

LANGUAGE VARIATION: A STUDY OF GEN Z LANGUAGE ON SELECTED SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Sunday, Ekemini Victor

Department of English

Akwa Ibom State University

Phone Number: 07081586752

Email: ekeminisundayjw0@gmail.com; drjacksonetuk@gmail.com

Abstract

This research investigates the dynamics of language variation within Generation Z (Gen Z) on selected social media platforms. Previous research focused on how technological advancement resulting in the new media has influenced English usage in the digital space. In continuation with the existing studies, this paper paid attention to how Gen Zs specifically utilise language differently from users of other generations in this space. Thus, this work identifies various forms of Gen Z words, the context through which they are deployed as well as their significance in the social media platforms. This research adopts the variationist sociolinguistic theory as its framework. The study employs a qualitative approach to explore Gen Z's linguistic practices and their implications. Data were collected from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Tiktok. In this paper, it is discovered that the Gen Zs employ distinct word usages, sentence structures, and linguistic features to express brevity and a conscious community style across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and Tiktok. This study also finds out that, the language of the Gen Z subverts traditional labels and expectations. More so, the language is casual, positive, and engaging, and as well displays a proactive and resilient mindset. The study concludes that technological innovation has resulted in the Gen Z creating a new form of linguistic identity on selected social media platforms.

Introduction

Language is a tool for communication and is used to establish social relationships with humans. Etuk and Urudzian (2018) enthuse that "Humans use language, in a distinct way, to communicate their feelings, desires and beliefs" (p.87). In the light of the above, it can be established that "Language serves as the impeccable register of a society's collective memory, recording and preserving historical facts concerning the people, their worldview and perceptions" (Etuk, 2021 p. 3). Thus, language often reflects the cultural nuances and intricacies of the communities using it.

Language variation typically refers to more than one way of expressing the same thing. People often use language in different ways to achieve socialisation, for language "...is a means by which humans carry out activities, exchange shared beliefs and thoughts and as well ponder on their individual and collective experiences" (Etuk and Urudzian, 2024 p.187). As time ebbs by, language develops as a result of a new region which it meets, a change in social structure as well as age differences. Every society has different kinds of variation. This is one of the concerns of sociolinguistics. The differences and numerous ways humans use language to convey a message is what is known as variation. Trask (2007, p. 20) notes that, "variation, far from being peripheral and inconsequential, is a vital part of ordinary linguistic behaviour". This is to say that, to study language variation is to study the sociolinguistics of spoken and written language in a social context, as "Language is primarily a social phenomenon" (Urudzian and Etuk, 2024 p. 313). This is because language is influenced by various social factors, such as age, gender, ethnicity, class and education.

Age is an important factor in language use. People of different age brackets have different linguistic behaviour. The Gen Z (defined as people born between 1997 and 2012) have a linguistic culture which is different from that of the millennial (born 1981–1996), as well as that of the Gen X, Boomers II and so forth (Turner, 2015). This culture is further strengthened by the new technologies which provides the context for this kind of communication. To Etuk and Umoh (2024, p. 379), "Context could be defined according to the function a certain type of communication performs". For instance, expressions such as, "popsie", "simp", "fam", "stop playing" and more are commonly found among the Gen Z. On this note, a prominent linguist, William Labov who introduced the concept of linguistic change,

emphasised the importance of generational differences in language patterns. He asserts that “language change is not a single force change affecting the speech community as a whole, but a collection of relatively small changes initiated by a variety of different speakers” (1982, p. 22). These new forms of a given language emerge to suit new social encounters. To this end, this study sets out to identify various forms of Gen Z words used on selected social media; examine the context through which these lexical items are deployed in these platforms; and explore the significance of these usages in the selected platforms.

Theoretical Framework

This research adopts variationist sociolinguistics as its theoretical framework. Variationist sociolinguistics provides a fundamental framework for understanding how language varies in response to social factors. This theory generates the notion that linguistic variation is not haphazardly distributed but organised and determined by social factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, and social context. The theory is often attributed to William Labov considered the foundational figure in this discipline. Labov instituted a framework that examines the complex connectedness between language and society. An underlying concern in this theory is that linguistic variation is an essential constituent to the structure of language (Tagliamonte, 2012).

Weinreich, Labov and Herzog (1968, pp. 100-101) assert that “the key to a rational conception of language change is the possibility of describing orderly differentiation”. Labov's exemplary work was at variance with linguistic theories of the time, which seemed to discountenance the relevance of linguistic variation, often taking it as a negligible aspect that counters efforts aimed at establishing the uniformity of language (Tagliamonte, 2012). Instead, Labov (1982, p. 17) argued that “differences in how language is spoken and written across individuals and situations are not only normal but also vital for the proper functioning of a language”. This explicitly defines the Gen Z language forms and functions.

Variationist sociolinguistics reveal the permeative and structured nature of linguistic variation, exposing forms of co-occurrence between language patterns, such as vowel deletion, and possible influences which could be occasioned by social forces, including socioeconomic classes. This ideology arises from Labov's socially realistic position, which takes into cognisance how different groups of speakers utilise language in everyday contexts (Hazen, 2017). Labov (1966, p. 54) observes that “linguistic variation is pervasive and highly structured, revealing regular patterns of co-occurrence between linguistic variables and social factors”. In addition to interrogating patterns of sociolinguistic variation occurring at a particular period of time, variationist sociolinguistics vehemently focuses on the study of language change (Hazen, 2017). In the light of the above submissions, the framework becomes suitable for the study of how Gen Zs employ forms of language in selected social media platforms, especially, in terms of guiding the exploration of linguistic variations, social influences, and language evolution in the digital age.

Methodology of the Study

The study adopts a qualitative research design. This approach is used to gain a holistic understanding of the language variation of the Gen Z. The research exploits the digital landscape of social media platforms, where Generation Z (Gen Z) actively shapes and adapts language to their unique communication needs. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok serve as the selected platforms for data collection, providing distinct ecosystems for linguistic exploration. Within these digital spaces, Gen Z forms of language undergo rapid innovation, influenced by socio-cultural values and profound implications for contemporary English and cultural dynamics.

A purposive sampling strategy is employed to select data that reflect Gen Z's use of specific language forms. Data include text-based contents, hashtags, emojis, and other texts with novel linguistic features characterising Gen Z language forms. Analysis focused on peculiar word usage, sentence structure, and the adoption of new expressions and trends. In addition, variationist sociolinguistics provided the

impetus for examining peculiar linguistic patterns and trends across the selected social media platforms to highlight variations and commonalities in Gen Z language usage.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Table 1: Commonly employed Gen Z Language

Gen Z words	Conventional words	Meaning	Remark
Simp	Admirer	Overly attentive to someone	Can be used negatively
Fam	Family	Close friend, family member or fan	Extended from "family"
Glow up	Transformation	Positive transformation	Refers to personal growth
Stan	Supporter/fan	An enthusiastic supporter	Derived from "Stalker fan"
Ghosting	Ignoring	Abruptly ending communication	Common in dating context
No caps	I am not lying	Truth	Emphasises honesty
High-key & low-key	Clearly & Discreetly	Clearly & Discreetly	Indicates intensity of expression
LOL	Laugh out loud	Laughing out loud	Common internet acronym
Woke	Aware	Socially aware of trending events	Social justice context
Drip	Stylish	Stylish and fashionable	Fashion-forward context
If you know, you know	Insider knowledge	Exclusive knowledge	Implies shared knowledge
Hits differently	Evokes Unique Feeling	A unique feeling	Indicates a unique impact
Drag someone on social media	Criticise publicly	Criticise publicly	Online confrontation
GOAT	Greatest of All Time	Greatest of All Time	Best or most talented in a particular field.
Throw shades	Insult subtly	Insult subtly	Subtle criticism
On God	Hoping on God	Believing in God	Often refers to spiritual belief.
Slay	Impressively Excel	Impressively Excel	Achieving success stylishly/dressing well
Groceries	Garri	Garri	Food items
Floating Berries	Groundnut	Groundnut	Groundnut berries
Sweetener	Sugar	Sugar	Any substance used to enhance sweetness
Stop Playing	Don't joke	Be serious	Expressing seriousness jokingly
That's on period	End of discussion	End of discussion	Adding finality to a statement

An Analysis of Selected Gen Z Language in Social Media Platforms



Plate. 1.0



Plate. 2.0

This Facebook post reflects the use of Gen Z language, specifically emphasising the term "stan". In this context, "stan" indicates a strong admiration or support, often associated with celebrities or influencers. In plate 1.0, the repetition of "Stan and restan" suggests a continuous and unwavering loyalty to the mentioned entity, VEEKEE JAMES, possibly in the fashion industry. The lexical items, "Stan" and "restan" are employed in the present tense to buttress the temporal position inherent in the interaction. According to Udoka, Umoh and Etuk (2020, p. 58), "Tense is a category that locates the action of a verb on a timeline in relation to the time of speech relating to the action in question". The use of emojis and phrases like "Aesthetically proven!" adds a layer of enthusiasm and approval to the endorsement. The mention of VEEKEE JAMES as a "book to study" implies a deep admiration and a desire to learn from her, and emphasises her influence. Similarly, the expression, "You can't go wrong with her" reinforces the positive sentiment, and the statement "She has proven a million times and still counting" highlights a consistent track record of success. The phrases: "class of her own" and "one of my biggest inspiration" further emphasise the high regard and personal connection accorded the persona. Overall, the post reflects a distinctive blend of admiration, appreciation, and engagement with the subject, showcasing characteristic Gen Z language features.

In plate 2.0, the Facebook commenter straightforwardly expresses admiration using the term "Stan." The statement, "A queen I Stan", indicates a strong and unwavering support or appreciation for the person referred to as a "queen". The use of this term emphasises a deep respect and admiration for the mentioned individual, suggesting that the writer may be a genuine and enthusiastic supporter. The brevity of the comment, coupled with the use of "Stan," align with the concise and expressive communication style commonly found in Gen Z online discourse. Both plates show that "...a world without language (would elicit) depressive boredom and retrogression" (emphasis mine) (Urujzian and Etuk 2023, p. 271) and that "Language is a reflection one's emotions, beliefs and ideological positions" (Etuk and Okon 2024, p. 88).



Plate. 3.0

This Facebook post humorously addresses the term "simp" within the context of relationships. The use of "Simp" suggests a man who is overly attentive or devoted to a woman, often with a negative connotation. The post humorously flips the narrative, suggesting that when someone is labeled a "simp," it is a reason to marry him wholeheartedly. The contrast in the statement, "When they call him a good man, use and leave him", adds a playful twist, highlighting the irony in societal perceptions. The inclusion of the laughing emoji amplifies the humorous tone, signaling that the post is intended as a lighthearted commentary on relationship stereotypes. In a socio-linguistic context, this post reflects the Gen Z trend of playfully subverting traditional labels and expectations. The use of terms like "Simp" in a casual language contributes to a conversational and relatable style commonly associated with this demography.



Plate. 4.0

In this Facebook post, the use of "fam" reflects the sociolinguistic trend within Gen Z language. "Fam" is an affectionate and informal term used to refer to close friends or a community of individuals who share a strong bond, akin to a chosen family. The greeting, "Hey fam, happy Thursday", signifies a friendly and inclusive tone, addressing the audience in a familiar and casual manner. This use of "fam" fosters a sense of camaraderie and closeness among the audience or followers. The post introduces new arrivals with positive affirmations like "Quality is super as always", "Neat", "Affordable", and "Unique wears", employing emojis and checkmarks to emphasise the positive attributes of the products. The language used is concise and enthusiastic, catering to the engaging and visually-driven nature of social media. In a sociolinguistic context, the use of "fam" and the casual, positive, and engaging language

align with the Gen Z style of communication on social media. It promotes inclusivity, fosters a sense of community, and encourages active participation and anticipation among the audience.



Plate 5.0

This Instagram caption showcases a strong allegiance to Cristiano Ronaldo and his association with Real Madrid. The phrase "Cristiano Ronaldo will forever be our GOAT" expresses an enduring admiration for Ronaldo, with "GOAT" used as an acronym to represent "Greatest of All Time." This suggests a perception of Ronaldo as an iconic and unparalleled figure in the eyes of the poster and their community. The statement "No Ronaldo or Real Madrid fan will pass without liking this post" not only encourages engagement but also underscores a sense of camaraderie among fans. It implies a shared identity and loyalty among those who support Ronaldo and Real Madrid. This position aligns with Etuk and Akpan's (2023, p. 69) position that "It is through language that emotions, desires, thoughts, religious and socio-political views and beliefs of individuals, groups of individuals and that of an entire community of people are expressed". In a socio-linguistic context, this caption reflects the use of sport-related abbreviations like "GOAT" and the emphasis on fan community engagement, which are common in online discussions among football enthusiasts. The post not only celebrates Ronaldo's achievements but also seeks to unite fans in a shared appreciation for the player and the team.

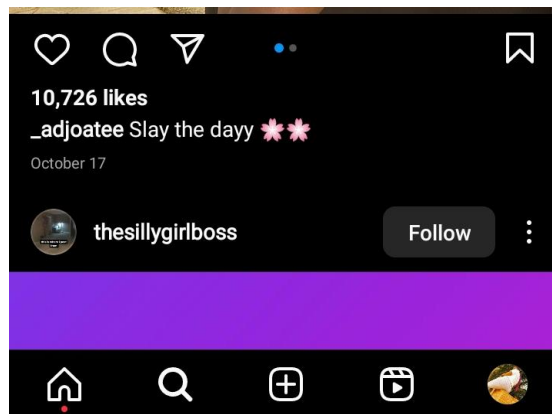


Plate 6.0

The Instagram caption "Slay the day" exudes positivity and motivation. The use of the term 'slay' suggests a confident and stylish approach to tackling the day's challenges. The lexical item 'slay' is a popular expression in contemporary language, often associated with empowerment and self-assurance. This caption encourages a proactive and empowered mindset, implying that the day should be conquered with style and flair. The brevity and simplicity of the phrase makes it well-suited for the casual and expressive nature of social media posts, especially on platforms like Instagram. In a socio-

linguistic context, this caption aligns with the trend of using empowering language and expressions that resonate with self-confidence and motivation, as is common in social media culture.



Plate 7.0

The TikTok caption "Stop playing, money must be made, I will never be poor" conveys a determined and ambitious attitude. The phrase "Stop playing" suggests a sense of urgency and a no-nonsense approach to achieving financial success. Similarly, the statement, "money must be made", underscores a focus on financial prosperity, and the use of the money-mouth face emoji adds a touch of playfulness to the declaration. The phrase, "I will never be poor", reflects a strong commitment to overcoming financial challenges and maintaining a prosperous lifestyle. In a socio-linguistic context, this caption aligns with the trend of expressing ambition and financial success on social media platforms like TikTok. It reflects a mindset of determination and resilience, common in contents related to wealth creation and success in online spaces.

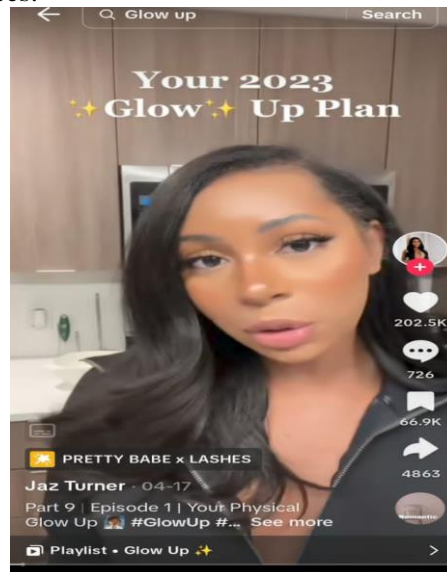


Plate 8.0

The caption, "Glow up", suggests a transformation or improvement, often associated with personal appearance, confidence, or lifestyle. This phrase has become a popular expression on social media, particularly in the context of sharing before-and-after images or stories of personal development. It typically conveys a positive shift or enhancement in various aspects of life. The brevity of the caption makes it suitable for the quick and visual nature of platforms like Instagram or TikTok, where users often share snapshots of their progress or changes over time. In a socio-linguistic context, "Glow up" aligns with the trend of promoting self-improvement and celebrating positive changes. It can encompass a range of transformations, from physical appearances to personal achievements, contributing to the culture of showcasing personal growth on social media.



Plate 9

‘Japa’ is a term associated with the Gen Z language. "Japa" is a Nigerian slang term that gained popularity and has been adopted by a broader audience, most especially, the Gen Z demography. In this context, "japa" suggests the act of leaving or escaping, often used in the context of relocating to another country. The statement "it's possible to japa abroad via luggages" indicates a lighthearted or adventurous tone, implying the possibility of moving to another country by stowing away in luggage. The use of the slang "japa" contributes to a casual and contemporary communication style, common among Gen Z on social media platforms. It reflects the dynamic nature of language, where slang terms evolve and gain widespread usage within specific age groups or communities.



Plate 10

In the provided tweet, the hashtags "#woke" and "#nonbinary" suggest discourse related to social awareness, consciousness, and gender identity. "#Woke" is a term that gained popularity among the younger generations, particularly Gen Z, signifying a heightened awareness of societal issues like racism, gender equality, and social injustices. The tweet's tone seems critical of the individual being described as "woke" and "nonbinary," implying a negative perception or disagreement with their behaviour. The phrase "play the victimhood card" suggests skepticism or disbelief regarding the person's actions or statements, possibly indicating a clash of ideologies or perspectives. In a socio-linguistic context, this tweet reflects the use of hashtags related to social consciousness (#woke) and gender identity (#nonbinary) often prevalent in discussions around social issues and activism within the Gen Z demography. The critical tone used towards the person described as "woke" indicates a divergence in viewpoints or ideologies within online conversations on such topics.

Findings

Findings of this paper reveal a myriad of insights into the linguistic landscape of Generation Z within Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok. It is found that the Gen Z exhibit remarkable linguistic adaptability

across the platforms. Twitter fosters brevity and condensed expression with the proliferation of hashtags and abbreviations. Instagram showcases a balance between visual and textual elements, encouraging longer narratives. TikTok, characterised by short video contents, emphasises succinct and engaging communication. Facebook creates longer narrative in new words. In all these platforms, the Gen Z deploy succinct language forms that are indisputably unique. The emergence of platform-specific slang, meme-driven language trends, and the adoption of emojis and emoticons as integral communication components exemplify the generation's creativity in evolving a distinct language form. Overall, these findings underscore the intricate and adaptive nature of Gen Z language within the digital landscape. They illuminate the impact of socio-cultural factors, the rapid evolution of language forms, and the transformative potential of Gen Z's linguistic practices on communication dynamics and cultural expressions within digital platforms.

Conclusion

This paper's exploration of Gen Z language variation has attempted to provide valuable insights into the dynamic interplay between digital communication, sociocultural influences, and the evolving nature of language in the 21st century. The analysis of linguistic innovations, socio-cultural dynamics, and the implications for the English language provides a perspective on the multifaceted world of Generation Z (Gen Z) and their linguistic practices on social media platforms. It is revealed that this generation of language users institute novel words and coinages peculiar to their time and age to represent their societal experiences on the internet space. The language forms so created are uniquely understood by people within the age bracket and others familiar with trends on social media. It is expected that language experts will document these forms for onward introduction into the rich lexicon of Nigerian English and or internet linguistics.

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