



Changes in The Meaning of Words in Slang: A Synchronous Semantic Study

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze how the meanings of selected slang words have changed over a specific period, identify the types of semantic change, and explain the social, cultural, and technological factors influencing those shifts. A qualitative descriptive method was applied to examine ten commonly used slang terms. The analysis revealed that the dominant type of semantic change was broadening, where the original meaning of a word expanded to cover broader or new usage contexts. Other types of semantic shifts, such as narrowing and metaphorical extension, were also observed. Slang words like *baper*, *ghosting*, *recek*, and *santuy* exemplify how language adapts to modern communication needs and reflects youth identity, emotion, and humor. The findings support the view that slang is not merely linguistic play but a reflection of social interaction and cultural trends. Through a synchronous analysis, this study shows how language functions as a living system that responds to changes in society, behavior, and media usage. Understanding these shifts is essential for both linguists and educators in appreciating the role of informal language in shaping modern communication.

Keywords: *Semantic; Slang; Synchronous*

Abstrak: Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis bagaimana makna kata-kata slang yang dipilih telah berubah selama periode tertentu, mengidentifikasi jenis-jenis perubahan semantik, dan menjelaskan faktor-faktor sosial, budaya, dan teknologi yang mempengaruhi perubahan tersebut. Metode deskriptif kualitatif diterapkan untuk meneliti sepuluh istilah bahasa gaul yang umum digunakan. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa jenis perubahan semantik yang dominan adalah perluasan, di mana makna asli sebuah kata diperluas untuk mencakup konteks penggunaan yang lebih luas atau baru. Jenis pergeseran semantik lainnya, seperti penyempitan dan perluasan metafora, juga diamati. Kata-kata gaul seperti *baper*, *ghosting*, *recek*, dan *santuy* menunjukkan bagaimana bahasa beradaptasi dengan kebutuhan komunikasi modern dan mencerminkan identitas, emosi, dan humor anak muda. Temuan ini mendukung pandangan bahwa bahasa gaul bukan sekadar permainan linguistik, melainkan cerminan interaksi sosial dan tren budaya. Melalui analisis sinkronis, penelitian ini menunjukkan bagaimana bahasa berfungsi sebagai sistem yang hidup yang merespons perubahan dalam masyarakat, perilaku, dan penggunaan media. Memahami pergeseran ini sangat penting bagi para ahli bahasa

dan pendidik dalam mengapresiasi peran bahasa informal dalam membentuk komunikasi modern.

Kata Kunci: *Semantik; Bahasa gaul; Sinkronisasi*

INTRODUCTION

Language is a dynamic and ever-changing system that continuously evolves over time. One of the most interesting and rapidly developing aspects of language is slang. Slang is a form of informal language used by particular social groups, especially youth and young adults, as a way to express identity, solidarity, or even resistance to standard language norms. The uniqueness of slang lies in its flexibility and creativity, often creating new meanings or altering the meanings of existing words.

In the field of semantics, changes in word meaning are a common and natural phenomenon. These changes can be studied from a historical (diachronic) perspective or from a synchronous perspective. A synchronous semantic study focuses on meaning changes within a particular period of time, rather than tracking the historical development of a word. This approach is particularly relevant when analyzing contemporary slang, since slang terms often change rapidly and are influenced by social, cultural, and technological developments.

For example, the word “*sick*”, which traditionally means “ill,” is now used in slang to express something that is impressive, cool, or extraordinary. This kind of change is known as amelioration, where a word with a previously negative meaning takes on a more positive connotation. Another example is the word “*ghost*”, which originally referred to a supernatural spirit but is now used as a verb in modern slang to describe the act of suddenly cutting off communication with someone, especially in romantic or social contexts. These examples show that meaning shifts in slang are not just random linguistic variations they reflect social and cultural dynamics within the speech community.

The phenomenon of meaning change in slang highlights that language is not only a tool for communication but also a reflection of evolving social attitudes, values, and trends. With the rise of social media and digital technology, slang spreads and evolves more rapidly than ever before. This makes the study of slang, particularly from a synchronous semantic perspective, an important and timely topic for research.

This research seeks to explore how certain slang words undergo changes in meaning and how those changes can be categorized semantically. It also aims to analyze what types of meaning change are occurring and to identify the social and cultural factors influencing these changes. In doing so, this study will contribute not only to the field of linguistics but also to a

broader understanding of how language reflects and shapes modern social behavior.

METHOD

This study applies a descriptive qualitative method with a synchronous semantic approach to analyze the shifts in meaning of slang terms used in contemporary digital communication. The qualitative design is chosen to enable an in-depth exploration of the semantic changes of slang expressions, especially in social media environments such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. The synchronous semantic approach focuses on examining language as it exists in the present moment, allowing the researcher to analyze the real-time usage of slang words without focusing on their historical development. This method is considered suitable given the rapid evolution of slang within digital communication spaces.

The data source in this study consists of both primary and secondary data. Primary data is obtained directly from digital platforms, including captions, video scripts, comments, hashtags, and user-generated content found on TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Secondary data includes academic articles, linguistic books, previous research on slang, and online dictionaries that provide definitions and explanations of slang meanings. Data collection is conducted through documentation and observation techniques, where the researcher systematically records and catalogs slang expressions used by teenagers and young adults aged between 15 to 30 years old, identified as the most active demographic in generating and spreading new slang terms online.

The collected data is analyzed using interactive qualitative data analysis consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Slang expressions are first identified and categorized based on their semantic characteristics and current usage context. The analysis then compares the current meanings with previous usages, identifying any shifts or extensions in meaning. Factors influencing these semantic changes, such as cultural trends, technological developments, and social media dynamics, are also examined to understand how language adapts to digital communication environments. Triangulation of data sources, including cross-referencing between primary and secondary data, is used to ensure the validity and credibility of the findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Semantic Change: Concepts and Categories

Semantic change refers to the process by which the meanings of words evolve over time as a result of linguistic, social, or psychological influences. This evolution is a natural process in every living language and is often systematic. In the context of slang, understanding semantic change is

particularly important since the meanings of slang expressions tend to shift rapidly within short periods. Several categories of semantic change can be identified, including amelioration, where a word develops a more positive meaning than it originally had. An example is the word "bad," which in contemporary slang can mean "cool" or "excellent," despite traditionally having a negative connotation. Conversely, pejoration occurs when a word's meaning shifts towards a more negative interpretation, as seen in the word "silly," which originally meant "happy or blessed" but now typically means "foolish." Broadening, or generalization, describes the process where a word's meaning becomes more inclusive than before, such as the word "holiday," which once referred exclusively to religious days but now encompasses any vacation.

Narrowing, or specialization, happens when a word's meaning becomes more specific, as in the case of the word "meat," which once referred to all types of food but is now limited to animal flesh. Another significant type is metaphorical shift, in which a word gains new meaning based on analogy or metaphor. A contemporary example is the word "virus," which traditionally referred to biological agents causing disease but now also denotes digital malware. These categories provide essential tools for analyzing how slang terms shift meaning in response to ongoing linguistic and social transformations.

The Nature and Function of Slang

Slang is recognized as a dynamic and informal variety of language that emerges within specific social groups, particularly among youth communities. It represents creativity, a marker of identity, and often a form of resistance against standard language norms. Slang functions as a linguistic resource through which speakers express informality, social belonging, and individuality. It also serves to create humor, convey emotional intensity, and signify rebellion or independence from conventional discourse. With the rise of digital communication, slang is no longer confined to spoken language; instead, it permeates social media platforms, online videos, memes, and digital comment sections. Social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube have accelerated the spread and evolution of slang expressions. The immediacy and informality of digital communication enable slang words to emerge, shift in meaning, and disappear within short time frames, making slang a critical element of contemporary digital interaction and cultural expression.

Synchronous Semantics and Its Relevance

Traditionally, studies of semantics have employed diachronic approaches, analyzing how the meanings of words change over extended historical periods. However, the present study adopts a synchronous

semantic approach, which focuses on analyzing language as it exists at a specific point in time. This approach treats language as a complete system functioning in the present, rather than examining its historical development.

The synchronous approach is particularly appropriate for the study of slang, considering the rapid pace at which slang expressions change and adapt in modern communication. In the digital age, slang meanings can shift within days or even hours, as users collectively redefine expressions through online interactions. Furthermore, the same slang term may carry different meanings simultaneously across various regions or digital communities. By employing a synchronous perspective, this research captures the real-time dynamics of semantic change in slang and examines how these shifts are influenced by cultural trends and technological developments in contemporary society.

Previous Studies on Slang and Semantic Change

Recent studies have highlighted the relationship between slang and semantic change, particularly in digital communication contexts. Research by Wan Mohd Muzani and Mohammad Lotfie (2024) on TikTok slang revealed that slang expressions are subject to rapid semantic and morphological changes, showing how digital users creatively reassign meanings to form novel expressions. Savitri and Dewi (2023), in their study of imitative slang on YouTube and TikTok, identified semantic phenomena such as metaphorical shifts, pejoration, and amelioration in slang usage. Meanwhile, Rezeki and Sagala (2019) explored the use of millennial slang on Instagram, observing that the formation and function of slang are closely linked to digital culture, which directly drives semantic evolution. Keidar and colleagues (2022) adopted computational analysis to demonstrate that slang words not only shift in usage frequency but also undergo measurable semantic shifts that are causally connected to their widespread digital adoption. Complementing these findings, Budiasa et al. (2021) examined the forms and communicative functions of slang across social media platforms, showing how meaning and purpose adapt according to platform-specific interactions. Collectively, these studies confirm that slang in digital spaces is a linguistic phenomenon shaped by rapid semantic shifts and complex social functions.

Categorization of Semantic Changes in Slang Words

The following table presents a list of ten slang expressions that have undergone semantic change. These examples show how everyday digital usage transforms word meanings, often expanding them or shifting them into metaphorical and socially expressive forms.

Slang Word	Social Media Source	Example Sentence / Usage Context	Type of Semantic Change	Brief Explanation
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Ghosting	Twitter	"He suddenly stopped replying—I think he's ghosting me."	Narrowing	From "becoming a ghost" to disappearing from communication.
Baper	TikTok	"Don't be baper, it's just a joke."	Broadening	From "bawa perasaan" to being overly sensitive in general.
FYP	TikTok	"This video appeared on my FYP and went viral!"	Broadening	From "For You Page" to any trending or popular video.
Receh	YouTube	"The joke was so receh, but I laughed anyway."	Broadening	From "small change" to simple, light humor.
Cie	Twitter	"Ciee... someone's in love!"	Broadening	From sincere excitement to playful teasing.
Mager	TikTok	"I feel so mager today. I don't want to do anything."	Broadening	From "malas gerak" to general laziness or low energy.
Santuy	YouTube	"Just stay santuy, bro. Don't stress it."	Broadening	From "santai" to a whole relaxed or chill lifestyle.
Rempong	TikTok	"Don't be so rempong—it's not that serious."	Broadening	From "troublesome" to a person who overcomplicates things.
Kepo	Twitter	"She's always kepo about everyone's business."	Broadening	From "knowing everything" to being overly curious.
Anjay	Twitter	"Anjay! That's so cool!"	Broadening	From surprise or shock to admiration or praise.

Interpretation And Contextual Meaning

Based on the table above, it is clear that most of the slang terms have experienced broadening a process in which the original meaning becomes more inclusive or is applied in broader social contexts. These meaning shifts often reflect modern habits, youth identity, emotional expression, and peer interaction, especially in digital platforms.

Take for example the slang word "*baper*." Initially used in romantic contexts to refer to emotional reactions, *baper* is now used more widely to describe any kind of over-sensitivity or excessive emotional response. Similarly, "*ghosting*" originally referring to ghosts or spirits has shifted to describe a common modern behavior of suddenly cutting off communication, particularly in romantic or friendship settings.

The synchronous approach enables us to capture real-time semantic shifts within modern communication, especially in environments like social media where language adapts instantly to context, emotion, and identity. Thus, it can be concluded that slang words undergo meaning changes not only for linguistic reasons but also because of social, cultural, and technological influences. They represent how language lives and grows within a community. Understanding these transformations helps researchers understand the dynamic relationship between language, identity, and society.

This study investigated the semantic changes in ten slang words frequently used in digital communication, particularly on social media platforms such as TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube. The findings revealed that all of the analyzed slang expressions had experienced a shift in meaning from their original form. The most dominant type of semantic change identified was broadening, in which a word's meaning expands to cover wider usage in various contexts. For instance, the word "*baper*", originally limited to romantic or emotional situations, is now used more broadly to refer to anyone who is overly sensitive in general interactions. Similarly, "*mager*", which came from the phrase "malas gerak" (lazy to move), now represents any general feeling of laziness or reluctance to engage in activity. In contrast, some words like "*ghosting*" have experienced narrowing of meaning shifting from the original idea of a "ghost" to a more specific behavior of abruptly cutting off communication without explanation, particularly in online relationships.

The analysis also revealed that slang words evolve primarily due to social interaction, technological influence, and youth culture dynamics. Social media plays a major role in accelerating this change, allowing slang terms to spread rapidly and adopt new meanings collectively. Terms such as "*FYP*", originally referring to TikTok's "For You Page," are now commonly used to indicate any viral or trending content across platforms. view of language as a system that functions and evolves within a specific point in time. By applying a synchronous semantic approach, this study was able to capture these meaning shifts in real-time rather than tracing their historical evolution.

The findings also align with (Blank, 1999) theory that semantic change can occur due to cognitive, linguistic, and social motivations. In this context, slang adapts to express emotions (*baper*), describe behavior (*ghosting*), or convey attitudes (*santuy*). These changes are not random but reflect the communicative needs and creativity of youth language users. Moreover, points out, slang functions as a tool for reinforcing group identity and social cohesion. Through slang, young people create shared expressions that distinguish them from formal language norms and enable them to participate in cultural trends and peer interaction. Therefore, slang can be seen as both a linguistic and a cultural phenomenon.

In summary, this research confirms that slang is a living and adaptive element of language shaped by its users. The changes in meaning observed in this study are influenced not only by linguistic mechanisms but also by social behavior, emotional expression, and technological innovation. Studying these shifts helps us better understand how language evolves to meet the needs of contemporary communication, especially in fast-moving digital environments.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis, this study concludes that slang terms used in today's digital communication—especially on TikTok, Twitter, and YouTube—have undergone systematic semantic changes driven by social interaction, cultural trends, technological factors, and youth community dynamics. Using a synchronous semantic approach, the study identified that broadening is the most common type of semantic change, followed by narrowing and metaphorical shifts. Slang expressions like *baper*, *mager*, *receh*, and *santuy* have extended beyond their original meanings to serve as social tools for expressing identity, emotion, and humor. These findings confirm that slang is not only a marker of linguistic creativity but also reflects broader cultural and social transformations. In the digital era, shifts in slang meaning illustrate how language evolves to meet the communicative needs and identities of its users.

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