

ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE CHANGE AND DIGITAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN GENERATION Z ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Nazla Syafiqah¹, Vanessa Indah Lestari², Cristin Atalia Sinaga³, Muhammad Natsir⁴

Email: nazlasyafiqah45@gmail.com¹, vanessandahlestari@gmail.com², crstnsng13@gmail.com³,
natsirfbs@unimed.ac.id⁴

Universitas Negeri Medan

ABSTRACT

The development of digital communication within Generation Z online communities has generated dynamic language changes that are not merely linguistic in nature but also reflect complex social processes, identity construction, and power relations. This phenomenon is significant to examine given the role of digital language in shaping interaction patterns, literacy practices, and the social experiences of young people in the contemporary era. This study aims to explore how language change is interpreted and negotiated within Generation Z online communities through a qualitative approach employing a case study design. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, digital participant observation, and document analysis in the form of online interaction corpora, involving 15–20 participants actively engaged in digital communities. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns of meaning and contextualized experiences. The findings reveal three main themes: language functions as a marker of identity and social affiliation, as a space for negotiating meaning characterized by ambiguity and irony, and as an arena of ambivalence between self-expression and social pressure. These findings indicate that digital language serves not only as a medium of communication but also as a site for identity formation and contestation within a dynamic social context. Theoretically, this study contributes to the advancement of discourse analysis by integrating corpus-based approaches with qualitative interpretation. Practically, the findings have implications for the development of digital literacy, language education, and policies that are more responsive to the social and psychological dynamics of young people, while also opening avenues for further exploration in digital discourse studies.

Keywords: *Discourse Analysis, Corpus-Based Discourse Analysis, Digital Language, Generation Z, Online Communities, Social Identity, Meaning Negotiation.*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the landscape of digital communication has undergone significant transformation alongside the increasing participation of Generation Z in various online communities. Within spaces such as social media, discussion forums, and community-based platforms, language is no longer merely a tool for communication but has evolved into a medium for expressing identity, fostering group solidarity, and negotiating social meaning. From the users' perspective, particularly among younger generations, the use of new terms, creative abbreviations, and semantic shifts has become a daily practice reflecting their socio-cultural dynamics. For instance, in interactions on platforms such as TikTok or X (Twitter), individuals do not merely communicate but also construct digital personas through specific lexical choices and discourse styles.

Preliminary observations across several Generation Z online communities indicate that language change occurs rapidly and is often highly contextual. Exploratory interviews with active users reveal that certain expressions carry meanings that are only understood within specific communities, thereby creating exclusivity of meaning. Additionally, field observations of digital interactions demonstrate a tendency toward code-mixing, the emergence of new metaphors, and distinctive irony-based humor strategies. These phenomena not only reflect linguistic creativity but also signal deeper social processes, including the construction of collective identity and resistance to formal language norms.

The urgency of this study becomes more evident when considering that language change in digital communities influences not only everyday communication but also education, digital literacy, and broader constructions of social reality. In the global context, this phenomenon has attracted attention within discourse analysis, particularly studies examining the relationship between language, power, and identity in the digital era. Recent studies have explored the dynamics of language in digital spaces, highlighting the acceleration of linguistic innovation, the importance of corpus-based approaches, and the role of multimodality and digital narratives. However, much of this research continues to focus on structural aspects and linguistic patterns, such as word frequency and variation, while paying limited attention to users' subjective experiences, meaning-making processes, and underlying social dynamics. This indicates a gap in the literature, particularly in integrating corpus-based approaches with qualitative perspectives that emphasize meaning, context, and lived experiences.

Based on these considerations, this study aims to analyze language change in Generation Z online communities through a corpus-based discourse analysis enriched by qualitative perspectives. The focus is directed toward understanding how digital language practices reflect identity, social relations, and meaning construction within these communities. Theoretically, this study seeks to contribute to the development of digital discourse analysis by integrating corpus data with qualitative interpretation. Practically, it is expected to inform digital literacy development, language learning strategies, and a more comprehensive understanding of youth communication dynamics in the digital age.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach with a case study design. The selection of this design is based on the characteristics of the research topic, which focuses on the dynamics of language change within a specific context, namely Generation Z online communities. A case study approach enables the researcher to explore the phenomenon in depth, contextually, and holistically, particularly in understanding how digital language practices are formed, interpreted, and negotiated by community members. This approach is also aligned with the framework of discourse analysis, which emphasizes the interconnection between language, social context, and discursive practices.

The participant selection strategy was conducted using purposive sampling, considering

the relevance of participants' characteristics to the research objectives. The participants consisted of 15–20 individuals categorized as Generation Z (aged 18–25), who are active in online communities (such as TikTok, X/Twitter, or digital forums) and demonstrate high interaction intensity (at least two hours per day). To broaden the scope of data, a snowball sampling technique was also applied, whereby initial participants recommended other relevant individuals. The study was conducted within a digital environment (virtual field), focusing on Indonesian-language-based online communities characterized by active engagement and dynamic interaction patterns.

Data collection was carried out through three primary methods. First, in-depth interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and subjective meanings regarding language use within their communities. The interviews were conducted online via platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet, with a duration of approximately 45–60 minutes per participant, and were recorded with participants' consent. Second, digital participant observation was undertaken, in which the researcher observed language interactions within online communities over a certain period (approximately two months), including the use of expressions, communication patterns, and discursive contexts. Third, document analysis was conducted by collecting corpus data from relevant posts, comments, and digital conversations. These corpus data were subsequently organized into a textual database for further analysis.

Data analysis was performed using a thematic analysis approach combined with open coding techniques. The analytical procedures involved several stages: (1) transcription of interview data and compilation of digital corpora, (2) repeated reading to gain contextual understanding, (3) open coding to identify units of meaning, (4) categorization of codes into thematic groups, and (5) interpretation of themes within the framework of discourse analysis. In this process, qualitative data analysis software such as NVivo was utilized to organize the data, facilitate coding, and map relationships among themes. This approach allows for the integration of corpus-based analysis with in-depth qualitative interpretation.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the data, this study applied four criteria. Credibility was maintained through methodological triangulation (interviews, observation, and documents) as well as member checking with participants. Transferability was achieved by providing detailed descriptions of the research context. Dependability was ensured through an audit trail documenting the entire research process systematically. Confirmability was established by ensuring that findings were grounded in the data rather than researcher bias, supported by critical reflection and analytical memoing.

From an ethical standpoint, all participants were provided with a comprehensive explanation of the research objectives and procedures through informed consent prior to data collection. Participants' identities were kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Additionally, all collected data were used solely for academic purposes and securely stored to prevent unauthorized access. This ethical approach is essential to maintaining research integrity and protecting participants' rights and privacy within digital environments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study reveals three main findings: (1) language functions as a marker of identity and social affiliation within Generation Z online communities, (2) language serves as a space for negotiating meaning characterized by irony and ambiguity, and (3) language creates ambivalence between self-expression and social pressure. These findings indicate that language change is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but rather a complex, dynamic, and multilayered social process.

From a discourse analysis perspective, the first finding illustrates how language

operates as a mechanism for constructing collective identity. The use of exclusive expressions within digital communities reflects what is conceptualized in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the construction of “ingroup” and “outgroup.” Language becomes a symbolic tool that delineates social boundaries while reinforcing internal solidarity. This finding aligns with KhosraviNik (2022), who argues that digital spaces enable users to construct identities through selective and exclusive discursive practices. However, this study extends previous findings by demonstrating that exclusion is not always consciously perceived as a form of domination; rather, it is often interpreted by participants as a means of achieving communicative comfort. This nuance suggests that power in language does not always manifest as explicit domination but may also operate through normalized practices.

The second theme, language as a space for negotiating meaning, highlights that communication among Generation Z is highly dependent on context, shared experiences, and implicit understanding. The presence of irony and reversed meanings indicates that digital language is performative and inherently unstable. This finding supports Zappavigna’s (2022) concept of “ambient affiliation,” in which meaning is constructed through subtle forms of collective engagement. However, this study also uncovers a dimension that has received less attention in previous research: ambiguity as a source of tension. While earlier studies tend to emphasize flexibility in meaning as a form of linguistic creativity, the present findings reveal that such flexibility can also lead to cognitive fatigue and potential miscommunication, as experienced by participants. Thus, this study not only reinforces existing theories but also offers a critical perspective on the social consequences of these linguistic practices.

The third theme, concerning the ambivalence between self-expression and social pressure, reveals a more personal and reflective dimension of language change. Within the CDA framework, this phenomenon can be interpreted as the internalization of discursive norms, whereby individuals unconsciously adjust their language to align with community expectations. This finding is consistent with Tagg et al. (2021), who demonstrate that social media users often adopt specific linguistic styles to maintain group membership. However, this study goes further by highlighting the internal conflicts experienced by participants particularly the feeling of losing authenticity when conforming to trending language practices. In this context, language is no longer merely a tool for communication or identity construction but becomes a site of existential negotiation.

Overall, this study offers an alternative perspective on language change within Generation Z online communities. Language can no longer be understood as a stable system but rather as a social practice that is continuously negotiated through interactions among individuals, communities, and broader social structures. The primary contribution of this research lies in its integration of data-driven analysis with an understanding of subjective experience, thereby opening new avenues for more holistic interpretations of digital language phenomena.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that language change within Generation Z online communities is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but rather a complex social practice embedded with meaning. The three main patterns identified language as a marker of identity and affiliation, as a space for negotiating ambiguous meanings, and as an arena of ambivalence between self-

expression and social pressure indicate that digital language functions both as a medium for constructing and contesting meaning in participants' everyday lives. Language does not simply reflect social reality; it actively shapes how individuals understand themselves and their relationships with others.

From these findings, a new understanding emerges: the flexibility and creativity of digital language, often perceived as a defining strength of Generation Z, also contain paradoxical dimensions. On the one hand, language provides an expansive space for expression and enables the formation of solidarity grounded in shared experiences. On the other hand, it generates subtle normative pressures, where individuals feel compelled to adapt in order to remain relevant within their communities. In this regard, the study contributes to discourse analysis by emphasizing that digital language change should be understood as an ongoing process of identity negotiation rather than merely linguistic innovation.

Future research is encouraged to expand the scope of investigation across diverse geographical and cultural contexts to better understand variations in digital language practices. Employing alternative methodological approaches, such as long-term digital ethnography or mixed methods, may also enrich insights into this phenomenon. Moreover, aspects that remain underexplored such as the relationship between digital language and mental health, or the role of platform algorithms in shaping discursive practices represent important directions for future studies.

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