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FUNCTIONAL CATEGORIES OF CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH SLANG: A CROSS-PLATFORM STUDY OF SPOKEN AND DIGITAL DISCOURSE

Abstract. Young people born between 1997 and 2012 grew up communicating across platforms where the boundary between speaking and writing barely exists, and their language reflects this. This paper examines 110 English slang expressions in active use between 2020 and 2025, tracing how they work, what they mean, and what social work they do for the people who use them. Most existing research treats podcast speech and social media writing as separate objects; this study treats them as two channels of the same phenomenon. The corpus was drawn from three English-language podcasts and cross-checked against TikTok, where each expression was verified across a minimum of ten independent videos before inclusion. Applying corpus methods alongside semantic and functional analysis, the study identifies twelve categories of slang. Emotional and reactive expressions account for the largest share at 13.6%; nine further categories, including cross-platform slang, meme constructions, viral expressions, and clipped forms, each represent 9.1% of the corpus. The analysis shows that slang does considerably more than provide informal alternatives to standard vocabulary. It marks who belongs to a group, encodes emotional reactions in compact form, frames social judgments, and ties speakers to the broader landscape of popular culture. Platforms such as TikTok appear to accelerate how quickly new expressions spread and stabilize, a process with real consequences for how we understand language change in the digital age, and for how contemporary English might be taught to language learners.

Keywords: slang, digital communication, youth language, corpus linguistics, podcast.

Introduction

Every generation develops its own vocabulary, but the speed at which new expressions now enter circulation, and the scale at which they spread, have no real precedent. Crystal's work on language and the internet identified this acceleration early [1], and subsequent research has only confirmed it. For adolescents in particular, informal vocabulary is not an optional add-on to communication: it is central to how identity gets constructed and how belonging gets signalled within peer groups [2]. Tagliamonte's studies of teen language show that slang is not random or arbitrary but follows patterns tied to social structure and group dynamics [3]. Eble's earlier work on college students reached similar conclusions: slang marks who is in and who is out, and using it correctly requires cultural knowledge that outsiders simply do not have [4]. Allan and BurrIDGE add a further dimension: slang interacts with social norms around taboo and politeness in ways that reflect broader cultural values, which is part of why some expressions spread widely while others stay confined to particular groups [5].

The picture has shifted considerably with the rise of platforms built around short-form video and algorithmic recommendation. TikTok in particular has become a major driver of lexical change: a new expression can move from a single viral video to widespread use across age groups and regions within days. Lihawa et al. document the productivity of Generation Z slang in terms of word-formation processes, including clipping, blending, compounding, and semantic shift [6]. Djohan, Wagati, and Kadir specifically track compounding in Gen Z slang on TikTok, confirming that the platform functions not just as a distribution channel but as a site of active linguistic innovation [7]. Kazakhstan is also part of this broader trend: digital communication has reshaped how young people speak here as much as anywhere, and TikTok content in English circulates freely alongside local-language material.

What is less well documented is how slang moves between spoken conversation and digital writing. Specifically, it examines whether the same expressions turn up in both, and whether they retain the same meanings across both contexts. Most existing studies focus on one channel or the other. This study takes a different approach, treating podcast speech and TikTok content as complementary windows onto the same register. The specific aims are to identify the main functional categories of English slang in use between 2020 and 2025, to map how expressions are distributed across those categories, and to examine what the patterns reveal about identity construction and cultural participation among Generation Z speakers.

Methods and Materials

The study draws on a qualitative corpus-based approach, combining semantic, morphological, and functional analysis to examine slang as it actually occurs in natural speech and online interaction. The primary data come from three English-language podcast episodes. Two of these, both from a youth-oriented cultural commentary show, were chosen for their conversational register and explicit engagement with contemporary trends. The third, from an independent mental-health podcast released in 2024, was included because its informal, personal tone produced particularly rich examples of everyday emotional vocabulary. All three episodes were transcribed manually in their entirety, yielding approximately 23,000 words of unscripted speech, a scale that allowed for meaningful pattern recognition while keeping the analysis manageable.

TikTok served as the cross-platform verification layer, covering the period from 2020 to 2025. The platform was selected because it demonstrably drives the spread of new lexical forms among Generation Z, a point confirmed during the data collection itself, when several expressions collected from podcasts were found to have originated as TikTok audio trends. Verification followed a consistent three-step procedure: the expression was searched directly on TikTok; the number of videos using it in captions, hashtags, or spoken content was recorded; and only items appearing in at least ten distinct videos with stable meaning were kept. Expressions with noticeably inconsistent or shifting meanings across different videos were excluded, since such instability would undermine any functional classification. Items were further selected on the basis of informal register, absence from standard dictionaries, semantic distance from their literal meanings, and clear relevance to youth communication. The result was a working corpus of 110 expressions.

Each expression underwent semantic analysis to determine meaning and contextual usage, morphological analysis to identify word-formation processes, and functional analysis to establish its primary communicative role. Where a single expression clearly served more than one communicative purpose, as was the case with several highly versatile items such as «dead» or «based», classification reflected the function most consistently observed across different contexts rather than any single occurrence. To ensure consistency, each expression was assigned to only one category according to its dominant analytical characteristic, even if it could potentially exhibit features of more than one category.

Although the categories Cross-platform slang, Viral expressions, and High-frequency viral phrases are closely related, they were distinguished according to different classification criteria. Cross-platform slang includes expressions that are consistently used across spoken discourse and digital platforms with relatively stable meanings (e.g., lit, sus, bet). Viral expressions refer to items whose popularity originated from specific online trends or memes and subsequently spread into broader communication (e.g., I'm cooked, caught in 4K). High-frequency viral phrases represent expressions that remained consistently widespread throughout the observation period regardless of their original source, reflecting their stable integration into contemporary youth vocabulary (e.g., based, touch grass, yet). Thus, the classification distinguishes between distribution across communication channels, origin of diffusion, and frequency of usage.

All source materials were publicly available, and no personal user data from TikTok was collected or stored, in keeping with standard ethical practice in corpus linguistics.

Result and Discussion

The analysis produced a corpus of 110 slang expressions that met all selection criteria. These expressions were distributed across twelve functional categories. The quantitative distribution of categories is presented in the table below (Table 1).

Table 1 – Results and Discussion

№	Category	Subcategory	Items	Examples	Function	Source
1	Lexical Slang	Emotion/Reaction	15	lit, bruh, bussin, dead, cringe	Quick reactions Open Up About Our Mental Health	Not Thriving Ep.4 & 12 [7,8,9]
№	Category	Subcategory	Items	Examples	Function	Source
2	Lexical Slang	Evaluation	10	mid, peak, ate, rizz, slaps	assessing quality	Not Thriving Ep.4 [8]
3	Identity	Role	5	I'm him, pick-me, pick-me boy	identity humor	LOLPodcast [7]
4	Lifestyle	Online Persona	10	main character energy, NPC, sigma	digital archetypes	All podcasts [7,8,9]
5	Lifestyle	Trends	10	soft girl, girl dinner, hot girl	walk lifestyle trends	All podcasts [7,8,9]
6	Meme	Slang	5	situationship, aesthetic, fanum tax	humorous/meme-based	Not Thriving Ep.4 [8]
7	Structural	Shortened forms	10	fr, no cap, W/L, ratio'd	Short forms	Not Thriving Ep.12 [9]
8	Meme	Constructions	10	go off, giving delulu, caught in 4K	meme syntax	LOLPodcast [7]
9	Viral	Expressions	10	rent-free, wig snatched, I'm cooked	viral usage	TikTok + podcasts [7,8,9,10]
10	Pop Culture	References	5	canon event, multiverse moment	references to media	TikTok + podcasts [9,10]
11	Cross-platform	Slang	10	lit, slay, sus, bet, dead	Digital communication	All podcasts [7,8,9,10]
12	High-frequency	Viral Phrases	10	based, yeet, touch grass	widely spread phrases	All podcasts [7,8,9,10]

Emotional and reactive expressions constituted the largest category, accounting for 13.6% of the corpus. Nine additional categories, including evaluative slang, lifestyle expressions, structural shortened forms, meme constructions, viral expressions, cross-platform slang, and high-frequency phrases, each accounted for 9.1% of the dataset. This relatively even distribution suggests that these

communicative functions are represented with comparable frequency across the corpus. Together, these categories account 40.9 % of the corpus, indicating that these communicative functions constitute the core of the contemporary English slang in the dataset. Short, emotionally expressive forms that function effectively in both spoken interaction and digital communication appear to have greater potential for cross-platform diffusion. Category size does not necessarily correspond to its significance. Three smaller categories (identity and role expressions, meme-based slang, and pop-culture references) each made up just 4.5% of the corpus (5 items each). That is a modest share, but these expressions tend to carry considerable cultural significance: knowing what «understood the assignment» or «that's so core» means signals membership in a particular online community, not just a general English speaker. The distribution is systematic. Brevity, cross-platform reach, emotional directness, and grammar borrowed from meme culture occur most frequently, which points to what actually drives the way young people communicate today. Clipped forms are particularly prominent as the single most productive pattern: items like «fr», «no cap», «sus», and «W/L» strip communication down to its essentials, which is well suited to both the pace of text-based exchange and the economy of spoken interaction. Cross-platform expressions remained remarkably stable: «lit», «slay», «bet», and «dead» retained consistent meanings whether encountered in podcast speech or TikTok captions, which suggests that what we are observing is not platform-specific jargon but more accurately described as a shared generational register. Meme-derived constructions such as «caught in 4K», «go off», and the productive «giving X» frame are of particular linguistic interest from a grammatical standpoint: they originate online, but have clearly migrated into spoken conversation, carrying their syntactic novelty with them. Emotional and reactive items such as «bruh», «dead», «cringe», «bussin» function essentially as prosodic markers, compressing an entire evaluative stance into a single word or short phrase. When podcast and TikTok data were compared directly, the overlap was substantial: expressions that appeared frequently in transcribed speech also ranked high on TikTok by video count, with very little divergence in how they were used. This consistency suggests that the boundary between spoken and written digital language is becoming increasingly blurred for this generation, and that the two channels reinforce each other rather than developing independently.

Three major patterns emerge from the data. First, efficiency-driven clipping dominates the corpus. Second, the same expressions recur across spoken and digital contexts with minimal variation. Third, constructions borrowed from meme culture are no longer confined to screens; they have entered everyday speech. Each of these patterns merits further discussion.

Clipped forms are not simply a convenience; they are a social signal. Saying «fr» instead of «for real» or «no cap» instead of «I'm not lying» reduces communicative effort, but it also flags familiarity with a particular cultural space. Getting these forms wrong, or using them in the wrong context, marks an outsider as clearly as any accent. Their compactness also makes them memorable and easy to carry across platforms, which helps explain their dominance in the corpus.

Identity-related categories, including role labels, digital personas, lifestyle descriptors, reveal important aspects of how Generation Z uses language to position itself socially. Calling someone a «pick-me», describing yourself as having «main character energy», or adopting the «soft girl» aesthetic through language are not merely descriptive acts. They locate the speaker within a shared cultural map and, crucially, they do so with a degree of ironic self-awareness that is characteristic of this cohort. The humorous effect is often intentional: many of these expressions work precisely because they acknowledge the performance involved in self-presentation.

Meme-based constructions are one of the most linguistically significant findings. The «giving [X]» frame (as in «giving main character», «giving villain era») is a genuine grammatical innovation: it repurposes a verb with no direct object to function as an evaluative predicate. It is noteworthy that such forms exist online, but that they appear consistently in unscripted speech. Podcast speakers use them without hesitation or explanation, which suggests the forms are now fully integrated into speakers' linguistic repertoire rather than consciously borrowed.

The cross-platform consistency observed here challenges the assumption that internet slang is inherently unstable or ephemeral. Recommendation algorithms on platforms like TikTok expose

users across different regions and social backgrounds to the same viral content, which appears to be driving a kind of informal standardization, a process that would have taken decades through traditional dialect contact but now occurs within months.

Earlier typologies of slang, including Eble's foundational work on college vocabulary and Tagliamonte's research on teen language, did not account for meme-derived grammatical categories, for the obvious reason that these did not exist at the time. The present corpus extends those frameworks by adding a category of constructions that are syntactically innovative rather than merely lexically novel. The observation that similar patterns have been noted in Russian-language sociolinguistic research suggests that the phenomenon is not specific to English but reflects broader shifts in how digital communication shapes language across different speech communities.

The data broadly support the theoretical view that digital communication accelerates language change, but they also provide additional insight: what is accelerating is not just change but standardization. This has direct implications for our understanding of slang, viewing it less as local, transient variation and more as a generationally shared system with its own internal logic. For language teaching, the practical implication is clear: learners who encounter only formal registers will find themselves poorly equipped for the communicative situations they actually face when interacting with native speakers of their own age.

Incorporating contemporary slang into language instruction does not mean abandoning attention to formal register; it means giving learners the full picture. Understanding that «mid» functions as a single-word quality assessment, or that «I'm cooked» signals helplessness rather than anything culinary, is the kind of pragmatic knowledge that classroom materials rarely address. The present study offers a structured basis for that kind of instruction.

Several limitations should be noted. The corpus is restricted to English-language content from two platforms, which means that slang circulating on Reddit, Discord, or YouTube (each with its own community-specific norms) is not represented here. The focus on Generation Z, while deliberate, leaves open questions about whether older or younger cohorts are adopting the same forms. The 23,000-word spoken corpus is sufficient for the identification of functional patterns but too small for reliable frequency claims. Future work would benefit from larger corpora, additional platforms, and a longitudinal design that could track how specific expressions enter, spread, and eventually date.

Conclusion

This study investigated contemporary English slang between 2020 and 2025, analyzing functional categories, distribution patterns, and social functions through podcast and TikTok content. Analysis of 110 expressions identified twelve functional categories. The largest included emotional and reactive expressions, followed by cross-platform slang, meme constructions, structural shortened forms, and viral expressions. Identity-related and meme-based categories, though smaller in number, carried the highest cultural density because they reflect not just how Generation Z speaks but how it thinks about itself and its relationship to digital culture. The cross-platform consistency observed throughout the corpus is one of the most significant findings: rather than diverging between spoken and written digital modes, these expressions appear to be converging into a single, relatively stable register.

The functional range of the expressions analyzed here is broader than might be expected. Slang does not merely replace standard vocabulary with more informal alternatives. It marks group membership, frames emotional reactions, positions the speaker relative to cultural trends, and sometimes introduces genuinely new grammatical patterns into spoken language. The «giving [X]» construction is perhaps the clearest example: it represents a grammatical pattern not typically found in Standard English, and speakers have adopted it precisely because it fills that gap.

By treating podcast speech and TikTok content as complementary rather than separate data sources, this study provides a more comprehensive account of how slang actually moves between contexts. The twelve-category typology developed here extends earlier frameworks and provides a basis for future comparative work, both across languages and across generations. For practitioners, the findings support the inclusion of authentic contemporary language in the EFL classroom, not as a novelty but as a legitimate object of linguistic inquiry.

Future work could track how specific expressions enter circulation, peak, and fade. Such a longitudinal approach would capture the lifecycle of slang rather than just its current distribution. Cross-linguistic comparisons, particularly with Russian and Kazakh youth language where similar digital influences are at work, would add important comparative depth. Studies focusing on how language learners acquire and deploy slang in second-language contexts would complement the descriptive findings presented here.

Contemporary English slang represents an important area of linguistic inquiry, providing insight into how a generation constructs identity, negotiates social relationships, and responds to rapidly evolving digital media environments. Studying it seriously is one way of taking that generation seriously.

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ҚАЗІРГІ ЗАМАНҒЫ АҒЫЛШЫН СЛЕНГІНІҢ ФУНКЦИОНАЛДЫҚ САНАТТАРЫ: АУЫЗША ЖӘНЕ ЦИФРЛЫҚ ДИСКУРСЫҢ КРОСС-ПЛАТФОРМАЛЫҚ ЗЕРТТЕУІ

Андатпа. 1997-2012 жылдар аралығында туылған жас адамдар ауызша сөйлеу мен жазбаша цифрлық қарым-қатынас арасындағы шекара іс жүзінде жоқ ортада өсті және олардың тілі осыны айқын көрсетеді. Бұл мақала 2020-2025 жылдар аралығында белсенді қолданылған 110 ағылшын сленг тіркесін зерделейді: олар қалай жұмыс істейді, не білдіреді және оларды қолданатын адамдарға қандай әлеуметтік қызмет атқарады. Бар зерттеулердің көпшілігі подкасттардағы ауызша сөйлеуді немесе әлеуметтік желілердегі жазбаша мәтінді бөлек қарастырады; бұл зерттеу оларды бір құбылыстың екі арнасы ретінде бірге талдайды. Корпус үш ағылшын

тіліндегі подкасттан жиналып, TikTok-та тексерілді, әр тіркес кемінде он дербес бейнеде тұрақты мағынасымен кездескен жағдайда ғана іріктелді. Корпустық, семантикалық және функционалдық талдау арқылы сленгтің он екі санаты анықталды. Ең үлкен үлесті эмоционалды және реактивті өрнектер алады – 13,6%; тоғыз санат – кросс-платформалық сленг, мем-конструкциялар, вирусты тіркестер және қысқартылған формалар, әрқайсысы 9,1%. Талдау көрсеткендей, сленг жай ғана бейресми балама сөздер жиыны емес. Ол топқа тиесілікті белгілейді, эмоционалды реакцияларды ықшам түрде жеткізеді, әлеуметтік бағаны білдіреді және сөйлеушілерді танымал мәдениет кеңістігімен байланыстырады. TikTok сияқты платформалар жаңа тіркестердің тарау және тұрақтану жылдамдығын арттырып жатқан сияқты – бұл цифрлық дәуірдегі тілдің өзгеру динамикасын және заманауи ағылшын тілін оқытуды түсіну үшін маңызды салдарлары бар процесс.

Тірек сөздер: сленг, цифрлық коммуникация, жастар тілі, корпустық лингвистика, подкаст.

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ФУНКЦИОНАЛЬНЫЕ КАТЕГОРИИ СОВРЕМЕННОГО АНГЛИЙСКОГО СЛЕНГА: КРОСС-ПЛАТФОРМЕННОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ УСТНОГО И ЦИФРОВОГО ДИСКУРСА

Аннотация. Молодые люди, родившиеся между 1997 и 2012 годами, выросли в среде, где граница между устной речью и цифровым письмом практически стёрта - и их язык отражает это в полной мере. В статье анализируются 110 английских сленговых выражений, активно использовавшихся в период с 2020 по 2025 год: как они устроены, что означают и какую социальную работу выполняют для тех, кто их употребляет. Большинство существующих исследований рассматривают подкастную речь и тексты социальных сетей по отдельности; данная работа трактует их как два канала одного явления. Корпус собирался на основе трёх англоязычных подкастов и верифицировался через TikTok – выражение включалось в итоговый список только при условии устойчивого употребления не менее чем в десяти независимых видео. С применением корпусного, семантического и функционального анализа выделено двенадцать категорий сленга. Наибольшую долю составляют эмоциональные и реактивные выражения – 13,6%; девять категорий – кроссплатформенный сленг, мем-конструкции, вирусные выражения и сокращённые формы – представлены по 9,1% каждая. Анализ показывает, что сленг не просто неформальная замена стандартной лексики. Он маркирует принадлежность к группе, компактно передаёт эмоциональные реакции, выражает социальную оценку и связывает говорящего с пространством популярной культуры. Судя по всему, платформы вроде TikTok ускоряют скорость, с которой новые выражения распространяются и закрепляются, и это имеет существенные последствия как для понимания языковых изменений в цифровую эпоху, так и для практики преподавания современного английского языка.

Ключевые слова: сленг, цифровая коммуникация, молодёжный язык, корпусная лингвистика, подкаст.

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THE LINGUISTIC POTENTIAL OF COMMENTS IN THE IDENTIFICATION OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE WITHIN ENGLISH MEDIA DISCOURSE

Abstract: The given article is devoted to identifying the cognitive dissonance through linguistics potential of comments on the basis of the English media discourse. The review of the authors who researched the problem is given, as well as their works. Currently, the topical issue is the study of media discourse together with the discourse of comments, which gives a complete picture of how a particular media discourse is perceived by people. Notions of «comments», «cognitive dissonance», «discourse», «media discourse» are considered. Recipients of information may experience a state of cognitive dissonance, in a situation where new information does not correspond to the ideas previously embedded in their minds. Users express this dissonance in social networks with the help of comments. Also, the article provides an example of media discourse and comments to it. Methods applied in the process of research are include the following: discourse analysis, content analysis, and functional-stylistic analysis.

Keywords: mass media, cognitive dissonance, media discourse, discourse of comments, recipient.

Introduction

Obtaining information about current events is vital for any modern person. Accordingly, the role of the media as one of the sources of such information is enormous. Mass media provide information, educate, entertain, and contribute to the formation of consciousness and culture. Therefore, the study of the language used in mass media remains an important and relevant issue in modern linguistics.

With the introduction of the concepts of discourse and media discourse, scholars have been able to broaden their understanding of the media's performance and encompass not only purely linguistic aspects of the text but also extralinguistic ones. Extralinguistic factors include the formation of media discourse, the recipients of information, encoding and decoding methods, as well as historical, social, and cultural aspects [1].

Consequently, media discourse can now be considered in conjunction with commentary discourse, which is closely intertwined with core media discourse because it clearly demonstrates