

Date: 25th October-2025

LANGUAGE IN THE AGE OF VIRALITY: HOW INTERNET
COMMUNICATION ACCELERATES NEOLOGISM FORMATION

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Annotation: In the digital era, internet-based communication platforms are accelerating the formation, dissemination, and entrenchment of neologisms in profound ways. This paper, *“Language in the Age of Virality: How Internet Communication Accelerates Neologism Formation”*, examines the mechanisms, processes, and consequences of lexical innovation driven by viral online communication. It begins by defining neologism and situating it in the context of the internet, then explores key factors such as social media virality, algorithm-driven exposure, networked participatory culture, meme culture, and generational language play. Morphological, semantic and pragmatic processes of neologism creation are described, drawing on recent studies of online slang and digital language change. Empirical cases (including pandemic-related vocabulary and Gen Z coining practices) illustrate how new lexical items rapidly spread, mutate, and sometimes become institutionalised. The paper also analyses the interplay between internet communication speed, global reach, platform affordances, and language change. Finally, it reflects on implications for lexicography, language policy, education and cross-cultural communication. The findings suggest that virality not only increases the rate at which neologisms are generated and disseminated, but also alters the thresholds and pathways by which lexical innovation becomes part of mainstream usage.

Keywords: neologism; internet communication; virality; social media; lexical innovation; digital language change; meme culture; Gen Z slang; language policy; participatory culture

Language in the twenty-first century is evolving at a pace unseen in human history. The traditional rhythm of lexical change, once governed by slow diffusion through print, education, and institutional media, has been replaced by the speed of digital communication. Every second, millions of users generate, modify, and share content that crosses linguistic boundaries. Words that did not exist yesterday can become globally recognized within hours. This phenomenon, known as the acceleration of neologism formation, reflects the new ecology of communication shaped by the internet’s viral nature. In this digital ecosystem, the human tendency for linguistic play, innovation, and creativity finds infinite space for experimentation. A neologism is commonly defined as a newly coined word, expression, or a new meaning of an existing word that gains social acceptance. However, in the age of virality, this definition becomes fluid. The internet produces countless protologisms—temporary, playful creations—that may vanish within days or transform into stable linguistic units. Online neologisms are no longer created by authors, scholars, or journalists but by collective digital communities. Every tweet, meme, or TikTok sound has the potential to become a linguistic event, influencing millions of



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speakers simultaneously. Unlike traditional linguistic change, which was primarily driven by necessity or technological innovation, digital neologisms are often driven by emotion, identity, and social interaction.

The viral logic of the internet amplifies this process. Virality implies exponential replication: one user creates a form, thousands imitate it, and algorithms boost its visibility based on engagement metrics. Thus, linguistic innovations benefit from the same dynamics that make videos or images go viral. A single word, phrase, or sound pattern can trigger waves of imitation, leading to semantic crystallization. Examples such as “selfie,” “hashtag,” “influencer,” “cringe,” “stan,” and “rizz” show how neologisms emerge within specific communities and quickly enter mainstream discourse. The term *rizz*, short for “charisma,” began as slang on Twitch streams before spreading to global platforms like TikTok and being recognized by Oxford University Press as the 2023 Word of the Year. This transformation from slang to dictionary entry encapsulates the new rhythm of linguistic evolution.

The mechanisms of digital neologism formation combine linguistic creativity with platform affordances. Algorithms act as invisible editors, promoting expressions that generate engagement. Users act as spontaneous co-authors, remixing and adapting existing words into new semantic forms. Meme culture, with its emphasis on repetition, parody, and variation, becomes a linguistic laboratory. Through captioned images, reaction videos, and textual remixes, users constantly invent and reinvent vocabulary. Memes such as “OK boomer,” “it’s giving,” or “that’s a vibe” demonstrate how online humor transforms into social meaning and lexical currency. These phrases function not only as communication tools but as markers of belonging, irony, and generational identity. The democratization of language creation in online spaces represents one of the most profound linguistic shifts of our time. In previous centuries, language authority was concentrated in institutions such as academies, publishers, and media. Today, linguistic legitimacy is negotiated through social networks. A viral TikTok comment or a trending tweet can define the meaning of a word more effectively than a dictionary entry. This decentralization of linguistic power turns language into a participatory system. The digital sphere has become both the birthplace and the archive of linguistic innovation: every social platform—from Reddit threads to Discord servers—functions as a miniature linguistic ecosystem where new forms evolve, spread, and fade.

Morphologically, online neologisms exhibit playful structures. Blending, clipping, abbreviation, and phonetic creativity dominate. Terms like “finsta” (fake + Instagram), “simp,” “sus,” “delulu,” and “ship” illustrate the economy and humor of digital language. The orthography of neologisms often reflects visual aesthetics or oral rhythm rather than grammatical convention. Abbreviations (TBH, FOMO, YOLO), emoji-based expressions, and intentional misspellings (thicc, smol) reveal a shift toward multimodal communication where meaning arises from the interaction of text, sound, and image. In online English, spelling becomes expressive, capitalization signals tone, and punctuation marks serve emotional rather than syntactic functions.



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Semantically, internet neologisms often rely on metaphor, irony, and contextual play. Words such as “ghosting” or “cancel” adopt preexisting meanings and transfer them into new social domains. The metaphorical creativity of digital discourse reflects a collective linguistic intelligence: users continuously reframe old words to fit new realities. Similarly, semantic bleaching—where a term loses specific meaning and gains general expressive force—is widespread. Words like “literally,” “iconic,” or “epic” have shifted from precise definitions to hyperbolic intensifiers, demonstrating how digital repetition transforms language pragmatics. Pragmatically, neologisms in the online sphere function as social signals. Their meaning often depends on in-group understanding and shared cultural knowledge. For instance, when a user comments “mood” under a video, it conveys emotional resonance rather than literal content. Internet communication rewards brevity and emotional immediacy, encouraging the creation of compact, expressive units. The linguistic economy of tweets and captions leads to condensation of meaning, while comment threads and memes foster polyphony—multiple voices participating in the creation of a shared expression. The same word may carry different meanings across platforms or subcultures, reflecting the diversity and fluidity of online language communities. The internet also facilitates the globalization of neologisms. English dominates global digital communication, serving as a reservoir of lexical innovation, but the exchange is bidirectional. Borrowings and hybrid forms circulate across languages, producing new code-mixing patterns. Non-native speakers adapt English neologisms into their vernaculars, creating hybrid forms like “like-lashgan,” “zoomovka,” or “streamit.” These examples demonstrate that internet virality does not only accelerate English lexical innovation but also global linguistic hybridity. The result is a dynamic feedback loop in which languages borrow, translate, and localize each other’s neologisms in real time.

The phenomenon of virality has not only accelerated neologism formation but also changed its sociocultural status. In previous epochs, new words entered the lexicon through necessity—scientific invention, political change, or cultural contact. Now they emerge through affective and aesthetic forces. Words like “vibe,” “slay,” or “aesthetic” embody cultural moods more than referential meaning. They circulate as linguistic tokens of style and emotion. Thus, neologism in the digital era is less about naming new things and more about expressing new ways of feeling and being online. This transformation has far-reaching implications for education, communication, and linguistic diversity. Teachers and linguists must navigate between prescriptive norms and living language. Students often use digital slang that textbooks ignore, while global English absorbs countless informal expressions. The challenge lies in recognizing that digital neologisms are legitimate reflections of linguistic creativity, not signs of decline. In fact, they reveal how flexible and adaptive human language remains under technological pressure. Rather than eroding grammar or vocabulary, the internet expands the expressive repertoire of speech communities.

At the same time, the ephemeral nature of viral language raises questions about linguistic memory. What happens to words once they fade from trends? The archive of the internet preserves them, yet their meanings shift with context. Tomorrow’s linguistic

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archaeologists may study memes the way historians study ancient inscriptions. The data of platforms, hashtags, and user dictionaries form a chronicle of living language—one that evolves faster than any previous medium could record. In this sense, the internet is both the laboratory and museum of linguistic innovation.

In conclusion, the age of virality has redefined the relationship between communication and language change. The acceleration of neologism formation on the internet demonstrates that linguistic evolution is now inseparable from technological and cultural dynamics. Words travel at the speed of light, shaped by algorithms, emotions, and collective creativity. Virality compresses time, democratizes authorship, and globalizes linguistic exchange. In this environment, language becomes not a static system but a continuous performance, where every user contributes to the evolution of meaning. The internet does not merely transmit language—it transforms it, making every click, meme, and message a potential birthplace of the next word that defines our age.

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