

SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF MEANING CHANGE IN GENERATION ALPHA LANGUAGE ON TIKTOK: A LEXICAL SEMANTIC APPROACH

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Abstract

Language is always evolving, with changes occurring in its usage, structure, and meaning. Social media accelerates these developments in the digital era, especially for Generation Alpha, the first generation to be completely surrounded in digital technology. This study explores the changes in meaning of selected slang words used by Generation Alpha on TikTok, applying a lexical semantic approach. A qualitative descriptive method was applied, involving non participatory observation of 22 slang words used by Generation Alpha on TikTok. Data were analyzed through reduction, display, and categorization of semantic changes into four types: amelioration, pejoration, generalization, and specialization. The findings show that most slang originates in English and changes its meaning. Generalization expands word usage across contexts (e.g., bussin, flex), specialization restricts meanings to specific circumstances (e.g., rizz, cap), amelioration reflects good or praising meanings (e.g., ate, Gucci), and pejoration carries negative connotations (e.g., basic, ghosting). These findings demonstrate how societal trends and internet contact have shaped Generation Alpha's flexible and adaptive language use. The understanding of semantic variance in teenage slang across social media platforms is enhanced by this study.

Keywords – *Generation Alpha, TikTok, slang, semantic change, lexical semantics*

INTRODUCTION

Language undergoes continuous development over time, including changes in structure, usage, and meaning. Such changes are not merely linguistic phenomena, but also reflect social values, cultural practices, and collective identities within a community (Chaer, 2014). One of the most visible forms of language change is semantic shift, where words acquire meanings that differ from their original lexical senses.

In the digital era, semantic change happens more because of the fast-paced information exchange through online platforms. Social media has become a platform where new meanings are formed, negotiated, and widely shared. Generation Alpha, being the first generation to be completely surrounded by digital technology, plays a crucial role in this process. Their active interaction with social media allows new meaning to spread quickly and become normalized within their community (Maulida, 2022).

TikTok particularly functions as an active linguistic environment where repetition, trends, and virality influence language use. In daily interactions on this platform, Generation Alpha often uses slang expressions such as rizz, sigma, slay, looksmaxing, and ate. These words have lost their original meanings because of the new interpretations that emerge from digital context and popular culture. For example, rizz, which comes from charisma, is commonly understood as the ability to attract or flirt, while sigma is used to describe a figure perceived as independent, dominant, or admirable.

The semantic changes found in these expressions often take the form of amelioration, where meanings gain positive connotations, or pejoration, where meanings become more negative. In some cases, meanings also undergo generalization or specialization depending on how the words are used within specific social contexts. These variations indicate that semantic change among Generation Alpha is systematic rather than random, and is strongly influenced by patterns of digital interaction.

Although previous studies have discussed slang and semantic change in digital environments, research that specifically examines lexical semantic change in Generation Alpha language on TikTok remains limited. Therefore, this study focuses on analyzing semantic changes in selected slang terms used by Generation Alpha on TikTok through a lexical semantic approach, in order to identify the forms of semantic change and understand how digital contexts contribute to the reshaping of word meanings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Semantic change has long been discussed within the field of lexical semantics as a natural consequence of language use in social contexts. Lexical semantics focuses on how meanings are encoded in words and how these meanings evolve as language is used by speakers over time (Chaer, 2014). This perspective is particularly useful for examining language in digital environments, where words are repeatedly recontextualized and exposed to new interpretations.

Semantic change refers to the process by which a word shifts from its original meaning to a new one due to social, cultural, and communicative factors (Ullmann, 1977). Common forms of semantic change include amelioration, where a word acquires a more positive meaning; pejoration, where a meaning becomes negative; generalization, where meaning broadens; and specialization, where meaning becomes more restricted. In digital communication, these processes often occur rapidly as words are reused across trends, memes, and viral content. This study adopts a lexical semantic approach to identify and categorize these forms of semantic change in the language used by Generation Alpha on TikTok.

Generation Alpha, defined as individuals born from around 2010 onward, is the first generation to grow up fully immersed in digital technology (McCrindle, 2023). Their exposure to social media from an early age significantly influences how they use and interpret language. Slang used by Generation Alpha is often shaped by internet culture, popular trends, and imitation of viral figures, resulting in meanings that differ from standard or original lexical definitions (Sartini, 2024).

TikTok has been identified as one of the most influential platforms in shaping contemporary youth language. Previous studies suggest that TikTok functions as a highly dynamic linguistic space where repetition, visual context, and algorithm-driven virality accelerate semantic change (Ibrahim & Septiani, 2022; Hariani, 2023). Words used on TikTok are frequently detached from their original meanings and redefined through collective usage within specific online communities.

Several previous studies have examined slang and semantic change among young people in digital contexts. Wijaya (2020) found that slang among high school students often changes meaning due to viral trends and social imitation. Mulyani (2021) showed that social media accelerates semantic change through humor and pop culture references across

platforms. Putri and Santoso (2022) analyzed slang on Instagram and identified processes of broadening, narrowing, and pejoration using a lexical semantic framework. Similarly, Lestari and Pratama (2022) examined lexical change among Generation Z on messaging platforms and highlighted abbreviation and meaning reduction as dominant processes.

More recently, Putri and Sofyaningrum (2024) focused specifically on Generation Alpha and identified various slang terms used in online communication during the Society 5.0 era. While their study provides valuable insight into the vocabulary used by Generation Alpha, it does not focus on semantic change within a specific platform. Therefore, despite existing research on youth language and digital communication, studies that specifically analyze lexical semantic change in Generation Alpha language on TikTok remain limited.

Based on this gap, the present study focuses on examining semantic changes in selected slang terms—rizz, sigma, slay, looksmaxing, and ate—as used by Generation Alpha on TikTok. By applying a lexical semantic approach, this research aims to contribute to a more platform-specific understanding of how digital interaction shapes word meaning among Generation Alpha.

METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative descriptive methodology combined with a lexical semantic approach. The qualitative method is chosen because this study focuses on interpreting meaning and identifying patterns of semantic change rather than measuring frequency or statistical significance. The analysis focuses on how the slang word changes meaning through the usage within a specific digital community, specifically Generation Alpha on TikTok.

The data includes slang terms like "rizz," "sigma," "slay," "looksmaxing," and "ate" that are used by Generation Alpha in TikTok videos. These words were chosen because they are often used in TikTok conversations and show clear semantic changes from their original lexical meanings. The researcher observed TikTok videos without actively participating in the interaction in order to gather data through non-participatory observation. To capture the language context in which the words were used, videos containing the chosen words were found, recorded, and transcribed.

Data analysis follows the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman, which includes data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing or verification. During data reduction, instances of the selected slang words were filtered to include only those that clearly demonstrated semantic change. In the data display stage, the meanings of the words were organized and compared with their original lexical meanings. Lastly, results were obtained by using lexical semantic theory to classify the semantic changes into categories such as amelioration, pejoration, generalization, and specialization.

The interpretation of meaning is based on reliable semantic change theory and supported by frequent usage patterns seen in various TikTok content in order to preserve analytical rigor. Instead of relying on isolated or subjective interpretation, this method guarantees that the analysis is founded on consistent linguistic evidence.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the research findings after data reduction, comparing Alpha Generation slang that did not undergo semantic change with those that did. Data were collected through documentation of TikTok videos featuring vocabulary popular among Generation Alpha, in accordance with previous research (Putri & Sofyaningrum, 2024). Observations were conducted non-participatively, focusing on 22 selected slang terms based on predetermined criteria.

Amelioration

Amelioration refers to semantic changes that give a word a more positive connotation. In this study, seven Generation Alpha slang terms were identified as undergoing amelioration, including:

Table 1. Slang Words Undergoing Amelioration in Generation Alpha Language on TikTok

No.	Slang	Original Meaning	Meaning in Generation Alpha Context
1	Ate	The past tense of eat, meaning to consume food.	Used as a compliment to indicate that someone did something exceptionally well.
2	Drip	To fall or flow in drops.	Refers to having a very stylish or fashionable appearance.
3	Fire	Literal fire or flame.	Describes something impressive, exciting, or outstanding.
4	Glow up	Literally “to glow” or shine.	A significant improvement in physical appearance or overall self-presentation.
5	Gucci	An Italian luxury fashion brand.	Used to mean “everything is fine” or “no problem.”
6	GOAT	A farm animal (goat).	An acronym for Greatest of All Time, referring to someone highly skilled or exceptional.
7	Slay	To kill or murder.	Used to praise someone for performing extremely well or looking very impressive.

Source: TikTok Application & Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Pejoration

Pejoration refers to a semantic change in which a word develops a more negative connotation compared to its original meaning. In this study, six Generation Alpha slang words were identified as undergoing pejoration, as presented below:

Table 2. Slang Words Undergoing Pejoration in Generation Alpha Language on TikTok

No.	Slang	Original Meaning	Meaning in Generation Alpha Context
1	Basic	Fundamental or simple.	Used to describe something as boring, unoriginal, or uninteresting.
2	Cringe	To shrink back or react physically due to fear or disgust.	A feeling of embarrassment, awkwardness, or discomfort.
3	Mid	Middle or central.	Something considered average or unsatisfactory.
4	Extra	Additional or added.	Describes behavior that is excessive or overly dramatic.
5	Salty	Containing or seasoned with salt.	A feeling of annoyance, bitterness, or irritation.
6	Ghosting	A faint image appearing on a television screen or similar display.	The act of suddenly cutting off communication or ending a relationship without explanation.

Source: TikTok Application & Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Generalization

Generalization is a semantic process in which a word acquires a broader meaning than its original sense. This study found six Generation Alpha slang terms that experienced generalization, as shown in the table below:

Table 3. Slang Words Undergoing Generalization in Generation Alpha Language on TikTok

No.	Slang	Original Meaning	Meaning in Generation Alpha Context
1	Bussin	Originally used in African American Vernacular English (AAVE) to describe delicious food.	Extended to describe anything highly enjoyable, such as music, fashion, or experiences.
2	Lit	Literally means “on fire” or illuminated.	Used to describe a fun, exciting, or enjoyable situation.
3	Mood	Emotional state or feeling.	Used to express relatability or identification with a situation or expression.
4	Ohio	The name of a state in the United States.	Used to describe something strange, unusual, or absurd.
5	Flex	To tense one’s muscles.	To show off achievements, wealth, or success.
6	Looksmax	Extreme efforts to improve physical appearance.	Broadly refers to improving one’s appearance, without emphasizing the extreme aspect.

Source: TikTok Application & Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Specialization

Specialization is a narrowing semantic change in which a word's meaning becomes more restricted to a specific context. In this study, three Generation Alpha slang words were found to undergo specialization.

Table 4. Slang Words Undergoing Specialization in Generation Alpha Language on TikTok

No.	Slang	Original Meaning	Meaning in Generation Alpha Context
1	Rizz	Shortened form of charisma.	The ability to flirt, attract, or charm others, especially in romantic contexts.
2	Cap	A type of hat.	A lie or something that is untrue.
3	Sigma	The 18th letter of the Greek alphabet.	Describes a masculine, dominant, and independent male archetype.

Source: TikTok Application & Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Based on the data obtained, it can be observed that most Generation Alpha slang terms originate from the English language. This result supports McCrindle's (2023) claim that Generation Alpha is highly capable of rapid adaptability to global digital trends and technologies. The common usage of these slang words among a large audience is further accelerated by TikTok's dominance as a social media platform. As a result, when words are frequently used in new digital situations, their meanings change.

Four categories can be used to categorize the semantic changes found in this study: amelioration, pejoration, generalization, and specialization. These categories were found in 22 slang words that the members of Generation Alpha frequently use on TikTok. Each kind of semantic change illustrates how this generation creatively reinterprets language to fit their social interactions and communication needs in digital environments.

Amelioration occurs when a word develops a more positive meaning or carries a sense of praise. The findings show that Generation Alpha frequently uses slang to express admiration, approval, or positive evaluation. For example, the word *ate*, which originally means "to eat," is now used to praise someone who performs exceptionally well. Similarly, *Gucci*, originally the name of a fashion brand, is used to indicate that a situation is fine or going well. These examples illustrate how Generation Alpha enriches language with positive connotations to support expressive and evaluative communication.

Pejoration refers to a semantic change in which a word acquires a more negative meaning or expresses dissatisfaction. Generation Alpha modifies existing words to convey negative evaluations in a relatively indirect or less harsh manner. For instance, the word *basic* is now commonly used to describe something as boring or unoriginal. Another example is *ghosting*, which originally referred to a visual disturbance on a television screen, but now denotes the act of abruptly ending communication without explanation. These shifts show how negative meanings are constructed through repeated contextual usage in social interactions.

Generalization involves the broadening of a word's meaning so that it can be used in a wider range of contexts. One clear example is *bussin*, which initially emerged from African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and was primarily used to describe delicious food. Over time, its usage has expanded beyond its original community and context, allowing it to describe various positive experiences such as music, appearance, or overall quality. This indicates how digital platforms enable slang to cross cultural boundaries and gain broader semantic functions.

Specialization occurs when a word's meaning becomes more limited or specific compared to its original sense. This can be seen in the slang term *rizz*, derived from charisma, which now specifically refers to the ability to flirt or attract others, particularly in romantic contexts. Another example is *cap*, which originally refers to a type of hat, but is now used to mean a lie or false statement. These semantic changes arise because the words are repeatedly used in specific communicative situations by Generation Alpha to express particular actions or social meanings.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the study of Generation Alpha slang, the conclusion is that Generation Alpha frequently uses English language slang words as a result of trends and quick spread through social media platforms such as TikTok. Amelioration, pejoration, generalization, and specialization are the four primary categories of semantic modifications in Generation Alpha's slang.

Amelioration occurs when words are used to express positive meanings or praise, as seen in slang such as *ate*, *Gucci*, and *fire*. Pejoration appears when words are used to convey dissatisfaction or negative connotations in a relatively mild way, such as *basic*, *ghosting*, and *salty*. Generalization can be observed in words like *bussin*, *looksmxing*, and *flex*, which now have broader and more flexible meanings compared to their original meanings. The last type, specialization, is used to narrow meanings into more specific contexts, as seen in *rizz*, *cap*, and *sigma*.

These semantic changes show that Generation Alpha's language is adaptive and flexible, evolving in response to social and technological shifts. The study's conclusions deepen knowledge of semantic variance in slang used on social media platforms, especially TikTok.

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