



Contemporary Lexical Typologies and Lexical Change in Digital Discourse

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Article History

Received: 20-10-2025

Accepted: 28-11-2025

Published: 12-12-2025



Abstract:

The English language, a dynamic system constantly evolving, has experienced significant semantic shifts in the 21st century due to the rise of social media. The rapid lexical changes driven mainly by social media challenge linguistic clarity, creating a distinct communication gap among English speakers. This study aims to systematically examine and classify these modern changes by applying classical semantic typologies (Broadening, Narrowing, Amelioration, Deterioration, Blending, and Coinage) to the fast-paced emergence of neologisms in the English vocabulary. The quick appearance of new words and changing meanings (polysemy) on social media platforms leads to misunderstandings, especially for older generations and language learners. Using a mixed-method approach, a Google Form questionnaire with comprehension exercises was given to 60 educated adults, complemented by systematic observation of platforms like TikTok and WhatsApp to compile a list of over 15 popular neologisms. Key findings show that social media acts as a catalyst, speeding up these processes for functional needs such as identity creation and emotional expression. The study concludes with proposals focusing on linguistic education and cross-generational awareness to reduce communication friction and foster linguistic inclusivity.

Original Research

Keywords: Semantic Change, Social Media Influence, Neologisms, Lexical Innovation, Communication Gap.

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INTRODUCTION (BACKGROUND)

A study of the semantic evolution of the English vocabulary involves analysing how the meanings of words and expressions in the language change over time. Specifically, this research concentrates on the semantic development of words and expressions. This refers to the process by which the meaning of a word or one of its meanings shifts over time, often due to changes in cultural, social, economic, or linguistic factors. Neologisms frequently drive semantic change; new words are often introduced to fill particular gaps in vocabulary. Examining how these new words are used and how their meanings evolve can provide valuable insights into broader trends in semantic change.

William Labov's work on Sociolinguistics provides rich examples of his perspective on language as a dynamic system. "Change is not a haphazard or erratic process; it follows a set of social and linguistic rules. Speakers are not simply making random mistakes; they are actively participating in the ongoing evolution of language." This perspective is crucial as it positions semantic change not as random decay, but as a structured social process.

The 21st century has witnessed rapid advancements in technology, globalisation, and shifts in societal values, all of which have influenced language use and meaning. The rise of the internet, social media, and mobile

communication platforms has provided unprecedented opportunities for communication and linguistic innovation. The language of social media actively alters lexical change, compelling a synchronic approach that classifies these modern shifts using classical typologies (amelioration, pejoration, narrowing, broadening, and coinage). This study aims to investigate semantic shifts and neologisms in English vocabulary during the 21st century, focusing on the systematic relationship between digital platforms and lexical output.

Motivation

The continuous, high-speed flux of the lexicon, primarily driven by social media platforms, creates a critical tension between linguistic innovation and communicative efficiency. This research is motivated by the need to apply established classical semantic typologies to the unprecedented velocity of lexical change in the digital era. The speed of neologism emergence and meaning shift creates a measurable communication friction, particularly among older generations who do not partake in digital discourse, leading to unintelligibility and social exclusion.

The motivation is to move beyond merely documenting neologisms to proposing viable mitigation strategies that restore clarity and inclusiveness across generations of English speakers. This requires a systematic classification of modern lexical phenomena to diagnose the precise sociocultural factors driving each type of semantic shift.

Statement of the Problem

The rapid emergence of neologisms and radical semantic shifts within 21st-century English, primarily accelerated by social media, poses a multi-faceted problem for effective communication:

- Erosion of Intelligibility:** The high velocity of lexical change leads to widespread unintelligibility and misinterpretation among English speakers, particularly among learned older adults and language learners who are excluded

from the current digital communication norms.

- Lack of Systematic Classification:** There is a need for a synchronic study that systematically categorises these contemporary shifts—moving beyond simple acknowledgement of neologism emergence—to classify them precisely into established classical semantic typologies (e.g., broadening, deterioration, coinage) to understand the sociological factor driving each specific type of change.
- Challenge to Linguistic Standardisation:** The resulting polysemy and constant influx of new terms challenge the stability of the English lexicon and complicate the work of lexicographers and educators.

Aim of the Research

The general aim of this research is to investigate the relationship between social media platforms and the acceleration of 21st-century lexical change in the English vocabulary.

This goal is achieved by explicitly focusing on two core aspects:

- To analyse and classify contemporary lexical innovation** by identifying the **classical typologies of semantic evolution** (including Semantic Broadening, Narrowing, Amelioration, Deterioration/Pejoration, Metaphorical Extension, Blending, and Pure Coinage) within high-velocity digital discourse.
- To determine the role of social media as the primary catalyst** for the birth and rapid diffusion of **neologisms**, and to diagnose the resulting unintelligibility experienced by non-digital-native English speakers.

Literature Review

The study of semantic change, particularly the relationship between **classical typologies** and **contemporary lexical change**, is central to diachronic and synchronic linguistics.

The Classical Typologies of Semantic Change

Semantic change explains how a word's meaning is modified by linguistic and cognitive processes. These main types (typologies) continue to serve as the foundation for analysis: Amelioration (a positive shift, e.g., Slay from 'kill' to 'impress'), Pejoration (a negative shift, e.g., Simp), Broadening (meaning expands, e.g., GOAT), Narrowing (meaning becomes more specific, e.g., Rizz), and Coinage (the creation of a new word or phrase, e.g., Ghosting). These typologies offer the essential framework for categorising 21st-century shifts systematically.

The Role of Social Media as a Catalyst

The contemporary acceleration of **lexical change** is attributed directly to **Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC)**. Digital media functions as both a "laboratory and a marketplace" for linguistic innovation by facilitating rapid formation and global diffusion of new words. This speed is driven by youth culture's functional need for words that are highly expressive and brief, favouring processes like abbreviation, shortening, and metaphorical extension. Platforms like TikTok act as a "powerful engine for language evolution," compressing the timeline of semantic change that previously took generations.

Theoretical framework

The research aligns with Labov's variationist sociolinguistics, viewing lexical divergence not as random error but as structured social variation that serves in-group identity.²¹ When multiple neologisms emerge for a single concept (e.g., *hot*, *dope*, *lit*), the Prototype Theory suggests a linguistic competition where terms vie for conceptual dominance. This competition and rapid replacement cycle create significant confusion and pose a major challenge for lexicography in documenting transient and context-dependent usage.

The Observer's Paradox

In the Observer's Paradox, where Labov explains the "Hawthorne effect", he clarifies that the paradox arises because the very act of observing language use can influence how people speak, thereby distorting or distorting the actual result of the observation. This principle suggests that when studied in a formal setting, speakers might alter their language use, making it difficult to capture natural variation. He states, "The interview situation itself can affect the speech of the informant" (1966, p. 49). This can be particularly relevant when researching social media neologisms. If a researcher relies solely on surveys or interviews, users might provide more formal or edited versions of their language.

Limited Topics: Interviews often focus on specific themes chosen by the researcher, potentially missing the natural flow of conversation and the vocabulary used in everyday situations.

Pressure to Perform: Participants might feel pressure to "perform" a certain way, either to impress the researcher with their knowledge or to avoid being judged for their language choices.

Limited Emotional Range: The interview setting might not evoke the full range of emotions that naturally occur in everyday conversations, potentially limiting the researcher's understanding of how language adapts to different emotional states. Therefore, to mitigate the effect of the observer's paradox, data for this research are collected from real-world interactions like comments, posts, status updates, stories, and discussions within online communities.

Methodology

This research utilised a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques, to investigate the intricate relationship between social media and semantic change.

Research Design and Data Collection

The study employed a convergent-parallel design, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data concurrently to provide a comprehensive analysis.

1. Quantitative Data Collection (Survey):

A Google Form questionnaire was administered to **60 learned adults**. The questionnaire incorporated 11 closed-ended questions and 10 open-ended questions. It included nine exercises designed to test respondents' active participation and measure their recognition and comprehension of specific neologisms and semantic shifts.

2. Qualitative Data Collection (Observation and Interviews):

Data were meticulously collected from various sources, including social media platforms (WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok), through direct observation of user interactions to gather frequently used neologisms [4].

3. Data Sourcing and Neologism Identification:

The extensive list of neologisms was gathered directly from observation of social media interactions and analysis of responses from the administered questionnaire, ensuring the data was rich and contextually relevant.

Data Analysis Procedure

1. Quantitative Analysis:

Statistical analysis was performed on the closed-ended questions to measure the frequency of knowledge, awareness, and difficulty encountered by participants. Responses were analysed by age group to compare the level of difficulty or unintelligibility encountered by each group.

2. Qualitative/Lexical Analysis (Typological Classification):

The identified lexical items were categorised by rigorously contrasting their established conventional meanings with the new contextual meanings observed in the social media comments. This analysis systematically classified each lexical change into one of the classical semantic typologies: amelioration, deterioration

(pejoration), broadening, narrowing, or pure coinage/blending [4].

3. **Thematic Analysis:** Thematic analysis was applied to the qualitative data to identify the sociocultural and technological factors contributing to the shifts and the adverse effects perceived by the learned adults.

Analysis, Results and Discussion

The core finding is that lexical change in the 21st century is systematic, accelerating the creation of polysemous words and neologisms through established classical semantic typologies.

The investigation revealed that semantic changes have occurred, leading to the creation of novel terms and new meanings (neologisms).⁷ For example, the meaning of *slay* has shifted from "to kill by the sword" to "to look or perform attractively". Similarly, *hot* shifted from "high in temperature" to "sexually appealing."

A primary result is that semantic change has primarily led to polysemy, in which semantic neologisms acquire new meanings while their old meanings remain usable. This is evidenced by the expression *serve breakfast*: 66% of participants provided two definitions, confirming the coexistence of the original meaning ("a meal of the day") and the contemporary meaning "to mean a heartbreak from a relationship".

Typological Classification of Contemporary Lexical Change

The study systematically classified over 30 identified neologisms into the core semantic typologies, demonstrating that social media is the **catalyst** for the rapid application of these classical mechanisms:

A. Amelioration and Broadening (Positive Lexical Shifts)

This category demonstrates how terms gain positive connotations, often through broadening their application domain (*Generalisation*):

Table 1: Amelioration

Term/Phrase	Mechanism & Shift	Sociolinguistic Context (Catalyst)
Slay	Broadening: From niche complement to universal affirmation of excellence/confidence.	Gen Z culture, identity, and intense emotional expression.
Lit / Dope	Amelioration: Shifts from negative (intoxicated/drugs) to positive evaluator ("excellent, cool").	Linguistic competition for prototypical positive markers; discarding negative baggage [18].
GOAT	Broadening: From "Greatest Of All Time" (sports specific) to a generalised superlative for excellence.	Digital culture's demand for high-intensity, efficient, superlative markers.
Cap	Amelioration: Shifts from "serious false statement" to "casual slang for 'not true'".	Affective de-escalation: reducing conflict risk in text-based discourse.

These shifts involve the word's meaning becoming restricted (Specialisation) to a negative or morally specialised field (*Pejoration*):

Table 2: Deterioration and Narrowing (Negative Lexical Shifts)

Term/Phrase	Mechanism & Shift	Sociolinguistic Context (Catalyst)
Yahoo Boy	Pejoration/Specialisation: Restricts 'young man' to denote a person committing internet fraud [19].	Reflection of cultural anxiety over cybercrime; need to label new forms of illegality.
Runs Girl	Pejoration/Specialisation: Restricts 'errands/business' to denote a female involved in transactional sex/prostitution	Moral judgment and specialisation based on contemporary social issues.
Knack	Specialisation: Restricts meaning to sexual intercourse (loss of original 'skill' or 'blow') in Pidgin English.	Highly informal register specialisation driven by contact linguistics.
Mid	Pejoration: From 'middle/average' (quality of marijuana) to a generalised insult meaning "mediocre" or "poor quality" [20].	Domain transfer and use as a dismissive critique in high-speed digital ranking.

These are **neologisms** created to label novel technological, social, or emotional realities:

Table 3: Coinage, Blending, and Metaphorical Innovation

Term/Phrase	Mechanism & Shift	Sociolinguistic Context (Catalyst)
Situationship / Pleasureship	Blending (Coinage): Fuses <i>situation</i> and <i>relationship</i> to define the ambiguous non-romantic state [6].	Linguistic necessity to label complex, modern non-committal relationships.
Zoom fatigue	Compounding (Coinage): Labels the psychological strain from excessive video conferencing.	Crisis-driven need for shared terminology for new technological experiences.
To serve breakfast	Metaphorical Extension/Coinage: Reframes heartbreak as an inevitable, universal daily occurrence.	Emotional efficiency and cultural resonance in music/slang.
It's Giving	Broadening/Metaphor: Expands from specialised AAVE to a generalised descriptor for a strong <i>vibe</i> or aura [21].	Diffusion and dilution of specialised subcultural lexicon via platforms like TikTok.

Table 4: Backronym Neologisms from Social Media

Neologism (Initialism)	Meaning in Digital Context	Mechanism of Change	Sociolinguistic Context
GRWM	"Get ready with me." Used by content creators as a video caption/genre tag.	Coinage (Initialism)	Functional Efficiency/Genre Tagging: Labels a specific video content style instantly.
OMG	"Oh my God." Exclamation variously expresses disbelief, frustration, excitement, or anger.	Coinage (Initialism) & Broadening	Emotive Efficiency/Exclamation: Standardized for conveying intense, high-frequency emotions with minimal characters.
LOL	"Laugh out loud," or "Lots of love." Used to indicate smiling, slight amusement, or a light mood.	Amelioration & Pragmatic Broadening	Affective Marker: Softened from literal "laughing" to mitigate criticism or signal a light mood ("no hard feelings").
ASAP	"As soon as possible." For when you need something right now.	Functional Extension & Intensification	Urgency/Call to Action: Transfer from formal English to inject high urgency into informal posts related to personal needs or trends.
GOAT	"Greatest of All Time." Pronounced "goat" like the animal.	Amelioration & Broadening	Superlative: Shifted from specific sport origin to universal superlative for excellence, accelerated by global fandom [1, 2].
MOG/WOG	"Man of God" and "Woman of God." Emphasising a person's religious or spiritual calling.	Coinage (Initialism)	Religious Specialisation: Efficient labelling of specific religious/spiritual roles within community discourse.

This table presents the findings from observations of social media platforms, identifying six backonyms (initialisations in which the letters represent an invented or derived phrase) commonly used in digital discourse. These forms are classified under the **Coinage** semantic typology, as they introduce new, highly efficient phrases into the lexicon. These neologisms confirm the high rate of lexical change and neologism creation in the 21st century).

The Unintelligibility Gap

The difficulty encountered by the 60 learned adults underscores the adverse effect of these rapid lexical changes. The continuous shift in meaning and the proliferation of local and digital jargon create high pragmatic risk and communicative friction, confirming the unintelligibility gap for those not up to date with the latest digital lexicon.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of contemporary neologisms demonstrates that lexical change is not a breakdown of language but a structured application of classical semantic typologies (broadening, narrowing, amelioration, pejoration, and coinage) accelerated by digital discourse.

The key findings confirm that semantic development has primarily resulted in polysemy (*serve breakfast*). Sociolinguistically, the neologisms reflect contemporary realities: the demand for strong positive markers (*slay, lit*), the labelling of novel relationship states (situationship), and the specialisation required for digital context and local socio-political realities (*Yahoo boy, Mbanya, Amba fighters*).

The most pressing implication is the unintelligibility and miscommunication experienced by learned adults and language learners, a direct result of the high-velocity, in-group nature of this lexical evolution. The difficulties these learned adults face, which can lead to negative self-appraisal and social

withdrawal, underscore the need for proactive solutions to mitigate the adverse effects of this communication gap and promote linguistic inclusion across all generations of English speakers.

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