

Social Media Slang Words Among Libyan Youths

Hala Mohammed Zreg*

Department of English, Faculty of Arts and Education, Sabratha, Sabrathe University,
Sabratha, Libya

* Email (for reference researcher): halazreg4@gmail.com

الكلمات العامية (السلانغ) المتداولة عبر وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي بين الشباب الليبيين

هالة محمد زريق*

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب و التربية صبراتة، جامعة صبراتة، ليبيا

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Abstract

Slang is a vital and interactive component of language that reflects social identity and cultural change. The present study investigates the use of slang among Libyan youth, focusing on the characteristics, functions, and development of slang expressions in their speech. Libyan youth slang is highly informal and differs from standard language in both form and usage, often shaped by social factors such as peer social networks, media exposure, and technological advancement.

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach to analyze slang usage among Libyan youth speakers. Data were collected from a sample of 30 male participants living in Sabratha. The dataset consisted of naturally occurring conversations containing slang expressions, gathered with the assistance of the researcher's social network, including relatives and students.

The analysis of this paper has attempted to explore four types of slang used by Libyan youth, including forms influenced by internet communication. The study examined the meanings and pragmatic functions of these expressions. The findings revealed that slang is primarily used to express emotions, particularly negative feelings, to facilitate informal communication, and to establish in-group identity. In some cases, slang is also used to obscure meaning or exclude outsiders from understanding conversations. Overall, this study highlights the richness and variability of Libyan youth slang and its significant role in everyday communication.

Keywords: Slang, Libyan Youth, Sociolinguistics, Pragmatic Functions, Informal Language.

المخلص

تعد اللغة العامية مكوناً حيوياً وتفاعلياً من مكونات اللغة، إذ تعكس الهوية الاجتماعية وتجسد التحولات الثقافية المتلاحقة. تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى استقصاء استخدام اللغة العامية (السلانغ) في أوساط الشباب الليبي، من خلال التركيز على خصائص التعبيرات العامية الشائعة في حديثهم، وظائفها، ومسار تطورها. وتتسم العامية الشبابية الليبية بطابعها غير الرسمي الواضح، ويتميزها عن اللغة المعيارية شكلاً واستخداماً، فضلاً عن تشكلها تحت تأثير جملة من العوامل الاجتماعية، أبرزها: الشبكات الاجتماعية بين الأقران، والتعرض لوسائل الإعلام، والتطور التكنولوجي المتسارع. اعتمدت هذه الدراسة المنهج الوصفي النوعي أداة لتحليل ظاهرة استخدام العامية لدى فئة الشباب الليبي الناطقين بها. وقد جمعت البيانات من عينة مؤلفة من ثلاثين مشاركاً من الذكور المقيمين في مدينة صبراتة. وتضمنت مجموعة بيانات من محادثات طبيعية جرت في سياقات واقعية تضمنت تعبيرات عامية، وقد جمعت بمساعدة الشبكة الاجتماعية للباحث، بما في ذلك الأقارب والطلاب.

انصب تحليل هذه الورقة البحثية على استكشاف أربعة أنواع من العامية الشائعة في خطاب الشباب الليبي، من بينها الصيغ اللغوية المتأثرة بالتواصل عبر الإنترنت. كما تناولت الدراسة دلالات هذه التعبيرات ووظائفها التداولية. وقد كشفت النتائج أن العامية توظف في المقام الأول للتعبير عن المشاعر، لا سيما السلبية منها، وتيسير التواصل غير الرسمي، ولتعزيز الشعور بالانتماء إلى المجموعة. وفي سياقات معينة، تستخدم العامية أيضاً بوصفها وسيلة لتعتيم المعنى وإقصاء المتلقين من خارج المجموعة من فهم مضمون الخطاب. وخلصت الدراسة في مجملها إلى إبراز ثراء العامية الشبابية الليبية وتنوعها، وتجليه دورها المحوري في منظومة التواصل اليومي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السلانغ (اللغة العامية)، الشباب الليبي، علم اللغة الاجتماعي، الوظائف التداولية، اللغة غير الرسمية.

Introduction

Like clothing and music, slang is an aspect of social life that is subject to fashion, especially among adolescents.

(George, Yule 2010)

Language plays a fundamental role in everyday communication, as individuals rely on it to interact within their societies. Slang, in particular, represents a distinct aspect of language use. The study of slang has become an important area of interest in modern linguistics. According to Webster's Dictionary, slang is defined as a nonstandard vocabulary characterized by extreme informality and usage that is not restricted to a specific region. Within sociolinguistics, which examines how social factors influence language variation and change over time, it has been observed that linguistic innovations are often initiated by younger speakers, particularly adolescents. Slang words and phrases are typically highly informal and are often restricted to specific social groups, such as teenagers and young adults, where they function as markers of in-group identity. As noted by George Yule (2010), slang is commonly associated with very informal speech and frequently serves as an "in-group" language. Teenagers, in particular, adapt their language according to context, using slang to strengthen social bonds and reinforce group identity.

Each year, adolescents generate numerous new slang expressions; however, these terms are typically short-lived. They tend to develop rapidly, often changing as quickly as trends in fashion or styles of music. In modern society, technological development has had a significant impact on youth language. For example, the internet highly effects teenagers' use of language. Instead of creating entirely new languages, technology contributes to the extension of slang, where existing words acquire new meanings. Denham & Lobeck, (2014:192) states, "Slang words or phrases are typically very informal, and they are usually restricted to a particular group typically teen and young adults as a marker of in-group status. Most are not new groups but existing words that have acquired new meaning for some group."

Therefore, this study focuses on two main aspects of slang use in conversations among Libyan youth. First, it identifies and analyzes slang expressions used by Libyan teenage males. This research is not concerned with gender differences; rather, it concentrates on how Libyan males use slang in communication. Previous studies suggest that slang is more frequently used by male adolescents. For instance, Shahraki (2011), reports that the usage of slang tends to be more widespread among males than females. Second, this study aims to determine the meanings and functions of the identified slang expressions.

Accordingly, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What slang expressions are most frequently used by the participants?
2. What are the pragmatic functions underlying the use of slang expressions in their daily conversations?

Literature Review

The use of slang among adolescents has become increasingly common across a wide range of social contexts. Existing research emphasizes the significant influence of social media on the development and spread of slang, particularly in accelerating linguistic change and introducing new informal expressions. Numerous studies show that online communication encourages the creation of abbreviations, acronyms, and innovative forms of vocabulary that differ from conventional language use.

Hutabarat et al. (2020), insists that at the present time, young people in society in general, and teenagers in particular, frequently use slang in their daily conversations. Its use is no longer limited to certain groups or communities that employ it as secret expressions or a form of coded language. Rather, it has become widely and repeatedly used in their everyday communication in their community or environment. According to Holmes (1992:183), "Slang is another area of vocabulary which reflects a person's age. Current slang is the linguistic prerogative of young

people and generally sounds odd in the mouth of an older person. It signals membership of a particular group - the young." Similarly, Coleman (1990:183) explains that slang is a vocabulary domain closely associated with age, with contemporary slang being predominantly characteristic of younger generations. Such forms of expression often sound inappropriate or unusual when used by older individuals. Wijaya (2014) mentions that slang vocabulary is created through various linguistic processes examined in morphology, including coinage, compounding, acronyms, clipping, back-formation, abbreviations, blending, as well as forms such as cockney, public-house slang, workmen's slang, commercial slang, and even standard slang.

Several studies indicate that the overuse of informal expressions—such as abbreviations and slang—may negatively affect teenagers' ability to use formal language. Haq, (2025:78) states, "The intensive use of slang can lead to a decrease in mastery of standard vocabulary, difficulty in structuring sentences according to the correct structure, and confusion in distinguishing between formal and informal language contexts."

In the context of modern communication, the rapid expansion of internet access and the widespread use of social networking platforms have contributed to the globalization of slang. According to Abdullah and Ghazali (2021), Malaysian university students increasingly employ distinctive and innovative slang expressions, largely shaped by the growing influence of digital media. Over a short span of time, the use of digital platforms has grown dramatically and continues to increase beyond expectations. Since young people make up most internet and social media users, they have formed a massive online community.

Language is bound to develop new lexical items and functions in a world where communication is now mediated more than ever before. Since young people are among the most active, skilled, and imaginative users of new media, the cultural identities shaped through these platforms are likely to be strongly linked to this age group (Bucholtz, 2000:281). In his book "Slang and sociability", Eble (1996) illustrates that slang, as a type of vocabulary, is flourishing in modern media and social settings that have appeared due to rapid technological advances at the end of the twentieth century. Instead of being mostly the language used by small or marginalized groups to mark identity, slang has become a global choice of expression for young people, who make up most of the world's population. It mirrors their preferences in music, art, fashion, and leisure activities. Slang not only adds many new words and expressions to the English language, but also has unique functions.

Alabdaly (2025), focuses on how slang reflects the cultural and social identity of individuals within the Baghdadi community. She discovered that the Baghdadi community exhibits a unique linguistic identity through its use of various slang expressions in communication. The findings also indicate that context plays a crucial role in fully interpreting the intended meaning of these slang words. Ultimately, the study demonstrated that the selection of such expressions varies according to specific social and pragmatic purposes.

According to Zhang (2023), slang in American society serves purposes beyond everyday interaction and information exchange. It also achieves several important social functions, such as promoting a comfortable conversational environment, expressing individual identity, strengthening group solidarity, and meeting people's desire for creative and innovative forms of expression.

Nuraeni and Pahamzah (2021), identify that there are four motivations for the use of slang. The first is the enhancement of the language through the creation of new lexical terms. The second involves encouraging friendliness. The third and fourth to differentiate and facilitate social interaction. The fifth is to diminish seriousness of communication. The sixth is the desire of enjoyment, while the final reason is to have delights in virtuosity .

In his study, Gomaa (2015), conducts a sociolinguistic investigation into slang usage among Saudi youth. The study explores the social factors that influence the emergence and use of slang, identifies the sources from which young Saudis acquire new expressions, and examines the

motivations behind their usage. It also outlines the major thematic areas that contemporary Saudi youth slang tends to focus on. The findings reveal a negative correlation between age and familiarity with slang; that is, younger individuals demonstrate a higher level of acquaintance with slang expressions. Slang is used more frequently by men than women.

Given the wide range of slang vocabulary used by adolescents in communication, it is valuable to examine this phenomenon by analyzing its forms, meanings, and functions. Allan and Burrige (2006), argue that slang expressions serve a range of functions in everyday interaction. They explain that slang develops within specific social groups and is used to convey particular meanings and purposes. These purposes may be social or pragmatic functions, and they can be categorized into seven\ distinct functions: to address, to form intimate situation, to express anger, to initiate relax conversation, to humiliate, to express impression, to show intimacy.

Although the literature has identified several features of slang, insufficient research has specifically examined its use in everyday Libyan teenage Arab communication. Previous studies have primarily focused on slang in some Arabic or non-Arabic contexts, leaving a noticeable gap in research on Libyan Arabic speech. Therefore, the present study was developed to analyze slang usage within Libyan youth, based on the researcher's recognition of the need to address this gap in the field of sociolinguistics. It aims to contribute to a better understanding of how slang functions within natural communication in this specific linguistic and cultural context.

Methods

In this study, the researcher employed a qualitative research approach using a case study design. The participants consisted of 30 native Libyan adolescent speakers aged between 15 and 24 years. The informants were selected to clarify their use of slang expressions in daily interaction. They belonged to the researcher's social network, including relatives and students, which facilitated access to natural conversational data.

To gather the required data, the researcher recorded conversations involving the 30 participants and passive observation was also conducted to capture spontaneous language use in natural settings. Both the recorded interactions and observation notes were collected over a period of approximately eight months.

The data included spontaneous conversations in both formal environments, such as workplaces and schools, and informal settings, such as homes, parties, and group discussions. In many cases, the speakers were unaware that they were being recorded. This approach was adopted to ensure that their speech remained natural and spontaneous, without being influenced by the awareness of being observed. Labov (1972, p. 209) emphasized the importance of capturing casual and natural speech without making speakers feel observed or influenced by the awareness of being watched. To achieve this, researchers often rely on an uncontrolled observation method in which conversation is allowed to progress freely, thereby increasing the likelihood of obtaining genuine and spontaneous speech.

After collecting the recorded data, the researcher reviewed all conversations, transcribed them, and documented additional observations. These notes helped identify elements that could not be obtained from audio recordings alone, offering further insight into the social and physical settings of the interactions. All transcripts were then carefully checked against the written versions to ensure accuracy and eliminate inconsistencies. After transcribing the conversations, the researcher selected several excerpts that contained instances of slang used by Libyan teenage speakers. These examples were then analyzed.

To analyze the data, the researcher classified the various functions that slang performs for both the speaker and the listener, as well as its impact on the meaning of the discourse. The functions identified in this study align with the theoretical framework established by Allan and Burrige (2006).

Findings and Discussion

In this section the researcher identified 50 slang words without context concerning the use of social media slang in the conversational life of the Libyan speakers. Each expression emphasizes the pragmatic strategies employed to effectively engage Libyan audience and enhance cultural relevance. The tables below present a sample of the collected expressions along with their pragmatic functions as employed by teenage speaker. The results showed that there are four functions of slang words.

To address

Speakers use slang terms to refer to others in order to maintain closeness and strengthen their relationship.

Table 1. To Address

No.	Arabic Expression	Transcription	Literal Translation	Pragmatic Function
1	برنس	Brins	Prince	Marking importance
2	برو	Bru	Bro	Indicating closeness
3	خال	Khāl	Uncle	Signals friendliness
4	معلم	Muealim	Teacher	To show admiration
5	صقر	Saqr	Falcon	Describing courage
6	أسد	Asad	Lion	To praise heroic

Table 1 indicates that teenagers frequently prefer using nicknames and endearments when addressing one another in order to maintain social relationships and foster friendliness and solidarity. Some of these expressions are borrowed from foreign languages, such as **برنس** “*Prince*” and **برو** “*Bro*”, to undergo semantic shifts to suit the communicative needs of their users. The Libyan term **خال** literally means “*Uncle*”; however, in colloquial usage, it functions as a marker of solidarity and familiarity among peers. A vocative expression such as **معلم** “*Teacher*” is also employed in teenage slang. This expression does not usually carry its literal meaning; rather, it functions as a slang term whose interpretation depends on context. It may be used to express admiration or praise for someone who has done something clever or impressive. Conversely, it may also be used sarcastically when someone makes an obvious mistake. Additionally, some expressions are derived from animal names. The term **صقر** “*Falcon*” is used metaphorically to describe a person as sharp, intelligent, or impressive. It is typically directed toward individuals who display intelligence, courage, or confidence. Similarly, the term **أسد** “*Lion*” signifies that a person is brave, powerful, and dominant, and it is often used to praise heroic or strong behavior. It contributes to solidarity and positive identity construction within the group.

To Humiliate

Slang can be used to express dislike or negative feelings toward someone or something, often through teasing or mocking. The examples of this type would be shown in the following table below:

Table 2. To Humiliate

No.	Arabic Expression	Transcription	Literal Translation	Pragmatic Function
1	افتح دماغك	Aftah dmāghak	Open your brain	Sarcastic
2	دماغك مسكر	Dmāghak msakkar	Your brain is closed	Sarcastic
3	نتك ضعيف	Natak ḍaif	Your internet is weak	Sarcastic
4	مسدسه معبي	Musadsuh muebi	His pistol is loaded	Disbelief
5	يزلزل	Yzeliz	Cover something with tiles	Disbelief
6	دبل شفرة	Dabal shafra	Two SIM cards	Mocking
7	يتجكتر	Yitjaktar	Player	Mocking
8	عيل	Eil	Child	Insulting
9	جمل و طاح في باسطي	Jmal w tāh fī: bāsti	A camel fell in a cake	Mocking
10	زارط	Zāriḍ	Heavily intoxicated	Mocking

This type of slang is one of the major functions used among Libyan adolescents. As seen in Table 2 the expressions *افتح دماغك* “Open your brain”, *دماغك مسكر* “Your brain is closed”, *نتك ضعيف* “Your internet is weak” share a similar pragmatic function, as they all relate to an individual’s cognitive ability or mental understanding. These expressions are typically used among Libyan speakers in informal contexts, particularly among friends, and are generally considered inappropriate for use with strangers. Additionally, a term such as *دبل شفرة* “Two SIM cards” is usually said to describe someone who plays on both sides - meaning they have double loyalties change their stance depending on personal interest. This term became especially common in political and social conversations after 2011. It is generally an insult or an accusation.

Following the wars that occurred in Libya after the 2011 Revolution, young people began to circulate new terms and expressions within their social groups. These expressions were influenced by the prevailing security and political conditions experienced by society. Consequently, many lexical items associated with war and conflict entered everyday discourse. For instance, the term *مسدسه معبي* “His pistol is loaded” in Libyan teenage slang does not denote an actual weapon; rather, it metaphorically describes a person who lies confidently. Similarly, the term *يزلزل* “Cover something with tiles” also signals disbelief and implies the person lies effortlessly. This usage reflects a humorous and figurative communicative strategy among peers. Another slang expression, *يتجكتر* “Player”, is derived from the Italian word *giocatore* (meaning “player”). In this context, it is used to describe an individual who is arrogant or conceited, often carrying connotations of mockery and criticism rather than praise. The expression *عيل* “Child” is used in Libyan slang to refer to someone who behaves in a childish manner. However, in Iraqi slang, similar expressions may convey affection or endearment, indicating lovable or playful behavior. Finally, some humorous expressions in Libyan slang are derived from references to food and animals, such as *جمل و طاح في باسطي* “A camel fell in a cake”, which is used to describe a foolish person who suddenly saw something that amazed him. The

meaningless slang expression زارط “*Heavily intoxicated*” is connected with drugs and alcohol consumption, highlighting that excessive use of these substances is both socially and legally unacceptable. The expression is highly informal and crude, often carrying a mocking or critical tone.

To Show Intimacy

While formal language is usually used with strangers, slang is commonly used with friends to signal closeness and social solidarity.

Table 3. To Show Intimacy

No.	Arabic Expression	Transcription	Literal Translation	Pragmatic Function
1	فكك منه	Fikik minuh	Release him	To ignore
2	أطلقه مع الريح	Itlquh mae alreeh	Release him with the wind	To ignore
3	كح فلوس	Kuh floos	Cough money	Reprimand joke
4	الحس ظهرك	Alhas dahrik	Lick your back	Disagreement
5	سوس قراية	Soos qraya	Weevil study	To Praise
6	شن الجو	Shni aljaw	What's the atmosphere?	Indicating intimacy
7	صقع عليك	Saqae ealeek	Cold for you	To tease
8	بتجيب العيد	Bitjeeb alead	You will bring Eid	To warn

The eight slang expressions in Table 3 are often used by adolescents in intimate situations such as with family members or close friends. An exciting use of the two verbs فكك منه “*Leave him*” أطلقه مع الريح and “*Release him with the wind*” appears to derive from a metaphorical understanding of disregarding the other person either by detaching yourself from him, or releasing him with the wind. In communication, speakers often use words containing commands that are typically conveyed through informal language, and utilizing slang vocabulary that may only be understood by members of specific social groups. For example, an imperative form such as كح فلوس “*Cough money*” is used jokingly between friends to push someone to give money. The lexis الحس ظهرك “*Lick your back*” is often used by close friends or relatives to express disagreement for something that is impossible to be done. The word سوس قراية “*Weevil study*” is said as a joke or to praise a person who studies most of the time. Similarly, in English slang the term “bookworm” is used. In Libyan Arabic the term شن الجو means “*What's the weather?*”. However, the respondents use it to mean “*How are things?*”. It shows friendliness and closeness intimacy. In addition, it is a very common informal greeting. From personal observations and group discussions with the teenagers, the word صقع عليك “*Cold for you*” is mentioned as an evaluative term expressing teasing, particularly in peer interactions. The last term بتجيب العيد “*You will bring Eid*” is widely popular not only in Libya, but across the Arab world. It functions as an idiomatic warning, indicating that an individual is likely to make a significant mistake or cause a problem.

To Express Impression

Speakers often use slang to convey their personal opinions or feelings, whether positive or negative, in a vivid or clear way.

Table 4. To Express Impression

No.	Arabic Expression	Transcription	Literal Translation	Pragmatic Function
1	فوضى	Fawḍa	Disorder	Description of something
2	مسستم	Masastum	System	Praise
3	طارح بالجني كله	Tarih biljni kulih	He threw all the dinar	Description
4	اولد مني	Awld muni	Old money	Description
5	سحنون	Sahnoon	Meaningless	Description
6	شني مني	Shini mini	What-Who	Requesting advice

As shown in the table above, adolescents often use words to express their impressions of someone or something. For instance, **فوضى**, which literally means “*Disorder*,” may be used with a positive connotation. It is common for teenagers to reverse the conventional meaning of a word. In this context, the expression signals that the speaker finds something impressive, enjoyable, or highly satisfactory. Moreover, several expressions are specifically used to describe individuals based on their clothing style. Noticeable examples include **طارح بالجني كله** “*He threw all the dinar*”, which suggests that a person has spent a considerable amount of money on their appearance, and **مسستم** “*System*” which conveys approval of someone's outfit or overall style. Furthermore, some expressions are used to describe individuals based on their clothing style. These expressions typically convey approval of another person's outfit and are associated with the addressee's physical appearance. For instance, the term **اولد مني** “*Old money*”, borrowed from English slang, does not refer literally to wealth but instead denotes a classic and elegant fashion style. In contrast, some slang expressions are more closely associated with personality traits than with physical appearance. The expression **سحنون** “*Meaningless*” is more closely associated with personality and behavior than with physical appearance. It is typically used to describe males perceived as having weak or passive personalities, often implying that their behavior and mannerisms diverge from socially expected masculine norms. Finally, the expression **شني مني** “*What-who*” is commonly used when seeking advice, consultation, or opinions regarding a particular situation.

Conclusion

Language does not stay fixed over time. Among teenagers, it changes faster than any other group, because they are always looking for new ways to express themselves and to feel connected with the people around them. Slang is one clear result of this — it is informal, not part of standard language, and it belongs to specific social groups. People use it to feel close to each other, to show that they are part of the same group, and sometimes to keep others out.

This study found that slang words are often not completely new. In many cases, they are old words that have been given different meanings by the group that uses them. The study looked at four main functions of slang: addressing, humiliating, expressing impression, and showing intimacy. The results showed that humiliation and intimacy were used the most. This might seem strange at first, but among close friends, using harsh or insulting words is usually not meant seriously — it is actually a way to show how comfortable they are with each other. Slang also does not stay in one place. It moves from one language to another, from one culture to another. Social media and the internet have made this process much faster in recent years. The linguistic study of Libyan slang is still a new and developing area. This study is a small contribution to that field, and the researchers hope it can be a starting point for future work. There is still a lot to explore, and many questions still need answers.

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