

A Pragmatic Study of Selected Words and Slang Expressions Use by Gen Z

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Abstract: This paper presents a pragmatic analysis of selected words and slang expressions use by members of Generation Z in everyday communication. Samples of these slang terms were collected from online discourses and through one-on-one interviews with Gen Z speakers. The data were analysed within the framework of J. L. Austin's *Speech Act Theory*. Findings reveal that each lexical item carries connotative meanings, and that many of the slang expressions are employed by Gen Z to enhance the aesthetic appeal and creativity of their language use. The study further indicates that certain slang terms serve a mitigating function, softening or reducing the impact of the intended message. Overall, the research underscores the dynamic and expressive nature of Gen Z's linguistic choices within contemporary discourse.

Keywords: Pragmatic, Slang, Gen Z, Speech Act, Connotative, Denotative.

Introduction

Language is a dynamic system that evolves continually in response to social change, technological advancement, and generational identity. Among the younger demographic, particularly Generation Z, language has become a tool not only for communication but also for the expression of individuality, creativity, and social belonging. The emergence of new words, abbreviations, and slang expressions in Gen Z communication reflects how this generation negotiates meaning and constructs expression within digital and face-to-face interactions. Slangs are short forms of words, phrases and expressions that are been used normally. Slang, in particular, functions as a linguistic innovation that both unites members of the group, in this case, Gen Z and distinguishes them from older generations like Millennials, Gen X and Boomers. These slangs spread through social media.

In contemporary discourse, Gen Z's linguistic practices are largely shaped by the digital environment, where platforms such as TikTok, Twitter (X), Instagram, and Snapchat serve as spaces for linguistic experimentation. Through these media, new lexical items and expressions are coined, modified, and circulated at remarkable speed. These expressions and slangs gain popularity when public figures and celebrities make use of them. These linguistic choices often carry meanings that extend beyond their literal interpretations, embodying shared cultural references, humour, irony, or emotional nuance. As such, understanding the pragmatic dimensions of Gen Z slang is essential to interpreting how meaning is constructed, negotiated, and performed in modern communication.

This study therefore adopts J. L. Austin's *Speech Act Theory* as its theoretical framework to examine how selected words and slang expressions used by Gen Z perform communicative functions beyond their surface meanings. The analysis focuses on identifying the illocutionary and perlocutionary forces of these linguistic items to uncover how they convey attitudes, manage social relationships, and create aesthetic effects. By doing so, the study contributes to the growing body of research on pragmatics and sociolinguistics, highlighting how Gen Z's language use exemplifies the evolving nature of human communication in the 21st century.

Theoretical Review

Speech Act Theory, introduced by J.L. Austin and further developed by John Searle, is a linguistic and philosophical theory that posits that language is not merely used to convey information but to perform actions. According to the theory, when people speak, they perform various types of "speech acts" that have specific functions and effects on the listener or situation. These speech acts go beyond the literal meaning of the words and involve performing actions such as promising, requesting, declaring, or expressing feelings. Speech Act Theory is a key framework within pragmatics, the study of language use in social contexts.

The theory classifies speech acts into five main categories:

Assertives: Statements that convey information or express beliefs about reality (e.g., "John is going to the store").

Directives: Utterances intended to get the listener to do something (e.g., commands, requests like "Go to the store").

Commissives: Speech acts where the speaker commits to a future action (e.g., promises such as "I will go to the store").

Expressives: Utterances expressing the speaker's psychological state or emotions (e.g., thanking, apologizing).

Declarations: Speech that brings about a change in the status or condition of the referent (e.g., "I declare you man and wife").

Regarding the pragmatic analysis of words and slang used by Generation Z (Gen Z), research shows that Gen Z incorporates a variety of slang words that have evolved through semantic shifts such as metaphorical extension, pejoration, and amelioration. These slang terms serve important social and pragmatic functions including identity formation, humour, emotional expression, and social bonding in digital communication contexts like social media platforms. Gen Z slang is often characterized by acronyms, abbreviations, and creative linguistic forms that reflect the needs for efficiency and social distinctiveness in digital interactions. Additionally, these slangs can serve as markers of group membership, ways to challenge norms, and tools for playfulness and critique.

In summary, Speech Act Theory explains how language acts perform functions beyond literal meaning in communication. This is particularly relevant in analysing Gen Z slang, where the pragmatic use of words and expressions shapes social dynamics and online identities.

J. L. Austin's Speech Act Theory (1962), which was later developed and refined by John Searle (1969), to provide the analytical framework for understanding meaning beyond the literal level. Austin's theory posits that language is not merely used to convey information but also to perform actions. Every utterance, therefore, encompasses three dimensions: the locutionary act (the literal expression), the illocutionary act (the intended function or communicative act), and the perlocutionary act (the effect produced on the hearer). Searle further systematized these acts into categories such as assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations, emphasising that meaning is deeply tied to context and speaker intention. In relation to the present study, Speech Act Theory provides a useful framework for examining how members of Generation Z use words and slang to perform specific communicative functions. The theory enables an understanding of how Gen Z speakers employ slang not only to express emotions and attitudes but also to construct identity, establish social bonds, and achieve pragmatic effects such as humour, irony, or mitigation. It further highlights the importance of context in interpreting slang expressions, as the same word or phrase may carry different illocutionary forces depending on the speaker's intent and the discourse situation.

Yakubu and Ishaya (2022) "Pragmatic Analysis of the Inscriptions on Motor-Vehicles and Signboards" use in a related study applying this theoretical perspective to the analysis of inscriptions on motor vehicles and signboards in Taraba State, Nigeria, revealed that linguistic expressions often carry connotative meanings that extend beyond their denotative or literal interpretations. The findings showed that contextual factors such as cultural norms, situational circumstances, and speaker intent play a crucial role in shaping pragmatic meaning. This supports Austin's view that understanding language requires attention not only to what is said but also to what is done with words in specific contexts. Consequently, this theoretical orientation underscores the importance of examining language as a form of social action. It suggests that to fully interpret the meanings embedded in linguistic expressions whether in vehicle inscriptions, signboards, or Gen Z slang researchers must go beyond surface semantics and consider the pragmatic functions that words perform within their socio-cultural contexts.

Devita and Bernieke (2025) "A Semantic Analysis of Slang Words Used by Gen Z on Social Media" examines how Generation Z employs slang on social media platforms such as TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter, focusing on the semantic shifts and pragmatic functions of these expressions. Using qualitative data from content analysis and ethnographic interviews, the research identifies key patterns of semantic change such as pejoration, amelioration, metaphorical extension, and narrowing shaped by cultural, technological, and contextual influences. The findings highlight that Gen Z slang functions not only as a creative mode of communication but also as a medium for identity construction, humour, emotional expression, and social connection in digital spaces. Overall, the study deepens understanding of how language evolves within online culture and reveals the mechanisms driving meaning change in contemporary slang.

Samuel (2025) "A Pragmatic Analysis of Slangs in Nigerian Social Media Advertising" This study examines the pragmatic functions of social media slang in Nigerian digital advertising, emphasizing how such expressions influence consumer engagement and brand perception. Anchored in Pragmatic Theory and Relevance Theory, the research explores how advertisers use slang to construct meaning, convey brand identity, and foster audience connection. Adopting a qualitative eclectic approach, the study purposively sampled twenty-one advertisements seven each from Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) to analyse the communicative role of slang within digital marketing contexts. Findings indicate that slang expressions such as "Awoof" (meaning bonus or freebie) play crucial roles in creating cultural resonance and positioning brands as

youthful, trendy, and relatable. Pragmatically, the use of slang helps build rapport with audiences, fosters a sense of belonging, and enhances the perceived authenticity of advertisements. By mirroring everyday language patterns, brands appear more conversational and culturally attuned which in turn strengthens emotional connection and encourages consumer loyalty. The study concludes that the deliberate incorporation of current and contextually appropriate slang can effectively enhance brand-consumer engagement, making brands appear responsive to evolving linguistic and cultural trends. It further recommends that advertisers continuously monitor emerging slang expressions to maintain relevance and avoid out-dated language that could distance the brand from its target audience.

Methods

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in Pragmatics, with a specific focus on Speech Act Theory as the theoretical framework. The research aims to investigate the dynamic and expressive nature of language use among Generation Z through selected words and slang expressions within contemporary discourse. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth examination of the pragmatic functions and socio-cultural meanings embedded in Gen Z's linguistic choices.

Data Collection

The primary data for this study consists of selected slang words and expressions frequently used by individuals identified as members of Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012). Data is collected from multiple contemporary digital communication platforms where Gen Z interaction is prominent, including social media sites such as Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, and informal online platforms and chat groups like Whatsapp group chat. These platforms provide rich, naturalistic language samples reflecting authentic usage and contextual variation. The selection of sample words and slangs is done purposively, based on their frequency of usage and relevance observed in preliminary scoping studies and prior research literature. Supplementary data is gathered through short informal interviews or surveys with Gen Z individuals to understand the intended meanings, contexts, and speech act functions of the slang terms.

Data Analysis

The analysis follows a pragmatic approach, applying principles of Speech Act Theory to categorize and interpret the linguistic data. Each selected slang word or phrase is analysed to identify the type of speech act it performs whether assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, or declarative. Attention is also given to the social functions these speech acts fulfil within Gen Z discourse, such as identity construction, social bonding, humour, or emotional expression. Contextual factors surrounding the use of slangs are analysed to understand how pragmatic meaning varies across different communicative situations. This includes examining the interlocutors' roles, medium of communication, and underlying social norms. In order to get a comprehensive result, interactions were conducted with other generations like Millennials, Gen X and Boomers to see if they understood the Gen Z slangs. The dynamic nature of meaning is explored through semantic shifts, metaphorical uses, and pragmatic implicatures characteristic of Gen Z language practices.

Validity and Reliability

To enhance validity, triangulation of data sources and methods is employed. Data from social media platforms is complemented with participant insights from interviews and surveys to capture both linguistic form and user intention. Reliability is ensured through systematic and transparent coding procedures guided by Speech Act Theory categories, enabling reproducibility and consistency in analysis.

Result

Speech Act analysis of data

Data 1

Delulu – Delusional

Data 2

Clout Chaser- a person who seeks attention online by making controversial posts of comment

Data 3

Smash – to have sexual intercourse

Data 4

Fine Shyt- an attractive person

Data 5

Chopped Shyt- a non-attractive person

Data 6

Mid- someone who is neither attractive nor ugly

Data 7

Tea- gossip or rumour

Data 8

Capping- to lie or exaggerate

Data 9

Ate and left no crumbs- to be excellent

Data 10

Situationship- undefined romantic relationship

Data 11

Caught in 4K-exposed while doing something with undeniable evidence

Data 12

Vibe check- judging someone's mood/energy

Data 13

Thirst trap- photos and videos posted to gain attention

Data 14

Live rent free- unable to stop thinking about something/someone

Data 15

Girl math- humorous logic used in justifying spending

Data 16

Green flag- good trait in a person

Data 17

Red flag- warning sign

Data 18

Ate- to do something exceptionally well

Data 19

No cap- honestly

Data 20

Simp- someone who goes above and above for someone they like

Data 21

Bae- and acronym for "Before Anyone Else"

Data 22

Lowkey/highkey- subtly true or openly true

Data 23

Ghost- to cut off all communication, suddenly

Data 24

Woke- to be socially aware

Data 25

Sus- short form of suspicious/ guys that acts gay

Data 26

Cutting season- the colder months when people seek relationship

Data 27

GOAT- Acronym for Greatest Of All Time

Data 28

Lit- something exciting or fun

Data 29

Finista- a fake instagram account for personal or candid content

Data 30

Big yikes- expresses embarrassment or cringe

Data 31

Bussing- means something is exceptionally good

Data 32

Finesse- means to manipulate or trick someone

Data 33

Rizz- expresses charisma or flirting skills

Data 34

Ick- something that turns you off

Data 35

To clip- means to leave

Data 36

Giving- used to describe the attitude or connotation of something or someone

Data 37

Periodt- used to end a statement or used to add emphasis to something

Data 38

Shade- to disrespect or insult directly or indirectly

Data 39

Sick- use to mean something or someone is cool

Data 40

Baddie- an expensive bad girl

Data 41

Midnight ballerina- a pole dancer/exotic dancer

Data 42

Famzing/glazing/washing- refers to high service

Data 43

Aura farming- use to refer to someone that is effortlessly cool

Data 44

Fruity/zesty- used to refer to gay guys

Data 45

Snitch- someone that spills out secret

Data 46

Roman empire- use to describe something that occupies your mind

Data 47

Savage- use to describe something or someone that is harsh or brutal

Data 48

Cheugy- not fashionable or not trendy

Data 49

Kala- to describe intelligibility/ to wise up

Data 50

Stan- very enthusiastic and often obsessive fan

Data Analysis

The dataset includes 50 slang words and phrases widely used by Gen Z in various digital and social communication contexts. These slangs range from acronyms, abbreviations, metaphorical expressions, to descriptive and evaluative terms reflecting contemporary youth culture. Examples include "Delulu" (delusional), "Clout Chaser" (seeks online attention), "Tea" (gossip), "No cap" (honestly), "Ghost" (cut off communication), and "GOAT" (greatest of all time).

Analysis of Gen Z Slangs Using Locutionary, Illocutionary, and Perlocutionary Acts

Locutionary Act (the act of saying)

The locutionary act involves the actual utterance or production of sounds and words that form slang expressions. In this data, the locutionary act is the use of the specific slang words or phrases such as "Roman Empire," "Clout Chaser," "Tea," "Caught in 4K," and "Vibe check." These are the literal verbal expressions used in communication. For example, saying "Roman Empire" literally refers to the ancient empire that dominated the Mediterranean Europe, Western Asia and North Africa, a surface-level utterance without yet considering intended meaning.

Illocutionary Act (the intended function)

The illocutionary act captures the speaker's intention behind the utterance, the social function it performs. Different slang terms carry various illocutionary forces depending on their use:

Asserting: "Delulu" is used to assert that someone is delusional, "Tea" asserts the presence of gossip.

Expressing: "Big yikes" functions expressively to convey embarrassment or discomfort.

Advising or Warning: "Red flag" illocutionarily warns about a negative trait.

Committing: "Stan" commits the speaker to enthusiastically support a person or cause.

Questioning or Checking: "Vibe check" functions as an informal test or challenge to gauge mood.

In many cases, slangs add humour, sarcasm, or emphasis, for instance, "Periodt" acts to emphasize finality or certainty.

Perlocutionary Act (the effect on the listener)

The perlocutionary act refers to the effect the utterance has on the listener or audience, which can be emotional, cognitive, or behavioral. The Gen Z slangs carry rich perlocutionary effects:

Social Bonding: Using a slang like "Bae" or "GOAT" fosters in-group identification and solidarity.

Eliciting Reactions: "Caught in 4K" can provoke surprise, shame, or humour by publicly exposing acts.

Influencing Behavior: "Simp" might induce self-reflection, criticism, or playful teasing.

Creating Emotional Responses: "Live rent free" can invoke annoyance or obsession over a person or thought.

Shaping Perceptions: "Clout Chaser" may lead to distrust or mockery in social circles.

The perlocutionary effects thus underline how slangs function beyond words to impact listeners' feelings, thoughts, and social dynamics. However, these reactions are peculiar with the Gen Z speakers who are familiar with the slangs and most times creates confusion among listeners who are not Gen Z and are not familiar with the slangs.

Summary Table of Acts for Selected Slangs

Slang	Locutionary Act	Illocutionary Act	Perlocutionary Act
Delulu	Utterance of "Delulu"	Assert someone is delusional	Listener perceives the target as unrealistic or out of touch
Clout Chaser	Utterance of "Clout Chaser"	Accuse someone of seeking attention	Audience may mock or distrust the person labelled
Tea	Saying "Tea"	Assert gossip or secret information	Sparks curiosity or social engagement around rumoured info
No Cap	Expression "No cap" saying honestly	Emphasize truthfulness/ assert honesty	Builds trust or confirms sincerity
Vibe check	Saying "Vibe Check"	Request to evaluate mood or attitude	Interlocutors react with self-awareness or adjust behaviour
Simp	Saying "Simp"	Express disdain or teasing towards over-affection	Listener may feel teased, self-reflect, or humorously criticized.
Roman Empire	Saying "Roman Empire"	Describe someone or something that occupies one's mind	Sparks conversation of recurring thoughts and depending on the context may create a sense of romantic feeling.

This framework shows how the physical utterance (locution) of Gen Z slangs is tightly linked to the speaker's intended social action (illocution) and the consequential impact on the listener's perceptions or behaviours (perlocution). The dynamic interplay among these acts reveals the pragmatic complexity and social significance of slang use in Gen Z communication.

Speech Act Categorization of Slangs

Applying Speech Act Theory, the slang expressions are analysed for the types of speech acts they predominantly perform:

Assertives: Many slang terms serve to assert information or state evaluations about reality or people, e.g., "Delulu" asserts delusional behaviour, "Clout Chaser" asserts attention-seeking behaviour, "Red flag" asserts bad traits in a person and "Mid" asserts mediocrity.

Directives: Some slangs act indirectly as directives by influencing others' behaviour or attitudes, such as "Vibe check" which prompts judgment of mood/energy, or "Shade" that implicitly directs others to perceive disrespect.

Commissives: Though less common, some slangs imply commitments or attitudes, for example, "Stan" expresses enthusiastic and sometimes obsessive support, committing to fandom.

Expressives: A significant portion convey emotions, judgments or attitudes directly; "Big yikes" expresses embarrassment, "Simp" expresses disdain or humor towards excessive affection, "Periodt" adds emphasis or finality, and "Woke" expresses social awareness.

Declarations: Few slangs function as declarations that change social status or conditions, but terms like "Caught in 4K" can publicly expose actions, altering social perception.

Pragmatic Functions in Gen Z Communication

The pragmatic functions of these slangs highlight their roles beyond literal meanings:

Identity and group membership: Usage of slangs marks in-group membership and cultural affiliation among Gen Z, reinforcing social bonds and shared values.

Emotional expression and social commentary: Slangs enable the subtle and creative expression of emotions, attitudes, and social critiques often with humour or irony.

Efficiency and creativity in communication: Many slang especially acronyms and abbreviations like "No cap," "GOAT," "IYKYK" or "Bae," serve pragmatic efficiency in fast-paced digital communication.

Contextual and social dynamism: The meaning and force of these slangs often depend on context, interaction setting, and shared knowledge among interlocutors, reflecting dynamic and evolving language use. Listeners' interpretation varies especially when the listener is not Gen Z, which makes the slang mutually intelligible to Gen Z speakers.

Conclusion

This analysis reveals that Gen Z slang operates broadly within the framework of Speech Act Theory, performing varied communicative acts that serve social, emotional, and interactive functions in contemporary discourse. The pragmatic richness of these slang and expressions demonstrates their integral role in shaping Gen Z's expressive and dynamic linguistic perspective.

This research has provided valuable insights into the pragmatic aspects of certain phrases and slang expressions utilised by Gen Z in daily communication, online interactions, and face-to-face encounters. Using J. L. Austin's Speech Act Theory, the study has shown that these words do more than just mean what they say; they also have complex connotative and social connotations that show how Gen Z speakers think and express themselves in unique ways. The findings reveal that slang terms are deliberately employed not only to convey messages but to enhance the aesthetic appeal, emotional impact, and playful creativity of language within this generation's vocabulary and discourse in general.

Moreover, the study highlights the mitigating function of certain slang expressions, which serve to soften or modulate the force of statements, facilitating more nuanced and context-sensitive interactions. This reflects Gen Z's linguistic adaptability and their capacity to navigate complex social dynamics through language choices. Some may contend that Gen Z's capacity to create neologisms and employ euphemisms renders them less socially and culturally ethical. The use of slang further acts as a marker of identity, group membership, and social alignment, underscoring the role of language in constructing peer relationships and cultural belonging in contemporary digital and offline contexts. Also, this research reveals that while some slangs are generally recognised, some may be intelligible to speakers of a particular region. For example "kala" is intelligible to speakers from Nigeria.

Overall, this pragmatic analysis underscores the dynamic, inventive, and expressive nature of Gen Z's vocabulary. Their strategic use of slang enriches communication with layers of meaning, humour, and subtle social indication that resonate within their social worlds. As such, the study advances the understanding of how language evolves with cultural shifts and highlights the importance of pragmatic frameworks like Speech Act Theory in capturing these evolving communicative practices.

Future research could expand upon these findings by exploring the cross-cultural variations of Gen Z slang use and examining the impact of emerging digital platforms on language innovation. Nonetheless, this paper establishes a vital foundation for appreciating the pragmatic complexity and sociolinguistic significance of Gen Z's contemporary language use.

Semantic Shifts and Pragmatic Implicatures

The data illustrates several semantic processes at play, such as metaphorical extension ("Tea" for gossip), amelioration or pejoration ("Midnight Ballerina" and "Baddie"), and pragmatic implicatures where surface meanings imply additional social or emotional information ("Aura farming", "Fruity")

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