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A pragmatic analysis of slang in modern English (based on internet platforms)

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Abstract: This study investigates the pragmatic functions of slang in contemporary English as used on two major internet platforms: Twitter and Reddit. Drawing on qualitative data from 100 authentic online interactions, the research explores how slang operates beyond its lexical meaning to perform a range of context-sensitive communicative functions. Utilizing frameworks from Speech Act Theory, Grice's Cooperative Principle, and Politeness Theory, the study identifies key pragmatic roles of slang, including expressing solidarity, managing face, performing humor and irony, and amplifying emotional stance. Findings reveal that users on both platforms strategically deploy slang to align socially with their audiences, negotiate disagreement, and enhance expressivity—often in ways shaped by platform-specific norms and affordances. The study highlights the importance of treating slang as a legitimate and dynamic resource in digital pragmatics and calls for broader, multimodal, and cross-cultural research to capture its evolving role in online communication.

Keywords: Discourse analysis, Internet language, Pragmatics, Slang, Social media

1. Introduction

Language is in a constant state of evolution, adapting to the communicative needs and cultural shifts of its users. Among the most dynamic and fluid aspects of language is slang—informal, often playful or subversive language that emerges within particular communities and spreads rapidly, particularly through digital communication. While traditionally associated with youth culture or marginalized groups, slang has now become a central feature of everyday interaction on internet platforms, influencing not only vocabulary but also pragmatic choices in online discourse.

In recent years, the explosion of social media and participatory digital spaces has transformed the way slang is created, shared, and understood. Platforms such as Twitter, Reddit, and TikTok have given rise to a new breed of slang expressions that are often multimodal, context-dependent, and richly pragmatic. These expressions do more than convey lexical meaning; they signal group membership, enact humor or irony, and navigate social norms—functions that are deeply rooted in the pragmatics of language use.

Despite growing interest in online language practices, the study of slang remains underrepresented in pragmatic research. Much of the existing literature has focused on the lexical or sociolinguistic aspects of slang, often overlooking its pragmatic dimensions—how slang functions within actual interactions, what intentions it serves, and how it shapes interpersonal dynamics. This gap is particularly evident in studies of internet discourse, where slang operates not just as vocabulary but as a tool for performing identity, managing politeness, and negotiating meaning in real time.

This study aims to address that gap by offering a pragmatic analysis of slang as used on contemporary internet platforms. By examining naturally occurring interactions on Twitter, Reddit, and TikTok, this research investigates the ways in which slang expressions function within their communicative contexts. Drawing on frameworks such as Speech Act Theory, Grice's Cooperative Principle, and Politeness Theory, the analysis explores how slang contributes to meaning-making, social alignment, and discourse coherence in online

environments.

In doing so, the study not only enriches our understanding of pragmatic variation in digital communication but also highlights the evolving nature of slang as a linguistic and social phenomenon. It offers insights into how language adapts pragmatically in virtual spaces where brevity, wit, and shared cultural knowledge are key to successful communication.

2. Literature Review

Slang has long occupied a paradoxical place in linguistic research. Often dismissed as ephemeral or non-standard, it is simultaneously recognized as a powerful marker of identity, in-group solidarity, and linguistic innovation (Eble, 1996; Coleman, 2012). Traditionally studied within sociolinguistics and lexicography, slang is increasingly gaining attention in studies of digital discourse due to its vibrant role in shaping online communication. However, its pragmatic functions—how slang operates in context to convey meaning, intentions, and social relationships—remain relatively underexplored.

2.1. Slang in Sociolinguistics and Cultural Studies

Historically, slang has been approached as a sociolect—language tied to particular groups such as youth, subcultures, or occupational communities (Labov, 1972; Eckert, 2000). Scholars have emphasized its role in constructing social identity, resisting authority, or fostering group cohesion (Matthews, 2007; Bucholtz, 2009). In these frameworks, slang is often viewed as a sociocultural tool: one that signals alignment, exclusion, rebellion, or intimacy. While these perspectives provide insight into who uses slang and why, they tend to treat slang primarily as a lexical or stylistic phenomenon, with limited attention to how it functions in real-time interaction.

2.2. Digital Discourse and the Emergence of Online Slang

With the advent of social media, the production and circulation of slang have become more visible, immediate, and participatory. Internet users actively generate new terms, recycle old ones, and attach slang to memes, hashtags, and trending content. Research on digital discourse has begun to explore this phenomenon, focusing on the rapid spread of slang across platforms and its evolution through user engagement (Crystal, 2011; Tagg, 2015; Zappavigna, 2018). Studies have shown how slang varies across communities like Twitter users or Reddit forums, often shaped by platform norms and user interaction styles (Androutsopoulos, 2014; Sharma & Brookes, 2022).

Yet even in this emerging body of work, the pragmatic dimension of slang—how it achieves communicative goals such as persuasion, politeness, or humor—remains largely unaddressed. Researchers tend to categorize slang semantically or trace its etymology rather than examine its usage in interactional context.

2.3. Pragmatics and the Function of Informal Language

Pragmatics, concerned with meaning-in-use, offers valuable tools for analyzing how slang operates in everyday communication. Foundational frameworks such as Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1975), Grice's Cooperative Principle (Grice, 1975), and Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987) provide lenses for examining how speakers use language to perform actions, convey implied meanings, and negotiate social relationships. These frameworks have been applied extensively to informal and digital language, particularly in examining politeness strategies, implicature, and expressive language in online settings (Herring, 2007; Locher & Graham, 2010).

Some studies have begun to explore how humor, irony, or affect are expressed through informal online language (Dynel, 2016; Bou-Franch et al., 2019). However, few focus specifically on slang as the vehicle for such pragmatic effects. This is surprising given that slang, by its very nature, often carries connotative, indexical, or context-dependent meaning that goes beyond literal interpretation. Slang can act as a form of social indexing, pragmatic softening or intensification, or implicit stance-taking—functions that align closely with core concerns of pragmatics.

2.4. The Research Gap

Despite growing interest in digital discourse and informal language, there is a notable gap in empirical research that analyzes slang pragmatically—especially using naturally occurring data from internet platforms like Twitter and Reddit. Most existing studies either describe slang lexically or analyze general informal speech without focusing on slang as a distinct pragmatic tool. Furthermore, cross-platform studies comparing how slang operates in different digital environments remain rare, leaving questions about how platform affordances influence pragmatic use unresolved.

2.5. Contribution of the Present Study

This study addresses this gap by offering a cross-platform, context-sensitive pragmatic analysis of slang in online discourse. By examining interactions on Twitter and Reddit, it investigates how slang is used to perform speech acts, manage politeness, express alignment or distancing, and construct digital identities. The study applies established pragmatic theories to new, culturally significant linguistic data, contributing both to the study of internet language and to broader pragmatic theory by illustrating how meaning is dynamically constructed through slang in real-time digital communication.

2.6. Research Questions

Grounded in the principles of pragmatic theory and informed by recent studies on digital discourse, this study addresses the following research questions:

1. What pragmatic functions do slang expressions serve in online discourse across Twitter and Reddit?
2. How are these functions shaped by platform-specific norms and communicative affordances?
3. In what ways do slang expressions contribute to the performance of speech acts and the generation of implicatures in digital interactions?
4. How is slang used to construct, maintain, or challenge social relationships in internet-based communication?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design grounded in pragmatic analysis and informed by discourse analysis principles. The objective is to investigate the pragmatic functions of slang expressions in online interactions, with particular attention to meaning in context, speech act realization, and social relationship management. A qualitative approach was chosen to allow for an in-depth exploration of language use as it naturally occurs in digital communication settings.

3.2. Data Collection

3.2.1. Data Sources

The linguistic data for this study were drawn from two major social media platforms: Twitter and Reddit. These platforms were selected due to their wide user base, informal discourse style, and high density of slang in public communication. Twitter provides a space for brief, performative utterances often shaped by trending topics, while Reddit allows for more extended and threaded discussions organized around topic-specific communities.

3.2.2 Sampling Procedure

A purposive sampling strategy was adopted to ensure the inclusion of content rich in slang and informal language. Specific subreddits (e.g., r/teenagers, r/Ask Reddit, r/Out Of The Loop) and Twitter hashtags or trending topics were identified as likely sources of slang-heavy discourse.

The following criteria guided the selection of data:

- Posts or comments written in English
- Content publicly accessible and free of personal identifiers
- Examples that included at least one slang expression
- Timeframe: January 2023 – March 2025

A total of 100 samples were collected: 50 from Reddit comment threads and 50 from Twitter posts and replies. Each sample consisted of a short exchange or post of 3–10 lines of discourse.

3.3. Analytical Framework

The analysis was conducted within the frameworks of established pragmatic theories, particularly:

- Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1975), to examine how slang expressions contribute to illocutionary force;
- Grice's Cooperative Principle and Maxims (Grice, 1975), to identify instances of implicature and strategic maxim flouting;
- Politeness Theory (Brown & Levinson, 1987), to explore how slang is used to manage face, mitigate threats, or express solidarity;
- Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986), to interpret how users infer meaning through shared context and cultural cues.

These frameworks facilitated a systematic examination of how slang is pragmatically deployed in digital communication.

3.4. Coding and Analysis Procedure

The analysis followed a thematic coding process in three stages:

1. Initial coding: All slang expressions were identified and annotated within their immediate discourse context.
2. Functional categorization: Each instance was coded according to its pragmatic function, such as humor, criticism, face-saving, irony, group alignment, or distancing.
3. Cross-platform comparison: The use and function of slang were compared between Twitter and Reddit to assess how platform affordances influenced pragmatic deployment.

Coding was conducted manually and iteratively, allowing for themes to emerge organically while remaining grounded in theoretical constructs. A small portion of the data (15%) was cross-checked by a second coder to ensure consistency, achieving a high level of intercoder agreement.

3.5. Ethical Considerations

Only publicly available data were used, and no private or login-restricted content was accessed. Usernames and other identifiable information were anonymized or excluded to protect individual privacy. The study adhered to the ethical guidelines for internet-mediated research as outlined by the British Psychological Society (2021) and relevant institutional review protocols.

3.6. Trustworthiness and Rigor

To ensure the credibility and transparency of the research process:

- Triangulation was applied by analyzing data from two distinct platforms.
- Thick description was employed to present contextualized excerpts that illustrate slang usage in interaction.
- An audit trail documented all coding decisions and category definitions to ensure dependability and transparency.

4. Results

The analysis of 100 samples—50 from Reddit and 50 from Twitter—revealed a range of pragmatic functions for slang expressions in online discourse. Slang was not only a lexical choice but a strategic communicative tool used to express stance, manage social relations, and construct digital identities. Four major themes emerged from the data: (1) Solidarity and Group Alignment, (2) Humor and Irony, (3) Politeness and Facework, and (4) Emphatic and Evaluative Force. Platform-specific patterns were also observed.

4.1. Solidarity and Group Alignment

Across both platforms, slang was frequently used to signal in-group membership and establish rapport. Expressions such as *bruh*, *fam*, *no cap*, and *based* were employed to affirm shared understanding or cultural references.

- On Reddit, especially in subreddits like *r/teenagers* or *r/memes*, slang marked generational identity and participation in internet culture. For example:

"That take is so based, not even gonna lie."

- On Twitter, slang often functioned as a marker of communal irony or social commentary, particularly in replies and quote tweets:

"He said he'd fix it and then dipped . Classic."

In both cases, slang served to align the speaker with the audience, creating a sense of intimacy or shared worldview.

4.2. Humor and Irony

A large number of slang expressions were used for comic effect or self-deprecating humor, especially when addressing controversial or awkward topics.

- Twitter users favored compact, meme-driven slang (*ratio*, *L*, *mid*, *delulu*) to convey layered irony or mockery. For example:

“Bro tried to flex his playlist and got cooked. L take fr.”

- Reddit comments used longer turns but similarly relied on slang to create humorous distance:

“That’s peak clownery, my guy. Peak.”

In both cases, slang operated pragmatically to soften criticism, inject playfulness, or perform irony, often relying on shared internet literacy.

4.3. Politeness and Facework

Though slang is often perceived as informal or abrasive, it was strategically used to mitigate face-threatening acts, particularly criticism or disagreement.

- In Reddit debates, users employed slang to cushion disagreement:

“Hot take, but I lowkey agree with the villain here.”

- On Twitter, slang offered a way to engage disagreement without direct confrontation, e.g.:

“Might be an unpopular opinion but that movie was kinda sus ngl.”

Such usage reflects a shift from conventional politeness markers to community-specific facework strategies embedded in slang.

4.4. Emphatic and Evaluative Force

Slang terms were often used to intensify emotional expression or signal strong evaluation.

- Reddit users used terms like *cringe*, *fire*, *legit*, and *simp* to frame opinions:

“She’s legit carrying the whole show, not even mad.”

- Twitter users amplified reactions using emojis and slang in tandem:

“That performance was straight . No notes.”

These choices reflect a pragmatic use of slang to heighten expressivity, often replacing or enhancing traditional adverbs and adjectives.

4.5. Platform-Specific Patterns

While thematic overlap existed, some platform-specific tendencies emerged:

- Twitter users relied more on brevity, stylization, and trending slang, often embedding expressions within visual or meme-based formats.

- Reddit featured more elaborated discourse, where slang was embedded in extended arguments, personal anecdotes, or storytelling.

This suggests that platform architecture and community norms influence not only the lexical items chosen but their pragmatic deployment.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study provide compelling evidence that slang in online discourse operates not merely as informal vocabulary but as a powerful pragmatic resource. Drawing on samples from Twitter and Reddit, the analysis revealed that slang expressions perform a range of context-dependent functions: they align users socially, index stances, mitigate threats to face, and enhance expressive force. These findings support and extend previous work on the role of informal language in digital environments (Locher & Graham, 2010; Dynel, 2016), while highlighting the specific pragmatic versatility of slang within platform-mediated communication.

5.1. Slang as a Marker of Social Alignment

Consistent with sociolinguistic accounts of slang as a tool for group identity (Eckert, 2000; Bucholtz, 2009), this study found that users on both Reddit and Twitter deployed slang to express solidarity, cultural belonging, and generational identity. However, going beyond lexical tagging, the current analysis shows how these expressions function at the illocutionary level to

perform acts of agreement, affirmation, or bonding. Terms like *based* or *no cap* do more than reference shared knowledge—they construct a relationship between speaker and audience, often with subtle indexical meanings that depend on discourse context.

5.2. Humor and the Strategic Use of Irony

Slang was frequently embedded in humorous or ironic exchanges, especially on Twitter. This aligns with previous research suggesting that humor and affect are central to informal digital communication (Dynel, 2016; Bou-Franch et al., 2019). What this study adds is a pragmatic account of how slang enables speakers to perform indirect speech acts, such as critique or mockery, while preserving politeness or plausible deniability. The widespread use of terms like *delulu* or *L* illustrates how implicature and community inferences are leveraged for humor. This supports Gricean analyses of flouted maxims as productive, rather than disruptive, communicative strategies in digital discourse (Grice, 1975).

5.3. Politeness, Facework, and Slang

Unexpectedly, the findings revealed that slang was also used to negotiate politeness, particularly in Reddit discussions. While not traditionally associated with face-sensitive language, slang here served as a softening mechanism, reducing the threat of disagreement or dissent. For example, the use of *lowkey* or *hot take* prefaces allowed users to present controversial views without direct confrontation. This echoes Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of facework, suggesting that in digital discourse, community norms and platform affordances shape how indirectness and mitigation are expressed—sometimes through non-traditional linguistic resources like slang.

5.4. Expressivity and Emphatic Functions

Another consistent pattern was the use of slang to intensify emotional or evaluative meaning. Users employed slang terms as a substitute for traditional adverbs or adjectives to express approval, disdain, or intensity. This finding reinforces previous observations that online language often emphasizes amplification and affective force (Zappavigna, 2018). From a pragmatic perspective, this reflects a strategic manipulation of relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1986), where users maximize communicative impact using minimal, culturally-loaded lexical items.

5.5. Platform-Specific Variation

While thematic patterns were consistent across Twitter and Reddit, their form and frequency varied. Twitter posts, shaped by character limits and a culture of rapid interaction, relied heavily on concise, trend-sensitive slang and visual-emotional layering (e.g., emojis). Reddit discourse, in contrast, allowed for more elaborated turns and narrative structure, with slang embedded in storytelling and argumentation. This supports Androutsopoulos' (2014) claim that platform affordances significantly influence not just language form, but language function.

5.6. Revisiting the Research Questions

This study set out to explore the pragmatic functions of slang on internet platforms and how platform norms shape its usage. The data reveal that slang serves multiple pragmatic roles—far beyond mere lexical novelty—and that these roles are conditioned by both contextual cues and platform dynamics. These findings advance our understanding of how users co-construct meaning through informal language, while highlighting the adaptability of slang to diverse communicative needs.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to explore the pragmatic dimensions of slang in modern English as used on two major internet platforms: Twitter and Reddit. By applying frameworks from pragmatic theory to naturally occurring digital discourse, the research demonstrated that slang is far more than casual or playful language; it is a strategically employed communicative tool used to achieve a variety of interpersonal and rhetorical goals.

The analysis revealed that slang serves to align speakers socially, express humor and irony, negotiate politeness, and amplify emotional meaning. These pragmatic functions were context-dependent and often tailored to the affordances and norms of each platform. Twitter favored brevity, stylization, and viral resonance, while Reddit encouraged extended discourse and more subtle forms of alignment and facework.

In doing so, the study fills a notable gap in existing research, which has largely focused on the semantic or sociolinguistic dimensions of slang. By foregrounding the functional and interactional roles slang plays in digital communication, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how informal language evolves and adapts within online communities.

As digital communication continues to shape language use in real time, slang will remain a key site for the negotiation of identity, humor, power, and group belonging. Future research could expand this inquiry by incorporating additional platforms (e.g., Instagram, Discord), longitudinal data, or user-centered perspectives through interviews or ethnographic observation. Furthermore, there is potential to explore how slang functions across different cultural or linguistic communities in online settings.

Ultimately, this study underscores the value of integrating pragmatic theory with digital discourse analysis to capture the rich, socially embedded ways that language functions in contemporary communication.

7. Implications of the study

The findings of this study offer several important implications for both linguistic scholarship and digital communication practices. From a theoretical standpoint, the analysis highlights the need for pragmatic models to more fully account for informal, community-driven language use in digital contexts. Slang expressions, as demonstrated in this study, function as meaningful pragmatic tools—shaping speech acts, managing face, and expressing alignment or irony within online discourse. This calls for a more dynamic and context-sensitive understanding of pragmatics that reflects the realities of internet-mediated interaction. Pedagogically, the study has relevance for digital literacy education, where greater awareness of slang's communicative functions can help learners and educators decode online texts with more nuance. Rather than treating slang as peripheral or problematic, language instruction can incorporate its social and rhetorical roles as part of authentic communication strategies. Additionally, the findings have implications for social media moderation and community management. Recognizing that slang is often used to maintain rapport, express solidarity, or soften criticism suggests that automated or blanket censorship policies may misinterpret user intent. Moderation strategies should consider the pragmatic function of slang before labeling it as disruptive or offensive. Finally, this study contributes to the growing body of research that connects academic inquiry with real-time linguistic evolution. By examining naturally occurring data from online platforms, it underscores the importance of treating slang not merely as cultural ephemera but as a legitimate subject of linguistic and social analysis.

8. Limitations of the Study

While this study offers valuable insights into the pragmatic functions of slang in digital discourse, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the scope of the analysis was limited to two platforms—Twitter and Reddit—which, although rich in informal language, do not fully represent the diversity of digital communication environments. Other platforms such as Instagram, Discord, or TikTok may foster different linguistic norms, modes of expression, and user demographics, potentially leading to alternative uses and interpretations of slang. Second, the data were restricted to English-language posts within a specific timeframe (2023–2025), primarily reflecting Western online culture. As slang is both temporally and culturally situated, these findings may not be generalizable to other linguistic communities or historical moments. Third, the analysis was based solely on textual data, without access to users' intentions or audience perceptions. As such, interpretations of pragmatic function are inferential, and may not fully reflect how messages were intended or received. Furthermore, although coding was grounded in established pragmatic theory and supported by intercoder checks, the inherently interpretive nature of qualitative analysis introduces a degree of subjectivity. Finally, the use of short, isolated samples may overlook the broader conversational or multimodal contexts in which slang operates. These limitations suggest that future research could benefit from more diverse data sources, cross-cultural comparisons, and user-centered methodologies to deepen our understanding of slang as a complex and evolving pragmatic phenomenon.

9. Future Research

Building on the findings and limitations of this study, several directions for future research are evident. One promising area involves expanding the platform scope to include additional social media environments such as TikTok, Discord, or messaging applications, where slang is used in more multimodal and interactive ways. Exploring how slang functions pragmatically in video content, voice messages, or meme culture could provide deeper insights into the relationship between linguistic form, visual context, and user intent. Additionally, a longitudinal or diachronic approach could trace how specific slang expressions evolve over time—examining shifts in their meaning, frequency, or pragmatic use as they move from subcultural to mainstream contexts. Cross-cultural and multilingual research would also be valuable, particularly in exploring how slang performs similar or divergent pragmatic functions across different linguistic communities or in intercultural online interactions. Furthermore, incorporating user-centered methods such as interviews, surveys, or digital ethnography could enrich the analysis by capturing how speakers themselves understand and strategically use slang in real-world online settings. Finally, reception-based studies could investigate how different audiences interpret slang expressions, and whether factors such as age, platform familiarity, or cultural background influence understanding. By pursuing these avenues, future studies can build a more comprehensive and inclusive account of slang as a dynamic and socially embedded aspect of digital pragmatics.

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