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THE GEN Z INTERNET SLANG AND EFL SPEAKERS: THE CASE OF N. MACEDONIA

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Abstract

In the realm of digital discourse, Generation Z (Gen Z), the true digital natives, have significantly changed English as we know it, infusing their online conversations with a distinctive lexicon of “No cap”s, and “High-key”s. Recognizing the uniqueness of such language use, this paper delves into the Gen Z internet slang, aiming to 1. Qualitatively dissect the word formation processes and explore the semantic shift of popular slang terms found on TikTok, YouTube, Twitter, and Instagram, and 2. Check whether EFL Gen Zers can understand this Internet slang.

Surveying a random sample of 52 EFL students from three high schools in Bitola, North Macedonia, the study found that the majority of these students are familiar with most Gen Z slang terms such as "Flex," "(Spill the) Tea," "Main character," and "(It's) Giving...". Though these responses relied on self-reported data, which cannot be seen as fully objective, this study still provided valuable insights into the linguistic terrain of tech-based linguistic creativity, aiming to unearth not just new words, but the very essence of this generation's digital identity.

Keywords: Gen Z, EFL Students, Internet Slang, Word Formation, Semantic Shift, Neologisms

Introduction

Slang, as a dynamic facet of language, undergoes frequent changes, evolving from one generation to the next and even from one trend to another. The evolution of slang is a testament to language's ability to morph and adapt to the ever-changing social landscape. In recent times, however, technology and its pervasive influence on young people's lives, have significantly contributed to an even more rapid evolution of new language patterns and the introduction of novel vocabulary, primarily used in online discourses.

Generation Z (Gen Z), often called the "digital natives," stands at the forefront of this linguistic revolution, as a generation that has had technology available as a means of communication throughout most of their lives. This generation of speakers, typically born between 1997 and 2012 (Bejtkovsky, 2016 as cited by Lihawa et al. 2021: 1) has had their linguistic repertoire uniquely shaped by their constant interaction with the digital world. Thus, Gen Zers have crafted a unique linguistic landscape that blends traditional language use with the rapidly evolving lexicon of the internet. As a result, they have developed a distinctive speaking and writing style in the realm of online communication, particularly on social media platforms like YouTube, Instagram, Twitter, and, most recently TikTok – a style that seems to be adopted by non-native, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speakers, as well.

1. Internet Slang – General Remarks

The Internet population surpasses that of any individual country, forming a unique community known as Internet People. Globally, approximately four billion people are online, accounting for roughly half of the world's population. (McCulloch, 2019: 23) Peoples everywhere in the world have their own language that they use to communicate. Similarly, the Internet People use their own variety of language to convey messages in the virtual world – a so-called, internet language. According to McCulloch (2019:65), the internet language, which we all speak in one way or another, is a new form of informal language that combines features of speech and writing. It is characterized by its focus on efficiency, employing acronyms, emojis, and GIFs to convey tone and emotion, and its use of visuals to restore the body to writing.

Crystal (2011) acknowledges that languages constantly evolve, and the Internet has accelerated this process. He suggests that the Internet has introduced new vocabulary, slang, and abbreviations into English, making numerous language changes. McCulloch (2019: 125) also argues that the Internet has changed some of the rules of English typography. For instance, using ALL CAPITAL LETTERS in one's writing gives the impression of shouting. At least online. While this is a well-known way to convey intense emotions through typography, there are various other types of expressing such feelings in online discourse. Some of these other types include using ***bolded asterisks*** or *_italicized underscores_* to make up for the absence of other formatting options that indicate emphasis, as well as using different emojis to convey sarcasm or humor (McCulloch, 2019: 127).

Internet slang has seen numerous important changes in the post-pandemic era, fueled by the growing population of short videos called reels, especially in regard to the ways in which Gen Zers (the Gen-Z members) have moulded language to fit their unique needs. @Popxodaily, an Instagram account producing popular content, for instance, noted the different use of emojis to convey certain messages and express emotions of Millennials, born between 1981 and 1996, and Gen Zers. The reel posted on the platform reveals some interesting differences: While Millennials tend to use the Face with Tears of Joy Emoji (😄) to denote laughing, Gen Zers tend to use a combination of Coffin Emoji (👊) and Skull Emoji (💀). The video also shows the difference between these two generations when trying to "emojify" shock. Millennials tend to use Astonished Face Emoji (😲) to portray shock, while Gen Zers – a combination of Eye and Lips Emojis (👁️👄) to "make" a shocked face.

Though the ways in which this Internet slang bends the rules of proper English might seem worrisome, it is important to keep in mind that this “strange” Internet writing is not a sign of language decay, but rather a sign of language evolution and innovation. Crystal (2011) often highlights the creative aspect of language evolution on the Internet stating that users play with language, creating memes, neologisms, and unique forms of expression, thus adding to the colorful world of new tech-infused Englishes.

2. Previous Studies in the Field

Though not abundant in number, the previous studies in the field have shed light on various aspects of Gen Z's linguistic landscape, providing valuable insights into the language patterns, use, and word formation practices, as well as some considerations about ESL/EFL and teaching.

Lihawa et al. (2021) conducted a comprehensive investigation of word formation (WF) processes of Gen Z slang, using data from Callahan's Generation Z Dictionary – a collection of slang terms used by this generation. Their corpus-based qualitative analysis identified eight distinct types of word formation processes at play, such as: fanciful formation (as in “**Nunya**” = None of your (business)), compounding (such as “**Deadass**” and “**low key**”), blending (as in “**Shlitty**” = Shitty + litty), clipping (such as “**Sus**” from “Suspicious”), conversion (as in “**Jawn**”, from a verb to a noun), suffixation, (as in “**Hardo**” = hard + -o), multiple process WF (as in “**Tryna**” from “trying to”), and reduplicatives (such as “**mad mad**”). The study found that despite there being instances of all WF processes mentioned, compounding emerged as the predominant WF process in Gen Z slang.

A recent article by a group of students enrolled in the UCLA Linguistics course (D. Vega, et al., 2019), focused on Gen Z's use of general extenders (GEs) in online discourse. The authors found that Gen Z members tend to use GE phrases such as “**and stuff**”, “**and things**”, “**and idk** (abbreviation for “I don't know”)” to add certain vagueness or uncertainty at the end of a sentence. The article's authors found that these GEs are used as pragmatic tools to express emotions, stances, and identities. The authors stated that such use of GEs reflects Gen Z's linguistic creativity as members of this generation are constantly creating new slang terms that at times may cause intergenerational confusion.

This intergenerational confusion that may arise was comprehensively studied by Vacalares et al. (2023). The authors have looked into the intelligibility of two distinctive internet slangs – the one of the Millennials and one of the Gen Zers – the two generations that use social media most extensively. By examining data from 100 respondents that belong to one of the two generations, the authors found that there is a significant positive correlation between Millennials and Gen Zers regarding the use of modern-day Internet slang. This means that both generations can comprehend and use many of the same words in online discourse. However, the authors also found that Gen Zers are more familiar with metathesis forms of words i.e. words that change the order of letters or sounds, such as “pwned” or “teh”.

Indonesian Gen Zers and their slang were also discussed in a recent study which examined 50 slang words that Indonesian Gen Zers use in WhatsApp groups (Yunisrina, Y. et al.

2022). The authors found that Gen Zers used different types of slang, such as fresh and creative slang (such as “**oww shoot**”), flippant slang (such as “**spill the tea**”), imitative slang (such as “**lemme**”), acronyms (like “**ss**” (screenshot)), and clipping (like in “**Congrats**”), to show their linguistic creativity and innovation.

The language in Internet memes, as part of the online discourse, was also extensively studied by Kostadinovska-Stojchevska & Shalevska (2018). Upon analyzing various language patterns employed in the creation of numerous types of internet memes, the authors found that memes employ colloquial English, alongside expressions from particular English regional varieties, puns and wordplays, specialized terminology, abbreviations, and newly coined words. Memes were also found to have deliberate misspellings and numerous both deliberate and unintentional errors in both grammar and syntax.

In terms of non-native speakers, Jeresano and Carretero (2022) explored the slang used by Gen Zers and the ways it can affect foreign language learners in the Pamurayan Integrated School, in the Philippines. The authors found that slang has both positive and negative effects on students’ conversational skills and writing skills. According to them, while slang can facilitate improved peer communication and conversational engagement, it can also create language barriers with older generations and negatively influence students’ spelling and grammar skills.

Demir & Sönmez (2022) also explored slang in an education context, examining the instructional expectations of Gen Z students in the English as a foreign language classrooms. The authors conducted semi-structured interviews with 38 students and 21 instructors from two universities in Turkey. The interviews showed that students prefer technology-oriented, interactive, and engaging instruction, while the instructors tend to favor traditional methods and teaching strategies.

Collectively, these studies provide a multifaceted view of Gen Z's linguistic practices and their impact on communication, (ESL/EFL) education, and intergenerational communication and barriers.

3. Methodology

To investigate the linguistic characteristics of Gen Z Internet slang and its legibility for non-native speakers, this study employed a mixed, quantitative, and qualitative approach, focusing its data collection efforts on four popular social media platforms, widely used by this demographic: YouTube, TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram and a random sample of 52 EFL speakers i.e. high school students from Bitola, North Macedonia. A systematic exploration of content on these platforms was conducted, and 10 frequently used slang items in the sampled content were selected.

The selected lexical items were then subjected to qualitative analysis, with a focus on two key aspects: word formation processes and potential semantic shifts in meaning. The sampled lexical items were also used in a Linkert-scale-based online questionnaire that was sent to 153 students from three high schools in Bitola, North Macedonia: The medical high school of “Jovan Kalauzi”, the technical high school of “Gjorgi Naumov” and the gymnasium “Taki Daskalot”.

The response rate was 33.99% with 52 out of the 153 students responding on the questionnaire. The collected data from the Google Forms survey was then statistically analyzed to determine if and to what extent, EFL speakers, born between 1997 and 2012, understand the Gen Z Internet slang used primarily by native speakers of English. This quantitative part of the study focused on (dis)proving the main hypothesis: *The majority of EFL speakers are familiar with Gen Z Internet slang.*

Throughout the data collection and analysis process, user privacy was guaranteed and all terms of service and community guidelines of the chosen social media platforms were considered. This research received no external funding and the author declares no conflicting interests of any sort that may obstruct this research's objectivity.

4. Results and Discussion

I. Qualitative Analysis of the Selected Data

The corpus of 10 phrases and words, observed frequently in the sampled content, has been carefully selected for analysis. The author provided their own definitions, while usage examples were taken from the abundance of content on the aforementioned platforms. In order to uncover the underlying word formation processes and potential semantic shifts that have shaped these expressions in the contemporary lexicon, the following lexical items were analyzed:

1. Lit

Definition: Something that is of exceptionally high quality, incredibly enjoyable, intense, or exciting.

Usage example: BRUUUHHHH THEIR HEARTBEAT STAGE IS SO LIT ☐ (@L2theA, 2023)

1.1. Word Formation and Semantic Shifts

"Lit" originally served as the past tense and past participle form of the verb "light," meaning to illuminate or ignite something. Over time, the verb was converted into a noun, undergoing conversion (zero derivation) that helped it evolve from a grammatical form to a standalone adjective with a broader, figurative meaning.

"Lit" used to be associated with physical illumination or fire with a somewhat of a negative connotation. However, in Gen Z slang, the semantic meaning of the word has shifted to now denote positive qualities. Thus, the word has undergone semantic amelioration. The meaning was also expanded through semantic broadening, and thus, "lit" has evolved to describe not just physical states but also abstract qualities such as excellence. In terms of usage, this term is mostly seen online, both in written discourse and in spoken discourse in videos and reels.

2. No Cap/Cap

Definition: "No cap" is used to show that a statement is true and that the person is not lying. "Cap" has the opposite meaning – a lie.

Usage example: Cardi is good but Nicki is the best, No cap!!! (@EdeMmesoma, 2023)

2.1. Word Formation and Semantic Shifts

Both "Cap" and "No cap" have undergone a primary semantic shift i.e. they have broadened their original meanings to new slang meanings: "No Cap" has shifted from its original meaning of "no headwear" (as in wearing no hat) to a slang term indicating truthfulness. A similar semantic shift occurred in "Cap". Other than a change in meaning, these terms had undergone no additional word formation changes. It's important to note that etymologically speaking, "cap" originates from African American English Vernacular (AAEV), but has now gained broader recognition beyond AAEV.

3. Salty

Definition: Feeling irritated about something.

Usage example: When She's Low Key Salty #couplegoals (@JaySharon, 2023)

3.1. Word Formation and Semantic Shifts

In terms of word formation, "Salty" can be considered a result of an affixation process i.e. combination of the noun "salt" and the suffix "-y," which is commonly used in English to form adjectives. The adjective, formed as such, has been used to describe certain foods and sensory experiences to do with taste. But this Gen Z meaning of "salty" has obviously undergone semantic broadening. Thus, this word that was originally associated with a specific sensory experience (taste) has broadened its meaning to encompass a broader range of emotions. The word has also undergone a shift in registry. While salty, as denoting food qualities, was perfectly acceptable as part of formal discourse, Gen Z's "salty" is not.

4. Flex

Definition: To boast (arrogantly) or show off one's possessions or knowledge.

Usage example: Newcastle flexing UCL qualification only to finish bottom of this group of death (@pogbhai, 2023)

4.1. Word Formation and Semantic Shifts

"Flex" as a verb, was originally linked with meaning to do with physical activities i.e. bending or tightening one's muscles. However, this transitive verb has since been metaphorically extended to describe boasting or showing off. This extension is probably based on the idea that just as one flexes their muscles to display physical strength, they can also "flex" verbally to

display their achievements or superiority. The semantic shift of this verb reflects its evolution in contemporary language, where “flex” has taken on a new, figurative sense related to self-promotion and bragging.

5. To Stan/ A stan

Definition: To support someone or something / A big (often obsessive) fan of someone or something.

Usage example: We Stan a woman with boundaries (@Charleytime, 2023)

5.1. Word Formation and Semantic Shifts

In terms of word formation, “stan” as a noun, might be a blend of the nouns “stalker” and “fan.” The blending of these two nouns, considering the WF Right hand head blending rules of English, yields the new noun and new meaning of the word. Yet, “stan” seems to also be used as a verb in online discourse, thus the word has also undergone conversion i.e. zero derivation to shift to a verb.

6. Lowkey

Definition: 1. Exactly what it is said. 2. Something not widely known.

Usage example: why does mina lowkey look scary when she’s jealous □ (@zxuchaemi, 2023)

7. Highkey

Definition: Opposite of lowkey – something obvious.

Usage example: Elliot’s reaction when Helen told him that her husband told her she needed to be thinner, he was highkey offended for her, THAT IS ONE GOOD MAN!!! □ #TheTourist (@Angeliique, 2023)

6.1./7.1. Word Formation and Semantic Shifts

Both “Lowkey” and “Highkey” can be considered exocentric compounds of “Low”/“High” + “key”, in which the head “key” “key” consistently carries the connotation of significance or noticeability. In terms of semantic shifts and meaning changes, both compounds have noticeably shifted from their original meanings:

“Low” suggests a lack of intensity or prominence, while “high” implies intensity, elevation, or prominence. In both cases, “key” implies significance. Yet in the Gen Z Internet slang, “lowkey” has shifted to mean either something that is exactly as it is said or something that is not widely known, while “highkey” has shifted to denote something that is obvious, prominent, or not discreet.

8. Tea

Definition: Gossip. Often, used in the phrase "Spill the tea".

Usage example: The Tea on Ashton Kutcher and Mila Kunis. The implication. Babbbyyyyy I had no idea. (@Karmalize2, 2023)

8.1. Word Formation and Semantic Shifts

The noun "tea" in this context has undergone a metaphorical change or extension of the original meaning. The idea that when people gather to gossip, they often do that over a cup of tea (or coffee) might have influenced such a metaphorical change in the meaning of the noun and its usage. In its original context, "tea" refers to a hot beverage, i.e. something with a concrete, tangible meaning. In the modern slang context, this tangible noun is used to represent an abstract concept such as gossip or information, thus shifting its original intent. The contextual-usage register has also shifted, from formal or semi-formal to informal.

9. Main character

Definition: 1. Someone making a scene. 2. Someone who is charismatic.

Usage example: The girl who thinks she's a main character has a test today (@lala.sadii, 2023)

9.1. Word Formation and Semantic Shifts

The term "Main character" has undergone a significant semantic shift moving from its traditional literary context to a more colloquial usage. In a more traditional, literary context, "main character" refers to the protagonist of a story. This character is typically the focus of the narrative and drives the plot. This meaning has broadened semantically to now describe individuals (typically online) who are either behaving dramatically or who possess charisma and stand out in certain social situations.

10. (It's) Giving...

Definition: 1. Serving (a look). 2. Looks like/Resembles

Usage example: It's giving... early depression. (@danandmariee, 2023)

10.1. Word Formation and Semantic Shifts

The phrase "It's giving..." is constructed with an ellipsis, which is a grammatical omission of words that can be understood from the context. In this case, the omitted words often relate to the description or characterization of something, and the phrase heavily relies on context to fill in the missing information. The original meaning of the verb "to give" has broadened to include a way to describe someone's appearance or outfit or denote resemblance to something.

The analysis of the terms above clearly shows a noticeable linguistic creativity, with speakers shifting or changing the original meaning of words, to convey more nuance or add metaphorical elements. By employing different word formation processes such as compounding and blending, and pairing them with unparalleled creativity and ability to transform language, Gen Zers have woven a vibrant linguistic tapestry of words and phrases that “flex” their “no cap” resourcefulness and out-of-the-box thinking, creating a truly “lit” version of the language.

II. Survey Results Analysis

To gain insights into the level of comprehension and familiarity among EFL students regarding the abovementioned slang terms, the online survey used a 5-point Likert scale-based set of questions, with answers ranging from 1 (min) to 5 (max). This allowed respondents to report the degrees of familiarity with each of the 10 selected Gen Z slang terms.

Before the results from the survey are presented, however, it is important to acknowledge one critical limitation of this study: the reliance on self-reported data. This data type may be susceptible to biases and inaccuracies, such as social desirability bias or students overestimating their familiarity with certain terms. Still, despite this limitation, the survey results are considered to provide valuable insights into Gen Z internet slang and non-native English speakers.

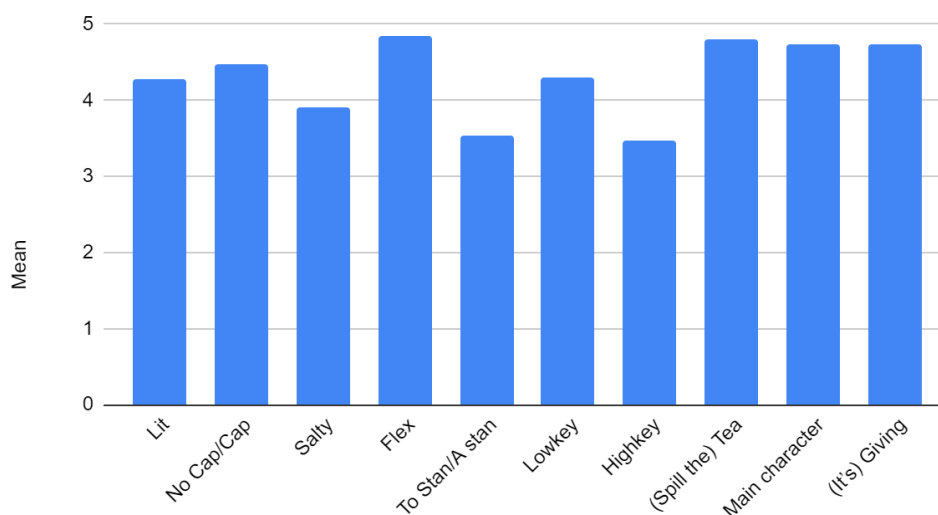
The data collected through the survey, has been statistically analyzed, performing basic statistical calculations to determine the mean (average understanding of the term), mode (the most frequent answer obtained), standard deviation (to measure the spread or variability of the collected data) and frequency distribution (to determine how many respondents chose each of the options: 1 to 5). The distribution of the data is as follows:

Table 1: Basic descriptive statistics of the survey data

Gen Z Slang	Mean	Mode	Standard deviation	Frequency distribution
<i>Lit</i>	4.27	5	1.10	1 = (3) 2 = (1) 3 = (5) 4 = (13) 5 = (30)
<i>No Cap/Cap</i>	4.48	5	1.08	1 = (3) 2 = (1) 3 = (2) 4 = (8) 5 = (38)
<i>Salty</i>	3.90	5	1.24	1 = (3) 2 = (6) 3 = (6)

				4 = (15) 5 = (22)
<i>Flex</i>	4.85	5	0.50	1 = (0) 2 = (1) 3 = (0) 4 = (5) 5 = (46)
<i>To Stan/A stan</i>	3.53	5	1.60	1 = (10) 2 = (5) 3 = (7) 4 = (6) 5 = (23)
<i>Lowkey</i>	4.31	5	1.17	1 = (2) 2 = (4) 3 = (5) 4 = (5) 5 = (35)
<i>Highkey</i>	3.47	5	1.50	1 = (9) 2 = (4) 3 = (11) 4 = (8) 5 = (19)
<i>(Spill the) Tea</i>	4.81	5	0.60	1 = (0) 2 = (1) 3 = (2) 4 = (3) 5 = (46)
<i>Main character</i>	4.73	5	0.78	1 = (1) 2 = (1) 3 = (1) 4 = (5) 5 = (43)
<i>(It's) Giving</i>	4.73	5	0.78	1 = (1) 2 = (1) 3 = (1) 4 = (5) 5 = (43)

The means in Table 1 represent the average comprehension score for each term, ranging from 1 (minimum) to 5 (maximum). To better understand the distribution, the difference between students' average familiarity with a given slang term is also presented in Graph 1:



Graph 1: Average familiarity with a given slang term

As one can note from the Graph and the Table above, the mean scores for most of the Gen Z slang terms are relatively high. This indicates that, on average, EFL high school students from North Macedonia are familiar with the chosen Gen Z slang terms. Another interesting observation can be made from the mode. The mode for all of the chosen terms is 5, indicating that the answer "5" (of maximum understanding) is the most common response on all questions.

The insights from the standard deviation results, also yield interesting results. Terms with lower standard deviations (like, "Flex," "(Spill the) Tea," "Main character," and "(It's) Giving") have less variability, suggesting that most respondents had similar levels of comprehension. On the other hand, terms with higher standard deviations (e.g., "To Stan/A stan," "Highkey") show more variability, indicating that some respondents had significantly different levels of comprehension for these terms in comparison to other respondents.

As for the frequency distribution, one can note that generally, for most terms, a significant number of respondents chose the answer "5" (of maximum understanding). This further suggests that the majority of the respondents had no issues with the chosen terms. However, for some terms like "To Stan/A stan" and "Highkey," one can note a more significant variability in responses, including some lower ratings (of "1" and "2").

Overall, the statistical analysis of the results obtained through the survey shows that EFL high school students in North Macedonia seem to be familiar with the selected Gen Z slang terms, as indicated by the high mean scores and the prevalence of "5" (of maximum understanding) in the mode. Terms like "Flex," "(Spill the) Tea," "Main character," and "(It's) Giving" appear to be understood best, as they all have high mean scores, low standard deviations, and a majority of respondents giving them a "5." Alternatively, terms like "To Stan/A

stan" and "Highkey" show more variability in comprehension, with some students giving lower ratings. This, in turn, might mean that students are less familiar with them.

5. Conclusion

The qualitative analysis of Gen Z slang yielded some interesting linguistic insights. It seems that Gen Zers have truly transformed the English of now using "lit", out-of-the-box thinking, resourceful use of word formation rules of blending and compounding, and beyond all, creativity.

Another particularly interesting insight derives from the responses of the survey in this study. The answers of the 52 respondents showed that Gen Zers from non-English-speaking countries seem to be generally well-versed in Gen Z slang. This would suggest that Gen Z slang has gone beyond English-speaking online communities and has become a somewhat universal hallmark of this generation worldwide.

All of this goes to show that Gen Zers' creativity has played a pivotal role in shaping the linguistic landscape of online discourse globally, leaving an indelible mark on the ever-changing landscape of language.

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