

New Romantic Expressions in Gen Z Language: The Linguistics of Neologism

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Abstract

It can be observed that new media plays a pivotal role in the linguistic assimilation of one of the new generations, born into the endless possibilities of information technology. This paper attempts to validate the hypothesis that the language of Generation Z is entirely distinct from that of other generations, focusing on new media—their primary domain of linguistic discourse. To achieve this, the study collects and analyzes the unique words, phrases, and meanings used by this generation within the discourse of "romance." The data has been sourced from Instagram, the most widely used social media platform among Gen Z. The analysis primarily focuses on the lexical level of the collected terms. Furthermore, the word combinations and patterns of word formation (morphology) are subjected to linguistic analysis.

Keywords: New Media, Gen Z Language, Neologisms, Linguistic Analysis

Introduction

This study analyzes the interrelationship between technology and grammar within the broader context of word-formation processes. The uncontrolled use of technology and social media has brought about numerous changes in language. The newest generation is referred to as Generation Z (Gen Z). They employ language in a way that is starkly different from existing forms. The use of neologisms and the reappropriation of existing vocabulary are distinctive features of this generation's language usage. These neologisms are likely used to make conversations simpler and more appealing to listeners. Recently, social media has witnessed the creation of numerous new terms to articulate romance and to express its diverse modes and states. It is essential to study the structural framework and semantic nuances of these terms.

This paper analyzes these newly emerged terms in Gen Z language on the basis of different word-formation processes in linguistics.

Gen Z

It is believed that the term 'Generation Z' was first used in the year 2000 by the publication *Advertising Age*. They proposed this name to signify the generation succeeding the Millennials (Gen Y). William Strauss and Neil Howe are the pioneers in studies classifying generations (Generational Theory). Those born between 1997 and 2012 are known as Generation Z. They are also commonly referred to as 'zoomers'. This generation has had the convenience and opportunity to possess and utilize various technologies. Consequently, they possess a special adeptness in handling technology. It is during their era that social media became so familiar and accessible to people. This influences all the social and linguistic activities in their lives. They do not utilize social media merely by confining it to the act of communication. This new generation connects all spheres of life through new media. They have succeeded in transforming communication, its methods, and its language into newer dimensions.

New Media

Lev Manovich defines new media not merely as a tool for the distribution or exhibition of computer technology, but as "cultural objects" constructed through computerization (*The Language of New Media*, 2001). New media encompass electronic forms of communication designed for users to share information, ideas, personal messages, photographs, and other content. They offer an expansive space to build and strengthen relationships without geographical barriers. The advent of new media has created a profound revolution in human communication patterns and linguistic practices. Each individual utilizing new media possesses distinct capabilities. New media open up vast possibilities for users in terms of private communication and knowledge production. Rapid information transfer and knowledge sharing are the hallmarks of new media. Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook are the predominant new media platforms. Among these, Facebook and WhatsApp have recently witnessed a significant decline in their significance and popularity. Recent statistics indicate that Instagram has emerged as the preferred platform among the youth. While there are around two hundred social media platforms with similar ultimate objectives, each offers a distinct style of communication. Linguistic usage on Facebook remains relatively traditional; users generally employ everyday

English styles for communication and profile updates. Conversely, new linguistic trends are more discernibly visible on Instagram, which has transformed into the primary communication hub for youth.

The Concept of Neologisms

The concept of neologisms is by no means entirely new. Neologisms are constructed in every era. Sometimes, they persist in the spoken language for a short period and subsequently disappear from usage as though they were never created at all. However, certain words endure within the lexicon for ages. There were distinct reasons behind the formation of all these words. In the modern era, the concept of new words is engineered by the users of new media. It is through new media that neologisms are most extensively constructed and utilized. Since the youth are the primary creators and consumers of these neologisms, their language is highly difficult to comprehend for other generations or for those who do not use new media. Just like the creation of entirely new words, assigning new meanings to existing words is a distinct linguistic feature of new media. Gen Z language is predominantly saturated with English neologisms. This is because the English language adapts to changes in language with astounding speed and ease, particularly in the context of new media. Linguists testify that the English language possesses the unique capability to rapidly assimilate all kinds of linguistic changes occurring in new media (Adejoke Maria, Matthew Abua, Adebola Tawa, 2018).

Literature Review

There are only a limited number of studies conducted so far that explain Generation Z language and its distinct characteristics. This is perhaps because it represents the most recent trend in language.

Major Global Studies

- Saiyida Shahbano Jabeen & Hafiz Imran Nawaz (2005): Their article explains the modern transformations in Gen Z language and their morphological features.
- Rahul A. Hazare (2023): This study analyzes the diverse communication methods in new media and explains the predominant neologisms and abbreviations used by Gen Z.
- Lines M. (2022): In his article, he analyzes the most significant words used by Gen Z.

- Sayma Yeasmin (2025): This work explains Gen Z terms and their semantic meanings, alongside analyzing major acronyms and abbreviations in the article.
- Syaputra et al. (2024) explain how Generation Z (Gen-Z) uses slang to make their communication more engaging on the social media platform Instagram.

Studies in Malayalam

- Dr. Vishal Johnson (2022): He has conducted research on new media and introduced new linguistic approaches.
- Jose K. Manuel (2014): He has carried out detailed studies on new media; however, his research does not make any mention of Gen Z words.

While studies regarding new media and its linguistic features do exist, a comprehensive linguistic analysis of neologism and semantics within Malayalam Gen Z language remains generally scarce.

Methodology

This study focuses on the prominent romantic neologisms in Gen Z language. The data collection has been carried out from the new media platform, Instagram. Data widespread on Instagram—including post comments and user chats—were collected utilizing a qualitative approach. Forty-six of the most frequently used and highly significant words related to romance in Gen Z language were selected as the primary data. These data are analyzed using a descriptive method.

Linguistic Analysis

Compounding

In linguistics, compounding is defined as the process of constructing a new word by combining two or more independent words. The terms formed through this process are called compound words. In a compound word, the first constituent is referred to as the initial element (*poorva-padam*) and the second as the final element (*uttara-padam*). Occasionally, the resulting compound word may acquire a semantic meaning that bears no direct relation to either the initial or the final element. Compound words can be written either as a single word or as separate, distinct words.

Compound words	First word + second word	Meaning
Soft launch	Soft+ launch	Showing subtle hints or glimpses of a romantic relationship/partner on social media without fully revealing their identity.
Hard launch	Hard+launch	Fully revealing and announcing a romantic relationship/partner on social media
Delulu love	Delulu + love	Being romantically infatuated with someone in one's own imagination, even though they are completely unattainable
Soft dumping	Soft+dumping	Gradually and slowly distancing oneself to break up with a boyfriend/girlfriend
Love bombing	Love+bombing	Showering someone with intense affection and attention at the beginning of a relationship to seem "perfect," only to later reveal "red flags" (toxic behavior)
Metro crush	Metro+ crush	Feeling a very intense attraction to a stranger seen on a train/metro, often sparked through brief eye contact or non-verbal gestures
Slow burn	Slow+ burn	A romance that develops gradually over time, where two people don't fall in love immediately but become friends first and talk before feelings grow
Gen blend	Gen+ blend	A romantic relationship between a person from Generation Z (Gen Z)

		and someone born in the 1990s (Millennial)
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Among the compound words mentioned above, slow burn, soft launch, hard launch, and gen blend have absolutely no literal connection to the individual meanings of their component words. On the other hand, metro crush, love bombing, soft dumping, and delulu love show a subtle connection to their respective compound structures—that is, to the

Blending

Blending is the process of creating an entirely new word by combining parts of two words with different meanings. Unlike traditional compound words, it is usually the last part of the first word (prefix) and the first part of the second word (suffix) that merge together. However, it can also happen in other ways. Gen Z language frequently uses many such blends to make messaging and communication faster and more entertaining.

Blended words	Original words	Meaning
Lovestagram	Love+ Instagram	When two people who haven't publicly announced their relationship post matching or hinting photos on Instagram, letting others figure out they are together.
Situationship	Situation+ relationship	A romantic arrangement that feels like a relationship but is not official (not committed, but definitely more than just friends).
Nanoship	Nano+relationship	Extremely short-lived romantic relationships with zero strings attached, which can end at any moment

Benching	Bench+playing	Keeping someone on the hook as a "backup" option, even though you have no genuine intention of fully committing to them.
Delusionship	Delusion + Relationship	A completely "one-sided love" or relationship that exists entirely within a person's own thoughts and imagination.
Imaginationship	Imagination + Relationship	Being in a relationship with someone entirely in your own imagination and daydreaming about them, even though that person doesn't actually exist in your life
Fexting	Fighting + Texting	Having an argument, fight, or "breakup talk" with a partner entirely over text messages instead of resolving it in person or over a call.
Affordating	Affordable+ dating	Going on budget-friendly dates that cost very little money (such as just holding hands while walking, window shopping, etc.).

In this, blending occurs by combining an adjective and a noun. Examples of this include Affordating (where *affordable* is the adjective and *dating* is the noun) and Nanoship. Blending

also occurs by combining verbal nouns (gerunds), with Fexting being an example. Imaginationship is a word formed by combining a noun and a noun.

Abbreviations

Gen Z uses several abbreviations in their social media language related to romantic terms. These short forms are used to call partners affectionately and to indicate certain relationship concepts.

Abbreviation	Full form	Meaning
Bae	Before anyone else	Loved ones / Favorite person
Menty b	Mental breakdown	Mental exhaustion caused by romantic heartbreak
Gf	Girl friend	Girlfriend
Bf	Boy friend	Boyfriend
LOML	Love Of My Life	The person one loves
LDR	Long distance relationship	A relationship where partners live in two different faraway places.
NATO dating	Not Attached To an Outcome	Enjoying the romantic moments without worrying about where the relationship will lead.
NRE	New relationship energy	The intense emotional state (Honeymoon phase) felt during the first few weeks or months of falling in love with a new person

Abbreviations are used to refer to individuals, processes, relationship categories, and people's mental states.

Verbal Nouns (Gerunds)

Verbal nouns are words that denote an action. Gen Z language daily incorporates many action-based terms (verbs/gerunds) related to romance and dating.

Neologism	Meaning
Ghosting	Suddenly disappearing from a romantic relationship without giving any reason.
Zombieing	When someone who previously ghosted you suddenly sends a message out of nowhere without any warning.
Orbiting	Avoiding direct contact or communication with a person, yet continuously interacting with them through social media (like watching their stories or liking posts).
Shipping	Encouraging or wishing for two people to be in a romantic relationship.

Nouns

Nouns are words that simply denote a person, place, thing, or concept. Many new nouns related to romantic relationships have emerged in Gen Z slang.

Neologism	Meaning
Simp	Someone who tries too hard to please or impress someone they are attracted to (especially in a romantic context).
Ghoster	A person who abandons their partner without saying a single word to them
Rizzler	Someone with immense charm or romantic appeal (expert at attracting others).
Sigma	Someone who is indifferent to or avoids romantic relationships (an independent loner).

Single	Someone who is not in a romantic relationship.
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Affixation

Affixation is the process of creating new words by attaching affixes (suffixes or prefixes) to existing base words. In Gen Z slang, there is a strong trend of forming new words by adding affixes to independent words. Attaching these affixes changes the natural grammatical form of the original word.

Word	Affix	Meaning
Snowmaning	Snowman+ ing	A romantic relationship that is meant to last only for the winter season (cuffing season)
Ghosting	Ghost+ ing	Suddenly disappearing from a romantic relationship without saying anything.
Zombieing	Zombie +ing	When someone who ghosted you returns to your life later on, acting as if nothing ever happened.
Orbiting	Orbit+ ing	Avoiding direct communication after ghosting someone, yet continuing to interact with them through social media.

Semantic Shifts (Words Given New Meanings)

As previously mentioned, there is a prominent trend in Gen Z language where existing words are assigned entirely new meanings. Some of these expressions are listed below:

Flag Terms

In a romantic relationship, partners are categorized using specific "flag terms" based on their behavior and attitude. These terms serve as indicators to help understand the quality and traits of their character

Flag terms	Literal Meaning	Gen Z Meaning
Green Flag	A green-colored flag	A partner who is not toxic at all and behaves with great decency and respect in a romantic relationship.
Pink flag	A pink-colored flag	Relationships that have the potential to cause major problems and friction in the future
Black flag	A black-colored flag	A person with such bad behavior that it makes you feel the romantic relationship must be ended immediately
Golden flag	A gold-colored flag	The absolute best and most ideal partner in a romantic relationship
Red Flag	A red-colored flag	Someone who is highly toxic in a romantic relationship
Beige flag	A beige-colored flag	A partner who is not toxic, but behaves in a slightly quirky or strange way in a romantic relationship

Digital Manoeuvres

The rate of romantic deceptions and manipulation tactics through technology has increased significantly. Consequently, many new words have been coined in Gen Z slang to describe these situations.

Neologism	Meaning
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Zombieing	Reappearing in a partner's life by sending messages on their social media accounts and acting as if nothing happened, after practically abandoning them.
Cushioning	Keeping someone as a "backup" while currently in a romantic relationship, just in case the current relationship fails
Pocketing	A situation where a romantic partner keeps you a secret, without introducing you to their family or friends.
Haunting	When an ex-partner does not talk to you but continues to interact with you on social media by liking your posts or watching your stories.
Roaming	Talking to and showing romantic interest in multiple people at the exact same time.

Analysis

As a result of the unique and distinct language patterns of the new generation, numerous new words have emerged on social media. These can be categorized in various ways. This study subjects words related to the emotional state of romance to linguistic analysis. A total of 46 Gen Z words collected from Instagram are categorized based on major word-formation processes in linguistics: Compounding, Blending, Shortening (Abbreviations), and Affixation. Additionally, it maps classifications based on actions resulting from technology (Digital Maneuvers) and major words used by assigning new meanings (Semantic Shifts).

In Gen Z language, a higher number of neologisms are formed through compounding and blending. It is worth noting that Gen Z word-formation processes do not adhere to any conventional linguistic rules. Users prioritize only the ease of usage and the trendiness of the words. The foundational rules of word meaning, form, and grammar are not part of their parameters.

- **Linguistic Innovation:** By bypassing existing linguistic rules, this generation successfully condenses complex emotions into simple words through Compounding and Blending.
- **Semantic Evolution:** Significant changes have occurred in the semantic dimensions of words. Expressions like 'Red flag' and 'Green flag' have evolved from terms merely denoting colors into social symbols that measure the quality of a person's character.
- **Digital Influence:** New media platforms like Instagram erase linguistic boundaries and drive youth to use a uniform vocabulary (Global Slang) on a global scale.

Conclusion

This study underscores the fact that the dominance of modern technology and new media has paved the way for significant linguistic transformation. It is evident from this research that the romantic language of Gen Z goes beyond mere emotional expression; it embodies numerous distinct linguistic characteristics.

A large number of new romance-related words have recently emerged in Gen Z slang. These terms propagate primarily through the social media platform Instagram. Furthermore, their presence is highly prominent in everyday informal communication. Gen Z language is remarkably unique and filled with distinct variations, making it quite challenging to fully comprehend and integrate into mainstream conversation.

Over time, these words may either become a permanent part of the lexicon, or vanish entirely from communication and social media after a brief period of intense usage. Conversely, certain words may continue to be used with the same level of importance for a very long time. As this is the language most widely used by today's youth, studying it holds profound significance.

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