadrianti et al., 2025). Thus, the resulting meanings not only reflect individual preferences but also result from the accumulation of interactions involving users at varying levels of participation.

Repetitive and collaborative interaction patterns demonstrate that social media acts as a linguistic ecosystem that enables collective, dynamic, and contextual changes in meaning. The participatory structure of digital discourse reinforces the formation of new meanings, making social media a primary space for the evolution of youth slang (Bardi et al., 2024; Herlina et al., 2024).

3. Analysis of Socio-Cultural Practices: Youth Identity and Digital Language Ideology

Analysis of social and cultural practices shows that adolescent identities in the digital age are formed through intense interactions with online culture and platform mechanisms that shape their values, preferences, and self-expression. Social media has become a primary space for adolescents to project identities encompassing psychological, social, and cultural dimensions, where orientations toward consumption, performative aesthetics, and online community norms are reflected in everyday lexical choices and pragmatic functions (Górecka, 2023). A case study of university students in the Kuzbass region corroborates these findings by demonstrating that digital culture can influence political and professional preferences through consistent online interaction patterns, thus providing insight into how global discourses combine with local contexts to shape the linguistic orientations of Indonesian adolescents (Matveeva, 2025). Platform algorithms and online community structures also reinforce particular ideological affiliations, making language a means of affirming social and political identities in the digital space (Alfan et al., 2025).

In the context of Indonesian youth slang, the shifting meanings of loanwords such as *cringe*, *flex*, *insecure*, and *gaslighting* illustrate how language functions not only as

a tool for communication but also as a dynamic instrument for constructing group identity, negotiating social norms, and responding to cultural change. The term *flex* increasingly operates as a marker of status and symbolic capital by signaling personal achievement, lifestyle aspiration, or material success that aligns with the values of an image driven digital culture, while *cringe* serves as an evaluative label used to mark behaviors considered embarrassing, awkward, or socially unacceptable within online communities, thereby acting as a subtle yet influential mechanism of social control. Meanwhile, *insecure* undergoes a narrowing of meaning as adolescents use it predominantly to express anxieties related to physical appearance and self presentation in visually oriented platforms, demonstrating how digital environments shape emotional expression. The widespread use of *gaslighting* further shows how global mental health discourses become integrated into everyday youth interaction, with the term being adapted from its clinical origins to describe a wide range of interpersonal conflicts and manipulative behaviors, reflecting the ability of adolescents to appropriate complex terminology and reshape it for more relatable social experiences (Pangesti et al., 2024). Through these intertwined processes, loanwords are continuously renegotiated and recontextualized, producing new layers of meaning that reflect the expressive needs of young people, their identity performance strategies, and the dynamic nature of peer relationships in digital spaces where global influences and local practices intersect.

The shift in the meaning of loanwords in youth slang also reflects broader cultural dynamics, including the increasing influence of consumerism, popular culture, and the position of English as a symbol of modernity. This phenomenon produces a hybrid linguistic identity, as youth simultaneously link global aspirations with local narratives of status, membership, and social solidarity (Triantoro & Pramana, 2024). From a modern sociolinguistic perspective, this transformation confirms that changes in meaning in slang are not only related to lexical aspects, but also represent an adaptive response to the pressures of globalization and the development of digital technology that shape the lifestyles and communication patterns of the younger generation.

4. Theoretical and Contextual Implications

The theoretical implications of this study indicate that changes in the meaning of English loanwords in youth slang are not simply lexical borrowing but rather a reconstruction of meaning influenced by social dynamics and digital culture. The semantic shift that occurs, ranging from narrowing to expansion and amelioration, illustrates that the younger generation is not only adopting foreign words but also adapting them to their expressive needs and identity practices. Previous studies have confirmed that borrowing in slang is often accompanied by semantic and grammatical changes that are adaptive to the influence of globalization and technology (Tsibizova & Galankina, 2021). In this context, English plays a role as a source of symbolic values and modernity, thus influencing the communication styles, interaction aesthetics, and cultural practices of Indonesian youth who are increasingly connected globally (Leleka et al., 2024). Therefore, the findings of this study support the modern

sociolinguistic view that slang represents broader social change, especially among generations growing up in a digital environment.

The contextual implications of this phenomenon indicate that changes in the meaning of loanwords are closely related to communication efficiency, language economy, and age and gender preferences, which enrich linguistic variation within youth communities (Nikolaieva et al., 2023). These changes in meaning reflect adolescents' efforts to build solidarity, manage social distance, and assert group membership in digital spaces, in line with the pressures of English globalization that encourage the hybridization of linguistic identities (Hnatyuk, 2025). Through these findings, the research opens up opportunities for developing a more dynamic and contextual theoretical framework in understanding language evolution in the digital era. The phenomenon of semantic shift in loanwords emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary approaches, including digital corpus and online ethnography, to capture the relationship between technology, popular culture, and rapid language change in contemporary society.

CONCLUSION

This study confirms that the changing meanings of English loanwords in youth slang are part of the language dynamics shaped by digital communication practices and the construction of young people's identities. Through the application of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, it was found that terms such as *cringe*, *flex*, *insecure*, *gaslighting*, and *random* experienced shifts in meaning in the form of narrowing, expanding, generalizing, and amelioration. These shifts emerged through the mechanisms of digital discourse reproduction involving content virality, repetition in public interactions, and the influence of algorithms that normalize the use of certain terms in online communities.

From a socio-cultural perspective, these shifts in meaning reflect the hybrid linguistic identity of adolescents, formed from a combination of global values, digital popular culture, and the need for fast, concise social expression aligned with social media aesthetics. In this context, slang functions not only as a manifestation of linguistic creativity but also as an instrument for group affiliation, self-image management, and the legitimization of social status in the digital space.

This research makes a theoretical contribution by demonstrating that *semantic shift* in loanwords in the digital era should be understood as a social practice influenced by platform structure, not simply as a lexical change. These findings reinforce the digital sociolinguistic perspective that social media is an active agent in the formation and transformation of meaning. Further research is recommended to expand the analysis based on user categories, usage timeframes, and the use of a larger digital corpus to obtain a longitudinal picture of the evolution of meaning in a networked society.

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