

THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA LANGUAGE: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF RECENT NEOLOGISMS

ЕВОЛЮЦІЯ МОВИ СОЦІАЛЬНИХ МЕДІА: СОЦІОЛІНГВІСТИЧНИЙ АНАЛІЗ ОСТАННІХ НЕОЛОГІЗМІВ

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This study examines linguistic innovations on social media platforms, analyzing a corpus of over 50 recent neologisms collected between 2016 and 2024. It investigates word formation processes, semantic domains, and sociolinguistic functions of these new terms to understand how language shapes online communication.

The methodology includes analysis of each neologism: its formation process, semantic categorization, and sociolinguistic functions. The study shows that blending is the most prevalent word formation process (40%), followed by affixation (21%), compounding (17%), and abbreviation (6%). Semantic analysis identified five primary domains: user types/roles (23%), online behaviors/practices (38%), platform-specific features/trends (19%), psychological/social phenomena (13%), and content types (7%).

The study displays the development of platform-specific language, showing how various social media ecosystems are a breeding ground for unique neologisms. Sociolinguistically, they serve functions such as in-group marking, commentary on digital culture, and determination of online/offline boundaries.

This research contributes to our understanding of contemporary sociolinguistic processes by illustrating the swift linguistic evolution in online contexts and the role of language in creating digital identities and communities. It demonstrates how neologisms help users navigate and describe their online experiences while reflecting further integration of digital culture into everyday life.

The results have implications for sociolinguistics and digital communication studies, showing the need for continued research into linguistic changes in online spaces and their potential impact on offline language use. The study emphasizes the importance of digital literacy in social media and provides practical insights into evolving online communication.

Key words: social media, neologisms, online communication, word formation, blending, sociolinguistics, euphemism.

Це дослідження вивчає лінгвістичні інновації в соціальних мережах, аналізуючи корпус із більш ніж 50 неологізмів, зібраних між 2016 та 2024 роками. Досліджуються процеси словотворення, семантичні домени та соціолінгвістичні функції цих нових слів, щоб зрозуміти, як мова впливає та формує онлайн-комунікацію.

Методологія включає аналіз кожного неологізму, в тому числі його процес формування, семантичну категоризацію та соціолінгвістичні функції. Результати демонструють, що телескопія є найпоширенішим процесом словотворення (40%), за нею йдуть афіксація (21%), словоскладання (17%) та скорочення (6%). Семантичний аналіз виявив п'ять основних доменів: типи/ролі користувачів (23%), онлайн-поведінка/практики (38%), специфічні функції/тренди (19%), психологічні/соціальні явища (13%) та типи контенту (7%).

Дослідження підкреслює розвиток мови, специфічної для соціальних платформ, демонструючи, як різні соціальні мережі сприяють появі унікальних неологізмів. З соціолінгвістичної точки зору, вони виконують такі функції, як маркування приналежності до групи, оцінка цифрової культури, та визначення онлайн/офлайн меж.

Це дослідження сприяє розумінню сучасних соціолінгвістичних процесів, ілюструючи швидку лінгвістичну еволюцію в онлайн-контекстах та роль мови у створенні цифрових ідентичностей і спільнот. Воно демонструє, як неологізми допомагають користувачам орієнтуватися та описувати свій онлайн-досвід, відображаючи подальшу інтеграцію цифрової культури у повсякденне життя.

Результати дослідження мають наслідки для соціолінгвістики та досліджень цифрової комунікації, показуючи необхідність подальших досліджень лінгвістичних змін в онлайн-просторах та їх потенційного впливу на офлайн використання мови. Дослідження підкреслює важливість цифрової грамотності в соціальних мережах і надає практичні уявлення про еволюцію онлайн-комунікації.

Ключові слова: соціальні мережі, неологізми, онлайн-комунікація, словотворення, телескопія, соціолінгвістика, евфемізм.

Introduction. The swift evolution of social media platforms and online culture has led to the creation of a vast array of new terminology. Linguistic innovations reflect not only the advance of technology, but are also shifting social interactions and communication

practices in digital spaces. As Thurlow and Mroczek note, “new media language” is a key site for understanding contemporary sociolinguistic processes [1].

Social media, according to Koronevych, “have a significant influence on spreading the new words and

expressions, since their ease of use encourages users to create, alter, and adopt newly coined lexemes as part of their online communication” [2, p. 92]. The neologisms coined within the social media serve multiple functions: they name new concepts and practices, facilitate in-group communication, and often comment on or criticize aspects of online culture. These terms can spread rapidly across platforms and enter mainstream discourse, highlighting the increasing influence of digital communication on language change.

This paper analyzes a corpus of recent social media-related neologisms to better understand linguistic innovation in digital spaces and its broader sociolinguistic implications. By examining word formation processes, semantic domains, and socio-pragmatic functions, we aim to shed light on how language adapts to and shapes online communication. The research also contributes to ongoing discussions about the impact of social media on language variation and change [3].

Methodology. The corpus consists of over 50 neologisms related to social media usage, collected from various online sources between 2016–2024. This timeframe was chosen to focus on recent linguistic innovations that reflect current trends in social media use and online culture.

The neologisms were sourced from:

- Technology, social media, and news websites (The Cut, Wired, NBC News);
- Online dictionaries specializing in internet slang (Word Spy, Cambridge Dictionary Blog of Neologisms);
- Academic publications on internet linguistics.

Each term was recorded along with its definition, etymology (where available), and example usage in context. Each neologism was analyzed for:

a) Word formation process: Identifying the linguistic mechanism by which the new term was created (e.g., blending, affixation, compounding);

b) Semantic domain: Categorizing the term based on its meaning and the aspect of social media culture it relates to;

c) Associated platforms/communities: Noting any specific social media platforms or online subcultures particularly associated with the term;

d) Sociolinguistic functions: Examining how the term is used in social contexts, its pragmatic functions, and its role in constructing or reflecting online identities and communities.

By using this methodology, we aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of recent social media neologisms, offering insights into both linguistic processes and the sociocultural dynamics of online communication.

Results and Discussion

Word Formation Processes

The neologisms in our corpus demonstrate a variety of word formation processes, reflecting the creative and dynamic nature of language evolution in digital spaces. The most prominent processes observed were:

1. Blending (40%):

Blending was the most frequent word formation process, combining parts of two (or occasionally more) words to create a new term. This prevalence likely stems from blends’ ability to efficiently convey complex concepts in a memorable, often playful manner. Examples include: finfluencer (financial + influencer); shoefie (shoe + selfie); vaguebooking (vague + Facebooking); sharenting (sharing + parenting); petfluencer (pet + influencer); fitstagrammer (fitness + Instagrammer); plandid (planned + candid):

It’s hard to take a truly good candid photo, so we can all thank Instagram for making it socially acceptable to post “plandids” – pictures that have been meticulously planned to look as spontaneous as possible. [Watch: Instagram Influencers Explain How to Carefully Plan a Spontaneous Photo, The Cut, Sep 19, 2017]

Many of these blends incorporate established social media terminology (e.g., -fluencer, -gram, -stagram), demonstrating how new terms build on existing digital vernacular. This process creates a layered lexicon where understanding newer terms requires familiarity with earlier social media language.

2. Affixation (21%):

Affixation was the second most common process. This suggests that users are extending existing words to describe new, often contrasting concepts. Examples include: to deplatform (de- + platform); to unalive (un- + alive); algospeak (algo + -speak); cyberhoarding (cyber- + hoarding); anti-fan (anti- + fan); outfluencer (out- + influencer). The prefixes used often carry specific connotations in the digital context. For instance, cyber- relates to online activities, while de-/un- often indicate reversal or removal in the social media context.

3. Compounding (17%):

Compound words, formed by combining two or more existing words, were also prevalent. These often describe complex concepts or practices in a straightforward manner. Examples include: rage-farming; social listening; live-shopping; social commerce, etc. Many of these compounds metaphorically apply offline concepts to online behaviors, helping users conceptualize new digital practices in familiar terms.

4. Abbreviation (6%):

While less common, abbreviation plays a role in creating concise terms for frequent use. Examples

include: FOLO (fear of living offline); sponcon (sponsored content). These abbreviations often originate in text-based communication where brevity is valued, and can subsequently spread to wider usage.

5. Other (16%):

This category includes other word formation processes:

a) Eponyms: Terms derived from names of platforms or brands, e.g., DoggoLingo (based on “Doggo” internet slang and DuoLingo language learning app);

b) Semantic extension: Broadening or shifting the meaning of existing words, e.g., shadow ban (extending the concept of banning to a more subtle form of content suppression);

c) Back-formation: e.g., “to rizz up” (verb derived from the noun “rizz”);

d) Truncation: e.g., “finsta” (fake + Insta[gram]).

The diversity of word formation processes observed reflects the creative and adaptive nature of language use in social media contexts. Users employ a range of linguistic strategies to efficiently coin terms that capture new concepts, practices, and identities in the constantly evolving digital landscape [4, p. 124].

The prevalence of playful and efficient word formation strategies like blending and creative compounding aligns with the fast, informal nature of online communication. These processes allow users to quickly coin and adopt new terms that resonate with their online experiences and communities.

Semantic Domains

The neologisms in our corpus can be categorized into several distinct semantic domains, reflecting the diverse aspects of social media culture and usage. This categorization offers insights into the areas of online life that are most dynamic and salient to users. The major semantic categories identified are:

1. User Types/Roles (23%): This category encompasses terms that describe different types of social media users or specific roles they adopt online. Examples include: cleanstagrammer (users who post content about cleaning and organization on Instagram); petfluencer (pet owners who have gained a following by posting about their pets); kidfluencer (children who have significant influence on social media platforms); outfluencer (influencers who focus on outdoor activities and adventures); finfluencer (individuals who share financial advice and content on social media):

Back in March, the FCA introduced new guidance aimed at regulating the behaviour of so-called “finfluencers” – social media personalities who issue financial advice and tips to their followers. [Reality TV stars charged in ‘finfluencer’ crackdown, The Week, May 17, 2024]

These terms reflect the increasing specialization and diversification of influencer culture. They also highlight how social media allows niche interests to develop substantial followings, creating new forms of micro-celebrity.

2. Online Behaviors/Practices (38%): The largest category in our corpus, these terms describe specific actions, strategies, or patterns of behavior on social media platforms. Examples include: sadfishing (posting about one’s emotional problems to gain attention or sympathy); plandid (posting seemingly candid photos that are actually carefully planned); vaguebooking (making intentionally vague posts to provoke curiosity); cyberhoarding (compulsive saving of digital files and information); rage farming (deliberately posting inflammatory content to provoke angry responses):

*American right-wing influencers Charlie Kirk and Candace Owens planted the most recent seeds of corporate-targeted **rage farming** – the exploitation of emotions to spread misinformation – by accusing airlines, particularly United, of endangering lives through inclusive access to pilot training programs. [How Companies Should Combat **Rage Farming** Attempts, ProMarket.org, February 6, 2024]*

This category sheds light on the evolving norms and practices of social media interaction. Many of these terms implicitly criticize some online behaviors, suggesting a growing self-awareness and meta-commentary within social media culture.

3. Platform-Specific Features/Trends (19%): These neologisms are tied to particular features, trends, or communities on specific social media platforms. Examples include: dark post (a targeted ad on Facebook that doesn’t appear on the advertiser’s timeline); WaterTok (TikTok community focused on flavored water recipes); BookTok (book-loving community on TikTok); algospeak (language used to avoid triggering content moderation algorithms).

This category demonstrates how each platform develops its own unique culture and vocabulary. It also highlights the impact of platform design and algorithms on user behavior and language.

Some social media neologisms function as euphemisms to avoid uttering words considered offensive, controversial or explicit, as well as to avoid conflicts with community guidelines of the relevant social media. For example:

- Using “unalive” rather than “dead” or “to unalive” instead of “to kill/murder”;
- Saying “adult/explicit content” instead of “erotic” or “porn”;
- Using “camping” instead of “abortion”;
- Generally using “algospeak” rather than directly naming inappropriate topics:

Since the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, social media has been flooded by posts from people offering to take people "camping" – coded language for assisting people seeking abortions out of state. But some activists and experts warn that offering to house strangers isn't as helpful as connecting them with local abortion rights organizations. [Post-Roe, 'camping' has become code for abortions. Activists say it may put people at risk. NBC News, June 30, 2022]

This reflects social sanctions around appropriate social media discourse, especially regarding controversial or adult themes.

Other euphemisms aim to temper criticism or conflict. For instance:

- “Ghosting” instead of more confrontational terms for ceasing communication;
- “Phubbing” rather than “ignoring” someone by using one’s phone;
- “Problematic” as a milder way to characterize offensive content.

Thus, euphemistic neologisms reflect evolving social media etiquette, values, and relationship strategies. Their emergence shows tensions between free expression and avoiding offense, criticism and conflict in digital spaces.

4. Psychological/Social Phenomena (13%):

These terms describe broader psychological or social effects related to social media use. Examples include: FOLO (Fear of Living Offline) (anxiety about not documenting one’s life on social media); digital campfire (small, intimate online communities); doomscrolling (compulsively scrolling through negative news on social media). These neologisms reflect growing awareness of the psychological impacts of social media use, both positive (like forming close-knit online communities) and negative (such as anxiety or compulsive behavior).

5. Content Types (7%):

This category includes terms for specific types of social media content. Examples include: walking around video (videos that give viewers a first-person perspective of walking through a location); shelfie (a photo of one’s bookshelf posted on social media), anti-haul (content where creators discuss products they don’t recommend buying). These terms display how social media has spawned new genres of content, often remixing or subverting traditional media formats.

The distribution of neologisms across these semantic domains provides several insights into contemporary social media culture:

1. The significant number of terms related to user types/roles (23%) and online behaviors (38%) emphasizes the importance of identity construction and performance in social media. Users are con-

stantly developing new ways to present themselves and interact online, creating vocabulary for describing these practices.

2. Social media neologisms also function as euphemisms, reflecting the evolving norms of online communication, addressing the need to navigate sensitive topics, mitigate conflict, and maintain a positive self-image in digital spaces. The emergence of such euphemisms highlights social media’s influence on shaping modern communication patterns and social etiquette.

3. The emergence of platform-specific terms (19%) reflects how each social media platform develops a unique ecosystem of features, trends, and communities. This linguistic differentiation may contribute to platform loyalty and distinct user cultures.

4. The presence of terms describing psychological/social phenomena (13%) indicates an increasing awareness of how social media affects mental health and social interaction.

5. While smaller in number, the terms describing new content types (7%) show how social media continues to spawn innovative formats for self-expression and communication.

This analysis reveals that social media neologisms serve not just to name new concepts, but to negotiate norms, construct identities, and navigate in the rapidly evolving digital social landscape. The distribution of terms across these domains provides a snapshot of the aspects of online life that are most prominent for users at the moment.

Platform-Specific Language

Our analysis reveals that a significant portion of the neologisms in the corpus are tied to specific social media platforms. This platform-specific language not only reflects the unique features and cultures of each platform but also demonstrates how digital spaces can foster distinct linguistic communities. Key examples include:

1. Instagram-related terms: Instagirl (a model with a large Instagram following); cleanstagrammer; fitstagrammer, shelfie.

2. TikTok-specific language: WaterTok, BookTokker, algospeak (while not exclusive to TikTok, it’s particularly relevant there due to the platform’s strict moderation).

3. YouTube-centric terminology: BookTuber (YouTube content creators who focus on book reviews and literary content).

4. Facebook-related terms: vaguebooking, dark post.

Dark posts were first introduced when targeting capabilities on platforms like Facebook were still in their rudimentary stages ... Brands and publishers used these dark posts to create a post that did not live permanently on their pages. Instead, the post would

be specifically targeted to a select few members of their target audience or following. In other words, it was a kind of marketing strategy. [What is Dark Content in Social Media, billo.app, Aug 2, 2024]

This platform-specific language development can be attributed to several factors:

1. Each platform has distinct features that shape user behavior and content creation. For instance, Instagram's image-centric format naturally leads to terms like "shelfie", while TikTok's short-form video structure influences the types of content trends that emerge.

2. Platforms often develop niche communities (like BookTok on TikTok) that create their own terminologies and practices.

3. The algorithms that govern content distribution on each platform can significantly impact user behavior and language. The emergence of "algospeak" on TikTok is a direct response to the platform's content moderation practices.

4. While these terms often originate on specific platforms, they can spread to wider usage. For example, "influencer" began on Instagram but is now used across all social media.

In the future, we can expect further divergence and cross-pollination of platform-specific languages. This linguistic differentiation may contribute to platform loyalty and distinct user cultures, while also reflecting broader trends in digital communication and culture. The study of platform-specific language offers interesting insights into how digital spaces shape communication, community formation, and cultural practices in the contemporary media landscape.

Sociolinguistic Functions

The neologisms in our corpus serve various sociolinguistic functions, reflecting and shaping the social dynamics of online communication. These functions show how language evolves to meet the needs of digital communities and how users employ new terminology to navigate online spaces. The key sociolinguistic roles identified are:

1. **In-group Marking:** Many of these neologisms serve as linguistic markers of belonging to specific online communities or subcultures. Examples include: *algospeak*, *DoggoLingo* (marking membership in online dog-enthusiast communities), *BookTokker*. These terms create linguistic boundaries that separate insiders from outsiders, fostering a sense of community and shared identity.

2. **Commentary on Digital Culture:** Many neologisms in our corpus carry implicit or explicit commentary on aspects of online behavior and culture. Examples include: *virtue signaling* (critiquing performative displays of moral values online), *sadfi-*

shing, *rage farming*. These terms provide users with a vocabulary to discuss and often critique aspects of online culture. They reflect a growing awareness among social media users and can serve as tools for negotiating acceptable online behavior.

3. **Negotiation of Online/Offline Boundaries:** Several neologisms in our corpus deal with the relationship between digital and physical realities. Examples include: *cyberhoarding* (applying the concept of hoarding to digital spaces); *digital campfire* (using a physical-world metaphor to describe online communities); *FOLO* (expressing anxiety about the online/offline divide). These terms help users conceptualize and discuss the increasingly blurred boundaries between online and offline life. They reflect the ongoing process of integrating digital experiences into our understanding of social reality.

The diverse sociolinguistic functions of these neologisms reveal the complex role of language in shaping online social interactions. Some terms reflect and potentially influence power relationships, both among users (e.g., influencer hierarchies) and between users and platforms. The creation and use of these terms can be seen as a form of digital literacy, where fluency in this language means competence in navigating online spaces.

These above-mentioned sociolinguistic functions demonstrate how language serves as a critical tool for users to navigate and shape their online experiences. The neologisms in our corpus not only reflect the evolving nature of social media culture but also actively contribute to its construction and dynamics.

Conclusion. This analysis of recent social media neologisms reveals the interplay between linguistic innovation and digital culture. The emergence and adoption of these new terms reflect the rapid evolution of online communication practices, social dynamics, and technological affordances. Key findings from our analysis are as follows:

1. The prevalence of blending as a word formation process, which allows for efficient and often playful creation of new terms that capture complex concepts.

2. The significant number of neologisms related to user types and online behaviors, highlighting the importance of identity construction and performance in social media spaces.

3. The development of platform-specific vocabulary, demonstrating how each social media ecosystem creates its own linguistic innovations.

4. The multiple sociolinguistic functions of these neologisms, including in-group marking, cultural commentary, and negotiation of online/offline boundaries.

5. The role of these terms in professionalizing influencer culture and providing vocabulary for discussing the psychological impacts of social media use.

These findings have several implications for our understanding of language and society in the digital age:

1. They demonstrate the accelerated speed of linguistic evolution in online contexts, where new terms can rapidly emerge and gain widespread adoption.

2. They highlight the central role of language in constructing and negotiating online identities and communities.

3. They underscore the growing integration of digital culture into broader societal discourse,

evidenced by the increasing use of these terms in mainstream media.

This research increases our knowledge of how language adapts to new communicative environments and how users employ linguistic innovation to exist in and use the complex landscape of social platforms. It also paints a picture of the current trends and tendencies in social media culture.

As social media continues to evolve and new platforms emerge, we can expect ongoing linguistic innovation in this domain. Continued study of these phenomena will provide valuable insights into the relationship between language, technology, and society in the digital age.

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