

LEXICO-SEMANTIC ANALYSIS OF SOME SELECTED GEN Z EXPRESSIONS

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Abstract

This paper investigates the lexical and semantic characteristics of selected Gen Z expressions as used in contemporary digital and face-to-face communication. Drawing from samples collected across social media platforms (TikTok, X, Instagram) and in-person interactions, the study examines some selected widely used expressions by Generation Z. Using the sociolinguistics Theory of Youth Language Innovation which sees linguistic creativity not as a decline in standards but as a natural site of language evolution, deeply tied to social identity, technological change, and cultural expression. More so, a lexico-semantic framework was used in the analysis of data. It considers the forms, meanings, and semantic shifts of each expression. It can be concluded that these expressions demonstrate language change in progress, shaped by technological mediation and cultural hybridity.

Keywords: Lexico-Semantics, Gen-Z Expressions, Semantics, Language, Communication

1.0 Introduction

Language is both an individual and social possession. It serves interactive and integrative functions. Therefore, it is expected that certain individuals would behave linguistically like others, they may speak the same language or dialect or variety. (Wardhaugh 2006). Language is what the members of a particular society speak and understand Ofoegbu (2012) asserts that language is man's most important asset, his most important tool with which he interacts. Ofoegbu (2021) believes that language is distinctively a human system of communication, based on oral and written symbols; It is a reflection of thoughts, the feelings, the values, beliefs and experiences of a community of speakers. Ofoegbu and Ishima (2024) reaffirm earlier views, calling language "the human system of communication ... man and man is language ... man uses language for his everyday interaction."

Language is used primarily for communication. This is because whenever people are together, they talk to one another using a system of specifically produced and organized sounds. These sounds and sound sequences represent different things or meanings and vary from language to language. (Osisanwo 1999). Thus language is a general human system of communication. It is a means by which humans alone communicate. It serves among other things as a binding factor for all humans. (Ofoegbu 2022)

Language is a dynamic system, constantly evolving in response to social, cultural, and technological changes. Contemporarily, among youth groups, i.e Generation Z popularly known as Gen – Z (Gen-Z baddies, born around 1997-2012) has been especially influential in generating new lexical items and expressions. These linguistic innovations often disseminated through digital platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X-app formerly known as twitter, and currently Tik-Tok. As in relation, Ofoegbu (2024) posits that language is uniquely a human phenomenon; used for communication, expression of identity, play, imaginative expressions and emotional release. These new lexical items and expressions serve not only communicative purpose but also perform social identity work, signaling group belonging and cultural fluency (Eble, 1996, Tagliamonte)

This paper provides a lexico-semantic analysis of some selected Gen z expressions, examinations examining how these items functions, how their meaning have shifted, and what they reveal about ongoing processes of language change.

This study will provide answers to these research questions:

1. What are the forms of construction of Gen z's expression especially on facebook, X and instagram?
2. What semantic peculiarities are Gen z's expressions especially social media or real life characterized by?

2.0 Literature Review

Lexico-semantics is the branch of semantics that focuses on word meanings, their relations, and contextual interpretations, making it essential in understanding language use (Murphy, 2022). It is a subfield of linguistics that studies the relationship between words and their meanings, focusing on how lexical items (words, phrases, idioms) convey meaning in different contexts.

Lexico-semantics is the study of the relationship between the lexicon (vocabulary of a language) and semantics (meaning), focusing on how word meanings are organized and interpreted within a linguistic system. Crystal (2008) and Palmer (1981) also asserts that lexico-semantics is essentially the study of word meaning in context and how lexical choices contribute to interpretation in communication. This shows the vital role lexico-semantics play in contextual meaning and interpretation.

Contemporary scholars view lexico-semantics not just as the study of static word meanings, but also as a dynamic investigation of how meaning evolves, especially in modern communication shaped by technology and social media.

3.0 Theoretical framework

The Sociolinguistics Theory of Youth Language Innovations was used in this research. In sociolinguistics, youth language innovations refer to the dynamic and creative ways young people modify language to suit their social, cultural, and communicative needs. Eckert (2018) and Androutsopoulos (2020) believe that these innovations may involve new vocabulary, phonological variations, semantic shifts, code-mixing, slang, and the appropriation of digital media language. Sociolinguistics examines these changes not as random deviations from the “standard” language but as socially meaningful practices that index identity, belonging, and generational distinctiveness

4.0 Methodology

This study is qualitative and adopted the content analysis method of data analysis in order to highlight new patterns in the language use by Gen-Z of Facebook, Tiktok, and Instagram. Qualitative research is increasingly valued in education, health, and social sciences for its ability to provide context-driven insight. As O'Reilly and Parker (2003) note, It allows researchers to understand “how” and why questions that quantitative methods might overlook, making particularly useful in policy, practice and intervention studies .

It also involves elicitation and self observation method in the collection of data from people of the aforementioned age. The context of the study focuses on majorly some selected Gen Z's expression on Facebook, X and Instagram. Also real life situations by Gen Z's. These includes; texts, hashtags, emojis, interviews and other language features.

The analysis of data focuses on how the internet and its associated technologies have stimulated new and diverse forms of ingenuity in language, especially in literature -Internet linguistics by Crystal (2005).

5.0 Lexico-semantic analysis of some selected gen-z expressions

Lexico-semantic analysis involves studying the words (lexis) and their meanings (semantics) in context.

So here, we are focusing on:

Lexical choice → the words/expressions Gen Z uses.

Semantic features → what those words mean, including literal vs. figurative meanings, connotations, and shifts from standard usage.

For Gen Z expressions, meanings often:

I. Come from social media trends.

ii. Use metaphors, irony, or hyperbole.

III. Are influenced by pop culture, memes, or online slang.

Sometimes deviate from dictionary definitions.

The analysis in this section of the paper provides answers to the research questions.

5.1 Full word and Acronym Blend in speech:

In interactions, Gen Z's creativity can be seen in the use of words and phrases that have acquired new meanings.

Examples of full word and Acronym Blend in Speech:

I. My G: stands “for My Guy” in the phrase, the noun “guy” is clipped having only the initial letter to represent a meaning. It is used to describe a good friend. This could be seen on hash tags, post, comment and texts even in real life context.

ii. OYO is your case – stands for “On Your Own” is your case. Acronym in this sentence is treated as the subject of the sentence saying “On Your Own is your case, “ wouldn't have made much grammatical sense. This proves that Gen Z's have no rule in forming a new language rather as it pleases them and how well it is understood on the social platform. “OYO is your case” -simply means - you are the one to save yourself in some situations you put yourself in.

iii. GOAT status- This stands for "Greatest Of All Time". This is used to describe one as being the best. Literally goat is an animal, and would be seen as an insult but, turns out to be a compliment for the tech generation. It is recognized globally as an internet slang.

- iv. CEO of vibes – chief Executive officer of vibes –for a person who embodies a certain mood or energy. CEO can also be attached to other things; this could be something negative. Such as CEO of gossips showing one who is especially good in gossips.
- v. LOL moment - laugh out loud moment –this shows something very funny.
- vi. BFF goals –“Best Friends forever goals” –ideal friendship standard. This shows things best friends are expected to do for each other.
- vii. DIY hack –Do It Yourself hack; i.e a self –made trick or method. That is what one can easily do without being an expert in such field.
- viii. Omo LWKMD- Omo native Yoruba word for child. Which could be boy/girl in the content, LWKMD –laugh wan kill me die. This means extremely funny. (notable as Nigerian internet slang)
- ix. Abeg ASAP – Abeg means please + “ As Soon As possible” – This is used for an urgent request.
- x. Wahala Pro Max – word + Brand- like term . “ Wahala” means trouble , Pro Max (from iphone , meaning maximum version). The combination means very big problem.
- xi. E choke AF – word +Acronym –“E choke” is a slang for surprising or shocking + As (explicit) F...k –very intense or serious.
- xii. Omo FR – Word + Acronym –“Omo + For real” k- emphasizing truth.
- xiii. Beta Padi 4LF – word + Acronym + Number – ‘Beta’ (better) + (padi) friend + ‘For Life’ – Same meaning as best friend forever.
- xiv. Japa ASAP – Word- Acronym – ‘Japa’ (run away) As Soon As Possible – means to flee urgently
- xv. Abeg LOL – Word + Acronym – “Abeg’ (Please) + laugh out loud – This is used in a playful request.

5.2 Words with Semantic Shift

s/n	Expression	Lexical Form	Literal Meaning	Gen-Z Meaning	Semantic Shift	Examples
1.	Vibe	Verb/noun	A vibration	Mood, feeling, atmosphere.	Vibration → social atmosphere	The old lady has got good vibes.
2.	Woke	Adjective	Past tense of wake	Socially aware, politically conscious	From literal “awake” → metaphorical awareness	One needs to be woke to understand Nigeria.
3.	Savage	Adjective/ Noun	Wild, untamed	Boldly ruthless (often admiring)	Shift from negative (cruel, barbaric) → positive slang (cool, fearless, impressive)	The teacher walked him out of the class, that was savage.
4.	Dead	Adjective	No longer alive	Extremely amused - especially to show extreme laughter .	Hyperbolic metaphor: meaning hilarious	The audience was dead with laughter at his jokes
5.	Sus	Adjective		Suspicious/ weird/ questionable	Shortening of “suspicious”	His movements look sus.
6.	No Cap	Phrase	without a head covering	Lie (“No cap” =No lie).	Shift from literal cap to indicate truth	That's a nice presentation no cap.
7.	Low-key	Adverb	Not intense, restrained	Slightly or secretly.	From literal “low in key” → understated action	I low-key liked how the girl fought him back.
8.	High-key	Adverb	Obvious – intense	Definitely , strongly.	From literal “high in key” → emphasized action	On a high-level, she needs a break
9.	Tea	Noun	A type of hot drink	Gossip or inside information	From literal drink to a figurative meaning of information	Do you have tea on why she didn't show up?
10.	Fire	Adjective	Flames	Excellent, amazing.	Literal burning to figurative excellence	That movie was fire.
11.	Lit	Adjective	Past tense of ‘light’	Exciting , fun.	From literal lit up to figurative excitement	The party was lit.
12.	Drag	Verb/noun	Pull along	Criticize or mock harshly.	From physical action “to drag” → metaphorical extension meaning to “pull someone’s reputation down”	She was dragged for the outrageous amount she claimed to have.
13.	Shade	Noun/verb	An area out of sunlight	Subtle insult	Literal shadow → figurative insult	She threw shades at her best friend.
14.	Ghost	Verb	Spirit of a dead person	to cut off communication Abruptly	From invisible ghost → disappearing socially	I got ghosted after helping her with her school fees.

15.	Flex	Verb	Bend or contract muscles	show off possession or skills	From muscle flexing → bragging	He flexed his latest ride around town.
16	Breakfast	Noun	The first meal of the day, usually eaten in the morning	Meaning heartbreak from a relationship	From literal meal → metaphorical “serving” of heartbreak	Jenny's fiancé served her a hot breakfast.
17	Period/ periodt	Interjection	A length of time	End, nothing needs to be said or added.	From literal grammatical term → emphatic conversational marker; spelling shift intensifies meaning	I must go to party and that's on periodt.
18	Ate... and left no crumbs	Idiomatic phrase	Past tense of eat, eat everything served.	Admiration or praise for doing a good job or something	From literal food consumption → metaphorical extension meaning “consumed a challenge and did it perfectly”	You ate the look and left no crumbs.
19	Purr	Interjection	The vibrating sound made by a cat in its throat when contented.	Expressing approval	From literal animal sound → metaphorical exclamation of excitement/ affirmation	Tell them girl, purr
20	Love to see it	Phrase	Interested and longs to see	I'm proud of you or rooting for you	From literal enjoyment of viewing → generalized positive evaluation	Comment: I graduated and in flying colors too. Response: Oh, love to see it.
21	It's giving	Verb phrase	Handing over	Love/like something or evoking an aura, also used to describe	Shift from physical transfer (“give”) to metaphorical evocation.	Her outfit is giving luxury.
22	Salty	Adjective	Tasting of salt	Bitter, annoyed or upset over something small	From taste (salty) → emotional bitterness.	He's still salty about losing the game
23	Delulu	Adjective/ noun	Internet slang for delusional	Acting or thinking unrealistically about love or fame	From clinical/serious “delusional” → lighthearted, self-aware, joking exaggeration	She's delulu to think the rich guy will look her way.

6.0 Conclusion

The findings show that Gen Z linguistic practices—particularly acronym blends and semantic shifts—reflect a dynamic adaptation of global resources within local contexts, a process that reshapes Nigerian English in creative ways (Akinlotan, 2021). Expressions such as “LOL” and “japa ASAP” exemplify how youths merge international communication norms with indigenous styles, demonstrating the interplay between global and local linguistic identities.

The phenomenon of semantic shift further highlights Gen Z’s role in language innovation. Words like sick and lit have been redefined to convey positive meanings, illustrating how young speakers continually repurpose language to express identity and belonging (Cheshire, 2021). Such innovations emphasize the youth’s central role in linguistic change and cultural expression.

Digital platforms amplify these shifts, as emojis, hashtags, and abbreviations foster concise, multimodal communication. This trend signals a departure from traditional conventions and underscores language’s adaptability in response to technological affordances (McCulloch, 2019; Stark et al., 2020). Collectively, these practices show how Nigerian Gen Z not only enrich their linguistic repertoire but also contribute to broader patterns of global linguistic innovation.

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