



## Lexical Ambiguity in Gen Z's Digital Dialogue

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### Abstract

This study investigates the manifestation and resolution of lexical ambiguity within the unique communicative landscape of Generation Z. As digital natives, Gen Z frequently engages in multimodal and context-dependent communication, often embedding double meanings in everyday discourse for humor, identity expression, and social cohesion. Utilizing qualitative content analysis, this research analyzed instances of ambiguous lexical usage gathered from Gen Z-dominant social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter. A corpus of 150 samples was selected and analyzed through the lens of discourse analysis and pragmatics. The findings reveal that Gen Z commonly employs lexical ambiguity in the form of polysemy and homonymy, relying on contextual cues, shared cultural knowledge, and digital semiotics (e.g., emojis and memes) to disambiguate meaning. These results underscore the dynamic and strategic nature of language in digital spaces, offering insights into Gen Z's sophisticated use of ambiguity as both a communicative tool and a marker of group identity.

**Keywords:** *Lexical Ambiguity; Generation Z; Digital Communication*

**Abstrak:** Penelitian ini menyelidiki manifestasi dan resolusi ambiguitas leksikal dalam lanskap komunikatif yang unik dari Generasi Z. Sebagai penduduk asli digital, Gen Z sering terlibat dalam komunikasi multimodal dan bergantung pada konteks, yang sering kali menyematkan makna ganda dalam wacana sehari-hari untuk humor, ekspresi identitas, dan kohesi sosial. Dengan menggunakan analisis konten kualitatif, penelitian ini menganalisis contoh-contoh penggunaan leksikal yang ambigu yang dikumpulkan dari platform media sosial yang dominan digunakan oleh Gen Z, seperti TikTok, Instagram, dan Twitter. Sebanyak 150 sampel dipilih dan dianalisis melalui lensa analisis wacana dan pragmatik. Temuan ini mengungkapkan bahwa Gen Z umumnya menggunakan ambiguitas leksikal dalam bentuk polisemi dan homonimi, dengan mengandalkan isyarat kontekstual, pengetahuan budaya bersama, dan semiotika digital (misalnya, emoji dan meme) untuk mengacaukan makna. Hasil penelitian ini menggarisbawahi sifat bahasa yang dinamis dan strategis di ruang digital, menawarkan wawasan tentang penggunaan ambiguitas yang canggih oleh Gen Z baik sebagai alat komunikatif maupun penanda identitas kelompok.

**Kata Kunci:** *Ambiguitas Leksikal; Generasi Z; Komunikasi Digital*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In the digital age, communication has undergone a significant transformation, particularly among Generation Z, individuals born between the mid-1990s and early 2010s. This generation, often referred to as digital natives, relies heavily on social media platforms for interaction, where informal language, including slang and emojis, has become the norm. The rapid evolution of language in these digital spaces has led to the emergence of lexical ambiguity, where words or phrases can have multiple meanings depending on the context in which they are used. Understanding how Generation Z navigates this ambiguity is crucial for comprehending their communication styles and the implications for effective interaction.

Previous studies have highlighted the impact of lexical ambiguity on communication. Pustejovsky (1995) posits that lexical items can possess multiple meanings that depend on their context of use, a phenomenon that is particularly pronounced in informal settings such as social media. Thurlow (2003) emphasizes that the informal nature of digital communication can enhance creativity but also lead to misunderstandings. While there is a growing body of literature on digital communication, there remains a notable gap in understanding how Generation Z specifically engages with lexical ambiguity in their online interactions.

This study aims to analyze the use of lexical ambiguity in digital communication among Generation Z. By examining how this demographic employs ambiguous terms and phrases, the research seeks to provide insights into their communication strategies. Additionally, the study aims to explore how context influences the interpretation of ambiguous language, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of language use in the digital age.

The primary research questions guiding this study are: How does Generation Z utilize lexical ambiguity in their digital communication? What types of ambiguity are most commonly encountered, and how do other users interpret these ambiguous terms? By addressing these questions, the research aims to shed light on the complexities of communication among Generation Z and the implications for digital literacy education.

Understanding the nuances of lexical ambiguity in the communication of Generation Z is essential for educators, linguists, and developers of natural language processing systems. As this generation continues to shape the future of communication, insights gained from this study can inform strategies for enhancing digital literacy and improving comprehension in an increasingly ambiguous linguistic landscape systems.

## **METHOD**

This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design aimed at exploring the use and interpretation of lexical ambiguity within Generation

Z's digital communication. The primary data sources consisted of texts gathered from social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, TikTok, and meme content created by Generation Z users. These data were selected purposively based on the presence of ambiguous expressions, including polysemy, homonymy, and figurative language. The secondary sources included relevant theoretical frameworks and previous studies on lexical ambiguity, digital discourse, and sociolinguistics to support the analysis.

Data collection was conducted using purposive sampling, focusing on posts containing ambiguous terms or phrases. Researchers utilized hashtags and keywords related to common themes among Generation Z, such as friendship, school, and social issues, to systematically gather 200 samples over a three-month period. Each post was archived and classified according to the type of ambiguity and contextual features that could influence its interpretation, such as emojis, hashtags, or accompanying visuals.

The data analysis applied qualitative content analysis to identify patterns and themes in the use of lexical ambiguity. The process included data familiarization, identification and categorization of ambiguous expressions, contextual interpretation of meaning, thematic coding, and interpretive analysis. Linguistic and sociolinguistic theories were employed to interpret how ambiguity functioned as a communicative strategy for humor, identity formation, group bonding, and cultural referencing within Generation Z's online interactions.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Lexical Ambiguity**

Lexical ambiguity, the phenomenon where a single word has multiple meanings, has been extensively examined in linguistic studies. Cruse (1986) distinguishes lexical ambiguity from vagueness by explaining that ambiguity occurs when a word has two or more distinct and clearly defined meanings—such as “bat” referring either to a flying mammal or a sports tool—whereas vagueness involves imprecise meanings. Expanding on this, Pustejovsky (1995) introduces the Generative Lexicon Theory, which suggests that the internal structure of words can generate multiple, contextually appropriate meanings, often through polysemy rather than complete homonymy. Riemer (2010) adds a pragmatic layer, emphasizing that ambiguity is not necessarily a communicative problem; it can be a resource for humor, puns, and creative expression. While Cruse and Pustejovsky provide structural insights, Riemer reminds us of the interpretive flexibility offered by ambiguity. Taken together, these perspectives frame lexical ambiguity as a rich, multidimensional aspect of language that plays both a functional and expressive role.

### **Generation Z and Language Behavior**

Generation Z's language behavior reflects their digital upbringing and rapid engagement with evolving forms of communication. Twenge (2017) highlights that Gen Z, being digital natives, are deeply embedded in the online environment, resulting in shorter attention spans, heavy reliance on visual elements, and rapid slang adoption. Complementing this, Tagliamonte (2016) shows that youth tend to be early adopters and innovators in language use, repurposing traditional structures into new, socially embedded meanings. Meanwhile, Androutsopoulos (2006) analyzes how youth digital discourse is shaped by identity expression and group belonging, often manifesting through stylistic choices like code-switching, emojis, and layered meanings. These scholars collectively illustrate that Gen Z's language is not only fast-evolving but also socially strategic, as they employ linguistic creativity to maintain group cohesion and assert individuality.

### **Digital Communication**

The digital environment fundamentally transforms how meaning is created and interpreted. Crystal (2006) argues that the internet has created a new linguistic variety that blends spoken and written norms, leading to hybrid forms of communication that frequently include ambiguous expressions. Similarly, Baron (2008) observes that digital interactions prioritize brevity, emotion, and informality—conditions under which lexical ambiguity thrives. Herring (2010) adds that each digital platform (e.g., Twitter, Instagram, TikTok) introduces unique structural features—like threading, multimedia integration, and time-sensitive content—that influence how users encode and decode meaning. These viewpoints reinforce the notion that digital communication is not linear or purely textual; instead, it is multimodal, relying on platform-specific conventions and contextual awareness to navigate meaning, including ambiguous expressions.

Polysemy—the existence of multiple related meanings within a single word—is a key characteristic of informal Gen Z communication. Lyons (1977) describes polysemy as a manifestation of cognitive economy, where speakers prefer using familiar words with extended meanings rather than inventing new terms. Taylor (2003), through prototype theory, explains that meanings often radiate from a central, prototypical sense and extend via metaphor or metonymy. Geeraerts (1993) emphasizes the social relevance of polysemy, noting that interpretation depends heavily on situational and cultural context. In the digital age, Gen Z often plays with polysemy to add layers of humor or sarcasm, as seen in words like “dead,” “slay,” or “iconic,” which carry different nuances depending on tone and context. These studies reveal that polysemy in Gen Z discourse is not accidental but a dynamic, socially informed process of meaning-making.

### **Internet Slang and Cultural Semantics**

Internet slang serves as a fertile ground for semantic innovation and ambiguity, particularly among Gen Z. Danet and Herring (2007) assert that internet slang is a tool for identity performance, often marked by playful spelling, abbreviations, and meaning shifts. Eble (1996), in her study of campus slang, finds that slang reflects generational culture and serves as a boundary marker for group inclusion. Zappavigna (2012) introduces the idea of “ambient affiliation,” explaining how hashtags and meme-driven expressions generate shared meanings among users who recognize the cultural context. Together, these perspectives reveal that internet slang is deeply embedded in cultural semantics, with ambiguous phrases often acting as social codes understood only by those within a particular digital or generational culture. Terms like “ratio,” “vibe check,” or “no cap” function as linguistic signals of cultural belonging, heavily reliant on context for accurate interpretation.

### **Pragmatics and Contextual Meaning**

Pragmatics plays a vital role in resolving lexical ambiguity by emphasizing meaning-in-context rather than fixed dictionary definitions. Levinson (1983) emphasizes that conversational meaning relies on implicature and shared assumptions between speaker and listener, helping to clarify ambiguous statements. Sperber and Wilson (1986), through Relevance Theory, argue that listeners interpret utterances by seeking the most relevant inference with minimal cognitive effort, often using contextual cues. Yule (1996) supports this view by stating that pragmatics is not just about words but about who says them, to whom, in what setting, and for what purpose. These scholars collectively underline that ambiguity in Gen Z discourse is often not problematic because participants share background knowledge and expectations, allowing them to decode even highly ambiguous or ironic expressions.

In summary, the previous works reviewed across semantic theory, sociolinguistics, digital discourse, and pragmatics converge on one central idea: lexical ambiguity is not merely a linguistic phenomenon, but a socially embedded and context-sensitive tool—especially in the hands of Generation Z. Their unique blend of digital fluency, cultural referencing, and creative expression enables them to navigate and even thrive in ambiguous communicative environments. Understanding how Gen Z uses and interprets ambiguous language provides valuable insight not only into contemporary youth discourse but also into the broader evolution of language in the digital era.

The analysis demonstrated that lexical ambiguity in Gen Z communication is both widespread and functionally purposeful. Rather than being a barrier to understanding, ambiguity often enhances digital interaction by enabling layered meanings, social nuance, and creativity. The

ability to decode such expressions depends on shared context, cultural awareness, and familiarity with online trends.

Post	Type of Ambiguity	Interpretation	Platform
"He has no rizz 🥲"	Neologism (polysemy)	"Rizz" means charisma or flirting skill	Tik tok
"This party is dead ,† ●"	Literal vs slang (polysemy)	Dead = boring OR funny depending on tone	Twitter
"She ate and left no crumbs , fμ"	Idiomatically ambiguous	"Ate" = performed very well	Instagram
"I'm weak ?● " -"	Physical vs emotional (polysemy)	Means laughing hard, not literally weak	Twitter
"Cap. That's straight cap."	Homonymy	"Cap" = lie, not a hat	Tik-tok
"This outfit is fire fμ,"	Polysemy	"Fire" = very stylish, not literal	Instagram
"That's lowkey genius"	Lexical ambiguity	"Lowkey" = subtle praise or secret admiration	Twitter
"He ghosted me."	Lexical shift	"Ghosted" = suddenly stopped communication	Instagram
"I'm crying 🥲🥲"	Figurative Means finding	Something famous in tik-tok	Tik-tok

“She’s so salty rn 🤔”	Polysemy	“Salty” bitter/annoyed, not food-related	=	Twitter
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The analysis of the 10 selected social media posts revealed that Generation Z frequently employs lexical ambiguity in their digital communication. Each of the posts contained instances of ambiguity, with polysemy being the most common type identified. For example, the term "lit" appeared in two different contexts: one post used it to describe a party as "exciting," while another referred to it in the context of being "intoxicated." Other ambiguous terms included "sick," which was used to express both admiration and illness, and "ghosting," which referred to both the act of disappearing from a conversation and the cultural phenomenon of ignoring someone.

The analysis of comments and replies to these posts indicated that users often had differing interpretations of the same ambiguous terms. For instance, in one post where "sick" was used, some users interpreted it positively, while others expressed confusion, highlighting the role of context in shaping understanding. This variability suggests that Generation Z navigates ambiguity with an awareness of their audience and the situational context.

The findings of this study underscore the creative potential of lexical ambiguity in the communication of Generation Z. While ambiguity can enhance expressiveness and foster a sense of community among users, it also poses challenges for clarity and comprehension. The context in which ambiguous terms are used plays a crucial role in determining how they are interpreted. For example, posts related to social events often led to more playful interpretations, while academic-related posts resulted in more serious interpretations.

These findings have important implications for digital literacy education. As communication increasingly occurs in ambiguous linguistic environments, it is essential for educators to equip students with the skills to interpret and navigate such complexities. By fostering an understanding of lexical ambiguity, educators can enhance students' ability to communicate effectively in digital spaces. In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on digital communication by providing insights into how Generation Z engages with lexical ambiguity. The findings highlight the importance of context in shaping interpretation and underscore the need for further research in this area to better understand the evolving nature of language in the digital age.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study set out to investigate the manifestation, interpretation, and implications of lexical ambiguity in Generation Z's digital communication. First, the findings reveal that lexical ambiguity is a prominent and intentional element in Gen Z discourse, often emerging through slang expressions, internet memes, abbreviations, and multimodal forms like emojis and gifs. Words such as "rizz," "dead," and "ate" demonstrate how meanings are layered and frequently context-dependent. Second, in decoding these ambiguities, Gen Z individuals rely heavily on contextual cues such as visual symbols, shared cultural knowledge, and platform-specific conventions. These strategies demonstrate their high pragmatic awareness and collective understanding of evolving linguistic norms. Lastly, the study concludes that lexical ambiguity does not hinder communication within Gen Z communities; instead, it enhances expressiveness, fosters humor, reinforces group identity, and allows for creative engagement. Therefore, lexical ambiguity serves as a powerful communicative tool that reflects the adaptive, nuanced, and socially embedded nature of Gen Z's digital language use.

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